

Year of Years

CELEBRATING 365 YEARS *of* JUDAISM *in* AMERICA

LOUIS M. SOLOMON, *Parnas*

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Central Park West and 70th St, New York City

Year of Years

CELEBRATING 365 YEARS *of* JUDAISM *in* AMERICA



TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 2019
11 ELUL, 5779

THE TRAVELS *of the* TORAH:
from Spain to Portugal,
from Amsterdam to America



*This event is dedicated to our
tireless Parnas,*

Louis M. Solomon

*for his ceaseless efforts on
behalf of our kehilla. His
determination and brilliance
will be remembered for
preserving our history,
maintaining our tradition,
and securing our future.*

365th ANNIVERSARY



• 5414 • 5779 •

CONGREGATION SHEARITH ISRAEL

Year of Years Celebration

THE TRAVELS *of the* TORAH:
from Spain to Portugal, from Amsterdam to America

Myer Myers Rimmonim Exhibit

an extraordinary one-hour viewing opportunity
of our matched pairs of finials

Rededication Ceremony of our Historic Torah Scrolls

with accompaniment by the Shearith Israel choir

Program hosted by Rabbi Soloveichik

featuring

An historic reunion of descendents of
Isaac Abarbanel and the Duke of Braganza

and

Keynote Lecture

Central Park West at 70th Street, New York City • www.shearithisrael.org

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GREETINGS FROM RABBI MEIR SOLOVEICHIK

Then said they unto him, Tell us, we pray thee...What is thine occupation? and whence comest thou? what is thy country? and of what people art thou? And he said unto them, I am an Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry land. - Jonah 1:8-9

Tonight we remember two stories of Jews who braved stormy seas far away from any settled Jewish community. The first is the tale of the origins of our own community. Twenty-three Jews had arrived by ship in New Amsterdam in early September, several days before Rosh Hashanah. They refused to abandon their beliefs, and they fought back when Peter Stuyvesant sought to “require them in a friendly way to depart.” Two years later, a Torah scroll arrived, and they requested the right to build a synagogue. Again Stuyvesant recorded that “the Jewish nation... have many times requested of us the free and public exercise of their abominable religion, [but] this cannot be accorded them.” They still maintained their faith, finally built a synagogue in 1730, and 46 years later would help create an exceptional country which would grant them full equality.



This story has a biblical predecessor. Queried by his fellow travellers, in the midst of storm, Jonah ignored their questions regarding his occupation and destination. In a moment of crisis, when all was on the line, one

aspect of who he was mattered, just as the 23 Jews who had braved the sea also gave only one answer: “We are Hebrews, and we revere the Lord God of Heaven.” As Dr. Pool has written, in the tale of the twenty-three, one “can hear the echo of Jonah’s simple answer ringing down the corridors of time.”

This is what we celebrate: not only the journey of Jews, but the journey of the Jewish faith, of the Jonah-like Hebrews who, thousands of miles away from their brethren, refused to forget who they were. 365 years later, their example inspires us still.



GREETINGS FROM LOUIS SOLOMON

Parnas of Congregation Shearith Israel

It is a singular privilege for me to open this volume commemorating the September 10 capstone event of our Congregation's *Year of Years* Celebration. This year of 2019, or 5779 in the Jewish Calendar, marks 365 years of organized Jewish presence in America, a full "year of years." Our celebrations have included a major symposium conducted by Rabbi Soloveichik titled, *Passover and the American Imagination*; an American history lecture series; Shabbat dinner programs, including with today's conversos from Recife, Brazil; Iraqi and Egyptian heritage programs; a special S&P music program; a Memorial Day ceremony at our Chatham Square Cemetery; and a July 4th excursion to the Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island. The booklets accompanying some of the programs are themselves enriching testaments (and are available digitally on our website at shearithisrael.org/year-of-years).

Rabbi Soloveichik has titled the event for which this current pamphlet is a companion, and his keynote lecture, "*The Travels of the Torah: From Spain to Portugal, From Amsterdam to America*." As he describes it in his stirring letter accompanying the invitation to this event, the "travel" we are celebrating is in large measure a spiritual one. The travel remembers the past as an indispensable tool for sustaining a future – for, in Churchill's

immortal phrasing, "The farther back you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see."

But the travel of our *Year of Years* Celebration is also one of concrete revival, recommitment, rededication. We will be entering our beautiful sanctuary on September 10 with a newly *kasher*ed or repaired Torah scroll, one that is ancient by American standards and will be pressed back into service by a living, thriving community committed to preserving it, living by the values it teaches, and passing it and them on future generations of American Jews in our Congregation's and Nation's second "*Year of Years*." This is one of many historic Torah scrolls that we are repairing.

The event will also include seeing on display all three sets of the *rimonim*, or Torah finials, that Shearith Israel owns that were fashioned by Colonial silversmith Myer Myers, a member of our Congregation who entered posterity as the first Jewish silversmith admitted into the British Silversmith's Guild. These dazzlingly beautiful objects are being united for the first time, a "*rimonim* reunion" under our roof for the simultaneous purposes of spiritual enhancement of the Torah scrolls they adorn, of historical commemoration, and of active ritual use by a community dedicated to its own confident continuation. Our Congregation will continue to use the Torah scrolls and gorgeous *rimonim* in our ritual for as long as we earn the merit to continue to care for them within the context of a vibrant Jewish community.

We feel blessed to be able to share this event as a community.



