

Hebrew Poetry in Early America

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Historians of American Hebrew literature have long neglected the antebellum period. Max Raisin, writing in 1901, dated the rise of Hebrew in America to the 1870's; before then he found "no signs of life" in the language. Ephraim Deinard and most of his successors dated the flowering of Hebrew in America just one decade earlier. To this group, Joshua Falk's *Sefer Avne Yehoshua* (1860), the first original Hebrew book to be printed in the United States, marked the true beginning of Hebraica Americana.¹ Earlier Hebrew writings – epitaphs, sermons, prayers, religious documents and letters – when they have been noticed at all, have usually been dismissed as "oddments."² Their existence has merely reinforced the common view that original works in Hebrew have been produced in America only since the Civil War.

The seven Hebrew poems printed below³ were all composed in the United States before 1860. Each was written for a specific

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- 1 Max Z. Raisin, "Sefat 'Ever Ve-sifruta Be-amerika," *Hashiloach*, VIII (1901), 176; Ephraim Deinard, *Kohleth America* (St. Louis: 1926), p. 4; Moses Z. Frank, "Hebrew Literature in America," *Contemporary Jewish Record*, VI (1943), 486-497; Jacob Kabakoff, *Pioneers of American Hebrew Literature*, (Tel Aviv: 1966), pp. 11-13; idem, "Major Aspects of American Hebrew Literature," *Hebrew Abstracts*, XV (1974), 58-59; J.K. Miklitzanski, *A History of Hebrew Literature in America* (New York: 1967), p. 9; Eisig Silberschlag, *From Renaissance to Renaissance* (New York: 1973), pp. 249-254. Curiously, the first Hebrew poetry in America has also been dated to 1860 – specifically, to three American poems of Jacob Netter printed in his *Salvim Min Hayam* (Vienna: 1860). See A.R. Malachi, "Reshit Ha-shira Ha-ivrit Be-amerika," *Sefer Hashanah: The American Hebrew Year Book*, II (1935), 296. As we shall see, Malachi was in error.
 - 2 The term is Eisig Silberschlag's, *op. cit.*; David de Sola Pool, *Portraits Etched in Stone* (New York: 1952); Isaac Rivkind, "Early American Hebrew Document," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* [= *PAJHS*], 34 (1937), 51-74; Joshua N. Neumann, "Some Eighteenth Century American Jewish Letters," *PAJHS*, 34 (1937), 75-106; "Prayer in Hebrew," *PAJHS*, 27 (1920), 34-37; Bernard Drachman, "Neo-Hebraic Literature in America," *Proceedings of the Seventh Biennial Convention of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America* (New York: 1900), pp. 53-135; Jacob Kabakoff, "Hebrew Culture and Creativity in America," in Theodore Friedman and Robert Gordis, *Jewish Life in America* (New York: 1955), pp. 170-180.
 - 3 All but poem (5) are to be found in the Lyons Collection of the American Jewish Historical Society. Hebrew language material was not included in the excerpts of the collection printed in *PAJHS*, 21 (1913) and 27 (1920). Poem (5) is found in box 8 of the George A. Kohut Papers at the American Jewish Historical Society. I am grateful to Professor Jacob Kabakoff for drawing it to my attention.

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occasion: (1) The second marriage of Gershom Seixas (to Hannah Manuel) in 1786,⁴ (2) The 78th anniversary of the consecration of the first Mill Street Synagogue of Shearith Israel, held on the seventh day of Passover, 1808,⁵ (3) & (4) The dedication of the second Mill Street Synagogue, April 17–18, 1818,⁶ (5) Shabbat Bereshit (the Sabbath which begins the annual Torah cycle), 1820⁷, and (6) & (7) The memorial services for President William Henry Harrison at the Crosby Street Synagogue of Shearith Israel and Bnai Jeshurun Synagogue, May 14, 1841.⁸

