

The Story of Mickve Israel

The Hope of Israel

Forty-one brave pioneering Jews, the "largest group of Jews to land in North America in Colonial days" arrived in Savannah on July 11, 1733, just five months after General James Edward Oglethorpe established the colony of Georgia. Although the trip on the William and Sarah was rough, and they ran aground near North Carolina, the new colony continued to provide hope for those "industrious" poor Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews in London who had been living in difficult circumstances.

In 1732 there were 6,000 Jews living in London. The more affluent and established members of that Jewish community, threatened by the poverty of their coreligionists, provided generous financial support by subscribing to Oglethorpe's new colony of Georgia, in addition to helping their fellow Jews set sail on the second boat for Georgia. Among the Jews who helped subscribe were members of the Spanish and Portuguese Bevis Marks Synagogue, the mother congregation to Mickve Israel in Savannah. These founders of Mickve Israel brought with them a "Safertoro" [sic] made of deerskin, with two "cloaks," and a "circumcision box," which was donated by a London merchant. This Torah is still used on commemorative occasions at Mickve Israel. All but eight of the original forty-two Jewish colonists were Spanish/Portuguese Jews who had arrived in London ten years earlier, having lived as Crypto-Jews, publicly practicing Roman Catholicism and secretly preserving their Jewish heritage, prior to their departure from Portugal. Among these Sephardic Jews was Dr. Samuel Nunes Ribiero, a physician who had been imprisoned during the Inquisition for his successful efforts to convert New Christians back to the Jewish faith. Of the eight Ashkenazic founders were the families of Abraham Minis and Benjamin Sheftall, whose descendants are benefactors and active participants in the congregation today. Savannah's Jewish community followed a sequence different from the two older Jewish communities in New York (1654) and Newport (1695), and markedly different from the newer colonial Jewish settlements in Philadelphia (1739) and Charleston (1749). The primary act of the Savannah settlers was the founding of a congregation, then the establishment of a cemetery, followed by a "mickvah," or ritual bath (on April 2, 1738). The pattern of the other colonial communities was to first build a cemetery, then a mickvah, and finally to found a congregation.

The Early Savannah Congregation

Upon settling in Georgia, the Savannah Jews probably held services in the homes of members. In July 1735 they "met together, and agreed to open a Synagogue...which was done immediately, named K. K. Mickva Israel" (Kahal Kodesh Mickva Israel which is translated as Holy Congregation Hope of Israel). The name "Mickva Israel" is a phrase in the Haftara (Jeremiah 17:13) and also reflected the influence of Mickve Israel, a book of messianic hope written in 1648 by the famous Amsterdam Rabbi Manashe ben Israel. The author dedicated the Latin edition to the English Parliament in an effort to ensure the return of the Jews to England following the Puritan revolution. Other seventeenth- and eighteenth-century new world congregations selected the name "Hope of Israel." At an unknown date, a house was rented on Market (now Ellis) Square and was altered for regular congregational services. But the small congregation faced internal problems. Although the Minis and Sheftall families became identified almost immediately with the Sephardic group, many other Ashkenazic Jews arrived in Savannah, mostly by land, and did not become a part of the Sephardic religious group. A sharp schism developed. The early difficulties encountered in constructing a synagogue building are evident in a letter by the Reverend Bolzius, minister to the Salzburgers, in 1739 to a friend in Germany. He wrote: Even the Jews, of whom several

families are here already, enjoy all privileges the same as other colonists. Some call themselves Spanish and Portuguese, others call themselves German Jews. The latter speak High German and differ from the former in their religious services and to some extent in other matters as well, as the former do not seem to take it so particular in regard to the dietary laws and other Jewish ceremonies. They have no Synagogue, which is their own fault; the one element hindering the other in this regard. The German Jews believe themselves entitled to build a Synagogue and are willing to allow the Spanish Jews to use it with them in common, the latter, however, reject any such arrangement and demand the preference for themselves. The local laws and regulations forbidding rum and slavery, strictly regulating commerce and trade, and providing that only males could inherit property, all but caused the disintegration of Georgia. Many Gentiles fled the city. Sephardic Jews had a more compelling reason to leave. The European war between Spain and England had reached this continent where it was known as the War of Jenkins' Ear. On July 5, 1742, some 3,000 Spanish soldiers landed on St. Simons Island with plans to capture Georgia quickly and then move on against the more heavily defended Carolinas. In the eyes of the Spanish Church, the Sephardic Jews were guilty of apostasy, which was punishable by burning at the stake. Only the Minis and Sheftall families remained in Savannah since they, being regarded as of Germanic origin and never having professed Catholicism, could not be accused of apostasy. Thereafter the lease on the Market Square-rented synagogue was not renewed and what services were held were informally conducted in the home of Benjamin Sheftall. By 1774 enough Jews had moved back to Savannah that Benjamin Sheftall reported in his diary, "having a sufficient number of Jews here to make a congregation we came to a resolution to meet at the house of Mordecai Sheftall (Benjamin's son) which was done." This meeting was held on the eve of Yom Kippur in a room that Mordecai Sheftall had furnished as a chapel. However, unrest was forthcoming since the war with England was imminent.

