

THE AMERICAN PESACH EXPERIENCE

By Yaakov Horowitz

The Chassidic masters point out that the two names of Pesach refer to two different sets of memories. “Chag HaPesach” relates to our memory of Hashem’s grace in His skipping over the doorposts (*pesach*) of Jewish homes during the final plague in Egypt; “Chag HaMatzot” refers to Hashem’s memory of our *mesirus nefesh* (self-sacrifice) during the culmination of the Exodus, when we followed His command with such speed that our bread did not have time to rise.

The Diaspora has afforded many outstanding Pesach moments of *mesirus nefesh*, some famous, some relatively obscure. None perhaps as obscure as the *mesirus nefesh* of our brothers and sisters while celebrating Pesach in difficult environments and during trying times throughout American history.

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The American Jewish Legacy is actively seeking photos, artifacts and archival material documenting the American traditional Jewish experience. If you have information to share, contact www.ajlegacy.org.

The Revolutionary War: Traditional Jews Share the Birth Pains of the New Republic

Life in the American colonies was hard during the second half of the eighteenth century. It is well documented that many Jews were patriots and participated significantly in the American Revolution. Some of these Jews include:

- Merchants such as Joseph Simon, *shochet* (ritual slaughterer) and founder of the Jewish community of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, who supplied arms to the Continental Army.

- Financiers of the Revolution such as Hayyim Solomon, who, when faced with a difficult financial dispute in 1784, brought the first recorded American case before a rabbinic court of arbitration (*beit din*).

- Vocal patriots such as Gershom Seixas, *chazzan* of Shearith Israel (also known as the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in New York), who, after an impassioned pro-revolutionary speech, closed the synagogue and took the *sifrei Torah* to Philadelphia.

- Soldiers such as Sheftall Sheftall, who performed the first documented *chalitzah* in America (in Philadelphia in 1764), and was honored with “special assignments” as a Revolutionary War soldier.

Relatively unknown are their stirring accounts of Pesach preparation and observance. Jewish functionaries and leaders, who as American patriots fled the British invasion, were faced with additional hardship. Aaron Lopez, “the Merchant Prince of New England,” fled Newport to Portsmouth, Rhode Island, and still managed to send one hundred pounds of flour to Newport so that matzah could be baked for the community. In his correspondence to the president of Shearith Israel in 1784, Seixas wrote of the “great hardship for a man to be without his family on Pesah” as a result of the war.

The Gold Rush

From the beginning, industry and commerce were the engines that generated the development of this country. The prevailing wisdom that the pursuit of making a living was the overwhelming factor in the assimilation of American Jewry is only partially true. Although many Jews felt that *shemirat Shabbat, kashrut* and halachic Judaism were incompatible with financial success, there exist numerous accounts of individuals who succeeded in the business world while maintaining traditional observance.

The merchant class of the developing frontier boom towns was often

Missing the Family on Passover

Mr. Hayman Levy
President
Shearith Israel Congregation

Dear & Worthy Sir

Should the Prayer of the Letter (that I can stay in Philadelphia until the new month of Iyar) not be thought Eligible you will please let me know by Post - & I'll be with you for Shabbat Hagadol - & leave my Family till after Pesah - tho' - you must allow it to be a great Hardship for a Man to be without His Family on a Pesah.

March 15th, 1784
Philadelphia, Pa.



Gershom Mendes Seixas



Matzah table, preserved at Touro Synagogue, used for the preparation of the dough for the matzot during the Revolutionary War era. Photo courtesy of Morris A. Gutstein, The Story of the Jews of Newport (Bloch Publishing, 1936)



Aaron Lopez, Colonial "Merchant Prince of New England," founder of Touro Synagogue. Photo courtesy of Morris Gutstein, To Bigotry No Sanction, A Jewish Shrine in America 1658-1958 (Bloch Publishing, 1958)

Photo courtesy of Gefen Publishing House, 1992

heavily Jewish. The business districts of California, including Sonora, Grass Valley and Nevada City (among others), had traditional Jewish communities that held Pesach and *yom tov* services at various times during the Gold Rush. Religious articles and foodstuffs such as matzah and wine were imported from San Francisco. Noted historian Robert Levinson relates the following:

