Laura Arnold Leibman | Jews and Religion

- So, all right, I'm sorry we're three minutes late. I'm going to hand over to you.

- [Laura] Sure.

- And, Jude, would you just mute everybody, please? Thanks.

- So, welcome again to the third part in this series. The first two days we did an overview of Jews in colonial America, and the second day we looked at women, in particular, Jewish women, in particular, in colonial America. And today we're going to be focusing in on religion in colonial America. So the biggest thing that I want to make an argument about today is what I see as a really common misconception that is spread both amongst sort of academics and more generally in the population about the idea that early American Jews were primarily secular and lived in this kind of religious wasteland in which they had no access to anything. So that's really the argument that I'm going to be going against today and I'm going to show some of the reasons why people have thought that was the case, as well as what kinds of evidence we have to show not true. So, here we go.

Visuals are displayed throughout the presentation.

So I would say the biggest misconception, or the thing that kind of leads people astray often are the images that we have in our heads of what religious Jews are supposed to look like from popular media and then what colonial Jews seemed to look like in their portraits. And you can see that like colonial Jews seem like they don't really match up, right? The women have lower bust lines, they're not wearing wigs, and if they are wearing wigs they seem to be fashion statements as opposed to being about religion. So, they really just don't match up to our preconceptions. In fact, even when we get colonial women who are covering their hair, it seems to be like a token gesture. It's not like the full on wigs of Mea She'arim that we might be associating in our minds with like that's what it means to be super religious. And even the men, so this is a rabbi or a hazzan from early America in She'arim, Me'a She'arim. Even he doesn't look like what we might have in our heads as like the archetype religious Jew.

He doesn't have the sidelocks. He's not wearing a black hat. In fact, he does have this sort of black and white garment. He's got no beard, he's clean shaven, he's got the black and white garment, but he looks a little bit more like he's a Protestant minister than even a religious Jew. And in fact he was referred to as reverend at the time, which also usually causes a lot of confusion. Like, why was he doing that? Why isn't he being called rabbi? So again, those images of what we have in our head of what a religious Jew might be versus what we're actually seeing when we look at Jews from early America often can make us lead people to have these presumptions of that Jews are not very religious during this time period. And I've heard this both from scholars and even from archivists too.

So I want to really push at where are these ideas coming from? So one reason that I think we need to like step back to remember is like even if we were to look at Christian evangelicals, people today who are super Christian don't look like they did during the 17th century, right? Like people's ideas of what it means to be religious changed for Christianity because nobody would dress like a puritan anymore, but we don't expect them. We don't hold them to those standards. So why do we have this idea of that Jews somehow should be frozen in time? And I'll get at where that weird misconception comes from. The second thing that sort of leads us into this problem is something that we talked about last time, which is we have so little evidence when it comes to women that sometimes when we have these little fragments or scraps, they can kind of lead us in strange directions or to have think that we have a bigger picture than maybe we do. So one really famous example of this is a letter that was written in Yiddish, which is super exciting, by a woman named Rebecca Samuel in Petersburg, Virginia.

And she, her family was from Hamburg, one of those three big feeder communities. Remember there was Hamburg, Amsterdam, and London are big feeder communities to the colonies. And she writes to her parents saying like, "I know quite well that you will not want me to bring up my children like Gentiles. Here they cannot become anything else." And so she's concerned. We have a ritual slaughterer, but he would just go off and buy tray of meat. And on Rosh Ha-Shanah, the people here worship without a Sefer Torah, without a Torah scroll. And none of them wore a tallit or even the tzitzit that we would normally associate with Jews, except for two of them, Hyman and Sammy's godfather. So she's very concerned that people in Petersburg, Virginia are not sort of living up to her standards from Hamburg of what religion would look like. And then she goes on to tell us that she, her husband doesn't want to stay there, he wants to move to Charleston where there's a blessed community of 300 Jews. And she says, "I crave to see a synagogue that I could go to. The way we live is no life at all. My children cannot learn anything here, nothing Jewish, nothing of general culture." So I want to like pause for a moment and think about her concerns about living in Petersburg, Virginia.

So just to, if you've never been to Petersburg, Virginia as a Jewish capital of the United States, there's probably a reason. But Petersburg, Virginia, you'll notice here it is just south of Richmond. But notice it's not one of those communities in the Americas that we talked about that actually had a lot of colonial Jews. So it's not surprising that she's having a lot of problems. In fact, if you look, as she noted, the closest community is Charleston. But really she's not living in one of these main ports and even these communities are much smaller at this time period, certainly than Amsterdam or Hamburg that she's used to. But the big Jewish American communities when she's writing are all down in the Caribbean. So those are the places where we're going to have over a thousand Jews in a community, where there's going to be day schools yes you vote for the children to go to, where there would be multiple resources, and lots of kosher food and people who are very knowledgeable and rabbis on hand.

So it's not surprising even Charleston sounds good to her because she's off in the hinterland. So I would suggest, even if she went to Petersburg, Virginia today, she still wouldn't find what she was looking for. So, I'm sure it's a lovely community, and it has one synagogue still, but it's

conservative and that's clearly not what she was looking for. She was looking for people who were really more what we'd consider orthodox practise and they still don't have a kosher butcher in 2021. So like so many years later, Petersburg, Virginia still isn't that mecca of Jewish life. In fact, I would argue if we took Akiva from Chichkul and put him in Petersburg, Virginia, he would write a very similar letter that she had written so many hundreds of years later back to his parents being like, "Ah, why am I in this wasteland?" But if he would just go a little farther north, say to New York, he would have a very different experience.