Who wrote these poems? In the case of poems (1) and (2) we simply do not know, although it might be conjectured that Gershom Mendes Seixas, then hazan of Shearith Israel, composed poem (2). More is known about poems (3), (4) and (5), which were authored by an obscure Shearith Israel Hebrew teacher named Dob Pique. Pique was a French rabbi whom Shearith Israel brought over from Bordeaux, along with his family in 1817/18. Possibly, the congregation hoped that Pique would be able to take the place of the recently deceased Rev. Seixas, thus relieving Moses Peixotto and Eleazar Lazarus from the burden of serving as part-time, interim hazanim. Soon after Pique arrived, he began advising the congregation on ritual matters. He quickly became respected for his Hebrew scholarship – a scholarship amply demonstrated in his clever and skillful poetry. Pique, however, proved a poor and ineffective teacher, and he demonstrated a propensity for strong drink. This fatal combination had, by 1821, deprived Pique of most of his students. Since Moses Peixotto had decided to accept the post of permanent hazan one year earlier, nothing remained for Pique to do. Not surprisingly, he soon left Shearith Israel. Where he went is unknown.⁹

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- 4 Jacob R. Marcus, "The Handsome Young Priest in the Black Gown: The Personal World of Gershom Seixas," *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 40–41 (1969–70), 409, 441.
 - 5 David and Tamar de Sola Pool, *An Old Faith in the New World* (New York: 1965), pp. 45, 108.
 - 6 *Form of Service at the Dedication of the New Synagogue of the Kahal Kadosh Shearith Israel* (New York: 1818). Poem (4) in abbreviated form was also used in the 1834 consecration of the Crosby Street Synagogue, *Form of Service at the Dedication of the New Synagogue of the Kahal Kadosh Shearith Israel in Crosby Street* (New York: 1834), pp. 11–12. See also Pool, *Old Faith*, pp. 48–52, 187.
 - 7 The poem is dated 26 Tishre 5581 (October 4, 1820); Pool, *Old Faith*, p. 267.
 - 8 *Ibid.*, p. 134; *PAJHS*, 21 (1913), 221–223.
 - 9 Pool, *Old Faith*, pp. 129, 174–176, 187, 219–220; Hyman B. Grinstein, *The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York 1654–1860* (Philadelphia: 1945) p. 542; Jacob I. Hartstein, "The Polonies Talmud Torah of New York," *PAJHS*, 34 (1937), 124, 136–137.

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Poem (6) was composed by a more familiar Shearith Israel figure: Jacques Judah Lyons, elected hazan in 1839 and who served until his death in 1877. Lyons possessed a good command of Hebrew, which he learned as a youth in Surinam, and he was familiar with Jewish texts. But neither his knowledge nor his poetic talents matched those of Dob Pique. In truth, Lyons was a better historian than poet, and it is due to his labors that innumerable documents in American Jewish history including six of the poems printed here, have been preserved.¹⁰

Among the poems Lyons saved, one (7) was unrelated to Shearith Israel. It was recited at Bnai Jeshurun (the congregation is named in the last line of the poem) and was probably composed by Jacob J. M. Falkenau who served as shohet and later as shammas of the synagogue.¹¹ Born in 1804, he came from a distinguished family in Furth, Bavaria and in his youth received a fine Jewish education. Immigrating to America in 1838, Falkenau failed in business but succeeded in impressing American Jews with his learning. Although he never became a minister, Falkenau did participate in halachic debates carried on in the *Occident*, and in 1846 even made a favorable impression on the newly arrived and hard-to-impress rabbi, Isaac Mayer Wise. Six years later, at the age of 48, Falkenau passed away, leaving incomplete a work on Hebrew grammar. It is not known if he produced any other Hebrew poems.¹²

Falkenau's poem, like the other six printed below, is a devotional poem, replete with biblical and liturgical allusions. Yet these early American Hebrew poems are more than mere compendia of verses. Somewhere within each, reference is made to the occasion for which it was composed. The anonymous first poem praised both the bride and groom - Gershom Seixas and Hannah Manuel - and then prayed for their happiness. In spite of its brevity, this composition included the name 'Gershom' (in various guises) fully three times, and the name 'Hannah' twice. The second poet, a less learned and less talented man, used a far simpler form, and entreated God in a straightforward manner. First he asked that the anniversary service prove acceptable to the "Overseer of living creatures." Continuing, he prayed for congregational members both living and dead; for America and for the American people;

10 "Jacques Judah Lyons," *PAJHS*, 21 (1913), xxiii-xxviii; "Items Relating to Rev. J. J. Lyons," *PAJHS*, 27 (1920), 144-49; Pool, *Old Faith*, pp. 178-182.

11 *PAJHS*, 21 (1913), 223.

