

From The Parnas

By.

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Abraham Israel Keys

This coming Shabbat, we remember the Hashcabah of a former minister of Mikveh Israel: Abraham Israel Keys, who served the congregation from 1824 until his death on October 18 (11 Heshvan), 1828. I have written previously about Gershom Mendes Seixas, who was requested to serve as the first Minister of Mikveh Israel by a large number of his congregants and the leadership of Shearith Israel in New York when they fled with their Torah Scrolls and other appurtenances to Philadelphia from the British occupation of New York in 1780. After the British surrendered in 1783 and Seixas was ordered back to New York, he changed places with Rev. Jacob Raphael Cohen who had been serving the wartime remnant of Shearith Israel.

On the passing of Rev. Cohen, the ministry of Mikveh Israel was left vacant for four years. During that time Rev. Cohen's son Mr. Abraham Hyman Cohen served as the Reader for the congregation. In 1815, the congregation elected Rev. Emanuel Nunes Carvalho as minister. Carvalho had obtained eminence through his knowledge of Torah, as well as a mastery of several languages. He was a skilled and fluent writer, and among his many works was "A Key to A Hebrew Grammar". Rev. Carvalho passed away in March, 1817 after serving the congregation for only a year and a half.

For the next 7 years, the congregation was again without a minister, and turned to lay readers Mr. Hartwig Cohen and Mr. Jacob Bensadon to lead the services. On June 20, 1824, an election for minister was held at a congregational meeting. The candidates balloted for the election were Dr. Jacob de La Motta, Rev. Isaac B. Seixas (nephew of Gershom), and Rev. Abraham Israel Keys. Keys was selected by a large majority of the members. Rev. Keys was serving at the time as minister of a congregation in Barbados, where he had journeyed from his native London.

Preaching to the congregation was first introduced at Mikveh Israel by Keys' successor, Isaac Leiser. Therefore Mr. Keys was judged by his ability to conduct and chant the services, strictly in accordance with the ritual and rich liturgy of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews. He did so with dignity and impressiveness, and was well loved by the congregation. He could often be seen walking from his home at the corner of Sterling Alley and Race Street to the synagogue around the corner on Cherry Street just above Third, fully attired in the robes of his office.

During his tenure, the Congregation built a new Synagogue building on the same property as the first. The 1782 building was over forty years old, and though the congregation had only about 100 members, it was financially sound. They conducted a capital campaign, which brought in money from congregations in North America, as well as from the Caribbean and from London. They were also able to sell 600 tickets to the dedication, which was an elaborate ceremony held on January 21, 1825. In attendance, in addition to the congregation and a well-trained (by Keys) Jewish choir, were a number of non-Jewish notables, justices of the Supreme Court, and the Bishop of the Episcopal Church. Rev. Keys officiated the proceedings, and was assisted by the Minister of Shearith Israel, Rev. Moses Levy Maduro Peixotto. He continued to serve the congregation until his death in 1828. He and his wife Jael Keys had several children. Jael survived her husband by 11 years.

An interesting story is told in connection with the passing of Rev. Keys. On the Shabbat preceding Rosh Hodesh Heshvan, Rev. Keys sang the prayers announcing the new month of Heshvan. The full name for the month is Marheshvan, deriving from the Akkadian for "Eighth Month". Many refer to the month as Mar-Heshvan (Mar means "bitter"), as a reference to this being the only month with no holidays. After the services, Rev. Keys, though in his usual health, remarked to the Shamash, Mr. Abraham E. Israel: "I have blessed the incoming of Rosh Hodesh Heshvan today. I fear it will be a Mar (bitter) Heshvan". Two weeks later, on Shabbat 11 Heshvan, Mr. Keys passed away. Rev. Keys is buried in our Spruce Street cemetery