

## Our History

### By Mark I. Wolfson

Josephine Phillips Pesoa

This week we remember the Hashcabah of Josephine Pesoa, who died on January 19, 1907 (4 Shebat 5667). Josephine was the granddaughter of Isaac Pesoa, who was Parnas of Mikveh Israel from 1801-1805 and 1807-1808. Isaac was born in Kingston, Jamaica in 1762, of Portuguese descent. He was a druggist in Jamaica and carried the practice to Philadelphia. He married Phila Phillips, daughter of Jonas Phillips and Rebecca Mendes Machado Phillips, on April 13, 1796. Together they had five children: Josephine's father David, Rachel, Hetty, Abraham, and Rebecca.

Of these, David Pesoa is perhaps the best known. He was born on January 11, 1801, and though he trained as a saddler, he preferred retail business and soon opened a dry goods business on Second Street, below Spruce. His business thrived and as he became more and more wealthy, he engaged increasingly in philanthropy, supporting many Jewish charities with his time and money. Foremost was his devotion to Mikveh Israel, where he served as a member of the Board of Adjunta. He was the President of the United Hebrew Beneficent Fuel Society where he focused on kindness to the poor. He was also Vice-President of the Hebrew Charity Association and a Manager of the Hebrew Education Society, as well as director or contributor to many other Jewish societies, both charitable and educational.

David Pesoa married Clara Marks, daughter of Isaac and Esther Marks, in 1835. They had one daughter, Josephine. For several years, Josephine was the Superintendent of a Sewing School for girls, which numbered 350 pupils, and operated under the auspices of the Hebrew Sunday School Society of Philadelphia.

Josephine Pesoa comes from a long line of Jews integral to the forming and shaping of Mikveh Israel. Countless of the men of the Pesoa and Phillips families served in various positions in the congregation, including officers and the board, and both the men and women founded, labored, and contributed time and money in forming the great charitable and educational institutions that had such a profound effect in the shaping of the Jewish community of Philadelphia and the country.

In terms of the heads of the congregation, her great grandfather, Jonas Phillips was Parnas from 1782-1783 and was very active in the building of the first synagogue building. He also lobbied the constitutional convention

regarding Jews holding office and removing the requirement to swear on the Christian bible in the oath of office. Her grandmother Phila's brother, Naphtali Phillips, was Parnas from 1799-1800. Her grandfather Isaac Pesoa was the Parnas from 1801-1805. Another of Phila's brothers, Zalegman Phillips was Parnas from 1806-1807, and then Isaac Pesoa served again from 1807-1808. Yet another of Phila's brothers, Benjamin Phillips served as Parnas from 1811-1815, and finally Zalegman Phillips again served for an additional 12 years from 1822-1834.

Josephine herself did not marry, and instead dedicated her life to Jewish charities and the affairs of the community. It is noted by Leon Hunner of the American Jewish Historical Society in his address delivered before The Council of Jewish Women at Temple Emanu-El in New York on November 21 1905, that "The American Jewish Historical Society has recently received a most valuable gift from Miss Josephine Pesoa, of Philadelphia. It is a bit of needlework made by a secret Jewess during the Inquisition, nearly four hundred years ago, and was one of the few things she was able to save when making her escape. It was subsequently used for ceremonial purposes in connection with admitting children into the Covenant, the last time it was so used being in the case of Mordecai M. Noah, in 1786".

One final note: Josephine's first cousin on her mother's side, Clara Esther Weil, married Rev. Sabato Morais, one of the greatest Rabbis of Mikveh Israel who served from 1851 to his death in 1897.