

Statement by Referee of Master's Thesis

The M.H.L. dissertation entitled:

"Beginnings of the Mikve Israel Congregation of Philadelphia:
A detailed study based primarily on source materials in the
American Jewish Archives,"

written by Herbert M. Yarrish
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BEGINNINGS OF THE
MIKVE ISRAEL CONGREGATION
of
PHILADELPHIA

A Detailed Study Based Primarily on
Source Materials in the
American Jewish Archives

by

Herbert M. Yarrish

submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree
Master of Hebrew Letters.

Referee:

Dr. Jacob R. Marcus

April, 1949

to

Mother and Ralph

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SUMMARY

The beginnings of the Mikve Israel Congregation of Philadelphia may be scantily traced as far back as the year 1740, when Nathan Levy received the grant of a plot to be used as a Jewish burial ground. For three decades after that, any Jewish worship was held informally in a small house rented for the purpose. In 1773 the name Mikve Israel was adopted.

As a result of the early victories of the British armies in the Revolutionary War, many of the patriots were forced to flee from their homes. Philadelphia became a center of refuge. Along with their compatriots the Jews fled, coming from Savannah and Charleston in the South; chiefly from New York in the North. It was this large influx of Jews that forced the Congregation to move into larger quarters. In 1780, The Rev. Gershom Mendez Seixas, who had come from New York, accepted the invitation to serve as Hazan.

In the Spring of 1782, an eviction notice served as the impetus toward constructing an edifice of their own. A lot was purchased,

subscriptions started, and, under the leadership of Mr. Isaac Moses, the building begun. On September 13, 1782, Dedication services were held at the new synagogue.

Jonas Phillips, the first Parnass, encountered problems that were chiefly of a financial nature. His successor, Simon Nathan, was faced with the problem of a recalcitrant Jonas Phillips. Under his leadership, however, the Mikve Israel Congregation stood off the challenge of the critical period in its history. Threatened by a paralyzing internal controversy; pressed for payments on its obligations; its membership depleted by the post-war exodus; feeling the general economic depression; the Congregation contrived to struggle through its formative years successfully. Among those who returned to their homes was the Rev. Seixas. To replace him, the Rev. Jacob Raphael Cohen came from New York to serve Mikve Israel as Hazan until his death in 1811.

From the ranks of the Mikve Israel membership come many of the most important figures in American Jewish history. Here we find the families whose names filled the annals of the early Jewish communities: Gratz, Bush, Seixas, Phillips, Levy, and others that were to make of Mikve Israel one of the outstanding congregations of the Nineteenth Century.

Prefatory Note

All numerals in parentheses indicate the date of the minutes from which the material was drawn. In those instances where direct quotations from the minutes are used, the original misspellings have been retained.

ANTECEDENTS

Although there were Jews in Philadelphia as early as 1655,¹ there is no record of any organized Jewish communal or religious life until almost one hundred years later. In 1738, one of the earlier inhabitants, Nathan Levy (1704-53), made application for some land for a family burial plot, and in 1740 (Sept. 25) received a grant from John Penn, the proprietor of Pennsylvania. Thereafter, the plot located on Spruce Street near Ninth Street was known as the "Jews' burying-ground." There are only fragmentary records of any activity by Jews at this time, but Rosenbach supposes that because of the need for a burial ground, there must have been some form of worship at the same time.² The records point to only a few deaths until June 27, 1752; yet on that date Nathan Levy applied for an additional thirty-five feet for the cemetery.³

"From about the year 1747 until the outbreak of the Revolutionary War 'the congregation is believed to have worshiped in a small house in Sterling alley which ran from Cherry to Race streets, between

Third and Fourth.' We learn from a letter written by Jacob Henry to Barnard Gratz that an attempt was made in the year 1761 to build a synagogue, but owing doubtless to lack of funds the project was given up." ⁴ In September of 1761 a loan of a Torah scroll was made from the New York Congregation. ⁵ The small but steady flow of Jews into Philadelphia in the 1750's and 1760's, ⁶ some of whom came from Spain(?) and the West Indies, ⁷ probably stimulated the consideration of a new building. Leaders in the effort were, doubtless, the Gratz and Bush families. ⁸

By 1769 there were only 30 or 40 Jewish souls in the city, but it was a sufficient number for a quarrel to arise between the "new Jews" and the old. In 1771 they secured another(?) Torah scroll by paying Jonas Phillips of New York (later a resident of Philadelphia) seven or nine guineas. Prayer books were obtained from London; and the Shearith Israel Congregation of New York City made them a gift of a silver yad (pointer). ⁹

"The congregation during provincial times was small but it was nevertheless an organized body with President, Treasurer and a Board of Directors. The

name Mikve Israel, "The Hope of Israel" was given to it when Pennsylvania was a dependency of the King. In 1773 . . . Barnard Gratz was Parnas, or President, and Solomon Marache, Gabay, or Treasurer, and the Adjunta or governing body consisted of Michael Gratz, Henry Marks, Levy Marks, Moses Mordecai, Mordecai Levy and Levi Solomon. . . . At a meeting of the 'Mahamad, Kahal Kadosh Mikve Israel,' held on the twenty-second day of February, 1773, it was 'resolved unanimously that in order to support our holy worship and establish it on a more solid foundation' to collect money to be appropriated for the 'uses of the Synagogue, now established in the City of Philadelphia.' The subscription was to last for three years. . . ." ¹⁰ However, the beginnings of the war interrupted any of the larger designs they may have had in mind.

When the British took New York (September, 1776) many of its Jewish residents fled to Philadelphia, and these together with an influx of other patriots from Charleston, Richmond, Savannah, Lancaster, and Easton forced the Congregation to move to larger quarters in the house owned by a Joseph Cauffman on Cherry Alley between Third and Fourth Streets. ¹¹

The majority of the Jews of Philadelphia, with a few notable exceptions like David Franks and his family, had remained devoted to the American cause and they welcomed the patriots who fled from other colonies. In checking the names of the refugees against the list of contributors and members from the Mikve Israel roster of the year 1782, we find that most of the leaders of the Congregation were not natives of Philadelphia. From New York there were Jonas Phillips, with his large family, who was already sending out circulars from his new store on November 27, 1776 ¹²; Isaac Moses, who was President of the Congregation during the time of the building and was chiefly instrumental in instigating it ¹³; Hayman Levy, Solomon Myers Cohen, Simon Nathan, Asher Myers, Solomon Marache, who were at various times members of the Mikve Israel Junta ¹⁴; Benjamin Mendez Seixas, brother of the Rev. Gershom Seixas, and later Treasurer of the Congregation ¹⁵; Benjamin S. Judah ¹⁶; Manuel Josephson, who later, in 1790, was the author of a letter of congratulations from the several Hebrew congregations to George Washington upon his election as President ¹⁷; Gershom Mendez Seixas, Hazan of Congregation Shearith Israel from 1768 until

the British capture of New York, ¹⁸ who was asked to serve as the Hazan of Mikve Israel in 1780; also, Myer Cohen, Eleazer Levy, Daniel Gomez, Mathias Gomez, and Samuel Judah. ¹⁹

Mordecai M. Mordecai had come from either Easton ²⁰ or Baltimore. ²¹ From Charleston, S.C., in 1780, came Isaac Da Costa who had been minister or reader of the Congregation there, ²² and his son, Samuel ²³; the outstanding patriot, Benjamin Nones ²⁴; Abraham Seixas ²⁵; and Bernard Spitzer. ²⁶

In 1780 the British passed a disqualifying act aimed at the patriots of Georgia and among those listed were Mordecai Sheftall, Sheftall Sheftall, and Cushman Pollock all of whom came to Philadelphia before 1782, and whose names appeared on the list of original members of the Mikve Israel Congregation. The three of them were patriots who had proved themselves in battle. ²⁷ There is a letter from George Walton, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, and two other delegates from Georgia in the Continental Congress, dated October 24, 1780, which attested to the patriotism of the refugee, "Cushman Pollock." ²⁸

The importance of these names (while constituting

only a partial list) will become obvious not only in the matter of the building of the new synagogue, but in the matter of the financial straits in which the Mikve Israel Congregation found itself when most of these refugee members moved back to their homes at the close of the war. They, indeed, comprised a large percentage of the thirty-seven names that appear on the 1782 congregational list as qualified members, or electors. In addition to them, many of the contributors were residents of other cities.

