



Who came to the New World in the 17<sup>th</sup> century?

1. Jacob Rader Marcus, *Early American Jewry*, Vol. 1, pg. 4

There were probably fewer than two million Jews in the world in the first half of the seventeenth century. At most, a million were in Europe; the rest were in North Africa and Asia.

2. Jacob Rader Marcus, *Early American Jewry*, Vol. 1, pg. 3

In the first half of the seventeenth century there were probably not more than ten or twenty Jews who wandered in and out of the English, French and Dutch colonies on the North American mainland or lived "underground" as Marranos in the Spanish provinces of Florida and New Mexico. The total population of the European nationals along the Atlantic seaboard, from Florida to Maine, was probably well under 75,000 at the time that the first permanent Jewish community was established on Manhattan Island in 1654.

3. Martin Luther, *On the Jews and their Lies* (1543), tr. Martin Luther, *the Bible and the Jewish People* pg. 173

They have been bloodthirsty bloodhounds and murderers of all Christendom for more than fourteen hundred years in their intentions and would undoubtedly prefer to be such with their deeds. Thus they have been accused of poisoning water and wells, of kidnaping children, of piercing them through with an awl, of hacking them in pieces, and in that way secretly cooling their wrath with the blood of Christians, for all of which they have often been condemned to death by fire.

4. Leading Anti-Semites of Jewish History: Martin Luther

- <https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/924621/>
- <https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/925146/>

5. S.M. Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland (1916-1920)* vol. 1 pg. 146

Contemporary Jewish chroniclers add that these human beasts purposely refrained from finishing their victims, so as to be able to torture them longer. They cut off their hands and feet, split the children asunder, "fish-like," or roasted them on fire. They opened the bowels of women, inserted live cats, and then sewed up the wounds.

6. The Rise and Fall of Shabbtai Zvi <https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/863300/>

7. *The Memoirs of Gluckel of Hameln* (1646-1724) Book III Section 2

Our joy, when the letters arrived, is not to be told. Most of them were addressed to the Sephardim who, as fast as they came, took them to their synagogue and read them aloud; young and old, the Germans too hastened to the Sephardic synagogue. The Sephardic youth came dressed in their best finery and decked in broad green silk ribbons, the gear of Shabbtai Tzvi. "With timbrels and with dances" they one and all trooped to the synagogue, and they read the letters forth with joy like the "joy of the Feast of Water-Drawing". Many sold their houses and lands and all their possessions, for any day they hoped to be redeemed. My good father-in-law left his home in Hameln, abandoned his house and lands and all his goodly furniture, and moved to Hildesheim... for the old man expected to sail any moment from Hamburg to the Holy Land.

8. Zohar, Midrash haNe'elam I Toldot pg. 139a

Leviticus 25:13 says, "In this (הַזֹּהַת) Jubilee year, each will return to his lot." When הַזֹּהַת is complete, which is 5408 (1648), then each will return to his lot, to his soul which is his lot and his portion.

9. Jacob Rader Marcus, *Early American Jewry*, Vol. 1, pg. 12

The Jews were too intelligent to be unaware of their importance in the new commercially-motivated states. This was made quite clear in the politico-economic tractate of the Venetian rabbi Simeone Luzzatto. If the republic of Venice

was declining, and that was an open secret, it was due in part to its intolerant and narrow attitude toward its productive Jewish citizens. Humbly, but clearly, he pointed out in his *Discourse on the Status of the Jews* (1638) that his coreligionists brought with them commerce, trade and prosperity.

10. Cecil Roth, *A History of the Marranos*, pg. 107

The nightmare of the Inquisition was not long in following the Marranos to the new home, the discovery of which had owed so much to their energy and enterprise. As early as 1515, a Marrano, Pedro de Leon, was brought back with his family from Hispaniola to face his trial at Seville. Four years later, Apostolic Inquisitors for the American colonies were appointed by the Supreme Tribunal in Spain. Among the earliest batch of victims was Hernando Alonso, the conquistador, who was burned at the stake with another Judaizer in 1528, at the first auto held in the New World, a third person being reconciled at the same time. In 1539, a New Christian named Francisco Milian was penanced for the same offence.

11. Judith Laikin Elkin, *The Jews of Latin America: The Historical Context*, pp. 8-9

The chief prize of the Holy Office of the Inquisition in New Spain was Luis de Carvajal y de la Cueva, conquistador, pacifier of the northern frontier, first governor of the province of Nuevo Leon, and faithful Catholic... The governor recruited over a hundred of his relatives and friends to settle in Nuevo Leon, evidently ignorant of the fact that some of them were Judaizing, or perhaps calculating that, if they were, he was well advised to have them near, where he could keep an eye on them. These accompanied him, whether in the hope of improving their fortunes or in the hope that in that distant waste they could revert to their ancestral religion. Eventually, the Inquisition arrested, tortured, penanced, and executed most of the Carvajal family, including the governor's nephew and namesake, Luis de Carvajal the younger, who became a martyr to his Jewish faith. Another nephew, Gaspar, a Dominican monk and authentic Catholic, was convicted of abetting and protecting Judaizers but was allowed to repent in the privacy of his monastery. The governor, stripped of office, honor, and property, died in jail.

