Kehila Kedosha Janina
Synagogue and Museum

June 2024 E-Newsletter

Dear Friends of Kehila Kedosha Janina,

Last week, Jews around the world celebrated the holiday of Shavuot, the receiving of the Torah. This newsletter celebrates Shavuot and highlights a popular recipe. The question of why we eat dairy has been debated over the centuries. One interesting answer is "Torah is likened to milk, as the verse says, "Like honey and milk [the Torah] lies under your tongue" (Song of Songs 4:11). Just as milk has the ability to fully sustain the body of a human being (i.e. a nursing baby), so too the Torah provides all the "spiritual nourishment" necessary for the human soul."

We are also happy to celebrate the beginning of summer. The Association of Friends of Greek Jewry is bringing their annual tour group to Greece, and the Greek Jewish & Sephardic Young Professionals Network will bring another group of young community members across Greece and the Balkans to trace the roots of our ancestors. We wish them safe travels, Καλό ταξίδι, and wish everyone a wonderful summer.

This newsletter is sponsored by the family of Rose Eskononts in honor of her 90th birthday on July 21st.
If you wish to sponsor a newsletter, contact us at museum@kkjsm.org.

This newsletter, our 183rd will, as always, cover news regarding Kehila Kedosha Janina and news concerning Greek Jewry. We hope you find our newsletter interesting. Your feedback is of utmost importance to us. If you missed previous issues, they can be accessed on our website www.kkjsm.org.

We now reach thousands of households worldwide. What an accomplishment for a little synagogue on the Lower East Side of New York City. Our community of 'friends' continually grow with each newsletter. If you know others who wish to be part of this ever-growing network, please have them contact us at museum@kkjsm.org

We are open for Shabbat every Saturday morning starting at 9:30am. Please email amarcus@kkjsm.org if you would like to attend, and enjoy a traditional Greek kiddush lunch after services. Our Museum is open every Sunday from 11am-4pm. If you wish to sponsor a newsletter, contact us at museum@kkjsm.org.

Simchas

On June 20th, Shirlee Cabellis Paganetti will be celebrating her 94th birthday. This woman never ages!

Mazal tov to our youngest board member Andrew Marcus on his recent graduation from CUNY Hunter College with a Master's Degree in Urban Planning!

Passings

Nathen (Nat) Cantos passed away on May 7, 2024, at the age of 99. Nat was predeceased by his wife, Shirley, who passed in 2009. He is survived by his son, Eric (Ellen) his daughter, Amy, and his beloved sister Esther, Krichevsky, his grandchildren, Andrew, Michael, Joshua, Emily and Rebecca. Nat was so proud of his Romaniote ancestry.

On May 26th, Morris (Zino) Gabrielides passed away, at the age of 91, leaving behind his wife Mae (Matilda), his son, Michael Gabriel, his daughter, Esther, and granddaughter, Elizabeth. His passing will be mourned by family and friends around the world.

We mourn the passing of Matilda Koen-Sarano, an extraordinary Sephardic Community leader and Ladino scholar in Israel. Matilda was a tireless advocate for her Sephardic heritage and Ladino language education. She authored more than 20 books, including one of the highest regarded Ladino-Hebrew dictionaries ever published. She was born in Milan, Italy to Sephardic parents from Western Turkey in 1939. The family went into hiding in the Italian mountains during the Nazi occupation of northern Italy, surviving through the War. After making Aliyah in 1960, Matilda found her passion for Ladino scholarship and education, becoming one of the leading Ladino educators in Israel and the diaspora, going on to teach University courses on the language and high-level seminars for other Ladino language instructors. Her passing is a loss for Sepharadim around the world.

Visitors to Kehila Kedosha Janina

May was one of our busiest months yet, with more 10,000 coming to our annual Greek Jewish Festival (see festival photos below). In addition, we were honored to welcome dignitaries from Israel whose families have roots in Greece, including Yaakov Hagoel, Chairman of the Executive of the World Zionist Organization, who came for a special visit and tour of our synagogue and museum. We also welcomed the newly appointed Consul General of Israel in New York, Ofir Akunis, who spoke during our Greek Jewish Festival and led a communal song of Am Yisrael Chai. These were particularly special experiences as Yaakov Hagoel's family is originally from Salonika, Kavala, and Izmir, and Ofir Akunis' family is also originally from Salonika. We even danced together at the Israel Day Parade as well (see Israeli Day Parade photos below).

Yaakov Hagoel, Chairman of the Executive of the World Zionist Organization

Ofir Akunis, Consul General of Israel in New York

Past Events at Kehila Kedosha Janina

Greek Jewish Festival

Thank you to everyone who joined us for an extraordinary day for our ninth annual Greek Jewish Festival! More than 10,000 people joined us on the Lower East Side, enjoying over 1,400 borekas, 1,000 Greek salads, live dancing, amazing music, synagogue & museum tours, and much more. It was truly a family and community reunion. Special thank you to all our sponsors, community partners, and committed volunteers who make this event possible. Check out more photos online **Here** and highlight videos **Here** and **Here**.

On June 2nd KKJ was proud to participate in the **Israel Day Parade** to show our strong support for the State of Israel. We proudly marched on our own community float representing our Romaniote & Sephardic community's support for Israel, and even danced to live Greek and Israeli music thanks to Avram Pengas and the Noga Group! Thank you to all who joined for this incredible experience, and we pray every day for the release of all the hostages and know that Am Yisrael Hai!

On June 6th we were honored to welcome **Dr. Leon Saltiel** who gave a moving presentation on the Holocaust in Thessaloniki, highlighting his research on rediscovered letters written by Jewish mothers to their sons during the Holocaust, as included in his moving book "Do Not Forget Me." Watch his presentation **Here.**

On May 30th we hosted a special program on Persian Jewish music and liturgy and in partnership with Centro Primo Levi. Scholar **Alan Niku** covered the musical traditions of the Jews of Iran and surrounding countries, examining their music and liturgy, past and present, and traveling through the historical, cultural and aural geography that connects it to Byzantine and Italian cultures. This presentation was part of Centro Primo Levi's work on Italian Chazanut and the Thesaurus of Italian Jewish Music created by the Centro Internazionale Leo Levi. Learn more **Here**.

