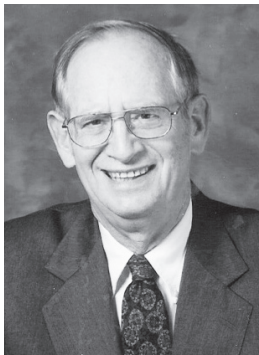


When Will We Ever Learn?

By Rabbi Jonathan Brown



Rabbi Jonathan Brown

Rabbi Brown, who is currently serving on the editorial board of *The Torch*, joined the Winchester Torch Club in 2005 and has presented papers on his uncle, Dr. Nelson Glueck, Biblical archaeologist and President of the Reform Jewish Seminary in Cincinnati, and on the impact on Leon Czolgosz, who assassinated President McKinley, of Emma Goldman, who “inspired him” to shoot the president. Both papers were published in *The Torch*.

An ordained Reform rabbi, Rabbi Brown has served congregations in many parts of the country and done interfaith work in all of his postings, including Long Beach, California, where he was involved in the effort to provide support for AIDS sufferers and raise funds for the several AIDS hospices there. He is also a published author.

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One of the great and enduring symbols of America’s welcome to new immigrants, the Statue of Liberty has stood for over a century on an island in New York’s harbor.

But a careful look at America’s treatment of many of the people already living here and at the challenges facing a great many of those arriving from countries other than Canada or England suggests a more nuanced understanding of what “welcome” has meant once newcomers actually set foot on American soil. This essay seeks to present that more nuanced understanding of the statue and its torch.

* * *

The dedication of the Statue of Liberty took place on the afternoon of October 28, 1886, with President Grover Cleveland presiding over the ceremony. A creation of one of France’s greatest sculptors, Frederic Bartholdi¹, the statue was a gift of the French people to the United States. Amity between the two nations went back to the time of the American Revolution, when the Marquis de Lafayette had come to the aid of the Americans in their fight against British imperialism; the French Revolution itself was undertaken to replace the rule of despotic kings in France just as the American Revolution was undertaken to remove once and for all the burdens and hardships of being a colony of Great Britain.

The ceremony on that October afternoon was replete with fireworks, music, and speeches. The crowds were large. The motto “Liberty enlightens the world” was displayed. To mark the statue’s arrival, a young Jewish poetess, Emma Lazarus, wrote a poem entitled

“A New Colossus”². Her poem was understood to express America’s attitude toward the steady stream of newcomers that came to America from strife-torn Europe and other nations whose work forces were disintegrating because of the invention of the steam engine and other inventions requiring far less manpower. The poem concluded with lines, imagined being spoken by the statue itself, which have touched the heart of almost every one who has read or heard the words.

“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!”*

That “wretched refuse” that came shore, in several generations, transformed the America that all of us have inherited.

But only a few days after the festive dedication, an African-American newspaper, the *Cleveland Gazette*, fulminated that the torch of liberty ought not to be lit until the United State had become a free nation for those already living there:

Liberty enlightening the world indeed. The expression makes us sick.

It cannot, or rather does not, protect its citizens within its

borders. Shove the Bartholdi stature, torch and all, into the ocean until that vaunted liberty is such as to enable an inoffensive and industrious colored man to provide a respectable living for his wife and family, without being Ku-kluxed or even murdered, his daughter and wife outraged, and his property destroyed. The idea of the liberty of this country enlightening the world is ridiculous in the extreme.³

Although the Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863 had freed all the slaves in the states that had seceded in 1861, the condition of millions of black Americans who still labored in virtual servitude in the South certainly did not suggest that America was willing to extend its hospitality to all those living within America's borders. Even twenty years after the end of the Civil War, huge challenges remained. Where were the former slaves and their descendants going to live? What kind of work could they do and who would hire them? How would they be educated? What property could they own? Would their full rights as citizens be protected? These questions and many more still resonate in our own day. We now have a movement, gaining momentum almost daily, whose placards can be seen everywhere proclaiming, "Black Lives Matter."

