

## Emma Lazarus

Voice of Liberty, Voice of Conscience

**O**n August 17, 1790, the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island, was expecting a visit from President George Washington. To welcome him, a prominent merchant named Moses Seixas wrote a letter about his hopes for the future of Jews in America:

*Deprived as we heretofore have been of the invaluable rights of free citizens, we now (with a deep sense of gratitude to the Almighty disposer of all events) behold a government erected by the Majesty of the People—a Government which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance, but generously affording to All liberty of conscience and immunities of Citizenship, deeming every one, of whatever Nation, tongue, or language, equal parts of the great governmental machine.*

In his reply, President Washington wrote,

*It is now no more that toleration is spoken of as if it was the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily, the government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.*

Washington's promise, in precisely Seixas's words, soon became a birthright for American Jews.

Nearly a century later, Seixas's great-great-niece, a young poet named Emma Lazarus, would write her own letter of welcome—this time, in the voice of a new “Statue of Liberty” to be erected in New York harbor:

*Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost, to me:  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.*

Like Moses Seixas and George Washington, like Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Susan B. Anthony, and Rosa Parks, Emma Lazarus sustained and shaped America's founding principles. But by offering liberty to all who sought it, rich or poor, ambitious or abject, her 1883 poem “The New Colossus” redefined liberty for all Americans.

Courier and Ives lithograph  
of the Statue of Liberty  
Courtesy of the Library of Congress

### Emma Lazarus

Collection of *The New-York Historical Society*. *Emma Lazarus*, engraving by T. Johnson, from photograph by W. Kurtz for *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, vol. 36, October 1888

Emma Lazarus, a fourth-generation American, was born in New York City on July 22, 1849. This exhibition is based on Esther Schor's biography, *Emma Lazarus*, which chronicles her life as a poet, critic, advocate for the poor, early Zionist and feminist, and champion of immigrants and refugees.

George Washington to Moses Seixas,  
closing page Letterbook copy, 1790  
Courtesy of the Manuscript Division,  
the Library of Congress

*Emma Lazarus*  
Jewish Founders

The first Jewish community in colonial America began in 1654, when a group of twenty-three Jewish refugees from the Inquisition in Brazil arrived in New York. Some were *conversos*, Jewish converts to Catholicism who had nonetheless maintained a Jewish identity. Despite Director-General Peter Stuyvesant's attempt to send them away, they settled in New York. There they founded the first American synagogue, Shearith Israel (Remnant of Israel), led by Emma Lazarus's maternal great-grandfather (and Moses Seixas's brother), Gershom Mendes Seixas, who served as *hazzan*, or reader. The family of Emma's father, Moses Lazarus, descended from these Sephardic Jews, while her mother's family, the illustrious Nathan family, had mixed Sephardic-Ashkenazic ancestry.

Jewish communities in colonial America were urban, close-knit, and synagogue-centered. Following the Revolution, many Jewish institutions became increasingly democratic, adopting phrases from the constitution in their bylaws. As more Ashkenazic Jews emigrated from Germany and Eastern Europe, new synagogues and educational and philanthropic organizations emerged; like their country, Jews themselves became more pluralistic. Most Jews struck a balance between keeping tradition and becoming part of a wider world, though the Sephardic Jews of New York remained closely bound. By the first decades of the nineteenth century, with intermarriage rates low but increasing, some leaders expressed concern for Jewish continuity.

Even so, adapting well and enjoying an unprecedented degree of religious freedom, Jews thrived. In 1750 there were about three hundred Jews in America; by 1849, when Emma Lazarus was born, this number had grown to 150,000.

Petition to Dutch West India Company on behalf of the Jews of New Netherlands, January 1655

*Courtesy of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania*

Jewish "merchants of the Portuguese nation" in Amsterdam successfully petitioned the Dutch West India Company to order Peter Stuyvesant to let the Jewish refugees stay in New Amsterdam. They reminded the Company that Jews had long been treated liberally in Amsterdam; besides, they argued, "many of the Jewish nation are principal shareholders of the company."

Portraits of Simon Nathan and Grace Mendes Seixas Nathan

*American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY and Newton Centre, MA*

Emma's great-grandmother, Grace Mendes Seixas Nathan, composed an unpublished manuscript of nineteen accomplished, well-crafted poems. Her great-grandfather, Simon Nathan, a merchant and auction house owner, served as leader of congregations in both Philadelphia and New York.

