

Shmuel Singer

## 1776: A Homegrown Torah Pioneer in America



### Gershom Mendes Seixas

MAINTAINING JEWISH LIFE in Colonial America, which began over a hundred years before the Revolutionary War, was always a struggle. By 1776, only 2,500 Jews were scattered in various settlements dotting the countryside — in New York, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Georgia. Yet out of this handful of pioneers we find a number of fascinating personalities well worth studying — and emulating. Undoubtedly, a leading force behind Torah observance in colonial America was Gershom Mendes Seixas (pronounced *Seishas*). He was *chazan* and general religious functionary in New York City's Kahal Shearith Israel, but his activities on behalf of Torah were spread all over the countryside.

#### The Marrano's Son

GERSHOM MENDES SEIXAS was born in New York on January 14, 1745. His father, Isaac Mendes Seixas, had lived as a Marrano in Lisbon, Portugal, until he escaped to New York. At that time the various communities of the New World were major places of refuge for Marranos fleeing Spain and Portugal. In New York, Isaac Seixas married the American-born Rachel Levy, daughter of Moses Levy, a very wealthy German Ashkenazi immigrant, who had become *parnass* (president) of the New York *kehilla*. They came to head

a large family that played a major role in the American Jewish world over the following century.

The young Gershom received both his Jewish and secular schooling in New York City. Kahal Shearith Israel, the New York *kehilla*, had for some time maintained a school teaching both religious and general subjects to children, with the *chazan* of the community serving as teacher. No permanent rabbis served Colonial America — perhaps because the *kehillos* had trouble attracting scholars willing to live at what was then, literally, the other end of the earth. True, visiting rabbis, such as Chacham Karigal, occasionally remained for a time to serve temporarily as local *rav*. This, however, was rare. Generally, the *chazan* of the community was also teacher, preacher and usually *shochet* (ritual slaughterer) and *mohel* (circumciser) as well. Not having *semicha*, he could not be called "rabbi," but resorted to the title "minister." Many of the *chazanim*, however, were scholars with a deep dedication to Torah observance.

The *chazan* of Shearith Israel at this time was Joseph Jessurun Pinto. He was originally from Amsterdam, where he had studied in the Sephardi yeshiva. When a vacancy occurred in New York in 1758, the officers of the *kehilla* wrote to the Sephardi community in London requesting "a young man of good morals and strictly religious" to serve as their *chazan*. Pinto, 29 at the time, was recommended and accepted the position. He left his fiancée in London, commissioning Dayan David de

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Castro of London to be his *shaliach* (proxy) and affianced her in his absence. She later followed her husband to New York.

During Pinto's tenure in New York, he drafted an official Jewish calendar for New York with the local times for the beginning and end of *Shabbos* and holidays. From his letters, which contain numerous quotes from the Talmud and Midrash, it is apparent that he was something of a *talmid chacham*. It was from Pinto that Gershom Seixas learned Torah.

### Filling the Pinto Vacancy

IN 1766 Pinto left for Europe ostensibly on family matters, but actually to become *chazan* of the Sephardi community in Hamburg. The New York position remained unfilled until July 1768, when Gershom Seixas, then only twenty-three, applied for it. He was the only American-born candidate for the position — actually the first American ever to apply for *klei kodesh* — competing with several foreign candidates. Seixas's credentials: he had been taught by Pinto, and was fully qualified as *chazan*, *shochet* and *mohel*. Although not a *musmach* (ordained rabbi), he seems to have been well-learned and possessed a strong commitment to Jewish values. Seixas was accepted.

In 1775 he married Elka'la, daughter of Abraham Cohen, an Ashkenazi immigrant. Ten years later, after having borne four children, Elka'la died. Seixas then married Hannah Manuel who brought nine more children into the Seixas family.

### In Flight From the British

IN AUGUST, 1776, when it was clear that the British army would occupy New York, Gershom Seixas, a strong supporter of the American Revolution, led the congregation in leaving the city. He took the *sifrei Torah* and other religious objects with him to Stratford, Connecticut, where he remained until 1780. In 1781 he was invited to serve as *chazan* at the Sephardi congregation, Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia. He remained in Philadelphia for a number of years and helped the local community grow. In 1782 he led the construction of a new synagogue building there.

When the Revolutionary War ended in 1783, many Jewish refugees from New York returned home and began reconstructing Jewish life there. An exchange of letters between the New York *kahal* and Seixas, asking him to return, revealed many aspects of communal life, some surprisingly similar to our own, including the low salary paid to communal workers.

Seixas returned to New York in 1784 in an agreement that placed the then-*chazan* in New York, Jacob Raphael Cohen, in Seixas's former position in Philadelphia. Seixas remained in New York for the rest of his life, assuming an active role in communal affairs.