So same thing in the colonies, that we want to be careful about our evidence and whether it comes from a place where there actually would've been Jews or whether we're sort of taking evidence that's of a place that that person wouldn't be happy there today either in terms of Jewish life. So the second thing that I think is really important here is to remember that she's speaking in Yiddish and she is in a Sephardic dominated area. So remember we had from the first lecture that sort of four hallmarks of Jewish life in the colonies. The first part of SECA was Sephardic. So it's going to be not what she is expecting. And we had the desert here, and again, not as a desert wasteland, but as a similar to the Jews travelling through the desert and remembering the sand that we saw in the synagogues is a reminder of the travels of Jerusalem, so again, or through the holy land. So again, not Sephardic wasteland but Sephardic-centered style. So what I would like to do is get at a little bit more deeply today, what does that Sephardic style mean and why is it so religiously and spiritually rich during this time period? But in ways that some of our speakers from the colonies, particularly ones who are not Sephardic, are not recognising.

At this point, it's helpful to remind ourselves how did the Jews get to places like Petersburg or even to New Amsterdam? And remember that they were coming as refugees from places like Recife and what would that have meant? So Recife, again, was a place that had over a thousand Jews at the time period when it collapsed and was recaptured by the Portuguese and had major rabbinical players being at that particular location. And in fact, the rabbi that was there, Rabbi Isaac Aboab da Fonseca, he's one of two major rabbis in that community. He's one of four major rabbis that I'm going to talk about today who really influenced Sephardic thought in the colonies and create this special kind of mysticism that we're seeing during this time period. So Rabbi Isaac Aboab da Fonseca, as I had mentioned before, was a really important kabbalist. He's written a number of very famous treatises even before he comes to Recife, including ones on the afterlife and what happens to the soul. But while he's in Recife, he pens what's probably for the American context, his most important piece, which is this poem about the fall of Recife.

That poem is about the Portuguese coming and building a blockade and really trapping the Jews so that they can't leave Recife and that they're worried for their lives. And he writes a poem which is in the exact same form as Yehudah Halevi's poem about Mi Kamocha which is about the story of Purim. So he's really seeing the Portuguese attempt to capture the Jews in Recife as being akin to what Haman did to the Jews in ancient Persia. So really drawing these parallels between the past and the present in the ways that Jews has suffered. And eventually he says we were redeemed through God's miracles. So he doesn't see it as the Dutch came

and saved us at the last minute, though that is technically what happened, but through God's providence. So he's reading all of these colonial events through this providential, this vision, that God is running the entire universe and that really shapes how he's telling his congregation to understand what it means to be a Jew in the colonies. That they should be thinking about anything bad as a call for them to repent and to renew their bonds with God, not a sign of despair. So when he leaves, he goes back to Amsterdam, but the Jews that are trained by him go to these other major ports, particularly Curacao, and set up these new yeshivot. And we know that they're still very interested in him and his legacy because, for example in Coracao, they actually put a copy of his portrait on some of their tombstones.

So this is a young man who died whose name is Isaac, and his father's name is David and his family after he dies is trying to say like, we want you to be like Isaac Aboab da Fonseca, somebody whose memory will persist. So they're trying to, just like Isaac Aboab da Fonseca was drawing connections between how the Jews were suffering in the story of Purim, here the next generation is saying we want our sons to be just like Isaac Aboab da Fonseca. That sort of religious fervour. So this sort of then sets up the mode for when the second major rabbi who's influential on the Americas comes into our story. And some of these four rabbis, the first and the fourth, were in the Americas. Other ones are really influencing the ideology behind the Americas, so we're going to see how. So Menasseh ben Israel is definitely one of these in Amsterdam, though he goes to London to negotiate to get the Jews back in. But really setting the stage for how Jews think about what it means to be in the colonies. So he writes, in addition to his political manoeuvres, he also writes treatises, kabbalistic treatises on the Soul. And he writes a book called The Hope of Israel. And this book is just phenomenally influential throughout Europe, but also to Jews coming to the colonies.

So you'll notice it's published in English but originally is published in Dutch and in Spanish and in Hebrew and in Latin. So he's really trying to get this broad audience of people interested in it. And the English version of it is really part of that negotiation with the Puritans trying to say like you need the Jews to settle in your country because, as he argues in this piece, it's not until the Jews settle in all four quarters of the earth and establish synagogues, then the Messiah will be able to come. And so for the Puritans, they think it will be the return of Christ. But for Menasseh ben Israel, it's the first coming of the Jewish Messiah. So he's making this really important argument about how the settlement of the Americas and in London is going to be this Hope of Israel or, in Hebrew, Mikveh Israel. So the other second part about his story, this is really the strangest book ever. He has at the beginning a relation or a story that was a told-to story of a man named Antonio de Montezinos, who had been to the colonies and had gone on an expedition. And he sort of puts this at the beginning of his treatise of like why we need to go to the Americas. And Antonio de Montezinos was another one of these Jews who had been raised as a Catholic but came out as a Jew. He was descended of forced converts.

