

Moses Jacob Ezekiel's *Religious Liberty* (1876) and the Nineteenth-Century Jewish American Experience

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Sculptor Moses Jacob Ezekiel (1844–1917) was the first Jewish American artist to earn international acclaim. Despite his occasional discouragement due to lack of patronage, Ezekiel persevered because, as he wrote in his autobiography, *Memoirs from the Baths of Diocletian*: “The race to which I belong had been oppressed and looked down upon through so many ages, I felt that I had a mission to perform. That mission was to show that, as the only Jew born in America up to that time who had dedicated himself to sculpture, I owed it to myself to succeed in doing something worthy in spite of all the difficulties and trials to which I was subjected” (281). His best-known work is a commission from the Jewish fraternal organization, B’nai B’rith: a freestanding marble group from 1876 depicting *Religious Liberty* (Figure 1.1). Ezekiel’s unique Jewish experience imbues this sculpture with elements of both his Southern and religious roots, shaped by his proximity to one of the most radical and influential rabbis in America, Isaac Mayer Wise. While Ezekiel’s *Religious Liberty* is fully “American” in theme, the artist also subtly addressed alternate, “Jewish” tensions beyond his celebration of religious liberties in his homeland. Indeed, *Religious Liberty* alludes to an essential contemporary concern of both Ezekiel and many of his nineteenth-century coreligionists: fear of assimilation amid temptations confronted because of the very freedoms they were enjoying.

Ezekiel’s American background differed substantially from his peers—not only the few other known nineteenth-century Jewish American artists, but also the general Jewish population of his day, primarily immigrants. Ezekiel, one of fourteen children, was a second-generation American—his paternal grandparents immigrated to Philadelphia in 1808 (in 1820 fewer than 2750 Jews lived in the United States). The Ezekiels were Iberian Jews (Sephardic) rather than Eastern Europeans (Ashkenazi). The earliest Jewish immigrants to America were Sephardic Jews—many came to the New World after several generations as refugees in more tolerant Holland, first arriving



FIGURE 1.1 Moses Jacob Ezekiel, *Religious Liberty*, 1876. Marble, 25 ft. high. National Museum of American Jewish History, Philadelphia. Photo: Samantha Baskind.

in New Amsterdam in 1654. Sephardic Jews dominated American Jewry until the massive influx of German Jews, followed by Jews from other Eastern European countries as the Jewish population surged in the nineteenth century; 15,000 Jews lived in the US in 1840, but by 1880 the population had swelled to over 250,000 Jews, largely of German origin (Glazer 1972).

After several years in Philadelphia, the Ezekiel family moved to Virginia. Ezekiel, born in Richmond, was the first Jew to attend the Virginia Military Institute. Serving as a cadet in the Confederate Army during the American Civil War, Ezekiel fought in the Battle of New Market. Although his family owned no slaves and did not advocate slavery, Ezekiel allied with the Confederacy because, as he wrote in an after-the-fact evasion, he believed that each state should make its own autonomous decisions: “None of us had ever fought for slavery and, in fact, were opposed to it.... Our struggle ... was simply a constitutional one, based on the constitutional state’s rights and especially on

free trade and no tariff" (Ezekiel 1975, 188). Regrettably, while coming from his own place of oppression, and grateful for the freedoms afforded Jews by living in America, Ezekiel was not immune to prejudicial thinking.

Following the Civil War Ezekiel graduated from VMI and studied medicine because he felt that a career in art was impossible and that medicine would provide financial security. Meantime, his childhood interest in art nagged at him; as a boy he had experimented with drawing and painting before he began sculpting at age thirteen. After a year at the Medical College of Virginia, Ezekiel dropped out, but not before he took several anatomy classes, which doubtless influenced his later study of the human figure as a professional sculptor.

In 1867 Ezekiel moved to Cincinnati, where his parents had relocated from ravaged postwar Richmond. His father's dry goods business had burned to the ground and the family's attempt to rebuild was fruitless. Cincinnati seemed hospitable because of its large Jewish population, including relatives of Ezekiel's mother. For the younger Moses Ezekiel, Cincinnati held promise as an artistic center; among others, sculptors Henry Kirke Brown and Hiram Powers were once based there, as was one of the few successful nineteenth-century American artists of Jewish heritage: the painter Henry Mosler, whom Ezekiel knew. Mosler, who joins Ezekiel and Solomon Nunes Carvalho as the small cadre of nineteenth-century Jewish Americans who made names for themselves as fine artists, began his career as an artist correspondent for *Harper's Weekly* during the Civil War. Mosler studied in Europe at the Düsseldorf Academy and the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, and soon became a painter of genre scenes, frequently picturing peasant life in Brittany. He contributed entries to the French Salon from 1878 to 1897; his 1879 submission, *Le Retour*, received Honorable Mention from the Salon jury and was purchased for the Musée du Luxembourg, the first painting by an American artist bought by the French government. When Ezekiel visited Paris he spent some time in Mosler's studio. Carvalho worked as a painter, and based on similarities in the artists' painting style, technique, and subject matter, it has been surmised that the well-known portraitist Thomas Sully may have trained him (Berman 1990–1991, 68–71). Carvalho's fame, though, rests on his daguerreotypes for John C. Frémont's 1853 exploratory expedition through Kansas, Utah, and Colorado.

