



# Creating American Jews

## Historical Conversations About Identity

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"THE REVOLUTION IN THE AMERICAN SYNAGOGUE"

by

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# The Revolution in the American Synagogue

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In 1654, 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 named the *Sainte Catherine*. This marked the beginning of American Jewish history, as we know it.

What distinguished these bedraggled refugees was their desire to settle down permanently: Jews who had landed in North America earlier, one as early as 1585, had no intention of forming a community; all had quickly departed. Now, for the first time, families of Jews had arrived. Their hope was “to navigate and trade near and in New Netherland, and to live and reside there.”<sup>1</sup>

Peter Stuyvesant, the dictatorial Director-General of New Netherland, sought permission to keep the Jews out. The Jews, he explained in a letter to his superiors, were “deceitful,” “very repugnant,” and “hateful enemies and blasphemers of the name of Christ.” He asked the Directors of the Dutch West India Company to “require them in a friendly way to depart” lest they “infect and trouble this new colony.” He warned in a subsequent letter that, “giving them liberty we cannot refuse the Lutherans and Papists.” Stuyvesant understood that the decisions made concerning the Jews would serve as precedent and determine the colony’s religious character forever after.<sup>2</sup>

Back in Amsterdam, “the merchants of the Portuguese [Jewish] Nation” sent the directors of the Dutch West India Company a carefully worded petition that listed reasons why Jews in New Netherland should *not* be required to depart. One of these reasons doubtless stood out among the others: “many of the Jewish nation are principal shareholders” in the company. The directors pointed to this fact, as well as to the “considerable loss” that Jews had sustained in Brazil, and ordered Stuyvesant to permit Jews to “travel,” “trade,” “live,” “and “remain” in New Netherland, “provided the poor among them shall not become a burden to the company or to the community, but be supported by their own nation.” After several more petitions, Jews secured the right to trade throughout the colony, serve guard duty, own real estate, and worship in private.<sup>3</sup>

A decisive moment in the religious life of the nascent Jewish community of North America came in 1655 when a borrowed Torah scroll, garbed in a “green veil, and cloak and band of India damask of dark purple color,” arrived from Amsterdam. The handwritten parchment text of the Pentateuch is Judaism’s central and most sacred ritual object, and its reading forms a focal point of Jewish group worship. In

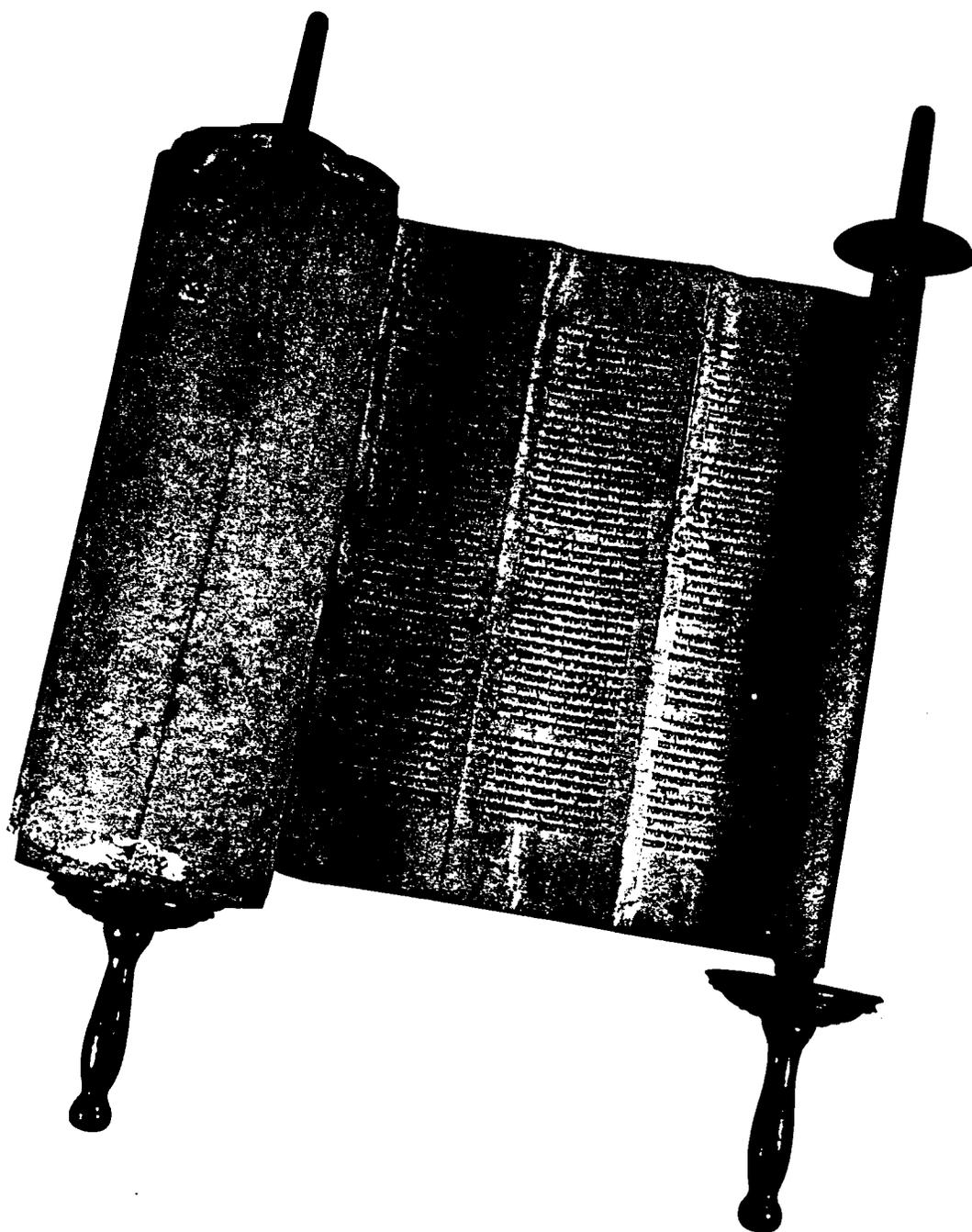
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Colonial North America, as elsewhere, it was the presence of a Torah scroll that served as a defining symbol of Jewish communal life and culture, of Jewish law and lore. It created a sense of sacred space: elevating a temporary habitation into a cherished place of holiness, and the private home in which Jews worshipped into a hallowed house of prayer. As long as the Torah was in their midst, the Jews of New Amsterdam knew that they formed a Jewish religious community. The green veiled Torah was returned to Amsterdam about 1663, signifying that the community had now scattered. The *minyan*, the prayer quorum of ten males over the age of thirteen traditionally required for Jewish group worship, could no longer be maintained.<sup>4</sup>

