

The Mercies of a Benign Judge: A Letter from Gershom Seixas to Hannah Adams, 1810¹

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Hannah Adams is noted for being the first woman in American history to make a living as a writer. Although largely unknown today, Adams was well known in her time for her writings on religious matters.² Her first and most important work was an encyclopedia of religions,³ originally published in 1784, with four succeeding editions, the last of which was published in 1992. Her encyclopedia is noted for its ecumenical spirit. Adams attempted an impartial overview of all religions of the world, focusing primarily on Christian sects, but devoting entries to Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, and other non-Christian religions. Following the success of this book Adams wrote other works on Christianity and a history of New England for young people. She then became captivated by Jewish history and in 1812 published *The History of the Jews from the Destruction of the Temple to the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century*.⁴ This two-volume work was the first book published about Jews in America.

Her correspondence with Gershom Seixas⁵ was part of the background research for this project. Seixas was the *hazzan* of the Spanish-Portuguese synagogue in New York City, Shearith Israel, at the time of the correspondence. Seixas began serving the congregation in 1784 and continued to serve the synagogue until passing away in 1816. We may presume that Adams turned to Seixas for help with the *History of the Jews* because he was the most widely known Jewish religious authority of the time. Adams's archives include notes on books by Mordecai Manuel Noah but there is no correspondence between the two of them. Adams's archives also includes a dozen letters from the Abbe Gregoire, the bishop of Blois, known for his efforts in the French government to emancipate Jews during the revolutionary period.

The letter below, recently discovered in Adams's archives is Gershom Seixas's response to an initial letter of inquiry from Adams to Seixas about Jewish life in America. Adams's letter is not extant, but it is clear from Seixas's response that the letter consisted of four questions. The questions were most likely: (1) What are the religious rites and ceremonies of the Jewish people, and what are the numbers of Jews worldwide?; (2) How is Judaism observed in America, and what are the numbers of Jews in the various American congregations?; (3) What is the total number of Jews in America?; and (4) Are there any laws barring Jews from holding office in the United States? The part of the letter regarding the number of Jews in America is reproduced in Adams's *History of the Jews*, but the rest of the letter has remained unpublished.

Hannah Adams's *The History of the Jews from the Destruction of the Temple to the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century* is a remarkable book not really for her insights into Jewish history, but for a history culled from a few earlier sources, like the translation of Jacque Basnage's *History of the Jews*. Adams's work is nonetheless remarkable for the contrasting impulses within the book. Adams introduces her topic with great sympathy for the Jewish people. Heinrich Graetz says of Adams in his *History of the Jews*:

The history of the Jews is remarkable above that of all other nations, for the number and cruelty of the persecutions they have endured. They are venerable for the antiquity of their origin. They are discriminated from the rest of mankind by their wonderful destination, peculiar habits, and religious rites. Since the destruction of Jerusalem, and their universal dispersion, we contemplate the singular phenomenon of a nation subsisting for ages without its civil and religious polity, and thus surviving its political existence.⁶

She consistently writes with great sensitivity and admiration for Jewish survival. Yet Adams is also thoroughly convinced of the need for Jewish conversion to Christianity. Her last chapter in her *History of the Jews* is devoted entirely to Jewish conversion. In her personal life, her commitment to this cause led her to establish in 1816 The Female Society of Boston and The Vicinity for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews. Given the paucity of Jews in Boston, the main goal of the society was to raise funds to be sent to The London Society for

Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews. To promote this goal of fund raising and missionizing, she wrote in 1816, *A Concise Account of The London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews*.⁷

Adams was piqued by the question of Jewish existence. How was it that the Jews had not converted to Christianity, despite scripture's testimony that their conversion was necessary to bring about the messiah's return? She saw her mission to bring Jews into the Christian fold both for their sake and to "fulfill Biblical prophecy and culminate sacred history."⁸ In her prologue to *A Concise Account*, Adams writes that she cannot but be peculiarly interested in the Jewish nation, and the goal of writing about Jewish history and the work of Christian missionaries will be to bring the message to America. She wished to "bring this long neglected people to a cordial acknowledgment of the grand tenet, in which all Christians unite, that 'Jesus Christ is the Messiah,' and she [Adams] indulges the hope that the attention awakened to the welfare of the 'lost sheep of the house of Israel' will be extended to America."⁹

