

Sephardic Heritage Update

*A collection of current Essays, Articles, Events and Information
Impacting our community and our culture
A Publication of the Center for Sephardic Heritage*

"Service is the rent we pay for living. It is the very purpose of life and not something you do in your spare time. Education is improving the lives of others and leaving your community and world better than you found it." -Marian Wright Edelman

Newsletter Special Independence Day

American Independence Day and Sephardic Jewish History

By: David Shasha

'Four Score and Seven Years Ago': A Jewish Connection

By: Marc Saperstein

The First American Jew: A Tribute to Gershom Mendes Seixas "Patriotic Rabbi of the Revolution"

By: Howard A. Berman

A Whirlwind Tour of the Origins of Jewish Life in Philadelphia

By: Mark Wolfson

Haym Salomon and Yom Kippur 1781

By: Mark Wolfson

Haym Salomon: The Revolution's Indispensable Financial Genius

By: Donald N. Moran

Haym Salomon (ca. 1740-1785)

By: Bob Blythe

American Independence Day and Sephardic Jewish History

Perhaps more than any other aspect of Sephardic Jewish History that has been erased by the Ashkenazim is that of our central place in American History.

The current crop of American Jewish Historians, led by Jonathan Sarna and Zev Eleff, and articulated in the popular press by Ashkenazi ethnocentrists like Rabbi Meir Soloveichik, have done little to teach the American Jewish community about the contribution of great figures like Gershom Mendes Seixas, Haym Salomon, Sabato Morais, and even Sephardi-influenced Ashkenazim like Isaac Leeser and Rebecca Gratz.

There was a time when the Warner Bros. movie studio produced a short feature directed by the great Michael "Casablanca" Curtiz called "Sons of Liberty" which provides the viewer with a stirring presentation of the life of Haym Salomon:

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0031953/>

The movie is available for online viewing:

<http://www.ovguide.com/sons-of-liberty-9202a8c04000641f8000000008e009b2>

Since the halcyon days of educated American Jews and the great scholars who served them in the 20th century, we have had precious little information about this illustrious history.

Over the years I have collected a number of important articles that provide the basic facts of this history.

We begin this special newsletter with an excellent article on Sabato Morais written by Marc Saperstein and published in The Huffington Post. Professor Saperstein has published widely on Sephardic Judaism, particularly on the Amsterdam community. His excellent book on Rabbi Saul Morteira, *Exile in Amsterdam*, is essential reading for any serious student of Sephardic Judaism:

https://www.amazon.com/Exile-Amsterdam-Morteiras-Congregation-Monographs/dp/0822963736/ref=tmm_pap_swatc_h_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=

His article on Morais looks at a seminal Independence Day sermon delivered by the great Sephardic leader at his Congregation Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia in 1863. The sermon, as Saperstein relates, is connected to Lincoln's famous Gettysburg Address delivered in November of that year and provides us with a very representative articulation of Sephardic Jewish Humanism at its most eloquent and insightful.

Howard Berman delivers an excellent portrait of Gershom Mendes Seixas, "George Washington's Rabbi." Seixas is an extraordinary figure, altogether typical of our religious leaders and their intense sense of commitment to the larger world and to the Jewish community. His biography presents us with an outstanding example of the depth and richness of the classic Sephardi Sage and our sacred religious values.

Our friend Mark Wolfson of Congregation Mikveh Israel provides us with two articles on Early American History and the Sephardim.

The first article reviews the history of the Jews of Philadelphia and their complex connections to some of the most important events in American History.

The second article provides the salient details of Haym Salomon's legendary donation to the American Revolution that is depicted in "Sons of Liberty." Indeed, it was on Yom Kippur 1781 that General Washington's representatives came calling, and Salomon was there to serve his country and his friend.

We close this special newsletter with another two articles on the great Salomon.

Donald Moran once again reviews for us Salomon's financial contributions to the Revolution, while Bob Blythe gives us a precis of his short life.

I recently discovered a two-part article on the Jews of New York by Richard Wheatley that was published in The Century Magazine way back in 1892 that fleshes out this Early American Jewish History in great detail:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B1NQdm28qvvXRFJRbXF2M18wN1k/view?ths=true>

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B1NQdm28qvvXM1dSdDcwYkZSVms/view?ths=true>

Taken together, all these resources provide us an important corrective to the current absence of Sephardic Jews from what has become an exclusively Ashkenazi preserve in American Jewish History.

I would like to close this brief introduction by recommending the two classic books on American Sephardic Jewish History by Rabbi David de Sola Pool of Congregation Shearith Israel:

https://books.google.com/books/about/Portraits_Etched_in_Stone.html?id=-j0OAQAAIAAJ

https://books.google.com/books/about/An_Old_Faith_in_the_New_World.html?id=P6YaAAAAIAAJ

Portraits Etched in Stone is an expansive history of the SI cemeteries here in New York with a plethora of information about the historical persons buried in them.

An Old Faith in the New World is a more general history of the Sephardic community in New York told through the prism of that glorious Synagogue in Manhattan that the pioneers established back in 1654!

Sadly, both these valuable books remain out of print and hard to find. But they are well worth seeking out, as they provide indispensable information about American Jewish History and the honored place of Sephardim in our country.

David Shasha

'Four Score and Seven Years Ago': A Jewish Connection

By: Marc Saperstein

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/marc-saperstein/gettysburg-address-jewish-connection_b_3539959.html

July 4, 1863 was a Saturday, and Rabbi Sabato Morais, a Sephardi immigrant from Italy serving as religious leader of Philadelphia's Mikveh Israel Congregation, delivered his Sabbath morning sermon. His sermon contains a phrase that might well have influenced the most celebrated speech in American history.

This particular Sabbath 150 years ago was unusual for several reasons. It was the American Independence Day, an occasion for celebration. However, in the Jewish

calendar, it was also the 17th Day of Tammuz, a traditional day of mourning, commemorating the Roman breaching of the walls of Jerusalem in 70 CE, beginning a three-week period of solemnity that culminates with the 9th of Av, when the Temple was destroyed. This contrast in moods between the American and the Jewish calendars created a significant challenge for the preacher.

But there was a third complicating component that made the 1863 date unique: it followed immediately upon the conclusion of the Battle of Gettysburg. On Saturday morning of July 4th, the news of the outcome of the battle was not yet accessible to Morais in Philadelphia — it would not be published until special-edition newspapers that afternoon. When he prepared the text of his sermon, and when he delivered the words from the pulpit, it was still unclear to the preacher and his congregants whether the Confederate Armies that had penetrated into Pennsylvania would break through the Union lines and threaten Philadelphia, Baltimore, or Washington, D.C.

Morais' sermon attracted enough attention to be published in a New York Jewish weekly six days later. The headline states that it had been delivered "at the request of the Philadelphia Union League." This patriotic organization was founded in December 1862 in strong support of the war effort and President Lincoln's policies. Weeks in advance, the League had urged all Philadelphia clergy to devote their July 5th Sunday morning sermons to a celebration of the July 4th national holiday. Following news of the victory at Gettysburg, the mood of those Sunday sermons was unambiguous. But for Morais, preaching on the 4th, the task was much more complex.

In his sermon, Morais confirms that he was officially asked to recall Independence Day, and that "A stirring oration on political topics may perhaps be anticipated as the most fitting manner of complying with the request."

Yet Morais says that — both because of the date in the Jewish calendar and the bleakness of the current military circumstances—he cannot give the up-beat, inspirational, patriotic address that the Union League plainly desired. For his biblical text, [rather than selecting the verse recommended by the Union League for all sermons by Philadelphia clergy — the Liberty Bell verse from Leviticus, "Proclaim liberty throughout the land, unto all the inhabitants thereof Morais reflected the prevailing mood (which would change so dramatically in just a few hours)] by choosing King Hezekiah's words spoken during the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem: "This is a day of trouble, of rebuke, and derision" (Isa. 37:3). Morais continues with an alarming allusion to the great battle some ninety miles away.

But the preacher could not totally ignore the July 4th occasion being commemorated throughout the North. And so he says, 'I am not indifferent, my dear friends, to the event, which four score and seven years ago, brought to this new world light and joy.'

Three days later, Abraham Lincoln spoke to a small group and, according to the *New York Times*, he said, "How long ago is it? — eighty odd years — since on the Fourth of July for the first time in the history of the world a nation by its representatives assembled and declared as a self-evident truth that 'all men are created equal'." [2] Morais also could have said "eighty odd years ago"; instead he used wording that echoes the King James translation "threescore years and ten" (Ps. 90:10), evoking an unusual event with what was then a highly unusual phrase — followed by "brought to this new world..."

