

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part --)

Manuel Josephson's Congregational Petition and Letter to George Washington

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In last month's column we sketched the life of Manuel Josephson (1729 -1796) who immigrated to New York in the 1740s. Manuel was one of the few learned Jews residing in America in the 18th century. His talents were recognized by Congregation Shearith Israel, and he served on the synagogue's Bais Din for several years and as its *Parnas* (president) in 1762. He earned his living as a merchant.

In 1776 when it became clear that the British were about to occupy New York, Manuel and a number of other New York Jews who supported the Revolution relocated to Philadelphia. There he became an active member of Philadelphia's Congregation Mikve Israel and was elected its *Parnas* in 1785. He held this office until 1791.

Manuel Josephson Petitions Mikve Israel to Build a Mikvah¹

"In 1784, Josephson presented the following petition to the board of Mikve Israel, asking that a ritual bathhouse (mikvah) be built for the women of the congregation. His motivation is classical in its orthodoxy: inasmuch as the American Jew had been blessed with desirable privileges, it was incumbent upon him to thank God by scrupulously observing the Divine Law. If he failed to do so, all the curses threatened in Holy Writ would descend upon the transgressor."

Below is Manuel Josephson's petition with his spelling and punctuation.

It having pleased the Almighty God of Israel to appoint our lot in this country, the rulers whereof he has inspired with wisdom and a benevolent disposition toward us as a nation, whereby we enjoy every desirable privilege and great preeminence far beyond many of our brethren dispersed in different countries and governments,

And in order to manifest our gratitude for those peculiar favors and blessings, we ought, in a very sincere manner, observe a strict and close adherence to those laws and commandments ordained by Him and delivered to our master Moses, of blessed memory, which have been handed down to us in a regular succession to the present time, wherein we are told (Exodus 19:5: "Ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people") that the Almighty has made choice of our nation in preference of all others, on condition (ibid., "If ye obey my voice and keep my covenant") that we hearken unto his voice and observe his covenants;

and on the other hand, if we neglect our duty, He has denounced (Leviticus 26: 14, etc., etc.) severe and tremendous sentences against us, to avoid which we should endeavour with all our might to regulate our conduct in every respect conformable to His Holy Law, rectify every deviation therefrom, and supply every omission so far as in our power.

In order thereto, we, the subscribers, having taken these matters to heart and duly reflected on the many defects this congregation called Mikve Israel in Philadelphia labours under, and to our great regret and sorrow we find one in particular, which strikes us most forcibly and cannot but affect with astonishment and horror every judicious and truly religious mind. This is the want of a proper *mikve* or bathing place, according to our Law and institution, for the purification of married women at certain periods. The necessity of having and using such place will readily appear from the text (*ibid.*, 20:18) where a transgression of this ordinance is highly criminal to both husband and wife. Nor does it rest with them only, but the very children born from so unlawful cohabitation are deemed *bene niddot* [children conceived during the menstrual period], which makes this offence the more heinous [heinous] and detestable, in as much as it effects not only the parents, but their posterity for generations to come. And should it be known in the congregations abroad that we had been thus neglectful of so important a matter, they would not only pronounce heavy anathemas against us, but interdict and avoid intermarriages with us, equal as with [a] different nation or sect, to our great shame and mortification.

Now, therefore, in full consideration of the foregoing, we have unanimously agreed that a proper mikve or bathing place for the sole use of our congregation be forthwith built, and that no delay may be made in accomplishing so necessary and laudable a work. We do hereby, each of us for himself, most solemnly and religiously engage and promise to pay such sum of money as is annexed to our respective names, without any hesitation or demur whatever, unto such person or persons as shall hereafter be nominated for the purpose of receiveing the said subscription money and to see the said work carried on and compleated. And we flatter ourselves that evry married man will use the most persuasive and evry other means to induce his wife to a strict compliance with that duty so incumbent upon them, that so the Almighty may look down in mercy upon us, and send the Redeemer to Zion in our days. Amen, so be it.

Philadelphia, 21st May, 1784.

Rosh Hodesh Sivan (the first of Sivan), 5544.

By 1786, the mikvah had been erected and placed under the supervision of the zealous Josephson.

Manuel Josephson Writes a Letter to George Washington²

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 second 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 1790, 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".

Manuel Josephson died on 30 January 1796 and is buried in the Mikveh Israel Spruce St. cemetery. His wife, Rachel died on the same Hebrew date, 20 Shebat, a year later and is buried beside him.

¹ This material is taken from the **American Jewish Archives**, Volume XXVII, November, 1975 No. 2, pages 220 – 222.

² This material is taken from [Mark I. Wolfson, Mikveh Israel History Blog, www.mikvehisraelhistory.com, Manuel Josephson \(1729-1796\), 2013.](#)