Many others soon joined Adams in her interest in Jewish conversion. Her *History of the Jews* in some ways marks the first step in American life toward what would become a significant effort to establish missions for the Jews. Adams's *History* was published in 1812, and four years later three events happened which marked the real beginning of Christian missionary work in America. First, Adams founded a Boston society for promoting conversion. Secondly, J. C. S. Frey landed in America. Frey would become the catalyst for the American Society for the Melioration of the Condition of the Jews, the most well-known organization dedicated to converting Jews.¹⁰ Finally, Elias Boudinot, president of the Continental Congress, published a popular book espousing the theory that Native Americans were the lost tribes of Israel and should be converted to Christianity.¹¹

The lost tribe theory added to the increasing missionary zeal toward the Jews, because the ingathering of the lost tribes of Israel, along with the Jews, would mark the final step leading to salvation.¹² The lost tribe theory and missionary efforts were entwined in Boudinot himself, who financially backed the establishment of the American Society for the Melioration of the Condition of the Jews. Interestingly,

in the epilogue of her *History of the Jews*, Adams provides nine proofs for Native Americans being the lost tribes of Israel. She bases her epilogue on the work of James Adair who after spending much of his life living with Indians, wrote the most influential work on the supposed link of Native Americans to Judaism.¹³

Some historians have viewed the mix of Adams's sympathy for the Jews and her conversionary fervor as a reflection of her time. In his study of Adams' life, Thomas Tweed suggests that it is only from a modern perspective that Adams's agenda seems "condescending." At the time of her writing it would have seemed more remarkable that she wrote of the Jewish people "without derisive comments or demeaning labels."¹⁴ Indeed, even the *Encyclopedia Judaica* notes that Adams's *Dictionary of Religions* is "significant for the sympathetic tone of the article on the Jews." However, others have taken her to task for her Christianizing sentiments.

Hannah Adams, of Boston, struck by the marvelous fate of the Jewish nation, delineated their history from the time of the return from Babylon to recent days. For many reasons she was not qualified to give an intelligible outline of Jewish history, but could only string together a number of rough sketches without connection or sequence. This crude work, nonetheless was good enough for the purposes of the London Society for the Promotion of Christianity Amongst the Jews ... It was high time for Jews to take away the historian's pen from the hands of Christians who only trifled with it.¹⁵

In evaluating Adams's attitude toward the Jews, it should also be noted that one of her most significant sources for *History of the Jews* was the correspondence she had with the Abbe Gregoire. Gregoire, unlike Adams, did not believe in the active conversion of Jews. He believed that God would reveal His plans regarding the Jews, and humanity should accept what it could not understand.¹⁶ Thus in evaluating Adams's conversionary efforts, we see that her approach was not simply the accepted viewpoint of a believing Christian of the time.

It is with this background that we can turn to Seixas's response to Adams. Seixas answered Adams's queries in a straightforward manner. His report on the numbers of Jewish families in major cities correspond to other information from the time. His response regarding the rites and practices of Judaism provides an interesting insight into

what was considered the core beliefs of Jewish tradition. The most intriguing question, though, may be why Seixas responded to Adams at all. Why would the prominent leader of New York's synagogue be helping a woman who has a clear agenda of Jewish conversion? Adams's encyclopedia of religions has, as the main part of its entry on Judaism, an approving description of the activities of the London Jews Society, so her convictions were certainly not secret. Seixas, nonetheless, refers to her as a woman of "eminent literary character." It would seem that either Seixas dismissed her conversionary attitude as insignificant compared to her sympathetic approach to the Jews, or possibly, Seixas was simply unaware of Adams's feelings towards the Jew and only knew of her literary celebrity. It is unclear from his letter which was the case.

