

A Synagogue in Newport

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Perhaps a dozen Jewish families — some sixty souls — called Newport their home in the early 1760's.¹ They were not, of course, the first Jews to live in the town; as early as 1658, nearly a century before the founding of a congregation in Rhode Island, there are said to have been Jews in Newport. According to a Newport antiquarian, in September, 1658, the home of Mordecai Campanal, a pioneering Jewish settler, had been the scene of Abraham Moses' introduction to Masonry.² In any case, two decades later, Campanal and a fellow Jew named Moses "Pacheckoe" (Pacheco) had been granted land "for a burial place" in Newport.³ This was the same cemetery of which Henry Wadsworth Longfellow would write almost two hundred years after its establishment:

How strange it seems! These Hebrews in their graves.
Close by the street of this fair seaport town,
Silent beside the never-silent waves,
At rest in all this moving up and down!

The trees are white with dust, that o'er their sleep,
Wave their broad curtains in the south-wind's breath,
While underneath these leafy tents they keep
The long, mysterious Exodus of Death.

And these sepulchral stones, so old and brown,
That pave with level flags their burial-place,

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¹ Jacob R. Marcus, *American Jewry. Documents. Eighteenth Century [AJD]* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1959), p. 211, declares that a petition signed in 1762 by seventy-eight Newporters, ten of them Jews, "included practically every Jewish householder in the community." See also Ezra Stiles, *The Literary Diary*, Edited by F. B. Dexter (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), I, 11, note 2.

² *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society [PAJHS]*, XXVII (1920), 416.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 175. Note especially the facsimile attached to that page. See also *PAJHS*, VI (1897), 68.

Seem like the tablets of the Law, thrown down
And broken by Moses at the mountain's base.⁴

Already in the 1760's, there may have been in the cemetery "sepulchral stones" that were "old and brown." The Jews were hardly newcomers to Narragansett Bay, but so small was their community that, as the seventh decade of the eighteenth century dawned, there was still no synagogue in Newport.

By the year 1754, Newport Jewry had organized itself into a congregation, taking its name from a verse in the Book of Isaiah:

ונשא גם לגוים ואסף גרדי ישראל ונפצות יהודה יקבץ מארבע כנפות הארץ

And He will set up an ensign for the nations, and will assemble the dispersed of Israel, and gather together the scattered of Judah from the four corners of the earth.⁵

"Nefutsé Yisrael" — The Scattered of Israel — they called their synagogueless congregation during the 1750's, and in view of the unmistakably messianic force of the verse underlying the name, we are not surprised by Ezra Stiles's report, dated in the summer of 1769, that "the Jews are wont in thunder storms to set open all their doors and windows for the coming of Messias."⁶ By that date, however, the congregation, no longer synagogueless, had adopted the name ישראל, "Yeshuat Yisrael" — The Salvation of Israel.⁷

A PIOUS DESIGN

The Scattered of Israel in Newport were far from content with their lack of a synagogue. As early indeed as 1754, they had set out to remedy the situation. In January of that year, they had appealed for aid to London's Saar ha-Samayim Congregation, better

⁴ Longfellow's poem, entitled "The Jewish Cemetery in Newport," appears in its entirety in *The Poetical Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1882), pp. 216-17.

⁵ Isaiah 11:12.

⁶ Stiles, *The Literary Diary*, I, 19. See also Marcus, *AJD*, p. 86.

⁷ See Morris A. Gutstein, *To Bigotry No Sanction: A Jewish Shrine in America, 1658-1958* (New York: Bloch Publishing Co., 1958), pp. 169-71; Marcus, *AJD*, p. 86.

known today as the Bevis Marks Synagogue. The London congregation, already a half-century old and recognized as the mother synagogue of Anglo-Sephardic Jewry, had responded with prayers — but no money: “We praise you very much,” wrote Moseh de Jacob Franco, treasurer of the London congregation, to the “very illustrious gentlemen of Congregation of Nephuse Israel,” but “at the present time it would not be convenient for us, nor are we able to comply with your request.” Rather, added Franco, “May God be the One who assists all, and of whose grace we would desire that he give to you as he is able, and may he prosper you in your pious plans!”⁸ The Newporters had obviously chosen an unfortunate time in which to call on their English coreligionists for financial support. England was then preparing for war with France, money was scarce, and the Londoners consequently felt themselves unable to do more than pray for the mendicant colonials. Later, however, they did contribute to the Newport congregation.⁹

Undaunted, Newport Jewry continued its efforts to acquire a synagogue. On June 13, 1759, Jacob Rodriguez Rivera, Moses Levy, and Isaac Hart — one Sephardi and two Ashkenazim — acting as trustees for the Newport congregation, acquired from Ebenezer Allen, of Sandwich, Massachusetts, title to

one certain small parcel or lot of land situate, lying and being in the township of Newport . . . containing per estimation ninety two feet in front or breadth and one hundred and six feet in length or depth, the same being butted and bounded . . . on a street called Griffin Street. . . .

