

THE JEWS AND THE EXPANSION OF EUROPE TO THE WEST 1450-1800



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– Chapter 25 –

THE JEWS IN BRITISH AMERICA



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THE JEWS IN BRITISH AMERICA" is a topic that could easily consume many more pages than are available here. To do the topic full justice, one would need to look not only at the British North American colonies but also at English Suriname, Barbados, Nevis, and Jamaica, all of which already had at least some kind of Jewish presence in the second half of the seventeenth century. In addition to the usual topics—political rights, economic structure, social and intergroup relations, cultural life, and so on—one would also want to undertake a detailed comparison between the condition of Jews in the English colonies and the condition of Jews back home in the English mother country. Jews were readmitted into England only in 1655, and began worshipping in public only in 1657. As a result—and in contrast to what we find in the Dutch colonies—Jews in British colonies could not look back to the mother country as a model for how Jews should be treated. Instead, we find Jewish life on both sides of the Atlantic developing more or less simultaneously. This had important and relatively unexplored implications both for the Jews and for those who sought to govern and regulate them.

The more limited topic that I will focus on in this chapter is Jewish religious life in British America. This is appropriate given the setting in which this essay was originally presented as a public lecture—the historic Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island—and the topic also serves as something of a corrective to the economic emphasis of so much of the literature concerning this period. Unfortunately, the available data is somewhat skewed, since we know more about Jewish religious life in colonial New York than anywhere else in British America. Some broader comparisons are possible, however, and there is in any case no reason to believe that Judaism in New York was *sui generis*. To the contrary, throughout

British America during our period, Judaism was becoming increasingly distinctive from its European counterpart. This distinctiveness, rooted in the peculiarities of colonial life, set the stage for the better known and more significant transformation of Judaism in the United States that took place following the American Revolution.

From the beginning, religion served as a motivation for Jews who settled in the New World colonies. Following Menasseh ben Israel, many fervently believed that the dispersion of the Jews to all corners of the world was "the hope of Israel," a harbinger of the messianic age. The presumed religious implications of New World settlement are reflected in the revealingly messianic names that many New World synagogues bear: Mikveh (Hope of) Israel (Curaçao and Philadelphia); Shearith (Remnant of) Israel (New York); Nidhe (Dispersed of) Israel (Barbados); Jeshuat (Salvation of) Israel (Newport). Nor should we assume that this is mere lip service to messianic ideas. We know that the Messiah was fervently anticipated by some North American Jews in 1768 and in 1783 on the basis of religious calculations that paralleled Protestant calculations of the same kind. In 1769 we have a remarkable account from the Reverend Ezra Stiles in Newport that during a thunderstorm Jews in his city threw open doors and windows while "singing and repeating prayers ... for meeting Messias." This exotic practice, apparently inspired by the mystical belief that Jews were to be spirited away upon a cloud to Jerusalem, is mentioned by Gershom Scholem, and reflects a custom found in some places in Europe as well at that time.¹

The defining Jewish symbol of communal religious life and culture in British North America, as elsewhere, was the Torah scroll. Historians generally have not paid sufficient attention to this ritual object; for the most part, they have defined community in terms of institutions, such as when a cemetery was acquired or when a synagogue was established. I would argue, however, that the presence of a Torah scroll is a much more reliable marker of an ongoing Jewish presence, for it created a sense of sacred space, elevating a temporary habitation into a cherished place of holiness and a private home into a hallowed house of prayer. The arrival of a Torah scroll in New Amsterdam in 1655 (brought over from Holland) was a defining moment in the life of the first Jews in that community, while the return of that Torah in 1663 demonstrates that the city's Jewish community had by then scattered. The subsequent reappearance of Torah scrolls in New York under the British signaled that Jewish communal life had been reestablished, and private group worship resumed. Wherever Jews later created communities in British America, as in Savannah, they also brought Torah scrolls with them, or, as was the case in Newport in 1760, they borrowed a Torah from a larger congregation. In smaller eighteenth-century colonial Jewish settlements such as Lancaster and Reading, where Judaism was maintained for years by dedicated laymen without a salaried officiant or a formal synagogue, the Torah scroll functioned similarly as

something of a Jewish icon. It embodied the holy presence around which Jewish religious life revolved.²