He gets to the Americas and he starts on this voyage down the River Magdalena and he encounters a tribe of indigenous peoples who he realises and they realise are one of the lost tribes of Israel. Now today we don't think this is probably the case, but this was enormously

popular during this time period and this was something that the Christians were always saying. So the Christians were always saying like, ooh, I found a group of Native Americans and bing, bing, bing, they do these things and they must be the lost tribe of Israel. Here we see a Jew making that same move. And again, finding the lost tribes is part of that gathering in of the Jews for the Christians that would then lead to their conversion and the return of Christ. But for Menasseh ben Israel, he's saying like we need to go to the colonies and bring Judaism back, full rabbinical Judaism back to these lost tribes and to settle our synagogues in all the different parts of the Americas and that's going to bring about the Messiah. So really important again that he's looking to the Americas as the redemption or the hope of the entire world and certainly of the Jewish people. The second little thing that's sort of interesting about this book, Hope of Israel, I mentioned that the Hebrew title was Mikveh Israel and that mikveh is pun between what we know today of people who know the word mikveh of a ritual bath but also hope. So he translates it as a hope, but in the Hebrew title there'd be more of a pun going on than we would see in the English. And that's because the ritual baths during this time period were seen as a place of purification and redemption.

So he's seeing the Americas as being this place where Jews will be purified as if they're going into this ritual bath and to this source of pure water and coming out rejuvenated and refreshed. This too is part of a messianic message that is very standard in Judaism from the book of Ezekiel from the Third Temple that when the Third Temple arrives, water will flow out from underneath the temple mount. So it's really this prophetic reenactment of, wah, The Messiah and the Third Temple are almost here. And we see the Jews throughout the colonies picking up on this message of they are that remnant, they are those scattered Jews, they are that hope for the future. And so, notably, the community in Curacao, which remember in our pyramid first at the top was Amsterdam and then there was London, Hamburg, and Curacao, they called their congregation Mikveh Israel. They are the Hope of Israel, they are that fountain of rebirth for the Jews by just being in the Americas and through that resurge of Judaism that they're bringing about. Similarly, in Philadelphia, we also have a sort of offshoot of that community naming themselves Mikveh Israel. And in Savannah we have another Mikveh Israel.

So again, very popular name. But even the other congregations notice that they're naming themselves all of this language of like those scattered tribes that are going to be hopefully regathered, right? So Shearith Israel is the Remnant of Israel. The congregation in Newport is a scattered and they change the name to the Salvation of Israel. Kind of cute, they go from being scattered to the salvation. Or in Barbados they're the Exiles of Israel. And sometimes we'll also see, for example in Suriname, congregations being the Blessing and Peace or the Dwelling of Peace. Again this idea of this is a place where messianic promise will happen. We see that Neveh Shalom happening also in Jamaica as one of the key names. And this Shaar ha-Shamayim for Bevis Marks, we also see a Jamaica synagogue using that same name.

So again, this sort of resonance around the Atlantic world of this idea that the Americas are going to be this promised land of messianic redemption that's going to bring about world peace and change. So again, one of the key places that we see this is in what becomes the

mothership for the colonies and ends up giving tzedakah to different, different outposts in the Americas, but also providing rabbinical leadership for different congregations in the Americas. And that's congregation Mikve Israel in Curacao. It's a congregation that began mainly from the refugees from Recife in the 1650s. And the current synagogue that we see here is actually their fifth synagogue building from the 1730s. They kept on outgrowing their space and having to get bigger buildings. And we know that this is sort of where our third big rabbi influence comes in because we know that the way that that was built was also supposed to be part of this message of redemption and world redemption that people dreamed that these synagogues in the Americas would be part of. And this is where our third rabbi, a man named Jacob Judah Leon de Templo, comes in. He's also a Dutch rabbi.

Again, Amsterdam at the top of the pyramid. And he's influencing the way that all the synagogues will be built. So just to back up a little bit, why is he so influential in terms of, and so interested in how synagogues will be built? Well this is a period in the sort of 1640s to 1660s when Jews more generally are very interested in the coming of the Messiah. And that's largely because of one man named Sabetha Sebi. I've given his birth date and death date over here, but these are the dates when he was really active. So when he first claims to be the Messiah up to the time when he says, oops, actually I'm going to convert to Islam. And most people sort of give up on him at that point. Though there are some followers that continue in the Ottoman Empire and actually still in Amsterdam too. So during this time period notice it's exactly during the siege of Recife, the fall of Recife, and the establishment of all these communities across the Americas is right when this person that we think of as a pretender, but was so persuasive as being the Messiah, both to Jews and non-Jews during this time period.

And we know that a number of the elite members of the Amsterdam community, who are incredibly wealthy, sold their houses and all their possessions and moved to the Holy Land in order to become followers of him. And then he apostatized and they had to like go back. But during this heyday of what it means to be awaiting the Messiah, we get this Dutch rabbi, Jacob Judah Leon de Templo, and again he's thinking towards that Third Temple and how it's going to be in reenactment of Solomon's Temple. So it's always this like, in the past we'll predict the future. And he is very famous for his drawings of what Solomon's Temple would look like. Here's an example of it. Anybody been to the Esnoga in Amsterdam will recognise this little weird motif that's at the back of the synagogue back around near where the sukkah is. But also his idea of what Solomon's Temple would look like, which to us seems like not right probably, was very influential. And he built a 3D model that then toured around the Western Sephardic communities and very much influenced their thought.