Encouraged by artists he met in Cincinnati, Ezekiel—eager for more extensive education—went to Europe to study at the Royal Academy of Art in Berlin. His training there—from 1869 to 1871—shaped his academic style, his propensity for allegory and historical subjects, and his belief in the central role of the faithfully rendered human figure in his art. Ezekiel later moved to Rome, where he was surrounded by ancient and Renaissance sculpture, particularly by Michelangelo, which reinforced his classicizing tendencies. Committed to what he understood as a timeless style already regarded by some modern artists as outmoded, Ezekiel readily condemned his own celebrated contemporaries. About Auguste Rodin Ezekiel wrote, "I saw Rodin's *Victor Hugo* bust, which is simply a hurried, pretentious affectation by a talented man.... Rodin did some good work in earlier times, but his fragments and sketchy works today show only that he caters to a false taste in art" (Ezekiel 1975, 399, 400).

After five years in Berlin, Ezekiel became a permanent expatriate, living in Rome for the next forty-three years of his life; his studio in the ruins of the Baths of Diocletian became a fashionable gathering-place for artisans of all persuasions, as well as for royalty and politicians. Internationally known, Ezekiel received numerous honors: the cavalier's cross of merit for art and science from the Grand Duke of Saxe-Meiningen in

1887; an award from Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany in 1893; a visit from Theodore Roosevelt in 1902; and knighthood from the King of Italy in 1907. At the same time, Ezekiel remained devoted to America and its ideals. He never surrendered his American citizenship, and his will specified that his body return to the US after his death. He was buried with full military honors beneath the 32.5 foot Confederate memorial that he designed for Arlington National Cemetery (1914); a eulogy by President Warren Harding, read at his funeral, lauded Ezekiel as “a great Virginian, a great artist, a great American, and a great citizen of world fame” (Cohen and Gibson 2007, 26). His gravestone reads: “Moses J. Ezekiel, Sergeant of Company C, Battalion of Cadets of the Virginia Military Institute.”

Ezekiel’s fervent patriotism and his grateful commitment to his native country were affirmed by his portraits of American political luminaries. A proud Southerner, Ezekiel was disappointed when he was not asked to sculpt Robert E. Lee, whom he knew personally and socialized with after the war. According to Ezekiel’s autobiography, Lee had encouraged him to pursue a career in art. He quoted the general: “I hope you will be an artist as it seems to me you are cut out for one. But whatever you do, try to prove to the world that if we did not succeed in our struggle, we were worthy of success. And do earn a reputation in whatever profession you undertake” (Ezekiel 1975, 124). A few of the sculptures Ezekiel did carve of prominent American figures—all produced after his move to Europe—are three portraits of Thomas Jefferson, a fellow Virginian. He first carved a marble bust (1888) for the Senate’s Vice Presidential Bust Collection. A later commission—from two Jewish philanthropist brothers—resulted in a 9-foot bronze statue of Jefferson, originally placed in front of the Jefferson County Courthouse in Louisville (1901). Jefferson stands atop the Liberty Bell, as drafter of the Declaration of Independence, holding the document outward. Ezekiel depicted Jefferson in his thirties, the future president’s age at the time when he wrote the Declaration. As a man who epitomized democratic ideals and who authored the Virginia Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom, Jefferson stood for the very religious liberty that Ezekiel celebrated with his own marble group. A smaller replica of the Jefferson sculpture (1910) was erected near the Rotunda at the University of Virginia, founded by Jefferson in 1819. Ezekiel also produced a full-length bronze statue of General Stonewall Jackson (1910), on commission from the Charleston, West Virginia chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy (1909), with a replica at the Virginia Military Institute (1912). He executed a bronze *Christopher Columbus* (1892) for the 1893 World’s Columbian Exhibition, the Chicago world’s fair celebrating the discovery of the New World.

In 1874, Ezekiel began his first major commission: the neoclassical, 25-foot allegory *Religious Liberty*. This project came as a surprise, with an invitation to submit a design arriving by letter to Ezekiel in Berlin. Ezekiel immediately penciled a sketch on the back of the envelope, which he wrote “flashed upon my mind at once” (Ezekiel 1975, 164). That original arrangement barely changed in the final version, except for a single alteration, suggested by the B’nai B’rith monument committee: instead of Faith reaching both hands up to heaven, they preferred that the boy in the group hold a lamp with the eternal flame in one hand. Ezekiel ceded artistic control on this single detail and returned to Europe (Ezekiel 1975, 167).

