

Special for Purim:

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# America's Jewish Emperor

## *The Story of Emperor Joshua Abraham Norton*

Officially, the United States of America has been led by 44 presidents with backgrounds and political persuasions from all across the spectrum. Most people are completely unaware, however, that America also had a leader of a different sort, a self-proclaimed emperor who commanded the respect of tens of thousands and enjoyed royal privileges.

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In 1859, Joshua Abraham Norton proclaimed himself Emperor of the United States and took the title "Emperor Norton I." Later he expanded his appellation to include "Protector of Mexico."

Norton was fortunate that he was not committed instantly to an insane asylum. On the contrary, he became a respected figure on the streets of San Francisco. The city's residents treated him royally, showing him the veneration due a monarch. Even the city police saluted him deferentially when he passed by in his uniform. His imperial decrees were widely published in the city's newspapers.

With Norton it was Purim all year round.

Although he receives little mention in the history books, Emperor Norton was a renowned figure for decades and remains popular even in his death. He "ruled" for nearly a quarter of a century, showing extreme generosity to his subjects and exceptional clarity of mind....

## Who Was Joshua Norton?

Unlike America's presidents, the country's one and only emperor was not native-born. Joshua Abraham Norton was born in England sometime between the years 1814 and 1819. The "royal chronicles" are unclear on this point, although the later date is more widely accepted. His father may have been John Norton and his mother Sarah Norden, who was a daughter of Abraham Norden and sister of a wealthy Jewish businessman named Benjamin Norden.

Like many Jews of the time, the Nortons migrated to South Africa in 1820. The British were just beginning to expand their influence in the area and many settlers believed that South Africa presented new opportunities. The Nortons were very successful, and the senior Mr. Norton amassed considerable wealth. He even

became president of the nascent Jewish community in Cape Town.

Joshua Abraham served as an officer in the British army that controlled South Africa. Later, he attempted to open his own business. When he was disappointed by the outcome he returned to working for his father's business, dealing in equipment for ships.

The family was struck by tragedy in 1848. Joshua Abraham's parents succumbed to disease, followed shortly thereafter by his two brothers. Now Norton was left alone in the world, though he had inherited his father's fortune of \$40,000—a very ample sum of money in those days.

Bent on beginning anew, Joshua Abraham Norton traveled to far-off America. He was attracted by the American Dream in general and the California Gold Rush in particular. Norton arrived aboard the steamship *Hurlothrumbo* and in 1849 he reached the future capital city of San Francisco. Unlike most who flooded California at that time, Norton did not arrive with empty pockets and the hope of becoming rich overnight by prospecting for gold. He was already in possession of a small fortune and he hoped to expand it through business activities.

Norton invested his money in real estate as well as in various import-export ventures. He was successful on both fronts and was soon drawing large profits from his investments. In one deal he purchased a piece of land along the seacoast and he salvaged the wreckage of a large cargo ship that had run aground in a riverbed nearby. The boat was converted into a large warehouse whose storage rooms were rented to other businessmen.

During the great fire that destroyed much of San Francisco on May 4, 1851 (see *Zman* 5 – Av 5770), Norton's floating warehouse was protected from the flames. The goods that remained safe inside were sold at several times their regular value while the battered city struggled to regain its footing. Using his innate business acumen,



America's one and only emperor.

by 1853 Norton had accumulated \$250,000 (worth around \$6.5 million today). He later purchased a cigar factory, a rice mill and an office building.

Thanks to his fortune, leading politicians and businessmen counted themselves among his most intimate acquaintances. San Francisco residents created a vigilante committee to restore order after the great fire and prosecute plunderers, vandals and the likes. Joshua Norton was chosen as a member of the committee.

But then Norton made a single business move that threatened his entire fortune. China was suffering from severe famine and to alleviate the problem it placed a ban on exporting its rice. As a result, the price of rice in San Francisco skyrocketed, jumping from 4¢ per pound to 36¢ overnight. Joshua Norton learned that a ship, the *Glyde*, was returning from Peru with a load of 200,000 pounds of rice and he saw this as a windfall. He purchased the entire cargo of rice for the sum of \$25,000, or 12.5¢ per pound. This was 1/3 of the street price for rice and it offered him a lucrative monopoly.

Unfortunately for Norton, days after he signed the contract, several other ships appeared with Peruvian rice, causing the price to plummet to just 3¢ per pound. That left Norton with a deep loss on the deal. He tried to save himself by invalidating the contract on the claim that the seller had misrepresented the quality of the rice shipment. The case spent four years in the courts. Norton won the case, but the rice merchants appealed the decision and the California Supreme Court had it overturned.

The steep loss led to further downturns in Norton's business affairs. A few months later, Lucas Turner & Co. Bank foreclosed on Norton's properties for failure to pay his debts. All of Norton's powerful and influential friends suddenly disowned him and by 1858 he was forced to declare bankruptcy. Norton left San Francisco a hardened, embittered man.

For a while, no one heard from Norton and to this day it is unknown what he did during the next period of his life. It seems, though, that his troubles left him somewhat unhinged.

## Coronation

Eventually Joshua Abraham Norton reappeared in San Francisco a changed man. He was bitter and angry at the injustices to which he felt he had been subjected. Norton was now convinced that the American



When fire destroyed much of San Francisco on May 4, 1851, Norton's floating warehouse survived intact.