Public worship became available to North American Jews around the turn of the eighteenth century, just about the time that New York's first Quaker Meeting House was erected, and before the Baptists and Catholics had opened churches in the city.³ For the next 125 years, Shearith Israel dominated Jewish religious life in New York. Indeed, the synagogue and organized Jewish community became one and the same—a synagogue-community—and as such it assumed primary responsibility for preserving and maintaining local Jewish life.

The synagogue-community descended from the *kehillah*, the distinctive form of communal self-government that characterized Jewish life in the Middle Ages. With the advent of modernity, as states consolidated their power over their citizens and individual rights gradually triumphed over corporate or group rights, Jewish communities as corporate political entities came to an end, and in seventeenth-century Western Europe the synagogue became the locus for Jewish self-government. Where multiple synagogues existed, this resulted in communal fragmentation, and in response the Sephardic Jews of Amsterdam in 1638 to 1639 merged their city's synagogues into one, "Kahal Kadosh Talmud Torah." It governed its members much like a church governed its parish, thereby promoting discipline while avoiding the appearance of a Jewish "state within a state." This synagogue-community model, akin to the prevailing Protestant model of the established church, spread quickly and widely, taking hold in Recife, Hamburg, London, the West Indies—and then New York.⁴

The synagogue established in New York, Shearith Israel, was located in a small rented house on Mill Street, today South William Street, but then popularly known as Jews' Alley. The synagogue closely resembled its Old and New World counterparts in assuming responsibility for, and monopolizing, all aspects of Jewish religious life: communal worship, dietary laws, life cycle events, education, philanthropy, ties to Jews around the world, oversight of the cemetery and the ritual bath, even the baking of matzah and the distribution of Passover *haroset* (used as part of the Seder ritual). The synagogue saw itself and was seen by others as *the* representative body of the Jewish community; it acted in the name of all area Jews. In addition, it served as a meeting and gathering place for local Jews, a venue for exchanging "news and tattle."⁵

The advantages of this all-encompassing institution were, from a Jewish point of view, considerable: the synagogue-community proved an efficient means of meeting the needs of an outpost Jewish community. It promoted group solidarity and discipline, evoked a sense of tradition as well as a feeling of kinship toward similarly organized synagogue-communities throughout the Jewish world, and enhanced the chances that even small clusters of Jews, remote from the wellsprings of Jewish learning, could survive from one generation to the next.

Looming large among the values espoused by the synagogue-community throughout British America (and beyond) were tradition and deference. These values had stood Sephardic Jews in good stead for generations and were considered essential to Jewish survival itself. At Shearith Israel, various prayers, including part of the prayer for the government, continued to be recited in Portuguese, and the congregation's original minutes were likewise written in Portuguese (with an English translation), even though only a minority of the members understood that language and most spoke English on a regular basis. Still, Portuguese represented tradition; it was the language of the community's founders and of the Portuguese Jewish "Nation" scattered around the world. (Ladino, or Judeo-Spanish, written in Hebrew letters, was spoken only by the Sephardim of the Ottoman Empire.)⁶ In matters of worship, too, Shearith Israel closely conformed to the traditional *minhag* (ritual) as practiced by Portuguese Jews in Europe and the West Indies. Innovations were prohibited; "our duty," Sephardic Jews in England (writing in Portuguese) once explained, is "to imitate our forefathers." On a deeper level, Sephardic Jews believed, as did the Catholics among whom they had for so long lived, that ritual could unite those whom life had dispersed. They wanted a member of their "Nation," the term commonly used to characterize Sephardic Jewry, to feel at home in any Sephardic synagogue anywhere in the world: the same liturgy, the same customs, even the same tunes.⁷

