

# Holy Congregation, House of God: KKBE's 1794 Synagogue Reconstructed

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In January of 1792, the Jewish community of Charleston, South Carolina, gathered on Hassell Street, near its intersection with King Street. In the late eighteenth century Charleston was home to the United States' largest Jewish population. One-hundred more Jews lived there than in New York City.<sup>1</sup> They were called together by Daniel Hart, Gershom Cohen, and Moses Levy on behalf of the building committee to witness the laying of cornerstones for their new Synagogue. Israel Joseph laid the first stone on the east side and Philip Hart the first on the west. The two men had already given generously to the building project. Hart, along with Jacob Cohen, and Gershom Cohen were the committee appointed by the Parnissim to oversee the construction.<sup>2</sup> The honor of laying the other six stones – four for the main body of the building and four more for its antechamber – was distributed by auction to Lyon Moses, Isaac Moses, Emanuel Abrahams, Mark Tongues, Hart Moses, and Abraham Moses Sr. The whole exercise was “conducted by the rules and regulations of the ancient and honorable fraternity of Freemasons.” In 1799, five years after the building was completed, David Lopez suggested that the congregation undertake to build a “handsome... chaste and beautiful ‘ark’.” At the beginning of its construction eight more cornerstones were laid

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<sup>1</sup> Reznikoff, Charles and Uriah Z. Engelman, The Jews of Charleston: A History of an American Jewish Community (The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1950) 67.

<sup>2</sup> Hagy adds to the list of building committee members Jacob Jacobs and Israel Joseph. It is unclear why he does this. Israel Joseph is listed as laying the first cornerstone, while Jacob Jacobs is not listed at all. The two men are not listed on the building committee by Levin whom Hagy cites, or in Ezraty or Briebart who make use of Levin as well. Hagy, James William, This Happy Land: The Jews of Colonial and Antebellum Charleston (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1993) 73 – 74.

along the eastern wall. Lopez, a member of the building committee for that project placed the final stone under the southwest column on behalf of the larger membership who had made it possible through their, “liberal contribution.”<sup>3</sup> The building might rise on stones laid by the wealthiest, but the ark and its Torah scrolls would rise in a more egalitarian spirit.

The laying of cornerstones as a means of honoring donors and funding construction echoed similar ceremonies in the Jewish communities throughout the Judeo-Atlantic world.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the use of ceremonial cornerstones was a common aspect of many buildings and was often linked with freemasonry; a movement Jews participated in widely.<sup>5</sup> The ceremony at Charleston that day differed from the others over the past century in a very important way: ex-Iberian Sephardic Jews and Ashkenazic Jews of Eastern European origin lifted shovel and trowel side by side. Ashkenazic Jews had been participants in Jewish life in America from the start. However, unlike in Amsterdam and London, in the eighteenth century they were not numerous enough in America to found their own synagogue or powerful enough to exert significant influence over the wealthy Sephardic community. In January 1792, on a side street in Charleston, the Sephardic Judeo-Atlantic web was broken open, expanded and dismantled with every turn of the earth.

On September 19, 1794, the last Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah, the new Synagogue of Kahal Kadosh Beit Elohim was dedicated. Charleston’s grandees attended

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<sup>3</sup> Levin, N., “The Jewish Congregation of Charleston,” The Occident, 1 (November 1843), <http://www.jewish-history.com/Occident/volume1/nov1843/>.

<sup>4</sup> For examples of the selling of the honor of laying cornerstones in Amsterdam see: van Agt, J.F. Synagogen in Amsterdam, (Staatsuitgeverij: ‘s-Gravenhage, 1974), 94 - 95. For Curacao see Emmanuel, History of the Jews of the Netherlands Antilles 120.

<sup>5</sup> Sarna, Jonathon D., American Judaism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) 89.

the event. Governor Moultrie was there, as was “the lieutenant-governor, the civil and military officers of the state, the municipal authorities, the reverend clergy....” They were all “highly delighted and edified” by what they saw.<sup>6</sup> To Governor Moultrie and the other grandees the Wren-inspired tower and the rows of compass-headed windows spoke more of St. Michaels a few blocks away than of Solomon’s Temple. Through its exterior architectural language, the synagogue made it clear that Jews saw themselves as an integral part of Charleston’s religious landscape.