And so his book on the temple and his 3D model that he's sending around for people to see becomes very influential for how people start to build their synagogues, particularly the Esnoga, that Amsterdam synagogue that becomes the mothership for all the other ones and becomes the model of how to build a Western Sephardic synagogue. And there are several key hallmarks here that if you haven't been to a Western Sephardic synagogue before are worth pointing out. One, there's almost always this portico, this little entryway at the beginning, just like there

would've been at the temple. There is what's called a tebah or a reader's desk in addition to the arc that's at the beginning. The women's section is almost always upstairs on a balcony that has 12 pillars holding it up, just like the 12 tribes. And often the boundary between the women, sometimes it will be just a regular wall, but most of the time it's this lattice work that's supposed to echo what was the boundary between the heavens and earth and between the women's section in the temple and the rest of the courtyard. So really this sort of idea that women are sort of in this alternate space. Whoops, let me go back one more. Also the very proportions that we see in the synagogue are exactly the proportions of the long room to the Holy of Holies in Solomon's Temple. And he's using some fancy map to figure this out. So we see this exact same ideal being used in the temple, the Esnoga. This is a picture from very shortly after it was built in Amsterdam. Again, we have the reader's platform here.

Here's the beautiful, beautiful arc made of hardwoods from the Americas. We have the women's balcony with that incredible lattice work that's supposed to remind us of the boundary between the heavens and the earth. And up on, and you can see sort of in the background these 12 little pillars. We can't see all of them because some of them are along the sides here. And we're sort of standing right in front of this portico, so we can't see that. So this way of building synagogues then becomes the baseline for all of the early synagogues in the Americas. So today we often focus on the sand, but we're missing this really important structural element which is this women's balcony up on 12 different pillars. Here I'm actually standing where the arc would've been looking back at the teva and back over here would've been the portico. And the same structure and proportions we see also in the US colonies. So here's the Touro Synagogue. Again, those same proportions that we saw in the Temple in Jerusalem, same 12 pillars holding up the women's area. Here we see a sort of variation on the theme, which is these railings often in numbers of 12, and same reader's platform and the arc up at the front.

So again, even in places where we've lost the buildings, when we still have the drawings of them, we're able to see those same elements which are so crucial to the hallmarks of these early Western Sephardic congregations. So this is an early synagogue in the south that was lost in a fire. We have this beautiful drawing from before it burnt down and we can still see the same hallmarks that we see in all the other ones and the same set of proportions. So that really is the first element that's really distinctive about the religious space. It's set to create this feeling of we are part of this redemption. The other thing that's really distinctive about this synagogue life that comes from Amsterdam to the colonies is that the synagogues were rarely a structure off by themselves, but instead were part of a ritual complex. So this is the outside of the Esnoga, the Portuguese synagogue in Amsterdam. Here we have some of the original buildings. You can see they're kind of, whoop, tilting in a little bit. These were added later in the 19th century. But you can see in the original floor plan that it's built with all these buildings around the edges. And so we would be right to ask what's in all those buildings that are around the edges.

And one of the answers is the synagogue complexes almost always contain a place where the children will be educated. And this is one of the hallmarks of these Port Jews very interested in reeducation. They're people who often were denied a Jewish education when they lived in Iberia

and they're very insistent that they want to give a good Jewish education to their children. So this is the Ets Haim Library from the Ets Haim Yesiba that was part of this original complex. Another element that is always in these synagogue complexes are ritual baths. This is actually the location of the 19th century bath, which you can see here. Though it was in the one of these other buildings, the original one, and it got fallen into disuse after they built newer nicer ones. So they built not just one, but actually a sequence of five different ritual baths along the side of this complex. So really interested in ritual baths, which we should hold onto.

Why would you need five ritual baths? So this obsession with the ritual baths, which you should hear in echo of with that idea of Mikveh Israel, the Hope of Israel, the purification of Israel, is something that we see even in the colonies where there were beautiful oceans of warm water that they easily could have immersed in, for women to immerse in following their menstrual cycles. Instead, what we find is that even in those places, they build these splendid, beautiful baths. So here is that synagogue complex, which we fortunately have a lot of good archaeological evidence for from Barbados. And we see what we hear about in the written records from places like New York and Philadelphia and Newport, that the complex had not just the synagogue here in pink 'cause it's actually pink today, but a sequence of houses, three of which were for the rabbi, for the shamash, the person who was the guardian of the complex, and for the shochet, the ritual slaughterer, as well as one for the bath attendant.

So, one women's house and the ritual bath. So we don't actually know which of these other houses belong to which person, but you'll see I'll go through what they're doing in that complex. And, in addition, we have what's now the museum, but was originally the school building. And again, this is typical in all of the early colonial records. We just have good archaeological evidence from this particular site. In other sites, we have written records that tell us the same kind of information. So again, regardless of whether there was access to water, we're constantly seeing in the different sites an interest in building the synagogues above a place where you would get water swelling up from underground. And that's actually interesting because that's part of what's the story of the Third Temple in Ezekiel. It's part of the prophecy. But it's actually not necessary to build a ritual bath today. To build a ritual bath today, you could use rainwater. This is the ritual bath in the Ashkenazi synagogue in Paramaribo, Suriname. They could be collecting rainwater. They actually don't use this rainwater.