365th ANNIVERSARY



• 5414 • 5779 •

CONGREGATION SHEARITH ISRAEL

Year of Years Celebration

LETTERS *of* COMMENDATION



THE CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE MAYOR
NEW YORK, NY 10007

September 10, 2019

Dear Friends:

It is my great pleasure to welcome everyone to *Year of Years*, Shearith Israel's 365th anniversary celebration.

New York's vibrant Jewish community has contributed tremendously to nearly every facet of life in our city, and Jewish heritage is deeply woven into the fabric of multiculturalism for which the five boroughs are known. As the oldest Jewish congregation in North America, Shearith Israel has helped to build and fortify this foundation of faith and fellowship since 1654. The Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue has grown with our country, welcoming members as its surrounding Jewish population grew and engaging in contemporary social issues for generations. The temple's storied legacy is inextricably entwined with our city's history, and its diverse membership has shaped many of the educational, philanthropic, and cultural institutions that have come to define Manhattan. As you gather tonight to celebrate over three-and-a-half centuries of leadership, I join in looking forward to all that this congregation will continue to accomplish in the years ahead.

On behalf of all New Yorkers, please accept my best wishes for a meaningful ceremony and joyous celebration.

Sincerely,

Bill de Blasio
Mayor

Consulate General
of Israel in New York
Consul General



הקונסוליה הכללית של
ישראל בניו יורק
קונסול כללי

September 10, 2019

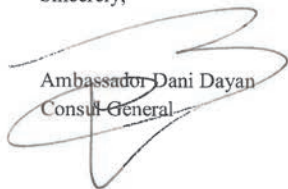
Dear Rabbi Solevachik and Congregants of Shearith Israel,

It is with great pleasure that I received your announcement that Congregation Shearith Israel of New York is celebrating its 365th Year of Years anniversary. I wish to take this opportunity to congratulate you and the entire Shearith Israel extended family on this tremendous milestone.

For the past 365 years, Congregation Shearith Israel of New York has served the interests of people across New York City who believe wholeheartedly in their Jewish traditions, American values and the State of Israel. The preservation of Sephardic traditions, together with the culture of welcoming all Jews, is an inspiring example of acceptance for all aligning with a community of faith. Through various programming, political initiatives and charitable campaigns, your congregation strives to enhance the Jewish community. Whether it is hosting the first Jewish services in New York, representing a diverse community of Jews, helping early Jewish immigrants to keep true to their faith in a new society or being a key part of the creation of many incredible Jewish communal charities, we know that your Congregation represents our people with pride.

On behalf of the State of Israel, I thank you for 365 years of service to our community and wish you all the best for a successful and bright future. מול טוב!

Sincerely,


Ambassador Dani Dayan
Consul General

800 Second Avenue, New York, NY 10017 • Tel: (212) 499-5450 • Fax: (212) 499-5455



To the Congregation Shearith Israel

It is with great pleasure that I accepted the very kind invitation to this event celebrating the 365th anniversary of Judaism in America.

The presence of the Portuguese Sefardi Community in New Amsterdam / New York as well as in some other cities in America has been a living memory of this community of Portuguese descent in the United States.

These communities have always been respected for having a sense of honesty and responsibility. Despite the most regrettable reasons that motivated their departure from Portugal, the Portuguese Sefardi Communities have always been loyal to their cultural and historical roots.

I am happy to have had the opportunity to promote (through the Institute of Portuguese Democracy), the law that gives the Portuguese nationality back to the descendants of the Portuguese sefardis!


Daniel Duarte,
Duke of Bragança

Lisbon, September 2019



CONSULADO GERAL DE PORTUGAL
NEW YORK

Dear Barbara,

First of all, allow me to praise Congregation Shearith Israel for hosting this magnificent event, with the presence remarkable personalities such as His Royal Highness D. Duarte Pio, the Duke of Braganza, and Rabbi Don Isaac Abarbanel. It is really an honor to be present, and to be surrounded by the wonderful artistic pieces owned by this Congregation, for sure not only a religious, but also a cultural symbol of the city of New York.

Secondly, we are very honored by the close relationship that Congregation Shearith Israel maintains with the Consulate General of Portugal, and particularly in the last few years. That relationship is not a mere historical reminiscence of the memory of the twenty-three Jews, mostly of Spanish and Portuguese origin fleeing from Recife, Brazil, who had the vision and audacity to devise and establish the first synagogue founded in North America, back in 1654. That historical landmark would be relevant by itself, but it is more than that.

Indeed, Portugal has been strengthening the bonds with the Sephardic community, not only in New York, but also elsewhere. As you are certainly aware, since 2013 our laws grant an easier access to Portuguese nationality for descendants of Sephardic Portuguese Jews, exempting them from some of the requisites stipulated for other communities. And, more recently, the relationship between this Congregation and the Consulate General of Portugal in New York has become more and more closer, evolving from a cordial institutional relationship to - if I may say - a warm friendship.

Therefore, let me reiterate that I sincerely wish that this Congregation may accomplish all its aims in the compelling new challenges it will face ahead, and that you can be sure that this Consulate General will be honored to foster this cherished relationship and to follow your activities closely in the future.

Please accept the assurances of my highest consideration,

The Consul General
Maria de Fátima Mendes



El Cónsul General de España

Congregation Shearith Israel
The Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue

August 28th, 2019

On the occasion of the Shearith Israel's special *Year of Years* event, I would like to congratulate the Congregation on its 365th anniversary and to extend my greetings to all its members.

The Shearith Israel, founded one year after the arrival of the first ship that brought in 1653 Jewish families, Sephardic families of Portuguese and Spanish origin, to America land, is today a Community that represents both tradition and inclusivity, and is one the most important and active Congregations in NYC.

