

## **Maintaining Orthodoxy in the New World**

### **Lecture 2: Young Israel of Ave J – 2/22/08 (Recorded on 2/24/08)**

**Lecture 2 (Fri. 2/22/08): 1700 to 1800 - Colonial Jewish Communities; Savannah, Dr. Samuel Nunes, Escape from the Inquisition; Newport, Aaron Lopez; Rebecca (Machado) and Jonas Phillips; Rebecca Samuels; Jews in the Revolutionary War; Hayyim Solomon; Israel Baer Kursheedt**

#### **I. Living in Spain and Portugal under the Inquisition**

- A. Secret practice of Judaism – matzo all year round, did not tell children until age 12 or so, married only within certain families, knew little about Judaism, no calendar, Jews were burnt at the stake well into the 18<sup>th</sup> century**
- B. Jews came to America not only from Spain and Portugal. From the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Jews began coming from England, Germany, and Poland. However, the five major Jewish communities besides NY, Newport, Philadelphia, Charleston, Savannah, and Richmond were all founded by Sephardim. However, soon the Ashkenazim outnumbered the Sephardim, yet the leadership and liturgy of this communities remained Sephardic.**

#### **II. Dr. Samuel Nunez –**

- A. Diogo Nunes Ribeiro (Dr. Samuel) b. 1668 - married Gracia (Rebecca) de Siquera b. 1678**
- B. Escape from the Inquisition**
- C. Circumcised in London, remarried wife according to Jewish Law.**
- D. Savannah – July 11, 1733, wife Nov. 12, 1733 – epidemic, James Oglethorpe gave Jews tracts of land, parent company in England said no.**
- E. Jews were treated the opposite of way they were in NY**

### **III. 6 children - daughter - Maria Caetana (Zipporah) b. 1714**

**A. Married Rev. David Mendes Machado – Shearith Israel**

**B. Daughter - Rebecca b. 1746**

**C. Zipporah said special prayer every time clock struck for deliverance from Inquisition**

### **IV. Married Jonas Phillips in 1762**

**In 1762 at the age of sixteen Rebecca married Jonas Phillips (1735 – 1803), who was eleven years her senior. Phillips, of Ashkenazic descent, was born in Rhenish Prussia, but had been reared in London. He must have received a better than average Jewish education, since he was trained as a *shochet*. “For Jonas, marriage to Rebecca would have symbolized social upward mobility, since Sephardim were associated with nobility and culture. Conversely, many eighteenth century Sephardim scorned German Jews as ‘ill-bred and uncouth.’ These attitudes help to explain the fact that until the early 1800s, all American congregations followed the Sephardic rite, although by around 1730, Ashkenazim were more numerous than Sephardim in a number of cities, including New York.”**

**Shortly after their marriage, Rebecca and her husband moved to New York, where Jonas resumed his activities as a businessman. By the next autumn, Rebecca had given birth to the first of their twenty-one children.**

**In addition to childbearing and childraising, Rebecca, like most eighteenth century women, manufactured cloth, clothing, soap, candles and prepared processed comestibles to serve as their winter food supply. The members of the Phillips family were, of course, observant Jews. Rebecca supervised her kitchen to make sure that all was done according to Halacha. N. Taylor Phillips, family historian and direct descendent of Rebecca, wrote in 1927**

**No matter how well off they were, how rich they were, whether they were Gomez or Machado, or who they were, the women**

either did the cooking themselves or superintended it. It was not left to the slaves, or to the Negroes. If it was, it was a *treifa* house, that is, the house that permitted the servants exclusively to run the kitchen. People would not eat there, and, therefore, the woman of the house either had to do it herself or had to be on the job and see that it was properly done. If she had a lot of servants, she directed them or could give the final O.K. that everything was according to “Hoyle,” but she had to be there personally.

During the last ten years of her childbearing years, if not earlier, Rebecca began to adopt an active role in both Jewish and non-Jewish public affairs. In 1801, at the age of fifty-five, Rebecca was one of the founding members of the Female Association for the Relief of Women and Children in Reduced Circumstances. This Philadelphia organization, in which Gentile and Jewish women joined efforts, was dedicated to assisting yellow fever victims in Baltimore, supporting a “soup house” for the poor, and generally providing food and clothing to indigent women and children. Only two years later, Rebecca was widowed, leaving her a single mother of as many as sixteen children.

