

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

A PHILADELPHIA WEDDING, 1787

[Letter of Benjamin Rush to his wife]*

Philadelphia, June 27, 1787

My dear Julia,

Being called a few days ago to attend in the family of Jonas Phillips,¹ I was honored this morning with an invitation to attend the marriage of his daughter to a young man of the name of LEVY from Virginia.² I accepted the invitation with great pleasure, for you know I love to be in the way of adding to my stock of ideas upon all subjects.

At 1 o'clock the company, consisting of 30 or 40 men, assembled in Mr. Phillips' common parlor, which was accommodated with benches for the purpose. The ceremony began with prayers in the Hebrew language, which were chaunted by an old rabbi and in which he was followed by the whole company. As I did not understand a word except now and then an Amen or Hallelujah, my attention was directed to the haste with which they covered their heads with their hats as soon as the prayers began, and to the freedom with which some of them conversed with each other during the whole time of this part of

* The text of this letter and the notes thereunto appertaining were published in *The Letters of Benjamin Rush*, edited by L. H. Butterfield (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1951), vol. I, pp. 429-432, and is reprinted here through the courtesy of the editor, the publisher and the owner of the original letter, Mr. Gordon A. Block, Jr., a member of the American Jewish Historical Society.

¹ Jonas Phillips (1736-1803), born near Aix-la-Chapelle, later lived in London, Charleston, New York, and at length in Philadelphia, where, according to the *Directory for 1785*, he had a mercantile business on Market between Second and Third Streets; he was prominent in the Mickvéh Israel Congregation [Henry S.] Morais, [*The Jews of Philadelphia*] (Philadelphia, 1894) p]p. 27-8.

² Rachel, daughter of Jonas Phillips, married Michael Levy; their son, Uriah Phillips Levy (1792-1862), rose to the rank of captain in the U. S. Navy and acquired some celebrity for his purchase of Jefferson's home, Monticello, though the work of restoration was to be begun by Levy's nephew and heir, Jefferson M. Levy (same; also *D[ictionary of] A[merican] B[iography]*, under Uriah P. Levy; Paul Wiltstach, *Jefferson and Monticello*, 5th edn.. N. Y.. 1930. ch. xiv).

their worship. As soon as these prayers were ended, which took up about 20 minutes, a small piece of parchment was produced, written in Hebrew, which contained a deed of settlement and which the groom subscribed in the presence of four witnesses. In this deed he conveyed a part of his fortune to his bride, by which she was provided for after his death in case she survived him. This ceremony was followed by the erection of a beautiful canopy composed of white and red silk in the middle of the floor. It was supported by four young men (by means of four poles), who put on white gloves for the purpose. As soon as this canopy was fixed, the bride, accompanied with her mother,³ sister, and a long train of female relations, came downstairs. Her face was covered with a veil which reached halfway down her body. She was handsome at all times, but the occasion and her dress rendered her in a peculiar manner a most lovely and affecting object. I gazed with delight upon her. Innocence, modesty, fear, respect, and devotion appeared all at once in her countenance. She was led by her two bridesmaids under the canopy. Two young men led the bridegroom after her and placed him, not by her side, but directly opposite to her. The priest now began again to chaunt an Hebrew prayer, in which he was followed by part of the company. After this he gave to the groom and bride a glass full of wine, from which they each sipped about a teaspoonful. Another prayer followed this act, after which he took a ring and directed the groom to place it upon the finger of his bride in the same manner as is practised in the marriage service of the Church of England. This ceremony was followed by handing the wine to the father of the bride and then a second time to the bride and groom. The groom after sipping the wine took the glass in his hand and threw it upon a large pewter dish which was suddenly placed at his feet. Upon its breaking into a number of small pieces, there was a general shout of joy and a declaration that the ceremony was over. The groom now saluted his bride, and kisses and congratulations became general through the room. I asked the meaning, after the ceremony was over, of the canopy and of the drinking of the wine and breaking of the glass. I was told by one of the company that in Europe they generally marry in the open air, and that the canopy was introduced to defend the bride and groom from the action of the sun and from rain. Their mutually partaking of the same glass of wine was intended to denote the mutuality of their

³ She was the former Rebecca Machado (d. 1831), daughter of the Rev. David Mendes Machado, of the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation Shearith Israel in New York (Morais, *Jews of Philadelphia*, p. 28).

goods, and the breaking of the glass at the conclusion of the business was designed to teach them the brittleness and uncertainty of human life and the certainty of death, and thereby to temper and moderate their present joys.