They're using an underground source. And, in fact, we know that a number of the complexes are built specifically because they're near this wellspring underground that will be a source for the ritual baths in the complex. Interestingly, some of you will remember that I'd mentioned that there were two synagogues. This was the only place that there was an Ashkenazi synagogue and a Western Sephardic Portuguese synagogue in Paramaribo, Suriname, and they each had their own ritual bath. There's no good reason why you need to have Ashkenazi Jews and Sephardic Jews immerse separately, but it's actually we see something that happens in London and Amsterdam, as well. So each complex has their own ritual bath. So the second thing other than the ritual bath that you would find in these colonial compounds around the synagogue would be the rabbi's house. And again, it might have been one of these other two.

We aren't really sure because it's not labelled on the early maps. And unlike this one where we found the ritual bath, so it was really clear it was the ritual bath, the bath attendant's house, we don't actually know which of these houses was which. But the rabbis that would be hired would be in charge, not just of leading the congregation, but all the letters going and asking for somebody to come to the colonies to lead services, regardless of whether they're a hazzan, a kind of cantor, or whether they're a chazzan, which is a homudically trained rabbi. They're always asking that they also would lead the school for the entire community. And you can see this is a pretty substantial school building, right? So this is for Barbados, a very nice school building, and it's right next to where the houses are. So this sort of leads me to that fourth type of rabbinical influence. And here I'm going to talk about one man, but it's helpful to think of him as actually representative of a whole group of men who were coming to the colonies during this time period. And this is a man named Isaac Carregal though he gets a couple of other little names added in 'cause he keeps getting sick.

So Carregal is originally, he is also a Portuguese Jew, but he comes from Hebron in the Holy Land and he is one of these emissaries who originally is fundraising for Hebron but ends up becoming somebody who, while he's out and about, ends up becoming not just a rabbi but a teacher in the different places he goes to. So you can see he's made these four different big long trips, two of which end up going to the colonies. And after the first trip to the colonies in 1762 and '64, he's going down mainly to Curacao. He comes back to London. He's a teacher again in London. And then he goes to Jamaica and then up to New York and Newport. And then he comes down to Suriname and finally settles in Barbados, where he is the most famous rabbi to have settled there. And unfortunately he gets sick and he dies, while he's in Barbados. So he is one of many men that we know of who are coming, either from the Holy Land and coming and visiting on fundraising tours and spreading knowledge about the Torah, or are just coming from these hubs and coming to the colonies and serving as rabbis and also religious leaders in the sense of training the next generation.

So what are some of the things that he was training people to do? So interestingly, we actually have a book that is part of what he's helping to introduce and it's this kabbalistic book about the omer. And so here are some pages from it. And just for people just as a background, the omer is something that's very important. It's the days between Passover and Shavuot. It's something that's very important for Western Sephardic congregations, in general. Each of the synagogues would have what's an omer board that tells you what day it is, so of the 49 days, which week it is, et cetera, et cetera. So it's telling you all the information that you need to know in terms of where you are in the count. So this is telling us that which day of the omer it is, which week it is and what day it is. What he does in this little book is just startling because it's this moment where we can really see a dissemination of this larger Eastern Sephardic tradition of very kabbalistic ideas about the counting of those days.

And in his book he's explaining, it's not just a counting that's going on, but also is actually related to, each of the days are related to a different moment in Psalm, what's known as the

Menorah Psalm, which is a kabbalistic prayer, and also are related to a different word, an anabathmoi, which is another kabbalistic prayer that's said during the omer. And actually there's even a special letter of the day that's related to another prayer. So he's really trying to get them to think about each day as a stage on the journey, each week as being one of these branches, and each day they're moving through this passage of changing who they are as a person. In fact, that count between Passover and Shavuot in this kabbalistic understanding is supposed to be a reenactment of those days of wandering in the desert between when they leave Egypt and when they receive the Torah on Mount Sinai, which is the holiday of Shavuot. And he's trying to help them reenact that passage. So a really interesting book where we're suddenly saying, it's not just rabbis that are doing this, but it's a book that belonged to a layperson in the community who brings it with him up to Philadelphia. We're really seeing this transfer to everyday people an everyday kind of kabbalism and influence on how they're supposed to be thinking about their lives and religious passages and development.

And really it's those rabbis like Carregal, who are coming primarily to the Caribbean, who are training that next generation of rabbis, that come up to all of these congregations up in what's the United States and become some of the most important early hazzans or chazzans up in these early congregations. So really that back and forth that we've seen before from the Caribbean. The Caribbean becomes, through their influence of rabbis from the old world, becomes a hope, a redemptive point, a spreading redemption northward to the northern colonies. So remember there's two other houses in that complex and I think, again, this is really important for thinking about Jews not in a religious wasteland. They're centred around communities that have these synagogue compounds and part of Jewish life that the compound is nurturing is their food. That they recognise that to be a Jewish community, they need to have the right kind of food. It was exactly what the woman was complaining about in her letter in Yiddish that she didn't have, because she didn't live in the city that had one of these compounds. So one of those houses would've been the shochet's house.