II. Organization

When, early in the year 1782, Mr. Cauffman informed the Congregation that they would have to vacate the home they had been renting from him, the members felt that they were now of a sufficient number to warrant the building of a synagogue. With this in mind, the Congregation held a meeting on Sunday morning, March 17, at which time they proposed to "form themselves into a regular society to be known by the Name of Mikve Israel." They took steps to form a subscription for the purpose of buying a piece of ground and building a house of worship. A building committee was elected and three persons in whose names the deed was to be made out: Barnard Gratz, Solomon M. Cohen, and Samsan(?) Levy. (3-17-82)

A week later(3-24) a meeting "was held by a Publick call in the Synagogue the Saturday before," for the purpose of organization and further discussion of plans to purchase a new home. Recognizing that hitherto they had proceeded in rather a disorganized fashion, they resolved: "That we the Subscribers now

meet, agree that in order to promote our Holy Religion and Establish a proper Congregation in this City, do hereby Solemnly form ourselves into a Congregation to be known and distinguished by the name of Mikve Israel in the City of Philadelphia....," and "to form a Constitution and rules for the good Government of the Congregation."

The members and officers felt that for the greater good and progress of the new congregation, the former officers should abdicate their positions. Mr. Isaac Moses, by whose efforts chiefly they had reached the present state, complied by resigning as Parnass, along with the three members of the Junta (Adjunta). Isaac Da Costa was elected chairman of the meeting, but in the balloting, Isaac Moses was again elected as Parnass. Of the five men elected to the Junta(Executive Board): Barnard Gratz, Hayman Levy, Benjamin Seixas, Simon Nathan, Jonas Phillips, the first two had served on the abdicated Junta. Solomon M. Cohen, the third member of the previous Board was not chosen again. Barnard Gratz was the only officer who was a pre-war Philadelphian.

It was further resolved that these officers should frame a constitution with the advice of the

other members of the Congregation. They were empowered to proceed with plans for the new building; to borrow money for the Congregation; to mortgage any of the congregational property; to collect money for the new building; and to fine any member of the Congregation who in their discretion was guilty of "Transgression." After considerable debate, it was decided that those who were not present at this meeting could be admitted as members only after being judged by the Parnass and Junta, if they applied within fifteen days after the publication of the new rules and regulations on the first and second days of Passover (i.e., March 30, 31).

Obviously, the meeting called on the next day, Monday (3-25), was the result of a feeling of resentment on the part of those who were not present at the Sunday meeting and were thus automatically barred from charter membership. It was the chairman himself, Isaac Da Costa, who moved that the phrase, "who is not present at this meeting (i.e., March 24)," be rescinded. The motion was passed by a majority. Then the desire for maintaining some controls on admissions asserted itself in the following restriction: "those Gentlemen that were not Excepted

by this Congregation, altho not present at said meeting, might sign it before Publication, for which purpose the Chairman's offer was accepted to be one of those to hand the said Rules to those thought worthy to sign them." Mordecai Sheftall was nominated to assist the chairman.

In the Spring of the year 1782 the nation, especially the merchant class, to which many of the Jews of Philadelphia belonged, was still enjoying considerable prosperity. The depression that was to set in at the beginning of the Critical Period in the years to follow had not yet begun to make itself felt. ²⁹ Perhaps this was one of the factors that had encouraged the Jews to proceed with an undertaking of such magnitude. Yet, it makes it more difficult to understand why they should have encountered financial difficulties at the very start of the project. On April 2nd, at a meeting of the Parnass and Junta it was resolved that since the first subscription had been inadequate, a new subscription be opened. In attempting to find another method of raising some of the funds, Isaac Moses proposed a loan of £400. He and Simon Nathan each offered £100 provided that Mr. Jonas Phillips

contribute a like amount, "which he refused! but offered to lend £50." They even went so far as to send letters to Lancaster and Amsterdam for financial aid in their building.(4-14)

Even lack of funds, or difficulty in collecting them, could not stay this one facet of urgency: the owner of the house the Congregation had been occupying supplied the impetus for haste by giving them notice to vacate by Tuesday morning, April 16. A meeting of the executive committee was called to consider the notice, and they resolved first of all to ask for an extension of time. They were to enter into contract immediately with a carpenter and mason, and the money that was wanting after the second subscription was to be furnished by a loan. They were further given full power (4-25) "to sell or Exchange the lott purchased for a Synagogue, for any other Lott of Ground they might think proper for that use."

A new obstacle was placed in their way.(4-30)
The Reformed German Congregation whose church was "contiguous to the Lott" already purchased objected to the building of the synagogue. Their reasons are not stated so we cannot place their action in the definite category of anti-Semitism. Nor, for that

matter, from a reading of the letter sent to them by the Jews (May 1, signed by the Junta) can we accurately characterize the Jewish reaction either as firm or as obsequious striving after good-will. The letter stated that they ~~zh~~ad purchased the lot, "not conceiving in the least we should disturb you, but to our great Surprise we are told that it will, we can now Supply Ourselves with another piece of ground, not so convenient for our purposes nor on such good terms, although it will cost more ... but as we would wish to live in friendship with our Neighbours, and to convince you it's our meaning we are willing to take the same price we gave for the place withh the charges..."

There was an exchange of correspondence between the Junta and the German congregation, but receiving no satisfactory answer, they finally (May 9) determined to avoid antagonizing their neighbors and to go ahead with the purch_ase of the new lot that was available to them for £600 and a yearly rent of £15. The higher price, of course, produced further difficulties for a congregation that had already twice failed to meet its subscription quota.

As once before, Mr. Isaac Moses offered to raise

the sum that was wanting, if Mr. Jonas Phillips would join him, and, as before, Mr. Phillips declined. Then Mr. Moses asked the Congregation to give him four days in which to employ his own means and discretion in raising the money. Mr. Phillips opposed this plan and proposed that they borrow from those present at that meeting. This attempt fell far short of the mark, so there was nothing left for them to do but accept Mr. Moses' offer. In order to help with their fund-raising, they put up for sale the four cornerstones and the two doorposts. The cornerstones were purchased by Jonas Phillips, Isaac Moses, Jacob Mordecai, and Michael Gratz; and the doorposts by Michael Gratz and Isaac Da Costa.

On a Tuesday morning, May 28, the subscribers met to discuss the building plans that the committee brought in. Jonas Phillips dissented from the plan presented by the majority. After what must have been a stormy session, the meeting was adjourned until six o'clock the same evening. Again Mr. Phillips dissented and refused to give any reasons. He insisted on having a copy of the plans so that he could study them before writing a formal protest. While the committee felt that ~~he~~ he had no right to proceed

in this manner, they attempted to compromise by setting a time limit for his possession of the plan; but he was unwilling to make even the slightest concession, so the committee adjourned with instructions for Mr. Benjamin Seixas to look into the matter further.

A few days later, Sunday, June 2, Jonas Phillips presented his formal protest, which, if his reasons were honestly given, had some merit and showed a farsighted concern for the future expansion and growth of the congregational buildings. He objected primarily to setting the building back seventy-five feet from the street and leaving only thirty feet in the rear against the possibility of erecting "a house Either for a Hazan or Shamas to build a school house to serve for a Hebry (Hebra) a Proper place for a Mickva and lastly a necessary house..." He also protested on the grounds that with the house set so far back it would be adjacent to the backyards of the neighbors and subject both to the disturbing noises and sights that might come from them. He also objected to having the entrance on the west side "Because it is very Inconvineunt to go into a four feet alley when

their is a front where we can have a door convenuent and for ornament, Except their is a Positive law that the door is to be at the west..." If the latter were the case, then he favored moving the building closer to the other boundary and having a six foot alley (which would seem to exhibit his lack of concern over whether or not there was a separate women's entrance). His protest was voted down, and it was agreed to proceed with the original plans. At the same meeting they were informed that they did not have half enough money in the treasury to meet the demands of the carpenter and mason. Therefore the Parnass and Junta agreed that they would each make a loan to the Treasurer, and would make every effort to sell the other lot.

Hardly a week after the plans for the building were accepted (6-9) Isaac Moses asked for information concerning the appropriate ceremony for the laying of the cornerstones. Mr. Benjamin Nones "described what he had seen in Burdeux respecting the same..." However, it was decided to request further information from several other members.

