

## From the Parnas

**By Mark I. Wolfson**

This week we commemorate the Hashcabah for the second minister of Mikveh Israel, Jacob Raphael Cohen, who died on September 9th, 1811 (20 Elul). Minister Cohen was born in 1738, most likely on the Barbary Coast, which is the area of North Africa which now contains the modern states of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. On December 5th, 1764, he married Rebecca Luria in London. Rebecca's family was exiled from Spain during the Inquisition. They had 5 daughters and one son, Abraham Haim Cohen.

Jacob Cohen was educated in London and served as a mohel. Ordination as known today was rare and though he was not a rabbi, he was knowledgeable, pious, and dedicated to Judaism and service to the community. He was a member of the Spanish-Portuguese congregation in London, Shaar Hashamayim. So it was that when the Spanish-Portuguese congregation in Montreal was looking for a spiritual leader, they consulted the London congregation, who recommended Cohen.

The congregation in Montreal, Shearith Israel, was small, probably about 20 families, most of them successful merchants from the American colonies and the islands of the Caribbean. It was the first congregation in Canada, formed in 1768. Just as with our own congregation Mikveh Israel, the members of Shearith Israel were Jews of Ashkenazi origins, descendants of German and Eastern European Jews, but just as we did, they adopted the Spanish Portuguese Sephardic customs and rite which was practiced in the London Synagogue with which they maintained close ties.

As it was here in Philadelphia at Mikveh Israel, Shearith Israel in Montreal was governed by the junta, lay leaders who were powerful community heads. The community was sufficiently established to build its first synagogue building in 1777. Cohen arrived in 1778 and ministered under the strict control of the lay leaders according to Sephardic custom. He was hired for £50 per year on a three-year contract to act as the Shohet (slaughterer), hazan, mohel, teacher of Hebrew and religious tradition, and Torah reader.

After the congregation split in 1782, Cohen intended to return to London. The ship he was to travel on was leaving from New York City, which at that time was occupied by the British army. His ship was commandeered by the British for the purpose of returning troops back to England. This stranded Cohen, who quickly discovered that the small remnant of the Jewish community in New York, Congregation Shearith Israel, was without a spiritual leader, as their minister, Gershom Mendes Seixas, was serving Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia. Cohen filled the position of Hazan (Minister) until 1784, when Seixas was recalled from Philadelphia to return to his post in New York.

This of course left Mikveh Israel without a Hazan, and they invited Cohen to come to

Philadelphia. He served as Minister from his arrival in 1784 until his death in 1811. Cohen was meticulous about keeping detailed records. His record book contained lists of circumcisions, marriages, and burials, both in Hebrew and in English. After his death, the record book was continued by several others, including Benjamin Nones, Dr. Alexander Wertheim, Lewis Allen, Zalegman Phillips, and Abraham Hart. Ultimately, the record book contained the records of more than 500 early American and Canadian Jews, along with written descriptions of the liturgies. A detailed, annotated study of the record book was published in the American Jewish Quarterly, volume 59, by our own former Minister, Reverend Alan Corre and Malcolm Stern.

Jacob Raphael Cohen was succeeded by his son Abraham Hyam Cohen, who served as Hazan for 5 years until 1816. The fascinating story of the life of Abraham Cohen and his wife Sarah Jannette Pickens Cohen, will have to wait for another time...