1492

*Thou two-faced year, Mother of Change and Fate,  
Didst weep when Spain cast forth with flaming sword,  
The children of the prophets of the Lord,  
Prince, priest, and people, spurned by zealot hate.  
Hounded from sea to sea, from state to state,  
The West refused them, and the East abhorred.  
No anchorage the known world could afford,  
Close-locked was every port, barred every gate.  
Then smiling, thou unveil'dst, O two-faced year,  
A virgin world where doors of sunset part,  
Saying, "Ho, all who weary, enter here!  
There falls each ancient barrier that the art  
Of race or creed or rank devised, to rear  
Grim bulwarked hatred between heart and heart!"*

"1492," poem by Emma Lazarus

This sonnet, written the same month as "The New Colossus," turns back four hundred years to an earlier group of refugees: the Jews expelled from Spain during the Inquisition. As a descendant of these Jews, Emma identified deeply with the refugees of the 1880s, though as an affluent fourth-generation American, she had little in common with them.

## *Emma Lazarus*

### The Lazarus Family in New York

In 1858, while three thousand laborers cleared, dredged, and planted what was to be “the central park,” the Lazarus family moved to a brownstone near Union Square in New York City, an elegant gaslit ellipse of fountains, birdhouses, and statues. In a city booming with both industry and culture, the Lazaruses’ wealth brought them all manner of urbane pleasure—servants, tutors, and carriage rides; social calls, window-shopping, concerts, and lectures.

Emma was the fourth of six daughters; she also had one brother. Little remains to document her precocious childhood, but she was probably tutored at home; like Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Virginia Woolf, Emma made her father’s library her “school.” There she studied German, French, and Italian, music and art, literature and history, and other subjects. And she began to write—and translate—poems.

Emma’s uncle, Jacques Judah Lyons, led their synagogue for thirty-six years; her aunt, Grace Lyons, was the first “directress” of its Hebrew Female Benevolent Society. Emma’s parents were somewhat less active in the synagogue. They kept the traditions of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Passover, and, at least for a time, the Jewish dietary laws. But Moses, by joining clubs and socializing widely, extended their circle beyond the tightly-knit Sephardic community into the “upper ten thousand,” New York’s wealthiest families.

Because of their father’s fortune, the Lazarus sisters—Sarah, Josephine, Mary, Emma, Agnes, and Annie—felt less pressure to marry than most Jewish girls of their time. In fact, Sarah, Josephine, and Emma never did marry, spending their entire lives in a household of sisters.

Esther Lazarus, Emma’s mother, died in 1874; unfortunately, not much is known about her life. For the next eleven years, until Moses Lazarus died in 1885, most of the Lazarus sisters remained under their father’s roof.

Emma’s father, Moses Lazarus (1813–1885)

*Courtesy Antoinette Geyelin Hoar*

Moses Lazarus, a sugar refiner, striking the pose of a prosperous man of society.

*Inset*

Emma’s mother, Esther Nathan Lazarus (1819–1874)

*Courtesy Antoinette Geyelin Hoar*

Esther Nathan Lazarus, whose young cousin would become Supreme Court Justice Benjamin Cardozo, married Moses Lazarus in 1840. This photograph probably dates from a few years before her death at 55.

New York, looking south on Fifth Avenue, c. 1865

*Collection of the New-York Historical Society*

*Poems and Translations, Written between the Ages of Fourteen and Sixteen*

*By Permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University*

In November 1866, her father privately printed Emma’s first book, more than two hundred pages of original poems and translations from German and French poets. A reviewer for *The New-York Times* found the poems “chiefly remarkable. . . [for having been] written by a girl—we beg pardon, by a young lady under seventeen, and during the three years preceding her arrival at that age.”

Emma’s sister, Annie Lazarus, as a young girl

*Courtesy Antoinette Geyelin Hoar*

## *Emma Lazarus*

### Fashionable Summers

Summer found the Lazarus family at a variety of watering places, some rustic and others posh: Niagara Falls; East Haven, Connecticut; Lenox, in the Berkshires; Lake Minnewaska, New York; Staten Island. But their favorite was Newport, where they built a modest house on the “wrong” side of Bellevue Avenue, at some distance from the ocean. Decades before Newport became home to the Vanderbilts and the Astors, it was a mecca for summering intellectuals and artists.

Emma, a city girl, loved to gaze at the landscape, walk in the woods, and follow trails along the rocky coast, as her ravishing poems of nature reveal.

### *Long Island Sound*

*I see it as it looked one afternoon  
In August,—by a fresh soft breeze o’erblown.  
The swiftness of the tide, the light thereon,  
A far-off sail, white as a crescent moon.  
The shining waters with pale currents strewn,  
The quiet fishing-smacks, the Eastern cove,  
The semi-circle of its dark, green grove.  
The luminous grasses, and the merry sun  
In the grave sky; the sparkle far and wide,  
Laughter of unseen children, cheerful chirp  
Of crickets, and low lisp of rippling tide,  
Light summer clouds fantastical as sleep  
Changing unnoted while I gazed thereon.  
All these fair sounds and sights I made my own.*

“The Beeches,” the Lazarus family home in Newport, built in 1870

*Courtesy of Redwood Library and Athenaeum, Newport, RI*

Privately owned and only slightly remodeled, the house still stands in Newport.

