Laura Arnold Liebman | Jews in Colonial America

- So good afternoon. Good evening, everybody. Thank you, Judy. Thank you, Laura. Today it is my great pleasure to introduce a new presenter, Laura Arnold Leibman. Laura is a professor of English and Humanities at Reed College in Portland, Oregon, USA, and the author of "The Art of the Jewish Family: A History of Women in Early New York in Five Objects," which won three national Jewish book awards. Her work focuses religion and the daily lives of women and children in early America and uses everyday objects to help bring their stories back to life. She has been a visiting fellow at Oxford University, a Fulbright scholar at the University of Utrecht and the University of Panama, and the Leon Levy Foundation professor of Jewish material culture at Bard Graduate Centre.

Her second book, "Messianism, Secrecy and Mysticism: A New Interpretation of Early American Jewish Life" uses material culture to retell the history of early American Jews and won a Jordan Schnitzer book award and the National Jewish Book Award. Her forthcoming book, "Once We Were Slaves" is about an early multiracial Jewish family who began their lives enslaved in the Caribbean and became some of the wealthiest Jews in New York. So today, Laura will be talking about Jews in Colonial America, and I want to welcome you, Laura, and thank you very much for joining us. And I'd like to say to Rudy, a special message to Rudy that I absolutely agree with her. You are one of the most wonderful presenters. So welcome, and we look forward to hearing from you. Over to you. Thank you.

- Thank you so much, Wendy. And just a quick, I guess it's shifting over to me, but when he had suggested that I sort of give you a little bit of a tease that she had mentioned the book, "The Art of the Jewish Family," one of the chapters, one of the objects is, this is a close-up of it, which is the miniature of the woman who's also my forthcoming book who began her life enslaved in Barbados and ended up one of the wealthiest Jews in New York. So just a little bit of tease of what things are coming up and what you're going to see over the course of the four lectures. So in this lecture, let me go ahead and share my screen, and I'll start with the images.

And I want to start in New York because that's where we typically start the history of colonial Jews in the colonies that would become the United States. And it begins in 1654 with the arrival of 23 refugees. Now, today, most Jews who go to New York intend to go there, but, of course, at the time it was new Amsterdam, and these Jews got there quite by accident. They were on a ship, and they were actually abducted. Originally, they were blown off course. They ended up in Jamaica. They got most of their money taken away by mercenaries. They ended up on a ship as somebody who were going to be then sort of ransomed to people who would pay in this colony. There were just a couple of Jews who preceded them, but really, yeah. Wendy, do you need something? Nope. Okay, she's good.

- [Wendy] Sorry. I'm very sorry. I went from one computer to the other.

- No, no, it's totally fine. I was just like maybe the slides aren't showing. It's always best to know

if it's not working ahead of time.

- [Wendy] Very, very sorry. No.

- Okay, no, no, no. Totally fine. Okay, so this group of 23 Jews is really important, not just because they arrive in what will eventually become New York, even though it's new Amsterdam at the time, but because it's the first time we don't have just, like, one or two Jewish guys who are on their own. But it's really the start of a community. It's both men but also women and children. So where did these Jews come from? Well, we know when they arrived, they weren't very welcomed. There were a couple of men already there who helped them and helped negotiate their stay, as well as some of the Jews from Amsterdam itself who intervened and helped make sure that they were able to settle there in spite of the fact that the mayor was not particularly excited to have them. But that group of Jews actually came from a place that seems unlikely as a big Jewish metropolis for today, which is this small town of Recife on the coast of what is now Brazil. So Recife, at the time, right before the Jews had arrived in New Amsterdam, had been the biggest Jewish community in all of the Americas.

Visual slides are displayed throughout the presentation.

So it was about half the size of the Jewish community of Amsterdam, which was one of the largest Jewish communities in Western Europe at the time, of open Jewish communities. And like in Amsterdam, this was an open Jewish community. The Jews had come there originally to help with set up some of the sugar industry. Many of the Sephardic Jews who came from Portugal had experienced in the sugar industry in some of the islands off of the coast of Africa. And so they're really helping the Dutch get a leg up in the colonial agriculture in ways that previously had been dominated by the Portuguese. And in fact, while today it seems obvious that people can produce sugar, it turned out sugar was really hard to figure out for the colonial empires. So having that secret access to, what did you need to do to produce it, what did you need to grow it properly, really was a moment where Jews could shine and add something important to the Dutch colonies. And that can help us understand why Recife, which ended up being this place which was near many of the sugar-growing lands for colonial Brazil, was taken over, grabbed away from the Portuguese by the Dutch. They made their first attempt in 1624, but it was really in the 1630s that the Dutch grabbed this area. And by 1650s, we have over 1,000 Jews living in this town.

And there were actually, I've marked where the synagogue was in Recife, but there's actually a second synagogue across this little, this breezeway that was over on the other side on the mainland as well. So there's two synagogues in this town, and it was such an important place that one of the most important rabbis from Amsterdam came to be the rabbi of that community. So we're not just talking an open Jewish community, a really important Jewish community. And that rabbi was Isaac Aboab da Fonseca. He's one of the great catalysts of the era. And in fact, the first Jewish literature we have from the Americas comes from him about this dispute that's going on between the Portuguese and the Dutch because the Portuguese are not happy the

Dutch have taken away their stronghold, and they're constantly fighting to take back with Recife. And they end up coming up with a sequence of boats out here to keep the Dutch from being able to distribute anything. And finally, in 1654, they retake the town. This is catastrophic for the entire Jewish community and particularly people like Isaac Aboab da Fonseca, who, in spite of his great learning, had been born in Iberia. So he had been born as the descendant of people who had been forced to convert to Christianity.

And if he's retaken by the Portuguese, he is going to be considered a heretic and could be burnt at the stake. So because of this, in 1654, when Recife is retaken, Isaac Aboab da Fonseca and most of the other Jews quickly get on ships and make their way back to Amsterdam. Some of the Jews, however, decide that they want to continue working in the Americas, setting up these sugar-making areas, and they instead flee to various parts of the Caribbean to begin new communities. So Recife becomes the building block of most of the major Jewish communities in the Americas. So this group that was going to New Amsterdam actually was going to the Caribbean, but they got blown off course, and they ended up getting taken in by mercenaries who ransom them to New Amsterdam.

