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Port Jews in the Atlantic: further thoughts

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Port Jews extended the boundaries of the Jewish world and re-imagined its contours. Pushing beyond harbors long familiar to Jewish merchants, they daringly crossed over into the New World, establishing Jewish communities around the Caribbean and up and down the Atlantic coast. The new map of the Jewish world, highlighting frontiers once unknown to Jews, was captured in words by Menasseh ben Israel in his *The Hope of Israel* (1650): "The Lord has promised that he will gather the two tribes, Judah and Benjamin, out of the four quarters of the world... Whence you may gather that for the fulfilling of that, they must be scattered through all the corners of the world... And this appears now to be done, when our synagogues are found in America."[1]

Historians have been studying port Jews for barely a decade. Originally, they focused on Europe, where port Jews vie with court Jews as harbingers of Jewish modernity. But recently, the scope of their interest has enlarged to encompass the Atlantic world, following port Jews as they began to populate the entrepôts of the Atlantic and beyond, reaching as far as the Indian Ocean.[2] In fact, Lois Dubin called attention to Atlantic Jewry a few years back, and David Sorkin recognized the "New World ports of Jamaica, Surinam, Recife and New Amsterdam" in his formulation of the port Jew as a social type.[3] The essays by Wim Klooster, Holly Snyder and Arthur Kiron in this issue of *Jewish History,* like Jonathan Schorsch's discussion of Sephardic port Jews and race, bring port Jews squarely to the Americas.[4] The study of port Jews thus raises the tantalizing prospect of a new Jewish history, re-imagined in global or trans-national terms.

The essays by Wim Klooster, Holly Snyder and Arthur Kiron do more than engage the port Jews of the New World. They also open up substantive themes and challenging questions, in some cases drawn from the emerging study of Atlantic history, that students of port Jewry will want to address. In this concluding comment, my aim is to build upon these essays by focusing on the Port Jews of colonial North America.

I point specifically to seven themes, drawn from the colonial North American Jewish experience, that seek to refine the concept of the Port Jew and to suggest avenues for future research.

(1) Port Jews dominated the Jewish community of North America. Rather than being 'a' social type, they comprised the leadership and heart of the community. Every single one of the organized North American colonial Jewish communities – Savannah, Charleston, Philadelphia, New York, and Newport – developed within a port city, and almost all of the known community leaders were substantial merchants. No religious leaders challenged the merchants for leadership. Since no ordained rabbis served the community until 1840, salaried *hazzanim* handled communal functions under lay direction. The complete absence of competing elites also helps to explain the decision by North American Jews not to impose taxes like the *imposta*, the communal income or sales tax, which pried into merchants' private affairs. Port Jews, given the chance to rule themselves, preferred to keep their secular and religious affairs separate. Perhaps to a greater extent than anywhere else in the world, then, the port Jews of North America governed themselves. This makes them particularly valuable subjects for study.[5]

(2) The port Jews of North America preferred heterogeneous communities to homogeneous ones. This helps to explain why they settled in colonial New York, filled as it was with people of different faiths, nationalities, and languages, and passed over colonial Boston, the most homogeneous of America's port cities. Political and economic considerations also obviously affected Jewish settlement patterns. The French port of New Orleans, for example, legally barred Jews from settlement and housed only a few crypto-Jews, while Newport, Rhode Island, where religious liberty was inscribed in law and trade and commerce flourished, became something of a Jewish boom town. In general, too little is known about the dynamics underlying the settlement patterns of port Jews. The North American experience suggests that where they did not settle explains almost as much as where they did.[6]

(3) The North American experience points up the problem of trying to distinguish Sephardic port Jews from their Ashkenazic counterparts. In colonial New York, where many records are preserved, both Sephardim and Ashkenazim engaged in commerce – though not usually with one another. The leading Sephardic family was Gomez, the leading Ashkenazic family was Franks, and both played central roles in the city's only synagogue, Shearith Israel – a Sephardic synagogue that for many years boasted an Ashkenazic majority. Philadelphia's Sephardic

synagogue, Mikveh Israel, was largely founded by Ashkenazim – merchants all. Throughout colonial North America, marriages between Sephardim and Ashkenazim abounded; indeed, overall, more Sephardic Jews married Ashkenazim than married Sephardim. Tensions between the two groups may never fully have dissipated, but for the most part, the Ashkenazic and Sephardic port Jews of colonial North America "successfully united in a single fellowship."[7] Efforts to restrict the term port Jew only to "merchant Jews of Sephardi . . . extraction" do not take into account the realities of colonial North American Jewish life.[8]

