

Jews In The Colonial And Early National Periods

Jonathan D. Sarna

American Jewish history as we know it began in 1654. In that year, twenty-three Jews—men, women and children, refugees from Recife, Brazil which Portugal had just recaptured from Holland—sailed into the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam on a vessel probably named the *Sainte Catherine*.

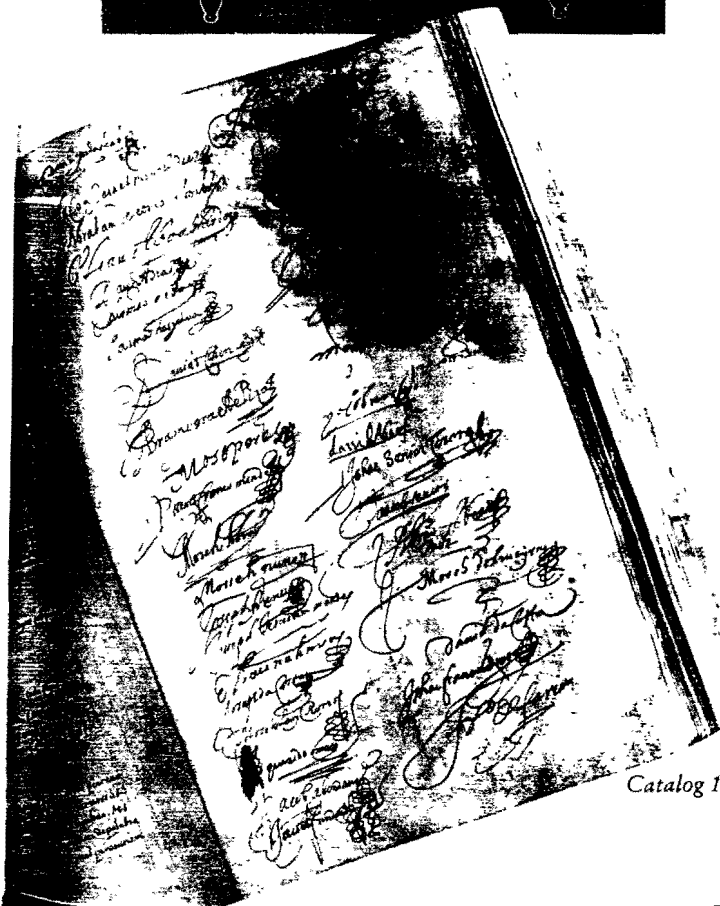
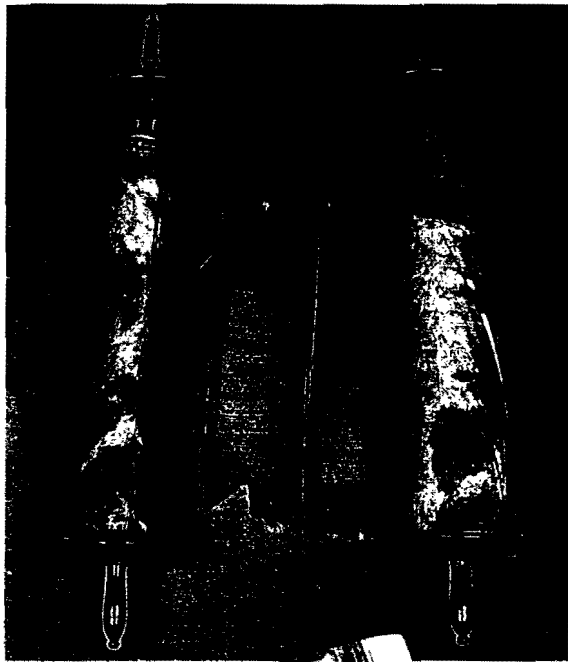
These twenty-three cannot accurately be labelled the first American Jews. Noted historian Jacob Rader Marcus's law—that “no Jew is ever the first Jew in any town”—applies in this case, for we know of at least two other Jewish merchants from Holland who preceded them, and it has recently been shown that a Jewish metallurgist named Joachim Gaunse (Gans) was a member of the famed Roanoke, Virginia colony of 1585–86. Still, the arrival of twenty-three Jewish refugees, including women and children, indicated that Jews now intended to establish themselves on a permanent basis in New Amsterdam: they had come to form a community.