Nevada City was the home of numerous Orthodox Jews, which included the Aaron Baruh family who maintained separate dishes for Passover and ordered matzos from San Francisco. So that the entire community would have kosher meat for Passover, the Reverend Samuel M. Laski of San Francisco acted as shokhet (ritual slaughterer). He came to Nevada City to slaughter the animals in an Orthodox manner. The preparations for the holiday of Passover in the Jewish communities of the Mother Lode were always elaborate. In Sonora, Julius Baer recalled that his parents conducted the Passover Seder at home and that, in anticipation of the holiday, "Dad used to buy 25 to 30 pounds of matzoth." In Mokelumne Hill, special preparations were also made for Passover, but owing to the remoteness of Mokelumne Hill and the great distance from San Francisco, special holiday foods did not arrive as planned. "My father used to tell me that any celebration of Passover was observed by the time the matzos arrived in Mokelumne Hill." However, Aaron Harris, who resided in Yosemite Park in the 1870s and 1880s, wanted to celebrate Passover at the proper time. So that his observance would not be late, as it was in Mokelumne Hill, "the matzos were always ordered the previous year [from San Francisco] so that they would arrive in time for the Passover." —*The Jews of the California Gold Rush*, Judah L. Magnes Museum, 1994.

It is interesting to note that although very few matzah bakeries exist today outside the greater New York area, many matzah bakeries once existed in such out-of-the-way places as Portland, Oregon; Helena, Montana, and San Francisco.

These were often large commercial enterprises that baked significant quantities of matzah, not to be confused with the documented histories of individuals baking their own matzot, a tradition practiced throughout American history whether it be by Sampson Simpson of Shearith Israel in Colonial New York or by Avrohom Isaac Trager in Columbia, North Carolina, during the Civil War. Trager ran a farm where kosher hospitality was always found. He left many Orthodox generations active in both Jewish and communal activities throughout the North and South. (See Milton M. Gottesman, *Hoopskirts and Huppas: A Chronicle of the Early Years of the Garfunkel-Trager Family in America, 1856-1920*, [New York, 1999].)



Emanuel Blochman, Gold Rush matzah baker, San Francisco, 1880. Photo courtesy of Western States Jewish Historical Journal

MATZOS IN MONTANA OVER 100 YEARS AGO

Dick Lockey's Montana Steam Cracker Company on Lower Main Street is engaged in the process of manufacturing Matzos, or Jewish unleavened bread, for the season of Passover, which occurs in April. Flour and water, minus salt, yeast or other ingredients, are only used in preparing this bread. The dough is rolled by machinery to the desired thickness and is then baked to brittleness in ovens specially designed for this particular article. The Jewish people throughout Montana are supplied with this bread from Lockey's bakery.

Helena Weekly Herald, Montana Territory, May 19, 1874, courtesy of Norman Winestone, Helena, Montana.

Many matzah bakeries once existed in out-of-the-way places such as Montana. Photo courtesy of Western States Jewish Historical Journal

REVOLT AGAINST MATZOTH PRICES, 1884

The high prices charged last Passover by the matzoth bakers of this city [San Francisco] has induced a number of coreligionists to form an association for the purpose of selling matzoth at a reasonable price. This society is called the "People's Matzoth Association of San Francisco," and at a meeting recently held the following gentlemen were appointed a committee to make the necessary arrangements to start the society: Aaron Levy, F. Henry, E. Belasco, S. Samuels, J. Hartman, D. Steinbach and H. Solomon. The society has funds to commence operations, the following amounts having been advanced: H. and S. Solomon, \$1,500; Mr. Steinberg, \$150; C. Hess, \$150; A. M. Cohn, \$100.

The Jewish Messenger, New York, June 6, 1884, p. 3.

Photo courtesy of Western States Jewish Historical Journal

The Civil War

During the Civil War, Pesach and matzah were not only important to individuals on both sides of the conflict in a personal way, they were also a prominent factor in bonding Jews and Jewish congregations who were adversaries, as demonstrated by the following colorful anecdote:

Myer Levy, a Union soldier in an occupied Confederate Virginia town, saw a little boy eating matzo during Passover and asked him for a piece. The child ran inside and shouted "Mother! There's a 'damnyankee' Jew outside!" The mother emerged and, to [Levy's] relief, invited [him] to the family Seder. —Bertram Wallace Korn, American Jewry and the Civil War (Philadelphia, 2001).

Civil War historian Robert Rosen further illustrates the concept of how matzah brought former enemies together.

As the war drew to a close, the dispirited Jewish communities of Savannah, Charleston, Columbia, and Richmond reached out to the Northern Jewry for desperately needed aid. They wrote appeals to national Jewish journals and newspapers such as the Jewish Messenger, published in New York by Samuel M. Isaacs; The Israelite, published in Cincinnati by Rabbi [Isaac Mayer] Wise; and The Occident, published by Rabbi [Isaac] Leiser in Philadelphia.

