

A gift in 1876, statue still serves as a beacon in 2015

By Jack Tomczuk, Inquirer Staff Writer

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A statue representing religious freedom and immigration stands at the site where Pope Francis will deliver a speech on those themes.

Donated for the 1876 centennial, the marble statue represents liberty shielding religious faith from intolerance. (JESSICA GRIFFIN / Staff) Religious Liberty, outside the National Museum of American Jewish History, shows a woman, symbolizing liberty, shielding a boy with a lamp, representing religious faith. On the opposite side of the woman is a carved eagle crushing a snake, a classic symbol of American democracy and representing the country's continuing struggle against intolerance. In addition, the woman is holding the Constitution and wears a crown with 13 stars for the original 13 colonies.

The 25-foot statue is very close to the site at Independence Hall where the pope will speak to thousands on Sept. 26 on religious freedom and immigration.

B'nai B'rith, a Jewish human-rights advocacy group founded in 1843, commissioned the sculpture and gave it to the American people for the Centennial celebration in Philadelphia in 1876. It stood in Fairmount Park for more than 100 years before being moved to the grounds of the Jewish history museum in 1986. In 2010, the statue was moved again, down the block to the museum's current location on Fifth Street and Market.

The statue is still owned by the City of Philadelphia, according to Claire Pingel, the museum's chief registrar and associate curator.

The statue was crafted by prominent Jewish sculptor Moses Jacob Ezekiel, a Confederate soldier during the Civil War. He was the first Jewish cadet to attend the the Virginia Military Institute.



Ezekiel carved the sculpture from Carrara marble - Michelangelo used the same marble for his *Pieta*. "The place to go to study was Italy, even [for] Moses, who was the first big American Jewish sculptor," said Cheryl Kempler, B'nai B'rith's archivist.

Immigration is an important topic for both the Pope and B'nai B'rith, according to Daniel Mariaschin, B'nai B'rith international executive vice president.

Mariaschin said B'nai B'rith sent a delegation to the Vatican in June to discuss with the pope religious liberty and the persecution of Christians in the Middle East.

"Our organization grew in this country as a result of immigration," Mariaschin said. "The pope's visit, with all this coming together, it is important."

The pope's speech will show that Ezekiel's *Religious Liberty* is just as relevant almost 140 years later.