Spain and Portugal share a rich Jewish history. The old Jewish quarters in our cities are sensorial and palpable encounters with history and tradition, and represent our common past and future. I feel proud and honored by our common past and the legacy that we leave to the generations to come.

To conclude, I'm moved and honored to have the opportunity to celebrate with all of you the work and achievements over the past 365 years and look forward to our continued collaboration and success.

Yours sincerely,

Rafael Conde de Saro
Consul General



Kingdom of the Netherlands

Consulate General of the
Kingdom of the Netherlands
666 Third Avenue, 18th floor
New York, NY 10017
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August 26, 2019

Greetings,

I wish to congratulate the Congregation Shearith Israel with the celebration of its Year of Years. A group of 23 religious refugees arrived in Manhattan in 1654 following the conquering of the Dutch colony in Recife, Brazil. The group had originated in Amsterdam and upon arrival in New Amsterdam, played an important role in the development of the Jewish community in New York and in the United States. It is an honour to represent the Kingdom of the Netherlands at this joyful occasion, celebrating the Congregation Shearith Israel's 365th anniversary.

The Congregation's Year of Years demonstrates, that these early Jewish settlers enforced religious freedom in the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam and offered a home for people with Jewish faith from Europe, regardless whether they migrated for economic reasons, or fled religious persecution.

Today we are not only recalling the founding of the Congregation Shearith, but also observe the achievement of 365 years of Jewish tradition in New York: The wonderful craftsmanship of Myer Myers, the rededication of an old and restored American Torah and in Rabbi Soloveichik's keynote the handed down, traditional exegesis of the Torah.

I extend my best wishes to the Congregation Shearith Israel for successfully organizing this commemoration and I am delighted to enjoy tonight's program together.

Dolph Hogewoning
Consul General of the Kingdom of the Netherlands



FOUNDED 1740
CONGREGATION MIKVEH ISRAEL
in The City of Philadelphia

RABBI ALBERT E. GABBAI
MINISTER

29 Ab 5779
August 30, 2019

It is such an honor to be present at the re-dedication of the Sefer Torah that has such historical importance. The Book of Proverbs tells us that the Torah is "Etz Hayim Hee Lamahazikim Bah," *It is a Tree of Life for those who embrace it*. It behooves us to give utmost respect to it. Like a tree gives fruit and shade, so is our destiny to be nourished by it and to be protected by G-d.

In the Book of Debarim (Deuteronomy), we read that the Torah is "... an inheritance for the whole congregation of Jacob." We know that the name "Jacob" and "Israel" are interchangeable, so how appropriate it is that both our congregations have the word "Israel" in their names. KKMI and KKSJ are two sister congregations with intimate bonds dating back to the Colonial Era. Many of our religious leaders have ministered alternately between the two congregations and many of these members have established family and friendship bonds that last to this day.

When we take out the Sefer Torah, we chant this verse: "Derakheha Darkhe Noam Vekhol Netiboteha Shalom," *The Torah's ways are pleasant and they all lead to peace*. How fortunate we are to be able to put into practice that wonderful verse.

May we continue in this path for many years to come.

Amen.

Rabbi Albert E. Gabbai
Congregation Mikveh Israel

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*Executive Committee member **Of blessed memory



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September 10, 2019

Dear Congregation Shearith Israel,

On behalf of UJA-Federation of New York, it is my privilege to wish you mazal tov on the remarkable occasion of your 365th anniversary.

As the founding institution of Jewish life in New York, Congregation Shearith Israel was at the forefront in shaping American Judaism. From your earliest days, your leaders and membership modeled what it means to be a Jewish community: a place of religious and spiritual vibrancy, deep personal and familial connections, an ethos of caring for all those in need.

Indeed, your synagogue served as the first "Federation" in America, providing for the vast needs of those first Jewish immigrants who settled in New York. As the synagogue and the New York Jewish community developed, Shearith Israel supported other agencies addressing a widening array of needs. More broadly, the synagogue embodied, and imbued in its members, a commitment to *zedakah* and a sense of responsibility for the broader community – a value still held deeply today.

It is UJA-Federation's honor to acknowledge Congregation Shearith Israel's work on behalf of our community. We are all stronger by virtue of your tremendous legacy.

On a personal note, as an occasional participant at your inspiring Friday night and Shabbat morning services, I'm very grateful for Congregation Shearith Israel's extraordinary contribution to Jewish life in New York and beyond.

Mazal tov again on this special milestone. May Congregation Shearith Israel go from strength to strength!

Eric S. Goldstein
Chief Executive Officer



American
Sephardi
Federation

18 score and 5 years ago, our ancestors came to this continent as strangers, a Shearith Israel ("Remnant of Israel"), the name they would later ascribe to their Congregation and its home, this sacred, majestic Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue. That remnant—23 Sephardic refugees from Recife—became the first Jewish community in America, helping both to define and defend the new nation, as well as their place of honor within it. Indeed, the illustrious members of this Congregation have down through the centuries distinguished themselves from the battlefield (with many making the ultimate sacrifice in the service of American liberty) to the boardroom, and from the Statue of Liberty to the Supreme Court.

In the past year, we, together with Attorney James Kaplan of the Lower Manhattan Historical Society and other partners, dedicated the location of Shearith Israel's first synagogue on the present South Williams Street as the Mill Street Synagogue/Sexias Way, a tangible reminder of the significant contributions of the Congregation and its first great leader, Rev. Gershom Mendes Sexias, to the Patriot's cause, New York's emergence as the most cosmopolitan of America's cities, and the improbable flourishing of Jewish life in the United States.