**Thomas Wentworth Higginson**

*Courtesy of the Library of Congress*

In Newport, Emma befriended the former minister and abolitionist Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a mentor she (unknowingly) shared with the reclusive poet Emily Dickinson.

“The Beeches,” the Lazarus family home in Newport, built in 1870

*Courtesy of Redwood Library and Athenaeum, Newport, RI*

Privately owned and only slightly remodeled, the house still stands in Newport.

## Emma Lazarus

### The Civil War

No American family, however affluent, went untouched by the national ordeal of the Civil War. It came closest to the Lazarus family when they were probably away on vacation. In July 1863, antidraft rioters marched within a block of the Lazarus home before swaggering north to ignite the Colored Orphan Asylum.

In April 1865, Emma wrote her first poem about the war when her father's friend, Brevet Brigadier-General Fred Winthrop, was killed at the Battle of Five Forks. In her elegy for Winthrop, she refused to take solace in the impending Union victory:

*More hearts will break than gladden when  
The bitter struggle's past;  
The giant form of Victory must  
A giant's shadow cast.*

After Lincoln's assassination, when Americans consoled themselves by writing memorial verses, fifteen-year-old Emma instead wrote a poem in the voice of Lincoln's broken and desperate assassin, John Wilkes Booth; she followed it up with another, in the voice of Booth's bereft mother. She had begun to look beyond the pieties and icons of the Union cause, to grieve the human cost of war, an American tragedy.

After the war, she wrote a poem that imagined the postwar South as an African-American woman, rising from sleep. Her poem "Heroes" (1867) was the first to urge a reconciliation between veterans of the Union and the Confederacy. For Emma, the true "heroes" of the war were those brave enough to leave military glory behind, to embrace the ordinary joys of their daily American lives.

The Draft Riots in New York, July 1863  
Collection of *The New-York Historical Society*. From the Illustrated  
London News,  
August 15, 1863

This illustration depicts a clash  
between the military and the rioters  
on First Avenue.

Courier and Ives lithograph of Lincoln's funeral, New York, April 25, 1865  
Courtesy of *Indiana Historical Society*

Abraham Lincoln  
Courtesy of the *Library of Congress*

from *Heroes*

*But who has sung their praise,  
Not less illustrious, who are living yet?  
Armies of heroes, satisfied to pass  
Calmly, serenely from the whole world's gaze,  
And cheerfully accept, without regret,  
Their old life as it was,*

*With all its petty pain,  
Its irritating littleness and care;  
They who have scaled the mountain, with content  
Sublime, descend to live upon the plain;  
Steadfast as though they breathed the mountain-air  
Still, wheresoe'er they went.*

*They who were brave to act,  
And rich enough their action to forget;  
Who, having filled their day with chivalry,  
Withdraw and keep their simpleness intact,  
And all unconscious add more lustre yet  
Unto their victory.*

## *Emma Lazarus*

### Meeting the Emersons

**N**ot every teenage author would send her first book of poems to Ralph Waldo Emerson, the celebrated transcendentalist writer and “sage of Concord.” But when Emma did, in 1868, Emerson responded avidly, praising her poems, offering advice, and recommending books. She dedicated her next book, *Admetus* (1870), “to my friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson” and was mistaken by one reviewer for “a young woman of Concord.”

When Emerson failed to include her in his 1874 anthology, *Parnassus*, Emma shot him a blistering letter: “I find myself treated with absolute contempt in the very quarter where I had been encouraged to build my fondest hopes.” A long silence ensued. But two years later, on learning that Emerson was suffering from dementia, Emma set aside their differences and visited the Emersons in Concord in 1876. To Emerson’s daughter Ellen, she disclosed details about her family’s Jewish observance. According to Ellen, Emma had been raised “to keep the Law, and the Feast of the Passover, and the Day of Atonement. . . . She says her family are outlawed now, they no longer keep the Law, but Christian institutions don’t interest her either.” Emma had to resort to the colorful term “outlaw” to describe her secular Jewish life—a life few American Jews of her day lived.

