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# Walter Jonas Judah and New York's 1798 Yellow Fever Epidemic

*Theodore Cohen*

Nestled within a group of old tenement houses in close proximity to the Manhattan Bridge is the Chatham Square cemetery. It was the first burial site for the members of Congregation Shearith Israel and is the oldest Jewish cemetery in North America.<sup>1</sup> This plot of land was granted to the Jewish residents of New Amsterdam in 1656 by the unfriendly Peter Stuyvesant,<sup>2</sup> then director-general of New Netherland. The oldest grave is probably that of Benjamin Bueno de Mesquita, which is dated 1683, and whose possible relative Joseph is credited with having made the original purchase of the site.<sup>3</sup> Among others, there are the graves of several Revolutionary War soldiers, of Gershom Mendes Seixas, America's most noted Jewish spiritual leader at the time, and of Walter Jonas Judah, one of America's first Jewish medical students, who risked and then lost his life in the yellow fever epidemic that scourged New York City in 1798. His story was not a major epic—he was less than twenty-one years old when he died—but it constitutes an interesting episode in the history of early American Jewry.

## *The Scourge*

Yellow fever epidemics were among the most lethal and horrifying of all the outbreaks which repeatedly raged through colonial America's coastal cities, particularly New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston.<sup>4</sup> They also created havoc along the Gulf Coast and traveled up the Mississippi into the great valley.<sup>5</sup>

The disease occurs in two epidemiological patterns, the urban and the sylvan (jungle). It is transmitted from person to person by the bite of a virus-infected *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, a species which breeds best in filthy, stagnant water, especially in warmer weather. It was also transported into Temperate Zone cities on ships sailing from

tropical ports. The mosquito still travels by small boat, airplane, and car, especially in the form of dried eggs carried on used tires.<sup>6</sup>

Following a three- to six-day incubation period, the classical clinical picture begins with a three-day period of infection, which is ushered in with fever, chills, generalized aching, and minor nose and gum bleeding. Then follows a twenty-four-hour period of remission of symptoms, and subsequently a severe period of intoxication with fever, vomiting, abdominal pain, yellow skin (jaundice), kidney failure, coma, and death in as many as 50 percent of cases, usually between the seventh and tenth days.<sup>7</sup>

Nowadays, the only specific treatment for yellow fever is immunization, which usually confers lifelong immunity to more than 90 percent of those who receive it,<sup>8</sup> but the vaccine did not exist in the eighteenth century. Interestingly, even in the present day, once the disease has developed there is no known agent which will kill the virus and cure the patient.

### *The Epidemic of 1798*

The onset of the epidemic in New York in 1798 was near the waterfront. It began in mid-July and continued into November. In some areas of the city not a single family escaped, and with few exceptions, every house had at least one victim. Normal life was entirely disrupted, and before it was over, the disease claimed 2,086 persons,<sup>9</sup> ten of them Jewish.<sup>10</sup> "Faced with the pestilence, the Common Council of the city appointed a special committee to assist the health commissioner, and along with the physicians, to take means to help the sick and indigent." Where necessary, the patients were to be admitted to Bellevue Hospital.<sup>11</sup>

Individuals who failed "to keep the streets clean before their respective doors" were to be penalized. It is of interest that the epidemic's association with "stagnant water in confined places, during hot weather,"<sup>12</sup> had been observed, but that no one had yet noted the association with the mosquito. A local newspaper writer at the time was reminded "of the people of Germany during the great plague of 1349, who not understanding the cause of such unusual mortality and credulously listening to an idle malicious report, that the Jews had poisoned the wells, rose and massacred the unfortunate

and innocent Israelites.”<sup>13</sup> Fortunately, such a horror was not inflicted upon New York’s Jews in 1798. They had only to cope with the situation — like everyone else.

