

# Glimpses Into American Jewish History

## *Bris Mila* During Colonial Times

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Since the time of Avraham *Aveinu*, Jews have observed the mitzva of having their sons circumcised on the eighth day after birth. During the Fifteenth, Sixteenth, and Seventeenth Centuries, “New Christian” men living on the Iberian Peninsula and in other countries under the influence of the Inquisition could not maintain this tenet of Judaism. To do so was almost the equivalent of committing suicide, since anyone found circumcised by the Inquisitional authorities would most likely be burned at the stake. Indeed, it was common practice for those who managed to escape the Inquisition and arrive in America to have themselves and their sons *mald* shortly after their arrival. More often than not, these circumcisions were performed when the refugees reached adulthood. Despite the risk and pain that a *bris* entails for adult men, New Christians, whose goal was to live fully according to the faith of their ancestors, underwent this operation.

The proper observance of *mila* as well as the other precepts of Judaism requires the support of competent religious functionaries. *Shochtim*, *mohellim*, and Rabbonim are all needed if Jews are to live a truly Jewish life. “Most Jewish functionaries of the colonial era were laymen. While an occasional rabbi [*hakham* to the Sephardim] found his way to these shores, few remained. The Jewish communities were too small, and often too struggling, to support professional clergy. As congregations became established and synagogues were built, the demand for ritual functionaries grew. The reader, or *chazzan*, who knew the ritual chants, became especially important.”<sup>1</sup>

While it is true that any observant Jewish man with the proper knowledge and skill can perform a *bris*, having one’s son circumcised in Colonial times was not easy for those who did not live in one of the few cities with “substantial” Jewish populations such as New York (with only about 300 Jews as late as 1790). Below is a description of the activities of an Eighteenth Century *mohel*, and what it took for one father to get his son circumcised.

### **Abraham Isaac Abrahams and the Bris of Josy Lopez**

Aaron Lopez (1731 – 1783) was a Portuguese refugee from the Inquisition who settled in Newport, RI, where he lived a completely observant life. (For information on the life of Lopez see the article **Aaron Lopez, Colonial American**

**Merchant Prince** that appeared in the \_\_\_\_\_ 2005 issue of the Jewish Press page \_\_\_\_ [www.jewishpress.com/](http://www.jewishpress.com/) .) We are not sure when Lopez's son Joseph was born. It was probably in 1756, but it may have been earlier. In any case, at the time of his birth the small Jewish community of Newport did not have a *mohel*. "Sometime during the summer of 1756 Aaron wrote to Abraham Isaac Abrahams (1720-1796) of New York and urged that rarest of eighteenth-century Americans, a Jew of Lithuanian descent, to undertake Joseph's circumcision. The Newporter may have previously favored others with that request, only to be disappointed; we do not know."<sup>2</sup> Abrahams was "the best known circumciser in New York during the 1750's. Like many fellow-Jews of his generation, Abrahams 'doubled in brass,' for he was a tobacconist, a distiller, a schoolteacher, a shopkeeper, and a synagogal precentor, as well as a mohel. Apparently he did a good job in performing the Abrahamitic rite, for his services were in constant demand. When summoned to add meritorious deeds to his credit by initiating young Israelites into the faith, he traveled into Westchester County, Long Island, to New Jersey, and to Connecticut. One of his trips to Long Island brought him to a prison where a Jewish debtor was incarcerated. The circumcision ceremony and the feast were held in the jail so that the father could participate. Five years later Abrahams was called back to the jail for the circumcision of another of his incarcerated friend's offspring. Clearly the imprisonment could not have been too onerous if the father was accorded the privilege of exercising his rights and prerogatives as a husband."<sup>3</sup>

"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."<sup>4</sup>

Abrahams replied on August 8, 1756 to Aaron Lopez's request that he *mal* his son. He wrote:

Mr. Aaron Lopez,  
S'r:

I was out of town last Monday or shou'd answer'd your favour pr. post. Am much oblig'd for your kind congratulations and wishes [on the birth of my son, Isaac].