- [Wendy] Laura.

- Yes.

- [Wendy] I'm so sorry to interrupt.

- No, go ahead.

- [Wendy] But a couple of people have asked, would you mind just speaking a little bit slower? It's not everybody's language.

- 100%.

- [Wendy] English is not,

- Yeah.

- thank you, thanks.

- No problem. So in 1654 we have that group of 23 Jews, some of whom actually decide, forget it, new Amsterdam looks pretty sad in 1654. It's muddy, it's small. Unlike Recife, which had this huge Jewish community and rabbis, there's very little in New Amsterdam at the time, so many of them actually go back to Amsterdam. But some stay and begin that first open Jewish community in what would become the United States. So some of the things that were driving Jews to follow that first initial group to the colonies are first the Inquisition. So we continue to see, over the course of the colonial period, surges of the Inquisition. Anytime anything bad happens in Iberia,

we'll get surges of the inquisition and people being captured and imprisoned, tortured, or even burnt at the stake. So if there's an earthquake in Lisbon, people get taken in by the Inquisition. If there is an economic problem, people get taken in by the inquisition. So Iberia continues to be a driving force of sending people to the colonies.

The second driving force is really the resettlement of Jews in England. So those of us who are in England, not me, but those of you who are in England right now, this will be more familiar that during the Puritan overtake of the government, Manasseh Ben Israel, who's a rabbi from Amsterdam, comes and negotiates to have the Jews be allowed back into England. And that allowing of the Jews back into England will, I'll show you in a moment, becomes very important for the settling of Jews in the colonies. And really, even after Charles II takes over, he also sort of continues this policy of allowing Jews back into London, which becomes a feeder community for Jews in the colonies. The third thing that's really driving Jews to the colonies is the opening up of the British colonies to people like the Jews to the Plantation Act of 1740. And this is an act that allows people, including Jews who've been living in the colonies, to have the same rights as British-born subjects after seven years. They can petition to get naturalised.

And that is really revolutionary as a way of Jews suddenly can own land and trade and pass along inheritances to their children in ways that they wouldn't have normally been able to before this Plantation Act. The fourth thing that really pushes Jews to the colonies, and this is really important to keep in mind, because for a long time, we only talked about wealthy Jews, is Jewish poverty. So there's a huge number of Jews coming into Amsterdam and into London and, to a lesser degree, to Hamburg, who are escaping either pogroms or enormous poverty in Eastern Europe. So we're talking Ashkenazi Jews who are overwhelming the poor roles of the Jewish communities in London, Amsterdam, and Hamburg. So in addition, we have also poor Jews who are escaping from Iberia who've had to leave behind everything that they ever had in order just to save their lives. So suddenly, these cities in Europe are really overwhelmed, and the communities, Jewish communities are in charge of the Jewish poor. And the way they decide to solve this problem is by giving the poor a one-way ticket to the colonies.

So they're kind of pushing along the problem to the Americas, and that really is seen as a way of dealing with things. Sometimes people won't succeed in the colonies, and they'll come back, and they'll get another one way ticket to the colony. So sometimes it doesn't work the first time. So the final thing that encourages Jews or drives them or pulls them to the colonies is really Jewish privileges. And this, in some ways, I think of as kind of the brainchild of the Dutch empire. So the Dutch realise, very early on, for example, with the sugar industry, that Jews can be very helpful to them, and we'll see in a moment why. And they start to get them little incentives to settle in their colonies. So some of the privileges that Jews get are ones that just would make it easier to be openly Jewish in a Dutch colony. So they don't have to serve in the militia on the Sabbath, they can do sewing in their doorways on Sundays, which otherwise would be prohibited, but they also are given little incentives for trade that make them actually have advantages over other people. So privileges could be just good to be a Jew or could be allowing them to practise Judaism openly.

So those are really the things that push more people to follow that original group of people who just came there by accident. So a hundred years after that first push to the American colonies, we actually see a lot of Jewish communities opening up. So I've put over, on this side, the main feeder communities that are pushing people to the Americas. Early on during this time period, all the largest, wealthiest Jewish communities are in the Caribbean at this point, with the largest ones in Curacao and in Suriname. And then we also start to have this group along the ports of the Upper Atlantic and Lower Atlantic of places where Jewish communities have started. So these are all towns where there would've been not just one or two Jews, but a real Jewish community established. So one of the things that I think is really important at this point is that you'll notice, hmm, Jews seem to focus on port towns, and we'll see that becomes very much part of Jew success over the course of the colonial period. So we sometimes talk about Jews during this period as port Jews as opposed to court Jews from Europe, and court Jews are people who were getting their, are wealthy and are negotiating with the people who are in the monarchies. Port Jews are more middling Jews, by and large.

They live in port towns, they set up communities. But some of the things that set them apart are that they tend to be very focused on education and we'll see that coming forward in the rest of this talk. And they sometimes tend to see their relationship to the Jewish community as more optional than people might in Eastern Europe at the time. So that means that the communities have to work a little harder to offer some services that make their communities worthwhile to the people who are settling. So for these Jews in these port towns, I want to emphasise four different things that really synthesise what their experience with life. And those are that they're primarily Sephardic communities. There are a portion of a result of empires and a push for economies. They're very much continuous with what's going on in Europe, but they're also adapting. So I'm going to use this acronym, which, in Spanish, SECA means dry, and we'll come back to this image of the sand towards the end of the lecture.

