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TIKVAH קרן תקווה

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CLASS 3

Immigration and Jewish-American Identity

Theodore Roosevelt | Emma Lazarus

Orientation

During the late 1800's, huge numbers of immigrants began arriving in the United States fleeing war, famine, and persecution in their home countries. Between 1870 and 1900, nearly 12 million immigrants came to America in search of safety and opportunity. While, as in decades past, large numbers of these newcomers were from Great Britain, this wave of immigration saw a dramatic increase in the numbers of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe. These immigrants' foreign cultures, languages, and religions made them stand out in a society still largely defined by the nation's Protestant and Anglo-Saxon (of British descent) majority.

In the first years of the 20th century, immigration from these parts of Europe surged: Between 1900 and 1915, America welcomed over 15 million additional migrants, the vast majority of whom were from Southern and Eastern Europe. It was a time marked by growing tensions between immigrant populations and "old stock" Americans over jobs, government resources, religion, and culture. With America's entrance into the First World War in 1917, some Americans even began to wonder whether immigrants from now-enemy nations—Germany, Austria, and Hungary—would stay loyal to the country that had taken them in.

Immigrants arriving at Ellis Island in 1915

Introduction

In opposition to many politicians of his time, Theodore Roosevelt believed that America's large and growing population of immigrants—of all ethnicities, including Jews from Eastern Europe—could become fully American. However, Roosevelt argued becoming American required completely abandoning one's "Old World" identity and becoming something altogether new.

In this unit, we will attempt to understand the way that immigration in the late-19th and early 20th centuries shaped the meaning of "American identity." We will begin by looking at the final scene of Jewish playwright Zangwill's the "Melting Pot" a play that had a strong influence on Roosevelt's perspective. We will then dive into this perspective through one of Roosevelt's speeches, exploring why so many Americans came to celebrate his melting pot view of America. We will then consider the burden of Roosevelt's assimilationist model for Jewish immigrants who were reluctant to abandon their Jewish heritage. Finally, through an exploration of the life of the poet Emma Lazarus, we will consider what it means to live a life that is at once both fully American and proudly Jewish.

Vocabulary

Term	Definition
Allegiance	Loyalty or commitment to an individual, group or cause
Goldene Medine (the Golden Land)	Yiddish term used by Eastern European Jewish immigrants used to describe the United States as a place of opportunity, freedom and safety.
Colossus	A statue of gigantic size and proportion; a person or thing of immense size or power

Guiding Questions:

1. What did it mean to be "American" in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and how did immigration shape that identity?
2. Should immigrants be expected to give up their cultural and religious identities in order to become fully American? Why or why not?
3. Is it possible to be patriotically American and strongly connected to one's Jewish heritage?

Key Texts

America – The Melting Pot

In 1908, a famous Jewish playwright named Israel Zangwill published a play, titled The Melting Pot, that would launch him into literary fame. Zangwill's play told the story of a young Jewish man who, fleeing the pogroms and persecution of Russia, set out to build a new life for himself in a land free from violent oppression: America. Though Zangwill himself was a British subject, he believed it was only America that offered the Jews—and oppressed peoples from around the world—a truly new start. For it was only in America that a Jew could shed his Jewish identity entirely and become "just as American" as anyone else.

This sentiment was famously captured in the last scene of The Melting Pot, in which Zangwill's hero catches sight of New York City for the first time. "There she lies," he shouts to other immigrants aboard the ship carrying them ashore:

Text 3a: Israel Zangwill, The Melting Pot (1908)

The great Melting Pot—listen! Can't you hear the roaring and the bubbling? Ah, what a stirring and a seething! Celt and Latin, Slav and Teuton, Greek and Syrian, black and yellow, Jew and Gentile, the crescent and the cross! Here shall they all unite to build the Republic of Man and the Kingdom of G-d. What is the glory of Rome and Jerusalem where all nations and races come to worship and look back, compared with the glory of America, where all races and nations come to labor and look forward!

The play was an immediate hit with audiences in both Europe and America. Among the play's most prominent admirers was U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, who saw the play on October 5, 1909, when it was first performed in Washington. When the curtain fell at the end of the play, President Roosevelt jumped to his feet and cheered: "That's a great play, Mr. Zangwill, a great play!" Years later, in a letter to Zangwill, Roosevelt told the Jewish playwright that he "always counted [The Melting Pot] among the very strong and real influences upon my thought and my life."

