

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 20)

Caribbean Jewish Communities in the 17th and 18th Centuries - II

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
Department of Mathematical Sciences
Stevens Institute of Technology
Hoboken, NJ 07030
llevine@stevens.edu

This article continues the history of Jewish communities that was begun in last month's column.

Curacao¹

The island of Curacao belonged to Spain from 1527 to 1634; in the latter year it became a Dutch possession. In 1650 Prince Maurice of Orange granted twelve Jewish families leave to settle in Curacao, thus establishing the local community.

This colony would doubtless have failed, had not numerous refugees, expelled from Brazil, seasonably appeared. The large number of Israelites that came from Brazil and the immense quantity of wealth they brought with them caused the old prejudices against the Jewish nation to disappear. They were allowed to take up their abode in any part of the country they wished; and later, they not only possessed the best houses in the city, but also lands, and almost the entire commerce of the Island was in their hands. Thus the youthful community grew in prosperity and affluence from year to year.

In 1656 the cemetery laid out by the original twelve settlers was turned over to the new community, A congregation was formed and a synagogue secured the same year, 1656, their treatment having been more liberal than that experienced by their co-religionists in the sister-colony, New Netherland (New York). They were allowed to erect a new Synagogue in 1692. Contrast this with the fact that the Touro Synagogue, the first built in North America, was not dedicated until 1763.

On February 22, 1652, the Dutch West India Company granted a considerable tract of land to Joseph Nunez da Fonseca, otherwise called David Nassi. The Jewish colonists settled under the leadership of Jan Illan, whose real name was Joao Ilhao, and who was born in Portugal about 1609. He gained experience in colonial activity as a result of his sojourn in Brazil where, in 1639 at Parahiba, he was denounced for Judaizing.

Curacao Jewry was recruited by a goodly number of Jews from Pernambuco in 1654 when the latter was reconquered by the Portuguese. The first emigrant

from Amsterdam to Curacao, whose name was given in the records, was Daniel Coem [= Cohen] Henriquez, departing from the Dutch metropolis in 1680. He belonged to one of the oldest Jewish families in Amsterdam, for Abraham, Jacob and Isaac Cohen Henriques figured in the synagogal registers from 1630. (It seems that) the first rabbi of this community was Yeosiahu Pardo, son of David Pardo, *Haham* of Amsterdam. Yeosiahu Pardo was a pupil of the famous Saul Levi Morteira, whose daughter he had married. In 1667 he (David Pardo) was the first religious leader of the holy brotherhood Honen Dalim in Amsterdam; about 1669 he studied at the Pinto yesiba (yeshiva) of Rotterdam, then located in Amsterdam; about 1674 he presided over the yesiba Gemilut Hassadim in the same city. In this same year he was appointed *Haham* of Curacao; he remained there to 1683 and then removed to Jamaica.

Jewish Education in Curacao²

(*Haham*) Pardo, an old student of Ets Haim and as *ros* (head) of the Yesiba de Los Pintos, [yeshibah (academy)] first of Rotterdam, and later of Amsterdam, stressed great importance on the teaching of the Law and accordingly his *medras* (school) in Curacao was modelled (sic) more or less along the lines of Ets Haim of Amsterdam. There were six classes with the following courses:

1. Elementary reading and berakhot (benedictions)
2. Prayers with their respective melodies
3. *Parasa* [*sidra* (section of the Pentateuch read consecutively each Sabbath)] with chanting in Ladino
4. *Perakim* [*Abot* (Ethics of the Fathers)], *Song of Songs* and *Prophets*, all in Ladino
5. Rashi and writing
6. Grammar, *Guemara* [Gemara (Talmud)] and *mefarsim* (Talmudic commentaries).

The teaching of the last course was the function of the *Haham*. A few of the students [*talmide hakhamim*] received an allowance from the community chest.

Religious Instruction Compulsory

Attendance at the *medras* was compulsory. Since a number of parents sent their sons to private schools, the Mahamad (Executive Committee of the Congregation) and Council on the 21st of Sivan 5476 [1716] sought to correct this situation by enacting a regulation (*haskamah*), prohibiting each and every *yahid* (yachid, member) from conducting a private school during the hours of the *medras* on pain of *berakhah* (euphemism for *kelalah* [curse, or minor excommunication]) and a fine of fifty pesos.