It is significant to note here that, as in several other she'eloth, Manuel Josephson is

consistently among those few who were solicited for an opinion. He was apparently recognized as somewhat of an authority on matters of theology and religious practices. ³⁰ He was "definitely a cut above the average Jew of his time. He was well versed in Hebrew and had the ability to consult the standard Hebrew law codes in the original tongue." ³¹ The Hazan was not only seldom consulted; but he seemed to have no authority at all. Yet we read of the Rev. Seixas that in New York "his personal prestige raised the position of the hazzan to a high level," and, in general, he enjoyed considerable respect and authority. ³²

As the building project now progressed into the stage of reality, it demanded more of the personal attention of the officers. In their enthusiasm they took every possible step to expedite the completion of their new home. Four men were appointed (6-9) to supervise the workmen: Barnard Gratz, Solomon M. Cohen, Benjamin Seixas, and Gershom Seixas. The Congregation was to be notified publicly that henceforth the Junta would meet every Sunday morning from nine to twelve for the purpose of forming a Constitution, and that

"they would receive in Writing any proposals from any of the members." As it turned out, there was always so much new and unfinished business that the Junta was forced to overlook the formulating of the Constitution for quite some time.

Evidently, in the discussion (Tuesday, June, 11) of when to sell the five pillars of the synagogue there had been quite a bit of disorder and cross-conversation, because Mr. Da Costa found it fitting to move, "That no person be suffered to speak to each other, but to address the Parnass only under the penalty of half a crown for each offense to be paid to the Seidaka (Treasury)."

On Tuesday, June 18 (6-30) there was a ceremony for the laying of the four cornerstones with the entire Congregation in attendance. The four major participants were Jonas Phillips, Isaac Moses (David), Jacob Mordecai, Barnard Gratz. Special prayers for the occasion were composed by the Hazan. Several days later, Thursday, June 27, the door and "cill" stones were laid, with Michael Gratz, Isaac Da Costa, and Hayman Levy as the chief functionaries.

Strangely, in the midst of all this activity and bustle there is a hiatus in the minutes from

June 30, 1782 to August 4, 1782, which would lead us to believe that there were no meetings held during these five weeks. From the financial records, however, we know that while the Congregation may have abstained from organized activity during this period, the carpenter and mason continued to receive payment for their work. Mr. Donohu, the carpenter, and Mr. Kegan, the mason, must have continued work through the hot season.

When the Board again met on Sunday, August 4, 1782, they considered that it was time to start making preparations for the consecration of the new Synagogue. Instructions to prepare an appropriate ceremony were sent to the Hazan; to which Isaac Moses appended his opinion that it should be held "in a decent manner as possible, without any band of Musick." The time was getting short before the High Holy Days and, in order to help speed the work, two more men, Jonas Phillips and Simon Nathan, were added to the committee which was supervising the building. The structure was nearing that stage where they could start to consider the interior fixtures, for the committee was asked to draw up plans for building the "Echall"(Ark), and to obtain

information on the price of new lamps and crowns, etc. Meantime, they would have to find a place of worship for the six week period until the beginning of the Holy Days, for on the morrow their lease on the building then in use was to expire. Jonas Phillips and Simon Nathan were asked to speak to Mr. Lewisk and see what could be done about getting a six week extention. More and more, as the time for greater speed and efficiency drew upon them, The Congregation called on the services of these two men for almost every committee. Jonas Phillips, ³³ who had started life in this country as a Shohet in the New York community (1768-70), become a merchant there and in Philadelphia, and was to be the Parnass of Mikve Israel after September, 1782. Simon Nathan was immensely popular and served two terms on the Junta and one as Parnass before his return to New York.

Again the problem (Board meeting, 8-12) of preparing a set of by-laws and a constitution was brought up, and it was decided to hold meetings every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon at three o'clock for this purpose.

A meeting of the Congregation was held the

following day, on Tuesday (8-13), to try to find means of raising the money still needed for the construction of the new building. One of the suggestions that was advanced, but voted down, was that they ask Haym Solomon to advance the money that he had subscribed. They did agree, however, to sell the five lots (?) that had been bought for the use of the Congregation.

Even this would be hardly sufficient to cope with the growing financial needs of the Jewish community of Philadelphia. Thus, the Junta (8-18) voted to send letters ~~nto~~ to the Jews of Cape Francois, St. Thomas, St. Croix, and Rhode Island for financial assistance. This was not the first time that the Jews of Philadelphia had sent appeals for aid to other Jewish communities. In April, as we have seen, they had sent to Lancaster and Amsterdam. In June they had "Resolved that Mr. Mordecai M. Mordecai be requested ~~xx~~ by the Parnass to write a Letter in Hebrew, to the Congregation at Sirenam requesting their aid & Contribution to our new Synagogue, and that the Parnass be desired to write to Rhode Is~~al~~nd & Landcaster, requesting the assistance of our Bretheren at those Places

for the same purpose." (6-30-82) This plea may have been responsible for the fact that several of the Jews of Lancaster were among the supporters of the Mikve Israel. Easton also came to their aid with Myer Hart and his son, Naphtali, among the contributors. 34

Philadelphia was linked, also, to most of the other Jewish communities of America by marriage ties. The feeling of mutual responsibility and dependency, Klal Yisrael, was attested to on "Kipur Night" of that year when there was a Misheberah for the Temple in Jerusalem and for all the Jewish congregations throughout the world.

The interesting thing to note in regard to this latest plea was that Mr. Benjamin Seixas who was appointed to write these letters asked that Jonas Phillips be appointed to collaborate with ~~him~~. Since, in a previous letter that Phillips had written (a protest against the building plans) we can see that he was hardly adept, we might possibly conclude that this request for his aid merely pointed to a growing respect for his general ability and leadership. Of course, Phillips considered himself an expert letter-writer. 35 Yet, the letter

turned out to be very ably written in the style of the times and would do credit to any one of our modern trained fundraisers. There is no record, however, of its final effectiveness. (For copy of letter, see Appendix I.)

A week later, August 25, further steps were taken when the Gaboy was instructed to close all the accounts, collect all the debts payable to the Treasury of the Congregation, and "take notes of hand from those that are not able to pay them." This meeting was adjourned until the following evening, then had to be cancelled because there were not a sufficient number attending. Evidently, the long debates at the extended meeting of the previous day had worn out all the members of the Junta with the exception of Isaac Moses, the Parnass, the indefatigable Jonas Phillips, and Simon Nathan. It must be said to the credit of the Junta that at their last two Sunday morning meetings they had taken it upon themselves to reconvene in the afternoon to finish their business.

Tuesday night, August 27, there was a congregational meeting for the purpose of electing a Shamas. His duties and remuneration had already been

specified (8-18):

"Resolved that the salary of a Shamas be Eighty dollars p. annum and that he be allowed his Mazoths He is to keep the shull and everything belonging to it, in good order, he is to make all the Candles -- light them when they are wanted, and see them properly Extinguished, he is to attend whenever there is prayers, and see the shull secured afterward, he is to obey all orders of the Parnass and in his absence the Gaboy, and any of the Adjunta. He is to see that the Lamp is kept Constantly Burning. he is to attend all Circumsicions, Weddings, and Funerals, which are according to our Religion and others."

These may seem like rather exacting and subservient duties, yet three men applied for the position: Lyon Nathan, Abraham Cohen, and Mordecai M. Mordecai. Before Lyon Nathan was elected, it was agreed "that the Salary for Shamas be Enlarged," and that he might accept any perquisites or gifts. (8-27) Thus honored by election, seven months later, "Mr. Lyon Nathan appeared and after a long preamble declined serving the congregation any Longer as Shamas." (3-30-83) The remuneration was so pitifully scanty and the dependency so marked that his successor had to be voted a cord of wood by the Junta. (11-10-83)

Then, as now, the recognition of merit or contributions through memorial prayers and public acknowledgement was arduously sought. So, before

the approaching High Holy Day season, the Congregation devoted the main part of several meetings to the matter of voting approval for the giving of certain escobas (memorial prayers) and Misheberah's (prayers to honor the living, usually for contributions), and the acceptance of ceremonial objects for the Dedication service. (8-29) Anyone desiring an escoba "every Roshodes & Kipur Night" for himself or ~~for~~ for anyone already departed should, if the Parnass and Junta pass favorably on the character of said person, pay the sum of ten pounds. (8-27)

At a congregational meeting, Sunday morning, September 1, the proposed constitutional laws of the Congregation were read and accepted after some debate. One of the chief points for discussion was whether the Junta or the whole Congregation should choose the Parnass. It was finally decided that the Junta and the Parnass should select the succeeding Parnass.

