

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part --)

Gershom Mendes Seixas: America's Patriot Hazzan (Part I)

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“In 1768 the position of hazzan became vacant at Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City, and Gershom Mendes Seixas, at the remarkably young age of 23, was unanimously elected to the post. Seixas was born in New York in 1745 or 1746 (the records are unclear), the son of Isaac Seixas. Legend has it that his grandfather was a Portuguese Marrano, Miguel Pacheco da Silva, who, upon realizing that the office of the Inquisition had discovered his criminal heterodoxy, prevailed upon one of his loyal servants to help smuggle him out of Inquisitorial reach. After escaping from his home in 1725, he fled to London, where he found a fairly large Jewish community. In London he reverted to his pre-Marrano name of Abraham Mendes Seixas and was elected to membership in the *Mahamat*, or ruling board of the Sephardic community.”¹

“Abraham's second son, Isaac Mendes Seixas, was born in Lisbon in 1709, but at an early age he escaped from his Marrano life in Portugal and by way of Barbados came to New York in 1730 (or 1738).”² The Jewish community at this time consisted of a mere 250 to 300 people and was dominated by Jews of Spanish/Portuguese origin that proudly referred to themselves as members of *La Nacion*. A few Ashkenazic Jews were also part of the Jewish community at this time.

In 1741 Isaac married London born Rachel Levy (1719 – 1797), the oldest daughter of Moses Levy. The Levys were a prominent New York Ashkenazic family. This caused uproar among New York's Sephardic elite, who looked down upon Ashkenazim as their social inferiors. Isaac's uncle Rodrigo Pachero made it clear that he was “displeased” with his nephew's marriage into an Ashkenazic family. Since he was not the only member of the New York Spanish/Portuguese Jewish community to feel this way, Isaac did not invite any of them to his wedding!

“Seven children besides Gershom were born to this marriage. The first child, Abraham (born 1741), and the last, Raphael, died in infancy. The others, who lived out their normal span of life, left a notable impress on the pages of American Jewish history. Gershom was the fourth of the children. His younger brother Benjamin and his younger sister Grace (Grace Nathan) were active and picturesque personalities. His older brother, Moses (1744-1809), was one of the organizers of the Bank of Rhode Island in Newport and was first Grand Master of Masons in Rhode Island. It was this Moses Seixas who as president of the Newport Jewish community in 1790 addressed to George Washington an historic letter of welcome to that town.

“Gershom's younger brother, Abraham (1750-1799), who married Richea Hart of Charleston, served throughout the Revolution, first as Lieutenant in the Georgia Continental Line and then as Captain in the South Carolina Militia. His older sister, Abigail (1742-1819), at the age of seventeen became the wife of Hillel Judah at New Aberdeen.

“History does not tell of the games or growing pains of these boys and girls constituting the family of Isaac Mendes Seixas in their New York home before their merchant father moved to Newport, R.I., where he died during the Revolution at the age of 71 on November 3, 1780. Nor does history inform us how Gershom received his training to become the religious leader of the New York Jewish community. There was no rabbinic seminary, nor even a rabbi in the United States at the time. It must have been his own spirit, his constant attendance at synagogue services, the Jewish life in his home, and what he learned from New York's Hazan Joseph Jessurun Pinto, that qualified him by the summer of 1768, when he was twenty-three years old, to present himself as a candidate for the position of hazan of the community.”³

Pinto, who was originally from Amsterdam, had come in 1759 from London at the age of thirty to serve as Congregation Shearith Israel's Hazzan. Gershom, who was then fourteen, learned from Pinto how to conduct synagogue services and gained from him a fairly advanced knowledge of Hebrew as well as familiarity with Halacha. In 1765 Pinto had to return to Europe for financial reasons. From 1766 to 1768 Isaac da Silva served as Hazzan. However, there were many who were dissatisfied with his performance and a replacement was sought. Gershom Seixas applied for the position on July 3, 1768 and the following Sunday afternoon, da Silva was discharged and Gershom was unanimously elected as Hazzan of Congregation Shearith Israel. He served in this position for almost fifty years, until his passing on July 2, 1816.

”The young hazzan took to his job quickly and well. One year after his appointment we encounter records of a trip to Lancaster, Pennsylvania in fulfillment of his duties, possibly to circumcise a child. Although he was quite happy with the work he was doing, the young man was dissatisfied with his annual salary, a mere eighty pounds. The additional perquisites of office, firewood and the option to live in congregation-owned quarters, did little to assuage his growing needs. In fact, a raise was necessary to facilitate his impending marriage. Hence, in January of 1775, he applied for a raise in pay which set off the first of a long number of haggles over salary. Seixas actually had to quit for a full month before the trustees of the congregation compromised with his demands. On March 29, his salary was raised to 120 pounds plus the usual perquisites of office.”⁴

On September 6, 1775, at the age of thirty, Gershom married Elkalah (or Elkaley), the daughter of Abraham and Sarah Myers-Cohen, who brought her husband a meager dowry of only 200 pounds. Elkalah was born in 1749, nine years after her father was granted letters of naturalization. Abraham Myers-Cohen was of Ashkenazic origin and eked out a living as a struggling storekeeper. He died before Elkalah's sixteenth birthday.

“During the ten years of their married life she had to establish for him no less than four homes. The first was their New York home in 1775. Then came their home in exile in Stratford in 1776, and their home in Philadelphia in 1780. Finally she set up their home once more in New York in 1784 before she died a little over a year later “in the 36th Year of her Age.” In those ten years she established not only his physical homes but also his family with four children to whom she gave birth, Isaac (born 1776), Sarah Abigail (born 1778), Rebecca (born 1780), and Benjamin (born 1783).”⁵

Isaac died in infancy, so when Elkalah passed away in 1785 Gershom was left to care for three small children. A little more than a year later Gershom married Hannah (Annie/Nancy) Manuel (1766 – 1856). Hannah gave birth to twelve children, one of whom died in infancy. Since fourteen of Gershom’s children reached adulthood, his home resounded with children’s and grandchildren’s voices. “Simple, modest, altogether unassuming, Gershom spent his happiest hours with his ever-growing family who were never far from his thoughts.”⁶

Next month’s column will deal with Reverend Gershom Mendes Seixas’ activities during and after the Revolutionary War.

¹ **Gershom Mendes Seixas: His Religious “Calling,” Outlook and Competence**, Thomas Kessner, *American Jewish Historical Quarterly (1961-1978)*; Sep 1968-Jun 1969; 58, 1-4; AJHS Journal pg. 445.

² **Portraits Etched in Stone, Early Jewish Settlers, 1682 – 1831**, David De Sola Pool, Columbia University Press, New York, 1952, page 346.

³ Ibid., pages 346 – 347.

⁴ **Gershom Mendes Seixas: His Religious “Calling,” Outlook and Competence**, page 551.

⁵ **Portraits Etched in Stone, Early Jewish Settlers, 1682 – 1831**, page 350.

⁶ **The Seixas-Kursheedts and the Rise of Early American Jewry**, Kenneth Libo and Abigail Kursheedt Hoffman, Bloch Publishing Company, Inc., 2001, page 25.