

## **Maintaining Orthodoxy in the New World**

### **Lecture 1: Young Israel of Ave J – 2/13/08**

- I. Thank YI of J for opportunity – American Jewish history with focus on those who remained observant.**

**Other lectures: Friday, 2/22, Wed. 2/27, Fri. 3/7. Special announcement: YGC Exhibit on 2/27**

**Disclaimer: Cannot cover everything of interest. May not even cover all of the topics listed.**

**Lecture 1 (2/13/08): From Columbus to 1700 - The Inquisition in Spain and Portugal; Jews who came with Columbus; Jews in Central and South America; The Inquisition in Mexico; Recife, Brazil; Jewish communities in the Caribbean; The First Jew in North America; Jews Arrive in New Amsterdam; Early NY Jewish Communal life (Asser Levy, Jacob Barsimson); Shearith Israel**

- II. How bad was it?**

**I dwell in complete darkness, without a teacher or companion.... The religious life in this land is on the lowest level, most people eat foul food and desecrate the Sabbath in public. Thousands marry non-Jewish women. Under these circumstances my mind is perplexed and I wonder whether it is even permissible for a Jew to live in this land. I am tired of my life.... I often think of leaving and going to Paris and put my trust in the good Lord.**

**Rabbi Abraham Rice (1802 – 1862) to his Rosh Yeshiva in Furth, R. Wolf Hamburger. First ordained rabbi to come to America in 1840.**

**As recently as 1900, Rabbi Jacob David Wilowsky, the rabbi of Slutsk, Lithuania, publicly proclaimed “that anyone who emigrated to America was a sinner, since, in America, the Oral Law is trodden under foot. It was not only home that the Jews left behind in Europe, he said, it was their Torah, their Talmud (Oral Law), their yeshivot (schools of Jewish learning)—in a word, their Yiddishkeit, their entire Jewish way of life.”**

- III. Back up and talk about how Jews came to the New World – North, Central and South America**

#### **IV. Inquisition**

**In the middle of the twelfth century, fanatical Almohad Muslims overran Southern Spain, causing a massive Jewish exodus to the Christian North. At first, the Christians proved to be as tolerant to Jews as were the Muslim rulers of the Golden Age. However, in the thirteenth century matters began to deteriorate.**

**In the 1300s, the situation worsened drastically. The Black Death struck Spain, and rumors of Jewish responsibility spread through the country. In response to the disaster, both Christian religious consciousness and open anti-Semitism increased.**

**In June 1391, riots broke out in Seville, rapidly spreading through the country. By the time the riots died down -- a full two months later -- 50,000 Jews were dead, and numerous, ancient communities were completely destroyed.**

#### **MASS CONVERSION**

**During the riots, Jews were offered the option of conversion to Christianity or death. Sadly, for the first time in Jewish history, large numbers of Jews converted, both under immediate coercion and in fear of future pressure. In 1411, a priest, Vincente Ferrer, later to become St. Vincent, embarked on a major mission to secure even more Jewish converts. Estimates put the number of Jews who converted during these two great waves, 1391 and 1412, as high as 400,000.**

**There was the widespread feeling that insincere conversion to Christianity was not such a bad thing, and that the Jews would revert to Jewish practice as soon as the pressure was off. Alas, the Jews did not realize that after conversion there would be no turning back.**

**A shocking phenomenon occurred in Spain -- the conversion to Christianity of prominent Torah scholars. The most infamous of these was the rabbi of Burgos, Solomon HaLevi, who became Pablo de Santa Maria. Rising to the position of bishop in the Catholic**

**Church, he persecuted Jews with fiery zeal. Playing a major role in enacting decrees that degraded unconverted Jews, such as forcing them to wear coarse sackcloth upon which was sewn a red badge of shame, Santa Maria also forbade Jewish men to trim their beards...**