Carved in a newly rented studio in Rome before any payment from the B’nai B’rith, *Religious Liberty* was intended to be unveiled at the upcoming 1876 Centennial International Exposition, the world’s fair in Philadelphia celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Signing of the Declaration of Independence. *Religious Liberty* presents the



FIGURE 1.2 Moses Jacob Ezekiel, *Religious Liberty*, 1876. Marble, 25 ft. high. National Museum of American Jewish History, Philadelphia. Photo: Samantha Baskind.

classicized Liberty as an 8-foot woman, wearing a coat of mail partly covered by a toga (Figure 1.2). Atop this armor and ancient dress appears a breastplate bearing the shield of the United States. She dons a Phrygian cap, the *pilleus libertatis*, bestowed on freed slaves, with a border of thirteen golden-colored stars to symbolize the original colonies. She holds a laurel wreath of victory, which also rests on fasces, a bundle of birch rods tied together with a ribbon that function as a symbol of power and unified strength. In turn, the fasces are covered by an open book, meant to signal the US Constitution. Liberty extends her right arm protectively over the idealized, nude young boy at her right, a personification of Faith, who does indeed grasp a flaming lamp as he reaches a hand up to heaven. At Liberty's feet an eagle, representing America, attacks a serpent, signifying Intolerance (and, as I will soon argue, also Temptation), and Faith steps on the serpent's tail. The group stands on a pedestal bearing the inscription "Religious Liberty, Dedicated to the People of the United States by the Order B'nai B'rith and

Israelites of America.” Even though the B’nai B’rith (literally “Sons of the Covenant”), founded in New York in 1843 by German immigrants, defaulted on advance payment due to financial difficulties, Ezekiel continued working on the sculpture. He wrote of living in poverty—giving up his apartment and moving into his studio where he slept on a folding chair, and quitting smoking to save money—and of having to borrow money to pay for materials (Ezekiel 1975, 185). Nonetheless, Ezekiel persisted because of his sense of obligation to the Jewish people: “It was the first monument that any Jewish body of men had ever wanted to place in the world; the matter had been published to the world, I had received the commission without ever seeking it, and it would have been an eternal disgrace upon every Jewish community in America if the work had been abandoned” (Ezekiel 1975, 185). Ezekiel was not paid until three years after the sculpture was delivered from Rome to Philadelphia, and then not the full, originally agreed amount of \$20,000.

The statue’s message would have been easily recognizable to nineteenth-century viewers even without an inscription because Ezekiel made use of a common trope of the moment: Lady Liberty. For instance, Thomas Crawford’s bronze *Freedom* (1857), a female personification of Liberty, crowns the Capitol dome in Washington. Inside the Capitol building, Constantino Brumidi’s copious decorations include *The Apotheosis of Washington* (1865)—an illusionistic fresco showing Washington ascending to heaven, flanked by female allegories, including Liberty, in the cupola of the dome. Also, during the Revolutionary years, America was frequently depicted as a female personified as a virtue, such as Freedom or Liberty.

Early images of Liberty, as far back as the third century BCE in Rome, showed her (similar to Ezekiel’s conception) in a draped robe, but alternatively with other attributes: a scepter, symbolizing sovereignty; a cat—an animal with no master—at her feet; and a shattered pitcher, indicating freedom from confinement, or the obvious broken chains. A key symbol of Liberty was her Phrygian cap. In one of the popular editions of Cesare Ripa’s influential emblem guide *Iconologia* (1603), Liberty is depicted as a middle-aged woman wearing classical robes and a helmet, with her Phrygian cap hanging atop a scepter—sometimes termed a liberty pole, and a cat at her feet. At times, the Phrygian cap sat on a scepter and also on the heads of American Liberty figures. However, Liberty occasionally wore other headdresses, such as Indian feathers or a stars-and-stripes cap, to complement additional, distinctly American elements, such as the US flag and the bald eagle, rather than a cat or shattered object.

