

## **My Conversation with Emma Lazarus**

### **Kol Nidrei 5787**

My dear teacher Rabbi Larry Hoffman taught us that Judaism is a conversation. Judaism is a conversation spanning decades, centuries, and generations. And what's incredible about the Jewish conversation is that any Jew from any era can engage in the conversation together.

So tonight, on Kol Nidrei, I want to imagine a conversation. I want to imagine a conversation with one of my favorite Jewish writers and poets, and I'd argue one of the most important American Jewish writers of our time, Emma Lazarus. As I continue on I will share more why I chose Emma Lazarus for this conversation.

I'd like to invite you into the conversation as well. I imagine you share some of the same worries and fears about being Jewish that I do as we head into this New Year 5787. I am worried about the Jewish people. The ground feels severely cracked beneath us. Chasms between us

about Israel and antisemitism. About who speaks for us.  
And what we stand for.

So I remember Rabbi Hoffman's teaching: Judaism is a conversation. Emma Lazarus has been one of my favorite writers and poets since I first visited the Statue of Liberty in college. As a student at Brandeis I read her magnificent poem, *The New Colossus*. *The New Colossus* spoke to me, as I imagined my great, great grandparents seeing that statue after an arduous journey from Austria at the turn of the century.

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free..." I saw Lazarus as a prophetess, in the lineage of Miriam, Isaiah, and Amos, writing of our ethical and moral burdens. And she lived it. Lazarus dedicated much of her life to supporting refugees and fighting against antisemitism.

This past year I read her biography by author Esther Schorr. "Lazarus was inventing the role of an American

Jewish writer,” writes Schorr. “To be a Jewish writer in the nineteenth century American was to glimpse, in the trials of her people, the pain of the world’s exiles and in her own passionate vocation, a mission for her country. And it meant persuading Americans of their need to accept this mission, to bind themselves to the needs of the world’s oppressed.”

Lazarus lived through a time not dissimilar to ours. A time of crisis and questioning for our future and safety in this nation. Antisemitism was on the rise in the United States. Theodore Herzl had just begun promoting Zionism and the creation of a Jewish state, prompting fierce debates about Jewish nationalism and where our home truly lies. There was an immigration crisis. Tens of thousands of Jews were fleeing pogroms in Russia. Lazarus was alive to her own prophetic burdens. And at this time in history, so must each of us be as well.

So I imagine myself sitting down at the table with Emma. It is just hours before sunset. We sit across from one

another in a dimly lit synagogue library. On the table in front of us is a copy of Lazarus' second most famous poem, entitled "The Banner of the Jew." Lazarus wrote this poem in 1882, and it would become her most well-known poem for decades. Until that certain other poem she brilliantly wrote was dedicated at the base of the Statue of Liberty in 1903.

She asks me why I chose this particular poem to read together. I respond that although we lived 150 years apart, her reality feels eerily similar to ours. As America marks 250 years, American Jews are asking themselves some of the same questions now that they did in her era. How do we navigate rising antisemitism? And fierce debates among our people about Israel and Jewish nationalism. What is our duty to our people? And what is our moral obligation to those who suffer? To the refugees and immigrants in our midst?

"Wake, Israel, wake!" Lazarus begins the first stanza of "Banner of the Jew." She continues on, "Recall to-day-

The glorious Maccabean rage, the sire heroic, hoary-gray,  
His five-hold lion lineage: The Wise, the Elect, the Help-of-  
God, The Burst-of-Spring, the Avenging Rod.”

I look up at Lazarus. “May I ask you a question? Recall the glorious Maccabean rage? The avenging rod? Why open with anger?” “This moment calls for anger,” I imagine her saying to me, standing to her feet to emphasize the point. “Be angry about what’s happening before your eyes. Be angry about the treatment of refugees and immigrants. Be angry about what is being done in our name. Be angry about the Jewish hate that is spreading across the earth. We celebrate that kind of anger every December over eight glowing candles. There can be good anger,” she tells me. “Righteous anger. Prophetic anger.”