Needless to say, some three months later, for the dedication of the Gettysburg cemetery, Abraham Lincoln elevated the level of his discourse from "eighty odd years" to "four score and seven years, our fathers brought forth to this continent," possibly borrowing from the published text by the Philadelphia Sephardic preacher who, without knowing it, may have made a lasting contribution to American rhetorical history.

[This article is based on the Preface to my *Jewish Preaching in Times of War, 1800 - 2001* (Littman Library, 2008)]

Notes

[1] The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, ed. Roy P. Basler, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, 1953), 6: 319.

[2] The Morais sermon was published in the "Jewish Messenger" on July 10, and it is conceivable that Lincoln was sent it and stored the phrase away for later use. The full text published in the "Jewish Messenger" is available on the website of the University of Pennsylvania Library: http://sceti.library.upenn.edu/pages/index.cfm?so_id=1661&PagePosition=40&level=2

From The Huffington Post, July 3, 2013

The First American Jew: A Tribute to Gershom Mendes Seixas "Patriot Rabbi of the Revolution"

By: Howard A. Berman

A major focus of the interests and commitments of the American Council for Judaism is the celebration of the distinctive significance of the Jewish historical experience in our country. As we express it in the Council's Statement of Principles,

"We affirm and celebrate the unique experience of Judaism in the United States. Our Hebrew Bible's ideals of liberty and justice have shaped American democracy from its earliest beginnings. Inspired by our tradition, and responding to its ethical and social values, Jews have played a vital role in the founding and building of America. We cherish this noble heritage, and are committed to the exercise of our rights and responsibilities as proud and loyal citizens of this nation."

There are many individuals who stand out as prominent figures in this colorful and inspiring heritage. Unfortunately,

in the popular perception, the focus tends to be on the latter stages of the nineteenth century, when the massive immigration of Jews from Eastern Europe shaped the cultural milieu of contemporary American Jewish life. However, the epic story of American Judaism extends far back into the earliest days of the Colonial period, beginning with the arrival of the first permanent Jewish settlers in New Amsterdam in 1654. Interestingly enough, Manhattan, while the first Jewish community to be established in the colonies, did not immediately emerge as the largest and most important center of Jewish life that it later came to be. The congregation that was established three years later in Newport, Rhode Island, initially achieved greater prominence and influence in its local environment than the New York synagogue, Shearith Israel, was able to aspire to for more than a century. The Jewish communities that arose in the major cities of the South were also larger and more prosperous through the Revolutionary era than New York Jewry was. In fact, if one wanted to visit the largest and most active center of Jewish life in the British colonies on the eve of Independence, their destination would have been Charleston, South Carolina rather than what was to become the “Big Apple!”

First Major Religious Leader

New York’s destined preeminence however was indeed foreshadowed by the influence of one individual who was to become the first major religious leader in American Jewish life. Ironically, his name remains little known outside of academic circles and the people of Manhattan’s Congregation Shearith Israel, “The Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue,” who proudly preserve their Sephardic heritage and the historical memory of his spiritual leadership. A particularly conscientious Religious School pupil is more likely to recall the name of Haym Salomon, the Polish-born Philadelphia financier who gave substantial support to the Continental cause...but only the most attentive student of American Jewish history is likely to remember the colorful and inspiring story of Gershom Mendes Seixas, “the Patriot Rabbi of the Revolution.” It is unfortunate that this should be so, since in many ways, Seixas’ life and accomplishments exemplify the most characteristic ideals of our American heritage, and intersect with the major events and personalities of our nation’s founding. Amazingly, there has never been a full-length scholarly biography of America’s first rabbi, while numerous studies of “heroes” of lesser significance — such as Salomon — have been published. Perhaps this brief profile and tribute might become the foundation for such an effort.

Seixas (the Sephardic family name is pronounced “Say’-shus”) was born in New York City on January 14, 1746. This fact alone is of great significance, in that he was one of the first generation of native-born American Jews —

the children of Spanish and Portuguese refugees who arrived in the colonies in the mid-17th century, primarily from Amsterdam and London. They were descended from the illustrious Jewish community of Spain, expelled by Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492. Gershom was one of seven children of Isaac Seixas, a London-born merchant descended from Portuguese Marranos, “secret Jews” who had fled the Inquisition. Isaac came to New York in 1730, and a decade later married Rachel Levy, the daughter of one of colonial New York’s most prominent merchant families. Her father Moses was an officer of Congregation Shearith Israel, which was then already a century old and the center of the Jewish community’s spiritual and social life.

Amalgam of Two Traditions

Yet another historic distinction emerges from the fact that the Levy’s were actually Ashkenazic Jews of German background, and the amalgam of the two major cultural traditions of European Jewish life that this “intermarriage” represented was, at the time, highly unusual. The Seixas family’s leadership in the elite Sephardic community, combined with their use of Yiddish in familial communication, symbolized the blending — and eventually the diminishing of distinctions — between the two cultures, that was to become a unique characteristic that distinguished American Jewry from the more socially stratified Jewish communities of the Old World. In the affluent and cultured Seixas home, these two strands of Jewish tradition were combined with the influence of the broader Anglo-American environment of colonial New York life, and seemed to inspire a rich family tradition of accomplishment and leadership. The other children of the family were also to attain great distinction. Gershom’s older brother Moses was to become a Founder of the Bank of Rhode Island, and President of Newport’s famous Touro Synagogue, presenting the welcome address to George Washington during the First President’s visit in 1790. A younger brother, Abraham, settled in Charleston, and became Captain in the South Carolina militia during the Revolution, and another, Benjamin, was one of the founders of the New York Stock Exchange. The descendants of the family continued to make major contributions to American life, culminating with Benjamin N. Cardozo, famed Justice of the United States Supreme Court.

The Seixas and Levy families were thus among the successful bankers and merchants who characterized elite Jewish society in the colonies at that time. It is all the more significant that young Gershom was to choose a very different path for this life, and early on decided to pursue the calling of religious leadership in the community. To appreciate the meaning of this ambition — and the unprecedented nature of such a commitment in

pre-Revolutionary America — one must remember that there were no more than 2000 Jews scattered throughout the thirteen British Colonies by 1776, with only about 100 in the New York congregation. While there were also flourishing and established synagogues in Newport, Philadelphia, Richmond, Charleston and Savannah, none of them had an ordained rabbi — and were led in worship primarily by lay cantors, known by the title “Hazzan.” There were certainly no resources or facilities for any other than the most elementary Jewish study. And yet, with no professional role-model, and little formal training, this young man of wealth and privilege was determined to serve his faith and people in the sacred calling. Most of Seixas’ religious education was self-taught. He attended Shearith Israel’s “Talmud Torah” parochial school as a boy, and studied Hebrew texts with the Hazzan, Joseph Pinto. His most intense exposure to Jewish liturgy and tradition probably came from his regular attendance at synagogue worship. He learned what he could from the few books then available in English on Jewish thought and history, but also read extensively in general philosophy, history and classics. His writings reflect a grounding in the ideals of the Enlightenment, as well as the writings of contemporary Christian theologians.

“Hazzan” Seixas

Most interestingly, there is evidence that he undertook a correspondence course of study with the rabbis of Shearith Israel’s mother Sephardic congregation in London, the famous Bevis Marks Synagogue. He eventually achieved the competence to serve as a cantor, shochet (ritual slaughterer of kosher meat), and mohel (ritual circumciser). In the summer of 1768, at the age of 22, Gershom Seixas, the first native son of the congregation to prepare for religious service, presented himself to the leaders of Shearith Israel as a candidate for the position of “minister,” according to British Jewish usage, with the title Hazzan. Without formal training at an established seminary or Yeshivah, Seixas was never fully ordained as a rabbi. In fact, well into the 19th century, most of the spiritual leaders, usually called “ministers,” of American synagogues were actually not formally ordained. However, as we shall see, Seixas single-handedly created the model and standards of what would eventually become the accepted role of the rabbi in America. The Trustees of Shearith Israel were justly proud that one of their own had sons had achieved such distinction, and on July 3, 1768, they unanimously appointed Seixas as Hazzan. He was licensed by the New York State Legislature as a “Minister of Religion,” with legal authorization to perform all clergy functions such as marriages and funerals.

