

## **Lady Liberty**

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Here is a text version of my Yom Kippur sermon, 5770 - posted 9/21/2018 - "The Human Side of the Coin"

One hundred and thirty two years ago next month - on October 28th, 1886 - the Statue of Liberty was dedicated on a day of great ceremony and celebration. There was a parade through Manhattan that hundreds of thousands of people attended, followed by a nautical parade of dignitaries. The ceremony itself, taking place at the foot of the great statue, was presided over by none other than President Grover Cleveland. It was a day that symbolized the hope and promise and freedom for which America would come to be known around the world. Lady Liberty!

It wasn't until 17 years later - in the year 1903 - that the poem 'The New Colossus' was installed at the base of what had become by that time America's most famous and symbolic statue. Written in sonnet form, the 14 lines of the poem captured Lady Liberty's symbolism, and also perfectly described the sense of America as a place of refuge, safety, and freedom. I expect some of you probably memorized these lines at some point in school, but it is worth repeating them this morning:

(Continued on next page)

## **"The New Colossus" by Emma Lazarus**

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!"

The sea washed sunset gates of the poem are the Hudson and East Rivers, framing Manhattan on her east and west sides. The imprisoned lightning? The torch in Lady Liberty's raised right hand, lit by electric light. The twin cities? New York is obviously one - what about the other? Brooklyn of course, the true center of the world! And the huddled masses are the thousands upon thousands of immigrants who came to these shores through the gates of Ellis Island. A nearly perfect description in words of what the statue had come to mean to our country, and to the world. America, a land of freedom, opportunity, and welcome to all.

The New Colossus was written by a Sephardic Jew named Emma Lazarus. Lazarus lived a largely secular life until she was in her early 30s when she read the great George Eliot novel *Daniel Deronda*, about a young Jew who suddenly discovers his Jewish identity and decides to devote himself to the Jewish people. She saw in that narrative a reflection of her own life, and from that point forward Emma Lazarus began to devote herself to Jewish causes. She was particularly interested in the eastern

European Jews who came to this country in the 1880s and 90s. She was moved by their stories of hardship and suffering, combined with their deep faith and the sense of hope they maintained that they could build a better life here in America. Lazarus saw her poem as an expression of gratitude for the past, for her own ancestors who had made their way to this country and the goodness that they found here, and she also saw it as expression of hope, that future generations of immigrants would be welcomed to these shores, where they could one day build lives of dignity and opportunity.

My Bubbe was one of those immigrants. She arrived on these shores in 1903, the very same year the New Colossus poem was affixed to the Statue of Liberty. She was a strong willed woman, feisty, tough as nails when she needed to be, determined, hard working, and fiercely protective of the people she loved. She married my Zayde - also an immigrant - as a young woman. Together they ran a series of small neighborhood grocery stores here in Baltimore, often with the help of their four sons. As immigrants they were vulnerable and unsure of how to make their way in this new country. They moved forward and made a life in the only way they knew how - they worked hard, they saved every penny they made, and they did everything, as they would have said, for the kinder, for their family.

My Bubbe was proud of three things in her life - she was proud to be an American, understanding this country as a place of opportunity where she ultimately was able to make a good life. She was proud of her family, and in the course of her 98 years was blessed to welcome not only 11 grandchildren into the world, but great grandchildren as well. And she was intensely proud to be a Jew. Her commitment to our tradition left a deep impression through the generations of my family, it still resonates today, and there is no question in my mind without my Bubbe's influence I would not be a rabbi.

I expect her story sounds familiar to you, and that there is someone in your family - a parent or grandparent or great-grandparent - whose life experiences were very similar to my Bubbe's. And it is this shared Jewish experience that Emma Lazarus connected to. That we Jews are wanderers, often in the course of our long history looking for a place to call home. That it is enormously difficult to find that place, and it is incredibly precious once it has been found. That is what my Bubbe and Zayde found here in Baltimore - a true home, a place where they could work hard, raise their boys, and stay committed to their roots without being afraid. I've often thought about them as the debate about immigration and immigrants has taken place in our country over the last two years. From DACA, which is still unresolved, to the question of which countries we are willing to accept immigrants from, to the question of numbers, and who ultimately gets in and who does not, to the policy, now revoked, of separating illegal immigrants from their children.

Last night at Kol Nidre we prayed the line םע ללפתהל ןיריתמ ונא - on this most sacred of nights, let us remember those who are rarely remembered, and let us welcome them in to our community. Those who are on the outside, those who are marginalized, those who do not have a voice. It is one of the most striking lines in the entire Mahzor, and a distillation of a classic Jewish value. In the Torah there are no fewer than 46 references to the גר, the 'stranger', each of them a reminder of the responsibility the community has to care for those who find themselves on the margins of society. And there are two reasons why the tradition is so concerned with this ideal. The first is it understands the Jewish experience to be that of the stranger. Jews know what it feels like to be ostracized, Jews know what it feels like to be marginalized, Jews know what it feels like to be subject to quotas, and Jews know what it feels like to be expelled from a country. And so if any people should have an extra sensitivity to the stranger, it should be the Jewish people.

But the other reason is that Judaism understands that the way a society treats its strangers, its weakest members, is a measure of that culture's quality and morality. I am not suggesting that our immigration system should let in every person who wants to make their home in the United States. But what I am suggesting is that regardless of whether or not someone is admitted to the country, how we treat them matters. And that is what this debate is about. It is not about numbers and quotas. It is about values and morals. It is about what we want this country to symbolize and stand for. It is about what ideals we hope the citizens of this country believe in. It really is, at the end of the day, about whether we still subscribe to the ideals and values that are so elegantly and beautifully laid out in the 14 lines of that sonnet that Emma Lazarus composed 135 years ago.

You see, how we treat the stranger - the immigrant, the foreigner, the poor and disenfranchised - those of other races and religions and beliefs - how we treat them says a lot more about us than it does about them. And in every case, in every interaction, we can choose to treat them with respect and dignity and decency - like the human beings that they are. And when we don't, it is our own respect and dignity and decency and values that are diminished.

115 years ago my Bubbe was a stranger coming to these shores. How would she have fared in today's world, with these debates raging through our society? Would she have been accepted or turned away? Would she have been separated from her parents? Would she have been treated with dignity and decency, would her humanity have been recognized and honored, would she have been respected? Her story is the Jewish story shared by so many of our families. And those questions - about decency

and dignity and humanity and morality and values - those are Jewish questions, questions that as Jews we should constantly be asking.

On that October day 132 years ago when the Statue of Liberty was dedicated, President Cleveland was the keynote speaker at the ceremonies. In his remarks that day he explained Lady Liberty's symbolism with this hope: "her stream of light shall pierce the darkness of ignorance and man's oppression until Liberty enlightens the world." It is that same aspiration that we Jews remember three times each day in the last paragraph of the amidah. We recited the words just a few minutes ago, and will do so three more times today - כי באור פניך נתת לנו ה' אלוקינו תורת חיים ואהבת חסד - in the Light of Your countenance, You gave us, God, a Torah of life, and a love of kindness, righteousness, blessing, compassion, life, and peace.

May that light and those values guide us and our nation in the months and years ahead.