Deference formed part of Sephardic tradition as well. Worshippers expected to submit to the officers and elders of their congregation, which, then and later, were entirely lay dominated. *Yehidim*, generally men of status who materially supported the congregation and subscribed to its rules, made most of the important decisions; they were the equivalent of "communicants" in colonial Protestant churches. The rest of the worshippers, including all of the women, occupied seats but held no authority whatsoever. Within the congregation, as in most religious and political institutions of the day, power was vested in men of means.

Even those without power agreed that disobedience to authority should be punished. In 1760, for example, the congregation severely punished Judah Hays for disobeying the *parnas* (president), although he himself was a significant member.⁸ In enforcing discipline through such edicts, Jews were following both the teachings of their ancestors and the practices of their non-Jewish neighbors. Indeed, deference to those in authority and to those who held the largest "stake in society" was accepted by "the bulk of Americans" in the mid-eighteenth century.⁹ By contrast, the right to dissent, the right to challenge the leadership in a free election, the right to secede and establish a competing congregation, the right to practice Judaism independently—these were unknown in colonial synagogues. Jews of that time would have viewed such revolutionary ideas as dangerous to Judaism and to the welfare of the Jewish community as a whole—which, of course, helps to explain why the impact of the American Revolution on American Judaism proved so profound.

No Jewish religious authority of any kind in colonial North America possessed sufficient status to challenge the authority of the laity. Neither Shearith Israel nor any of the synagogues subsequently established prior to the Revolution ever hired a *haham* (the Sephardic equivalent of an ordained rabbi), nor did rabbis grace any American pulpit until 1840. London's Sephardic synagogue, by contrast, considered it "necessary and imperative ... to have a Haham," and appointed one in 1664, just seven years after that congregation's founding, to "instruct us and teach the observance of the most Holy Law." In the New World, the Jewish communities of Recife, Curaçao, Suriname, Barbados, and Jamaica all enjoyed the religious leadership of a *haham* at various times in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁰ New York, the "mother" congregation of North American Jews, was the exception; indeed, so far as we know no *haham* was ever employed by any North American colonial congregation. Lack of members and funds partly explain why, but the practice of local Christian churches was probably more important. Only about a fourth of the congregations in the province of New York enjoyed full-time pastors in 1750, and even the Anglicans failed to appoint a bishop to oversee their flock.¹¹ Jews, therefore, felt no pressure to import a religious authority from abroad. The absence of a professional religious authority did not embarrass them in the eyes of their neighbors. Moreover, the diversity of the North American Jewish community, which by the mid-eighteenth century embraced Sephardim and Ashkenazim from many different locales and was much more diverse Jewishly than Jamaica and Barbados, would have made the task of finding an appropriate *haham* difficult, if not impossible. To compensate, the officiating *hazan* (cantor), in addition to chanting the liturgy, assumed many of the ceremonial functions that a *haham* might otherwise have performed, including, on rare occasions, public speaking.¹²

Colonial mainland American synagogues also differed from their European and West Indies counterparts in their relationship to the state. In Sephardic communities as diverse as those at Bayonne, France, Curaçao and the Virgin Islands, synagogue leaders looked to government to buttress their authority. The leaders of Curaçao's congregation, for example, were constitutionally empowered under various circumstances to seek "the intermediation of the Honorable Governor should all other means fail."¹³ In other communities, fear of the state justified extraordinary extensions of Jewish communal power. Concern for "our preservation" led synagogue leaders in London, for example, to demand the right to have "revised and emended" any book written or printed by any local Jew in any language.¹⁴ No such clauses, however, appear in any known American synagogue constitution. In the religiously pluralistic colonial cities where Jews principally settled, local governments (at least in the eighteenth century) extended a great deal of autonomy to churches and synagogues and rarely intervened in their internal affairs. As a result, synagogue leaders, like their church counterparts, found it necessary to

fall back upon their own authority. Under ordinary circumstances, they knew, local officials would not step in to help them.

