

Emma Lazarus 1849-1887

Emma Lazarus was born in New York City to a wealthy Jewish family that could trace its roots to the American Revolution. Her early poetry was modeled after the Victorian style: conventional rhyme and meter, proper language, and common themes like nature, history, art, and human experiences, like love and death. She rarely wrote about Jewish issues, and then only historically. Around 1880, when violence against European Jews was at its highest, and Jewish migration to America was rising dramatically, Lazarus became increasingly concerned about the persecution of Jews. She became “one of the most fervent poetic voices” for Jewish issues; first, the establishment of a Jewish homeland; later, “the call for Jewish unity, her condemnation of injustice, and her indignation at the world’s indifference to Jewish suffering” (203-204). As her passion increased, her poetry began to change, becoming much more powerful and less traditional.

About this time, Lazarus was asked to write a poem to help raise money to complete the base upon which the Statue of Liberty would be placed. In her poem, “The New Colossus,” the “Mother of Exiles,” (line 6) welcomes all migrants to America’s “golden door” (line 14). This now-famous poem is engraved on a bronze plaque on the statue’s pedestal, and is Lazarus’s most famous poem.

Rubin, Steven. “Poets of the Promised Land.” In Jonathan N. Barron and Eric Murphy Selinger, eds., *Jewish American Poetry*. Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2000.