On May 5th we commemorated **Yom HaShoah** by pausing to remember all those who perished in the Holocaust. Every year we light candles for each community from Greece, as well as six candles for the six million we lost. This year we especially remember those communities from Greece who perished 80 years ago, including Ioannina. Thank you to everyone who joined us. We stand together to say we will Never Forget.

Upcoming Events at Kehila Kedosha Janina

Hy Genee Award Honoring Chaim Kofinas – June 22 at 9:30am

Join us on Saturday morning June 22 for a special Shabbat service when we will honor Chaim Kofinas with the Hy Genee Legacy Award. The Hy Genee Legacy Award was established by the KKJ Board of Trustees to acknowledge individuals who, over a long period of time, have preserved Hy's legacy by going above and beyond to ensure the survival and vibrancy of Kehila Kedosha Janina Synagogue and Museum. Join us as we recognize all that Chaim has contributed to our community. Services will begin at 9:30am followed by a traditional kiddush lunch. Please RSVP to Amarcus@kkjsm.org

Greek Jewish & Sephardic Young Professionals Network

Κοινότητα קהילה Komunita

JOIN US FOR A

POOL PARTY & BBQ

WEDNESDAY JUNE 19 AT 5PM

DOWNTOWN BROOKLYN ROOFTOP

CELEBRATE THE START OF SUMMER, ENJOY FOOD AND DRINKS, AND MEET OTHER YOUNG PEOPLE FROM OUR COMMUNITY

$20 PER PERSON

RSVP TO GREEKJEWISHYPN@GMAIL.COM

ADDRESS PROVIDED WITH RSVP
OPEN TO YOUNG ADULTS
IN THEIR 20S AND 30S

Israeli Diplomacy in Europe & Beyond

A Special Discussion with Israeli Deputy Consul General Tsach Saar

Join young professionals from our Sephardic & Romaniote community for an intimate conversation with Tsach Saar over drinks and bites.

Before serving in New York, Saar served as Deputy Ambassador of Israel in Greece, as well as previous positions in Berlin and Albania. He also spent four years as an advisor in the Knesset. Born in Tel Aviv in 1984, Saar received his B.A. in Political Science & Communication from Tel Aviv University and earned an M.A. in Law from Bar-Ilan University. Proficient in Hebrew, English, and German, he is also a skilled DJ who enjoys playing house music.

Wednesday June 26 at 7pm

Open to young adults in their 20s and 30s

Downtown Manhattan Location
Provided with RSVP

RSVP to GreekJewishYPN@gmail.com

This Newsletter is sponsored by the family of Rose Eskononts in anticipation of her 90th birthday on July 21, 2024.

Rose has been President of the Sisterhood of Janina for over 20 years, probably during its most challenging periods, when membership dwindled and it was more difficult to engage the younger generation. Rose never gave up, humbled by the responsibilities she had taken on. The Sisterhood of Janina is a living testimony of the success of the first experiment in America of an organization of Judeo/Greek women of Janina parentage, whose sole purpose was to practice benevolence and charity to their co-religionists in the U.S., those living in Greece and other foreign lands. This group was established in 1932 under the supervision of Leon Colchamiro, who saw the need for philanthropic work as an adjunct to the Kehila Kedosha Janina.

Membership was solicited membership by making personal visits, door-to-door each month, collecting the 25 cents membership dues. During this brief visit, a chat was enjoyed over the traditional serving of home-made jelly compote and cup of "Turkish" coffee. In time, the Sisterhood of Janina became a Charter Member of The Sephardic Home for the Aged during the presidency of Ray W. Nachman.

In 1991 the Sisterhood learned of the plight of 37 Albanians (originally from Ioannina, Greece) seeking to flee Albania. The Sisterhood accepted the responsibility and challenge of creating a safe haven for these people. Through fund-raising efforts and help from some other sources, these Albanian Jews were brought to the United States and settled in Brooklyn.

Today, Sisterhood has broadened its membership scope. They are no longer purely a Judeo-Greek Sisterhood, but an amalgamation of Jewish women with one united philosophy, that of philanthropy. The Sisterhood has given generously to a multitude of organizations, including The Sephardic Home for the Aged and Kehila Kedosha Janina, in addition to helping with financial needs of the Jewish Community of Ioannina.

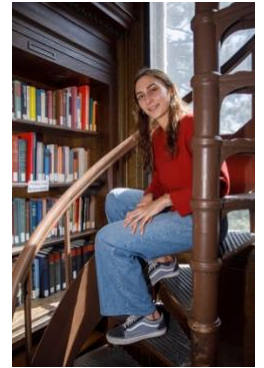
Rose was born into a traditional Sephardic family, both her mother, Dora Marash and her father, Solomon Capon born in Thessaloniki, and immigrating to the USA at the beginning of the 20th century.

Rose and Murray Eskononts

Rose in 1934

News of Interest from Around the World

Tracing Largely Forgotten History of Major Community: Julia Tellides explored shifts, upheavals of Thessaloniki between two wars Full article Here by Christy DeSmith, Harvard Staff Writer



Commencement 2024 series
A collection of stories covering Harvard University's 373rd Commencement.

Julia Tellides discovered the rich Jewish heritage of Thessaloniki two years ago on a Harvard Summer School Study Abroad program.

"It was the first time I heard about there being a large Jewish community anywhere in Greece," said the graduating senior, a joint history and classics concentrator. "I thought, why have I never heard about this before? If anyone should know about this history, it's me."

Tellides, who grew up in New Haven, Connecticut, with a Greek father and Jewish mother, went on to devote her senior thesis to the city's politically active Jewish residents during a period of upheaval in the early 20th century. Once home to the largest Sephardic Jewish population in Europe, Thessaloniki (traditionally known as Salonica or Salonika) proved a gold mine of Jewish culture and resistance, with Tellides surfacing new insights on the community's struggle for survival.

"For an undergraduate to have gone into such depth, and with such originality, is remarkable," said Tellides' thesis adviser Derek Penslar, the William Lee Frost Professor of Jewish History and director of Harvard's Center for Jewish Studies.