The ultimate authority available to the synagogue-community was the power of the *herem* (excommunication), "the principal means of defining social deviance and of removing from the community wayward members whose actions and behavior offended its values."¹⁵ In the North American colonies, as in eighteenth-century Amsterdam, this punishment was threatened far more often than it was actually invoked, for its effectiveness in a society where Jews were not solely dependent upon one another and where compliance could not be overseen was doubtful. There was, moreover, always the danger that excommunication would backfire and bring the whole Jewish community into disrepute. More commonly, therefore, punishments consisted of fines, denial of synagogue honors, and, most effective of all, threatened exclusion from the Jewish cemetery—punishments limited to the religious sphere and thus parallel to church forms of discipline.

Even these punishments required some degree of communal consensus. The leaders of Shearith Israel found this out the hard way in 1757 when they attempted to crack down on outlying members of the congregation who were known to "dayly violate the principles [of] our holy religion, such as Trading on the Sabbath, Eating of forbidden Meats & other Henious Crimes." Citing Biblical passages, the *adjunta* darkly threatened these wayward members with loss of membership and benefits, including that "when Dead [they] will not be buried according to the manner of our brethren." But six months later, in the face of opposition, they decided to "reconsider." Relying on Isaiah's call to "open the gates" (Isa. 26:2), they welcomed everybody back into the congregation's good graces.¹⁶ Synagogue-communities thus may be said to have patrolled "the edges" of irreligious behavior, much as Jon Butler shows New England congregational parishes of the time did. They punished some, a few severely, but let many violations pass without comment. It was more important, they knew, to blazon the possibility of censure than to pursue every accusation.¹⁷

What really sustained the colonial synagogue-community was not so much discipline as a shared consensus concerning the importance of maintaining Judaism and its central values. Shearith Israel's new Mill Street synagogue, consecrated in 1730, reflected this consensus in its very architecture and design. Never before had North American Jews built (or even owned) a synagogue, so this was their first opportunity to shape the urban landscape. Since the completion of Trinity Church by the Anglicans in 1696, a slew of competing churches had been built in New York City, including a French church, a Dutch church, a Lutheran church, and a Presbyterian church. These opulently designed buildings, with their large spires and towers, had transformed and sacralized the city's religious skyline, displaying the colonists' burgeoning material success for all to see.¹⁸ Jews had likewise achieved material success (the house of Lewis M. Gomez, for example, was assessed at nearly ten times the value of the

Jews' rented house of worship), but the new synagogue building as finally constructed favored tradition over external display. The principal investment was in the interior of the synagogue, designed in classical Sephardic fashion, while keeping the exterior comparatively simple, on the scale of the modest New York churches built by the persecuted Baptists and Quakers. In this, local Jews emulated the pattern of the English Sephardic synagogue Bevis Marks (completed in 1701), and anticipated what the Jews would do in Newport when they built their synagogue in 1763.¹⁹ The architectural message in all three cases was the same—that Jews should practice discretion on the outside by not drawing excessive attention to themselves, while glorying in their faith on the inside, where tradition reigned supreme.

Seating arrangements in the New York and Newport synagogues underscored the power of deference. They mirrored social and gender inequalities within the community and reinforced religious discipline. The congregation assigned a "proper" place to every worshipper, and each seat was assessed a certain membership tax in advance. In New York, members of the wealthy Gomez family thus enjoyed the most prestigious seats and paid the highest assessments. Others paid less and sat much further away from the holy ark. Women, in accordance with Jewish tradition, worshipped apart from men; they sat upstairs in the gallery, far removed from the center of ritual action below. Few women attended synagogue services in Amsterdam, Recife, and London, so there they were free to take any available gallery seat; none was assigned. By contrast, in New York and probably also in Newport, where Jewish women, like their Protestant counterparts, attended public worship much more punctiliously, seats had to be assigned to them on the same basis as for the men. Since the women's section was small, disputes over status and deference abounded—so much so that in New York a special area was eventually reserved just for the elite women of the Gomez clan.²⁰

