

American Jewish History 101

Things Most People Never Learn in School

Faculty Forum 10/17/07

Names: Aaron Lopez, Dr. Samuel Nunez, David Machado, Rebecca Mercado Phillips, Louis Moses Gomez, David Gomez, Benjamin Gomez, Isaac Leeser, Abraham I. Abrahams, Raskas, Gratz, Jacob Mordecai, Asser Levy, Jacob Barsimson, Rabbi Abraham Rice, Rabbi Dr. Bernard Drachman, Harry Fischel, Gershom Kursheedt, etc.

Places: Recife, Curacao, Suriname, Nevis, Savannah, Philadelphia, Richmond, New Orleans, Warrenton, NC, Jamaica, Newport, St. Louis, etc.

Only thing that I know learned in yeshiva about American Jewish history is that Chayim Salomon financed the Revolution. Sorry, may not be true.

I. Appreciate the opportunity to again speak at a Faculty Forum

How was the lecture? Ask the students, not me. Invited back indication that I am doing something right or you people are masochists.

II. Became interested in early American Jewish history – focus observance

A. Most of literature – Jews who did this or that, not about their adherence to Yiddishkeit

B. JHS exhibit – Aaron Lopez, Rebecca Gratz: no mention that both were Shomer Shabbos

Israel Baer Kursheedt (1766 – 1852)

Sources: Asmonean and The Occident (Isaac Leeser) 1852

I. Early American Jewry – no ordained rabbis stayed here from 1654 until 1840

A. Rabbi Abraham Rice – 1840 Found Chaos

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

C. Recife, Brazil 1630 – 1654. 1642 imported religious officials from Amsterdam

D. So bad that many European communities would not accept a Get or gayrus from America

II. One Talmud Chocham here who came before 1800 – IBK

III. 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.

IV. 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

V. 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

VI. 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 ¹	4,000	2.5
1750	300 ²	13,000	2.3
1794	350 ³	33,000	1.1
1809	450 ⁴	96,000	0.5
1815	350 ⁵		
1820	450 ⁶	123,000	0.4
1825	500 ⁷	166,000	0.3
1836	2,000 ⁸	270,000	0.7
1840	7,000 ⁹	312,000	2.2
1842	10,000 ¹⁰		
1846	12,000 ¹¹	371,000	3.2
1850	16,000 ¹²	515,000	3.1
1855	30,000 ¹³	629,000	4.7
1859	40,000 ¹⁴		

VII. 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)

VIII. 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)

IX. 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.

X. Richmond, VA – 1812-1824

A. Chazzan

B. Isaac Leeser, forefront of everything Jewish in 19th 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.

XII. Return to NY – family of 11 with 9 children

A. 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)

XIII. 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 19th 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.’”

V. Son Gershom Kursheedt – Judah Touro, New Orleans

VI. Nevis

The sister islands of the Federation of St. Kitts and Nevis lie about 225 miles southeast of Puerto Rico in the Leeward Islands in the Eastern Caribbean.

A. Charlestown, Nevis was central port, sugar, etc.

B. Jews there by 1677 – small, 17 households

C. Forgotten Jewish community – Dr. Malcolm Stern, historian, pleasure cruise in 1957. Jewish cemetery

D. Synagogue, Jewish school

E. Alexander Hamilton - “It is unclear if the school was in the synagogue or in a separate building. Curiously enough, we know of the existence of a Jewish school through some of the biographies of Alexander Hamilton, born in Nevis. Hamilton's mother, Rachel Faucett, after her separation from her Danish-Jewish husband John Michal Lavien, cohabited with a Scotsman, James Hamilton, in Nevis and gave birth to Alexander. ‘The Anglican Church could not offer full acceptance of the situation... (and) denied Alexander membership or education in the church school. He was enrolled in a private school on Nevis taught by a Jewish head mistress and... soon was fluent in Hebrew and French.’”

“His son later related that ‘rarely as he alluded to his personal history, he mentioned with a smile his having been taught to

repeat the Decalogue in Hebrew, at the school of a Jewess, when so small that he was placed standing by her side upon a table.'

“Perhaps from this exposure at an impressionable age, Hamilton harbored a lifelong reverence for Jews. In later years, he privately jotted on a sheet of paper that the ‘progress of the Jews...from their earliest history to the present time has been and is entirely out of the ordinary course of human affairs. Is it not then a fair conclusion that the cause also is an extraordinary one - in other words, that it is the effect of some great providential plan?’ Later on, in the heat of a renowned legal case, Hamilton challenged the opposing counsel: ‘Why distrust the evidence of the Jews? Discredit them and you destroy the Christian religion....’

VII. Raskas Family of St. Louis

A. In 1882 Sholom Yitzchok [Isaac] and [Shifra] Rivka Raskas immigrated from Kovno, Lithuania, to St. Louis to join members of Mrs. Raskas’s Sarasohn family.

B. Dairy – Cholov Yisroel

C. Sent two sons to Slabodka Yeshiva in 1900 - Yudel (Julius) and Louis (Chaim Shabatsai Lev). Lewis was 12 at the time!

D. Louis went from Slabodka to Radin - Married Ruth Poupko, worked as a pharmacist

E. 1914 – called home to St. Louis, had to stay, could not return.

F. Wife and two children in Europe - no contact during WW I.

G. After WW I, she wanted to stay in Radin, he could not leave family business in St. Louis

H. Choice – divorce or go to America. Arrived in 1920

I. Pillars of Jewish community

K. Ruth and Louis developed business into most successful dairy – Raskas Dairy

L. From 1929 – 1930 Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Schneersohn, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, came to America and visited many Jewish communities throughout the country. While in St. Louis, it was Ruth Raskas who prepared the food that he ate.

Just surface of what there is to know.

VIII. Rabbi Chaim Tzvi Sneersohn (1833 – 1881)

Harold Sharfman, in "The First Rabbi" writes:

That year, (1870, HT) there arrived in America, a unique personality, a Jerusalemite, a Judean diplomat without portfolio, who became an American citizen before returning to the Land of Israel. He was Hayyim Zevi Sneersohn, a grand-grandson of Shneur Zalman, Rabbi of Liadi, the founder of Chabad Chasidism.

Reb Chayim Tzvi was the great grandson of the Alter Rebbe. He had immigrated to then-Palestine with his mother in 1840 (aged 8?) and was recognized as a prodigy. By 1860 he was traveling to the Far East and as far as Australia to raise funds for the poor of Israel.

In 1869 met with President Ulysses S. Grant.

Sharfman continues:

In May 1870 he traveled to Cincinnati, where he told audiences that he felt he could discern the finger of G-d pointing to a day "not far distant, he hoped, when the great deliverance would take place and the land [of Israel] be restored to the Jewish people."

"He stressed the need to purchase land and erect buildings, because the restoration would not be accomplished just by the word of G-D. He pointed out that Abraham too, bought land, even though it had been divinely promised to him."

He had one son, Moshe, no grandchildren are known. He passed away in South Africa in 1881-1882 as a young man, while raising funds for the Needy of Israel.



רבי חיים צבי שניאורסון
(תקצ"ד—תרמ"ב)

The Rabbi was dressed in his national and official costume, a white robe over a long yellow vest, and wore a red fez. (The New York Times, February 19, 1869)