The last meeting of the old Junta took place the following Sunday. (9-8) Although there is no mention in the minutes of the election of a new Parnass, we may assume from the procedure decided upon

at the last meeting that the outgoing officers elected Jonas Phillips Parnass for the new year, 5543, which was to be ushered in that very evening. They must have been quite disappointed that the new building would not be ready for the first days of the Holy Day season, although the contract (4-22-82) had called for the completion of the structure by September 1.

As soon as the two days of Rosh Hashonoh were over the Congregation was called into session on Wednesday night in order to elect five men for the Junta which was to govern for the coming year. (9-11) The vote:

Simon Nathan	...(re-elected)	26
Solomon M. Cohen	.	25
Hayman Levy	15
Michael Gratz	...	15
Solomon Marache	.	15.

Simon Nathan, the only member of the old Junta who was reelected was evidently the most popular choice. This popularity was to express itself in his election to the post of President from 1783-84, and later, in New York, as President of the Shearith Israel Congregation in 1785. Barnard Gratz and Benjamin Seixas were not reelected and there is no record as to whether they had presented themselves

as candidates. Jonas Phillips had, of course, been elected to the office of Parnass. With the election over, the Congregation adjourned its meeting.

However, the energetic Jonas Phillips wasted no time in calling a meeting of the Junta on the following morning, Thursday, September 12. An application for membership was summarily set aside and referred to a subsequent meeting. One can imagine the air of excitement as a letter was read from the building committee, i.e., "committees for the Superceeding the Building the new Synagogue....," informing them that the new synagogue was "so far finished to be Consecrated the fifth of Tisra in the afternoon." A committee was appointed to "wait on the Governor and council with an address." (For copy of the address, see Appendix II.) Mr. Phillips likewise sent a letter of invitation to George Washington and received a gracious reply. ³⁶

If they followed their plans (8-12), then they should have met "at the old Shull at three oclock and say Minha till after amidat." After this they all proceeded to the new building where Haym Solomon was to have the honor of opening the door. They were then to stop at the Taba (rostrum), and

after that to carry the "Seriphim" (Torah scrolls) six times around the Taba, and on the seventh time around to deposit them in the Echall. We can assume (9-12) that the procession on the day of Dedication, September 13, 1782, took shape in the

*

following manner: "the following Gentlemen are to have the Mits Votes (i.e., Mitsvoth) on the day of the dedication of the new ש"ו viz.

Haym Solomon	to open the new <u>ש"ו</u> door
Haym Levy	.. Portes(Echall)
Barnard Gratz	first ... (order or scroll?)
Isaac Da Costa	2 ... ditto
Isaac Moses	3 ... ditto
Henery Marks	4 ... ditto
Benjamin Seixas	5 ... ditto
Asher Myers	6 ... ditto
Joseph Myers	(<u>M'laveh?</u>) "

When the scrolls had been deposited, the Hazan read "the Hanother & Misheberahs for those who were entitled to have them," for: 1) "all of this Holy Cong. Mikve Israel, all of them holy men and the Lord is in their midst, who have gi ven freely of their spirit to acquire the land and to build this house of assembly, etc.; 2) Haym Solomon, for giving a quarter of the total cost of the Synagogue; and the four men who bought the cornerstones; 3) Michael Gratz and ^Simon Nathan who bought the stones under the doorposts as well as the stone with

* "Shabbos T'shuvah," (i.e., Shabbos Shuvah) the Sabbath of Return.

the inscription; 4) the five men who bought the pillars; 5) The contributor of a Sepher Torah; 6) the contributor of a Sepher Torah and its ornaments; 7) Solomon Cohen for giving a charity box (changed to an Escoba because of his death); 8) to the women of the Congregation for sewing the various cloth covers and the curtain for the Ark; 9) those who purchased/plots in the cemetery; 10) those who were members of the society for receiving wayfarers, etc.

Then, whoever had in mind to make any offering had "to go before the Eshall, where the Hazan" was to make the appropriate recitation. (8-12) At this time the Hazan, we hope, carried out the instructions of the Junta "to adopt such prayers & Psalms as he thinks applicable to the occasion and take such measure to Conduct the whole with Propriety." (8-18) At the same time the Congregation was "to be particularly³⁷ carefull not to raise their Voices higher than the Hazan's who will endeavor to modulate his Voice to a proper Pitch So as only to fill the Building." With the expected attendance of some non-Jewish dignitaries they were determined to conduct themselves with as much decorum as possible, so as not to create

an unfavorable impression. It must have been a taxing restraint inasmuch as it had been planned that the service would continue until seven o'clock in the evening. 38

In the service was included a prayer for the government:

"His Excellency the President & Honble Delegates of the United States of America in Congress Assembled -- His Excellency George Washington Captain General & Commander in Chief of the federal Army of these States, his Excellency the President, the Hon'ble the Executive Council & Members of the General Assembly of this Commonwealth & all Kings & Potentates in Alliance with North America." 39

After the excitement of the Dedication was over, the ordinary troubles of congregational life began to come into full play. The Dedication took place at the beginning of the Sabbath, and on Sunday morning (September 15) there were already complaints about the distribution of front seats. Benjamin Seixas declined the office of Gaboy to which he had been elected only three days before, "alleging that the committee's for regulating the Seats did not Proceed agreeable to the Constitution in not giving the Yahidim (members) and their families the preference and the Gaboy not

being admitted to set in the Banko(i.e., the bench of honor)." Accordingly, at a Junta meeting the day after Yom Kippur (September 19) Mr. Isaac Moses was elected Gaboy. But this was not the end of the matter. Mr. Seixas and several others were still bitter about the distribution of seats.

Wednesday, a week later, a meeting of the Congregation was held as a result of a letter from Mr. Seixas, Isaac Moses, and Isaac Da Costa. (9-25) The meeting was heated and marked by rather lengthy tirades. An attempt was made to clamp a time limit of fifteen minutes for each of a maximum of three appearances on the floor for any individual. Evidently the great majority was determined to thresh out completely the problem of seating in the new edifice, because they voted down the attempt to limit discussion. Seixas and two others were each penalized with a fine "for speaking out of their places." Then it was decided by a vote to limit the discussants to voting members only. When the Parnass, Jonas Phillips, finally read the letter, he requested that the group form themselves into a committee of the whole, so that he too might participate in the debate, since the letter complained of "arbitrary

proceedings in the Junta." A chairman, Mordecai Sheftall, was chosen, and the meeting went on with give-and-take debates, accusations, and defenses until finally "it being ~~too~~ Late it was resolved to adjourn until Tommorrow 5 Oclock in the Evening."

Interest increased in the controversy, and when the group reconvened (9-26) according to the previous adjournment, there were twenty-five present, five more than the evening before. Apparently one side had brought reinforcements, because Mr. Cosman Polock, who had not been at the Wednesday night meeting, opened the session with a motion which was carried by a majority, "that as it appears that nothing criminal has been done Either by the Committee appointed to distribute the seats in the New Synagogue or by the Parnass or Junta, but that many irregularities have been committed from a misconstruction of the Constitution since Their Election. Therefore recommended that every thing that has happened be buried in oblivion."

Mr. Benjamin Seixas did not accept this maneuver gracefully. On the roll-call which he demanded only he and four others remained of the dissenters. Of these, two were members of the Junta: Solomon Marache and Solomon M. Cohen.

Mr. Polack remained active in seconding motions that were designed to appease the malcontents. Mr. Isaac Moses was another who made several moves in the same direction. Mr. Moses, who had been elected Gaboy in place of Seixas, proposed that the first election for that office be considered the only valid one. So, Seixas was restored to office and by another vote was given a seat on the "Banko." Before adjournment, a committee was appointed to complete the constitution in order to lessen the possibilities for confusion. Until such time the Parnass and Junta were to exert more than normal authority, with the proviso that now their meetings be open to any "Yaheed" who wished to attend.

Peace seemed to have been restored. The next meeting of the Board was held on Wednesday, October 2, with Mr. Seixas in attendance. However, the controversy had not been settled to everyone's satisfaction. Mr. Solomon Myers Cohen accounted for his absence with a letter asking that his resignation be accepted. Jonas Phillips replied with a letter telling him that the Junta would not accept his resignation, that he had no right to resign, and that he would be considered a member despite his absence.

