



From the AJHS Archives

A one day lesson about Emma Lazarus, “The New Colossus,” and the Statue of Liberty
Time requirement: 50 - 60 minutes

Resource Overview:

The American Jewish Historical Society is the oldest ethnic, cultural archive in the United States. The AJHS has an unparalleled collection on the Lazarus family, as well as material on immigration, anti-Semitism and freedom of religion. The American Jewish Historical Society, steward of the Emma Lazarus papers, has now digitized her work and make it available to the public. In an era that can sometimes flatten history, our collections allow us to show that history is complicated, people waver over ideas and convictions, and students have a place in that interpretation.

This guide provides teachers with further contextualizing and interpretive information to aid in the facilitation student analysis.

Essential Question:

- How does historical context shape the art created in a particular era?
- How can art help express and define a nation’s identity?

Materials:

Powerpoint presentation, “From The AJHS Archives”
Sources for Students Printable Primary Source Sets

Notes for the teacher:

The “Sources for Students” document includes 6 thematic sets of sources that we named “Chapters”. We suggest breaking the students up into groups of 4-5 students. Each group should be given one set, or “Chapter”, to analyze in their small group. We then suggest having each small group share out with the full class what they learned from their sources.

These source set are designed to accompany the three-day lesson, for more information about the three day lesson structure and materials, visit our website.

Teacher's Notes

Chapter 1: What was it like to grow up as Emma Lazarus?

Emma Lazarus is a descendent of the Seixas and Nathan families. The Seixas family was a part of the first Jewish community in colonial America dating back to 1654. These 23 Sephardic Jewish refugees from the Inquisition in Brazil who arrived in New York. Despite attempts to send them away, they founded the first American synagogue, Shearith Israel.

Simon Nathan (1746-1822) was the first member of the Nathan family to arrive to the colonies in 1773 and supported the revolution during the British occupation. He helped ship goods to the colonists from Jamaica, and then moved on to New Orleans, then Virginia and Philadelphia before finally moving to New York City. From 1786 to 1790 Simon Nathan was a trustee of Shearith Israel congregation. During his time in Philadelphia he married Grace Seixas, the daughter of Isaac Mendes Seixas and Rachel Levy.

Emma Lazarus was born on July 22, 1849 in New York City. She was the fourth of seven children born to Moses and Esther Nathan Lazarus. The Nathan family was very wealthy due to their involvement in the sugar refining business. It is important to note that the sugar industry, including Moses Lazarus's business, relied on the use of slave labor. Moses Lazarus very much wanted his family to be accepted in the highest circles of secular society. While Emma's uncle Jacques Judah Lyons led Shearith Israel for 36 years, Emma's parents were less active in the synagogue.

While not much is known about Emma Lazarus's early years, we know she was most likely tutored at home in her father's library. She would have studied German and French and studied the arts, literature and history, and many other subjects. We do know at an early age she began writing and translating poems.

Emma Lazarus came of age during the Civil War, and in July of 1863 antidraft rioters marched down streets just blocks away from Emma's brownstone home. These rioters would continue north until they arrived at the Colored Orphan Asylum and set it on fire. Emma composed multiple poems during and after the War.

Emma's father facilitated the publishing of her first book of original poems and translations when she was just a teenager in 1866. She then sent the book to Ralph Waldo Emerson, who would become a mentor to Emma. Through correspondence he would offer praise and pointed criticism. They had a falling out in 1874 after Emerson did not include Emma in his poetry anthology entitled *Parnassus*, but Emma later went to visit Emerson after she learned he was suffering from dementia.

Chapter 2: What were the conversations around immigration in Emma's time?

Some historians mark Emma's lifetime as a turning point in the composition of immigrants to the United States. Unlike previous decades in which the majority of newcomers were from Western Europe, many immigrants in the 1880s were coming from Eastern and Southern Europe, including Jews from Poland, Russia, and elsewhere, as well as Italians, Greeks, and others. The total number of immigrants coming to the United States drastically increased and many of the new immigrants were poor and had left their country because of persecution or in the hope of earning a living.

As in previous eras of mass migration, there was vocal public prejudice in the press and on the lips of some political and community leaders. These stereotypes were often expressed in the language of Eugenics, a new scientific movement whose proponents believed that new immigrants were a biological threat to the nation, who would contaminate the nation with low intelligence and criminal activity.

Teacher's Notes

In 1882, the year before "The New Colossus" was written, anti-Chinese racism led to the adoption of the Chinese Exclusion Act which made it nearly impossible for Chinese immigrants to come to the country. The act formalized growing anti-Chinese sentiment, particularly from the West Coast where many Chinese immigrants lived, into law. This was the first time legislation limiting immigration targeted a specific racial, ethnic or national group.

