

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part --)

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

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Introduction

Last month's column dealt with Reverend Gershom Mendes Seixas' activities during and shortly after the American Revolution. Gershom, who served for almost 50 years as the hazzan of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City, chose to leave New York during the Revolution rather than live under British rule. From 1776 to 1780 he resided with his father in Stratford, Connecticut and from 1780 to 1784 in Philadelphia where he served as hazzan of Congregation Mickve Israel. Upon his return to New York in 1784 he again served as hazzan of Shearith Israel until his passing in 1816.

In this concluding article about hazzan Seixas we will sketch his service to New York's Jewish community and to the wider New York community. In addition, some insights into his family life based on his correspondence with one of his daughters will be given.

Serving New York's Jewish Community¹

Hazzan Seixas was an expert *mohel*. "Gershom Seixas served in this capacity throughout his life, winning praise from a local doctor for his surgical expertise even at the age of seventy. The shortage of capable *mohalim* meant that a child would often be circumcized after the eighth day. Seixas' correspondence indicates that it was not unusual for two weeks to pass before the operation, and we even find reference to the circumcision of a seven-month old baby. After the operation Seixas would attend the child to check on his health and progress, often administering necessary medicinal remedies. These tasks sometimes ended in Pyrrhic finance when the hazzan would in the end use most or all of his fee to pay for transportation and supplies.

"Seixas filled yet other positions of importance. Often his duties depended on knowledge of religious law and the subtleties of religious judgment based on such law. A number of times he sat on a board which would examine applicants for the position of shohet and supervise the practice of ritual slaughter within the community. At other times he would officiate at wedding ceremonies, often writing the necessary contracts in a handsome Hebrew script. These duties, too, required halachic knowledge in yet other areas.

"The growth in Seixas' reputation and responsibility supplied him with the necessary stature for preaching to the congregation as their leader and minister. When the European rabbi spoke, it was usually in the form of learned Pilpulistic discourses or in an effort to

arouse a transcendent piety, while Seixas' sermons had a more secular tone. He preached sporadically, interweaving various topics under one heading. The subject which received the greatest amount of attention in these sermons was charity. It is significant that Seixas found it necessary to preach that poverty was no crime nor an outward manifestation of internal evil. He realized that 'there are rich who are wicked,' and for him this proved that wealth cannot, therefore, be a reward. He told his fellow congregants that the purpose of a rich man's life is to help the poor, who in turn suffer poverty to test both the virtue of the rich and their own mettle.

“He asked the congregation to support various charitable societies that disbursed charity secretly to the needy without disclosing the names of the poor to the rest of the community. In these sermons he admonished the congregation, complaining that a few generous souls were forced to carry a disproportionate load. Charity, he preached, is a consummate act of faith. For Gershom Seixas it represented a recognition of man's stewardship - his caretaker status. By the charitable act, man shows that wealth and goods are not really his but merely in his possession by favor of God for the purpose of doing good deeds.”

From 1783 until late in his life he also somehow found the time to serve as a teacher in his congregation's religious school.

Relationship with Non-Jews

“After the treaty that ended the Revolutionary War in New York, the governors of Columbia College petitioned the state legislature to make the college into a university, a request that was granted on May 1, 1784. In the same year the New York state legislature, possibly in recognition of his patriotic flight and his position as nominal head of the Jewish community, elected Gershom Seixas to the Board of Regents of the university, an office that was converted to a trusteeship in the reorganization of 1787. He served until 1815, attending 127 such meetings. His election was significant, showing the esteem in which he was held throughout the community, and is even more interesting in view of Columbia's sectarian affiliation with the Church of England. The busy minister also served as a trustee for the New York Humane Society.

“Indeed, Seixas had a fine relationship with the Gentile community. N. Taylor Phillips writes that his grandfather, a contemporary of Gershom Seixas, told of the high esteem accorded the hazzan. Many times Seixas welcomed Episcopalian ministers and sometimes even the Catholic Bishop of New York to his services, often in their ecclesiastical vestments. This would seem a radical departure from Jewish practice, as would Seixas' delivery of sermons in the Episcopal diocese of New York, which Phillips also alludes to. There is evidence that Jew and non-Jew alike were welcome to hear his sermons, but there seems to be no documentary proof for the assertion that the hazzan delivered sermons in the churches of New York.

