

The Mystical World of Colonial American Jews

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Early American Jews are not generally associated with the practice of Jewish mysticism.¹ Since there was “no oppression” in colonial America, Jacob Rader Marcus explains in his definitive history, “there was no need here to seek escape through emotionalism, mysticism, or ecstatic flights of the imagination. The colonial Jews never ‘illuminated their hearts by beclouding their minds.’”²

Most of the Jews who came to the New World belonged instead to the social type now known as “port Jews.”³ They were merchants with far-reaching commercial ties. As such, business dominated their world—so much so that Marcus once called them “a nation of shopkeepers.”⁴ They also, according to David Sorkin, pioneered aspects of Judaism that we associate with the “origins of the modern Jew”: “Virtually all those developments thought to be characteristic of the modern Jew can be found among the port Jews a century or two earlier: the reduction of Judaism to a synagogue-based religion with a growing emphasis on faith as opposed to practice; immersion in the larger Christian culture; the emergence of various forms and degrees of assimilation; and, as a consequence of all of these, the development of a segmental Jewish life and identity.”⁵

If one asked, as Michael A. Meyer did of German Jews, what being a Jew meant to the Jews of early America, most historians would not include mysticism as one of the answers.⁶ The colonial American Jewish merchants are assumed instead to have been paragons of rationalism—a calculating rather than a mystical group.

This essay challenges that assumption. It argues that messianic hopes and mystical devotions played a larger role in the lives of colonial Jews than generally supposed. In the New World, as in the Old World, the line dividing mystical and magical beliefs from modern thinking was neither as bright nor as well-defined as scholars once imagined.

The spread of Jews to the New World was associated, as early as the seventeenth century, with the hope of messianic redemption.⁷ Menasseh ben Israel, the Dutch rabbi who did more than anybody else of his day to promote Jewish settlement in the New World and underscore its religious significance, wrote in 1656 that he “conceived, that our universal dispersion was a necessary circumstance, to be fulfilled, before all that shall be accomplished which the Lord hath promised to the people of the Jewes, concerning their restauration, and their returning again into their own land.”⁸ According to this hopeful assessment, the Jewish dispersion, furthered by the expulsion from Spain, presaged Jews’ imminent ingathering. The traumas that Jews had experienced assumed transcendent significance as part of the divine plan leading up to the return to Zion and the coming of the messiah.

Menasseh ben Israel was, of course, a significant student of mysticism. “I have sworn allegiance to Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai,” he wrote, referring to the presumed author of the Zohar, “and I shall not betray my faith.”⁹ His *Nishmat Hayyim*, even if it ignores some central kabbalistic themes, has been described as an “encyclopedia of parapsychology, magic hiromancy and . . . a kabbalistic and philosophical compound of Jewish teachings” on the controversial subject of the eternity of the soul.¹⁰ He concealed his mystical side, however, from some of his non-Jewish friends. Huet, the bishop of Avranches, for example, described him as “a very good man of gentle spirit, easy-going, reasonable and free from many Jewish superstitions and the empty dreams of the Kabbalah.”¹¹ But even non-Jews knew of the rabbi’s deep interest in millenarianism and messianism.

The Hope of Israel (1650), Menasseh ben Israel’s best-known work, published in Spanish and Latin and eventually translated into English, Dutch, Yiddish, and Hebrew, focuses on the coming of the messiah as it relates to the discovery of the New World and the origins of the American Indians.¹² The preface (“to the courteous reader”) explains both the book’s title and its objectives:

I prove that the Ten Tribes never returned to the Second Temple, that they yet keep the Law of Moses, and our sacred rites; and at last shall return to their Land, with the two Tribes, Judah and Benjamin; and shall be governed by one Prince, who is Messiah the Son of David; and without doubt that time is near. . . .

