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Source: *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, 1893, No. 1 (1893), pp. 13-24

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43058504>

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MICKVE ISRAEL CONGREGATION OF PHILADELPHIA.

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The history of the *Mickvê Israel* Congregation has engaged the attention of several writers. Mr. Thompson Westcott sketched it briefly in his "History of Philadelphia," an extensive work published *seriatim*, during a long period, in the *Sunday Dispatch* of that city. In 1883, Mr. Hyman P. Rosenbach furnished a fuller account of it—as far as the year 1800—in a lecture which he delivered before the "Young Men's Hebrew Association" of Philadelphia. His address, published in pamphlet form at the request of friends, possesses much interest. Mr. Henry S. Morais dwelt on the subject in the course of a series of articles which appeared in the *Public Ledger* through the summer and fall of 1891. It is not my intention to quote anything that has already been written, but simply to set forth a few early incidents which, I believe, were not noticed by those whose narratives preceded mine.

On the seventeenth of March, 1782, Mr. Isaac Moses, a reputable Israelite who had taken up his residence in Philadelphia during the hostile occupation of New York by the British, convened a meeting of representative men. For some time he had exerted himself in behalf of a small body of Philadelphia co-religionists who had worshiped in a place hired for a synagogue. At that meeting Mr. Moses saw fit to relinquish any authority formerly conceded to him by tacit consent. He said that hitherto the affairs of the congregation, both religious and temporal, had been conducted without any settled rules, but that the time had arrived when

the brethren, whose welfare he had at heart, should be governed according to acknowledged laws. Thereupon, the speaker declared himself divested of any official capacity. Following his example, Messrs. Solomon M. Cohen, Hayman Levy, and Barnard Gratz, who had worked in concert with Mr. Moses, agreed to yield whatever power they might have exercised before.

Mr. Isaac DaCosta was proposed as chairman of that meeting, and the motion being carried, a number of important questions relative to the erection of a regular synagogue, the method of raising funds for its support, and the selection of directors were then discussed. On Mr. Isaac Moses, who had shown earnest zeal, was conferred the honor of being the first presiding officer (*Parnas*) of the Mickvé Israel Congregation.

The Board of Trustees (*Adjunta*) were five Israelites favorably known in the community, namely, Messrs. Barnard Gratz, Hayman Levy, Jonas Phillips, Benjamin Seixas, and Simon Nathan.

Deserving of special mention is a circumstance which occurred shortly after that historic meeting. A lot of ground had been bought of a Mr. Robert Wall. There the congregation designed to set up a synagogue and a school-house. The objections advanced by a German-Reform congregation of non-Israelites against such a project are not stated. Possibly the synagogue would have been very close to the church, and in some manner, left unexplained, the proximity might have occasioned displeasure. At all events, Mr. Moses and his colleagues addressed to the vestry of that congregation a letter, inspired by kindly consideration. They wrote thus: "In order that we may understand each other and prevent any future difficulties, we now offer you again the same (property). Our intention was to build a synagogue and a school-house thereon, for the use of our congregation, not conceiving that we would in the least disturb you. To our great surprise we are told that it will. We can now supply

ourselves with another lot, not so convenient for our purpose, nor on such good terms, for it will cost more. But as we wish to live in friendship with our neighbors, and in order to convince you that such is our meaning, we are willing to take (from you) the same price as we gave for the place," etc.

Most probably the offer was accepted, because soon after a site was selected for the erection of a permanent synagogue. The congregation determined to build on the north side of Cherry street near Third street, at an outlay of "eighteen hundred and fifteen pounds, current money of Pennsylvania," the builder being John Donohue, associated with Edward McKegan, bricklayer. The two undertook the work on the second of April, 1782, and completed it on the first of September of that year.

The ceremony that should mark the laying of the foundations seems to have given the Trustees much concern. At that juncture an Israelite named Nohos called on Mr. Moses and described what he had witnessed at Bordeaux, in France, on an occasion like that looked forward to in Philadelphia. Upon reflection, the decision was entrusted to a learned Israelite. Gershom Mendes Seixas, who had officiated as *Hazan* (minister) at the *Shearith Israel* Hebrew Congregation of New York, was among those who had made Philadelphia their home during the occupation of New York by the British army. He outlined the service necessary to be held, and on the sixth of Tammuz, 5542—June the sixteenth, 1782—four stones were severally laid in four corners by Messrs. Jonas Phillips, Isaac Moses, Jacob Mordecai, and Barnard Gratz. The whole congregation attended the ceremony, to which the chanting of appropriate prayers composed by the above-mentioned minister added impressiveness.

