

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part --)

Chazzan Jacques Judah Lyons (1813 – 1877)

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Introduction

From 1654, when the first Jews arrived in North America, until 1840, when the first Orthodox ordained rabbi, Rav Abraham Rice, settled in Baltimore, American Jewry was led by Chazzonim and Baalei Batim (private individuals) who had better than average Torah educations. These men did their best to fill the void in rabbinical leadership that characterized American Jewish life until the last few decades of the nineteenth century. One such congregational leader was Jacques Judah Lyons, who served as the Chazzan of New York's Spanish-Portuguese Congregation Shearith Israel for almost four decades.

Biographical Sketch

Jacques Judah Lyons was born in the city of Surinam,¹ Dutch Guiana, on Menahem [Av] 29, 5573 (August 25, 1813). His father, Judah Eleazar Lyons, and his mother, Mary Asser Lyons, who before her marriage was Mary Asser Levy, were born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and there they were married. In the early part of the last century they went to Surinam, Parimaribo, Dutch Guiana. Their son Jacques received the ordinary common school education afforded by the colony, there being neither university nor college in the place. Besides Dutch (the language of the country), he spoke Hebrew, English, German and French fluently and could also read and understand Spanish.²

In 1833 at the age of 20 Jacques became one of the Chazzanim at Surinam's Congregation Neve Shalome. In 1837 he left Surinam for Philadelphia. Shortly thereafter, he was offered the position of Chazzan by Congregation Beth Shalome of Richmond, VA.

His accomplishments while serving this synagogue were noteworthy. Indeed, the following piece appeared in the Richmond newspaper *The Daily Dispatch*.

The new minister thoroughly infused with his love for his faith, and armed with the divine enthusiasm of youth, at once addressed himself to the task of waking the memories of the ancient creed in the hearts of the faithless, and summoning her people again to their neglected affairs. In a brief period he had gathered the scattered flock, comforted the strong, encouraged the weak, recalled the wandered, aroused the indifferent and compacted the congregation which has

probably never been equaled in influence and respect among the dwellers of this city. For years he labored with unflagging zeal, continued success winning the devoted affection of his own people, and the sincere respect of all.³

In 1839, shortly after the death of its Chazzan Isaac B. Seixas, Congregation Shearith Israel of New York invited Lyons to apply for the position of Chazzan.

For the New Year the Richmond congregation had consented that Mr. Lyons remain in New York. On that Holy Day and on the two preceding Sabbaths Mr. Lyons conducted the services in what the trustees found to be a “dignified, impressive, and appropriate manner,” besides giving an “able and interesting discourse in commemoration of the fifty-sixth centennial of the creation.” The electors immediately approved him as hazzan at a salary of \$1,500 a year, a substantial increase over the \$1,080 finally paid Hazzan Isaac Seixas. By the middle of October he had said farewell to Richmond and he came to New York ready to assume his duties.

He was conscientious and a good hazzan. His reading of the services with his tenor and sometimes falsetto voice was most acceptable. He was somewhat tall and of dignified appearance and gracious manner. Above all, his religious sincerity and his studied courtesy to all endeared him to his congregation. In 1842, he married Grace, daughter of Seixas Nathan and Sarah Mendes Seixas. Genealogical charts would show how in the intricate pattern of the First Families of Shearith Israel he became a central figure in the midst of a group which for a long time had played a large part in guiding the affairs of the congregation.⁴

Chazzan Lyons was staunch and unyielding in his commitment to Orthodoxy at a time when Reform was making advances amongst American Jewry. Through his efforts many of his congregants remained within the fold of Orthodoxy.

His appearance was commanding, his personality magnetic, and with all his strength he was a mild-mannered man, unobtrusive and notably courteous. He swayed his flock by persuasion and affection more than by authority. As was said in one of the notices published at the time of his death, he “Truly he was the Jewish Bishop.”⁵

In addition to serving as Chazzan he was also responsible for the educational programs of the congregation. He was for a number of years the superintendent of Shearith Israel’s Polonies Talmud Torah School. In this capacity he not only directed the school staff, but also personally prepared boys for their Bar Mitzvahs. Due to his influence, many boys developed an interest in synagogue ritual and regularly attended synagogue services for the rest of their lives.

