

## **Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part \_\_)**

### **Jonas Phillips: Patriotic Colonial Jewish Businessman**

**Dr. Yitzchok Levine**  
**Department of Mathematical Sciences**  
**Stevens Institute of Technology**  
**Hoboken, NJ 07030**  
[llevine@stevens.edu](mailto:llevine@stevens.edu)

Note: All quotes are from **Portraits Etched in Stone, Early Jewish Settlers, 1682 – 1831** by David de Sola Pool, Columbia University Press, New York, 1952, pages 191 – 297.

In last month's column we sketched the life of the Orthodox Jewish businessman Jonas Phillips who came to America in 1756. Jonas and his family first resided in New York and then moved to Philadelphia in either 1772 or 1773.

#### **Pillar of Congregation Mikve Israel**

“While in Philadelphia, Phillips was active in the affairs of its Jewish community. The Revolution brought there a large access of numbers from New York and elsewhere, and he was one of the committee which in March, 1782, was charged with purchasing the ground for a new and larger synagogue. With his payment of £ 144 · 7 · 6 he was far and away the largest contributor towards the cost of the new synagogue building, with the exception of Haym Salomon who gave £ 341 · 15 · 2. One of the cornerstones of the new building was laid by him and one by Isaac Moses in September of that year. At the following meeting of the congregation he was elected its president. He had the honor of serving as president when the synagogue was consecrated, and on that occasion he presented to the congregation a scroll of the Torah and ‘made his Sephar Holy.’ He had been one of those who had signed the memorial sent to the president, vice-president, and council of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania asking for their approval of the opening of the synagogue, and it was he who wrote to General George Washington the letter inviting him to attend the dedication ceremonies.

“He was one of the most if not the most active of the members of that reorganized Philadelphia congregation. On the first day of Rosh Hashanah he would chant the haftarah, the prophetic reading, and on the second day the early morning Psalms, zemirot. On the Day of Atonement it was he of the name of Jonas who would read the Book of Jonah, the reading from the prophets on the afternoon of that day, and on Hoshana Rabbah he would read the Selihot, the most important part of the service. His offerings to the congregation remained outstandingly generous, reaching the sum of £ 169 · 14 · 0 in 1784. The next year, however, they dropped to £ 49 · 18 · 0, a reduction perhaps indicating not an impairment of his prosperity but a falling out with the synagogue authorities.”

## Letter Asking for Guarantee of Religious Freedom

In 1787 Jonas wrote a letter to Congress asking that the federal Constitution guarantee religious liberty in the state of Pennsylvania. He did not know that three weeks earlier it had been agreed upon that no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States. The letter is given below with Phillips' original spelling. It is "characteristically dated 24th Ellul 5547, as well as September 7, 1787."

To His Excellency the president and the Honourable Members of the Convention assembled

Sires

With leave and submission I address myself To those in Whom there is wisdom understanding and knowledge, they are the honourable personages appointed and Made overseers of a part of the terrestrial globe of the Earth, Namely the 13 united states of America in Convention Assembled, the Lord preserve them amen-

I the subscriber being one of the people called Jews of the City of Philadelphia, a people scattered & dispersed among all nations do behold with Concern that among the laws in the Constitution of Pennsylvania, there is a Clause Sect 10 to viz - I do believe in one God the Creatur and governor of the universe and Rewarder of the good & the punisher of the wicked - and I do acknowledge the Scriptures of the old & New testament to be given by divine inspiration - to swear & 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-By the above law a Jew is deprived of holding any publick office or place of Government which is a Contridictory to the bill of Right Sect 2 viz

That all men have a natural & unalienable Right to worship almighty God according to the dictates of their own Conscience and understanding & that no man ought or of Right can be Compelled to attend any Religious Worship or Creed or support any place of worship or Maintain any minister contrary to or against his own free will and Consent, nor can any man who acknowledges the being of a God be Justly deprived or abridged of any Civil Right as a Citizen on account of his Religious sentiments or peculiar mode of Religious Worship, and that no authority can or ought to be vested in or assumed by any power whatever that shall in any case

interfere or in any manner Controul the Right of Conscience in the free Exercise of Religious Worship.-

It is well known among all the Citizens of the 13 united states that the Jews have been true and faithful whigs, & during the late Contest with England they have been foremost in aiding and assisting the states with their lifes & fortunes, they have supported the cause, have bravely fought and bled for liberty which they cannot Enjoy.-

Therefore if the honourable Convention shall in their Wisdom think fit and alter the said oath & leave out the words to viz - and I do acknowledge the scripture of the new testament to be given by divine inspiration, then the Israelites will think themself happy to live under a government where all Religious societys are on an Equal footing-I solicit this favour for myself my children & posterity, & for the benefit of all the Israelites through the 13 united states of America.

My prayers is unto the Lord. May the people of this states Rise up as a great & young lion, May they prevail against their Enemies, may the degrees of honour of his Excellency the president of the Convention George Washington, be Exhalted & Raise up. May Everyone speak of his glorious Exploits.

May God prolong his days among us in this land of Liberty-May he lead the armies against his Enemys as he has done hereuntofore. May God extend peace unto the united states - May they get up to the highest Prosperitys-May God Extend peace to them & their seed after them so long as the sun & moon Endureth – and May the almighty God of our father Abraham Isaac & Jacob indue this Noble Assembly with wisdom Judgment & unanimity in their Counsells & may they have the satisfaction to see that their present toil & labour for the wellfair of the united states may be approved of Through all the world & particular by the united states of america, is the ardent prayer of Sires

Your Most devoted obed. servant

JONAS PHILLIPS

“In 1786, after the Revolution, he returned to New York -where he set up in business as a vendue master, but within three years he went back to Philadelphia where he spent his last days. \r e catch a characteristic glimpse of this staunch Jew in the record that,

The case of Stansberry v. Marks, reported in 2d Dallas, page 213, was tried on Saturday, April 5, 1793. The defendant offered Jonas Phillips, a Jew, as his witness, but he refused to be sworn because it was his Sabbath. The Court therefore fined him £10.

Jonas Phillips passed away on January 29, 1803. “In his will he left a legacy of £ 12 to the New York congregation so that when even the descendants of his numerous progeny may have forgotten him, his name will still be commemorated in grateful memory.”