Anger is rarely in my emotional rolodex. Maybe it’s because I’m a Libra. Maybe God just created me this way. At my rabbinical school interview the Dean of the rabbinical school asked me what makes me angry. I had trouble answering the question. I often default to sadness

when I look out at the world. Sadness that our people are so divided. Sadness from the trauma of October 7. Sadness seeing how the immigrant in our midst is being treated.

“Sadness is no doubt part of our story,” she says. We must acknowledge our pain. Our collective trauma. What October 7th did to you. What the Russian pogroms did to me. Stanza number two of the poem speaks of that sadness.

“From Mizpeh’s mountain-ridge they saw Jerusalem’s empty streets,” Lazarus continues. “Her shrine laid waste where Greeks profaned the Law, with idol and pagan sign. Mourners in tattered black were there, with ashes sprinkled on their hair.”

“Speak to me about October 7th,” she says to me, softly. “Tell me more about your sadness.” “I ask why Jews needed to die so senselessly,” I say to her. “I ask myself how any human being can kidnap a little baby and his

mother and brother. How people could cheer the attackers as heroes. How a music festival could turn to horrific tragedy in a matter of hours.”

“Then from the stony peak,” she continues. “There rang a blast to open the graves: down poured the Maccabean clan, who sang their battle-anthem to the Lord. Five heroes lead, and following, see, ten thousand rush to victory!”

“The Maccabees knew they had to fight,” she tells me. “The five sons of Matthathias. They became ten thousand. Collectively celebrating in victory as they rekindled the Temple menorah. We are the miracles” she says, with a laugh almost in disbelief. “We have only our memories and our will to keep fighting.”

“You write of a blast” I say to her, “that is the shofar?”  
“Yes,” she replies. “So when you speak of Israel waking up, hearing the blasts of the shofar, that is becoming like that Maccabees? Fighting? Filled with rage and anger? Still holding the tears of Jewish pain and grief?” “Yes,” she

says quietly. “Sometimes our history and our shofar calls for us to fight.”

Yom Kippur nears just a little bit closer. Lazarus sees I am uncomfortable with her call to anger, fighting, and vengeance. “The fight is not necessarily a physical one,” she tells me. “It is the collective Jewish will. Every single Jew awakening to the blast of the shofar to save what we hold most dear. The fight to speak up. The fight for the oppressed. The fight against injustice right here in our midst. The fight for our people.”

I’ve never thought of the Maccabees in this way. We’ve softened them over the years with dreidels and gelt. Lazarus reminds us, this too is a spiritual fight. To fight like the ancient Maccabees for what we hold most sacred. For them, it was the ancient Temple. The will to rekindle the flame of the menorah. But what is it that we are protecting? What is it we Jews in the year 5787 are trying to save? What is it we are we fighting for?

“Oh for Jerusalem’s trumpet now,” she continues with the fourth stanza of her poem. “to blow a blast of shattering power, to wake the sleepers high and low, and rouse them to the urgent hour! No hand for vengeance - but to save, a million naked swords should wave.”

“Is this not a call to violence? To act with vengeance?” I ask her. “No, read it again,” she says. “No hand for vengeance,” she writes. “This is a call to rescue, to save, to defend our people and our homeland. It is a call to awaken those who have become despondent or sit in despair. The ones who feel perhaps too overwhelmed by the moment to act. Those who feel powerless to stop the ongoing storm.”

It has been just about ten days since we heard the blast of the shofar. I think about what it means to be fully awake to this moment. We see examples right here in our synagogue. Our Tikkun Olam team’s work and partnership with CIRI, the Connecticut Institute for Refugees and Immigrants. The planned public rededication of our

Chanukah menorah that was damaged last year. Working with the ADL to teach our students how to stand up to antisemitism. Over five hundred of us singing Oseh Shalom at Jennings Beach last Friday night. Reading banned books. Our bet mitzvah students chanting the ancient words of the prophets every Saturday morning. Being an active member of CONECT, Congregations Organized for a New Connecticut. Investing in security. Praying with our voices, and our feet. Being proudly Jewish.

“Oh deem not dead that martial fire,” she continues to stanza five. “Say not the mystic flame is spent! With Moses’s law and David’s lyre, Your ancient strength remains unbent. Let but an Ezra rise anew, to lift the Banner of the Jew!”

