

"Wherever we are free,
we are at home"

Emma
Lazarus
and the Aporia of
Jewish Community

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"The Jewish problem is as old as history, and assumes in each age a new form. The life or death of millions of human beings hangs upon its solution; its agitation revives the fiercest passions for good and for evil that inflame the human breast."

Emma Lazarus, "The Jewish Problem" (1883)^{vi}

The year before these lines appeared in *The Century* magazine, Jewish-American poet Emma Lazarus published her *Songs of a Semite: The Dance to Death and Other Poems*—her first book of poetry that identified her as both American and Jew. Her poems and political essays seem to offer two competing solutions to the "problem," which amount to two competing views of Jewish community. This impasse is no doubt sprung from her recognition of her own position within two communities. Lazarus' dual perspectives on Jewish community—and more particularly, Jewish statehood—must be reconciled through a renewed engagement with her poetry, particularly "In Exile," from *Songs of a Semite*, and "The New Colossus," the work for which she is still best known. Thus in this essay I will examine her work on this subject in light of Jean-Luc Nancy's *La communauté désœuvrée* (*The Inoperative Community*), in which he grapples with the "gravest and most painful testimony of the modern world...the testimony of the dissolution, the dislocation, or the conflagration of community" (1). This recontextualizing of Lazarus' work will, I hope, enable both a rethinking of her poetry and of the broader "Jewish question," a question that is deeply tied to the modern problem of community.

Lazarus, Nancy, and the (Tenuous) Idea of the Jewish State

Lazarus' 1883 essay outlines the history of anti-Semitism in Europe and presents a solution to the "Jewish problem" that predates Herzl's Zionism—and, indeed, predates the term "Zionism" itself: "They must establish an independent nationality" (*Selected Writings* 277). In support of this assertion, she attempts to provide a basis for this shared nationality—one which necessarily must exist amongst peoples with neither land nor culture in common. Rather, she posits a shared experience of persecution, as well as a common ability to withstand it, as the ground on which the new Israel can be built. She writes, "The mere survival of the Jew, despite every provision made for his extermination, evinces the vitality of a singularly well-equipped organization, while the elasticity with which he rebounds as soon as the strain of adverse conditions is removed, is without parallel" (*Selected Writings* 275). The bond shared by the world's Jews, for Lazarus (as for Herzl and the Zionists after her) is no "longer a religious one." In fact, "The racial tie binds Jews together even though they discard all religions" (*Selected Writings* 280). Her support of various plans for a Jewish "return" to Palestine rests on the following premises: that the Jewish people belong to a shared race, that this race has been persecuted for centuries, and that Jewish diaspora, forced by this persecution, has actually only strengthened the bonds of community. Lazarus makes her argument for "independent nationality" by providing the ground for a renewed sense of Jewish kinship, or, perhaps, "similitude," that is beyond religion or ethnicity. In his text, Nancy frames the concept of "similitude" as foundational for the existence of community. Community, he writes, "is that singular ontological order in which the other and the same are alike (*sont le semblable*): that is to say, in the sharing of identity" (34). Lazarus asserts that a shared identity can be located, even between such distinct groups as her elite, New York, Jewish readership and the destitute Jews of Eastern Europe.

Her *Epistle to the Hebrews*, serialized in fifteen parts in *American Hebrew* magazine between November 1882 and February 1883, provides a more detailed explanation of this nationalistic position, which she roots in the Hebrew literary-historical tradition. She utilizes the Old Testament prophetic tradition in order to establish the common ground upon which "assimilated" (particularly American) Jews may locate a shared experience with their "brothers" scattered throughout the world. In Jewish history, she writes, lies a "guiding example for all later difficulties" (*Epistle* 25). This example, for Lazarus, applies to all the world's Jews, and must awaken in each a recognition of his national identity—in spite of other national ties: "A crisis has arrived in Jewish history, presenting for millions of Jews the sharp alternative of extinction or separation. Fortunately for us [American Jews] we are not among these millions, but we have with them the one great bond in common—that *we too have stood upon the sinking ship*" (*Epistle* 66, emphasis mine). The ship to which she refers is, according to her explanation, that of the legendary Simon Bar-Kochba, leader of the second century AD Jewish revolt against the Roman Empire at Jerusalem. Bar-Kochba figures prominently in Lazarus' work—her poem bearing his name hails him

as "the last Warrior Jew" to whom is owed "eternal thanks" and "eternal praise" (*Selected Writings* 239).

