

AJ RH Two 5779 — Sermon by Rabbi Barry A. Kenter

“Who lives? Who dies? Who tells your story?”

Rosh Hashanah, commemorating the traditional birth of humankind, annually reminds us in Lin Manuel Miranda’s words, “History has its eyes on you. Who lives? Who dies? Who tells your story?” At the dawn of a new Jewish calendar year, here we are just across the road from Philadelphia proper, 5.2 miles north from where Clara Berman Dickstein, an immigrant from Russia, raised her sons down Old York Road at 3860 Tenth Street, in Philadelphia’s 43rd Ward. Philadelphia, birthplace of democracy, birthplace of America, birthplace of freedom, birthplace of the nation, birthplace of liberty, “who lives? who dies? who tells your story?” History has its eyes on us, which story? Whose story? What is our narrative? Whose narrative is it? Who tells it?

One narrative is that of the Know Nothings; the other of a contemporary 19th century woman whose early life nearly spanned the same time period.

There were rules about joining the secret society known as the Order of the Star Spangled Banner (OSSB), a successor to the Order of United American Mechanics, originally called the Union of Workers, an anti-Catholic American Nativist organization founded in Philadelphia amid the anti-alien riots of 1844–45. A pureblooded pedigree of Protestant Anglo-Saxon stock and the rejection of all Catholics, above all, members of the clandestine organization weren’t allowed to talk about it. If asked anything by outsiders, they would respond with, “I know nothing.”

At its height in the 1850s, the Know Nothing Party included more than 100 elected congressmen, eight governors, a controlling share of a half-dozen state legislatures from Massachusetts to California, and thousands of local politicians. Party members supported deportation of foreign beggars and criminals; a 21-year naturalization period for immigrants; mandatory Bible reading in schools; and the elimination of all Catholics from public office. They wanted to restore their vision of what America should look like with temperance, Protestantism, self-reliance, with American nationality and its work ethic enshrined as the nation’s highest values. As cultures clashed, fear exploded and conspiracies abounded.

The Know Nothings emerged out of what seemed to be a political vacuum. It was the failing Whig party and a faltering Democratic Party and their inability to articulate, to the satisfaction of the great percentage of their electorate, answers to the problems that were associated with everyday life. The Know Nothings displayed three patterns common to all other nativist movements: the embrace of nationalism, religious discrimination, in this case, Protestants against Catholics; and lastly, a working-class identity exerting itself in conjunction with the rhetoric of upper-class political leaders. Appeals to ethnic hatreds allowed men whose livelihoods depended on winning elections to sidestep the more complex and politically dangerous divisions of class.¹

Emma Lazarus was the fourth of seven children born to Moses Lazarus, a wealthy Jewish merchant, and sugar refiner, and Esther Nathan, July 22, 1849. One of her great-grandfathers on the Lazarus side was from Germany; the rest of her Lazarus and Nathan ancestors were originally

¹ “How the 19th-Century Know Nothing Party Reshaped American Politics From xenophobia to conspiracy theories, the Know Nothing party launched a nativist movement whose effects are still felt today” by Lorraine Boissoneault, Smithsonian.com, January 26, 2017.

from Portugal, residing in New York long before the American Revolution, being among the first Jewish emigrants to the United States. A sonnet she wrote in 1883 to raise money for the construction of a pedestal for the Statue of Liberty, is also part of the American narrative:

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
Glows 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!"

"History has its eyes on you. Who lives? Who dies? Who tells your story?"

The themes are consistent, actors still the same, but with different names. As the late Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary and eminent historian Gerson D. Cohen often pointed out, "History doesn't repeat itself. Human nature does." Nativism never left, and the legacy of the Know Nothings has been apparent in policies aimed at each new wave of immigrants. In 1912, the House Committee on Immigration debated over whether Italians could be considered "full-blooded Caucasians" and immigrants coming from southern and eastern Europe were considered "biologically and culturally less intelligent." From the end of the 19th century to the first third of the 20th, Asian immigrants were excluded from naturalization based on their non-white status. People from a variety of groups and affiliations, ranging from the Ku Klux Klan to the Progressive movement, old-line New England aristocrats and the eugenics movement, were among the strange bedfellows in the campaign to stop immigration that was deemed undesirable by old-stock white Americans. The passage of immigration restrictions in the early 1920s ended virtually all immigration except from northwestern Europe. The nativism, populism, and isolationism that grew out of World War I and the Great Depression, evoked counter narratives, one provided by the 32nd president of the United States.