An additional source of tension at Shearith Israel and throughout colonial Judaism—more in North America, as I indicated, than in the Caribbean—stemmed from the ever-growing number of Ashkenazic Jews, immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe whose traditions, background, and world-view diverged markedly from those of the founding Sephardim. In Amsterdam, London, Hamburg, Bordeaux, Suriname, and many other places where Jews lived, Sephardim and Ashkenazim worshipped apart. They formed two Jewish communities, married among themselves, and co-existed uneasily. North American Jews, by contrast, worshipped together, as had also been the case in Recife, with the Sephardim exercising religious and cultural hegemony. This continued to be true in New York, despite the fact that by 1720 Ashkenazim formed a majority of the Jewish population.²¹ The fact that the Sephardim came first and enjoyed higher status than the Ashkenazim partly explains this arrangement, but the threat on the part of Curaçao's wealthy Sephardic congregation to stop assisting the New Yorkers unless they

agreed not to allow the German Jews "any More Votes nor Authority than they have had hitherto"²² probably explains more. Nevertheless, Ashkenazim did come to exercise considerable authority within Shearith Israel's new synagogue, serving as officers slightly more often, according to Eli Faber's calculation, than the Sephardim. Jacob Franks, an Ashkenazic Jew, was a perennial leader of the congregation, and Gershom Seixas, its most important and beloved colonial-era *hazan*, was the product of mixed Sephardic-Ashkenazic parentage—as were a growing number of other colonial Jews.²³ Sephardic traditions still held firm, but increasingly it was not Iberian blood ties among kindred members of the "Nation" that buttressed them. Instead, religious ties had become the dominant force among the Jews of diverse origins who worshipped together in New York, and power was slowly shifting to the Ashkenazim.

Synagogue-communities, as they developed in the major cities where Jews lived, bespoke the growing compartmentalization of eighteenth-century Jewish life in British America into Jewish and worldly domains—a distinction unknown to medieval Jews or, for that matter to most European Jews of the day, but characteristic of American Judaism almost from the very beginning. Colonial synagogue-communities did not tax commercial transactions, as synagogues in Amsterdam, London, and Recife did. They did not censor what Jews wrote on the outside, and they did not punish members for deviant personal beliefs or for lapses in individual or business morality. Instead, akin to neighboring churches, they confined their activities to their own sphere, disciplining some religiously wayward congregants with fines and loss of religious privileges, but leaving commercial and civil disputes, even those that pitted one Jew against another, to the general authorities. Some Sephardic Jews went so far as to employ different names in each realm, recalling their former multiple identities as crypto-Jews. The renowned Newport merchant Aaron Lopez, for example, inscribed his business ledgers with his Portuguese baptismal name, Duarte. In the synagogue, he was always known as Aaron.²⁴

The problem for early American Jews was that central Jewish observances—maintaining the Sabbath on Saturday, celebrating Jewish holidays in the fall and the spring, and observing the Jewish dietary laws— infringed upon the boundaries that the separation of realms sought so scrupulously to maintain. This engendered painful conflicts between the demands of Jewish law and the norms of the larger secular or Christian society in which Jews moved. Refusing to work on the Jewish Sabbath effectively meant working five days instead of six, since local "blue" laws prohibited work on Sunday, the Christian Sabbath. Jewish holidays similarly conflicted with the workaday world of early America. As for Jewish dietary laws, they made both travel away from home and social interactions outside of Jewish homes both difficult and embarrassing.