And again, we know this is a paid position in each one of these compounds and that shochet would've been in charge of making sure there was good kosher meat for people in the compound. And the compound would also make sure that they had enough of the right kind of grain to make matzah for the entire community. So this is a matzah board from the synagogue complex in Newport, Rhode Island. And this is something we see across the synagogue records. The synagogues become a hub for spreading matzah, not just in their little city, but also if you happen to be one of the Jews in the outlying areas where you don't have a complex, you could order matzah and make sure that you had enough made and have it shipped to you. And in fact, that shipping of Jewish food from one synagogue complex to another becomes one of the crucial things that happens across those networks of port towns. So this is a kosher certificate for meat that was sent from the north. We have a lot of kosher meat being made in places like Philadelphia and New York that are very good for raising cattle. It would've been put in one of these barrels and would've been pickled with salt, so it would've been a salt beef.

And in fact this, if you're used to hearing about corned beef, this is where that very Jewish food

corned beef comes from. It's a pickled beef. The corn are the corns or kernels of salt, not corn like corn on the cob if you're from the US. So corned beef is a way of saying salt beef, which is something that's just crucial as something being sent between these ports. And what we see is people in the Caribbean with these wealthier, better-educated communities will write back to places like New York and Philadelphia and send them instructions for how to send better kosher meat to them with better supervision. In addition, we have from letters and from records information about Jews sending other kinds of kosher food from port to port to port. So you'll remember Aaron Lopez, who had those 2 wives and 18 kids that he settled in all those different ports. He sends his daughter and son-in-law in Jamaica a nice kosher Turkey, presumably smoked 'cause it would be gross otherwise.

And he also writes in his letters about sending charoset to people, presumably, again, a Sephardic style that could be preserved better. And likewise, we see different communities ordering either the wheat that they need for the matzah or sending matzah as gifts. So kosher food gets distributed both for money but also as a kind of gift giving, a way of connecting all those different communities and binding them together. The next house that's in the synagogue complex very typically is the house of the shamash and the shamash is, during the colonial period, often the person who's the caretaker for the synagogue. But I think it's worth just today, as well, we see that the shamash isn't just like somebody who sweeps the floors, he's a spiritual caretaker of the community. And in this compound he did something strange but is typical of a shamash job, as well, which is this compound is very distinctive in that the cemetery is in the compound.

This is the only one that I know of like this. It's imitating the way that you would do a cemetery in a church yard during this time period right next to the synagogue. You see that they have walkways for the kohanim and have walls up, here are the old walls, so that kohanim won't get polluted by the cemetery. This is unusual that the cemetery would be part of the compound. Usually it would be much farther away, but it would be normal that the shamash would also be in charge of the spiritual welfare and taking care of that part of the community, as well. And here again, we see that sort of dreams of how the past connected Jews in the present. The cemetery is not, this is the big cemetery in Curacao. It's near the oil refinery, but it's in Hebrew the House of Life. It's a place not of death, not of despair necessarily, but of hopes for the future. And we see this on the gravestone. Here's the man named Mordecai who's died, and they hope that he will be like Mordecai in the story from Purim.

That the angels will bring him upward to olam ha-ba and that he will be part of this story of Jewish redemption in spite of what he struggled. And in fact, very sweetly, he was a man who helped save the community from some mercenaries who were threatening the island. So he is in many ways like Mordecai in the story that he's saving from people who are trying to destroy the Jews. So really those ties between I'm like people in the stories in the Bible, and that is a sign of redemption coming. Similarly, we see on other stones, these sort of hopes of here's a man named Elijah who's being compared to Elijah the prophet. He dies, but he doesn't die. He goes up in the Holy Merkabah, the Holy Chariot of Fire, and he leaves his mantle of prophecy

behind for the people who are still alive. So again, this hope that he's dead, but really he's going to another place really full of optimism for the future and that he's going to leave behind this religious tradition for the people who are still alive.

Sort of sweetly this man had, you can see his little house in the background. Likewise, we often have these symbols on the gravestones of cutting down the tree of life, particularly for somebody who dies young. We put this emphasis on providence. It's not just that the tree falls by itself, we have the hands of angels, of God's emissaries, coming down and cutting down the tree. It's part of providence, of God's plan. It's not a random act. So again, helping people in the community understand tragedy and how they're supposed to think about the loss, even of people who died seemingly too young. So we see this throughout the northern colonies, as well, where we see these sort of redemptive messages as well as here's a tombstone from a young man who died during one of the yellow fever epidemics and we see God himself or an angel bringing a fire down upon the city of early New York, even as this man's life is being cut down. So God is in charge of the plague, as well as this man's death.

It's not a source of despair, it's part of a larger providential plan that the community is trying to help everybody understand. So coming back to that rabbi that we saw earlier, who doesn't look like what we would expect from religious figures today. Why does he look so different? Well, I would say one reason, some of you from London will recognise the rabbi on the side, is that even today Spanish-Portuguese rabbis do not look like people in Mea She'arim. They have their own tradition. One is a tradition which is hearkening back to Eastern Europe. For the people in the Western Sephardic tradition, it's a tradition which also hearkens back to an earlier time period, but is a specific tradition. So again, a reminder, these are Western Sephardic congregations with their own ways of dressing and their own ways of signalling what it means to be part of the spiritual redemption. So one thing I think that's really important that we've talked about before, that people, in general, in Western Sephardic communities, the average person would dress just like other people during the time period.

