



**When
Philadelphia was
the Jewish Capital
of America**

Zev Eleff



“In former times the few house keepers that where [sic] settled here being impressed with a sense of Duty to assemble on Sabbaths and Solemn days, to offer up their prayers in Congregation, thereby preserving the mode of Worship and those Ceremonies appertaining to our holy religion and initiating their young offspring therein, that the same might become familiar to them and so be handed down unviolate [sic] to succeeding generations. And in order that they might have a place where in to assemble for that purpose they hired a room in a private house furnished and Decorated it, proper for a Synagogue Altho’ in Miniature, it being Suited to their Numbers and Circumstances; thus they continued many years satisfied and happy in that particular, till the year 1776 when the disturbances in this Country began which caused numbers of our brethren from the different Congregations in America to come with their families to reside here.”

-- Barnard Gratz and Manuel Josephson to Jews of Surinam, 1790





“I am told there is Great and might News with you, at Philadelphia— that the Building of a [Shul] is actually Resolved on, and according to my intelligence, is to be put in Execution with the utmost Vigor. This is news! I cou’d hardly have thought 7 months ago, that the Same would be Talk’d of this 24 Years.”

-- Jacob Henry to Barnard Gratz,
January 7, 1761



JONAS PHILLIPS, 1730-1803
Mrs. Eliza Phillips, 25, Richmond Square,
London, 1776. Original in the
National Portrait Gallery, London.

“The war will make all England bankrupt. The Americans have an army of 100,000 soldiers [literally: "tough guys"], and the English only 25,000 and some ships. The Americans have already made themselves [free] like the States of Holland. The enclosed is a declaration [of independence] of the whole country. How it will end, the blessed God knows. The war does me no damage, thank God!”

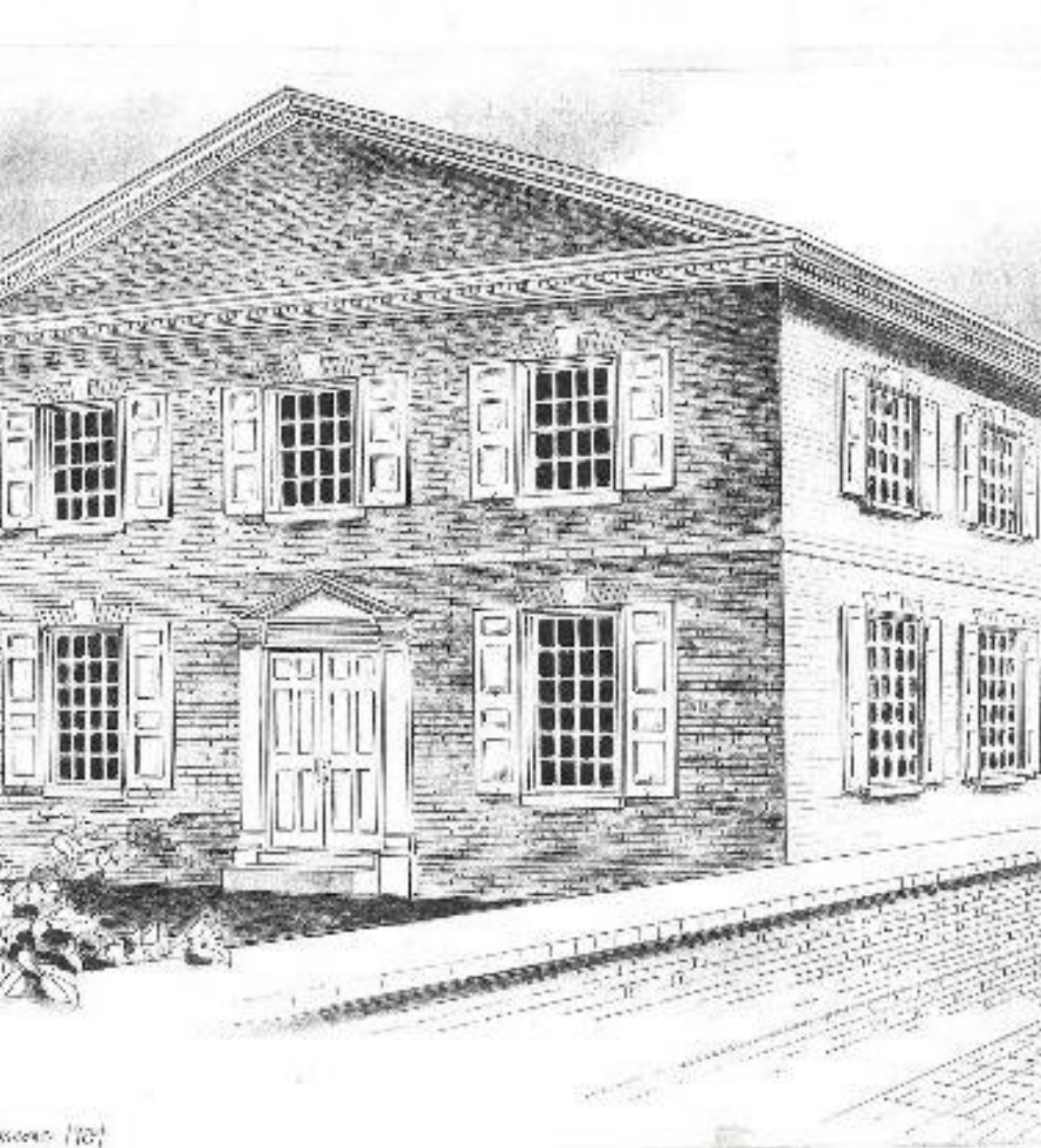
-- Jonas Phillips to Gumpel Samson, July 28, 1776