In 1838 that message was consumed in one of many fires that swept through antebellum Charleston. Today the synagogue’s form is known through interior and exterior paintings by Salomon N. Carvahlo and subsequent engravings as well as and a recently discovered sketch in the Library of Congress by John Rubens Smith. Both exterior representations present a view from the southwest. Carvahlo’s painting style is impressionistic, and somewhat impractical for resolving fine detail. The engravings resolve the interior and exterior features more clearly, but were made after the fire and from the paintings. It is the discovery of the Smith sketch that has made detailed study of the interior and exterior architecture of the synagogue possible. Smith’s background as a topographer allows us to check Carvahlo’s accuracy against someone proficient with accurate rendering of the built environment.<sup>7</sup> Together, the Smith sketch and the Carvahlo paintings and engravings allow us to discern in great detail the articulation of the exterior and the functional and liturgical arrangements of the interior.

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<sup>6</sup> South-Carolina State Gazette September 20, 1794.

<sup>7</sup> “John Rubens Smith,” AskArt.com, <http://www.askart.com/askart/artist.aspx?artist=20513>.

The synagogue presents a profile to Hassell Street, it is oriented parallel to the road with its tower and entrance to the west. This fits with the liturgical desire to face east during prayer. It also makes sense since most Jews lived and worked on and around King Street and would have approached the synagogue from that direction.<sup>8</sup> The synagogue measured seventy feet west to east, and forty feet at its widest point north to south.<sup>9</sup> The doorway to the synagogue on the west end was embellished by a fan-light and what appears to be a plaque that may have carried either the name of the synagogue or a piece of scripture, as is found in Curacao. The antechamber was lit by a compass-headed window above this doorway and by two long compass headed windows on the north and south. These windows interest the belt-course and are one of the few cases where double rows of compass headed windows are not used on the structure. This suggests that the stairway to the women's balcony was in this antechamber, as the stair would have blocked the lower window. The antechamber is tied in to the main body of the Synagogue through decorative idiom and a single belt-course that wraps around the entire building. Each corner of the synagogue is embellished with quoins, each compass headed window with decorative arches and keystones, and the cornices through simple classical moldings. The main body of the synagogue stood forty-feet in height at its ridgeline. Two small ox-eye windows are visible in the gables of the antechamber and the main body of the building. These probably provided light and ventilation to an attic space. Twenty compass-headed windows lit the interior of the worship space from the north and south, and were arrayed in two levels. On the west face of the main body this

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<sup>8</sup> Hagy, 45 – 46. Hagy notes that of those Jews listed in the directory 46% listed a King Street address. By 1809 that number had risen to 55%.

<sup>9</sup> Mills, Robert, Statistics of South Carolina Including a View of Its Natural, Civil, and Military History, General and Particular (Charleston 1826; Spartanburg, SC: The Reprint Company, 1972) 416.

articulation was continued with four more compass-headed windows. Two compass-headed windows and a half-ox-eye window at the very top of the wall above the ark pierced the east end of the synagogue and provided light behind the bimah. These compass-headed windows, with the probable exception of those on the north and south of the anteroom, were all ten by four feet and glazed with nine by nine light sash windows with six-light fans. The octagonal cupola consisted of two levels, the first glazed with compass-headed windows embellished with decorative moldings and keystones and separated by classical columns. A molded cornice separated the first level from the second with its classical arches. A weathervane atop a bell-roof topped out at seventy-five feet, just about half of St. Michael's cupola's one-hundred-and-sixty-five feet, but still an impressive height <sup>10</sup>

The details of Charleston's 1794 synagogue suggest that its designers intended for it to make use of the civic and religious architectural language of St. Michael's Episcopal Church, the most socially-important of the city's religious structures. In 1751 the South Carolina legislature authorized a new parish south of Broad Street and a new church to serve that community and compliment the older St. Philips. When it was completed in 1762, the cost was far in excess of £50,000.<sup>11</sup> The synagogue could not compete with the

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<sup>10</sup> Bae, Suhoon and Daniel Ackermann, "Digital Reconstruction of KKBE's 1794 Synagogue," Experiential Visualization Final Presentations, ARCH 536, Spring 2005. These measurements were arrived at through the use of image correcting software and computer aided drafting tools that used Robert Mills' measurements of the length and width of the Synagogue as a starting point. Both the Carvahlo and the Smith images were tested independently to confirm the accuracy of the calculations. For St. Michaels measurements see Mark W. Steele, Longitudinal Section of St. Michaels, St. Michaels Episcopal Church, Department of the Interior, Historic American Buildings Survey (Washington, DC: Department of the Interior, 1963).