*I would like to be appointed your professor, you being required to attend the whole term.*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson to Emma Lazarus, April 14, 1868

Emerson’s letter to Emma Lazarus, April 14, 1868

*Emma Lazarus Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University*

Emerson’s study

*Courtesy of the Library of Congress*

Ellen Tucker Emerson, his daughter, 1860

*Ralph Waldo Emerson Memorial Association Deposit,*

*Houghton Library, Harvard University*

## *Emma Lazarus*

### At the Studio

**I**n the mid-1870s, Emma befriended Helena DeKay Gilder, a painter and founder of the Art Students League, and her husband, Richard Gilder, poet and editor of *Scribner's*. On Friday nights, when observant Jews were home enjoying a Sabbath dinner, Emma could be found at "The Studio," the Gilders' converted carriage house at 103 East Fifteenth Street, meeting artists, writers, actors, and musicians, many freshly back from Europe. Among them was Helena's dashing brother, Charles DeKay, an aspiring young poet. Emma made no secret of her attraction to him, prompting Helena to confide to her diary, "Miss Lazarus . . . seems rather too cracked about Charley to please his sister." Despite this inauspicious beginning, Emma's and Helena's friendship soon blossomed, and their loving correspondence lasted the rest of Emma's life. Childless herself, Emma was fond of Helena's children, especially the playful Rodman, whom she nicknamed "The Young Bacchus."

As for Charles, he found Emma engaging and talented but altogether inappropriate as a match; unbeknownst to her, he mocked her in a satirical poem sent to his brother-in-law, Richard Gilder.

#### *Portrait of Helena DeKay* by Winslow Homer

*Courtesy of Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza*

Winslow Homer, the American painter, was a disappointed suitor of the young Helena DeKay. Homer presented the lugubrious *Portrait of Helena DeKay* to Helena in 1874 as a wedding present.

#### Richard Watson Gilder

*Courtesy of Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN*

From 1881 until his death in 1909, Gilder edited the prestigious *Century* magazine, in which Emma published her controversial essay, "The Jewish Problem" (1883), along with many other essays, reviews, and poems.

#### Helena DeKay Gilder at work

*Courtesy of Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN*

## *Emma Lazarus*

### Friendship and Hospitality

**L**ike her father, the witty and gregarious Emma Lazarus moved freely among illustrious and affluent non-Jews. At the home of banker Samuel Gray Ward and his wife Anna Ward, Bostonians who summered in the Berkshires, Emma met the philosopher William James, a Harvard friend of the Wards' son, Thomas Wren Ward. The night he met Emma Lazarus, William James told his wife that he'd fallen "violently in love again . . . with a lady I met at the Wards' last night and from whom I hope never to be separated—a poetess, a magaziness, and a Jewess, Miss Emma Lazarus . . . whose name you doubtless know. . . ." Though she preferred not to discuss it, Emma was accustomed to being regarded, even by her closest friends, as a "Jewess."

Though Emma knew few women writers, she was drawn to women artists, such as Maria Oakey Dewing, wife of the painter Thomas Dewing. Watching both Maria and Helena DeKay Gilder try to combine art and family life made her alive to the sacrifices marriage and motherhood demanded of women artists. Another close friend was the naturalist John "Jack" Burroughs. "I think you need above all things to cherish & encourage & insist upon yourself," he told her. Burroughs was delighted that Emma appreciated the works of his friend Walt Whitman; though he yearned to introduce them, the two poets never met. Whitman would have recognized Emma Lazarus as a fellow champion of a new, progressive, vital American literature, no longer dominated by male New England writers; as she put it, she saw "fresh vitality in every direction."

#### **Charlotte Cushman**

*Courtesy of the Library of Congress*

The actress Charlotte Cushman, along with her partner, the sculptor Emma Stebbins, were Newport friends; they were one of three same-sex couples Emma Lazarus befriended.

#### **William James**

*By Permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University*

A friend of both William and Henry James, Emma Lazarus was warmly welcomed by eminent non-Jews into their homes. Visiting England in the 1880s, she dined with illustrious writers, artists, and politicians such as Thomas Hardy, Robert Browning, Edward Burne-Jones, and the working-class champion and Member of Parliament, John Bright.

#### **Manuscript of "The Creation of Man," poem by Emma Lazarus**

*American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY and Newton Centre, MA*

In "The Creation of Man," Emma Lazarus became the first American to versify the recently discovered "Coyote" myth of the Miwok tribe in California. This classic "trickster" story is now widely taught in American public schools.

## *Emma Lazarus*

### A Sensation in Saratoga

In June 1877, the German-Jewish banker Joseph Seligman was refused a room in the Grand Union Hotel in Saratoga, New York. Judge Henry Hilton, the hotelier, made an invidious distinction between newly arrived German “Jews,” Sephardic “Hebrews,” and “the Adler set,” those Jews who had embraced the new Ethical Culture Society, a universalist group founded by Felix Adler, a rabbi’s son. But New York’s Jews protested with one voice, denouncing Hilton and boycotting his A. T. Stewart department store.

