

REV. GERSHOM MENDEZ SEIXAS

"The Patriot Jewish Minister of the American Revolution"

BY N. TAYLOR PHILLIPS, LL. B.

"Through all Eternity to Thee
A joyful song I'll raise.
For oh! Eternity is too short
To utter all Thy praise."

The foregoing, with the Thirty-fifth Psalm, poetically arranged, was written by Rachel Levy in a Festival Prayer-book, now in the possession of the writer, printed in Amsterdam in the year 1726, in which are also recorded the births of her children, one of whom is the subject of this sketch. She was the daughter of Moses Levy, who was born in Spain about the year 1665. When quite a young man he went to London, where he became a merchant, and was the owner of many vessels engaged in the trade with the north of Africa. He arrived in New York about 1705, and he immediately took an active interest in the affairs of the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City. He was for several years, and at the time of his death, which occurred 14th of June, 1728, its Parnas (President). He was buried in the Cemetery on New Bowery, New York, of the Congregation, and the inscription on his tombstone, which is in Hebrew, Spanish, and English, can still be seen. Rachel Levy, his daughter, married in 1741 Isaac Mendez Seixas, born 1708, a native of Lisbon, Portugal. He was a merchant in New York, and afterward removed to Newport, R. I., where he engaged in active business until his death in 1780. His remains repose in the ancient Jewish

cemetery at Newport, made world-renowned by Longfellow's beautiful poem. He was one of the signers, in 1770, of the agreement to make more stringent the "Non-importation Agreement," whereby the merchants of the Colonies took the first concerted action to resist the oppression of Great Britain.

All the six children of Isaac Mendez Seixas and Rachel Levy became prominent in American Jewish history. Their son, Gershom Mendez Seixas, was born in the city of New York on the 14th of January, 1745. At a very early age he evinced a disposition to follow the Holy Service of the Synagogue, and when but five years old read a portion of the prayers in the Synagogue of the Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City. As early as 1766 he adopted the ministerial profession, and was formally elected and installed, with considerable ceremony, as pastor of the above-mentioned Congregation, which position he occupied amid vicissitudes for half a century. It is said that he was always a serious man, and, even when very young, by his bearing and manner he impressed those with whom he came in contact as being very much further advanced in years.

From the beginning he seems to have secured the affection of the members of his Congregation. He was an ardent patriot during the preliminaries to the struggle for independence, and it is related that when at length the crisis came, rather than continue the Synagogue under British auspices, he closed the doors of the edifice, which act was fiercely contested, even families being split apart as the result of it. Many of the members of the Congregation were merchants in active business in New York City, and their interests naturally were with the Tories rather than with the feeble little band of patriots endeavoring to secure freedom for the Colo-

nies. When the patriot members of the Congregation were about to flee from the city upon the appearance of the British fleet in New York Bay in August, 1776, preparatory to the occupation of the city by Lord Howe, the Rev. Gershom Mendez Seixas preached a sermon in English, in which he feelingly stated that the service on that occasion might be the last to be held in the historic old edifice situated in Mill Street (now South William Street), then approaching the half-century mark, and we are told that it was delivered with such force and eloquence that tears were shed by all present, men and women alike.

He left New York to seek retirement in Stratford, Conn., where he took with him for safe-keeping the scrolls of the law and the articles of ceremonial belonging to the Congregation. The records of the Congregation Shearith Israel show by statements rendered by the Rev. Mr. Seixas how he personally superintended the closing of the Synagogue and the transfer of its property in his flight from the city before the enemies of his country. By 1780 the Jewish patriots who had fled to Philadelphia, which city was selected by many as a place of refuge after incurring the displeasure of the Tories elsewhere, demanded the establishment of a permanent Congregation, and the Rev. Seixas was requested to officiate, which he consented to do. He at once left Connecticut, taking with him the sacred objects of holy worship, and established at Philadelphia the Congregation Mickvé Israel, a majority of the members being patriot refugees from New York. When the newly-erected house of worship was ready for dedication, he was one of a committee who waited on the Governor of Pennsylvania, inviting him to attend the ceremony. The occasion was most impressive, the Rev. Seixas deliv-



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ering a memorable patriotic address, and it is related that he invoked the blessing of Almighty God "on the members of these States in Congress assembled, and on his Excellency George Washington, Commander-General of these Colonies."

