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AMERICA'S FIRST TORAH SCHOLAR: ISRAEL BAER KURSHEEDT

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Editor's Note: The following article is based on "Israel B. Kursheedt" by Dr. M. J. Raphall, The Asmonean, May 7, 1852; "Mr. Israel Baer Kursheedt" by Isaac Leiser, The Occident and the Jewish Advocate, 1852 (10); and "The Seixas-Kursheedts and the Rise of Early American Jewry" by Kenneth Libo and Abigail Kursheedt Hoffman, Bloch Publishing Company, 2001).



One of the factors that hindered the proper early development of Judaism in America was a lack of qualified religious functionaries. From 1654 until the middle of the 19th century the religious needs of the few small Jewish communities in North America were served by a variety of layman, "reverends" and cantors, few with anything more than a basic yeshiva education.

Indeed, the first ordained Orthodox rabbi did not arrive in the United States until 1840. Rav Avraham Rice found religious chaos in the Jewish community of Baltimore where he served.

One man who came to America just before the turn of the 18th century did possess an excellent yeshiva education. Israel Baer Kursheedt (known to many as IBK) was the first Ashkenazic talmid chacham to make his way to these shores. His knowledge, leadership, and sage counsel were of inestimable value to the Jewish communities in which he resided.

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Little is known of Kursheedt's early life. He was born in Singhofen, Germany, near the Rhine on the 4th day of Pesach in 5526 (April 6, 1766). His father passed away when he was young, and his mother relocated to the village of Kurscheidt, near Konigswinter, where he spent his childhood. At the time many German Jews did not have family names, so Israel Baer took as his surname the name of this village.

His exceptional intellectual abilities induced friends of his family to send him to the yeshiva of Rabbi Nosson Adler in

Frankfurt am Main. Rav Adler, a celebrated Talmudist and kabbalist, attracted a number of excellent students who later became well-known rabbonim, the most famous being the Chasam Sofer.

Among Kursheedt's fellow students were two who particularly distinguished themselves and attained considerable eminence: Rav Avraham Bing and Rav Wolf Heidenheim. Rav Bing became chief rabbi of Wurzburg; his students included Rav Jacob Ettlinger, Rav Nathan Marcus Adler, *Chacham* Isaac Bernays and Rav Seligman Baer Bamberger. Rav Heidenheim is known for his many literary publications, including a Hebrew commentary on and a German translation of the *machzor*.

Rav Adler held these three students - Bing, Heidenheim and Kursheedt - in equal esteem. Rav Adler liked to say that Reb Avraham was a *charif* (acute logician), Reb Wolf a *medakdek*

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(grammarians and philologists), and Reb Yisroel a *chacham*, a wise man accomplished in Torah learning.

Kursheedt's studies in Rav Adler's yeshiva were interrupted by the outbreak of the French Revolution and General Adam Custine's invasion of Frankfurt in 1792. He was forced to find some means of earning a livelihood and in some way or another was able to obtain a contract to supply the Prussian army with provisions. It's quite amazing that this young man, whose life had been spent in a cloistered yeshiva environment, was able to navigate the inherent dangers of doing business during wartime and deal with genteel military officials.

Coming to America

In 1795, as a result of the peace of Basil, the Prussian army on the Rhine was disbanded and IBK's military-related business endeavors came to a close. He decided he would leave Germany, a country where Jews were treated as less than second-class citizens, and immigrate to England where he would try his luck in business.

In 1796 he traveled to Hamburg with the intention of going on to England. While in Hamburg, however, he heard of an American sloop, the *Simonhoff*, which was preparing to sail to Boston. A friend had told him that Boston had a burgeoning Jewish community, so he changed his plans and booked passage on the ship.

Kursheedt may not have realized the difficulty of crossing the Atlantic in this relatively small (70- to 80-ton) one-mast ship. The trip took 70 days and Kursheedt, who spoke virtually no English at the time, was probably the lone Jew making the voyage. He was fortunate that the captain of the ship became kindly disposed to him and did his best to make his time on board as comfortable as possible.

Kursheedt was at sea during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. He often related how on *erev* Yom Kippur he managed to communicate to the captain the nature of his observance of this holy day. He had the captain get an English Bible, and, using the Arabic numbering of the chapters and verses to find those dealing with Yom Kippur, he pointed them out. In this way the captain came to understand what he was doing. Kursheedt also used this device to get the captain to understand and assist him with some of his other religious needs.

When Kursheedt arrived in Boston sometime toward the end of 1796, he discovered that there was no synagogue. Indeed, the entire Jewish community consisted of one family. Disappointed, he stayed only a short time in Boston before deciding to give New York a try:

Israel Baer's first impressions of Jewish life in New York must have left him crestfallen. In material terms, the Jewish community consisted of a synagogue building on Mill Street dating back to 1730, an adjoining *hebra* [meeting place and schoolhouse], the minister's house, and a cemetery on Chatham Square. Its upkeep was the cause of frequent outbreaks [disagreements] among the trustees of Shearith Israel; until 1825, it would be the only Jewish cemetery in New York City. They [the Jews of New York] knew little of Jewish traditions. Neglect, apathy, and petty bickering were pervasive. (*The Seixas-Kursheedts*)

It did not take Kursheedt long to make the acquaintance of Rev. Gershom Mendes Seixas, who served as the *chazzan* of Congregation Shearith Israel for almost fifty years. Born two decades before Kursheedt and raised in New York, Seixas lacked Kursheedt's educational background. Recognizing the benefits of Israel Baer's years of intensive Torah study, Seixas increasingly turned to him for advice in resolving questions regarding Jewish law. Kursheedt was Ashkenazic while Seixas came from Sephardic stock, but that difference in background proved no detriment to their relationship.

