

# Sacred Stories

*A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible*

**SUKKOT** SEPTEMBER 19-25, 2013

## ***Living the Land***

By Rabbi Elyse Seidner-Joseph



### **Artifact:**

**Diploma of Louis Lieboff, Baron de Hirsch Agricultural School, Woodbine, 1918  
National Museum of American Jewish History**

**Located in the Settling the Interior gallery, a section of the Making America Home streetscape on the third floor.**

Jews have long been known as “the people of the book,” connected deeply to Torah (Hebrew scripture) and Jewish law (Talmud and later commentaries). However, in biblical times, agriculture was deeply rooted into Jewish life and culture; growing cycles and harvests were connected to most Jewish historical holidays. Today, Jews celebrate holidays through their related biblical stories often forgetting the historic agricultural connections.

*Sukkot* for example, commemorates the forty years of wandering in the desert following the liberation of the Israelites from slavery, but *Sukkot* is also a harvest holiday. Also known as *Chag Ha-Asif*, the Festival of Ingathering, *Sukkot* is a time of thanking God for the harvest: “At the end of the year, when you gather in the results of your work from the field.” [Exodus 23:16]

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In the late 1800s, German Jewish philanthropist Baron Maurice de Hirsch funded an ambitious agricultural program that provided a way for Jews to escape the grinding poverty and persecution of Czarist Russia. De Hirsch was hoping that resettlement into agricultural communities would help Jews start new lives in more fortunate, safe, and healthy circumstances. In the United States, forests were cleared by new immigrants, and in 1892, sixty Jewish families arrived in Woodbine, New Jersey to start farming. The Baron de Hirsch Agricultural School started shortly thereafter to teach the immigrants how to work the land. Woodbine was proudly hailed as “the first all-Jewish town since the fall of Jerusalem.” Unfortunately, de Hirsch’s bold endeavor did not succeed for long—bad soil, swarms of mosquitoes, and the lure of city life made this a well-intentioned, but one-generation, experiment. Although no longer an agricultural settlement, Woodbine remained a home to many Jewish families for generations and still exists today.

Even though the agricultural enterprise at Woodbine did not survive, the Jewish people's connection to the earth has deep roots in Torah that are still bearing fruit today. Jewish farms for committed young farmers, CSA's (community-supported agriculture) and gleanng gardens at synagogues are sprouting up across America.

Many *Sukkot* customs continue to connect non-farming Jews to the land. These include construction of a *sukkah*, a temporary, fragile shelter, which we live (or eat our meals) in for eight days. During *Sukkot*, we say a daily blessing over a *lulav* (branches of palm, willow, and myrtle) and *etrog*, a yellow citron fruit native to Israel.

Commitment to sustainable food sources, ecology, and issues around food production, distribution, nutrition, and safety emerge from Jewish values in Torah, such as the commandments to be caring stewards of the earth, to let the land lay fallow every seven years (*shmita*), to feed the poor through gleanng of the fields, and thank God for the harvest. Here in 21st century America, Jews are again living successfully as people of the book AND people of the earth.

*Rabbi Elyse Seidner-Joseph was ordained in January 2013 by the Aleph Rabbinic Program a non-denominational, decentralized program that understands its core mission as the spiritual renewal of Judaism. A former physician who left the practice of medicine due to disability, Elyse holds a Master of Arts in Jewish Studies from Gratz College. She attended the Juilliard School as a classical pianist, studied Shakespearean literature at Penn, and graduated from Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons. Rabbi Elyse was a member of the first student cohort of CLAL's Rabbis Without Borders project.*

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*What is your Food Worth?* Is a two-year long conversation about food, ethics, sustainability, and eating Jewish, presented by Temple University's Feinstein Center for American Jewish history, in partnership with the National Museum of American Jewish History, and Congregation Rodeph Shalom. Learn more at <http://whatisyourfoodworth.com>



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## About this partnership:

Both the Jewish People and the United States of America are rooted in a quest for greater freedom and human dignity. Inspired by this parallelism, the National Museum of American Jewish History is collaborating with Clal—The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership and its Rabbis Without Borders program to launch a new initiative, **Sacred Stories: A Living Commentary on the Hebrew Bible and American Jewish History**.

**Sacred Stories** weaves together Judaism's foundational sacred text, the Torah, with one of the most successful expressions of freedom in human history, the story of Jewish life in America. **Sacred Stories** explores our shared values by linking these two vital and compelling stories through contemporary commentary and 21st century media.

The **Torah** is a central feature of Jewish tradition. Used to refer generally to Jewish wisdom, it also refers specifically to the 5 Books of Moses which makes up the Hebrew Bible. A portion of the Torah text, a **Parsha**, is read on **Shabbat** (Sabbath). The whole Torah is read sequentially over the course of the year. Shabbat is the Jewish day of rest and begins on Friday evenings and ends Saturday night. Many Jews observe Shabbat to emulate God's resting on the seventh day of Creation. The fourth commandment is to keep Shabbat holy which Jews do with festive meals, resting, and learning.



The National Museum of American Jewish History, on Independence Mall in Philadelphia, presents educational programs and experiences that preserve, explore and celebrate the history of Jews in America. Its purpose is to connect Jews more closely to their heritage and to inspire in people of all backgrounds a greater appreciation for the diversity of the American Jewish experience and the freedoms to which Americans aspire.



Clal—The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership is a think tank, leadership training institute, and resource center. Bringing Jewish insights to a wide American audience, Clal makes Jewish wisdom an accessible public resource. A leader in religious pluralism, Clal builds bridges across communities to encourage diversity and openness. Linking Jewish texts and tradition with innovative scholarship, Clal promotes Jewish participation in American civic and spiritual life, reinvigorating communities and enhancing leadership development.