

In The Jewish Synagogue At Newport, 1871

BY EMMA LAZARUS

*Here, where the noises of the busy town,
The ocean's plunge and roar can enter not,
We stand and gaze around with tearful awe,
And muse upon the consecrated spot.*

*No signs of life are here: the very prayers
Inscribed around are in a language dead;
The light of the "perpetual lamp" is spent
That an undying radiance was to shed.*

*What prayers were in this temple offered up,
Wrung from sad hearts that knew no joy on earth,
By these lone exiles of a thousand years,
From the fair sunrise land that gave them birth!*

*How as we gaze, in this new world of light,
Upon this relic of the days of old,
The present vanishes, and tropic bloom
And Eastern towns and temples we behold.*

*Again we see the patriarch with his flocks,
The purple seas, the hot blue sky o'erhead,
The slaves of Egypt,—omens, mysteries,—
Dark fleeing hosts by flaming angels led.*

*A wondrous light upon a sky-kissed mount,
A man who reads Jehovah's written law,
'Midst blinding glory and effulgence rare,
Unto a people prone with reverent awe.*

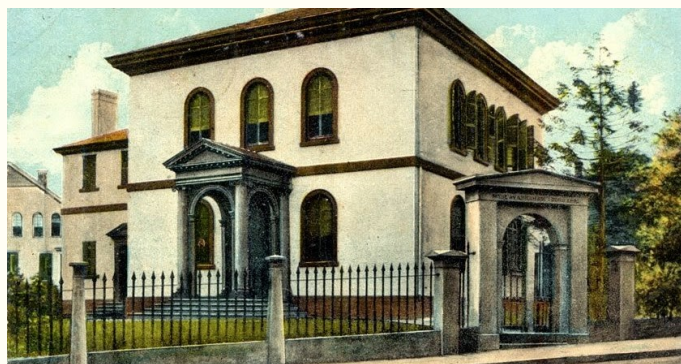
*The pride of luxury's barbaric pomp,
In the rich court of royal Solomon—
Alas! we wake: one scene alone remains,—
The exiles by the streams of Babylon.*

*Our softened voices send us back again
But mournful echoes through the empty hall:
Our footsteps have a strange unnatural sound,
And with unwonted gentleness they fall.*

*The weary ones, the sad, the suffering,
All found their comfort in the holy place,
And children's gladness and men's gratitude
'Took voice and mingled in the chant of praise.*

*The funeral and the marriage, now, alas!
We know not which is sadder to recall;
For youth and happiness have followed age,
And green grass lieth gently over all.*

*Nathless the sacred shrine is holy yet,
With its lone floors where reverent feet once trod.
Take off your shoes as by the burning bush,
Before the mystery of death and God.*



**TOURO SYNAGOGUE IN NEWPORT, RHODE
ISLAND IS KNOWN TO BE THE OLDEST
SYNAGOGUE IN THE UNITED STATES,
SURVIVING FROM THE COLONIAL ERA.**

“IN THE JEWISH SYNAGOGUE AT NEWPORT,” BY EMMA LAZARUS—1871

SOURCE

This poem was written by Emma Lazarus when she was 19 in 1868. It was then published in 1871 when she was 22 in a volume entitled *Admetus and Other Poems*.

BACKGROUND

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882) was one of the most popular American poets of the 19th century. Primary school and secondary school teachers throughout the country taught his work and so Emma, an avid reader, found his poetry at an early age. In 1854 he wrote a poem called “The Jewish Cemetery at Newport.” Jews had established a congregation as early as the 1650s in Newport. They also bought land for a cemetery in the 1670s. By 1768, the community built a new synagogue building. Emma’s great great uncle Moses Seixas led the congregation in the late 1700s and when George Washington came to visit, Seixas wrote him a letter extolling religious freedom in America. The congregation thrived for several decades but as commerce in Newport declined in the years after the American revolution, many of the Jewish merchants moved to other cities. Still, they sent funds for the maintenance of the cemetery.

When Longfellow visited, he saw only the cemetery and wrote a poem, “The Jewish Cemetery at Newport” where he remarked “closed are the portals of the Synagogue,” “gone are the living but the dead remain.” The poem ends with the following:

*“But ah! What once has been shall be no more!
The groaning earth in travail and in pain
Brings forth its races, but does not restore,
And the dead nations never rise again.”*

GUIDING QUESTIONS

As you read the source consider how it informs these questions:

- When Longfellow wrote his poem, he described what he saw in the cemetery, the tombstones, the old synagogue. Emma also describes the physical setting, but delves into history. What does she see?
- In the historical background, we included the last stanza of Longfellow’s poem. Compare this to Emma’s last stanza. What is Emma Lazarus saying about the Jewish people---its past, present and future?
- How can the arts help people express, understand, and debate ideas and history?
- How does Emma’s American identity help her to write this poem; how does her Jewish identity help her to write this poem?

HISTORICAL NOTES

Definitions of terms used in the source.

Perpetual lamp: Ner Tamid, the lamp that is supposed to always remain lit inside the synagogue.

Patriarch with his flocks, Slaves of Egypt, Solomon: Biblical references