Rabbi Gershom Mendes Seixas: The First Native-Born U.S. Rabbi

Rabbi Gershom Mendes Seixas was born in New York on January 15, 1745. He was the son of Isaac Mendes Seixas and Rachel Levy, both descendants of Sephardic families who emigrated from Portugal and Spain to the New World, settling in the small but influential Jewish community of New York.

His father, Isaac, was a merchant and one of the founders of Shearith Israel, the oldest synagogue in North America.

From a young age, Gershom dedicated himself to the study of Torah. At that time, there were no yeshivot or rabbinical centers in America, but he studied Torah, Tanakh, and Jewish tradition with local teachers and books brought from Europe. Although he lacked formal rabbinic studies, due to his knowledge, fluency in Hebrew, and leadership, he was appointed as hazzan (cantor), preacher, and religious guide at Shearith Israel—a role that in Sephardic communities was equivalent to that of Hakham or Rabbi .

Education and Religious Leadership

He was fluent in English and Hebrew and had knowledge of Spanish and Portuguese, reflecting his Sephardic heritage. In 1768, at just 23 years old, he was appointed hazzan and religious leader of Shearith Israel. During the War of Independence, his leadership was put to the test. The Jewish community was divided between loyalists to the British Crown and patriots. Gershom firmly supported independence. When British troops occupied New York in 1776, he left the city along with other patriots, relocating to Philadelphia.

Patriotism and Service in Philadelphia

In 1780, he left Stratford and settled in Philadelphia, the revolutionary capital. There he was appointed hazzan and rabbi of Mikveh Israel, the second oldest congregation in the United States. During the critical years of the war, he officiated, preached, and kept Jewish religious life alive in the community. When the war ended and New Yorkers began to return, Mikveh Israel did not want to let him go, but Seixas returned to New York, where he would reside for the rest of his life.

Family and Personal Life

He had two children with his first wife, Elkaleh Cohen. After her passing, he married Hannah Manuel, with whom he had ten children. His descendants continued to be influential in American Jewish life, maintaining the Seixas surname as a symbol of Sephardic pride.

His brothers were also prominent figures in Jewish communal and American civic life:

- Isaac Mendes Seixas was an officer in the New Jersey militia during the American Revolution and fought in George Washington’s army. He died in 1780.
- Moses Mendes Seixas was a successful merchant and president of the Jewish community in Newport, Rhode Island. He received George Washington and wrote a very famous letter to the first American president.
- Benjamin Mendes Seixas was a successful merchant and a founder of the New York Stock Exchange.

Community and Civic Roles

His duties as hazzan were not limited to leading prayers. He was also responsible for education, circumcision, kosher ritual slaughter (shechita), and was the main religious and community authority of New York’s Jews, a small and united community.

Seixas also represented Jews to broader society. Between 1784

and 1815, he served as a Regent of Columbia College alongside figures such as Alexander Hamilton and John Jay, being the first Jew to hold such a position at an American university. He held this post for over three decades, reflecting the integration of Jews into American civic life.

Sermons and Teachings

A distinctive feature of his service at Shearith Israel was his custom of delivering sermons in English, something that reflected his new role as a comprehensive spiritual guide and would be vital for his influence in his American homeland.

Members of the congregation transcribed and preserved his sermons.

Among them stand out:

- His prayer for Thanksgiving Day in 1789, where he spoke of the duty of Jews to thank God for living in a country of freedom.
- His Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur messages, emphasizing moral responsibility and the importance of mitzvot as a guarantee of Jewish continuity.

He died on July 2, 1816, in New York at the age of 71, and was buried in the old Shearith Israel cemetery. Today, he is remembered as the first American Jewish leader to openly support independence—a patriot who trusted that the United States would be a place where Jews could practice their religion with freedom and dignity.

As historians note, “Seixas was to American Judaism what George Washington was to the United States: a founding father.” His life and legacy symbolize the integration of Jews into America without ever renouncing their faith and traditions.

At George Washington’s inauguration, he offered the following

prayer, reflecting both his patriotism and faith

April 30, 1789 | Congregation Shearith Israel, New York

“Our God and God of our fathers: We implore You to pour out Your blessings upon the President of the United States and upon all those in authority under him. May they be strengthened with Your power to fulfill the duties of their respective offices with honesty and integrity. May they be guided by wisdom, advised by understanding, and sustained by Your strength.

May this government be a blessing to all the inhabitants of this land; may it promote the honor of Your holy Name and knowledge of You and Your law, so that justice and peace prevail, truth flourish in the days of our lives, and we may be allowed to see the coming of the Redeemer in peace. Amen.”

Read the complete article about Rabbi Mendes Seixas, by Seymour “Sy” Brody, here: