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DISPUTES ANTI-SEMITIC DESIGNATION

To the Editor:

I read with considerable surprise Avi Klar's characterization of Dr. Benjamin Rush as being "virulently anti-Semitic." (*Hamodia Magazine*, June 28, 2006 America's Founding Fathers and the Jews, pages 12 - 13.) Mr. Klar gives no source for what he writes, and, I believe, with good reason, because from all that I know about Dr. Rush he was anything but an anti-Semite.

Dr. Benjamin Rush (1745 - 1813) was a physician and a signer of the Declaration of Independence. He resided in Philadelphia and for some time was the physician of the large family (21 children) of Jonas (1736-1803) and Rebecca Machado (1746-1831) Phillips. The Phillipses were a very prominent observant Philadelphia Jewish family. Mrs. Phillips' mother, Tziporah (Nunez) Machado, and her father, Dr. Samuel Nunez, were Crypto-Jews who escaped to London from the Inquisition in Portugal during the first part of 18th century. In 1733 they were amongst the first group of Jews that settled in Savannah, GA. Rebecca's husband, David Machado, also escaped from Portugal. He served for some time as the Chazan of Congregation Shearith Israel, the first congregation in New York City.

Dr. Rush's relationship with the Phillips family was more than that of doctor/patient. "Dr. Rush distinguished himself from the other doctors who administered to the Phillips family, for it is known that he also interacted with the Phillips family socially. In June 1787, he accepted an invitation to attend the wedding of eighteen-year-old Rachel, the fifth child of Jonas and Rebecca, whose twin had died at the age of one." (*The Exceptional and the Mundane: A Biographical Portrait of Rebecca (Machado) Phillips, 1746 - 1831*, by Aviva Ben Ur, published in *Women and American Judaism*, Brandeis University Press, 2001, pages 60 - 61)

Dr. Rush wrote a letter to his wife about this wedding,

and it describes the ceremony in a most positive manner. In this letter he writes, "Mr. Phillips pressed me to stay and dine with the company, but business and Dr. Hall's departure, which was to take place in the afternoon, forbade it. I stayed, however, to eat some wedding cake with the guests. Upon my taking leave of the company, Mrs. Phillips put a large piece of cake into my pocket for you, which she begged I would present to you with her best compliments. She says you are an old New York acquaintance of hers." (*Letters of Benjamin Rush*, volumes I and II, edited by L. H. Butterfield Volume I 1761-1792, published by the American Philosophical Society by Princeton University Press, 1951, pages 429 - 432)

"Social interactions between Dr. Rush and the Phillips family continued into the next decade. In June 1792, Dr. Rush attended the circumcision of Aaron, perhaps the youngest Phillips child. He recorded a description of the event in his [diary]. Of the over thirty guests in attendance, the physician notes, he was the only Gentile." (*The Exceptional and the Mundane*, page 61) From the above it is quite clear that Dr. Benjamin Rush was most certainly not an anti-Semite. On the contrary, he was on good terms with the Phillipses and had great respect for the family and the Jewish rituals that he witnessed. It is a disservice to his memory to incorrectly characterize him as being "virulently anti-Semitic."

History has given us more than our share of rabid anti-Semites. Surely, there is certainly no reason to add to their numbers those Gentiles who viewed Jews positively and were on friendly terms with them.

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Response from Avi Klar

While Dr. Rush's decision to socialize with the Phillips family was certainly a wise business move (there were, after all, 23 potential patients) it certainly does not take away in any way from the fact that he was an anti-Semite.

Professor Levine is apparently unaware of the fact that Dr. Rush corresponded with Thomas Jefferson on the question of whether Jews were "fit citizens for a Republic

that requires exceptional virtue." Even more sinister, he openly admitted that his only reason for supporting giving Jews rights was that the better they were treated the more likely that they would convert!

These facts are well documented in the book *Letters of Benjamin Rush* as well the book *Jews and Gentiles in Early America* by William Pencak.

Unfortunately, due to a technical error, these footnotes did not appear in the original article.