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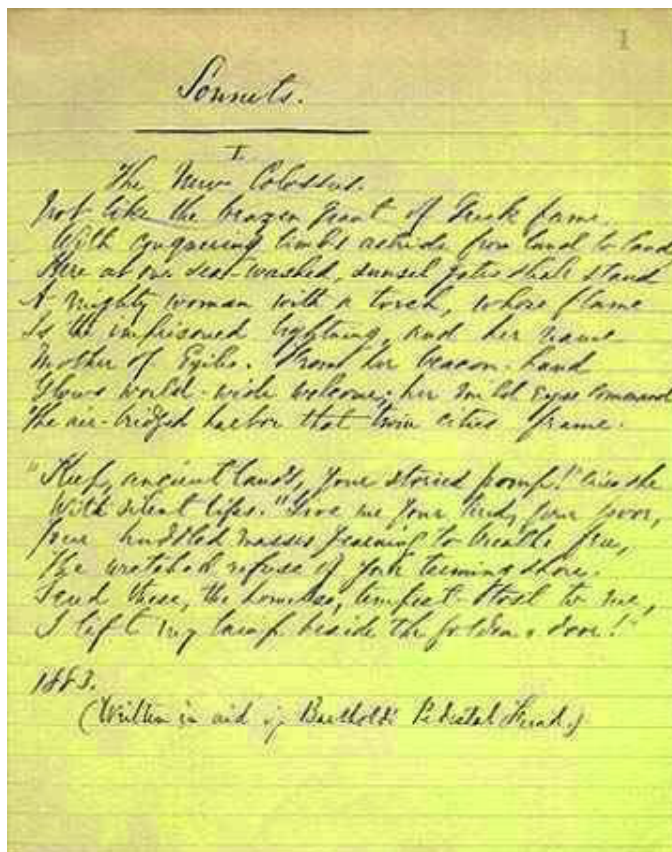
## Lazarus and Liberty in Jerusalem

Dr. Judith Rosenbaum | [Text and the City](#)

*A series of posts from The Bronfman Fellowships' 2014 Faculty Members.*

As we waited by the El Al gate at JFK airport, my son excitedly pointed out every guy wearing a kippah – “Look! There’s a Jewish person!” Despite our explanation that this was not exactly noteworthy in New York on the way to Israel, nothing could quell his enthusiasm. For him, traveling to Israel is a journey into Jewish peoplehood and a celebration of connection.

Though I share elements of my son’s joyful embrace of Israel’s Jewish intensity, for me, Israel is where I also feel the tensions of peoplehood. In addition, it’s where I feel my Americanness most profoundly and uncomfortably. Though I traverse the streets of Jerusalem with familiarity and insist on speaking Hebrew with shopkeepers and waiters, in Israel I’m forced to notice that I share a lot in common with the baseball cap-wearing, English-speaking, American Express-wielding tourists marching up and down Emek Refaim Street. My Zionist experience – even on the streets of Israel – still involves wrestling with my American Jewish identity.



The New Colossus, from Emma Lazarus' Copy Book. 1883.

So perhaps it is fitting that on the first day of the fellowship in Israel this summer, we will gather to celebrate the Fourth of July with the traditional barbeque. For as much as we've come together in Israel to explore the meaning, challenges, and responsibilities of Jewish peoplehood in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are a group of North American Jews who need to figure out our particular place and contribution to this larger project.

One of my guides and inspirations in this complex intertwining of Americanness and Jewishness is the poet Emma Lazarus (1849-1887). She is best known as the author of the sonnet "The New Colossus" that graces the base of the Statue of Liberty:

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.

"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she  
With silent lips. "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!"

Lazarus's sonnet, written in 1883 for an auction to raise money for the construction of the Statue's pedestal, did not immediately capture the public's imagination and was, in fact, forgotten for almost 20 years. In 1903, sixteen years after Lazarus's death, it was engraved on a plaque on the pedestal. Despite this delayed impact, it transformed the purpose and image of the Statue of Liberty from its original intention as a symbol of the shared values of France and the United States, to the "Mother of Exiles" welcoming immigrants — the quintessential symbol of America's promise.

This story is likely familiar to Americans who studied the Statue of Liberty in elementary school. But the broader story of Emma Lazarus is less well known. As one of the first successful Jewish American authors, Lazarus was not only part of the New York literary



Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

elite but also a member of the Sephardic Jewish elite of New York City, a community descended from America's first Jewish settlers. Though her family worked hard to assimilate into upper class Christian society, they were also proud of their Jewish ancestry.

Lazarus, in particular, grappled with her Jewishness and her outsider status as a "Jewess" among Christian society (as well as a woman writer in male literary circles). She treated Jewish themes in her work, translating the German Jewish poet Heinrich Heine and medieval Hebrew poets from German to English. She challenged Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem "The Jewish Cemetery at Newport" which depicts a community dead and gone with her own version, "In the Jewish Synagogue at Newport," which insists that "the sacred shrine is holy yet."

But a new surge of anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe in the early 1880s and the subsequent beginning of a massive wave of Russian immigrants to America's shores sparked Lazarus's passion and tipped her thoughtful literary reflections into advocacy. Unlike many of her class and community, she felt a sense of connection to and responsibility for these refugees, despite their differences. "Until we are all free, we are none of us free," she wrote, in her "Epistle to the Hebrews." She volunteered with the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society and founded the (short-lived) Society for the Improvement and Colonization of East European Jews. Years before Herzl uttered the term "Zionism," Lazarus began writing about the need for a Jewish homeland.

Moving between Christian and Jewish communities, Lazarus interrogated her own understanding and experience of ancient and modern, Jew and American, freedom and

oppression; through her writing and advocacy, she encouraged others to do the same. That Lazarus could create a lasting symbol of an inclusive American ideal reminds us of our own power and responsibility to shape our communities through our hard-earned insights about place and belonging. Though we find ourselves in contexts probably unimaginable to Lazarus – hailing from diverse communities and sharing an Independence Day meal on a green Jerusalem lawn in the modern Jewish state – her message weathers time as well as that steadfast Statue, and her challenge – to weave together Jewish and American, enlivening both – is not so different from our own.

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