Mr. Phillips pressed me to stay and dine with the company, but business and Dr. Hall's departure, which was to take place in the afternoon, forbade it. I stayed, however, to eat some wedding cake and to drink a glass of wine with the guests. Upon going into one of the rooms upstairs to ask how Mrs. Philips did, who had fainted downstairs under the pressure of the heat (for she was weak from a previous indisposition), I discovered the bride and groom supping a bowl of broth together. Mrs. Phillips apologized for them by telling me they had eaten nothing (agreeably to the custom prescribed by their religion) since the night before.

Upon my taking leave of the company, Mrs. Phillips put a large piece of cake into my pocket for you, which she begged I would present to you with her best compliments. She says you are an old New York acquaintance of hers.

During the whole of this new and curious scene my mind was not idle. I was carried back to the ancient world and was led to contemplate the passovers, the sacrifices, the jubilees, and other ceremonies of the Jewish Church. After this, I was led forward into futurity and anticipated the time foretold by the prophets when this once-beloved race of men shall again be restored to the divine favor and when they shall unite with Christians with one heart and one voice in celebrating the praises of a common and universal Saviour.

I have only time to add that the pleasure I enjoyed in the sight and reflections I have recorded was soon damped by my being obliged to take leave of my dear friend and late partner Dr. Hall. He took me by the hand at 4 o'clock — but was unable to bid me farewell. His eyes filled with tears, and he attempted in vain to give utterance to his affection and grief. Mr. Blakely,⁴ Dr. Griffitts,⁵ and four or five more

⁴ Not identified.

⁵ Samuel Powel Griffitts (1759–1826), Quaker physician and philanthropist; M.B., University of the State of Penna., 1781; completed his training in Europe, carrying with him a letter of advice on traveling from BR (see note on letter to John Foulke, 25 Apr. 1780); a principal founder of the Philadelphia Dispensary, 1786, and for many years an attendant physician there; professor of materia medica, University of Pennsylvania, 1792–1796. Griffitts was almost the only physician of prominence who supported BR unreservedly in the controversy over treatment of the yellow fever in 1793; he believed that he had recovered from a severe attack by the use of bleeding

of his companions accompanied him to Gray's ferry. He has left a blank in every part of the house. I feel without him as if I had lost my right arm.

John prefers visiting Morven in the holidays next month to a short excursion, agreeably to your proposal. I have promised Dick that he shall accompany him.

Adieu. With love to your Mama, sisters, and brothers, and to our dear children, I am your affectionate husband,

B: RUSH

P.S. June 28th. We met last night about our free schools. The company was well chosen and truly respectable. A plan was adopted that cannot fail (heaven continuing to smile upon the undertaking) of succeeding and doing the most extensive good. O! Virtue, Virtue, who would not follow thee blindfold! — Methinks I hear you cry out after reading this postscript, "Alas! my poor husband! he is as crazy as ever."

I have sent the wedding cake by Mr. Stockton.⁶

MS: Mr. Gordon A. Block, Jr., Philadelphia.

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and purging. (Thacher, *Amer. Med. Biog.*; W. S. Middleton, "Samuel Powel Griffitts," *Ann. Med. Hist.*, 2d ser., x [1938], 373-90; frequent references in BR's letters to Mrs. Rush, Sept.-Oct. 1793.)

⁶ Probably Robert Stockton; see [letter of] B[enjamin] R[ush] to Shippen, 2 Dec. 1777.