In February 1865, the Jews of Savannah wrote to these Jewish periodicals seeking matzo: "Many of the inhabitants, formerly wealthy are now in extremely straitened circumstances; and besides have entirely lost the means of baking for the ensuing Passover." Isaacs of the Messenger recalled the generosity of Savannah's Jewish community in its heyday and asked his readers to lay aside any enmity they might harbor and come to their co-religionists' aid. The response was overwhelming: three thousand pounds of matzo was sent from New York and two thousand pounds from Philadelphia. There was even a proposal in New York to establish a charitable organization to assist Southern Jewry. "This is no time to look back upon petty differences that may have arisen between communities," the Jewish Record urged. "Nor can any one now allude to political dis-

מזות
THE ORIGINAL PIONEER
Matzoth Bakery,
25 Kearny Street, near Post.

The undersigned Pioneer Matzoth Bakers in this State, would respectfully call the attention of co-religionists to the facilities for manufacturing the above article. They are practical bakers, and followed the business since 1852 in this State, as well as in Europe. They will strictly pay obedience to religious duties, and invite customers for inspection of the article they bake. Mr. Wiener has been engaged as Shomer, who is well known for his strict observance of religious duties.

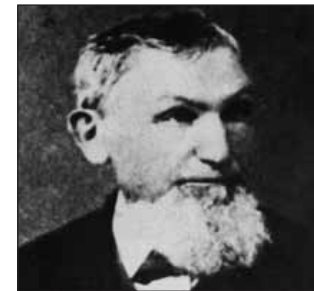
CHAS. B. HEFTER,
ISAAC FREEMAN,
JOSEPH SALOMON.

All kinds of Cakes of the best quality will be sold cheap.
Orders from the country can be sent to the following gentlemen:

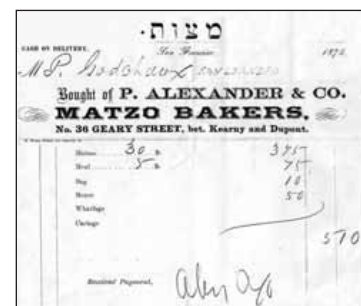
UHLFELDER & CAHN, 309 Sacramento street.
A. JACOBS & CO., 325 Sacramento street.
ROSENBAUM & FRIEDMAN, 316 Sacramento street.
A. CABN & Co., corner California and Front.
Bakery, Rich street, between Folsom and Harrison streets.
Place of Business, 25 Kearny street, near Post.
No connection with any other firm. nr25

Justice to All! No Monopoly!

Matzah advertisement: The Original Pioneer Matzoth Bakery, San Francisco, 1875. Photo courtesy of Gefen Publishing House, 1992



Aaron Baruh, Gold Rush pioneer and Mother Lode Jewish community leader. Photo courtesy of Doris Foley, Nevada City



Matzah receipt from P. Alexander Matzo Bakers, San Francisco, 1875. Photo courtesy of Western States Jewish Historical Journal

cussions or angry passions... Let all of us join in tendering to our brethren a part of that wealth with which the God of Israel has blessed us. —Robert N. Rosen, The Jewish Confederates (South Carolina, 2000).

The Prairie

The American West and prairie were the last places one might expect to find traditional Jewish observance. Surprisingly, there are many accounts relating to traditional Pesach experiences similar to that of Sophie Trupin from Wilton, North Dakota. Born in Russia in 1903, Trupin immigrated to the empty plains and prairie of North Dakota in 1908.

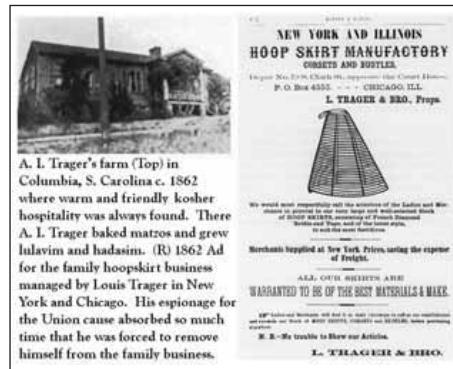
In her own words:

My mother kept a kosher home, observing every holiday. This was never easy, but here it was even harder than it had been in the Old Country. Several days before Passover, when the melting snow had run into the narrow valley at the south side of the hill we lived on, my mother, sister, and I set about getting our home ready for the holiday. Mother whitewashed all the walls and scoured the floors. She made the utensils kosher for Passover with scalding hot water. A stone was first heated in the range until it was red hot. It was then put into a very large pot of boiling water, making the water sizzle and hiss. The utensils were boiled for some time in this water. In addition, every piece of furniture was carried down to the slew and scrubbed and allowed to dry on the bank where the young grass was just beginning to appear. —Courtesy of the Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest

This story is not unique. In 1890, Rabbi



European immigrant hoopskirt entrepreneurs Avrohom Isaac Trager and his scholarly son-in-law, Moses Garfunkel. Photo courtesy of the American Jewish Historical Society, New York City; Newton Centre, Massachusetts



