

THE EMMA LAZARUS PROJECT

Migration, Memory, and Reimagining What It Means to “Breathe Free”...

If You Could Write a Poem For The Statue of Liberty Today, What Would You Say?



Interactive “Storybook”
Lesson Plans & Curriculum

EMMA LAZARUS PROJECT

**What does it mean to “breathe free”?
You know her poem—but do you know her story?**

The “Emma Lazarus Project” Poetry Contest invited students to reimagine the meaning of the Statue of Liberty using their own ideas - because historical texts continue to acquire new meanings across time, historical inquiry connects to present, and personal inheritance can inform civic reflection. Educators are celebrating the multiple dimensions of heritage when they model that creative interpretation is a form of student agency. When they engage curiosity, diversity, and lived experiences through cultural memory. And when they situate intergenerational storytelling as a connecting fabric for students.



High School | 2020 | Winner
Lady Liberty: Reimagined
by Kevin Kong

*25 poems from
winners and finalists*

EMMA LAZARUS'

"GOLDEN DOOR!"

Emma Lazarus' "**The New Colossus**," mounted on the Statue of Liberty, travels far beyond the monument—a dream inherited by generations of refugees arriving at “sea-washed, sunset gates,” searching for refuge at “the golden door.” This is an American story—and a Jewish one. Lazarus, a Jewish American writer and refugee advocate, came from a long history of exile. **Her Sephardic ancestors were among the first Jews to establish a permanent community in what would become the United States: 23 refugees, one ship, an enduring beginning.** Jews in the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal) had faced **forced conversion and Inquisition-era persecution.** Some lived as “*Conversos*,” practicing Judaism in secret, some fled. **Those who found refuge in Dutch-controlled Brazil faced uncertainty when, in 1654, the Portuguese regained control. That small ship carrying 23 Jewish refugees from Recife (Brazil) arrived in New Amsterdam—present-day NYC—carrying some of Emma Lazarus’ own ancestors.** Director-General Peter Stuyvesant tried to bar them from staying, but after fierce debate and support from Jewish communal leaders in Amsterdam, the refugees were ultimately permitted to remain.

Centuries later, born in New York City, Emma Lazarus (1849–1887) gave us language that embodies not just her own Jewish family history, but a broader one. With the words, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” she tied the Statue of Liberty to an ongoing, unfinished conversation about immigration, belonging, and who gets to call a place home. Her legacy reminds us how personal history and public voice shape the stories we tell, inviting exploration into the tangled histories of exile, diaspora, and migration as they intersect across religious, linguistic, geographic, national, and family origins.