As the only recognized religious leader serving in a rabbinic/pastoral capacity in the entire Northeast at that time, Seixas was called upon to minister to the spiritual

needs of far flung Jewish households and communities. In addition to leading worship at the New York synagogue, supervising and teaching in its parochial day school, and attending to the needs of his people, he often traveled to perform weddings and circumcisions throughout New York State, Connecticut and Massachusetts, as well as Pennsylvania and even Canada. As respected as he quickly became by the community however, it seems that his own father could not quite adjust to the idea of his son’s suddenly exalted position. A year after his appointment to the pulpit of Shearith Israel, Seixas was called to perform a wedding for the famous Gratz family in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. His father Isaac had misgivings about his single, 23 year old son traveling alone so far from home, and sent along a letter addressed to the bride’s father:

“Permit me Sir to recommend my son to your particular notice. He has never been so far from home, and if you find anything amiss in his behavior, impute it favourably to his want of experience, and kindly admonish him for it.”

Challenges of Congregational Leadership

Paternal over-protectiveness was not the only challenge that the young hazzan faced. In common with many clergymen of other denominations in early America, there were occasional disputes with the congregation’s leaders over salary. In 1768, Shearith Israel set his initial compensation at £140 annually, plus three cords of firewood, and five pounds of Matzo for Passover! When he eventually married, and raised a family of 16 children, there were periodic struggles for more generous payment for his services. His limited Hebrew education also remained a concern for some of the more observant and knowledgeable members of the synagogue, who constantly demanded that the young hazzan study to improve his rabbinic credentials. Perhaps as an impetus to this, the Trustees directed that a fine of 5 shillings be imposed on Seixas for every error discovered by a member during the Hebrew chanting of the Torah reading each Sabbath. We can assume that this had a double benefit — inspiring conscientious preparation by the hazzan, and particularly attentive listening to the Torah by the congregation!

Despite these challenges to his authority, the young Seixas’ stature and influence steadily grew, both in the congregation and the broader community. He brought his energy and creativity to building Shearith Israel’s activities and service to its membership. He organized two charitable societies v the Hevra Hased Va-Amet for the proper burial of the dead, and a general aid fund for impoverished families called, in the stylistic parlance of the day, “The Society for the Collection of Charity Given Secretly.” These communal projects, combined with his regular liturgical, teaching and pastoral duties, and his travels to outlying areas helped to assure his growing popularity and profile.

In 1775, he married Elkalah Cohen, a member of Shearith Israel, and their first son was born a year later.

It was in the midst of this busy life that the unfolding drama of history was to transform Gershom Seixas' life and work. Like most Jews in the colonies, who had come to these shores seeking religious freedom, he had long been a supporter of the Patriot cause. However, he also shared the hope of many religious leaders that a violent break with Britain could be averted. On May 17, 1776, when hostilities seemed inevitable, a Day of Fasting was called by the clergy of New York City. Seixas led his congregation in prayer:

"O Heavenly Father, we beseech Thee that Thou might put it in the heart of our Sovereign Lord George III, and in the hearts of his Counsellors, Princes and Servants, to turn away from their fierce wrath against our countrymen, and that there may be no blood shed in this land. That Thou mayest once more plant an everlasting peace between Great Britain and her colonies as in former times."

Declaration of Independence

That prayer was not to be fulfilled, and little more than a month later, the Continental Congress signed the Declaration of Independence. Seixas and most of the members of Shearith Israel, joined the majority of Jews throughout the colonies in casting their lot with the cause for Independence. When, within weeks of the Declaration, the British forces occupied New York City, the hazzan and most of his people knew that they would have to flee along with other known patriots. In August, 1776, on the Sabbath preceding the ancient Fast Day of Tisha B'Av, which commemorated the Destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, a Farewell Service was held at the Mill Street Synagogue. Hazzan Seixas led the congregation in prayer for General Washington and the Congress, and the hope that God would keep them safe and protect them wherever they would be scattered. He then gathered the sacred books and objects from the sanctuary, removed the Scrolls of the Torah from the Holy Ark, and left his native city with many of Shearith Israel's families. They settled first in Stratford, Connecticut, where they lived in exile for four years, and then, in 1780, the group moved on to Philadelphia. There, Seixas was elected Hazzan of Congregation Mikveh Israel, whose membership had swelled with Jewish families seeking refuge in the nation's first capital. It was during his leadership in Philadelphia, that the congregation dedicated its new synagogue, to which many prominent civic leaders contributed funds, including Benjamin Franklin. During the Dedication Ceremony, Seixas offered a fervent prayer for peace and reconciliation, but also a firm expression of devotion to

"The Honourable Delegates of the United States of America, in Congress in this City assembled; and His

Excellency George Washington, Captain-General and Commander-in-Chief of the Federal army of these States..."

Full Equality and Immunities

In 1783, as Pennsylvania was debating amendments to its new State Constitution, Seixas was part of a commission of leading Jewish citizens who petitioned the Legislature, demanding full equality and immunities under the new government, and protesting the discriminatory clauses in current laws that restricted the civil rights of non-Protestants, requiring those holding public office in Pennsylvania to swear belief in the Divine authority of the New Testament. Seixas helped to draft the formal protest, and for the first time, in the public records and reports of this civil action, he is referred to as Rabbi Gershom Seixas. The Philadelphia congregation recognized the strength of his spiritual and communal leadership, and had begun referring to their hazzan with the honorific title. From then on, he was widely addressed with the rabbinic title, or as "Reverend Mr." both in the Jewish community and by Christian colleagues and civic authorities.

In 1784, with the evacuation of the British from New York, Seixas brought his family and Shearith Israel flock who had been with him in Philadelphia, back to their home city. That summer, the Mill Street Synagogue was reopened for worship, after having been used intermittently by the handful of loyalist members who remained during the War — joined by Hessian Jewish soldiers stationed in the city. The rabbi devoted himself to the rebuilding of the congregation and its communal life, reestablishing its school, cemetery, and charitable committees. But his stature and leadership in the Jewish and general community had greatly increased over the years of his patriotic exile and official representation of the Jewish presence in the wartime capital of Philadelphia, where he came to be known by many of the leading political and cultural figures in the nation. He emerged as both the spiritual leader and the public face of New York Jewry, and personally shaped a rabbinic role that was both unprecedented in Europe, and was to become the model for the American rabbinate from that point onward. This involved functions that had been unknown in traditional Jewish religious leadership — serving as an "ambassador" to the broader society of the city and the nation, representing a free, acculturated, prominent Jewish citizenry in the social and cultural life of the community. Influenced by the religious environment of America, Seixas developed such significant innovations as public preaching on contemporary issues during worship at Shearith Israel, as well as a more personal pastoral relationship with the members of the synagogue than had been traditional in the function of a rabbi.

Creating the Role of the Rabbi

Clearly, Seixas' clerical style was being shaped by the influence of the dominant Protestant culture. Aside from the use of the title "Rabbi" and "Reverend," Seixas adopted the clerical garb that was common in the Christian ministry, including a black pulpit robe and the clerical tab collar, depicted in the well known portrait commissioned by Columbia University. This phenomenon reflected the growing public persona of the Rabbi of Shearith Israel — an indeed revolutionary development in the new pluralistic society of the United States. At a time in which the rabbis of Europe still served the traditional parochial function of ritual judge and Talmudic scholar, in Jewish communities isolated and marginalized behind the locked walls of ghettos, Seixas was assuming a remarkable leadership role in the broader society of the merging metropolis of America. In 1784, the year he returned to Manhattan, he was invited to become a Regent of Columbia College, then still under the auspices of the Episcopal Church. That same year, he was appointed as one of the first Regents of the State University by the New York Legislature. He remained devoted to Columbia throughout his life, and was later elected a Trustee of the University, by its leaders that included such Revolutionary luminaries as Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, Gouverneur Morris, and Robert Livingston. In 1796, he was also appointed a Trustee of the Humane Society, the major commission for the improvement of public health and medical care in New York State. The most important distinction however came to Seixas on April 30, 1789, when he was invited to participate in the Inauguration of George Washington as first President of the United States. As the official spiritual representative of the Jewish citizenry, the rabbi marched in the procession of local clergy that preceded the ceremony at New York's Federal Hall. This first symbolic recognition of Judaism as one of the "official" religions of America, followed shortly afterward by Washington's famous series of letters to the nation's synagogues, affirming his assurances that the new republic would grant "to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance," were indeed seismic shifts in Jewish history. In fact, it may well be surmised that the famous "to bigotry no sanction" phrase from Washington's letter to the Jewish congregation of Newport, was actually composed or at least suggested by Seixas himself. The President was echoing this profound sentiment, as initially expressed to him in the congratulatory address from the Rhode Island synagogue, whose President, Moses Seixas, was Gershom's elder brother. It is perfectly feasible to assume that he sought his rabbi-brother's help in composing the address, and these phrases do indeed appear in a number of Seixas' sermons and letters.