During his entire stay at Philadelphia he continued his labors in the cause of liberty. I must digress here to mention the public spirit that was manifested by the Seixas family whenever tyranny or oppression became evident. Certain it is that the brothers of Gershom Mendez Seixas were just as strongly devoted to the patriotic cause as the minister himself. One of them, Benjamin, was an officer of the Patriot Militia in New York at the outbreak of the Revolution. He was also one of the founders of the New York Stock Exchange. Another brother, Abraham Mendez Seixas, was a colonel in the Georgia Brigade of the Continental Army, serving actively and zealously throughout the entire struggle, and a magistrate of the City of Charleston, S. C. He was distinguished as an officer in the confidence of Generals Lee and Laurens. The eldest brother, Moses, was also devoted to the patriotic cause. He addressed a letter of congratulation to George Washington, upon the first President's inauguration, to which General Washington sent a reply, the original of which is still in the possession of his descendants. Moses Mendez Seixas was one of the founders, and for many years, until his death, President, of the Bank of Rhode Island at Newport, and the first Grand Master of Masons of the State of Rhode Island. A word must also be said of Grace, sister of Gershom Mendez Seixas, who shared the natural ability possessed by her brothers. She was thoroughly conversant with many of the subjects to which her sex are usually strangers, and could discuss politics, finance, and commercial affairs with startling

intelligence. Many of her writings are still in the possession of her descendants, and display striking evidence of her capacity.

To return to the subject of this sketch. After the city of New York had been evacuated by the British, the Rev. Gershom Mendez Seixas returned to his native city, March 23, 1784, and assumed his old charge as Minister of the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation. He was recognized as a truly patriotic American and a public-spirited citizen. There never was an occasion of general thanksgiving or day of fasting or prayer in which he did not take the initiative in leading the congregation in a public manner. He was one of the first ministers of any denomination to preach a regular Thanksgiving sermon on Thanksgiving Day and conduct services in connection therewith. To Leon Hühner, Esquire, the well-known Curator of the American Jewish Historical Society, we are indebted for the discovery of much valuable information relating to the career of the Rev. Gershom Mendez Seixas. In an excellent article published in the *Jewish Comment*, January, 1902, he observes:

Washington's proclamation to him was more than a mere formality, and the Jewish minister received it in the proper spirit. His conduct in this connection was extensively commented on by the press of the day, and among others the following extract from the *Daily Gazette*, December 23, 1789, may not be inappropriate here. After stating that a discourse had been delivered by the Rev. Gershom Seixas in the Jewish Synagogue on Thanksgiving Day, November 26, 1789, it continues: "This excellent discourse (to which is annexed the order of service), the first of the kind ever preached in English in this State, is highly deserving the attention of every pious reader, whether Jew or Christian, as it breathes nothing but pure morality and devotion."

Theology never crowded out other themes in this minister's

sermons; he seems constantly to have seized on subjects that agitated the public mind and from which some lesson could be drawn or which would enlist the sympathies of his audience in some charitable enterprise. The country and its institutions were always favorite subjects with him.

He instituted a recital of a prayer for the Government in English, it having been theretofore always read in the Spanish language, insisting that as Americans his Congregation could not tolerate the use of any tongues but the sublime one of Israel and that of their adopted country. Whenever it was necessary to raise money for public purposes—for example, to carry on the wars, to repel invasion, to relieve the sufferings of persons in other States who had endured Indian incursions, etc.,—the Rev. Mr. Seixas never deemed it beneath his dignity as a Jewish minister to invite public free-will offerings in the Synagogue for these objects, and I have drafts of formulas in Hebrew, in his handwriting, for use on such occasions.

His name is found in the charter of Columbia College as one of the original incorporators, and he was a trustee of the College from 1787, the year of incorporation, uninterruptedly until 1815, in which year he resigned the position. He is the only Israelite who has ever sat upon the Board of Trustees of that institution, they being uniformly of the Episcopalian faith. He was highly respected and esteemed by his associates on the board and by the ministers and ecclesiastics of the Church of England in New York, and it was common for him to deliver addresses in the Episcopal diocese of this city. One of these, which was delivered in St. Paul's Church in the month of August, 1800, contained an historical sketch of the Jews in New York City up to that time. The suggestion to

follow the example of the Rev. Seixas in inviting Episcopal ministers, clothed in their robes of office, to seats on the altar of the Synagogue during divine service would probably at this date be considered out of place, but it was common enough then.