“A small number of our Brethren, who having during the calamitous [sic] War fled here from different Parts for refuge, in conjunction with those in this city undertook to build a place of Worship, that we might meet to offer up our Prayers to the Holy God of Israel, having hitherto substituted a room for that purpose, from which we were compelled to move by the owner.

Our ability to compleat [sic] the building is not equal to our wishes, from many recent losses, we are under the necessity to ask assistance of our absent Brethren amongst them, we look up to you, & the rest of our Brethren with you, not doubting but you’ll readily contribute to so laudable an undertaking.”

-- Mikveh Israel to Jews of St. Thomas, August 18, 1782



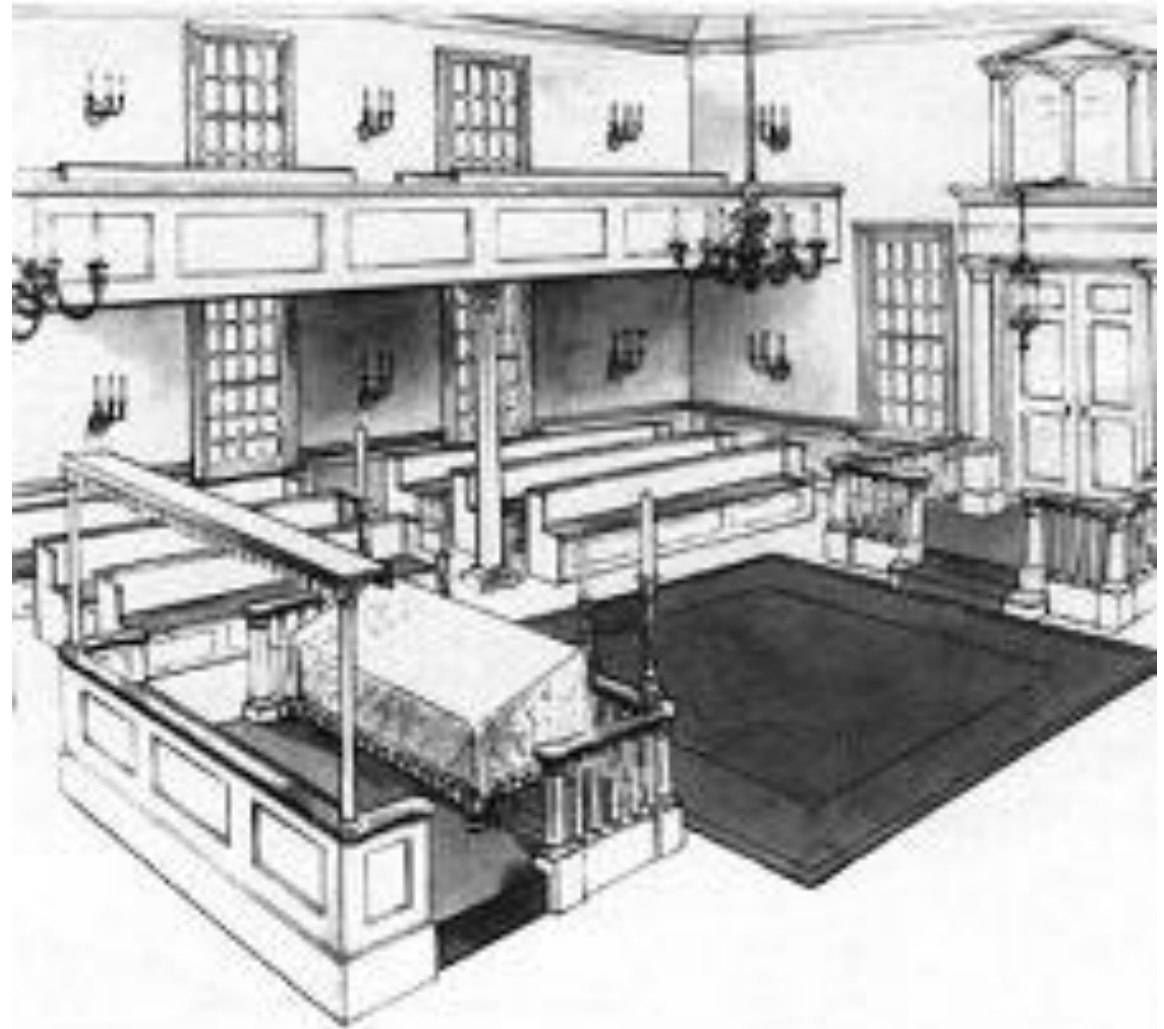
“As we have hitherto congregated according to the custom of other congregations only, but have no fixed rules established by the whole body for its government whereby the rulers hitherto had no right or legal power so to do, and consequently their determinations were not binding on the congregators. We therefore moved that we may now enter into the following resolution, vizt.:

That we, the subscribers now met, agree that in order to promote our holy religion and establish a proper congregation in this city, do hereby solemnly form ourselves into a congregation to be known and distinguished by the name of Mikve Israel in the city of Philadelphia. And we, whose names are hereunto subscribed, do bind ourselves one to the other that we will assist if required to form a constitution and rules for the good government of the congregation and strictly abide by the same.”

-- Minute Book, Mikveh Israel, March 24, 1782

Mikveh Israel Adjunta, 1782

- Benjamin Seixas, South Carolina
- Hayman Levy, New York
- Jonas Phillips, Philadelphia
- Simon Nathan, French North America
- Barnard Gratz, Philadelphia





