



1. The First “Canadian” Jews Esther Brandeau, a Halifax community, Samuel Jacobs and Aaron Hart

Religious Identity in the Jewish New World (continued)

2. 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...”

3. 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...

4. 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...

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

6. 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,” [*sic*] 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.

7. Rabbi Chaim Shabtai, Torat Chaim 3:3

They have sent from there, from a distant land in the empire of Brazil, a place far south of the equator, where the South Pole is elevated twenty degrees and more, and the North Pole is hidden below the horizon twenty degrees and more, and the days of the year and order of times is altered from summer to winter, such that their sunny season is from Tishrei to Nisan and their rainy season is from Nisan to Tishrei, and they need rain from Nisan to Tishrei and not from Tishrei to Nisan...

8. Isaac Aboab de Fonseca, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/isaac-aboab-de-fonseca>

For the first four years under Aboab's leadership, Recife's congregation Kahal Kodesh Zur Yisroel thrived in an atmosphere of religious toleration characteristic of the 17th century Dutch. The Portuguese, however, had retained control of the Bahia region of Brazil and never ceased longing to recapture Pernambuco. In 1645, a Portuguese Jesuit, Joam Fernandes Vieyra, convinced the King of Portugal to regain Recife because "that city is chiefly inhabited by Jews, most of whom were originally fugitives from Portugal." Vieyra continued, "They have their open synagogues there, to the scandal of Christianity. For the honor of the faith, therefore, the Portuguese ought to risk their lives and their property in putting down such an abomination."

In 1646, Vieyra and his army attacked Recife. Hoping to divide and conquer, Vieyra offered the city's Jews protection on the condition that they not participate in the battle. The Jewish community unanimously rejected his offer and took up arms with their Dutch comrades.

The Portuguese besieged Recife off and on for a total of nine years, unable to defeat the inhabitants yet unwilling to retreat. During this prolonged ordeal, Recife's Jews gave their food, property and lives in defense of their freedom. Throughout the siege, Aboab encouraged all the resisters—Jewish and Dutch alike—and led prayers asking G-d to protect the colonists from their enemies.

Recife held out through nine years of deprivation. In a poem he later wrote, Aboab described his congregation's ordeal: "Many of the Jewish immigrants were killed by the enemy; many died of starvation. Those who were accustomed to delicacies were glad to be able to satisfy their hunger with dry bread; soon they could not obtain even this. They were in want of everything and were preserved alive as if by a miracle." It is the oldest known Hebrew text

written in America that has survived to the present day.

In 1654, the Dutch garrison could no longer hold out and the governor agreed to surrender. To their credit, the Dutch insisted that the Portuguese not slaughter the Jewish inhabitants as a condition of surrender. The Portuguese honored this proviso but demanded that the Jews leave Brazil.

9. The Pardos Rabbi David Pardo (Surinam), Rabbi Josiah Pardo (Curacao), Chazan Saul "Brown" (New York)

10. Dr. Malcolm H. Stern, *Ashkenazim and Sephardim in the Colonial Era*, RI Jewish Historical Notes 10:2 (1988) pg. 163

The New Amsterdam Jewish immigrants included at least two Ashkenazim: Asser Levy, who arrived with twenty-two other refugees from Brazil on the French man-of-war, the *Ste. Catherine*, in September of 1654, and Jacob Barsimson, who met the boat, having arrived two weeks earlier from Amsterdam. With whom did Asser Levy join in challenging Stuyvesant's demand that the Jews pay head taxes rather than stand guard duty on the town wall? Not with his fellow-travelers from Brazil, who were Sephardim, but with Barsimson, the only other Ashkenazi in town.

11. 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."

12. Dr. Malcolm H. Stern, *Portuguese Sephardim in the Americas*, American Jewish Archives pg. 158

<https://books.google.ca/books?id=YyurDAAQBAJ&pg=PA158&lpg=PA158>

The congregation, recognizing that the Ashkenazim were more versed in halakhah (Jewish law), engaged them for such synagogue functions as shochet and bodek (kosher butcher and inspector), and mohel (circumciser). However, for the conduct of worship the New York congregation sought Sephardim who could chant in the Sephardic mode. They were greatly assisted by the appearance in 1761 of an English translation of the Sephardic prayerbook for the eve of the holidays, followed five years later by a more complete prayerbook for the year, both presumably the work of Isaac Pinto, an educated layman.

