

Emma Lazarus

Contributed by [Smith College Jewish Community](#)

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Emma Lazarus's famous lines captured the nation's imagination and continues to shape the way we think about immigration and freedom today. Written in 1883, her celebrated poem, "The New Colossus," is engraved on a plaque in the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty. Over the years, the sonnet has become part of American culture, inspiring everything from an Irving Berlin show tune to a call for immigrants' rights.

Lazarus grew up in a wealthy, Sephardic family who were descendants of America's first Jewish settlers. One of the first successful Jewish American authors, Lazarus was part of the late nineteenth century New York literary elite and was recognized in her day as an important American poet. In her later years, she wrote bold, powerful poetry and essays protesting the rise of antisemitism, Zionism, and arguing for Russian immigrants' rights.

As a Jewish American woman, Emma Lazarus faced the challenge of belonging to two often conflicting worlds. As a woman she dealt with unequal treatment in both. The difficult experiences lent power and depth to her work. At the same time, her complicated identity has obscured her place in American culture.