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MAINTAINING YIDDISHKEIT IN COLONIAL TIMES

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
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It was not easy to maintain tradition and religious observance in the sparsely settled American colonies. These colonies were, of course, far away from the old European centers of Jewish life and learning. Furthermore, there were very few Jews residing in America during the 17th and 18th centuries.

In 1695, New York City, considered to be a relative bastion of American Judaism, had a Jewish population of about 100. By 1750 this number had increased to about 300; by 1794 it rose to only 350. In addition, qualified religious leadership was to be found only in a few cities. The first ordained Orthodox rabbi in America, Rav Abraham Rice, did not arrive until 1840. Sadly but not surprisingly, he found total chaos in Baltimore's Jewish religious community.

Despite the almost insurmountable obstacles that stood in the way of observance, there were those who made valiant efforts to maintain Yiddishkeit to whatever extent possible.

The Franks were a prominent New York Jewish family during Colonial times. Jacob Franks came to New York in 1705, and he married Billah Abigail Levy in 1719. They were typical of Jewish families of the times in that, with very few exceptions, they were observant and resolved to continue their Jewish way of life.

Of course, "remaining loyal to the ancient traditions was not easy in the colonies where there were neither rabbis nor Jewish learning, and where Jews were outnumbered 1,000 to one." (Jewish Pioneers in America, 1492-1848, Anita Libman Lebeson, Brentano's Publishers, 1931, pages 110-111.)

In the 1740's it was extremely difficult in a place like Georgia to maintain observance. There were at most four or five Jewish householders and only two of them were "religious." One of the two families was that of the Sheftalls, headed by Benjamin Sheftall, who came to Savannah with the first Jewish settlers. Benjamin's oldest son, Mordecai, became thirteen in the spring of 1749. However, his father did not have a siddur and tefillin for him. Such religious items had to come from abroad, and war had made it very difficult for British ships to come to Georgia.

Benjamin's anguish at the thought that his son would not be properly prepared for full-fledged membership in the Jewish community is reflected in a note to his friends in England [the spelling and wording of the original has been preserved]:

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As I have received some letters five days ago from one of our relation, Samule, who writes me that you was so good as to send mee some books and other things, which I to my misfortune never have received, and as I do not no [know] which way they wear [were] sent, nor no [know] the name of the captain or the name of the ship, so I can't enquier for them. I hope your honour will soon find it out wether that ship is taken by an enemy or lost at sea.

If she is not taken nor lost, I hop your honour will let me no [know] where to inquier for them. I live [leave] your honour to guess in what grife I am in to be so

misfortenabel, my eldest son binq [being] three months ago thirteen years of age and I not to have any frauntlets [phylacteries] nor books fit for him. I won't troubel your houner with much writing, for my heart is full of grife.

No more at present, I am Your humbel servant Benjamin Sheftall Savanah in Georgia, March 1748. [1]

Mrs. Hyman Samuel (née Rebecca Alexander), whose family lived in a small town in Virginia during the last part of the 18th century, corresponded with her parents in Hamburg, Germany. Rebecca's husband, a competent craftsman, was a watchmaker and silversmith. The letters of hers that are extant are among the best descriptions we have of life on the American Jewish cultural and religious frontier. They indicate the difficulties encountered in America by those

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who wanted to remain observant Jews. Indeed, the reader cannot help but empathize with the Samuels for the Jewish isolation they experienced in the New World.

Petersburg, January 12, 1791, Wednesday, 8th [7th ?] Shebat, 5551.

Dear and Worthy Parents:

We are completely isolated here. We do not have any friends, and when we do not hear from you for any length of time, it is enough to make us sick. I hope that I will get to see some of my family. That will give me some satisfaction.

You write me that Mr. Jacob Renner's son Reuben is in Philadelphia and that he will come to us. People will not advise him to come to Virginia. When the Jews of Philadelphia or New York hear the name Virginia, they get nasty. And they are not wrong! It won't do for a Jew. In the first place it is an unhealthy district, and we are only human. God forbid, if anything should happen to us, where would we be thrown? There is no cemetery in the whole of Virginia. In Richmond, which is twenty-two miles from here, there is a Jewish community consisting of two quorums [twenty men], and the two cannot muster a quarter [quorum when needed?]. In another letter Rebecca wrote:

I hope my letter will ease your mind. You can now be reassured and send me one of the family to Charleston, South Carolina. This is the place to which, with God's help, we will go after Passover. The whole reason why we are leaving this place is because of (its lack of) Yehudishkeit.

Dear Parents, I know quite well you will not want me to bring up my children like Gentiles. Here they cannot become anything else. Jewishness is pushed aside here. There are here (in Petersburg) ten or twelve Jews, and they are not worthy of being called Jews. We have a shoet here who goes to market and buys terefah meat and then brings it home. On Rosh Hashanah and on Yom Kippur the people worshipped here without one Sefer Torah; and not one of them wore the tallit or the arba kanfot, except Hyman and my Sammy's godfather.

You can believe me that I crave to see a synagogue to which I can go. The way we live now is no life at all. We do not know what the Sabbath and the holidays are. On the Sabbath all the Jewish shops are open, and they do business on that day as they do throughout the whole week. But ours we do not allow to open. With us there is still some Sabbath. You must believe me that in our house we all live as Jews as much as we can. My children cannot learn anything here, nothing Jewish, nothing of general culture.[2]

From the above we see how difficult it was for Jews to maintain their Yiddishkeit in the New World in the 17th and 18th centuries. Yet there were those who, despite huge obstacles, did their utmost to maintain as much of the faith of their ancestors as possible. Knowing this should make us realize how fortunate we are to live in vibrant Orthodox communities where all needed religious amenities are readily available.

[1] On Love Marriage Children and Death Collected and Edited by Jacob R. Marcus, Society of Jewish Bibliophiles 1965, pages 7 and 9.

[2] Ibid., pages 42-45.

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