Discussion Questions:

1. How does Zangwill's idea of America as a "melting pot" reflect both hope and potential loss of cultural identity for immigrants?
2. Why do you think Theodore Roosevelt found The Melting Pot so influential, and what does that suggest about American attitudes toward immigration at the time?

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Cover of Theater Program for Israel Zangwill's play "The Melting Pot"

President Theodore Roosevelt delivering a speech in 1906

Immigrant Tensions

The idea of the melting pot was tested as immigration surged in the early 1900s with new cultures and languages from predominantly Southern and Eastern European countries posing concern to the mostly British, already settled Americans.

Theodore Roosevelt (though no longer president) used his influence to preserve the nation's unity and principles. While recognizing the threat of discord posed by high levels of immigration, Roosevelt nevertheless rejected the commonly held view that there was no place for newcomers in America's national story. Instead, he argued that anyone—regardless of their country of origin, their race, or their religion—could be fully and completely "Americanized." However, as we will read in the following 1917 address, Roosevelt also believed that the process of Americanization was total: If an immigrant was to become an American, he must shed his old identity completely.

Text 3b: Theodore Roosevelt's "Address to the Knights of Columbus" (1917)

There is no room in this country for hyphenated American-ism. When I refer to hyphenated Americans, I do not refer to naturalized Americans. Some of the very best Americans I have ever known were naturalized Americans—Americans born abroad. But a hyphenated American is not an American at all. This is just as true of the man who puts 'native' before the hyphen as of the man who puts German or Irish or English or French before the hyphen. Americanism is a matter of the spirit and of the soul. Our allegiance must be purely to the United States. We must unsparingly condemn any man who holds any other allegiance. But if he is heartily and singly loyal to this Republic, then no matter where he was born, he is just as good an American as anyone else.

The one absolutely certain way of bringing this nation to ruin, of preventing all possibility of its continuing to be a nation at all, would be to permit it to become a tangle of squabbling nationalities, an intricate knot of German-Americans, Irish-Americans, English-Americans, French-Americans, Scandinavian-Americans or Italian-Americans, each preserving its separate nationality, each at heart feeling more sympathy with Europeans of that nationality, than with the other citizens of the American Republic. The men who do not become Americans and nothing else are hyphenated Americans; and there ought to be no room for them in this country. The man who calls himself an American citizen and who yet shows by his actions that he is primarily the citizen of a foreign land, plays a thoroughly mischievous part in the life of our body politic. He has no place here; and the sooner he returns to the land to which he feels his real heart allegiance, the better it will be for every good American. There is no such thing as a hyphenated American who is a good American. The only man who is a good American is the man who is an American and nothing else.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is a hyphenated American? Why would Roosevelt be so concerned about the phenomenon that he would make it the topic of a public address?
2. Is Roosevelt's message pro-immigrant or anti-immigrant? In what way?
3. As a Jew in America (a "Jewish-American" perhaps), how do you view Roosevelt's argument for rejecting hyphenated identities? Is his argument persuasive? Do you think it is possible to be fully American and also fully and proudly Jewish?

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Jewish Immigration

The "Great Wave" of immigration around the turn of the 20th century carried with it unprecedented numbers of Jewish immigrants to America: From 1850 to 1900, the Jewish population of the United States exploded from a mere 50,000 to over 1,000,000; by 1920, this number swelled to 3,500,000.

Like the characters in Israel Zangwill's play, many of these new immigrants were thrilled to enter the American "melting pot": these Yiddish-speaking Jews, fleeing Eastern European anti-Semitism, were eager to enter the "pot", Americanize, and leave behind the horrors of their past. Others, however, were less excited to abandon the richness of their Jewish heritage for a life of freedom in the "*Goldene Medine*" (Yiddish for "the Golden Land"). For some of these Jews, the assimilationist pressures of life in the melting pot began to feel more threatening than liberating. Some American Jews even began to mourn the Jewish culture, faith, and identity which they felt they had been forced to abandon.

The following excerpts of an article, originally published in the *North American Review* in 1917, offers a powerful account of this last perspective. The author, an anonymous and assimilated Jewish man, attempts to explain the pain brought on by his feeling of disconnection from the Jewish people and his Jewish roots.

Text 3c: Excerpts from "I am a Jew" in the North American Review (1917)

I am a Jew. . .

There are times when I could wish that I had been born into a Ghetto of the Middle Ages; or into some squalid village in the Russian Pale; or even into a tenement of New York's Lower East Side. For then I should have come at once into my rich inheritance. I should have known what I was. I should have been wholly a Jew. . .

