

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part --)

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

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Note: All quotations below are from **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. 444 ff.

Last month's column sketched the background of American born Gershom Mendes Seixas (1745 – 1816), who became Hazzan of Congregation Shearith Israel in 1768 at the young age of 23. In 1775 Gershom married his first wife Elkalah Myers Cohen, who passed away ten years later.

“As Seixas and his wife began to settle down, the Revolution broke out with actual hostilities in New York. The Jewish community, composed mainly of merchants, shared the grievances of their fellow traders (many Jewish merchants signed the non-importation agreement). Revolutionary feeling was intensified by revolutionary rhetoric which described England as an oppressive European power hindering personal liberties, a description applicable to the countries of the Inquisition. With the coming of the British, Jews, like all New Yorkers, had to decide whether to stay in New York and acquiesce in British rule or abandon their property and homes and leave the state in patriotic loyalty to the principles of the Revolution. In this dilemma Gershom Seixas rose to lead his fellow congregants. He identified with the Revolution on an elemental level. It was a movement that would benefit the Jew and a movement that accorded with the liberal views of the era. A short eight years after achieving his position of hazzan, Gershom Seixas influenced his congregation to make a strong show of support for the Revolution.

“The decision to leave New York must have been particularly difficult for Gershom Seixas. As the religious leader of his community, he had to make the decision to abandon, and thus split, the congregation and to close down the synagogue. For all practical purposes this meant the destruction of the New York Jewish community. Furthermore, he had to take responsibility for the books and scrolls and other religious portables and for leaving the Jewish house of worship to the uncertainties of a war situation, (uncertainty justified when two British soldiers burned holes in two sacred scrolls that had been left behind). On another level it was a decision that meant a great deal of hardship for him in view of his meager finances and, more importantly, of a family tragedy that resulted from the loss of Elkalah's infant child just three weeks before the move from New York.”

Despite these difficulties Reverend Seixas preferred not to remain in a city under British control, and he and his wife moved to his father's home in Stratford, Connecticut, where

they resided from 1776 to 1780. His favorite daughter, Sarah Abigail, the future Mrs. I. B. Kursheedt¹, was born there in 1778. There was no nucleus of a Jewish congregation in Stratford, and Gershom probably earned his living by going into business, as did most of the other patriotic refugee Jews who had relocated to Connecticut.

However, he did not completely abandon those Jews who had remained in New York City. For example, in March 1777 he went to New York to officiate at the wedding of Samuel Lazarus and Fannie Cushell, and in 1779 he performed the same service for the Hessian soldier Alexander Zuntz and Rachel Abrahams.

When his father died in 1780 Gershom moved to Philadelphia, bringing with him the property of the New York congregation which he had carefully guarded during his four year stay in Connecticut. There he was offered and accepted the position of hazzan of Congregation Mickve Israel. This congregation first met in the upper story of a rented building. In 1782 Mickve Israel built a new building which Gershom dedicated. In his dedication speech he called for G-d's protection for the Revolution and for Him to impart wisdom to the revolutionaries and their supporters.

“In September, 1783, Gershom Seixas along with Haym Salomon, Simon Nathan, Asher Myer, and Bernard Gratz addressed the Council of Censors of Philadelphia on the statutory requirement of what they believed was a discriminatory oath for holding the office of assemblyman. The Philadelphia law called for swearing belief in the divine inspiration of the Old and New Testaments, and these men protested that it precluded observing Jews from holding office.”

The British evacuated New York on November 25, 1783, and Congress demobilized the American army shortly thereafter. The Revolution was over, and many of the Jews who had left New York to avoid British rule returned to the city. Congregation Shearith Israel was eager for its hazzan to return and wrote to Gershom in December asking if he intended to return and lead their Congregation. On January 28, 1784, after some negotiations regarding salary and other compensation, Gershom was reelected as hazzan by the members of Congregation Shearith Israel. He was to receive a yearly salary of 200 pounds, an allocation of six cords of firewood, matzah for Pesach, some other perquisites, and funds to defray his travel expenses from Philadelphia. Gershom was to take office on Rosh Chodesh Nissan, March 23, 1784.

When Mickve Israel learned that Gershom was leaving them, its congregants protested, asking that his departure be delayed. However, in a strongly worded letter, the *Parnas* of Shearith Israel made it clear that Gershom's first loyalties were to them, and Gershom returned to New York, although not by Rosh Chodesh Nissan.

Upon his return to New York, Reverend Seixas found that most of its Jews were struggling financially to recover from the crippling years of British occupation. During the winter of 1785 things got so bad that Shearith Israel actually considered discharging its hazzan, shochet, shames, and clerk within the next few months. A special appeal was made and additional funds were raised, so that these employees of the Congregation were

not dismissed. Nonetheless, more often than not they were not paid on time. Gershom remained loyal to the Congregation despite the fact that in some years his meager salary was reduced. In short, he was constantly financially strapped, and the pressures increased over the years as his family grew. (Recall that from his first and second wives he has a total of 14 children to support!) At times he received additional income through his activities as a teacher, a shochet, and a mohel, but even with this income he was just barely able to get along financially.

The War of 1812 affected the finances of New York's Jews negatively and, of course, those of the hazzan of Shearith Israel. In 1813 he reported that "Provisions are dear; the necessaries of life almost an impossibility." In 1814 Seixas wrote, "Business is at a standstill, people calculate upon an armistice." Yet, his family never knew acute want. In one way or another he managed to maintain a basic standard of life while never wavering in his loyalty to Congregation Shearith Israel.

To be continued.

¹ For information about him see **America's First Torah Scholar: Israel Baer Kursheedt, The Jewish Press**, February 7, 2007, page 1. This article is available at <http://www.jewishpress.com/indepth/front-page/americas-first-torah-scholar-israel-baer-kursheedt/2007/02/07/>