So keep in mind this idea of SECA, and we're going to go through the different parts of it. So first, they're primarily Sephardic. So for people who are not Jewish, or just as a quick reminder, we tend to break down Jews into three different groups, Ashkenazi Jews who tend to be from Eastern Europe or parts of Germany, Mizrahi Jews who are people who settled in the Middle East, and Sephardic, Jews who are originally from Iberia. And as this map shows, often we think of the Jews who scholars would call Eastern Sephardic Jews, people who settled in North Africa and areas around the Mediterranean that would become the Ottoman Empire. But there's also a second group of Sephardic Jews that is more symbolised by this little line right here. And those are the ones that I'm going to be talking about today. And those are Western Sephardic Jews or Spanish and Portuguese Jews. And they mainly settle in, the low country is what breaks away from Spain. They settle in Bayonne in France. So in Amsterdam and Bayonne. They settle up in Hamburg and eventually in London. So those are the groups of people who are mainly coming to the colonies early on. So again, there you can see sort of where those people are coming from. So interestingly, when you look to the colonies, I think we sort of assume today, because in the United States that most of the Jews are Ashkenazi Jews, that that would be the case

early on. But early on, almost all of the congregations are Sephardic congregations. So I've put little stars around the places where, before 1800, or slightly after 1800, there were Ashkenazi congregations.

The first one in Amsterdam is 1639. First one in London is 1690. But again, they're really not the powerhouses of those communities early on. So in New York, we don't get the first Ashkenazi synagogue until 1825, so after the colonial period. Philadelphia, not till after the colonial period, not till 1795. Jamaica, not till 1787. The only one of the big places that have communities, the only first Ashkenazi synagogue that's before the American Revolution is in Suriname in 1735. This is that building, and it looks amazing. It's still in use today. And so it sort of seems like, wow, okay, so they had a lot going for them. Well, yes, but still, even though they had their own building, it was very much Sephardic-centered. And let me explain why. So this building was actually first built by the Sephardic Jews. So the style, which we're going to be talking about more next week, was really in the Sephardic style of architecture. In addition, the rules within the congregation, even though it had been built by Sephardic Jews and then sold to the Ashkenazi community and the Sephardic Jews moved a street over and built a new synagogue, even though they were given this synagogue, bought it to use for themselves, they still had to use the Sephardic prayer book. And in fact, until the 1830s, they're using the Sephardic prayer book, which is in Hebrew and in Spanish.

And finally, in the 1830s, the high German, or Ashkenazi Jews, in Suriname asked the people in Amsterdam, "Could we please stop saying the prayers in Spanish? None of us understand them, and we don't even know how to pronounce them." So really quite late, 100 years after they've bought this building, they're still having to use the Spanish Portuguese, right? And really are in that scene. And that is true across these congregations. Finally, in 1746, we get a English translation, but before 1746, almost all of the prayer books were in Spanish. So imagine you are a Jew, an Ashkenazi Jew, you've come as a refugee to Amsterdam or London, and then you come to the Americas. And suddenly you're in a congregation. And sure, some of it is in Hebrew, but most of the service in Spanish. It's going to feel very, very different from what you're used to in your own congregation. And again, this is true, even in the one Ashkenazi synagogue. In addition, the Sephardic Jews put in regulations in Suriname to show that they were separate from the Ashkenazi congregation, such that if somebody from the Sephardic congregation married somebody from the Ashkenazi congregation, if this man married somebody from here, he would be demoted to a second class member of his community.

That means he could sit only in the bad seats in the synagogue, he couldn't have any synagogue honours, and in addition, he would be buried in the swampy part of the cemetery. So there's this big push of like, we don't want people marrying back and forth. And that actually is true, something that they've adapted from Amsterdam and London at the time, that there are these kind of regulations that encourage people not to intermingle between the synagogues. That really starts to disappear those stigmas after the wedding of the Montefiores in the 19th century, the early part of the 19th century. But up until then, it's very much part of Suriname and what's going on in Europe as well. So why would that be? That seems like really sad and

horrible, but I think it's really helpful to think about, what did it mean to be Sephardic during this time period? And here, I'm going back to some drawings that Rembrandt made of different Jews in Amsterdam at the time. This side, we have one of the Portuguese Jews who you notice is dressed just like any other wealthy Dutch person. And here are some pictures of some of the the Ashkenazi Jews who he thinks of as being just like people from the biblical time period. So he really is thinking of them as sort of relics of the past. And that difference between notions of modernity is part of the reason why the Sephardic Jews are a little bit sceptical of their Ashkenazi co-religionists. They tend to be extremely poor. In fact, the word that the Sephardic Jews use for Ashkenazi Jews, tudesco, also is the same that they use to indicate somebody's a servant. So really, poverty is driving that dispute.

But also, to be honest, the Ashkenazi Jews were a little bit snotty towards the Portuguese Jews who happened to be people who had escaped from Iberia. They didn't think of them as well educated Jewishly. But the Sephardic Jews kind of turn that on the head and say, "that's because we actually value secular education as much as we value a religious education." So all of the Sephardic schools have these two tracks, religious and secular education, going hand in hand. So there's a lot of sort of disputes between what it means to be a part of a modern society between these two groups that's driving some of those prejudices that go back and forth. These sorts of prejudices follow the Jews when they get to the American colonies, this emphasis on being Sephardic as being the best. So we see this with Mordecai Manuel Noah, who's an early US statesman. When he traces his lineage, and he tells people if he's Sephardic or Ashkenazi, he says that he's Sephardic, but in reality, he only has one Sephardic grandmother. The rest of them are all Ashkenazi. So we really see Jews sort of erasing parts of their lineage to emphasise I'm Sephardic because that's what's deemed classy.

So part of what happens in places such as New York and Philadelphia, where Mordecai Manual Noah's family was from, unlike in Suriname where there's these two congregations, everybody has to be part of the same congregation. So we don't get those kind of official policies that you can't intermarry. But again, we see these unofficial policies of it's still better to be Sephardic. In addition, we find that wealthy Jews who are completely Ashkenazi will adapt Sephardic customs in order to show that they're sort of people of culture and classy. So here's Rebecca Gratz, a very famous early woman who started many of the services to the Jewish poor and Jewish education. She should be having one of these upright Ashkenazi style stones, but instead, her gravestone imitates the Sephardic flat style or pyramid style, just because that scene as being classier at the time. So again, Sephardic becomes something, even when you're not technically Sephardic in these communities, that you want to emulate because it's what's considered good. So that's the first part of what's important to know that's different or unique about Jewish life in the colonies, very Sephardic biassed. Even after most the Jews become Ashkenazi, still Sephardic rule the synagogues, and it's the thing that people want to be.

