

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 19)

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

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Places like Barbados, Curacao, Jamaica, Tobago, the Lesser Antilles, and St. Eustatia probably conjure up, in the minds of many Jewish Press readers, visions of vacation resorts. They may not know that Jewish communities existed in these places, some as early as the first part of the seventeenth century. This means that Jews lived in the Caribbean (formerly referred to as the West Indies) years before they settled in New York in 1654.

The establishment of the first permanent Jewish communities in the Western Hemisphere during the middle of the seventeenth century was viewed by Spanish and Portuguese Jews with satisfaction and pleasure. On the one hand, these settlements represented an extension of the prodigious commercial activity of Spanish and Portuguese Jews; on the other, some felt that this activity represented the realization of the Messianic age. Indeed, in 1650, no less a personality than Haham Menasseh ben Israel of Amsterdam wrote that in his opinion the establishment of American synagogues corresponded to prophecies in the Book of Daniel. Some years later the poet Daniel Levi de Barrios confirmed the ideas of Menasseh ben Israel in a bizarre interpretation of the text of Zechariah. According to de Barrios the prophet literally mentioned the Americas!

It may well have been that the theories of Haham Menasseh ben Israel and Daniel Levi de Barrios were, to some extent, motivating factors behind the emigration of Jews to the Western Hemisphere during the seventeenth century. One should keep in mind that these enterprising men, while intensely interested in material gains, were at the same time idealists. Most of these men had lost their wealth in Spain or Portugal due to the persecutions of the infamous Inquisition. In addition, they had suffered torture and imprisonment. Rather than abandon their Jewish religious convictions, they chose to forsake the land they loved, despite the fact that it had been the home of their forefathers for centuries. The New World held out the tantalizing prospect of being able to practice Judaism, if not openly, then at least with less fear of persecution.

This and the next Glimpses column will deal with some of the history of certain of the more prominent early Caribbean Jewish communities.

Barbados

Barbados was captured by the British in 1605. Jews are said to have settled on this island as early as 1628. Since Jews were expelled from England in 1290 and were not permitted, until 1656, to openly live as Jews in England, those Jews who initially came to Barbados must have been forced to live as crypto-Jews (Marranos). Professing Jews did not reach Barbados until 1656 when Abraham de Mercado, a medical doctor, and his son, David-Raphael de Mercado, were granted permission to settle there by the British government. Until 1654 Dr. de Mercado had resided in Recife, Brazil. While there he had been one of the “elders” of the Jewish community. He was so highly respected that in 1641 Menasseh ben Israel dedicated one of his books to him. David-Raphael de Mercado was a man of considerable means, and, in 1679, his name headed the list as the largest Jewish taxpayer in Barbados.

Rabbi Eliyahu Lopes, who left Amsterdam for Barbados in Tammuz, 5438 (July 1678), was the first *Haham* of the Jewish community. While still relatively young, he had established a reputation as an effective preacher in Amsterdam. In 1675 he was given the honor of preaching the sermon at the dedication of the Portuguese synagogue in Amsterdam. There is evidence that Rabbi Lopes was still serving in his position as *Haham* in 1683. The Jewish community apparently expanded during the 1680s, because by 1688 there were two synagogues in different parts of the island.

The Jews of Barbados remained generally committed to the traditions of their forefathers and did not forget their former Jewish European communities. Records show that one Yirmiyahu Burgos of Barbados sent one hundred florins to Amsterdam to be dispensed to the poor and needy.

The persecutions of the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal were responsible for a continuous influx of Jews to Barbados during the eighteenth century. For example, it is known that Diogo Fernandes Chaves resided in Barbados in 1702. All members of the Chaves family had been treated barbarously by the Inquisition.

The family patriarch, Manoel Nunes Chavea, was born in Covilham, Portugal, in about 1630. In 1656, in order to escape the long arm of the Inquisition, he fled to Bordeaux, France. Later, in 1670, he moved to London. In both Bordeaux and London he openly professed and practiced Judaism. For some reason he returned to Lisbon, where he was “reconciled” before the Holy Office on January 2, 1670, and condemned at the *auto da fé* of Lisbon held on June 21, 1671. (This means that he had publicly renounced Judaism and agreed to live as a Christian.) However, he did this only to save his life and secretly continued to observe Jewish practices. On March 15, 1703 Manoel was rearrested by the Inquisition, tried for living as a Jew, and burned in the *auto da fé* of Lisbon the following 9th of September.

Jamaica

Christopher Columbus made a total of four trips to the Caribbean and South America during the years 1492-1504. On May 4, 1494, during his second voyage, he arrived at the island of Jamaica. Columbus annexed the island in the name of his master and mistress, the King and Queen of Spain. However, it was not settled by the Spanish until Juan de Esquivel came from Santo Domingo in 1509. For the next 146 years Jamaica remained a Spanish colony.

In 1580 King Philip II of Spain united the crowns of Spain and Portugal. It is likely that shortly thereafter Marranos from Portugal arrived with other merchant adventurers to participate in the colonization of Jamaica.

In 1655 the island was captured by the English. Some of the Jews who fled from Recife, Brazil when the Portuguese recaptured it in 1654 ended up settling on the island of Jamaica. The Jewish community began to prosper, and in 1684 a synagogue was dedicated. Shortly after its completion Rabbi Yeosiahu Pardo arrived to serve as *Haham*.

Amongst the first settlers sent to Jamaica by the Amsterdam community were Aron de Mosseh Tartas, who emigrated in 1694, and Daniel Ribeyro de Payva who arrived 1717. Their ancestors and relatives were persecuted by the Portuguese Inquisition. In 1647 Isaac de Castro Tartas was burned at the stake in Lisbon; Antonio Ribeiro de Payva, an apothecary in S. Vicente de Beira born at Penamacor in about 1721, was sentenced to prison for Judaizing, and reconciled in the *auto da fé* of Lisbon on September 24, 1747.

In 1760 Reverend Isaac Touro, a native of Holland, left Jamaica to serve as chazzan of the Yeshuat Israel Synagogue (subsequently to be known as the historic Touro Synagogue) in Newport, Rhode Island. His son Judah Touro (1775 – 1854), who was born in Newport, was the famous philanthropist. “A Tory, Judah’s father remained with his family in Newport after the British captured the city. The Touros became dependent upon the charity of the British occupying forces, which helped the family relocate to Jamaica, West Indies, where Isaac died in 1783.”¹

This above article is based in part on **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. This article is available at <http://www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm>.

¹ <http://www.ajhs.org/publications/chapters/chapter.cfm?documentID=223>