(mins. 11-3)

Simultaneously with his informing the Junta of this action (11-3), the Parnass also told them that Hayman Levy's walkout from the meeting of October 24 after a dispute with Simon Nathan was permanent. Levy had rejected an invitation to be present at any further meetings of the Junta. Another of the Junta, Solomon Marache, also resigned. It will be recalled that he was, along with Solomon M. Cohen, one of the dissidents in the controversy over the seating arrangements. If there was some more significant cause underlying their quarrel with the other leaders, it is not apparent from the records. At any rate, at the meeting of November 12, the Parnass read the letters of all three (Levy, Marache, and Cohen) "resigning their places."

Either the office continued to lack popular appeal, or the effects of the post-war exodus were beginning to make themselves felt. For it was not until over four months later (3-30-83) that the proposal came to bring the Junta up to its normal size of five by the election of three new men. Was Jonas Phillips jealous of the added power that a smaller more friendly Junta gave him? It was his negative vote that broke a tie on the motion that a

new Junta be elected; and on the motion that three men be elected to fill the vacancies, "the Parnass declined voting on the Subject," when it was obviously carried by a majority. The reason given for the need then of a full Junta was: "that the Congregation are Few in Numbers and some of them agoing away..." Henry Marks, Haym Solomon, and Asher Myers were elected and immediately declined the honor of serving.

There is no record of any meeting until the congregational meeting of June 22. However, it was not until the 23d of Elul (September 20, 1783), a week before the High Holy Days, that the existence of a full Junta became imperative because there was "not a Suffieient Junta to Elect a Parnass Hatan Torah Hatan Bueshet (Breshit) for the ensuing year ... to Elect the said officers and Transact any other Business there will be occasion for untill ~~Bashash~~ Bashashana (Rosh Hashana)."

The financial difficulties of the Congregation continued parallel with the other administrative hardships of the first year of organization. On October 2, 1782, the Junta was informed that Mr. Parrish, from whom they had purchased the lot,

"wanted £200 due him some time past but desired only £40 for the Present and he would wait a Little Longer for the Remainder." At the same time (10-9) • it was agreed "that as there are several Small Sums due on account of the building that a sum not Exceeding £20 may be borrowed from the Gaboy after the salery as paid of the Hazan, etc."

On October 24, the Junta meeting with the building committee decided to apply to "mr. Haym Solomon for his Quarter part of the Cost As the money is wanting to pay the workmen as the said money has been due some time past." Four days later the Parnass was able to report "that he had received from Mr. Haym Solomon 643 5/90 dollars being his quarter part of the Cost ... which he now pays in the hands of the Gaboy of the Buikding."

Mr. Parrish again applied for the sum due him for the lot. (11-3) As a ~~reult~~^{result}, the Gaboy was instructed in a letter:

"You are desired to call for & send to the Gentlemen Indebted to the Synagogue for a Settlement of what they owe and urge them to pay the same being in great want of money to discharge some Contracts and take a note from any one who is going away."

The tenth of November came and "The Parnass acquainted

the Junta that Mr. Moses had advanced Robert Parrish £50 and that the said Parrish still pressed him to pay the remainder of the £200... due on the bond by Tommorrow. The Parnass will endeavour to settle with Mr. Parrish Tommorrow."

Even with all these troubles, at the last meeting of the year 5543 (September 22, 1783) in the election for the new officers it was "Resolved unanimously that Jonas Phillips is Elected Parnass for the Insuing year." He refused to be elected in that manner, insisted on a ballot, and in a drawing, because of a tie vote, he lost the office to Mr. Simon Nathan. Mr. Nathan had been one of the two Junta members to remain in office, and in the Junta election of the previous year had been the recipient of the largest number of votes.

For some reason, the congregational meeting called on the third day of the new year, September 29, 1783,** WAS VERY POORLY ATTENDED, with only five persons present. It was a meeting for the purpose of electing the new Junta, but for want of a quorum had to be postponed until the following evening. The number that showed up then, seems to

** Beginning with the year 5544, the minutes become sparse, inexact in dating, and difficult to decipher.

indicate that the first meeting was a failure partly because of poor publicity, and partly because of the declining membership. They decided "that In Consideration of the Small Number of Yehadim (members) residing in this Place the Number of Adjunta be reduced to Three..." Barnard Gratz, Asher Myers, and Jonas Phillips were elected; but when the latter was elected Gaboy, Haym Solomon was chosen to take his place on the Junta. Their method of voting here seems to have been to present a slate and then allow everyone to vote for each candidate, a kind of preferential balloting. Of interest is the fact that the only candidate to receive as low as one vote was Solomon Marache, who had been one of the dissident members of the Junta.

III. THE CRITICAL PERIOD

It had been fortunate, indeed, for the religious life of the Jews of Philadelphia that that city had been the refuge for patriots from all parts of the country during the period of the Revolutionary War. Those Jews who sojourned there for less than a decade were men of executive ability, devoted to their faith, and anxious to build a religious center even though they knew that their own stay would be only temporary. Now, with the end of the War, they began slowly to return to their former homes.

It was a poor moment in history for them to leave the heavily burdened congregation. For both the Mikve Israel and America this was the Critical Period, especially in financial affairs. Just before the large New York exodus, Mr. Parrish had once again been pressing for payment, this time on the second bond, (10-7-83) The call for support came in the form of a circular letter and probably received a poor response. People who were planning to pull up stakes and move their families could hardly

be counted on to contribute to the institutions they were leaving. In addition to this, the nation as a whole was facing its critical period. Prices had been falling; inflated paper money had been disappearing. A general business depression ensued.⁴⁰ The depression may not yet have struck with its full intensity; but the threat of depression or even business uncertainty can be more detrimental to fundraising efforts than the actuality.

A partial list of those who took leave of the Mikve Israel Congregation will reveal that most of them were men who had served as officers in the critical years of organization.

Some time after September of the year 1783 Isaac Da Costa returned to Charleston, S.C., where he died in November.⁴¹ Other Jews from the South probably left at about this same time. On November 25, 1783 New York was finally evacuated by the British, and many of the New York members of the Congregation took their leave. We find the names of Hayman Levy, Isaac Moses, Solomon Myers Cohen, and Benjamin Seixas reappearing in the minute books of the Congregation Shearith Israel in New York on December 9, 1783, as the leaders who had

signed a resolution sent to Governor Clinton of that state. ⁴² Some of these men did not completely sever their ties upon leaving, but they could not long continue to divide their resources. Isaac Moses, for example, wrote a few times to the Junta in Philadelphia, asking that he be relieved of his financial obligations and that the bonds in his name be transferred to other parties. (1-11, 21-84) In return they assured him that they would take the necessary steps, and in closing the letter stated that the Junta "wish you every Felicity in your place of Abode."

A further blow came when, on February 23, "The Parnass read a letter from Hazan Seixas informing the P.(arnass) & Junta of his having engaged to return to New York to his former Congregation Ros Hodes Nisan (i.e., March 23) -- also a Letter from Mr. Cohen the present Reader in N. York offering himself a Candidate." The letter from Seixas exhibits clearly his feelings of continued loyalty to the Philadelphia Congregation. (For copy of letter, see Appendix III.)

Seixas, too, had felt the effects of the return of the exiles. Almost as soon as the first

contingent left, he began to feel the security of his position threatened. Until then he had been able to rely on the dependable Mr. Isaac Moses to pay him his salary on time. Now (11-20-83), he complained in a letter that he was afraid that he would be neglected unless someone else would undertake to guarantee payments. "As I have before experienced the Inconvenience of relying on the Public Hope your Honours will not take it amiss in me for applying for some Individual Security."

This feeling of insecurity coupled with his own desire to return to his former home and the appeals from New York to return, since it was "always expected Mr. Seixas would return," ⁴³ had finally determined his future for him. He removed to New York, where he was to serve as Minister until his death in 1816. Several other families may have left with the Rev. Gershom Seixas, "including the members of his own family, which was numerous." ⁴⁴

Before he left, he was one of the signatories of a document that stands as a congregational highlight of the year 1783. In December the Congregation sent a note to the Council of Censors

in Pennsylvania objecting to the provision in the State Constitution which barred Jews from becoming members of the General Assembly. (A digest of the address follows:)

" On the 23d of December (1783) the Rabbi, Ger. Seixas of the Jewish Synagogue in Philadelphia, Simon Nathan, the Parnass or President, Asher Myers, Bernard Gratz and Haym Salomon, the Mohammed (Ma'amad) or Associates of the Council in behalf of themselves and brethern, addressed the Council of Censors in relation to the decalration required to be taken by each member of the Assembly, which affirmed that 'the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament were given by divine inspiration'; and also in relation to that part of the Constitution which declared that no religious test should be required of any civil magistrate in the State. They represented that these provisions deprived them of the right of ever becoming representatives. They did not covet office, they said, but they thought these provisions improper, and an injustice to the members of a persuasion that had always been attached to the American cause, and given a support to the country, some in the Continental army, some in the militia, and some by cheerfully paying taxes and sustaining the popular cause.