But it was not only emancipated slaves whose righteous indignation challenged the message of the Torch of Liberty. Turns out that Americans were far more willing to welcome Canadians and other English-speaking folks than the rest of the "tempest tost" masses yearning to breathe free. The welcome extended to the Europeans (mostly English) who came to these shores in the 17th and 18th centuries was withheld from the thousands of "coolies" from China and Japan who started arriving on the West Coast in the 19th century.

The United States' first ever anti-immigration law was passed in 1875. Called the Page Act because of its sponsor, a Republican member of the House of Representatives, it prohibited the entry of so-called undesirables, defined as any male person from Asia coming to America as a forced laborer—that is, kidnapped from his native land—to work at wages no non-immigrant would accept. Nor were aliens considered convicts in their own countries permitted entry into America. By the middle of the 1920s, strict quotas were established for almost everyone else.

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Other major sources of immigrants were the Baltic States, Romania, and Russia. The anti-Semitic policies of the Tsar included pogroms (attacks on Jews encouraged by the government, with the police standing by), and the Russian policy of "kidnapping" Jewish boys as young as twelve and conscripting them into the Tsar's army for a period of 25 years. This policy contributed significantly to the exodus of millions of Jews fleeing the Pale of Settlement within which they were officially restricted, subject to increasingly stressful regulations. Not all of those fleeing the Tsar's cruel decrees went to the United States, but many who did were influenced by letters from earlier Jewish immigrants describing America as the "Goldene Medinah," where the

streets were paved with gold. Between 1881, when the situation for Jews in Russia became intolerable, and 1914, when the Great War began, more than 2,000,000 Jews came to America.⁴

There was one other major "identity issue," as we would say now, that limited America's welcome to new immigrants. In 1907, many Americans feared that the "huddled masses" contained any number of bomb-throwers. Some (or most, depending on whom you were talking to) of the Jewish and Italian immigrants were anarchists or militant unionists. As such, the native-born feared, the new arrivals would be the source of strife between labor and management—or even assassins. The same sort of prejudice persists today for immigrants who are Muslims, or come from a Middle Eastern county where Muslims predominate. This anxiety of native-born Americans was well in excess of any actual danger posed, but the hostility was none the less virulent for being largely unfounded.

Largely but not entirely unfounded, one has to acknowledge, for anarchism had been involved in the assassination of heads of government (kings, dukes, and duchesses in Italy and elsewhere). In America, by and large, expressions of anarchism were limited to rioting in the streets and protesting against the titans of industry and commerce, but Leon Czolgosz, the assassin of William McKinley, had been affected by anarchist thought.⁵

The center of anarchism in the U.S. in the 19th century and early 20th century was the city of Chicago. In the 1880s, there had been a number of violent protests by workers against their employers in America's Second City; the workers were angered by poor working conditions, inadequate pay, and the reality that striking workers could be locked out and replaced by newer immigrants who would work for less money.

On May 4, 1886, during a peaceful rally in support of workers striking for an eight hour-day, and responding to the killing of several workers the previous day by the police, a riot broke out in Haymarket Square. A bomb was thrown at the officers trying to disperse the crowd. The bomb and ensuing gunfire resulted in the deaths of seven police officers and at least four civilians. Scores of others were wounded.⁶ The trauma of the violence remained deeply rooted in the memory of Chicagoans for more than twenty years.

* * *

Into this *mélange* of violence and suspicion came a 19 year old Jewish accountant named Lazarus Averbuch, whose family had fled Russia's pogroms and settled briefly in Central Europe. He migrated from Austria in December 1907, arriving at Ellis Island and then boarding a train heading west from Union Station in New York City. He went directly to the Jewish "district" of Chicago, where his sister Olga lived in a small home where he could stay. She also worked for someone who could provide a job for her brother as well—not as an accountant, as he had been trained, but for the menial task of packing egg cartons for a distributor. Averbuch would be paid \$6 week. The money certainly wasn't going to be sufficient for any long range plans.

