

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 20)

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

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The Jewish Community of Curacao

In 1527 the Spanish took possession of Curacao. By the early 16th century they had determined that the island had little gold and not enough fresh water for the establishment of large farms; hence, they had essentially abandoned it. Therefore, it was relatively easy for a Dutch fleet under the command of Johan van Walbeeck to conquer the island in 1634 for the Dutch West India Company, a quasi-private, government-backed company. Since Samuel Coheno served as an interpreter for van Walbeeck, he was most probably the first Jew in Curacao.

In 1651, Joao d'Ylan brought no more than 12 Jewish families from the Amsterdam Portuguese community to Curacao. Most of these settlers were originally from Spain and Portugal. They formed the initial nucleus of the Jewish community of Curacao. On February 22, 1652, the Dutch West India Company granted a considerable tract of land to Joseph Nunez da Fonseca, otherwise called David Nassi. As a result, the Jews lived on Plantation 'De Hoop' ('The Hope') and worked the land. However, this endeavor was abandoned due to Curacao's arid soil, and the Jews concentrated on trade. It was only a matter of time before the Jewish community became so prosperous that almost the entire commerce of the island was in their hands.

When, in 1654, the Portuguese reconquered Brazil from the Dutch, all of those who openly practiced Judaism there left, fearing they would be persecuted by the Inquisition. Many of these refugees first returned to Amsterdam. In 1659 more than 70 of them¹ sailed for the New World to settle in Curacao. They brought with them considerable wealth. In addition, they brought with them a spiritual treasure - a sefer Torah from the Amsterdam Portuguese Jewish Community.

In 1651 an improvised synagogue, named Congregation Mikve Israel (Hope of Israel), was set up in a small house. This first house of worship probably stood in the fields where the colonists had originally toiled. In 1692 the Jews were allowed to build a new synagogue. Thus, the Jews of Curacao were treated somewhat more liberally than the Jews residing in Curacao's sister colony of New Netherland (New York). Services were held there in rented quarters until 1730,

when Shearith Israel consecrated its first synagogue building on Mill Street in Lower Manhattan.

The first *Haham* of this community was probably Rabbi 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 the younger Pardo became the first religious leader of the holy brotherhood *Honen Dalim* in Amsterdam. In (about) 1669 he became head of Yeshiva de Los Pinto. This yeshiva was founded in Rotterdam, and subsequently relocated to Amsterdam. In (about) 1674 he became the head Yeshiva *Gemilut Hassadim*, which was also located in the Amsterdam. In the same year he was appointed *Haham* of Curacao, remaining there until 1684 when he left to become the *Haham* of Jamaica.

Jewish Education in Curacao

Given that *Haham* Pardo had been educated at Yeshiva *Etz Chaim* in Amsterdam, it was not surprising that the yeshiva he oversaw in Curacao was conducted more or less like Yeshiva *Etz Chaim*. Both institutions stressed the teaching of *Halacha*. There were six levels of classes, which, in addition to teaching Halacha, concentrated on the following subjects:

1. Introduction to reading (in Hebrew and Ladino) and *berakhot* (benedictions);
2. Prayers with their respective melodies;
3. *Parasha* of the week with its translation into Ladino;
4. *Pirke Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers), *Shir HaShirim* (the Song of Songs), and *Neviim* (Prophets). These subjects were all translated into Ladino;
5. Rashi and writing;
6. Grammar, Gemara (Talmud) and *mefarsim* (Talmudic commentaries).

The *Haham* taught highest class. It is noteworthy that students who came from poor homes received stipends from the community.

Religious Instruction Compulsory

The leaders of the Jewish community were strongly committed to making sure that every Jewish boy received a good Jewish education. As a result, in 1711 a regulation (*haskamah*) was passed requiring attendance at the *medras*, as the yeshiva classes were called, until age 16. Nonetheless, a number of parents decided to privately educate their sons. On the 21st of Sivan 5476 [1716] the Executive Committee of the Congregation and its Council attempted to put a stop to this practice by enacting a regulation (*haskamah*) prohibiting each and every *yahid* (member) from conducting a private school during the hours the *medras* met. Anyone who did not follow this directive was to receive a *berakhah* (a euphemism for a *kelalah* [curse] that was a minor form of excommunication) and a fine of fifty pesos.

In 1716, when Joseph Abudiente neglected sending his son Yehudah to the medras, the *haskamah* of 1711 was invoked, with the result that 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, went so far as to urge the governor of the island, Jonathan van Beuningen, to compel Yehudah's attendance at the *medras*.

Duties and Obligations of the Rubissim and Hakham

The *ruby*, as the teachers in the *medras* were called, was required to regularly attend the *medras*. If a *ruby* was tardy, he had to pay a fine fixed at the discretion of the *Parnas* (directors) of the Talmud Torah which was deducted from his salary. Frequent absence on the part of a *ruby* could lead to dismissal by the *Parnas*. The *ruby* accompanied his pupils to the *tikun* (the religious service conducted when a family moved into a new home), and he also was responsible for watching the boys in the synagogue.

In 5510 [1749-1750], during the rabbinate of Hakham Samuel Mendes de Solas, there were at least five *rubissim* teaching in the yeshiva: Jeoshuah Touro, Guidon Mendes, Eliau Lopes, Jeoshua Hisquiao de Cordova, and Ishac, son of *Hakham* de Solas. It is interesting to contrast the stress the Jewish community put on education with that of the gentile population. During 1762-1763 the Dutch West Indies Company maintained only one teacher in its service for the entire white non-Jewish population of the island.

In addition to the duties of his office, the *Hakham* also had to supervise the teachers and students and was subject to the orders of both the *Mahamad* (governing body) and *Parnas* of the Talmud Torah. He had to accept whatever number of students the *Parnas* sent to his *medras* and, like the *rubissim*, could not be absent from the *medras* or leave the city without permission.

In spite of the tropical climate, the *medras* was in session year round. There was time off only on Fridays, Shabbosim, fast days, and for two or three days before each Yom Tov. There were, of course, no classes held on Yom Tov and Chol Moed.

Girls received no formal instruction. (The reader should keep in mind that this was the situation throughout Europe until the first part of the twentieth century.) Some wealthy families did hire tutors to teach their daughters reading, writing, arithmetic, and some religious subjects in their homes. Since these tutors were almost always men, instruction was given in the presence of a girl's mother.

Adult Learning Organizations

Torah study did not end at 16 when a young man completed his course of instruction in *medras*. Following the example of their mother community in Amsterdam, the leaders of the Curacao Jewish community founded fraternal organizations known as *hermandades*. The members of these organizations regularly met, with the *Hakham*, on certain fixed days for Torah study. As a result, the *hermandades* were also referred to as “*yeshivot*.” Records show that there were at least thirteen such *yeshivot* functioning at one time on the island. The *hermandades* were also involved in doing chesed work, and they raised funds to assist the unfortunate and the poor. The community's peak seems to have been reached around 1800, when more than 2,000 Jews lived on the island.

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

This article is based in part on:

(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.

(3) **Jewish Education in Curacao (1692 – 1802)**, by Isaac Samuel Emmanuel, Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society, 1955, 44, pages 217 - 220.

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

¹ <http://www.snoa.com/snoa.html>