In the aftermath of the incident, Lazarus composed several historical poems reviling anti-Semitism. Adopting the personae of anti-Semitic inquisitors and functionaries, she set out to explore the psychology of hatred and to show how anti-Semitism deforms Jewish life. She composed a five-act play, *The Dance to Death*, about atrocities against Jews that occurred in Germany in 1359, dedicating it to the memory of George Eliot, whose novel *Daniel Deronda* had introduced her to Zionism. Eliot’s novel would have lasting reverberations in Emma’s life.

Emma Lazarus also became the preeminent American translator of the baptized German-Jewish poet Heinrich Heine. She identified with Heine’s struggle as a Jewish artist-intellectual in a non-Jewish world, but for her, baptism could never be the solution.

#### Joseph Seligman

*Collection of The New-York Historical Society*

Joseph Seligman made his fortune selling Union War Bonds and, later, by investing in railroads. His son, Edwin Seligman, a Columbia University economist who later co-founded the New School for Social Research, became a close associate of Emma Lazarus; together they would organize the Society for the Colonization and Improvement of East European Jews.

“A Hint to the Hebrews” by Frederick Burr Opper,

*Puck*, May 11, 1881

*Courtesy of the Library of Congress*

Dedication page from *Songs of a Semite: The Dance to Death, and Other Poems*, play by Emma Lazarus

*The Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute*

Like *La Juive*, Fromental Halevy’s opera of 1835, *The Dance to Death* treats a romance between a young Jewish woman and a Christian nobleman against a backdrop of violent anti-Semitism. In Lazarus’s play, however, the ordeal of the Jewish community overshadows the ordeal of its protagonists.

## *Emma Lazarus*

### “Russian Jewish Horrors”

In March 1881, Tsar Alexander II was assassinated by members of the “People’s Will,” a revolutionary group in which Jews played a minor role; nonetheless, the event set off a wave of anti-Jewish violence. From a *New-York Times* article published in January 1882, Emma Lazarus learned, along with other New Yorkers, about a rash of pogroms in more than 160 towns in Russia and parts of the Ukraine. In graphic detail, the papers described anti-Jewish violence: murders, rapes, arson, and looting.

By summer, poor and desperate Jewish refugees were streaming into New York at the rate of more than two thousand per month. After visiting the refugees in the makeshift “Schiff Refuge” on Ward’s Island, Lazarus became their tireless advocate, pleading their case to New York’s Jews, donating her own money, teaching English, and setting up job training and education through the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society. “The Jewish Question which I plunged into so wrecklessly & impulsively last Spring has gradually absorbed more & more of my mind & heart— It opens up such enormous vistas in the Past & Future, & is so palpitatingly alive at the moment . . . that it has about driven out of my thought all othersubjects,” she wrote to her friend Rose Hawthorne Lathrop, the daughter of American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne.

During the refugee crisis, Lazarus also began to publish articles about anti-Semitism in the mainstream *Century* magazine, edited by her friend Richard Gilder. For the magazine’s wide readership, Emma Lazarus was the first writer to scrutinize, publicly, both violent and genteel anti-Semitism. For most readers, her passionate, erudite, and rousing voice was their first encounter with a Jewish-American writer.

Jewish refugees en route to the United States, c. 1890

*From the Archives of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research*

#### “Plunge 4,” Photograph of a Pogrom

*From the Archives of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research*

After reading in *The New-York Times* that “the peasants have a technical name for the deliberate firing of towns – the ‘red Cock’ is said to crow,” Lazarus wrote a searing ballad about the pogroms called “The Crowing of the Red Cock,” which begins with this stanza:

“Across the Eastern sky has glowed  
The flicker of a blood-red dawn,  
Once more the clarion cock has crowed,  
Once more the sword of Christ is drawn.  
A million burning rooftrees light  
The world-wide path of Israel’s flight.”

## Emma Lazarus

### Palestine and Repatriation

**D**uring the refugee crisis, Emma Lazarus began her close connection to the *American Hebrew*, a weekly journal that aimed to instill pride and a commitment to tradition in modern American Jews. Between November 1882 and February 1883, at the invitation of editor Philip Cowen, Lazarus wrote her Epistle to the Hebrews, a weekly column in which she urged established American Jews to accept and embrace the refugees.

But the lack of response discouraged her. Soon she conceded, with some reluctance, that the only way to assure the safety of European Jews was to found a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Fifteen years before the first Zionist Congress, while the young Theodore Herzl still dreamed of becoming a playwright, Emma Lazarus advocated “Re-nationalization, Auto-Emancipation, Repatriation—call it by what name you will.”