A few months after Washington's Inauguration, the

President proclaimed the first official national day of "Public Thanksgiving and Prayer" on Thursday, November 26, 1789. Drawing on the New England celebration of Thanksgiving Day, this official designation is regarded as the beginning of the transformation of a regional tradition into a national American observance. The proclamation called for citizens to gather in their houses of worship to offer prayers of gratitude for the blessings of Independence, as well as petitions for Divine guidance and blessing for the new nation. The people of Shearith Israel duly assembled in the Mill Street Synagogue, where their rabbi officiated at a special Service he had composed, drawing on appropriate prayers and Psalms from the liturgy. He also delivered a stirring "Discourse," the first of a number of sermons he would offer from the pulpit on subsequent occasions of national celebration or "humiliation." In his Thanksgiving Sermon on this occasion, Seixas expressed the distinctive emotions that American Jews felt at this transforming moment in their 4000 year history:

"In considering the duties we owe to ourselves and the community to which we belong, it is necessary that we, each of us in our respective stations, behave in such a manner as to give strength and stability to the laws entered into by our representatives; to consider the burden imposed on those who are appointed to act in the Executive Department; and to contribute, as much as lays within our power, to the support of that government which is founded upon the strict principles of equal liberty and justice..."

If, to seek the peace and prosperity of the city wherein we dwell, be a duty even under bad governments, what must it be when we are situated under the best of Constitutions? It behooves us to unite, with cheerfulness and uprightness, upon all occasions that may occur in the political as well as the moral world, to promote that which has a tendency to the public good. As Jews, we are even more than others, called upon to return thanks to God for placing us in such a country – where we are free to act according to the dictates of conscience, and where no exception is taken from following the principles of our religion.

...And lastly to conclude, my dear brethren and companions, it is incumbent on us as Jews, in a more special manner, seeing that we are the chosen and special treasure of God, to be more circumspect in our conduct – inasmuch as we are this day, living examples of His Divine Power and Unity. So may we be striking examples to the nations of the earth, as it is mentioned in Sacred Scripture: 'Ye shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation!' For this purpose, let me then recommend to you a serious consideration of the several duties set forth this Day: to enter into a self-examination; to relinquish your prejudices against each other; to subdue your passions; to

live as Jews ought to do – in brotherhood and amity with all our neighbors, ‘to seek peace and pursue it.’ So shall it be well with us, both here and hereafter, which God in His infinite mercy, will grant to us all!”

Revolutionary New Chapter for Judaism

Seixas’ words powerfully reflect the consciousness that the experience of the tiny Jewish community of the newly established United States, indeed represented an unprecedented and revolutionary new chapter in the long history of Judaism. At that time, Jews in every other country on the face of the earth still remained isolated, oppressed and disenfranchised, with none of the most basic civil rights of citizenship. In most places they still suffered violent persecution, and were marginalized in even the most advanced societies. And yet on the shores of America, they had been part of the founding and building of the new nation from its very beginning. They fought as equals in the struggle for Independence, providing support and leadership during the Revolution far out of proportion to their numbers. They were the first Jewish community since Biblical times to be able to express the sense of integration and participation in their broader society, and their loyalty to their government, that Seixas so eloquently proclaimed. His sermon had such an impact on the congregation that it was published in pamphlet form shortly afterward, hailed in the New York Daily Gazette as “the first of its kind ever preached in English in this State, and highly deserving the attention of every pious reader, whether Jew or Christian, as it breathes nothing but pure morality and devotion.”

During the years following the Revolution, “Rev. Mr. Seixas” continued to be involved in many aspects of community life in New York, in addition to his guidance and leadership of Shearith Israel. He remained deeply devoted to the building of the congregation as it grew with the arrival of new Jewish settlers from Europe. While eventually joined by many other newly founded synagogues throughout the city, Shearith Israel remained distinguished as America’s “Mother Jewish Congregation,” and continued to number many of the city’s most illustrious citizens among its membership. In addition to his particular commitment to the religious education of the children of the synagogue, in which he actively participated, the aging rabbi also remained devoted to his long-time mission of serving Jews in remote settlements. As late as 1811, at the age of 66, he undertook a solitary pastoral tour of New England and Canada, visiting isolated Jewish families and performing weddings and Brit Milah circumcision ceremonies. This dimension of his life became immortalized in local Jewish folklore, which preserved the memory of the itinerant rabbi’s devotion to his people.

Gershom Mendes Seixas died on July 2, 1816, at the age

of 71. His funeral was attended by the leading citizens and clergy of New York. He had served his people and community for almost 50 years, and was beloved and respected by Jews and Christians alike. His influence on his congregation and the contributions he made to the civic and cultural life of America’s major city at this formative period, are of major importance. And yet his greatest legacy lies in the far-reaching impact that his life and accomplishments were to have on the development of American Judaism. Isolated from the scholarly and cultural resources, major centers and historic models of European Jewish life and tradition, Seixas was called upon to virtually create the role of the American rabbi ex-nihilo in the remote frontier of the New World. As we have observed, the circumstances and needs of Jewish life in a free, open, and pluralistic society, provided unprecedented opportunities for creative leadership. Seixas made up for in vision, energy and intellect what he lacked in traditional knowledge and training. It can indeed be argued that Gershom Seixas singlehandedly fashioned the unique qualities and functions that came to distinguish Jewish religious leadership in the United States. While never officially ordained as a rabbi in the formal sense, “Reverend” Seixas, Hazzan of Shearith Israel, combined the ancient functions of the rabbinate with the radically new roles of civic leader, respected colleague of Christian clergy, and acknowledged representative of a free and equal Jewish citizenry in the broader social and political life of the country.

First Truly “American Jew”

However, it can be argued that Gershom Seixas achieved something even more significant. He was not only the first American rabbi... but also, in a major way, the first truly “American Jew.” There had been Jews in America for a century before his birth, and there were many whose contributions to the birth of the new nation were of great importance. But he uniquely made his impact on American history as a Jew... deeply grounded in both identities, and playing a critical role in both dimensions of his life. He personally participated in the key events of America’s birth ... as a Jew. His commitment as a Revolutionary Patriot, was embodied in the dramatic image of his reverently wrapping up the Torah Scrolls of the Mill Street Synagogue in preparation to flee the British occupation. It was his first formal designation by the title “Rabbi,” that distinguished his leadership in the proud struggle for civil rights before the Pennsylvania legislature, not supplicating, but asserting the just liberties that Jews could claim as equal citizens. His official presence as a rabbi at the inauguration of George Washington, symbolically placed Judaism front and center at the official birth of the nation. And his contributions to the civic life of New York, were made as the respected representative of the Jewish community. At the core of his consciousness in each of these

experiences, was his clear belief in the cosmic significance of the Jewish experience in this new nation...the Providential redemption that the freedom and liberty of the United States signified in the annals of Jewish history... and the unique opportunity and mandate that American life offered for the creative development of new expressions of Jewish life and identity. As clearly and eloquently as this realization was reflected in his Thanksgiving Day Sermon of 1789, it seems to have become even more evident to him in the later years of his life. In 1810 the popular American writer and historian Hannah Adams was preparing her famous two-volume work, *The History of the Jews, from the Destruction of the Temple to the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century*. She wrote to Rabbi Seixas, the foremost Jewish authority in the country, to clarify a number of questions on contemporary Jewish life. Following inquiries regarding belief, observance, and demographics, she asked Seixas to comment on any civil disabilities or discrimination suffered by Jews in the United States. The rabbi's answers to the other more descriptive requests were informative and straightforward — but he was clearly quite indignant at the implications and assumptions of this particular query...

"which surprises me very much...as the Constitution of the United States as well as the Constitution of the State of New York does not disqualify any person from holding an office either of honor or trust on account of his religious principles or tenets... all are entitled to equal rights and privileges... My dear Madam, there is one thing which I would wish you to notice — that the Justice and righteousness of Providence is manifested in the dispersion of His People — for they have never been driven from any one country without finding an Asylum in another... and this Country — the United States of America, is perhaps the only place where Jews have not suffered persecution, but rather the reverse — for through the mercies of a Benign Judge, we are encouraged and indulged with every right of citizenship."

Upon Seixas' death, Columbia University, which he had devotedly served as Trustee for thirty years, commissioned a portrait that still hangs on the campus today. The Trustees also commissioned a memorial medallion, with the rabbi's likeness... and a tribute that embraces his essential quality: "Rev. Gershom Mendes Seixas... A Man in Whom Was The Spirit." Indeed, the noblest and most enduring ideals of both the Jewish tradition and the American spirit were embodied in this fascinating American Jewish hero... the "Patriot Rabbi of the Revolution"... and the first American Jew!