<sup>11</sup> Waddell, Gene, Charleston Architecture: 1670 – 1860 (Wyrick & Company, Charleston: 2003) 107 – 109.

rich associations of St. Phillip's, "colonial, revolutionary, and ecclesiastic history."<sup>12</sup> But Charleston's Jews could hope to have a synagogue that closely corresponded to St. Michaels where many of Charleston's richest and most fashionable families worshiped.<sup>13</sup> St. Michaels Church is a large Gibbs-inspired building with double rows of tall compass-headed windows enhanced by decorative surrounds and keystones. The corners of the building are delineated by quoins. The use of a galleried space, lit by two levels of compass headed windows, embellished with stucco dressings and corner quoins all suggest an architectonic engagement with St. Michaels.

Charleston's Jews also sought to use their synagogue's architecture to engage with other buildings in the civic landscape, just as they were engaged with those structures as men of trade and culture. Peter and John Adam Horlbeck are thought to be the designers of the 1794 synagogue.<sup>14</sup> Their 1771 Exchange Building on East Bay Street shows their knowledge of neoclassicism, particularly in its use of compass-headed windows with decorative surrounds and keystones of simulated stone.<sup>15</sup> The Charleston City Hall on Broad Street was originally constructed as a Branch of the Bank of the United States in 1800. It also features compass-headed windows and quoins.<sup>16</sup> The Jewish community chose to adopt the architectural language of other Charleston civic and religious buildings to make a statement about their place within the city.

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<sup>12</sup> "The Circular of the Congregation of St. Phillip's Church," The Politics of Taste in Antebellum Charleston, Maurie D. McInnis, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005) 111.

<sup>13</sup> What should I cite for this???

<sup>14</sup> Ravenel, Beatrice St. Julien, Architects of Charleston (Charleston: Carolina Art Association, 1945) 44.

<sup>15</sup> Ravenel, 39.

<sup>16</sup> Posten, Jonathon, The Buildings of Charleston: A Guide to the City's Architecture (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1997) 166-167.

While the synagogues of Curacao and Newport both appropriated local civic and religious architecture, they did so in a restrained manner that avoided one of the most obvious articulations of Christian religiousness, the steeple. Indeed, Charleston's Synagogue reads much like Wren church because of the tall steeple over its western end. The steeple of Kahal Kadosh Beit Elohim is a particularly close parallel with St. Michael's steeple, especially its second, fourth and fifth levels.<sup>17</sup> The St. Michael's steeple is set on a square base of imitated stone, where the synagogue's steeple is set on the eastern antechamber. The second level of St. Michael's steeple is octagonal and pierced by compass-headed windows separated on the edge of each facet by classical columns. Though these windows are not glazed on St. Michael's as they are on the synagogue, the parallel is none-the-less very close. One of the reasons for the non-glazed windows of St. Michael's second steeple level was the clock in the third level. The synagogue had no external clock and thus had no need for bells or an open steeple to accommodate them. Indeed, the lack of a clock in the synagogue suggests that the recognized the primacy of the Church, and through it Charleston's civic leaders, in setting the daily flow of life in the city. The fourth octagonal level of classical arches and the cap-level topped with a ball-and-weathervane echo – at a somewhat steeper pitch – are both closely paralleled in the Synagogue's steeple. John William Hill's 1851 view of Charleston shows that the Jews were not the only non-Anglican denomination to engage with Charleston's religious landscape and St. Michael's in particular through its classically inspired steeple. While the synagogue – which burned in 1838 – is not present in Hill's view, there are at least two other classical steeples in addition to the ones at St.

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<sup>17</sup> Wischnitzer, Rachel, Synagogue Architecture in the United States: History and Interpretation (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1955) 20.

Philips and St. Michaels. With their steeple piercing Charleston's skyline, the Jews asserted themselves as full participants in the city's religious and civic life.