Early British American Jews found no easy solutions to these dilemmas. Religious laxity was plentiful, just as Todd Endelman found among English Jews of the time,²⁵ but there were also those who managed to

weave Judaism into the fabric of their daily existence. Indeed, the most striking feature of Jewish ritual life in the colonial period was its diversity—a feature that continued to characterize American Judaism long after the uniformity of colonial synagogue life was forgotten. Within every community, even within many individual families, a full gamut of religious observances and attitudes could be found, a spectrum ranging all the way from deep piety to total indifference.

When it came to the Sabbath, for example, the wealthy Aaron Lopez "rigidly observed ... Saturday as holy time," closing from Friday afternoon to Monday morning. Over a three-year period for which we have records, none of his ships left port on a Saturday.²⁶ Many surviving colonial Jewish letters also reflect strict Sabbath observance, closing abruptly with comments like "Sabbath is coming on so fast"—writing would then be prohibited.²⁷ Visiting New York in the middle of the eighteenth century, the Swedish naturalist Peter Kalm heard that the city's pious Jews "never boiled any meal for themselves on Saturday, but that they always did it the day before, and that in winter they kept a fire during the whole Saturday."²⁸ On the other hand, Kalm also heard reports of Jewish ritual laxity. Indeed, evidence abounds that Jews were trading on the Sabbath and traveling in violation of its commandment to rest—so much so that Shearith Israel once threatened with excommunication wayward members who violated the Sabbath in these ways.²⁹ The most revealing of all accounts of Jewish Sabbath observance in the colonial period, however, comes from a missionary to the Delaware Indians named David McClure. Sometime in 1772, he spent a weekend in Lancaster and went with a business order on Saturday to the home of Joseph Simon, a prominent local Jewish merchant:

[Simon] said, "Gentlemen, today is my Sabbath, & I do not do business in it; if you will please to call tomorrow, I will wait on you." We observed that the same reasons which prevented his payment of the order on that day would prevent our troubling him the day following [Sunday]. We apologized for our intruding on his Sabbath, & told him we would wait until Monday. He replied, you are on a journey, & it may be inconvenient to you to wait. He went to call in his neighbor, Dr. Boyd, & took from his Desk a bag, laid it on the table & presented the order to the Dr. The Doctor counted out the money and we gave a receipt. The Jew sat looking on, to see that all was rightly transacted, but said nothing, & thus quieted his conscience against the rebuke of a violation of his Sabbath.³⁰

Simon's dilemma—torn between his Sabbath, his business, and what he saw as common courtesy—very much reflected what many an observant American Jew of his day experienced. His use of a surrogate to solve the problem failed to impress the missionary: "... he might as well have done the business himself," he grouched. But what made Jewish life among the gentiles so difficult was that any solution would likely have been wrong; often Jewish law and American life simply proved irreconcilable. Jewish holidays, of course, posed similar problems.

Dietary laws posed an even greater problem for colonial Jews, for they were supposed to be observed at all times and had as their religious objective the goal of preventing precisely those kinds of social interactions with non-Jews that commerce and good neighborly relations demanded. Accurate statistics on colonial American Jewish observance of the dietary laws are unavailable. Even without them, however, we know that Jews defined themselves religiously through their practice of these laws; they were what they ate. Some labored to uphold the dietary laws wherever they were, while others quickly abandoned them. Still others, probably the majority, struggled somewhere in between. They maintained a double standard—one for home and one for outside—that effectively mirrored the bifurcated world they inhabited.

While private beliefs and practices defined Jews in British America religiously, and distinguished them from their Christian neighbors, social interactions in trade, in the street, and wherever else Jews and Christians gathered inevitably blurred these distinctions. The majority of Jews, especially in North America, resided in religiously pluralistic communities where people of diverse backgrounds and faiths, including many who had themselves experienced religious persecution, lived side by side. Perhaps for this reason, they felt more comfortable interacting with Christians than Jews did in most parts of the world—so much so that we know of Jews and Christians who joined forces in business, witnessed each other's documents, and socialized in each other's homes. Jews certainly faced continuing outbreaks of prejudice and persecution on account of their faith, and, legally speaking, in most colonies they remained second-class citizens. But from the very beginning of Jewish settlement, Jews and Christians also fell in love and married. This was an alarming development from the point of view of the Jewish community, which for religious and social reasons considered intermarriage anathema. It was also, however, a sure sign of the acceptance of Jews—particularly as only a small number of the Jews who intermarried converted to Christianity in order to do so.