Trager farm and hoopskirt advertisements. Courtesy of the American Jewish Historical Society, New York City; Newton Centre, Massachusetts

Binyomin Papermaster was sent by Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan Spector from Kovno, Lithuania, to serve as the *rav* and *shochet* of North Dakota. When he arrived in Grand Forks, he found a group of very traditional Jewish European immigrants who were of Chassidic descent. They afforded him an amusing and memorable introduction to his many years of service as rabbi in the Prairie States. To quote his son:

During the first Passover my father was put to a rather severe test, religiously speaking. In later years he delighted in retelling this experience. As he had arrived only a few days before Passover, his time was taken up with last minute preparations for the holiday: providing kosher meat, killing of fowl, providing matzos and other Passover necessities, and he also attended meetings of community leaders. As the day prior to Passover was a traditional fast day on behalf of the first born, father was both tired and hungry ... father quite naturally expected the host to conduct the Seder service ... finally losing patience he inquired of the host why he did not proceed with the Seder... Pulling up an ordinary chair, [my father] waited for everyone to be seated and then proceeded to the ritual of the Seder... Having been accustomed to



Lieutenant Colonel Marcus M. Spiegel, Jewish Union officer and brother of the founder of Spiegel Catalog Co. Photo courtesy of Jacob Rader Marcus Center, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio



Confederate soldier Isaac J. Levy and the letter he sent to his sister Leora describing his Passover Seder in Adam's Run, South Carolina, April 1864. He was killed in the battle of Petersburg, August 21, 1864, at age twenty-one. Photo courtesy of Jacob Rader Marcus Center, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio



Chassidic ceremonials the host anticipated that the rabbi would don a white robe, hose, streimel, etc.... The younger people were delighted, while the older and more Orthodox members either grumbled or openly denounced him for so wanton a disrespect for [Chassidic] tradition. At services the following morning an extra large congregation was in attendance and a buzz of excitement prevailed. Taking advantage of the situation and the attendance that morning, the rabbi decided to make his position clear in his sermon. He repeated the promise that he had given Rabbi Isaac Elchanan to bring Judaism as he had been taught at the yeshiva to the community where he settled, and stated that he would never deviate from the laws as expounded by [traditional Jewish] authorities.... He pointed out that in addition to those laws there were customs in Jewish life which varied throughout the world.... He promised to do his utmost to adjust himself to their ways and practices.... —
Western States Jewish Historical Journal



Sophie Trupin, Jewish prairie homesteader, circa 1900, www.storiesuntold.org/women/trupin_detail.html.




Rabbi Binyomin Papermaster, nineteenth-century North Dakota rabbi. Photo courtesy of Western States Jewish Historical Journal

Outside of Rabbi Papermaster's service as *rav* and *mohel* for the entire region, his responsibilities included visiting Jewish communities on both sides of the Red River of North Dakota, east into Minnesota and west into Montana. He provided them with kosher meat and fowl, supplies for Passover, prayer books for the children and tefillin for the boys.

The Pesach Message –World War I and World War II

Historical records of Seders during World War I and World War II document how the observance of Pesach in general, and the Seder in particular, seemed to have provided special strength to participants in times of war. The holiday's message has inspired non-Jews in these conflicts as well. Lieutenant General Mark W. Clark, commander of the United States Fifth Army, addressed Jewish soldiers attending a Seder in Naples, Italy, in April 1944:

*Tonight you are eating unleavened bread just as your forebears ate unleavened bread. Because the Exodus came so quickly the dough had no time to rise. There was a time of unleavened bread in this war. The time when it looked as though we might not have time to rise—time to raise an army and equip it, time to stop the onrush of a Germany that has already risen. But the bread has begun to rise. It started at Alamein. It was rising higher when the Fifth Army invaded Italy. It is reaching the top of the pan and soon the time will come when it will spread out ... and the victory will be ours. —Rabbi David Geffen, *American Heritage Haggadah*, Gefen Publishing House (Jerusalem/New York, 1992). *



World War I train Seder: In April 1919 a Seder was held in a Pullman car on a siding in the railroad yards of Detroit, Michigan. Soldiers returning from Europe were on their way to Camp Grant, near Chicago, to be discharged. When it became clear that they could not get to Illinois in time for the beginning of Pesach, the Jewish Welfare Board arranged a Seder for them on the train route, and obtained a rabbi to officiate. Photo courtesy of the Jewish Welfare Board in World War I, New York, 1920



Lieutenant General Mark W. Clark, World War II Commander, United States Fifth Army, www.olivedrab.com.



The Sioux Falls chapter of Hadassah provided Seders for servicemen at the nearby airbase during World War II. Photo courtesy of the Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest



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