What was the Jewish experience during the outbreak? Gershom Mendes Seixas, the community’s leader, urged that a special fund be established from the Sedakah (charity fund) to aid the sick and poor of the congregation during the time that the trustees were absent from the city.<sup>14</sup> A year later, at a public thanksgiving and prayer meeting, he recalled:

Again the visitation of an epidemic which though it has not been attended with the same degree of fatality as formerly, still it has been carried with it the same formidable appearance, compelled the Citizens to quit their usual places of residence & to flee for refuge to the country towns and villages, where they have been obliged to put up with many inconveniences, and attended with great expense—The Man of business relinquishes the advantages of trade, & the poorer Class of people most inevitably in their pecuniary circumstances, so that we may truly say, that every individual (either in a greater or a lesser degree) have felt the bad effects of this direful malady. These sufferings call loudly on us for a strict reformation ... let us also keep in mind that although our small congregation was driven from our public place of worship, and dispersed in various parts of the country there was yet an opportunity for a greater number of them to assemble in union to observe the appointed times & festivals instituted by divine Authority, agreeably to the rites and ceremonies of our forefathers. To pretend to specify all the particular blessings we enjoyed amidst the terrific evil of the late epidemic would be descending too much in the minutia of things: suffice it to say in general terms, that we had a regular supply of the real necessities of life, though attended somewhat with more difficulty than common in the procuring of them.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Youth and Family Background*

How and why Walter Jonas Judah became medically involved in

the epidemic is unknown. Although he had not completed his medical training as yet, he might have been provoked by a sense of responsibility or benevolence for his fellow man. Certainly he was not following any sort of family medical tradition. On the contrary, Walter came from very ordinary beginnings.

Walter's paternal grandparents had migrated to America from Breslau. His father, Samuel, who was born in New York, had married London-born Jesse Jonas on December 19, 1759. They were the parents of fourteen children, the youngest of whom was Walter Jonas, born April 4, 1778.<sup>16</sup>

In his early youth, the family moved to Philadelphia, possibly as a result of the British occupation of New York. When Walter was three and a half years old, his father died. Samuel Judah left his widow with twelve surviving children and essentially no estate. Benjamin, the eldest son, assumed the role of head of the family, which in 1783 returned to New York after the British left. Matriarch Jessie supported the family through several business ventures, including real estate. She and her children were members of the Shearith Israel congregation. As conditions improved, she was able to give Walter more time than some of her older children had received.<sup>17</sup>

At about sixteen and a half years of age, Walter began to pursue a medical career.<sup>18</sup> One can only conjecture as to what motivated this decision, beyond the sense of the importance of education so typical of Jewish families. We do know, however, that the quest for higher education presented some special problems for Jewish students at this time, since all of colonial America's twenty-five colleges had been founded primarily for the purpose of training young men for the Christian clergy, and their curricula and tone, in various ways, reflected their origins.<sup>19</sup>

Certainly, a degree of pioneering spirit was imperative for Walter, since there were few Jewish matriculants in the colleges, probably due in part to the country's small Jewish population and the remoteness of its largest Jewish communities from most of the institutions of higher learning. More than half of America's Jews lived in South Carolina and Georgia, neither of which had a college or professional school.<sup>20</sup> Huhner, however, points out that given the size of the colonial Jewish population, the number of Jews attending college was greater than might have been anticipated.<sup>21</sup>

*Becoming a Physician in the Eighteenth Century*

Medical education and practice were primitive in the colonial era. Aside from the highly undeveloped state of the science, most colonial practitioners were products of an unstructured and unsupervised apprenticeship system which was often combined with other occupations, such as barbering, the magistracy, butchering, and, especially in New England, the ministry.<sup>22</sup> By the beginning of the Revolutionary War, there were approximately 3,500 practicing physicians in the colonies, of whom not more than 400 had M.D. degrees.<sup>23</sup> Formally trained medical school graduates came from two sources: colonists who had gone to Europe to study and then returned;<sup>24</sup> and immigrant physicians.<sup>25</sup>

There were two medical schools in the colonies in the mid-eighteenth century: the College of Philadelphia (now the University of Pennsylvania), founded in 1765;<sup>26</sup> and the Medical School of King's College (now Columbia University), founded in 1767.<sup>27</sup> Both were patterned after European medical schools, especially Edinburgh.<sup>28</sup>

Before the end of the century, three additional medical schools began to function: Harvard in 1782,<sup>29</sup> the medical department of Queen's (Rutgers) College in New Jersey in 1792,<sup>30</sup> and Dartmouth in 1797.<sup>31</sup> In all likelihood, Walter chose King's College because of its proximity to where he lived.

