

Island for a Blessing

By Robert E. Segal.

Jews of America, contemplating all that Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur mean to them as individuals, have something unusual to muse over this year: They can, in the best spirit of the High Holy Days, think with affection of their parents and grandparents in connection with the beginning of a new chapter in the history of Ellis Island.

For how much more significance the New Year will hold for the millions among us whose forebears came in through Ellis Island if we make time during these Days of Awe to think back upon the true awe with which our elders first beheld the tall lady with the great torch in the harbor and then encountered the gruelling tests and probing examinations visited upon immigrants when Ellis Island flourished!

Ellis Island has been much in the news this year. It is as if some of our more enlightened fellow-Americans finally realized that something special was owed in this Bicentennial Year to the memory of the millions who moved through that bureaucratic labyrinth from 1892 to 1954. And the answer to the search for proper recognition

of the anguish endured and the eventual joy realized by immigrants at the famous point of debarkation is to make Ellis Island a respectable national monument.

Closed in 1954, Ellis Island faced the possibility of crumbling into an isle of isolation. But now the National Park System has renovated and restored the haven, sacred to the 12,000,000 immigrants for whom it was the gateway to freedom and a new life. Each day, beginning at 10:45 a.m., you can go to the revered spot by ferry and imagine with filial tenderness all that moved through the minds of the impoverished, the harassed, the bewildered entering the passageway to liberty.

We are reminded often that the Indians, whose descendants have been so disgracefully treated by newcomers, were already here when the Pilgrims arrived. We forget too easily that blacks came early and in chains. Some 40,000,000 immigrants entered America after many of the slaves had arrived. And now, looking with joy upon a refurbished, splendidly shining Ellis Island, we must recall, with prayerful thankfulness during the New Year that from 1881 to 1925, more than 2,500,000 Jewish immigrants entered the United States through Ellis Island. More than a million were from Russia, a nation now epitomizing the antithesis of all that Ellis Island and the famed Statue of Liberty symbolized for our Jewish progenitors.

For those who might care to focus on Ellis Island some portion of their resolve to do better by their neighbors in the year ahead, a sensible and rewarding guide is available in Irving Howe's magnificent new hymn of thanksgiving for American Jewish immigrants. For in "World Of Our Fathers: The Journey Of The East European Jews To America And The Life They Found And Made," Howe brings us a great feast of remembrance.

In his years of research for "World Of Our Fathers," Howe came upon one turn-of-the-century journalist who wrote: "The day of the emigrants' arrival in New York was the nearest earthly likeness to the final Day of Judgment, when we have to prove our fitness to enter Heaven."

And Howe continues: "No previous difficulties roused such overflowing anxiety, sometimes self-destructive panic, as the anticipated rest of Ellis Island. Nervous chatter, foolish rumors spread through each cluster of immigrants: 'There is, Ellis Island,' shouted an immigrant who had already been in the United States and knew of its alien laws. The name acted like magic. Faces grew taut, eyes narrowed. 'There, in those red buildings, fate awaited them. Were they ready to enter? Or were they to be sent back?... 'Only God knows,' shouted an elderly man, his withered hand gripping the railing."

Oh, sorrow! Some were sent back. Regulations for entry were strict. Some, but surely

not all, of the examiners, were anything but charitable.

But millions did come through. Up the harbor. Past the saintly lady, torch raised heavenward. Into Ellis Island. Thence to the East Side streets, to the byways of America, to years of labor and to eventual fulfillment.

This then the New Year of hope limned against the memorable backdrop of a commemorative Ellis Island.

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