

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part --)

Dr. D. Peixotto and the New York Cholera Epidemic of 1832

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Introduction

“The occurrence of cholera is rooted in sub-Asian antiquity. Three major cholera pandemics lashed out at the United States in the nineteenth century. The pestilential movement of the disease through the urban system was rapid, and frequently masses of people fled the possibility of death to no avail. Others never knew what killed them. The recognized epidemic years of national proportions were 1832, 1849, and 1866.

“Rosenberg offers a vivid presentation of the three successive waves of the disease in New York City. New York was an international port capable of receiving cholera from dozens of maritime sources, and some of the filthiest slums in the city were adjacent to the port facilities. It was only natural for New York City to be the first to feel the impact of an epidemic, and in most instances this is apparently what happened.”¹

Dr. Peixotto’s Letter Regarding Observing Tisha B’Av

Cholera was officially recognized to be of epidemic proportions in New York City on June 26, 1832. The epidemic was at its peak in July and 3,515 out of a population of about 250,000 died. (The equivalent death toll in today’s city of eight million would exceed 100,000.) Sadly, in 1832 there were no effective treatments available for those who contracted this disease.

The relatively small Jewish community of New York was also affected by this disease. Since Tisha B’Av occurred on August 5th that year, there was concern that fasting on Tisha B’Av would negatively affect the health of the Jewish community. This led Dr. Daniel Levy Madura Peixotto to issue the following letter² which was distributed throughout the Jewish community.

New York, August 1, 1832.

Sir,

I deem it my duty to call your attention to the propriety of so modifying the observance of the Fast, which takes place on the ninth of Ab, (Sunday next,) as not to expose those who strictly keep it, to incur the pestilential disease which has been, and is still devastating our once healthy metropolis. It has been my lot every

year to be called upon to render professional assistance to one or more persons suffering under more or less severe attacks of disease, from the effects of abstinence long continued, aggravated by the operations of intense heat incident to the season. If such causes operate in healthful seasons, what may not be apprehended from them in a season like the present?

The benign spirit of our laws, if I am not much mistaken, authorises a latitude in the construction of its letter, whenever the lives, healths, or important interests of the community require it. There never was a more imperative necessity for such liberal interpretation, than exists at the present moment. It is a notorious fact that the Cholera first broke out in Smyrna among our people after their strict observance of a Fast Day.

Allow me then to suggest, that on the present occasion a slight meal, say of coffee, tea, or cocoa, with dry toast, be allowed at early rising, and a few draughts through the day of toast-water [water infused with a slice of toast], or tea. This will obviate any mischief which might otherwise result from severe abstemiousness in the first place; or secondly, from too sudden repletion occasionally indulged on the breaking of the fast.

Very respectfully,

DANIEL L. M. Peixotto, M.D.

Dr. Daniel Levy Maduro Peixotto (1800 – 1843)

Who was the physician who in 1832 issued this letter regarding not fasting on Tisha B'Av?

Dr. Daniel L. M. Peixotto was born on July 18, 1800 in Amsterdam. His father, Moses Levy Maduro Peixotto, served as Chazzan of Congregation Shearith Israel from 1816 to 1828. He refused to accept any compensation for his service, insisting that the salary and emoluments of the office go to the family of his predecessor, Gershom Mendes Seixas.

Daniel received some education in Curaçao under the direction of Professor Strebeck and came with his father to New York in 1807. He must have been a child prodigy of sorts, because he graduated from Columbia College at the age of sixteen and earned the degree of Doctor of Medicine in 1819. Later in 1825 he earned an M.A. from Columbia.

“Shortly after Peixotto’s graduation, he went to the West Indies where he remained for a few years, and then returned to New York to practice his profession. He was not only active in the practice of his profession, but interested in all movements tending to its advancement and development, and contributed largely thereto.”³

In 1822 Dr. Peixotto published the article “Observations on the Climate and Diseases of the Island of Curacao” in *The New York Medical and Physical Journal*, the first regular quarterly medical journal ever undertaken in the English language. The journal had been founded in the same year. He eventually became one of the journal’s editors. He was a frequent contributor to other periodicals and newspapers of the day. Later on he edited

“The True American,” advocating the election of General Andrew Jackson, and he was also connected with the *New York Mirror*.

