

## Focusing on Our Own Failures while the World Is on Fire

Kol Nidre 5785

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Emma Lazarus is best known for words of her poem, “The New Colossus,” inscribed on the Statue of Liberty. She wrote that poem in 1883, by which time Lazarus had been a prolific writer for more than a decade. She had translated German and French poetry, was mentored by Ralph Waldo Emerson, and wrote about Goethe.<sup>i</sup> She penned “Progress and Poverty,” a poem addressing economic inequality in America.<sup>ii</sup> But she had not written about Jewish suffering.

Lazarus was born and raised amidst “a wealthy Sephardic Jewish family of Portuguese descent.”<sup>iii</sup> She was Jewishly observant, but only when she was over thirty and increasingly aware of the pogroms facing Jews in Eastern Europe did she focus on her own people. She confessed that she and other comfortable, intellectual American Jews like her had lacked “sufficient solidarity to perceive that when the life and prosperity of a Jew in [far-flung] provinces of [Russia] are attacked, the dignity of a Jew in free America is humiliated.” She continued her Yom Kippur-like confession by saying that she and her colleagues had not practiced “cohesion with our fellow Jews,” but had failed “to champion ... the rights of the lowest and poorest Jew...,” those forced to flee pogroms. Only now did she recognize the “common creed, common stock, ... common history, [and] common heritage of misfortunate” that bound her to her dispersed and often-despised people.<sup>iv</sup>

Dr. Elana Stein Hain speaks of “Emma Lazarus’s pivot,” the moment she found the need and the will to direct her attention and concern toward our Jewish people.<sup>v</sup> Many American Jews have made a similar pivot since last October 7.

A couple years ago, our Jewish Federation of Arkansas conducted a study, as it sought to clarify its priorities before seeking a new executive director. Among the areas of concern listed, Israel came in dead last. I participated in that study, and I confess not to recall the list of issues we were asked to rank or where I placed Israel on my own list. Many of the respondents doubtless asked themselves, “What is the unique mission of the Jewish Federation of **Arkansas**?” Now, like Emma Lazarus before it, Arkansas’s Jewish Federation has pivoted. Many who ranked Israel last just a few years ago now understand that the fate of Arkansas’s Jews is linked to that of our people in Israel and around the world.

Speaking to rabbis in July, Dr. Hain pointed us to a sermon that Rabbi Dr. Walter Wurzburger delivered to Congregation Chai Odom on Yom Kippur in 1943, at the height of the Holocaust. Rabbi Wurzburger was a refugee from Nazi Germany. A sermon excoriating Hitler and his wickedness would have been expected and appropriate.

However, Dr. Wurzburger followed the example of the High Priest, carrying out the Yom Kippur ritual in the Jerusalem Temple's Holy of Holies, confronting "all the failures and shortcomings that undermined the structure of Jewish existence" in that era. The High Priest could easily have lambasted the "militaristic Romans ... idolatrous Babylonians ... Godless Assyrians ... [and] faithless Egyptians." Instead, the priest confessed: "אנה יהוה חטאתי עויתי פשאתי לפניך, 'Adonai, I have sinned! I have failed! I am guilty.' I am responsible for the suffering...I caused all the agony, misery and injustice that shakes the structure of our ailing society."<sup>vi</sup>

Dr. Wurzburger did not imagine himself or the congregation arrayed before him to be responsible for the Nazi menace and the genocide it was perpetrating. Still, Rabbi Wurzburger turned to his congregation: "We in America have also failed miserably. Do we have to travel to Europe in order to discover racial persecution? Why not go to Detroit ...? ... Each and every one of us is responsible for the debacle of civilization."<sup>vii</sup>

Just as Rabbi Wurzburger's congregation was not to blame for the Holocaust, Jewish leaders in Arkansas did not cause the horrific terror that Hamas unleashed upon our people in Israel, no matter where we ranked Israel among our priorities for our statewide Federation. Nor are we culpable for antisemitism that has grown exponentially in the United States since 2016 and again over the course of the last year. Still, we may take our cue from Emma Lazarus and Rabbi Wurzburger. Denouncing Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis, and their Iranian overlords is as easy as it is deserved. Rabbi Wurzburger had a good reason for not focusing his Yom Kippur sermon on the Nazi enemy. Yom Kippur is not for **them**; it's for **us**.

