

# Sacred Stories

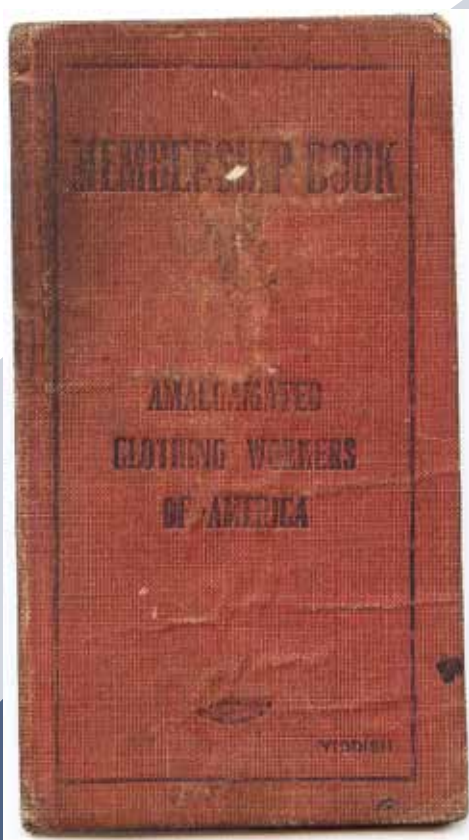
*A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible*

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**LABOR DAY** SEPTEMBER 2, 2013

## ***Taking the First Step***

By Rabbi Ruth Abusch-Magder PhD



**Artifact:**

**Membership book, Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, Philadelphia, 1919  
National Museum of American Jewish History**

**Gift of the Anne and John P. McNulty Foundation in honor of Lyn M. and George M. Ross**

# Taking the First Step

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## Sacred Stories **LABOR DAY**

The early labor movement is a story of liberation. In the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, many workers faced low wages, long hours, and unsanitary conditions. Bathroom breaks, fair pay, sick leave, and vacation were for most like dreams of a promised land.

The biblical story of the journey to the Promised Land begins with the Exodus from Egypt. Moses takes center stage in this drama, it is top down leadership. Likewise the labor movement had many well known leaders like Samuel Gompers and Sidney Hillman. There is a legend that the Exodus, specifically the parting of the Red Sea would not have happened had not Nachshon literally taken the first steps. According to this legend, Moses puts his arms out over the water, like God instructs, but the waters do not split. It is only when Nachshon, a regular Israelite, walks into the water, up to his neck, does the sea part into two creating a dry path towards freedom. Nor would the Exodus have happened without the people of Israel who followed and did the hard work of walking the difficult path towards liberation.

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Clara Leimlich was the Nachshon of a major strike of women workers in 1909. Leimlich emigrated from Ukraine in 1903; just three years later she helped organize Local 25 of the International Ladies Garment Worker’s Union (ILGWU). Only three years after that, in 1909, did she stand up at a union meeting and call for a general strike. While union leaders, like Samuel Gompers, could not give the masses a direction, 23-year-old Leimlich stepped into the waters and led the way. The strike that followed is now known as the “Uprising of the 20,000” although some estimate that close to 30,000 mostly women workers joined the strike.

Like the wandering in the desert, the journey towards better working conditions for garment workers took time and effort and relied on the sacrifices of many. In 1914 a socialist-minded group of workers broke with the more conservative United Garment Workers to form the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA). Members of this new union showed commitment to a vision of a better future and were willing to walk a long difficult road to ensure the freedom and fairness they sought. Members were involved in long strikes and lock outs. But the ACWA, under the leadership of Sidney Hillman, would go on to secure significant gains such as a 44 hour work week in men's garment production and establish a bank and cooperative housing for union members that are still in existence today. Recognizing the diversity of its members, the ACWA published membership books with bylaws and dues information in many languages like Yiddish.

The road to liberation, in ancient times as well as modern ones, is challenging. Labor Day is more than the last hurrah of summer, it is an opportunity to acknowledge the work of people who fought and continue to fight to make the world a better place.

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In 1976, the ACWA merged with the Textile Workers of America to form the Amalgamated Clothing and Textiles Workers Union (ACTWU). The ACTWU merged with the ILGWU to form the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees or UNITE.



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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.