I willingly leave it to the judgement of the godly, and learned, what happy worth there is in this my book, and what my own Nation owes me for my pains: It is called *The Hope of Israel*; which name is taken from Jeremiah 14:8: Oh the hope of Israel, the Saviour thereof. For the scope of this discourse is, to show, that the hope in which we live, of the coming of the Messiah, is of a future, difficult, but infallible good, because it is grounded upon the absolute promise of the blessed God.¹³

Like many Christians of his day, Menasseh ben Israel insisted that the Indians found in the New World descended from Adam and Eve and were survivors of the Flood. The alternative—that they descended from a separate act of creation not described in the Bible—was, to him, theologically unpalatable. He also concurred with those who, based on the apocryphal book of Second Esdras, insisted that the Lost Ten Tribes had scattered to the four corners of the earth.¹⁴ Since he argued, based on Isaiah, that “the gathering together of the captivity shall begin . . . in America,”¹⁵ he put forth a conclusion that offered Jews and Christians alike both solace and hope:

The shortness of time (when we believe our redemption shall appear) is confirmed by this, that 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; as Daniel (12:7) says: “And when the scattering of the holy people shall have an end, all those things shall be fulfilled.” And this appears now to be done, when our synagogues are found in America.¹⁶

The synagogues that Menasseh ben Israel had in mind were presumably Zur Israel of Recife and Magen Abraham across the bridge from it on the island of Mauricia (the two were united in 1649).¹⁷ Following the publication of his book, however, many subsequent synagogues in the New World, through the end of the eighteenth century, took on

names that reflected the Dutch rabbi's millenarian belief that the colonization of Jews in the New World was both a harbinger and an instrument of messianic redemption. No fewer than four synagogues—in Curaçao, Savannah, Philadelphia, and Jamaica—took as their name the Hebrew title of Menasseh ben Israel's book *Mikveh Israel*, thereby echoing Jeremiah's promise: "O Hope of [*Mikveh*] Israel, Its deliverer in time of trouble."¹⁸ New York's Shearith Israel based its name on the prophecy of Micah: "I will bring together the remnant of [*Shearith*] Israel."¹⁹ The synagogue in Barbados called itself *Nidhe Israel* based on the redemptive prophecy of Isaiah:

He will hold up a signal to the nations
And assemble the banished of [*Nidhe*] Israel
And gather the dispersed of Judah
From the four corners of the earth.²⁰

The synagogue in Newport, originally to be called *Nefutzei Israel* (and, beginning in the nineteenth century, the *Touro Synagogue*), took as its official name *Jeshuat Israel*, based on the Psalmist's prophecy: "O that the deliverance of [*Yeshuat*] Israel might come from Zion! When the LORD restores the fortunes of His people, Jacob will exult, Israel will rejoice."²¹ All alike demonstrated through their unusual names the mystical significance of New World Jewish communities. They reaffirmed the very point that Menasseh ben Israel had made in his book, that the dispersion of Israel's remnant to the four corners of the world heralded the ingathering of the exiles.

The synagogue of the *Jodensavanne* in the jungle off the Suriname River even more clearly betrays through its name a close acquaintance on the part of local Jews with mystical texts and ideas. The synagogue, consecrated in 1685, was named *Berahah VeS[h]alom* ("blessing and peace"), which is a highly unusual name for a synagogue, and not based on a scriptural verse.²² The key to the name lies instead in the *Zohar*, the mystical Book of Splendor, which asks, "And where is [the Garden of] Eden located? R. Yossi said, in *Aravot* [seventh heaven], for we are taught 'there are [found] the treasures of good life, blessing, and peace.'"²³ The name provides us with the clearest proof we have that the Jews of Suriname viewed their self-governing community as a Jewish paradise. Indeed, both the synagogue and the town seem to have been modeled on an idealized vision of Jerusalem, akin to Christian efforts to fashion a "new Jerusalem" in New Haven. In mystical terms, Aviva Ben-Ur observes, theirs was a sense "of actualized—as opposed to anticipatory—messianism." Where other New World Jew-

ish communities eagerly looked forward to the coming of redemption, the Jews of Suriname believed that these hopes were already in the process of being fulfilled.²⁴

In their private lives too, early American Jews engaged in mystical practices. Jonathan Edwards, the distinguished Protestant theologian, for example, recalled that he "once [1722–23] lived for many months next to a Jew (the houses adjoining one to another), and had much opportunity daily to observe him; who appeared to me 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, which opened next to mine, seeming to be most earnestly engaged, not only in the daytime, but sometimes whole nights."²⁵ Edwards's Jewish neighbor prayed, as per tradition, toward the east, and his late night devotions would most likely have been the mystical rite, developed in the sixteenth century, known as *tikkun hatsot*, "prayers recited at midnight in memory of the destruction of the Temple and for the restoration to the Land of Israel."²⁶ Since Edwards was living at the time on the estate of Thomas Smith, having befriended Madame Susanna Smith and her son, John, we know from the tax assessment list for that year that the Jew in question was named Lousada (Louzada), scion of a well-known Sephardic merchant family.²⁷ How many other colonial Jews filled their public lives with business but spent hours of their private time devoutly communing with God we do not know.