Estimates of Jewish intermarriage in the colonial period range from 10 to 15 percent of all marriages, with men intermarrying more frequently than women, and those living far from their fellow Jews more likely to intermarry than those who lived near them. Available statistics leave many questions unanswered, chief among them whether the rate rose or fell over time. Still, the numbers are far lower than for some other religious groups of the day. New York City's French Huguenots, to take an extreme case, married non-Huguenots between 1750 and 1769 at a rate that exceeded 86 percent!³¹

Colonial Jews mostly dealt with intermarriages on an ad hoc basis. Thus, when Phila Franks married the wealthy Huguenot merchant Oliver DeLancey in 1742, her pious, grief-stricken mother withdrew from the city and in traditional Jewish fashion resolved never to see her daughter again, "nor Lett none of the Family Goe near her." Her more politic husband, however, demurred: "Wee live in a Small place & he is Related to

the best family in the place," he explained, and tried to promote reconciliation.³² As a rule, intermarried Jews did sooner or later drift away from the Jewish community, but exceptions to this rule were not shunned, as they might well have been elsewhere. David Franks continued to maintain close social and economic ties to Jews. Benjamin Moses Clava was buried as a Jew. Samson Levy and Michael Judah had their non-Jewish children ritually circumcised, and half a dozen intermarried Jews numbered among the twenty original founders of the Shearith Israel Congregation in Montreal.³³ In each of these cases, a Jewish tradition that was uncompromising on the subject of intermarriage clashed with colonial society's more indulgent social norms. Caught between two realms that they strove mightily to keep separate, colonial Jews vacillated. Once again, Jewish law and American life proved difficult to reconcile.

By the time of the American Revolution, the pluralistic character of American religious life had begun to transform not only social relations between Jews and Christians, but also American Judaism itself. Where in so many other diaspora settings, including the Caribbean, Judaism stood all alone in religious dissent, in America it shared its status with many another minority faith. This forced Jews to change the very way that they thought about themselves; religious pluralism demanded that they reimagine who and what they were. While early on they defined themselves, akin to other Sephardim, as members of the Jewish or Portuguese "Nation," by the eve of the Revolution they more commonly spoke of themselves as members of a "religious society," on the model of parallel Christian religious societies, like the "Society of Friends" (Quakers). When Ezekiel Levy was hired in 1774 to serve as ritual slaughterer, reader, and teacher in Philadelphia, his contract was thus with the "Jewish Society" of that city, not as earlier contracts had read with the "Jewish Nation." Later, in 1783, when New York Jews wrote a formal letter of welcome to Governor George Clinton they used the same term. Revealingly, they juxtaposed "the Society, we Belong to" with "other Religious Societies," as if to underscore that Judaism stood on an equal footing with all the rest.³⁴

This development, which as we have indicated was also very much influenced by the increasingly diverse and pluralistic character of North American Jewry—the large number of Ashkenazim and mixed Ashkenazi-Sephardi families—pointed to the growing distinctiveness of the North American Jewish community; increasingly, it was marching to the tune of its own drummer. Elsewhere, in Jamaica and Barbados, Judaism developed along British lines, maintaining for as long as possible the traditions that characterized Anglo-Jewry in the eighteenth century. By contrast, in the wake of the American Revolution, Judaism in the United States, heavily influenced by democratization and American Protestantism, developed during the half-century following independence a character all its own—one that had been anticipated in significant respects already in the colonial era.

