

Stevens Faculty Forum

Reverend Ezra Stiles and the Jews of Newport, RI

October 14, 2009

I. The Rev. Ezra Stiles (November 29, 1727 - May 12, 1795) was an American academic and educator, a Congregationalist minister, theologian and author. He was president of Yale College (1778-1795). While he was a minister in Newport, he showed a great interest in the Jews who were living there. He studied Hebrew and even included Hebrew on the Yale Emblem!



II. In 1636 Roger Williams, after having been banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for what were considered radical religious views, settled at the tip of Narragansett Bay. He was joined by twelve other settlers at what he named Providence Plantation, due to his belief that G-d had sustained him and his followers. This settlement became the colony of Rhode Island. Rhode Island was unique in that it

guaranteed freedom of religious practice to all. It is little wonder that the colony became a haven for Quakers, Baptists, Jews and other minorities who were prosecuted for their religious beliefs.

III. Settlement of Jews in Newport

The date of the first arrival of the Jews in Newport has been variously given by different writers. Some give it as 1655, while others state it as 1656, 1657, or 1658. There is also a conflict as to the place [from] whence they came, although all seem to agree that the newcomers were originally from Holland.

Newport was a main port on the eastern coast of America during colonial times and hence an attractive place for Jews to settle.

The total number of Jews who initially settled in Newport was very small, probably no more than fifteen Spanish/Portuguese families. However, their numbers increased with the arrival on August 24, 1694 “of a number of Jewish families of wealth and respectability” from one of the West Indian Islands, most probably Curacao.

IV. Jewish Life in Newport

The Jews who settled in Newport soon established the institutions necessary for the proper functioning of Jewish life. A minyan was organized shortly after their arrival in 1658, and services were conducted in private homes for the next 100 years. In 1677 land for a cemetery was purchased. This is the oldest known location of a Jewish cemetery in the United States.

With the arrival in Newport of the Lopez, Rivera, Pollock, Hart and Hays families, all Jews, the city entered into an era of prosperity.

It was generally conceded that Newport had every advantage. Wealth had centered here, and was attracting capitalists from every part of the world. Between 1750 and 1760 some hundreds of wealthy Israelites, a most distinguished class of merchants, removed here from Spain, Portugal, Jamaica and other places, and entered largely into business.ⁱ One of them, Mr. Aaron Lopez,

owned a large fleet of vessels (rising thirty at one time) in the foreign trade, and many more in the coasting trade.

The manufacture of sperm oil and candles was introduced into Newport by the Jews, from Lisbon, between 1745 and 1750, and from that time to 1760 there were put in full operation seventeen factories for these articles alone; also twenty-two distilleries, four sugar refineries, five rope-works, and many large furniture factories, shipping immense quantities of furniture to New York, the West Indies, Surinam and many other places. In 1770 ... mention [was] made of eighteen West India vessels arriving here in one day.

The Jewish merchant princes were not merely the capitalists who furnished the wherewithal for this trade, but their enterprise created the trade itself, introduced the new arts and industries involved, and furnished the trade connections through their co-religionists in the different foreign ports with which the relations were formed.

The Jews of Newport participated in the general life of the city and were viewed most favorably by their non-Jewish neighbors. One gentile writer wrote:

The Jews who settled in Newport were not only noted for their knowledge of mercantile and commercial affairs, but also for their industry, enterprise, and probity. They kept to their callings, took but little part in politics - at least there is no evidence that they gave much attention to the discussion of public questions - and they seem to have avoided both the marine and military service. They were neither good sailors nor good soldiers; nor do they appear to have been very fond of books. Moses Lopez and Jacob Joseph, it is true, were numbered among the founders of the Redwood Library, and in 1758 Jacob Rodriguez Riviera was a stockholder in that institution but this may be taken as one of many evidences of their desire to promote whatever promised to be a public benefit. Their business, with but few exceptions, they made a success, and in all things appertaining to their devotions they were exact.

It is interesting to note that this gentile writer was so impressed by the religious observance of the Jews of Newport that he mentions the strict adherence to a Torah way of life by the wealthy Jewish merchants of Newport.

V. The American Revolution Leads to Decline

The residents of Newport, Jewish as well as gentile, flourished until the American Revolution. Rhode Island declared its independence from Britain two months before the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Given its large harbor and strategic location, Newport was a prime target of the British. The port was blockaded by the British fleet and Newport was soon under British control. This occupation was a devastating blow to the economy of the community. Many residents left rather than submit to British rule.