The distinguished Jewish divine received many public honors. On the inauguration of President Washington as the first President of the United States, at New York, 1789, the Rev. Mr. Seixas with thirteen other clergymen of various denominations participated in the ceremonies, which notable fact may serve to remind American citizens for all time that our republic is founded on the very broadest principles, tolerating every race and creed, and American Israelites should ever recall with pride that the lives of Hebrews like the Rev. Gershom Mendez Seixas and his brothers, who cheerfully offered their lives and fortunes for the establishment of American independence, give to their brethren throughout the world a right of asylum on these shores which no true-hearted or grateful American will ever have the temerity to challenge. The Jews of New York City can also ever be proud of the fact that while the clergy of other religious faiths, with scarcely an exception, sided with Great Britain against the Colonies, the Rev. Gershom Mendez Seixas, "the Patriot Jewish Minister of the American Revolution," from the very beginning of the struggle, loyally and unflinchingly took his stand for the cause of liberty, and constantly made the walls of the only Synagogue on the Island of Manhattan ring with his eloquence in behalf of the doctrine of human rights, educating his Congregation to strike for liberty, until the day finally arrived when, as a magnificent climax to his efforts, he led forth a majority of his flock in flight north-

ward over the plains of Harlem and Washington Heights to a seven years' exile from the city of their birth, abandoning in a single day homes and fortunes.

Something of the Rev. Mr. Seixas' public spirit during the War of 1812 may be shown by a sermon, recently reprinted, which was delivered at the time when many were violently opposed to the existing administration for having declared war with Great Britain. After admonishing his hearers to support the administration of President Madison, he said :

For the citizens at large it is sufficient for us to know that our rulers are chosen to be judges on all affairs concerning the welfare of their constituents. They have declared war, and it is our bounden duty to act as true and faithful citizens, to support and preserve the honor, dignity and the independence of the United States of America, that they may bear equal rank among the nations of the earth.

These sentiments are followed by a touching appeal to his flock to help the families of those whom the war has impoverished, and by a description of the horrors of war, which he calls on Heaven to end.

Witness the distressed situation of our fellow-citizens on our frontier settlements in the northern boundaries of our State; driven from their peaceful abodes in this inclement season of the year, their houses sacked and burned, destitute of food, raiment and of every necessary of life, often without a place to shelter them from the most piercing cold . . . consider for a moment the distress of twelve thousand souls in such a pitiable situation; widows and orphans, who after passing their blood-stained villages, their houses burnt, deprived of parents, husbands, sons, with many of their nearest and dearest connections massacred by ferocious savages and the unrelenting mercenaries of an implacable and inhuman enemy . . . Think, oh think, brethren, what must such a multitude suffer! Deprived of their earthly

comfort, where it is not in the power of one to help another . . . many would despair in such a miserable situation, but it is to be hoped that the kindness of Providence will still strengthen their minds to support the trials they are now laboring under. Who can hear so deplorable a recital without a sense of feeling? Humanity is shocked with the melancholy narrative. . . . Vouchsafe to accept our prayers and penitence, O Lord; deliver us from our present impending evils, and guard us in future from those who rise up against us; frustrate the designs and machinations of the enemy; restore us to the bosom of peace. . . . Let us be always ready and willing to ameliorate the conditions of the unhappy, and in the first instance of benevolence enable us to assist our fellow-citizens in the Northwest Territory at this juncture.