In her American incarnations, Liberty took on many guises, with amendments based on either an artist’s desire or a commissioner’s request, as in the case of Thomas Crawford’s *Statue of Freedom* atop the Capitol dome. Crawford deviated from typical Liberty imagery, because one of his proposed designs, which incorporated a shield, a sword, and stars around a liberty cap, was opposed by slave-owner Jefferson Davis—Secretary of War and later President of the Confederacy—who requested the elimination of the customary liberty cap because of its status as a symbol of freed slaves. As a result, Crawford replaced the liberty cap with a helmet surmounted by an eagle head-dress. His final, militant 19-foot Liberty grasps the hilt of a sheathed sword in her right hand, and in her left she holds a laurel wreath and the shield of the United States with thirteen stripes. Dressed in classical drapery, she stands on a globe encircled with the national motto, *E Pluribus Unum*, and fasces and wreaths decorate the lower part of her base. Ezekiel’s sculpture is not armed and bellicose like Crawford’s, yet she still wears mail, ever-prepared to defend her liberty role even while wearing a peacetime toga.

Instead she resolutely and peacefully strides forward with the common Liberty trappings of fasces, a Phrygian cap, and the bald eagle.

In telling ways, Ezekiel's *Liberty* strays from familiar precedents. She leans on the traditional Roman fasces, an emblem most associated with republican Rome, although in Roman art an axe typically appears with the fasces (Liberty was also depicted with fasces on the first and second seals of the French Republic, and she was the Republic's emblem, known as Marianne, who also wore a Phrygian cap). Fasces, though, do function as an official symbol in several US government venues; for instance, two fasces are pictured on either side of the United States flag in the House of Representatives, the seal of the Senate features a pair of crossed fasces at bottom, fasces ring the base of Crawford's *Statue of Freedom*, and Brumidi's *Liberty* in the Capitol dome carries a fasces. Surely known to Ezekiel was Jean-Antoine Houdon's *George Washington* (1788–1792), who leans on fasces, in the Rotunda of the Virginia State Capitol in Richmond. Ezekiel's original invention was the addition of the Constitution, lying open and covering the fasces. The inclusion of the Constitution atop the fasces reinforced the importance of the individual, and of the freedoms accorded to the individual, through this founding document. With regard to religion, Ezekiel's pre-eminent constitutional concern, the First Amendment specifically states, and which Ezekiel partially quoted in his autobiography when reflecting on *Religious Liberty*: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof" (Ezekiel 1975, 168). In fact, when *Religious Liberty* first arrived in Philadelphia, she was placed on a temporary pedestal that bore these words prior to her installation on a permanent granite base.

Thus far, *Religious Liberty* has been considered in its American context. Yet some of Ezekiel's other divergences from tradition suggest tensions within the Jewish community at the time. The year Ezekiel finished modeling *Religious Liberty* in clay, he was simultaneously working up in clay what would eventually become a bronze, *Eve Hearing the Voice* (1876; Figure 1.3). This life-sized sculpture—a narrative conception rather than an allegorical one—depicts a nude Eve after she has been tempted by the serpent, eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, and been rebuked by God (Genesis 3:1–13). The naturally modeled Eve averts her head and painfully attempts to hide her face in the crook of her left arm, which crosses over her chest. At Eve's feet, the serpent coils around the rock upon which she cowers. Eve's bowed head looks downward, directly at the head of the serpent. Crucially, Ezekiel portrayed Eve without a navel because he understood the esoteric interpretation of the biblical text, which states that Eve was fashioned from one of Adam's ribs (Ezekiel 1975, 181). The artist was raised as an Orthodox Jew, the descendent of rabbis, including a father heavily involved in Jewish communal life; his father, Moses, was the secretary of Richmond's first synagogue and a scholar of Jewish theology (the elder Ezekiel owned all writings by Moses Maimonides, one of the chief Torah scholars whose work is revered to this day). Thus, Moses Ezekiel possessed intimate knowledge of both the Bible and Jewish thought. It is important to note that biblical subjects appeared in Ezekiel's work more than once. Several are mentioned in his autobiography, but few survive. He sculpted a torso of *Judith* (1881) and depicted Jesus several times, including a presentation titled *Christ in the Tomb* (1896) that showed Jesus with Semitic features. As a boy he modeled *Cain Receiving the Curse of the Almighty* and *Moses Receiving the Law on Mount Sinai*, and made a large drawing in crayon he called *The Revolt of the Children of Israel in the Desert and the Stoning of Moses* (all three of these latter works are now lost).

Since Ezekiel repeated the same serpent iconography in his *Eve Hearing the Voice* as he worked on the B'nai B'rith commission, he must have attached special significance



FIGURE 1.3 Moses J. Ezekiel, *Eve Hearing the Voice*, 1876, bronze, Cincinnati Art Museum, Gift of Dr. Merlyn McClure and the Family of Dr. George W. McClure, 1997.152. Image courtesy of the Cincinnati Art Museum.

to its unusual inclusion as a symbol associated with Liberty. The serpent, tempter in the Garden of Eden, looms large in Judaism. Near the outset of Genesis, the serpent, through particularly crafty deception, tricks Eve into an act that God has expressly forbidden; the serpent convincingly argues that if Eve eats from the tree her “eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5). Eve then saw that the tree provided good food, was attractive, and “was to be desired to make one wise,” so she ate from it (Genesis 3:6). Considering his familiarity with the Bible, especially this foundational story, Ezekiel shared a background steeped in time-honored education and ways with other nineteenth-century Jewish Americans. As such, Ezekiel may have intended for the serpent in *Religious Liberty* to be interpreted not only as Intolerance, but additionally as Temptation. Furthermore, Faith stepping on the serpent’s tail, which wraps around the back of the sculpture, signals how in an American context retaining faith might allow an individual to resist America’s manifold temptations.

