

Special Feature / By Dr. Yitzchok Levine

The Six Rabbis Whom Reverend Ezra Stiles Met

Introduction

On September 12th, 1781, the Christian minister Reverend Ezra Stiles (1727-1795), who was then the President of Yale College, delivered "An Oration upon the Hebrew Literature." In this speech, Stiles extolled "the wisdom of Israel as it was transmitted from generation to generation, beginning with Ezra the Scribe and thereafter." He then proceeded to give "an overview of Jewish learning as conveyed by the Talmud, the Targums, the Zohar, Maimonides and the Bible commentators." He further stated, "This kind of learning is worthy to be sought after and transplanted into the Colleges of America," and that he desired to see "it illuminating the Scholars of Yale College, and also the Literati of different Cities..."

Stiles mentioned his debt of gratitude to various "Rabbinical Authors of past ages" and expressed his appreciation for enlightenment to six rabbis whose acquaintance he had made — Rabbi Moses Malchi in 1759, Rabbi Moses bar David [Ashkenazi] in 1772, Rabbi Chaim Isaac Karigal

"This kind of learning is worthy to be sought after and transplanted into the Colleges of America."

(Carigal) in 1773, Rabbi Tobiah bar Jehudah in 1773, Rabbi Bosquila in 1774 and Rabbi Samuel Cohen in 1775.

Who was this Christian reverend, and how had he managed to meet six rabbis before the Revolutionary War, given that the first Orthodox rabbi to settle in the Americas, Rabbi Avraham Rice, did not arrive until 1840?

Sketch of the Life of Ezra Stiles

Ezra Stiles was born in Connecticut on November 29, 1727, and graduated from what was then Yale College in 1746. After graduation, he studied for the ministry and was ordained in 1749. After his ordination, he worked as a tutor for a year at Yale and then began some missionary work among the Indians. In 1752, ill health forced him to give up his missionary endeavors. He next studied law, which he practiced in New Haven from 1753 to 1755.

However, in 1755, after being offered the position of pastor of the Second Congregational Church in Newport, Rhode Island, he

returned to the ministry, serving there as pastor until 1776.

Stiles's avid support of the American Revolution led to his leaving Newport when the city was captured by the British in late 1776. He then served as pastor of the Congregational Church in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. In 1778, he became the president of Yale College, a position he held until his death on May 12, 1795.

The Reverend's Interest in Judaism

While in Newport, Ezra Stiles began studying Hebrew, because he felt he could not properly understand the Scriptures unless he could read the "Hebrew Bible" in the original. It was only natural for him to turn to members of Newport's small but vibrant Jewish community for assistance with his Hebrew studies. This led to his genuine interest in all things related to Judaism. In addition to a Hebrew *Tanach* and *Siddur*, Stiles eventually acquired copies of the Talmud and the *Zohar*, as well as some other classic *sefarim*. He got to the point where he was able to fluently translate Hebrew into English and understand at least some of what he read in his *Gemara* and *Zohar*.

Stiles became a frequent attendee at the religious services held on Jewish holidays and Shabbosos at what is known today as the Touro Synagogue. He attended the dedication of the Touro Synagogue on December 2, 1763, and wrote an elaborate description of the building and the dedication ceremonies. His "Literary Diary," which he began on January 1, 1769, provides a fascinating window into Jewish religious life in Newport during the years 1769 to 1776.

Stiles was especially interested in discussing various religious and theological matters with the various rabbis who, from time to time, visited Newport, and he recorded these meetings in his diary. Below are some excerpts from what he wrote about each rabbi.

Rabbi Moshe Malchi of Tzfas

Rabbi Moshe Malchi visited Newport in 1759, ten years before Stiles began his diary. However, in an entry made on December 30, 1771, the reverend wrote:

"R. Moses Malchi of Saphat near the Sea of Galilee in the holy land was in Newport AD 1759, when I saw & conversed with him. He had travelled among all the Bodies of Jews in the East, particularly in Greece, Constantinople, Smyrna, & Egypt & Syria. He told me that his mother tongue was Spanish (tho' born in the Holy Land) his Extraction



Rabbi Raphael Chaim Yitzchok Carigal



PAINTING BY SAMUEL KING
Reverend Ezra Stiles, 1770-1771

being from the Spanish Jews that settled in Saphat, once a famous University: He said, that in all his Travels he could converse with his brethren in Spanish, except in Grand Cairo in Egypt, where the Spanish Jews did not settle."