The American Sephardi Federation is honored to once again join our friends and partners tonight in shining a light on Sephardic excellence (especially the extraordinary craftsmanship of the Jewish "Paul Revere," the artisan Myer Myers), Sephardic scholarship and commitment to Torah, Sephardic continuity and history in Spain, Portugal, (old and new) Amsterdam, and America, as well as the Sephardic tradition of tolerance and inclusivity without which tonight's historic reunion—between the descendants of Sephardic statesmen, financier, Biblical commentator, and rabbi, Hakham Don Isaac Abarbanel, and those of his former compatriot (some say, conspirator), the Duke of Braganza—would not be possible.

Hazak u'Baruch on this Year of Years Anniversary,

David E.R. Dangoor
President,
American Sephardi Federation
Board Member,
Congregation Shearith Israel

Jason Guberman-P.
Executive Director,
American Sephardi Federation

The American Sephardi Federation at The Center for Jewish History: 15 West 16th Street,
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To the *Congregation Shearith Israel* community,

Ever since its founding, Shearith Israel and its membership have become interwoven into the very fabric of life in this land. The congregation was birthed into existence during the Dutch colonial period by Jewish souls determined to brave the anti-Jewish prejudice of New Amsterdam's governor, Peter Stuyvesant. It was helmed during the American Revolution by ardent patriot and lover of liberty, the legendary Reverend Gershom Mendes Seixas. It was home to the United States Navy's first Jewish commodore, Uriah P. Levy, as well as to the family of Emma Lazarus, whose stirring verse adorns the Statue of Liberty to this day. In the early 20th century, Rabbi David de Sola Pool served as a leading voice advocating for the establishment of a Jewish State, and was instrumental in shaping the future of Jewish liturgy in this country. It is now under the leadership of my dear friend, and Yeshiva University colleague, Rabbi Dr. Meir Soloveichik, one of contemporary America's foremost religious intellectuals.

For 365 years this community has gathered into its bosom Jews from all four corners of the earth. In the words of Reverend de Sola Pool, "its history has been marked by the integration of the elements which have come to it from the sixty or more countries of the earth." Like the colossus in Lazarus' sonnet, it has truly been a "Mother of Exiles."

May this auspicious occasion herald a new era of growth for the congregation, as it continues in its - and the Jewish people's - grand tradition of bringing light and virtue to this country, and to all the nations of the world.

Mazal tov!

Rabbi Dr. Ari Berman
President

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ORTHODOX UNION
תורה ומצוות
Enhancing Jewish Life

On behalf of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, it is our privilege to extend greetings to the membership and leadership of Congregation Shearith Israel on this august occasion. This occasion is made even more momentous as it coincides with the Year of Years, a celebration of nearly 365 years of continuous service to the Jewish community, spanning multiple locations and generations.

There is a great deal of shared history between the Orthodox Union and Shearith Israel, one of the flagship congregations in North America. Throughout the long history of the American Jewish experience, your Bet Kneset has stood the test of time, preserving authentic Jewish tradition and demonstrating a deep loyalty to our heritage over centuries.

However, our connection is also deeply personal. As an institution, we owe our very existence to the visionary leadership of the Spanish and Portuguese community. It was Rabbi Henry Pereira Mendes, who served as your Minister from 1877 until 1937, and who demonstrated such extraordinary vision, recognizing the need for a unified Jewish voice to represent the interests of the Orthodox community. It was his foresight and wisdom that led to the founding of the Union of Orthodox Congregations of America, a vision that survives and thrives today. Rabbi Dr. David De Sola Pool continued in that path as the author of a Siddur used in OU congregations across the world. The tradition of strong leadership and commitment to education has been a constant throughout our shared history, as we have looked to your Congregation and especially to your Ministers for guidance and clarity through turbulent times. This too is a tradition that thrives today as we salute Rabbi Dr. Meir Soloveichik and thank him for the role he plays in bringing profound and insightful scholarship and eloquent expression of Jewish values and ideas to the world stage.

As an umbrella organization, we turn to our constituent members for inspiration as we look to serve the Klal. As you celebrate this special moment in your history, please know that Congregation Shearith Israel has provided outstanding leadership for the entire community by serving as role models for what it means to hold fast to an eternal heritage. For this and more, you have the gratitude of the OU and all of the Kehillot that we represent.

It is our sincere wish that, as you celebrate your Year of Years, you continue to flourish for many more to come as you go M'chayil el chayil, and as you fulfill your mission of Ribuy Kevod Shamayim.

Allen Fagin
Executive Vice President
Orthodox Union

Moishe Bane
President
Orthodox Union



Elul 5779, August 2019

Dear Friends,

The New York Board of Rabbis rejoices with Congregation Shearith Israel as you celebrate a “year of years,” three-hundred sixty-five years since the brave “remnant of Israel” established a Jewish community in New Amsterdam.

Shearith Israel, fondly known by all of us as the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, anchors Jewish life in New York and beyond. Your congregation literally *lives* history each day as you preserve your glorious past while you continue to build a vibrant place of Torah and spiritual life for yourselves and all Jews. Your exemplary rabbinical leadership has inspired the Jewish people throughout the years.

May the beloved blessing, “go from strength to strength,” continue to propel you to even greater historical achievements in the years ahead.

Biv’rachah,

Rabbi Lester Bronstein, President
Rabbi Joseph Potasnik, Executive Vice President
Rabbi Diana Gerson, Associate Executive Vice President



HISTORIC EXHIBIT

of our

Matched Pairs of

MYER MYERS RIMONIM





Myer Myers finials (18th Century): Owned by Shearith Israel. In use in Shearith Israel since the middle of the 18th century. Frequently on display - but continue to be used ritually, especially on Rosh Hashanah and Kippur.