He could hardly have come to Chicago at a worse time in so far as finding a job was concerned. The country's economy was in recession, and some would argue that 1907 was the most severe year of economic stress and distress between the middle 1880s and the Great Depression of the 1930s. Nor could he have come to a more dangerous place in so far as the likelihood being taken as an anarchist was concerned. All Jewish men were suspect, although the most prominent and therefore the most feared Jewish anarchist was a woman—Emma Goldman.

* * *

Probably only a very few readers recognize the name of Lazarus Averbuch, and the many who do not may wonder why I am describing his arrival in such detail. Averbuch, as it fell out, played the central role in a tragedy that exemplifies how fear and ignorance can undermine the promises implicit in the Statue of Liberty and the moving poem about the statue that Emma Lazarus was inspired to write. The story of what happened to Lazarus Averbuch reveals the xenophobia, nativism, prejudice, and stereotyping of some groups as inherently evil that betray those promises, as well as the tremendous resistance sometimes mounted against allowing these "undesirables" to live in your community amidst "decent citizens." The story of Lazarus Averbuch carries a moral we in the United States always need to remember—perhaps especially now in 2017.

* * *

Soon after Averbuch's arrival, a Catholic priest, Father Leo Heinrichs, was shot down while saying the Mass at his Church in Denver, Colorado. Newspaper articles the next day reported that priests were in dread of becoming the next victim, and police in Chicago were sent to all the Catholic churches in the city, while the Vicar-General of the Chicago Diocese declared all-out war upon "anti-clericals" and "anarchists." Catholic clergy in other cities also sought and received police protection, but Chicago in particular prepared for the worst when the local press reported that Emma Goldman, "the Queen of the Reds," would begin an extended speaking campaign in Chicago on March 6.

About this time, evidence suggests, Averbuch met a man named Abraham Levy at the egg packing plant. Levy was then looking for men willing and capable to get started as farmers in central Iowa, and though Averbuch

knew nothing about farming, he likely thought it would be better than packing eggs.

It was probably his interest in moving to Iowa that prompted Lazarus Averbuch to seek an audience with George Shippy, the newly appointed Chief of Police in Chicago. From Averbuch's past experience with his family's moving about in Russia, he would have expected that when one arrived at any new location, one had to make an appointment with an official who could sign a permit allowing residence in that community. If a person then wanted to leave and go somewhere else, one had to once again approach an official to obtain permission to move. Averbuch's willingness to abide by what he thought were the rules, amidst the fears and suspicions in Chicago, would cost him his life.

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On March 2, a cold Monday, Averbuch left his modest lodgings in the Jewish neighborhood and made his way to the far larger residence of Chicago's newly appointed police chief, George Shippy. At age 54, Shippy had reached the top of his profession. He had earned the sobriquet "The Iron Chief" both for his physical strength and for his refusal to allow Chicago's unemployed to stage a protest march. He was known for being especially hard on alleged subversives and anarchists. In modern parlance, he was

the sort of person who, “spotting” an Anarchist, would shoot first and ask questions later.

When Averbuch arrived at the Shippy home, the family maid answered the door as the Shippys were finishing breakfast and the Chief was about to leave for his office.⁷ His driver was waiting outside. Averbuch, with an envelope in his hand, asked to see the Chief, and the two stood face to face for a few moments, each sizing up his other. The chief was a robust and powerful man, Averbuch a slight and slender youth. But the chief later testified that the “swarthy” young man he was “assessing” looked to the chief to be an anarchist. Meanwhile, the Chief’s wife had come down the stairs, and the Chief asked her if she would pat Averbuch’s pockets to see if he was carrying a gun. He testified that she detected one. Then the bullets started to fly, and when the shooting was over Averbuch was dead. Shippy claimed that not only did Averbuch have a gun, he also brandished a 12-inch knife. Neither weapon was ever found.