Rebecca’s personal piety and dedication to her people shone particularly during her widowed years. In 1820, at the age of seventy-four, Rebecca, now widowed for seventeen years, served as first directress and one of thirteen managers serving on the board of the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society of Philadelphia. The society, founded in 1819 to assist the Jewish indigent, was the first non-synagogue-related charitable society in America.

Rebecca Phillips embodies both the exceptional and the mundane. Her duties as wife and mother are typical of the colonial and early American experience. Yet these duties must be considered extraordinary, for they were carried out as Rebecca bore twenty-one children and raised two of her grandchildren, exceeding the count of even the largest known American Jewish families of her time. Rebecca’s pioneering activities as a communal activist and philanthropist in both the Jewish and non-Jewish communities were extraordinary for her time. Yet these endeavors would be considered, by the end of the nineteenth century, not only the common domain of the American woman, but increasingly and in many important respects, her ‘natural’ domain. Rebecca’s

pioneering exceptionalism thus foreshadowed that which would soon become commonplace.

## V. Aaron Lopez – Colonial Merchant Prince

A. Born 1731, Duarte, escaped Inquisition in Portugal, came to Newport RI 1752. AJHS exhibit: Became wealthy merchant, Picture – does not look observant and AJHS does not tell you that he was a Shomer Shabbos

B. Changed name from Duarte to Aaron, remarried, had himself circumcised when he came to Newport

C. Shomer Shabbos – ships did sail on Shabbos

D. Shipped kosher meat to Caribbean, founder of Touro Synagogue, large family

E. Bris of Yosef Lopez – Abraham I Abrahams

“Abrahams traveled as far north as Rhode Island in the performance of his craft. It is doubtful that he was paid for performing this religious privilege. More likely he did so out of devotion. In June, 1756 – he was then thirty-six – he began to chronicle his work as a *mohel* in New York City. His first recorded circumcision was that of his own son, Isaac. He was to grow up, not, as his father had prayed, ‘to the study of the Jewish law,’ but to become a New York physician. He was the only Jewish graduate of King’s, later Columbia, College, prior to the American Revolution. Less than two months after Isaac Abrahams was circumcised, his father was called upon to make a trip to Newport, Rhode Island, at the invitation of a young businessman by the name of Aaron Lopez.”

F. Fled to Leicester, MA during Revolutionary War – Remembered that he and his father-in-law; kept businesses closed on Saturday and Sunday

Died in 1782 on return to Providence – horse went into water

## G. What was he like?

What sort of a Jew was Aaron? He lived in the world of eighteenth-century American Sephardic orthodoxy and simultaneously in the world of the eighteenth-century Gentile milieu. He belonged as much to the one as to the other, and he appears to have been conscious of no inevitable conflict between the two. ‘All who knew him agree,’ wrote a Massachusetts journalist shortly after Aaron’s death, ‘that he was, in the fullest import of the words, a good citizen and an honest man.’ Nearly all we know or can surmise of Aaron’s life lends substance to this observation.”

Ezra Stiles believed “him to have been ‘without a single enemy and the most universally beloved by an extensive acquaintance of any man I have ever knew.’ Aaron’s ‘beneficence to his fam[ily] and connexions, to his nation [the Jews], and to all the world is almost without parallel.’ Such was the *buena fama* of Aaron Lopez.”

## VI. Rebecca Samuels

Petersburg, (VA) January 12, 1791,  
Wednesday, 8th [7th ?]

Shebat, 5551.

Dear and Worthy Parents:

I received your dear letter with much pleasure and therefrom understand that you are in good health, thank G-d, and that made us especially happy. The same is not lacking with us — may we live to be a hundred years. Amen.

We are completely isolated here. ‘We do not have any friends, and when we do not hear from you for any length of time, it is enough to make us sick. I hope that I will get to see some of my family. That will give me some satisfaction.