(4) Notwithstanding the image of port Jews as focused on commerce, infused with secular culture, and anticipating the values of the Haskalah, the port Jews of North America (and indeed the entire New World) also inhabited a world steeped in Jewish mysticism and hopes of messianic return. Menasseh ben Israel's influential book, *Mikveh Israel* (Hope of Israel), spoke of the Messiah's imminence ("the shortness of time when we believe our redemption shall appear") and, as noted, it interpreted the Jewish communities of the New World as both a sign and a spur to "the advent of the Messiah . . . an expectation of happiness to come."[9] Synagogue names in the new world echoed this hope. Three synagogues (Curacao, Savannah and Philadelphia) were actually named Mikveh Israel, evoking both Menasseh ben Israel's book and Jeremiah's promise (14:8) of salvation in time of trouble. New York's Shearith Israel in New York recalled, through its name, the prophecy of Micah (2:12): "I will bring together the remnant of Israel (*Shearith Israel*)." Congregation Jeshuat Israel ("Deliverance of Israel") in Newport, whose name was based on Psalm 14:7, reflected this same idea. According to non-Jewish accounts, several port Jews took their messianism further. Jonathan Edwards described a Jewish neighbor in New York in 1722/23, probably the merchant Jacob Lousada, whom he described as being "the devoutest person that ever I saw in my life; great part of his time being spent in acts of devotion, at his eastern window . . . not only in the daytime, but sometimes whole nights."[10] Ezra Stiles reports that the Jews of Newport were "wont in Thunder Storms to set open all their Doors and Windows for the coming of the messias." "Last Hail Storm, 31 July [1769], when Thunder, Rain and Hail were amazingly violent," he recalled in his diary, "the Jews in Newport threw open Doors, Windows, and employed themselves in Singing and repeating Prayers, etc. for meeting Messias."[11] Colonial port Jews, like their non-Jewish counterparts, thus lived in a world of wonders. Even as they engaged in commerce and secular pursuits, many of them also anticipated imminent messianic redemption.[12]

(5) North American port Jews reinforce the thesis of recent scholarship that "the degree to which Jews were involved in the early growth of a city and had achieved a notable and respected place in public and private life... directly influenced how later generations of Jews were received."[13] Far more than their European counterparts, these port Jews participated in the early development of their communities. They enjoyed the status of 'founders,' passed that status on to their descendants, and, thanks to them, subsequent Jewish residents enjoyed "pioneer" status as well. Even years later, Jews in communities like Charleston, New York and Newport (and, for that matter, Curacao) benefited from the "ancestral merit" of their port-Jew forebears. By contrast, Jews who came to live in port cities where Jews had not established communities early on, such as Boston or New Orleans, enjoyed no similar advantages. Through their commercial activities at an early stage of a community's growth, port Jews thus helped to ensure not only their own well-being, but also that of the Jews who followed them.

(6) Commerce, rather than geography, defined North American port Jews. As commercial opportunities opened up outside of port cities – for example along trade routes to the American west – port Jews opportunistically abandoned their ports in search of greater profits. Luis Moses Gomez, for example, established an important trading station just north of Newburgh, New York (1717–1720) where he and his children traded with the Indians.[14] A few Pennsylvania Jews, Sephardim as well as Ashkenazim, moved west to Lancaster, at one time the most important inland city in America; Joseph Simon settled there in 1740/41 and became particularly prosperous.[15] Other colonial Jews settled in Easton and Reading.[16] Following the American Revolution, which disrupted the North Atlantic trade, successful Jewish merchants, like the Gratzes, turned their full attention westward, abandoning port cities for the expansive American frontier.[17] While the Atlantic world that colonial North American port Jews had known ended with the American Revolution, some of the mercantile traditions and practices of the port Jews lived on among their descendants.

(7) Large numbers of North American Jews continued to reside in port cities – to this day, the vast majority of North American Jews live in coastal communities – but the port Jew as a "social type" disappeared early in the nineteenth century. The United States, in the wake of the Federal Constitution and the Bill of Rights (1787, 1791), opened up a host of new economic and political opportunities for Jews.

As old trade networks collapsed and Jews ceased to identify themselves – as the Jews of Amsterdam traditionally had – as members of "the nation," unified Jewish communities in America's port cities fragmented and Sephardic cultural hegemony gave way to Ashkenazi domination, particularly as growing numbers of immigrants from Central Europe made their presence felt. For a time, a different social type – the Jewish peddler – characterized the community. Subsequently, North American Jews became associated with all facets of the clothing trade, while its elite members ("Our Crowd") built department stores and investment houses. Jewish involvement in shipping and international commerce continued, particularly in the South, but its significance greatly declined.[18]

This is not to minimize the cultural significance of the "Atlantic Jewish Republic of Letters" that Arthur Kiron so illuminatingly describes here. This portrayal, however, seems to me to reflect not a 19th century variant on the world of the port Jews, but instead something quite new and different: the creation of a distinctive English-language Jewish diaspora that ultimately came to embrace Great Britain, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and the English-speaking communities of the Caribbean. The emergence of this trans-national diaspora, characterized more by language and culture than by commerce and trade, is one of the most important, and least recognized features of the 19th century. The circulation of books, periodicals, ideas and Jewish migrants (particularly religious leaders) around this diaspora, and its subsequent emergence as the largest and most culturally creative Jewish diaspora in the world cries out for greater historical analysis.