Walter was not the first Jew in the medical profession in New York City. There were several doctors before him. Drs. Nunez and Elias Woolin appear on the rolls of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in 1742. Dr. Woolin, who arrived from Bohemia in 1740, boasted of having served four years as a surgeon in the Imperial army. In 1742, Dr. Jacob Isaac from Germany advertised "wonderful cures." Dr. Levy's name appears in the congregation's records in 1750, as did Dr. Andrew Judah, who went to South Carolina, where he claimed to have been from London and Holland also.<sup>32</sup>

The first New York City Directory, published in 1786, lists the names of Drs. Barney Cowan and Saul Israel. Dr. Israel professed to be a Curer of Deafness. Drs. Leo Wolf and Hyman Isaac Long are also listed in Shearith Israel's records. Dr. Long was originally from the island of Jamaica and was also involved in Masonic activities in New York, Virginia, and South Carolina.<sup>33</sup> A somewhat better known late-

eighteenth-century New York physician was Dr. Isaac Abrahams. He deserves recognition for having been the first Jew to graduate from King's College (Bachelor of Arts, 1774), but there is no record of his having attended medical school.<sup>34</sup> His medical training, presumably, was by apprenticeship.

Walter's attendance at King's College from 1794 to 1798 makes him one of the first identifiable Jews to attend a medical school in New York. A review of early New York medical school records reveals the name of an Isaac Bloom, who was a student at King's from 1791 to 1792. This could have been a Jewish name, but there is no further information about him.<sup>35</sup> Also listed in attendance from 1791 to 1796 was London-born Bernard Samuel Judah.<sup>36</sup> He was not naturalized until 1799,<sup>37</sup> three years after he left medical school. Although Bernard did not graduate, he lived in New York and was referred to as a surgeon and druggist.<sup>38</sup> Accordingly, Walter appears to be the first identifiable American-born Jew, as well as the second identifiable Jew, to have attended a medical school in New York. One may assume that Walter and Bernard knew each other, since both men were students at the medical school (which had very few students compared to nowadays) at the same time, and they may have been related.<sup>39</sup>

Walter is recorded as being at King's College in 1794 and in the medical school from '95 to '96, and '97 to '98.<sup>40</sup> At that time, it was customary for students to pay the professors directly in order to attend their lectures.<sup>41</sup> This explains the following entries by Walter's brother Benjamin, who maintained the family accounts:

May 27, 1795—Cash paid Dr. Samuel Bunon \$100, Doer not wishing public the fee, it being \$150, for my brother Walter a student.

November 17, 1797—To cash Walter attending lectures at college. £ 16

Aug. 10, 1798—Cash Walter's attending Dr. Hosack's lectures £ 6<sup>42</sup>

Walter is not listed as having been in school in 1796–97,<sup>43</sup> nor do the family records indicate any payment that year for his education. Possibly he did not attend school for a time, or he may have been

serving an apprenticeship, since the records indicate that Walter was an apprentice to two New York doctors. One of them, Dr. David Hosack, a very well known and respected physician, was the attending doctor at the famous Hamilton-Burr duel!<sup>44</sup>

The rather large sum paid to Dr. Bunon late in the 1795 academic year may have been for an apprenticeship, since \$100 was the usual apprenticeship fee at the time;<sup>45</sup> whereas the fee for a lecture series was \$15.<sup>46</sup> Whatever his reason for not attending school in 1796–97, it is apparent that Walter planned to continue his medical education, since the last payment for Dr. Hosack's lectures was made on August 10, 1798, only thirty-six days before his death.

### *Walter Judah's Death*

When the yellow fever epidemic began to devastate New York that summer, Walter could easily have left the city, as so many others were doing.<sup>47</sup> Instead, as a medical student undoubtedly aware of the risk involved, he joined in the effort to help the sick. Walter Judah not only was willing to give of his expertise and place his life in jeopardy, but even contributed from his personal finances so that those afflicted could purchase medication.<sup>48</sup>

In September, the average daily death rate was thirty-eight persons.<sup>49</sup> On the fifteenth day of that month, one of the victims was Walter Jonas Judah.<sup>50</sup> Unfortunately, he had succumbed to that which he had sought to assuage.

