

TWO FAVORITE POEMS, AND HOW THEY DEFINE ISRAEL AND AMERICA

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“The New Colossus” by Emma Lazarus and “The Silver Platter” by Natan Alterman distill, reinforce, and hallow what makes each nation distinctive.

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The Nobel Prize Committee did us a favor when it awarded the 2016 prize for literature to Bob Dylan “for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition.” If previous laureates like T.S. Eliot had us believe that poetry was an intellectual challenge, the award to Dylan reminded us that poems can also be our collective voice. They can say what needs saying.



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Jews have always known this, and poets who experience themselves as part of a people can help to explain the nation to itself. The problem is that when they succeed, we tend to take their work for granted and lose sight of the originality behind the cliché. It bears thinking about how an individual can forge the soul of a nation and even help chart its destiny.

Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. . . .
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me.

When I first came across these lines—long before I moved to the United States in 1993—I assumed they expressed what it meant to be an American. Inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty, they seemed to say that the United States extended shelter to all those in need of it. And

if America could not admit all of the refugees who came to its shores, at least it projected the universal hope of sanctuary.

But when I once researched the poem for an [essay I was writing](#), I was surprised to learn that the statue had been intended to represent something altogether different. Briefly, it was commissioned from the French sculptor Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi to represent “Liberty Enlightening the World,” and in 1883 it was given as a gift by the people of France to the United States as a symbolic passing of the torch. The torch in Lady Liberty’s right hand—which for a time served as a lighthouse—represented the flame of reason that had sparked the Enlightenment and ignited the French Revolution. The tablets in her left hand linked the American Declaration of Independence to the biblical Tablets of the Law, while the crown recalled the great statue of the sun god Helios that once stood in the harbor of Rhodes, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Bartholdi gave Liberty a stern face befitting her intellectual heritage and proud European design. This gift was meant to strengthen the bonds and common values of Europe and America.

The French supplied the statue but the Americans had to pay for its installation in New York harbor, and a celebratory catalogue was one device for raising the necessary funds. Enter Emma Lazarus, already a well-known figure in New England literary circles, who was now invited to contribute a poem. The sonnet she wrote for the catalogue turned out to be its most popular item, and twenty years later, in 1903, it was chosen to be inscribed on the base of the statue.

Emma Lazarus was quite familiar with that harbor. Born in New York in 1849 to a distinguished Jewish family with Sephardi roots, she was a published poet by seventeen, at ease in New York society and friendly with the daughters of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Nathaniel Hawthorne. But even as her writing and talent won her stature in American letters, she grew ever more conscious of herself as a Jew and aware of the various dangers that were facing the Jews of Europe. She was thus one of the earliest American supporters of the budding movement for self-emancipation that came to be known as Zionism. At the immigrant processing center on Ward Island, precursor of Ellis Island, she also worked at helping the Jewish refugees who had begun to come by the thousands after the Russian pogroms that followed the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881. Her sonnet drew on that first-hand experience.

Lazarus titled her sonnet “The New Colossus,” invoking the Colossus of Rhodes that Bartholdi used as his model. The people of Rhodes had built the original giant figure in 280 BCE out of the abandoned armor of their defeated invaders, and dedicated it as an emblem of their freedom to their sun god. Bartholdi’s statue combined that ancient tribute to liberty with the French Revolution’s overthrow of monarchy; in turn, the statue’s donors meant to fortify this political-spiritual bond with America.

But from the very first word, Emma Lazarus defied their intention:

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.

The sonnet's opening octet distinguishes the new statue from its mythic precursor. The American colossus radiates might not through conquest but through motherly protection. Did her listeners and readers realize how boldly Lazarus was deviating from the intended message? To be sure, the fight for liberty was still being championed, but no one had previously defined it through the impulse of hospitality.

In place of the common idea of power, the poem casts this country as the *refuge* from Europe. Mother of Exiles is a welcoming figure with "mild eyes"—a phrase mischievously at odds with the statue's actual stare. Where Bertholdi's Liberty is all intellect and strength, the poem is all kindness on the Jewish model of Abraham welcoming his guests.

When the sonnet then pivots from octet to sestet—as sonnets formally tend to do—the statue takes the same theme even farther.

“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!”

Silent lips don't make a sound. The poem thus admits that it is “putting words into the mouth” of the statue—and not just any words, but words that redefine its meaning. The lady with the lamp promises those fleeing Europe (most of the immigrants in those years) a safer, kinder country than the world had ever known.

Needless to say, the poem no more describes the true nature of those arriving than it describes American immigration policy. But though the poem has become something of a pawn in debates over immigration, and is much challenged by the history of slavery, it forever reinforces America's spirit of generosity. Emma Lazarus did not write it for the Christian majority as Irving Berlin did in “White Christmas” and “Easter Parade,” or for a marginalized part of America as George and Ira Gershwin did in *Porgy and Bess*. She wrote as a self-possessed American and Jew, inviting others to share her good fortune.

Decades later, in 1947, when Jews had already come a long way toward the Zionist goal that Emma Lazarus advocated, the Hebrew poet Natan Alterman wrote “The Silver Platter,” which likewise helped to define a nation—in this case, the state of Israel on the eve of its independence. When I recently asked an Israeli in her forties whether she remembers the first time she read or

was taught the poem “*Magash ha-keseif*,” she couldn’t remember such a time; instead, she said, she was never taught the poem because it was always there, recited on Yom Hazikaron, Israel’s Day of Remembrance, and always referred to on the assumption that everyone knew it.