In the young republic Jews imbibed the language of liberty that followed the American Revolution and its promise of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."<sup>18</sup> They believed, as George Washington wrote to them, that, "The power and goodness of the Almighty were strongly manifested in the events of the late glorious revolution."<sup>19</sup> Gershom Mendes Seixas, the leader of New York's Jewish community, carefully read the Constitutions of each state and made marginal notes about the possibility of Jewish civic involvement in each state. South Carolina's Constitution allowed for a Jew to be elected "either Gov'r, Lieut Govern'r, member of Privy council, senate or assembly..." Though the Constitution only allowed Protestants to hold office, as Seixas saw things "a Jew being a protestant there is no impediment."<sup>20</sup> Not everyone shared Seixas' optimistic view of the place of Jews within the world of American Protestantism. In 1787 *The New-Haven Gazette and Connecticut Magazine* reported that during the ten days of penitence between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur vandals had broken in to the old synagogue in Charleston and made off with "a silver spice box." Disgusted that the rich silver ornaments had, as usual, been removed, the thieves took "the Five Books of Moses which

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<sup>18</sup> Jefferson, Thomas, et. al., Declaration of Independence (Philadelphia: 1776) preamble.

<sup>19</sup> "Washington: To the Hebrew Congregations in the Cities of Philadelphia, New York, Charleston and Rickmond," The Occident, 4 (July 1844), <http://www.jewish-history.com/Occident/volume2/jul1844/washington.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Seixas, Gershom Mendes, marginalia in The Constitution of the Several Independent States of America, the Declaration of Independence: The Articles of Confederation Between the Said States, the Treaties Between His Most Christian Majesty and the United States of America (Philadelphia: 1781), ms., Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH, 173.

contain the law and commandments of Almighty God, (and) wantonly (threw them) about the floor.”<sup>21</sup>

Despite such random acts of hatred, the general Jewish experience in the young Republic was one of civic engagement. In 1791, while they were still worshipping in their old building, they founded the Hebrew Benevolent Society of Charleston. The organization sought to “relieve sorrow, to succor distress, and to pour the balm of sympathy into the wounded heart, to give to the poor, and to clothe and feed the hungry and naked.”<sup>22</sup> Like the various churches in Charleston and Jewish congregations elsewhere, charity formed a major part of the mission of the synagogue. In 1802, General Christopher Gadsden made a gift of a three-volume set of the Mishnah and a two-volume set of Maimonides to the congregation. Gadsden was a non-Jew, but in his accompanying letter notes a “particular regard,” for the Jewish community. David Lopez, the President of the Congregation – a title he assumed instead of “Parnas” for extra-Jewish communications – responded that he and congregation hoped:

That your days may be with happiness uninterruptedly extended to the limits conceded to man; and when that eventful period arrived beyond which no man can pass that you, like the patriarchs of ancient days, may be translated with peace... to partake in the mansions of the just, those tranquil enjoyments allotted as the reward of all, whose lives, like yours, have been employed in deeds of virtue and charity.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Kaganoff, Nathan M., “An Early American Synagogue Desecration,” American Jewish Historical Quarterly 58 (September 1968 to June 1969): 136. A spice box is used ritually as part of the Havdalah, the service on Saturday night that separates the Sabbath from the rest of the week.

<sup>22</sup> “Fifty-Sixth Anniversary of the Hebrew Benevolent Society of Charleston, S.C.,” The Occident, 6 (April 1848), <http://www.jewish-history.com/Occident/volume6/apr1848/charleston.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Levin, N., “The Jewish Community of Charleston,” The Occident, 1 (November 1843), <http://www.jewish-history.com/Occident/volume1/nov1843/charleston2.html>.

The prominence of the Jewish community was also made clear during the Marquis de Lafayette's visit to the city during his 1825 American tour. He included the synagogue on his itinerary of the city, and his secretary described its interior as "spacious and elegant."<sup>24</sup> The elegance that Lafayette saw was the visible manifestation of the civic engagement of Charleston's Jews.

The interior of Kahal Kadosh Beit Elohim's 1794 synagogue engaged in conversation with the larger Judeo-Atlantic world as much as with the religious landscape of Charleston, South Carolina. The interior of the anteroom is unknown, but the placement of the windows on the north and south sides suggests that the balcony stairs were within that space.<sup>25</sup> The space is lit by twenty-four compass-headed windows arrayed in two levels on the north, south, and west sides and two similar windows centered in the east, ark end capped by a large half-ox-eye directly above the cabinetry. A woman's balcony extended along the north, south and west walls.<sup>26</sup> Simple columns with plain ovolo moldings carried the balcony. Plain geometric wainscoting ran along the balustrade. As in London and Newport, the columns continued through the balcony and up to a simple molding at the base of the curved barrel-vault ceiling. The Banca was placed in the center of the north wall, as traditional, and was of a simple, canopied design. The ark against the east wall, added in 1799, is a three bay design, with each bay articulated by fluted pilasters. Its geometric wainscoting echoes the design on the balcony balustrade. The curvilinear attic echoes the design of the 1701 ark at Bevis

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<sup>24</sup> Levasseur, Auguste, Lafayette in America in 1834 and 1825, or, Journal of Travels in the United States, trans. John D. Goodman (New York: 1829)

<sup>25</sup> Wischnitzer 20.