During the Revolutionary War, Mordecai Sheftall became the highest-ranking Jewish officer of the American Revolutionary forces, attaining the rank of Deputy Commissary General to the Continental Troops in South Carolina and Georgia. Along with his son Sheftall, he was captured by British forces and imprisoned in Antigua. Eventually they were traded for two captured British officers. From the outbreak of hostilities until the Treaty of Paris there was a virtual cessation of all formal organized religious activity in Savannah. It was July 7, 1786, before conditions were sufficiently normal to permit the reorganization of the "K. K. Mickvah [sic] Israel." Officers were elected, and a house was rented from a Miss Ann Morgan located on Broughton Street Lane between Barnard and Whitaker streets and furnished for use as a synagogue. Services were held regularly, and at one time attendance numbered "seventy-three males and females." On November 20, 1790, Governor Edward Telfair granted the congregation a perpetual charter as "a body incorporate by the name and style of the 'Parnas and Adjuntas of Mickve Israel at Savannah,'" the same charter under which the congregation operates today. (A photocopy of the original charter can be seen in the archival museum of the congregation.) By 1793 the rent on the Broughton Street Lane building was constantly delinquent, and on at least one occasion Miss Morgan became so upset that Mordecai Sheftall, who then ran a general store, was requested by David Cardozo, treasurer of the congregation, to let her have merchandise for the amount owed and "charge the same to Sedaka [sic] K. K. Mickvah [sic] Israel." Shortly afterward "the aged, main props of the Synagogue, having closed their earthly careers ...conspired to produce a suspension of public worship, and the building was surrendered to the owner."

Although the congregation functioned for many years without its own synagogue, the loyal few zealously guarded the corporate identity and existence by having regular meetings and electing officers while conducting services in the homes of various members.

Presidential Letters

Upon George Washington's election as first president of the United States, Levi Sheftall, president of the congregation wrote, on "behalf of the Hebrew Congregation," a congratulatory letter "on your appointment, by unanimous approbation, to the Presidential dignity of the country." President Washington dispatched an immediate answer "To the Hebrew Congregation of the City of Savannah, Georgia":

May the same wonder-working Deity, who long since delivered the Hebrews from their Egyptian oppressors, planted them in the promised land, whose providential agency has lately been conspicuous in establishing these United States as an independent nation, still continue to water them with the dews of Heaven, and make the inhabitants of every denomination partake in the temporal and spiritual blessings of that people, whose God is Jehova.

The First Synagogue in Georgia

By 1818 the growth of the Jewish population of Savannah encouraged the congregation to seek its own synagogue building. Dr. Moses Sheftall and Dr. Jacob De la Motta were the leading spirits in this movement. From a contemporary account: When Dr. De la Motta took up his residence at Savannah, he found that, besides the lot given by the city to the Congregation, they had seven or eight small buildings which were rented out, which as such were but of little interest to the Israelites. Upon inquiry, the doctor ascertained from a respectable mechanic that he would build a Synagogue such as was needed, on the lot given by the city, provided a lease of the above small buildings were granted him by the Congregation free of charge for a term of eight years. The doctor thereupon convened the Congregation; a majority of the members agreed with the proposition, and the undertaking was commenced. This building, the first synagogue to be erected in the State of Georgia, was consecrated by Dr. De la Motta on July 21, 1820. Commemorating the event is a bronze plaque embedded in the sidewalk near the site, on the northeast corner of Liberty and Whitaker streets. The small wooden structure was destroyed by fire on December 4, 1829, though the Torahs and ark were saved without injury. Efforts to rebuild were begun in 1834, and a new brick building on the same site was consecrated in 1841 by Reverend Isaac Leeser, of Philadelphia. Dr. Moses Sheftall served as chairman of this second building committee. One of the silver pointers now used by the congregation during weekly Torah readings was a gift from Dr. De la Motta to the congregation when he was president. It was 1853 before the congregation could afford a permanent spiritual leader. Reverend Jacob Rosenfeld served as its spiritual leader until 1862. Except for 1867-1869 when the Reverend R. D. C. Lewin served, services were again read by various members of the congregation until the arrival of Reverend A. Harris in 1873.