Many Israelis know not only the poem but also how it came to be written. On November 29 (*kaf-tet*, as it’s known in Hebrew), 1947, the General Assembly of the United Nations voted on the partition of Palestine. The British who had been governing the territory were about to withdraw, and UN Resolution 181 divided the land between Jews and Arabs, recognizing the Jews’ right to at least a small share of what earlier agreements had promised them. Arab and Muslim countries were united in opposition. Jewish leadership had lobbied hard for every vote and when the count was taken, Jews listening to their radios all over the world rejoiced: 13 against, 10 abstaining, but 33—the required two-thirds majority—*for*.

In the Tel Aviv literary café and hangout Kassit, the owner did the unprecedented, and broke open the champagne. But legend has it that in the midst of celebration, Natan Alterman was subdued. Nor was he alone in fearing what still lay ahead. Elsewhere, the great Jewish statesman Chaim Weizmann, who had been lobbying for this outcome, said, “A state is not given to a people on a silver platter.” A couple of weeks later in the weekly column he wrote for *Davar*, Natan Alterman published this poem (here translated by David P. Stern and reproduced in Hebrew below) under that cautionary quote from Weizmann: אין מדינה ניתנת לעם על מגש של כסף.

And the land will grow still
Crimson skies dimming, misting
Slowly paling again
Over smoking frontiers

As the nation stands up
Torn at heart but existing
To receive its first wonder
In two thousand years

As the moment draws near
It will rise, darkness facing
Stand straight in the moonlight
In terror and joy

. . . When across from it step out
Toward it slowly pacing
In plain sight of all
A young girl and a boy

Dressed in battle gear, dirty
Shoes heavy with grime
On the path they will climb up
While their lips remain sealed

To change garb, to wipe brow
They have not yet found time
Still bone weary from days
And from nights in the field

Full of endless fatigue
And all drained of emotion
Yet the dew of their youth
Is still seen on their head

Thus like statues they stand
Stiff and still with no motion
And no sign that will show
If they live or are dead

Then a nation in tears
And amazed at this matter
Will ask: who are you?
And the two will then say

With soft voice: We—
Are the silver platter
On which the Jews' state
Was presented today

Then they fall back in darkness
As the dazed nation looks
And the rest can be found
In the history books.

The *vav* of the opening word *V'ha-arets* establishes the biblical aura of the poem, connecting the ancient Land of Israel with the country the poet and his readers inhabit. Modern Hebrew poets knew they could evoke the biblical past through such poetic means, but they also knew it could sound derivative and trite. Writing in Tel Aviv, still months before the declaration of the state, Alterman signals that he is writing in the biblical spirit of miracles—the nation is about to receive “its first wonder in two thousand years”—but he then situates the poem at the end of a hard day of fighting in an unmistakably present-day war. In that first generation of Hebrew-speakers, he knew that he could count on readers to sense the same miraculous connection that he did.

The setting of the poem is formal, ceremonial, like the swearing-in of soldiers: in this case, the swearing-in of the Jewish state. It is as pictorial as a painting. The mood is both ominous and momentous, and those two emotions remain inseparable—the combined terror and joy the poet must have felt on hearing the news. Under a dimming red sky, as the “nation” stands after a hard day of battle, it is approached by a young man and young woman in improvised battle dress.

Unlike the stationary nation, the youngsters who have come straightaway from the fighting are described in detail, unwashed, bone weary, drained. The Israeli whom I asked about this poem said that what struck her most was that phrase in the fourth stanza, “*v’notfim tal’ley n’urim*,” the dewdrops of youth that contrast so painfully with the youngsters’ fatigue. They are too young to have been sent into such an unequal battle.

In the fog of war, the people do not yet know to what purpose they are gathered until the pair step forward and softly say, “We are the silver platter/ On which the Jews’ state was presented to you today. “*Anahnu magash ha-kesef/ she-alav lakh nitnah m’dinat ha-y’hudim*.” They do not say *m’dinat Yisrael* because the state of Israel had not yet been [named](#), and they are not in military formation because they were not yet formally constituted as an army. These fighters are recognizably part of the Palmach, the strike forces of the Haganah, which later evolved into the Israel Defense Forces. They were young men and women—often teenagers—trained for special missions, the exceptionally daring soldiers of a citizen army, and too many of them were killed in action. Alterman used Weizmann’s English idiom to hallow their sacrifice.

This poem confers a heavier legacy than the Lazarus sonnet, since the descendants of those youngsters have never stopped having to *be* that silver platter. When they incorporate this poem into their memorial ceremonies—as many do—they are putting their lives on the poetic line.

Both Jewish poets, Lazarus and Alterman, express their respective nations’ innate generosity. For the time being, at least, the Hebrew poet calls for the greater self-sacrifice.

מגש הכסף

והארץ תשקוט, עין שמיים אודמת
תעמעם לאיטה על גבולות עשנים,
ואומה תעמוד-קרועת לב אך נושמת
לקבל את הנס, האחד, אין שני...

היא לטקס תיכון, היא תקום למול הסדר
ועמדה טרם יום עוטה חג ואימה.
אז מנגד יצאו נערה ונער
ואט אט יצעדו הם אל מול האומה.

לובשי חול וחגור וכבדי נעליים
בנתיב יעלו הם, הלוך והחרש
לא החליפו בגדם, לא מחו עוד במים
את עקבות יום הפרך וליל קו האש.

עייפים עד בלי קץ, נזירים ממרגוע
ונוטפים טללי נעורים עבריים...
דם השניים יגשו ועמדו עד בלי נוע
ואין אות אים חיים הם או אים ירויים.

אז תשאל האומה שטופת דמע וקסם
ואמרה: "מי אתם?", והשניים שוקטים
יענו לה: "אנחנו מגש הכסף,
שעליו לך ניתנה מדינת היהודים."

כך יאמרו ונפלו לרגלה עוטפי צל
והשאר יסופר בתולדות ישראל