Ironically, 80 years ago, on April 21, 1938, almost exactly one year before the rejection of Marian Anderson's request to perform a concert in the DAR's Constitution Hall and her subsequent Easter morning concert at the Lincoln Memorial, Franklin D. Roosevelt, had addressed the Daughters of the American Revolution:

"... how glad I am to avail myself of this opportunity, to tell you how proud I am, as a Revolutionary descendant, to greet you. I thought of preaching on a text, but I shall not. I shall only give you the text and I shall not preach on it. I think I can afford to give you the text because it so happens, through no fault of my own, that I am descended from a number of people who came over in the Mayflower. More than that, every one of my ancestors on both sides—and when you go back four generations or five generations it means thirty-two or sixty-four of them—every single one of them,

without exception, was in this land in 1776. And there was only one Tory among them. The text is this: Remember, remember always that all of us, and you and I especially, are descended from immigrants and revolutionists.

“I am particularly glad to know that today you are making this fine appeal to the youth of America. To these rising generations, to our sons and grandsons and great-grandsons, we cannot overestimate the importance of what we are doing in this year, in our own generation, to keep alive the spirit of American democracy. The spirit of opportunity is the kind of spirit that has led us as a nation — not as a small group but as a nation — to meet the very great problems of the past.

We look for a younger generation that is going to be more American than we are. We are doing the best that we can and yet we can do better than that, we can do more than that, by inculcating in the boys and girls of this country today some of the underlying fundamentals, the reasons that brought our immigrant ancestors to this country....”

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Narrative One. Philadelphia, city of brotherly love, haven and sanctuary for runaway slaves, great center of Abolition, St. Paul’s Elkins Park, oldest church in the Cheltenham area, started in 1851 and built in the early 1860s by the generous vision of financier and abolitionist, Jay Cooke, who hid escaped slaves at an Underground Railroad Station on his estate for years.

Narrative Two: Philadelphia, home to the Ben Franklin Hotel, denier of accommodations. On April 15, 1947, Jackie Robinson broke baseball’s color barrier. He was met with racial slurs, not only in the South. Infamously, when playing the Phillies a week later in Brooklyn, many Philadelphia players taunted Robinson. Phillies manager Ben Chapman initially threatened to boycott the series, changing his mind only after realizing that not playing the games would result in a forfeit. When the Dodgers traveled to Philadelphia the next month the entire team was refused entry at the Ben Franklin Hotel because of Robinson. They moved to the Warwick Hotel, where they were welcomed. The city publicly apologized to Robinson's widow, Rachel, 69 years later, in 2016.

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Is our Narrative to be one of Walls or Windows? While many of us tend to focus on the Western Wall, the kotel, the remains of the outer retaining wall on which rested the foundations of the Temple, our Rabbis focused on the Temple’s windows, not its walls. They taught that the windows in the Temple were broad on the inside and narrow on the outside [*Menahot* 86b]:

(מלכים א'ו, ד) ויעש לבית חלוני שקופים אטומים תנא שקופין [מ בפנים] ואטומים [מבחוץ] לא לאורה אני צריך

Solomon “made for the House, windows narrow and broad” (I Kings 6:4). Our Sages taught in a baraita: Typically, windows are constructed to wide toward the inside so that the light from the outside can be dispersed throughout the room. For the Temple, God said: Make the windows narrow within and broad without, as I do not require its illumination. On the contrary, something like the design of a lighthouse, the light of the Temple is to be radiated outward.

Based on the example of Daniel’s place of prayer in which, the Bible says, “his windows were open in his upper chamber” (Daniel 6:11), the Talmud equally requires that synagogues always have

windows (BT *Berakhot* 31a). Rav Kook, the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of British Mandatory Palestine, understood this rabbinic requirement of windows in a synagogue to teach us that during our prayers we must be aware of the outside world. A Jew must not withdraw from the world and pray only for his own needs.

Pirke Avot begins:

מֹשֶׁה קִבֵּל תּוֹרָה מִסִּינַי, וּמָסָרָהּ לַיהוֹשֻׁעַ, וַיְהוֹשֻׁעַ לְזִקְנִים, וְזִקְנִים לְנָבִיאִים, וְנָבִיאִים מִסְּרוּהָ לְאַנְשֵׁי כְנֶסֶת הַגְּדוּלָּה. הֵם אָמְרוּ שְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים, הָיוּ מְתוּנִים בַּדִּין, וְהִעֲמִידוּ תַלְמִידִים הַרְבֵּה, וַעֲשׂוּ סִיג לַתּוֹרָה:

Moshe received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Yehoshua, and Yehoshua to the Elders, and the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly. They said three things: Be deliberate in judgment, raise up many disciples and make a fence for the Torah.

And yet, Abraham Joshua Heschel cautions us against walls and fences: build them too high the plant dies; build a wall, the spirit dies....: “there is a suspension of man’s sense of the holy. His mind is becoming a wall instead of being a door open to what is larger than the scope of his comprehension. He locks himself out of the world by reducing all reality to mere things and all relationship to mere manipulation.”²

In his well-known and oft-cited “Mending Wall,” Robert Frost wrote,

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
...
There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, “Good fences make good neighbors.”
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
“Why do they make good neighbors? ...
Before I built a wall I’d ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.
Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,
That wants it down.” ...
He will not go behind his father’s saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, “Good fences make good neighbors.”