Notes

1. Jacob R. Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew, 1492–1776* (Detroit, 1970), 954; *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 34 (1934):70; *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, ed. Franklin B. Dexter, vol. 1 (New York, 1901), 19; Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah* (Princeton, 1973), 594–95. I am grateful to Jonathan Schorsch for this last reference.
2. *American Jewish Archives* 7 (1955):17–23, 56; *American Jewish History* 80 (1990):22; David de Sola Pool, *Portraits Etched in Stone* (New York, 1952), 188; *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 54 (1965):247; Morris Gutstein, *The Story of the Jews of Newport* (New York, 1936), 94; David Brener, “Lancaster’s First Jewish Community 1715–1804: The Era of Joseph Simon,” *Journal of the Lancaster County Historical Society* 80 (1976):232; Joshua Trachtenberg, *Consider the Years: The Story of the Jewish Community of Easton, 1752–1942* (Easton, 1944), 31.
3. Marcus, *Colonial American Jew*, 402; Leo Hershkowitz, “The Mill Street Synagogue Reconsidered,” *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 53 (1964):408.
4. Arnold Wiznitzer, “The Merger Agreement and Regulations of Congregation Talmud Torah of Amsterdam (1638–39),” *Historia Judaica* 20 (1958):109–32; Daniel Swetschinski, “The Portuguese Jewish Merchants of 17th-Century Amsterdam,” (Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University, 1980), 337–66; Miriam Bodian, “The *Escamot* of the Spanish-Portuguese Jewish Community of London, 1664,” *Michael* 9 (1985):12–13. The Ashkenazi community in Amsterdam established its own congregation in 1635; see Yosef Kaplan, “The Portuguese Community in 17th-Century Amsterdam and the Ashkenazi World,” *Dutch Jewish History* 2 (1989):29.
5. Marcus, *Colonial American Jew*, 855–1110; Leo Hershkowitz, ed., *Letters of the Franks Family (1733–1748)* (Waltham, 1968), 60.
6. Herman P. Salomon, “K. K. Shearith Israel’s First Language: Portuguese,” *Tradition* 30 (1995):74–84.
7. Lionel D. Barnett, ed., *El Libro de los Acuerdos* (Oxford, 1931), 3; H. P. Salomon, “Joseph Jesurun Pinto (1729–1782): A Dutch Hazan in Colonial New York,” *Studia Rosenthaliana* 13 (1979):18–29.
8. *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* [=PAJHS] 21 (1913):50–51, 84.
9. John B. Kirby, “Early American Politics—The Search for Ideology: An Historiographical Analysis and Critique of the Concept of Deference,” *Journal of Politics* 32 (1970): 808–38; J. A. Pocock, “The Classical Theory of Deference,” *American Historical Review* 81 (1976):516–23.
10. Barnett, *El Libro*, 15; Zvi Loker, *Jews in the Caribbean* (Jerusalem, 1991), 41.
11. Richard W. Pointer, *Protestant Pluralism and the New York Experience* (Bloomington, 1988), 13–15.
12. Hyman B. Grinstein, *The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York* (Philadelphia, 1945), 84–87; Marcus, *Colonial American Jew*, 928–34.
13. Isaac S. Emmanuel and Suzanne A. Emmanuel, *History of the Jews of the Netherlands Antilles* (Cincinnati, 1970), 544; Judah Cohen, “Documents Concerning the Jews of the Virgin Islands” (private collection); Gérard Nahon, “From New Christians to the Portuguese Jewish Nation in France,” in *Moreshet Sepharad: The Sephardi Legacy*, ed. Haim Beinart, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1992), 248.
14. Barnett, *El Libro*, 11.
15. Yosef Kaplan, “Deviance and Excommunication in the Eighteenth Century: A Chapter in the Social History of the Sephardi Community of Amsterdam,” *Dutch Jewish History* 3 (1993):103.
16. The minutes are reprinted in PAJHS 21 (1913):74–76.
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