No doubt, the temptations of American freedoms—beyond religious freedom—could also lead to license, distracting Jews from rigorous adherence to traditional Jewish law, thereby threatening the core values of Judaism. Known as *Halakhab*, these rules outline an encompassing way of living that influences all things, from what one can eat, to how holidays are observed (including the weekly Sabbath), to one's clothing, and how one should treat one's fellow man. And true to Ezekiel's iconographic commentary, America's freedoms did dilute Judaism. Around 1792, a Virginia resident both extolled and lamented acculturation. Rebecca Samuels, an immigrant, wrote to her parents in Germany: "One can live here peacefully." Nevertheless she also worried that her children would become gentile because of the lack of Jewish observance. Among her many regrets: "Jewishness is pushed aside here.... I crave to see a synagogue to which I can go. The way we live now is no life at all. We do not know what the Sabbath and the holidays are. On the Sabbath all the Jewish shops are open.... My children cannot learn anything here, nothing Jewish" (Marcus 1996, 142, 143).

By virtue of his move to Cincinnati, Ezekiel lived amid these dramatic changes. The Bohemian-born Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, recognized as the chief early exponent of American Reform Judaism (a modernized and Americanized form of Judaism), came to the United States in 1846. Initially he served as a rabbi in Albany, New York, but relocated to Cincinnati in 1854 to assume the pulpit at B'nai Yeshurun. There he published an English-language weekly, the *Israelite* (later retitled *American Israelite* and still published), which allowed him to espouse the ideology of Reform Judaism to a national audience. The Cincinnati congregation B'nai Yeshurun stood as a flagship institution for liberal Jewish observance, with Wise the charismatic spokesman at its helm. B'nai Yeshurun introduced organ music during worship, advocated for the abandonment of old-style dress and head coverings, and instituted considerably shorter services, with widespread English translations. In 1875, Wise founded and became president of the first Reform seminary in America, Hebrew Union College, based in Cincinnati, which trained rabbis to lead Reform congregations throughout the country. About these extreme modifications, which took place in Ezekiel's homeland and which he viewed as diluting the Judaism he grew up with and preferred, the artist wrote in an 1892 letter:

The operatic-hat-off ape-ism service [of Reform Judaism] is very distasteful to me. The difference between Judaism and *all other* religions is simply this: Moses created *a people for a religion*; all other created a *religion for the people*—and this latter is what the so called Reformers are attempting.... All the intelligent Christians I have met have more respect for a real Jew than one who apes them in a service dedicated to the one God. (Ezekiel 1975, 461–462; emphasis in original)

Nonetheless, Ezekiel modeled from life a bronze portrait bust of Isaac Mayer Wise (1899), the first sculpture of a rabbi by a Jewish artist. Apparently of his own volition and without a commission, Henry Mosler (1841–1920) painted *Plum Street Temple* (c.1866; Skirball Cultural Center, Los Angeles), a canvas detailing the exterior of Wise's newly built temple, B'nai Yeshurun. Mosler's portrait commissions also include a likeness of Wise's wife Therese Bloch Wise (c.1867).

Ezekiel's strong personal views on religion further substantiate the claim that the artist intended *Religious Liberty* to convey two meanings: a paean to religious freedom and a warning against too drastic assimilation. His inclusion of the serpent—a biblical symbol of deception—cautions against straying from divinely ordained and

long-established practice and admonishes that there may be a steep price to pay for giving in to the temptation of extreme acculturation. Related to this, a few months after the sculpture was unveiled a number of supporters exhorted B'nai B'rith to fully compensate Ezekiel for *Religious Liberty*. One author of a letter to the editor for the *American Israelite* suggested a small fee be assessed from B'nai B'rith members to fulfill the original contract. He argued that honoring the contract provided a valuable precedent for the younger Jewish generation (many of whom were not immigrants)—the generation that especially enjoyed America's liberties, certainly more so than the older generation, which hewed closely to tradition (Louis 1877, 80). It was that older generation Ezekiel may have intended to address, a generation fearful that complacency and acquiescence to mainstream American culture would water down Jewish life and culture.