12 *The Occident*, II, 407-408, 522-525; X, 259-262; Grinstein, *op. cit.*, pp. 76, 220-221; I.M. Wise, *Reminiscences* (New York: 1901), p. 23-24

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and, finally, for all the faithful remnant of Israel. Of particular interest in this poem is the Hebrew name used for "United States." In 1808, no Hebrew equivalent for the country's name had as yet been coined. The poet, therefore, translated the name literally – and awkwardly.

Dob Pique was more skillful than both of his predecessors. In poem (3), for example, he not only mentioned the new house of prayer built by Shearith Israel of New York; he also mentioned the Hebrew names of the synagogue's president (Naphtali Phillips), trustees (Moses Peixotto, Naphtali Judah, Eleazar S. Lazarus, Moses L. Moses and Aaron Levy) and treasurer (Cary Judah).¹³ In poem (4) Pique displayed similar talents. His themes – gratitude and supplication – were fitting for a dedication; his mention of President "Jimmy" Monroe and Vice President Daniel Tompkins was suitably patriotic; and his refrain, "out of the mouths of infants and sucklings" (Psalms 8:3), was most appropriate for a poem recited, as this probably was, by school children. Pique wrote this entire poem in the form of an acrostic. Using the first letter of the first three lines of each stanza, he spelled his own name forwards and backwards. In the last of his three known poems, poem (5), Pique again made use of his own name, this time in much more elaborate fashion. He began and ended every line after the first with a syllable from his complete Hebrew paterfamilial appellation. In the body of the poem, Pique, as usual, related content to occasion. He alluded both to the Garden of Eden and to the story of Adam, themes taken from those chapters of Genesis read on the Sabbath for which the poem was composed. In poem (5), however, content was secondary. It is the external appearance of the poem which is much more striking.

The later poets, Falkenau and especially Lyons, could not match Pique's talent. Neither in form nor in language was their poetry nearly as sophisticated. The two poems in memory of President William Henry Harrison were, nevertheless, still suitable in tone to the occasion for which they were written. Lyons, in poem (6), utilized the tragedy to stress the frailty of man. He expressed Shearith Israel's sorrow at the President's death, and turned to God for aid and comfort. Falkenau (poem 7) was more pessimistic. He saw the President's death as punishment for the nation's sins and he called on the country to banish evil from its midst. Both poets tempered their sorrow, urging God to exalt America's¹⁴

¹³ *Form of Service* . . . (1818), introduction.

¹⁴ The Ashkenazi Falkenau spelled "America" with an extra "ayin" and "yud," reflecting the influence of Yiddish.

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glory, and invoked Divine blessings on the country's rulers and leaders.

The effort made to relate the content of Hebrew poems to the occasions for which they were composed demonstrates that long before the Civil War some Jews in America tried to make Hebrew into a living language – one in which original compositions could be written. Of course the survival of seven examples of Hebrew poetry over a span of fifty-four years does not warrant the conclusion that Hebrew culture flourished in early America. What these poems do suggest is that to a far greater extent than has been realized early American Jews respected the Hebrew language. They wanted to celebrate special occasions with original, specially written, Hebrew works. For early American Jews, Hebrew seems to have served as an identity symbol: a Jewish contribution to Western culture. Jews, therefore, lamented the increasingly widespread ignorance of Hebrew and were upset when Hebrew requirements disappeared from colleges and universities. Needless to say, the antebellum Jewish community was too small and too ignorant to stage a Hebrew renaissance of its own. But it at least patronized to some degree the few figures who carried on the old traditions. The original Hebrew works produced by these early figures, while scant, should not be dismissed. They represent the earliest flowering of Hebrew culture in America, and they adumbrate the vastly more important developments of a later era.¹⁵

A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATIONS

The translations of poems (3) and (4) are from the *Form of Service at the Dedication of the New Synagogue of the Kahal Kadosh Shearith Israel* (New York: 1818). Poem (6) was originally printed along with a translation. Lyons may have been the translator as well as the composer. Poems (1), (2) and (7) are freely translated by the author of this article. Poem (5), which is notable more for its form than for its content, is left untranslated.

15 Other Hebrew poems were apparently written and lost. Lyons mentions a poem by I. B. Kursheedt on the consecration of Bnai Jeshurun, *PAJHS*, 27 (1920), 399.

