Dear Editors:

Thank you for inviting me to comment on M.L.G.'s letter (Sept.), in which he asked, "Henrietta Szold epitomizes Hadassah; how does Emma Lazarus reflect secular Judaism? . . ." His question is doubly welcome on the eve of the 75th anniversary of Emma Lazarus' death, November 19, 1887. The question often encountered, "Who was Emma Lazarus?", is asked even by those who know her as the author of "The New Colossus," the sonnet inscribed on the Statue of Liberty.

Secularism cannot be epitomized by an individual as Henrietta Szold may be said to epitomize Hadassah. However, before there was a Jewish secular movement here, Emma Lazarus played a major role in cultivating the favorable soil of democracy for the growth of a many-faceted Jewish secularism. This secularism did not require denunciation of religion. In a letter to Rabbi Gustav Gottheil of Temple Emanu-El, who had invited her to contribute to a volume of hymns, she replied, "I will gladly assist you as far as I am able; but that will not be much. I shall always be loyal to my race, but I feel no religious fervor in my soul."

Emma Lazarus not only "wrote movingly on behalf of the immigrants," as M.L.G. notes, but visiting them at Ward's island, talked with them through interpreters and concluded that as a prerequisite to enjoy freedom here they had to learn trades from which they had been barred under the Tsars. This daughter of a wealthy family, a poet come to earth from her "ivory tower," initiated the practical idea of a trades school that became the Hebrew Technical Institute.

As for M.L.G.'s not finding any letters to Emma Lazarus "of Jewish interest except possibly two from Lawrence Oliphant," several of her letters providing an inspiring glimpse of her Jewish awareness and humanism can be found in The Letters of Emma Lazarus, edited by Morris U. Schappes and published by the New York Public Library in 1949 on the hundredth anniversary of her birth.

Emma Lazarus' Jewish consciousness did not begin or end with compassion for and kinship with Jews in flight from oppression and pogroms. Her "compassion" no doubt developed with the reading of Heine, whose poetry she began to translate while still in her teens. She also read the Hebrew poets of medieval Spain in German and translated them into English in 1879, before studying Hebrew. What she learned about the Jewish people by reading ancient and modern history and literature enhanced her own creativity. Her The Dance to Death, a "Historical Tragedy" in verse, deals with the persecution of the German Jews, accused in the 14th century of poisoning the waters to cause the bubonic plague. This too was written several years before Tsarist pogroms shocked the peoples in democratic countries.

Her profoundest contribution, still pertinent, is to be found in her article

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"The Jewish Problem" in The Century in 1883. "The Jewish problem," she wrote, "is as old as history, and assumes in each age a new form. . . . From the era when the monotheistic, Semitic slaves of the Pharaohs made themselves hated and feared by their polytheistic masters, till today when the monstrous giants Labor and Capital are arming for a supreme conflict, the Jewish question has been inextricably bound up with the deepest and gravest questions that convulse society."

Another equally illuminating article was read at the Philadelphia Young Men’s Hebrew Association in Nov., 1884. There we find how she learned, while writing and fighting for Jewish rights, to champion the rights of all people “yearning to breathe free.” Proud of her identity as a Jew and an American she wrote, "I see the spiritual fathers of those who braved exile and death for conscience’s sake, to found upon the New England rocks, within the Pennsylvania woods over this immense continent, the Republic of the West. I see in Bar-Kochba, the ignored, despised, defeated Jewish soldier, the same passion of patriotism which under more fortunate conditions, made illustrious a William of Orange, a Mazzini, a Garibaldi, a Kossuth, a Washington . . ." We may add to her roll of Freedom Fighters a Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Negro youth in the South who have stirred white youth to join with them.

At the founding convention of the Emma Lazarus Federation of Jewish Women’s Clubs in 1951, its reason for being emerged out of the urgent need to advance a humanistic culture as a shield against Nazism and war. A five-point program, influenced by what we knew of Emma Lazarus, was adopted to: 1) Advance a Jewish secular culture; 2) Promote democracy in public school education and render support to secular Jewish schools; 3) Provide aid to Israel—through financial support of an Emma Lazarus Day Nursery for children of working mothers in Tel-Aviv and through civic activities for a U.S. foreign policy based on peace in the Middle East; 4) Stimulate legislative and community action to outlaw anti-Semitism, Negro discrimination and second class citizenship for the foreign-born—to protect the civil rights and liberties of all Americans; 5) Cooperate with all Americans striving for peace, better schools, a health program and decent housing . . .

As a Jewish secularist, Emma Lazarus also advocated Jewish communal cooperation and unity. In “An Epistle to the Hebrews” in The American Hebrew, Feb. 23, 1883, Emma Lazarus concluded with an urgent call for unity: “All that I wish most earnestly to implore from Jews of every variety of political and religious belief, is that they lay aside personal and superficial considerations and approach this subject in the grave spirit which it imperatively demands, and with the cordial desire to ignore all non-essential differences and to meet upon those bases of agreement which must underlie all patriotic Jewish thought, and upon which some substantial project of reform or emancipation may be consentaneously founded.”

Having not only the honor but the responsibility of bearing the name of Emma Lazarus, all our activities are directed, in the face of today’s problems, to help achieve the unity Emma Lazarus implored.

June Gordon,
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Emma Lazarus Federation of Jewish Women’s Clubs

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