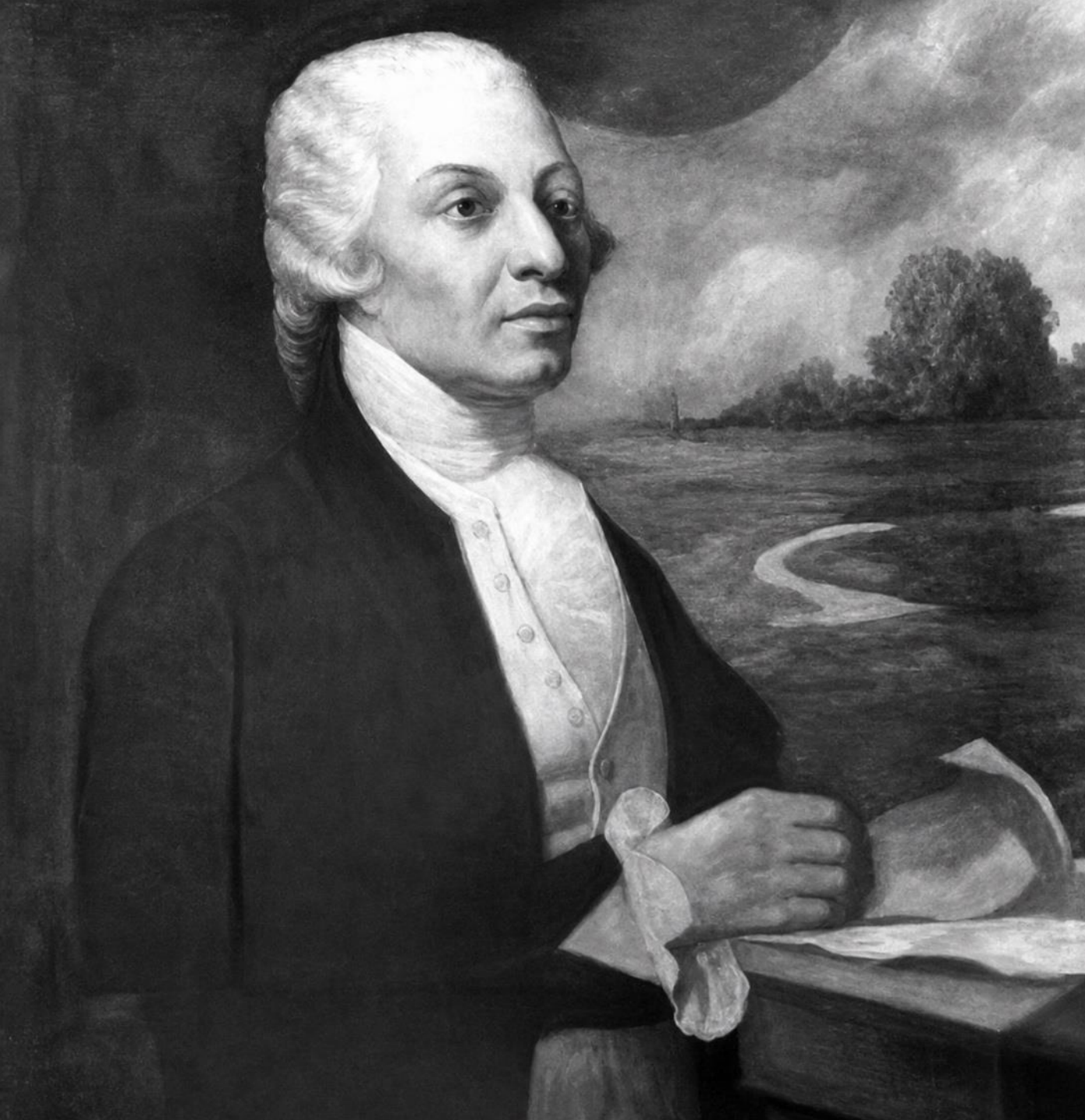
“O Great, tremendous, mighty, high, & Exalted King of Israel, Lord of Hosts. He who dispenseth Safety unto Kings, and Dominion unto princes, whose Kingdom is an Everlasting Kingdom ; He that Redeemeth, delivereth, and multiplieth his mercies for their benefit; He that is near to all those that call upon him, He that answereth those that fear him, when called on in time of their distress. May he bless, guard, preserve, assist, shield, Save, supremely Exalt, and aggrandize to a high degree His Excellency the President, & the Honble Delegates of the United States of America, in Congress Assembled; His Excellency George Washington, Capt. Genl. & Commander in Chief of the Federal Army of these States, His Excellency the President, the Honble the Executive Council, & Members of the General Assembly of this Commonwealth, and all Kings & Potentates, in alliance with North America.”

