

בס"ד

Shluchim Sermons



Holidays

# The Jewish Statue of Liberty

*Countless Jewish immigrants passed under the uplifting message of the Statue of Liberty. Did you know that ancient Israel also had a similar thing? And — it has a message for Rosh Hashanah.*

## Making It to America

Good Yom Tov!

Because we're at the start of a new year and a new beginning, I'd like to talk about Ellis Island, which, for many Jews who came to this country—our great-grandparents, grandparents or even parents—was the place where life in America began.

Ellis Island is the place where the bulk of American Jewish history began.

From 1892 to 1954, any Jew who came to America from Europe came through Ellis Island. When they got off the boat, immigration inspectors would be waiting for them, and the inspectors would immediately separate the men to one side and the women and children to the other side—and that alone would frighten many people. One Chosid remembers his wife being terrified, and so he told her that “this is America—whatever should happen, there's nothing to be afraid of.”

Now, while most new immigrants passed through inspection fairly quickly, there were those who would get detained for a day or two. However, there were those unfortunates who had to stay on the island

for weeks or even months.

On an average day, 5,000 people would arrive at Ellis Island, and on one day, the records tell us, close to 12,000 people arrived. The men would be sent to one section and the women to another, where they would be given bunk beds to sleep on—and so hundreds of people would sleep in the same huge dormitory rooms.

After sleeping the night, the new immigrants would undergo inspections the next morning. During inspections, they would check everyone's health, and if they would find an individual who was sick or who carried some disease, they would isolate and detain them until they recovered, so that diseases would not be brought into America.

Rabbi Yisroel Jacobson, one of the fathers of Chabad in America, related that when he arrived at Ellis Island in 1925 with his family, it was getting dark already, and so they were first sent to bed. The next morning, they were all checked by doctors and then by immigration inspectors, who interviewed him and asked him if he knew the persons who had sent him an invitation of citizenship.

Now Rabbi Jacobson's invitation had come from some synagogue in New York that had wanted him to serve as their rabbi, so Rabbi Jacobson replied that while he had been invited to become an American by a synagogue, no, he did not personally know the people who had invited him.

Then they asked him, "Will your salary be enough to cover your costs of living?" Rabbi Jacobson explained that besides their salaries, rabbis also have a side income officiating at weddings, bar mitzvahs and the like. So they asked him whether he conducts marriages. Rabbi Jacobson smiled. The inspector asked him, "Why are you smiling?" He answered, "That's out of the question! Of course I conduct marriages!"

Then they asked him the question of all questions: “How much money are you bringing with you into the United States?” He replied that he had exactly one dollar in his wallet!

Then came the president and secretary of the synagogue that had invited him to serve as their rabbi. They had come down to Ellis Island to personally meet and greet him. The inspectors asked them similar questions—they asked, “This rabbi only has one dollar in his wallet. How is he going to rent an apartment and buy furniture?” But the president and secretary said that they had taken care of everything already.

Two days after they had arrived in the United States, the Jacobson family was freed from Ellis Island. Their hosts, who were really poor people themselves, could not even afford to take a car service once they set foot in Manhattan. Instead, they traveled by train. And when they passed Wall Street, their hosts said, “This is the richest place in the world.”

On Shabbos, they walked to the shul that had invited him to serve as its rabbi. This synagogue was nothing more than a converted storefront rented by a group of Jews.

But the next day, Sunday, the shul was closed and shut down—because they didn’t have the money to pay rent!

Rabbi Jacobson ended his story by saying that the whole synagogue was created just to bring him to America.

## **The Ellis Island of Israel**

Now, the first thing that those who came through Ellis Island would see was the Statue of Liberty. When they would see it from afar, while still on their ships, their joy would reach the sky. At the gateway to America stood the symbol that expressed everything that America believed in: freedom and equal rights for every human being.

But the idea that at the entrance or gateway to a country, one sets up a symbol that stands for the values believed in by that country—that idea comes from the Torah.