Greece's second-largest city, situated 300 miles north of Athens on the Aegean Sea, once served as an economic and cultural crossroads. "It was one of the most important ports in the Ottoman Empire," Tellides explained. It was also a melting pot where Jews, Muslims, and Christians coexisted in relative peace.

That changed when the Greek government took control in the early 20th century, with Thessaloniki changing from "a multicultural, multireligious empire to a Christian nation-state," said Tellides, whose second thesis adviser was Paul J. Kosmin, the Philip J. King Professor of Ancient History.

According to a 1913 census, the Jewish population in Thessaloniki numbered around 90,000. Tellides' scholarship focused on the community's activism in the years between World Wars I and II, with Jewish residents organizing in opposition to rising antisemitism and discriminatory public policy. One example is a 1924 mandate for all businesses to remain closed on Sundays.

"Other historians have acknowledged the significance of the Sunday closing law — if Jews observed the Sabbath they effectively lost a day of work, which made it very hard to make a living," Penslar noted. "Julia's original contribution was depicting how the Jewish community reacted to the crisis, how they interceded with the Greek government, and even more interestingly how they interceded with international organizations in the spirit of the Minority Rights Treaties created after World War I."

Tellides, a history lover from childhood, also examined a moment in the 1930s when the Greek government sought to take over the city's vast Jewish cemetery, with more than 350,000 graves dating as far back as the Roman era. "They wanted to build a university campus on top of it," she said.

With support from Harvard's Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies, Center for Jewish Studies, and Department of the Classics, the Leverett House resident traveled to Thessaloniki last summer to conduct archival research and explore the city. But Tellides, who bolstered her Greek skills with coursework at Harvard,

quickly found herself unable to decipher materials written in Ladino, a Romance language developed by Sephardic Jews expelled from Spain in the late 15th century.
"Many of these spaces commemorate the community's death rather than its life."

"What I read instead was their correspondence with international Jewish organizations," shared Tellides, who plans to teach English to kindergarteners in Athens following graduation. "They were desperately trying to overturn these laws through diplomatic channels, political pressure — anything they could possibly do."

As Tellides walked the streets of Thessaloniki, she found little that celebrated the city's Jewish heritage. All that exists are a couple of Holocaust memorials, two surviving synagogues, and a small but impressive Jewish museum.

"Many of these spaces commemorate the community's death rather than its life," she writes in her thesis before calling for more memorials to the lasting influence of Jewish residents.

One thing the city has in abundance are vestiges of the ancient Jewish cemetery, which was in fact dismantled during the Holocaust. "They used the tombstones to rebuild after World War II," Tellides said. "They're built into landscaping walls and parks. One of the biggest churches has Hebrew inscriptions in its floor."

That harrowing chapter wasn't a focus for Tellides, but it was impossible to set aside entirely. Thousands of Jews had already left Thessaloniki by the 1940s. During Nazi occupation, about 96 percent of the remaining population was deported and killed in concentration camps.

"So much is gone. Not only in terms of the amount of people killed, but all their synagogues, communal centers, and neighborhoods — everything was confiscated or actively destroyed during World War II."

"So much is gone," Tellides said. "Not only in terms of the amount of people killed, but all their synagogues, communal centers, and neighborhoods — everything was confiscated or actively destroyed during World War II."

For Tellides, the scale of loss made it all the more important to focus on the interwar period. "It's really inspiring, but also difficult to understand how hard they were working to save their community," she said.

"The thesis is a case study of the failure of the Minority Rights system of the interwar era," Penslar observed. "Julia catalogs and analyzes Jewish activism and agency in Thessaloniki in ways that go well beyond existing scholarly literature on the subject."

Columbia's Jewish Commencement

In 1800, Sampson Simson delivered a history lesson in Hebrew about the deep-rootedness of New York City's Jews to the trustees of Columbia College. Full article by Michael Hoberman Here

Whether or not Sampson Simson felt out of his element, his commencement oration asked the audience to grant him that sort of leeway. "I am very young," he said, quoting Elihu's repudiation of Job's comforters, "and you are very old, wherefore I was afraid & durst not show my opinion." The date was June 21, 1800, and Simson, a 21-year-old Jew who had just completed his studies at Columbia College, stood at the rostrum of St. Paul's Church, in lower Manhattan. Like Elihu, who had bitten his tongue before daring to weigh in on the subject of Job's misfortunes, Simson had been waiting for the opportunity to speak on a subject of great importance. Here, in one of the nation's most storied and elegant Christian landmarks, and before an almost entirely Anglican audience, he was poised to communicate a history lesson. The subject of his talk was the origin, genealogy, and national significance of New York Jews. The language in which he delivered it was Hebrew.

Samson Simpson's 1800 Columbia commencement oration was the earliest public assertion of Jewish belonging and longevity in the nation's largest city. A hundred and fifty years after their first arrival there, in their own language, the city's Jews were proclaiming New York as the birthplace of American Jewry.

Simson had not written the speech himself, and the Hebrew words probably did not roll off his tongue. Gershom Mendes Seixas, his Hebrew teacher since boyhood and the hazan of Shearith Israel, the city's only synagogue at that time, had prepared his script. The graduate probably understood enough Hebrew to appreciate the gist and comprehend the import of what he was saying, which was that being a guest at St. Paul's did not equate to being a foreigner in the city. Sampson Simson's German-born grandfather Joseph, 101 years old when he died in 1787, had come to North America in 1718. Rebecca Isaacks Simson, his grandmother, had been born in New Jersey near the turn of the 18th century. As Jacob Rader Marcus noted in 1968, Sampson Simson's Columbia commencement oration comprised "the first evidence of communal self-awareness among American Jews." After a century and a half of continuous presence in the city, New York Jews were finally taking stock of their history and telling their story, both to themselves and the wider world.

Gershom Mendes Seixas' Portuguese-born father, Isaac, had first come to the city in the 1730s. His mother, Rachel Franks Levy, was the daughter of one of New York's most prominent Jewish merchants, Moses Raphael Levy, who had been made a freeman in the city in 1695. In his own youth, Gershom Mendes Seixas had not only witnessed the pivotal events of 1776 but been an active participant in them. He had taken a firm stand in the cause of American independence, choosing to vacate the synagogue ahead of the British invasion of Manhattan to avoid being compelled to take a loyalty oath to King George III. According to family lore, he was among the dozen or so members of the New York clergy who attended George Washington's inauguration in 1789. In the years following the achievement of American independence and nationhood, Seixas had been an outspoken advocate for republicanism.