-- Gershom Mendes Seixas, “Prayer for Peace,”
September 13, 1782

“On Motion of Mr. Simon Nathan second by Mr. Mordecai M. Mordecai finding that the Congregation are few in Numbers, **and some of them going away** that on Adjunta be Elected in Addition to the two now serving that any two adjunta with the Parnas be a Corum [Quorum] to proceed to business the Votes being taken it appearing an Equal Member the Parnas gave Vote against the Motion on account that it appears to him that it would break the Constitution now Erecting—”

-- Mikveh Israel Board and Congregational Minutes, March 30, 1783





“I am a Jew; it is my own nation; I do not despair that we shall obtain every other privilege that we aspire to enjoy along with our fellow-citizens.”

-- “A Jew Broker,” *Independent Gazetteer*, March 13, 1784



“I the subscriber being one of the people called Jews of the City of Philadelphia, a people scattered and dispersed among all nations do behold with Concern that among the laws in the Constitution of Pennsylvania their [sic] is a Clause Sect. 10 to viz—I do believe in one God the Creator and governour of the universe the Rewarder of the good and the punisher of the wicked—and I do acknowledge the scriptures of the old and New testement [sic] to be given by a devine [sic] inspiration—to swear and believe that the new testement [sic] was given by devine [sic] inspiration is absolutly [sic] against the Religious principle