They weren't trying to look really distinctively different. But the rabbis we know are always trying to look about 50 years out of date. No offence to Rabbi Morris here, who I think is obviously dressed very nicely in terms of following this tradition. But the rabbis look distinctive, but not the same as they did in the colonial time period. Does that make sense? So as we see the tri-cornered hat and he's wearing these little knee breeches. This is not how anybody would've dressed during this time period. He's 50 years back in time. Again this, he's also looking like 50 years back in time. Finally, we get the top hats during the 19th century, but it's an unfashionable type of top hat. And again, unless you go to a Western Sephardic congregation where they're always wearing top hats, most of us don't wear top hats today.

So again, it's this signal to a tradition which is constantly evolving and changing, but we can see this continuity over time and this homage to what it means to be religious within a Western Sephardic style. And really important for us to realise, and this is something we talked about with portraits before, that the Western Sephardic Jews are dressing similar to other people when

they're not in the synagogue or in their rabbinical gear, in part in response to anti-Semitism. So we see this rise of anti-Semitism where Jews are often depicted as being very sloppy dressers. So we start to see some racialized language about skin colour and noses. This is a anti-Semitic drawing from Suriname of a Jew. This is of Mordecai Manuel Noah and we start to see some of the same things. But it's really out of control, bad hair, plus sloppy, over out of control clothing that doesn't fit them. That's what signals the Jews can't manage their bodies. So we start to see Jews wearing these very, Western Sephardic Jews, wearing these very beautiful, heavily starched outfits that showed, no, we are perfectly capable of managing our bodies and in fact we're very religiously upright and not religiously suspect of the ways that anti-Semitic portraits are showing Jews as being.

In addition, they're really trying to echo the ways that white elites during this time period were dressing, in part, because Jews are starting during the end of the colonial period to be racialized and to be seen as, eh, maybe not completely white. During this time period, cloth and the way people dressed, both because of sumptuary laws, laws about who can dress in what way, as well as how fabric is categorised according to race, Jews don't want to be seen as non-white often during this time period. And they're pushing, even multiracial Jews such as Sarah Brandon Moses and her brother Isaac Lopez Brandon were born enslaved, are really echoing that white elite clothing style. So here I come to my conclusion. So what are some of the things we should cling to when we think about Jewish religious life in colonial America?

One, we should cast aside that idea that Jews were primarily secular and lived in this religious wasteland. When they're living in those port towns, particularly in the Caribbean but even up in the north, they're really part of these larger Jewish networks that are sending knowledge and rabbis and food and all sorts of information across and around the Atlantic world. Second, within their cities that they're living in, within those port towns, for the larger communities, we would expect to find a synagogue complex which had everything people would need for religious life. It would have, not just the synagogue, but also the place for the school because education is extremely valued, it would have places where specific Jewish foods, such as matzah and kosher meat would be prepared, and it would have all the necessary structures, such as ritual baths that you'd need for ritual life.

Third, this is a time period when Jews are very concerned about the Messiah and America is supposed to play a role in that redemptive narrative. A place where the entire world will benefit from Jews coming and settling in these places. And fourth and finally, the way that we are seeing people dressing and the way that they're creating their synagogues are all part of this very distinctive Western Sephardic style, which doesn't look like people in Mea She'arim today because it's Sephardic and because Jews change over time and because they really are just having a different religious system and different religious history that they're pulling off of. So I'm going to go ahead and stop sharing now, and I would be happy to answer questions of which I see there are some. Wendy, did you have anything before I start?

- [Wendy] No, thank you. Thank you for the presentation. Thank you, Lauren.

- Okay, great. Okay, so I'm hearing from.

- [Wendy] Yeah, I want to say that we're going to just, we'll only have 10 minutes of questions, if you don't mind, because we have another presentation with Osborne

- No problem.

- [Wendy] at 2:00.

- Okay, okay no problem.

- [Wendy] Thank you very much.

Q&A and Comments:

- Okay so I'm hearing from people that it is very sad and cold and snowy in London and I'm sorry. It sounds like a lot of places are having problems with weather lately and it looks like it's sunny here, but that really is an anomaly. Most of the time it is cold and dreary here, as well.

Q: There is a question from Jill about, "Were the Jews from Hamburg Ashkenazi?"

A: So there is definitely a double community in Hamburg, just like there is in Amsterdam. There's both an early Sephardic congregation, which ends up being really important for feeding to the colonies. So we know some of the early religious leaders, for example in Curacao and in Barbados, come from Hamburg from these rabbinical families. But there is also a very important Ashkenazi congregation there, as well. So I don't know if people have read Gluckel's memoirs, but she's from Hamburg. So very important old Ashkenazi community, as well, and it's a trading port.

Yeah, so there's a question about how difficult it is to have, from Mary, about how Rebecca Samuel's letter emphasises that outside of a large Jewish community, it's very difficult to have a strong Jewish community. Yes, and I would say we share that problem today in the United States, right? That I think for, you know, I'm... but it's nothing like New York, right? So certainly if I went to even farther away from Portland, I would have you know if I went to Medford, for example, I would have even more problems, right? So I feel like, yes. So you can see why they have this desire to have everything all in one compound, right? Like it's really a kind of full service station for the synagogue complexes.

She asks whether she wonders if they consider themselves a strong Jewish community. Good question. Clearly Rebecca Samuel doesn't. In fact, she ends up leaving and going back to London with her children. First, she tries Charleston and then she gives up and goes back to Europe. So really, yeah, good question. Hard to know. But maybe for people who weren't as

interested in having the kind of religious life that she had, who wanted more freedom, maybe it would've been a better place for them. So, hard to know.