" This memorial appeared to have no immediate effect, but it doubtless had its influence in procuring the subsequent modification of the test clause in the Constitution." 45

Although Jacob Raphael Cohen had expressed his interest in accepting the post as Hazan of Mikve Israel, the Congregation was hesitant. They would

have been happier, apparently, if someone else had been available. Before accepting his application, the Junta was authorized "to write to Europe for a fitt Person to Serve the Congregation as Hazan." (3-15) When the search was unsuccessful they submitted, but not without a display of impatience at his attempt to postpone taking up office until the first of May. Perhaps thinking that he might take the occasion to explore other possibilities, they wrote "that unless he (Mr. Cohen) is here before the Holydays (Passover) we shall not have Occasion to trouble him." (3-28-84) He received his last salary payment from ⁴⁶ ~~Phar~~ ^{Phar}ith Israel on March 29, ~~and~~ and evidently complied with the wishes of his new employer. Although he did not always enjoy the full cooperation of his congregation, he was slated to remain with them until his death in 1811. To him we owe thanks for his register of deaths as well as a complete list of the circumcisions he performed from the time of his stay in London (1779) until his death. His first circumcision in Philadelphia was performed in Elul, 1787. On the list also appear the names of his grandsons; for his daughter had become the second wife of the affluent Michael Hart of Easton.

During his early weeks there, the Congregation took its first decisive steps in bringing some order into the financial picture. They realized the impossibility of proceeding without a budget, or as they stated it, they now found it necessary to "fix the income in proportion to the Expense on a solid and Certain footing." With this in mind they sent a copy of the resolution around to the members for their individual signatures and promises of the annual sum to which they would subscribe. By the terms of this statement (4-20), the yearly assessment was to be paid promptly in quarterly installments. In this way salaries could be paid on time, and a general order brought into the paying and receiving of accounts.

The Rev. Cohen may have been responsible in some measure for a lengthy petition that was circulated in May, written in such a studied, pompous manner that one might suspect the author had tongue in cheek:

"We the Subscribers having taken these matters to heart & duly reflected on the many defects this Congregation called Mikve Israel in Philadelphia labours under -- and to our great regret & Sorrow we find one in particular which strikes us most forcibly, & Cannot but affect

with astonishment & horror every judicious & truly Religious mind; This is the want of a proper Mikve or Batheing place according to our Law..."

THE PHILLIPS CONTROVERSY

Because of the aforementioned difficulty with deciphering the minutes, we cannot be quite certain of the issues nor the outcome of a lawsuit involving Abraham Levy and Jonas Phillips when he was Parnass, although there is considerable discussion in the records of the last part of the year 1783. This may possibly have been the precursor of, or even the same, controversy that continued on into the year 1784, occasioned by Jonas Phillip's refusal to turn over the minute books, papers, and deeds from his administration to the present incumbent, Simon Nathan.

The tie vote in the election for Parnass at the beginning of the religious year had evidently been an indication to Jonas Phillips that he could match his power against that of Simon Nathan. His dogged refusal to comply with the wishes of the Parnass and Congregation resulted in endless meetings and resolu-

tions, in addition to bringing so much grief to the Parnass who was harassed enough by the normal difficulties of the office.

Attempts at appeasement failed. Neither friends nor threats were able to break through the shell of his obstinacy. Jonas Phillips was a man who had come to this country as an immigrant, begun life as a shohet in New York (1768-70), and had struggled as a merchant and auctioneer until he had amassed sufficient wealth and power to become one of the leaders of the community. It was a process that had hardened him and made him as tough and unyielding as any of the pioneers of the Revolutionary period.

Finally, on March 14, "On Motion made by Mr. Solomons & Seconded by Mr. B. Gratz Resolved that Mr. Jonas Phillips shall be deprived of every Immunity & other Rights which he derived from being a Yohid of the Congregation and that no monys be pd. him as Gabay, shall have no Mizvas or Mishiberachs untill he Complys with the Resolution of the Congregation."

The Parnass, Simon Nathan, had his hands full. He was balked at every turn, subjected to insults, and degraded by helplessness. He had swallowed his pride and "requested of the Yehidim to know if they acknowlgd him as Parnass or not." And they had

"unanimously acknoulg'd"him. (3-15-84) He had "address'd the Congregation in a most pathetic Manner strongly recommending Unanimity amongst them, & at the same Time requested the Support of the Yehidim in every Constitutional Measure." They had agreed unanimously. (3-15) All of these expressions had ~~been~~ of no avail.

On March 15, the Congregation voted to give Jonas Phillips eight days to comply with the wishes of the Parnass and Junta. If he did not he would be subject to one major fine and then a series of fines until such time as ~~he~~ would comply. This was passed by the narrow margin of six votes to five, with the Gratz brothers on different sides. Then "The Parnass requested the Members to empower him & the Junta to commence a Suit at Common Law against Mr. Jonas Phillips at the Expence of the Congregation if he behaves Refractory after the Expiration of the Time allow'd Him to deliver up the Deed Books & Papers belonging to the Congregation of Mikve Israel ..." This proposal received unanimous approval.

The matter had even more colorful sidelights when, a few days later, (3-17-84) Mr. Phillips was sent a demand through the agency of the Shamas to

turn over the books. The Shamas returned and reported, "that Mr. Phillips threw the Note in a violent Passion on the Floor & said he knew not any Parnass."

From the instructions at the Junta meeting (3-28-84) "That Mr. Phillips be empowered to write to those Gent'n " it might be assumed that the whole Phillips controversy had been satisfactorily settled before this time. Yet, despite the confusion and disorder of the minutes, we can see that the dispute raged on into the summer months. On August 30, "The Segan recommended to the Junta to endeavor to bring about a reconciliation with Mr. Phillips & the Congregation." And later on that same day, in protest against the arrogant stand of Phillips, Asher Myer resigned his post as Segan. When the Congregation met again the next day there was nothing they could do but accept the resignation. However, the same evening they continued their business and determined that in order "to prevent as much as possible dissensions and confusion from arising" that they would institute several new rules and regulations. Anyone breaking the rules would be placed "under the Penalty of being deprived of all benefits Profits immunities and services of the Synagogue." (8-31-84)

At the same meeting, as talk of revising the Constitution arose, the disorder became so marked that Mr. Nathan who was acting as chairman withdrew from the chair in protest. Appended to this record is an interesting note to the effect that "Mr. Phillips came down stairs but would not come up. Witnessed by us....," and signed by two of the members.

The obstinate Mr. Jonas Phillips had successfully defied the Congregation and the Parnass for one full term of the latter's office. He had displayed an amazing amount of personal power and brazenness; and the Congregation, in turn, showed its helplessness and lack of disciplinary controls. The Jewish New Year came (5545) and Mr. Phillips was still holding out, with the books still in his possession. (9-19-84) In reply to their latest request for the "Book of the minutes," he had answered "that he would not Send the Book untill a parnass should be elected by the Congregation." So, at that very meeting when his answer was made known, an election was held, and Michael Gratz became the new Parnass.

Whatever the real cause for the dispute, it was

vicious and involved not principles but personalities. That it was an enormous drain of energy on an already weakened and struggling Congregation can be seen from the very fact that the controversy almost monopolized the business of a full year of meetings. By this very token, Jonas Phillips could not have been "right" in his actions. Mr. Simon Nathan, on the other hand, had earlier proved his popularity and capacity for leadership. When he returned home to New York shortly after his term as Parnass expired he was elected almost at once as co-Parnass of the Shearith Israel Congregation. It was almost the equivalent of a vote of confidence from a group who knew both him and Phillips.

A year had been dissipated in fighting. Much could have been done and should have been done to co-ordinate and further organize the facilities of the small group of Philadelphia Jews. Now that this power struggle was over they could once again devote their energies to the more constructive tasks that were to make of Mikve Israel one of the outstanding congregations in America.