The second thing that people are characterised as Jews in the colonies is this E part of SECA, the empire and economy. One of the very famous scholars of Jews in the Atlantic world, Jonathan Israel, emphasises that Jews in the colonies were both agents and victims of empire

at the same time. And I think this is really an important thing to realise. They're both working for the empires and against them at the same time. So Aaron Lopez, who settles in Newport, Rhode Island, is a great example of this. When he is in Lisbon, his family is constantly being captured by the Inquisition, being tortured, and he barely escapes with his life to the colonies. And many of his family members follow him sporadically, trying to escape the inquisition. So very much a victim of the empire and the sort of concerns about how Jews are settling in the main ports in Europe. On the other hand, once he gets to the colonies, he engages in the slave trade. So very much an agent of the now British Empire, once he gets there. And even Jews who are not as hugely wealthy as Aaron Lopez are still have these entanglements with being agents and victims of empire. So I'd like to think of this as being, it's not just one thing or the other, it's somehow both at the same time.

And sometimes they're first an agent and then a victim. So here's an example of a woman, Hannah Louzada, who lived most of her life either in New York or in early New Jersey. And when her husband dies in 1750, they do an inventory of the state, and we find out that the family were slave owners. They owned two slaves. One was a woman named Jenny. One was a man named Tom. But because of the way that colonial laws work, Hannah Louzada's husband forgot to leave a will or just didn't, and she cannot inherit in the part of New Jersey, according to colonial law that she lives in. So she loses everything she owned before, including Jenny and Tom and all of those goods that her husband had. And she becomes extremely poor. And so in the 1760s, we find Hannah writing these very sad notes to the synagogue, asking for a little money for wood for the winter and how she's disabled, but she really is suffering and needs the money in order to buy her food to get through the winter. So she's somebody who has become so impoverished, she has a a yearly welfare check given to her from the synagogue. And she has to write each year and beg in order to get her yearly allowance.

So very much a shift from she's somebody who we think of as being like somehow being on the side of the empire to somebody who's very much the victim of the empire's laws about women. In fact, she ends up writing another begging letter in Spanish to Aaron Lopez because she can't get enough money from the synagogue. So she hopes that Aaron Lopez, who has money, will give her some some supplies. So part of the reason why that people in the colonies were these both agents and victims of empire has to do with the fact that they lived in these port towns. Most Jews in these port towns were merchants, and very few of them were like Aaron Lopez, who were actual slave traders. But it's nearly impossible to be in the colonies during this time period and not be impacted by what we call as the triangle trade. So here's an example of Aaron Lopez, and you can start to see why he's a powerful merchant. He has two wives. His first one is from from Iberia. She passes away, and then he marries somebody who's the daughter of somebody from Curacao and from Iberia.

And he has two wives, 18 kids, not all of them live to be adults. But he very strategically sets up members of his family in all the different ports that he can't, so any place that there's one of these stars that has the black around it is a place where Aaron Lopez has strategically either got a relationship through his in-laws or has sent one of his children to there or married his children

to a trading partner in that port. So you can see why Jews who have these incredible trade networks are so important and desirable to people like the Dutch, that they would want to give them privileges, right? Like, they just have this incredible ability to move goods around the Atlantic world when they're being successful. So in the case of Aaron Lopez, we can sort of see how the triangle trade works. And again, he is unusual in that he is actually shipping enslaved Africans. But what happens is in the triangle trade, which triangle is kind of a misnomer, it's more like a quadrilateral trade or something like that, that we get manufactured goods coming from Europe to Africa and to the colonies. Then enslaved people are brought to the Caribbean or to what becomes the United States.

They pick up raw goods, such as cocoa or coffee, sugar, it wouldn't have looked like nice cubes like this, or hardwoods, and they bring them north to places like Newport where Aaron Lopez lived. They're made into chocolate and rum. His father-in-law is also famous soap manufacturer. So he's getting whale oil and making beautiful soap out of it. So they then ship these processed goods back to London and get manufactured goods that they can sell. So again, these incredible networks of trade that are possible because they have so many family ties in different ports. So that's at the like really high end in terms of like super wealthy Jews, but even Jews who are much more middling and poor, such as this woman named Rebecca Gomez, who has a chocolate shop on the corner of Ann and Nassau Street in New York City in the 1770s. She also has all these goods from around the world in ways that seem normal today, but are kind of mind-boggling, given what we know about just how small these shops are, like how they really rely on all these trade networks. So I've indicated so that you can see where her different items in her shop are.

She's getting teas from China. She's getting sugar probably from the Caribbean or from Suriname. She's getting peppers and gingers and coffee from either Central America or the northern part of South America. She's getting recipes about how to make Indians desserts from India. She's getting all these different wines and starches from Europe. And then in addition, she's actually also making things out of whale oil that would've probably been from around somewhere, collected somewhere in the Pacific from whales. So again, just this incredible dispersion of this one woman who's a widow and is just struggling to get by in a colonial shop. So very difficult for anybody in the colonial period not to be into these networks of trade on some level. And you can also imagine these are normal household goods. Anybody living in the colonies is somehow part of this trade network, just by virtue of what they're consuming on a daily basis. So that was our second big thing to know about Jews in the colonies. They're part of these empires, both as victims and as agents, and they're part of these incredible colonial economies. The third thing from our SECA idea that's important is continuity. So they're having connections to the Jewish past.

They're not off on some wasteland by themselves. So again, here's where I think it's useful to think about those feeder communities. And not all feeder communities are the same in terms of Jewish continuity. Really the main feeder community is Amsterdam, which then has offshoots in London after the Dutch rabbis negotiate to have Jews readmitted to London, and Hamburg,

which also has a large Sephardic and also an Ashkenazi community. So Amsterdam has sort of satellites in London and Hamburg, and its third satellite is this Jewish community in Curacao, which, by the middle of the 18th century, really is the its own hub for setting up networks with other places in the colonies. So across those different places, there's this common culture that everybody is sharing through the synagogues and through synagogue life. Part of that is the synagogue style, which, again, we'll talk more about next week. Second are those prayer books, which are physically being brought across the ocean until the 1760s, when we finally get a translation in English, which is from New York. Third aspect is food, which, both in terms of recipes, are being spread across that Atlantic networks, but also literally being shipped from community to community. So we actually have Jews in different ports.