Almost all of the prominent Jewish merchants fled the city, and Newport never regained its commercial prominence. By the early 1800s the Jewish community was essentially non-existent. During most of the 19th century almost no Jews resided in Newport, and the Touro Synagogue was used only on rare occasions. The descendents of Newport's once flourishing Jewish community scattered throughout America. Sadly, many lost their Jewishness through intermarriage and assimilation.

This marked the end of a glorious chapter in America Jewish history. Indeed, in 1858 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote his famous poem The Jewish Cemetery at Newport in which he wrote in part

**Closed are the portals of their Synagogue,
No Psalms of David now the silence break,
No Rabbi reads the ancient Decalogue
In the grand dialect the Prophets spake.**

**Gone are the living, but the dead remain,
And not neglected; for a hand unseen,
Scattering its bounty, like a summer rain,
Still keeps their graves and their remembrance green.**

VII. Biographical Sketch of Ezra Stiles

The Rev. Ezra Stiles was born on November 29, 1727 in Connecticut and graduated from Yale University in 1746. He then studied theology at Yale and was ordained in 1749. Stiles worked as a tutor at Yale for a year after he was ordained, and then began some mission work among the Indians. In 1752 he was forced to give this up due to ill health. He then studied law. In 1753 he took the attorney's oath and practiced law in New Haven until 1755. In 1755 he returned to the ministry, accepting the position of pastor of the Second Congregational Church in Newport, Rhode Island, where he served from 1755 until 1777.

Stiles was an avid supporter of the American Revolution. Thus, when the British captured Newport in late 1776, he left Newport and became the pastor of the Congregational Church in Portsmouth, NH in 1777. In 1778 he became the president of Yale, serving in this capacity until his death on May 12, 1795.

VIII. Hebrew Studies

After settling in Newport Stiles became interested in the Jews residing there as well as in the Hebrew language.

Proceeding in the study of the Scriptures and of divinity, he felt the necessity of the knowledge of the Hebrew. His frequent attendance at the Jews' synagogue increased his wish to possess at least as much of it as to see a little into their books and service. On receiving a diploma from Edinburgh [March, 1765] his ambition was touched, or rather a sense of shame excited, that a Doctor of Divinity should not understand a language; so important and so easily acquired.

In May, 1767, Dr. Stiles knew ten letters of the Hebrew alphabet; he therefore requested one of his Jewish friends to teach him the others. Unlike some modern students of that ancient tongue, he determined, before beginning to translate from it into English, to read the language fluently, and henceforth read ten pages of the Psalter every day before breakfast. On the last of January of the next year, he began to translate Genesis, and by May 12 had finished it and Exodus. By the end of the year he had read Ezra

and some of the Chaldee in Daniel, reading one chapter of the Bible and a little Arabic daily except Sundays. Thus he finished the Bible in October, 1770. As was most natural, he compared his translation with the authorized version, and found the latter an excellent rendering, requiring corrections in but few places.

He now continued his Hebrew studies and became so proficient that in 1773 - the year he met Rabbi Hayim Isaac Carigal - he wrote a Hebrew letter of 22 pages on the "Divinity of the Messiah"; in 1774, he read Onkelos and Jonathan in the original, and in 1777, we find him, according to his biographer, reading "Chaldee and Targum with Eben Ezra and Ishaki." In July 1778, when he was inducted into his office as President of Yale, he delivered a Hebrew oration.

Despite all of this, one should not make the mistake of thinking that Dr. Stiles became an accomplished Hebraist. In a footnote to the quote above, the author writes, "This sounds very nice, to be sure, nevertheless we may doubt whether he understood everything he read in his 'Ishaki'." He then goes on to point out a number of translation errors that Stiles made in his notes to a siddur.

IX. Interest in Newport Jewry

On January 1, 1769 Dr. Stiles began keeping a diary, making regular entries until shortly before his death.

One is struck at once upon taking up the Diary by the large number of references to Jews and to Jewish affairs, although they are almost all confined to the period of his residence at Newport. The first entry about the Jews occurs as early as March 16, 1769, which day, he tells us, he spent mostly with the "Jew priest," Isaac de Abraham Touro, [who was the Chazzan of the Newport Synagogue] in a discussion on biblical prophecies. From that time until the outbreak of the Revolution, which, when it began, absorbed almost all his thoughts, scarcely a month passes without some entry referring either to conversations or to correspondence with Jews, or to discussions on religious questions with them, or to items of interest regarding Jews.

On December 2, 1763 Dr. Stiles attended the dedication of what is today known as the Touro Synagogue, and among his papers there is an elaborate description of the services as well as of the building. He often attended services at the Synagogue on special occasions such as Jewish holidays and describes in detail what he saw. These writings provide us with a fascinating description of the religious life of Newport Jewry during the middle of the 18th century.