Peter Stuyvesant, New Amsterdam's notoriously intolerant governor, attempted to bar the new arrivals. He had previously fought to exclude Quakers from the colony, and felt that Jews were no better: they were, he wrote, “usurious and covetous.” Far better, he believed, to promote religious homogeneity in New Amsterdam. “Giving them liberty,” he warned, referring to the Jews, “we cannot refuse the Lutherans and Papists.”

Stuyvesant realized that the decision about whether or not to admit Jews was no less than a decision about the religious character of New Amsterdam. But when the decision came down, Jews did win the right to settle, trade and worship, thanks to the Dutch West India Company, so long as they did so “in all quietness” and made sure that the “poor among them” did not become a burden on the larger community. Just as Stuyvesant had feared, the colony soon filled up with people of diverse faiths who insisted on their right to pray according to the dictates of their own consciences.

The first Jews on American soil were, for the most part, Sephardim, descendants of Spanish and Portuguese Jews who had been expelled from the Iberian peninsula when they refused to convert to Christianity. Sephardim shaped the character of early American Jewish life, and also set its religious tone, according to their traditional rites and practices. This first period in American Jewish history, stretching all the way to the early nineteenth century, is thus frequently known as the “Sephardic Period”—the era of Spanish-Jewish hegemony.

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It is nevertheless important to bear in mind that even in this early period, the Sephardim were rapidly outnumbered by Ashkenazim, the descendants of Jews from German-speaking lands. Ashkenazic religious and cultural traditions differ from those of the Sephardim, and relations between the two groups were not always cordial. But given the small number of Jews in early America, the wealth and status enjoyed by the Sephardim, the fact that the Sephardim had come to the New World first, and the widespread desire for a unified Jewish community, most German Jews during this period made their peace with the Sephardim. Some went so far as to try to "Sephardize" themselves, while others married into Sephardic families. Separate Ashkenazic synagogues did not become widespread until the second quarter of the nineteenth century.

During the decade in which Jews lived in New Amsterdam, they gradually acquired most of the rights enjoyed by Jews in other Dutch colonies and in Holland, including the right to trade, own property, stand guard, and be admitted as burghers. One Jew was even excused from making court appearances on the Sabbath. The Jewish community remained small and retained its transient character, for it comprised mostly traders. But Asser Levy, the best known of the original twenty-three Jews and the one who worked the hardest on behalf of Jewish rights, became a respected member of the community. Interestingly, when he was licensed by the colony as a butcher and slaughterer, he was excused from slaughtering hogs.

With the capture of New Amsterdam by the English in 1664, many of these same patterns continued. Few of the original Jewish settlers remained in the colony by this time, possibly only Levy himself. The community had so diminished, in fact, that in 1663 its Torah scroll was returned to Holland. Still, when New Amsterdam became New York the rights that had been extended to Jews in New Amsterdam were maintained. Jews shortly returned to the city in larger numbers than before.

Under British rule, the number of Jewish communities in the colonies expanded, reaching five on the eve of the Revolution. Most Jews lived in the rapidly developing port cities of New York, Newport, Savannah, Charleston and Philadelphia; others lived in the back country. While the Jewish population of British North America grew steadily, Jews never constituted more than a minuscule part of the total population — less than one-tenth of one percent.