The building of the new structure proceeded rapidly, but the Board of Trustees soon discovered that the task which they had assumed demanded a larger expenditure than the income warranted. Accordingly they resolved to appeal for aid to sister congregations in various localities. A letter

was written in Hebrew by Mr. Mordecai M. Mordecai to the Jews of Surinam, and one in English by Mr. Isaac Moses to Rhode Island and to Lancaster, respectively. The address sent later on to the Jews of Cape François, to those of St. Thomas and St. Croix, in the West Indies, is of historical interest. It read as follows: "A small number of brethren, who, during this calamitous war, fled from different parts to find a refuge, in conjunction with those in this city, undertook to build a place of worship, that they might meet together to offer up prayers to the Holy God of Israel, having hitherto substituted for the purpose a room, from which we were compelled by the owner to move. Our ability to complete the building is not equal to our wishes. Because of many recent losses we are under the necessity to ask the assistance of our distant brethren. Amongst them, we look up to you and the rest of our brethren with you, not doubting but that you will readily contribute to so laudable an undertaking. We pray the Almighty Father of all the universe—the Lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—to take you all under His holy protection and grant you long life, health and happiness. We are respectfully your," etc.

The small body of Philadelphia Jews bravely labored to accomplish their object, and on Friday before the Penitential Sabbath—the fifth of Tishri, 5543—September the thirteenth, 1782, the new synagogue was consecrated with due solemnity.

Two days previously a change had taken place in the Board, Mr. Jonas Phillips having been elected Parnas to succeed Mr. Isaac Moses, who, however, still retained his interest in the congregation during his residence in Philadelphia. Together with the Reverend Gershom Mendés Seixas, Messrs. Jonas Phillips, and Barnard Gratz, Mr. Moses called on the Governor and invited that high official and his associates to the celebration of the forthcoming occasion.

Again the knowledge which the minister possessed was brought into requisition in the arrangement of the service.

The latter was characterized by exceptional simplicity, there being a total absence of instrumental and choral music and of preaching. Noteworthy is the prayer for the Government. Blessings were invoked on "his Excellency the President and the Delegates of the United States in Congress assembled; on his Excellency George Washington, Captain-General and Commander-in-Chief of the Federal army of these States; on his Excellency the President and the honorable members of the General Assembly of this commonwealth, and all kings and potentates in alliance with North America."

A commendable feature in a congregation with exceedingly limited means is the promptness it exhibited in responding to the appeals of humanity. A perusal of the minutes, noted down in its early stages, shows that the cause of the poor and the stranger was not pleaded in vain. Here, one is told that widows were granted enough to prevent their being left without a shelter; there, that a subscription was raised to enable a French lad in a state of destitution to return home comfortably and decently clad. In fact, *Zedakah*, or "charity," occupied the attention of the directors equally with the securing of means to carry on public worship.

But the same records make us acquainted with what cannot challenge approval. Judging from their contents, we may infer that neither the meetings nor the divine services had been conducted at all times with the dignity which is an indispensable accompaniment. Witness the following motion set forth by Mr. Isaac Da Costa: "No persons shall be suffered to speak to each other. They must address the Parnas, under penalty of half-a-crown for every offense." And again, Mr. Isaac Moses moved "that we now bind ourselves by the strictest ties of honor to behave with decency and decorum in time of the worship, and that if any man behaves improperly, the Parnas shall stop him, and we will support the Parnas in his office." But what Israelites of this century, and particularly of this country, will consider strange

and disapprove of, as a stretch of power, is the ecclesiastical authority which the *Ma'amad*, or Board of Directors, assumed. A curious incident will illustrate it. At a meeting of the Trustees, held on Sunday, the seventeenth of September, 1782, Mr. Jonas Phillips, who occupied the chair, stated that he was informed by Mr. Mordecai M. Mordecai "how Ezekiel Levy, contrary to our laws, had shaved on a Sabbath at Baltimore." A discussion then arose as to summoning the accused. The majority decided affirmatively, and Mr. Levy, one of the original signers of the document who had recommended the rearing of a permanent synagogue, and had continued to be a member in good standing, was made to appear. Irritation may have been mingled with annoyance when the accused asked his accuser if the charge which he had brought could be substantiated by a personal knowledge of the act. Mr. Mordecai was obliged to confess that he could not so assert, admitting that his informant was a Baltimorean named Isaac Abraham. That man was officially written to touching the unpleasant concern, but with what results the records do not tell.