### Initiating Programs

IN 1802, a Jewish stranger who died in New York was buried in Potters Field. When Seixas learned of this, he was shocked and immediately organized the "*Hebra Hased Va'Amet*," the first free burial society for the Jewish alien and stranger. In 1798 Seixas had also led the way in founding "*Kalfe Sedaka Mattan Besether*" (Fund for Charity and Anonymous Gifts) to help local poor as well as needy in *Eretz Yisroel*. In an appeal in 1807 for the *Kalfe Sedaka*, he stated "There is not a prophet from Moses to Malachi . . . but what takes notice of the remarkable events that have attended us, from the commencement of our general captivity, even unto the present day. Twice have we been redeemed according to the sacred history and we have every reason to expect, the third time is rapidly approaching when we shall be established forever."

Seixas emphasized the imminent coming of *Moshiach* and the end of the Exile in speeches throughout his career. He may have felt that the success of the Revolution which granted equal rights to Jews, made it essential that he remind his people that they were still in *golus*. Indeed, there was a decline in religious observance and commitment among American Jews following the Revolution. Thus, in 1789, (in a sermon entitled "A Religious Discourse") he pointed out that attainment of civil rights did not signify the end of "the captivity." From 1799 to 1807 we have a string of sermons, reflecting a growing religious neglect, in which he appealed to his fellow-Jews to return to full Torah observance, and thereby fulfill a condition for redemption. Again, in a Thanksgiving Day sermon given in 1804, he reminded his listeners that "G-d will gather us again from all corners of the earth . . . and reinstate us in our former possessions."

### The Financial Squeeze

GERSHOM SEIXAS had continual salary problems with his congregation. His pay was indeed quite meager and he was forced to subsist on a poverty line income. In 1803, his salary was \$500 a year while the *shochet* (who had meanwhile been employed separately) received \$250, and the *shammass* \$125. In 1808, after much effort, his annual salary was raised to \$750. He did receive extra income as an occasional *shochet* and *mohel*.

Seixas' dedication to the *mitzva* of *milah* was indeed exemplary. He was the sole *mohel* not only in New York but throughout the Northeast. He was frequently called to Newport and neighboring cities to perform this *mitzva*.

Probably his most strenuous trip was undertaken in 1811, when he was sixty-six. He left New York in October on a journey of several weeks to perform a *milah* in Montreal. He then traveled on to Three Rivers,


Canada, where he circumcised two more babies. He performed a fourth *milah* in the town of Berthierville, Canada. Seixas finally returned to New York at the end of November. The trip had lasted thirty-four days and had been undertaken for the sake of just four children. We must bear in mind that in those days, travel was truly hazardous. There were no roads through the woods and much of the territory was occupied by hostile Indians and infested with wild beasts. Also, Kosher food was not readily available along the way. The monetary compensation for *milah* was also quite modest. On one occasion, out of Seixas's fee of twenty-four shillings, twenty-two went for his carriage fare.

#### New York's Prime Authority

FOR MANY YEARS, Gershom Seixas was New York's prime religious authority. Although American born and educated, he was an acknowledged *talmid chacham*. In his early years, he organized a New York *beis din* (rabbinical court), consisting of himself, Abraham Abrahams, a learned immigrant from Brisk, Lithuania, and Isaac Pinto. Pinto translated the first *seforim* to be printed in English in America: *machzorim* printed in 1761 and 1766. Seixas was later assisted in religious matters by his son-in-law, Isaac Baer Kursheedt, a German immigrant, who had studied in the Frankfurt yeshiva.

We have records of a number of *halachic* questions asked of Gershom Seixas: One was *Must the kohein always be called first to the Torah?* to which he replied in the affirmative . . . This question still comes up in some American congregations. — Another question dealt with the removal of bodies from the New York cemetery when it was threatened with flooding. The records tell us that in response, Seixas opened the *Shulchan Aruch Yore' De'ah* and read the appropriate chapter to the assembled company.

Gershom Seixas was also active in dealings with non-Jews. He was highly respected in the general community. Indeed, soon after the Revolution he was appointed a trustee of Columbia University, a position he held for a number of years. He was also adept in his dealings with leaders in the Christian world. For example, when George English, a missionary, attempted to engage him in theological correspondence and discussion, Gershom Seixas declined to involve himself, but remained friendly with him.

Seixas remained in his position in New York for the rest of his life. With advancing age, he became progressively weaker. He fell seriously ill in 1813, lingering on for several years, until July 2, 1816, when he died. His death not only ended an interesting life filled with Jewish devotion, it also brought down the final curtain on the Jewish colonial period in America, typified by the *mesiras nefesh* and devotion to Torah demonstrated by Gershom Seixas's own life. 

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