This strong moral obligation to give their sons a thorough religious education was manifested earlier during the treasurership of Benjamin Motta, when the

Parnassim (wardens) passed a regulation on the 18th of Sivan, 5471 [1711] compelling attendance at the medrasim until the age of sixteen years. This *haskamah* was modified by Jacob Abenatar, treasurer in 1716, after the death of *Haham* Eliau Lopes, whereunder the school age limit was fixed to thirteen years and any father who refused to send his son to the *medras* was subject to punishment.

In 1716, when Joseph Abudiente neglected sending his son Jehuda to the medras, the *haskamah* of 1711 was invoked and both father and son were prohibited entry into the synagogue. Since Abudiente stubbornly refused to submit, he was dropped from the community rolls. But when this action did not bring about Abudiente's compliance, the Parnassim, in an all-out effort to avoid a precedent, urged Jonathan van Beuningen, the governor of the island, to compel Jehuda Abudiente's attendance at the medras.

Duties and Obligations of the Rubissim and Hakham

The *ruby* (teacher) had to attend the medras regularly. If he was tardy, he had to pay a fine fixed at the discretion of the Parnas of the Talmud Torah which was deductible from his salary. If he was absent, he could be dismissed by the Parnas of the Talmud Torah. The *ruby* accompanied his pupils to the *tikun* (the religious service conducted when a family moved into another home), and he also watched over the boys in the synagogue, who as late as 1860 sat in back of the *tebah* (reading platform of the synagogue).

In 5510 [1749-1750], during Hakham Semuel Mendes de Solas' rabbinate there were at least five *rubissim*, namely: Jeoshuah Touro, Guidon Mendes, Eliau Lopes, Jeoshua Hisquiao de Cordova, and Ishac, son of *Hakham* de Solas. It is interesting to observe that during 1762-1763 the Dutch West Indies Company maintained in its service only one teacher for the white non-Jewish population of the island.

In addition to the duties of his office, the *Hakham* supervised the teachers and students and was subject to the orders of both the Mahamad and Parnassim of the Talmud Torah. He had to accept whatever number of students the Parnassim sent to his *medras* and, like the *rubissim*, under no condition whatsoever could he absent himself from the *medras* or leave the city.

Vacations

In spite of the tropical climate, teachers and students had to continue their courses without interruption. The vacations were limited to Fridays, Saturdays, fast days, half-holidays, the major holidays and the High Holidays with two to three days preceding the latter two.

Education of the Girls

Inasmuch as the object of study was the meditation of the Sacred Law, the girls of Curacao, until the early part of the nineteenth century, like their sister coreligionists of Amsterdam, officially received no instruction. Some wealthy families hired a tutor who taught the girls reading, writing and arithmetic in their homes, in the presence of the girl's mother. Indeed this is surprising, especially since the Jewish woman in Curacao was called upon to affix her signature to her prenuptial agreement, to guarantees given in behalf of her husband, powers of attorney and her own testament.

Hermandades - Yeshibot

The *Hakham*, Parnassim and *rubissim* with the deep religious ardor of the eighteenth century, they felt strongly about pursuing the study and meditation of the Torah with its commentaries. Impelled by their desire to help their needy brothers and by their zeal to study for the glory of God, following the example of their mother community in Amsterdam, they founded hermandades (fraternal organizations) which they termed yeshibot, with the double function of aiding the poor and of meeting with the *Hakham* on certain fixed days for the study of the Torah, hence the name Yeshibah. Records show that there were at least thirteen such yeshibot.

From the above description of the Jewish community of Curacao, it is clear that during the 17th and 18th centuries the Jews who settled there and their offspring created a community that was committed to Torah, Avodah, and Gemilas Chassodim.

¹ This material in this section is based on two articles:

(1) **Notes on the Spanish and Portuguese Jews in the United States, Guiana, and the Dutch and British West Indies During the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries**, by Cardozo De Bethencourt, Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society, 1925, 29, pages 20 - 21.

(2) **The Jews in Curacao** by G. Herbert Cone, Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society, 1902, 10, pages 145 – 146.

These articles are available at <http://www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm>.

² This material is based on the article **Jewish Education in Curacao (1692 – 1802)**, by Isaac Samuel Emmanuel, Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society, 1955, 44, pages 217 - 220. This article is available at <http://www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm>.