Jewish colonists concentrated particularly, but by no means exclusively, in commerce as shopkeepers, purveyors and merchant shippers. Some acquired substantial wealth, like the Franks, Gomez, Gratz, Hart, Hays, Levy and Simson families, and individuals like Aaron Lopez and his father-in-law Jacob R. Rivera. Most, however, led ordinary lives, struggling to make ends meet within the volatile colonial economy. Their challenge, even then, was a formidable one: to promote the survival not only of individual Jews in the New World, but of Judaism itself.

Seeking to address this challenge, American Jews strove to recreate the kind of all-encompassing religious community that they had known prior to immigration. The first colonial synagogue, Shearith Israel in New York which dates its founding to 1730, and each subsequent congregation into the first half of

from his master, William Vogan, weaver, of Southbury, Lancaster county, in the province of Pennsylvania, infant, one Michael Hant, from Waterford in Ireland, one year servant, about 25 years of age, a stout made ad shoulder'd, broad face, heavy brow'd, and long black hair: five feet three inches high; took with him when he came a linsey woolsey white blanket, two old cloth jackets, a coat, blue fluff jacket, with hair buttons, buckskin without buttons at the knees, two pair of grey colour'd and two coarse linen shirts: Whoever takes up and serves as his master may have him again, shall Shillings reward, paid by WILLIAM VOGAN. The said servant served four years with David Rees, of Southbury, in the said province, and is supposed to make Jerseys, in or about Woodbridge, where he has some

Richard Renshaw's, at Greenwich-point, opposite New York, about a month ago, a black horse, upwards of 14 years of age, with a large star in his forehead, his off hind foot shod before. The owner is desir'd to prove his property, and take him away. RICHARD RENSHAW. If any one has any demands against said estate, are desir'd to bring in, or about Woodbridge, where he has some

LITAM GUTSLEIN, Gunsmith, residing in Second-Street, in the house where the widow Bruch lately lived, a little below the corner of Second-Street; Where he continues his business at

ANTHONY DUCHE, Dyer, at the end of Chestnut-Street, near the State-house, where he continues the same business, where all sorts of silks, fustians, woollens, cottons, laces, ribbons, dyed and printed; he fustians coats, and jackets skins and leather breeches of any colour, and prints counterpanes, carpets, gowns and petticoats; likewise makes and repairs for men, women and children, and puts up of wafers, in men, women and children.

THOMAS GIBBONS, Watchmaker from London, at the door to Mr. Inglis's, over the Draw-bridge, and repairs clocks and watches of all sorts, at reasonable rates. His wife also makes all sorts of mantels, childrens caps, &c. The 13th W

whereby given to all persons indebted to John Priest, of Philadelphia, not to pay any money to any person but himself on the 17th day of the 11th ult. in the afternoon, at the Court-house, where he lost out two pocket-books, in a black leather pocket-book, the green silk, in which were three pocket almanacks, papers, bills of parcels and memorandums, of no figure to any person but himself, also a Carolina Five Shilling piece, which was all the money therein. Whoever finds said pocket-books, &c. or causes them to be sent to the Court-house, shall be handsomely rewarded, and no questions ask'd. Said Priest has to dispose of, very reasonable, a strong woman's time, who has three years and four months

ATHAN and JOHN MEEFLIN, near the Draw-bridge, between Front and Water-Street, and opposite Hamilton's Wharf, sell, Barbados, Antigua, and New-England rum, 10 years old, for Tavern Use, Also mistakes by the bag, and best muscovado sugar in barrels repack'd, London sugar, and Boston double ditto, Babas Tea by the dozen or hundred, chocolate, Rhode-Island cheese, Barbados figs, Indian wax, excise, gun-powder, shot, bar lead, and sundry other

to be sold, by ROSES STANDLEY, at Market-Street, next door but one to Dr. Shippen's, good Albany peas, at 7th Cd. per bushel, very good potatoes 2nd Cd. per bushel, very good peack'd coffee by the barrel, warranted, also Liverpool caribbea-wares in trade, tobacco muscovado in the barrel, and very good beer. On Thursday the 2d ult. by David Chambers, flame-cut in Arch-Street, between the window Parry, in the West, and a silver watch, marked on the dial with Robert's name, a silver watch, marked on a black leather strap, and ind. written Samuel Gerrard, with a black leather strap, and ind. written Samuel Gerrard, with a black leather strap, shall be rewarded, and no questions ask'd.