**You write me that Mr. Jacob Renner's son Reuben is in Philadelphia and that he will come to us. People will not advise him to come to Virginia. When the Jews of Philadelphia or New York hear the name 'Virginia, they get nasty. And they are not wrong! It won't do for a Jew. In the first place it is an unhealthy district, and we are only human. God forbid, if anything should happen to us, where would we be thrown? There is no cemetery in the whole of 'Virginia. In Richmond, which is twenty-two miles from here, there is a Jewish community consisting of two quorums [twenty men], and the two cannot muster a quarter [quorum when needed?].**

**Rebecca Samuel**

**Petersburg, Virginia, 179-**

**Dear Parents:**

**I hope my letter will ease your mind. You can now be reassured and send me one of the family to Charleston, South Carolina. This is the place to which, with God's help, we will go after Passover. The whole reason why we are leaving this place is because of (its lack of) Yehudishkeit.**

**Dear Parents, I know quite well you will not want me to bring up my children like Gentiles. Here they cannot become anything else. Jewishness is pushed aside here. There are here (in Petersburg) ten or twelve Jews, and they are not worthy of being called Jews. We have a shoet here who goes to market and buys terefah meat and then brings it home. On Rosh HaShanah and on Yom Kippur the people worshipped here without one Sefer Torah; and not one of them wore the tallit or the arba kanfot, except Hyman and my Sammy's godfather.**

**You can believe me that I crave to see a synagogue to which I can go. The way we live now is no life at all. We do not know what the Sabbath and the holidays are. On the Sabbath all the Jewish shops are open, and they do**

**business on that day as they do throughout the whole week. But ours we do not allow to open. With us there is still some Sabbath. You must believe me that in our house we all live as Jews as much as we can.**

**All the people who hear that we are leaving give us their blessings. They say that it is sinful that such blessed children should be brought up here in Petersburg. My children cannot learn anything here, nothing Jewish, nothing of general culture. My Schoene [my daughter], G-d bless her, is already three years old, I think it is time that she should learn something, and she has a good head to learn. I have taught her the bedtime prayers and grace after meals in just two lessons. I believe that no one among the Jews here can do as well as she. And my Sammy [born in 1790], G-d bless him, is already beginning to talk.**

**I could write more, however, I do not have any more paper.**

**I remain, your devoted daughter and servant,  
Rebecca, the wife of Hayyim, the son of  
Samuel the Levite**

**VI. Jews in Revolutionary War – most Jews sided with the colonies –**

**Only natural the Jews should side with the Shaitels! (Whigs)**

**Most Jews were merchants and hence were unhappy with the financial interference of the British into their business**

**A. Gershom Mendes Seixas, revolutionary chazzan, NY Jews fled to Philadelphia, Moses Mordecai and son Jacob Mordecai, the Sheftalls of Savannah**

**B. Some sided with British – David Franks, Isaac Touro, chazzan in Newport, RI**

**C.**

**D. Island of Saint Eustatius supplied the revolutionaries with much needed materials.**

## **VII. Hayyim Salomon (1740 – 1785)**

**“Only thing that I know learned in yeshiva about American Jewish history is that Chayim Salomon financed the Revolution.” Sorry, may not be true. Hayyim Solomon did not finance the Revolution. Loaned money to prominent Americans in the government and served as financial agent**

**A. Email - Was he observant?**

**B. Jacob I. Cohen, Esther Elizabeth Whitlock Mordecai, Kesuva**

## **VIII. Israel Baer Kursheedt (1766 – 1852)**

**Sources: Asmonean and the Occident (Isaac Leeser) 1852**

**A. Early American Jewry – no ordained rabbis stayed here from 1654 until 1840 - Rabbi Abraham Rice – 1840; He found chaos in the Jewish community of Baltimore**

**B. Chazzanim, better educated Ba’alei Batim, mohellim: businessmen**

**C. Level of Torah knowledge was so low that many European communities would not accept a Get or gayrus from America**

**D. One Talmud Chocham here who came before 1800 – IBK**

**VIII. Youth - Born in Sing-hafen, Germany near the Rhine on the 4th day of *Pesach* in 5526. (April 6, 1766)**

**A. Orphaned at young age, mother relocated to Kursheidt (near Konigswinter)**



**B. Showed brilliance – sent to yeshiva of Rav Nosson Adler (1741 – 1800) in Frankfurt**

**C. Most famous student R. Moshe Schreiber (Chasam Sofer, 1762 - 1839)**

**D. Good student**

Among IBK's fellow students were two who particularly distinguished themselves and attained considerable eminence - Rav Avraham Bing (1742 – 1841) and Rav Wolf Heidenheim (1757 – 1832). Rav Bing became the Chief Rabbi of Wurzburg. His students included Rav Jacob Ettlinger, Rav Nathan Marcus Adler, Chacham Isaac Bernays, and Rav Seligman Baer Bamberger. Rav Heidenheim is known for his many literary publications, including a Hebrew commentary on, and a German translation of, the Machzor. Rodelheim Machzor.

