

Early Relations between the Jewish Communities in the Caribbean and the Guianas and Those of the Near East 17th to 19th Centuries

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The Jewish exodus from Portugal, in the beginning of the 16th century was caused mainly by the installation of the "Holy Office of the Inquisition" there. Since the forced conversion of the Jews to Catholicism in 1497, they had lived as so-called "New Christians." For those who wanted to continue to profess their Judaism in the privacy of their homes, in a quiet, discreet manner, there was no clerical authority that could punish them for doing so. In Spain where the Inquisition was very active throughout the Spanish provinces following the activities of the "conversos" and persecuting them if they were caught continuing their Jewish practices, the newly converted Jews of Portugal could keep their Judaism silently and unobtrusively.

As an exodus of small groups, families, and even individuals, the exodus of the Jews from Portugal was not similar to the massive one from Spain. It continued from the 16th century to well into the 19th. The emigrants from Portugal proceeded mainly to Western Europe — France (Bayonne and Bordeaux); The Netherlands; Germany (Hamburg); Denmark (Copenhagen as well as Altona and Gluckstadt which at that time were in Danish hands); Italy (Leghorn, Venice, and Florence); and to the Mediterranean ports of Ragusa (Dubrovnik), Salonica, Istanbul, and Izmir. Some of the Jewish exiles from Portugal left for North Africa or to the Far East. In most of these places conversos returned to Judaism.

In the beginning of the 17th century interest in the economic potential of the Americas grew among the non-Iberian powers of Europe: France, England, The Netherlands, and later on Denmark. Netherlands started settling parts of Brazil (Recife, Olinda) which was held by Portugal, the so-called Wild Coast (between the Amazon River and the Orinoco), Cayenne (now French Guyana), Pomeroun, Berbice, Demerara and Essequibo (now the Republic of Guiana), and Curaçao which was held by Spain. England settled the island of Barbados, the island of Jamaica which was held by Spain, the island of Nevis and Surinam on the Wild Coast. France occupied Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Haiti. Denmark settled the Virgin Islands. The new colonizing powers, except France, were Protestant, such that Jews who reconverted from Catholicism to Judaism were not liable to persecution. Jews leaving Portugal saw these colonies as very suitable for their settlement. The colonizing powers saw the Jews as a very positive human element for settlement. Their expertise in trading, shipping, and banking, their knowledge of Spanish and Portuguese was useful for commerce with Spanish and Portuguese America.

With the reoccupation by Portugal of the Dutch-held parts of Brazil, in 1654, the Jews were forced to leave Recife and Olinda, and seek other places of settlement. Now they were also regarded as experienced planters and traders in tropical produce — sugar, cacao, vanilla, and indigo — and people coming from Brazil were used to life in tropical conditions and therefore were very much needed in the American colonies. These exiles from Dutch Brazil took their place among the main producers of sugar in Cayenne, Pomeroun, Surinam, Barbados, Jamaica, Martinique, and Guadeloupe. The "Black Code" promulgated in 1683 by the French

king Louis XIV instigated the expulsion of the Jews from the French-held islands.

This fresh diaspora of Jewish exiles from Spain and Portugal formed communities that remained, despite significant distances, very closely linked with the Sephardi centers the world over with sentiments of kinship and brotherhood. The most observant of the exiles made the effort, despite the difficulties and hardship, to return to the Land of Israel and settle there — they were a minority. Others that left Portugal joined their coreligionists from Spain in the Balkans and in the Eastern Mediterranean, where they could join the centers of Jewish leaning and observance. Those who reached America somehow decided that their return to the land of their forefathers could be postponed. This is very well illustrated in the diary of Jeosua Nunes Netto and Joseph Pereira written in September 1657 on their arrival to the Jewish settlement of New Middelbourg on the Pomeroon river on the Wild Coast:

Thank God who has brought us from hell to the peace of this beautiful land. Here our bodies will lay to rest, until the time comes when they will be transferred to the land of our forefathers — Jerusalem.¹

The decision to see America as their more or less permanent place of settlement, their life for several generations as "New Christians" with no Hahams (i.e., rabbis), no Jewish schools, no synagogues, all had taken its toll on their knowledge of Judaism. With their return to the faith of their ancestors, they had a strong desire to observe it fully. At the same time their weakness in religious matters made it impossible for them to produce the necessary spiritual leaders.