Bibliographical Notes

Judson, Dan, "The Mercies of A Benign Judge: A Letter from Gershom Seixas to Hannah Adams, 1810." The

American Jewish Archives Journal, Vol. LVI. Nos.1 & 2. 2007.

Marcus, Jacob Rader, "The Handsome Young Priest in the Black Gown: The Personal World of Gershom Seixas." Hebrew Union College Annual, 40-41 (1969-70).

Seixas, Gershom Mendes, "A Religious Discourse: Thanksgiving Day Sermon, November 26, 1789." With Introduction by Isidore S. Meyer. Jewish Historical Society of New York. 1977.

From Issues, The American Council for Judaism, Spring 2007

A Whirlwind Tour of the Origins of Jewish Life in Philadelphia

By: Mark Wolfson

Mikveh Israel is called "The Synagogue of the Revolution" because the early founding members of the congregation were very active in the activities that led up to the war, with many of them signing the Non-Importation Act of 1765. Many of the members were very active in the war effort itself, either directly fighting on the American side, supplying the army with food, ammunition, equipment, and clothing, or contributing funds that made war itself possible and ensured an American victory. After the war, members of Mikveh Israel with were in regular contact with Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Adams, and the other leaders who wrote the constitution and shaped the country in its earliest days.

Our story begins with the origins of Western Sephardic Judaism in Amsterdam. The Jewish families that moved there were remnants of Spanish & Portuguese families that were forcibly converted to Catholicism in 1495 and kept the memory and traditions of their heritage over several generations under the watchful and ever-present Inquisition. In the late 1500's, some of the families were able to move to Amsterdam, where they were able to live openly as Jews beginning in the early 1600's. These families, most of them wealthy merchants, formed a thriving community that flourished in Jewish life, Jewish thought, Jewish learning, publication of Jewish books and in all manner of secular life as well.

As they became more confident and established, they also began to follow the Dutch explorers and settlers into outposts in the New World. By the 1630s, many Jews had settled in Brazil in the parts that were captured by the Dutch from the Portuguese. Recife and the neighboring town of Olinda were captured by the Dutch in 1631 and by 1639 Recife was a thriving Jewish community of thousands, who were traders and merchants, craftsmen, professionals and scholars. Isaac Aboab de Fonseca, one

of the founders and most prominent leaders of the Amsterdam Jewish community, came to Recife to become the Hakham of the congregation along with Raphael de Aguilar who served as its reader.

Largely because of the prominence of the Jews, the Portuguese decided to reconquer Brazil and Recife in particular. The war between the Dutch and the Portuguese raged through the late 1640's and early 1650's as the Dutch struggled to hold onto Brazil and their prized possession, Recife. During the siege of Recife by the Portuguese, the Jews suffered and died both from hunger and by the sword. By 1654, it was clear that the Dutch were not going to be able to hold Recife and the Jews, fearing complete massacre at the hands of the Inquisition, capitulated and were granted amnesty by the Portuguese and the right to leave peacefully. Most of the families fled back to Amsterdam, and many settled in the islands of the Caribbean, including Curaçao. One boat containing 23 Jews sailed into New Amsterdam in September 1654, founding the Jewish communities of North America.

Ten years later, in 1664, the British replaced the Dutch and renamed the city New York. Now, by the very early 1700s, the Jewish community in New York, though there were only a few hundred people all together, was thriving and successful. They formed a synagogue which they called Shearith Israel, the remnant of Israel. One of the very active members of that congregation was Jacob Franks. Franks was a very successful and influential merchant, importing items such as tea, iron, guns, currency and rice and trading them for local grain and furs. He served as Parnas of Shearith Israel seven times in a twenty year period. In 1712 he married Bilhah Abigail Levy, daughter of Moses Levy, New York's most successful merchant. Moses Levy also served as Parnas of Shearith Israel various times. Jacob and Bilhah had 9 children, one of whom was David, who was born in 1720. In 1742, at the age of 22, David Franks went into business with his mother's brother Nathan Levy, who was 16 years his senior.

Both Nathan Levy, who had already attained some success as a merchant in New York, and David Franks, his nephew who he took under his wing, came to Philadelphia. On September 25th, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Proprietor of Pennsylvania Thomas Penn granted Nathan Levy a nine hundred square-foot burial ground where he buried a child who had died in infancy. This was the first Jewish burial in Philadelphia and, as many congregations do, Mikveh Israel dates its origins back to this date, as the establishment of a sacred Jewish burial ground is the beginning of a Jewish Community.

The trading company of Levy and Franks became very successful in Philadelphia and westward to Lancaster, in

association with the prominent merchant Joseph Simon. Levy and Franks owned all or part of several merchant ships, which they used to transport goods back and forth to England. They built a large business trading in furs with the Indians, and imported goods needed in Philadelphia such as sail cloth, cordage, twine, prepared medicines, Scotch and snuff.

In the fall of 1751, they acquired a new vessel, the Myrtilla, holding 250 tons of cargo, equipped with 10 guns, and a crew of 20. The name Myrtilla came from the myrtle tree (in Hebrew Hadas), one of the four species we wave on Succot.

Meanwhile, in Philadelphia, seat of government of the British Crown Province of Pennsylvania, the General Assembly had decided to build a State House, which is now Independence Hall. On November 1st, 1751 a letter was written to Robert Charles, the Colonial Agent for Pennsylvania who was working in London to purchase a bell for the State House. The bell was ordered to commemorate the 50th anniversary of William Penn's 1701 Charter of Privileges, which speaks of religious freedoms, liberal stances on Native American Rights, and in the inclusion of citizens in enacting laws. The legislators ordered that the bell should be cast in England and that it should have round it words from the Book of Leviticus.

"Let the bell be cast by the best workmen, and examined carefully before it is shipped, with the following words, well shapen in large letters round it, viz.:

"By order of the Assembly of the Province of Pennsylvania for the State House in the City of Philadelphia, 1752.'

"And underneath:

"Proclaim Liberty through all the land to all the inhabitants thereof. Levit. xxv., 10.'

And so, in September 1752, on the Myrtilla, captained by Mr. Richard Budden, and owned by the trading company of Levy and Franks, docked in the port of Philadelphia and delivered one of the most important and recognizable symbols of American freedom and liberty, the Liberty Bell.

By this time, communal Jewish life in Philadelphia, which started in the early 1740's, started to come together. The small but growing congregation first worshipped together in a small rented house on Sterling Alley, which ran from Cherry to Race Streets, between 3rd and 4th Streets. In 1761, the congregation borrowed a Torah scroll from Shearith Israel in time for the High Holidays of that year. An attempt was made that year to build a synagogue building, but the plans were abandoned at that time due to

lack of funds. Over the next ten years, several more Jewish families settled in the city, and in 1771 the tiny congregation incorporated as Kahal Kadosh Mikveh Israel and named a president, officers, and a board of trustees. They acquired another Torah scroll and some prayer books from London, and received a gift from Shearith Israel of a silver reading pointer (yad).

On February 22, 1773, at a meeting of the Mahamad (Board), it was resolved that they would collect money in order to fund a synagogue building. The subscription was to last for 3 years. The outbreak of the revolutionary war in 1776 put a temporary halt to their plans. As Jewish refugees from other colonial cities streamed into Philadelphia, they soon outgrew their tiny space and moved to the second floor of a rented house on Cherry Alley between 3rd and 4th Streets, about 2 blocks from the present building. In 1782, with a substantial contribution by Haym Salomon and spiritual guidance from Rev. Gershom Mendes Seixas, the congregation purchased land and erected a building on the north side of Cherry Street, west of 3rd.

It's interesting to note that Gershom's mother, Rachel Levy, was Ashkenazi, which made Gershom half Sephardi and Half Ashkenazi, mirroring the makeup of both the congregations in New York and Philadelphia. Seixas became the minister of Shearith Israel in July, 1768 at the age of 23. He had been born and raised in the Shearith Israel community. His teacher and mentor, Joseph Jessurun Pinto had served the New York congregation for 8 years before he suddenly had to leave for Europe in 1766. He later became the minister of the Sephardi community in Hamburg. After Isaac Cohen Da Silva served for a brief 2-year term, the Jewish community in New York, numbering only 300 people, unanimously elected the young Gershom Seixas as hazzan. Seixas served as the spiritual leader of the congregation, and also as the supervisor of Kashrut, performed all marriages and funerals, was the mohel, and for a time served as the shohet – the ritual slaughterer for the congregation.