The subsequent reappearance of Torah scrolls in the city, which was now under the British, signaled that the community had been reestablished; private group worship resumed. Wherever Jews later created communities in North America, in Savannah and Newport for example, they brought Torah scrolls with them. In smaller eighteenth-century colonial Jewish settlements, such as Lancaster and Reading, where Judaism was maintained for years by

*Torah scroll sent to  
Savannah in 1737*

*Congregation Mickve Israel,  
Savannah*



dedicated laymen without a salaried officiant or a formal synagogue, the Torah scroll functioned in a similar way. It embodied the holy presence around which Jewish religious life revolved.

Back in New Amsterdam, now renamed New York, the British, in an effort to promote tranquility and commerce, scrupulously maintained the religious status quo, according Jews the same rights (but no more) as they had enjoyed under the Dutch. The operative British principle, for Jews as for other social and religious deviants from the mainstream, was "quietness." As long as Jews practiced their religion "in all quietness" and "within their houses," the authorities generally left them in peace. When, in 1685, the approximately twenty Jewish families in town petitioned for the right to worship in public, they were summarily refused; "publique Worship," they were informed, "is Tolerated... but to those that professe faith in Christ."<sup>5</sup>

Around the turn of the eighteenth century, public worship became available to Jews without any fanfare or known change in the law. Kahal Kadosh Shearith Israel ("the Holy Congregation Remnant of Israel") became the official name of North America's first synagogue. That name, like the names of many other early synagogues in the New World, hinted at the promise of redemption (see Micah 2:12). It recalled the widespread belief that the dispersion of Israel's remnant to the four corners of the world heralded the ingathering. The synagogue also closely resembled its old world counterparts in that it functioned as both the traditional synagogue and the organized Jewish community, or *kehillah*. It assumed responsibility for all aspects of Jewish religious life: communal worship, dietary laws, life-cycle events, education, philanthropy, ties to Jews around the world, oversight of the cemetery and the ritual bath, even the baking of matzah and the distribution of Passover *haroset*. Functionally speaking, it was equivalent to the established colonial church. It was monopolistic, it disciplined those who violated its rules (usually through fines, but sometimes with excommunication), and it levied assessments (essentially taxes) on all seatholders. Unlike established churches, however, the synagogue-community had no legal standing in the colonies. Jews were not required to join it nor did state funds support the congregation. Nevertheless, the synagogue-community saw itself, and was seen by others, as the Jews' representative body – it acted in their name – while the synagogue served as a central meeting and gathering place for local Jews.

The events in New York served as the model for other organized Jewish communities that took root in the American colonies – Savannah (1733), Newport (1750s), Charleston (1750s), and Philadelphia (1760s). These four communities developed in tidewater settlements, with mixed urban populations, where Jews found economic opportunity and a substantial measure of religious toleration. Savannah's Jewish colonial community was the earliest, the shortest-lived and the most distinctive. There, in a bid to become self-supporting, forty-two Jews arrived from England on July 11, 1733. They were sponsored by London's Sephardic community, as part of a colonization effort that was characterized by historian Jacob Rader Marcus as inspired by an "amalgam of patriotism, philanthropy, expediency, and concern for their fellow Jews."<sup>6</sup> The colonialists carried with them a Torah and other religious articles "for the use of the congregation that they intended to establish." They won the right to settle and trade (thanks, in part, to the Jewish

*Drawing of "Jew's Synagogue" by William Strickland, architect, Philadelphia, 1824*

*Congregation Mikveh Israel*



Freedom and democracy, as we understand them, were unknown in colonial synagogues. Jews of that time would have viewed such revolutionary ideas as dangerous to Judaism and to the welfare of the Jewish community as a whole.

physician Dr. Samuel Nuñez, who stopped the spread of a ravaging disease), received generous land grants, and were soon joined by other Jews seeking their fortune in the New World – Sephardim as well as Ashkenazim. Group worship in a private house began at once, the Sephardim apparently dominating, and two years later, according to a surviving diary, Jews met “and agreed to open a Synagogue [sic]... named K.-K. Mikva Israel,” which was organized on the model of a synagogue-community.<sup>7</sup> In 1740, however, the threat of a Spanish invasion frightened the Sephardic Jews away – they knew what awaited them if Spain won – and a Torah that had been used in Savannah was forwarded to New York. Three Jewish families remained in town worshipping individually, but the congregation did not resume meeting – at a private home – until 1774. Thereafter, while Sephardic tradition predominated, the lay leaders of Savannah’s Jewish community were Ashkenazim.<sup>8</sup>