The partnership between FISHER and FUSSELL, is now expiring.

All persons who have any demands against them, are desir'd to bring in their accounts, in order to be discharged; and all persons indebted to them, are desir'd to discharge their several balances.

N. B. The said Fisher and Fussell, in order to finish their accounts, have a considerable quantity of goods, viz. Groceries, cutlery, peweeers, European and India, with sundries, too tedious to insert, to sell, very cheap for ready money.

Run away, from the subscriber, of Cecil county, Maryland, near Charles-Town, on the 22d ult. a servant man, named Maurice Smith, an Irish man, about 20 years of age, a lanky bodied fellow, about five feet, ten inches high, pock-mark'd and pale faced, short fusty colour'd hair: Had on, and took with him, a short white flannel jacket, with leather buttons, a dark colour'd pea jacket, and a new blue double breasted jacket, a pair of buckskin breeches, and old trowsers, a pair of grey stockings, and a pair of fine white cotton stockings, and old shoes, a felt hat, and sometimes wears a worsted cap, a white and check shirt, a coarse white waist, with several other things out of the house: Also took with him, a large black and white rough Dog, and a gun mounted with brass; he has been a tailor, and pretends to be a Wig-maker, and Barber. Whoever takes up said servant, and secures him for his Master, shall have Forty Shillings reward, if taken up in Maryland, if in Pennsylvania, or elsewhere, Three Pounds, paid by RICHARD SEDOWICK.

N. B. All masters of vessels are forbid to carry him off.

For LONDON, The Ship MYRTILLA, RICHARD BUDDEN, Commander.

Will sail with all possible expedition having great part of her cargo already engaged. For freight or passage, apply to Levy and Franks, or said commander.

N. B. Just imported in said vessel from London, and to be sold by Levy and Franks, a great variety of European and East-India goods.

Just imported from London, in the ship Myrtilla, R. BUDDEN, commander, which will be sold on the most reasonable terms, by THOMAS LISTER.

At his store, in Third-Street, next door to George Plawley's, A Parcel of European goods, suitable for the season; as also a parcel of English garden seeds.

N. B. Fine Spanish rappee and Spanish flannels by the maker. All persons indebted to the estate of Mary Shucart, late of the city of Philadelphia, widow, deceased, are desir'd to make speedy payment; and those who have any demands against said estate, are desir'd to bring in their accounts, that they may be adjusted; by Richard Hockley, Isaac Zane, and Sarah Brown, execs. Four hundred acres of good land, situate in Oley, Philadelphia county, to be sold by said execs.

Run away from the subscriber, living near Popas meeting-house, in Lancaster county, a servant man, named Philip Kieve, of a middle stature, about 20 years of age, somewhat of a swarthy complexion, with short black hair, and has mark of the brogue on his tongue: Had on when he went away an old black coat, brown jacket, and black breeches, patch'd on the knees. Whoever takes up and secures said servant, and brings him to the subscriber, shall have Three Pounds reward, and reasonable charges, paid by HUGH McCLELLAN.

All persons who have any demands against the estate of SAMUEL HAZELL, Esq; late of Philadelphia, deceased, are desir'd to bring in their accounts, that they may be adjusted and paid; and all persons indebted to the said estate are requested to make speedy payment; to prevent trouble. The accounts to be received and adjusted at the house of Alexander Huston, next door to the sign of the Spinning wheel, almost opposite the Prison, in Market-Street; where will be sold cheap, for ready money, choice Antigua, Barbados and Jamaica rum, and sugars, Madeira wines, and a great variety of European and East India goods, belonging to the said estate. Just imported in the last ships from London, and to be sold by the said ALEXANDER HUSTON, the following goods, viz.