Rabbi Moshe bar David

It was not until thirteen years later that a second rabbi, Moshe bar David, visited Newport. An entry by Stiles made on November 9, 1772, reads:

"This Forenoon I visited a learned Jew in Town and on his Travels. He is really a Rabbi. His title is *Mori Morenu Rav Rebbe Moshe bar Ashkenazi m'Polin Katan m'K"K Apta*, [which Stiles wrote in Hebrew] 'The Doctor our Doctor the great Rabbi, Moses the Son of David of little Poland, of the holy Synagogue of Apta.' He is now AEt. [*Anno aetatis suae*, i.e., aged] 52 born at Apta in Poland 17 German miles from Cracow. Has studied in all the Jew Colleges *Bais Medrash* in Poland: — received the Title of Rabbi at Barot which was confirmed in Glogau 36 or 38 years ago."

Rav Moshe bar David had begun his travels at age 20, and over a period of 14 years he had visited "Jerusalem, Cairo, Tiberias, Saphat, Aleppo, Ur of

[situated 220 miles northwest of Bagdad], Bogdat [Bagdad?], Mt. Ararat, Basara [in Iraq], Ispahan [in Iran], Capsan [?], Hamodan [in Iran] and Surat in India."

Stiles soon discovered that Rabbi Moshe bar David was knowledgeable in *Talmud Bavli* and *Yerushalmi*, as well as the *Zohar*. He was also "well acquainted" with the writings of the Rambam and Rashi. Rabbi Moses admitted that he was a *Gaon*. "As evidence of his attainments, Rabbi Moses produced for Stiles a letter of testimony from the *Hakharn* of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of London."

Rabbi Moses was an accomplished Kabbalist, because Stiles wrote:

"I shewed [showed] him the *Zohar*, with which he was much delighted, speaking with Raptures of the Sublimity and Mysteries of its Contents; he told me if I could comprehend the Book I should be a Master of Jewish Learning & of the Greatest philosophy in the World. He explained several Passages in it respecting the holy Name, and the ten Saphirots. Of the Saphirots he spake with Eyes turned up heavenward & with Fervor."

Rabbi Raphael Chaim Yitzchok Carigal (Karigal)

Rabbi Raphael Chaim Yitzchok Carigal (1732/33-1777) arrived in Newport on March 3, 1773. When Stiles learned that a rabbi from the Holy Land had come to Newport, he made it a point on the evening of March 8 to attend Purim services at the Newport Synagogue, where he knew he would see Rabbi Carigal.

"As Rabbi Carigal stood on the *Bimah*, Stiles, seated in a pew, took his first impressions of the man. He judged him to be about forty-five." Stiles described his first impression of Rabbi Karigal as follows:

"He was dressed in red

Garment with the usual Phylacteries and habiliments, the white silk Surplice; he wore a high brown furr Cap, had a long Beard. He has the appearance of an ingenious & sensible Man."

Rabbi Carigal and Reverend Stiles met for the first time on March 30. It was not long before the two of them were engaged in a discussion of certain passages from the *Zohar*, and thus began a series of meetings that took place frequently during the rabbi's four-and-one-half-month stay in Newport. Surprisingly, these two men, who had very different backgrounds, became friends.

"Stiles learned that Carigal was born at Hebron in Palestine in 1733, where he was educated and ordained as rabbi at the precocious age of seventeen. In 1754, Carigal set out on a series of voyages, remaining for periods of time in each of the places that he visited. He traversed all of the Middle East, visiting Egypt, Turkey, Syria and Greece. Carigal moved on to Europe, visiting Italy, Germany, Holland and England. In 1761, when he was twenty-eight, he arrived in Curacao to fill in for the local rabbi, who had returned to Holland for further

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studies. In 1764, Carigal returned to Holland, eventually making his way to Germany and Italy and again back to Palestine. Four years later, in 1768, he sailed for France and then to England, where he taught in London for over two years. In 1772, he arrived in the American colonies, spending time in New York and Philadelphia before coming to Newport."