The occasion for Sampson Simson's oration was the commencement of Columbia College's 1799/1800 academic year, an event that coincided with a trustees' meeting. The ceremony had begun with a procession from the Columbia campus, which was located at the corner of Church and Barclay streets, to St. Paul's, northward along Broadway by way of Robinson Street. Its participants included all of the varied constituencies typical at such an occasion—medical students, undergraduates, degree recipients, alumni, faculty members, trustees, and assorted dignitaries and "strangers of distinction."

Most of the day's featured speakers delivered their remarks in English, but a handful of the honorees, in accordance with what was then common practice at American colleges, had prepared formal addresses in the ancient languages of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. The study of Hebrew in particular had a venerable history at the college. Only weeks ahead of the 1800 commencement, William Samuel Johnson, himself an amateur Hebraist and also the son of one of the foremost Hebrew scholars in America, had retired his post as Columbia's president. As Shalom Goldman notes, it was "ironic" that Johnson had left Columbia before he had the chance to listen to the June 1800 commencement exercises, as "he might have been among the few" in attendance that day "to understand the Hebrew oration." The subjects of the day's other orations (there were 15 in total) varied widely. Samuel Harris, who hailed from Brooklyn, delivered a speech (contents unknown) "on negro slavery." Robert S. Livingston, a Manhattanite, offered a timely "comparison between Julius Caesar and Napoleon."

As communicative events, the orations written in the classical languages could only speak on a symbolic level to the majority of their audience members, who did not understand Greek or Latin, much less Hebrew. Fortunately for the speaker and his teacher, the trustees and others in attendance would have grasped at least two of the salient details. First, Sampson Simson was known to be a Jew and the first member of his faith to be matriculated, and now graduated, at Columbia. Second, the matter-of-fact title of his speech imparted its content clearly enough: "Historical traits of the Jews, from their first settlement in North America."

Simson's oration began with an expression of thanks to God, who, as Seixas wrote, "hath called generations (into existence) from the beginning." After passing through the requisite greetings to the audience, expressions of gratitude to his teachers and fellow students, and qualifications, the speaker announced his particular interest in his people's history in New York. If he were a more erudite man and a more thoroughly trained religious scholar, he said, he might have given more attention to strictly religious matters. "The tongue of the learned the Lord hath not given unto me," he noted, reminding his listeners that he was, after all, only 20 years old. In preparation for giving the speech, he said, he had asked himself: "In what manner shall I open my mouth before so great—so respectable an audience?" The answer—the entire oration's "topic sentence," if you will—stated the facts plainly. "Therefore," the speaker says, "I have Chosen to inform you in a concise manner of what which my Ancestors and Predecessors have met in this country." From this point on, all the way to the oration's salutatory remarks, the primary subject of Simson's remarks didn't change.

Superficially, Simpson's oration resonated with other histories of New York (the first of which was published in 1757 by the Loyalist leader William Smith Jr.). "At the time [that Jews first came]," the oration read, "this State was under the Dominion of Holland." Where other New York historians, beginning with Smith, devoted deliberate attention to the turnover that occurred in 1664, when the English deposed Peter Stuyvesant and renamed the city New York, however, Seixas passed right over the subject of imperial history and naval rivalries. Instead, he highlighted the fact that Jews were on hand during both eras. From the perspective of the city's Jewish population, the Dutch and English phases of the city's history were of a piece. He focused instead on the history of Jewish arrivals.

Gershom Mendes Seixas, circa 1784

Like their biblical predecessors arriving for the first time in the land of Israel. New York's earliest Jewish settlers had come there in hopes of improving the circumstances of their lives. Besides the fact that the Dutch and English settlers who had preceded them treated them kindly, one of the things that New York had going for it had been its geography. "The land being spacious [extensive]," the oration read, "they settled in this City,—near the sea coast [harbor] and entered into trade." The Jews who came to New York weren't interlopers. They had as much of a stake in the city's future as its non-Jewish inhabitants did.

Seixas avoided naming names and seemed indifferent to the question of where in Europe the city's first Jews had originated. In one telling instance, however, he relayed the story of a single family:

About one hundred fifty years past, an Israelite with his Wife and four Daughters Natives of the City of Amsterdam arrived here, they had not been settled a long while when the Man died, and the Woman was left with her four Daughters, they (the Daughters) married—After their Father's death, and from them we have many respectable families settled throughout the United States of America. None of the currently available genealogies of early New York Jews offer insight into who this native of Amsterdam and his daughters might have been. Resolving that mystery isn't a prerequisite to our appreciation of the story's powerful symbolism, however.

In referring to the father, mother, and four daughters as individuals, even though he refrained from naming them, Seixas departed from the larger pattern of the oration. Other parts of the speech referred to "my ancestors & predecessors" without identifying a single one of them. The oration referred to the Jews' "European" origin, instead of mentioning their ties to Iberia, or Holland or England, let alone the extended sojourns in Brazil or the Caribbean that we know to have preceded their arrival in North America. Even Seixas' geography favored abstraction over narrowness of scope: Instead of naming New York or the Hudson River or any other identifiable landscape feature, the oration told of Jews having come "to this City, near the sea-coast."

Seixas interpreted the Jews' arrival in New York in the 17th century through the wider lens of Jewish and biblical history. Hence, the oration's intermittent allusions to biblical phrases and motifs, beginning with the quotation from Job. While the premature death of man with the four daughters did not allude to the Hebrew Bible, it projected an arresting image of new beginnings in the wake of tragic loss. Seixas' language surrounding the widowhood of the Amsterdam native's wife hinted strongly at just such an idea. In his formulation, the birth of the Jewish community in North America was an aftereffect of that loss. That the daughters' families thrived "after their Father's death" hinted at the notion that the Jews' happiness and prosperity in New York had taken shape as a moment of succession and renewal following upon an era of deprivation. Their exodus from Europe had been both providential and epochal, and it marked a singularly blessed departure from a long-established pattern. Moreover, it had instigated a miraculous renewal of Jewish life on a promising shore.

