

Making the Revolution Jewish: Patriotism and Citizenship in Early U.S. Synagogues

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I'm going to do something usually best left to undergraduates: make some extremely broad suggestions about historiography, and then talk about Nazis.

First, historiography. I would categorize our current scholarship on religion and the revolution into two broad categories. The first I call "America's Christian Patriots" school. Thomas Kidd, James Byrd, and Mark Noll are the bulwark here. This genre is dedicated to proving that 1) American patriots believed in God because 2) they liked to quote the Bible and 3) The First Great Awakening absolutely totally caused the revolution even though there is no clear patriot/loyalist divide between Old and New Light churches.

The second category I call "Religious Right No Good" school. These works are dedicated to cataloging bad stuff Protestants did in the early republic and/or showing virtuous response by Americans of deist persuasions. The subtext is, of course, that the modern evangelical movement, especially its political arm, is no good.

What's surprising about this school is that they mention Judaism so rarely. You would think a book like Sam Haselby's *Origins of American Religious Nationalism* would spend some time discussing Jews. It never mentions any Jews or synagogues as existing in the antebellum U.S. (Not much about Catholics in there, either.) David Sehat's *Myth of American Religious Freedom* mentions the existence of Jewish disabilities but not the Jewish response. No Jew before the Civil War has a single word to say in his book, although a few anti-Semites get to

chime in. So, even supposedly “liberal” books essentially accept that it’s a generalized Christianity or nothing early republic.¹

Both historiographies share the same two problems. First, both use the word “Christian” in a fairly uncritical way; mixing modern definitions of “evangelicalism” with New Light concerns of the eighteenth century. See Douglas Winiarski on this, but generally speaking, modern evangelicalism has five elements of which New Light Whitefieldism shares two.²

The deeper problem here is that these schools of thought limit the experience of revolution to the experience of religion. The problem is not that Kidd and Byrd argue that patriots were religious Protestants—which they mostly were—but that they argue that *Protestant interests and theologies were paramount reasons why people fought for the revolution*. Although Haselby and Sehat have a different take on those theologies, this assumption is in their works, too.³ And these questions bother me because they implicitly make the case that what mattered in the revolution is religious belief; what makes a patriot is Protestant faith. If you have faith, you have patriotism. This has modern political ramifications, among which is a support of modern white nationalist concept that Christian faith is the essence of the American citizen, and rights of Jews, Muslims, Catholics, are later aggregations that can be wiped away.

Please note: I am not saying here that Kidd, Byrd, and Noll are neo-Nazis. They are asking legitimate questions. But the absence of other questions provides ideological

¹ Haselby’s only mention of Jews is the *concept of Judaism*, 136, 220. Sehat has several references to Judaism in the early republic, but as is often the case in his work, only those against religious pluralism are heard and dissenting voices, even when successful, go unmentioned. 17-20, 27, 44.

² *Darkness Falls* 15-16.

³ Haselby, for example, reads debates on religious freedom as a “rallying cry for those who wanted to create a Christian commonwealth.” 27

ammunition to those who claim that American freedom is equivalent to American Christianity. Given that Nazis marched on my campus in 2017, I'm pretty wary about these questions. And I wanted to find a way to stand up the rising tide of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. One way is to wear your Auburn University yarmulke. (It is a big hit in the classroom.)

But we need another way to discuss religion and the revolution—so that we are not projecting today's evangelical-secular argument into the past, and thereby affirming modern nationalist contentions about the unchanging nature of American Christianity and an untrammled Eden of revolutionary America. The Jewish experience has a lot to offer here. Furthermore, we may want to investigate whether Jewish emancipation in the American context was automatic. American Jewish historiography assumes, in the words of Jonathan Sarna, "Jews gained their religious rights in the United States...as individuals along with everybody else."⁴ This approach, however, inadvertently repeats another great anti-Semitic theme best summed up by Mark Twain: "In the United States he [the Jew] was created free in the beginning—he did not need to help, of course."⁵ This is the Jew as parasite. Exploring how Jews played a role in their own rights in America therefore has serious bearing on Jewish historiography as well as modern political discourse about the Founding, the nature of citizenship, and the twenty-first century's high tide of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia.

Let's go ahead and review Jewish participation in the revolution. Marcus Rezneck has determined that nationally, American Jews served in the patriot army in direct proportion to their numbers in the general population.⁶ Estimating Jewish participation in the war is difficult,

⁴ *American Judaism* 37.