“Peixotto married Rachel Seixas, [the daughter of Benjamin Seixas], in 1823. They had 8 children: Judith, Zipporah, Sarah, Moses Levy Maduro II, Rebecca, Benjamin Franklin, Raphael, and Miriam.”⁴ Tragically Dr. Peixotto, who was one of the foremost physicians of his day, died at the young age of 43.

Judith Salzedo Peixotto (1823 – 1881)

Dr. Peixotto’s eldest daughter, Judith Salzedo Peixotto, was a woman whose pioneering achievements during the nineteenth century are worth noting.

In 1918 a writer for the American Jewish Historical Society noted that while “To-day a goodly proportion of the teachers in the public schools of New York are Jews.... this was not always the case.” Seventy-one years earlier, Judith Peixotto, a twenty-four-year-old public school teacher of Sephardic origin, among the earliest Jewish educators in America, earned the distinction of becoming the first Jewish principal in the city of New York.

Her father’s premature death in 1843 left twenty-year-old Judith with most of the responsibility for supporting the family. That year, Judith entered the teaching profession in the New York public schools, where she and her sisters Zipporah and Sarah Naar seem to have been the only Jewish teachers.

Judith Peixotto was a teacher at the Ward School No. 10, Fourth Ward, for girls at 32 James Street from 1847 to 1850. In 1848, fourteen of her students, aged seven to sixteen, were selected to have their writing published in the *Excelsior Annual*, the student body’s annual report. The *New York Sun*, on April 15, 1850, called her “a thorough scholar and teacher” and mentioned “the great excellence of her classes.”

From 1849 to 1850, Peixotto served as principal of the Female Evening School No. 10, Fourth Ward, where students from ages twelve to fifty were instructed in literacy and rudimentary arithmetic. In 1849, she wrote to the school’s committee: “We do not speak without foundation when we tell you that from our Evening School many will go forth determined to cultivate the soil in which, we trust, seeds have been sown that will produce fruit of uncommon excellence; nor should we be surprised if among them there should be those who will become teachers, strong in mental energy, rich in an education implanted by your noble efforts, and inspired by the desire to do good.”

Peixotto’s name does not appear on the New York City Board of Education rolls after 1850. She apparently gave up teaching when she married David Solis Hays (1820–1897) at 12 Bedford Street on September 17, 1851. David Hays, originally from Pleasantville, New York, was a well-known pharmacist, and served as

treasurer of the College of Pharmacy in New York City. For several years, he and Peixotto's brother Moses operated a pharmacy business, with stores at 207 Division Street and 543 Fifth Avenue.

Judith and David Hays had eight children: Sarah Rosalie (b. 1852), Daniel Peixotto (b. 1854), Rebecca Touro (b. 1855), Benjamin Franklin (b. 1857), George Davis (b. 1859), Rachel Peixotto (b. 1861), David Solis, Jr. (b. 1863), and Cora Florence (b. 1870). Judith Peixotto Hays died on March 1, 1881, and is buried at the Shearith Israel Cypress Hills Street Cemetery in Queens, New York.⁵

¹ **The diffusion of cholera in the United States in the nineteenth century** by G. F. Pyle, **Geographical Analysis**, 1969; 1: 59 - 75

² **The Lyon Collection Volume II, Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society**, 27, 1920 pages 158 -159.

³ **Daniel L. M. Peixotto, M. D.**, by Daniel Peixotto Hays, Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society, 1918, 26, pages 219 ff.

⁴ <http://ech.case.edu/ech-cgi/article.pl?id=PDL>

⁵ **Judith Peixotto**, Jewish Women's Archive, <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/peixotto-judith>.