of a Jew. and is against his Conscience to take any such oath—By the above law a Jew is deprived of holding any publick office or place of Government which is a Contridectory [sic] to the bill of Right Sect 2. viz”

-- Jonas Phillips to the Constitutional Convention, September 7, 1787



“That all men have a natural and unalienable Right To worship almighty God according to the dectates [sic] of their own Conscience and understanding, and that no man aught or of Right can be Compelled to attend any Relegious [sic] Worship or Erect or support any place of worship or Maintain any minister contrary to or against his own free will and Consent nor Can any man who acknowledges the being of a God be Justly deprived or abridged of any Civil Right as a Citizen on account of his Religious sentiments or peculiar mode of Religious Worship, and that no authority Can or aught to be vested in or assumed by any power what ever that shall in any Case interfere or in any manner Controul the Right of Conscience in the free Exercise of Religious Worship

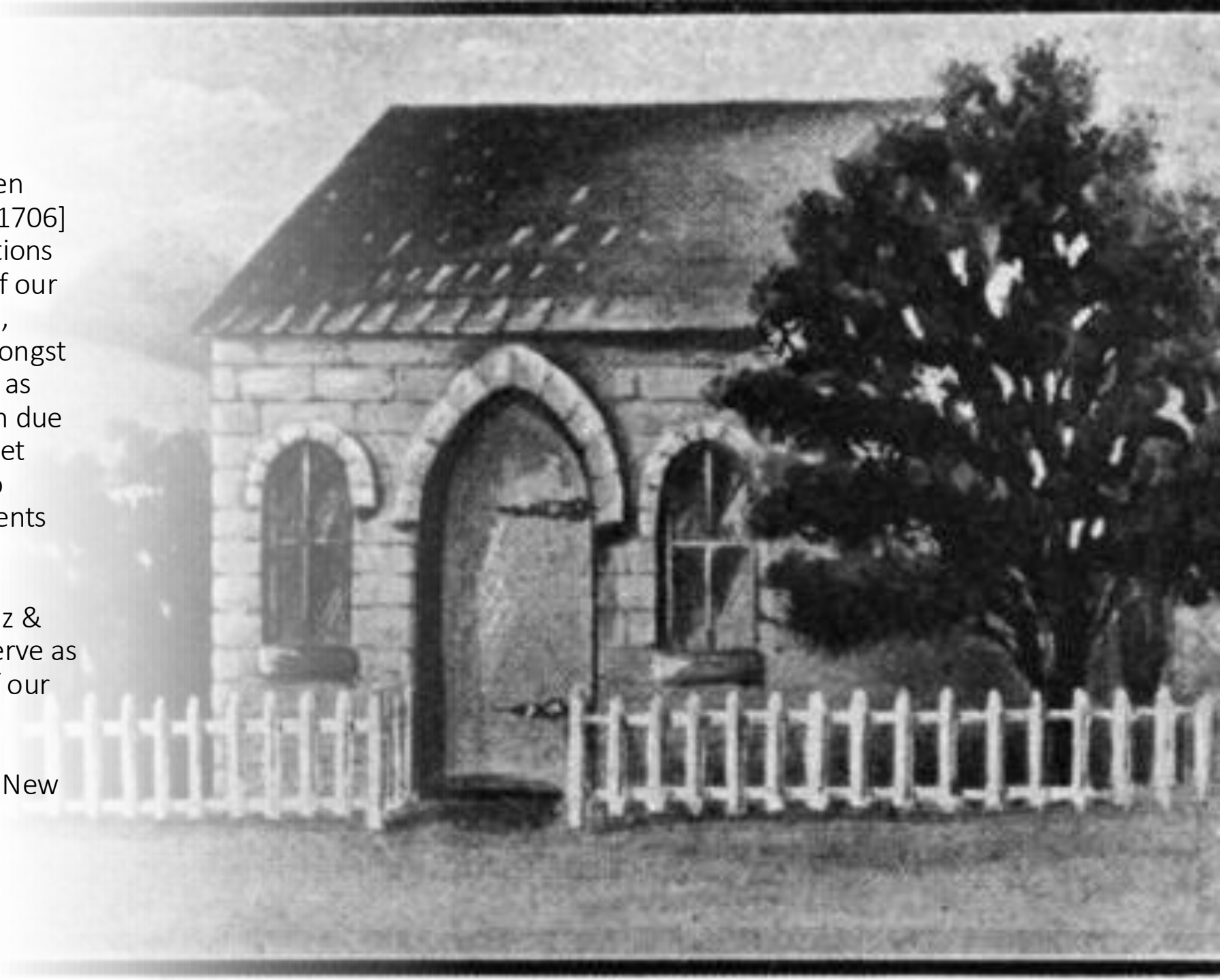
It is well known among all the Citizens of the 13 united States that the Jews have been true and faithful whigs, and during the late Contest with England they have been foremost in aiding and assisting the States with their lives and fortunes, they have supported the Cause, have bravely faught and bleed for liberty which they Can not Enjoy—”