<sup>26</sup> Though there is no visual evidence that the balcony extended along all three sides, this three-sided balcony would follow the model seen in Amsterdam, Bevis Marks, and Newport, though not Curacao.

Marks in London and probably the original ark in Newport as well. The bimah is raised platform reached by four stairs on the north and south sides and surrounded by a simple railing. Tall candles provide extra light at the corners and a cloth-covered reading desk sits in the west half of the space.

The position of the bimah relative to the ark in the synagogue space has generally been thought to be the same as that in other synagogues in the Judea-Atlantic world.<sup>27</sup> Digital modeling of the synagogue based on the interior and exterior representations that survive shows that this is not the case. The placement of the bimah reflects a compromise between Charleston's Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews.<sup>28</sup>

Though the wealthiest Jews in the eighteenth century tended to come from Sephardic backgrounds, by 1720 they were in the minority. Generally poorer, their Ashkenazic co-religionists from Eastern Europe often ended up on American shores through the agency of the major Sephardic communities in Amsterdam and London. The wealthy Sephardim sometimes paid for passage and gave aid so long as these "tedescos" went elsewhere and not upset the carefully created social order. In the Americas some achieved great prosperity, and ultimately through leadership roles and monetary contributions exerted more influence on the character of American worship.<sup>29</sup>

The small size of many communities meant that socially, if not spatially, the divide between Sephardic and Ashkenazic was shrinking.<sup>30</sup> Abigail Franks wrote to her

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<sup>27</sup> Waddell, Gene, "An Architectural History of Kahal Kadosh Beit Elohim, Charleston," South Carolina Historical Magazine 98 (January 1997): 9. Waddell also contends that the cupola admitted for the reading desk, this is almost certainly incorrect. Wischnitzer, 20. Hagy, 76 – 77.

<sup>28</sup> Bae and Ackermann.

<sup>29</sup> Dinar, Hasia R., The Jews of the United States: 1654 - 2000 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) 18 – 19, 29 – 31.

son Naphtali in 1740 about her sister Rachel Levy's marriage to Isaac Mendes Seixas. Seixas' marriage raised eyebrows among New York's Sephardic Jews because, though the Levy family had attained a high level of wealth and material refinement, they were of Eastern European extraction. Various reasons were given publicly for the displeasure, but Abigail attributed the feelings about her sister's marriage to "her being a Tudesco. The Porugueze here where(sic) in A Violent Uproar about it for he Did not invite any of them to ye Wedding."<sup>31</sup>

More serious was the perceived threat that the Ashkenazic Jews made to the established Sephardic mode of worship. In 1729, the Jewish community of Curacao sent £136.12.1.75 to Shearith Israel in New York for their new Synagogue. In the letter accompanying the donation, Haham Jesurun confessed his fear of that the:

Germans (Ashkenazic Jews) are more in Number than Wee (Sephardic Jews) there, (and) desire of you not to consent... to Let them have any More Votes nor Authority then they have had hitherto and for the performance of Which you are to get them to Signe an agreement of the Same by all of them, and that one Copy of the Sayd agreement... be Sent to me for the Treasurer of this Congregation to Keep in his Books...<sup>32</sup>

Despite the concerns expressed by Haham Jesurun and others in the Judeo-Atlantic world about the growing prominence of Ashkenazic Jews in, there was a slow interjection of Ashkenazic forms within the Sephardic worship spaces in America. The New York silversmith Myer Myers produced two sets of Rimonim for Mikve Israel in Philadelphia.

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<sup>30</sup> Dinar, 30.