Port Jews, I have argued here, not only crossed back and forth between the Old World and the New, as Wim Klooster shows, and not only made the case for Jewish rights in the New World, as Holly Snyder shows, but also extended the very boundaries of world Jewry and re-imagined its contours at the dawn of modernity. They carefully chose where they settled, dominated colonial North American Jewish life, combined mercantile pursuits with mysticism, acquired status which they passed on to their children, and some of them later abandoned port cities for more lucrative opportunities to the west. In their wake, as the data offered here by Arthur Kiron begins to demonstrate, English-speaking Jews created what may one day be seen as modern Jewry's wealthiest and most vibrant diaspora subculture.[19]

Notes

1. Menasseh Ben Israel, *The Hope of Israel*, Henri Mechoulan and Gerard Nahon eds., (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press. 1987), 158.
2. Lois Dubin, "Researching port Jews and port Jewries: Trieste and beyond," 47–58, in David Cesarani ed., *Port Jews: Jewish Communities in Cosmopolitan Maritime Trading Centres, 1550–1950* (London: Frank Cass, 2002), [also *Jewish Culture and History* 4:2 (2001)].
3. David Sorkin, "The port Jew: Notes toward a social type," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 50:1 (1999). 89, and "Port Jews and the three regions of emancipation," in Cesarani, *Port Jews*, 31–46.
4. Jonathan Schorsch, "Portmantcau Jews: Sephardim and race in the early modern Atlantic world," 59–74, in Cesarani ed., *Port Jews*; see also Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, "Between Amsterdam and New Amsterdam: The place of Curaçao and the Caribbean in early modern Jewish history," *American Jewish History* 72 (December 1982), 172–192.
5. Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 1–30 expands upon some of these points.
6. Jonathan D. Sarna et al. eds., *The Jews of Boston* (2nd ed., New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 4, 22–23; Bertram Wallace Korn, *The Early Jews of New Orleans* (Waltham: American Jewish Historical Society, 1969), 1–73; George Goodwin and Ellen Smith eds., *The Jews of Rhode Island* (Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2004), 2, 13–26.
7. Eli Faber, *A Time for Planting: The First Migration: 1654–1820* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 66; Sarna, *American Judaism*, 18–19; Jacob R. Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew, 1492–1776* ((Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), 1001–1006; Malcolm H. Stern and Marc D. Angel, *New York's Early Jews: Some Myths and Misconceptions* (New York: Jewish Historical Society of New York, 1976).
8. Sorkin, "The Port Jew," 88.
9. *The Hope of Israel*, eds., Mechoulan and Nahon, pp. 62, 158.
10. Quoted in George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 48; I am grateful to Prof. Louis Hershkowitz for identifying Edwards' neighbor as Jacob Lousada.
11. Franklin B. Dexter ed., *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), I:19.
12. Compare David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).
13. Judith E. Endelman, *The Jewish Community of Indianapolis, 1849 to the Present* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 3; John Higham, *Send These to Me* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 142–144; Jonathan D. Sarna and Nancy H. Klein, *The Jews of Cincinnati* (Cincinnati: Center for the Study of the American Jewish Experience, 1989), 7; Sarna et al. *The Jews of Boston*, 4; Richard L. Zweigenhaft and G. William Domhoff, *Jews in the Protestant Establishment* (New York: Praeger, 1982), 87.
14. Leon Huhner, "Daniel Gomez: A pioneer merchant of early New York," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 41 (Dec 1951), 107–125; the trading post still stands, see http://www.gomez.org/.

15. David Brener, *The Jews of Lancaster, Pennsylvania: A Story With Two Beginnings* (Lancaster: Cong Shaarai Shomayim and Lancaster County Historical Society), 1979), 1–34.
16. Joshua Trachtenberg, *Consider the Years: The Story of the Jewish Community of Easton, 1752–1942* (Easton: Temple Brith Shalom, 1944), 22–82; Marcus, *Colonial American Jew*, 328–331.
17. W.V.Byars, *B. and M. Gratz:Merchants in Philadelphia 1754–1798* (Jefferson City, Missouri: Stephen Printing Co., 1916), 208–289; Sidney M. Fish, *Barnard and Michael Gratz : Their Lives and Times* (Lanham, Maryland : University Press of America, 1994).
18. Sarna, *American Judaism*, 29, 31–61,67–75; Stephen Birmingham, *Our Crowd: The Great Jewish Families of New York* (New York: Berkley, 1967).
19. Adam Mendelsohn's forthcoming Brandeis dissertation explores the 19th-century English language diaspora in detail. I am grateful to him, Lois Dubin and Kenneth Stow for their comments on this essay.