Less than two weeks ago, we read the Torah portion of Ki Savo, in which Moshe Rabbeinu tells the Jewish Nation, “And it will be on the day on which you cross the Jordan to the Land... and you shall erect for yourselves large stones... and you shall write upon them all the words of this Torah” (Devarim 27:2-3).

At that time, G-d commanded the Jewish Nation that at the entrance to the Holy Land, they should put up a monument so that anyone entering the Land would immediately know upon what foundations this Land was built—in what the people who live there believe in.

But here we can ask: What exactly was written on the stones?

Many scholars interpret these verses simply: They literally engraved all the text of the Torah on these giant stones, from the very first letter until the very last.

The Ramban says that the writing of the entire text occurred via a miracle.

Rabbeinu Saadya Gaon, an ancient Jewish sage who lived well before Nachmanides, says that they didn't literally write out the entire Torah but rather, the “minyan hamitzvos”—they simply listed the mitzvos in the Torah.

But there's another opinion. Some of the mekubalim, the heirs to the Kabbalistic tradition, say that these stones only contained the Aseres HaDibros, the Ten Commandments.

Now that's already not a miracle! It's a very natural, tangible thing. The Ten Commandments contain a total of 620 letters— and so engraving 620 letters on stone doesn't require much of a miracle at

all. According to this opinion, they very well may have just put up two big boulders and wrote five of the commandments on one and five on the other, so that anyone entering the Land and seeing the Ten Commandments before his eyes would know the values upon which this place was based— and in what its residents believe.

The Abarbanel, another medieval Jewish sage, says that writing the Torah on these stones was similar to the mitzvah of putting a mezuzah on the doors of one's home—that these stones were like the mezuzah on the doorway to the Holy Land.

I remember that some years ago, the world's largest mezuzah was put up in Ben-Gurion Airport. This giant mezuzah, which was written by a Chabad chosid, is about four feet tall. Writing a normal mezuzah generally takes a professional sofer, a Jewish scribe, about two hours—but this mezuzah took three years to write. And it was literally just before Rosh Hashanah last year that the mezuzah was put up at the entrance to the main arrival/departure hall— even the authorities in Israel recognized that at the main gate to Israel, it's only fitting to have a giant mezuzah so that everyone who comes immediately knows that he or she is in the Holy Land.

Now how can we keep this mitzvah in our personal lives? When we put a mezuzah on our door and someone comes in and sees the mezuzah on the doorpost, he or she right away knows that a Jewish family lives here, and that this home is built upon the fundamentals of the Torah.

So now we come back to the message of our little talk here: How the Torah, and the natural, down-to-earth keeping of the Torah, is the symbol of who we are and what we believe in, just like the Statue of Liberty told the immigrants of Ellis Island what America believed in.

## **The Mezuzah of the Year**

We now stand at Rosh Hashanah, in the doorway of a new year. And

just like at the doorway to the Holy Land, and the doorway to America, there stands a symbol stating upon what is based the beliefs of their citizens, so too at the entrance to the new year must we declare and make known upon what our new year will be founded.

And this, my friends, is why we blow the shofar.

We all gather together in shul to hear the blowing of the shofar— and it is the shofar that is our “symbol of freedom,” our “Statue of Liberty” for this year, and for every New Year.

In Biblical times, the shofar would be blown in the Yovel year, the jubilee year, as a sign that all the slaves were freed from servitude.

So, on Rosh Hashanah, we pray: “Sound the great shofar for our liberation”—we ask G-d that in the coming year, we be freed of all worries and concerns, from all problems, whether problems that face all Jews or personal problems that can make people feel that they’re imprisoned in their own jail cells. We pray that we be freed from all the things that cause us stress and cause us to retreat into ourselves.

Rosh Hashanah, ultimately, symbolizes Man’s turning to G-d for everything. This is the gateway, the mezuzah, the “Statue of Liberty,” the value that guides and describes our entire year.