The very generous "rights and privileges" given to the Jews of the Caribbean area and in the Guianas in the 17th century allowed the religious leaders to assume special responsibilities. The English in Surinam and the Dutch in Cayenne, Pomeroon, and Curaçao permitted the Jews to administer their own lives, to have their own courts of law for litigation among themselves, to maintain their own schools, to build synagogues, and to observe the Sabbath. Such rights were available to Jews at that time in very few places in the world.

The Haham, with the help of the community leaders — "the Mahamad" — had to take care of the synagogue, the schools, the courts, the cemeteries; to perform circumcisions, marriages, funerals; to arrange for cantors, ritual slaughters, sextons, and community physicians; to provide for widows, orphans, and the needy (haspacoht); to take care of dowries for unmarried women ("santa compania para dotar donzelas"), assistance to transients, ransom of captives, contributions to the Holy Land; and relations with the authorities and other religious groups. They also had to promulgate the rules and regulations of the community (Haskamot).

The communities depended on the religious centers around the Near East or in Amsterdam in their correspondence and on the import of Hahams, preferably originating in the Balkans or the Mediterranean region, or individuals born as conversos in Spain and Portugal who had returned to Judaism, studied in rabbinical academies, and were renowned for their knowledge and piety.

At the time of the expulsion from Spain, those who left the country were the hardcore Jews, not willing to convert. They preferred a life of exile and diaspora to one of genuine or false converts. The largest group left for Portugal where they were condemned to live the life of forced converts while maintaining their Judaism in secret. Jews who headed for the Ottoman Empire were able to continue their Jewish life without restraint and strengthen and enhance their Jewish identity. Those who left Spain and Portugal after living for several generations as secret Jews and wished to bolster their Jewishness turned in their new places of residence in

Europe to schools and academies to reimmerse themselves in Jewish studies and expand their Jewish consciousness.

The Caribbean Jews preferred spiritual leaders from the two groups mentioned above as they felt they would obtain better understanding of their special situation as well as leadership that would meet their needs. Responsa, correspondence with a rabbinical authority featuring questions on how to act on religious matters, was usually directed to Istanbul, and in some cases to Salonica (usually when regular contact with Istanbul was very difficult). For instance, we learn from the responsa of Hayim Shabbetai, compiled in 1772, that early settlers in Brazil, having no rabbinical authority among them wrote to Hayim Shabbetai of Salonika, asking whether the seasonal prayer for rain should be altered, given the difference in the seasons in the southern hemisphere.²

When the number of Jewish settlers in Dutch Brazil grew almost to the number of Jews in Amsterdam, the community members saw the need to import a Haham. In 1641 Isaac Aboab da Fonseca arrived in Recife. Aboab was born in 1605 in Castro Daire, Portugal, into a converso family which fled to St. Jean de Luz in France; Aboab had his Jewish upbringing in Amsterdam. He became the first rabbi in the Americas and served in Brazil until 1654 (the Portuguese occupation) when he returned to Amsterdam and followed a brilliant career.

With the foundation of the "Mikve Israel" community on the island of Curaçao in 1659, the community began to expand with the newly arrived Jews from Amsterdam and then with Jews who came after the destruction of the Jewish communities of Cayenne and Pomeroun, and the unsuccessful attempt to have a Jewish settlement on the island of Tobago. The community needed a spiritual leader and the choice fell on the Haham Josiau Pardo, a descendant of a Salonica family of Hahams.

