



Syllabus: The Jews of Early America
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Meir

What unique opportunities and challenges did the Jews encounter in America in its first 100 years? How did the connection between early American culture and the Hebrew Bible impact the Jewish experience and the founding and policies of America itself? What lessons can we draw from early American history to guide American Jewry today? We will engage these questions through the study of original texts: the letters, memoirs, sermons, and speeches of some of America's first Jewish families and communities. We will also read the writings the Founders composed about and to American Jewry.

Course requirements: Readings will be assigned for every class. They will usually be original texts but will also at times include the work of historians as background to our subject. Every reading will be accompanied by a question in order to enhance and inspire analysis, and the students are required to send in their written reflections before the next class. Usually, all that is expected will be several paragraphs, showing that the assigned text has been carefully read. Several times throughout the semester, responses will be assigned that should be similar to small essays. The semester will conclude with a comprehensive final. Class participation and written responses will make up 50 percent of the grade, and the final will make up the other 50 percent. Reading responses should be sent to meirysoloveichik@gmail.com.

Topics and Readings

1) The Jews of the Colonies and Hebraism in America: "Unwritten History: Reminiscences of N. Taylor Phillips"/ selections from the diaries of Ezra Stiles/ Background Reading: Da Sola Pool, *An Old Faith in a New World*, Selections/ Constitution of Shearith Israel

2) The Jews of the Revolution: Letters and Ketubah of Haym Solomon/Letter of Jonas Phillips to Gumpel Samson/ Prayer for George III of Gershom Mendes Seixas/ First Jewish prayer for the American government/ Letter by John Adams about the seal of the United States

3) The Debate Over the Constitution: *Federalist* 10 and 51/Essay by "Brutus"/ Nafatali Phillips' memories of the Constitutional Parade/ Letter of Benjamin Rush describing his attending a Jewish wedding/ Letter of Jonas Phillips to the Constitutional Convention/ Background Reading: Michael Schwartz, "A Great Compliment Paid the Jews."

4) George Washington, the Jews, and Religious Freedom: Washington's Letter to the Hebrew Cong. of Savannah/ Washington's Letter to the Hebrew Cong. of Newport/ Washington's Letter to the Hebrew Cong. of Philadelphia/ Background reading: Michael Myerson, *Endowed by Our Creator: The Birth of Religious Freedom in America* and Andrew Porwancher, *The Jewish World of Alexander Hamilton*

5) Adams, Jefferson, and the Jews: Adams, Letter to Van der Kemp/ Letters by Adams and Jefferson on religion and the Bible/ reminiscences of John Trumbull about Jefferson/ Selected articles from the election of 1800. Background reading: Gordon Wood, *Friends Divided*



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6) 19th Century America and the Holy Land: Address of MM Noah to Shearith Israel/ Letters of Adams, Madison, and Jefferson to Noah/ / Memoir of William Seward/ Mark Twain, *Innocents Abroad*

7) Jews, Secession, and the Civil War: Selected sermons from American Jewish Clergy/ letters of Jewish Civil War soldiers/ sources from Sarna and Mendelssohn, *Jews and the Civil War: A Reader*

8) Lincoln, the Bible, and the Jews: Lincoln's speech at Trenton, 1861/Lincoln's address in Philadelphia, 1861/ "Meditations on Divine Will/ Letter on Jewish Chaplaincy/ Letter to Lincoln about Sabbath observance/ Correspondence with, and sermons of, Sabato Morais/ Gettysburg Address and Second Inaugural Jonathan Sarna, *When General Grant Expelled the Jews, Lincoln and the Jews*/ Meir Soloveichik, "When Lincoln Died on Passover."