Ezra Stiles, pastor of the Second Church of Newport and later president of Yale University, provides broader evidence of mystical beliefs and practices among Jews. "This day," he reported to his diary on August 10, 1769, "one of the Jews shewed me a computation of one of the present Rabbins of Germany: wherein he makes *Time, Times, and half* [Daniel 7:25, 12:7], to denote the space from the last Destruct[ion] of the Temple to its Restora[tion] & Return of XII Tribes. Time he call 'Seventy Semitots' or 490 years, Times 980, half 245, total 1715 years, ending he says, A.D. 1783, when the Messias is expected." Others, including Gershom Seixas, *hazzan* of Shearith Israel, supplied alternate dates, but there can be little doubt that messianic speculation among Jews was rife.²⁸

Stiles, a Christian Hebraist, was particularly fascinated by the mystical texts of the Jews, and owned a copy of the *Zohar*. Like many devout Christians of his day, he imagined that the kabbalah concealed hidden trinitarian teachings. He inquired about this of every visiting Jew whom he considered knowledgeable enough to enlighten him upon the subject, and also corresponded on these subjects with his friend, the itinerant Sephardic *hakham*, Raphael Haim Isaac Carigal.²⁹

Others too discussed kabbalah in early America. At least two converts, Isaac Miranda and Judah Monis, owned their own copies of kabbalistic writings.³⁰

Finally, we learn from Stiles of a curious mystical practice that seems to have been widely observed by Newport Jews, at least during thunderstorms: "The Jews are wont in Thunder Storms to set open all their Doors and Windows for the coming of Messias. Last Hail Storm, 31 July [1769], when Thunder, Rain & Hail were amazingly violent, the Jews in Newport threw open Doors, Windows, and employed themselves in Singing & repeating Prayers, &c., for Meeting Messias."³¹ A century earlier, a Greek Catholic priest in eastern Europe, describing the enthusiasm surrounding the false messianic claims of Sabbatai Sevi, reported what may be a related practice: "whenever a cloud appeared over some city, they [the Jews] would boast before the Christians and say that the messiah would soon take them to dwell in Palestine and in Jerusalem." Gershom Scholem shows that "the expectation of being transported on the clouds of heaven seems to be authentic . . . the motif occurs in a midrashic source [Pesiqta Rabbathi, I] . . . the belief was current not only in Russia and Poland, but also in Germany and Turkey. . . . The Sabbatian enthusiasts were not the first to believe in a miraculous journey to the Holy Land on the clouds of heaven."³²

While none of Scholem's sources specifically mention thunderstorms, the Jews of Newport, many of them with roots on the Iberian Peninsula, were apparently heir to an authentic mystical tradition. Notwithstanding their deep involvement in the North Atlantic trade, their close interactions with non-Jews, their linguistic and cultural assimilation, and other evidences of "modernity" characteristic of port Jews, they nevertheless upheld this mystical tradition, even though it presumably brought a good deal of rainwater into their homes. Menasseh ben Israel's *Hope of Israel* and the very name of their own synagogue, Jeshuat Israel, likely steeled their resolve amidst the thunder, the hail, and the rain. They believed—more fervently, perhaps, than historians realize—that "deliverance" was near.

Messianic expectations, mystical devotions, and magical beliefs: contrary to what previous scholars have imagined, these all formed part of the cultural and religious worlds of early American Jews. As the "hope of Israel," they were instruments of messianic redemption. As "port Jews" they were harbingers of modernity. Their identity, like that of their non-Jewish counterparts, was shaped by multiple and conflicting impulses.³³