Pardo arrived in Curaçao in 1674. He updated the community regulations (Haskamot) and founded the first rabbinical academy in the Americas, "Etz Hayim." In 1683 he went to serve as the Haham of Port Royal, Jamaica. It is not known whether he perished in 1692 after the disastrous earthquake and tidal wave that destroyed the city of Port Royal, including its synagogue, or whether he died earlier.

His son David served at the beginning of the 18th century as the Haham of Surinam. Curaçao continued with its custom of preferring Hahams and spiritual leaders who either came from the Near East or were born as conversos in Spain and Portugal. Being the spiritual center of the Jewish communities in the Caribbean area, and often called the "mother" of the Jewish communities of the Americas in the 17th and 18th centuries. Its religious administration and its rabbinical academy influenced all the communities in the area.

At about the same time, the Jewish community of Barbados, "Nidhei Israel," was organized, and here again the members were anxious to have a leader. Their choice was a Haham stemming from Spain, Eliau Lopez. Born as a converso in Malaga in 1648, Lopez returned to Judaism in Amsterdam. His arrival in Barbados in 1678 to serve the two Jewish communities there, Bridgetown and Speighstown, was very remarkable — a tall figure with flowing robes as worn by the Hahams of the Mediterranean area — even the English authorities on the island were impressed.³

Barbados was one of the rare places in the Caribbean where the authorities and the population had distinctly pronounced anti-Jewish feelings. Haham Lopez, however, was held in great respect by all residents. This was the reason that in time of crisis the bigger and more prestigious community of Curaçao, nominated Haham Lopez to serve as their spiritual leader. He arrived in Curaçao in 1693, after a cholera epidemic, and following the exodus of groups

of Jews to Newport, Rhode Island,⁴ and Tucacas, Venezuela.⁵ He organized the Jewish cemetery, founded the synagogue erected in 1703, and administered the community and its Jewish schools.

A Chief Haham of the same origin Lisbon-born (1699) Samuel Mendes de Sola, who reconverted to Judaism in Amsterdam where he pursued his rabbinical studies. In 1744 he was contacted by the Curaçao community. During his tenure one can see the growing difference between the Hahams, who wanted to introduce customs acquired in Amsterdam, influenced by the proximity to the German communities, and the Caribbean Jews, who had become accustomed to the lax tropical atmosphere in their everyday life and who had no desire to change the familiar traditional ways inherited from their forefathers in Spain and Portugal. Angry exchanges between the Chief Haham and the community lay leaders became more and more common.

These pious Hahams had to adapt themselves to the special conditions of the Caribbean. One issue was how to deal with children born as a result of the not uncommon relations between Jewish men and their servant girls. Another problem was that of the wives of numerous Jewish seafarers who had disappeared or not returned to their homes for many years. In the search for solutions the Hahams had to reconcile strict obligations to Jewish law with the unique conditions of Jewish life in the Caribbean. The fate of the rule promoted by the Surinam community, namely, that every Jew must grow a beard, serves as a typical example. In response to the rule, many Jews presented the Haham medical certificates attesting that the growing of a beard causes rashes and skin diseases to the bearer of the certificate and that he must be exempted from doing so.⁶ There were strict Hahams who often resorted to the punishment of excommunication (Herem) of those who did not abide by the rules. This was a very severe punishment in a society of islanders who lived in groups who had no external social relations.

These discussions continued during the tenure of the Haham Lopez da Fonseca (served 1764–1815), the son-in-law of Haham de Sola, and resulted in an open clash with the arrival of Cantor Piza in 1816.

Piza, a descendant of a very prestigious family of Istanbul Hahams, was invited to Curaçao to serve as a cantor and to eventually become the Chief Haham.⁷ Born and educated in Amsterdam, he was already influenced by the customs and usages of modern European Sephardi Jews. His way of service clashed with the majority of the community members. On one side, angry voices called for his dismissal. On the other, he had a strong group of supporters. The rift degenerated into the secession from the established community of the protesters against Piza. They left the synagogue as well and prayed in private houses. Curaçao Jewry broke into two communities with separate cemeteries, separate administration of Jewish laws (marriages, births, funerals, ritual slaughter, and so on).