I was born into Limbo. . . It was a day when the phrase "self-made man" was a term of the highest approval. Not that they denied their origin. It would never have occurred to them to do that, even had their origin not been written so clearly on their features, with all the down-strokes hard and definite, as in old-fashioned German script.

After all—they were Jews. That was the rock bottom of their lives, never to be blasted away. Yet hardly less fundamental was the conviction that it was well not to insist too strongly on their Jewishness; not to flaunt it before strangers; not to be "too Jewish."

To be "too Jewish" would be doing a disservice to the Jews themselves: for would it not increase the contempt of the [non-Jewish people] for all of us? They knew that in this

Text 3c: Excerpts from "I am a Jew" in the North American Review (1917) (cont.)

country appearances count for much. Why, then, with opportunities all but unlimited for those who will adapt themselves—why insist on one's differences? Indeed, why not bend a little toward the prevalent uniformity? For why come to a land where no Ghetto walls have ever been, if one insists, by one's own excessive Jewishness, on erecting them around the brownstone house which one has achieved?. . . .

Was it not, indeed, those Jewish books, and the controversies over them, that sent the first settlers, the Pilgrim Fathers, to these shores? And has not, through them, the tradition of ancient Israel become the rock on which all that is strong and stern in American character and tradition was built up?

So I took up the search for the tradition of ancient Israel. Not among books—which, as the Chinese sage has said, are but the leavings of men who are dead—but there where that tradition is most living, there where the Jews of America are most Jewish: on New York's Lower East Side. . .

I had hoped to find the Jewish spirit among the Russian Jews of the New York Ghetto. And I found it. I found old Jews selling suspenders or calico from pushcarts, who, clad in royal robes, might have posed for any artist as Abraham, or Solomon, or the aged Jacob. I saw women's faces—sad, long-suffering, fatalistic and intense—which seemed to bear the very features and expression of the Jewish race. . . I even saw a few young men who, unspoiled by the cheapness of the city, and undaunted by the difficulties which beset a Jew, seemed to be going forth to meet life, bravely and eagerly as a young David. . .

Discussion Questions:

1. How does the author show his struggle between fitting into American life and staying connected to his Jewish identity?
2. Do you relate to his struggle in your expression of your Jewish values and identity?
3. Why does the author compare people on the Lower East Side to figures like Abraham, Solomon, and David? What does this tell us about how he sees them?

Emma Lazarus – Holding both Identities

An engraving of Emma Lazarus, 1889

As a result of the "melting pot" view of American identity, many Jews felt pressured to abandon their Jewish identity and become—simply and exclusively— Americans. Other Jews, fearing the assimilationist pressures of American society, looked inward and refused to engage the broader culture for fear of losing their connection to their fellow Jews and to their Jewish faith.

Some, however, rejected the idea that a Jew must choose between being an American and being a Jew. These Jewish-Americans asserted that, far from being mutually exclusive, Jewish identity and American identity were in fact complementary and mutually enriching. One of the great embodiments of this perspective is Emma Lazarus, the esteemed Jewish-American author and public intellectual whose poem, "The New Colossus," is inscribed at the base of the Statue of Liberty. The story of her astounding life and many accomplishments are explored in the following biographical essay.

Text 3d: Biography of Emma Lazarus

Emma Lazarus was born in 1849 into a wealthy New York family of largely assimilated Jews—descendants, on the family's Sephardi side, of the Jewish communal leader Moses Seixas. By the 1880s, she was a widely acclaimed poet, essayist, political activist, and translator into English of famous European writers.

Already in her teens, she had been recognized as a literary prodigy. In 1866, when she was seventeen, Poems and Translations: Written Between the Ages of Fourteen and Sixteen, was put together by her father and printed "for private circulation." A year later, a copy of the now-commercially published volume was sent to the preeminent American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson. Soon a meeting was arranged, and over time Emerson became a mentor with whom Lazarus would correspond until his death in 1882. Four years after their meeting, the title poem of her next collection, Admetus and Other Poems (1871), would be dedicated to "My Friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson."