At that time, and for many years afterward, Kursheedt was the only real rabbinical scholar to be found anywhere in North America. On January 18, 1804, he married Sarah Abigail (Sally) Seixas, the eldest daughter of *Chazzan* Seixas. Sarah was Seixas's favorite child and Kursheedt became his favorite son-in-law.

In New York, Kursheedt went into business:

He had his share both of prosperity and of adversity, like all other men. But the one never rendered him arrogant, the other could not cast him down. There were in his character two remarkable traits that still kept him upright and enabled him to preserve the serenity of his mind: trust in God and good opinion of men. He was incapable of believing in the bad intentions of others. And though he, more than once or twice, suffered severely from his confidence being abused, he could not be persuaded that the cause was other than imprudence or folly on the part of those through whom he suffered. His trust in God was firm and not to be shaken, as it sprang from his profound conviction of the truth of his religion and consequently in the wisdom and goodness of Providence. (The Asmonean)

Communal Activities

As a man with a growing family, it was natural for IBK to become involved in the Jewish education offered by Yeshivat Minhat Arab, which Shearith Israel had established in 1731. He believed strongly that Jewish education was "the first thing that ought to be pursued in life." With this goal he worked diligently to expand the curriculum of this yeshiva. In 1808 IBK was appointed to a committee of six to draft a detailed proposal and regulations for the reorganization of the yeshiva into a real Jewish day school for boys and girls. The school remained active until 1822. Its aims, as articulated by Israel Baer, were to: 1) instruct students in religion and morality, 2) make sure their actions are in harmony with these

teachings, and 3) "impress on their minds the excellence of our belief."

In 1810, in recognition of his service to the Jewish community, IBK was elected *parnas* (president) of Shearith Israel and served for one term.

Israel Baer fought many battles at Shearith Israel; not all were victorious, especially in matters involving ingrained customs. In 1809 he and other forward-minded congregants attempted to restrict Mishe-Berakh prayers, made on behalf of individuals called to the Torah (for which it was customary to make a donation to the synagogue) to three per person. The plan was not adopted. (*The Seixas-Kursheedts*)

Richmond, Virginia

By 1812 the Kursheedts were the parents of four children. Kursheedt must have had trouble supporting his family in New York, however, because that year he relocated to Richmond, Virginia, with the hopes of finding more lucrative business opportunities in the South. Kursheedt and his family traveled by land, while his valuable library of Jewish religious books was shipped by sea. Unfortunately, that particular ship was the first prize taken by the British in the War of 1812. It was brought to Bermuda and sold. Miraculously, several years later, much of his library was returned to him. Kursheedt never knew who was responsible for this extraordinary act of kindness.

While in Richmond Kursheedt took an active part in Jewish communal affairs. He served as the third *chazzan* of Richmond's first synagogue, Kahal Kadosh Beth Shalome (Holy Congregation, House of Peace), from 1812 until 1824. While residing in Virginia, Kursheedt became acquainted with Thomas Jefferson and even visited him on more than one occasion at Monticello.

Return to New York

In 1824 the Kursheedts, now a family of 11, returned to New York where Israel Baer resided until his passing in 1852. New York's Jewish community had changed a great deal during the 12 years the Kursheedts lived in Richmond. The majority of the Jewish community was now of Ashkenazic background, and they were unhappy with the Spanish-Portuguese (Sephardic) ritual of Shearith Israel, the only synagogue in the city.

In 1825 in an attempt at compromise, Kursheedt organized a separate Ashkenaz *minyán* at the synagogue. The leaders of the congregation, however, refused to let the *minyán* continue, and Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, New York's second oldest congregation, following Ashkenazic ritual, was established that same year.

Kursheedt was active on a number of other fronts as well. He played a key role in the establishment of *Hebra Terumath Hakkodesh*, which aided the poor of Israel and on August 19, 1840, chaired a gathering of New York's Jewish community to protest the Damascus Affair: "When a Franciscan friar and his Muslim servant disappeared, the Jews of Damascus were accused of having killed them to use their blood for Jewish Passover rites. A number of Damascene Jews were arrested and tortured to make them 'confess' to the crimes. Some Jews died; even Jewish children were taken prisoner." (*The Seixas-Kursheedts*)

Last Days

In *The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York*, Hyman Grinstein writes, "Israel B. Kursheedt, whose rabbinical knowledge was undoubtedly outstanding in the city in the first half of the nineteenth century, was a retiring person who rarely went out of his way to make his influence felt in the community. When he was approached on legal or ritual problems, he would prepare an answer; occasionally he led a movement or made a suggestion. His leadership was not aggressive, nor did he leave any books as tangible monuments to his scholarship."

Another reason Kursheedt did not play a larger role in public affairs was that there were few people in America at the time who could appreciate the extent and value of his learning. Perhaps more important, he had a very marked influence on his nine children. He made sure to give them the best Jewish education he could. The result was that all married Jewish spouses (save for one who never married) and were strongly attached to Judaism. This was no small feat in light of the high rate of intermarriage in America during the first part of the 19th century.

According to his obituary in *The Asmonean*, Kursheedt was more than beloved by his family - he was almost idolized. His family devoted themselves to caring for him during the last two years of his life when he was ill and suffering. During this period he was confined to his home, and many came to visit him simply to be in the presence of a man who was a living example of a true Jewish patriarch.

He died at age 86 surrounded by family and friends. Someone present at his passing, witnessing Israel Baer's serenity of spirit, spontaneously and with great fervor declared, quoting the words of Scripture, "May I die the death of the righteous, and may my end be like his."

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