As mentioned above, Adams published only the first half of Seixas's letter to her in her book. The second half of the letter, which deals with Jewish rituals, is not used. Instead, she included excerpts from David Levi's book on this subject.¹⁷ Adams does, however, include the last sentence of Seixas's letter: "The United States of America is perhaps the only place where the Jews have not suffered persecution, but rather the reverse, for through the mercies of a benign judge we are encouraged and indulged with every right of citizenship." She does not comment on this sentence in *History*, presumably choosing to include this sentence because it extols the great promise of America. As a distant relative of both Samuel and John Adams, she would appreciate this notion. But the modern reader can only note with irony that Seixas evokes the promise of a religiously tolerant America to one of the very people whose efforts to missionize the Jews could thwart this vision.

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Following is a transcription of the letter

New York 23 July 1810

Madam

To convince you of my readiness to assist you in your researches, I hasten to reply to the Queries, you have propounded, in your courteous letter addressed to me of 6th [month indecipherable] — but I shall take the liberty of replying to the 2nd querie as it appears to be more methodical. (In New York) there are about 50 families of Jews, which, with a number of unmarried men, make about from 70 to 80 subscribing members to the Congregation Shearith Israel, which is incorporated by an Act of the Legislature of this state, empowering all religious societies to hold this property by charter, under the direction of Trustees, chosen annually by the communicants of the Society, according to certain order prescribed in the Act — as may be seen in the Laws of New York.

The Trustees have the management of all the temporalities, as customary in other Societies. They have one Synagogue, established conformably to the customs and forms of prayer, used among the Portugese Jews in Europe. Their public service is altogether in the Hebrew language excepting in particular cases provided for in the Constitution of the Society. I cannot precisely ascertain the time when the first Jews settled here in New York but there were some families in this City when it was owned by the Dutch, and the documents that are among the Archives of the Congregation do not extend further back, than about 140 or 150 years (as the Rev. Mr. Miller¹⁸ is about writing the History of New York and solicited me to give him an account of the 1st establishment of Jews in this country I do not think myself at liberty to be very minute).

Some of the Jews who settled in New York were of Portuguese, others of German extraction besides Hollanders. There are also descendants of those who arrived after New York became an English colony. The Jews had the right of soil under the Dutch government, and the English never attempted to deprive them of it. On the contrary, they granted letters-patent to several Jewish families in the time of Queen Anne who had arrived in London from France, among the Hugonots [*sic*] to settle in North America.¹⁹

In Philadelphia there may be about 30 families of Jews, they have two Synagogues one for those who observe the Portuguese customs of forms of prayer, and the other for those who adhere to the German

rules, customs, and forms of prayer — neither of them incorporated. There may be about 80 to one hundred men in the whole state of Pennsylvania who all occasionally attend the Synagogues in Phila[delphia].

There is in Charleston, S.C. a large Society incorporated (with their Laws) [and] they have an elegant Synagogue established on the Portuguese customs and they also have different institutions with appropriate funds for benevolent and charitable purposes likewise incorporated.

In Richmond there are about 30 families, they are now building a Synagogue; they are not (as of yet) incorporated, the number of Men, unmarried, is unknown (to me) although there may be near an hundred altogether, scattered throughout the state, who are (or will become) members of the Congregation.

In Savanah, state of Georgia, there are but few families, yet they assemble at times, and commune with each other in public prayers.

3rd Querie — from the preceeding ... some calculation of the whole Number may be made of those who adhere to the Jewish principles of religion. There are very many in the United States who are only nominal, and few others who are settled in the New England States that are respectable characters both religious and moral. I recur now to the 1st Query...