*Interior of Touro  
synagogue in  
Newport, RI*

*John Hopf Photography*



Newport, Charleston and Philadelphia developed along different lines. In all three cities there had been multiple attempts to organize and establish regular synagogue worship, dating back, in Newport, to the seventeenth century. Success came only in the second half of the eighteenth century, however, as the number of Jews in the American colonies increased to nearly one thousand, and colonial cities prospered. Shearith Israel extended help to these fledgling congregations, and all three followed its lead in organizing as a synagogue-community, embracing Sephardic traditions, and welcoming Jews of diverse origin, including Ashkenazim, into their midst. Prior to the Revolution, Jews in Charleston and Philadelphia lacked both the money and the confidence to invest in a permanent house of worship, and so worshipped in private homes and rented quarters. The wealthy Jews of Newport, by contrast, exhibited great confidence in their surroundings. With financial assistance from Jews in New York, London and the West Indies, they built a beautiful

synagogue, which they dedicated in 1763. Now known as the Touro Synagogue, it is the oldest surviving synagogue structure in North America.

The synagogue-community, as it developed in the major cities where Jews lived, proved to be an efficient means of meeting the needs of an outpost Jewish community. It promoted group solidarity and discipline and it evoked a sense of tradition as well as a feeling of kinship toward similarly organized synagogue-communities throughout the Jewish world. It also enhanced the chances that even small clusters of Jews, remote from the wellsprings of Jewish learning, could survive from one generation to the next.

Freedom and democracy, however, did not loom large among the values espoused by the synagogue community. It stressed instead the values of tradition and deference as critical to the Jewish community's wellbeing. These values had stood Sephardic Jews in good stead for generations, and even though Sephardic Jews no longer commanded a majority among eighteenth-century colonial American Jews, their values still ruled supreme. At Shearith Israel in New York, for example, tradition loomed so large that various prayers were recited in Portuguese and the congregation's original minutes were written in Portuguese (with an English translation) – even though only a minority of the members understood that language and most spoke English on a regular basis. But Portuguese represented tradition; it was the language of the community's founders and of the Portuguese Jewish Nation scattered around the world. Ladino, or Judeo-Spanish, written in Hebrew letters, was only spoken by the Sephardim of the Ottoman Empire. In matters of worship, too, Shearith Israel closely conformed to the traditional *minhag* (ritual) as practiced by Portuguese Jews in Europe and the West Indies. Innovations were prohibited; "our duty," Sephardic Jews in England (writing in Portuguese) once explained, is "to imitate our forefathers."<sup>9</sup> On a deeper level, Sephardic Jews believed, as did the Catholics they had lived among for so long, that ritual could unite those whom life had dispersed. They wanted members of their Nation to feel at home in any Sephardic synagogue anywhere in the world: the same liturgy, the same customs, even the same tunes.

Deference, too, formed part of Sephardic tradition. Members of the community expected to submit to the officers and elders of the congregation. These were generally men of wealth and substance who took on the burden of communal leadership out of a sense of *noblesse oblige* and who perpetuated one another in office. There were disagreements, but there was also a consensus that disobedience to authority should be punished. In 1746, for example, members of Shearith Israel decreed that obstreperous worshippers be asked to leave the synagogue and not return until they paid a fine. They explicitly included themselves in the edict "if wee do not behave well."<sup>10</sup> In 1760, they severely punished Judah Hays for disobeying the congregation's *parnas* (president), even though Hays was a significant member. As late as 1790, Savannah Jews wrote into their synagogue constitution a requirement that "decent behaviour [sic] be observed by every person during service," and warned that offenders, "on being called to order and still persisting, shall, for every such offence, pay a fine not exceeding forty shillings."<sup>11</sup> In enforcing discipline through such edicts, Jews were following both the teachings of their ancestors and the practices of their non-Jewish neighbors. Indeed, deference to those in authority and to those who held the largest 'stake in

Rabbi Gershom Seixas,  
New York

Museum of the City of New York



society' was accepted by "the bulk of Americans" in the mid 18th century.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, freedom and democracy, as we understand them, – the right to dissent, the right to challenge the leadership in a free election, the right to secede and establish a competing congregation, the right to practice Judaism independently – were unknown in colonial synagogues. Jews of that time would have viewed such revolutionary ideas as dangerous to Judaism and to the welfare of the Jewish community as a whole.

The American Revolution, however, legitimated precisely these revolutionary ideas. In rebelling against the British, the colonists explicitly rejected both tradition and deference, and they overthrew many of the established ideologies that had previously governed their existence under the British. These changes were by no means confined to politics; they also affected the realm of religion. Religious establishments throughout the former colonies were overthrown, religion and state were separated, and democracy became an important religious value. As a result hierarchic churches waned in popularity and democratic ones, like Methodism, became more popular.

Judaism too was transformed by the Revolution. A majority of Jews supported the Revolution, including the *chazan* (minister) of Shearith Israel, Gershom Seixas, who left the city with his followers in the face of the British occupation forces. After the Revolution, in all of the communities where Jews lived, patriotic Jews returned to their synagogues and very soon had to grapple with the new situation in which they found themselves. The challenge they faced was whether Judaism as they knew it could be reconciled with freedom and democracy. Could Jews maintain the structure of the traditional synagogue-community that bound them together and promoted group survival, and at the same time accommodate new political and cultural realities? In an initial effort to meet this challenge, every American synagogue rewrote its constitution. More precisely, they wrote *constitutions* for the first time; they had previously called their governing documents *askamot* or *haskamot*, meaning agreements or covenants. The new documents broke from the old Sephardic model, incorporated large dollops of republican rhetoric, and provided for a great deal more freedom and democracy – at least on paper. At New York's Congregation Shearith Israel, in 1790, a particularly interesting constitution was promulgated, the first that is known to have contained a formal "bill of rights." The new set of laws began with a ringing affirmation of popular sovereignty suggestive of the American Constitution: "We the members of the K.K. Shearith Israel." Another paragraph explicitly linked Shearith Israel with the "state happily constituted upon the principles of equal liberty, civil and religious." Still a third paragraph, the introduction to the new bill of rights (which may have been written at a different time) justified synagogue laws in terms that Americans would immediately have understood:

Whereas in free states all power originates and is derived from the people, who always retain every right necessary for their well being individually, and, for the better ascertaining those rights with more precision and explicitly, frequently from [form?] a declaration or bill of those rights. In like manner the individuals of every society in such state are entitled to and retain their several rights, which ought to be preserved inviolate.