Two years had passed, and Gershom Mendes Seixas officiated as minister of the Mickvé Israel Congregation. On the twenty-third of Shebat, 5544—February the fifteenth, 1784—that Reader at the synagogue wrote to the Trustees: "Gentlemen: Being called to my former place of residence—and the place of my nativity—I have to inform you that my quarter expires here on *Rosh Chodesh* (the New Moon) of Nisan. I have engaged to return to New York. That you may not lose the opportunity of providing yourselves with a suitable person for the office of Hazan, I beg leave to recommend a speedy application to those whom you think worthy, and I will, on my part, do everything in my power for the benefit of the *Kahal Kadosh* (Holy Congregation) Mickvé Israel, to whom I acknowledge myself greatly indebted for the many kind and generous favors that I have received during my stay amongst them, and shall

ever make it my study to render every possible service in return. May the Great God of Israel vouchsafe to hold you under His holy and divine protection. May you increase and prosper in peace and tranquillity. So I most devoutly pray. I am, gentlemen, your much obliged and humble servant." On the first of Adar, 5544—February the twenty-third, 1784—Mr. Barnard Gratz acquainted his colleagues with the contents of the above communication, and added that he had also in his possession a letter from Mr. Jacob Cohen, then acting as Reader in New York, wherein the writer offered himself as a candidate for the office which would soon become vacant.

On the sixth of Nisan—March the twenty-ninth—Mr. Gratz told his associates that the President and Trustees of the Shearith Israel Congregation, of New York, had addressed him regarding the application of Reverend Jacob Cohen, and that a friend of the latter, Mr. Myer Myers, had also forwarded a note on the same subject. The applicant was loth to leave New York altogether, but he would agree to serve his Philadelphia co-religionists temporarily. The statement caused dissatisfaction and word was sent that Mr. Cohen must arrive at a definite determination, and that unless he reached this city prior to the Passover holidays—April the sixth—other arrangements would be entered into.

Subsequent records clearly show that Jacob Cohen did succeed Mr. Seixas, but a number of papers leave the impression that the relations between him and the Board of Trustees were not always harmonious. Thus in October, 1791, the minister complained to Mr. Benjamin Nones, who was then President, of the lack of a proper recognition of his official services. Again in 1800 Mr. Cohen set forth the identical grievances to Naphtali Phillips, and again to Zalegman Phillips in January of 1807, who both, in turn, represented the congregation as Parnasim. At one period of his incumbency he forwarded a letter of resignation, which the Directors declined to accept.

Evidently the ministerial berth was not very wide, for its occupant lamented the inadequacy of his means to supply his wants. The emolument, which none now holding a similar position in any American congregation would be likely to envy, was slightly above that of the sexton. For Abraham Cohen—successor of Lyon Nathan, the first who served in the capacity of *Shamash* (sexton) at the new synagogue—was allowed an increase, so that his yearly pay amounted to thirty-seven pounds and ten shillings, exclusive of perquisites, while the *Hazan* (minister), who acted as *Shochet* (killer of animals for the use of Jews) and as *Mohel* (circumciser) received but fifty pounds. True, from all accounts, the sexton likewise had multifarious and onerous duties to perform; still, what a low estimate must our Jewish predecessors have put on the services of the men that led the congregation in prayer and offered entreaties to God for its welfare! Besides, very aggravating was the undue authority displayed by the Parnas and Adjunta in those “good old times,” so that the *Hazan* was kept actually under subjection.

These outlines of the early stages of the Mickvé Israel Congregation would be too incomplete without a sketch of the history of the first Jewish cemetery in Philadelphia. On the twenty-fifth of September, 1740, Nathan Levy applied to John Penn, chief of the Proprietary government, for a small lot of ground which he might use as a burial place for his family. He was granted thirty feet square, which he had walled in upon the north side of Spruce street between Eighth and Ninth streets. Again, on the twenty-seventh of June, 1752, he applied for an addition of thirty-five feet, the yearly tax being “a quit rent of five shillings sterling, or value between Philadelphia and London, for the time being.” On December 23d, 1753, Nathan Levy died, in the fiftieth year of his age, and was interred in that cemetery. A Hebrew acrostic on the tombstone bewails his loss as a communal bereavement. On the thirty-first of October, 1765, John Lukens, Surveyor-General, drew a design of the

cemetery, beneath which he wrote thus: "A draught of several lots, or parcels of ground granted to several Jews for a burying yard, situated on the north side of Spruce st. between the Eighth and Ninth st. from the Delaware; some part surveyed and the other part resurveyed the eighth of October, 1765. Returned to the Secretary's office, the thirty-first day of October, 1765." The genuineness of that document was certified to by Benjamin Nones, Notary Public, on the twentieth of March, 1803. Twelve years prior to the last named date, at a general meeting held on the twenty-seventh of November, 1791, the congregation appointed Messrs. Manuel Josephson, Joseph Simons, Barnard Gratz, Solomon Lyon, and Samuel Hays, trustees for the burial ground, and asked "Benjamin Nones, Parnas, to apply for a patent authorizing said Benjamin Nones to certify as to the appointment of the aforesaid five trustees—if so required—in behalf of the congregation." That authorization and the endorsement of Mr. Nones were sworn to in the presence of Hilary Baker, a Philadelphia alderman.