Though Lazarus' rhetorical move in this piece is a genuine attempt to historicize the Jews' suffering in a way that renders it palpable to a Jewish-American reading public, what she does here is further mythicize Bar-Kochba—the figure whose reincarnation, it seems, Lazarus seeks in the nineteenth century. Lazarus purposefully avoids prophesying a coming Messiah, but rather looks to Bar-Kochba as a model for the Jews as a whole people; her messianism resides not in her longing for an individual savior, but in her expectation of a "community to come," a community founded on the shared *national* glory recalled by her reference to Bar-Kochba. Again, we see that Lazarus' commitment to Judaism is not a religious one; her invocation of messianism is based in a secular social agenda that posits "a faith in social progress, with this singular peculiar condition that this progress is to be accomplished by the hand and under the direction of the Jews" (*Epistle* 33).^{vii} This inevitable "progress," we can assume, will arrive on the heels of the realization of a Jewish nation.

Thus, in her *Epistle* Lazarus puts forth a vision of a future community that is rooted entirely in the imagined past, in the collective memory of a unified Israel. This memory, however, is one that has been entirely constructed in the Jewish cultural consciousness by the very sort of rhetorical work that Lazarus does here. Nancy considers the desire for "lost" community with regard to the Christian tradition, but his perspective is relevant to Lazarus' secular Jewish project. He writes, "*Community has not taken place*, or rather, if it is indeed that humanity has known...social ties quite different from those familiar to us, community has never taken place along the lines of our projections of it" (11). Any "projection" such as Lazarus' is, for Nancy, a false one precisely because it "arise[s] from the domain of *work*." For Nancy, a thinking of community that constitutes it a "work" must necessarily "presuppose that the common being, as such, be objectifiable and producible (in sites, persons, buildings, discourses, institutions, symbols: in short, in subjects)" (Nancy 31). In *An Epistle to the Hebrews*, Lazarus attempts to engineer community by utilizing the rhetorical devices available to her—the Torah, the Talmud, figures such as Bar-Kochba—and constructing an idea of Israel around which she hopes Jews the world over will rally. In other words, she makes a case for a *myth*—which we will understand here in the Nancian view as "full, original speech, at times revealing, at times founding the intimate being of a community" (48). Her myth depends upon a fullness of language, upon an "uninterrupted world of presences" (49), in which the cultural memory of Israel can not only be thought, but actually come to pass in the modern, diasporic reality of the Jewish people. Her aims force her into a totalizing rhetoric, under which centuries of movement and assimilation—of subjective experience—are necessarily collapsed in the service of national definition.

Lazarus' vision finds its concrete realization in the Zionist movement under the leadership of Theodor Herzl, who emerges as the movement's major proponent just over a decade following the completion of the *Epistle*; indeed, Herzl's plan for the Jewish resettlement of Palestine follows a strikingly similar line of thought. Like Lazarus, he invokes a kind of political messianism to foretell the "coming" of an authentic Jewish community, of a Jewish nation-state: "It is remarkable that we Jews should have dreamed this glorious

dream all through the long night of our history. Now day is dawning. We need only to rub the sleep from our eyes, stretch our strong limbs, and turn the dream into reality" (Herzl 20).^{xiii} The "we" here is significant—it is the pronoun Herzl will use repeatedly in his effort to establish, as Lazarus did before him, a common, communal ground upon which Jews of many nations may stand. And, again, crisis provides this foundation; Herzl posits a shared experience of anti-Semitism as the basis of community. It is through an understanding of persecution, he writes, that the Jews can locate a nationality, or "similitude" in the Nancian context. Yet for Herzl, as for Lazarus, shared identity can only be defined negatively—that is, the Jews' exclusion from other communities, the result of anti-Semitic forces of varying degrees and designs, signifies the need for a strictly Jewish one. However, Herzl and Lazarus seem to be unable to put forth a positive definition of Jewishness for the present, one that is based neither in the prejudice of others nor the myths of the past. Their imagined community is one based in a "similitude" defined by difference from others, and thus can only emerge as equally exclusionary, as we will see a bit later.

