

# The Founding of Baltimore's First Jewish Congregation: Fact vs. Fiction

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According to the various accounts of the early history of Baltimore Jewry, Zalma Rehiné (1757-1843), moving to Baltimore from Richmond, Virginia, became the nucleus around which the first Jewish congregation in the state was formed. Local writers have displayed little hesitation in accepting as fact that a newcomer in his seventies, for four decades a member of Richmond's Sephardic Beth Shalome, once settled in his new home, became not only a congregation-builder but the leader of an Ashkenazic organization.<sup>1</sup> In view of this rather unusual circumstance, it seems somewhat remarkable that not one writer has expressed any doubts about its authenticity. How has such total acceptance among Jewish historians come about, and does any possibility exist at this late date, in the absence of the earliest congregational records, of discovering whether the story is fact or fiction?

An article on Baltimore Jewry which the accomplished scholar and Zionist leader Henrietta Szold published at the beginning of this century appears to have been the first to relate the story:

Almost coincidentally with the removal of civil disabilities occurs the first of a series of regular meetings for religious services, whose continuity has been

<sup>1</sup> See Henrietta Szold, "Baltimore," in *Jewish Encyclopedia*, II (1902), 479; Adolf Guttmacher, *A History of the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation, 1830-1905* (Baltimore, 1905), pp. 19-20; Isidor Blum, *The Jews of Baltimore* (Baltimore, 1910), p. 7; Abraham I. Shinedling, "Baltimore," in *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, II (1940), 53-58; Isaac M. Fein, *The Making of an American Jewish Community: the History of Baltimore Jewry from 1773 to 1920* (Philadelphia, 1971), pp. 42-43.

uninterrupted. According to the recollections of one participant still living, this meeting took place in Holliday street, near Pleasant street, at the house of Zalma Rehiné, a former resident of Richmond, Va., and an uncle of Isaac Leeser.<sup>2</sup>

Aware of the risks of drawing conclusions without adequate documentation, Miss Szold went on then to state cautiously: "This may possibly have been the beginning of the congregation Nidche Israel, now known as the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation . . . . The date of the congregation charter is January 29, 1830 . . . ." <sup>3</sup>

Adolf Guttmacher, on the other hand, in his error-laden history of the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation published a few years later, was quite definite:

. . . in 1826 . . . the first regular Minyan was established . . . . The Minyan met in the home of Zalma Rehiné on Holliday near Pleasant street. Rehiné was of French descent. He came to Baltimore from Richmond in 1812 . . . .

The Minyan that met in the home of Rehiné led to the organization of the Congregation, for the men who composed the Minyan were among the first members of the Congregation . . . .<sup>4</sup>

Guttmacher had no evidence, only his imaginative reconstruction of Miss Szold's sketch, that a *minyan* met in Rehiné's home in 1826. He was mistaken in stating the Rehiné had come to Baltimore in 1812, or that he was of French descent. Rehiné was a native of Germany; he had been born in the duchy of Westphalia.<sup>5</sup>

Isidor Blum, in a work published in 1910, "corrected" the date but not the location of the first meeting:

The first regular meeting for divine worship of which we have certain knowledge was held in the autumn of 1829, in the home of Zalma Rehiné, on Halliday Street, near Pleasant . . . . This *minyan* must have been the nucleus of the Congregation *Nidche Israel*, better known as the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation.<sup>6</sup>

### Illustrious Family Connections

More recent writers—Abraham I. Shinedling and Isaac M. Fein—

<sup>2</sup> Szold, p. 479.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Guttmacher, pp. 19-20.

<sup>5</sup> Herbert T. Ezekiel and Gaston Lichtenstein, *The History of the Jews of Richmond from 1769 to 1917* (Richmond, 1917), p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> Blum, p. 7.

agree that the original meeting for public worship was held at Rehiné's home, but, like the earlier scholars, differ in their degree of certainty as to whether this service actually marked the birth of the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation. According to Fein, "In 1829 Rhine (*sic*) came back to the city where he first landed" from Westphalia, "and it was in his home, on Holiday [*sic*] and Pleasant Streets, that a historic *minyán* was held. It was this service that led to the formation of the first synagogue in the city . . . ." <sup>7</sup> Shinedling's version reads as follows:

The first meeting for public worship, with ten men present, was held in 1829, in the house of Zalman [*sic*] Rehiné, an uncle of Isaac Leeser, in Holliday street, near Pleasant street. Little is known of this group, since no records of their proceedings have survived. It is probable, however, that they were the same men who formed the Nidche Israel Congregation . . . . <sup>8</sup>

Thus, after the first appearance in print of the story of Rehiné's role in Baltimore Jewish history, no subsequent writer seems to have had any misgivings regarding its veracity. Nevertheless, it seems pertinent to mention a number of unexplained inconsistencies. First, it appears relevant to note that Rehiné and his wife are buried in the Etting family cemetery in Baltimore, not in the cemetery of the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation. <sup>9</sup> If Rehiné was indeed the "founding father" he is reported to have been, why was his final resting place elsewhere in the city than the congregational burial ground? Second, Rehiné's name is missing from the earliest existing public documents relating to the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation—the list of five men who during the session commencing in December, 1829, petitioned the state legislature for its incorporation and the list of fifteen electors who in November, 1831, agreed to the purchase of the burial ground. <sup>10</sup> Why the absence of

<sup>7</sup> Fein, pp. 42-43.