NOTES

1. Given the close family ties and remarkable geographic mobility of Jews in the Caribbean and North American Jewish communities of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, I consider them here as a group.
2. Jacob R. Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew, 1492–1776* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), 962. Marcus explicitly contrasts Jews with their non-Jewish colonial counterparts.
3. David Sorkin, "The Port Jew: Notes toward a Social Type," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 50 (Spring 1999): 87–97; Lois Dubin, *The Port Jews of Habsburg Trieste: Absolutist Politics and Enlightenment Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); David Cesarani, ed., *Port Jews: Jewish Communities in Cosmopolitan Maritime Trading Centres, 1550–1950* (London: Frank Cass, 2002); Jonathan D. Sarna, "Port Jews in the Atlantic: Further Thoughts," *Jewish History* 20 (2006): 213–19.
4. Marcus, *Colonial American Jew*, 1339.
5. Sorkin, "Port Jew," 96–97.
6. Michael A. Meyer, *The Origins of the Modern Jew: Jewish Identity and European Culture in Germany, 1749–1824* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1967), 8–9.
7. Abraham Farisso associated the discovery of the New World with the hope for Israel's redemption as early as 1525, but his work preceded the emergence of Jewish communities there. See David B. Ruderman, *The World of a Renaissance Jew: The Life and Thought of Abraham ben Mordecai Farissol* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1981), esp. 137. For this and other examples, see Noah J. Efron, "Knowledge of Newly Discovered Lands Among Jewish Communities of Europe (From 1492 to the Thirty Years' War)," in *The Jews and the Expansion of Europe to the West 1450–1800*, ed. Paolo Bernardini and Norman Fiering, 47–72 (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001); and Abraham Melamed, "The Discovery of America in Jewish Literature of the 16th and 17th Centuries," in *Following Columbus: America 1492–1992* [in Hebrew], ed. Miriam Eliav-Feldon, 443–64 (Jerusalem: Mercaz Shazar, 1996).
8. Menasseh ben Israel, *Vindiciae Judaeorum* (1656), 37, reprinted in Lucien Wolf, *Menasseh ben Israel's Mission to Oliver Cromwell* (London, 1901), 143; see also Jonathan I. Israel, "Menasseh ben Israel and the Dutch Sephardic Colonization Movement of the Mid-Seventeenth Century (1645–57)," in *Menasseh ben Israel and His World*, ed. Yosef Kaplan et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 139–42. For a readable but dated biography, see Cecil Roth, *A Life of Menasseh ben Israel: Rabbi, Printer and Diplomat* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1934).
9. Joseph Dan, "Menasseh ben Israel: Attitude towards the Zohar and Lurianic Kabbalah," in Kaplan, *Menasseh ben Israel and His World*, 200n3.
10. Rivka Schatz, "Menasseh ben Israel's Approach to Messianism in the Jewish-Christian Context," in *ibid.*, 247 (quoted); and Moshe Idel, "Kab-