Furthermore, a rhetoric of similitude was, in many ways, unappealing to assimilated American Jews like Lazarus herself. As Ranen Omer-Sherman writes in his discussion of Lazarus, "The urban, Americanized, and comfortably established Sephardic and German Jews did not always welcome what Lazarus herself calls those who came 'blinking forth from the loathsome recesses of the Jewry' of Russia and Poland in the eighties. The majority of American Jews feared that their own reputation would suffer from the popular habit of regarding all Jews as alike" (15). The totalizing impulse we see at work in the writings of both Lazarus and Herzl was, to many American Jews of the period, frightening precisely because it potentially invited anti-Semitism against those who saw themselves as Americans—and, perhaps, because it indicated a degree of anti-Semitism within the assimilated American Jewish public with regard to the Jews of Eastern Europe. In fact, it seems that the idea of the "American Jew" represents a deep paradox in Lazarus' writings that is not worked out in the *Epistle*. Her argument for the existence of a Jewish nationality, of Jewish similitude across borders and cultures, is constantly frustrated by the American Jew, "the free citizen of a republic," who does not need "to rest his hopes upon the foundation of any other nationality soever" (*Epistle* 41). As Omer-Sherman points out, Lazarus' family had been in the United States for over a century when her *Songs of a Semite* were published, and, prior to 1882, she at least appeared to identify with a strictly American literary tradition. Though she is committed to improving the plight of Eastern European Jews—critics have argued that her "turn" toward Judaism was in fact a response to the Russian pogroms of the 1880's—she seems equally firm in her belief that Jews living in America have no practical need for relocation.

Songs of a Semite: In Praise of Diaspora

This complication is reflected in *Songs of a Semite: The Dance to Death and Other Poems*, where her support for the foundation of a Jewish homeland is at odds with her

appreciation of the diasporic condition. In these poems, diaspora comes to represent a more viable vision of community, in which the exclusionary principles that underlie her "Zionist" position necessarily cannot function. As I mentioned above, *Songs of a Semite* was the first book published by Lazarus in which she hailed herself as both an American and a Jewish poet, the result of her increasing engagement with a Jewish tradition and history that she had previously avoided. As John Hollander writes, "The growing intensity of her study of Jewish history and culture led her to try to write poems that could deal with Judaic matters while remaining American in mode and tone and stance" (xviii). In this book we see the older, more political Lazarus merging with her younger self, the disciple of Longfellow and Emerson.

Her poem "In Exile," set in the American western frontier, puts forth a vision of "the true brotherly life"^{xix} that is rooted in an almost pre-modern connection with the earth. Lazarus develops a scene in which distinctly Jewish characters—"Strange faces theirs, wherethrough the Orient sun/ Gleams from the eyes and glows athwart the skin/ Grave lines of studious thought and purpose run/ From curl-crowned forehead to dark bearded chin"—connect their ancient history with a wholly American experience of farming the untitled frontier, "to link Egypt with Texas in their mystic chain" (*Selected Poems* 178-9). America provides a space where old and new can coexist; tradition need not be cast aside, but rather is morphed and rethought when mixed with the American soil.

Most importantly for Lazarus, the Jews are free in America, both to adopt a new culture and to remain faithful to traditional customs:

Freedom to love the law that Moses brought,
To sing the songs of David, and to think
The thoughts Gabirol to Spinoza taught,
Freedom to dig the common earth, to drink
The universal air—for this they sought
Refuge o'er wave and continent...