Myer Myers finials (18th Century): Owned by Shearith Israel and used at Touro Synagogue with Shearith Israel's permission.



TORAH SCROLLS OF SHEARITH ISRAEL

by Zachary Edinger, Sexton

Shearith Israel owns 49 Torah scrolls. This is an impressively large number of scrolls for any congregation. As the first Jewish congregation in North America, our community is quite a bit older than most, and this accounts for our unusually large collection of *Sifrei Torah*. Each of these 49 scrolls has a unique story to tell. Collectively, however, these scrolls bear witness to the long history and the wide diversity of our community.

In 1655, the *Parnassim* of Amsterdam's *Esnoga*, gave to Abraham de Lucena "a *Sepher Thora* of parchment, with its green veil, and cloak and band of India damask of dark purple" for use by the new community of New Amsterdam founded in 1654. This was the first Torah in North America. However, this scroll was returned and given to the community of Amersfort in 1663.

It is doubtful whether Asser Levy (one of the only original settlers of New Amsterdam to remain in New York during the transition from Dutch to British colonial rule) had his own Torah Scroll. No such scroll is mentioned in his will or in the inventory made of his estate. However, an unusual silver object described as a "*Chaine for my Booke*" was listed. We do not know what this

object was, and it is at least possible to speculate that this was a ritual object meant to adorn a holy book. But in truth, we simply do not know if Asser Levy owned a Torah Scroll.

Joseph Bueno de Mesquita (who in 1682 purchased the land now known as the Chatham Square cemetery) owned a *Sefer Torah*. We know this from his will, which was executed shortly before his death in 1708. In his will, Joseph gave his "*five Books of the Law of Moses in parchment with the ornaments belonging thereto*" to his brother Abraham Bueno de Mesquita then living in Nevis. However, this Torah does not appear to have left New York. It was purchased from his Estate in 1709 by Isaac Pinheiro. Whether this was because Abraham Bueno de Mesquita declined to receive it, or because Isaac Pinheiro wanted it to remain in use in New York is not known.

Isaac Pinheiro died in 1710. There is no mention of this Torah Scroll in his will but it was valued in the inventory of his estate at the hefty sum of £125 (the equivalent of more than \$20,000 today). We do not know what happened to this *sefer*. It is possible that it is one of the unidentified scrolls still in the possession of Shearith Israel.

The Gomez family owned at least one *sefer Torah*, and possibly more. Wills from the Gomez family bequeath several sets of *Rimonim* (Torah finials) through at least four generations during the 18th century. In 1782, Moses Gomez loaned a *sefer Torah* to Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia. Another *sefer* once owned by Isaac Gomez was purchased from him in the early 19th century by Samuel B.H. Judah, who in turn sold this *sefer* to Lewis J. Cohen. This *sefer* is still in the possession of the congregation.



In 1737, Rachel Lewis (Luiza) left money for the purchase of a Torah scroll. This is the first *sefer* specifically described as being owned by the congregation and not by any individual member of the synagogue. We know that this Torah was still in the possession of the Congregation as of 1869, but it is not identifiable today. However, the *rimonim* which accompanied this *sefer* are still in use—we refer to these finials today as the “Pineapple” bells, pictured on page 29.

Two of our oldest scrolls were in the Ark of the Mill Street synagogue and in use throughout the British occupation of New York during the American Revolution. These two scrolls were desecrated by Hessian soldiers. They are as a result *pasul* (invalid for use) and beyond repair, but despite this the congregation has kept them for generations.

Today, they are occasionally loaned to museums for educational purposes. Interestingly, one of these scrolls is written in an Ashkenazic script from the 17th century, while the other is an old Sephardic Torah written on *gevil* (a type of parchment) that probably came from Morocco in the early 18th century. These two scrolls, so important to the history of our congregation’s experience during the Revolution, are also evidence of the diverse makeup of our synagogue even during the colonial era.

Three additional *gevil* scrolls owned by Shearith Israel are of great antiquity. They are at least 400 years old, written in old Spanish square script. It is possible, perhaps even likely, that they have their origins in Morocco about the same era of the Spanish Expulsion. One of these scrolls has handles upon which a silver ring has been engraved with the identifying mark “K*K*T*T No. 10.” This stands for *Kahal Kadosh Talmud Torah* (which is

(continued)



Torah Scroll (Ashkenazic) desecrated during the American Revolution



KKT #10 Scroll, possibly over 500 years old

the official name of the Portuguese community in Amsterdam). Tantalizingly, a 1640 inventory of the scrolls in the *Esnoga* in Amsterdam describes *Sefer* #10 as being a *gevil* scroll written by a scribe named Zabarro. We are currently in the process of performing additional research, including carbon dating on all three of these amazing and very antique scrolls.

Other scrolls of note are the *Ephraim Hart Sefer*, an old Ashkenazic Torah scroll with very unique crowns and special letters. This scroll was once owned by Ephraim Hart, a veteran of the American Revolution, signer of the Buttonwood Agreement and *Parnas* of Shearith Israel. This *sefer* is currently on display in the hallway of the synagogue. We expect to have it repaired and returned to ritual use in the future.

Of Shearith Israel's 49 Torah scrolls, 15 are written in Ashkenazic script. Among these, most originate in Germany during the



Ephraim Hart *Sefer* – note the unusual crowns

19th century. However, several date from the 18th century and one was even produced in 17th century Germany. Two scrolls originate in 19th century Eastern Europe and Poland. There are also *sefarim* from Romania, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, dating from the first decades of the 20th century.

