

Early Americanization

Summary: In the 18th century, many Jewish synagogues adopted American Christian forms of worship and organization. Jews democratized synagogue leadership and began employing hazzans, spiritual leaders who had less traditional religious authority than rabbis and whose roles were similar to those of Christian pastors. American Jews also began to participate in American culture and civic life.

The formative period of American democracy was also a formative period for American Judaism. Much like the young republic, Judaism in America defined itself in contrast to its European past: created by the will of the people, it generated its leadership from within. The rhythms of the new nation resonated deeply with the Jews of early federal period who were present at the creation of the United States. And while caught up in the fight for American independence, they sowed the seeds of their own independence from European Judaism. By creating a distinctive American Judaism, they would become Americans themselves.

In the European Jewish community, religious authority was vested in a hierarchical structure at whose apex stood the chief rabbi of that community. In federalist America, however, the absence of rabbis placed the institution and administration of the religious community in the hands of laymen. The early development of American Judaism was therefore highly democratized; created, to borrow words from the U.S. Constitution, “by the people, for the people, and of the people.” Through this democratization process, the synagogue not only became the home for Jewish religious and social life, but also an arena for developing Americanization. Membership requirements were lowered to be more inclusive, synagogue regulations were redeveloped as a written constitution, the community elected a president, and ideals of free speech created rich community conversations. At the same time, symbols of American patriotism became incorporated into the synagogue, leading to the celebration of American holidays, the memorialization of war veterans, and an insistence upon using the English language. More and more often Christian American neighbors were welcomed as visitors. Ultimately, such openings to the outside world would have repercussions for the nature of Judaism inside.

The Americanization of Judaism was perhaps best represented by the new form of religious leadership. In 1768, the Jewish congregation of New York hired 23-year-old Gershom Mendes Seixas as the first American-born *hazzan* (lay minister), engaged by the colonial synagogue as the regular leader of the

service. In Europe, the *hazzan* often functioned as the kosher butcher, the ritual circumciser, and the religious educator, but never attaining the community authority and respect of the rabbi. However, in an American context where Protestant ministers were venerated and ordained rabbis nonexistent, Seixas' role as the *hazzan* soon took on a wider scope and larger purpose. He acted, for the nascent Jewish community, as a figure who could represent Judaism both within the synagogue and out to the American community at large.

In this context, Seixas joined the revolutionary effort and led his community out of British-held New York City to Philadelphia. There, in 1782, he spoke at the dedication of the new synagogue and invoked blessings upon “His Excellency the President, & Honorable Delegates of the United States of America in Congress Assembled,” thus bringing American politics and revolutionary themes into the synagogue service. In December 1783, Seixas joined a petition to abolish the Christian oath required by the Pennsylvania Constitution for government service, which acknowledged both “the scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be given by divine inspiration.” According to Seixas' petition, the oath requirement was “a stigma upon their nation and their religion.” Returning to New York in 1789, Seixas was present at the inauguration of President George Washington. Had he remained in Philadelphia, he would have been the *hazzan* to walk arm in arm with his fellow clergymen in celebration of the ratification of the Constitution in 1788. In short, Seixas' career, combining religious functionary and ethnic representative, was the prototype for the American rabbi.

In general, however, Jewish participation declined in the post-Revolutionary period. As the role of the church in American life was receding, the synagogue/community bond slowly stopped being a quintessential element of some Jewish individuals' lives. Many Jews began to assimilate into politics or journalism as means of expressing Jewish commitments. Two examples of this model were Mordecai Manuel Noah of New York and Isaac Harby of South Carolina. While both were active in their respective synagogue communities, each reached a position of influence through journalistic writing and public speaking. Noah is best known as the creator of a proto-Zionist plan to establish a Jewish colony near Buffalo, and Harby as the leader of an early effort to reform Judaism in Charleston. These were a new kind of American Jew: active and successful in secular society, yet maintaining loyalty to their Jewish origins. At the same time, the Jewish tradition was developing a new way of life that combined democratization, Americanization, and secularization—a process that brought Judaism into a new era in North America.