-- Jonas Phillips to the Constitutional Convention, September 7, 1787

“In the Name of the Blessed God Amen
Whereas on or about the Year 5466 [1706]
certain wholesome Rules and Restrictions
have been made by the then Elders of our
Holy Congregation, to Preserve Peace,
tranquility and good Government amongst
ym [them] and those after them, and as
they have Been neglected to be put in due
force for some time past, we now meet
with common consent and Resolve to
Revive the same with some amendments
and additions, which are as follows.

Firstly There shall be elected as Parnaz &
Two Hatanim, which shall Like wise serve as
assistants for ye good Government of our
Holy Congregation ...”

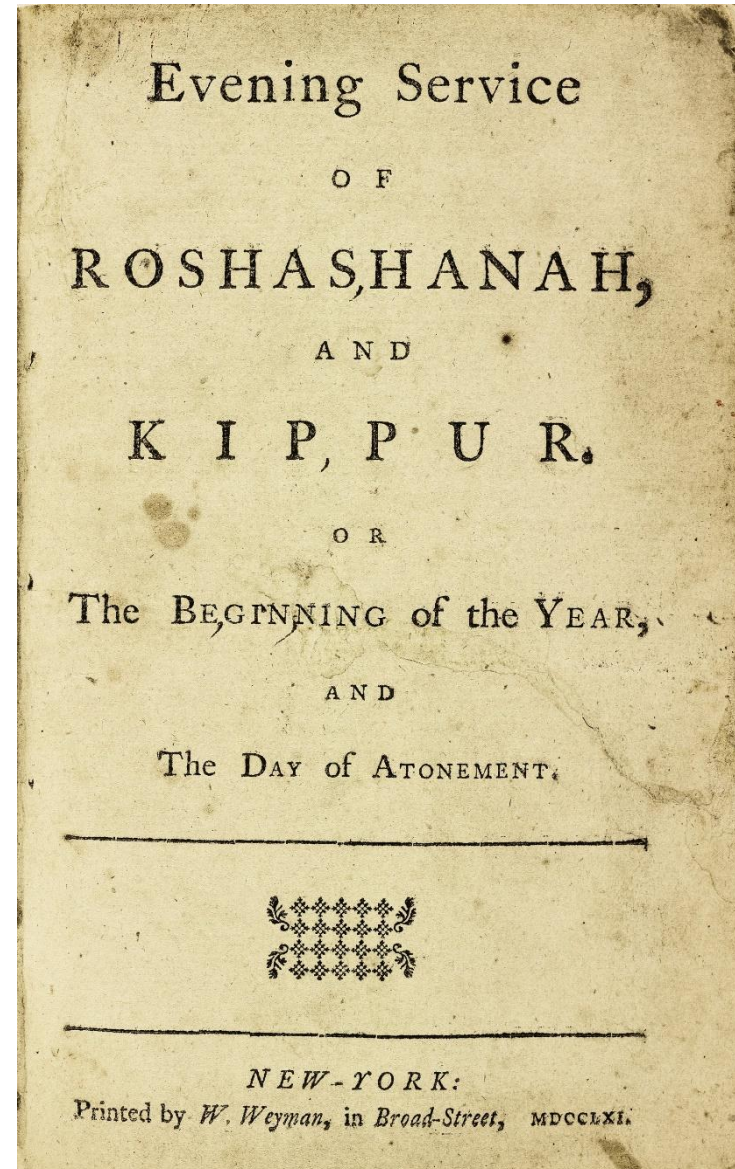
-- Constitution of K.K. Shearith Israel, New
York, 1728