A highlight of Rabbi Carigal's visit to Newport was the *drashah* he gave on May 28, 1773, the first day of Shavuot. "The congregation invited town and colony officials to attend worship that they might hear Rabbi Carigal preach. Stiles took careful notes of the content and manner of Carigal's preaching. Carigal's sermon ran forty-seven minutes and was delivered in Spanish, interspersed with Hebrew. Stiles noted:

"His Oratory, Elocution, and Gestures were fine and oriental. It was very animated. He exhorted them not to perplex themselves with Traditions and

the Chaldees, the R[iver] Chebar [in Babylonia], Mosul

Criticisms, but to attend to certain capital points and principal points of Religion — he expatiated upon the Miseries and Calamities of their Nation in their present Captivity and Dispersion and comforted them under their Tribulations by the assured Prospect of the Messiah's Kingdom — he exhorted them not to be discouraged but persevere &c. — he shewed them that Calamities and sufferings were not evidence of their being forsaken of G-d — that Adversity and Judgments were the common Lot of all Nations, Kingdoms and Countries — and instanced in the Desolations made by the eruptions of Mt. Vesuvius near Naples in Italy which he said he had seen, and beheld the deluge of liquid matter flowing and carrying all before it, overwhelming Villages, Houses, Temples, people &c — yet Christians did not consider this as an evidence against their Religion; neither was the Destruction of the Temple and the City of Jerusalem by the Romans &c. any argument against the Truth of the Jewish Religion. They were chastised for their Sins but not forsaken of G-d ..."

At the end of July 1773. Rabbi Carigal left Newport to continue his journeys. It was an emotional parting for these two men who had become such close friends.

After Rabbi Carigal's departure, he and Reverend Stiles corresponded in Hebrew until the rabbi died in 1777 in Barbados. The reverend never forgot Rabbi Carigal and even requested that a portrait of him be made from a small crayon likeness made during his stay in Newport. This portrait, shown above, was eventually delivered to Yale in 1782.

Rabbi Tobiah bar Jehudah

The next rabbi to come to Newport was Rabbi Tobiah bar Jehudah, who was from Cracow, Poland, and arrived in Newport in November 1773. Rabbi Tobiah, who was 48 at the time, had been educated in Amsterdam, where he had been sent at the age of 8. He was a direct descendant of Rashi.

Reverend Stiles, who had by now developed a keen interest in Jewish mysticism and had even arranged for the purchase of the *Zohar* from a London book dealer in 1772, was delighted to learn that Rabbi Tobiah possessed extensive knowledge of *Kabbalah*. An entry he made in his Literary Diary, dated November 19, 1773, reads:

"Visited this Afternoon by Rabbi Tobiah bar Jehudah late from near Cracow in Poland Aet [age] 48. We had much conversation on the *Zohar* and particularly the X Saphirots. He said that the Sapher Haujtzirah was now in the same state as in Abraham's Time; that Rabbi Akiba made no change in it — only he selected it as a part of a larger Book called the Sapher Razael, which was communicated by the Angel Razael to Adam,

from Adam to Seth, who delivered it to Enoch, he to Methuselah, he to Noah, he to Shem & Shem delivered it to Abraham."

The two men had a number of subsequent conversations about various Kabbalistic matters. An entry made by Stiles on December 7, 1773 in his "Hebrew-Aramaic Notebook" reads:

"R. Tobiah bar Jehudah told me that the Sapher Jatzirah was a part of the Book of Rozel which the Angel Rozel gave to Adam which with Adams & other Writings came to Seth, Seth delivered it to Enoch; Enoch delivered it with his Additions to Methuselah — & he to Noah — Noah to Shem — Shem (who he said was Melchizedek) to Abraham. Abraham selected that upon the Creation in a Volume by itself. It came from Abraham to the Patriarchs and is now in being in a Quarto Volume. I have since seen & perused it."