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In one of the most recent Oprah Book Club selections, *The Sun Does Shine: How I Found Life and Freedom on Death Row* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2018), Anthony Ray Hinton tells of how he

² *Who is Man?* Chapter 5.

created a book club well into his 30-year tenure on Death Row at Alabama's Holman State Prison for a crime he did not commit. After reading James Baldwin's *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, one of the participants, Ed, raised in an abusive racist home, observes "... I like how you think the people are all a certain way, but then you find out their stories, their histories, and you see how they got to be that way. Yes, maybe their father is an ass, but he's had some loss, and it seems like the more you know of their story, they more you kind of forgive them for what they do. You know? It's kind of like life here, right? We all got a story that led to another story and led to some choices and big mistakes. All these characters made mistakes, you know? Nobody is living this life perfect.".... [152]

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Rosh Hashanah juxtaposes two narratives, that of Hagar and that of Sarah. Shared but distinct narratives. Shared father; two mothers circling, prodding, protecting, preparing. Ishmael's mother ever in the shadows; Isaac's as well. Brother, companion, confidante, friend perhaps, play together, fool around? First-born banished, exiled, removed. Sacrificed. A sheltering bush; refuge, protection. Maternal pain. Son regained, closely held, embraced. A well, suddenly seen. Always there; now revealed. Refreshed, revived. Resurrected?

A second only child. Hovering, protective mother. Fearful, anxious, nervous for and about him. Laughter's child. A test. A trial. Visionary mountain seen from afar. A climb. Limestone, dolomite, sun and light sensitive. Beige, grey, yellow, green gold, pink, blood red, bone. They lift their eyes to the mountains. Which one? Wood shouldered, fire kindled and carried, knife readied. And the offering? Another son, another sacrifice. Trauma ever-present. Another son, another bush? Another naming. The mount of seeing. What seen? What revealed?

A mountain and a well. Both remind of aborted sacrifice. Father leaves. Son remains behind. Does he recall stumbling down the mountain, running, escaping, hiding, never once seeking his father? His mother dead. Funeral without son, unspoken unexperienced unrealized grief. Fear, trembling, trauma, pain, anger, silence. Two brothers, trauma-shared, unite to bury a shared father.

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Recalling Egypt and perhaps the Egyptian, Hagar, the Torah mandates:

Exodus 12:49 and Leviticus 24:22 — "There shall be one law for the native and for the resident alien who resides among you."

Exodus 22:21 — "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien; for you were aliens in the land of Egypt."

Leviticus 19:9-10 and 23:22 — "You shall not strip your vineyards bare...leave them for the poor and the resident alien."

Leviticus 19:33-34 and 24:22 — When the alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God."

Leviticus 24:23 — “With me you are but resident aliens and tenants.”

The Torah insists on windows in our souls looking out onto the world. There can be no wall. Narratives intertwine. The laws and narrative traditions of a culture cannot be critically separated.

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Some four years after the founding of Aduth Jeshurun, Abraham Lincoln delivered his first Inaugural (March 4, 1861). Speaking to a country practically at war, torn by shared but distinctly differently understood narratives, he said:

“Physically speaking, we can not separate. We can not remove our respective sections from each other nor build an impassable wall between them. A husband and wife may be divorced and go out of the presence and beyond the reach of each other, but the different parts of our country can not do this. They can not but remain face to face, and intercourse, either amicable or hostile, must continue between them... This country, with its institutions, belongs to the people who inhabit it. Whenever they shall grow weary of the existing Government, they can exercise their *constitutional* right of amending it or their *revolutionary* right to dismember or overthrow it....

“The Chief Magistrate derives all his authority from the people... His duty is to administer the present Government as it came to his hands and to transmit it unimpaired by him to his successor.

...

“By the frame of the Government under which we live this same people have wisely given their public servants but little power for mischief, and have with equal wisdom provided for the return of that little to their own hands at very short intervals. While the people retain their virtue and vigilance no Administration by any extreme of wickedness or folly can very seriously injure the Government in the short space of four years....

“... We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”

Gunnar Myrdal’s, one of the great observers of America, a 20th century de Tocqueville and author of the 1946 classic, *An American Dilemma*, which details the persistence of racism, bias and bigotry in America, was infused with admiration for this country. Above his desk in Stockholm hung two framed documents, the Declaration of Independence and a quote from Lincoln: “To sin by silence when they should protest makes cowards of men.” Observed Myrdal, “I’ve always been optimistic about America. Why? ... Because ideals mean something. They mean something special in America.”

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