What, then, are **our** failings, as we confront all that ails the world today? Israel continues to be at war, increasingly isolated in the world and vulnerable to attack from Iran and its terrorist tentacles. Antisemitism comes at us from both extremes of the American political spectrum, right and left, just as it does worldwide.

על חטא שחטאנו לפניך

For the sin we have sinned against You by indifference to Israel and our Jewish people.

Many among us have experienced an awakening like Emma Lazarus's in this last year. Today, let us confess our failings of solidarity with our Jewish people, and particularly with the Land and People of Israel, in years past. Let us commit to

standing with our worldwide Jewish community, even when the current catastrophe abates.

על חטא שחטאנו לפניך

For the sin we have sinned against You by indifference to the plight of the Palestinian people—and of Israel’s Bedouin and Druze citizens, too.

On October 7, Israelis of all ethnicities and religions were victims of Hamas’s massacre on the Jewish State. We have also seen horrifying attacks on innocent Palestinians by extremist Jewish settlers in the Occupied West Bank. Let us enhance our commitment to equal rights for **all** Israelis and redouble our commitment to a future of peace and security for all in the region.

I am troubled by my own failure to be grieve civilian deaths in Gaza. Yes, that blood is on Hamas’s hands—indeed, massive loss of life among its own people was among Hamas’s goals on October 7. Still, I am ashamed that I continue to avert my eyes from the horror of the tens of thousands of precious human souls lost to war, and I suspect I am not alone.

על חטא שחטאנו לפניך

For the sin we have sinned against You by calling out antisemitism on the other side of the American political divide, but not our own.

Antisemitism on the far left, including among some Democratic Members of Congress, goes well beyond legitimate criticism of Israel, endangering American Jews and providing aid and comfort to terrorists. Those who support Kamala Harris must call that out and demand that the Vice President do the same, forcefully. Meanwhile, White supremacy is an all-too-potent force in the Republican Party, threatening Jewish lives, as it did when a right-wing extremist murdered eleven Jews at prayer by in Pittsburgh in 2018. Former President Trump’s claim that Jews will be to blame if he loses, is dangerous, potentially inciting violence against us; and his own supporters must repudiate it. Neither “side” is free of antisemitism, and we deepen the threat when we point only to its manifestations on “the other side.”

This Yom Kippur, the world is on fire. We could be forgiven for pointing the finger at the perpetrators of the world’s greatest evil. But Yom Kippur is not about **them**. Yom Kippur is for **us**. Let each of us take a hard look—at our actions, at our wrongdoing, at our own role in setting planet Earth ablaze. Let us acknowledge our failings and transcend them—building greater solidarity among our Jewish people, growing our empathy for our Arab cousins, and combatting antisemitism. It’s a tall

order. With our hard work and God’s partnership, let us build a better world in the year ahead.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Kerry Lee Alexander, “Emma Lazarus,” *National Women’s History Museum*, 2018-2020, <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/emma-lazarus>.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://ajhs.org/wp-content/uploads/Progress-Poverty.pdf>.

<sup>iii</sup> Alexander.

<sup>iv</sup> Emma Lazarus, “Epistle to the Hebrews,” 1883.

<sup>v</sup> Elana Stein Hain, “Standin in the Breach: Jewish Preaching During Crisis,” Rabbinic Torah Seminar, Shalom Hartman Institute, July 14, 2024.

<sup>vi</sup> Rabbi Dr. Walter Wurzburg, “The Individual in the Crisis,” Congregation Chai Odom, Brighton, Massachusetts, Yom Kippur, October 9, 1943.

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*