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SIGHT



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GLIMPSES INTO AMERICAN-JEWISH HISTORY

By RAY BRIL,
In The Jewish Daily News
(November 26, 1922)

On Thursday, November 30, the people of United States will celebrate Thanksgiving day within the cozy warmth of their homes. On that day men and women of every creed will participate in that joyous festival which dates back to the days of the Pilgrims, a little more than three hundred years ago. And now the twentieth century man and woman will sit down to the feast of turkey and cranberry sauce just as the little band of Pilgrims did in the good old days of 1621.

Yet how few of the 110,000,000 individuals of the United States will on that day be aware that although the Pilgrims were the first to celebrate Thanksgiving day in 1621, it was the Jew who preached the first Thanksgiving day sermon in this country in response to George Washington's proclamation in 1789. The man who took that step was none other than Greshom Mendes Seixas, the fighting minister of the Revolutionary war, of whom the writer has had occasion to refer to in previous articles. Rev. Greshom Mendes Seixas was minister of the Congregation Shearith Israel (Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue) at the time when the Revolutionary war broke out. And fired by patriotic zeal he left his pulpit to enter the battle for democracy. But that was not all, he also urged the members of his congregation to take up arms and fight for the goddess of liberty.

So it was only natural because of his stand in the war that he should have been the one to have delivered the first Thanksgiving day sermon. Destiny had indeed been kind, it had chosen the right man for the honor. A thread of justice after all does shoot through every now and then in the odd and impenetrable pattern that we call life. But be that as it may, the sermon of Dr. Seixas caused quite a sensation in his time. Indeed this Thanksgiving sermon of his was such a success that the worthy minister decided to publish copies for the public at one shilling per. And on December 23, 1789, there appeared this advertisement of the sermon in The Daily Gazette, a contemporary newspaper:

"This excellent discourse (to which is annexed the order of service) the first of the kind ever preached in England is highly deserving the attention of every pious reader whether Jew or Christian as it breathes nothing but pure morality and devotion."

In order to appease the curious in our midst as to the nature of the service arranged by the congregation for the Thanksgiving day of

1789, here is the order of the service:
"Order of Service for Thursday, 8th Kislev 5550, 26 Nov., 1789—Being the day appointed for public Thanksgiving and prayer throughout the United States of America.

"To begin with O come let us sing unto the Lord the first three verses of Psalm 95.

"To Sing O give thanks unto the Lord, call upon His name (Psalm 105) as on Sabbath morning.

"Then the following Psalms The Hazan will sing the first verse of each Psalm alone.
"Psalms 30-33."

After his inaugural Thanksgiving day speech in 1789 the Rev. Seixas faithfully delivered one annually until the year of his death in 1816. This, to-wit, is a sample of the style and type of sermon the Rev. Seixas was wont to deliver to the members of his worthy congregation on Thanksgiving day:

"Let us now unite in prayer, and with awful tremblings render praise and thanksgiving to our God, the God of Israel, to whom all power and mercy pertaineth—join with me in supplication and let us mentally pray for each other—humbly beseech thee Oh Lord! to look down upon us from thine holy habitation and grant us thy all-powerful protection, shield us under the wings of thy holy Providence, and preserve us from evil; direct us in the pursuits of life, and guard us from the reproaches of Man—Bless and protect the President of the Union, with the administrators of the general government, in their respective departments—the governor and rulers of this state—judges and counsellors—and the magistrates of this city—impart to them an emanation of thy divine wisdom—that they may know and judge distinctly between that which would prove beneficial to the United States—and that which might be injurious—let no party schisms in state affairs prevail, so as to destroy the principles of the constitution, which is for the security of persons and property, and sworn to be observed by the administrators of government.

"May the Congress assembled, act in unison with each other to promote the welfare of all—and may they be able to deliberate and decide on all laws proposed for the advantage of their constituents. May agriculture flourish and commerce be prosperous, may the seminaries of education be continued under the direction of able teachers and professors—that the succeeding generations may gain the knowledge of freedom without licentiousness, and the usefulness of power without tyranny.