Jews were not alone in harboring such sentiments. Seixas went out of his way to avoid theological entanglements with Christianity (he did not want to be proselytized), but his not wanting to discuss the Jewish religion with Christians didn't mean that he didn't wish to engage them on other subjects of potential mutual interest. Judging from Seixas' other publicly facing works (particularly his sermons), he frequently sought and found ways to link his own Torah-centered Judaism to American republicanism. As David de Sola Pool, who served as Shearith Israel's rabbi from 1921 to 1955, put it, "the theme which constantly recur[red] in [Seixas'] sermons is that of profound gratitude for the blessings which the United States outstandingly offered the Jews ... when emancipation from an imposed ghetto was still a dream in most countries of the world."

Fewer than 10 years after Sampson Simson delivered his Columbia commencement oration with its reference to the founding of New York's Jewish community, clean slates and new beginnings were also on the minds of a spate of self-styled historians of New York. In 1809, for instance, in anticipation of the 200th anniversary of Henry Hudson's entrance into New York Harbor and voyage up the river that would eventually bear his name, Samuel Miller, a Presbyterian minister and a stalwart of the newly formed New York Historical Society, delivered an anniversary speech titled "A

Discourse Designed to Commemorate the Discovery of New York by Henry Hudson." Having first described the voyages of Verrazzano, Cabot, and Hudson himself, Miller's address proclaimed its wider celebratory agenda. His purpose had been "to trace the gradual advances of this colony, from small beginnings, to wealth, to power, and universal improvement." Like Seixas, in other words, Miller looked back with wonder at what his "ancestors & predecessors" had managed to accomplish following upon their arrival in New York.

Simson's oration equated the establishment of a Jewish community in New York with the birth of the American nation. While the Jews who arrived in the city in the 1650s had undoubtedly needed to adjust to relatively primitive conditions, Seixas' oration did not refer to them as having conquered the wilderness or triumphed over the natives. Instead, he described their efforts to establish and maintain a community of worshippers. "During the space of many years," Seixas wrote, "the children of Israel had no fixed place of public worship in this city." Instead, "on the Sabbaths & Festivals they used to assemble in a private house where they appropriated a room for the purpose of reading the law, & praying according to the prayers instituted for the day." If any "historical traits of the Jews" applied here, they hinged on the tendency to find common cause and honor the commandments that they had carried with them from the Old World.

Seixas' oration emphasized the Jews' eagerness to make their own way within the wider framework of a growing city whose "European" residents had evidently been willing to accommodate their presence. It's clear to us today that the Jews had been drawn to New York (and other seaboard locations) in order to advance their undertakings as trans-Atlantic merchants. For that matter, we also know that one of the primary motivations behind relative tolerance that Protestants of various denominations evinced for Jews in the New World was their sense that mobile Jewish capital could assist them in their own marketing endeavors. The speech that Seixas wrote for Simson, however, contained only the one brief reference to the Jews' having "entered into trade" upon their arrival in New York. Like Samuel Miller and the other commemorators of early New York history whose orations and publications would emerge around the bicentennial of Hudson's 1609 voyage, Seixas may have been thinking about the reputation that the city had by then acquired as a morally compromised arena in which economic competition threatened to overtake social grace.

On the heels of telling Simson's listeners about the century and a half of Shearith Israel's historical evolution from a group of scattered families to a geographically fixed congregation, Seixas launched into the address's most impassioned portion—its treatment of the American Revolution and its legacy. Seixas referred to the "inhabitants of North America" having "broken the yoke of subjection" to Britain, echoing Isaiah in his effort to invoke the Americans' rejection of royal authority. In choosing a republican government, Seixas wrote, in this instance borrowing phrasing from Deuteronomy 16:18, the patriots had decided "to have a head (a Chieftain) Judges and Officers from among [their] own people." His disquisition on the revolution and its aftermath culminated in a passage in which he returned to the theme of mutuality that he had stressed in his description of the Jews' cooperative efforts to form a community of their own. "The Jews throughout the union," he wrote, "placed their lives in their hands palms and joined with their Friends the people to strengthen and assist them."

The ultimate import of Sampson Simson's oration was that it equated the establishment of a Jewish community in New York with the birth of the American nation. In the biblically allusive words of the oration's stirring conclusion, "notwithstanding that the Jews came here one by one within the space of 150 years yet through the greatness of divine mercy, [they had] multiplied in the land, so as to be numbered among the citizens of America." For Seixas and his pupil, New York, like the entire continent of North America, had been a launching point for a new era, both from a Jewish perspective and in the annals of world history.

New York was the one North American settlement that, from the late summer of 1776 until 1783, had been under continuous British occupation. It wasn't just profoundly contested territory in the sense that the war's bloodiest battle (the Battle of Brooklyn, fought on Aug. 27, 1776) and most intense fighting occurred within its precincts. As the staging ground from which each major British attack on American forces was initiated and the strategic focal point of British operations (assuming control of the corridor between New York Harbor and the upper Hudson Valley would have enabled the British to sever New England from the other American colonies), it was New York's status that determined the war's outcome. As the historian Barnet Schecter points out, "the battle for the city ... clarify[ied] the major turning points of the American Revolution."
New York's importance to Seixas and Simson had nothing to do with the size of its Jewish population, which until 1830 would remain smaller than that of Charleston, South Carolina. In the minds of the graduate and his mentor, the city mattered because it had been the birthplace of the United States. As Sampson Simson intoned his Hebrew oration to the assembled audience in St. Paul's Church (which, incidentally, was one of the handful of the city's buildings that predated the war but hadn't been destroyed by it), he was standing on hallowed ground. New York City had been consecrated by events that, within a few short years of their having occurred, had attained scriptural significance.