In the family records kept by Benjamin, we read an entry dated April 16, 1808: "Tombstone for my brother Walter work and materials erected May 1801 £ 38.0.9.22."<sup>51</sup>

Both the tomb and its inscription may have been prepared abroad.<sup>52</sup> The grave marker is a most unusual one. In characteristic Sephardic tradition, which was dominant in the Shearith Israel congregation, Walter's horizontal stone lies flat on the tomb. Carved into its head is the angel of death suspended over the city's skyline and wielding a flaming sword. On the right side, an arm extruding from the clouds with an axe in its hand is felling the tree of life. His epitaph reads:



*Tombstone of Walter Jonas Judah*

*(courtesy of Theodore Cohen)*

In memory of  
Walter J. Judah  
student of physic, who worn down  
by his exertions to alleviate the  
sufferings of his fellow citizens  
in that dreadful contagion  
that visited the City of New York  
in 1798 fell a victim in the cause  
of humanity on the 5th of Tishri  
A.M. 5559 corresponding  
with the 15th of September 1798  
aet 20 years 5 months  
and 11 days.

Here lies buried / The unmarried man— / Old in wisdom, tender  
in years / Skilled he was in his labor, the labor of healing /  
Strengthening himself as a lion and running swiftly as a hart to  
bring healing / To the inhabitants of this city treating them  
with loving kindness / When they were visited with the yellow  
fever / He gave money from his own purse to buy for them  
beneficent medicines / But the good that he did was the cause  
of his death / For the fever visited him while yet a youth in his  
twenty-first year / Declare him and his soul happy May they  
prepare for him his canopy in Paradise / And there may he have  
refreshment of soul until the dead live again and the spirit  
reenter into them / Joshua the son of Samuel / departed hence  
/ on the holy Sabbath day of the 5 of Tishri / in the year / And  
thou shalt rest and stand in thy lot at the end of the days (5559  
Daniel XII, 13) / May his soul be bound up in the bond of life.<sup>53</sup>

Thus, Walter Jonas Judah merits special recognition in Jewish American history as an individual imbued with a sense of civic obligation and charity, as well as a medical pioneer and martyr. By his deeds, he also fulfilled a religious tenet, for in the Talmud it is written, "He who saves a single life is said to have saved the entire world."<sup>54</sup>

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### Notes

1. Rosalie S. Phillips, "A Burial Place for the Jewish Nation Forever," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 18 (1909): 93.
2. David de Sola Pool, *Portraits Etched in Stone* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), p. vii.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 188. Pool is uncertain about the relationship between the two, if indeed there was one.
4. John Duffy, *Epidemics in Colonial America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), p. 138.
5. Henry Rightor, *Standard History of New Orleans* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1900), pp. 203-214.
6. James B. Wyngaarden, Lloyd H. Smith, Jr., and J. Claude Bennett, eds., *Cecil Textbook of Medicine*, 19th ed., 2 vols. (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1992), 2:1879.
7. Bernard N. Fields and David M. Knite, eds., *Virology*, 3rd ed., 2 vols. (New York: Raven Press, 1996), 1:1011-12.
8. Wyngaarden et al., *Cecil Textbook of Medicine*, 2:1881.
9. James Hardie, *An Account of the Yellow Fever Which Occurred in the City of New York in the Year 1822* (New York: Samuel Marks, 1822), pp. 2, 5, 6.
10. Pool, *Portraits Etched in Stone*, p. 271.
11. *Minutes of the Common Council (1784-1831)*, 2:467-468. Entry of September 10, 1798, as cited in Isaac N. P. Stokes, *The Iconography of Manhattan Island, 1498-1909* (New York: Robert H. Dodd, 1915), 5:1356.
12. Hardie, *Account of the Yellow Fever*, pp. 3-4.
13. *New York Spectator* 50, no. 94 (Saturday, August 18, 1798).
14. Pool, *Portraits Etched in Stone*, p. 362.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 271-272.
16. Malcolm H. Stern, *First American Jewish Families* (Baltimore: Ottenheimer, 1991), p. 139.
17. Pool, *Portraits Etched in Stone*, pp. 269, 393.
18. The premedical requirements are described in William Frederick Norwood, *Medical Education in the United States Before the Civil War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944), p. 110. Judah apparently completed them during the 1794 academic year since he is listed on p. 118 in the Columbia Catalogue, under "Non-Graduates in Arts," as follows: 1794-: Med. 1795-1796, 1797-1798. On p. 182, he is listed under "Non-Graduates in Medicine," 1795-1796, 1797-1798. Milton S. Halsey, *Columbia University Officers and Alumni, 1754-1857* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936).