12. Sheinin, Baer, *The Jewish Diaspora in Latin America*, Preface

All the same, colonial Latin America was generally not a safe haven. Jews were forced to convert to Christianity. Many Jews (and non-Jews) were prosecuted for "Judaizing." In one case in 1635 a libel of Jewish treachery was used to frighten the citizens of Lima when the entire community of converted Jews (*conversos*) was arrested. Prosecutions for the practice of Judaism followed. Ten of those convicted were burned at the stake in a 1639 auto-da-fe. Others died in jail cells during the long investigation process, while some were eventually released under order to wear the *sanbenito*, a hood and cloak that would mark individuals as repentant heretics.

### Religious Identity in the Jewish New World

13. Dissertation of Jonathan Schorsch, *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern Mediterranean and Atlantic Worlds, 1450-1800*, pg. 73, citing Marcus, *Colonial American Jew* 1:162

In the Jewish world, at least, "the peripheries" were not unreligious. The first Jewish pioneers in Dutch Guiana "were devoted to Jewish observances," being "careful to take with them kosher food for the long voyage, and in later years as well, Surinamese Jewry generally complied with the dietary laws." Marcus even saw in the Hebrew names given by Surinamese Jews to their plantations – Nahamu, Sukkah, Dothan, Moriah, Haran, Carmel, Rehobot – "eloquent documentation that their interest in religious matters never flagged."

14. Don Isaac Abarbanel, Commentary to Jeremiah 3:18

When it said, "In those days the house of Judah will go to the house of Israel," it was very strange. But behold, in these days when I wrote this, I saw a true text brought by westerners who travel today from Portugal to India for spices, testifying that they saw there many Jews. And they brought a letter from one of their sages, saying that they are descendants of Judah and Benjamin, who had been exiled from the cities of Judah by Sancherev before the destruction of Jerusalem by Nevuchadnezzar, as recorded in Seder Olam, that they had been placed beyond the mountains of darkness, and that they had not returned for the Second Temple!... And this is, "The house of Judah goes to the house of Israel..."

15. Rabbi Avraham Faritzol, *Iggerot Orchot Olam*, Chapter 29

Those who sat on the masts saw a great and long land, green, entirely settled (?), crowned with mountains and valleys and hills and great forests and rivers of sweet water. And when they traveled around this coast for more than 1000 parasangs, for they thought perhaps it was a very large island, then they concluded based on what they saw of the extent of the shores of that land and the way it turned and traveled that this was actual land, "longer in dimension than the land and broader in [sic] the sea," and they called it a New World due to its size and length...

16. Rabbi Menasheh ben Israel, *Mikveh Israel*, citing Aharon haLevi

And the elders fulfilled their wish, testifying and telling that the Gd of the Children of Israel is the true Gd, and all of the commandments inscribed on the stone tablets are true, and at the "end" they will reign over all of the nations on earth... and the Children of Israel will travel from their places and reign over this land...

17. List of Rabbis of the Surinam community, 1642-1750, <http://www.angelfire.com/mb2/jodensavanne/>

Aharon Capadoce	Abraham de David Cohén
Abraham de David Pardo	David de Abraham
David de Mosseh Ledesma	David Mendes Meza
David Pardo	David Pinto da Fonseca
Dr. Abaron de Ishak Ledesma	Hm. Izidro
Hm. Ledesma	Hm. Meatob
Immanuel Pardo	Is. de Sem. Hm. Cohén Nassy
Is. Ledesma	Is. Marques Cardozo.
Is. Meatob	Ishak de Jona Jz. Cohén Nassy
Jahacob Cohén. Nassy	Jeos. de Abr. de Capadoce
Jeos. Hm. Arrias	Jeuda bar Seby Hartogh
Jona Abarbanel	Mordechal Mendes Quiros
Mós. de Britto	Mosseh Cohén Nassy
Sel. de Josseph Halévy	Sel. Rl. Arrias
Sel. Turgeman	Selomoh León Templo
Ury de Josseph	(Incomplete)

18. Rabbi Oran Zweiter, *Challenges of the American Rabbinate from the First Rabbi in the Americas: In Honor of the Yahrzeit of Rabbi Isaac Aboab da Fonseca*, <https://thelehrhaus.com/commentary/challenges-of-the-american-rabbinate-in-honor-of-the-yahrzeit-of-rabbi-isaac-aboab-da-fonseca/>

By 1646, the Dutch colony was under siege by the Portuguese. The Jews of Recife were terrified at the prospect of Portuguese conquest, knowing that Portuguese victory would also migrate the Inquisition to the New World and Brazil. To respond to the threat, Rabbi Aboab composed a *vidui*, confessing what he believed to be the community's sins, as well as beseeching G-d to spare them. In addition, Aboab composed a poem recounting the suffering of the siege, as well as the Jews' rescue. These two documents are critical to not only understanding the specific events of the Portuguese threat, but also Aboab's general perception of the Recife community and his rabbinical life in America.