Rev. Seixas was a strong advocate of American Independence, and has been given the nickname, The Patriot Jewish Minister of the American Revolution. In 1775, with the British Army fast approaching New York City, Seixas persuaded a majority of the congregation to close Shearith Israel rather than continue operating under the coming British occupation of Manhattan. He then packed up the Torah scrolls and other artifacts and books and moved them, along with his family, to his father-in-law's home in Stratford, CT. In 1780, Congregation Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia invited Seixas to become the minister of the congregation. He arrived on June 6, and immediately began helping to create an established Jewish community in Philadelphia.

One of the most famous members of Mikveh Israel was Haym Salomon. Though Salomon's life was brief, his contribution to the birth of the United States, to American Jewry, and to Congregation Mikveh Israel was enormous. Salomon was born in Lissa, Poland on April 7, 1740 to a Sephardic Jewish family of Portuguese origins. He died in Philadelphia on January 6, 1785. Salomon spent several years in his youth moving from place to place in Europe, developing a proficiency in at least 7 languages including English, Hebrew and German. He arrived in New York City in 1772.

As tensions heated up between the American colonists and the British, Salomon was very sympathetic to the American cause. While establishing himself as a successful merchant in New York, he also became active in the New York Sons of Liberty and the patriot cause through an acquaintance with Alexander MacDougall. When the war broke out in 1776, Salomon began serving the Americans, providing supplies to the troops. He was arrested by the British in September as an American spy and sentenced to death. While serving his sentence, he convinced his British captors of his talents and proficiency in German, and was eventually pardoned and hired by the British to interpret for the Hessian soldiers. In actuality, he convinced quite a number of the Hessians to desert the British, telling them that there was free land being offered by the colonialists for homesteading if they would join the American cause.

On January 2, 1777, Salomon married Rachael Franks, daughter of Moses Franks of NY. By 1778, the family had escaped to Philadelphia, where Haym set up shop in a little office on Front Street as a broker. During the next few years, Salomon worked closely with Robert Morris, the Superintendent for Finance for the Thirteen Colonies. He brokered bills for the French, Dutch and Spanish governments, and thereby provided much of the funding for the Revolutionary War effort. He also loaned money to a large number of the American leaders including Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton and Morris himself.

In Morris' diary, Salomon's name comes up frequently. Morris wrote: "This broker has been useful to the public interests...". James Madison, who Salomon kept financially afloat during the revolution, acknowledged the "kindness of our little friend in Front Street, whose assistance will preserve me from extremities, but I never resort to it without great mortification as he obstinately rejects all recompense". Upon his death, the Philadelphia Packet wrote, "He was remarkable for his skill and integrity in his profession and for his generous and humane deportment".

Haym Salomon was very active in Congregation Mikveh Israel, serving on the Board of Adjuntos for many years. He was actively involved in the building of the first synagogue building, which was completed in September, 1782. He was the largest contributor to the construction, contributing fully a quarter of the total cost with his donation of 300 pounds. In the board minutes, it was recorded: "The Parnass reported that he had received from Mr. Haym Salomon his quarter part of the cost of the new synagogue. The Parnass moved that a letter of thanks be wrote and be signed by the Parnass and Junto to Mr. Haym Salomon for his generous donation." Salomon was given the honor of officially opening the door to the new building.

In August 1781, the Continental Army had trapped Lieutenant General Charles Cornwallis in the Virginia coastal town of Yorktown. Washington allied himself with the French army and decided to march to Yorktown to deliver what turned out to be the decisive blow to win the Revolutionary War. But Washington's war chest was empty. There was no money for the troops for food, boots, guns, or ammunition. There was talk of mutiny among the ranks. Washington contacted Robert Morris and gave a short, urgent order: "Send for Haym Salomon". The following is the stuff of legend:

It was Shabbat, September 29, 1781, Yom Kippur. There was a knock on the synagogue door. A messenger urgently needed to deliver a note to Haym Salomon. The message was from Robert Morris. Morris wrote that money was urgently needed for Washington's army and the finance minister could not cover the two notes that were drafted to fund the battle. He begged for Salomon's help. In spite of angry protests from congregants and from the Minister, Gershom Mendes Seixas, Salomon addressed the congregation assembled for the service. He spoke to the patriots who had already done so much towards the revolutionary effort. He himself pledged 3000 pounds. He urged the others to help. He spoke of Washington, the troops dying of starvation, the cause. He spoke of living in a country where the Jews would be treated like any other citizens, of religious freedom. Within 15 minutes, they had raised the 20,000 pounds that Morris needed to fund the battle and allow the army to continue. On October 19, 1781 the British surrendered at Yorktown. Even though the fighting would go on for another 2 years, the outcome was no longer in doubt. The new American nation would be victorious and the world would be changed forever

With the influx of members of Shearith Israel, including the leaders of the New York Jewish community, the number of Jews in the city grew from about one hundred, to over a thousand people. The New Yorkers, including Jonas Phillips, Hayman Levy, Gershom's brother Benjamin Seixas, Simon Nathan, and Isaac Moses, used their experience at Shearith Israel to work with the Jewish

leaders in Philadelphia, including Michael and Bernard Gratz, and Haym Salomon who had arrived some two years prior, to establish a form of prayer, a method of government, and a system of keeping records for the nascent Mikveh Israel. A Board of Adjuntos and officers were elected, and the congregation then began the project to design and build its first synagogue building. Seixas led the construction to its completion and carefully planned the consecration ceremony which was held in time for Rosh Hashanah in September, 1782. The elaborate ceremony was conducted by the Parnas Jonas Phillips, and Rev. Seixas. Haym Salomon was given the honor of opening the doors to the new synagogue building. The following was quoted from the address which was presented to the Governor and Executive Council of Pennsylvania:

"The Congregation of Mikve Israel (Israelites) in this city, having erected a place of public worship which they intend to consecrate to the service of Almighty God, tomorrow afternoon, and as they have ever professed themselves liege subjects to the Sovereignty of the United States of America, and have always acted agreeable thereto, they humbly crave the Protection and Countenance of the Chief Magistrates in this State, to give sanction to their design, and will deem themselves highly Honored by their presence in the Synagogue, whenever they judge proper to favor them."

At the close of the war in 1783, many of the refugees from New York returned to their homes and rebuilt the Jewish Community there. Congregation Shearith Israel invited Seixas back to New York to lead the congregation as minister once again. In spite of being established and comfortable in Philadelphia, he agreed, and, four months after the British evacuated Manhattan, on March 23, 1784, Seixas resumed his duties as minister. He exchanged places with the minister in New York during the latter years of the war, Jacob Raphael Cohen, who came down to Philadelphia to serve as its minister. Each served their respective communities with distinction for the rest of their lives.

In 1770, Jonas Phillips had been a signer and strong supporter of the New York Non-Importation Agreement. In 1776, when the British occupied Manhattan, Phillips used his influence to close down Shearith Israel rather than continue under the British. Phillips himself had already removed his wife and 15 children to Philadelphia and many of the members of the New York Congregation followed him there. In 1778, Phillips joined the militia in Philadelphia, enlisting as a private under Colonel Bradford. After his service, he supplied the continental army with dry goods, food items, and other needed materials. Following the war, he appealed to President Washington and the Continental Convention drafting the new Constitution of the

United States in a letter dated September 7, 1787. His concern was that all office-holders in the new government were to be required to swear allegiance over the Christian Bible. He writes, "to swear and believe that the New Testament was given by divine inspiration is absolutely against the religious principle of a Jew and is against his conscience to take any such oath". In his eloquent and impassioned letter, he argues that, "during the late contest with England [the Jews] have been foremost in aiding and assisting the States with their lives and fortunes, they have supported the Cause, have bravely fought and bled for liberty which they cannot enjoy". He wrote the letter for "my children and posterity and for the benefit of all the Israelites throughout the 13 United States of America".

Shortly after the US Constitution was ratified in 1789, George Washington was elected as the first President of the United States. Moses Seixas, the brother of Gershom Mendes Seixas who was the minister of Shearith Israel at the time and was the minister of Mikveh Israel during the war, wrote a beautiful letter to the new President, filled with warmth and eloquence. He famously noted that the new Government of the United States of America gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, and considers all of its citizens of all religions equal under the law. Washington's famous reply repeated the eloquent words of Seixas and affirmed the equality of the Jews, and declared that America was different from other nations of the world because "All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship".

