

Rep. Henry A. Waxman
Extension of Remarks
Special Order for Jewish American Heritage Month
May 23, 2006

Mr. Speaker, it is an honor and pleasure to rise in recognition of Jewish American Heritage Month, which was inaugurated this year to be celebrated annually during the month of May.

Jewish American Heritage Month is a special opportunity to celebrate Judaism not only as a religion, but a culture that is rich in history, tradition, and flavor. The American Jewish Community has made significant contributions to our society and has helped weave the fabric of American life.

In 1833, it was a Jewish immigrant, Emma Lazarus, who composed the poem “The New Colossus” as part of a fundraising campaign to erect the Statue of Liberty. The monument was later inscribed with her words, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” These words have come to symbolize America’s role as a haven for all who seek opportunities and freedom from persecution, including hundreds of thousands of Jewish immigrants who arrived at our shores.

My own grandparents came in the early 1900s from what is now Moldova after escaping hardship and pogroms. They settled in a working-class Jewish neighborhood in Los Angeles much like other communities that sprang up in major cities around the country. They lived amid a tight-knit community of kosher butchers, synagogues, and Jewish businesses, where Yiddish was often heard on the streets.

Although sometimes criticized for their insularity, these ethnic neighborhoods epitomized the values of charity and community service, building a safety net long before Medicaid, Medicare and Social Security came into existence. In this regard, Jewish Los Angeles has an impressive history. The Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles (JFS), established in 1854, was one of the first umbrella organizations of its kind to support comprehensive support services like a food pantry, care for the elderly, and assistance for the unemployed.

The community in Los Angeles also earned distinction for its openness and diversity. A special milestone being celebrated in my own district this year is the 100th anniversary of Sinai Temple, which is the oldest Conservative congregation west of the Mississippi. L.A. is now home to the University of Judaism, Hebrew Union College, and an array of synagogues and schools from all streams of Jewish religious practice.

Of course, Jewish Los Angeles is perhaps best recognized for the many Jewish entrepreneurs and entertainers who have taken on prominent roles as producers, actors, recording artists and media personalities. Jewish Americans also made their mark in education, science, economics, literature and many other arenas. More than a third of U.S. Nobel Prize winners in science or economics have been Jewish. There have been 18 Jewish Recipients of the Congressional Medal of Honor.

While Jews in the United States have suffered periods of discrimination and anti-Semitism, the community has persevered as a champion of civil rights, tolerance and religious freedom. It is often said that Jews living in America are freer, safer, and more prosperous than at any time or place in Jewish history.

One reason it is particularly fitting that this month has been chosen to honor Jewish American Heritage Month is that May 5th is the anniversary of the founding of the State of Israel. The United States was the first major country to officially recognize the fledgling Jewish State. Our relationship has been cemented through robust economic ties and strong military cooperation, and an enduring partnership based on democratic values.

Although Jews account for barely two percent of the population, there are today more Jews living in the United States than any other country outside of Israel. I welcome the designation of Jewish Heritage Month and the opportunity for all Americans to learn about the contributions made by one of our nation's most vocal and vibrant minorities.