When he led services, he carefully maintained in a most dignified and respectful manner every detail of Shearith Israel’s Spanish-Portuguese liturgy.

He had a pure, clear, melodious, tenor voice, and this with his intense fervor and earnestness made his rendition of the services most effective. Indeed it often seemed to be almost dramatic, especially in the services of the Day of Atonement, (Yom Kippur) and the anniversary of the destruction of Jerusalem (Tisha be-Ab).

At his death a writer in one of the papers devoted to Jewish matters said:

Everyone has his own idea as to the part of the prayers which he considers the most solemn. For my part I always regarded Mr. Lyons as at his best at the opening of the Negilah [Neilah] on Yom Kippur when with his Talleth over his head he walked from the Reader's desk to the Ark, solemnly and deliberately opened its doors and turning to the Congregation chanted, "Elle Norah Naleelah."⁶ I think he approached and seemed to be nearer a man of God than any clergyman whom I ever saw or knew.⁷

Diarist, Historian and Scholar

Jacques Lyons was a painstaking diarist who recorded the details of his personal contacts, what occurred at synagogue services, the administration of the synagogue's business, and even the weather. These records give invaluable insight into Jewish life in New York during the 37 years he resided there.

Jacques possessed a deep interest in Jewish history. In 1854, Jacques and Rabbi Abraham de Sola of Montreal collaborated in writing *A Jewish Calendar for Fifty Years*, a book that contained a comprehensive Jewish calendar, an essay on the Jewish calendar system, as well as historical information concerning Jewish communities in the United States, Canada, and the West Indies.⁸ Prior to 1861, and continuing to the end of his life, Jacques painstakingly gathered sources and information on United States Jewish history in the hopes of publishing his findings. He made copies of some of the documents he found, and also obtained papers from old families, such as Naphtali Phillips, Isaac Phillips, Joshua Phillips, Horatio Gomez, Joseph Nones, the Pesoa, and Judah Families. His family later destroyed a portion of his papers; one cannot but think of the treasures that may have been contained therein.⁹

Chazzan Lyons passed away at the age of sixty-three on August 13, 1877, shortly before Rosh Hashanah. His funeral services were held on August 15th in Shearith Israel Synagogue.

The coffin was placed on the platform of the reading desk in the synagogue, and seven circuits were made around it as the traditional lament was chanted. No less than fifty carriages with mourners followed the remains to the burial ground in Cypress Hills.

Emma Lazarus, who was his niece [by marriage], wrote a tribute to him in which she said:

Ripe of years was he,
The priest, the good old man who wrought so well
Upon his chosen glebe [“church” land]. For he was one
Who at his seed-plot toiled through rain and sun.
Morn found him not as one who slumbereth,
Noon saw him faithful, and the restful night
Stole o'er him at his labors, to requite
The just man's service with the just man's death.¹⁰

¹ For information about the Jewish community of Surinam please see **The Jewish Community of Surinam**, by Dr. Yitzchok Levine, **The Jewish Press**, July 7, 2006, page 43.

² **Jacques Judah Lyons** *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society (1893-1961)*; 1913; 21, AJHS Journal. This article is available at no cost at <http://www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm>

³ Ibid.

⁴ **An Old Faith in the New World, Portrait of Shearith Israel, 1654 – 1954** by David and Tamar De Sola Pool, Columbia University Press, New York, 1955, page 179

⁵ **Jacques Judah Lyons** AJHS Journal 1913; 21.

⁶ The writer is referring to a piyyut sung in the Sephardic ritual for Yom Kippur. One can listen to this piyyut at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6lUUFNVXNmM&feature=related>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oDfI9dOdyyo&feature=related> High Holidays: El Nora ‘Alila – Ramon Tasat and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N6Mregs7nCI&feature=related>

⁷ **Jacques Judah Lyons** AJHS Journal 1913; 21.

⁸ This book may be downloaded at <http://www.archive.org/details/jewishcalendarfo00lyonrich>

⁹ **Jacques Judah Lyons, 1813-1877**, http://www.cjh.org/nhprc/lyons_jacques_judah.pdf

¹⁰ **An Old Faith in the New World**, page 181.