Therefore we, the profession [professors] of the Divine Laws, members of this holy congregation of Shearith Israel, in the city of New York, conceive it our duty to make this declaration of our rights and privileges.<sup>13</sup>

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The new bill of rights explicitly ended many of the colonial-era distinctions between members and non-members. It did so by declaring that "every free person professing the Jewish religion, and who lives according to its holy precepts, is entitled to... be treated in all respect as a brother, and as such a subject of every fraternal duty."<sup>14</sup> The new system also made it easier for members of the congregation to attain synagogue office. Leadership no longer rested, as it had for much of the colonial period, with a self-perpetuating elite.

An even more democratic constitution was produced in 1789 by the fledgling Jewish community of Richmond, Virginia. The document began with a democratic flourish: "We, the subscribers of the Israelite religion resident in this place, desirous of promoting the divine worship..." It then offered membership and voting privileges to "every free man residing in this city for the term of three months of the age of 21 years... who congregates with us." It tried to ensure "an equal and an independent representation" to everyone involved in synagogue government, and allowed even a single dissenting member to bring about a "meeting of all the members in toto" to pass on proposed rules and regulations.<sup>15</sup>

Most of these constitutions were subsequently modified, and some patterns from the past were reasserted, as the age-old values of the synagogue-community and the new values of the fledgling republic proved hard to reconcile. In Charleston, to take an extreme example, the revised synagogue constitution of 1820 returned "all the functions formerly exercised by the people at large" to a self-perpetuating "general adjuncta."<sup>16</sup> In New York and Philadelphia too, the synagogue-community was losing its religious hold, and its confidence. The strategy of promoting Judaism through tradition and through a single overarching institution that would unify all Jews was crumbling under the weight of demands for more freedom and democracy. In his study of American Christianity during this period, the religious historian Nathan Hatch found that "The American Revolution and the beliefs flowing from it created a cultural ferment over the meaning of freedom. Turmoil swirled around the crucial issues of authority, organization, and leadership." For Jews and Christians alike in the United States, "the first third of the nineteenth century experienced a period of religious ferment, chaos and originality unmatched in American history."<sup>17</sup>

Young Jews moved to transform and revitalize their faith, somewhat in the spirit of the Second Great Awakening. In so doing they hoped to thwart Christian missionaries, who insisted that in order to be modern one had to be Protestant, and they sought most of all to bring Jews back to active observance of their religion.

To the Hebrew Congregations in the Cities of Philadelphia, New York, Charleston and Richmond.

Gentlemen,

The liberality of sentiment towards each other, which marks every political and religious denomination of men in this country, stands unexampled in the history of Nations... The affection of such a people is a treasure beyond the reach of calculation; and the one great privilege which my fellow citizens have given of their attachment to me and of my own, has been a joy string from the purest source of my happiness, felicity. - The affectionate regards of your citizens again excite my gratitude, and receive my warmest acknowledgments.

The American Goodwill of the Aborigines are strongly manifested in the results of our late glorious Revolution; and

his kind interposition in our behalf has been equally visible in the establishment of our present equal Government. - So soon he averted the sword; and in peace he has seated in our Councils. - My agency in all has been guided by the best intentions, and a sense of the duty which I owe my Country: And as my country has not been cruelly deceived by the opposition of my fellow citizens, I shall endeavor to deserve a continuance of it by my future conduct.

May the same temporal and eternal blessings which you implore for me, rest upon your Congregations. -

Edw. M. Theodor

The "Hebrew Congregations" wrote letters of congratulation to the President in 1790, expressing the confidence Jews felt in their new republic.

Letter of reply, George Washington to the Hebrew Congregations of Philadelphia, New York, Charleston and Richmond, 1790

Congregation Mikveh Israel, Philadelphia

Two telling examples illustrate the kinds of challenges that synagogue-communities now faced. In New York, in 1813, the *shohet* (ritual slaughterer) of Shearith Israel decided to reject the congregation's terms of employment and to sell kosher meat independently. This represented deliberate and unprecedented defiance of the congregation's authority in a matter of critical Jewish concern. The congregation, seeking to reassert its authority, promptly used its political connections with the New York Common Council to pass an ordinance that "no Butcher or other person shall hereafter expose for sale in the public Markets any Meat sealed as Jews Meat who shall not be engaged for that purpose by the Trustees of the congregation of Sheerith Israel." Once upon a time this would have meant the end to the story (except that perhaps the congregation might have disciplined the independent-minded *shohet* as well). Now, however something remarkable happened that had never happened before. Eight members of the congregation, supporters of the dissident *shohet*, protested to the New York Common Council that this Ordinance "impair[ed]" their "civil rights," was "an encroachment on our religious rites [sic] and a restriction of those general privileges to which we are entitled." They asked that the ordinance be "immediately abolished" and privately complained that it was "an infringement on the rights of the people."<sup>18</sup> The language itself was revealing, for it resonated with the rhetoric of liberty and freedom that pervaded American life at the time. The result, however, was even more revealing. The Common Council, unwilling to enter into what it now understood to be an internal Jewish dispute, expunged its original ordinance, and washed its hands of the whole matter. This response signaled a sharp diminution of the "established" synagogue's authority. Henceforward, in New York, the synagogue-community's authority over kosher meat was completely voluntary; local Jews had established their right to select a *shohet* of their own choosing. Though they did not immediately exercise that right, this episode was a harbinger of the greater challenges the synagogue-communities were to face.