"May the people be convinced of the fidelity of their representatives, and may no cause of jealousy subsist

among the different states' of the Union—may the blessing of peace attend their land councils; and finally may 'the earth be filled with knowledge as waters covereth the seas.'

"So be it thy will and we will say Amen."
Can't you just hear the worshippers exclaiming as they walked with dignified strut out of the synagogue on Mill street more than a century ago: "Really, that was a good sermon—that our rabbi gave us this morning."

I hope that on Thursday you will devour your Thanksgiving day dinner with a greater relish because of the role played by the Rev. Seixas in the grand, old festival.

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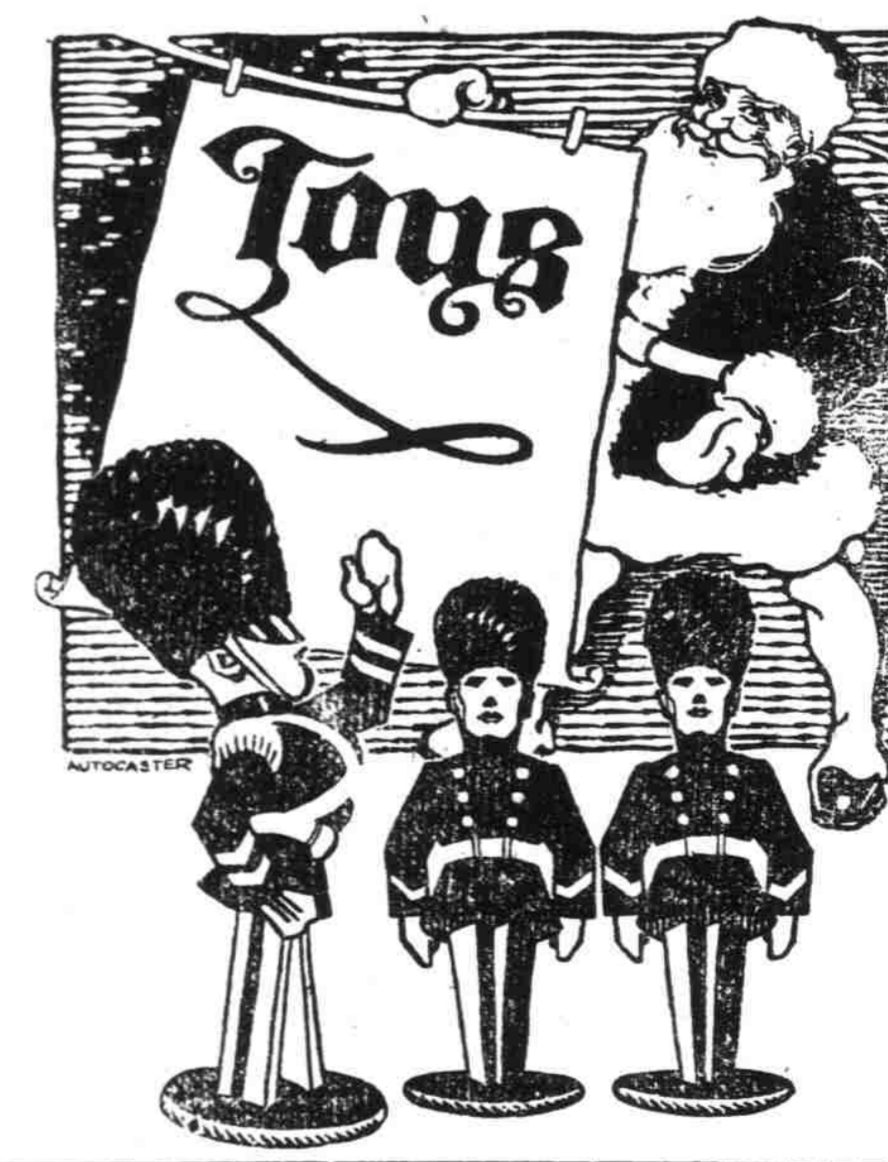
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