The majority of our Torah scrolls are written in various Sephardic scribal styles. Several of the most beautiful scrolls were written at the end of the 19th Century by our very own *Hazzan*, Abraham Haim Nieto, who was an excellent scribe. These are the only scrolls of Shearith Israel that can be stated with certainty to have been written in the United States.

Two scrolls show signs of having been written by Italian scribes. A very large number of scrolls (13) indicate their origins in the scribal style of the Portuguese community of Amsterdam. But there are also scrolls that come from all over the Sephardic world,



including Morocco, Rhodes, Turkey, Egypt, Israel, Iraq, and Shanghai. Some of these scrolls were donated by members of our congregation who had come to New York as refugees from diverse communities, including: the Abraham family (Shanghai) the Arias family (Turkey), the Capelluto family (Rhodes), The Gubbay family (Iraq), the Mosseri family (Egypt), the Salomon family (Amsterdam), the Sereni family (Italy), and the Zilkha family (Iraq).

Many of these *sefarim* are remnants of ancient Jewish communities which no longer exist. They are (as the late Joe Abraham put it) *אודים מוצלים מאש* – *brands plucked from the fire*.

Some of our newest Torah scrolls testify to the rebirth of Jewish life in Israel, which is where many *Sifrei Torah* today are written. Among these are the two *Jessurun* scrolls donated in 1949, the *Elias Meth* Scroll donated in the 1950's, as well as the beautiful scrolls donated more recently by the late Abraham "Barry" Cohen and Ronald Stanton.

Our Torah scrolls have been lovingly cared for by our *Hazzan*, Rabbi Ira Rohde, who has studied *Safrut*. He knows each *sefer* intimately, having personally made or overseen repairs to many of these *sefarim*, and of course as our main *Koré* (reader).

Our current Torah project has been initiated in conjunction with Rabbi Yizchak Goldstein and *Machon Ot*, recognized leaders in Torah Repair based in Israel. The first step in our project has been to inventory all of our *Sifrei Torah* and to make an assessment of our needs and goals. This inventory was completed in July, 2019. Several historic scrolls were identified for additional research and repair. This work is ongoing. The first Torah scroll chosen



to be repaired was the Samuel N. Hart *sefer* which is described elsewhere in this booklet.

The *Sifrei Torah* of Shearith Israel are a reflection of our community as a whole. Like our congregation, there are scrolls of very great antiquity, predating the United States, some of which even played a role during the American Revolution. They reflect the diverse origins of our congregants coming from communities all over the Ashkenazic and Sephardic world. They testify to our origins in the Portuguese community in Amsterdam and our strong connection there throughout our 365-year history.

Our *Sefarim* are living memorials to Jewish communities destroyed by persecution and Holocaust, and they are evidence of the rebirth of our people in the modern State of Israel. The past, present, and future of these special and holy objects, like our community as a whole, is worthy of our celebration and support.

Thank you for joining us in doing so.

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RIMONIM

*Used in
the Historic*

TORAH REDEDICATION CEREMONY

From our “pineapple” bells to our “liberty” bells, finials have adorned our Torah scrolls in Shearith Israel. Their Hebrew appellation makes reference to fruit: we call them *rimonim*, or pomegranates. This is noteworthy. The wooden staves on which the *rimonim* are placed are known as *atzei hayyim*, or trees of life, a reference to the Bible’s description of the Torah as “a tree of life for those who grasp it.” The *rimonim* thus embody the fruit of Jewish faith, and reflect our belief that the Torah is the true source of immortality. To celebrate the *rimonim* of Shearith Israel is thus to mark how we have lavished love on the Torah, and how the Torah has sustained our community for the past 365 years.



Pineapple Bells, purchased by Shearith Israel in 1737 from a bequest of Rachel Luiza, continue to be used ritually, especially on the Seventh Day of Passover (Mill Street Consecration Anniversary)



Myer Myers finials, marked Hays & Myers (18th Century):
 Donated by Caroline Cohen in 1893 to Shearith Israel and
 owned by Shearith Israel since. Used at Touro Synagogue with the
 permission of Shearith Israel.



Liberty Bells (1961): donated by Arthur and Carol Goldberg in
 honor of the 70th Birthday of Judge Edgar J. Nathan, Jr.



THE FAMILIES BRAGANZA *and* ABARBANEL:

A Shining Moment in Portuguese History

by Rabbi Meir Soloveichik



The Abarbanel family served the House of Braganza in Portugal for many years. According to the historian Eric Lawee, Don Isaac was known as the Duke's "most great servant and friend," and was given by his patron an estate on the outskirts of Lisbon as a reward for his faithful service. Abarbanel himself would open his commentary on the book of Joshua by referring to the "strong love" that he felt for the Braganza family.

This bond between Catholic Portuguese nobility and Jewish rabbinic aristocracy was thus much more than a pragmatic relationship; rightly understood, it embodied an interfaith friendship that stands to this day as a shining example of humanism. As the scholar Cedric Cohen Skalli has noted, this can be seen from an exquisite condolence letter written by Abarbanel to a member of the Braganza family who was in the midst of mourning. Citing sources as diverse as Ecclesiastes and Seneca, he coaxes his friend to return to public life, thereby showing a touching empathy and a genuine concern for the political continuity of this noble man.