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(1)

Upon seeing the second household built by Gershom Seixas on [illegible] Heshvan, Wednesday, of the year [5]547 my thoughts were aroused and I was inspired to compose the following poem. I took up my theme and sang:

A SONG OF FRIENDSHIP

O Most High, O Supremely Exalted One, from your holy habitation heed the cry of your servant.

Fulfill the wish of the Gersomite your priest, and prosper him with your blessings - him who labors on behalf of your people.

Grant him the strength to shoulder the burden, and may he see offspring who busy themselves in the work of God.

Speedily answer the cry of GER SHOM who dwells in Shearith Israel.

His treasure is grace cast with perfect beauty. Who can count her virtues? Bless them, bring them happiness, protect them, for she is righteous and worthy.

Do I speak in vain when I say "And Hannah Prayed" [1 Samuel 2:1]?

שיר דודות
לדודת בני ישראל. אלהים יתברך יתן להם חסד ורחמים רבים. ואלהים יתברך יתן להם חסד ורחמים רבים.

קבוצה על נבואה. רם על רמים. ויעה עוקת עפק. סמיען קסוד.
לכן הנרשם סתם אמלא. וכלל לך מברכתך. הוא העובד עבודת עפק.
שכמו למט הוזהר. וראוהו ארץ עוסקי בדת אל.
מה עשה לקול גר. שם שוקק עם שארית ישראל.

חן הוצק בנני כללית זכר טאלוד. ומדותיה מן בנה.
א פנים. שפחם. שאדם. כ צדקה. והיא האמה.
האשכ ריקם. בקרא והתפלל חמה ?

(2)

You who dwell on high and watch over creatures,
I entreat You to hearken to those gathered here;
Accept their songs and music as sweet-savored offerings.

On this, the day on which the sanctuary was consecrated to the worship
of God,
Give ear and hearken to the cries of fathers and children.

Have compassion on us and on the people of the United States.
Grant us tranquility among ourselves and peace with all combatants.
Distance us from strife; and from your dwelling place, favor us with calm.
Happy are you, the faithful remnant [Shearith] of Israel.
May your [hands] ever draw strength from the Lord, the Rock of Eternity.

May life be the lot of those friends who dedicated this sanctuary to prayer.
On this, the seventh of Passover – our seventy-eighth year,
We sing, as they sang: "Arise O Lord unto Your resting-place."

שׁוֹכֵן בַּקְרוּמִים וּמִשְׁגִּיחַ לַבְּרָאִיִּם
אֲחִיכֶּה לְפָנֶיךָ לְהַקְשִׁיב לְהַנְקִוּלִים
רְנָה וְקוֹל זְמִירָה לְקַבֵּל בְּרִיחַ נִחוּחִים

יּוֹם אֲשֶׁר בּוֹ הַבַּיִת הַזֶּה לְעִבּוֹדֵי לִקְיָם
תִּשְׁמָע וְתִקְשִׁיב לְשׁוֹעַת אֲבוֹת וּבָנִים

יְהִימוּ רִזְמוֹת עֲלֵינוּ וְעַל בְּנֵי מְדִינֹת הַנְּאֻחִדִים
שִׁים שׁוֹנֵה בְּנֵנוּ וְשִׁלּוֹם עִם כָּל הַנְּלַחֲמִים
רַב תְּרַחֵק מִמֶּנּוּ וְהִשְׁקֵט תִּשְׁפִּיעַ מִמְּעוֹנִים
אֲשֶׁר־כֶּם הַשְּׂאֲרִית יִשְׂרָאֵל הַנְּאֻמְנִים
לְעוֹלָם תַּחֲזִקְנָה בָּהֶן צוֹר עוֹלָמִים

הֲ לִקְס בַּחַיִּים הַיְדִידִים שֶׁחֲנֹכוּ הַבַּיִת לְתַפְלָה
זֶה הַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי לַחֹג יְשִׁבְעִים וְשִׁמְנָה שָׁנָה
ק' וּמָה הֵן לְמִנוּחַתְךָ רְנֹ אוֹ וְאֲנַחְנוּ עִתָּה

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(4)

1.

Lord, open thou my mouth in songs of praise, that my lips may imitate the Psalmist's. Let us draw nigh unto him with prayer, and magnify his holy name. Raise your voices in solemn strains of the Author of wonderful miracles. What tongue can declare the greatness of the invisible God! He has established the world, and all that is therein. The God of hosts is his name; therefore let no tongue falter.