- balah, Platonism and Prisca Theologia: The Case of R. Menasseh ben Israel," in *ibid.*, 207–19 (esp. n63). For the context of *Nishmat Hayyim*, see Alexander Altmann, "Eternity of Punishment: A Theological Controversy with the Amsterdam Rabbinate in the Thirties of the Seventeenth Century," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 40 (1972): 1–40.
11. Menasseh ben Israel, *The Hope of Israel*, ed. Henry Mechoulam and Gerard Nahon (London: Oxford, 1987), 25.
 12. Benjamin Schmidt, "The Hope of the Netherlands: Menasseh ben Israel and the Dutch Idea of America," in Bernardini and Fiering, *Jews and the Expansion of Europe*, 102n12.
 13. *Ibid.*, 102.
 14. Richard H. Popkin, "The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Indian Theory," in Kaplan, *Menasseh ben Israel and His World*, 63–82.
 15. Menasseh ben Israel, *The Hope of Israel*, 145.
 16. *Ibid.*, 158.
 17. Arnold Wiznitzer, *Jews in Colonial Brazil* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 77–78, 130–35.
 18. Jeremiah 14:8 in the New JPS translation. For the history of these synagogues, see Isaac S. and Suzanne A. Emmanuel, *History of the Jews of the Netherlands Antilles* (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, 1970), 1:51n2, which suggests that the name in Curaçao dates to 1651; Saul J. Rubin, *Third to None: The Saga of Savannah Jewry 1733–1983* (Savannah, Ga.: S. J. Rubin, 1983), 5, which dates "Mickva Israel" in Savannah to 1735; Edwin Wolf 2nd and Maxwell Whiteman, *The History of the Jews of Philadelphia from Colonial Times to the Age of Jackson* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1975), 115, which dates Philadelphia's "Mikve Israel" to 1782; and Jacob A. P. M. Andrade, *A Record of the Jews in Jamaica from the English Conquest to the Present Times* (Kingston: Jamaica Times, 1941), 45–46, which dates "Mikveh Yisroeil" in Spanish Town, Jamaica (an Ashkenazi synagogue) to 1796.
 19. Micah 2:12. The name seems originally to have been Shearith Jacob (following Micah 5:6–7), but by 1728 the name Shearith Israel had been adopted. See Jacob R. Marcus, *Studies in American Jewish History* (Cincinnati: HUC Press, 1969), 45; and David de Sola Pool, *An Old Faith in the New World: Portrait of Shearith Israel, 1654–1954* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955).
 20. Isaiah 11:12. The origin of the synagogue is unknown but has been dated to 1654; see Mordecai Arbell, *The Jewish Nation of the Caribbean* (Jerusalem: Geffen, 2002), 198.
 21. Psalms 14:7. Nefutzei Israel presumably was based on 1 Kings 22:17 with its promise that the scattered of Israel would "return. . . home in safety." The name seems to have been changed between 1764 and 1765; see Theodore Lewis, "Touro Synagogue—National Historic Site," *Newport History* 48 (Summer 1975): 283.
 22. The Jews of St. Thomas employed the same name for their congregation, founded in 1796. See Judah M. Cohen, *Through the Sands of Time: A History of the Jewish Community of St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2004), 15–18.
 23. Zohar, Midrash Hane'elam, Genesis, p.125a (see also T. B. Hagigah 12b): "V'eden b'ayzeh maqom hu'? . . . R. Yose 'amar ba'aravot hu', deha' tenan: sham ginzei hayyim tovin berakhah veshalom."
 24. I draw here upon the brilliant analysis of Aviva Ben-Ur in "Still Life: Sephardi, Ashkenazi and West African Art and Form in Suriname's Jewish Cemeteries," *American Jewish History* 92 (March 2004): 40–46.
 25. Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 165. Edwards's judgment on the Jew was negative: "Experience shows that persons, from false religion, may be inclined to be exceeding abundant in the external exercises of religion."
 26. *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1971), 15:1139; Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken, 1960), 146–50.
 27. George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 47–48. For details concerning the Smith family, see the biographies of William and John in Franklin Bowditch Dexter, *Biographical Sketches of the Graduates of Yale College, October 1701–May 1745* (New York: Henry Holt, 1885), 207–11, 359–60, esp. 359. I am grateful to Professor Louis Hershkowitz for providing me with information from the New York Tax Assessment list, January 1722–February 1723 (Hershkowitz to Sarna, April 22, 2004). On the Lousada family, see Robert Zassler, "About Jews in the Colonial New Brunswick Area," posted at <http://home.earthlink.net/~etzahaim/ceajhist2.html>; "Lousada," *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia* (1942), 7:210; and Marcus, *Colonial American Jew*, 332–33. For a genealogy, see Malcolm Stern, *First American Jewish Families* (Baltimore: Ottenheimer, 1991), and www.geocities.com/wdavid5961/Descendants_of_Jacob_De_Lousada.html.
 28. Franklin Bowditch Dexter, *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles* (New York, 1901), 1:19; Jacob R. Marcus, *The Handsome Young Priest in the Black Gown: The Personal World of Gershom Seixas* (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, 1970), 58–62; Raphael Mahler, "The Historical Background of Pre-Zionism in America and Its Continuity," in *A Bicentennial Festschrift for Jacob Rader Marcus*, ed. Bertram W. Korn, 347–54 (New York: Ktav, 1976).
 29. Marcus, *Colonial American Jew*, 1104–7; Arthur A. Chiel, "Ezra Stiles—The Education of an 'Hebrician,'" *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 60 (March 1971): 235–41; Arthur A. Chiel, "The Rabbis and Ezra Stiles," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 61 (June 1972): 294–312.
 30. Marcus, *Colonial American Jew*, 1075, 1081, 1083, 1102.
 31. Dexter, *Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, 1:19.
 32. Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah* (Princeton:

Princeton University Press, 1973), 594–95. Thanks to Jonathan Schorsch for pointing me to this source.

33. For parallels, see David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); and Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).