

MICKVE ISRAEL AND THE MASONIC MOVEMENT

Based on Research by Alan S. Gaynor (OBM) and Rabbi Saul Rubin's *Third to None*

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Masonic history began with the stone mason craft guilds in the late 1300's. Freemasonry's goals changed over the centuries. During the late 1700's Freemasonry spread Enlightenment ideals: human dignity, individual liberty, religious freedom, the spread of democracy, and the importance of public education. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, Masonic projects supported children, widows, and the elderly. Today American Freemasonry sponsors children's hospitals, treatment for eye disease and childhood language disorders, medical research, and local community service.

Mickve Israel's connection with Freemasonry dates to the early days of colonial Georgia and the congregation. Benjamin Mendes de Costa, donor of Mickve Israel's second Torah scroll, a chanukiah, and numerous prayerbooks, became Grand Steward of the Grand Lodge of England in 1737. In February, 1734, General Oglethorpe and a group of English Freemasons, including several Jews, formally organized Georgia's first Masonic lodge, originally listed as the Premier Grand Lodge of England's Lodge "No. 139 Savannah in Ye Province of Georgia", re-named Solomon's Lodge by 1771. Charter members included Moses and Daniel Nunes (sons of Dr. Samuel Nunes) and Benjamin Sheftall. Possibly originally located at the "first Jewish meeting house" (Daniel Nunes's home), Solomon's Lodge is now housed at the Cotton Exchange, the terra cotta building at the north end of Drayton Street.

According to *Third to None*, Masonic activities helped American Jews and Gentiles to bridge religious and cultural differences. Masonry's emphasis on the "Old Testament" and King Solomon's Temple helped Jews and Christians realize that they had common Biblical roots. Partially due to shared Masonic activities, Jewish and Christian Georgians learned to bond with and trust each other, requirements for success during the colonial and American Revolutionary eras.

Masonry also provided early opportunities for Jews to practice leadership skills and to be accepted as leaders in the Savannah community. Benjamin Sheftall was Solomon's Lodge's Worshipful Master, 1758-1764, a position held by others Jews over the years.

By the 1860's, Mickve Israelites and its leaders populated several of Savannah's Masonic lodges. Names like De La Motta, Sheftall, Abrahams, Rosenthal, Levy, Byck, and Kayton were on Masonic rosters, and recent generations of Mickve Israelites were often members of Clinton Lodge. From 1868 to 1944, every Mickve Israel rabbi from Raphael D.C. Lewin through George Solomon supported or participated in the Masonic movement. Rabbi Solomon was a 33° Mason, Master Emeritus of the Temple Chapter of the Rose Croix of Scottish Rite, and Past Master of Zerubbabel Lodge.

Tradition says that General Oglethorpe used a gavel made from a piece of Liberty County's Sunbury Oak to open Georgia's first Masonic lodge. In 1859 Perla Sheftall Solomons, a great-granddaughter of Benjamin Sheftall, presented Solomon's Lodge No. 1 with a gavel made from the Sunbury Oak. According to Sheftall Sheftall, Benjamin's grandson and Perla's uncle, this gavel is the original one used by Oglethorpe when establishing the Lodge. Solomon's Lodge No. 1 still treasures this gavel, Benjamin Sheftall's Masonic apron, and a jewel given to him by the Lodge when he was its Worshipful Master, all donated by Perla Sheftall Solomons.

Masonic participants and traditions were part of the cornerstone-laying ceremony for the original 1820 synagogue building. The importance of this ceremony to congregational leaders including Dr. Jacob de la Motta, Solomon's Lodge's Worshipful Master at the time, is shown by the great detail in Mickve Israel's *Minute Book*, later recorded in *Third to None*.

In 1876 a Masonic cornerstone-laying ceremony and time capsule burial for our current sanctuary took place at Mickve Israel. This ceremony was re-enacted 100 years later when the 1876 time capsule was opened and a new time capsule was buried.

When the Scottish Rite Temple was built on Madison Square in 1912, Hyman Witcover, prominent Savannah architect, Mickve Israel congregant, and a 33° Sovereign Grand Inspector General of Georgia, received the call.

In Savannah's cemeteries, Masonic symbols decorate Jewish graves. For Mickve Israel congregants who are active Masonic participants, the Masonic movement becomes an integral part of their lives, and through them, an important part of Mickve Israel's story.