Meanwhile, in Charleston, which in the immediate post-Revolutionary era was the largest Jewish community in the United States, the authority of the synagogue community was also being challenged – indeed, repeatedly. There were short-term schisms, a memorable brawl in 1811, and most revealingly, an unprecedented movement to establish private Jewish cemetery plots. The Tobias family established one, so did the da Costa family, and a larger private cemetery was established on Hanover Street in Hampstead by half a dozen Jewish dissidents, including Solomon Harby. Beth Elohim, Charleston's established synagogue, attempted to ban this practice, for it

בְּלִרְאֵינוּ אֱלֹהֵי אֵל צֶדֶק צַנִּינוּ  
הַקְּשִׁיבָה לְקוֹל שְׁוֹעֵתֵינוּ וְחַנּוּנוּ  
רַחֵם עַל־יְנֵינוּ וְשִׁפְטֵנוּ אֵל תְּפִלָּתֵינוּ  
כִּי אַתָּה אֵל עֲלִיזָה הַרְחַבְתָּ צָרָה כִּכְנֹנוּ  
אֵל חַנּוּן הַצַּלְתָּנוּ מִכָּל אֲוִיבָנוּ  
מִמַּתְקוֹמָמִים עַל־יְנֵינוּ אַתָּה פָּדִיתָנוּ  
אֲדַרְתָּנוּ בְּכַח לַמְּחֹץ וְהֵאֵמַת אֲשַׁנְּאֵנוּ  
בְּבוֹשָׁה וּבְכֹל־כֹּחַ נִפְלֵה תַּמַּת רַגְלֵינוּ  
אֵל צְבָאוֹת נָתַתְּ שְׁלוֹם וְשִׁלְוָה בְּאַרְבַּעְיָתֵינוּ  
אֵת הַפְּלֵה אֵנוּ מִכְּנֻעִים לְפָנֶיךָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ  
אֵל תַּחֲנוּנֵינוּ תִּקְשִׁיב וְתוֹשִׁיעֵנוּ  
לְכֹל חֲכֵמָה וְתִבְוֹנָה תֵּן בְּלֵב רֹאשׁ כְּרִימָנוּ  
יִשְׁפֹּט אֶתְּנוּ בְּצֶדֶק יִשְׁפֹּט וְיַגִּיד לְבָנוּ  
נְתִיבוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל הַגָּאֹל יוֹלִיכֵנוּ  
גַּם עַד שִׁבְעָה יִקְרָה וְיִשְׁפֹּט בְּתֻבָּנוּ  
ט הוֹר וְיִשְׂרָאֵל יִהְיֶה לֵב שֵׁר וּפְקִיד עַל־יְנֵינוּ  
אֵל שְׂדֵי יִשְׁמַע אֵל קוֹלֵנוּ וְיִוֹשִׁיעֵנוּ  
נֵן אֲרִיךְ תְּפִלָּתֵנוּ לִפְנֵי אֵל וְגֹאֲלֵנוּ  
הוּא יִשְׁמָר וְיִצְוֹרֵל *The U.S. Senators & Representatives of N.Y.*  
יֵתֵן יִשְׁכַּל וְיִבְרָא לְכָל רֹאשֵׁי מִשְׁפָּטֵינוּ  
יִשְׂרָאֵל וְנִאֲמָנִים יְהִי לִבְבֵי שְׂרֵינֵנוּ  
יִצְלִיחַ וְיִבְרַךְ אֶתְּכֵל מַדְרֵינֵנוּ  
מִיָּד בְּנֵי נֶכֶד יִצְלִיחַ  
כֹּנְסֵי־עֵינִים מִגְּדֹלִים בְּנֵי־עֵרֵי־יָם יְהִי בְּנֵנוּ  
כֹּנְסֵי־עֵינִים וְהַבְּנוֹתֵינוּ  
כִּלְאִים מִפִּיקִים מִן אֵלֶיךָ יְהִי מִקְרִינֵנוּ  
כִּלְאִי־פֹת מִדְּבֹת בְּחֻצֵינוּ  
אֲלֵתֵינוּ מִסֻּבְּלָם אֵין פֶּרֶץ וְאֵין יוֹצֵץ בְּרַחֲבוֹתֵנוּ  
כָּל אֲוֵהֵי הַמִּדְיָנָה וְשׁוֹפְטֵיהֶם בְּרַךְ אֱלֹהֵינוּ  
וְתֵנוּ כְבוֹד לֵה אֵל גֹּאֲלֵנוּ  
תִּשְׁעֵי יְהוָה וְיִשְׂרָאֵל יִשְׁכּוֹן לְבָשָׁה וְיִבְרָא לְצִוִּן וְגֹאֲלֵנוּ וְנִימְרָאָה

This prayer of gratitude for the new nation was recited in Richmond's synagogue in 1789.  
National Museum of American Jewish History, Gift of ARA Services, Inc., through the agency of William S. Fishman

undermined a critical pillar of its authority; the threat of withholding Jewish burial from those who either defaulted on their obligations or were "rejected" by the congregation. "There shall be one Congregational Burial Ground only..." the congregation's 1820 constitution proclaimed, although in the interests of peace it provided "that this law shall not extend to any family place of interment already established."<sup>19</sup> But like so many other attempts to reassert congregational authority over independent-minded dissidents, this one too failed. In these post-Revolutionary decades, in both synagogues and churches, we see burgeoning religious ferment, challenges to established communal authority, and appeals to American values to legitimate expressions of religious dissent.