⁵ Mark Twain, "Concerning the Jews"

⁶ Rezneck 25

because for many years Jewish historians simply looked at names of enlisted men and decided if they “sounded” Jewish.⁷ This did not work in the case of Elias Pollack, who—perhaps fearful his origins would disqualify him—joined the revolution under the name “Joseph Smith.”⁸ The methodology here is problematic, but it points to a much more significant fact: the army *did not keep data on the religious faith of its members*, unlike European armies of the day. Similarly, Washington and others promoted Jews to officer status, again, something no Jew in Europe experienced.

There is one case where the religion of Jewish soldiers was recorded. One of the companies of the Battle of Beaufort has become known as “the Jew Company,” since 28 of its 40 members were Jewish. The members of the company, however, do not seem to have called themselves by that name; instead, a scrap of paper listing their names notes on one side that they were “Called the *Free Citizens*,” a handle that suggests the full meaning that the Jews of the regiment attached to the Revolution.⁹

Geography and the accidents of war gave Jewish patriots an unusual advantage. American Jews largely lived in five cities: Charleston, New York, Philadelphia, Newport, and Savannah. All of those cities except Philadelphia were occupied by the British by 1780. Exiled Jewish patriots therefore had only one place to go to worship—Philadelphia. From 1779-1783, Philadelphia hosted a Jewish community from across the colonies, unified in political ideology more than by common religious liturgy. (Loyalist Jews stayed home.) In 1782, Philadelphia’s

⁷ Adam Mendolsohn TK.

⁸ Marcus, USJ 55.

⁹ Some Additional Notes on the History of the Jews of South Carolina,” PAJHS 19 (1910), 151-156; Hoberman, 303.

synagogue Mikveh Israel was re-founded with a governing board (*adjunta*) staffed by Jews from across the nation. The presence of an unabashedly national, patriotic congregation of Jews in the nation's capital—just a few blocks from Independence Hall—may explain why Benjamin Rush later wrote, “the Jews in all the States” were Whigs.¹⁰

In an organizational sense, American Judaism owes its origin to the Revolution: the patriot Jews worked and lived together in a single community, founded a synagogue, then returned home and remade their own synagogues in the image of Mikveh Israel. Every American synagogue is led by a patriot who spent time at Mikveh Israel by 1789. Structurally, therefore, the American Revolution likely had a greater immediate effect on Judaism than on any other religious group in America. Judaism may well have been the first truly *national* American religion.

As important, however, was the way in which the revolutionary experience—especially patriot service—shaped Jewish responses to anti-Semitism and efforts to achieve full citizenship. This was most clear in Georgia. Famously, Mordecai Sheftall assumed leadership of the patriot cause and by 1775 was the *de facto* head of government in Savannah. Mordecai and his son were captured and held on prison ships when Savannah fell. David Cardozo became a sergeant-major with the Savannah volunteers. Abraham Seixas and David Sardezas served as lieutenants. In response to Jewish participation in the revolt, James Wright, Georgia's royal governor, advocated a total ban on Jewish immigration to the colonies, because “these people,

¹⁰ Rush, *Travels through Life*, 119.

my lord, were found to a man to have been violent rebels and persecutors.” Wright exonerated himself by claiming the British had no choice: “the times require these exertions.”¹¹

At war’s end came the accusations of *Cursory Remarks on Men and Measures in Georgia*. The work is a series of political complaints packaged around a candy center of anti-Judaism. (I will use the terms anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism interchangeably here.) The author remains unknown except by the pseudonym “A Citizen,” although from the content of the work we know the Citizen was an enemy of Georgia judge and signer of the Declaration of Independence George Walton. (As soon as the Georgia Historical Society reopens in 2020, I hope to tell you more about that.)

The Citizen claimed Georgia was under threat, and part of threat was that it tolerated Jews and allowed them political power. Indeed, the Citizen was upset that a recent court case involving Sheftall had found, in a 2-1 decision, that Jews had standing in U.S. courts, but the Creeks did not. *Men and Measures* launched into an extensive discussion of how Jews were parasites feeding off honest governments: Jews were a potential political threat, for “Jews nowadays enter very little into politicks further than to favour that system which is most promotive of their pecuniary interest, the principle of lucre being the life and soul of all their actions.”¹² It mentioned medieval legends of the blood libel without stating them as fact. It argued both that no English law ever allowed Jews to claim civil rights, and also that the English laws that offered civil rights were not in effect in Georgia thanks to the revolution. No Jew, he argued, “can become citizens but by the aid of the Legislature” in this “Christian Country.”¹³

¹¹ CAJ 1277; Pencak 160-164.

