

1810, 23 Julho, Nova Iorque. Carta de Gershom Mendes Seixas a Hannah Adams.

(in Dan Judson, "The Mercies of a Benign Judge: A Letter from Gershom Seixas to Hannah Adams, 1810", American Jewish Archives Journal, 56 1-2, 2004, pp. 184-187)

New York 23 July 1810

Madam

To convince you of my readiness to assist you in your researches, I hasten to reply to the Queries, you have propounded, in your courteous letter addressed to me of 6th [?] - but I shall take the liberty of replying to the 2nd querie as it appears to be more methodical. (In New York) there are about 50 families of Jews, which, with a number of unmarried men, make about from 70 to 80 subscribing members to the Congregation Shearith Israel, which is incorporated by an Act of the Legislature of this state, empowering all religious societies to hold this property by charter, under the direction of Trustees, chosen annually by the communicants of the Society, according to certain order prescribed in the Act – as may be seen in the Laws of New York.

The Trustees have the management of all the temporalities, as customary in other Societies. They have one Synagogue, established conformably to the customs and forms of prayer, used among the Portuguese Jews in Europe. Their public service is altogether in the Hebrew language excepting in particular cases provided for in the Constitution of the Society. I cannot precisely ascertain the time when the first Jews settled here in New York but there were some families in this City when it was owned by the Dutch, and the documents that are among the Archives of the Congregation do not extend further back, than about 140 or 150 years (as the Rev. Mr. Miller is about writing the History of New York and solicited me to give him an account of the 1st establishment of Jews in this country I do not think myself at liberty to be very minute).

Some of the Jews who settled in New York were of Portuguese, others of German extraction besides Hollanders. There are also descendants of those who arrived after New York became an English colony. The Jews had the right of soil under the Dutch government, and the English never attempted to deprive them of it. On the contrary, they granted letters-patent to several Jewish families in the time of Queen Anne who had arrived in London from France, among the Hugonots (sic) to settle in North America.

In Philadelphia there may be about 30 families of Jews, they have two Synagogues one for those who observe the Portuguese customs of forms of prayer, and the other for those who adhere to the German rules, customs, and forms of prayer – neither of them incorporated. There may be about 80 to one hundred men in the whole state of Pennsylvania who all occasionally attend the Synagogues in Phila[delphia].

There is in Charleston, S.C. a large Society incorporated (with their Laws) [and] they have an elegant Synagogue established on the Portuguese customs and they also have different institutions with appropriate funds for benevolent and charitable purposes likewise incorporated.

In Richmond there are about 30 families, they are now building a Synagogue; they are not (as of yet) incorporated, the number of Men, unmarried, is unknown (to me) although there may be near an hundred altogether, scattered throughout the state, who are (or will become) members of the Congregation.

In Savanah, state of Georgia, there are but few families, yet they assemble at times, and commune with each other in public prayers.

3rd Querie – from the preceding... some calculation of the whole Number may be made of those who adhere to the Jewish principles of religion. There are very many in the United States who are only nominal, and few others who are settled in the New England States that are respectable characters both religious and moral. I recur now to the 1st Query...

The religious rites and ceremonies of the Jews throughout the Captivity, are alike, some few have been explained lately, by a Sanhedrin in Paris, differing in some measure to the general acceptation, but the identical Laws remain as they were, previously, only modified in such manner, as to be easier understand and observed. The law of God, as handed down by Moses, is divided into two parts, one relates solely to be practiced in the holy land which it embodied as a Nation, with Temple, Priests, and Levites for the sacrifices and offerings together with the observance of the Sabbatical year, and the Jubilee release. The other extends to all parts of the world, wherever Jews may find themselves such as abstaining from all prohibited creatures (meats, fishes, fowl and reptiles) and from every species of uncleanness in every sense and shape – either living or dead – as may be found in the Levitical laws. Strictly observing the Decalogue, in celebrating the festivals and set times, according to order – which are the Passover, Feast of Weeks, Feast of Booths, the 1st of the seventh month as the commencement of the civil year, keeping holy the 10th day of the month as a solemn fast

day, a day of expiation and prayer – to atone for their sins and for the sins of their fathers – as may be found in the liturgy translated and published by David Levy and others¹ – acting consistently with the purest principles of humanity and justice to all Men, whether *home-born* or *stranger* (at this day, I do not think it would be improper according to the idiom of our American languages and principles to render the Hebrew terms, *Native* and *Foreigner*).

In the “Jew Letters to Voltaire” reasons are assigned for not ascertaining the number of Jews in existence and I have observed that the Sanhedrin in France, have calculated on an immense number of whom, they are the constituted Representatives – I have likewise lately read an account in Faber's works of some very large body of Jews discovered in the interior parts of India, taken from “the travels of (author's name forgotten) through the interior parts of India” reference being had to those writers, will, no doubt be gratifying to all who desire to acquire this knowledge.

The Dissertation on the Prophecies by D. Levy are ingeniously compiled from various learned writers and his own observations thereon, and render them (at this day) well worth the attention of studious and literary characters. I know of at least one set (3 Vol) in this city, owned by Mr. Aaron Levy – who has some thoughts on getting them published by subscription, and he is not willing to lend them out of the city.

Query 4th and last – which surprises me very much (the others did not) as the Constitution of the United States as well the Constitution of the State of New York does not disqualify any person from holding an office either of honor or trust on account of his religious principles or tenets, all entitled to equal rights and privileges – the Constitution of Massachusetts State does not allow of equal rights in all cases.

When I first sat down to answer the questions you stated in your letter I thought to have confirmed the whole in half a sheet of paper, but every one thing produces another, and embraced so much that I have been obliged to be this prolix – you will please to observe, that I have generally made use of the 3rd person instead of the 1st and only wrote in the 1st person whenever my opinion was necessary to elucidate some particular occurrence. Should the foregoing prove to be of any advantage to you in your publication, I shall be much gratified to think I could in any wise, contribute towards the accompaniment of a Work coming from the pen of a woman so eminently distinguished as a literary character – but my dear Madam there is one thing which I would wish you

1 À margem: “the moons are celebrated, the feast of Purim (Vide Esther) and Hanuca (Vide) Maccabees, 9th of Av and 4 other days observed as fast days every year.”

to notice (if it can be done with propriety) that the Justice (or righteousness) of Providence is manifested in the dispersion of His People – for they have never been driven from any one country without finding an Asylum in another and this Country – the United States of America is perhaps the only place where the Jews have not suffered persecution, but rather the reverse, for through the mercies of a benign judge we are encouraged and indulged with every right of citizenship.

Madam

Yours Sincerely,

Gershom Seixas