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TWO FOUNDING AMERICAN JEWISH FATHERS

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Posted Aug 03 2005

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"The twenty-three Jews who sailed into New Amsterdam harbor on a September day in 1654 were to found the first Jewish community in what is today the United States. They were not the first of their folk in that town; at least one man had come there from Holland earlier in the summer for the purpose of carrying on trade. The careful historian soon comes to the unfailing rule that no Jew is ever the first Jew in any town: there is always one who had been there before him. The earlier settler in this case was Jacob Barsimson, an old-timer, who had been in the colony for the long period of two weeks!

"It has been suggested, with some measure of plausibility, that Barsimson had been sent out by the Jewish leaders of Amsterdam to determine the possibilities of an extensive Jewish immigration to the new colony on the Hudson. With the fall of Dutch Brazil it was imperative for Jews planning to leave Europe to find other new homes."^[1]

"Leaving on July 8, 1654, Jacob Barsimson had crossed the ocean on the Pereboom, and reached Nieuw Amsterdam on August 22."^[2] Since he came under a passport as one of a party of emigrants from Holland sent by the Dutch West India Company, no objection was made to his stay by Governor Stuyvesant and his city council. However, when Asser (Assur) Levy arrived on September 7 as one of 23 Brazilian refugees without passports, Stuyvesant made an unsuccessful attempt to force him and his companions to leave.

Barsimson and Levy were to become pioneers in the fight for Jewish rights in the New World. It should be kept in mind that both of these gentlemen were, of course, observant Jews.

"When in 1658 a charge was brought against Jacob Barsimson, the court records stated: 'Though defendant is absent yet no default is entered against him as he was summoned on his Sabbath.'^[3] The inventory of the property that Levy left at the time of his death lists "two 'dreeping' pans, two brass skimmers, two brass plates, and two pewter 'basons'"^[4] indicate that he kept a kosher home. The listing of "one Sabbath Lamb"^[5] shows that he kept Shabbos. Furthermore, "Levy was a butcher. It is likely that he served as the shohet, or slaughterer of animals, for the local Jewry, for the records reveal that he was excused from killing hogs."^[6]

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Asser Levy was a pioneer in fighting for the rights of Jews in New Amsterdam.

In 1655 he protested when Peter Stuyvesant and local officials required male Jews between sixteen and sixty to pay a tax in lieu of guard duty. Stuyvesant had cited the "disinclination and unwillingness" of local residents to serve as "fellow-soldiers" with the Jewish "nation" and "to be on guard with them in the same guard-house." Levy insisted, however, that as a manual laborer he should be able to stand guard just like everybody else. Although initially thwarted, within two years he had succeeded in standing "watch

and ward like other Burghers," whereupon he promptly petitioned for burgher rights (citizenship). Again he was thwarted, but, backed by wealthy Jewish merchants who had immigrated months before from Amsterdam and recalled the promises made to them by "the Worshipful Lords" of the Dutch West India Company, the decision was reversed and the rights of Jews to "burghership" guaranteed.^[7]

As a result of these legal actions, Asser Levy and Jacob Barsimson kept "watch and ward" with the other (non-Jewish) male residents of New Amsterdam. In addition, in 1657 all male Jews who lived in the town gained the rights of burghership (citizenship).

Besides being a butcher, Levy was a trader and land owner.

By 1660 he had achieved both financial and social importance. It was in that year that he signed himself Asser Levy Van Swellem. Whether that name was an afterthought, brought on by prosperity, or one belonging to his past, we have no way of ascertaining. Gradually his real estate operations were extended. Among his holdings were two lots on Mill Street which later became the site of the first synagogue.

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When in 1664, New Amsterdam was in danger, its wealthiest citizens were called together - Asser Levy among them - for the purpose of raising money to defend the town. He lent 100 florins. It was, as we know, a lost cause. On October 21, 1664, he took the oath of allegiance to England, and later was assessed two florins a week toward the support of the British soldiers.

The change in sovereigns had little effect upon Asser. He continued to gain wealth and land, and to keep the law courts busy. "His suits cover a whole range of law, arrests, attachments, accounts, customs, building contracts and apprenticeship. At times he secures the reprimand of an official for some insult, or the punishment of a careless court officer. So jealous was he of his rights that no man stood so high in authority that he was afraid to begin suit against him.[8]

He did not hesitate to utilize the courts to rectify any injustice he felt was committed against him.

When a man promised Asser to complete his dwelling and left that for more profitable employment, Asser Levy compelled him through legal action to drop his other work and fulfill the terms of contract. When a maid, employed by his wife, left before her term expired, he sued her new employer and won.[9]

One would naturally think that a man with such a litigious nature would have many enemies. However, this was not so.

Strange as it may seem, instead of being despised by his Christian associates, he gained their confidence and respect. His influence was felt not only in New York, but his activities reached Albany, and even Connecticut. His request to reduce the fine imposed upon Jacob Lucena was effective in New England. Such men as Joannes de Peyster and Jacob Leisler (leader of the Rebellion) he knew well, for they were at his request appointed referees in his disputes. When in 1671, the Lutherans built their first church, it was the battling butcher who advanced them money.[10]

As the years went by, Asser Levy prospered more and more.

He was an extensive land operator. He built a slaughter house. He owned a famous tavern in the neighborhood of what is now Wall Street. He was usually his own lawyer, and his arguments as a rule carried enough weight to secure a favorable verdict. So successful was he that he was employed as spokesman for other Jews, and so experienced that Christians often called him in to act as referee in their disputes. His name appears as executor in the wills of Christians, showing that his prestige was not limited to his co-religionists.[11]

In summary we should note that "Asser Levy was just the man for his environment. He was neither refined nor cultured, and certainly he was insensitive to rebuffs. His energy was boundless; his obstinacy tremendous. He was blunt, thick-skinned, pugnacious, generous, fearless, pushing; jealous of his honor and that of his co-religionists - and successful!" [12]

Among the Jews who immigrated to New Amsterdam in 1654 he was the only one who stayed, maintaining a home in the city until his death in 1682. For long lonely stretches as Dutch rule waned and the rest of the Jews departed for colonies with more sun and promise, he was the only Jewish family in town.[13] Yet the inventory of his estate suggests that he resolutely observed at least the principal rituals of his faith, including the Sabbath and Jewish dietary laws, within the precincts of his home. His life epitomized both the hardships entailed in being a Jew in early colonial America and the possibilities of surmounting them.[14]

[1] Early American Jewry Volume I, Jacob Rader Marcus, The Jewish Publication Society, 1951, page 24.

[2] An Old Faith in the New World, David and Tamar de Sola Pool, Columbia University Press, New York, 1955, page 12.

[3] Jewish Pioneers in America: 1492-1848, Anita Libman Lebeson, Brentano's Publishers, 1931, page 50.

[4] "Asser Levy and the Inventories of Early New York Jews, Leo Hershkovitz, American Jewish History 80 (Autumn 1990), page 30.

[5] Ibid., page 36.

[6] Early American Jewry Volume I, page 30.

[7] American Judaism: A History, Jonathan D. Sarna, Yale University Press 2004, page 9.

[8] Jewish Pioneers in America: 1492-1848, pages 75-76

[9] Ibid., page 76.

[10] Ibid., page 76

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid., page 77

[13] Most historians do not agree with Sarna's statement that Levy was the only Jew in New York at some period during the 17th century. They maintain that while the Jewish community was indeed small, numbering no more than 100 souls in 1695, Levy and his wife were never the only Jews residing in New York.

[14] American Judaism: A History, page 9.

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