The facts that Averbuch never owned a gun and did not know how to use one were revealed as soon as his sister was informed of the tragedy. The Lazarus family, already diminished by a massacre of Jews in the Kishinev pogrom of 1903, lost another member whose only “crime” was being a newly-arrived Jewish immigrant.

As soon as word got out that the chief of police had avoided an “assassination” by killing the assassin, the Chicago newspapers went ballistic. Chicago’s major paper, the *Tribune*, referred to him as an anarchist of a morbid, insane type, a disciple of Emma Goldman. Even the *New York Times* made news of the killing its lead story. The name of Averbuch became, almost instantly, to most of Chicago’s citizens, synonymous with anarchy, communism, malevolent foreigners,

and violence, and Shippy was a hero protecting his city.

However, the accusations confidently made against Averbuch had no credible support, and there was no question in Olga Averbuch’s mind that her brother had been murdered. She did everything she could while being interviewed the police to confront their lack of evidence, and to deny all the accusations that were made about her brother. Olga was instrumental in setting up an investigation about what really happened in the Police Chief’s parlor. With financial help and other support from Jane Addams, Olga managed to acquire as her attorney a young lawyer, then just a recent graduate from Harvard Law School, but destined for greatness: Harold Ickes, who later became an important figure in FDR’s government. It did not help, however. Shippy was exonerated.⁸

* * *

I chose to write this paper because, as its title suggests, more than a century after the anarchist hysteria of 1907 and 1908, it is abundantly clear that America has yet to trod that long and arduous path to knowing—and trusting—your neighbor, in order to realize the hope expressed in Emma Lazarus’s sonnet, as well as by the torch of the Statue of Liberty itself. The “huddled masses” now include Muslims, Hindus, Mexicans, Central Americans, Syrians, Afghanis, Pakistanis, and refugees from many other places where strife and prejudice and hatred of the “other” have caused people to flee from their country of origin with the hope of finding respite somewhere where they might be able to rebuild their lives, raise their children, find gainful employment, and thrive in a place where they feel welcome. To the extent that America is able to be that place, the frustration expressed in the title of this paper will be mitigated and ultimately dissolved. The story of Lazarus Averbuch reminds us of the high costs of our falling short of that ideal.

Notes

1 Gustave Eiffel was the engineering genius who actually built the 151 foot statue, which would stand on a pedestal and foundations of 154 feet, for a total of 305 up to her torch.

2 The original Colossus stood at Rhodes (an island off the coast of Greece) and was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Lazarus’s sonnet was written for and donated to an auction, conducted by the Art Loan Fund Exhibition in Aid of the Bartholdi Pedestal Fund for the Statue of Liberty to raise funds to build the pedestal. It was not actually affixed to the pedestal until 1903.

3 Quoted from the Wikipedia article on the Statue of Liberty.

4 The earlier Jewish immigrants came in the 1840s, 50s, and 60s, from Germany and other central European countries. They were far outnumbered by the flood of Jewish immigrants later, but did their best to help their co-religionists to “find” a new life in America. Interested readers are referred to Jonathan Sarna’s *American Judaism*, pp. 151-158.

5 [Editor’s note] Czolgosz is the subject of an earlier piece by Rabbi Brown, “An Extraordinary Woman and an Unlikely Anarchist: Emma Goldman, Leon Czolgosz and Anarchism in America,” in the Spring 2014 issue of *The Torch*.

6 There are many accounts of this event. Here I rely on that in *An Accidental Anarchist*, by Walter Roth and Joe Kraus, 8 ff.

7 My account of this incident is based on that of Roth and Kraus, pp. 14-16.

8 That Lazarus Averbuch went to Shippy’s home instead of his to his office to present his request has bearing on another contemporary issue: the current heated conversations and court cases involving the “stand your ground” laws in a number of states, laws which purport to give homeowners the right to shoot strangers who appear at their door without invitation and for unknown purposes.

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