But the story of Emma Lazarus as an esteemed and widely read author is by no means the whole story. All along the way, her Jewish sensibilities and commitments were just as fully engaged—and were made as fully public—as her literary and artistic ones. Her poetic spirit and Jewish soul often went together hand in hand. She worked directly with newly arriving immigrants, including ceaseless efforts to advance the prospects of East European Jews in the United States. In the face of rising European anti-Semitism

Text 3d: Biography of Emma Lazarus (cont.)

in the 1870s and 1880s, and specifically of Russian pogroms in the early 1880s, this early member of the American Jewish elite took to print in order to vigorously defend the Jews against their enemies and detractors. She aimed to inspire in Jews a stronger and deeper sense of their own culture and heritage, and—perhaps most strikingly—to promote the cause of a Jewish homeland in the land of Israel.

In this same period, Lazarus became a regular contributor to the American Hebrew; in that weekly magazine, she published far-ranging essays with such titles as "Judaism: The Connecting Link between Science and Religion," "An Epistle to the Hebrews," "Cruel Bigotry," and "The Last National Revolt of the Jews" (about the failed Bar Kokhba revolt against Rome in 132-135 CE).

Yet this proud Jew and early Zionist remained an American in full. In an 1881 essay in *The Critic*, she defended American literature against the charge that the country had no literary tradition and that America's poets had left no mark. It was followed by a eulogy for Ralph Waldo Emerson and a salute to the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. She offered an appreciation for Longfellow's 1852 poem on the Jewish cemetery in Newport, Rhode Island, while also criticizing the dismissive ending declaring that "dead nations never rise again." For she believed that the Jews were not dead, and that the Jewish nation would indeed rise again.

Emma Lazarus was the great Jewish American poet. She understood the meaning of America as a beacon of liberty for the world and for world Jewry. She saw in "the wretched refuse" of the Yiddish-speaking immigrants not only life but hope for the Jewish people as a whole. And she foresaw a global revival of Jewish civilization through the mutually encouraging ideas and actions of Jews in America and oncoming Jewish generations in the Holy Land.

Dedication to the Statue of Liberty

By the time the Statue of Liberty was raised at the entrance to New York Harbor, Emma Lazarus's fourteen-line dedicatory poem, strictly metered and rhymed in the style of a classical sonnet, had already given to Lady Liberty—the "Mother of Exiles"—an immortal voice:

Plaque inside the base of the Statue of Liberty with the sonnet "The New Colossus" by Emma Lazarus. Plaque unveiled in 1903

Text 3e: Emma Lazarus, The New Colossus (1883)

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 the imprisoned lightning, and her name

Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand

Glows world-wide 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-tost to me,

I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Discussion Questions:

1. How does Emma Lazarus challenge the idea that immigrants must choose between fully assimilating into American culture and maintaining their original identity?
2. In what ways did Emma Lazarus combine her roles as a Jewish activist and an American writer, and how did each identity influence the other?
3. How does "The New Colossus" reflect Lazarus's views on immigration and America's responsibility toward oppressed people?
4. How does the concept of America as a "beacon of liberty" compare with the "melting pot" idea presented earlier—are they compatible or in tension?

Final Thoughts:

A great wave of immigration at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries brought millions of new immigrants and refugees to the Golden Land of opportunity and safety. At the same time, it also raised new and difficult questions about the meaning of American identity: Is American-ism limited to one race? To one religion? Is it a question of one's country of origin, or, as President Roosevelt argued, is it "a matter of the spirit and of the soul"?

Perhaps no group wrestled with these questions as intensely as the Jews. Indeed, the questions raised during that first major wave of Jewish immigration around the turn of the 20th century are still entirely relevant to American Jews living today: What does it mean to be an American and a Jew at once? Must we sacrifice our Americanism to our Judaism or vis-a-versa? Or, like Emma Lazarus, is it possible to draw on both traditions and identities simultaneously—to be, at once, both fully American and fully Jewish?

A young boy wearing prayer shawl and holding book, standing outside building, East Side, New York City; 1911

Going Deeper: Additional Resources

- "The Secret Jewish History of Theodore Roosevelt" by Seth Rogovoy in The Forward | https://forward.com/culture/449269/the-secret-jewish-history-of-teddy-roosevelt/
- "Two Favorite Poems and How they Define Israel and America" by Ruth Wisse in Mosaic | https://mosaicmagazine.com/observation/arts-culture/2021/06/two-favorite-poems-and-how-they-define-israel-and-america/

For the Family Table

The Covenantal Letter at Carnegie Hall – Rabbi Dr. Stuart Halpern, Jewish Journal
https://jewishjournal.com/judaism/385034/the-covenantal-letter-at-carnegie-hall/

One hundred and twenty years ago this month, a celebration was held at New York's Carnegie Hall on Thanksgiving Day, celebrating 250 years of Jewish presence in the United States. It was the capstone of a week of festivities commemorating the founding of Shearith Israel in 1655, the first Jewish congregation in what was then called New Amsterdam.

