

## Thanksgiving: Celebrating unity within diversity

BY RABBI ROBERT STERNBERG  
FOR THE GARDNER NEWS

Thanksgiving is a holiday that captures the unique spirit of America's people. It also reflects our understanding of ourselves as a nation as well as the way in which the United States is perceived in other parts of the world.

We remember the first Thanksgiving in American history in which Native Americans shared their food and their knowledge of how to survive the winter with newly-arrived Puritan settlers from Great Britain.

More than anything else, Thanksgiving then was a celebration of human kindness and generosity, a mutual acknowledgement of a shared humanity, and an exchange of knowledge and understanding by two very different cultures.

America as an ideal has been centered on preserving the idea of what took place those hundreds of years ago when the first Europeans encountered the first Native Americans.

While the United States of America as a nation has struggled and sometimes failed tragically to live up to this ideal, the American people as a whole understands its legacy and has tried hard to correct the imbalances in its society, eradicate prejudice and discrimination, and fulfill its destiny as a haven for the oppressed and persecuted.

Our recent presidential election has exemplified the best of these ideals. During the presidential campaign, the American people, both Democrats and Republicans, affirmed their commitment to not allow race or gender to be factors that determine a person's ability to be the leader of our country.

After the election was over, the immediate public commitment made by our Democratic President Elect and by his Republican opponent to work together, as one united force, to address the serious economic problems that face our country are reflective of the same spirit.

The vote of the American people for "unity within diversity" has been heartwarming. Our leaders have given us all a reason to be hopeful for a brighter future in the years ahead.

### JEWISH PERSPECTIVE



RABBI  
ROBERT  
STERNBERG

For Jewish people, American Thanksgiving has always had a special spiritual significance. Most American Jews are the descendants of Jewish immigrants who fled to America to escape persecution and oppression in Europe.

In more recent years, Jews have also fled from countries in the Middle East for the same reason. Like other immigrants, Jewish immigrants worked hard to overcome their displacement, to learn English, and to become productive contributors to American society. Jews acculturated well into life in America.

Jews have contributed in many ways to the building of our country and to creating a society that is free of bigotry and hate. Like our fellow Americans, we are proud

of what our country has accomplished and we are committed to do our part to make the dream of "unity within diversity" a reality.

This week also coincidentally marks the *yahrzeit* (death anniversary) of one of the most important American Jews. Emma Lazarus is the Jewish American poet whose poem, "The New Colossus", is engraved onto the Statue of Liberty. Emma Lazarus was born in New York City on July 22, 1849 and passed away on Nov. 19, 1887.

In addition to being a renowned poet, Lazarus became an advocate for assisting oppressed Jews in Czarist Russia who were being raped, massacred, and murdered in pogroms. Lazarus was part of a group of American Jewish leaders who assisted Jews to escape from the hate and oppression of the Czar and his government. She raised money to assist Jews with immigration to the United States and she made five trips to Russia to lobby on behalf of their release.

Her best known poem, "The New Colossus" was submitted as a donation to an auction organized in 1886 to raise money to help build the Statue of Liberty. It was the only poem read aloud at the auction but was not mounted onto the statue until 1903, 15 years after her death.

*Not like the brazen giant 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 imprisoned lightning, and her name*

*Mother of Exiles. From her beacon hand*

*Glows worldwide 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-tossed, to me,*

*I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

The statue was originally built as a tribute to "International Republicanism" and not as a public statement to welcome immigrants to the United States. However, after "The New Colossus" was mounted onto the statue, its message to the world as well as to all Americans became immediately and forever connected with the idea of America as a haven for the oppressed and persecuted. The Statue of Liberty came to be seen as a mother holding up her lantern of hope and shelter to welcome her tired, poor, and hungry children home. Because the Statue of Liberty sits opposite Ellis Island, then the processing station for new immigrants, it became the ultimate symbol of what America represents to its own citizens as well as to the rest of the world.

This Thanksgiving, 2008, let us remember the American Jewish poet Emma Lazarus as well as take heart that the legacy of her life and what she represents has now been placed in the hands of a group of good, competent leaders who will renew the strength of what America stands for, a strong nation committed to "unity within diversity".

*(Rabbi Robert Sternberg is the rabbi at Temple Israel in Athol.)*