The Jewish population of Curaçao was an important part of this Dutch colony, and at times comprised over half of the white population of the island. Thus it was imperative that the rift be mended. By order of the Royal house of Holland and with the help of the head of the rabbinical court, Daniel Lopez-Penha, reconciliation was achieved, but Cantor Piza had to go. The hunger for religious leaders was so great that Piza obtained a contract to serve the Jewish community of Charlotte Amalie on the island of St. Thomas where he remained for many years.⁸ His descendants became quite prominent in the Jewish communities of Panama and Costa Rica.

The lack of suitable Hahams forced the Curaçao community to use leaders from their own

midst, known as "assessors," as substitute Hahams. The most prominent, Daniel Lopez-Penha, descendant of an Izmir, Turkey, family which played an active role in maintaining Jewish life on the Caribbean coast in Curaçao, Barranquilla (Colombia), and the Dominican Republic.⁹ For communities smaller than Curaçao and Surinam, the expense of importing and maintaining a Haham was quite high, but when the community felt the need, they did not hesitate to hire a spiritual leader.

A typical example is Barbados. The relatively small community there saw that Jewish observance was waning. They decided to hire Meir Hacoheh Belinfante, a descendant of a family of Hahams, cantors, teachers, and writers which had settled in Dalmatia (Dubrovnik and Split)¹⁰ when fleeing the Portuguese Inquisition. In this instance, too, there was a clash between the strict, disciplined, pious Haham from the Balkans and the lax tropical life of Barbados (1752). With difficulties, he instituted an orderly religious administration. His death in 1773 found the Barbados community as a whole in mourning. The depression was so all pervasive that when an emissary of the Holy Land, Haham Raphael Haim Isaac Carigal (see below for further information on him), passed through Barbados, the state of the community convinced him to remain there as its Haham until his death in 1777. Other members of the Hacoheh Belinfante family served as religious teachers in Jamaica.¹¹ Jamaican Jews were dispersed in at least 13 locations all over the island. Over 16 Jewish cemeteries have been located. A need was felt for a Haham who would be able to serve the entire island. The choice fell on Joshua Hizquiau de Cordova. He was a member of a Sephardi family originating in Istanbul. Born in Amsterdam, he arrived in Curaçao to teach the Bible and Talmud in Ladino translations and also to hold services and preach.¹² In 1755 he accepted the invitation of the Jamaican community to serve there as the Chief Haham of all the important communities, "Shaar Hashamaim" in Kingston, "Neve Shalom" in Spanish Town, and "Neve Zedek" in Port Royal. He fulfilled this function until his death in 1797. He wrote several books, the most important being *Reason and Faith*, considered the first American volume of Jewish apologetics, in which he defended the Jewish religion against the pronouncements of Spinoza, Voltaire, and Hume.

Caribbean communities had to rely on the services of itinerant emissaries from the Holy Land or from the Mediterranean ports for guidance, instruction, and maintenance of Jewish traditions. Sometimes those emissaries remained and served as rabbis for limited periods of time. Their main aim was to collect funds and donations for the communities in Palestine and for the rabbinical academies there. Their mission was also to maintain the continuation of Jewish life in the Americas.

Portuguese Jews considered contributions to the Holy Land as part of life and as a must. Donations were sent by special carriers through Venice, Vienna, Istanbul, and Izmir. Committees for funds for Holy Land were formed in every Sephardi community as were bodies for community aid "para gozar la morada del Cielo" (to enjoy the place where God is present). The rabbinical academies in Palestine, which in the 16th and 17th centuries were mainly Portuguese Jewish and located in Jerusalem, Hebron, Safed, and Tiberias, usually reciprocated by sending sand from the Holy Land in the Caribbean (in Surinam, Curaçao, Jamaica, and St. Thomas) where synagogue floors are covered with sand, the sand of the Holy Land was mixed with the local grains.¹³ Sand from the Holy Land was also used for burials.

