

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 17)

A 1797 Jewish Wedding

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Dr. Benjamin Rush (1745 – 1813), a physician and a signer of the Declaration of Independence, “was the most striking, the most impressive, and the most controversial figure in North American medicine of his day. Brilliant and well educated, he was a restless soul, impatient and impulsive, quick to make decisions and to defend them against all disagreement. Nor did he confine his attention, solely to medicine: he was interested in every phase of life about him; and he was an ardent proponent of inoculation, and later, of vaccination, against smallpox. His work on mental illnesses was the standard for a half century.”¹ Dr. Rush was a prolific letter writer,² and his letters give us keen insight into life during colonial times and after the Revolutionary War.

In 1797 Dr. Rush, who lived in Philadelphia, treated the family of Rebecca (Machado) and Jonas Phillips. (See Glimpses Part 13 http://www.jewishpress.com/page.do/17894/Glimpses_Into_American_Jewish_History_%28Part_13%29.html .) On the morning of Tuesday, June 27, 1797, Mr. and Mrs. Phillips invited Dr. Rush, who was not Jewish, to attend the wedding of their daughter, Rachel, to Michael Levy, who was from Virginia. After attending the wedding Dr. Rush wrote a letter³ to his wife, Julia, describing the *chasuna*. The reader will no doubt find it interesting to contrast the *chasuna* Dr. Rush attended with the *chasunas* of today.

“I accepted the invitation with great pleasure, for you know I love to be in the way of adding to my stock of ideas upon all subjects. At 1 o'clock the company, consisting of 30 or 40 men, assembled in Mr. Philips' common parlor, which was accommodated with benches for the purpose. The ceremony began with prayers in the Hebrew language, which were chaunted by an old rabbi and in which he was followed by the whole company. As I did not understand a word except now and then an Amen or Hallelujah, my attention was directed to the haste with which they covered their heads with their hats as soon as the prayers began, and to the freedom with which some of them conversed with each other during the whole time of this part of their worship.

“As soon as these prayers were ended, which took up about 20 minutes, a small piece of parchment was produced, written in Hebrew, which contained a deed of settlement and which the groom subscribed in the presence of four witnesses. In

this deed he conveyed a part of his fortune to his bride, by which she was provided for after his death in case she survived him.

“This ceremony was followed by the erection of a beautiful canopy composed of white and red silk in the middle of the floor. It was supported by four young men (by means of four poles), who put on white gloves for the purpose. As soon as this canopy was fixed, the bride, accompanied with her mother, sister, and a long train of female relations, came downstairs. Her face was covered with a veil which reached halfway down her body. She was handsome at all times, but the occasion and her dress rendered her in a peculiar manner a most lovely and affecting object. I gazed with delight upon her. Innocence, modesty, fear, respect, and devotion appeared all at once in her countenance.

“She was led by her two bridesmaids under the canopy. Two young men led the bridegroom after her and placed him, not by her side, but directly opposite to her. The priest now began again to chaunt an Hebrew prayer, in which he was followed by part of the company. After this he gave to the groom and bride a glass full of wine, from which they each sipped about a teaspoonful. Another prayer followed this act, after which he took a ring and directed the groom to place it upon the finger of his bride in the same manner as is practised in the marriage service of the Church of England. This ceremony was followed by handing the wine to the father of the bride and then a second time to the bride and groom. The groom after sipping the wine took the glass in his hand and threw it upon a large pewter dish which was suddenly placed at his feet. Upon its breaking into a number of small pieces, there was a general shout of joy and a declaration that the ceremony was over. The groom now saluted his bride, and kisses and congratulations became general through the room.

“I asked the meaning, after the ceremony was over, of the canopy and of the drinking of the wine and breaking of the glass. I was told by one of the company that in Europe they generally marry in the open air, and that the canopy was introduced to defend the bride and groom from the action of the sun and from rain. Their mutually partaking of the same glass of wine was intended to denote the mutuality of their goods, and the breaking of the glass at the conclusion of the business was designed to teach them the brittleness and uncertainty of human life and the certainty of death, and thereby to temper and moderate their present joys.

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 and to drink a glass of wine with the guests. Upon going into one of the rooms upstairs to ask how Mrs. Philips did, who had fainted downstairs under the pressure of the heat (for she was weak from a previous indisposition), I discovered the bride and groom supping a bowl of broth together. Mrs. Phillips apologized for them by telling me they had eaten nothing (agreeably to the custom prescribed by their religion) since the night before.

“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.

“During the whole of this new and curious scene my mind was not idle. I was carried back to the ancient world and was led to contemplate the Passovers, the sacrifices, the jubilees, and other ceremonies of the Jewish Church. After this, I was led forward into futurity and anticipated the time foretold by the prophets when this once-beloved race of men shall again be restored to the divine favor.”

¹ <http://dodd.cmcvellore.ac.in/hom/21%20-%20Benjamin.html>

² **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

³ Ibid., pages 429 – 432.