Being a Sephardic Jew Means Existing in the in Between
My identity is more than nationality, race, language or cuisine. It comes from within myself.
Full article by Jesse Habif Rogers Here

When I was maybe 8 years old, my grandmother told me the story of how she met my grandfather. My grandparents met in 1953 at a Jewish singles event in the Catskills of upstate New York, sometimes called the Borscht Belt. They had been set up by mutual friends, and their first date consisted of some combination of chatting, drinking and pool (I've never been able to imagine either of my grandparents playing pool). As they were chatting, my grandfather offhandedly mentioned that he was Sephardic; his family had come to the U.S. from Izmir, Turkey and he grew up speaking Ladino at home. In response, my grandmother looked at him for a second, laughed, and replied: "That's ok, I'm sure it's not a serious condition."

My grandmother (who's now almost 92) has both a great sense of humor and a tendency to be a bit hyperbolic, so I've always taken that story with a grain of salt. However, I do think there's some truth at the heart of it. Despite having some Sephardic ancestry (she has a mixed Sephardic-Ashkenazi background), she didn't have any real exposure to Sephardic culture as a kid and grew up in a primarily Ashkenazi neighborhood with Ashkenazi friends.

Growing up in rural western Massachusetts, diversity didn't feature much in my own childhood either. While I attended Hebrew School at my local synagogue and had a number of Jewish friends, Judaism as it was presented to me was homogenous and relatively uniform: Every single Jewish person I knew (besides my family) was Ashkenazi, and queer and POC Jewish representation was basically nonexistent.

I was aware quite early on that my conception of Jewish culture was different from that of my peers. I didn't grow up hearing my family speak Yiddish, gefilte fish and chopped liver were nowhere to be found at holiday gatherings, and I was dolmas and olive-obsessed from a young age (and still am). Whenever I would visit my grandparents in New York, I'd inevitably end up sitting next to my grandfather in the living room while he snacked on walnuts and figs and made the occasional attempt to teach me common Ladino phrases. Truthfully, I never paid as much attention to the lessons as I did to attempting to unravel the mystery of how an 80-something-year-old was able to crack open walnuts using nothing but his hands.

To me, these traditions, foods and phrases were Jewish culture, just as much as Ashkenazi traditions, foods and sayings were Jewish culture to my peers. But growing up in an environment where Ashkenazi culture and Jewish culture were treated as essentially interchangeable, I often found myself wondering where my cultural identity fit into the equation, or if there was room for it at all.

Even after learning more about my family's history and the history of Sephardic Jews writ large, things didn't fall into place for me. Starting around the time I was 10, I decided that the easiest way to explain my background was just to say that I was Turkish (after all, my grandfather's entire family was from Turkey and spoke Turkish), and I stuck with this explanation even after going away to college. In the broadest sense, 10-year-old me wasn't wrong, but it doesn't take much digging to understand that there are differences between Sephardic Jews living in Turkey and ethnic Turks. Perhaps more importantly, my grandfather never once referred to himself or his family as Turkish.

I went through a similar process trying to connect with Spain. Many Sephardic Jews trace their origins back to medieval Spain and Portugal — in my family's case, Córdoba, Spain — and to this day you can find a strong Iberian influence in Sephardic culture. This is especially true when it comes to language: Ladino bears a strong resemblance to Spanish and Portuguese and was even considered a dialect of Spanish at one point. In fact, most of my comprehension of the Ladino phrases my grandfather taught me growing up came from having taken Spanish in school. If calling myself Turkish didn't feel quite right, I thought, maybe it was because my family was actually Spanish.

A few months ago, I took a trip to Spain with my girlfriend. It was my first time visiting the country, and we split our time between Madrid and Sevilla. Visiting Sevilla, and Andalusia in general, was a priority for me — this was where my ancestors had once lived, and I hoped that in some small way it would help me come to terms with my identity. As our train passed through Córdoba, I pressed my face against the window (what germaphobia?) and tried to imagine what life there was like some 800 years ago.

In Sevilla, in the shadow of the city's massive cathedral, we walked the narrow streets of the old Jewish quarter, now called Santa Cruz. Amidst colorful buildings, orange trees, souvenir shops and cafes, there was nothing whatsoever to indicate that Jews had ever lived there — no monuments or statues, not even a plaque. A sign for a Catholic school bid us farewell as we left. Sevilla's Jewish community might as well have never existed.

One day, I'll go back to Spain and visit the Córdoba Synagogue, one of only a handful of pre-Inquisition synagogues that still exist in the country. And I'm sure one day I'll travel to Izmir and see the neighborhood where my great-grandparents lived, and maybe even Alexandria, Egypt, where my great-great grandmother was born. Regardless, though, what I saw (and didn't see) in Sevilla's old Jewish quarter will always stay with me. In my journey to find my place in the world, walking the narrow streets of Santa Cruz provided clarity about how I define myself.

Being Sephardic, I've often felt like I exist in a space between: not Turkish, not Spanish, not Arab, not Ashkenazi. The truth is, my identity isn't made any less meaningful because I didn't see it reflected in my peers growing up, or because I didn't find it inscribed on a plaque in Sevilla or because my grandmother might have thought it was a medical condition. The value of my cultural identity doesn't come from the external features of my life; it comes from within myself.

My Sephardic identity is more than nationality, race, language or cuisine. It's more than the countries my family came from, the languages they spoke or the food they ate. These are certainly important aspects of my identity, but they're not what's at its center. My Sephardic identity is memory — a collective understanding of the struggles, accomplishments and upheavals that shaped my people and took them from Córdoba, to Alexandria, to Izmir, to New York and finally to a rural town in the far flung reaches of Massachusetts. It exists in learning Ladino phrases, smelling tabbouleh in the kitchen and eating figs stuffed with walnuts with my grandfather (I will figure out that walnut-cracking technique). And most importantly, my cultural identity is unique to me, just as yours is to you.

We all walk our own path in figuring out our place in the world. I wish you good luck for whatever your journey holds. Kaminando kon buenos.

Jesse Habif Rogers graduated from Tufts University in 2020 and currently lives in Cambridge, MA, where he works as a communications and social media manager at a local nonprofit. His greatest loves include live music, spending time outside, and kalamata olives.

3 Historic NYC Synagogues Receive Grants for Renovation Projects Full article Here

Three historic synagogues received Sacred Sites grants from the New York Landmarks Conservancy, a private non-profit organization dedicated to preserving and restoring New York's historic architecture.