The Shabbat before a packed house was to arrive at the world-famous venue, both a warning and a call to renewal were offered by Shearith Israel's then-rabbi, Reverend Dr. H. Pereira Mendes. He was concerned about the rate of assimilation of the comfortable American Jewish community…

He then took the occasion to urge a recommitment to the covenant. "Men and women of Israel, God speaks to us at this moment. It is a historic, it is a divine moment. By the memories of our fathers and of our mothers, whose examples, teachings, wishes, surely are potent yet; let this solemn moment witness the renewal of our loyalty to God the Holy One, to holiness, with truth, righteousness, and justice."

In addition to Mendes' sermon and his synagogue's customary recitation of the Jewish prayer of Hallel on Thanksgiving (a practice Shearith Israel maintains to this day), the highlight of the celebration was no doubt when Jacob Schiff, the prominent banker, read to the Carnegie crowd a letter from President Theodore Roosevelt.

Roosevelt began by noting that he doesn't usually write letters for historic anniversaries. "I am forced to make a rule not to write letters on the occasion of any celebration, no matter how important, simply because I cannot write one without either committing myself to write hundreds of others or else running the risk of giving offense to worthy persons." But on this day, he was making an exception.

He broke with his usual habit because "the lamentable and terrible suffering to which so many of the Jewish people in other lands have been subjected makes me feel it my duty, as the head of the American people, not only to express my deep sympathy for them, as I now do, but at the same time to point out what fine qualities of citizenship have been displayed by the men of Jewish faith and race, who, having come to this country, enjoy the benefits of free institutions and equal treatment before the law." Jews, he understood, had found a haven in America from the persecution that had plagued them for centuries.

The president then recounted how from the start, Jews have positively contributed to the American project: "Even in our colonial period the Jews participated in the upbuilding of this country, acquired citizenship, and took an active part in the development of foreign and domestic commerce. During the Revolutionary period they aided the cause of liberty by serving in the

Continental army and by substantial contributions to the empty treasury of the infant republic. During the Civil War thousands served in the armies and mingled their blood with the soil for which they fought."

Though Roosevelt possessed an affinity for the pro-assimilationist play "The Melting Pot," he on this occasion expressed his admiration for the balance American Jews have struck to loyalty to their faith and commitment to America's flourishing, admiring how "while the Jews of the United States, who now number more than a million, have remained loyal to their faith and their race traditions, they have become indissolubly incorporated in the great army of American citizenship, prepared to make all sacrifices for the country, either in war or peace, and striving for the perpetuation of good government and for the maintenance of the principles embodied in our Constitution."

The former Rough Rider who had overcome a sickly youth sensed in the American Jewish community kindred spirits, a by-their-bootstraps diligence and devotion to contributing positively to the societal project. "In a few years," he admiringly reflected, while focusing on the recent wave of Jewish immigrants, "men and women hitherto utterly unaccustomed to any of the privileges of citizenship have moved mightily upward toward the standard of loyal, self-respecting American citizenship; of that citizenship which not merely insists upon its rights, but also eagerly recognizes its duty to do its full share in the material, social and moral advancement of the nation."

Roosevelt's words continue to ring true. His letter is worthy of remembrance as America celebrates Thanksgiving once more and looks ahead to its own 250th anniversary. Now, as then, all Americans, regardless of their faith, can recommit to the privilege of being in "the great army of American citizenship," standing for truth, righteousness, justice and the material, social and moral advancement of our covenantal country.

Rabbi Dr. Stuart Halpern *is Senior Adviser to the Provost of Yeshiva University and Deputy Director of Y.U.'s Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought. His books include the newly released "Jewish Roots of American Liberty," "The Promise of Liberty: A Passover Haggada," "Esther in America," "Gleanings: Reflections on Ruth" and "Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land: The Hebrew Bible in the United States."*

Discussion Questions:

1. Rev. Dr. Mendes warned about assimilation and called for renewed commitment to the covenant. How can communities balance maintaining their unique religious/cultural identity while fully participating in broader society?
2. Roosevelt praised American Jews not only for claiming their rights but for embracing civic duties. What does it mean today to be part of the "great army of American citizenship," and how should individuals balance rights with responsibilities?