

## **The Rabbis and the Reverend Ezra Stiles**

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*Note: All quotations below are from **The Rabbis and Ezra Stiles** by Arthur A Chiel, **American Jewish Historical Quarterly** (1961-1978); Sep 1971-Jun 1972; 61, 1-4. This article is available at <http://www.ajhs.org/scholarship/adaje.cfm> Please note that the original punctuation and spelling that Reverend Stiles used has been preserved in the quotations from his writings.*

### **Introduction**

On September 12<sup>th</sup>, 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 (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 America, Rabbi Avraham Rice, did not arrive here 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 at Yale as a tutor for a year 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 1753 to 1755. However, in 1755 he returned to the ministry, after being offered the position of pastor of the Second Congregational Church in Newport, Rhode Island, serving as its pastor until 1776.

Stiles 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 the pastor of the Congregational Church in Portsmouth, NH. 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 that he could not properly understand the Scriptures unless he could read the "Hebrew Bible" in the original. It was only natural that he should turn to some of the members of Newport's small but vibrant Jewish community for assistance with his Hebrew studies. This led to a genuine interest of the part of Reverend Stiles in all things related to Judaism. In addition to a Hebrew Tenach and a Siddur, Stiles eventually acquired copies of the Talmud and the Zohar, as well as some other classic seforim. 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.

This Christian reverend became a frequent attendee at the religious services held on Jewish holidays and *Shabbosim* at what is today known as the Touro Synagogue. He attended the dedication of the Touro Synagogue that took place 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.

Reverend Stiles was especially interested in discussing various religious and theological matters with the various rabbis who from time to time visited Newport. He recorded many of these meetings in detail 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 he 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 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 the Chaldees, the R[iver] Chebar [in Babylonia], Mosul [situated 220 miles northwest of Bagdad], Bogdat [Bagdad ?], Mt. Ararat, Basara [in Iraq], Ispahan [in Iran], Capsan [?], Hamodan [in Iran] and Surat in India.”

To his delight, Stiles soon discovered that Rabbi Moshe bar David was knowledgeable in Talmud Bavli and Yerushalmi, as well as in the Zohar. He was also, as Stiles wrote, “well acquainted” with the writings of the Rambam and Rashi. According to Stiles, 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 spent six weeks in Newport. During this time he and Stiles had lengthy discussions related to the Talmud and Zohar. Rabbi Moses was apparently an accomplished Cabalist, 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 habilments, the white silk Surplice; he wore a high brown furr Cap, had a long Beard. He has the appearance of an ingenious & sensible Man.”

It was not until March 30<sup>th</sup> that Rabbi Carigal and Reverend Stiles actually met. 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 which 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 which 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 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 *drasha* he gave on May 28, 1773, the first day of Shavuuous. “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 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 Messiahs 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 God – 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 God .....

At the end of July, 1773 Rabbi Carigal left Newport to continue his journeys. It was certainly an emotional parting for these two men who had become such close friends. “Stiles wrote of their moving farewell:

“I told him I parted with him with great reluctance, and should ever retain an affection for him, that it was probable we might never see each other in the land of the living and wished we might after death meet together in the Garden of Eden and there rejoyce with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and with the soul of the Messiah till the Resurrection. He wished me reciprocally and my family every blessing and desired me to write him by every opportunity - and he loved me from the heart, had my name in his book, and should send it to Jerusalem, where I would be soon known as I was here.”

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 below, was eventually delivered to Yale in 1782.



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### **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 descendent 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 Saphiots. He said that the Sapher Haujtzirah was now in the same state as in Abrahams 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 during the two months that the Rabbi Tobiah spent in Newport. Indeed, 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.”

(“In all likelihood Stiles was shown the *Book of Raziel* published in Amsterdam in 1701, and Rabbi Tobiah erred in lumping together the much earlier *Sefer Yetzirah* with the *Book of Raziel*.”)

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 Hazzan of the Newport Synagogue and the father of the famed philanthropist Judah Touro.

“The Rabbi visited me again or came to my house 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 of the “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 quotes.) An entry in Stiles’ 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 little 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."

The reverend had little to learn from or to discuss with Bosquila, and his diary contains no more than this one entry about him.

### **Rabbi Samuel Cohen**

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

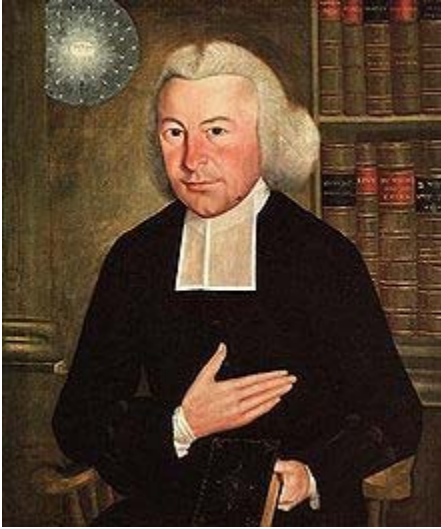
Stiles diary contains only a few entries about Rabbi Cohen, and these are relatively brief. Indeed, on August 16, 1775 he wrote, "Visited R. Samuel Cohen." and nothing more.

"Somehow, so terse an entry as this last one was not at all in keeping with Stiles' 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. Understandably, the leisurely theological and academic interests that excited Stiles' interest in the past, now faded into the background. 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."

### **Summary**

Ezra Stiles had no further interactions with rabbis after 1775. He left Newport in 1776 around the time the British captured the city. Most of Newport's Jews, who shared Stiles' pro revolutionary outlook, did the same. After leaving Newport, Stiles resided first in Portsmouth, NH and then in New Haven, CT. Neither place had Jewish communities that were likely to attract rabbinical visitors. Furthermore, the Revolutionary War made travel between Europe and America much more difficult, so very 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 ....'



*Rev. Ezra Stiles, 1770-1771, by Samuel King*  
From [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ezra\\_Stiles.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ezra_Stiles.jpg)