The grant program, which this year allocated more than $228,000 to 14 historic religious properties across the state, provides matching grants to congregations "for planning and implementing exterior restoration projects," according to Thursday's announcement. Half of the grantees are congregations in New York City.

In Manhattan, Kehila Kedosha Janina at 280 Broome St. — the only Greek-Jewish Romaniote synagogue in the Western Hemisphere — received $10,000 toward replacing its roof. The congregation, founded in 1906 by Jewish immigrants from Ioannina, erected the Lower East Side building in 1927.

The synagogue, which also operates as a museum, offers guided tours and holds services for Shabbat and holidays. They also host the annual Greek Jewish Festival with other Lower East Side Jewish institutions every spring. The building was declared a New York City Landmark in 2004.

In Brooklyn, Crown Heights' Congregation Kol Israel was granted $25,000 for roof replacement, skylight restoration and parapet repair. Founded in 1924 and claiming to be the "oldest continuously practicing Orthodox community in Brooklyn," per their website, the Modern Orthodox congregation serves 75 member households and reaches hundreds more each year through programming such as community meals.

The building, located at 603 St. Johns Pl., was designed by Brooklyn architect Tobias Goldstone in 1927. The facade reflects the "Semitic style" popular at the time, which combines "Moorish and Byzantine Revival ornament[s] with Judaic motifs," according to a New York Landmarks Conservancy press release. It was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2009.

Young Israel Beth El, an Orthodox synagogue in Borough Park, was granted $20,000 towards masonry restoration. The building, located at 4802 15th Ave., was designed in 1923 with acoustics in mind. It has been called "Brooklyn's Carnegie Hall" for its history of inviting renowned cantors to pray at its pulpit during the golden age of "hazzanut," or florid cantorial music. The synagogue reaches 1,200 people a year through services, Talmud study groups, community programs and concerts. The congregation hosts a popular "Shabbos Mevarchim" service led by its famed cantor Benzion Miller, on the last Shabbat of every month. The building was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2010.

Along with grant money, the program also provides the congregations with technical assistance and workshops for implementing the grant and beginning the restoration process. To be eligible for a Sacred Sites grant, each site has to be a religious institution actively used for worship, as well as listed on the state or national Register of Historic Places.

"We are delighted that our grants will help these diverse congregations maintain their buildings and continue to serve their communities with social service and cultural programs," Peg Breen, the president of New York Landmarks Conservancy, said in a statement." These 14 congregations reach a total of 60,000 people beyond their congregations with no-cost or low-cost services."

In addition to the three synagogues, other grantees in New York City include the Ebenezer Gospel Tabernacle Christian Mission in Harlem, Old First Reformed Church in Park Slope, and St. Paul's German Evangelical Lutheran Church and St. Peter's Episcopal Church, both in Chelsea.

Rabbi Marc D. Angel
The Humility of an Open Mind: Thoughts for Shavuoth
JewishIdeas.org

When I was a senior at Franklin High School in Seattle, my teacher for Language Arts was Mr. James Britain. Even after these many years, I remember him and his class quite vividly.

I invariably got A grades on all my papers. But once, Mr. Britain marked my paper with a D. I think I learned more from that D than from all my A papers. What was the paper about and what did I learn?

Mr. Britain often presented the class with challenging assignments. Once, he asked us to walk around the outside of the school building and to observe all its architectural details. Another assignment was to study a painting and analyze it as carefully as possible—its colors, perspective, lighting etc. His goal was to teach us to "see", to focus in on detail, to look for the usual and the unusual.

One day, he played a recording of atonal electronic music for the class and asked us to write our impressions. I was outraged by this "music" and wrote a scathing essay condemning it. This was not music at all! It was a cacophony of senseless screeching, painful to the ear. Mr. Britain gave me a D on this paper. He wrote me a one line comment: "In order to learn, you must open your mind to new ideas."

When I spoke to him afterward about my "unfair" grade, he calmly explained that I had entirely missed the point of the assignment. He indicated that I should have listened carefully, with an open mind; I should have tried to understand the intentions of the composer; I should have put aside my preconceived notions so as to experience the music on its terms—not on mine. Only after I had processed the experience with an open mind was I entitled to offer my judgments about it. Think carefully, don't rant.

That was one of the most valuable lessons I've ever learned—and one of the most difficult to apply.

We all have fixed ideas on a great many topics. It is often painful to hear opinions that conflict with our sure understanding of life. New ideas, unusual approaches, unconventional artistic expressions—these are difficult to absorb. It is tempting—and usual—to shut off ideas that challenge our own views and tastes. It is very common for those who have different views to talk at each other, or to talk against each other; it is far less common for people actually to listen to each other, to try sincerely to understand the ideas and approaches of others. To open our minds to new ideas demands tremendous self-control and humility.

And this brings us to some thoughts about Shavuoth.

The festival of Shavuoth commemorates the Revelation at Mt. Sinai. The Torah and its commandments were revealed by the Almighty to the people of Israel on this special mountain.

In the early 17th century, Rehuel Jessurun wrote Dialogo dos Montes, a drama based on the rabbinic tradition that various mountains competed for the privilege of having the Torah revealed on them. (The drama was presented on Shavuoth, 1624, in the Bet Yaacob synagogue of Amsterdam.) Each mountain offered its claim to be the most worthy of this honor. Mount Sinai, though, was humble. It was a low and unimpressive mountain, hardly worthy of being chosen by God for the Divine revelation of the Torah. Because of its very humility, God chose Mount Sinai upon which to give the Israelites the Torah.

Much of human life resembles the Dialogue of the Mountains. People seek to assert their pre-eminence, to highlight their virtues, to claim the highest honors. Yet, it is the Mount Sinais of the world who reflect the quiet humility worthy of Divine blessing.

As we celebrate the Shavuoth festival commemorating the Revelation at Mount Sinai, it would be appropriate for us to recall the symbolic virtues of Mount Sinai—humility, awareness of limitations, openness to new and unique revelation.

“In order to learn, you must open your mind to new ideas.”

This does not mean that one must accept all new ideas, or that one should adopt every new opinion. Rather, it entails the ability to listen carefully, to analyze and process ideas, to think carefully and not to rant. Even ideas that we ultimately reject may contain kernels of truth that will sharpen and enhance our own understanding.