<sup>31</sup> Franks, Abigail, "Abigail Franks to Naphtali Franks, August 3, 1740," The Lee Max Friedman Collection of American Jewish Colonial Correspondence: Letters of the Franks Family, 1733 – 1748, eds. Leo Hershkowitz and Isidore S. Meyer, Studies in American Jewish History No. 5 (Waltham, MA: American Jewish Historical Society, 1968) 75 – 77.

<sup>32</sup> Pool, David de Sola, The Mill Street Synagogue (1730 – 1817) of the Congregation Shearith Israel (founded in the city of New York in 1655), (New York: 1930) 49, 71.

One set follows the traditional Sephardic forms found in his work for Newport. But the other set is a clearly Ashkenazic pair with bulbous forms that follow in the German rather than Iberian tradition.<sup>33</sup>

Though Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews interacted on the local level, the broader Judeo-Atlantic world of the eighteenth century remained decidedly Sephardic. When the Jewish communities of North America looked for money or wisdom in Amsterdam and London they looked to the Sephardic and not the Ashkenazic congregations there. But that was changing. In 1790, Congregation Mikvah Israel in Philadelphia sent out an appeal for funds to build a new synagogue to the usual list of subscribers; they also send a copy to “the Parnissim & Gabay of K.K. Ashkenazim In Paramaribo, Surinam.”<sup>34</sup>

The Jews in Charleston did not need to look to Ashkenazic congregations elsewhere for money: they had their own locally. Between 1775 and 1783 Beth Elohim appears to have split in to two factions, one Ashkenazic and one Sephardic. The best evidence for a split on religious rather than political grounds comes from the will of Joseph Salvador. He bequeathed “100 sterling to the Portuguese Congregation in the City of Charleston known by the name of Beth Elohim Unveh Shallom, or the House of the Lord and Mansion of Peace... and 20 sterling to the German Jewish Congregation in the City of Charleston known by the name of Beth Elohim or the House of the Lord.”<sup>35</sup> The differences between the two groups had evidently been ironed out by January 1791 when Philip Hart, Isaac DaCosta, Moses C. Levy, J.I. Cohen, Dores Benjamin, Israel

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<sup>33</sup> Barquist, 154 – 162.

<sup>34</sup> “Letter from Mikve Israel to K. K. Ashkenazim,” ms., Congregation Mikve Israel Records 1781 – 1899, Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH.

<sup>35</sup> Breibart, Solomon, “The Synagogues of Kahal Kadosh Beit Elohim, Charleston,” South Carolina Historical Magazine, 80 (July 1979): 217.

Joseph and Gerhon Cohen addressed a petition of incorporation to South Carolina's legislature. Hart, an Ashkenazic Jew and DaCosta a Sephardic Jew signed the petition as co-Wardens. The remaining signatures were closely matched between Sephardic and Ashkenazic as well.<sup>36</sup> The building Committee for the new synagogue was also carefully selected. Of the three members, Daniel Hart and Moses Levy were Ashkenazic; Gershom Cohen was Sephardic.<sup>37</sup> The cornerstones were probably all laid by Ashkenazic Jews.<sup>38</sup>

The building committee faced a problem: how to remain part of the Sephardic Judeo-Atlantic world while meeting the needs of a growing Ashkenazic community and a clearly important Ashkenazic donor base. The desire to remain part of the Judeo-Atlantic was more than nostalgia; The Judeo-Atlantic world represented important trans-national webs of trade and commerce. After all, Jewish merchants from London, New York, or most the Caribbean, expected to find a Sephardic Minyan in Charleston. Meanwhile, the Ashkenazic Jews who funded much of the building sought a spatial experience that met their expectations. The committee came to an elegant solution: they moved the ark forward slightly from the classic Sephardic position and backwards slightly from the traditional Ashkenazic placement.<sup>39</sup> With this solution the Sephardim could enjoy much of the benefits of a long Torah procession while the Ashkenazic could have a view of the Torah and reader easily accessible from most seats.

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<sup>36</sup> Hagy, 73.

<sup>37</sup> Hagy, 25, 74.

<sup>38</sup> Cornerstones were laid by: Israel Joseph (A) Philip Hart (A) Lyon Moses (A) Isaac Moses (A) Emanuel Abrahams (A) Mark Tongues (?) Hart Moses (A) and Abraham Moses Sr. (A) Hagy, 18 – 27.

<sup>39</sup> Krinsky, 21 – 26. The plans of the Ashkenazic and Sephardic synagogues in Amsterdam and London demonstrate the contrast between the spatial arrangements preferred by each sect.