The B'nai B'rith request that Ezekiel place the eternal flame in Faith's hands, indicates that, although the order was service based rather than religious, it still realized that components of traditional Judaism formed the group's essence and had to be maintained to insure Jewish continuity. Early projects of the fraternal lodge involved the erection of the first Jewish community center in the United States, in New York in 1851. The following year B'nai B'rith dedicated the first Jewish public library in New York. Its nineteenth-century humanitarian endeavors include disaster relief in 1868 after a severe flood in Baltimore. Still, the order valued the inclusion of the eternal flame as critical to Faith's conception. The eternal flame, or eternal light (Ner Tamid), hangs near the Torah ark in all synagogues. As written in Exodus 27:20–21:

And thou shalt command the children of Israel, that they bring unto thee pure olive oil beaten for the light, to cause a lamp to burn continually. In the tent of meeting, without the veil which is before the testimony, Aaron and his sons shall set it in order, to burn from evening to morning before the Lord; it shall be a statute for ever throughout their generations on the behalf of the children of Israel.

This eternal light functions as a symbol of God's eternal presence, a principal symbol recognizable by every Jew.

Perhaps the most obvious example that the sculpture held an alternate meaning, for Ezekiel at least, is evidenced by another iconographical element: the striking, and outwardly peculiar manner by which the artist conceived Liberty's right hand. In this manifesto of freedom, Liberty's elongated gesture, which extends over faith, also reaches over spectators of the sculpture, thereby offering them a protective blessing as well. Her fingers are spread in an unnatural configuration, with her two middle fingers connected, separated from her pinkie finger and index finger. That gesture recalls the priestly blessing, decreed in Numbers 6:24–26: "May God bless you and keep you. May God cause the divine light to shine upon you and be gracious to you. May God turn toward you, and grant you peace." Ancient rabbis blessed the Jewish people in this way each morning after the sacrifice at the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, and during holidays and Sabbath services, while in its modern context the blessing is bestowed upon congregants near the end of prayer services and during major Jewish holidays in more observant temples. A rabbi raises his hands with palms facing downward and forward, and the four fingers separate into two groups with thumbs touching, a gesture sometimes reproduced on tombstones and Jewish ritual objects (Figure 1.4). The fingers are thus deliberately split into the Hebrew letter "shin," the twenty-first letter of the



FIGURE 1.4 Priestly blessing gesture depicted on the gravestone of Rabbi Meschullam Kohn (1739–1819). Fürth, Germany. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

Hebrew alphabet, which comprises three pronged lines and looks like a crown. A shin serves as a symbol for *Shaddai* (Almighty God), one of several Hebrew words for God. Traditionally, congregants avert their eyes when this blessing is made because the Divine Presence is said to shine through the rabbi's open fingers, which have formed "windows" to let light in. Compositionally, it would have been awkward for Ezekiel to have Liberty give this exact, uniquely Jewish, blessing, and such an arrangement may also have raised questions about its connotation, overtly connecting this American allegory of freedom to religious Jewish practice. Instead, Ezekiel has Liberty offer a variation of the blessing with a single hand creating a shin pattern. Faith's hand nearly mirrors his guardian's; his palm extends upward, in the other direction—to God and heaven—with his fingers in the process of forming the same "shin" configuration. This parallel composition connects Liberty's earthly, secular blessing with Faith's gesture to God's divine blessings.

The letter "shin" itself is so central in Judaism that it is replicated in another chief ritual, performed every weekday morning by Jewish men: the wearing of *tefillin*. *Tefillin*, special boxes and straps wrapped on one's head and arm, serve as a symbolic connection to God. Considered one of the primary *mitzvot* (commandments), the wrapping of *tefillin* is commanded in the Oral Law and four times in the Bible, first in Exodus: "And it shall be for a sign for you upon your hand, and for a memorial between your eyes, that the law of the LORD may be in your mouth; for with a strong hand did the LORD bring you out of Egypt" (13:9). The arrangement of straps on one's hand

purposefully forms a modified “shin” and on the four-sided box attached to one’s head, two of the four sides display the letter “shin,” in both cases as a reference to *Shaddai*, or God. The box itself holds parchments inscribed with verses from the Bible, including the oldest and foremost daily prayer in the Jewish religion: the *Shema*. Recited every morning and evening, the *Shema* proclaims God’s oneness and one’s faith in God (Deuteronomy, 6:4–9). Ezekiel’s remarkable adaptation of the all-important “shin” in his sculpture stands as a symbol of his continuing faith in the Jewish religion, a value he fervently hoped his more assimilated coreligionists shared. Notably, Ezekiel made use of the potency of hand gestures in his art on several occasions, as demonstrated, for instance, by *Eve Hearing the Voice*, where he carefully modeled Eve’s left hand, with palm conspicuously turned outward, and fingers splayed, to shield herself from God’s wrath.