For out of the mouth of babes and sucklings he has ordained praise.

2.

To seek after the precepts of the Divine law is the foundation of wisdom. He that submits with resignation to the will of God, is alone worthy of his condition; for man was the last of the works of his creation.

When wickedness had increased among man, He that dwelt between the cherubim said, "Walk before me, and be thou perfect"; for that is the path in which man should walk, and then he shall rejoice in strength. For out of the mouth of babes and sucklings he has ordained praise.

3.

What wonders did he not perform for Israel when he delivered them out of the land of Egypt! He divided the sea, and preserved their bread from corruption two days. He caused them to approach the holy mountain, and shewed them the tree of knowledge. The angels cried aloud, "Give thy glory, O most High, to the heavens." The Seraphim murmured, "Wherefore should Moses approach the invisible Majesty?" But we prevailed in strength.

For out of the mouth of babes and sucklings he has ordained praise.

4.

The man of God answered, "Since the Book of the Law, in describing the creation of man, has employed the term *Va-yitser* (to form,) like him and the ministers of the Most High subject to iniquity; wherein consists your power to increase and multiply, that you may receive the holy benediction? Can we impute blasphemy to the angels, or forbid them to serve the work of their own hands? I am the Lord thy God. Keep holy the Sabbath. Covet not that which is thy neighbour's. Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord in vain.

For out of the mouth of babes and sucklings he has ordained praise.

5

Put your trust in the all-seeing God, then will you not desire to destroy his image, which is the work of his hands; neither steal nor commit adultery.

But seek after righteousness and follow it. Bear not false witness before the judges. Brethren of Israel, who hope for salvation, and have raised in this place a temple to the glory of Israel, let its sanctuary be established in our hearts also; then will the Almighty dwell among us. Whilst we faithfully fulfill his commandments he will incline towards us with mercy. Obedience to his will is better than knowledge.

For out of the mouth of babes and sucklings he has ordained praise.

(5)

אשר יתן לך ה' אלהיך ביום הזה ואתה תאמר כי ה' אלהיך הוא ה' אחד



וה' אחד הוא ה' אחד ואלהים אחד הוא ה' אחד

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(7)

Proclaim a fast, O House of Israel;
Sanctify the day, pray intensely to God;
Children of [Bnai] Jeshurun! Shroud yourselves in sackcloth, mourn,
Grieve and wail; raise your voices in lamentation.

A bitter death befell our palace;
The hand of God has struck us down.
Since America's founding day,
Such an event has never occurred.

* * * * *

We, all of us, descend from one Father;
We have transgressed, we have been rebellious.
The people have sinned, sinned greatly,
"God Himself provides the lamb for a burnt offering [Gen. 22:8]."

* * * * *

Let us scrutinize our ways and our deeds;
Let us remove our evil acts.
Let us eschew violence, lawlessness and deceit;
Let us strive only for righteousness every day.

* * * * *

We beseech you, Father of Mercy, have pity on us,
Have compassion on us and on our country;
Exalt America's glory ever higher;
Cause it to soar aloft like an eagle. Selah.

A new leader's installed to succeed him;
Grant him long life; let him enjoy his days,
Bless the nation's elders and elected officials,
Its lawmakers, counsellors and jurors.

Bless also the leader of the State of New York,
As well as its officers and judges,
The City, all its residents and those who hold office,
With the members of Bnai Jeshurun, its congregation.

ראש עם. בשם העם לכפר את.
 וזאת. קשה. סוד. סעל וזאת.
 וזה הוא הנדבתי וזאת.
 סוד. ועל זהם קשה.

נדקשה ונדבתי ונדבתי.
 נדבתי רע מעלתי.
 שר חסם ונדבתי ונדבתי.
 עזק עזק יום יום נדבתי.

כי אלהי ה נדבתי.
 אלא אל לקיט ונדבתי.
 נדבתי נדבתי ונדבתי.
 נדבתי שר נדבתי ונדבתי.

אלא אב ונדבתי ונדבתי.
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 נדבתי אפס ונדבתי ונדבתי.
 כגש ר שר נדבתי ונדבתי.

לראש העם על. נדבתי נדבתי.
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קשה עם. נדבתי נדבתי.
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