19. John Marshall Barker, *Colleges in America* (Cleveland, 1894), p. 48, as cited by Leon Huhner, "Jews in Connection with the Colleges of the Thirteen Original States Prior to 1800," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 19 (1910): 101-102.
20. F. W. Blackmar, *American Educational History Series*, no. 9, (Washington, 1890), pp. 200-201; Charles Edgeworth Jones, "Education in Georgia," in *ibid.*, no. 5 (Washington, 1889), pp. 40-41.
21. Huhner, "Jews in Connection with the Colleges," p. 101.
22. Norwood, *Medical Education in the United States*, p. 9; Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York: Random House, 1958), pp. 231-232.
23. Joseph M. Toner, *Contributions to the Annals of Medical Progress and Medical Education in the United States, Before and During the War of Independence* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1874), pp. 9-10; Nathan S. Davis, *History of Medical Education and Institutions in the United States of America* (Chicago: S. C. Griggs, 1851), pp. 9-10.
24. Boorstin, *The Americans*, p. 230.
25. Norwood, *Medical Education in the United States*, p. 10.
26. *Directory of American Medical Education, 1993-94*, 40th ed. (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Medical Colleges, 1993), p. 194.
27. Norwood, *Medical Education in the United States*, p. 111.
28. *Ibid.*
29. *American Medical Colleges*, p. 94.
30. John H. Raven, *Catalogue of the Officers and Alumni of Rutgers College* (Trenton, N. J.: State Gazette Publishing Co., 1916), p. 62; and David L. Cowan, *Medical Education: The Queens-Rutgers Experience, 1792-1830*. (New Brunswick, N.J.: State University Bicentennial Commission and the Rutgers Medical School, 1966).
31. *American Medical Colleges*, p. 128.
32. Leon Huhner, "Jews in the Legal and Medical Professions in America Prior to 1800," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 22 (1914): 160-163.
33. H. Morrison, "The Early Jewish Physicians in America," *Medical Life*, October 1928, pp. 6-7.
34. Jacob R. Marcus, *United States Jewry, 1776-1985, 4 vols.* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1989), 1:410, 428.
35. *Columbia University Officers and Alumni*, p. 180.
36. *Ibid.* p. 180.
37. Stern, *First American Jewish Families*, p. 141.
38. Marcus, *United States Jewry*, 1:87.
39. Anne Josephs, *Heritage of a Patriarch* (Quebec City: Septentrion Publisher, 1995).
40. See above, n. 18.
41. Norwood, *Medical Education in the United States*, p. 392.
42. Pool. *Portraits Etched in Stone*, p. 270.
43. *Columbia University Officers and Alumni*, p. 182.
44. Marcus, *United States Jewry*, 1:428. In the New York Academy of Medicine,

there is a handwritten booklet by Dr. David Hosack entitled "List of Private Pupils Educated in the Office of D. Hosack from the Year 1795." On page 2, among the students in 1795, is the name "Wm. Jonas," who entered between November 6 and 23. Whether or not this was Walter Jonas Judah is speculative. No one named Judah was mentioned by Dr. Hosack.

45. Norwood, *Medical Education in the United States*, p. 33.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 392.

47. Hardie, *Account of the Yellow Fever*, p. 4.

48. Pool, *Portraits Etched in Stone*, p. 269.

49. Hardie, *Account of the Yellow Fever*, p. 4.

50. *New York Spectator*, September 19, 1798. Under the column of Monday, September 17, entitled "Died Yesterday," appears the name Mr. Walter Judah. His tombstone (see text) gives September 15 as the date of death. The one-day discrepancy is more likely an error by the newspaper than by the family.

51. Pool, *Portraits Etched in Stone*, p. 270.

52. Marcus, *United States Jewry*, 4:366.

53. Pool, *Portraits Etched in Stone*, p. 269.

54. Tractate Sanhedrin 37a.