Personal Vignettes²

“On January 18, 1804, Sarah Abigail, oldest daughter of Hazan Gershom Mendes Seixas and his wife Elkalah Myers Cohen, was married by her father to Israel Baer Kursheedt. The bridegroom, a native of Singhafen-on-the-Rhine, had arrived in the United States in 1796. Sarah was the favorite child of Hazan Seixas, and her husband was his favorite son-in-law.

“Kursheedt³ had a varied career in business. In 1812 he settled in Richmond, Virginia, where he stayed until his return to New York in 1824. At frequent intervals Hazan Seixas wrote to his daughter Sarah or, as he sometimes called her, Sally, and these letters have come down to us through the direct line of the Kursheedt family.”

The letters give us insight into the personal life of hazzan Seixas. Below are some selections. Hazzan Seixas' originally spelling and punctuation have been retained. I

“It more interesting to observe that Hazan Gershom Mendes Seixas, the Sephardically named Sephardic minister of a Sephardic synagogue, makes a very free use of Ashkenazic terms and of Hebrew words in the Ashkenazic pronunciation. It was his practise to use the Ashkenazic Hebrew script, and he seems to take a gleeful delight in using such terms as Shule, Hosin and Hosen (bridegroom), Good Shabess and Good year, Taulass (prayer shawl), Koogole or Kugle (pudding), Kindbett (childbirth) ... This free use of Ashkenazic terms is to be interpreted not as a gracious Sephardic concession to an Ashkenazic son-in-law, but as a reflection of the usage in the New York Jewish community of the time. For although the tradition of the synagogue was Sephardic, the personnel of the congregation was and had been for over a century predominantly Ashkenazic.

“We get numerous intimate glimpses of life in the Hazan's household, and of the close reckoning that was needed to make both ends meet. Like everyone else of his day he played the lottery in the hope of bettering the family fortune, but apparently with no success.

“In the first letter we have a picture of the family's Purim celebration ‘with all the merriment & festivity usually practised in my family, the Children seated at a large Table, in the Parlour, with two lighted Candles, & a great display, of *fair* Tea (no water & milk for a mockery)-a sweet Loaf, gingerbread, & some few nic-nacs from our friend L in Broad St.-sent in the mornng for *Shelach Manos* in fact they were so full of the frolic, that everyone reserved some of their allowances for the next day-they stayed up until i past 8 O'clock, & I entertained them with quite a romantic biographycal history, & we of larger growth entertained each other, with the occurrences of last *Purim*, in which you were one of the chief characters of the Drama. . . .”

These letters reveal “a man of brave humor, who accepted the whips and arrows of outrageous fortune with an unfailing quizzical philosophic smile. Jolly and frolicsome within the family circle, he also found occasion to give to his family moral admonition

and a religious guidance which sprang not from any professional manner but from an inherent goodness. These letters give us the privilege of knowing him in his old age when he is mellow, tempered in his judgments, and sagacious from long experience of dealing with people. His was a mind that showed no weakening. At 70 he was as vigorous in his interests as in his *joie de vivre* [cheerful enjoyment of life]. Thanks to these letters the revered patriot minister of the Revolution and Trustee of Columbia College is no longer only a formal historical figure. He steps off the pulpit and the platform and becomes a living man of flesh and blood and genial spirit.”

“In all the years from 1784 to 1816 he [Reverend Gershom Mendes Seixas] was the sole leader of New York’s Jewish community. He was deeply loved and he has remained a living memory of the congregation [Shearith Israel]. It was his duty to conduct all Jewish religious services both in the synagogue and outside of it. After some years of failing Gershom Mendes Seixas passed away on July 2, 1816.”⁴

¹ All quotes in this and the next section 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.

² All quotes in this section are from **Gershom Mendes Seixas’ Letters, 1813 – 1815, to His Daughter Sarah (Seixas) Kursheedt and Hi Son-in-law Israel Baer Kursheedt**, Rev. D. de Sola Pool, PhD, *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* (1893-1961); 1939; 35, AJHS Journal pg. 189 ff.

³ 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/>

⁴ **An Old Faith in the New World, Portrait of Shearith Israel 1654 – 1954** David and Tamar de Sola Pool, Columbia University Press, New York, page 173