“But the scales have fallen from our eyes,” she continued in Epistle to the Hebrews, “and we can no longer remain blind to the fact that all the boasted civilization of nineteen Christian centuries is not sufficient to protect us in the old world against a periodical recurrence of [anti-Semitism]. Woe unto us if we are again taken unawares! We shall have only ourselves to blame . . . .”

For her Zionism, Lazarus was dismissed—even ridiculed—as amessianist by traditional Jews and resented by Reform Jews, who feared that a Jewish state in Palestine would undermine the acceptance of Jews in America. Her very public position soon achieved notoriety, and the response left her chilled and isolated.

#### Gedara Stamp, 1889

*Courtesy of the Central Zionist Archives*

#### Leon Pinsker

*Courtesy of the Central Zionist Archives*

The Russian Jewish writer Leon Pinsker published his book *Auto-Emancipation* in German on January 1, 1882. Emma Lazarus cited it in her plea for a Jewish state.

#### Zikhron Ya'akov, 1890

*Courtesy of the Central Zionist Archives*

One of the first Zionist colonies in Palestine, Zikhron Ya'akov was settled by members of *Hovevei Zion* (Lovers of Zion). Leon Pinsker was the group's founder and leader.

#### Gedara, 1889

*Courtesy of the Central Zionist Archives*

Gedara, one of the first cooperative farms in Palestine, was founded in 1884 by young members of BILU, an acronym based on Isaiah 2:5: “*Beit Ya'akov Lekhu Ve-nelkha*/O House of Jacob, let us go forth!” Beset with poor crops and violence from neighboring Arabs, the founders eventually departed for other parts of Palestine. The stamp for Gedara, also known as Katra, can be seen at the upper right.

#### Rosh Pina, 1891

*Courtesy of the Central Zionist Archives*

In 1882, a group of Romanian Jews founded the first permanent Jewish settlement in Palestine. They called it Rosh Pina (Hebrew for “cornerstone”), alluding to Psalm 118:22: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.”

## *Emma Lazarus*

### Progress and Poverty

**T**he era of the refugee crisis brought yet another awakening to Emma Lazarus. She credited the reformer Henry George with opening her eyes to the Gilded-Age exploitation of the poor. After reading his book *Progress and Poverty*, she wrote, “Your work is not so much a book as an event . . . . For once prove the indisputable truth of your idea, & no person who prizes justice or common honesty can dine or sleep or read or work in peace until the monstrous wrong in which we are all accomplices be done away with.” She began to see herself as an unwitting accomplice in the “monstrous wrong” of slavery; after all, her family’s fortune—sugar money—had been made on the backs of slaves.

In the 1880s, Lazarus befriended the British utopian writer and designer William Morris. She wrote a lengthy profile of Morris and his worker-owned factory for the *Century*, but, with no explanation, Richard Gilder waited two years to publish it. Lazarus thought she knew why: she had quoted Morris saying that he was “driven toward revolution as the only hope.”

**Columbia Welcomes the Victims of German Persecution to**

**"the Asylum of the Oppressed," 1881**

*Courtesy of the Library of Congress*

**“Progress and Poverty,” published in *The New-York Times* on October 2, 1881**

The poem features an enlightened, affluent party on board a ship propelled by slaves. It is both an allegory of Gilded-Age greed and an allusion to Emma Lazarus’s own inheritance, “sugar money,” tainted by the slave trade.

**Henry George**

*Courtesy of the Library of Congress*

In 1879, Henry George wrote that the “fundamental mistake” of capitalist society lay “in treating land as private property.”

**William Morris (inset)**

*Courtesy of the Library of Congress*

**Kelmscott Manor**

*Courtesy of the Library of Congress*

Kelmscott Manor was William Morris’s country home in Gloucestershire from 1871 until his death in 1896. In 1883, Emma Lazarus visited his worker-owned factory in Surrey and praised it highly in the *Century*.

## *Emma Lazarus*

### Mother of Exiles

In 1883, when Emma Lazarus wrote her famous sonnet “The New Colossus,” she had never seen the Statue of Liberty; in fact, it was still lying in pieces in a warehouse in Paris. Knowing of Lazarus’s involvement with refugees, the writer Constance Cary Harrison asked for her help in raising money to build a pedestal for a new statue, *Liberty Enlightening the World*, a gift from the people of France to the people of the United States.

In “The New Colossus,” Lazarus took her appeal on behalf of refugees to the American public at large. The sonnet performs a double act of iconoclasm. First, it shatters the icon of empire, a massive figure striding in conquest “from land to land.” It also shatters the icon of the Enlightenment; for Emma Lazarus, light remains “imprisoned” as long as human beings are not free. As she put it in the Epistle to the Hebrews, “we are none of us free if we are not all free.”