13. Mordechai Arbel, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Women: Caribbean Islands and the Guianas*, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/caribbean-islands-and-guianas>

A special custom prevalent in the Caribbean area was a prenuptial agreement called "Shetar Halizah." According to Jewish law a husband's brother has to marry his widowed sister-in-law if she was left childless. This obligation could only be lifted by going through a halizah ceremony in which the widow takes off her brother-in-law's shoe and denounces him for refusing to marry her. Until this ritual takes place, the widow cannot remarry and she remains an agunah ("anchored" woman).

To prevent this situation, in the Caribbean the groom's brother gave the bride—at the marriage ceremony—in writing, a letter granting her halizah in case of the death of his brother. The wording, taken from an actual example from Kingston, Jamaica, in 1824, was as follows, "... the woman Esther, wife of my brother Uri, should hold it as proof that I have consented of my own free will ... that if Esther will have need of halizah, I am obligated to free her of a valid halizah" (This halizah letter, in the possession of M. Arbel, was given in Kingston, Jamaica, by Yitzhak Yehuda son of Eliezer to Esther daughter of Naftali Halevi, and was signed by two leaders of the community.)

14. Rabbi Joseph Caro (16th century Israel), Code of Jewish Law 82:2-3

A kosher bird may be eaten based on a tradition, meaning that it is obvious to people there that this is a kosher bird...

And if it is known not to be *doreis*, there are three signs of a kosher bird: An extra toe, a crop and a gizzard that can be peeled by hand... Even if it has these three signs, one should not eat it, for we are concerned that it might be *doreis* – unless they have a tradition from their ancestors that it is kosher.

Some say that if a bird has a broad beak, and the sole of its foot is broad like that of a goose, then it is known not to be *doreis*, and one may eat it if it has these the aforementioned three physical signs.

15. Rabbi Moshe Isserless (16th century Poland), Code of Jewish Law 82:3

And some say one should not rely even on this [comparison to a goose], and one should not eat any bird without a tradition that it is kosher. This is the practice, and one should not deviate from it.

16. Rabbi Ari Zivotofsky, *Is Turkey Kosher?*, J of Halacha and Contemporary Society 35 (Sp. 1998)

- We rule that a tradition is not necessary (*Shoel uMeishiv*)
- We only need a tradition if it may be *doreis* (*Arugat haBosem*)
- The turkey is part of the chicken clan (*Dvar Halachah*)
- Sephardim started it (Rabbi Zivotofsky)

Review Questions

- Which events made Europe an inhospitable and tumultuous place for Jews in the 16th and 17th centuries?
- Why were Jews well-positioned to capitalize on the economic opportunity of exploration?
- What was the attitude of 16th century European rabbis to exploration?
- Did learned rabbis go to the New World?
- Why might the Sephardim have been less observant than the Ashkenazim?
- Were there Jewish community professionals in the colonies?
- Why did Jews accept turkey as kosher?

Surinam

17. Mordechai Arbel, The Encyclopedia of Jewish Women: *Caribbean Islands and the Guianas*, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/caribbean-islands-and-guianas>

In 1694 the population of the Jewish Savanna totaled more than 570 Jews employing about nine thousand laborers in forty plantations, and in the mid-eighteenth century, two thousand Jews in 115 plantations with tens of thousands of laborers (Arbel 2002, 92). The Jews on the plantation were the owner, his wife and children, the overseer (not always Jewish) and the accountant. The others were plantation workers, usually salaried Indian workers or African slaves and house slaves. The owner's wife was customarily in charge of the house slaves.

18. Dissertation of Jonathan Schorsch, *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern Mediterranean and Atlantic Worlds, 1450-1800*, pp. 701-702

Richard Menkis wrote that the Bordeaux Jewish "community structure was controlled by a strong lay leadership, overshadowing clerical authority to a degree which probably surpassed even the strong lay influence in the Sephardic community of Amsterdam," Brazil, Curacao or Surinam, London [*sic?*]. None of the *mahamads* of these communities included a rabbi, who was always an employee of these boards. The Amsterdam Sephardic community was "run by the wealthiest 20 per cent of the community," though it lacked the "tight oligarchic control" of the Bordeaux community.

19. Dissertation of Jonathan Schorsch, *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern Mediterranean and Atlantic Worlds, 1450-1800*, pg. 620

In Curacao, Rabbi Jossai Pardo arrived toward the end of the seventeenth century and established an *eruv* to allow carrying on Shabbat. There, too, according to a witness in 1825, the Sephardic planters followed "a number of religious laws relative to agriculture and cattle-breeding, and so doing... lost a part of the produce" of their plantations.