IV.
MISCELLANEOUS ITEMS
relating to the
MIKVE ISRAEL CONGREGATION

There are several items which could not find their way into the history proper of the Congregation without seeming to clutter up or divert the main stream of the history. Yet, in many ways, they are more revealing of the inner workings and individualism of a group by their very concern with the human aspects rather than the organizational. Apparently irrelevant entries into the minute-books are often major clues to the reconstruction of actual community life and religious practices. For example, in several of the stories that are to follow we can see clearly the limited power of the Hazan, and the rather extended ecclesiastical authority of the governing board of the Congregation (the Junta or Mahamad). The Hazan, whose position approximated that of Rabbi, was seldom consulted on questions of religious law or infractions thereof. Certainly, enforcement of any of the dinim (laws) was never placed in his hands.

Jacob Cohen and the Widow Mordecai

The Junta, on June 9, 1782, was informed that Mr. Jacob Cohen was desirous of marrying the widow of the late Moses Mordecai. The matter was referred to a committee which was supposed to check on the dinim in regard to the problem (a Kohen is prohibited to marry a widow). Two months later (8-12) the Parnass reported that the two men whom he had approached: Manuel ~~Wash~~ Josephson and Isaac Da Costa, refused to discuss the matter, saying that it was a private affair. The din was "that no Cohen can marry a woman Situate as Widow Mordecai is." They decided that they would do nothing about it until Mr. Cohen would apply in writing and agree to abide by the decision of the Board.

At a Junta meeting (Sunday, August 25) a letter was read from the Hazan in regard to the case, with the result that Mr. M(ordecai) Mordecai and Mr. Israel Myer were sent for so that the question, "Can Mr. Jacob Cohen marry the widow Mordecai"? might be threshed out. Much time was spent in debate of the dinim, and then Mr. Da Costa was sent for as an additional authority since he had

been minister of the Congregation in Charleston, S.C. Mr. Cohen was also invited to be present, but there is no record of his acceptance.

The final decision was that a letter be sent to the Hazan informing him that he was not to perform the wedding, neither was he to be present, nor was he to read Mr. Cohen's or his wife's name in the Synagogue. Anyone else who performed the wedding or was present at it would be subject to some punishment. Whether these threats were effective in preventing the marriage remains a question.

Ezekiel Levy, the Shaver

September 15, 1782, "The Parnass represented to the Junta that he was informed by Mr. Mordecai M. Mordecai that Ezekiel Levy Contrary to our Laws shaved on a Sabbath at Baltimore." Both the accused and the informer were immediately summoned to the meeting, where Mordecai was asked for the sources of his knowledge. He replied, "That his information was from Mr. Isaac Abrahams at Baltimore." A letter

was sent to the latter requesting further information. Nothing more was heard of the matter; but we can well imagine that hereby developed another of those personal enmities without which no congregational history could be complete.

Sabbath Coffee

Another matter of rather trivial importance further illustrates the ecclesiastical power that the Junta and Parnass exercised. The following came before them for judgement: "The Parnass acquainted the Junta that Mr. Bromat had applied to him ----- in Consequence of an Accusation made ag(ainst) him by Mr. Moses Nathan that he had Seen him write at the Coffee House on the Sabbath, he therefore desired to have a hearing before them in order to Clear himself, Mr. Bromat denies the Charge." No action was taken on the case, it appears; and, in fact, this entry into the minutes was crossed out.

Women in the Congregational Records

Chiefly because of the size of the families in the period under discussion, women, even if they

had had the recognition, would have found little time for congregational activities. They had no separate organization, such as a sisterhood or temple society. Yet, we find that two of the wives of synagogue officers (and Mrs. Jonas Phillips with her twenty-one children⁴⁷⁾) did devote some of their spare time to help raise money. On November 3, 1782, "The Parnass moved that a Letter of thanks be wrote to Mrs. Phillips & Mrs. Nathan for the Trouble they took in handling about the Subscription to the Ladies of the Congregation for to purchase a Tabat cloth and Curtains for the Echal...."

In general, their attitude and treatment of women in religious life reflected the common practices of the time. In the new Synagogue building there was a gallery for women, that could be reached by a separate alley and entrance. (6-2-82) In the records, the register of deaths contains a separate page for the women, but there is only one entry extant. On the page for men's deaths, after 1811 (when the Rev. Jacob Cohen died) women's names appear together with the men's. That the birth register contains the names of no girls is, of course, due to the fact that it is a circumcision list of the Mohel, Rev. Jacob Cohen.

For the men there is a list of "Eshcaboth to be said every Rosh Hodesh." For the women there is a separate page of "Eshcaboth every Sabath Minha." Curiously, on each page respectively there had inadvertently crept in the name of one of the opposite sex, and each had been duly crossed out.

Charity

The Hebrew word "Tsedakah" usually signifies charity; in our records it is used to mean the synagogue treasury. Considering the financial difficulties the Congregation encountered it might have, indeed, been the highest form of charity to contribute to the treasury. Be that as it may, in the resolution adopted at the meeting of February, 1773, it was stated that they were to have a subscription for money for the "use of the Synagogue and for charity." In the early years, however, there is only one reference in the minutes to any organized charity. At the Dedication service in September, 1782, a Misheberah is given for "all the brothers of the society for ~~the~~ hospitality to wayfarers" (Hebrath Hachnosath Orhim). According

to Rosenbach, in 1783 the Congregation formed the first Jewish charitable organization, "Society of Ezrath Orchim," or the "Society for the Relief of Destitute Strangers." Jacob I. Cohen was President, Isaiah Bush, Secretary, and Haym Solomon, Treasurer. Unfortunately, he states, the records of this group have disappeared. ⁴⁸

There are several instances in which the New York Congregation wrote to Philadelphia telling them that they were sending a poor traveler to them for further assistance on his way to the West Indies, or elsewhere. It was common then, as it has been in so many other periods, for wandering Jews to request this type of aid from various communities along their way. In our records there is one early example: "The Parnass informed the Junta that a poorman requested their aid, to Enable him in order to proceed to Boston. Resolved that the Gaboy be directed to pay the said poorman £5." (6-16-82)

A few scattered references to other forms of charity are sufficient to indicate that the concept of charity was still cherished among the Jews in the new country. "Mr. Moses informed the Junta that Mrs. Mordecai (probably the widow of Moses

Mordecai) had applied to him for money to Enable her to pay her rent Nine Pounds, as also for Hannah Levy's Rent, being a Smaller Sum." It was resolved that these sums be paid. (5-29-82)

"Mr. Michael Gratz informed the Junta that Mr. Clava owed L18 for rent due his Landlord. Resolved that L12 should be paid him by Gaboy." (10-9-82)

"Mr. Jonas Phillips requested something might be provided for a poor french Boy. Resolved that he be relieved by Subscription." (8-12-82)

The case that followed a few months later may have referred to the same boy: "The Parnass laid before the Junta a Letter received from Solomon Rivera, a poor french boy, petitioning for assistance to get some winter cloathing and a blanket, having taken his passage on board a French Frigate ... Resolved that the Gaboy purchase a blanket and check shirt and charge the same to the Sadaka." (11-3-82)

We know also (3-15-84) that Matzoth were baked for the poor at each Passover season.

Education

There is nothing in the records of the Mikve Israel Congregation of the first years to indicate that any attempt was made to educate the children in Hebrew or in Jewish studies. Although the Congregation later earned fame as the center of one of the first Hebrew Sunday Schools in the country in 1838, it would seem that in our period they paid scant attention to their youth.

This seems especially strange in the light of the fact that so many of the leaders were from the New York Congregation which had evidently considered fully the necessity for a Hebrew education. As early as 1760, they had written a letter to a Mr. Benjamin Perira in Jamaica "to acquaint you that at a meeting of the Elders of this K.K. (Shearith Israel) it was agreed that wee should apply to you and that you will be good enough to Engage a Suitable Master Capable to Teach our Children ye Hebrew Language; ...but he will not Suit unless he understands Hebrew and English at Least..." ⁴⁹ Evidently there were so few learned Jews in America at that time that they had to send abroad for teachers.

In 1785, I.W. Carpeles wrote from Philadelphia to Rabbi Saul Lowenstamm of Amsterdam, claiming that:

רב בני מדינות היק אינם בני תורה ואינם מבינים בשללנו הקדושה.

(The majority of the citizens here are not conversant with the Torah and do not understand our Sacred Tongue).⁵⁰ "Even the leaders of the Philadelphia congregation at the time understood no Hebrew."