Chapter 3: What were some of the issues and conversations happening around Emma in her community?

As mentioned above, Emma Lazarus moved in the highest circles of New York City and her personal circle of friends included many artists and writers. Mentioned above was Ralph Waldo Emerson, and she later became very close to his daughter Ellen Emerson. In 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, Emma could be found at Gilder's home, which their friends called "The Studio". There, Emma met artists, writers, actors, and musicians, many freshly back from Europe. Of her nights at the Gilder's home she wrote, "Helena's 'Friday Evngs.' grow more & more brilliant- last Friday she had about 50 people, literary, artistic, social 'lions' of all kinds."

Emma also traveled to Europe, and came in contact with famous authors and thinkers like Robert Browning and William Morris. After one of her trips to Europe her friend and author Henry James wrote her, "You appear to have done more in three weeks than any lightfooted woman before; when you ate or slept I have not yet made definite."

However Emma was not immune to the antisemitism that lurked within her circles. Before she became her close friend, Helena DeKay Gilder expressed concern over Emma's growing friendship with her younger brother because Emma was Jewish. Emma was usually referred to and seen as a "Jewess", and Emma knew that despite her father's efforts and financial prosperity, she would never be fully accepted. As she wrote in one letter, "I am perfectly conscious that this contempt and hatred underlies the general tone of the community towards us..."

Outright acts of discrimination were rare during the early years of Emma's life. However, in 1877 the Grand Union Hotel in Saratoga New York Refused to admit Joseph Seligman, a wealthy German Jewish banker. This incident became highlight publicized. The owner of the hotel explained her had no objection to the prosperous Sephardic Jews like Emma's family, but that he would refuse entrance to more recent immigrants from Germany and Eastern Europe. The Jewish community of New York City showed solidarity by boycotting the hotel and the A.T. Stewart Department store.

During this time period the city was changing and industrializing around Emma. While the "Gilded Age" saw dramatic growth in the economy and rapid industrialization, it also exposed acute social issues. Factory jobs were low paying, which meant that both parents had to seek work outside the home, bring work into the home, or send their children to work in factories to make ends meet. Often conditions in these factories were dangerous and at the time, unregulated. The first labor day parade was held on September 5th 1882. Ten thousand workers marched from City Hall to Union Square, just blocks away from Emma's home. At Union Square, soapbox speakers would deliver speeches about suffrage, workers rights, racial inequality, and workplace reforms. The economic division between the classes was becoming gaping, and Emma Lazarus would have been aware of these conversations.

Teacher's Notes

Chapter 4: There are many different ways to be Jewish, what did being Jewish mean to Emma?

While Emma's devout ancestors and relatives were actively involved with the Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue, her immediate family was not as active. Emma explained her family's relationship to Judaism to her friend Ellen Emerson, who happened to be a Sunday school teacher. Ellen then later wrote to her sister about her conversation with Emma. Emma had said that her family were "outlaws" because they did not keep "The Law", but only observed the major Jewish holidays. Judaism is a comprehensive way of life, filled with rules and practices that affect every aspect of life. Jewish Law is a set of rules and practices is known as halakhah. The word "halakhah" literally translated is "the path that one walks."

In many ways Emma forged her own path that was grounded in the study of history, literature, and advocacy. She wrote my "interest and sympathies were loyal to [my] race," but, as she explained in 1877, "my religious convictions ... and the circumstances of my life have led me somewhat apart from my people." It was the Russian pogroms and the growing number of refugees arriving from Eastern Europe that shifted her from academic to activist.

It wasn't until later in life that she began studying and learning Hebrew. When she was a teenager she would translate poems from their German translations because she did not understand the Hebrew. She began studying Hebrew with the help of her tutor Louis Schnabel.

"Songs of a Semite" was published by the *American Hebrew*, and title was a public reclaiming of the word Semite. Emma Lazarus had to combat not only antisemitic response, but also criticism from the Jewish community that she was being too outspoken. In the late 1880's Emma became a regular contributor to the *American Hebrew*, which was edited by her friend Philip Cowan. She also wrote pieces that addressed Jewish refugees and concerns for American magazines like *Century Magazine*, which her friend Richard Gilder was the editor of.

Many consider Emma Lazarus the first "modern Jew" because she had to navigate multiple worlds at once. Her obituaries and reflections from friends reflect just how complicated it was for Emma to be at once a part of, but never fully embraced by, the communities she belonged to.

Chapter 5: How did Emma act in the world, and how did she express herself and shine line on issues important to hear?