All of this set the stage for the religious revolution that transformed American Judaism in the 1820s, a remarkable era in American Jewish history that paralleled in American history the epochal period of the Second Great Awakening and the beginning of the Jacksonian age.<sup>20</sup> At this time, the Jewish community was still small – three to six thousand – but more Jews than ever before were native-born and the number of immigrants from Western and Central Europe was growing. This was a decade during which a significant number of Jews began moving to the West. It was also a decade that saw a few extraordinary Jews emerge in American cultural and political life, and a decade that witnessed the first serious writings by American Jews on Judaism – largely polemical and apologetic pieces designed to counter Christian missionaries. It was during this time that Jews became seriously alarmed about what we would call "Jewish continuity." In New York, Charleston and Philadelphia, Jews expressed concern about Jewish religious indifference – what those in Charleston called the "apathy and neglect" manifested toward Judaism by young and old alike. They worried about the future. "We are... fallen on evil times," Haym M. Salomon, son of the Revolutionary-era financier wrote to the *parnas* of Shearith Israel.<sup>21</sup> While many of his complaints focused on religious laxity, the real question, not quite articulated, was whether the colonial system of Judaism – one established traditional Sephardic synagogue per community – could adequately meet the needs of young Jews. These were people born after the Revolution, who were caught up in the heady, early nineteenth-century atmosphere of freedom, democracy, and religious ferment. Responding to this larger challenge, young Jews moved to transform and revitalize their faith, somewhat in the spirit of the Second Great Awakening. In so doing they hoped to thwart Christian missionaries, who insisted that in order to be modern one had to be Protestant, and they sought most of all to bring Jews back to active observance of their religion.

The immediate result of this revitalization effort was the final disestablishment of the synagogue-community in the two largest American Jewish communities of that time, New York and Charleston. In New York, a group of ambitious young Jews, mostly from non-Sephardic families, petitioned Shearith Israel's leaders for the seemingly innocuous right to establish their own early worship service "on the Sabbath mornings during the summer months."<sup>22</sup> The request brought into the open an assortment of communal tensions – young vs. old, Ashkenazim vs. Sephardim, newcomers vs. old-timers, innovators vs. traditionalists – that had been simmering within the congregation since the death of Gershom Seixas in 1816. First, there was an ugly dispute concerning the pension rights due the *chazan's* widow. Then the synagogue was unsettled by the arrival of new immigrants who sought to revitalize the congregation and in the process threatened to transform its very character. Meanwhile, shifting residential patterns drove many far from the synagogue; members wanted a congregation closer to

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where they lived. Sundry attempts to discipline those who violated congregational customs only added fuel to this volatile mix, and as passions rose synagogue attendance plummeted. With the proposed early morning service threatening to disrupt synagogue unity still further, the trustees "resolved unanimously... that this [petition] can not be granted." An accompanying "testimonial" warned that the proposed service would "destroy the well known and established rules and customs of our ancestors as have been practised... for upwards of one hundred years past."

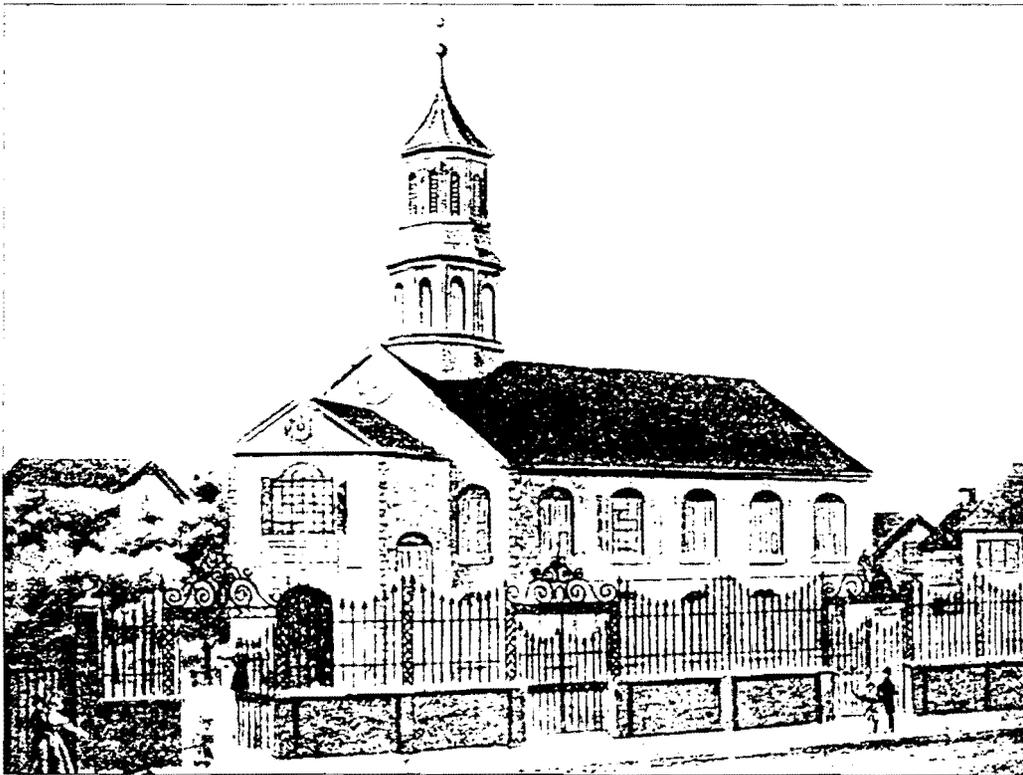
Rather than abandoning their plan for a new worship service, the young people gathered "with renewed arduor [sic] to promote the more strict keeping of their faith,"<sup>24</sup> and – urged on by Seixas' own son-in-law, Israel B. Kursheedt – formed an independent society entitled *Hebra Hinuch Nearim*, dedicated to the education of Jewish young people. The society's constitution and bylaws bespeak the spirit of revival, expressing "an ardent desire to promote the study of our Holy Law, and... to extend a knowledge of its divine precepts, ceremonies, and worship among our brethren generally, and the enquiring youth in particular." Worship, according to this document, was to be run much less formally than at Shearith Israel. There was to be time set aside for explanations and instruction, there was to be no permanent leader and, revealingly, there were to be no "distinctions" made among the members. The overall aim, leaders explained in an 1825 letter to Shearith Israel, was "to encrease [sic] the respect of the worship of our fathers."<sup>25</sup>