To open our minds to new and differing ideas is not only the way for all of us to grow intellectually and spiritually; it is the foundation of a responsible civil society.

Insights from Rabbi Isaac Choua

Every morning for 2,000 years, Jews have recited the berakha (blessing) of "matir asurim" (one who unties those bound) as we sit up straight from bed:
בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה ’אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם מַתִּיר אֲסוּרִים

For the past eight months, and sadly for more to come, this blessing has returned to its original context from Psalms 146:7:

עֹשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט ׀ לָעֲשׁוּקִים נֹתֵן לֶחֶם לָרְעֵבִים ה ’מַתִּיר אֲסוּרִים
“Who secures justice for those who are wronged, gives food to the hungry. The L-RD sets prisoners free."

We now reflect on the reality of actual captives in our nation. This blessing has shifted from simply praising God for our own freedom to a poignant reminder of those who remain bound.

As the great American Jewish poet Emma Lazarus wrote to the Jewish people in her 1883 work 'An Epistle to the Hebrews,' "Until we are all free, we are none of us free."

We thank God for the success of the IDF in rescuing hostages Almog Meir Jan, 21, Andrey Kozlov, 27, Shlomi Ziv, 40, and Noa Argamani, 26, and pray for the rescue of all the remaining hostages.

Spanakopita Recipe
by Rae David

2 packages chopped spinach frozen (drain water off)
Mix 2 large eggs
1 pkg Farmer Cheese (8-oz)
1/2 pkg cream cheese (4-oz) 1-tsp salt
Add some matzo meal

Mix spinach with other ingredients
Grease 10-in. pie plate
Sprinkle with grated cheese and dot with butter
Bake at 375 until browned on top

Romaniote Documentary Project

Be a part of preserving history! So - what's better? Babka or baklava?

Come along on a journey that preserves Greek history by supporting a film that answers this pressing question and takes a look into the little known world of the Romaniotes.

Keeping the Faith: Meet the Romaniotes! brings you into a community that includes my grandmother and her ancestors from Janina (modern day Ioannina) and how they managed to survive over the past 2,300 years.

Romaniotes are Greek Jews that have struggled to hang on since the time of Alexander the Great. They're considered the oldest Jewish community in Europe and thrived in Greece until the Holocaust decimated the community and eradicated much of their legacy.

Like so many other immigrants, they sought refuge and a chance at a better life here in the US. Romaniotes established a synagogue, Kehila Kedosha Janina, which translates to Holy Community of Janina in 1927 on Broome Street. It was founded by working class Greek immigrants from Janina, a small town in northwest Greece.

But now, with so few Romaniotes remaining in the U.S. and in Janina, their traditions are at risk of disappearing. Keeping the Faith goes to the Lower East Side where the only Romaniote synagogue in the western hemisphere still manages to hang on, and to Greece where ancient traditions and a small community struggle for their survival.

This hearty band of Greek Jews has survived slavery in ancient Rome, a shipwreck, poverty, wars, anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, gentrification, and a dwindling congregation.

Today, only four synagogues on the Lower East Side are still active. Against all odds, Kehila Kedosha Janina is one of them, plopped down in Chinatown around the corner from Vanessa's Dumpling House. The synagogue is the only one of its kind in the western hemisphere. Keeping the Faith is a portrait of a community that refuses to disappear.

My documentary tells the history of the Romaniotes through my grandmother's story including an arranged marriage and working outside of the home which was unusual at the time, relatives who perished in the Holocaust, congregation leadership valiantly using social media to tug an ancient religion into the 21st century, and a museum director who is the keeper of Romaniote history, including its archival photography and artifacts that will be used to tell the Romaniote story.

With a mission of sparking powerful conversation among identity and preservation, Keeping the Faith explores such questions as, What does it mean to hold on to an identity for two thousand plus years? How is this community doing it today? What lessons might be valuable to other religious or cultural groups who are also struggling to survive? Is baklava better than babka?

This resilient group of Romaniotes has been documented over the past few years through interviews and footage filmed at Kehila Kedosha Janina, its sister synagogue, and in Greece, as well as the Lower East Side and the Bronx. Archival footage, photographs, and music are key components.

Now it's time to put it all together. Post production costs include editing, music rights, archival film and photographic rights, sound editing, and color correction.

The generous support of donors like you will enable me to complete this important documentary that answers the question that other religious and cultural institutions face: What happens when there's no one left?

Keeping the Faith was recently awarded with a $2,500 grant from Inwood Art Works. A very generous donor recently contributed $1,800 in memory of his late wife's family who are Romaniotes from Janina..

Would you consider making a gift to support the legacy of this community? I'm slowly chipping away at a production budget of $50,000. Donors of gifts of $180 or more will receive recognition in the credits. Gifts of $1,800 or more will include very special recognition through an invitation to a screening as well as an onscreen credit.

Thank you so much for helping to document history!

Contact Arlene Schulman to make a donation at arlenetheauthor@gmail.com.

Photographs are of my grandparents on their wedding day. Our family tree includes the families of Attas, David, Vechoropoulos, Matsa, Levi, Nachman, Negrin, and so many others. Photographs may not be used without expressed written permission.

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So many of you have applauded our efforts. We thank those who have sent in contributions.

If you would like to make a contribution to Kehila Kedosha Janina, please send your check (in US dollars) made out to *Kehila Kedosha Janina,* to us at 280 Broome Street, New York, NY 10002 (attention Marcia). Your donation will enable us to continue to hold services and preserve our special traditions and customs, and to tell our unique story through our Museum.

Some of our major donations have been generous bequests, which have enabled us to complete major work in our synagogue/museum. Do remember us in your will. Your legacy will be present in our legacy. **You can do this online on our website: www.kkjsm.org accessing the donation link in the upper left hand corner.**

When you are in New York, visit us on Broome Street.

Kehila Kedosha Janina E-Newsletter – Number 183
June 2024
Kehila Kedosha Janina
280 Broome Street, New York NY 10002
Website: www.kkjsm.org
Email: museum@kkjsm.org

Your donations enable us to continue our work. You can send donations via mail directly to 280 Broome Street, New York, NY 10002, or you can donate via our website www.kkjsm.org.