

# Sacred Stories

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

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**RE'EH** AUGUST 3, 2013

## ***Celebrating Our Heritage***

By Rabbi Elianna Yolkut



**Artifact:**

**Gown of Harry Hoffberger, Baltimore, ca. 1884**

**National Museum of American Jewish History**

**Gift of Etta Weinberg, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**

# Celebrating Our Heritage

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## Sacred Stories **RE'EH**

The birth of a child is one of the most precious and precarious times in our lives. When we welcome a new life into the world, we are overcome with exhaustion, yet overjoyed with the perfect child we are holding in our arms. In the Jewish tradition, while we are still in a daze of new parenthood, we are commanded to take our eight-day-old sons and ritually circumcise them. In doing so, we welcome them into the covenant of the Jewish people and give them their Hebrew names, connecting them to their past and linking them to a future. What a difficult task – literally marking our precious children in the earliest days of their lives, when protection and comfort are all we want to give them. Yet, for thousands of years, the Jewish community has fulfilled this ancient rite as a way of celebrating our heritage.

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“As a parent, you commit to teaching your child how to be a source of goodness and kindness in the imperfect world.”

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This artifact is a circumcision gown, donned at the *brit milah* (the ritual circumcision) of Harry Hoffberger in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1884. Notice the tiny blood stain in the mid-section of this beautiful yet simple white garment. Why wear a gown for this serious act of deep religious significance? Certainly, people considered then (and still consider), that a blood stain might be likely on this delicate garment. What, then, is the point of dressing a little baby up for this moment?

Imagine for a moment you are the parents of this child; he is yours, he is special, he is a part of you. Deep in your heart, you want to share with him your faith's wisdom, community, and heritage in celebration of his new life. You want his connection to Judaism to be filled with beauty, awe, and inspiration. And so in the earliest days of his life, days he will not remember except when you will tell him the story, you dress him in pure white. You place him before your family and friends, before your community and you commit on his behalf. You commit him not to a perfect life, but to covenant with his faith and with God.

This week's Torah portion, Re'eh, recounts many moments of great celebration in ancient life. While joy governed these events, many included animal sacrifice, a bloody ritual in which the Israelites offered God part of their livestock. The world is both beautiful and messy. In Jewish tradition, we create balance between give and take. When we celebrate our successes and privileges, we also must take the time to thank God for what we have by reaffirming our connection to Judaism.

As a parent, you commit to teaching your child how to be a source of goodness and kindness in the imperfect world. You want him to remember even in his most private and intimate moments that he is a part of a bigger story and a deeper chain of past, present and future. The Torah teaches in Deuteronomy 12:28, "Be careful to heed all these commandments that I enjoin upon you; thus it will go well with you and with your descendants after you forever, for you will be doing what is good and right in the sight of the Lord your God." We all have moments like those described in the Torah where we instruct our children to be gracious, charitable, and righteous, so that their lives will be filled with joy and comfort. Perhaps, the precarious timing of the ritual and the simplicity of the ritual garment is a reminder that we all have these hopes for our children- a simple yet profound human desire.

*Rabbi Elianna Yolkut received her rabbinic ordination from the American Jewish University's Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies in 2006 and holds a BA in Near Eastern and Judaic Studies and Sociology from Brandeis University. Following rabbinical school Elianna served as the Assistant Rabbi and Religious School Director of Adat Ari El, a Conservative synagogue in Los Angeles, CA, and as an adjunct faculty member at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies and the Fingerhut School of Education at the American Jewish University. Upon moving to New York in 2010 she worked as the Director of the Center for Jewish Life at the Jewish Community Project Downtown. Currently Elianna serves the Jewish community as a freelance rabbi through a portfolio of teaching, speaking, writing, and guiding individuals and families through lifecycle events.*

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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.