

Reflections on the Impact of Western Sephardim on the Jewish World
Talk for Mr. Raif Melhado's *Keter Shem Tob* Haburah at YCT Rabbinical School
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New York, Sivan 21, 5773 / May 30th, 2013: Today I will share my opinion on the role of Western Sephardic thinking in Jewish thought and practice. Hence this is not just another talk about Jewish jurisprudence or liturgy. It encapsulates the story of Jewish devotion, divisiveness, zealotry, and compromise.

As far as the Western Sephardic tradition is considered many people have a hazy picture. All they seem to know is that Spinoza was excommunicated from the Amsterdam community for heresy (July 24, 1656). Indeed, the dramatic account of that excommunication has been repeated as an example of religious intolerance and fear of change comparable to the indictment of Galileo (1564-1642) and the excommunication from Islam of Salman Rushdie in our own day. Accused of a multitude of crimes, denounced from the pulpit of various faiths, insulted, ridiculed and held in contempt, these thinkers and writers created the world we know today as they demonstrated in word and deed that some of the erstwhile conceptions of religion were wrong and their views based on reason, not superstition, could withstand the rigors of debate and argument.

In their early days in the Netherlands the Jews of Iberian origin were influenced and challenged by their new surroundings. They had to debate and defend their faith. In communities such as Ferrara, Venice, Antwerp, Amsterdam, Hamburg, London, and Bayonne these Iberians – most of whom had been raised as Roman Catholics, were largely unaware of Hebrew and formal Judaism. For their benefit Bibles, prayer books, and a whole range of works on the essentials of Judaism and the duties of a Jew were published in the vernacular.

However Jewish book printing was an enterprise not confined to didactic works. Many publications reflect the broad cultural interest, and the academic background, these people had brought with them from Spain, Portugal, Italy, and the Ottoman Empire. The encounter between Renaissance culture and the rediscovered Judaism in environments such as the cosmopolitan, tolerant city of Amsterdam turned these Western Sephardim according to some scholars into the first "modern Jews." This is exemplified by the life and works of such intellectual pioneers as Saul Levi Mortera, Menasse Ben Israel, Isaac Aboab de Fonseca, and in his own way Uriel da Costa.

It might be useful to describe the paradigm of the Sephardic community as something unprecedented, rather than as the reconstruction of a suppressed religious identity. Strong arguments for such a view can be derived from the conflicts that divided the Sephardic community in the first half of the seventeenth

century. Disputes arose between important laymen and the religious leadership. The clergy itself was divided between a rationalistic faction and those of a kabalistic bent.

Rabbinic Judaism has many variations in matters of both ritual and outlook. Jews are too far-flung and span too many cultures for it to be otherwise, especially given the decentralized nature of religious authority. On the other hand, the degree of uniformity is remarkable.

The chief means by which uniformity was achieved and sustained in the medieval period on the Iberian Peninsula was through the dissemination of the Babylonian Talmud, and the acceptance of this text's authority. Later on uniformity was again ensured by the acceptance of a code of Jewish law, the *Shulhan Arukh*, composed by Haham Joseph Caro in sixteenth-century Safed, in northern Palestine.

In my view it is interesting how the circle of Jewish history comes around. Most Jews residing in the Iberian Peninsula were driven to convert to the Catholic faith at the end of the middle Ages and eventually most of them resettled in other parts of Spain and Portugal. It would take many years until some of them chose to return to the Jewish faith.

At the time of the first wave of emigration from Portugal the people who adopted Judaism settled mostly in Ferrara and Venice. Fugitives from the Inquisition were ignorant of Hebrew. Therefore they recited their prayers in Spanish and by 1604 Spanish prayer books were being printed in Amsterdam. When Hebrew became more familiar to them, Venice supplied prayer books in Hebrew, with or without translation.

These communities of novice Jews depended on outside scholars to support their return to normative Judaism. Their need was met by rabbis and cantors from the Sephardic strongholds in North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean.

In 1596 a Jewish merchant, Garcia Pimentel, arrived in Amsterdam from Venice. "The Pimentels were extremely prominent in Venice and Constantinople where one of Garcia's brothers was a rabbi and it is safe to assume that Garcia played a conspicuous part in the early judaisation of the Marrano immigrants in Amsterdam."¹ Jonathan Israel describes Venice as "the crucible of a new Hispanic Judaism forged from a mixture of intellectually dynamic but unstable and unformed Marranism and traditional, orthodox, Balkan Spanish Judaism."²

¹ Jonathan Israel, "Sephardic Immigration," p. 49.

