

HISTORY



Alexander Hamilton on the Series 2004A US \$10 bill.
(Photos: Wikimedia Commons)



A 1956 \$5 Hamilton postage stamp.

Statue of the Founding Father at the US Treasury in Washington.



US Founding Father one of us?

• By BARRY DAVIS

We all know that the US has a large and influential Jewish community. Some say it is even larger than the Jewish population of this country. But how instrumental were Jews in creating the United States?

That is a topic that has fascinated Dr. Andrew Porwancher for the last seven years. During that time the Wick Cary associate professor of American constitutional history at the Institute for the American Constitutional Heritage of the University of Oklahoma, has delved deeply into the life and work of Alexander Hamilton, one of the Founding Fathers, and first secretary of the Treasury, of the United States of America.

Hamilton was born, and spent part of his childhood, in Charlestown, on the island of Nevis in the Leeward Islands, then part of the British West Indies.

This Monday, at 7:30 p.m., the Mishkenot Sha'ananim Cultural Center will host Porwancher and Rabbi Dr. Meir Soloveichik, director of the Zahava and Moshael Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at New York-based Yeshiva University, when they will discuss the emerging evidence and historical debate surrounding Hamilton's Jewish roots.

Porwancher says it was his all-encompassing historian's ethos that sparked his interest in digging into the possibility that one of the people responsible for laying the foundations of the world's foremost superpower was Jewish.

"I teach American constitutional history, and Alexander Hamilton features centrally in the adoption of the US Constitution in the 1780s," Porwancher explains. "I like to give students biographical details about the historical figures whom we study in class, so that the texts we read are less abstract and more relatable. As I studied Hamilton's life story, it turned out that his mother was named Rachel Levine and she enrolled him in a Hebrew school on the Caribbean island of Nevis."

It seems this was not exactly breaking news, neither was it considered to be of particular importance – that is, until Porwancher began researching the matter.

"These facts have long been known," he notes. "Despite that they hinted at a possible Jewish identity, no other scholar had taken seriously the idea that Hamilton may have had Jewish origins. So I went down to the Caribbean to start investigating and began piecing together clues that suggested he was in all likelihood born and raised Jewish."

That is the basic premise for Porwancher's upcoming publication *The Jewish Founding Father: Alexander Hamilton's Hidden Life*, which is scheduled for release,

by Harvard University Press, in 2019.

The historian had been looking to produce a tome on the US pioneer for a while but, due to previous professional commitments, he had to put it on a back burner for a while. Even so, while Porwancher was enthused by the topic, he could not be sure how much interest an exploration of an 18th-century American whose portrait graces the \$10 bill would generate among the public at large.

Any doubts Porwancher may have had about that were soon allayed by the launch and resounding success of *Hamilton: An American Musical* show, a sung-and-rapped-through musical about Hamilton's life,



Andrew Porwancher. (Photos: Mishkenot Sha'ananim Spokesperson)



Meir Soloveichik.

written by Lin-Manuel Miranda. The musical was nominated for no fewer than 16 Tony Awards, taking 11. In 2016, it also received the Grammy Award for Best Musical Theater Album and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Clearly, there was an abundance of interest in the pioneer American. "The fact that the Hamilton musical was opening on Broadway to wide acclaim at that very moment certainly strengthened my case that there would be a market for a new book about Hamilton's life."

OK. SO 21st-century America was intrigued by the life and work of the 18th-century statesman, but why should anyone care about the man's religious origins?

"It is important to understand Hamilton's links to Judaism in his childhood, because they provide crucial context for making sense of his relationship to American Jewry as an adult," notes Porwancher. "Although Hamilton had abandoned any outward Jewish identity by the time he left the Caribbean for New York as a teenager, in adulthood he became more involved with the American Jewish community than any other Founding Father. And this untold story of Hamilton's alliance with Jewish Americans complicates the typical depiction of him as a lackey of the powerful who had little concern for those on the margins."

Porwancher plowed his way through piles of documents, held in archives on Nevis and nearby Saint Croix, which shed light on Hamilton's roots. He also looked into Hamilton's relationship with American Jewry by probing a wide range of repositories. "I undertook research in Hamilton's papers at the Library of Congress, his legal papers at Columbia University, additional legal records at the New York State Archives, archival materials from contemporary Jews that are now housed at the American Jewish Historical Society, and 18th-century newspapers."

Most researchers will tell you trawling reams of documents can be a taxing although, hopefully, ultimately rewarding experience. They might also add that their sleuthing labors can also produce some unexpected anecdotal snippets. Porwancher said he came across a curious form of late-18th-century remuneration.

"I was surprised to learn that the rabbi in New York in the 1780s got paid partly in matza," he laughs.

One might surmise that suggesting that one of Founding Fathers of the United States of America was Jewish could stir up some pretty murky waters, as well as being warmly welcomed by some. Porwancher says he has had his fair share of reactions from both sides of the emotional divide.

"I've encountered both fervent enthusiasm for, and knee-jerk hostility to, my work. A number of scholars of early American history have staked their careers on a particular interpretation of the era that relies on a caricatured version of Hamilton. They use Hamilton as a convenient foil against which to build their narratives of the time period. So by unearthing Hamilton's alliance with Jews, I threaten the foundations of these scholars' work. As a result, they are predisposed to oppose my argument. But I have also found a number of scholars, and members of the public at large, who are sympathetic to my work. Ultimately, I hope that the evidence I've marshaled in support of my conclusions will win over the open-minded skeptics."

Porwancher feels that providing documented collateral for Hamilton's Jewishness, besides gaining some fascinating knowledge about the formative period of the United States, can have a much wider bearing on contemporary American society.

"The same stereotypes about Jews as rootless financiers who bilk ordinary Americans that were commonplace in Hamilton's time continue, in our own day, to be peddled by extremist elements in the United States. Modern day antisemites like to suggest that Jews are somehow untrustworthy outsiders who have taken control of American institutions. But we should not forget that Jews were a part of the American story since its founding. They exhausted their treasure and spilled their blood to support the cause of American independence. Antisemitism today is not only morally repugnant, but it's premised on a fiction that only white Anglo-Saxon Protestant men created the nation."

Porwancher and Soloveichik have presented the case for and against Hamilton's Jewish connection before, but Porwancher says he is particularly moved by the opportunity to discuss the topic here.

"In Hamilton's day, America was called a New Jerusalem, and it's an honor for me to now come to the real Jerusalem to share Hamilton's story of his search for a redemptive homeland."

*For tickets and more information: www.mishkenot.org.il and *3289*