In this utopian vision of diasporic community, Lazarus imagines the Jew taking American culture and making it his own, while, at the same time, he becomes an integral part of the American nation through his labor—she invokes images of "tanned herdsmen" and "tillers of the soil." The economy she depicts relies on a deep engagement with the land, through which a people rediscover their heritage and produce new traditions through the work of their hands. The exiles live in symbiotic harmony with the natural world, which is as free and joyous as they. They revel in "the fresh smells of the earth"; they lead the "yoke-freed oxen" and "udder-lighted kine" home for the evening. In this setting, the exiles become true "brothers" and "comrades." This scene recalls Lazarus' adoption of "faith in social progress" in the *Epistle*, though here, the possibility for social change lies not in a recreated Zion, but in exile in America. Similarly, in "The Jewish Problem" Lazarus points out:

the very latest reforms urged by political economists, in view of the misery of the lower classes, are established by the Mosaic Code, which formulated the principle of the rights of labor, denying the right of private property in land, asserting that the corners of the field, the gleanings of the harvest belonged in justice, not in charity, to the poor and the stranger; and that man owed a duty, not only to all humanity, but even to the beast of the field... (*Selected Poems* 276)

The idyllic, even socialistic vision laid out by "In Exile" is, for Lazarus, a natural extension of the Mosaic Code that can be realized in the present in the American West. The deep connection with the land that is so integral to her vision in this poem has its roots in ancient Jewish tradition and culture. She posits "justice" as the foundational element of Hebraic law, one which separates it from the Christian model of charity—and which, at the same time, makes Judaism necessarily compatible with American ideals.

The vision of community presented here approaches what Nancy, drawing upon the writings of Maurice Blanchot, might call a kind of "unworking." As discussed earlier, Nancy maintains that community does not emerge from "work" or as "a work": it "is not the work of singular beings" (31). The conception of "unworking," he writes, "no longer having to do either with production or with completion, encounters interruption, fragmentation, suspension." It resists a static, totalizing definition and thus resists the threat of *immanence*—"communal fusion...in which each member has his truth in the other" (12). In Lazarus' depiction here, community is not made, nor is it derived from an (imagined) originary experience. Rather it "happens," in a foreign space where individuals find themselves free to exist alongside one another, free to "communicate"; and it is through communication that they find joy in togetherness. Nancy considers community as "communication," which necessarily takes the place of the "sacred," as it was conceived of by Bataille before him—"the separated, the set apart" (35), a messianic projection of the "unattainable" community to come. Community as communication is, for Nancy, "transcendence," stripped of "any 'sacred' meaning, signifying precisely a resistance to immanence (resistance to the communion of everyone or to the exclusive passion of one or several: to all the forms and all the violences of subjectivity)" (35). In his discussion of "immanence" Nancy uses the example of Germany under Nazism, which is, of course, anachronistic in a discussion of Lazarus. However, his warning is, as we can see, quite relevant to a consideration of Zionism as a philosophy of community. In his recent critique of Zionist ideology, Adi Ophir illumines some of the deeply troubling results of "its contemporary realization" in the state of Israel. He writes:

Zionism was a revolt against European anti-Semitism and, later, against racism, and many of those who took part in this struggle were later victims of racism and anti-Semitism. But the struggle has yielded a society that tolerates, and sometimes actively supports, the emergence and consolidation of a Jewish racism that constantly victimizes its others. (96)

We considered earlier the difficulty of definition that seems inherent in the Zionist formulation of community, as it may be in any movement that emerges as a reaction to the definitions imposed by others. However, this inability of the movement to articulate a positive definition of community by which to unite and identify seems to have led it into a similar trap with regards to its new neighbors; Israel continues to be caught in a process of defining itself, or perhaps of defining the members of its community, by what they are *not*. In his discussion, Ophir points out that, in Israel, there exist six classifications of citizenship, of belonging to the state, which he describes as a kind of "apartheid," that have emerged out of this impasse. Such a schema unavoidably produces a kind of hierarchy that can only be maintained through cycles of violence and redefinition.

