

Sacred Stories

A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible

FATHER'S DAY JUNE 16, 2013

Time to Honor Fathers

By Rabbi Ruth Abusch-Magder PhD



Artifact:

**Grandfather clock from the Russel Erskine Hotel, Huntsville, Alabama, with Margaret Anne Goldsmith
National Museum of American Jewish History
Gift of Margaret Anne Goldsmith in memory of the Bernstein, Herstein, Schiffman, and Goldsmith Families**

Time to Honor Our Fathers

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In 1876, abolitionist Henry Clay Work composed “My Grandfather’s Clock.” The song, which quickly became popular, told the fictional story of a tall standing clock whose time-telling was tied to the life of the singer’s grandfather. When the grandfather married, the clock struck 24 tones, and when he died, it stopped telling time. Both the symbolic clock and song function to honor the memory of Work’s grandfather.

The Bible tells countless stories of fathers, recalls upon a myriad of male ancestors, and recounts numerous male genealogies. Many of the stories about biblical fathers are complex. Abraham loved his sons but was willing to sacrifice them. Jacob favored one son above the rest.

“On this Father’s Day, take time to honor your father and grandfathers. Ask them to tell you their stories.”

Nonetheless, Jewish tradition teaches us to honor the memory of our fathers and tell their stories. Throughout the Torah, great emphasis is placed on recalling paternal ancestry. Noah descends from Adam, Abraham from Noah. Where one comes from is important. Lessons of the fathers’ lives shine through the generations. We take the time to tell and retell their stories, to recall the accomplishments and complexities of their lives.

In 2011, Margaret Anne Goldsmith donated a collection of artifacts that chronicled the five generations of her family’s life in Huntsville, Alabama. Prominent among them is a grandfather clock that stood in her grandfather’s hotel. The clock was purchased from a clock maker in Cincinnati in the years surrounding Clay Work’s song. An expensive item, it was shipped with care to Huntsville. It passed through the generations and in January 1930, Goldsmith’s grandfather, Lawrence B. Goldsmith Sr. opened the Russel Erskine hotel in Huntsville and soon had the

grandfather clock installed in the lobby. Miraculously, the hotel and its business survived the depression. It became a hub of life in a town known for NASA research. The clock stood by, as did her grandfather, through decades of parties and meetings, and watched as integration and other historical milestones came to the South. The hotel closed in 1973 and the clock returned to the home of Margaret Ann's father Lawrence B. Goldsmith, Jr.

As in Clay Work's song, Goldsmith's donation of the clock to the Museum is a means of honoring the memory of her grandfather. With this action, she keeps his story alive and passes it on to future generations.

On this Father's Day, take time to honor your father and grandfathers. Ask them to tell you their stories. Share the stories of your forefathers who have passed. Consider the songs and artifacts that recall their challenges, milestones, and accomplishments. Honor their lives and their contributions.

Rabbi Ruth Abusch-Magder PhD is the Rabbi-in-Residence at Be'chol Lashon (In Every Tongue), an organization advocating for ethnic and cultural diversity in the global Jewish community. A graduate of Barnard College holding a doctorate from Yale University, Rabbi Ruth is the editor of Tzeh U'llimad: A Blog of Jewish Learning.

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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.