<sup>8</sup> Shinedling, p. 53.

<sup>9</sup> Guttmacher, p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> For the five charter members see *infra*, p. 125. The names of "the Electors of the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation" who on October 18, 1831, agreed to "hold the lot of ground" acquired from David Stewart and Thomas Parkin Scott for a burial ground were: John M. Dyer, Leon Dyer, Lewis Silver, Levi Benjamin, Joseph Osterman, Solomon Hunt, S. A. Waterman, Leonard Levy, Levy Collmus, M. A. Cohen, Jacob Aaron, Samuel Benjamin, Semon Moses, Jacob Abrahams, Joseph Dyer. Baltimore Land Records, WG 216, folio 507, Feb. 13, 1832 (Maryland Hall of Records).

his name in such documents? Here are background facts that cannot help but raise questions, despite their circumstantial nature.

Last of all exists the puzzle of motivation. Would a long-time member of a Sephardic congregation have wished to help his fellow worshippers—mostly relatively new immigrants from Western or Central Europe—organize a congregation of Ashkenazic tendency? Would he not have felt greater affinity in religious sentiment and ritual to such established Baltimore residents as the Ettings—who had worshipped in Philadelphia's Sephardic Mikveh Israel Congregation—or the equally Sephardi-oriented Cohens, formerly of Richmond?<sup>11</sup> Not only was Rehiné the uncle of Isaac Leeser, the spiritual leader of Mikveh Israel; he was also the husband of a member of the Judah family—a lady who could claim "Rabbi" Gershom Mendes Seixas of New York's Sephardic Shearith Israel as her uncle.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, it may have been precisely these illustrious family connections that made the Rehiné story so attractive to local writers. A man linked to both the leading American Jewish religious leader of the first half of the nineteenth century and a notable patriot of the Revolutionary War era was an appealing choice as designate to the title of founding father of Baltimore's oldest congregation.

### A Household In Richmond

In the absence of the early records of the Baltimore congregation it seems mandatory to trace clearly the details concerning Zalma Rehiné's date of arrival and early residence in the city, in the hope that some clues to his association with the congregation's origins may come to light. Herbert T. Ezekiel and Gaston Lichtenstein, historians of Richmond Jewry, have presented the most detailed chronology of Rehiné's life. Their material for his years in Richmond comes from such original documents as court records, deeds, and contemporary correspondence. For Rehiné's experience in Baltimore, however, they rely solely on the previously published

<sup>11</sup> Maxwell Whiteman, "Isaac Leeser and the Jews of Philadelphia," in *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, XLVIII (1959), 210; Ezekiel and Lichtenstein, pp. 30-31.

<sup>12</sup> Malcolm H. Stern, *Americans of Jewish Descent* (Cincinnati, 1960), pp. 102, 109, 189.

works and conclude that "Rehine, when seventy-two years of age, removed to Baltimore. Soon after his arrival in the Maryland metropolis, the Israelites of that city held in his home their first regular meeting for divine worship. Thus did his advent mark an epoch in the religious life of the community."<sup>13</sup>

Can contemporary material tell us more? Two likely sources are available: the city directory—which provides street addresses—was appearing in Baltimore at this time about every two years<sup>14</sup>; and the Federal census, which gives a once in a decade picture of residence by ward, was taken in 1830.

Rehine's name does not appear in the Baltimore directory for 1829. This is not particularly surprising since the more reliable published statements indicate that he arrived in Baltimore in 1829, while the directory, published in June, would list only persons resident in the city in the first part of the year. He does appear in the next directory, published in 1831, as resident at 15 Courtland, and again in the 1833 directory, where his address is given as "Holliday N. of Lucas's brewery." In 1835, the address is more formally given as "Holliday st. near Pleasant."<sup>15</sup> As these consecutive city directories testify, it is most improbable that a service was held at Rehine's home on Holliday Street in 1829 since his first known residence in Baltimore was on Courtland Street and—barring error in the directory—it was not until sometime between the appearance of the 1831 and 1833 city directories that he moved to the Holliday Street location.