Aboab's poem is an account of the Portuguese siege. It is also a deeply personal reflection on what it meant for him to be sent as a rabbi to the far end of the world. He used biblical words with similar pronunciation and spelling to allude to Brazil, such as *kur ha-barzel*, the "melting pot," which in the Torah refers to Egypt (Deuteronomy 4:20).

Similarly, Aboab referenced the new geography in which the Jews found themselves. "Arise, build cities in the forests," is presumably a reference to the forests surrounding Recife, and "Drink in Aram the cold rivers," a reference to the rivers and waterways upon which Recife was built.

More importantly, however, for Aboab, Brazil represented a state of exile. In a number of places in his poem, Aboab alluded negatively to the remoteness of Brazil. At the very beginning of the poem, he depicted the Jewish residents of Brazil, himself included, as "Dwellers in the shadows of the universe." Brazil was on the fringes, in the shadows of the

known world, far from any major center of Jewish life. Later in the poem, he makes a personal statement, claiming that, "For my sin, I have been tossed to a faraway land."

For Aboab, the Americas were in the shadows, and the only reason that could explain his presence there, was that it was a punishment of exile for sins he had committed. He was a young, rising star in the rabbinic world of Amsterdam, who was taken from the center of his community's Jewish life and sent to the most remote place imaginable. Aboab's sentiments reflect the feelings of later immigrant rabbis to the New World, whether from Germany, Lithuania, or Hungary. The Americas were far. The Americas were different. It was rabbinic exile.

Aside from his own personal feelings of exile, Aboab also implied in his writings what he felt were the shortcomings of his community. The years 1637-1644, the years in which many Sefardic Jews, including Aboab, arrived in Recife, were the peak of Dutch commercial activity in the region. The Jews became an integral part of commercial life in Recife, and in turn in Dutch world trade. According to Aboab, the Jews of Recife were too focused on their material success, which shifted their focus away from spiritual pursuits. Like many American rabbis after him, Aboab was a rabbi struggling to lead his congregation through the challenges of prosperity in the "Land of Opportunity."

In his poem, Aboab accused his community of forsaking G-d because of their material success: "My flesh stood up from fear of my adversaries, for from my wealth I forgot my Creator." Aboab's accusations of materialism, however, take on a clearer and harsher tone in the *vidui*, confession. "I have coveted ... all of man's pleasures at all times." "Towards vanity my eyes fell." "I stole. I robbed vast amounts of treasures." In enumerating the long list of evils committed by his community, Aboab probably utilized a measure of hyperbole.

One cannot, however, ignore the common thread binding those evils together, which is the pursuit of material success at the expense of a more pious life. Aboab led the Jews of Recife in the midst of their material success, and could not come to terms with their focus on materialism.

The writings of Rabbi Isaac Aboab, the first rabbi in the Americas, reveal challenges that would continuously confront rabbis, immigrant and native alike, in the Americas. His writing reflects the uniqueness of the Jewish experience in the New World from its earliest stages. His story demonstrates that the challenges that have faced spiritual leadership in the Americas are not new. They began with the very first rabbi to settle, however shortly, in the New World.

Some interesting reads (among many)

- Judith Laikin Elkin, *The Jews of Latin America: The Historical Context*  
<https://www.rienner.com/uploads/531e1f03f1bcc.pdf>
- Meyer Keyserling, *Christopher Columbus and the Participation of the Jews in the Spanish and Portuguese Discoveries*  
[https://books.google.ca/books?id=5727Qu\\_Z9RwC](https://books.google.ca/books?id=5727Qu_Z9RwC)
- Jacob Rader Marcus, *Early American Jewry, Volume 1*  
<https://www.amazon.ca/American-Jewry-England-Canada-1649-1794/dp/B000M1IKYK>
- Cecil Roth, *A History of the Marranos*  
<https://blog.lusofonias.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/A-History-of-The-Marranos.pdf> (legal?)
- Jonathan Schorsch, *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World*  
<https://www.amazon.ca/Jews-Blacks-Early-Modern-World/dp/0521820219>