Emissaries from the Holy Land were sent to the Americas to collect funds for synagogues, rabbinical academies, and communities in Palestine. These messengers were received with greatest respect and were lodged in the best Jewish homes. Usually accompanied by two

local dignitaries, the emissary would visit the contributors, pay official visits to the authorities, and participate in family feasts. At the same time, the emissaries preached in the synagogue, instructed the circumcisers and ritual slaughterers and oversaw their performance, and helped the communities write their rules and regulations.

Usually, the emissaries bore official letters of presentation, which gave them official recognition. The first such document addressed to the "Holy Communities of Israel who had settled in parts of America" was given in 1772 to Shmuel Hacoheh of Hebron who went to Barbados. The list of emissaries is quite long: 1749, R. Moshe Hagucl; 1750, R. Selomo Zeeli of Hebron; 1757, R. Eliah ben Araya; 1758, R. Moshe Malki of Safed.

The most impressive emissary was Raphael Haim Isaac Carigal. His life is typical of what an emissary had to do in his double capacity of collecting funds and striving to maintain Judaism. Born in Hebron in 1729 to a Portuguese Jewish family, after visiting communities in Asia and Europe he arrived in Curaçao in 1761. There he was also engaged as a Haham for over two years. In 1771 he was in Jamaica where he stayed for a year. After a well-publicized stay of five months with the Portuguese Jewish community in Newport, Rhode Island, founded by Jews from Barbados and Curaçao, he sailed for Surinam (1773), where he remained for half a year before proceeding to Barbados in 1774.¹⁴ Special emissaries were sent to the Caribbean if there was a large-scale disaster in the Near East or the Mediterranean. The mutual help flowing between the communities in the Caribbean and those of the Mediterranean was limited to Spanish-Portuguese Jews only.

Haham Yahacob Saul of Izmir came to Curaçao in 1744 to collect funds to "overcome the misfortunes that befell that community";¹⁵ in 1759, Haham David Florentin collected funds for Salonica after the plague had struck there;¹⁶ Haham Haim Modahi collected funds after the 1765 earthquake in Safed;¹⁷ and Haham Abraham Leon was sent as an emissary to Curaçao, St. Eustatius, and St. Thomas to raise funds after a fire destroyed nine synagogues in Izmir in 1774.¹⁸ One of the duties of a Jewish community was to obtain the release of Jewish captives, slaves, and hostages. Many Caribbean Jews were shipowners and also captains of their own ships. In the conduct of their business they often acted against the interests of Spain by importing and exporting merchandise from the Spanish colonies in Latin America to Dutch and English territories, activity considered illegal by Spain. Spanish warships in some instances captured these ships, and if on them they caught Jews who had been born Catholic and reconverted to Judaism, the Jews were brought to the tribunals of the Inquisition in Spain itself (to Cadiz or San Sebastian).¹⁹ In such cases the Dutch ambassador in Madrid had to intervene, most often with little success. It was the Spanish-Portuguese communities in Gibraltar and Bayonne that invested effort towards obtaining the release of the Caribbean Jewish captives by paying high sums to ransom them. Usually, those communities were reimbursed by the prisoners' home communities.²⁰ Jews lived in Dutch, English, and Danish colonies in the Caribbean. Yet, their language in the 17th and 18th centuries remained Spanish or Portuguese. They physically observed their religion in America, but spiritually they remained in the Mediterranean basin.

The employment of learned individuals from the Near East and the Mediterranean area to serve as Hahams in the Caribbean continued well into the 20th century. With the destruction of most of the Spanish-Portuguese Jewish communities in Europe during the Holocaust and the emigration of the Caribbean Jews to Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, and the Dominican Republic, the Jewish communities in the Caribbean began to diminish in number and could no longer rely on communities in the Balkans or around the Mediterranean to provide spiritual succor.

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