### **THE CONVERTS' DILEMMA**

**After the fury of the pogroms and anti-Jewish decrees abated, many converts desired to return to Judaism. Alas, this was not possible according to Christian law. The Pope ruled that only those Jews who were dragged to the baptismal font vehemently protesting their opposition were permitted to rejoin the Jewish faith. Anyone who converted under threat of harm, and surely those who accepted baptism in anticipation of threats, was considered by the Church to be full-fledged Christians. Reversion to Jewish practice was considered heresy, which was punishable by death. These conversos lived in limbo, despised by both Jews and Christians. Jews looked down on them for forsaking Judaism and Christians saw them as insincere, which many were.**

**Even while outwardly professing Christian belief, many conversos retained Jewish laws, privately mocking the Christian religion. However, Jewish religious observance gradually faded. For example, it was impossible for conversos to circumcise their sons; if the heretical act were discovered, it would lead to death. Similarly, since these Jews were unable to provide their children with a Torah education, their children grew up with just a smattering of Jewish knowledge.**

**By 1492, the third generation conversos were overwhelmingly Christian, with lingering traces of Judaism. Faithful Jews attempted to bring the conversos back to Torah observance, but the Jews' efforts were stymied by the Church's ruling that anyone causing a Christian to leave the fold would incur the death penalty.**

**In 1469, Ferdinand of Aragon (who had converso ancestry) married Isabella of Castille, uniting the two most powerful Spanish regions under one royal family. Despite Ferdinand's power and lineage, anti-converso feelings remained at a fever pitch, with the people**

**demanding a resolution of the issue. An Inquisition court was set up to ferret out insincere converts.**

**The Inquisition publicized signs of heretical behavior for faithful Christians to watch for and report, including changing linens on Friday, buying vegetables before Pesach, blessing children without making the sign of the cross, fasting on Yom Kippur, and refraining from work on the Sabbath. Interestingly enough, Jews who never converted to Christianity were not under the jurisdiction of the Inquisition, and could practice their religion freely and openly. It was only conversos who were considered heretics for forsaking the Christian creed and practicing Judaism.**

## **PUNISHMENTS & TORTURES**

**If the Inquisitors could not obtain a confession from a suspected heretic, they employed torture to extract one. Interestingly, as gruesome as these tortures were, they were designed not to spill blood, a practice forbidden under Christian law.**

**The penalties imposed by the Inquisition included monetary fines, confiscation of all property, public humiliation, and flogging. Most severe of all punishments were the death sentences. Since the Church did not spill blood, but only saved souls, the victims were handed over to the secular authorities for execution.**

**On March 31, 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella signed the Edict of Expulsion in the Alhambra Palace in Granada, giving Jews until the end of July to leave the country. Justification for the decree was that the “Jews are instructing them [conversos] in the ceremonies and observances of their religion, seeking to circumcise them and their children, giving them prayer books, supplying them with matzah on Passover, and kosher meat throughout the year.”**

## **V. Portugal – perhaps 100,000 (>150,000) Jews fled here.**

**Of those Jews who chose to flee Spain in 1492, large numbers went to Morocco, Italy and to the Ottoman Empire. But, the greatest number, perhaps half of the total went to Portugal. King João II, of Portugal,**

allowed them to enter. He was preparing for war against the Moors, and he needed the taxes collected from these Jews to finance that war.

Permanent residence was granted only to 630 wealthy families who were allowed to establish themselves in several parts of the country upon payment of 100 cruzados. Others were allowed to settle for only eight months upon payment of eight cruzados for each adult. The king then bound himself to provide shipping so that they could leave. One hundred thousand refugees may have entered under these conditions. At the end of eight months, however, the king saw to it that little shipping was available and few could leave. Those left behind were declared forfeit of their liberty and were declared slaves of the king.”

The situation of the Jews continued to deteriorate. Pressure was exerted upon them to convert to Christianity. Those who did not were told that they had to leave Portugal. However, in the end, the vast majority of Jews were not allowed to leave, and any who had not undergone conversion were forcibly converted. “Holy water was sprinkled on them and they were declared to be Christians. King Manoel (the successor to King João II) then informed the Catholic Kings of Spain, ‘There are no more Jews in Portugal.’