¹² MM 22

¹³ MM 23, 25-26

Even worse, the Jews of Georgia were uppity: “we see these people eternally obtruding themselves as volunteers upon every publick occasion, one day assuming the lead at an election, the next taking upon them to direct the police of the town, and the third daring to pass as jurors...what are we to expect but to have Christianity *enacted into* a capitol heresy.”

And finally, the kicker, the thing that really makes this sound like it was written yesterday on an alt-right site: The author claimed he’s not prejudiced: “I am as far removed from being a votary or friend of persecution as any man on earth. Had the Jews in this state but conducted themselves with common modesty and decorum, I should have been the last person to point out their disabilities.” He also told readers about his Jewish friends: “one whole family ... of upright demeanor.” Nevertheless, “A Citizen” maintained that Jews had only the same rights as escaped African-American slaves.

Levi Sheftall—Mordecai’s half-brother—wrote a response to *Men and Measures* and published it in the *Georgia Gazette* in January 1785. Levi wrote only a paragraph, and left every issue aside but the issue of citizenship. The author of the tract “subscribes himself a Citizen” but Levi asked, “what had the Jew particularly alluded to [Mordecai]...done that he should not also be entitled to the rights of citizenship”? Then Levi listed the patriotic services Mordecai had rendered Georgia in the Revolution—including having his property seized, imprisonment for refusing to reveal the location of patriot gunpowder, and “as became a faithful citizen, discharge[ing] the several trusts reposed in him.” Whether or not such a man “and the rest of his profession in this state” should have the same rights as a slave, “I leave to the Whigs to judge.” Levi signed his response, “A Real Citizen.”

There is a lot going on here. Levi was calling out A Citizen, but in fact, Levi himself had returned to Savannah during British occupation. And there is no question that the Sheftalls were attempting to establish their rights *as white men*, doing so in part by separating themselves from the enslaved and Indian nations. But what is interesting is that even though A Citizen brings up many points—what is the nature of the Jew? What is the nature of the law? What is the nature of the Christian community?—the response by did not attempt a point-by-point rebuttal. For A Real Citizen, there is only one point that cuts through everything else: Citizenship comes from service; it is an action and not a status. Jews answered the call; therefore they are citizens, and nothing else matters.

Levi's original draft, now at the University of Georgia, was even more specific about Jewish patriotism. Referring to "A Citizen" as "a pretended Citizen," Sheftall wrote "He says he has travelled with the Jews through a wilderness of History. It had been much better for him, had he travelled as far to the Northward, as some of them had done, and partook his share of the sufferings which they and many other good Whigs suffered." Here, it is the journey north—a journey *to Philadelphia*—and enduring privation during the war that entitled people to "the sacred name of Citizen." Of course, Levi didn't go to Philadelphia—Mordecai did. So it is possible that Levi and other Jews understood the Jewish exile into Philadelphia as an experience that extended citizenship to *all Jews*, even those Jews who stayed loyal or neutral.¹⁴

At almost the same time, in December 1783, the leadership of Philadelphia's Mikveh Israel wrote to the Pennsylvania Council of Censors, the body charged with making revisions to Pennsylvania's constitution. Mikveh Israel asked the Censors to seek a change in the state's test

¹⁴ Sheftall Papers, Box 23, folder 13, Keith Read Collection, University of Georgia.

oath, which required officeholders to be Christians. They explained their argument the same way Sheftall did: “the Jews of Charleston, New York, New-Port, and other posts occupied by the British troops have distinguishedly suffered for their attachment to the Revolution principles.... The Jews of Pennsylvania ... can count with any religious society whatsoever the Whigs among either of them. They have served some of them in the Continental army, some went out in the militia ... all of them have cheerfully contributed to the support of ... the government of the state.”¹⁵

This letter has, as Jacob Rader Marcus noted decades ago, “almost every nuance of apologetics” which modern Judaism has employed in its search for full rights. It is an argument which can only exist in a republican or democratic state, where power emerges from the people, who contribute as a whole (in some way) in making the state. As Martha Jones rather brilliantly points out, of course, citizenship is very tricky to define—sometimes rights make citizens and sometimes citizenship makes rights—but whatever the case, Jews followed the line that sacrifice in wartime *for liberty* awarded the status of liberty (rights or citizenship or some combination thereof). *Men and Measures* by contrast follows an anti-Semitic standby: that personhood and membership in the state comes from some inherent essence (here, law or confession), and that Jews simply can never have it. Moreover, the state has enemies that must be cast out, of whom the Jews are one.