In her considerations of diaspora as a space for viable community in "In Exile," Lazarus avoids the problems she encounters, and fails to address, in her formulation of the Jewish nation-state. Here, she escapes the danger (and impossibility) of national self-definition, a process which, as we have seen, is laden with potential for the "violences" to which Nancy and Ophir refer. In exile, definitions of identity seem to be in constant flux; tradition encounters a new way of living and being that emerges as something wholly new—no longer "purely" Jewish, yet continually altering the idea of what it means to be "American."

"Home," at Last: Rereading "The New Colossus"

In Lazarus' most famous poem, "The New Colossus," she again illustrates a unity between foundational Judaic principles and the promised freedoms of America. This poem, written for the Bartholdi Pedestal Fund in 1883 and inscribed in the base of the Statue of Liberty, has been held up as the paradigmatic representation of America as a "melting pot" society. What seems to have been largely ignored, however, is the poem's deep engagement with a specifically Jewish migration to America. Lazarus herself, in the early 1880's, was often involved with projects in support of recent Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, particularly women. She was extraordinarily sympathetic to their cause, and spoke out on their behalf to an otherwise unaware, elite Jewish audience in New York, where many of these exiles settled. "The New Colossus," though certainly mindful of an American promise of "world-wide welcome," speaks most directly to this new influx of Jews (and to their already-assimilated American counterparts, whose support she tries to garner), particularly when read alongside her other work from this period.

The Statue of Liberty is, for Lazarus, "Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame"; immediately she sets America apart from the "Old World" of Europe (*Selected Poems* 233).

She is “a mighty woman with a torch,” and “From her beacon-hand/ Glows world-wide welcome.” Again, we may recall her *Epistle to the Hebrews*, in which Lazarus speaks of the need for “a beacon-light” for the Jews, and “the torch of visible community”—a phrase borrowed from George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* (*Epistle* 14-5). However, where in the *Epistle* she seems to desire that this “torch” appear in the form of a “resolute and *homogenous* nation” (15, emphasis mine), her vision in this poem is quite different. The Statue—and America more broadly—is hailed as the “Mother of Exiles,” indiscriminately accepting a vast array of refugees who arrive at her shores. She writes, “Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp,” again rejecting the burden of European history; tradition must be updated to meet the needs of the present, specifically the needs of the persecuted and destitute peoples, the “wretched refuse,” of Europe. She rejects the idea that immigrants should hold to all the customs they bring along with them to a new land; in particular, as she writes elsewhere, she believes strongly that Judaism should not subsist in orthodoxy, but rather should be reformed and updated to better survive the trials of modernity. Underlying this statement is, additionally, a reminder of the evils that the present generations have inherited from this history of pomp, evils such as anti-Semitism. When she considers those “tempest-tost” individuals fleeing persecution—a descriptions she uses frequently in her prose to reference the Jews (most often, but not always, those fleeing Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth century)—she envisions the Statue of Liberty extending to them the promise of community; it is one that must be stripped of the outmoded traditions of the past, but also one that they, a foreign people, will help to constitute.

As we saw in “In Exile,” the immigrant’s identity is in a state of flux between old and new, as is the identity of America. Again, the vision is a utopian one. Lazarus posits America, land of immigrants, as the space where the Jews can finally be at “home” in community as it occurs through the free movement and interaction of individuals; as she writes in the *Epistle*, “Wherever we are free, we are at home” (73). According to this formulation, home, divorced from the concept of “homeland,” can take place anywhere. She thus breaks with the desire for an authentic, mythical Jewish community in favor of one in which the Jews can exist, as brothers, among others—as, in Nancy’s terms, “beings *in common*” (57). By promoting the exilic model of community Lazarus is resisting the “storied pomp” of myth, and its “doubly totalitarian” (according to Nancy, in form and in content) will to power (56). Instead she presents the scene of a gathering, of “huddled masses” existing together, where “neither the community nor, consequently, the individual...invents the myth: to the contrary, it is they who are invented or who invent themselves” (59). Community is not produced in her vision; rather it appears amongst individuals who “yearn to breathe free” and hold *in common* a desire to feel at home in the world.

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