**VI. Columbus and the Jews - Columbus was not a Jew IMO (Dr. M. Kayserling, Christopher Columbus and the Participation of the Jews in the Spanish and Portuguese Discoveries**

**A. Columbus used Rabbi Abraham Zacuto’s astronomical tables.**

**B. Jews who sailed with him – Interpreter Luis de Torres, Alonso de la Calle, ship-physician Maestre Bernal, surgeon Marco**

**C. October 12, 1492 was Hashanna Rabba**

**VII. Jews wanted to escape from Spain and Portugal – came to New World because it offered financial opportunities. Also thought that they would not be bothered by the Inquisition. Came to Brazil and Mexico. Portuguese shipped some repentant heretics to Brazil.**

**VI. The Inquisition followed the Jews to the New World and a number of trials of Judaizers were held in regions that were under the control of**

**Spain and Portugal. One of the most interesting personalities to be tried by the Inquisition in Mexico during the sixteenth century was Luis de Carvajal, Jr. (1567 – 1596). His commitment to and the sacrifices he made for Judaism are nothing less than inspiring.**

## **VII. Sketch of the Life of Luis de Carvajal, Jr.**

**Luis was born in Benavente, Portugal and was baptized by the Bishop of Benavente. His early education consisted of studying reading, writing, and basic mathematics. Later, he attended a Jesuit school for three years where he was taught Latin and rhetoric. His father, Francisco Rodriguez, was a Marrano who influenced his wife and most of his nine children to live as crypto-Jews. In 1584 Luis and his family immigrated to Mexico with his uncle. This uncle, who became the Governor of the New Kingdom of Leon in Mexico, had no sympathy for Marranos despite his Jewish background, and Luis could never reveal to him his family's secret Jewish practices. His father died not long after the family arrived in Mexico, and Luis succeeded him as the head of their large family.**

**Luis explored the northern territories of Mexico with his uncle. On these journeys he sought the company of fellow crypto-Jews and attempted to learn what he could of Judaism from those who knew more than he did. Although well-educated for his time, Luis' Jewish learning was limited and his Jewish practice was based on a Latin translation of the *Tenach* and a few fragments from the Jewish prayer book. Nonetheless, his memoirs clearly evidence his insatiable desire to acquire Jewish learning and to observe as much of Judaism as he could.**

**His drive to become an observant Jew is clearly evidenced in his description of how, after his father's passing, he circumcised himself in a ravine of the Panuco River:**

**When the Lord took my father away from this life, I returned to Panuco, where a clergyman sold me a sacred Bible for six pesos. I studied it constantly and learned much while alone in the wilderness. I came to know many of the divine mysteries. One day I read chapter 17 of Genesis, in which the Lord ordered Abraham, our father, to be circumcised -- especially those words which say that the soul of him who will not be circumcised will be**

erased from among the book of the living. I became so frightened that I immediately proceeded to carry out the divine command. Prompted by the Almighty and His good angel, I left the corridor of the house where I had been reading, leaving behind the sacred Bible, took some old worn scissors and went over to the ravine of the Panuco River. There, with longing and a vivid wish to be inscribed in the book of the living, something that could not happen without this holy sacrament, I sealed it by cutting off almost all of the prepuce and leaving very little of it. (Translated by Seymour B. Liebman in *The Enlightened, The Writings of Luis de Carvajal*, The University of Miami Press, 1967.)

Luis and some of the members of his family became the focal point of a network of crypto-Jews based in Mexico City. He and some of his siblings encouraged former Jews to return to Judaism. Through their efforts, Jews were circumcised, studied *Tenach* together and observed the festivals. It was only a matter of time before his Judaizing would come to the attention of Catholic officials.

## VIII. The First Trial

A. Warrant for his arrest issued April 20, 1589. Found hiding in his mother's house on May 9.

B. Questioned over several months and accused of Judaizing

C. Accusations - A parent [father] of Luis had asked him while he, the father, lay dying to wash his corpse according to the Jewish rite in order that it should not be buried unclean; Luis had studied the Old Testament and the Prophets in order to be more knowledgeable in his practice of Judaism; he quoted the Prophets habitually; and it was impossible to convince him that the Prophets had predicted that Jesus Christ would come as the Messiah; he had run away to Vera Cruz when his sister, Isabel de Andrade was imprisoned by the Holy Office and finally that he had protected Judaizers by not denouncing them.