The Influence of Reform

The Reform movement was well under way in America by the middle of the nineteenth century. But the congregants of Mickve Israel so strongly favored the Portuguese Minhag that it was February 11, 1868, before this congregation took its first hesitant steps toward Reform Judaism by omitting the celebration of the second day of festivals and by introducing a choir with musical accompaniment. The Reverend Isaac P. Mendes, who in 1877 began his twenty-seven years of distinguished service as rabbi, dissuaded against too hasty abandonment of the older form of worship. Not until February 2, 1880, was the use of a canopy in the marriage ceremony made optional, and another fourteen years passed before members were permitted to go hatless during services. The Portuguese Minhag remained in use, though gradually modified, until 1895, when Mickve Israel printed its own prayer books. In 1902 the Union Prayer Book was adopted, and on January 10, 1904, membership in the Union of American Hebrew Congregations was attained and Mickve Israel's transition to Reform Judaism was complete. The last vestige of its Spanish-Portuguese heritage is proudly maintained in

the Sephardic melody "El Norah Ah Lee Lah" sung by the congregation during the closing hour of each Yom Kippur service.

The Sanctuary Today

Savannah participated in the great wave of German-Jewish immigration that began about 1840. By 1874 it became apparent that the small synagogue on Liberty Street and Perry Lane was no longer adequate for the growing congregation. On March 1, 1876, the cornerstone was laid for the present building, and the Monterey Square sanctuary was consecrated on April 11, 1878. This magnificent synagogue, designed by the nationally known New York architect Henry G. Harrison, was built in a pure neo-Gothic style, which reflects the fashionable architecture of the Victorian era. On the very same square, not more than 60 feet away stood a neo-Gothic Presbyterian church until it was destroyed by fire in 1929.

A portion of the land that was given in perpetual trust by Mordecai Sheftall in 1773 for use as a Jewish cemetery and as a site for a synagogue had, in fact, been used as a cemetery. On December 16, 1893, the Mordecai Sheftall Trustees obtained permission from the Superior Court to sell the unused portion of the tract and to hold the proceeds of the sale for the purposes expressed in the original trust. The present sanctuary used only the western portion of the block of land owned by the congregation; however, no provisions had been made for a religious school, meeting rooms, or the like. By the turn of the century the need for these additional facilities was keenly felt. Agreement was reached between the congregation and the Sheftall Trustees for the trustees to construct a building to be known as the Mordecai Sheftall Memorial, which was completed and dedicated in 1902. Title of the land and the complete management, supervision, and control of the new building was vested in the congregation, but title to the building itself remained, as it still does, in the hands of the trustees. By 1954 the needs of the congregation, once again outgrew the Mordecai Sheftall Memorial. The congregation raised the necessary funds, another arrangement was entered into with the trustees, and on January 11, 1957, the new and enlarged Mordecai Sheftall Memorial was dedicated. In 2002/2003, the congregation again rebuilt the Mordecai Sheftall Memorial, which houses our museum, school and administrative offices. Throughout nearly three centuries,

Mickve Israel's members have contributed significantly to the larger community. The Honorable Herman Myers was mayor of Savannah from 1895-1897 and 1899-1907. Attorney Dana Braun served with distinction as alderman on the Savannah City Council from 1991 to 1997. In commerce, law, medicine, the military, government, politics, and culture the Jews of Savannah have enriched their community and their nation. Some descendants of Mickve Israel's colonial settlers include Mordecai Manuel Noah, sheriff of New York, founder of the Tammany hall political machine and early Zionist (in 1825 he sought to establish a Jewish homeland called "Ararat" at Grand Island on the Niagara River) and Commodore Uriah Phillips Levy, who rescued Monticello (President Thomas Jefferson's home) from destruction and was responsible for the abolition of flogging in the U. S. Navy. While Dr. Samuel Nunes Ribiero, who specialized in infectious diseases, was considered Georgia's first hero in 1733 (he is credited with ending an epidemic that threatened the young colony), it was his descendant Raphael Moses, who planted peach orchards and developed the technology for shipping fruit to far-off markets and may be the father of the peach industry in the "peach state." Today in Mickve Israel's Archival Museum ten presidential letters are on display, including the Washington letter, and others from Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, as well as the more recent ones from George Bush and Bill Clinton. Grateful to its founders for having built it well, the officers and members of Congregation Mickve Israel look back upon its rich heritage with pride tempered with humility, asking only that they be permitted to continue to serve equally well "One God and One Humanity."