

## From The Parnas:

By Mark I. Wolfson

Gershom Mendes Seixas

This week (6 Tammuz) we commemorated the Hashcabah of Gershom Mendes Seixas, the first minister of Mikveh Israel. Gershom was born on January 14, 1745 in New York City, to Isaac Mendes Seixas and Rachel Levy. Rachel Levy was the daughter of Moses Levy, who was one of the most prominent merchants in New York at the time. Her brother was Nathan Levy, whose request for a parcel of land for a burial ground in Philadelphia in 1740 is regarded as the founding of our congregation. He was thus the first American-born minister of Shearith Israel, and the only American-born minister of Mikveh Israel to the present day.

It's interesting to note that Rachel Levy was Ashkenazi, which made Gershom half Sephardi and Half Ashkenazi, mirroring the makeup of both the congregations in New York and Philadelphia. Seixas became the minister of Shearith Israel at the age of 23, succeeding his teacher and mentor, Joseph Jessurun Pinto who had served there for 8 years and then left to become the minister of the Sephardi community in Hamburg. The community in New York numbered only 300 people at the time.

Seixas served as the spiritual leader of the congregation, but also as the supervisor of Kashrut, performed all marriages and funerals, was the mohel, and for a time served as the shohet - the ritual slaughterer for the congregation. At age 30, Seixas married Elkalah Cohen. Together they had 4 children over the next 10 years, after which time Elkalah passed away. He then married Hannah Manuel, with whom he had 9 additional children.

Seixas was a strong advocate of American Independence. In 1775, with the British Army fast approaching New York City, Seixas persuaded a majority of the congregation to close Shearith Israel rather than continue operating under the coming British occupation of Manhattan. He then packed up the Torah scrolls and other artifacts and books and moved them, along with his family, to his father-in-law's home in Stratford, CT. In 1780, our own Congregation Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia invited Seixas to become the minister of the congregation. The congregation then began the project to design and build its first synagogue building, and Seixas led the construction to its completion in September, 1782.

At the close of the war in 1783, many of the refugees from New York returned to their homes and rebuilt the Jewish Community there. In 1784, Congregation Shearith Israel invited Seixas back to New York to lead once again. In spite of being established and comfortable in Philadelphia, he agreed, and changed places with the minister in New York at the time, Jacob Raphael Cohen. Each served their communities for the rest of their lives. Seixas was one of fourteen clergy to participate in the inauguration ceremony for George Washington as the first President of the United States. In 1787, he was invited to be a trustee of Columbia College, serving until 1815. He was one of the incorporators when Columbia was incorporated and his name appears in the charter.

Seixas dedicated his life to serving the poor. He began many charitable organizations including the Hebra Hased Va'Amet - the first free burial society, and Kalfe Sedaka Mattan Besether - Fund for Charity and Anonymous Gifts. He frequently preached that the purpose of a fortunate person's life was to help others, which they should do whether or not they receive a reward. He also established a New York bet din for deciding disputes.

Rev. Seixas was not the only high-achieving, successful child of Isaac Mendes Seixas and Rachel Levy. Gershom's brother Benjamin was a prominent merchant in Newport, Philadelphia and New York, and was one of the founders of the New York Stock Exchange. Benjamin's son became the minister of Shearith Israel in 1828. Gershom's brother Abraham served in the American army and carried dispatches for Gen. Harry Lee in the south. His brother Moses, the eldest, was one of the founders of the Newport Bank of Rhode Island. Moses drafted a letter, in the name of the Newport congregation to George

Washington upon Washington's visit to Newport. Washington responded with a beautiful letter expressing his appreciation of the good wishes and his strong views in favor of religious tolerance.

This letter will be on display, along with the letter from Mikveh Israel to Washington and its response, in the new exhibit at the National Museum of American Jewish History, opening June 29th entitled To Bigotry No Sanction: George Washington and Religious Freedom. The letters, copies of which can be perused in our lobby, are on loan from Mikveh Israel to the Museum though the duration of the exhibit.