Ezra the scribe. Ezra brought the Jewish people back from exile. He gathered the community together in the square and together they publicly read Torah. Ezra sparked a renewed awakening to the words of the Torah, Moses’

law. And with David's lyre, she said. The need to nourish our Jewish souls. With the Psalms. With music. With song.

We need readers, writers, poets, musicians, artists, and composers. The Torah guides us morally and ethically. It is one of the few things that still unites us as a people. But it is not by words of Torah alone that we raise our banner. It is with song, prayer, and deep nourishment of the Jewish heart and spirit. B'chol l'avcha, b'chol nafshecha, b'chol me'odech, with all of your heart, all of your soul, and all of your being, will our strength remain unbent, teaches Lazarus.

"A rag, a mock at first," she concludes with the sixth and final stanza of the poem. "erelong, when men have bled and women wept, to guard its precious folds from wrong, even they who shrunk, even they who slept, shall leap to bless it, and to save. Strike! for the brave revere the brave!"

I sit, imagining that I have just heard Emma Lazarus recite one of her most famous poems to me. “Your conclusion,” I ask. “tell me what it means.” “Hold our banner proudly,” she says. “We are one people, carrying one banner.” “Be brave. Allow yourselves time to weep. Act. Bless one another. Ensure that banner is passed to your children. And your children’s children.”

I awaken from my daydream. It is nearly time to enter the sanctuary for Kol Nidrei. The library fades away. Emma Lazarus returns to the sky. The words of her poem remain right there in front of me. I read it one more time.

Recall to-day

    The glorious Maccabean rage,  
The sire heroic, hoary-gray,  
    His five-fold lion-lineage:  
The Wise, the Elect, the Help-of-God,  
    The Burst-of-Spring, the Avenging Rod.

From Mizpeh’s mountain-ridge they saw

Jerusalem's empty streets, her shrine  
Laid waste where Greeks profaned the Law  
With idol and with pagan sign.  
Mourners in tattered black were there,  
With ashes sprinkled on their hair.

Then from the stony peak there rang  
A blast to ope the graves; down poured  
The Maccabean clan, who sang  
Their battle-anthem to the Lord.  
Five heroes lead, and following, see,  
Ten thousand rush to victory!

Oh for Jerusalem's trumpet now,  
To blow a blast of shattering power,  
To wake the sleepers high and low,  
And rouse them to the urgent hour!  
No hand for vengeance—but to save,  
A million naked swords should wave.

Oh deem not dead that martial fire,

Say not the mystic flame is spent!  
With Moses' law and David's lyre,  
Your ancient strength remains unbent.  
Let but an Ezra rise anew  
To lift the *Banner of the Jew!*

A rag, a mock at first—erelong,  
When men have bled and women wept  
To guard its precious folds from wrong,  
Even they who shrunk, even they who slept,  
Shall leap to bless it, and to save.  
Strike! for the brave revere the brave!

The past reassures me we will make it through. The  
Jewish conversation endures. The people of Israel live.  
We stand proudly, holding our banner high.

Our people still live and thrive in this nation. Where many  
of our great grandparents were met with Emma's  
compassionate, and prophetic words. So many of them

were inspired to build, create, learn, and grow in this country because of her. Because of one single voice.

When Emma lived, Jews were still outlawed, quota-ed, and challenged from entering every potential space, job, and club in America. Today, we can still do anything in this country. Yes, we are being challenged from all directions. And, in spite of all those challenges, we are still here. Free, enduring, and proud. And, too, like Emma, tasked with great responsibilities.

I close my eyes, and listen for the sound of David's lyre. I take the words of Moses' law from the shelf. I see the Statue of Liberty towering above me. I place my kippah upon my head and my tallit upon my shoulders. I open the doors of our synagogue wide. Wake, Israel, wake!

May we be strengthened by one another in this new year. May memory mobilize us. May we act with prophetic anger. May we awaken to the world around us. May we accept our mission and bind ourselves to the needs of the

world's oppressed. May we always remember we are one people. May the words of Torah guide us. May we be nourished by the sounds of David's lyre. And may we all be brave enough to join the ages old Jewish conversation and lift our banner proudly.

Shanah Tovah.