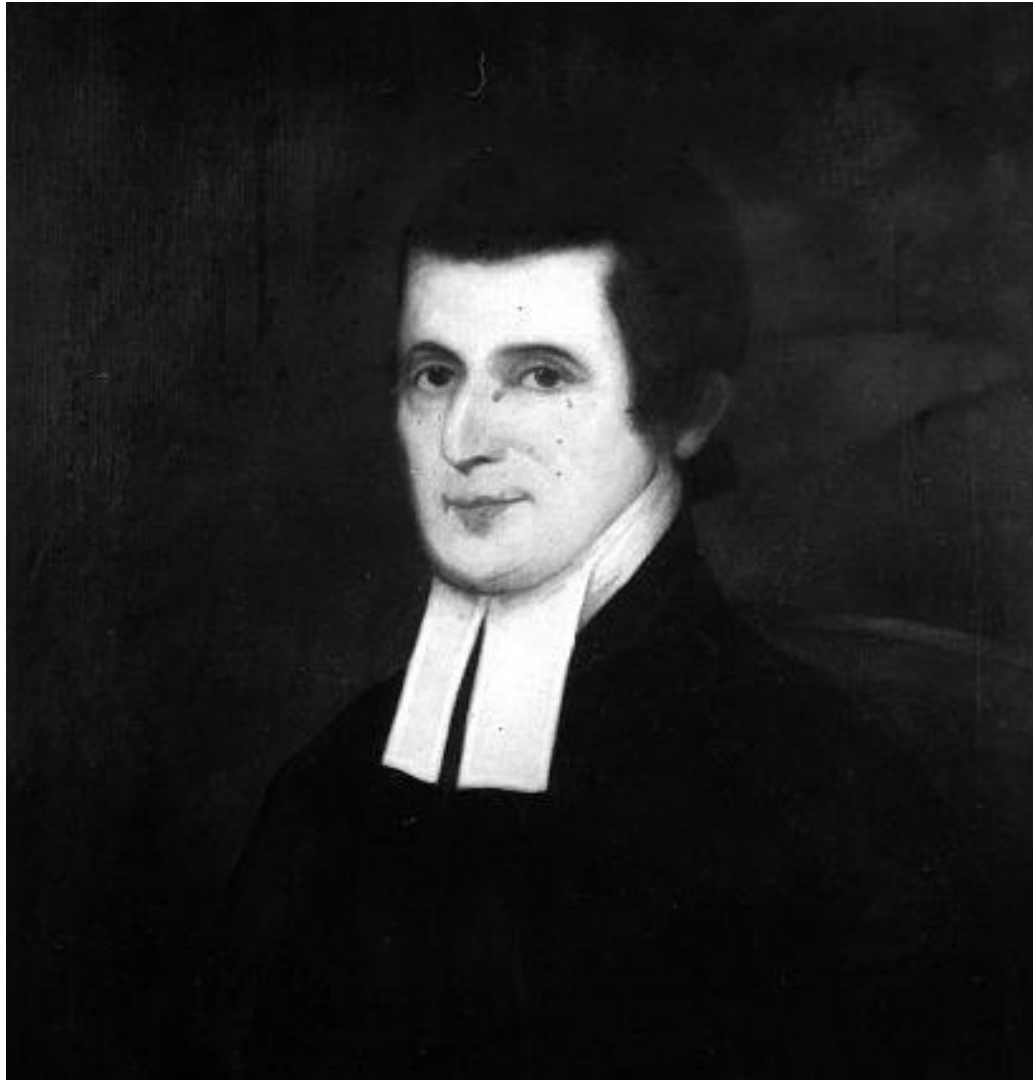


“On the 20th day of SHEBAT 5521 the YEHIDIM of the K.K. were assembled and by plurality of votes Elected the following five persons, viz: Jacob Franks, Isaac Gomez, Myer Myers, Hayman Levy and Sampson Simson assistants to the PARNASIM, which office they accepted, and with the authority given them by the said YECHIDIM do Institute the following HASCAMOTH.

1. In conjunction with the PARNASIM they are to collect and Form such Laws and Rules as may be necessary for the benefit and tranquility of the Congregation. For which purpose they are to meet on the first day of every Month, or when required by the Parnasim. Sabbath and Festivals excepted.”

-- Constitution of K.K. Shearith Israel, New York, 1761





“We, the members of the K.K. Shearith Israel, met this day by a legal summons from the junta published in the synagogue two Sabbath days successively, do by these present in the most solemn manner, in the presence of the Almighty and of each other, agree to form such rules to serve for and be considered as a constitution, and to accede to such other institutions, rules, and regulations as may be conducive to the general good of this congregation ...

Whereas in free states all power originates and is derived from the people, who always retain every right necessary for their well being individually, and, for the better ascertaining those rights with more precision and explicitly, frequently form a declaration or bill of those rights. In like manner the individuals of every society in such state are entitled to and retain their several rights, which ought to be preserved inviolate.

Therefore we, the professors of the Divine Laws, members of this holy congregation of Shearith Israel, in the city of New York, conceive it our duty to make this declaration of our rights and privileges.