² Jonathan Israel, "The Jews of Venice and their links with Holland and with Dutch Jewry (1600-1710)," in *Gli Ebrei e Venezia, secoli XIV-XVIII* (Venice 1987), p. 97.

Western Sephardic Judaism is officially launched in 1602 with the arrival to Amsterdam from Emden of a learned Ashkenazi Jew: Uri Halevi (1544-1627). Both Uri and his son Aaron instructed some of the converts, circumcised them and became their first religious leaders. They led services Ashkenazic style, knowing no other *minhag*. They started a *minyán* and brought for that purpose a *Torah* scroll, which they donated in 1606 to Congregation Bet Jacob. That congregation's founder was the merchant Jeronimo or Jaimes Lopes da Costa, alias Jacob Tirado (hence "Bet Jacob").

Francisco Mendes Medeiros did not get along with Jaimes Lopes da Costa. As a result in 1604 Mendes Medeiros tried to start a break away congregation in Haarlem but his request was denied by that City's Magistrates. Six years later, i.e. in 1618 the community was considerably enhanced with the arrival of Joseph Pardo, a Sephardic rabbi and merchant from Venice. Joseph Pardo had grown up in Salonica, one of the thriving Sephardic communities around the Mediterranean basin. In Venice he had earned the respect of Haham Leon de Modena. Pardo's arrival coincided with that of two more scholars: the brothers Joseph and Samuel Palache. They were natives of Fez, Morocco and both men of erudition.³

Don Samuel Palache made a journey to North Africa and returned as Vice-Ambassador of Morocco's Sultan Muley Sidan with two authentically Sephardic Torah scrolls. It was he who introduced the Sephardic pronunciation of Hebrew as well as a sizable repertoire of hymns and melodies. Francisco Mendes Medeiros joined the Palaches and they proclaimed themselves the above-mentioned new congregation *Neve Salom* (Dwelling of Peace). In 1610 Don Samuel Palache brought with him from Fez a distinguished rabbi, Haham Isaac Uziel, who was to serve *Neve Salom* until his death in 1622. He was succeeded by the 18 year old Haham Menasse ben Israel.

Haham Joseph Pardo succeeded Rabbi Uri Halevi in Bet Jacob. Two physicians, Abraham Farar (alias Francisco Lopes Henriques) (Rosa 1573-1624), and his son in law, David Farar, were accused of heresy in 1616. They had openly questioned certain *aggadic* interpretations of Scripture and kabalistic practices.⁴

At that time Haham Saul Levi Mortera (Venice 1596-Amsterdam February 7, 1660) was appointed as senior minister of Bet Jacob.⁵ Saul Levi Mortera is often referred to as the 'First Haham of Amsterdam'. This rabbi struggled to maintain a strict

³ Brugmans en Frank, *Geschiedenis der Joden in Nederland*, Amsterdam 1940, pp. 233-234.

⁴ See Zunz, *Die Ritus*, &x., p. 24, 149 ff.; Elbogen, p. 377 ff.

⁵ Brugmans en Frank, *Geschiedenis der Joden in Nederland*, Amsterdam 1940, pp. 233-234.

orthodox Jewish code of behaviour. He promoted complete adherence to rabbinical norms and authority.

A very important contemporary, who is remembered as a very learned cleric, leader of the community, and also as a Kabbalist, was Haham Isaac Aboab de Fonseca (1609-1693).

Each of these fathers of the community left his distinct mark on Western Sephardim. It has been remarked that Western Sephardic culture combines the morality of Calvinistic Amsterdam and the breath of the Italian Renaissance, both delightfully combined with a Near Eastern touch of Kabbalah.

A comparison with the Jews of the Italian Renaissance is worthwhile for a more general appreciation as well. Italian Jews produced Renaissance thinkers. In both Italy as well as in the Netherlands Sephardic intellectual activity ran parallel to and not dependent of contemporary developments. Thus, the complete literary output, of Jew and Christian alike, affected Sephardic culture. Aristotle and Virgil were not examined as mere 'aliens' but as potential contributors to Jewish culture.