D. Denied everything – Threatened with being tortured. Finally, on August 7, 1589, apparently seeing no way out of his predicament, he voluntarily appeared before the Inquisitors, “went down on his knees,

kissed the floor, shed tears, beat his breast, and said: *‘Peccavi, misericordia’* [‘I have sinned, mercy, mercy.’].”

E. Following the usual legal procedures of the tribunal, on February 24, 1590, Luis was permitted to be reconciled to the Catholic faith at an auto-da-fé, after public abjuration of his errors. He was condemned to wear the penitential cloak [*sambenito*] and to perpetual imprisonment.

## **IX. Imprisonment**

The Holy Office in Mexico did not have a prison for those sentenced to lifelong imprisonment. As a result, Luis was transferred to San Hipolito Martyr, a convalescent home in Mexico City, where he was required to perform any services that the hospital administrator would require of him. He spent two years at this hospital doing all sorts of menial labor, completely isolated from his family.

Luis’ mother and four sisters, who had also been tried for Judaizing and been reconciled with the church in the auto-da-fé of 1590, were confined to an isolated house near the College of the Holy Cross in Mexico City. In 1592 one of Luis’ brothers-in-law petitioned the Inquisitors to allow Luis to live with his mother and sisters, so that they would not be left without a man’s protection. The request was granted. Luis “found his mother and sisters completely overcome by their experiences with the Inquisition, but it was not long before he persuaded them again to practice Jewish rites.

## **X. The College Library**

The Carvajals developed a relationship with Fr. Pedro de Oroz, the supervisor of the College of the Holy Cross. As a result, Fr. Pedro made Luis his private secretary and a Latin instructor at the college. He also gave Luis the keys to the college’s library. This gave Luis access to many classical works, including Josephus Flavius’ History of the Jews. After the students left each day, Luis spent hours studying the Bible and other works. One day he came across a book that contained the Rambam’s Thirteen Principles of the Jewish faith. These *Ikarim* were completely unknown to those living under the Inquisition. The net result was that Luis immensely increased his knowledge of Judaism.

## **XI. Release and Then Imprisonment Again**

**A. For several years a relative of the Carvajals had been petitioning the authorities for their release. In 1594 this request was granted, and, after the payment of a fine, they were released from all of the penalties imposed upon them in 1590.**

**B. Remained free for only 3 months. Arrested again**

**C. Many witnesses testified against him**

**XII. Luis realized that since he was a relapsed apostate who had abjured his heresy in 1590, he would most certainly be sentenced to death at his second trial. Furthermore, he was now at the age of twenty-eight a very different man than when he was first tried. At that time his knowledge of Judaism was rudimentary, whereas now he knew the Bible and some of its commentaries well. Furthermore, he had become an enthusiastic follower of Judaism, as well as “a mystic who was given to fasting and praying, and the writing of religious poetry.”**

**Therefore, at this trial he openly declared his Jewish beliefs and practices. When asked whether in the future he desired to follow Judaism, he “responded that he wished to live and die observing the Law of Moses.” In response to another question he gave nine reasons for denying the Catholic faith.**

**In the end, “Luis was imprisoned and tortured for nearly two years and finally, on December 8, 1596, he was burned at the stake in Mexico City with his mother, Francisca, and three of his sisters, Isabel, Leonor and Catalina. No Jewish woman had been executed in Mexico until then. Conflicting accounts of his death have been circulated. Before his body was consumed in the flames a priest claimed that he had been garroted [strangled]. The same priest suggests that he kissed a crucifix held up to his lips. If the priest's account is correct (which is by no means certain), he almost certainly did so solely to avoid the pain of being burned alive, for such was the price of an expedited death. He was survived by his saintly sister, Anica, and a beloved disciple, Justa Mendez. His brothers, Baltazar and Miguel, escaped to Europe.**