Though the congregation had elegantly solved their architectural problem between Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews, they faced new issues within Jewish tradition that were not so easily solved. The sectarian tensions in the congregation certainly made it possible for other issues to fracture the synagogue community. In 1812, there was a controversy in the synagogue when their religious leader, the Reverend Emanuel Nunez Carvahlo “taught the children to sing the concluding psalms of the Sabbath Morning Service in a very handsome manner.”<sup>40</sup> Choirs and singing were part of religious expression elsewhere in Charleston. Reverend Carvahlo wanted the children to be accorded the same hushed respect that accompanied singing elsewhere in Charleston’s religious spaces. He “did away with the discordance which attends every Synagogue for a whim or caper he discontinued this ceremony & forbid the children to sing.” The Parnissim enjoined Reverend Carvahlo to ignore the disturbance and let the children continue finish their singing, and when he would not comply with their order he was suspended for five days. That afternoon Carvahlo turned to his supporters and had a signed petition to present to the Parnissim at their meeting after sunset. Reverend Carvahlo was reminded by the Parnissim that they could not accept the petition – presumably because he had been suspended from the congregation – at which point the “whole meeting parnas & all were battling with clubs & bruising boxing &c during which his reverence & brother... came off with a few thumps.”<sup>41</sup> Other members of the community sought more substantive reforms than quiet during the singing of children. In

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<sup>40</sup> “Reverend” was the term used for many Jewish leaders in the early United States. Rabbis were trained, usually in London or Amsterdam. A Rabbi is not necessary for Jewish prayer and worship, and learned men like Gershom Mendes Seixas of New York became respected leaders within and outside of the Jewish community.

<sup>41</sup> Noah, M. M., “Letter from M.M. Noah in Charleston to his uncle May 10, 1812,” Menorah Journal No. 24, Autumn 1936, 287 – 288.

1824 a group of peripherally involved Jews met to investigate what had driven them away from the synagogue. They wanted a simpler service, less Hebrew, and a modernization of the membership system. They presented their findings and recommendations to the Parnissim who reminded them of the near impossible requirements in the constitution for change in the Minhag Sephardim.<sup>42</sup> There were clearly limits to how far secular and religious integration and change could go.

Perhaps they went too far, or perhaps the world was changing. On April 27, 1838, the synagogue was consumed by fire. One imagines that the sight for the Jews witnessing the fire was much like that of St. Philip's parishioners three years earlier as the fire "wreathed the steeple... forming literally a pillar of fire."<sup>43</sup> Moses Levy rushed in to the burning building to save the Torah scrolls.<sup>44</sup> He succeeded in saving the heart of the Jewish community, but not its body. The building was a loss. An appeal was made "to the different congregations of London, Liverpool, and Amsterdam, also to all Congregations in this Country, and to all Israelites in this City."<sup>45</sup> But the world had changed. Nathaniel Levin, writing in Charleston five years after the fire bitterly noted that "letters were received from the congregations of London, Amsterdam, Barbados, Curacao and other places, *sympathizing* with us in the loss of our Synagogue, but excusing themselves... from affording us the necessary aid." In the decades that

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<sup>42</sup> Zola, Gary Phillip, Issac Harby of Charleston 1788 – 1828: Jewish Reformer and Intellectual (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1994) 112 – 115.

<sup>43</sup> McInnis 110.

<sup>44</sup> Levin, N., "The Jewish Congregation of Charleston" The Occident, 1 (December 1843), <http://www.jewish-history.com/Occident/volume1/dec1843/charleston3.html>.

<sup>45</sup> "Circular of May 15, 1838," ms., Congregation Beth Elohim Records, 1800 – 1884, Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH.

followed the dedication of the Synagogue in 1794, the traditional Judeo-Atlantic world collapsed as Ashkenazic and Sephardic built an American Judaism that integrated itself more closely with the secular Christian community in architecture, and in the worship of the new Reform movement brought from Germany and incubated in new centers of Judaism in places like Ohio. The new American Judaism looked west as much as east. And the only Jewish community to substantively respond to Kahal Kadosh Beit Elohim's plea for aid: A check for \$119.50 from Cincinnati, Ohio.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Levin, N., "The Jewish Congregation of Charleston" *The Occident*, 1 (December 1843), <http://www.jewish-history.com/Occident/volume1/dec1843/charleston3.html>.