This was to be the first of three letters that Washington wrote to different Jewish communities during that year, mainly because of discrimination and infighting among the Jews. Shortly after the inauguration in April 1789, the presidents of the six congregations in the US – New York, Philadelphia, Newport, Charleston, Richmond, and Savanna – agreed to send a joint letter. Then they spent the next year and a half arguing over who would sign it! The original plan called for the letter to be sent from Shearith Israel in New York, as this was originally the capital of the fledgling country. But there were months of delays and meanwhile, Congress moved the capital to Philadelphia in January of 1790.

Then Manuel Josephson, Parnas of Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia, offered to write the letter on behalf of the other congregations. However, the Spanish & Portuguese Sephardic elite who dominated the other congregations objected to the Ashkenazic Josephson, of humble Eastern European origins, considering him unworthy to speak for them. A few months passed in which nothing was done, so finally in May, the Savanna congregation, noting and apologizing for the delay in writing, presented a letter to Washington. Washington was gracious in his eloquent reply. In August, Moses Seixas and the Jews of Newport

also tired of waiting and presented their own letter, certainly the most famous of the three, along with its often-studied reply.

Finally, in December 1990, Josephson, in a short meeting with Washington, presented a letter from the four remaining congregations from Philadelphia, New York, Charleston, and Richmond. Josephson apologized for the delay in adding their congratulations to those of the rest of the nation. Washington's reply was shorter than the other two, but was nonetheless warm and appreciative, stating that "The affection of such a people is a treasure beyond the reach of calculation" and conveyed how much pleasure he received from the support and approval of his fellow-citizens. He thanked the Almighty for intervening on behalf of the Americans in the "late glorious revolution", and promised to work just as hard for the country in times of peace as he did during the war. He closed by saying, "May the same temporal and eternal blessings which you implore for me, rest upon your congregations".

Haym Salomon and Yom Kippur 1781

By: Mark Wolfson

One of the most famous members of Mikveh Israel was Haym Salomon. Though Salomon's life was brief, his contribution to the birth of the United States, to American Jewry, and to Congregation Mikveh Israel was enormous. Salomon was born in Lissa, Poland on April 7, 1740 to a Sephardic Jewish family of Portuguese origins. He died in Philadelphia on January 6, 1785. Salomon spent several years in his youth moving from place to place in Europe, developing a proficiency in at least 7 languages including English, Hebrew and German. He arrived in New York City in 1772.

As tensions heated up between the American colonists and the British, Salomon was very sympathetic to the American cause. While establishing himself as a successful merchant in New York, he also became active in the New York Sons of Liberty and the patriot cause through an acquaintance with Alexander MacDougall. When the war broke out in 1776, Salomon began serving the Americans, providing supplies to the troops. He was arrested by the British in September as an American spy and sentenced to death. While serving his sentence, he convinced his British captors of his talents and proficiency in German, and was eventually pardoned and hired by the British to interpret for the Hessian soldiers. In actuality, he convinced quite a number of the Hessians to desert the British, telling them that there was free land being offered by the colonialists for homesteading if they would join the American cause.

On January 2, 1777, Salomon married Rachael Franks, daughter of Moses Franks of NY. By 1778, the family had escaped to Philadelphia, where Haym set up shop in a little

office on Front Street as a broker. During the next few years, Salomon worked closely with Robert Morris, the Superintendent for Finance for the Thirteen Colonies. He brokered bills for the French, Dutch and Spanish governments, and thereby provided much of the funding for the Revolutionary War effort. He also loaned money to a large number of the American leaders including Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton and Morris himself.

In Morris' diary, Salomon's name comes up frequently. Morris wrote: "This broker has been useful to the public interests...". James Madison, who Salomon kept financially afloat during the revolution, acknowledged the "kindness of our little friend in Front Street, whose assistance will preserve me from extremities, but I never resort to it without great mortification as he obstinately rejects all recompense". Upon his death, the Philadelphia Packet wrote, "He was remarkable for his skill and integrity in his profession and for his generous and humane deportment".

Haym Salomon was very active in Congregation Mikveh Israel, serving on the Board of Adjuntos for many years. He was actively involved in the building of the first synagogue building, which was completed in September, 1782. He was the largest contributor to the construction, contributing fully a quarter of the total cost with his donation of 300 pounds. In the board minutes, it was recorded: "The Parnass reported that he had received from Mr. Haym Salomon his quarter part of the cost of the new synagogue. The Parnass moved that a letter of thanks be wrote and be signed by the Parnass and Junto to Mr. Haym Salomon for his generous donation." Salomon was given the honor of officially opening the door to the new building.

In August 1781, the Continental Army had trapped Lieutenant General Charles Cornwallis in the Virginia coastal town of Yorktown. Washington allied himself with the French army and decided to march to Yorktown to deliver what turned out to be the decisive blow to win the Revolutionary War. But Washington's war chest was empty. There was no money for the troops for food, boots, guns, or ammunition. There was talk of mutiny among the ranks. Washington contacted Robert Morris and gave a short, urgent order: "Send for Haym Salomon". The following is the stuff of legend:

It was Shabbat, September 29, 1781, Yom Kippur. There was a knock on the synagogue door. A messenger urgently needed to deliver a note to Haym Salomon. The message was from Robert Morris. Morris wrote that money was urgently needed for Washington's army and the finance minister could not cover the two notes that were drafted to fund the battle. He begged for Salomon's help. In spite of angry protests from congregants and from the

Minister, Gershom Mendes Seixas, Salomon addressed the congregation assembled for the service. He spoke to the patriots who had already done so much towards the revolutionary effort. He himself pledged 3000 pounds. He urged the others to help. He spoke of Washington, the troops dying of starvation, the cause. He spoke of living in a country where the Jews would be treated like any other citizens, of religious freedom. Within 15 minutes, they had raised the 20,000 pounds that Morris needed to fund the battle and allow the army to continue. On October 19, 1781 the British surrendered at Yorktown. Even though the fighting would go on for another 2 years, the outcome was no longer in doubt. The new American nation would be victorious and the world would be changed forever.

Haym and Rachael Salomon had a daughter Sallie. Sallie married Joseph Andrews on October 31, 1824 in Philadelphia. They had a son whom they also named Joseph Andrews, who married Miriam Nones in 1849. This Joseph Andrews had a son David who married Frances Lyon in 1895. They had a son, whom they also named Joseph Lyon Andrews who married Katherine Louise New in 1925. They, in turn, had a son born in 1938 whom they named Joseph Lyon Andrews, Jr. who married Margareta Langert in 1969. This Joseph Andrews, who is Dr. Joseph Andrews, will be at Mikveh Israel on Sunday, October 14th, at 10AM and will deliver a presentation entitled, "*Haym Salomon, George Washington's Money Man and My Ancestor: Myth vs. Reality ... What Do We Really Know?*". A presentation with film and slides not to be missed!

Tizkeh Leshanim Rabbot to all. Muchos Años!

Haym Salomon: The Revolution's Indispensable Financial Genius

By Donald N. Moran

<http://www.revolutionarywararchives.org/salomon.html>

Editor's Note: This article was reprinted from the October 1999 Edition of the Liberty Tree and Valley Compatriot Newsletter

Haym Salomon was born in Lesno, Poland in 1740. His parents were Jewish refugees from Portugal, who escaped religious persecution there. In his early twenties, he traveled throughout Europe acquiring an extensive knowledge of currency finance, that was to serve him well in his coming years.

After ten years of touring Europe he returned to Poland to join in that country's war with Russia. It is believed that he had to escape from the Russians, and decided on England. After earning enough money to pay for his passage to America he sailed in August, 1772. He arrived in New York City that winter.

In 1772, New York was a thriving colonial city of some 14,000 souls. Salomon soon learned that the colonies were in political turmoil over the issue of taxation without representation. Haym soon started a brokerage company and was very successful. His clientele included a large number of prominent loyalists, however, when word of the fighting at Lexington and Concord reached New York, Haym sided with the revolting Colonials and joined New York's active "Sons of Liberty". This was to get him into serious trouble.

New York City fell to the British on September 15th, 1776. Five days later a mysterious fire destroyed twenty-five percent of the city. 493 houses were burned, greatly inconveniencing the British Army that had planned on quartering their troops in these houses.

British General William Howe blamed the Sons of Liberty (He was probably right although no evidence has ever been found to substantiate it). George Washington reportedly said:
"Providence, or some good honest fellow, has done more for us than we were disposed to do for ourselves".
(Congress had forbidden Washington to destroy the city to deny the British its use). In any case, before the British and citizens of New York City had put out all the fires, all known members of the Sons of Liberty found themselves in jail! Among them Haym Salomon.