**Sadly, this marked the end of Luis Carvajal, Jr.'s short life. One can only marvel at his commitment to Judaism in the face of unbelievable opposition and ruthless oppression.**

### **XIII. Recife, Brazil – 1630 to 1652**

**Brazil was originally under Portuguese rule and Jews first arrived there some time after the year 1500. They were active in making Recife a prosperous center for the production of sugar in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries. Many, if not all of the Jews who came to Recife before 1630 were “New Christians,” that is, Jews forced to convert to Christianity during the Inquisition. These Jews were also known as Marranos.**

**In 1630 the Dutch occupied Pernambuco. Holland had a tradition of granting Jews a good deal of religious freedom, and this same freedom was now extended to Recife and its environs. So promising was the position of the Jews in Brazil that Ephraim Sueiro, brother-in-law of Manasseh ben Israel, emigrated to that country in 1638, and was to have been followed by Manasseh himself, who dedicated the second part of his "Conciliador" to the community at Recife (1640). Two years later no less than 600 Jews from Amsterdam embarked for Recife. Included in this number were Rabbi Isaac Aboab da Fonseca, a well-known Amsterdam rabbi, and scholar Moses Raphael d'Aguilar. They came to Brazil as spiritual leaders to assist the congregations of Kahal Kodesh Tzur Yisroel in Recife and Magen Abraham in Mauricia. By 1645, the Dutch Jewish population of Recife was about 1,500, approximately half of its European population.**

**Synagogue records show a well-organized Jewish community with a high level of participation by Jews as well as New Christians, who were finally able to openly return to the practice of Judaism. There was an elementary level Talmud Torah and an upper level yeshiva in which Gemara was taught. These records also indicate the existence of a Tzadakah fund and an overseeing executive committee. The community was, not surprisingly, in general observant. Each adult male was required to stand guard on a regular basis. There are documents that show that Jews were exempt from doing guard duty on Shabbos. They were, however, required to hire gentiles who served in their stead.**

**During the twenty-four years that Recife was under Dutch rule the Jews developed a vibrant Jewish community. Recife became the first place in the New World where Judaism was practiced openly. Its members were doctors, lawyers, peddlers, and merchants. Many Jews prospered in the tobacco, precious gems, wood, and sugar trades. It even had a street called the Rua dos Judeos (Street of the Jews) on which the synagogue Tzur Yisroel was located. Indeed, in 1999 archeological investigation located the exact site of the synagogue when its *bor* and mikvah were found. The site has been restored and is now a featured tourist attraction of the Recife community.**

**Everything changed in 1654 when Portugal reconquered Brazil. Fearing the reenactment of the Inquisition, the Jews of Recife either returned to Holland or fled to Dutch, French, or English colonies in the Caribbean. Jews mainly of Sephardic descent (collectively known as "La Nacion") had recently established small but flourishing economic enclaves in Parimaribo, Barbados, Curacao, Jamaica, Hispanola and Cayenne.**

**A total of sixteen ships transported both Jewish and Dutch colonists from Recife. Fifteen arrived safely; however, the sixteenth was captured by Spanish pirates only to be overtaken by the St. Charles, a French privateer. After much negotiating, the master of the St. Charles agreed to bring a group of twenty-three Jewish men, women and children from the captured ship to New Amsterdam for 900 guilders in advance and 1,600 on arrival.**

**These twenty-three refugees arrived in New Amsterdam in 1654. They, together with at least two other Jews who had arrived not long before, were the founders of the Jewish Community of New York.**

**XIV. New Amsterdam – 23 Jews arrived on September 7, 1654. Not welcome.**

**Peter Stuyvesant, the dictatorial director-general of the colony, did not want them to stay. Since none of the group had passports, Stuyvesant might well have been successful in forcing them to leave.**

**When the Jews arrived, Stuyvesant sought permission from Amsterdam to keep them out**

altogether. The Jews, he explained, were “deceitful,” “very repugnant,” and “hateful enemies and blasphemers of the name of Christ.” He asked the directors of the Dutch West India Company to “require them in a friendly way to depart” lest they “infect and trouble this new colony.” He warned in a subsequent letter that “giving them liberty we cannot refuse the Lutherans and Papists” Decisions made concerning the Jews, he understood, would serve as precedents and determine the colony’s religious character forever after.

