Where Are We? The Inner Life of America's Jews

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In considering our last 100 years in this land and the tomorrow of the Jewish people, which of our myriad stories shall we tell? How can we say where we have been when we have been to so many different places? There are so many ways to tell these stories, and there is no obvious master narrative into which all the messy details of Jewish life in America during this past century can neatly be tucked.

Shall we tell the broad story that begins not a century ago, but a century and a half ago, in 1852, when Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, visiting the cemetery of the synagogue in Newport—a cemetery that had been purchased in 1677, was the oldest Jewish burial ground in North America, and was attached to a synagogue that by the time of the poet’s visit could no longer could assemble a minyan—was inspired to write these lines: “How strange it seems! These Hebrews in their graves.../ 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.” We begin with Longfellow and we end triumphantly with Joseph Lieberman: Take that, Henry! The Jewish story as the story of obituaries has been proven premature, dismal expectations defied.

Another version of our story comes in endless forms: the Jews and Hollywood, the Jews and investment banking, the Jews and comedy. My favorite? Almost exactly 100 years ago, the kosher butchers of New York’s Lower East Side raised the price of their meat from $.12 a pound to $.18 a pound. Jewish women immediately organized themselves into the Ladies’ Anti-Beef Trust Association and called for a boycott of the butchers, not only refusing to buy the pricey meat but actually entering some of the shops late at night to douse the meat with kerosene, rendering it—one hopes—unsuitable for sale. Within three weeks, the butchers rolled back the price increase. There followed frequent rent strikes. And then, in 1909, in a strike that would have major implications for trade unionism in general, 20,000 shirtwaist-makers, mostly women between the ages of 16 and 25, went out on strike, the largest strike by women up to that time in American history. That strike made the International Ladies Garment Workers Union into a major force in the labor movement.

Energized by the shirtwaist-makers strike, a year later 65,000 men, chiefly cloak and suit workers, left their jobs and went on strike, demanding, among other things, a closed shop. The uptown Jews sought to intervene, for they were horrified at the spectacle of Jewish workers
striking against Jewish employers. Their efforts at mediation finally were successful when they invited a Boston lawyer by the name of Louis Brandeis to handle the matter. When Brandeis successfully negotiated what was called the “protocol of peace,” which endorsed the union shop, again a pattern was set: three weeks after the New York strike was settled, the workers at Chicago’s Hart, Schaffner went on strike, to be joined very soon by another 35,000 Chicago workers in the garment trades striking 50 different manufacturers. Out of that strike was born the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, a signal chapter in the story of Jews and the American labor movement.

More broadly, it is the story of Jews as activists who changed the face of America. It was Abba Eban who once proposed that we Jews are a people that cannot take “yes” for an answer—but here in America, it is as if a people so used to hearing only “no” finally heard “yes” and surged to respond, all the pent-up energies of centuries of oppression and restriction now released in this new Jerusalem. Once can hardly imagine how America would look if no Jew had ever come, how sharply different the streets and schools, the courthouses and laboratories, the concert halls and department stores would be. Where have we been in America these last 100 years? Everywhere, from country clubs to county jails, from Nobel ceremonies to nursing homes, from the sacred to the profane, and from the sublime to the ridiculous. On the whole, however, we have a remarkable record of contribution and achievement.

Or, shall we prefer the rather more complex and surely more downbeat story of the Lazarus sisters? In 1883, a young Jewish poet from New York named Emma Lazarus was the unanimous choice of a government commission to write the poem, “The New Colossus” for the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty. Written in 1883, the words of that poem, that extraordinary celebration of America’s hospitality—“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free”—surely reflected the general Jewish view of what this country and its freedom even then had come to mean to Jews. I set aside for the moment the rarely asked question of how this gifted woman, herself a proud Jew, an ardent advocate of Jewish learning and of Jewish affirmation, could refer to the immigrants as “the wretched refuse of Europe’s teeming shore.” How could she describe my parents and the parents and grandparents of millions of us as “wretched refuse,” as garbage? Does the fact that she did offer us a clue as to the complexities of being Jewish in this free and welcoming country? Emma’s sister Josephine, writing in 1895, is a de facto Jew for Jesus as she writes, “We do not say to these bewildered and belated wanderers from other climes and times: ‘keep your jargon and your uncouth ways and customs...on the contrary, we bid them welcome only on