It is essential to point out that there are no extant documents to substantiate the claim that Ezekiel’s Jewish audience received the sculpture’s implied message as the artist intended. As Michelle Bogart observes in her fundamental study on early modern American public sculpture, however attuned an informed viewer may be to certain symbols, allegorical sculpture can be difficult to decode (Bogart 1989, 227–231). Yet, as hard as it is to trace the reception of large scale, allegorical civic works, it is still instructive to explore possible meanings of *Religious Liberty* to see how this sculpture may have resonated in its own time and place. Ezekiel knew the symbols and conventions familiar to his homogenous group of Jewish viewers—and not least, the values held dear by Jews—surely the reason why the B’nai B’rith gave him the commission for *Religious Liberty* despite the fact that he was an impractical choice to sculpt the monument considering that he lived in Europe. Paying close attention to Ezekiel’s variation of a highly recognizable sign, or ritual, adapted in the context of a different, secular kind of blessing, as well as the other iconographical signs teased out here, opens up a tripartite understanding of the artist, his work, and Jewish life in late nineteenth-century America.

Religious Liberty finally arrived in America, delayed by both Ezekiel’s perfectionism and the challenges he incurred trying to raise money to transport the sculpture across the ocean. It was an arduous journey for the enormous sculpture, which could only be removed from Ezekiel’s Roman studio after a wall was knocked down (a wall was also knocked down initially, when the original 27-ton block of Carrara marble was delivered to Ezekiel’s studio). Another setback ensued when the sculpture reached New York; during its unloading the first of its two protective crates broke. Fortunately, the sculpture remained intact, but Ezekiel, frayed and still without a penny from the B’nai B’rith, discovered that the brotherhood did not have funds to transport the sculpture from New York to Philadelphia. Once again, Ezekiel borrowed money to bring his monument to its final resting place, twenty days after the centennial world’s fair had ended.

On a cold Thanksgiving Day, Jews and non-Jews stood together—along with Ezekiel, members of his family, and representatives from the B’nai B’rith—as *Religious Liberty* was unveiled in Philadelphia’s Fairmount Park in front of Horticultural Hall and positioned across from a statue of Christopher Columbus. The unveiling was covered in a number of newspapers including *The Jewish Record*, *The Public Ledger and Transcript*, *The New York Herald*, *The Press*, and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. After a procession of about 250 dignitaries to a platform decorated with American colors and flags, along with accompanying music by McClurg’s Cornet Band—who throughout the ceremony

played patriotic songs like the “The Star Spangled Banner,” “Home Sweet Home,” and “Yankee Doodle Dandy”—Rabbi George Jacobs addressed the spectators. Jacobs, who coincidentally had served as a rabbi in Ezekiel’s hometown of Richmond for several years, carefully mentioned God but did not include any Hebrew or specific Hebrew prayers. Rather he spoke in large part about the good fortune of Jews in America, even as he implied their misfortune elsewhere:

Almighty God, Sovereign of the Universe, who art enthroned high above all mortals and rulest the destinies of all nations, we approach Thee this day with thankful spirits for having preserved us alive and sustained us to behold the advent of this joyous occasion to which every Hebrew heart, as well as the heart of every lover of religious liberty, has looked forward to with anxious and blissful expectation ... to unveil a precious monument – one that belongs not to any creed or sect, but which interests the good and the true of all denominations. (“Religious Liberty” 1876)¹

Considering some of the goals of B’nai B’rith, the rabbi’s inclusive word choice makes sense. Later in the ceremony, A.L. Sanger, Chairman of the B’nai B’rith centennial committee, recited a portion of the order’s mandate, “to develop and elevate the mental and moral character of our race, by a liberal support of science and art, and the inculcation of the holiest and purest principles of philanthropy, honor and patriotism” (“Statue to Religious Liberty” 1876). This broad statement focused on philanthropy and personal growth rather than on promoting religious Judaism. At the same time, the group’s mission explicitly promoted patriotism—in other words, becoming one with the nation in which the Jews reside—in line with the sculpture’s outwardly Americanized conception. Sanger continued his remarks, “It is not in our special character of Jews that we offer this tribute, for we do not conceive that it is strictly as Jews that we enjoy Religious Liberty, that being a blessing which is offered freely to all” (Ibid., 1876).

