

# Memorial Day Address Given at Chatham Square Cemetery

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By Peter A. Berkowsky

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*Editor's note: Shearith Israel's largest cemetery, located in Chinatown, is the resting place of many early members and trustees of the congregation, including 18 who supported George Washington during the Revolutionary War. Each Memorial Day, a moving ceremony is held to honor these patriots, featuring a color guard, live music, and participation from veterans and descendants. This year, Peter Berkowsky was honored as one of three veterans invited to speak. Below is the text of his speech.*

Good Memorial Day, and Yom Yerushalayim sameach.



What you see around you this morning is silent testimony to the enduring patriotism of the pioneer Jewish community here in New York City. Shearith Israel is the direct link to those first 23 Jewish immigrants—refugees from the Inquisition—who fled here from Brazil in 1654 to the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam, and then were initially denied admission by Governor Peter Stuyvesant, in North America's earliest act of antisemitism. It would take another half-century before the community was even permitted to build their own house of worship.



(Credit: Lawrence Hauptman)

Some of the patriots buried here—18th-century successors to those early immigrants—joined George Washington’s cause. After his army’s defeat in the Battle of Long Island, they retreated with him from New York City and reestablished their congregation-in-exile in Philadelphia, until the tide of the war turned.

Still another century later, a descendant of those early immigrants played yet another role in American history. The people of France had decided to honor the memory of our late President Abraham Lincoln with the gift of a statue cast by Alexandre Eiffel and sculpted by Auguste Bartholdi, who would call it “Liberty Enlightening the World.”

A gifted young poet of the Shearith Israel community named Emma Lazarus, a protégé of Ralph Waldo Emerson, joined the effort to raise money for a pedestal for this statue, to be erected at a prominent spot in New York Harbor. Emma was one of America’s earliest Zionists, inspired by the plight of Jewish victims of pogroms then taking place in far-off tsarist Russia. For the pedestal fundraising campaign, she wrote a sonnet, calling it “The New Colossus”—a reference to the Colossus at Rhodes, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. But rather than a colossal giant straddling the entrance to the harbor of a Mediterranean Greek island, Emma envisioned this new statue as a welcoming sign for shipboard immigrants arriving in New York City—a reenactment of the voyage her own ancestors had made 230 years earlier.

When this Statue of Liberty was dedicated on Bedloe’s Island in October 1886, Emma was not present at the ceremony. Her sonnet was not read there. In fact, she died of cancer soon after, at the age of 38, and was buried in Shearith Israel’s Beth Olam Cemetery in Cypress Hills, Queens. The sonnet, lost for years, was discovered in a used book shop in 1903 by an old friend, Georgina Schuyler, a humanitarian, patroness of the arts, and granddaughter of Alexander Hamilton. Since 1945, Emma’s sonnet has been greeting visitors to the Statue of Liberty from above the main entrance.

It reads like this:

**Not** like the brazen giants 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.

**“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!”

Many of us here today are descendants of those who arrived on immigrant ships from Europe, beginning in the 1880s. We owe our appreciation to this daughter of the Shearith Israel community, Emma Lazarus.

And finally, on this Memorial Day, as we look around at the graves of our patriotic forebears, let us keep in mind the simple words of the prophet Isaiah:

***Yich-yu mei-techa. The dead shall live.***