When the new king of Portugal turned against the House of Braganza, the rabbi known for his great love for this house was in great danger as well. Abarbanel was forced to flee Portugal for Spain, where he ultimately served in the court of Ferdinand and Isabella. As we mark the persecution that the Jews of Spain and Portugal would ultimately experience, the friendship between the families of Abarbanel and Braganza is worthy of commemoration and celebration.



A portrait of Fernando II, Duke of Braganza at the time of the Abarbanel.



A commonly-used portrait of Portuguese Jewish rabbi, statesman, and philosopher, Don Isaac Abarbanel



Dom Duarte Pio, HRH Duke of Braganza. Photo credit: Official Photographer of the Portuguese Royal House, António Homem Cardoso



Members of the Abarbanel family and members of Shearith Israel, Lauri and Lewis Barbanel. Photo credit: Five Towns Jewish Times.

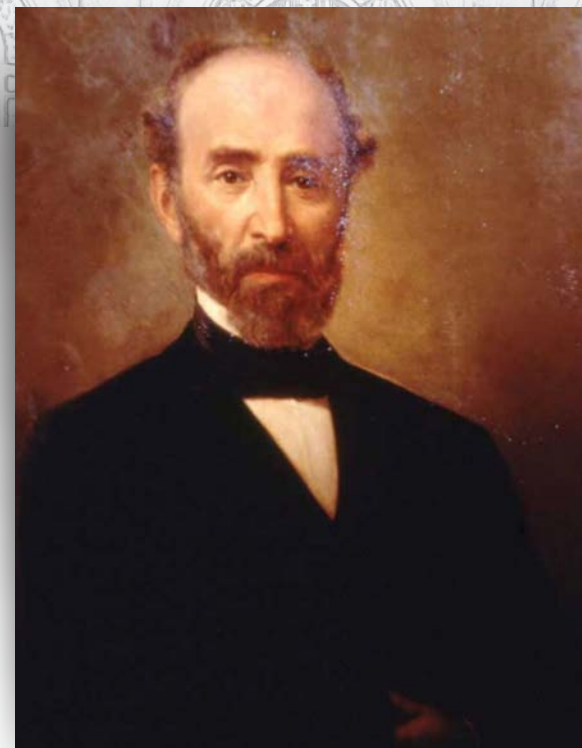


An Extraordinary Restoration:

REPAIRING *the* SIFREI TORAH

As noted elsewhere in this booklet, Shearith Israel owns 49 Torah Scrolls. Of these about a dozen are kosher (fit for ritual use). Our *Hazzan*, Rabbi Ira Rohde, rotates these *Sifrei* Torah so that most of these scrolls remain in active use during the liturgical year.

Some scrolls have fallen into disuse because of relatively minor problems, such as cracked letters. Other problems affecting the kosher status of a Torah are harder to repair, such as fading or discolored letters, flaking ink, or mold accumulation. Many of these scrolls are waiting for expert repairs to be made so that these holy objects can be put back into use. However, there are also a significant number of scrolls that are damaged beyond repair.



Earlier this year, we began a project to assess all of our *Sifrei* Torah and identify if any of our historic scrolls could be repaired and returned to kosher status. Several historic scrolls were identified as repairable. The scroll that we decided to inaugurate this repair project with is called the “Samuel N. Hart *Sefer*.” It is a beautiful and tall Torah scroll. It also has a very interesting history, which did not begin in New York at all.

The Samuel N. Hart *Sefer* was donated to Shearith Israel in 1873, together with a pair of silver finial bells (*rimonim*), a pointer, and a silk mantle. These were donated to Shearith Israel by Samuel Nathan Hart a native of Charleston, South Carolina.