We're relying on Jews to send them kosher meat or different articles that they'll need in order to be able to, for example, have a Passover Seder. So before Passover, you get all these exchanges going on between Jews in different ports, making sure that people have what they need. Fourth, there's a common culture around gravestones. And again, gravestones, I think we might think of as something you would just make wherever you are. They're shipped from place to place. So we see this continuity going on. And also in their ritual baths in the style in which they're made, something which we'll talk about more again next week. And finally, the language. So part of the reason why the prayer books are in Spanish is because the Sephardic, the Portuguese Jews really see Spanish and Portuguese as Jewish languages. So just like Yiddish might be for Ashkenazi Jews or Ladino for Eastern Sephardic Jews, Western Sephardic Jews use Portuguese to keep their records, and they use Spanish for their prayer books and for the poetry that they're writing. And those are languages which are taught in the schools to the next generation to keep this common culture going.

Amongst all those different places and those networks, again, there's really a hierarchy of different places with Amsterdam at the top and then the three satellite communities that are sort of the next wave being a mediator, and then finally everybody else in that bottom layer. So if I live in Barbados and I have a question, I would go to one of these three communities, typically, with my question. And then if there was a question in Curacao, they would go to Amsterdam. So again, there's this sort of negotiating of who's going to be asked if I can't figure things out for myself. And that happens all the time. Jews are constantly getting a group of people together. And just like Jews today, people disagree in the colonies. So there'll be a discussion about like, what should happen with the ritual bath, or somebody got taken captive? What should we do with redeeming them? The kosher butcher in New York made a mistake, now what do we do?

So they're constantly having to go to that next level up to settle disputes. So New York goes to London. London, if they have problems, would go to Amsterdam for the Sephardic community. So again, these sort of networks are going on. For those of you who are wondering what happens if there's a fight in Amsterdam, they go and talk to Venice. So Venice is the next level up, but you wouldn't see people leaping over those normally. You go to the the person who's sort of in your pyramid scheme next up from you. So that's our third aspect of SECA of Jewish life in the colonies, this incredible continuity that's through these networks that are set up around

the Atlantic world that allow people to share a common culture and actually to be able to have a religious structure beyond their one small port town. That said, there's always adaptation. It's not like everything is exactly the same in every single port town. We actually see some sort of spread as things move out across the colonies. So the farther you get away from the hub, in general, the more variation that you tend to have. So London and Hamburg tend to be closer to Amsterdam, as does Curacao. And the farther you get away, the more that you're going to see the trends changing. Kind of the classic example of this, and this gets back to our image of SECA with the sand, is people will remember, oh, I've been to a synagogue in the Caribbean, and they had sand on the floors.

And so we think of that as an adaptation. It's something that's borrowed from the religious community in Amsterdam and the Esnoga and the Portuguese synagogue. Being cleanly was incredibly important during this time period in the Netherlands and in the Dutch colonies. This image of a woman sweeping a broom was associated in Dutch literature and iconography with getting rid of the Catholic culture and heresies and sweeping it out. So very much something which people associated with getting rid of Catholicism, even if you were Jewish or Protestant. And one of the things that we see here is the use of sand on the floors as part of this cleanliness programme. You'll notice there's very little sand on the floor in the Spanish Portuguese synagogue in Amsterdam. In fact, there would be a little bit more by the doorway. It sort of varies depending on when you go there, how much sand is there. But again, it's really just for keeping the floors clean, by and large, though religious explanations have come up over time. It's something that was done very standard in religious structures like this at the time, regardless of whether they were Jewish.

But when we get to the Caribbean, and here's the example from Curacao, suddenly, we have tonnes of sand. They obviously have lots more sand available, but they're adapting that Dutch tradition and adding levels of religious meaning to it. Suddenly, the sand becomes symbolic of the travels through the desert, the original exodus of the Jews, as well as the exodus to the Americas. It's also becomes symbolic of the time when Jews are waiting for the Messiah to come when they're at this sort of limbo scene. And so we'll see actually a little bit of sand is often added from Jerusalem and from the holy land to the sand that's otherwise local. And the third explanation that we tend to get from people early on in these communities is that the sand is a sign of all those years in Spain and Portugal when people had to practise in secrecy. So when they had these hidden synagogues, when they were fearful of the Inquisition, and they would put down sand in order to make sure that people couldn't hear them walking, and it would sort of hide their footsteps.

So over time, that sand, which had once been something about cleaning, becomes very religiously poignant as it adapts to meet the Caribbean. Another example of this sort of adaptation that happens over time are these gravestones and how they change. So in Amsterdam, it's sort of like the peak example of the Western Sephardic gravestone style. And there are certain things that make it very distinctive, compared to other places. One, this emphasis on these flat tablestones as opposed to an Ashkenazi cemeteries where you might

see the upright ones. One, something which you can't see on these ones, but which I'll show you in a moment, which is a hand cutting down the tree of life. Third, a death's head, which, again, I'll show you in a moment. Angels, which many of us, so there's angels up here, angel here. Angels, which some of us might think would be prohibited by the second commandment, are all over the gravestones. Biblical scenes, so for example, we have a scene here which is for the story of Purim. Up here, we have Moses and the tablets of the law. Here we have the Akedah where the angel's coming down and stopping Abraham from sacrificing Isaac. So these biblical scenes very lovingly displayed and Spanish and Portuguese, in addition to Hebrew, again, because they're Jewish languages.

So that sort of this style that comes out of Amsterdam. And what we see is as that style moves to Hamburg and London, we see a lot of continuity but also some adaptation. So in Hamburg, we do get the flat ones, but also a lot of interest in these pyramid styles, which we have a few of in Amsterdam, but more of in Hamburg. Again, we still have the biblical scenes, we still have the angels. And in London, we still have the Spanish and Portuguese. And here, we can also see that cutting down of the tree of life. Interestingly, in London, we don't have as many of the biblical scenes as we do in Hamburg or Amsterdam. But again, sort of adaptation but pretty close to the original. Similarly, when we get to the colonies, we continue to see these kind of adaptations going on. So here's a stone that's from Curacao, which we would expect to be more similar to Amsterdam. And in fact, they were getting their stones, often, directly from Amsterdam. So it looks just like a stone you could have gotten in Amsterdam. There's the flat tablestones. Sometimes you'll see the tree of life.

