

## GLIMPSSES INTO AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORY

BY DR. YITZCHOK LEVINE



### Manuel Josephson: A Learned 18th-Century American Jew

The overwhelming majority of Jews who came to America before the Revolutionary War did not have an extensive Jewish education. One exception was Manuel Josephson (1729-1796), who was born and educated in Germany. His extensive knowledge of Judaism qualified him to serve on the *beis din* of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York. Even though he was an Ashkenazic Jew, he was so highly esteemed that he was elected *parnas* (president) of the congregation in 1762. He was given the honor of being *chassan Bereishis* in 1760. On *Lag B'Omer* of 1759 he married Rachel (Ritzel) Judah. The Judahs were prominent Jews who had resided in New York City since before the Revolution.

Manuel made his living as a merchant. During the French and Indian War (1754-1763), also referred to as the Seven Years' War, he was engaged in trading at Fort Edward, a British installation. On August 9, 1757 the French captured Fort Henry, another British stronghold located at the southern end of Lake George. The terms of surrender included the withdrawal of the garrison to Fort Edward, with specific terms that the French military protect the British from the Indians as they withdrew from the area.

In one of the most notorious incidents of the French and Indian War, the Indian allies of the French violated the agreed terms of surrender and attacked the British column, which had been deprived of ammunition, as it left the fort. On August 10 Josephson, who was at Fort Edward, wrote two letters to Hyman Levy, another Jewish merchant who did business with the British during the war. In his second letter Manuel described in detail the horrors of what the Indians had done.

Fort Edward, Aug't 10th, 1757.  
Mr. Hyman Levy,  
Sir:

I wrote you this morning; the post came in this morning but had no letters. Fort Wm. Henry went over to the French yesterday morning at seven o'clock with a very honourable capitulation, all their baggage, arms, colours, etc. The French Gen'l [Montcalm] made a present of a six pounder to Coll. Young in testimony of his gallant behaviour. They

were to have been escorted by some of the French troops till they came safe here, but how much has that promise been violated! When our troops came away this morning safe from the French, the cruel Indians (of which 'tis said they have near 3000) fell in the first place among them, took out the women from among them, stript, and afterward scalpt them with their children and sucklings. Almost every young lad and boy among them shared the same most cruel fate.... Mr. Williamson, engineer, is not yet come in; Farrell, the sutler of the Thirty-Five Regiment, and his wife, both killed and scalped. Lieut. Harburt is likewise missing. In short, you never saw such havock and condition the poor people come in camp. Lyon came in safe amongst the rest but much fatigued....

Manuel Josephson<sup>1</sup>


Josephson was a strong-willed man who was not afraid to take action when he felt things were not being properly done. Despite having been elected president of the congregation in 1762, "he had trouble with the synagogal leaders a number of years later. He was accused, in 1769, of opposing the 'good rules and orders instituted by our community' and was threatened with expulsion."<sup>2</sup>

What those "good rules and orders" were,  
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## Levine

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which he violated is not disclosed. The time of “penance” was set at one month. At the expiration of that time no penance was forthcoming and a further extension of one month was granted. The results are unknown, except that after the deadline the officers agreed to “prepare a draft for a new Table of Laws.” Apparently those who had rebelled were either vindicated or perhaps were even justified in their opposition to some of the “good rules and orders” previously enacted.

Josephson seems to have been a man of persistence in his convictions. A few years later, he and two others were cited for their non-conformance to the “ninth hascamah” [a regulation, the type of which we do not know] and consequently were deprived of all Synagogal honors, (and) their vote in the Synagogue, until they would make satisfactory concessions. No further details as to the final outcome are recorded in the Congregational minutes. Perhaps the conflicts in the Synagogue were of a ritual nature, arising of differences between the Ashkenazic and the Sephardic customs and the attitude of the Ashkenazim to the Sephardic form of Communal Government and their rigid enforcement of certain communal laws such as absolute decorum during worship services.<sup>3</sup>

In 1770 Josephson was involved in a personal feud that led to a public civil trial. He “disparaged eighty-four-year-old Joseph Simson, father of merchants Solomon and Sampson Simson, because the elder Simson’s prayer shawl was unkempt and because of his flawed speech and unseemly gestures. Sampson labeled Josephson a ‘dirty hog’ for teasing a man ‘old enough to be [his] grandfather.’ He also claimed Josephson had been a dishonest merchant both in Pensacola and in New York and belittled his lowly origins as a ‘shoeblack.’ At an ensuing trial, Josephson, responding through witness Solomon Hays, claimed the elders, ‘all of one Family,’ deadly plotters who ‘if it was not for the Christian Law ... would kill many.’ The court found for the synagogue and against Josephson.”<sup>4</sup>

In 1770 Manuel signed a non-importation agreement in which he agreed not to import goods from Britain. This agreement and others were attempts by colonial merchants to force the British to recognize the political rights of the colonists through the application of economic pressure. In reaction to the Stamp Act (1765) and the Townshend Acts (1767), colonial nonimportation associations were organized by Sons of Liberty and Whig merchants to boycott English goods. In each case, British merchants and manufacturers suffered curtailed trade with the colonies and exert-

ed the anticipated pressure on Parliament. When the acts were subsequently repealed, the boycotts collapsed.

In 1776, when occupation of Manhattan by British troops was imminent, many Jews who supported the Revolution left the city for other locales. “Josephson arrived in Philadelphia as part of the New York contingent and set up shop as a merchant with a store at 144 High Street, later in about 1800 called Market Street. Aside from quickly becoming one of the leaders of Mikveh Israel, he was also held in very high esteem in the general community by Jews and non-Jews alike.

“Josephson was a very traditional and observant Jew. In 1784 he petitioned the board of Mikveh Israel asking that a ritual bathhouse (mikveh) be built for the women of the congregation, in order that they observe Jewish law. Accordingly, the mikveh was built in 1786, while Josephson was *parnas* of the congregation, and the board placed it under his supervision. Josephson was elected as *parnas* in 1785, and served through 1791. His most famous accomplishment, however, came in 1790.”<sup>5</sup>

*Next month we will discuss Manuel’s petition and “his most famous accomplishment” in some detail.*

<sup>1</sup> *Early American Jewry – The Jews of New York, New England and Canada, 1649- 1794, Volume One*, Jacob Marcus Rader, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1951, Philadelphia, pages 76 – 77.

<sup>2</sup> *Early American Jewry – The Jews of Pennsylvania and the South, 1655 – 1790, Volume Two*, Jacob Marcus Rader, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1953, Philadelphia, pages 43 -44.

<sup>3</sup> “American Responsa as a Source for the History of the Jews of America to 1850: and Hebrew Learning 1636 to 1850,” Israel Harold Sharfman, Thesis (D.H.L.) – Yeshiva University, 1955, pages 195-196.

<sup>4</sup> *City of Promises: A History of the Jews of New York, Volume I, Haven of Liberty, New York Jews in the New World, 1654 – 1865* by Howard B. Rock, New York University Press, 2012, page 74.

<sup>5</sup> “Manuel Josephson (1729-1796)” – <http://mikvehisraelhistory.com/2013/01/25/manuel-josephson-1729-1796/>

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