The Rev. Gershom Mendez Seixas was twice married, his first wife being Miss Elkalah Cohen, whom he married September 6, 1775. The following is a copy of the record of their marriage as contained in the archives of the Congregation Shearith Israel in New York: "On Wednesday, the 11th day Elul, September 6th, 1775, was married Hazan Gershom Mendez Seixas to Miss Elkaley Cohen, in New York." She was born in the year 1749 and died October 30, 1785. Their children were Isaac, born at Stratford, Connecticut, July 30, 1776, who lived but three hours; Sarah, born at Stratford, Connecticut, January 9, 1778, who married Israel B. Kursheedt; Rebecca, born in Philadelphia in 1780, died 1867, unmarried; and Benjamin, died at Baltimore, Maryland, unmarried. His second wife, to whom he was married on the 1st of November, 1789, was Miss Hannah Manuel. He had returned to New York City after the Revolutionary War, where they were united in marriage. The children of this second marriage were: David, unmarried, the founder of the Pennsylvania Institution for the Deaf and Dumb in Philadelphia (this institution was opened May, 1820, temporarily, at Mr. Seixas' residence, and still exists as one

of the monuments of Philadelphia benevolence); Joshua, a learned Hebraist and text-book writer, and at one time a professor at Andover, who married Miss Raphael, of Richmond, Virginia; Theodore J. and Henry N., twins, born 1803, the first of whom married Anna, daughter of Naphtali Judah, and died 1822, and the second of whom died single; Grace, born December 7, 1789, married February 1, 1815, Manuel Judah, and died in Richmond, Va., August 20, 1826; Elkalah married Benjamin Solomons; Samuel, born in 1793, died in 1852; Rachel, born January 11, 1801, married Joseph Jonas, one of the pioneers of Cincinnati, and died in Cincinnati, February 19, 1827; Lucia Orah, born December 26, 1804, married Abraham Jonas, brother of Joseph Jonas, and died in Cincinnati, June 15, 1825; Selina, born 1806, married Lucius Levy Solomons, and died 1883; and Myrtilla, born November 22, 1807, married William Florance, of Philadelphia.

The death of Rev. Gershom Mendez Seixas occurred at 9 A. M. on July 2, 1816, Tammuz 6, 5576. Obituaries were published in various papers throughout the United States, and services in his memory were held both in New York and Philadelphia. Some of the eulogies delivered were published in pamphlet form, and I have copies of addresses delivered at his funeral by Dr. Jacob De La Motta, the Rev. Emanuel N. Carvalho, minister of Congregation Mickvé Israel, of Philadelphia, and by the late Mr. Naphtali Phillips, who was at that time President of the Congregation Shearith Israel, of New York, the last eulogium being delivered at the request of the Board of Trustees as a memorial of their beloved pastor. One paragraph, which strongly illustrates his career, reads as follows: "This city was not only his birthplace, but his favorite spot, and he spent the whole of his virtuous life within it, excepting those years when, during the

Revolution, he fled from the enemies of his country while they held it in occupation, for America was the country of his love." His remains were interred and still rest in the old Cemetery on New Bowery, New York City, of Congregation Shearith Israel, and the following is a copy of the English inscription which was on his tombstone. It is now entirely obliterated:

ERECTED
BY THE TRUSTEES OF THE CONGREGATION
SHEARITH ISRAEL
AS A TRIBUTE OF THEIR
RESPECT AND AFFECTION
FOR THE MEMORY
OF THE
REVEREND
GERSHOM MENDEZ SEIXAS,
WHO FOR
FIFTY YEARS
FAITHFULLY PERFORMED
THE DUTIES OF
HAZAN
OF THIS
CONGREGATION.
HE DIED ON THE 2ND
DAY OF JULY,
1816,
IN THE 71ST YEAR OF HIS AGE.

In 1902 the "Hebra Hased Va Amet," a Society attached to the Congregation Shearith Israel having for its object the relief of indigent sick and the burial of the dead, which was founded by the Rev. Gershom Mendez Seixas, celebrated its

centennial anniversary. The Rev. Mr. Seixas' purpose in organizing the Society, which is now in a flourishing condition after a century of activity, was to secure for every Israelite of New York City not only substantial relief in his last hours, but respectable interment upon his demise. He foresaw the need of such practical charity for Jews in a great cosmopolitan city like New York, and his wisdom has been abundantly vindicated. As a tribute to his memory, and to perpetuate the virtues of this sterling patriot and distinguished clergyman, the Society caused to be erected a tablet of bronze and marble in the beautiful Synagogue of the Congregation Shearith Israel, Seventieth Street and Central Park West, New York City, where worship the descendants of New York's pioneer Jews, who revere the memory of the man, the lustre of whose life has shed glory upon the Congregation and upon American Israel for over a century, Gershom Mendez Seixas.