It was Mr. Mordecai M. Mordecai (who had come from Baltimore) who was requested to write a letter to the Congregation in "Sirenam". (6-30-82) This might indicate that he, and not the Rev. Gershom Seixas, was the leading Hebraist in town.

All we know is that they had plans for building a schoolhouse. Jonas Phillips, in protesting against the building plans, objected because there would not be enough room left for the future construction of a schoolhouse. (5-30-82) Likewise, in the letter to the Reform German Congregation they wrote, "Our intention was to Build a Synagouge & School House thereon for the use of our Congregation."

Appendix I

From p.22

A copy of the letter written on August 18, 1782,
to the Jews of Cape Francois, St. Thomas, St. Croix,
and Rhode Island:

"A Small number of our Bretheren who have during this Calamititious war, fled from different parts for refuge, in conjunction with those in this city undertood to build a place of warship, that we might meet to offer up our prayers to the Holy god of Israel haveing hitherto Subscribed a room for that purpose from which we ware compelled to move by the owner. our abilities to Compleat this Building is not Equal to our wishes from many recent Losses, we are under the necessity to ask the assistance of our absent Bretherin, among them we look up to you and the rest of our Bretheren with you not doubting but you will readily Contribute to so Laudable and undertaking. we pray the almighty Father of the universe, the Lord God of Abraham, Isaac & Jacob to take you all under his holy protection & grant you Long Life health & happiness--we are Respectfully, etc."

Appendix II

From p.26

Address presented to the Governor and Executive Council
September 12, 1782.

"Pennsylvania Archives, 1784. 731.

Memorial of the Jewish Congregation of Philad'a 1782.

We the President & Representatives of the Jewish Congregation of this City, humbly beg leave to approach his Excellency the President, his Honour the Vice President and the Honorable the Executive Council of this Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

The Congregation of Mikve Israel (Israelites) in this City, having erected a place of publick worship which they intend to consecrate to the service of Almighty God tomorrow afternoon and, as they have ever professed themselves liege subject to the Sovereignty of the United States of America, and have always acted agreeable thereto, they humbly crave the Protection & Countenance of the Chief Magistrates in this State to give Sanction to their design, and will deem themselves highly honoured by their Presence in the Synagogue whenever they judge proper to favour them. The doors will be open'd at 3 O'clock and the service will continue 'till seven. The uncertainty of the day of consecration was the sole cause of having delayed this matter till now, but earnestly hope that it will not be thought too late.

With Prayers to the God of Israel for the safety of the United States in General, and this Commonwealth in particular we are,

Appendix II (cont'd)

Gentlemen, most respectfully
and most devotedly,
In behalf of the Congregation,

Jonas Phillips, President
Michael Gratz,
Solomon Marache,
Solm'n Myers Cohen,
Simon Nathan."

Appendix III

From p. 40

Phila. Feb'y 15th 1784.

"Gentlemen:

Being called to my former Place of Residence (& the Place of my Nativity) have to inform you that my Quarter expires here on Rosh Hodes (the New Moon) Nisan, at which time have engaged to return to New York, — that you may not lose the Opp' of providing yourselves with a suitable Person for the office of Hazan beg leave to recommend a speedy Application to those whom you think worthy, and I will on my Part do everything in my Power for the Benefit of the Mikve Israel to whom I acknowledge myself greatly Indebted for the many kind & generous Favors that I have received during my Stay amongst them & shall ever make it my Study to render every possible Service in return.

May the Great God of Israel vouchsafe to hold you under his holy & divine Protection may you Increase & prosper in Peace and Tranquility. most devoutly prayd.

Gentlemen,
Your much obliged
& Very Humble Servitor,

Gershom Seixas."

NOTES

- 1) Rosenbach, A.S.W., "An Historical Sketch of the Congregation." Dedication of the New Synagogue of the Congregation Mikve Israel. Phila:1909. p.5.
- 2) ibid;p.6;
Jewish Encyclopedia, art. "Philadelphia." p.670
vol.IX. (also by Rosenbach, A.S.W.)
- 3) Cohen, Mary M., An Old Philadelphia Cemetery,
City History Society of Phila., Phila:1920.
p.74.
- 4) Rosenbach, op.cit.p.4;
Morais, H.S., The Jews of Philadelphia, Phila:
1894. p.11.
- 5) Marcus, J. R., Letter Book (in MS.) maintains that
the Philadelphia Congregation borrowed the Torah
scroll for themselves, and not for the Reading
Congregation as in "Items Relating to the New
York Congregation" PAJHS, vol.27. p.20-1.
- 6) Marcus, op.cit.
- 7) JE, loc.cit.
- 8) Marcus, op.cit.
- 9) ibid.
- 10) Rosenbach, op.cit. pp.6-7.
- 11) ibid.

- 12) "The Lyons Collection" PAJHS, vol.27, 1920.
p.388.
Phillips, N.T., "History of David Mendez Machado"
PAJHS, vol.2, 1894. p.55.
- 13) Phillips, N. T., "The Congregation Shearith
Israel" PAJHS, vol.6, 1897. ~~p.55~~
p.130-1.
- 14) ibid.;
"The Lyons Collection" p.38.
"Historical Sketch by Naphtali Phillips" PAJHS,
vol.21, 1912. ~~p.140~~ p. 183.
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- 15) Phillips, op.cit.
- 16) ibid.
- 17) Phillips, N.T., "History of the Jews of New York"
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- 18) Shearith Israel Minutes, July 3, 1768.
- 19) "Historical Sketch by Naphtali Phillips", p.183.
- 20) Trachtenberg, J., Consider the Years, Easton:1944.
p.38.
- 21) Marcus, op. cit.
- ~~22) Hühner, L., "Jews of Georgia" PAJHS v. 17.~~
- 22) Hühner, L., "The Jews of South Carolina"
PAJHS. v. 12, 1904. p. 53.
Oppenheim, S., "The Jews and Masonry"
PAJHS. v. 19, 1910. p. 76.

- 23) Hühner, op. cit.;
"Items Relating to the Jews of North
America" PAJHS v. 27, 1920. p. 226-7.
- 24) Hühner, op. cit.
- 25) ibid. In the source listed in note 27, the
same author, Hühner claims Nones and Seixas
for Georgia. The important fact for this
paper is that they were not native to Phila-
delphia.
- 26) Oppenheim, op. cit. p. 78.
- 27) Hühner, L. "Jews of Georgia" PAJHS v. 17.
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- 28) Memorable Documents in American Jewish History
Pamphlet of the Am. Jew. Hist. Soc., N. Y. 1940
p. 9 (photostat).
- 29) Wright, C. W. Economic History of the United
States. McGraw-Hill. N. Y.: 1941. p. 225.
Morais, H. M. The Struggle for American Freedom.
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- 30) "Items Relating to the Jews of Newport"
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- 31) Marcus, op. cit.
- 32) Grinstein, H. B. The Rise of the Jewish Community
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- 33) "Minute Book of the Congregation Shearith Israel,"
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- 34) Tractenberg, op. cit. p. 67.
- 35) Marcus, op. cit.
- 36) Phillips, N. T. "Family History of the Reverend
David Mendez Machado" PAJHS v. II, p. 57.
- 37) Memorable Documents in American Jewish History,
p. 7. (photostat).
- 38) See Appendix II, p. 62.

- 39) cf. note 28.
- 40) Wright, op. cit. p. 230
- 41) Oppenheim, S. op. cit.
- 42) "Minute Book of the Congregation Shearith Israel," p. 141.
- 43) In a letter (March 22, 1784) from Hayman Levy, Parnass of the New York congregation telling the Philadelphians that they had no legitimate reasons for complaining of insufficient notice from Hazan Seixas.
- 44) Phillips, N. T., "History of D. M. Machado" p. 58.
- 45) Hollander, J. H. "Some Further References Relating to Hayim Solomon." PAJHS v. III, 1895. p. 8. also, Rosenbach, op. cit. p. 13, from Westcott, Persons Who Took the Oath of Allegiance to Pannsylvania, p. xxiii.
- 46) "Receipt Book of the Congregation Shearith Israel." PAJHS v. 27, 1920.
- 47) Marcus, op. cit.
- 48) JE, loc. cit.; Rosenbach, A. S. W., op. cit., p. 13.
- 49) "Items Relating to the Jews of New York," PAJHS v. 27, 1920. p. 17.
- 50) Grinstein, H. B., op. cit., p. 562, n. 2.