B’nai B’rith’s and Ezekiel’s neutral approaches differed from the six other American religious or ethnic groups’ contributions to the centennial celebrations, including Italian Americans, German Americans, Catholics, Presbyterians, and “colored citizens.” Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett observes that all of these groups, except Jews, depicted their own history and relevant historical personages (1988). For example, the German American sculpture by Friedrich Drake portrayed the geographer and explorer Alexander von Humboldt in bronze, solemnly holding a scroll with his hand resting on a globe (1871). Italian Americans presented a portrait sculpture of Christopher Columbus (1876) with the same accouterments. The other religious groups featured conventional monuments of religious men relevant to their church history. The Catholic group erected a grandiose sculpture called the *Catholic Total Abstinence Union Fountain* (1876), designed by the architect Herman Kirn. Five statues on separate pedestals present four eighteenth-century Catholic figures of renown: Father Theobald Mathew, Charles Carroll, Archbishop John Carroll, and Commodore John Barry, along with the biblical Moses, who stands grandly at center grasping the Tablets of the Law at his chest. The Presbyterians’s sculpture also depicted a member of the clergy, a straightforward likeness of Reverend John Witherspoon, who represented America as signer of the Declaration of Independence. *Religious Liberty* deviated from this norm of mostly realistic portrait monuments, and close analysis of Ezekiel’s distinctive, didactic allegory demonstrates

that the sculpture conveyed a larger message for its contemporary Jewish American audience, although one likely too complex to be fully understood.

Despite Ezekiel's trouble with B'nai B'rith and his travails in getting *Religious Liberty* finished and delivered, difficulties he later assessed as "the tragedy of my life" (Ezekiel 1975, 190), the artist remained gracious as he handed over his sculpture at the dedication ceremony to members of B'nai B'rith, whose mission he extolled as "a sacred charge" ("Statue to Religious Liberty" 1876). He also fondly remembered the fanfare of that day, which included speeches to an audience of 1200 and then, of course, the climactic moment, "when the veil fell off, [and] hundreds of small American flags, with *Religious Liberty* stamped on them, fluttered around and were gathered by the spectators" (Ezekiel 1975, 192). As punctuation, the band played the American hymn "Hail Columbia" and the German patriotic anthem "German Fatherland." Along with the specially designed flags, spectators could also take home the program for the ceremony, with a cover designed by Ezekiel's good friend, the German painter Fedor Encke, who traveled with him to America during the transport of *Religious Liberty*. Four nudes lounging on reproductions of ancient Greek architecture decorated the border of the cover to complement Ezekiel's classical sculpture at center.

In 1986, after a 108-year stay in Fairmount Park, *Religious Liberty* moved to the grounds of the National Museum of American Jewish History, beside Independence Mall, with the financial assistance of B'nai B'rith International and a number of individual benefactors. A press release for this move reiterated the endurance of the vital principles in Ezekiel's sculpture:

The historical monument, *Religious Liberty*, symbolizes the commitment to the ideal of freedom which has made America the great nation that it is. Relocating the sculpture to the Museum to a site on Independence Mall facing the Liberty Bell puts this national treasure in the birthplace of our nation's freedom and places the symbol of a fundamental civil liberty in proximity to the emblem on American independence.... Underscoring our nation's commitment to freedom and equality, the relocation project will affirm the continued dedication of B'nai B'rith and the Jewish community to this cherished ideal. (Press release, 1985)

Ezekiel's tribute to religious freedom was once again moved, in 2010, to the museum's new, enlarged building, fittingly still on Independence Mall, and still serving as a proud reminder of the liberties that have allowed Jews to thrive, finally in freedom, in America. These moves, too, from a civic space to "Jewish" spaces, reshape the meaning of Ezekiel's monument, now overtly connecting it to a specific Jewish history alongside a broader American history—in a sense the same kind of dual dialogue that Ezekiel envisioned for his towering sculpture. As the twofold Mission Statement for the National Museum of American Jewish History reads, in part: "Its purpose is to connect Jews more closely to their heritage and to inspire in people of all backgrounds a greater appreciation for the diversity of the American Jewish experience and the freedoms to which Americans aspire" (National Museum of American Jewish History 2014).

Moses Jacob Ezekiel's *Religious Liberty* and the fanfare surrounding it simultaneously reminded Americans of their democratic lineage and Jews of their good fortune. By fashioning a large, public, highly visible monument, Ezekiel elicited a sense of American and Jewish national pride and support of democratic principles. At the same time, the sculpture aimed to address the struggles of the American assimilation experience—and

the consequences thereof—through the use of allegory. Indeed, Ezekiel created an American monument that spoke of the hopes, aspirations, and fears of nineteenth-century American Jews during a crucial, fraught period in their history.

Note

- 1 For a comprehensive account of the dedication ceremony and other details about the B'nai B'rith Centennial Committee's problems acquiring funding for Ezekiel see *Report of the Executive Committee of the Constitution Grand Lodge, I.O.B.B., 1875–1876* (New York: M. Thalmessinger, Stationer and Printer, 1877). Copy on file at National Museum of American Jewish History.

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