According to the above cited articles from the Asmonean and the Occident, Rav Nosson Adler held these three students in equal estimation. Rav Adler used to say that Reb Avraham was a *charif* (acute logician), Reb Wolf a *medackdek* (grammarian and philologist), and Reb Yisroel a *chochem*, a wise man whose accomplishments in Torah learning were universal.

## **IX. Studies interrupted in 1792 by French Revolution**

**A. General Adam Custine invaded Frankfurt**

**B. Asked Jew where to camp – beautiful park, off-limits to Jews**

**C. Contract to supply Prussian army – how sheltered yeshiva boy was able to do this. Danger, dealing with gentile military men**

**D. Peace in 1795 – decided to leave Germany – Conditions for Jews not good. Special taxes, bridge tax**

## **X. Hamburg – London, ship to Boston**

- A. Heard there was a Jewish community there
- B. Booked passage on Simonhoff, 70 to 80 ton vessel
- C. Passage took 70 days!
- D. Spoke no English – captain, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Bible
- E. Arrived in Boston at end of 1796 – only one Jewish family, left for NY after short time

XI. Small number of Jews in America – Jewish population of NY

According the “The Rise of the Jewish Community of NY” by Hyman B. Grinstein

APPENDIX I

THE JEWISH POPULATION OF NEW YORK CITY

Based on the number of seats in the synagogues, on other data, and on other estimates:

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of Jews in N. Y.</i>	<i>Gen. Pop. of City (in round numbers)</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1695	100 <sup>1</sup>	4,000	2.5
1750	300 <sup>2</sup>	13,000	2.3
1794	350 <sup>3</sup>	33,000	1.1
1809	450 <sup>4</sup>	96,000	0.5
1815	350 <sup>5</sup>		
1820	450 <sup>6</sup>	123,000	0.4
1825	500 <sup>7</sup>	166,000	0.3
1836	2,000 <sup>8</sup>	270,000	0.7
1840	7,000 <sup>9</sup>	312,000	2.2
1842	10,000 <sup>10</sup>		
1846	12,000 <sup>11</sup>	371,000	3.2
1850	16,000 <sup>12</sup>	515,000	3.1
1855	30,000 <sup>13</sup>	629,000	4.7
1859	40,000 <sup>14</sup>		

## **XII. NY 1796**

**“Israel Baer's first impressions of Jewish life in New York must have left him crestfallen. In material terms, the Jewish community consisted of a synagogue building on Mill Street dating back to 1730, an adjoining *hebra* [meeting place and schoolhouse], the minister's house, and a cemetery on Chatham Square. Its upkeep was the cause of frequent outbreaks [disagreements] among the trustees of Shearith Israel; until 1825, it would be the only Jewish cemetery in New York City. They [the Jews of New York] knew little of Jewish traditions. Neglect, apathy, and petty bickering were pervasive.” (The Seixas – Kursheedts, pages 29 -30)**

## **XIII. Gershom Mendes Seixas (1745-1816) Appointed Chazzan of SI at age 23 –**

**A. Not rabbi – served almost 50 years – patriotic Chazzan, left NY for Philadelphia during Revolutionary War.**

**B. Quickly made acquaintance of IBK – appreciated value of IBK’s learning**

**C. On January 18, 1804, he married Sarah Abigail (Sally) Seixas (1778 – 1854), the eldest daughter of *Chazzan* Seixas. Sarah was the favorite child of Rev. Seixas and IBK became his favorite son-in-law.**

**D. In New York IBK went into business. “He had his share both of prosperity and of adversity, like all other men. But the one never rendered him arrogant, the other could not cast him down. There were in his character two remarkable traits that still kept him upright and enabled him to preserve the serenity of his mind: trust in God and good opinion of men. He was incapable of believing in the bad intentions of others. And though he, more than once or twice, suffered severely from his confidence being abused, he could not be persuaded that the cause was other than imprudence or folly on the part of those through whom he suffered. His trust in God was firm and not to be shaken, as it sprung from his profound conviction of the truth of his religion**

and consequently in the wisdom and goodness of Providence.”  
(The Asmonean)