(Quite probably Stiles was shown the *Book of Razel* published in Amsterdam in 1701, and misunderstood that Rabbi Tobiah had lumped together the much-earlier *Sefer Yetzirah* with the *Book of Razel*.)

In an entry made in his Literary Diary dated November 23, 1773, Reverend Stiles gives us his perception of a dinner that he ate at the home of Isaac Touro (1738-1783), the *chazzan* of the Newport Synagogue and the father of the famed philanthropist Judah Touro.

"The Rabbi visited me again ... but I was not at home. In the Evening I visited him at Mr. Tauro's — and supped with them, the only Time I ever happened at Meal with a Jew. Just before they sat down to supper, Water was brought by the Maid, in a white earthen Bottle which stood in a Vase or Bason: they two washed their hands, taking up the bottle and pouring the Water on the hand. I did not wash, but sat down & eat with them. After sitting each in a whispering voice said Grace for himself."

"Rabbi" Aaron Bosquila

The fifth "rabbi" whom Stiles came to know in Newport was Aaron Bosquila, who arrived in that city in June 1774. (It will become apparent why the word rabbi has been put in quotation marks.) An entry in Stiles's Literary Diary dated June 15, 1774, reads:

"Yesterday visited by a new Rabbi come to Town. Rabbi Bosquila from Smyrna in the Levant where he was born and educated. He resided with his Family 14 years in London, is now aet. [age] 61, for many years has followed Traffic & laid aside his rabbinical Studies. He says, he has not read the Talmud which I was surprized at, as by the Certificate under the hands of a London Rabbi he appears to be indeed a Rabbi — but he has read the *Zohar*. The Bible and the *Zohar* he is versed in and few other Books. He is of a contrasted and limited Literature — he is among the Rabbins."

Obviously, Stiles was surprised that this "rabbi" had lit-

tle familiarity with the Talmud and may have even doubted the authenticity of his "rabbinical credentials." In truth, Aaron Bosquila may not have been a rabbi. In the Minute Book of Congregation Shearith Israel of New York, which he also visited, he is referred to as "Mr. Aaron Bosquilo."

Rabbi Samuel Cohen

Rabbi Cohen arrived in Newport in late June 1775. He was a 34-year-old *kohen*, who had been born and educated in Eretz Yisrael. Stiles found him to be a "very agreeable" man with broad knowledge that lacked depth.

Stiles's diary contains only a few entries about Rabbi Cohen, and these are relatively brief. On August 16, 1775, he wrote, "Visited R. Samuel Cohen." and nothing more.

"Somehow, so terse an entry as this last one was not at all in keeping with Stiles's approach to the previous rabbis with whom he met. But a good clue to this brevity of treatment by Stiles is to be found in the context of his Diary entries of that period. Stiles was very much preoccupied with the volatile political situation in the colonies at the time. Most of the colonies were already in a state of rebellion against

England. There were British warships in Newport harbor with their guns ominously trained on the town. His Diary during that period is full of the tension and concern that permeated the country. Politics and war moved to the fore. And, undoubtedly, for this reason, discoursing with Rabbi Cohen was hardly of prime interest under the prevailing circumstances."

His Diary during that period is full of the tension and concern that permeated the country. Politics and war moved to the fore.

Summary

Ezra Stiles had no further interactions with rabbis after 1775. He left Newport in 1776 around the time the British captured the city, residing first in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and then in New Haven, Connecticut. Neither place had

Jewish communities that were likely to attract rabbinical visitors. Furthermore, the Revolutionary War made travel between Europe and America more difficult, so few rabbis were able to make the arduous journey across the Atlantic at this time. Still, it is clear that Reverend Stiles was deeply influenced by his interactions with the rabbis he met in Newport. The result was "a keen interest to learn as broadly and deeply as he could about Judaism. As Stiles put it himself in his first public oration at Yale's commencement in 1781, 'this kind of Learning is worthy to be sought after ...'"

Note: All quotations are from The Rabbis and Ezra Stiles, by Arthur A. Chiel, American Jewish Historical Quarterly (1961-1978); Sep. 1971-Jun. 1972; 61, 1-4. Please note that the original punctuation and spelling that Reverend Stiles used has been preserved in the quotations from his writings.

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