Broad-cloths, bear-skins, blue, green and cloth colour'd yards wide and 6-4 naps, white, red, scarlet and embo's'd flannels, swan skin, broad and narrow London flannels, 3/4 q. striped linnen 7/8 q. 7 eights, yd. wd. 5/8 q. and 6 q. cotton and linnen checks, green and bates' red, by the chest or dozen, ons. briggs, Heflings, Irish linnen, 6 q. 8 q. and 10 q. damask and diaper table cloths, superfine damask and diaper napkins and clouting, yd. wd. and 7 eights garks, yd. wd. taudem, double and single fleeces, nuns, gulls, and Swifs holland, Hamburg and Holland whit'd long lawns, clear, spotted and flower'd ditto, great variety of callicoes, chintz,

Advertisement for the Myrtilla (Time Line)

the nineteenth century, viewed itself as a “holy community” or *kahal kadosh*. Synagogue-communities assumed the full range of Jewish communal functions: from organizing religious services, educating the young, and arranging for kosher meat, to governing the cemetery and providing charity for the poor. In return, they expected every Jew within their geographic area to affiliate with them and lend them support—which most Jews did, although in contrast to much of Europe, they were not compelled to do so.

No less important to Jewish survival was the relationship they cultivated with their Christian neighbors. Modern notions of religious and ethnic pluralism were unknown in the eighteenth century, and restrictive Christian oaths effectively excluded Jews from various professions as well as from public office. But in other respects, as Jacob Marcus has shown, Jews enjoyed a great deal of equality: “they administered estates, served as guardians, occasionally sat on juries, marched with the militia, and patrolled the streets as constables and members of the watch.” Some Jews worked side by side with Christian business partners, others made Christians executors of their wills. More generally, there is abundant evidence of social fraternizing between Jews and Christians, and of intellectual discourse as well.

Some Christian-Jewish encounters, to be sure, proved less friendly: there were many efforts to convert Jews, several displays of anti-Jewish prejudice, even a few recorded cases of anti-Jewish violence. Yet compared to the situation of Jews in most corners of the world, American Jews were well off. “The colonial American Jew,” Marcus asserts, “probably was the freest Jew in the world.”

By the end of the colonial period, then, certain enduring features of American Jewish life were already in place. In general, and there were some notable exceptions, Jews found America a land of opportunity. They enjoyed unprecedented freedom in the cities where they lived, benefited from de facto religious pluralism, co-existed with their Christian neighbors and established synagogues for religious and communal reasons and to promote Jewish survival. In the few urban areas where Jewish settlement clustered, Jews carved out a distinctive economic niche.

Beyond this, Jews also faced at least three significant challenges: first, how to meld utterly diverse Jews, Sephardim and Ashkenazim, immigrants from different countries with different traditions, into a cohesive community supported on a voluntary basis alone; second, how to establish the right of Jews to differ from the Christian majority without prejudice; and third, how to preserve Jewish distinctiveness in an open society where Jews and non-Jews could mix

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Interior of the HEBREW SYNAGOGUE of Charleston S.C.
Destroyed by Fire, the 2nd April, 1838.

*See also the "Jewish Cemetery" in the "Jewish Museum" by the artist
founded 1793*

freely. These challenges met with no easy solutions for they reflected some of the basic tensions underlying American Jewish life—tensions between unity and diversity, majority rule and minority rights, and, most important of all, between the preservation of identity and the assimilation of alien ways.

Given all that Jews had accomplished during the colonial era it is not surprising that religious concerns played only a very small part in determining Jewish loyalties in the struggle against British rule. Individuals based their decisions largely on business, national and personal considerations. Many Jews vacillated, and pledged allegiance to both sides for as long as they could. But when finally forced to choose, only a small minority sided wholeheartedly with the Crown. Most Jews came down on the side of the Whigs and cast their lot for independence. They contributed what they could to the national struggle, shed blood on the field of battle, and, after the victory, joined their countrymen in jubilant celebration.