Stiles was particularly interested in discussing theological and religious matters with the various rabbis who from time to time visited Newport. He writes that he met six rabbis – Rabbi Moses Malki in 1759, Rabbi Moses Bar David [Ashkenazi] in 1772, Rabbi Chaim Isaac Karigal (Carigal) in 1773, Rabbi Tobiah ben Jehudah in 1773, Rabbi Bosquila in either 1773 or 1774, and Rabbi Samuel Cohen in 1775.

X. Rabbi Raphael Chaim Yitzchok Karigal (1732 – 1777)

Dr. Stiles found Rabbi Raphael Chaim Yitzchok Karigal (1732 – 1777) by far the most interesting of his rabbinical acquaintances. Rabbi Karigal was a unique visitor to America in that he was a true Talmud Chocham who had received semicha in 1750 at his birthplace, Hebron, and then went to Jerusalem to continue his studies. He was appointed a shliach of the Hebron community in 1754. In this capacity he became a world traveler visiting Jewish communities in Egypt, Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Persia, Italy, Germany, Prague, Vienna, London, and Amsterdam.

In 1762 the rabbi of the Sephardi Jewish Community of Curacao passed away. Since Curacao was a Dutch colony, the Jews of Curacao had close ties with the Amsterdam Jewish community. The leaders of the Jewish community of Amsterdam asked Rav Karigal to become the rabbi of Curacao Jewish community. He agreed and served in this capacity for two years, returning to Hebron in 1764.

In 1768 he again took up his travels going to France and then London. After visiting Jamaica, he set sail for North America, visiting Philadelphia and New York. On March 3, 1773 he arrived in Newport, RI where he stayed until July 21.

When on March 5 the Rev. Stiles learned of Rabbi Karigal's arrival in Newport, he wanted to meet the newly arrived Rav. Therefore, on

March 8 Stiles attended Purim night services at the Newport Synagogue, because he knew that the rabbi would be there. This led to numerous meetings between Rabbi Karigal and Dr. Stiles while the rabbi stayed in Newport, all of which Stiles recorded in his diary.

In a diary entry dated April 8, Dr. Stiles provides us with a fascinating description of the appearance of Rabbi Karigal. Below is a direct quote that preserves his spelling, grammar and syntax.

The Rabbi's Dress or Apparel: Common English Shoes, black leather, Silver flowered Buckles, White Stockings. His general Habit was Turkish. A *green Silk Vest* or long under Garment reaching down more than half way the Legs or within 3 Inches of the Ankles, the ends of the Sleeves of this Vest appeared on the Wrists in a foliage Turn-up of 3 inches, & the Opening little larger than that the hand might pass freely. A Girdle or Sash of different Colors red and green girt the Vest around his Body. It appeared not to be open at the bottom but to come down like a petticoat; and no Breeches could be discovered. This Vest however had an opening above the Girdle – and he put in his *Handkerchief*, and *Snuff-box*, and Watch. Under this was an inner Vest of Calico, besides other Jewish Talismans. Upon the vest first mentioned was a *scarlet outer Garment* of Cloth, one side of it was Blue, the *outside scarlet*; it reached down about an Inch lower than the Vest, or near the Ankles. It was open before, no range of Buttons &c. along the Edge, but like a Scholars Gown in the Body but plain and without many gatherings at the Neck, the sleeves strait or narrow and slit open 4 or 5 Inches at the End, and turned up with a blue silk *Quarter Cuff*, higher up than at the End of the sleeve of the Vest. When he came into the Synoguge he put over all, the usual Alb or white *Surplice*, which was like that of other Jews, except that its Edge was striped with *Blue straiks*, and had more Fringe. He had a White Cravat round his Neck. He had a long black Beard, the upper Lip partly shaven-his Head shaved all over. On his Head a high Fur [Sable] Cap, exactly like a Woman's Muff, and about 9 or 10 Inches high, the Aperture atop was closed with green cloth. He behaved modestly and reverently.

Dr. Stiles was so taken with the personality and wisdom of this genuine Talmud Chocham that he commissioned the painting of his portrait.

XI. The Building and Dedication of the Newport Touro Synagogue

For its first hundred years the Jewish community worshipped in private homes. By the year 1754 Newport Jewry had organized itself into a congregation which was called Nefutse Yisroel (the Scattered of Israel). However, this name was later changed to Yeshuat Yisroel (the Salvation of Israel).

By 1759 the Congregation had sufficiently increased to undertake the building of a Synagogue, which would also incorporate provision for the religious instruction of the young. As this was an ambitious undertaking, beyond the means of the community, an appeal was addressed to other congregations for funds.