Forced to choose between their economic interests and their religious sensibilities, the directors of the Dutch West India Company back in Amsterdam voted with their pocketbooks. They had received a carefully worded petition from the “merchants of the Portuguese [Jewish] Nation” in Amsterdam that listed a number of reasons why Jews in New Netherland should be permitted to stay there. One argument doubtless stood out among all the others: the fact that “many of the Jewish nation are principal shareholders.” Responding to Stuyvesant, the directors noted this fact and referred as well to the “considerable loss” that Jews had sustained in Brazil. They ordered Stuyvesant to permit Jews to “travel,” “trade,” “live,” and “remain” in New Netherland, “provided the poor among them shall not become a burden to the company or to the community, but be supported by their own nation.” After several more petitions, Jews secured the right to trade throughout the colony, serve guard duty, and own real estate. They also won the right to worship in the privacy of their own homes, which seems to be more than the Lutherans were permitted do.

However, all was not total gloom for this small band of Jewish refugees when they arrived. They actually found other Jews who had already settled in the colony!

In so far as their names have come down to us in the court records, four men: Abraham and David Israel, Moses Ambrosius (Lumbrozo), and Asser Levy; and two women, Judicq de Mereda and Rycke Nounes, and others making up the twenty-three, found in Nieuw Amsterdam two other Jews. One of these was Solomon Pietersen, of whom we seem to know no fact other than that he was designated to act as counsel for the new arrivals. The other was one Jacob bar Simson. He had come from Holland some two weeks before the arrival of those who came from Brazil. He bore with him a passport issued by the Dutch West India Company in July. Isolated Jews had preceded them in coming to what is now the United States. These scattered individuals left no mark on the American Jewish story. But Solomon Pietersen, Jacob bar Simson, and the twenty-three other Jews who came to Manhattan in 1654 may truly be called the “Jewish Pilgrim Fathers,” for their settlement on the North American continent became the nucleus of a congregation and of a community with historic continuity.

It appears that the authors of the above quote regarding Solomon Pietersen are wrong, because according to Jonathan Sarna we do know one more sad fact about him.

The most difficult challenge facing New Amsterdam’s nascent Jewish community—one that American Jews would confront time and again through the centuries—was how to preserve and maintain Judaism, particularly with their numbers being so small and Protestant pressure to conform so great. From the earliest years of Jewish settlement, a range of responses to this challenge developed. At one extreme stood Solomon Pietersen, a merchant from Amsterdam who came to town in 1654, just prior to the refugees from Recife, to seek his fortune. In 1656 he became the first known Jew on American soil to marry a Christian. While it is not clear that he

personally converted, the daughter that resulted from the marriage, named Anna, was baptized in childhood.

One of the first orders of business that the new arrivals attended to was the fulfillment of their religious obligations. Arnold Wiznitzer tells us

The twenty-three were not ex-Marranos but in part Ashkenazic Jews from Germany and Italy, and in part, Sephardim born as Jews. Together with the boys above the age of thirteen among them, the Ashkenazim, Jacob Barsimson and Salomon Pietersen and probably with some others already present, they could have congregated as a minyan to conduct divine services on Rosh Hashanah, 5415 (Sept. 12, 1654), the first to be held on the island of Manhattan. Sephardim and Ashkenazim together formed Congregation Shearith Israel, the first Jewish congregation and the first Jewish community in New Amsterdam which, for valid reasons as we have shown above, included from its very foundation Ashkenazic and Sephardic members of the earlier Congregation Zur Israel of Recife.