The religious rites and ceremonies of the Jews throughout the Captivity, are alike, some few have been explained lately, by a Sanhedrin in Paris, differing in some measure to the general acceptance, but the identical Laws remain as they were, previously, only modified in such manner, as to be easier understand and observed. The law of God, as handed down by Moses, is divided into two parts, one relates solely to be practiced in the holy land which it embodied as a Nation, with Temple, Priests, and Levites for the sacrifices and offerings together with the observance of the Sabbatical year, and the Jubilee release. The other extends to all parts of the world, wherever Jews may find themselves such as abstaining from all prohibited creatures (meats, fishes, fowl and reptiles) and from every species of uncleanness in every sense and shape — either living or dead — as may be found in the Levitical laws. Strictly observing the Decalogue, in celebrating the festivals and set times, according to order — which are the Passover, Feast of weeks, Feast of Booths, the 1st of the seventh month as the commencement of the civil year, keeping holy the 10th day of the month as a solemn fast day, a day of expiation and prayer — to atone for their sins and for

the sins of their fathers — as may be found in the liturgy translated and published by David Levy²⁰ and others* — acting consistently with the purest principles of humanity and justice to all Men, whether *home-born* or *stranger* (at this day, I do not think it would be improper according to the idiom of our American languages and principles to render the Hebrew terms, *Native* and *Foreigner*).

In the “Jews Letters to Voltaire” reasons are assigned for not ascertaining the number of Jews in existence and I have observed that the Sanhedrin in France, have calculated on an immense number of whom, they are the constituted Representatives — I have likewise lately read an account in Faber’s²¹ works of some very large body of Jews discovered in the interior parts of India, taken from “the travels of (author’s name forgotten) through the interior parts of India” reference being had to those writers, will, no doubt be gratifying to all who desire to acquire this knowledge.

The Dissertation on the Prophecies by D. Levy²² are ingeniously compiled from various learned writers and his own observations thereon, and render them (at this day) well worth the attention of studious and literary characters. I know of at least one set (3 Vol) in this city, owned by Mr. Aaron Levy²³ — who has some thoughts on getting them published by subscription, and he is not willing to lend them out of the city.

Query 4th and last — which surprises me very much, (the others did not) as the Constitution of the United States as well the Constitution of the State of New York does not disqualify any person from holding an office either of honor or trust on account of his religious principles or tenets, all entitled to equal rights and privileges — the Constitution of Massachusetts State does not allow of equal rights in all cases.

When I first sat down to answer the questions you stated in your letter I thought to have confirmed the whole in half a sheet of paper, but every one thing produces another, and embraced so much that I have been obliged to be this prolix — you will please to observe, that I have generally made use of the 3rd person instead of the 1st and only wrote in the 1st person whenever my opinion was necessary to elucidate some particular occurrence. Should the foregoing prove to be of any advantage to you in your publication, I shall be much gratified to think I could in any wise, contribute towards the accompaniment of a Work coming from the pen of a woman so eminently distinguished as a literary character — but my dear Madam there is one thing which I would wish you to notice (if it can be done with propriety) that the

Justice (or righteousness) of Providence is manifested in the dispersion of His People — for they have never been driven from any one country without finding an Asylum in another and this Country — the United States of America is perhaps the only place where the Jews have not suffered persecution, but rather the reverse, for through the mercies of a benign judge we are encouraged and indulged with every right of citizenship.

Madam

Yours Sincerely,

Gershom Seixas

[*side note] the new moons are celebrated, the feasts of Purim (Vide Esther) and Hanuca [*sic*] (Vide) Maccabees, 9th of Av and 4 other days observed as fast days every year.

Notes

¹ The author wishes to acknowledge with gratitude Professor Jonathan Sarna at Brandeis University for his help in this research, Harvard University's Center for Jewish Studies Silver Fellowship program, and the New England Historical Genealogical Society for generous access to Hannah Adams's archives.

² See Thomas Tweed, "An American Pioneer in the Study of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 60 (Fall 1992): 437-64; Michael Vella, "Theology, Genre, and Gender: The Precarious Place of Hannah Adams in American Literary History," *Early American Literature*, 28 (1993), 21-41; Gene Gleason, "A Mere Woman," *American Heritage*, 24 (Winter, 1972): 80-84; Anita Lebeson, "Hannah Adams and the Jews," *Historia Judaica* 8 (October, 1946): 113-34.

