

# Sacred Stories

A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible

## ACHREI MOT-KEDOSHIM

APRIL 20, 2013

### *Promise of a New Start*

By Rabbi Yonah Berman



**Manuscript, *The New Colossus*, by Emma Lazarus**

**Located in our Only in America® Gallery/Hall of Fame**

# Promise of a New Start

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## Sacred Stories **ACHREI MOT-KEDOSHIM**

For millions of immigrants and would-be immigrants around the world, America has long been synonymous with words like Freedom, Opportunity and Liberty. One can only imagine the elation felt by numerous of soon-to-be new Americans, as they were greeted by welcoming eyes of the Statue of Liberty as they sailed into New York Harbor. Arriving from every corner of the globe, men, women and children saw – and continue to see – the potential to build a better life for themselves and their families in the United States. To those escaping lives of ethnic, economic and religious oppression, Lady Liberty has long symbolized cornerstone values on which this country is built,

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themselves expressed thousands of years ago in the Bible and read in this week's Torah portion: "You shall not defraud your fellow. You shall not commit robbery.... You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind.... You shall not render an unfair decision: do not favor the poor or show deference to the rich; judge your kinsman fairly." [Leviticus 19:13-15]

This creed was eloquently paralleled by the Jewish American poet Emma Lazarus (1849-1887), in words now found on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty:

"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 New Colossus*, 1883)

Emma Lazarus, a descendant of one of the first Jewish families in America, grew up in New York City, where she witnessed the arrival of countless new Americans. She spent time assisting Russian Jewish immigrants, an experience that influenced her advocacy work with the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society and her writing. She wrote *The New Colossus* in 1883 to raise money for the Statue of Liberty's pedestal. Sixteen years after her death, the final lines of the poem were affixed to Lady Liberty's pedestal, helping to turn the Statue into a symbol of welcoming to new immigrants.

As you stand here, imagine what it must have felt like to arrive in the New World; to have finally escaped from the Old World and its endless difficulties and to see, in America, a land of boundless potential.

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#### ARTIFACT

Manuscript, *The New Colossus*

Emma Lazarus

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**You can also find an image of Emma Lazarus in the family tree in our Establishing Communities gallery.**



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## About this partnership:

Both the Jewish People and the United States of America are rooted in a quest for greater freedom and human dignity. Inspired by this parallelism, the National Museum of American Jewish History is collaborating with Clal—The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership and its Rabbis Without Borders program to launch a new initiative, **Sacred Stories: A Living Commentary on the Hebrew Bible and American Jewish History**.

**Sacred Stories** weaves together Judaism's foundational sacred text, the Torah, with one of the most successful expressions of freedom in human history, the story of Jewish life in America. **Sacred Stories** explores our shared values by linking these two vital and compelling stories through contemporary commentary and 21st century media.

The **Torah** is a central feature of Jewish tradition. Used to refer generally to Jewish wisdom, it also refers specifically to the 5 Books of Moses which makes up the Hebrew Bible. A portion of the Torah text, a **Parsha**, is read on **Shabbat** (Sabbath). The whole Torah is read sequentially over the course of the year. Shabbat is the Jewish day of rest and begins on Friday evenings and ends Saturday night. Many Jews observe Shabbat to emulate God's resting on the seventh day of Creation. The fourth commandment is to keep Shabbat holy which Jews do with festive meals, resting, and learning.



The National Museum of American Jewish History, on Independence Mall in Philadelphia, presents educational programs and experiences that preserve, explore and celebrate the history of Jews in America. Its purpose is to connect Jews more closely to their heritage and to inspire in people of all backgrounds a greater appreciation for the diversity of the American Jewish experience and the freedoms to which Americans aspire.



Clal—The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership is a think tank, leadership training institute, and resource center. Bringing Jewish insights to a wide American audience, Clal makes Jewish wisdom an accessible public resource. A leader in religious pluralism, Clal builds bridges across communities to encourage diversity and openness. Linking Jewish texts and tradition with innovative scholarship, Clal promotes Jewish participation in American civic and spiritual life, reinvigorating communities and enhancing leadership development.