

From The Parnas:

By Mark I. Wolfson

This past Shabbat, we read the double Parasha of Behar and Behukotai. In the first Parashah, Behar, we read the words that are inscribed on the Liberty Bell: “Proclaim Liberty through all the land to all the inhabitants thereof”. The story of how the Liberty Bell arrived in Philadelphia is bound up in the history of Mikveh Israel.

The story begins in New York, though, in the very early 1700s at our sister congregation Shearith Israel. One of the very active members of that congregation was Jacob Franks. Franks was a very successful and influential merchant, importing items such as tea, iron, guns, currency and rice and trading them for local grain and furs. He served as Parnas of Shearith Israel seven times in a twenty year period. In 1712 he married Bilhah Abigail Levy, daughter of Moses Levy, New York’s most successful merchant. Moses Levy also served as Parnas of Shearith Israel various times. Jacob and Bilhah had 9 children, one of whom was David, who was born in 1720. In 1742, at the age of 22, David Franks went into business with his mother’s brother Nathan Levy, who was 16 years his senior.

Both Nathan Levy, who had already attained some success as a merchant in New York, and David Franks, his nephew who he took under his wing, came to Philadelphia. On September 25th, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Proprietor of Pennsylvania Thomas Penn granted Nathan Levy a nine hundred square-foot burial ground where he buried a child who had died in infancy. This was the first Jewish burial in Philadelphia and, as many congregations do, Mikveh Israel dates its origins back to this date, as the establishment of a sacred Jewish burial ground is the beginning of a Jewish Community.

The trading company of Levy and Franks became very successful in Philadelphia and westward to Lancaster, in association with the prominent merchant Joseph Simon. Levy and Franks owned all or part of several merchant ships, which they used to transport goods back and forth to England. They built a large business trading in furs with the Indians, and imported goods needed in Philadelphia such as sail cloth, cordage, twine, prepared medicines, Scotch and snuff.

In the fall of 1751, they acquired a new vessel, the Myrtilla, holding 250 tons of cargo, equipped with 10 guns, and a crew of 20. The name Myrtilla came from the myrtle tree (in Hebrew Hadas), one of the four species we wave on Succot.

Meanwhile, in Philadelphia, seat of government of the British Crown Province of Pennsylvania, the General Assembly had decided to build a State House, which is now Independence Hall. On November 1st, 1751 a letter was written to Robert Charles, the Colonial Agent for Pennsylvania who was working in London to purchase a bell for the State House. The bell was ordered to commemorate the 50th anniversary of William Penn’s 1701 Charter of Privileges, which speaks of religious freedoms, liberal stances on Native American Rights, and in the inclusion of citizens in enacting laws. The

legislators ordered that the bell should be cast in England and that it should have round it words from the Book of Leviticus.

"Let the bell be cast by the best workmen, and examined carefully before it is shipped, with the following words, well shapen in large letters round it, viz.:

"By order of the Assembly of the Province of Pennsylvania for the State House in the City of Philadelphia, 1752.'

"And underneath:

"Proclaim Liberty through all the land to all the inhabitants thereof. Levit. xxv., 10.'

And so, in September 1752, on the *Myrtilla*, captained by Mr. Richard Budden, and owned by the trading company of Levy and Franks, docked in the port of Philadelphia and delivered one of the most important and recognizable symbols of American freedom and liberty, the Liberty Bell.