

From The Parnas

By Mark I. Wolfson

Did you ever wonder who the distinguished bearded man was in the large portrait on the south side of the social hall? He was Abraham M. Frechie, whose Hashcabah we remember this coming Shabbat. Frechie was born in Amsterdam, Holland in 1831, and died in Philadelphia on October 19 (30 Tishri), 1906. He was one of many important Dutch Jews in the history of Philadelphia. As I have written before, Mikveh Israel, along with our sister congregation in New York, Shearith Israel, owes its customs and rites to the traditions brought to this country by Dutch Sephardi immigrants from Amsterdam.

The majority of Dutch Jews, however, were of Ashkenazi background and followed the German minhag. Just a few years after Mikveh Israel built its first building in 1782, the Dutch, German, and Polish Jews of the city formed the German Hebrew Society and very soon founded the first Ashkenazic synagogue in North America, Rodeph Shalom in 1795. This happened 30 years before a similar secession in New York when Bnai Jeshurun broke away from Shearith Israel. They purchased land for a cemetery in Northern Liberties in 1801, and incorporated in 1810, agreeing to read the prayers "according to German and Dutch Rules," which were not to be altered.

The two congregations co-existed in harmony for many years, with the German and Dutch congregants continuing to contribute and maintain formal ties with the more established congregation Mikveh Israel, and depended on them for kosher services and Torah scrolls. Each family had to choose which of the two congregations to join. Most of the Dutch families that started to arrive in large numbers after 1800 joined Rodeph Shalom. The largest growth of the Jewish community came in the 1840s through the 1860s where the Jewish population of Philadelphia grew from 1,500 to 6,000 in 1850 and then 10,000 in 1860, many of them Dutch pioneers.

There was some movement back and forth between the two congregations. For example, Isaac Stuttgart arrived in Philadelphia from Amsterdam in 1807 and opened a retail fancy goods store. He was a member of Rodeph Shalom until 1924, and then joined Mikveh Israel. Another Dutch merchant, Aaron Stork also arrived in 1807 and was a member of Rodeph Shalom, but switched to Mikveh Israel some years later and is buried, along with Stuttgart and many other Dutch Jews in our Spruce Street cemetery. A most notable example was Aaron Moses Dropsie (1794-1839) who arrived in Philadelphia from Amsterdam in 1819 at the age of 25 and joined Rodeph Shalom. He opened a pawnshop and quickly became wealthy and influential. He married a Christian woman and when in 1826 Rodeph Shalom tightened its membership rules to exclude Jews who married out, they granted Dropsie the only exception. The agreement provided that Dropsie's son, Moses Aaron who was 4 years old at the time, be denied religious education until he was old enough to make his own choice of religion. Moses eventually chose Judaism and became a leader in Philadelphia Jewry, in Mikveh Israel, and the benefactor of Dropsie College which has

now become the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies at the University of Pennsylvania.

Abraham Meyer Frechie was born in Amsterdam in 1831. He learned the trade of cigar-making at a young age, and after travelling throughout Europe, he sailed for America and arrived in 1857. His knowledge of cigar-making enabled him to establish himself as a manufacturer and dealer and settled in Philadelphia, eventually joining the firm of Emilio Nunez & Company, importers of Cuban tobacco. Frechie helped to establish and served as director of many charities, including the Hebrew Relief Society and the Association of Jewish Immigrants, and also served as the treasurer of the Philadelphia Branch of the Alliance Israelite Universelle. He was married to Judith Laura Pereyra, who came from a famous French family of Bankers. He had no children, and upon his death in 1906, he left money to many charities, along with several nieces, nephews, grand-nieces and grand-nephews. He left the very large sum of \$5,000 to the Jewish Hospital Association of Philadelphia.

Abraham M. Frechie was the Parnas of Mikveh Israel from 1883-1888, from 1891-1892, and again from 1899-1900. His widow donated several ritual object to Mikveh Israel in his honor, include a Sefer Torah, Rimonim, and a Torah Mantle, among other objects.