I take it as a great honour in your presenting me with the circumcising your son. Shou'd been glad it had been sooner on acc't of my [ap]prentice being out of his time and gone and [this] will make it difficult

for me to go just now. And another reason, my cousin Manuel [Emanuel Abrahams] and self have enter'd in the business of distilling and tobacco and manufacture. However, if I can possibly come in a little while hence, will gladly do it as nothing would be more pleasure than to see my good friends at your place which I really long to do. In my next, will be more particular as to my coming. Till then I am, with respect, s'r,

Your very hum'le ser't,

Abr'm I. Abrahams

My spouse joins her compliments to you, spouse, and family.<sup>5</sup>

"Abrahams was, however, no more particular in his next letter, dated two weeks later, August 25, and Aaron could not have been much encouraged by it. He was 'sorry to tell' Aaron that his business still detained him in New York, and he could not say when it might be possible for him to come. Perhaps Aaron would consider employing someone else: 'Doctr Marks is releas'd out of goal [jail]. Believe he would willingly go if you was to write him. Think he gladly go.' About two weeks later, on September 9, Abrahams wrote again that he hoped to give Aaron 'a final answer' in a few days. Once more he mentioned Dr. Marks: 'Don't doubt he'll willingly go.'

"Perhaps Aaron had little confidence in the erstwhile prisoner, who had probably been jailed for nothing more heinous than debt. Or perhaps 'Doctor' Marks was not as willing to go as Abrahams had assumed. It may even have happened that Marks did not remain out of jail long enough to set out for Newport. At all events, little Joseph remained uncircumcised until the following February, when Abrahams did at length find it possible to undertake the journey to Newport. The New Yorker then recorded in his registry of circumcisions:

3. Sundry Feby 12: 1757  
Moses Lopez's son Aaron
4. and Aaron Lopez his son  
Joseph at Rhode Island.

He added in Hebrew, 'Sunday 13th Shebat 5517 Aaron son of Moses Lopez and on the same day Joseph son of Aaron Lopez.' During the same visit Moses' newborn son, named Aaron in good Sephardic fashion for his uncle, was circumcised as well. Writing to the Newporters from Stamford, Connecticut, some weeks later on his way back to New York, the mohel asked to 'have the pleasure of a few lines from you all with good news from all your good families.' Abrahams must have felt warmly attached to his Newport host; on at least two further occasions he concluded business letters to Aaron with the request, 'Pray kiss my dear boy Josy for my sake.'"<sup>6</sup>

Such were some of the difficulties encountered by Colonial Jews who wanted to initiate their sons into the covenant of Avraham. Despite these obstacles, they

did their best to continue the religion of their ancestors and pass it on to their offspring. In a real sense they laid the foundations for those who came to the United States after them by showing that in the face of what appeared to be insurmountable obstacles, one could still maintain one's Yiddishkeit.

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<sup>1</sup> **Two Jewish Functionaries in Colonial Pennsylvania**, Malcolm H. Stein, American Jewish Historical Society, reproduced in the Jewish Experience in America, Ktav Publishing House, New York, 1969, pages 120-121.

<sup>2</sup> **Lopez of Newport, Colonial American Merchant Prince**, Stanley F. Chyet, Wayne State University Press, 1970, page 32.

<sup>3</sup> **On Love, Marriage, Children ... And Death, Too** Jacob R. Marcus, Society of Jewish Bibliophiles, 1965, pages 36 - 37.

<sup>4</sup> **Early American Jewry**, Volume 1, Jacob Rader Marcus, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1951, page 79.

<sup>5</sup> **Lopez of Newport**, page 32 and **On Love, Marriage, Children ... And Death, Too**, page 37.

<sup>6</sup> **Lopez of Newport**, pages 32 – 33.