In 1784—the same two-year period, in Pennsylvania, the lawyer Miers Fisher spoke at the Pennsylvania state legislature and attacked Jews as part of his case against Robert Morris’ Bank of the United States. Fisher apparently informed legislators that because the bank had

¹⁵ EAJ 2:159.

Jewish backing, it was a security threat because it involved “foreign” elements and because Jews by nature would charge “high and unusual interest.” Jewish patriot Haym Salomon responded in print with an essay signed “A Jew Broker,” and made the same basic argument as before: Jews “have in general been early uniform, decisive whigs, and we were second to none in our patriotism and attachment to our country!” Regarding Jews: “I do not at all despair, notwithstanding former obstacles, that we shall still obtain every other privilege that we aspire to enjoy, along with our fellow-citizens.”¹⁶

Sadly, I don’t have time to talk about *all* the anti-Semitic episodes of early republic, but there are a decent number of them, and in many of them, the response goes directly to revolutionary service that made them citizens and therefore Jews needed to make, in the words of Benjamin Nones, “no... change my political any more than my religious principles.”¹⁷ Even the most famous statement on Jewish rights in early America—George Washington’s 1790 letter to the Hebrew congregation of Newport—followed the same pattern. The letter prompting the response, from Moses Seixas of the Newport synagogue, mentioned Jewish disabilities—“Deprived as we heretofore have been of the invaluable rights of free citizens”—and lauded the military record of Washington, comparing him to David and Joshua. At the time

¹⁶ AJD 40ff

¹⁷ As prominent examples: in 1778, an author named “the American” in South Carolina complained about the arrival of Savannah’s Jews in Charleston; he could tell the Jews by their faces, and blamed them for the rise in prices and for “dastardly turning their backs upon the country, when in danger, which gave them bread and protection.” A published response defended the Jews as “brother citizens in the field, doing that which every honest American should do”—defend the nation. The letter was signed, “A Real American.” (Real American to Wells, 12/2/1778, Marcus, EAJ 2:350). In 1800, when a Federalist broadside insulted African-Americans, Frenchmen, and Jews as the soul of the Jeffersonian party, Benjamin Nones retorted in a widely-reprinted essay, “I fought in almost every action which took place in Carolina, and in the disastrous affair of Savannah, shared the hardships of that sanguinary day, and for three and twenty years I felt no disposition to change my political any more than my religious principles.... I am a Jew, and if for no other reason, for that reason I am a Republican.” (quoted Wolf Whiteman 210-211.)

Seixas wrote the letter, Rhode Island had only just joined the union, and despite repeated efforts, Jewish Rhode Islanders could still not participate in political activities. They were still ruled by their 1663 charter that limited political participation to Christians only. Washington followed Seixas' sentiments exactly, praising the Newport synagogue and writing, "All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights."¹⁸

The use of patriotic service to press for citizenship did not, on its own, achieve full civil rights for Jews, and their use of revolutionary service as an argument for citizenship was not exclusive to Jewish communities. But it does move the discussion of religion and revolution off the question of "Did they believe?" and "How much?" As religious institutions commit to the revolution, they buy themselves a token in the game to establish citizenship. Jews—in their own minds, at least—did not receive rights as a favor from Christians, who really owned the state. Rather citizenship was in some way achieved through voluntary participation in the Revolutionary War. And this seems to be an approach shared by Jews, Catholics, Baptists, and potentially others.

Our national discussion will likely not be transformed by this paper, but we have a better chance of altering that discussion by making the Revolution a little more Jewish: thinking beyond "Christian" as an analytical term, and think past belief or lack thereof as the driving question in our scholarship. We might think instead about how religions—theologically or structurally—confronted and defined citizenship. And we may find—to wildly paraphrase Lenny

¹⁸ GW to the Hebrew Congregation, GWP Presidential Series 6:285

Bruce—that Catholics are Jewish, Baptists are Jewish, Presbyterians are Jewish, Quakers are Jewish. Indeed, we may all be just a little bit Jewish. And that is how you answer anti-Semitism.