Evidently one must conclude that the aged raconteur who, according to Miss Szold, remembered the occasion many decades later, erred in at least one respect. Very likely he was recalling a service at Rehine's Holliday Street home held in 1831 or later rather than before the chartering of the first congregation. Nevertheless, the remote possibility that he attended an earlier service but confused the address with that of Rehine's later residence must be explored. The identity of Miss Szold's witness now assumes especial importance since both her account and that of all

<sup>13</sup> Ezekiel and Lichtenstein, p. 39.

<sup>14</sup> Richmond city directories were nonexistent during this period.

<sup>15</sup> *Matchett's Baltimore Directories, Corrected up to June 1829* (Baltimore, 1829); *Corrected up to June 1831* (Baltimore, 1831); *Corrected up to May 1833* (Baltimore, 1833); *Corrected up to September 1835* (Baltimore, 1835).

subsequent writers hinges on his testimony. Miss Szold's statement that the service was attended by a "participant still living" furnishes a valuable clue to his identity. Almost certainly her source was Jacob Ezekiel (1812-1899), to this writer's knowledge the only member of the early community still alive within a half-decade of her article's date of publication.<sup>16</sup> In his memoir, Ezekiel wrote a rather detailed account of his residence in Baltimore, which happened to be from "the latter part of 1833" to "the month of April, 1834."<sup>17</sup> By a not so strange coincidence this is precisely the time when Rehiné lived on Holliday Street.

We now turn to the last available source of clarification of this issue: the 1830 census. The manuscript returns for the city of Baltimore fail to reveal the presence of Zalma Rehiné. Since only household heads were listed by name this is not conclusive proof that he had not yet arrived in the Monumental City; he and his wife may have been boarding with another family. On the other hand, this leaves open the distinct possibility that he may still have been residing in Richmond. A check of the 1830 returns for the Virginia capital shows that this supposition was indeed the case. Zalma Rehiné's household is to be found in Richmond's Monroe ward; it was comprised of one white male aged 70-79 years (Zalma), one white female aged 60-69 years (his wife Rachel), one white female aged 20-29 years and one white female aged 10-19 years.<sup>18</sup> The census enumeration commenced in June, 1830, while a charter was granted to the first Jewish congregation in Baltimore in February, 1830.<sup>19</sup> Thus we have conclusive evidence that at a time when Baltimore's initial congregation was already functioning Rehiné had not yet departed Richmond for the city whose historians later acclaimed him as founder of that pioneer body.

<sup>16</sup> At least one extant letter is evidence of communication between Henrietta Szold and Jacob Ezekiel: *See American Jewish Archives*, XXVI (1974), 91.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, *The Jews of the United States, 1790-1840; A Documentary History* (Philadelphia, 1963), III, 873-74.

<sup>18</sup> There were also two slaves present. Manuscript 1830 census returns for Richmond, Va. (National Archives). The Rehinés were childless. The two young women who boarded in their home were nieces, daughters of Rachel Rehiné's brothers, Manuel and Moses. Manuel Judah, Will, Baltimore County Register of Wills, Liber 15, p. 156 (Maryland Hall of Records).

<sup>19</sup> Carroll D. Wright and William C. Hunt, *The History and Growth of the United States Census* (Washington, 1900), p. 28; *Laws Made and Passed by the General Assembly of the State of Maryland* (Annapolis, 1830), chap. 140.

### Priest of the Jews

What were the actual circumstances of the first congregation's organization? Since history has left no accurate record, we must assume as probable an arduous struggle waged over months or even years by a group of immigrants attempting to assemble for formal worship and finally meeting with success. The applicants to the legislature who requested incorporation were Levi Benjamin, Joseph Osterman, Moses Millem, Lewis Silver, and John M. Dyer.<sup>20</sup> With the exception of the German-born Dyer, all were natives of the Netherlands.<sup>21</sup>

We have no published information giving the name of the man who served as religious leader of this newly chartered group, but he is likely to have been one Joseph Jacobs, who performed the marriage of Wilhelm Marshutz to Henrietta Behrens on July 1, 1830, a few months after the congregation was chartered. His leadership is attested to in the 1831 city directory by his listing as "priest of the Jews"; it is also stated that he "manufactures chemical colours."<sup>22</sup>

There is a lesson to be learned from this foray into Baltimore Jewish history, a lesson that may well apply elsewhere. Surely this Baltimore example is not unique in American Jewish historiography. Late twentieth-century writers would do well not to rely on some of the hearsay evidence of their predecessors, who often lacked scholarly training. Errors have all too frequently been perpetuated from book to book. Verification by means of tedious search through all existing records is essential if fact is to be reported, not fiction repeated.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Blum, p. 9; Stern, p. 4; *Baltimore American*, October 8, 1830; *Baltimore Sun*, September 6, 1860; *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, X, 203.

<sup>22</sup> Baltimore Marriage Licenses, card file, Maryland Hall of Records; *Matchett's Baltimore Directory* (1831).