A Tribute to a Small Group of Jews from 1730: Thoughts for the Closing Days of Passover

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Angel for Shabbat, 7th Day of Pessah

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What was happening in the Jewish world around the year 1730?

Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (1698-1760) was precipitating the development of a new movement in Judaism—Hasidism. This movement took root in the Ukraine, and spread widely among Ashkenazim of Eastern Europe.

Rabbi Yaacov Huli published the first volume of the Me'am Lo'ez in Constantinople in 1730. The Me'am Lo'ez is a Ladino Biblical commentary that became a classic among Sephardim of the Ladino-speaking world.

Rabbi Hayyim BenAttar (1696-1743) was a spiritual influence among Moroccan Jews, and had a profound impact on world Jewry through his Torah commentary, Ohr ha-Hayyim.

The Gaon of Vilna (1720-1796) was a child genius, growing into one of the most venerable sages of the Jewish people. His mastery of Talmud and halakha were legendary; he was an arch opponent of Hasidism.

Moses Mendelsohn (1729-1786) was to become a founding figure in Jewish enlightenment. Born in Dessau, Germany, he was the foremost Western European Jewish thinker of his time who sought to put traditional Judaism into a philosophically sophisticated framework.

While these individuals represent powerful trends affecting many thousands of Jews throughout the world, something happened in 1730 which surely received very little worldwide attention at the time.

In 1730, Congregation Shearith Israel of New York City dedicated its first synagogue building—the first synagogue building erected in North America—on

the seventh day of Passover. Shearith Israel, founded in 1654, was the first Jewish congregation on this continent. Until 1730, the community was quite small and met for worship in rented quarters. By 1730, the congregation felt able—with the support of Sephardic congregations of Amsterdam, London, Curacao and Suriname—to build its own building.

In 1730, the dedication of Shearith Israel's synagogue on Mill Street would have attracted little notice from the great Jewish communities of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. New York was a remote and tiny Jewish community, far from the pulsating Jewish life of the "old world." New York could not boast of a Baal Shem Tov, or a Yaacov Huli, or a Hayyim BenAttar, or a Gaon of Vilna, or a Moses Mendelsohn…or of a substantial Jewish community that could influence the larger Jewish world.

Yet, perhaps to the ultimate surprise of those great "old world" communities, Shearith Israel became the foundation stone of the American Jewish community. Its members struggled for and won civil rights for Jews in America; they fought in the American Revolution and shared in the birth and development of the United States. That little synagogue building, dedicated on Passover in 1730, is a symbol of the religious devotion, idealism and commitment that characterized early American Jewry. Although that first building no longer stands, many of the furnishings of the Mill Street synagogue grace Shearith Israel's chapel in its current synagogue building on 70th Street and Central Park West (dedicated in 1897).

Shearith Israel was established by Sephardic Jews of the Western Sephardic tradition. Its "mother" Congregation was the famous Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam. While the synagogue custom was—and continues to be—that of the Western Sephardim, Shearith Israel, even from its earliest years, included Sephardim and Ashkenazim alike. It was—and continues to be—a remarkable Jewish institution with a diverse membership of Jews of many backgrounds and various levels of religious knowledge and observance.

Since the late 17th century, the Western Sephardic tradition has eliminated kabbalistic texts and practices from the synagogue service, preferring a more rational and classical synagogue service. This tradition has emphasized order and dignity, a fine sense of aesthetics, a commitment to social justice and involvement in general society, an embracing of Jewish and general knowledge.

While the dedication of Shearith Israel's synagogue building on Passover 1730 must have seemed a relatively insignificant event in the Jewish world, it turned

out to be of tremendous historic significance. This pioneer congregation, with its first synagogue building on North American soil, was the harbinger of an American Jewish community that was to grow into the largest and most influential Jewish diaspora center in modern Jewish history.

As we celebrate the closing days of the Passover festival this year, it is appropriate that we remember the spiritual heroism of the members of New York's tiny Jewish community who dedicated this continent's first synagogue building on the seventh day of Passover in 1730. It is appropriate to remember that events that may seem small at the time, can become landmark turning points in history.

Angel for Shabbat