A makeshift prison was set up in an old warehouse, called the "Old Sugar House". The building was in terrible condition and the prisoners suffered horribly. Salomon became ill with a severe chest cold (pneumonia?). He was transferred to the maximum security prison "The Provost" where his condition worsened. Haym noticed that the Hessian soldiers that were serving as guards did not speak English, and the British did not speak German. He let the British know he could speak German, without volunteering to be an interpreter. He did not want to be viewed as a British sympathizer. He was soon given the job and received better treatment, food and quarters.

During this time Salomon became a member of the American espionage ring. They operated in such secrecy that even today we know little of their activities, however, it appears that Salomon was responsible for encouraging more than 500 Hessian soldiers to desert to the American side! The British paroled him, not knowing of his other activities. However, two years later, he was again arrested, and this time taken to a prison called "Congress Hill". On August 11th, 1778, he was convicted of several capital charges, all relating to his activities as a spy. He was sentenced to be hanged by the neck until dead, the next morning. He was returned to his cell to await his fate.

Haym Salomon had planned on this eventuality and had hidden some gold coins in his clothes. With them he bribed a guard, escaped and made his way to Philadelphia and safety.

In Philadelphia he reestablished his brokerage business from a coffee house and became known as a knowledgeable broker. In addition he was appointed by Congress as Postmaster to the French Army and Navy as well as to the Spanish, French and Dutch Ministers (Ambassadors). He did very well, and soon had created a new fortune.

About this time his ability to make money and serve the cause of American independence was noticed by Robert Morris, Congress's Minister of Finance. Haym started handling transactions for Congress. He did this for little or no remuneration, his continued contribution to the American cause. He made numerous personal loans to members of our fledgling government, thus allowing many of them to stay in Philadelphia. It should be noted that these loans were from Haym's personal funds. Like Robert Morris, and other contributors, none were reimbursed or repaid.

In August of 1781, our Southern forces had trapped Lieutenant General Charles Cornwallis in the little Virginia coastal town of Yorktown. George Washington and the main army and the Count de Rochambeau with his French army decided to march from the Hudson Highlands to Yorktown and deliver the final blow. But Washington's war chest was completely empty, as was that of Congress. Washington determined that he needed at least \$20,000 to finance the campaign. When Morris told him there were no funds and no credit available, Washington gave him a simple but eloquent order: "Send for Haym Salomon". Haym again came through, and the \$20,000 was raised. Washington conducted the Yorktown campaign, which proved to be the final battle of the Revolution, thanks to Haym Salomon.

The Treaty of Paris was signed on September 3rd, 1783, and ended the Revolutionary War, but the financial problems of the newly established Country were not. It was Haym Salomon who managed, time-after-time, to raise the money to bailout the debt ridden government.

The damage done to Salomon's health during his imprisonment is believed to have led to his contracting tuberculosis. At age 44, on January 6th, 1785, he succumbed to the disease, leaving his wife, Rachael (Franks) Salomon, and four young children. He was buried in the Mikveh Israel Cemetery, Philadelphia. His estate showed that he owned approximately \$354,000 of Continental securities, but inflation had reduced the value of this substantial amount owed him to a mere \$44,732.

Against this asset, he owed \$45,292. His estate was insolvent! Haym Salomon had died in bankruptcy.

Prior to the adoption of the Constitution in 1789, Congress did not have the power to levee taxes, other than collect duty on imported goods. The overwhelming debt owed by the fledgling Nation far exceeded that of its meager income. Among the indebtedness obligating Congress was the need to provide pensions for those officers and soldiers who had been wounded while serving in the Continental army. This was their first priority. Repaying vast sums to a few creditors like Salomon and Morris, was outweighed by the number of disabled veterans desperately needing governmental support.

Haym's children attempted, on several occasions, to recover the monies owed, but they were always turned down. They even offered to accept a settlement of \$100,000 -- but, Congress simply didn't have the money.

In 1925 a bill was introduced in Congress to erect a statue to Haym Salomon in Washington, D.C., but again, events interceded. The financial crash of 1929 caused the government to renege on the project. In 1926, Congress, did however, officially recognize the contribution to the American Revolution by Salomon, and passed a resolution placing a record of his efforts in the Congressional Record.

On December 15th, 1941, the City of Chicago erected the statue of George Washington, flanked by Haym Salomon and Robert Morris. It stands today at the intersection of Wabash and Wacker Drive. Under the image of Salomon it says "Haym Salomon - Gentlemen, Scholar, Patriot. A banker whose only interest was the interest of his Country."

The twelve foot tall statue we rededicated on January 10, 1999, was sculpted by Robert Paine in 1941 and was originally placed in Hollenbeck Park in East Los Angeles in 1944. Because of vandalism, the statue was moved to MacArthur Park in 1953, and then again to West Wilshire Recreation Center of Pan Pacific Park at the request of the Los Angeles Council of the Jewish War Veterans of America, who paid all the relocation expenses.

On March 25th, 1975, in time for the bicentennial, the United States Post Office issued a commemorative postage stamp which honored him as a Revolutionary War hero. It depicted him seated at a desk. On the front side of the stamp are the words "Financial Hero". And, for only the second time in 143 years of U.S. stamps, a message appeared on the back of this stamp, reading:

Businessman and broker Haym Salomon was responsible for raising most of the money needed to

finance the American Revolution and later to save the new nation from collapse.

From Revolutionary War Archives, Sons of Liberty Chapter

Haym Salomon (ca. 1740-1785)

By: Bob Blythe

http://www.nps.gov/revwar/about_the_revolution/haym_salomon.html

Salomon (sometimes written as Solomon and Solomons in period documents) was a Polish-born Jewish immigrant to America who played an important role in financing the Revolution. When the war began, Salomon was operating as a financial broker in New York City. He seems to have been drawn early to the Patriot side and was arrested by the British as a spy in 1776. He was pardoned and used by the British as an interpreter with their German troops. Salomon, however, continued to help prisoners of the British escape and encouraged German soldiers to desert. Arrested again in 1778, he was sentenced to death, but managed to escape to the rebel capital of Philadelphia, where he resumed his career as a broker and dealer in securities. He soon became broker to the French consul and paymaster to French troops in America.

Salomon arrived in Philadelphia as the Continental Congress was struggling to raise money to support the war. Congress had no powers of direct taxation and had to rely on requests for money directed to the states, which were mostly refused. The government had no choice but to borrow money and was ultimately bailed out only by loans from the French and Dutch governments. Government finances were in a chaotic state in 1781 when Congress appointed former Congressman Robert Morris superintendent of finances. Morris established the Bank of North America and proceeded to finance the Yorktown campaign of Washington and Rochambeau. Morris relied on public-spirited financiers like Salomon to subscribe to the bank, find purchasers for government bills of exchange, and lend their own money to the government.

From 1781 on, Salomon brokered bills of exchange for the American government and extended interest-free personal loans to members of Congress, including James Madison. Salomon married Rachel Franks in 1777 and had four children with her. He was an influential member of Philadelphia's Mikveh Israel congregation, founded in 1740. He helped lead the fight to overturn restrictive Pennsylvania laws barring non-Christians from holding public office. Like many elite citizens of Philadelphia, he owned at least one slave, a man named Joe, who ran away in 1780. Possibly as a result of his purchases of government debt, Salomon died penniless in 1785. His descendants in the nineteenth century attempted to obtain

compensation from Congress, but were unsuccessful. The extent of Salomon's claim on the government cannot be determined, because the documentation disappeared long ago.

In 1941, the George Washington-Robert Morris-Haym Salomon Memorial was erected along Wacker Drive in downtown Chicago. The bronze and stone memorial was conceived by sculptor Lorado Taft and finished by his student, Leonard Crunelle. Although Salomon's role in financing the Revolution has at times been exaggerated, his willingness to take financial risks for the Patriot cause helped establish the new nation.

To learn more:

Laurens R. Schwartz, *Jews and the American Revolution: Haym Salomon and Others* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 1987).

From The National Park Service website, The American Revolution: Lighting America's Flame

Editorial Note: All opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of its individual writers. Please feel free to submit your own thoughts in the form of an essay which will be considered for publication by the editors.

While credits are given, we have not obtained consent to reproduce or publish these articles, and only do so as "fair use," i.e. for our minimal academic purpose. Mass distribution is not intended.

If you wish to have an e-mail address added to our list please contact david.shasha.shu@gmail.com

A full listing of all the contents of past issues is available by e-mailing David Shasha.