First, of Jews in general. That every free person professing the Jewish religion and who lives according to its holy precepts, is entitled to worship the God of Israel in the synagogue, and by purchase or gift to have a seat therein, and to be treated in all respect as a brother, and as such a subject of every fraternal duty.”

-- Constitution and Bylaws of K.K. Shearith Israel, New York, 1790

-- Constitution of Congregation Beth Shalome, Richmond, 1789

"New moon of Elul, 5549, August 24, 1789

We, the subscribers of the Israelite religion residents in this place, desirous of promoting the divine worship which, by the blessing of God, has been transmitted by our ancestors, have this day agreed to form ourselves into a society for the better effecting the said laudable purpose, to be known and distinguished in Israel by the name of Beth Shalom.

It is necessary that in all societies that certain rules and regulations be made for the government for the same as tend well to the proper decorum in a place dedicated to the worship of the Almighty God, peace and friendship among the same. We do, therefore, agree that the following rules be adopted and be continued in force until a majority of the congregation propose to alter or amend the same.

1. Every free man residing in this city for the term of three months, of the age of 21 years and who congregates with us, shall be a yahid of the kehilla and entitled to every right and privilege of the same."



“We, whose names are hereto subscribed, electors of the Hebrew Congregation of the City of Philadelphia, and citizens of the State of Pennsylvania, do hereby publish and declare, that we have formed ourselves into a body corporate by the name, style and title of Kaal, Kadosh, Mickve, Israel, under the articles and conditions following, to wit ...”

-- Constitution of K.K. Mikveh Israel, Philadelphia, 1824