The word pogrom comes from a Russian word meaning "to destroy and demolish violently," and is an outbreak of mass violence directed against a minority religious, ethnic, or social group. Violence was largely directed against the property of Jews rather than their persons. In the course of more than 250 individual events, millions of rubles worth of Jewish property was destroyed. In March of 1881, Tsar Alexander II was assassinated, launching a wave of violence throughout the Russian Empire against Jewish communities. The pogroms were finally repressed in the Summer of 1882. During the 1880's almost 2,000 Jewish refugees arrived in NYC each month.

With the onset of pogroms in Russia entering public awareness, Lazarus became highly involved in her work and personal life in combating anti-Semitic persecution. She began visiting Eastern European immigrants on Ward's island in 1881 and became involved in efforts to create the Hebrew Technical Institute and agricultural communities for Jewish immigrants. Between 1882 and 1884, Lazarus published twenty-two essays and two editorials concerning Zionism, religious life and anti-Semitism in America.

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Emma donated her own money, taught English as well as poetry to refugees (including at the 92nd Street Y), and wrote about the overcrowding and difficult conditions she encountered at Ward's Island. She wrote to her friend Rose Hawthorne Lathrop, the daughter of American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne, "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 palpatingly alive at the moment . . . that it has about driven out of my thought all other subjects."

Emma's activism wasn't limited to the refugee crisis, and she credited the reformer Henry George with opening her eyes to the growing socio-economic gap of the Gilded-Age. She was so inspired after reading his book *Progress and Poverty*, she wrote a poem by the same title. She wrote the Henry George, "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." Henry George responded "I flatter myself that if I cannot sing myself, I have at least been the means of inspiration for one who can." He tried to bring her further into the movement, but her first priority was helping the Jewish refugees, and she even traveled to Europe to try and garner support.

Chapter 6: How did Emma come to write "The New Colossus" and how did the poem become connected to the Statue of Liberty?

Many assume the poem was gifted with the Statue of Liberty by France, completely erasing Emma Lazarus from the story. In reality, only the statue, designed by Frederic Auguste Bartholdi, was a gift from the people of France to America. In 1885, it arrived in New York City's harbor – there was no poem, and more problematic at the time, there was no pedestal for the statue to stand on.

Fundraising efforts began in the 1870's, and Bartholdi traveled with the statue's torch to Philadelphia in 1876 and later New York's Madison Square Park in hopes of generating excitement and enthusiasm, but donations were only trickling in. When the statue itself reached New York, Americans had not managed to raise the funds necessary to construct a pedestal for the statue. The only option was to keep the statue packaged in crates, hoping one day the money would be raised.

One of the most important donations came from an art and literary auction in December of 1883, held at New York's Academy of Design. Among the fine art, antiques, and manuscript that were featured, was a sonnet by Emma Lazarus.

In her obituary for Emma, her friend Constance Cary Harrison shared how she approached her friend to contribute a poem.

She wrote:

I may cite, in illustration, the circumstances under which were written the beautiful lines entitled The New Colossus ... I begged Miss Lazarus to give me some verses appropriate to the occasion. She was at first inclined to rebel against writing anything "to order" as it were, ... 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. She sped home – her dark eyes deepened – her cheek flushed – the time for merriment was passed – she said not a word more, then. ... A day or two later, accompanied by a note of generous sympathy, came the poem below appended, which was welcomed as a treasure for the Portfolio....

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The sonnet was purchased for \$1,500, what today would be over \$35,000. On October 28th, 1886 President Grover Cleveland performed the dedication ceremony of the Statue of Liberty. As President Cleveland accepted the statue on behalf of American citizens, he declared "we will not forget that liberty here made her home; nor shall her chosen altar be neglected." Emma Lazarus' poem was not read at the ceremony, and was not mentioned. For a time, it seemed "The New Colossus" had been forgotten.

In August 1884, the first signs of Lazarus' illness appeared. Her father's death in 1885 greatly devastated her, and Lazarus again sailed to Europe to recover. She stayed in Europe for two years, visiting Holland, France, Italy. She wrote only two poems during her stay. She returned to New York on July 31, 1887 seriously ill with cancer. Lazarus passed away on November 19, 1887 and was buried in the family plot in Congregation Shearith Israel's cemetery. She was 38 years old. Her death was memorialized in several sonnets and letters published in literary magazines. *The American Hebrew* published a memorial issue on December 9, 1887. *The Poems of Emma Lazarus*, a two-volume selection of poems and translations compiled by her sisters, was published in 1889.

Georgina Schuyler, a direct descendent of Alexander Hamilton a member of the New York elite, was a close friend of Emma Lazarus. In 1901, Georgina saw a copy of Emma's poetry in a bookstore, and was inspired to act. Georgina led the effort to reestablish the connection between the poem and the statue. Two years later in 1903 a plaque of "The New Colossus" was placed on an interior wall of the statue's pedestal.