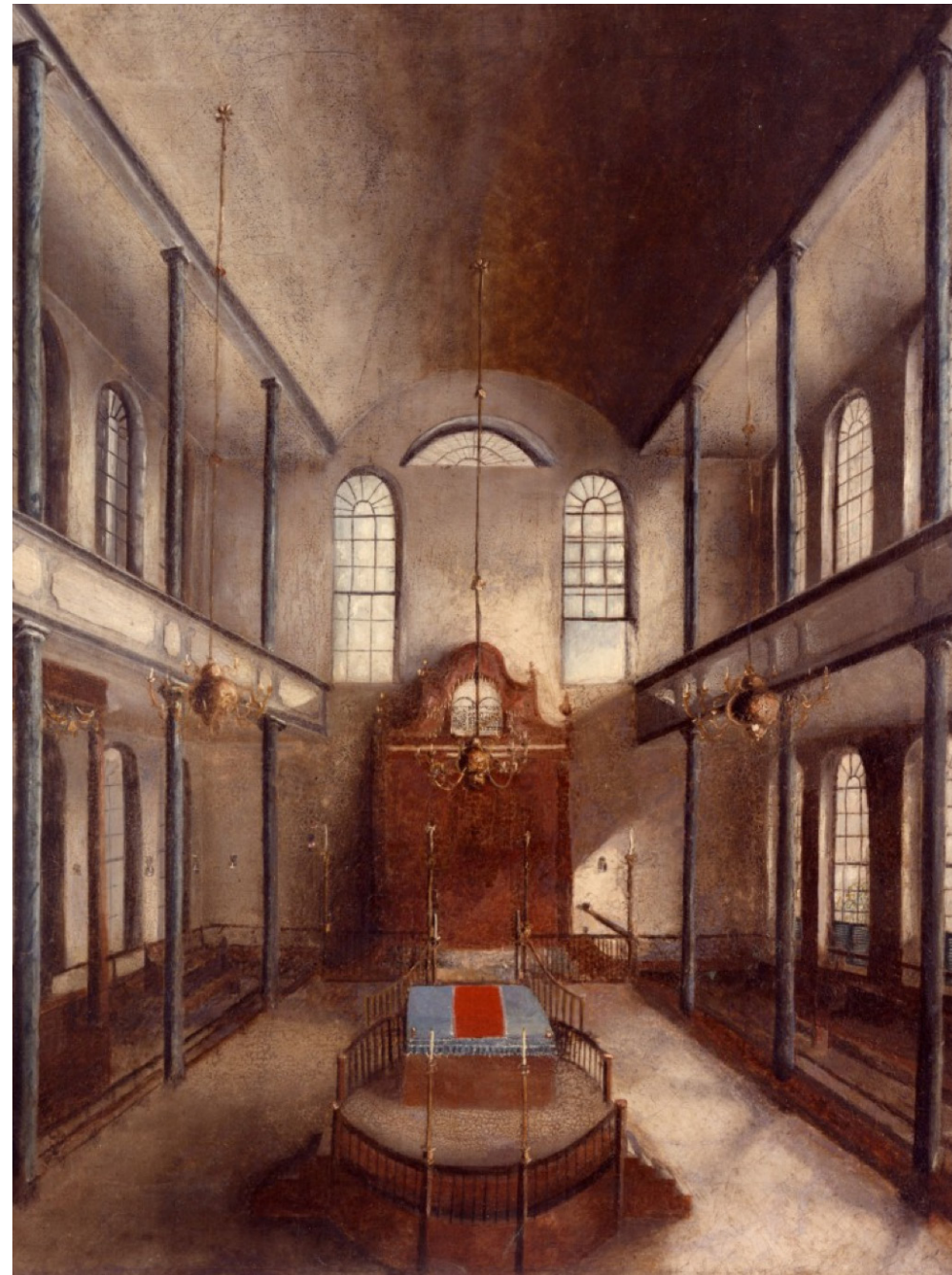


Samuel's father, Nathan Hart, moved to Charleston as a young man. He was born in 1784 in Mannheim, Germany. But by about 1800, he, along with several of his siblings, had moved to Charleston, South Carolina. In the first decades of the 19th century, Charleston was the largest Jewish community in the United States.

Its synagogue, KK Beth Elohim, was a traditional Portuguese synagogue, worshipping in the same rite as observed in Shearith Israel in New York. In 1825, a first attempt at "reform" was spearheaded by Isaac Harby. It failed, and Beth Elohim remained a traditional and Portuguese synagogue, but this first effort to reform Jewish practice would later influence and become a root cause of several decades of acrimonious relations between Charleston's traditional and reform factions.

Nathan Hart was one of the leaders of traditional Charleston Jewry. He was president of Beth Elohim in 1840 when the fight between reform and traditional Jewry once again broke wide open. The initial impetus for the dispute was an effort by some members of Beth Elohim to introduce an organ into a new synagogue which was being built to replace the old synagogue which had burned down in a tragic fire.

As president, Nathan Hart tried to quash efforts being made to reform the traditional service. He enlisted the help of his friend, the minister of Philadelphia's Mikveh Israel and a staunch traditionalist, Rev. Isaac Leeser. But to no avail, as a seeming majority of vocal congregants together with their rabbi, Gustave Poznanski, were unrelenting in their advocacy of a variety of reforms. The matter ended up in the civil courts of Charleston, where the advocates of Reform prevailed. During this intense



Interior of Charleston's KK Beth Elohim Synagogue, as depicted in a painting by Salomon N. Carvalho (1815–1897)



period of acrimony, Nathan Hart passed away and was buried in Charleston's old Jewish Cemetery. KK Beth Elohim experimented with many significant reforms.

Nathan's son, Samuel N. Hart, together with the other members of the traditional camp, rather than appeal legally or attempt other measures to counter the move to Reform within Beth Elohim, left the congregation and founded a new traditional synagogue named Shearith Israel (consciously named after our synagogue in New York). These two synagogues operated simultaneously in Charleston from 1841 until after the Civil War.

Charleston was bombed heavily during the Civil War and the two congregations ultimately merged in 1866 with less moderate reforms, in an attempt to unite the two congregations. Samuel Nathan Hart, however, appears not to have been satisfied with the compromises being made by the two congregations. In 1873, he donated his father's Torah scroll, together with its bells and dressings, to Shearith Israel in New York, rather than have them used in Charleston by the Reform congregation Beth Elohim.

Much more archival research needs to be done to know more about this scroll, but it is likely that this Torah scroll was originally purchased by Nathan Hart in the early decades of the 19th century. It is written in a beautiful Dutch Portuguese script, and was likely used in Beth Elohim before 1840. It then almost certainly was used in Charleston's traditional Shearith Israel synagogue between 1840 and 1866. But Samuel Nathan Hart did not want his father's Torah Scroll and bells to be used in a Reform congregation, which he had fought so long against. And this is how this *sefer* came to be donated to New York's Shearith Israel. A bastion, then as now, of traditional Sephardic and Orthodox practice.





Rabbi Gez restoring the Samuel Hart *Sefer Torah*

From 1873 until recently, this *sefer* was used in our synagogue. You can see the bells of Nathan Hart displayed in the wall case opposite the North Western doors of the Synagogue.

Today, we celebrate the return of this Torah scroll to our synagogue. It was expertly repaired by Rabbi Hanokh Gez of *Machon Ot*, under the direction of Rabbi Yizhak Goldstein.

Depending on available funds, additional historic scrolls will be repaired. We hope to work on the Ephraim Hart *Sefer* mentioned elsewhere in this booklet next.

Thank you for joining us in this important and historic project.