The Revolution had an enormous impact on Jewish life in America. Most immediately, wartime conditions caused massive human and economic dislocations. Many Jews had to leave their homes, some never to return. The Newport and Savannah Jewish communities were particularly hard hit; in the wake of the war's destructive impact, both communities declined. On the other hand, two cities that were spared destruction, Philadelphia and Charleston, emerged from the war with larger and better organized Jewish communities than they had ever known before. Economically, the situation was no less mixed. Some old line Jewish merchants, hurt by the disruption of former patterns of trade, suffered grievously. Adventurous entrepreneurs like Haym Salomon, meanwhile, accumulated large fortunes.

The war's greatest impact on Jews, however, came in the area of political rights. Having fought as equals on behalf of the new nation, and having contributed to the national struggle in other ways—for example, in Salomon's case, by serving as broker to the Office of Finance—Jews now sought full political equality. They called for an end to restrictions that barred them from public office and otherwise limited their freedom on religious grounds. Jonas Phillips, a German Jewish immigrant merchant, summed up the Jewish political agenda in a petition to the Constitutional Convention meeting in Philadelphia in 1787. "The Israelites," he wrote, "will think them self happy to live under a government where all Religious societys are on an Equal footing."

The Constitutional Convention, of course, had not waited for Phillips's petition. Eighteen days earlier, and for reasons that had nothing particularly to do with Jews, it accepted the provisions of what became Article VI: "No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States." Two years later, Congress passed a much more explicit guarantee of religious liberty as

part of the First Amendment, ratified on December 15, 1791: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

Actually, these constitutional provisions applied only to Congress and not to the individual states; the battle for what Phillips had called "equal footing" was thus by no means ended. Indeed, Maryland did not abolish its mandatory "declaration of belief in the Christian religion" until 1826. But the framework of America's inclusive religious tradition, with its emphasis on religious freedom and diversity, church-state separation, denominationalism, voluntarism and patriotism, had been set. It was within this framework that American Judaism would develop.

The ensuing decades, from the ratification of the Constitution in 1788 until the immigration of thousands of Jews from central Europe beginning in the 1830s, was a comparatively settled period in American Jewish history, an era of consolidation, accommodation and renewal. The American Jewish population remained small—perhaps four to six thousand in 1830—and for a brief period the majority of American Jews were native born, something that would not happen again until the second half of the twentieth century. Broadly speaking, Jews in this period strove to advance economically, to push out geographically and to accommodate Judaism to American religious norms. At the same time, they fought for Jewish equality on the state level and battled missionaries who tried to persuade them to convert.