Her sonnet briefly caught the public’s attention but quickly faded from view. Three years later, when the statue was dedicated, in pomp and ceremony, by President Cleveland, the poem was not even mentioned.

*“Think of that Goddess standing on her pedestal down yonder  
in the bay, and holding her torch out to those Russian refugees  
of yours you are so fond of visiting at Ward’s Island,” I suggested.  
The shaft sped home—her dark eyes deepened—her cheek flushed  
. . . she said not a word more, then. —Constance Cary Harrison*

“The New Colossus,” in Emma Lazarus’s own hand,  
from the “deathbed” collection  
*American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY and Newton Centre, MA*

#### Statue of Liberty

*Picture Collection, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundation*

Bartholdi’s “Liberty”—Hand and Torch  
*Courtesy of the Free Library of Philadelphia*

The hand bearing the torch of the Statue of Liberty was exhibited at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition in 1876 to raise funds for the Statue of Liberty. It was later exhibited in Madison Square, New York.

## Emma Lazarus

### A Wider World; A Closing Door

**T**hough she had dreamed all her life of traveling to Europe, Emma first went in the wake of the refugee crisis to raise funds for poor Russian Jewish refugees. In 1883, armed with letters of introduction from her friend the novelist Henry James, she made herself at home in drawing rooms and salons of affluent Jews in both London and Paris, taking time off to enjoy museums, opera, and sightseeing.

In 1885, grieving for her father who had just died and disillusioned by the poor reception her Jewish advocacy had met with in America, Lazarus considered settling in Europe. Accompanied by her favorite sister, Annie, she sojourned in England, France, and Holland until in December she finally reached Italy, where she became “drunk with beauty.”

But by the following summer, back in England, she was suffering recurrent fevers and lassitude caused by Hodgkin’s disease. Unable to compose, she made a collection of her best poems, with “The New Colossus” as the leading entry—a prescient gesture, since it would be four more decades before it became famous. Mortally ill, she sailed back to New York in July 1887. She died at home on November 19 at age thirty-seven.

Obituaries appeared in major American newspapers such as *The New-York Times* and the *New York Herald*, as well as in papers abroad. The *American Hebrew* printed a special memorial issue, adding nearly two dozen pages full of memorial tributes by writers and rabbis, philanthropists and civic leaders. Emma Lazarus’s severe intelligence, her accomplished poetry, and her acts on behalf of the refugees—advocacy, teaching, and organizing—all drew high praise. Described as a “scourge” of anti-Semitism and as a “Sibyl Judaica,” she was compared to the Maccabees, Miriam, Deborah, and Esther. One rabbi even compared her to Joan of Arc, “who waved our flag and marched before us into battle.”

That she had been an ardent though unobservant Jew was remarked on widely and delicately. But the sole mention of her Zionism fell to Philip Cowen; for most, it remained an embarrassment, a quixotic dream.

*To me, it is so overpoweringly beautiful, strange &  
significant, that from the very first instant I was crushed  
by it, & have continued to feel the spell of it all, more &  
more profoundly with each hour of my stay.*

—Emma Lazarus on seeing the Colosseum in Rome

#### Emma Lazarus’s home

*Photo credit: Jeff Meltz*

As was customary, Emma Lazarus’s funeral was held in the parlor of her final New York home, a handsome brownstone at 18 West Tenth Street.

#### Emma Lazarus

*Courtesy of Antoinette Geyelin Hoar*

By the spring of 1887, back in Paris, Lazarus was so ill that her sister Annie took over her correspondence. “Emma holds her own wonderfully,” Annie told Helena DeKay Gilder, “in spite of all her afflictions—every possible one I should say that can come to us in this world.”

Table of contents for “deathbed” collection,

with “The New Colossus” on page one

*American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY and Newton  
Centre, MA*

## *Emma Lazarus*

### The Lazarus Legacy

**B**y 1900, though the statue had itself become an icon, “The New Colossus” was rarely invoked; it had dropped out of anthologies and was all but forgotten. In 1903, to honor and remember both poem and poet, Emma Lazarus’s family and friends made a gift to the nation of a bronze plaque inscribed with “The New Colossus.” It was installed inside the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, where it remains to this day.

After the 1920s, following the passage of laws restricting immigration, pro-immigrationists took the sonnet as their watchword and made it famous. Countless schoolchildren memorized it. Alfred Hitchcock ended his wartime *Saboteur* (1942) in the crown of the statue, with his heroine quoting the sonnet to an enemy agent. In 1949, while refugees from war-torn Europe arrived in great numbers, Irving Berlin gave the famous final lines of the poem a schmaltzy musical setting that was sung in synagogues and churches, town halls and public schools.