It is interesting to note that in the letter of appeal to Congregation Shearith Israel, in New York, reference is made to the urgency of procuring proper facilities for educational purposes. In this letter dated March 21, 1759, the Newport Congregation wrote:

“When we reflect on how much it is our duty to instruct children in the path of virtuous religion and how unhappy the portions must be of the children and their parents who are through necessity, educated in a place where they must remain almost totally uninstructed in our most holy and Divine Law, our rites and ceremonies - we can entertain no doubt of your zeal to promote this good work.”

The response to this appeal was positive, because the land upon which the synagogue was eventually erected was purchased on June 30, 1759. As construction proceeded appeals for funds were made to other Jewish communities throughout the world.

The architect selected for the work was the renowned Peter Harrison. There is no record of his ever having asked for or receiving payment for his work. It must have been a labor of love to him. With consummate skill he applied his great talents to his assignment and succeeded in erecting a Synagogue of outstanding beauty, dignity and impressiveness.

Construction began in 1759 and proceeded in stages as funds became available. In addition to the actual synagogue, the building includes a school wing. There was also a slaughterhouse located on part of the property which was eventually removed.

The synagogue was dedicated on Friday, December 2, 1763, which was the second day of Chanukah. Isaac (de Abraham) Touro was the Chazzan of the congregation at this time.

XII. The Dedication

The Rev. Ezra Stiles attended and then recorded the dedication ceremonies. Below is his description of the event, as well as of the synagogue structure (with his original punctuation and spelling preserved).

December 2, 1763, Friday. In the Afternoon was the dedication of the new Synagogue in this Town. It began by a handsome procession in which were carried the Books of the Law, to be deposited in the Ark. Several Portions of Scripture, & of their Service with a Prayer for the Royal Family, were read and finely sung by the priest [Chazzan Touro] & People. There were present many Gentlemen & Ladies. The Order and Decorum, the Harmony & Solemnity of the Musick, together with a handsome Assembly of People, in a Edifice the most perfect of the Temple kind perhaps in America, & splendidly illuminated, could not but raise in the Mind a faint Idea of the Majesty & Grandeur of the Ancient Jewish Worship mentioned in Scripture.

Dr. Isaac de Abraham Touro performed the Service. The Synagogue is about perhaps fourty foot long & 30 wide, of Brick on a Foundation of free Stone: it was begun about two years ago, & is now finished except the Porch & the Capitals of the Pillars. The Front representation of the holy of holies or its Partition Veil, consists only of wainscoted Breast Work on the East End, in the lower part of which four long Doors cover an upright Square Closet the depth of which is about a foot or the thickness of the Wall, & in this Apartment (vulgarly called the Ark) were deposited three Copies & Rolls of the Pentateuch, written on Vellum or rather tanned Calf Skin; one of these Rolls I was told

by Dr. Touro was presented from Amsterdam & is Two Hundred years old; the Letters have the Rabbinical Flourishes.

A Gallery for the Women runs round the whole Inside, except the East End supported by Columns of Ionic order, over which are placed correspondent Columns of the Corinthian order supporting the Ceiling of the Roof. The Depth of the Corinthian Pedestal is the height of the Balustrade which runs round the Gallery. The Pulpit for Reading the Law, is a raised Pew with an extended front table; this placed about the center of the Synagogue or nearer the West End, being a Square embalustraded Comporting with the Length of the indented Chancel before & at the Foot of the Ark.

On the middle of the North Side & affixed to the Wall is a raised Seat for the Parnas or Ruler, & for the Elders; the Breast and Back interlaid with Chinese Mosaic Work. A Wainscotted Seat runs round the Sides of the Synagogue below, & another in the Gallery. There are no other Seats or pews. There may be Eighty Souls of Jews or 15 families now in Town. The Synagogue has already cost Fifteen Hundred Pounds Sterling. There are to be five Lamps pendant from a lofty Ceiling.

The lamps were subsequently imported and installed.

In 1946, in recognition of its architectural and historical significance, an act of Congress made the Touro Synagogue a National Historic Site, and it became part of the National Park System. “The synagogue is the fourth church edifice to be designated as a national historic site, not federally owned.” In 2001 The National Trust for Historic Preservation selected Touro Synagogue to become part of its collection of historic sites.

ⁱ This number is most probably inflated, unless many of those who came left. Ezra Stiles wrote that he estimated there were about 30 Jewish families in Newport in 1760. (*Ezra Stiles and the Jews*, by Reverend W. Willner *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society (1893-1961)*; 1900; 8, AJHS Journal.)