Because of the popularity of the Kabbalah, on Tammuz 5th, 5386 (July 1626) Amsterdam's third Sephardic congregation, Bet Israel, hired Haham Joseph Delmedigo (1591-1655). Physically and spiritually restless, Delmedigo was born in Candia, Crete, studied medicine at the University of Padua and astronomy under Galileo. In his pursuit of knowledge he travelled to Cairo and Constantinople; and in pursuit of a livelihood to Poland, Amsterdam, Frankfurt, and Prague, engaging in the study, not only of science but also of Kabbalah. He was a prolific writer (though most of his works are known only through his own bibliography). Delmedigo, in response to requests by Karaites, to whose faith he seems to have been attracted, wrote a book on mechanics.⁶

Under Haham Saul Levi Mortera Bet Jacob came to dominate the three aforementioned congregations. In due course the three decided to merge. This merger is known by the Portuguese word as "União". 42 articles of that "União" were published in the Congregation's Synagogues on Kislev 6, 5399 (13 November 1638), and ratified by all married congregants on 28 Adar II, 5399 (April 3, 1639). The adopted name was "*Kahal Kados Talmud Tora*", borrowed from the Venice congregation. Services were henceforth conducted in a single place of worship.

⁶ See A. Geiger, *Melo Chofnahiem*, Berlin, 1840.

Soon the rabbinical leadership was home of sons of the settlers trained in the community's own seminary.⁷ As a centre of Jewish learning, this Amsterdam school, *Talmud Torah* and *Ets Haim*, was celebrated for the breadth of its syllabus and excellence of teaching, covering not only Talmudic subjects, but also Hebrew grammar and poetry. The school produced gifted Hebrew writers and poets. The community was also known for its prolific printers, rabbis, scholars, physicians, philosophers, playwrights, and....since its main leader, Mortera, was tolerant and open-minded, even Kabalists. *Kahal Kados Talmud Tora* became the mother congregation of many communities like Hamburg, Recife, Suriname, Curacau, London, Livorno, The Hague, Jamaica, Barbados, Nevis, St. Thomas, New York, New Port, Bayonne, Bordeaux, Philadelphia, and New Orleans, etcetera.

It must be noted that Western Sephardic clergy's only authority was to advise and consent. The congregation was governed by a 'Mahamad', a standing committee of seven wardens invested with absolute power. The 'Mahamad's' decisions were binding on all; and no verbal or written opposition was brooked. No member could, for example, take another member to court without the Mahamad's permission, nor could he print a book without its prior approval. As a result scholars like Juan de Prado, Uriel da Costa and Baruch de Spinoza were formally excommunicated. Excommunication was a regular tool against behaviour or speech the *Mahamad* deemed inappropriate. If a sermon in the synagogue was not to the liking of these gentlemen they would excommunicate the preacher.

RATIONALISM VERSUS KABALAH

Haham Levi Mortera was profoundly committed to rabbinic tradition. He was a sober man whose accommodation of religion and reason followed the Maimonidean model. Indeed, the stamp of Maimonides is seen in reasoned argumentation of his writings no less than in his dogmatic theology and morality.⁸

Like Rambam Mortera struggled with superstition, prejudice and hypocrisy in order to establish truth and reason as the basis of piety. Thus, Mortera promotes justice, free inquiry and freedom of expression and thought, not to eliminate Judaism but to support it. He was of course not the only writer to criticize matters of superstition. In this Mortera was preceded in his own century by Grotius (1583-1645), Isaac de la Peyrere and Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) as well as Montaigne (1553-1592), Descartes (1596-1650) Uriel da Costa, and Baruch de Spinoza. These thinkers

⁷ Cf. J. d'Ancona, "De Portugese Gemeente 'Talmoed Tora' te Amsterdam tot 1795," in H. Brugmans and A. Frank, op. cit., pp. 270-305.

⁸ H. P. Salomon, Saul Levi Mortera en zijn "Traktaat betreffende de Wet van Mozes", Braga 1988, pp. 31-60.

provided Mortera with writings he could not ignore and which supported with their arguments his views concerning Jewish religion.

Uriel da Costa had been excommunicated by the *Mahamad* from Judaism in 1618 for denying the immortality of the soul and retribution in the “World to Come.” The rational direction of the Farars and Mortera continued from that time forwards.

The negotiations of the 1639 “*União*” were lead by David Pardo, the son of Haham Joseph Pardo. With exception of those instances where it is explicitly mentioned it was agreed that the rite of Bet Jacob, as it was in 1639, would be the rite of Talmud Torah, and that Haham Saul Levi Mortera would be its first and foremost chief minister.⁹ The ministers compromised on all those issues were major differences of tradition had been the case until 1639. It was written down in a manual to be kept by every Hazan, to be copied by their successors.¹⁰

That’s why, also in our own days, as a courtesy to Bet Jacob, immediately following new years services one blows an additional 30 notes on the shophar, while congregation Talmud Tora officially only blows 70 notes.