There was a question about what is Rabbi Isaac's last name? Judging from the time that this was written, I think this is talking about the rabbi who is in Recife, who is Rabbi Aboab. I'll put it in the chat. I don't know if you can see that, de or da Fonseca. It depends, the de or da is depending on whether you're doing it in Spanish or Portuguese. So, whoops, and I spelled it wrong. Aboab, let's try it again. A-B-O-A-B da Fonseca. Okay, so Rabbi Aboab de Fonseca is that early kabbalistic rabbi. And then there's a later rabbi, well I'm thinking that's probably based on when it was that you were thinking of, who was so influential and a rabbi.

So, a statement from Jane, which is really interesting. "For many years after Rabbi Isaac Aboab dies, the name Aboab and the date of his death were still to be found on the grave border of all marriage contracts of the Sephardi community." Very interesting. I did not know that, thank you.

Q: There's a question about could I comment on the colonial presence in Panama of Jews?

A: I wish that I could, Robert, but I do not know enough about that, though I wish that I did since I used to live in Panama. But I will look into it and see if I can find something out for you. I know that there's actually a good book written in Spanish that I'm trying to get a copy of from University of Washington that's on that very subject. So if I find out anything, I will update you in the last lecture.

Q: When will my new book come out?

A: Oh, thank you so much for asking. The new book will be out in, it sounds like August now is the new date for the next book. Whoops, and now I've somehow gotten over to the side.

Okay, any more Q&A?

Q: "I don't see the," so Sam says, "I don't see the difference between the standard Sephardic synagogue configuration and that of the colonies. Could you kindly elaborate?"

A: This is a really good question. So one of the things that happens in the colonies very similar to what I talked about with the gravestones during the first lecture, is in each of the places you see most of the hallmarks of that Sephardic style that's echoing Solomon's Temple, that there's that reader's platform back towards the opening of the door, The arch at the front, not surprisingly, that it's rectangular, it's got the 12 different columns which are holding up a women's gallery. That really is something that we see throughout the early American synagogues obviously after a certain time period during the 19th century that starts to change, but during the colonial era. And one of the things that has sort of puzzled people for a while is each of the synagogues does look different because they're using local building crews, right? So there's always this weird way in which they're slightly different influenced by what's going on

locally, even as they're very deliberately borrowing the pattern. So we do know from letters that Jews will say, "I sat down with the architect and explained what it's supposed to look like based on what's going on in Amsterdam and London." So really clear lines of communication about how they want things to look, even as there's this kind of regional variation that they look a little bit like what's going on locally.

Q: Katherine asked a great question, which was, "How were these synagogue complexes funded?"

A: So the synagogue complexes were funded because Jews in the area, it depends a little bit on where you are, but in places like Barbados, if you're a Jew, you have to belong to the Jewish congregation. And the Jewish community assesses you for what they refer to as a finta, a tax of how much you can afford to pay. So it's proportional to how much money you have and how much property you have determines how much you're going to pay to the community. And then that money goes to distributing to the Jewish poor and to paying for the school and to paying for the hassan or the rabbi. So that's really where the money's coming from. The problem that happens is most of the communities, the congregation doesn't have the ability to force, they have a right to tell people to pay their taxes, but they don't have a way to force them to pay them. So we do see that Jews will just be like, I think, no, I'm not interested in paying the taxes.

So we do see in the synagogue records sometimes a lot of fights between people who are not paying their share of the taxes even though they could. Particularly, in certain congregations, you'll have families that were on the poor rolls for a long time. Suddenly, the next generation gets money and then they refuse to pay their taxes and that makes the synagogues very, very angry as you might imagine. So there's a lot of back and forth about this, but everybody is assessed a certain amount that they're supposed to pay. In communities once there starts to be two congregations, then you pay to whichever community you belong to. But we do see in the north, in particular, where Jews don't have to belong to the congregation. It becomes something where they're really trying to become a member of the congregation 'cause it's their only source of like insurance or welfare if they get sick or disabled or elderly that somebody will take care of them. So if you're not a member, you might not get on that list of payments to people. So the synagogues become very careful as we get into the 19th century about who they're letting in as being members because they're worried about being overwhelmed by the poor.

Q: Okay, we have I think time for just one last question. Oh, Susan, I'm going to answer your question because I love it, which is, "Why does every community from Curacao to Charleston to Newport claim to house the very first synagogue in the colonies?"

A: Oh, Susan, that is the best question ever because I too have noticed this pattern that everywhere I go that that's the first synagogue and often they're right in a specific way. So, for example, Shearith Israel is the oldest congregation, Jewish congregation in the US colonies. Does that make sense? So, in the United States. Whereas the Touro Synagogue is the oldest synagogue building still standing from the United States. So, do you see what I'm saying? So

like there's often like a little qualification that's missing. But I think there is something really interesting about different congregations still seeing something important about being part of this lineage, of how they're part of these networks and what it means to be part of an American tradition that continues over time and has value in adding to American culture over time. So that's it for questions. Thank you all so much for coming today and we will see you next time.

- Thanks Laura, thank you very much. Thank everybody for participating. We will see you in 45 minutes for our next presentation. Fantastic.

- Thanks.

- [Wendy] Take care. See you soon, Laura.

- Okay, bye.

- Bye, thank you.