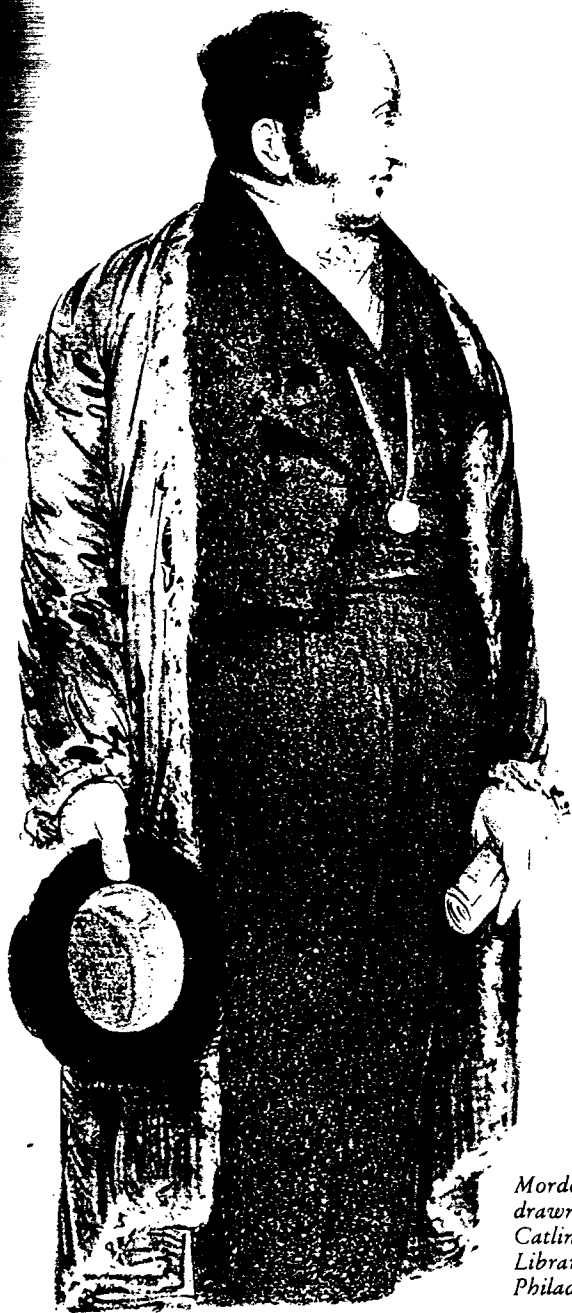
The leading American Jew of this period was Mordecai Manuel Noah, a man who at one time or another was a diplomat, journalist, sheriff, playwright and judge. While holding these lofty positions, he not only identified himself openly as a Jew, he educated Christians about Jews, sought to encourage increased Jewish immigration and defended Jews against those who reviled them and sought to deny them their rights. In 1825, he even tried to set up a Jewish colony—Ararat—on Grand Island, New York. But although Noah defended Jews, he also talked about the need for them to change their ways. He served as a living symbol of the fact that Jews could rise in American society without having to forfeit their faith, even as he implied that compromises with tradition could not be avoided.

This tension between tradition and change, between the lure of American life and the requirements of Jewish law, arose on many fronts in the 1820s. Seeking to combat "apathy and neglect," young Jews in Charleston petitioned their congregation, Beth Elohim, to effect ritual changes designed to make religious services there more appealing, decorous and modern. Their petition denied, they established the Reformed Society of Israelites, a precursor of the American Reform movement.

At practically the same time, "young gentlemen" in New York's Congregation Shearith Israel called for changes designed to revitalize Judaism along more traditional lines. Their petition to hold their own early morning Sabbath services, democratically organized, and with special emphasis on Jewish education, was likewise denied. As a result, the "young gentlemen" went on to form the nucleus of Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, founded in 1825.

The existence of these dissident congregations, together with an earlier breakaway congregation in Philadelphia, effectively sounded the death knell for the traditional synagogue-community; it gave way, within a remarkably short time, to a community of synagogues. Where before Jews from different backgrounds all worshipped together in uneasy harmony, henceforward the community made available to all an increasing number of synagogue options, allowing everyone to pray where he (or she) felt most comfortable. Congregational autonomy thus became the rule. It was left up to newly created community-wide and national Jewish organizations to keep Jewish communal ties from attenuating.

The breakdown of the synagogue-community marked the end of an era in American Jewish life. It signalled the beginning of a pluralistic model of American Jewish community organization, far more complex and variegated than ever before. In time, American Jews would find a full spectrum of religious options open to them, a bewildering array of synagogues, organizations and ideologies vying for their attention. This created new problems, some of them evident to Central European Jewish immigrants later in the nineteenth century. But it also strengthened the American Jewish community, for it provided alternatives to those who were spiritually dissatisfied and might otherwise have opted out. Indeed, it may well be that this diversity, for all of its problems, sustained the overarching unity that has, until now, held the American Jewish community together.



*Mordecai Manuel Noah
drawn by George
Catlin, courtesy
Library Company of
Philadelphia*