This has this lovely biblical scene, again, from the story of Purim. Angels on them, the Spanish and Portuguese, in addition to the Hebrew, death's heads. All these symbols are things that I might expect to see, just like they would be in Amsterdam. But then when I go a little bit north to Jamaica, I start to see some variations. So again, angels, yes, in the corners, cutting down the tree of life, yes, Spanish and Portuguese, yes, definitely see death's heads. Particularly in the early synagogues, there's a lot of death's heads after Port Royal falls into the ocean, we get a lot of death's heads. But I start to see some adaptations, namely this particular way of doing the inscriptions becomes very common in the British West Indies and not as much in other places. So this sort of border inscription. I put it in a slightly different lighter shade to indicate adaptation. Similarly, when I go north, I start to see adaptations as well. So in New York, I'm still getting some angels and some flat tablestones and a cutting down of the tree of life. But they become much more unusual.

This is a rare stone. Most of the stones are not this elaborate. It's really somebody who died. This is somebody, a young man who died in helping people, save people from an early smallpox epidemic. He was an early doctor. Interestingly, he's not even Sephardic, but he's using the Sephardic style, again, as an homage to what he's doing. Or in Newport, I'm still seeing the angels, but suddenly I'm seeing things in English. And even though this is a young Sephardic child, I'm seeing some upright stones in addition to the tablestones. Similarly in Barbados, I'm starting to see some of those adaptations. Flat tablestones, I've got my angels, I've got some

death's heads. But notice I've still got that weird border inscription around the edges that I expect from the British West Indies. And interestingly, this is actually a gravestone that was for, again, for an Ashkenazi man, but it's in Spanish and Portuguese. And it was carved by somebody from Newport. So instead of being in the Newport style, it's like an adapted Newport style for somebody in the Caribbean. So again, continuity but adaptation for what you can do in the local places. And the farther I get away from the centres, the more variation I start to see. So as I am in the centre, it's stronger, and then the culture sort of filters out.

That stays true until about the middle of the 19th century when Curacao cemeteries actually become very sort of, like, whoo, off on their own tangent and become very different. And that's at that point when this hierarchy has been destabilised. So Adam Mendelsohn will be telling you more about that in upcoming weeks. We see that same sort of adaptation going on with marriage contracts where there's this interest in illustrating them. But instead of having the typical symbols that I expect from Amsterdam, suddenly I've got masonic symbols going on. And the text remains largely the same format. But I start, in certain places, for example, to get racialized language, so adaptations to what's going on in the colonies by place. Not consistent from each place, but Jews sort of navigating what are the local influences. So in conclusion, some of the things that I would take away from this introduction to what Jewish life was like in the colonies, one, even when people aren't Sephardic, they either want to be Sephardic or are being immersed in a Sephardic religious style.

Second, Jews are very much part of empires and economies, either as agents or victims or sometimes both. Third, they aren't off in the wilderness by themselves. They're part of these networks that are continuous with life back in Europe. But at the same time, there's adaptation. So not each place is exactly the same. They're just working off of the same model. So what's coming up next? On next week, we're going to start with Jewish women in Early American. I'm really going to focus in on some of the work that I'm known for in terms of going back and seeing how objects can help us think about, how do I talk about Jews for whom there aren't very many texts left? And then in the second part of next week, we're going to talk about Jews in religion in colonial America. And I've got lots of fantastic images to show you of all the different ways of what makes their religion distinctive and what's going on religiously during this time period, particularly those messianic and mystical movements.

And then we're going to have to figure out when to reschedule, but the epidemics and Jews in early America, I'm going to talk to you about how the ways that Jews grappled with both disease in early America and these huge pandemics, how it was associated with a rise of anti-Semitism, and how the responses to that anti-Semitism and the pandemics can help us think about the context of what's going on right now and also strategies for the future. So I'm going to stop sharing right now, and I have time for some question and answers. So I don't know, Wendy, do you want me to navigate the questions that are coming up?

- Yeah, I think that's the easiest. And if you wouldn't mind reading them, Laura, if you wouldn't mind reading them out so people know what's being asked and then answer them. And I'm not

sure-

- [Laura] Yeah, sure.

- I'm not sure what your timeframe is. What's the time? It is five to 1:00. How much time do you have?

- I have plenty of time. It's early in the morning for me, so I don't know how long people want to, do you want to hang around for like 20 minutes, or how long do you want?

- I'm available today if you are, so.

Q&A and Comments:

- Okay, okay, so let me get through as many of them as I can. So I'm seeing, nice to see some people who are just doing a little shout-out of hello.

Q: So there's a question about, were the Jews of Recife slave owners?

A: It really depends on, so I would say slave owning throughout the colonies, Jews don't own slaves in greater proportions than anybody else. Sometimes they own them in fewer proportions, depending on colonial laws. So in certain places like Barbados, there were restrictions for a while on how many enslaved people Jews can own because they get tired of Jews being so involved in the sugar industry. So they push them out of plantation work. So in Recife, certainly some people owned enslaved people. Most of the Jews were living in town closer to the synagogues. And so you tend to have people who are, if they are owning enslaved people, owning fewer numbers. So we do know that some were owning enslaved people, but again, sort of typical of how you would expect within a colony where poor people know mingling people, maybe a couple or people involved in trade, and then people with larger plantations more. So it's a good question, but I think the answer is typical across the different colonies.

Q: Okay, there was a question about, what era were the one-way tickets given to New Amsterdam?