Another document to the same effect bears the signature of David Franks, a prominent Israelite in those days, and its correctness is testified to by Mr. Nones. It reads as follows: "Whereas Nathan Levy, formerly of this city, merchant, did apply for two pieces of ground for a burial place for his family, which said two pieces of ground was granted to him, as more fully will appear by the records of the Land Office, this is to certify and declare that said application, which was in the name of the aforesaid Nathan Levy, was intended for the use of his family, and also for the use of the Hebrew Congregation of this city; it being intended at the time he applied for the same to be a trust for a burial place for the interment of Hebrews. Given under my hand at Philadelphia, the thirtieth day of November, 1791."

Another document, drawn in 1793, by direction of Benjamin Levy, of Baltimore, married to Rachel Levy, daughter of the deceased Nathan Levy, and her sister Philadelphia Levy,

recognizes the appointment of the five trustees, reserving to the heirs of the departed Nathan Levy "the free, unrestrained and absolute right of burial and all and every the honors and privileges of sepulture for themselves only in and upon and above described lot of ground." Nevertheless, the legal title of the Mickvé Israel Congregation to the Spruce street cemetery has been strongly disputed. Notably, a Miss Hetty Levy, granddaughter of Nathan Levy, living at Baltimore in 1812, applied repeatedly by letter and through her friend and adviser Moses Levy of Philadelphia, to Mr. Simon Gratz, for what she claimed was due to her as heiress of the Israelite who owned part, at least, of the Spruce street Jewish burial ground. She pleaded forcibly and touchingly, and as a lineal descendant of the Hebrew who certainly was the first to apply for the spot where the earliest inhabitants of the Jewish faith might find an honored burial suitably to the rites and practices of their faith, one may hope that at all events she did not plead in vain for some consideration in her reduced circumstances.

Other claimants to a portion of the same ground are the Gratz family. Tradition does call a lot on the west side of the cemetery "The Gratz Lot," but a document to support the tradition does not exist. That the family have considered themselves entitled to it is evident from a letter which the late Major Alfred Mordecai addressed to the late Mr. Abraham Hart, than whom none could be more familiar with the past history of the congregation. For that Philadelphia Israelite had been identified with it from his youth, and served it upwards of half a century either as Trustee or as President. Major Mordecai's letter is an inquiry into "the terms of the resolution passed in September, 1813, by the congregation, granting a special part of the Spruce street ground to the Gratz family." But no resolution of that character can be found.

In fact, prior to the year in which the grant is supposed to have been made, two members of the Gratz family had found

burial in that particular spot. A reasonable surmise is that the Congregation Mickvé Israel, wishing to acknowledge services rendered during many decades by prominent members of that Jewish family, allowed persons belonging to it to be interred in the same lot, whereas none other had been so privileged before or afterwards. The following document sets the question at rest and proves beyond doubt the absolute right of the Congregation Mickvé Israel to the Spruce street cemetery :

"No. 195.

"An act to enable the Hebrew Congregation, known by the name and style of 'Kahal Kadosh Mickvé Israel' of the city of Philadelphia, in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania, to lease on ground rent a lot of ground in the city of Philadelphia, belonging to said congregation.

"Section 1st. Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives, met in General Assembly, and it is hereby enacted by the authority of the same, that Samuel Hays, Simon Gratz, Zalegman Phillips and Abraham Myer Cohen, or a majority of them, Trustees of the Hebrew Congregation of the City of Philadelphia, incorporated and known by the name, style and title of 'K. K. Mickvé Israel,' be and they are hereby authorized, whenever by a vote of a majority of the whole number of members of the corporation they shall be so directed, to sell and convey in fee simple, upon ground rent for the use of the said congregation, the whole, or any part of a certain lot of ground situate at the north-east corner of Spruce and Ninth streets, in the city of Philadelphia, containing in front on Spruce st. one hundred and nineteen feet and in front on Ninth street one hundred and twenty-seven feet and six inches. And the said Trustees shall be able to give good and sufficient lease for the same, which shall be valid in law, and the said corporation shall have power to collect, sue and recover all rent or rents, arising from the same.

"Passed in April the 14th, 1828."

Glancing over the list of persons who figured in the history of the Jewish congregation that very probably met to worship in Philadelphia as early as 1740, one will easily discover many a descendant of the refugees from Spain and Portugal who found a home of security in this God-favored land of America. For instance, Samuel Delucena, Abraham Sasportas, Lopez y Riveras, Moses Gomez, Mordecai Sheftall, Solomon Marache, Joseph Abendanon, Samuel Israel Pacifico, Rodriguez Riveyra, Abraham Montes, Moses Naar. But none among the progeny of those worthies were found here by me on my arrival in March, 1851, since which time I have uninterruptedly served the Mickvé Israel Congregation of Philadelphia.