The words Emma Lazarus gave to the Statue of Liberty have inspired preachers and politicians, poets and novelists, historians, cartoonists, graphic artists, and painters. The words of her resonant, beautifully crafted sonnet have become bywords in popular culture. Ironically, the more famous the poem became, the less often its author was mentioned.

**Scene from Irving Berlin’s musical *Miss Liberty***  
*Broadway, Imperial Theatre, July 15, 1949–April 8, 1950;*  
*music and lyrics by Irving Berlin, book by Robert E. Sherwood,*  
*directed by Moss Hart, choreographed by Jerome Robbins*  
*Courtesy of Photofest*

**Scene from *Saboteur* (1942), directed by Alfred Hitchcock**  
*Shown from left: Norman Lloyd, Robert Cummings © Universal Pictures*  
*Courtesy of Photofest*

In the climactic scene of Hitchcock’s film, Barry Kane (Cummings), an airline factory worker falsely accused of sabotage, confronts the real saboteur, a fascist spy played by Lloyd, in the torch of the Statue of Liberty.

**Political cartoon protesting toxic-waste dumping**  
*Courtesy of [www.Cartoonstock.com](http://www.Cartoonstock.com)*

## *Emma Lazarus*

### A Voice for Liberty

*We are none of us free if we are not all free.* —Emma Lazarus

**M**any have been inspired by Emma Lazarus, though only some have known it. In the early decades of the twentieth century, especially at times of crisis for Jews and immigrants, her name was often invoked in support of her most cherished causes: denouncing anti-Semitism, promoting Zionism, and training and educating refugees. In 1941, the Emma Lazarus Federation, a progressive women's organization, was founded to further her legacy. "The Emmas," as they were called, demonstrated for civil rights and women's rights and protested the Vietnam War, nuclear armament, and the use of baby formula in third-world countries. In Tel Aviv, they built a day-care center for children from poor families.

While the words of "The New Colossus" are often quoted at times of national celebration, they have taken on new luster these days, as we celebrate our multicultural heritage. And whenever controversies arise about immigration laws and their enforcement, the words of her poem—"Give me your tired, your poor / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free"—are hurled like salvos on both sides. They are words of unity and words of contestation; words of consequence.

Today, Emma Lazarus's legacy is far greater than her sonnet. Though she has been with us, in Liberty's shadow, for more than a century, she is now emerging as a person whose life and work left our country forever changed. She showed America how to become more generous, more noble, and more just. And her vision of American Judaism as a proud and pluralistic tradition, inspired by American democracy, was prophetic. Her passion for justice lives on whenever we Americans dedicate ourselves to welcoming immigrants, training and educating the poor, and celebrating diversity.

Emma Lazarus gave not only a voice to the Statue of Liberty, but a conscience to America.

Emma Lazarus, c. 1886  
*University of Virginia*

Emma Lazarus Federation  
*Courtesy of the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives*

The Emma Lazarus Federation rallies for civil rights at the March on Washington, on August 28, 1963.

*Emma Lazarus: Voice of Liberty, Voice of Conscience* was curated by Esther Schor and produced by Nextbook, New York City, in association with the American Library Association Public Programs Office, Chicago. Esther Schor, a poet and professor of English at Princeton University, is the author of *Emma Lazarus*, published as part of the Jewish Encounters series by Nextbook/Schocken. She is also the author of *The Hills of Holland: Poems* and *Bearing the Dead: The British Culture of Mourning from the Enlightenment to Victoria*. Her essays and reviews have appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *New York Times Book Review*, and the *Forward*. She lives in Princeton, New Jersey.

The Jewish Encounters book series is produced by Nextbook Press, in conjunction with Schocken/Random House. This critically acclaimed series features such prominent authors as Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright David Mamet and former U.S. Poet laureate Robert Pinsky writing about notable individuals, issues, or events in Jewish history. Current titles cover philosopher Baruch Spinoza, boxing champion Barney Ross, poet Emma Lazarus, and other figures, while the latest releases address subjects ranging from the Jewish body to the American song-book. Nextbook Press is a project of Nextbook Inc., a nonprofit organization that also publishes Tablet Magazine, offering insightful features, interviews, and essays by today's finest writers. To learn more, visit [www.nextbookpress.com](http://www.nextbookpress.com).

The mission of the ALA Public Programs Office is to foster cultural programming as an integral part of library service. To learn more, visit [www.ala.org/publicprograms](http://www.ala.org/publicprograms).

Exhibition Curator: Esther Schor

Exhibition Design: Chester Design Associates, Chicago