According to Hyman B. Grinstein's "The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York" in 1695 there were 20 Jewish families in NY. Assuming each family had an average of 5 members, this means that there were about 100 Jews in NY in 1695. This number did not grow very quickly, because there were only about 300 Jews in NY in 1750.

XV. By 1690s the twenty Jewish families had an official synagogue on Beaver Street. By 1706 they had an official constitution and called themselves Congregation Shearith Israel (the Remnant of Israel), and in 1729 they built their synagogue building, on Mill Street, which they continued to use for almost a century.

## **XV. Asser Levy and Jacob Barsimson**

**Leaving on July 8, 1654, Jacob Barsimson had crossed the ocean on the *Pereboom*, and reached Nieuw Amsterdam on August 22.” Since he came under a passport as one of a party of emigrants from Holland sent by the Dutch West India Company, no objection was made to his stay by Governor Stuyvesant and his city council. However, when Asser (Assur) Levy arrived on September 7 as one of 23 Brazilian refugees without passports, Stuyvesant made an unsuccessful attempt to force him and his companions to leave.**

**Barsimson and Levy were to become pioneers in the fight for Jewish rights in the New World. It should be kept in mind that both of these gentlemen were, of course, observant Jews. “When in 1658 a charge was brought against Jacob Barsimson, the court records stated: ‘Though defendant is absent yet no default is entered against him as he was summoned on his Sabbath.’” The inventory of the property that Levy left at the time of his death lists “two ‘dreeping’ pans, two brass skimmers, two brass plates, and two pewter ‘basons’” indicate that he kept a kosher home. The listing of “one Sabbath Lamb” shows that he kept Shabbos. Furthermore, “Levy was a butcher. It is likely that he served as the shohet, or slaughterer of animals, for the local Jewry, for the records reveal that he was excused from killing hogs.**

**Asser Levy was a pioneer in fighting for the rights of Jews in New Amsterdam.**

**In 1655 he protested when Peter Stuyvesant and local officials required male Jews between sixteen and sixty to pay a tax in lieu of guard duty. Stuyvesant had cited the “disinclination and unwillingness” of local residents to serve as “fellow-soldiers” with the Jewish “nation” and “to be on guard with them in the same guard-house.” Levy insisted, however, that as a manual laborer he should be able to stand guard just like everybody else. Although initially thwarted, within two years he had succeeded in standing**

**“watch and ward like other Burghers,” whereupon he promptly petitioned for burgher rights (citizenship). Again he was thwarted, but, backed by wealthy Jewish merchants who had immigrated months before from Amsterdam and recalled the promises made to them by “the Worshipful Lords” of the Dutch West India Company, the decision was reversed and the rights of Jews to “burghership” guaranteed.**

**As a result of these legal actions, Asser Levy and Jacob Barsimson kept “watch and ward” with the other (non-Jewish) male residents of New Amsterdam. In addition, in 1657 all male Jews who lived in the town gained the rights of burghership (citizenship).**

**Besides being a butcher, Levy was a trader and land owner.**

**Asser Levy was just the man for his environment. He was neither refined nor cultured, and certainly he was insensitive to rebuffs. His energy was boundless; his obstinacy tremendous. He was blunt, thick-skinned, pugnacious, generous, fearless, pushing; jealous of his honor and that of his co-religionists—and successful!**

**Among the Jews who immigrated to New Amsterdam in 1654 he was the only one who stayed, maintaining a home in the city until his death in 1682. For long lonely stretches as Dutch rule waned and the rest of the Jews departed for colonies with more sun and promise, his was the only Jewish family in town.<sup>1</sup> Yet the inventory of his estate suggests that he resolutely observed at least the principal rituals of his faith, including the Sabbath and Jewish dietary laws, within the precincts of his home. His life epitomized both the hardships entailed in being a Jew in early colonial America and the possibilities of surmounting them.**

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<sup>i</sup> Most historians do not agree with J. Sarna's statement that Asser Levy was the only Jew in New York at some period during the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. They maintain that while the Jewish community was indeed small during the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, numbering no more than 100 souls in 1695, Levy and his wife were never the only Jews residing in New York.