A: New Amsterdam is one of the few places where there aren't one-way tickets given to them. So the Jews are pretty strategic about where they give tickets to for the colonies. So there's a few places that are very popular for giving tickets to send people to the colonies, and those tend to be the sugar colonies because they are places where they think Jews could actually make some money and get off of the poor roles. Like the goal is not just to get rid of them, but to give them a leg up and a new start. So typical places that people get sent are Suriname in large numbers, Sint Eustatius, which also has some areas and is actually the congregation's name sort of indicates that they're a welcome spot for the poor. And we also get to some people sent to the southern parts of the United States, so like Savannah would be an example. So really

they're pretty strategic about trying to send to places that they think people could do well.

And sadly, at that point, New Amsterdam, New York, is not one of them. New York does not become a hub until after the Revolutionary War. And really not until the 1820s do things start to take off for New York. So you wouldn't send somebody there because it's a hard place to make money.

Q: Okay, so explain which countries constitute Iberia. Yes, so question was, is that just Spain and Portugal?

A: Yes, when I say Iberia, I tend to mean Spain and Portugal. It's worth remembering that right before this time period, the low countries would've been an extension of Spain and Portugal. So the low countries are what we consider Belgium and Amsterdam, for example, today. And they broke away and became Protestant. And as part of the like, my enemy is my friend's enemy, the Jews congregate in areas where the Protestants are more open to them. So that's why they moved to Amsterdam. But there's already some Jews sort of located there. They just negotiate to be able to embrace Judaism openly. So early on, Spain and Portugal would've included gone farther up. But by the time period we're looking at, it's really that Spain and Portugal as we think of it today in Liberian Peninsula.

Q: A lot of people are saying that they went to the synagogue in Curacao, and who runs it now?

A: There's actually two congregations in Curacao. There is the old Portuguese historic synagogue, which I showed you some images of, in which you'll see more images of next week. It's still run by the Portuguese congregation. Some of the people in that community are descendants of people from the colonial period, as is the case in many Spanish and Portuguese communities. There's also a newer Ashkenazi congregation as well on the island. And I believe there's now a Chabad rabbi there. It changes pretty rapidly. So with the shutdown due to COVID, I'm not really sure what's going on. But yeah, there's a lot going on the island, beautiful island, totally, the shul is beautiful, worth going to.

Q: Okay, do I know how Jews retreating the slaves on the sugar plantations?

A: So again, most Jews did not own sugar plantations with the exceptions of a few areas. There is a Jewish plantation town in Suriname. There's kind of, I will be honest, we don't have good evidence is probably the best answer. There is some records from the colonial period of people who were clearly anti-Semitic who are saying the Jews were the worst slave owners. And then there are later Jews saying, like, the Jews were the best slave owners. You know, each of those are a little bit suspect in terms of not being based on much evidence and having their own agendas. So I would say best answer is, eh, we don't know. Probably similar to other people.

Okay, doo, doo, doo. Ooh, somebody has a relative who was the rabbi in Suriname. Suriname is still an amazing, amazing place. I covered the information about the sand on the floor, so I'm

going to skip that. There is a question.

Q: In 1754, in all of those port towns, what was the common language among Jews involved in business and commerce? How did they communicate with the non-Jewish community?

A: This is such a great, Helen, thank you for asking this. This is a great, great question 'cause it gets to why Jews are so important in those networks. So Jews, part of the reason why they're so valuable is the men, in particular, often know multiple languages that tie them across different ports. Say if they're somebody engaged in business, the men are being educated in the secular language of whatever, so English or Dutch. In addition, they would be educated in Hebrew and in Spanish or Portuguese. So that combination allows them to be able to communicate with the Spanish and Portuguese, means they can communicate with all of their kin, regardless of where they grew up across the Atlantic world. And it gets at why there's such powerful trade networks and partners. For women, the answer is somewhat different. So women, during this time period, often were not educated, and this will seem counterintuitive, in the local language.

So if their husbands died, they often had a hard time taking over the business because they didn't necessarily speak the local language, the local language of the colony. So instead, they would often speak the local Creole languages. So for example, the Creole language that was spoken by enslaved people in Suriname or the Creole language, Papiamento, that was spoken in the Dutch Caribbean. So that means, and we know this because Jewish men and other people at the time were very condescending about women not speaking the right languages. And we know from signatures and all sorts of other things of when women were literate in the languages of the colonies. So this really put women at a huge disadvantage, when their husbands died, about whether they were able to succeed in business. So there are women like Rebecca Gomez who are totally able to take over, but women definitely have a disadvantage in terms of language during this time period. Some of the times, like, Hannah Louzada, the woman who ended up on the poor roles, we know that she spoke at least three languages, but unfortunately, English is her worst one in terms of being intelligible. And so her business folds very quickly as a result.

Q: Okay, so there was a question about, were the prayer books in Spanish or Ladino? And then she says, "When I stayed in Paris, my landlady read her prayer book in Ladino, but Hebrew letters." So that is such a great question 'cause it really gets at the difference between those Eastern Sephardim, those people who settled in the Ottoman Empire, versus the Western Sephardim who've went to like Hamburg, London, Bayonne, Amsterdam, and then came to the colonies.

A: So the people in the Eastern Sephardic are people who spoke Ladino, which often was written in Hebrew letters, even though it sounds kind of like a mediaeval Spanish. So those of us who work on early Spanish, it's kind of fun because it got a lot of hallmarks of early modern Spanish, even though it's current. So people who are in Paris today, a lot of Sephardic Jews are actually Eastern Sephardim who came to Paris later. So came from Egypt and other places or

Algeria and then settled in Paris. So a lot of Eastern Sephardic Jews, so that totally makes sense that the landlady would be using a prayer book in Ladino written in Hebrew characters.

Very different for the Western Sephardic Jews because their prayer books tended to be written in Spanish but with Roman alphabet because they wanted to make sure that everybody, even the people, they had themselves left Iberia and maybe hadn't learned Hebrew characters yet, that they would be able to read it. So there's an early translation of the Bible into Spanish, that Spanish and Hebrew interlinear. But again, all the Spanish is in Roman alphabet. And that's really typical for these colonial tracks. That's very unusual that you would see, I don't know of any examples, though somebody, I'm sure, will correct me of an example of something that was written in Spanish, but in Hebrew letters from the colonies. That would be very unusual because it's not what the community needs at that point.