Some 17th century scholars like Mortera preached that disobedience would be punished with eternal hell and doom. On the question of repentance however, he was less controversial. Indeed he repeats Rambam’s three components of repentance: soul searching, confession of past wrongs and commitment to do better in the future, including restitution to those harmed. As far as his coreligionists were concerned it was of utmost importance to Mortera to stimulate piety and virtue with passion, to spread biblical knowledge with rabbinic interpretation and a Maimonidean slant. His sermons contributed to the promotion of religion and morality.

Professor Marc Saperstein remarked that “the printed and manuscript sermons of Haham Saul Levi Mortera, which not infrequently refer to specific individuals, institutions, and communal conflicts, are an important resource for the history of Western Sephardic culture. They also contain many passages criticizing behaviour that Mortera believed to be incompatible with the norms of Jewish life. Quantitatively, these passages represent only a small percentage of the time he spent preaching. The central purpose of Mortera’s sermons was didactic: to educate, inform, mediate a tradition, expose his listeners to classical texts with the full

⁹ D. Henriques de Castro Mz, *De Synagoge de Portugees-Israelietische Gemeente te Amsterdam*, s’Gravenhage 1875, pp. XXI-XXXIII.

¹⁰ Cf. *Ohel Jaakob*, Amsterdam, 5497, Responsum number 64, (only the original version of *Ohel Jaakob*, in the Amsterdam library of the Portuguese-Israelite Seminary Ets Haim, has the complete text of this responsum); Sigmund Seeligmann, *bijdrage tot de geschiedenis der eerste Sephardim in Amsterdam*, Amsterdam, 1927.

richness of their problematics and insights, define and defend the boundaries of acceptable doctrine against the challenges raised by spokesmen for the majority religion and by sceptics within the fold. But the preacher was also expected to serve as a moral and religious authority, and the element of rebuke for unbecoming behaviour has a venerable pedigree in Jewish homiletical tradition.”¹¹

These issues were often sensitive especially since many of the Western Sephardim had relatives of the Roman Catholic faith. But Mortera’s contemporary, the Kabalistic Haham Isaac Aboab de Fonseca, responded with words of consolation, saying that Judaism does not preach everlasting punishment. Mortera and Aboab didn’t change their views but they respected one another and would, for the benefit of the community at large, cooperate harmoniously for many years.

Moreover, in 1635 a new-fangled doctrine took hold in the Amsterdam community. It assured every Jew, no matter how grave his or her sins, of a share of bliss in the world-to-come. The Mishnaic phrase “All Israelites have a portion in ‘*olam haba*”¹² was being bandied about as a slogan in complete disregard of the qualifications which had been applied to it in the Talmud itself. The kabalists were responsible for spreading this doctrine of salvation of all Jews. Haham Mortera called the doctrine “a rock of offense and stone of stumbling disguised as Kabbalah.” As a mystic and adept of the Kabbalah Haham Aboab disagreed. Aboab’s treatise ‘*Nishmat Hayyim*’ represents a seventeenth century attempt to break the spell of the traditional eschatology of hell by publicly embracing the Lurianic doctrine of *tikkun* through the transmigration of souls. Haham Aboab was maybe not an innovator. His merit lies in the boldness with which he affirmed the Lurianic stance. Mortera felt confident because he found support in the classical rabbinic sources. Aboab preferred to soar into kabalistic realms. With advice and consent of their own *Beth Din* (rabbinical court), the Mahamad of the Venetian Congregation settled the issue as we learn so vividly recounted in Mortera’s sermons.

¹¹ Cf. Marc Saperstein, “The Rhetoric and Substance of Rebuke: Social and Religious Criticism in the Sermons of Haham Saul Levi Morteira,” in *Studia Rosenthalina* Volume 34 number 2, (2000), p. 131. For a description of the 550 unprinted sermons, see also Marc Saperstein, “The Manuscript/s of Morteira’s Sermons,” in J. Dan and K. Hermann (eds), *Studies in Jewish Manuscripts*, (Tübingen 1999), pp. 171-98; and Marc Saperstein, “Treatise on the Immortality of the Soul,” in *Studia Rosenthalina* Volume 25 (1991), pp. 131-48. For the printed edition, published at Amsterdam in 1645, see the chapter “The Sermon as Art Form: Structure in Morteira’s Gib’at Saul,” in Marc Saperstein, ‘*Your Voice Like a Ram’s Horn’: Themes and Texts in Traditional Jewish Preaching* (Cincinnati 1996), pp. 107-26. For examples of sermons on individuals from the community, see the eulogies for David Farar and Menasse ben Israel published in Marc Saperstein, ‘*Your Voice Like a Ram’s Horn’: Themes and Texts in Traditional Jewish Preaching* (Cincinnati 1996), pp. 367-444.

¹² Sanhedrin 11:1