#### **XIV. Communal Activities**

**A. As a man with a growing family, it was only natural for IBK to become involved in the Jewish education offered by *Yeshibat Minhath Arab*, which Shearith Israel had established in 1731. He believed strongly that Jewish education was “the first thing that ought to be pursued in life.” With this goal he worked diligently to expand the curriculum of this yeshiva.**

**B. In 1808 IBK was appointed to a committee of six to draft a detailed proposal and regulations for the reorganization of the yeshiva into a real Jewish day school for boys and girls. The school remained active until 1822. Its aims, as articulated by Israel Baer, were: 1) to instruct students in religion and morality, 2) to make sure their actions are in harmony with these teachings, and 3) to “impress on their minds the excellence of our belief.” In 1810, in recognition of his service to the Jewish community, IBK was elected parnas (president) of Shearith Israel and served for one term.**

**C. Israel Baer fought many battles at Shearith Israel; not all were victorious, especially in matters involving ingrained customs. In 1809 he and other forward-minded congregants attempted to restrict Mi she-Berakh prayers, made on behalf of individuals called to the Torah (for which it was customary to make a donation to the synagogue) to three per person. The plan was not adopted.**

#### **XV. Richmond, VA – 1812-1824**

**A. Chazzan**

**B. Isaac Leeser, forefront of everything Jewish in 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

**C. Jacob Mordecai – Female academy, Warrenton, NC**

**D. While residing in Virginia, IBK became acquainted with Thomas Jefferson and even visited him on more than one occasion at Monticello.**

#### **XVI. Return to NY – family of 11 with 9 children**

**New York's Jewish community had changed a great deal in the 12 years the Kursheedts had lived in Richmond. The majority of the Jewish community was now of Ashkenazic background, and they were unhappy with the Spanish-Portuguese (Sephardic) ritual of Shearith Israel, the only synagogue in the city. In 1825 in an attempt at compromise, IBK organized a separate Ashkenaz minyan at the synagogue. The leaders of the congregation, however, refused to let the minyan continue, and Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, New York's second oldest congregation which followed Ashkenazic ritual, was established that same year.**

**In about 1834 IBK played a key role in the establishment of *Hebra Terumath Hakkodesh*, which aided the poor of Israel. On August 19, 1840 he chaired a gathering of New York's Jewish community to protest the Damascus Affair. "When a Franciscan friar and his Muslim servant disappeared, the Jews of Damascus were accused of having killed them to use their blood for Jewish Passover rites. A number of Damascene Jews were arrested and tortured to make them 'confess' to the crimes. Some Jews died; even Jewish children were taken prisoner." (The Seixas – Kursheedts, page 46)**

#### **XVII. His Last Days**

**A. Hyman Grinstein writes on page 220 of his *The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York*, "Israel B. Kursheedt, whose rabbinical knowledge was undoubtedly outstanding in the city in the first half of the nineteenth century, was a retiring person who rarely went out of his way to make his influence felt in the community. When he was approached on legal or ritual problems, he would prepare an answer; occasionally he led a movement or made a suggestion. His leadership was not aggressive, nor did he leave any books as tangible monuments to his scholarship."**

**Another reason why IBK did not play a larger role in public affairs was most probably because there were very few people in America at the time he lived who could appreciate the extent and value of his learning. However, perhaps more importantly, he had a very marked influence on his nine children. He made sure to give all of them the best Jewish education he could. The result was that all married Jewish spouses (save for one, who never married) and were strongly attached to Judaism. This was no small feat in light of the high rate of intermarriage in America during the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.**

**B. According to the Asmonean obituary, IBK was more than beloved by his family – he was almost idolized. His family devoted themselves to caring for him during the last two years of his life when he was ill and suffering. During this period he was confined to his home, and many came to visit him simply to be in the presence of a man who was a living example of a true Jewish patriarch.**

**He passed away at age 86 surrounded by family and friends. Someone present at his passing, witnessing his serenity of spirit, “involuntarily burst out in the words of Scripture, ‘May I die the death of the righteous, and may my end be like his.’”**

**His son Gershon Kursheedt – Judah Touro, New Orleans**