³ Hannah Adams, *Alphabetical Compendium of the Various Sects Which Have Appeared from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Present Day* (Boston, Mass.: B. Edes and Sons, 1784). This was republished in 1992 under the title *A Dictionary of All Religions and Religious Denominations, Classics in Religious Studies Series* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992).

⁴ Hannah Adams, *The History of the Jews from the Destruction of the Temple to the Nineteenth Century* (Boston, Mass.: John Eliot, 1812).

⁵ See Jacob Rader Marcus, "The Handsome Young Priest in the Black Gown; the Personal World of Gershom Seixas," *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 40-41 (1969-1970), 409-67.

⁶ Adams, *The History of the Jews*, v-vi.

⁷ Hannah Adams, *A Concise Account of the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews* (Boston, Mass.: John Eliot, 1816).

⁸ Tweed, 451.

⁹ Adams, *A Concise Account*, I.

¹⁰ For an account of the history of the ASMCJ, see George Berlin, "Joseph S.C.F. Frey, The Jews and Early Nineteenth Century Millenarianism," *Journal of the Early Republic* I (1981), 27-49; Lee Friedman, *Early American Jews* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1934), 96-112.

¹¹ Elias Boudinot, *A Star in the West; or a Humble Attempt to Discover the Long Lost Ten Tribes of Israel, Preparatory to Their Return to Their Beloved City*, Jerusalem (Trenton, N.J.: D. Fenton, S. Hutchinson, and J. Dunham, 1816). Boudinot's work is interestingly similar to Adams's *History* in its combination of great sympathy to a much-maligned people, with an argument for their necessary conversion.

¹² Shalom Goldman, *God's Sacred Tongue: Hebrew and the American Imagination* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 89-94.

¹³ James Adair, *The History of the American Indians* (London: E. and C. Dilly, 1775).

¹⁴ Tweed, 451.

¹⁵ Heinrich Graetz, *The History of the Jews*, vol. 5 (Philadelphia, Pa.: Jewish Publication Society, 1895), 593.

¹⁶ See Rita Hermon-Belot, "The Abbe Gregoire's Program for the Jews: Social Reform and Spiritual Project," in *The Abbe Gregoire and His World*, edited by Jeremy Popkin and Richard Popkin (Boston, Mass.: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000).

¹⁷ David Levi was an English Jew born in 1742 who published a number of works including translations of prayer books, a Hebrew grammar dictionary, and a refutation of Christian missionizing to the Jews. Levi's book on Jewish ritual, which Adams uses is: *A succinct account, of the rites, and ceremonies, of the Jews, as observed by them, in their different dispersions, throughout the world, at this present time. In which, their religious principles, and tenets, are clearly explained: particularly, their doctrine of the resurrection, predestination, and freewill; and the opinion of Doctor Prideaux concerning those tenets, fully investigated, duly considered, and clearly confuted* (London: J. Parsons, 1783).

¹⁸ Probably the Rev. Samuel Miller. In 1794 Rev. Miller declared his intentions to write a history of New York, but apparently no such work was ever produced.

¹⁹ One of those letters went to Luis Moses Gomez, a Sephardic Jew who settled six hundred acres in the Hudson Valley region in 1714 and whose house presently stands as a museum.

²⁰ Seixas is probably referring here to Levi's *Machzor k'minhag Polin* (London: 1794).

²¹ George Stanley Faber, *A general and connected view of the prophecies: relative to the conversion, restoration, and union and future glory of the houses of Judah and Israel: the progress and final overthrow of the antichristian confederacy in the land of Palestine; and the ultimate general diffusion of Christianity* (Boston, Mass.: Andrews and Cummings, 1809)

²² David Levi, *Dissertations on the prophecies of the Old Testament: containing all such prophecies as are applicable to the coming of the Messiah, the restoration of the Jews, and the resurrection of the dead, whether so applied by Jews or Christians* (London: J. Bysh, 1817).

²³ Aaron Levy was born in New York, served in the War of 1812, and became a real estate dealer in upstate New York. Seixas would have had much contact with him because he was president of Shearith Israel from 1803 to 1804.