So there is a discussion about Pesaro, which I read that book, I don't know a tonne about it, so I'm not going to weigh in on it. So there's somebody who's telling a sort of sad story about her parents marrying in the 1930s and having to face derision because as a Sephardi, his fellows considered he was letting the side down by choosing her beautiful, richer Ashkenazi mother. Yes, so I would say when I lived in Panama for a while, this was also the case there that, like, it was 95% Sephardic, and Sephardic was definitely still like, super, super fancy. And people who intermarried with an Ashkenazi Jew would come to the Ashkenazi synagogue. So definitely there are certain, definitely communities today where being Sephardic is still more valued. Yeah, and I would say, vice versa, that sometimes you'll see there's some interesting letters from early Seattle about somebody asking the forward whether people who spoke Ladino, whether they were actually Jewish. So again, people come with all sorts of interesting conceptions.

Q: What language did they speak to each other in?

A: That is a great question. This is from Sheila. Oh, I don't know where Sheila is, but good question. So it varies tremendously on what generation people are. So that first generation of people leaving Iberia, you'll often see people writing letters to each other in either Spanish or Portuguese, depending on what country they're from. And so the people of that same generation, they'll write in Spanish and Portuguese, but if they're writing to their child, they'll write in English because that's the language their child understands. So it definitely seems as if there's some generational problems. And that generational problem is probably why we get that English siddur printed in 1760s because suddenly the younger generation aren't native speakers of Spanish and Portuguese. And it's becoming harder in the US colonies for them to actually be able to read things in Spanish, whereas in other places, they keep the Spanish and Portuguese longer.

Let's see if I can scroll down. Somebody else saying, "I thought the prayer books were in Hebrew." So the prayer books tend to be, just like today, if you pick up a prayer book, most prayer books have a mixture of languages. So certainly certain prayers are always in Hebrew, but there's that framing material which isn't a language. And if you've ever gone to synagogue in

another country, that framing material could be quite helpful if you don't understand the person telling you what page number you're on it, for example. But there's also things, such as the prayer for the government, which tends to be in the local language. So for example, in the Suriname example, when somebody was complaining, I don't want to say the prayers in Spanish. It was the prayer for the government, which, in the United States, would typically be in English. You would expect it to have been in Dutch in Suriname since it was the Dutch colony, but instead they were saying it in Spanish because it was a Spanish prayer book.

Q: How did the Jewish community end up in Amsterdam? Such a great question.

A: So again, when the low countries broke away from Spain and became Protestant, there were already some Jews living there because it was already a great place to be trading. But as those places became more hospitable to people had been conversos or crypto-Jews who were practising Judaism in secret in Iberia, you do actually have people leaving from Iberia and going directly to places like Amsterdam or The Hague and other places in what's now the Netherlands. Very early on, they are allowed to have worship openly as Jews without it being illegal and are allowed to set up synagogues. And that really is like the turning point where Amsterdam becomes, whoop, suddenly people want to go there. So you have to remember that's really unusual in Western Europe during this time period because, in Catholic countries, that wasn't generally the case. So that really becomes why people start to get sucked in there.

As the community becomes wealthier, in part because of their relations with the Dutch West India company and with trading and with money made from the colonies, then you start getting there will be pogroms in Eastern Europe, and you'll start getting Ashkenazi Jews coming to Amsterdam 'cause it's known because they're wealthy. So there's kind of different reasons why people come. And again, this is a time period where most governments don't have any welfare system. It's up to individual congregations to care for their own poor. So that's why the Jews are getting overwhelmed. There's so many more poor people than people who can pay taxes that they're struggling to figure out, like, we don't want to just thrust them back into a place where they're going to be killed, but we want to figure out how can we get them to be able to be self-sustaining so that it doesn't mean that the whole congregation collapses. So at the same time as they're sending people to the colonies, they're also setting up free educational schools, for example, in London for the poor, where they're teaching people trades as well as Hebrew. So really it becomes, during the 18th century, a big push in almost all these communities of how to get the Jewish poor to be able to be self-sustaining.

Yes, so somebody was asking about cookbooks. We're going to talk a little bit more about food in the lecture that's on religion, because I work on food. So yes, I love Jewish cookbooks, and I have some really interesting information for you about what are unique about Sephardic recipes during this time period and what kinds of foods they exchange. So very different than what I would've expected when I first went into this.

Somebody asked, why is Venice above the top of the triangle? Venice, great, great question.

She was like, "Venice?" Venice has a very long, well-established Sephardic community, and it also has a Portuguese community, as well as something that looks more like Eastern Sephardic Jews. A lot of the early rabbis from Amsterdam come via Venice and areas around Venice. And in addition, they sort of have a common religious structure, if that makes any sense. So they're, in some ways, an early feeder community helping establish the religious community in Amsterdam, particularly for that generation of Jews who, they're escaping from Spain and Portugal, they've been raised as Catholics. How are they going to set up a Jewish school? They really turn to Venice as being the model for what their Jewish community will be like. And anybody who's been to Venice, they have amazing architecture.

- Laura?

- Yeah.

- [Wendy] Hi, it's me.

- Yeah.

- [Wendy] I want to say that I want to just thank you for a fantastic presentation today.

- [Laura] Sure.

- [Wendy] It was absolutely brilliant. At two o'clock, we have Trudy coming on, and she's going to be talking about Ben Hecht, journalism, a screenwriter, and a Zionist. And I just feel like you've been going for a long time, and we need to give you a break now.

- Sure, no problem.

- [Wendy] And Judy, before our next lecture. But that was fantastic, and I just want to say to everybody else who wanted a rerun of the lecture, we are working on the website, and all of this will be on our website. So you know that you had over 2,000 participants.

- Wow, that's great.

- [Wendy] Yeah. 2,200 almost, so yes.

- Perfect, and I look forward to, have a great time with the lectures this afternoon. I hope some people will join us again tomorrow morning or afternoon for the next of the series.

- [Wendy] And so welcome to the team. Great, great pleasure having you with us.

- Thank you.

- [Wendy] Thanks so much.

- Thank you so much.

- Take care.

- Bye.

- Thank you very, very much. Thanks, bye-Bye.