In these endeavors, we see familiar themes from the general history of American religion in this era: revivalism, challenge to authority, a new form of organization, anti-elitism, and radical democratization. Given the spirit of the age and the availability of funding, it is no surprise that the young people boldly announced "their intention to erect a new Synagogue in this city." It was to follow the "German and Polish minhag [rite]" and be located "in a more convenient situation for those residing uptown."<sup>26</sup> On November 15th, the new congregation applied for incorporation as B'nai Jeshurun, New York's first Ashkenazic congregation.<sup>27</sup>

As if conscious of the momentous step they were taking, the leaders of the congregation took pains to justify their actions on both American and Jewish grounds. First, they observed that "the wise and republican laws of this country are based upon universal toleration giving to every citizen and sojourner the right to worship according to the dictate of his conscience." Second, they recalled that "the mode of worship in the Established Synagogue [note the term!] is not in accordance with the rites and customs of the said German and Polish Jews."<sup>28</sup> Together, these two arguments undermined the basis for the synagogue-community; and did so with much rhetorical power. In fact, these words were so rousing that two full decades later, in Cincinnati, Ohio and Easton, Pennsylvania, Jews who were similarly breaking away from established synagogue communities borrowed the identical wording employed here to justify their actions (without giving crediting to the original authors).<sup>29</sup> The shared language demonstrates that in this period there was a nationwide movement to transform and revitalize American Judaism, and that changes and developments in larger communities influenced those in smaller ones.

In Charleston, a more famous schism within the Jewish community took place. Just as it had in New York, the challenge to the synagogue-community came initially from young Jews – whose average age was about thirty-two, while the average age of the leaders of Charleston's Beth Elohim congregation was close

to sixty-two.<sup>30</sup> Dissatisfied with “the apathy and neglect which have been manifested towards our holy religion,” these young people were also somewhat influenced by the spread of Unitarianism in Charleston, and fearful of Christian missionary activities that had begun to be directed toward local Jews. Above all, like their New York counterparts, they were passionately concerned about Jewish survival (“the future welfare and respectability of the nation”). These concerns led these young people, like their New York counterparts, to petition congregational leaders to break with tradition and institute change.<sup>31</sup> The Charleston reformers were largely native born – their city, mired in an economic downturn, did not attract many immigrants – and the changes in traditional Jewish practice that they sought were far more radical than anything called for in New York. Among other things, they called for an abbreviated service, vernacular prayers, a weekly sermon,



*Beth Elohim synagogue,  
Charleston, SC. Solomon  
Nunes Carvalho, artist*

*American Jewish  
Historical Society*

and an end to traditional free will offerings in the synagogue. When, early in 1825, their petition was dismissed out of hand, they, preceding the New Yorkers by several months, created an independent Jewish religious society called The Reformed Society of Israelites for Promoting True Principles of Judaism According to its Purity and Spirit. A fundamental aim of the new society was to replace “blind observance of the ceremonial law” with “true piety... the first great object of our Holy Religion.”<sup>32</sup>

Fundamentally, the strategies that were proposed for revitalizing American Judaism in New York differed from those in Charleston. The New Yorkers, influenced by contemporary revivalism, worked within the framework of Jewish law, stressing education and changes in the organization and aesthetics of Jewish religious life. The Charlestonites, on the other hand, were influenced by Unitarianism, and believed that Judaism needed to be reformed in order to bring Jews back to the synagogue. The New Yorkers adumbrated Modern Orthodox Judaism; the Charlestonites Reform Judaism. Both explicitly rejected the traditionalist strategy of the “established” Sephardic congregations. But the issue was more than just strategic. Both secessions challenged the authority of the

synagogue community, insisting that America recognized their right to withdraw and worship as they saw fit. In the early decades of the 19th century, Protestants all over the United States were abandoning denominations in which they had been raised. They turned, instead, to those they felt were more democratic, inspiring and authentic; moving, for example, from Congregational, Presbyterian and Episcopal churches to those of the Methodists, Baptists and Disciples of Christ.<sup>33</sup> Jews now followed the same pattern.

Henceforward, in larger communities, dissenters no longer sought to compromise their principles for the sake of consensus. Instead, they felt free to withdraw and start their own synagogues, which they did time and again. In New York, there were two synagogues in 1825, four in 1835, ten in 1845, and more than twenty in 1855. By the Civil War, every major American Jewish community had at least two synagogues, and larger ones like Philadelphia, Baltimore or Cincinnati had four or more. These were not satellite congregations created to meet the needs of dispersed or immigrant Jews, nor were they congregations sanctioned by any central Jewish authority. While in Western Europe church and synagogue hierarchies persisted, in free and democratic America, congregational autonomy largely became the rule – in Judaism as well as in Protestantism. Indeed, new congregations arose largely through a replication of the divisive process that had created B'nai Jeshurun and the Reformed Society of Israelites. Members dissatisfied with their home congregations resigned and created new ones more suited to their needs and desires. Some hard-to-please Jews founded several synagogues in succession.<sup>34</sup>

The result was nothing less than a new American Judaism – a Judaism that was diverse and pluralistic where before it had been designedly monolithic. For the first time, American Jews could now choose from a number of congregations, most of them Ashkenazic in one form or another, reflecting a range of different rites, ideologies, and regions of origin. Inevitably, these synagogues competed with one another for members and for status. As a result they had a new interest in minimizing dissent and keeping members satisfied. Indeed, more than anyone realized at the time, synagogue pluralism changed the balance of power between the synagogue and its members. Before, when there was only one synagogue in every community, that synagogue could take members for granted and discipline them; members had little option but to obey. Now, American Jews did have an option; in fact, synagogues needed them more than they needed any particular synagogue. This led to the rapid demise of the system of disciplining congregants with fines and sanctions. Congregations became much more concerned with attracting members than with keeping them in line.<sup>35</sup>

One final implication of synagogue pluralism: it brought to an end the intimate coupling of synagogue and community. Into the twentieth century the bylaws of Shearith Israel, (today the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue) still demanded that "all and every person or persons who shall have been considered of the Jewish persuasion, resident within the limits of the Corporation of the City of New York... shall be assessed and charged by the Board of Trustees ten dollars per annum."<sup>36</sup> But the breakdown of the synagogue-community meant that there was no incentive for anyone to pay. Instead, in every major city where Jews lived, the synagogue-community was replaced by a community of synagogues. A single synagogue was no longer able to represent the community as a whole. In fact, synagogues increasingly came to represent *diversity* in American Jewish life – they symbolized and promoted fragmentation. To bind the Jewish community together and carry out functions that the now privatized and functionally delimited synagogues could no longer handle required new community-wide organizations

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that were capable of transcending religious differences. Charitable organizations like the Hebrew Benevolent Society and fraternal organizations like B'nai B'rith soon moved in to fill the void.

By the 1840s, the structure of the American Jewish community mirrored the federalist pattern of the nation as a whole, balanced precariously between unity and diversity. American Judaism had likewise come to resemble the American religious pattern. Jews, many of whom were young, dissatisfied with the American Jewish "establishment," influenced by the world around them, and fearful that Judaism would not continue unless it changed had produced a religious revolution. This revolution overthrew the synagogue communities and replaced a monolithic Judaism with one that was much more democratic, free, diverse, and competitive. American Judaism, as we know it, was shaped by this revolution, and its impact and implications continue to reverberate.

## Notes

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4. *American Jewish Archives* 7 (January 1955), 17-23, 36.
5. Morris U. Schappes, *A Documentary History of the Jews in the United States 1654-1875* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 19.
6. Jacob R. Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew 1492-1776* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), 351.
7. Malcolm H. Stern, "The Sheftall Diaries: Vital Records of Savannah Jewry (1733-1808)," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 54 (March 1965), 247.
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12. John B. Kirby, "Early American Politics -- The Search for Ideology: An Historiographical Analysis and Critique of the Concept of Deference," *Journal of Politics* 32 (1970), 808-838; J.A. Pocock, "The Classical Theory of Deference," *American Historical Review* 81 (1976), 516-523.
13. Marcus, *American Jewry-Documents-Eighteenth Century*, 149, 150, 154-155.
14. *Ibid.*, 155.
15. *Ibid.*, 145-146.
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17. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 6, 64.
18. Samuel Oppenheim, "The Question of the Kosher Meat Supply in New York in 1813: With a Sketch of Earlier Conditions," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 25 (1917), 54-57; David and Tamar De Sola Pool, *An Old Faith in the New World: Portrait of Shearith Israel 1654-1954* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), 243-247.
19. Elazar, Sarna, and Monson, *A Double Bond*, 116.
20. Malcolm H. Stern, "The 1820s: American Jewry Comes of Age," in *A Bicentennial Festschrift for Jacob Rader Marcus*, ed. Bertram W. Korn (New York: Ktav, 1976), 539-549.
21. Haym M. Salomon to Zalegman Phillips (November 30, 1825) in *The Jews of the United States 1790-1840: A Documentary History*, ed. Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 547-548.
22. Blau and Baron, *Jews of the United States*, 541.
23. Pool, *An Old Faith in the New World*, 436; cf. Hyman B. Grinstein, *The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York 1654-1860* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1945), 40-49.

24. [New York] *National Advocate*, December 5, 1825, p.2.
25. Blau and Baron, *Jews of the United States*, 542-545; see *Christian Inquirer*, September 17, 1825, p.151.
26. Pool, *An Old Faith in the New World*, 437.
27. Israel Goldstein, *A Century of Judaism in New York: B'nai Jeshurun 1825-1925* (New York: B'nai Jeshurun, 1930), 54-55; the original spelling of the congregation's name was "B'nai Yeshiorun."
28. *Ibid.*, 55-56.
29. See James G. Heller, *As Yesterday When It Is Past: A History of the Isaac M. Wise Temple...* (Cincinnati: Isaac M. Wise Temple, 1942), 26-27; Joshua Trachtenberg, *Consider the Years: The Story of the Jewish Community of Easton, 1752-1942* (Easton: Temple Brith Sholom, 1944), 237.
30. These average ages are based on incomplete data assembled by Solomon Breibart; see Robert Liberles, "Conflict over Reforms: The Case of Congregation Beth Elohim, Charleston, South Carolina," in Jack Wertheimer (ed.), *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 282.
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32. Moise, *Biography of Isaac Harby*, 61.
33. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 59.
34. Grinstein, *Rise of the Jewish Community of New York*, 472-474; Gerard R. Wolfe, *The Synagogues of New York's Lower East Side* (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 37.
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