The property had cost the congregation a modest £ 1,500 in local Rhode Island currency. Unable to raise among themselves sufficient funds for the building of a sanctuary, the Newporters lost little

⁸ On the Bevis Marks Synagogue, see *The Jewish Encyclopedia [JE]* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1901–1906), III, 133–34, and Cecil Roth, *A History of the Marranos* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1932), pp. 266, 269. Franco’s letter, translated from Spanish, appears in Marcus, *AJD*, p. 87.

⁹ George M. Wrong, *The Conquest of New France: A Chronicle of the Colonial Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1920), p. 158. That the London congregation did later contribute is documented by the fact that, not long after the Newport synagogue had been consecrated, benedictions made at the synagogue on the eve of Yom Kippur included one for the “Trustees of Congⁿ in London for having made a present to this Cong.” (*PAJHS*, XXVII, 408).

time in appealing to already established congregations in North America, the Caribbean area, and Europe.¹⁰

A few months before, they had already written to New York's century-old "Shearith Yisrael" — Remnant of Israel — congregation, whose house of worship on Mill Street, now South William Street, was the "mother synagogue" of American Jewry.¹¹ In an eloquent "address," they had acquainted the New Yorkers with their aspirations and asked for help in fulfilling them:

When we reflect on how much it is our duty, to instruct children, in the path of virtuous religion; and how unhappy the portions must be, of those children, and their parents, who are thro necessity, educated in a place where they must remain almost totally uninstructed, in our most holy and divine law, our rites and ceremonies; and from which place, they may perhaps never have it in their power to depart; when we farther reflect on how much it is our duty to assist the distressed; and when we consider the extensive usefulness of a charity, like this for which we now supplicate assistance; we can entertain no doubt of your zeal, to promote this good work.¹²

The Newporters, as it happened, were not to be disappointed in their expectations of aid from New York. A *nedaba*, or offering, collected in the New York synagogue during the Passover festival produced "a contribution of £ 149:6^d [pence] . . . towards building at New Port a place of worship to Almighty God." Newport Jewry's "pious design," wrote the leaders of Shearith Israel Congregation warmly to their Rhode Island brethren,

was a sufficient inducement to promote the success of your request. We heartily wish our mite may enable you to go on with the holy building and that you may be a religious and prosperous congregation. . . . We

¹⁰ Gutstein, p. 53. Among the congregations contributing to the Newport synagogue were New York's Shearith Israel Congregation; the Shaar Hashamayim Congregation of Kingston, Jamaica; London's Saar ha-Samayim (Bevis Marks) Congregation; Mikveh Israel Congregation of Willemstad, Curaçao; and Newe Shalom Congregation of Paramaribo, Surinam (*PAJHS*, XXVII, 408).

¹¹ See David de Sola Pool, *The Mill Street Synagogue (1730-1817) of the Congregation Shearith Israel* (New York, 1930), pp. 18, 22.

¹² *PAJHS*, XXVII, 178. The letter is reprinted also in Marcus, *Early American Jewry* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1951-1953), I, 119-20.

sincerely wish you success in all your laudable undertakings, and that our God may graciously enable his people to do *mitsvoth* [good deeds]. . . .¹³

This was, of course, a far more gratifying response than they had received from the London Sephardim five years earlier, and in a letter written to Myer Myers and Jacob Franks, the presiding officers of the New York congregation, on May 28, 1759, the Newporters acknowledged "with unfeigned thanks" the contribution of Shearith Israel.¹⁴

MOST PERFECT OF THE TEMPLE KIND

From the other congregations to which they appealed, it is evident, the Newporters did not receive so favorable a response, for barely two years later, on April 5, 1761, Naphtali Hart, serving for that year as parnas, or president, of the Newport congregation, was obliged to address another supplication "To Mess^{rs} the Parnassim and Elders of the Jewish Congregation in New York"; Hart regretted, he wrote, the fact that the Newporters were "necessitated again to supplicate the charitable assistance" of the New Yorkers, who had "already cheerfully and generously contributed towards finishing" the Rhode Island synagogue. But, "greatly disappointed in their expectations from the charity of other congregations, and the cost of building rising to much more than it was conceiv'd it would," the Newporters now found themselves "unable to compleat the building" and were compelled to "intreat . . . the farther assistance" of their New York brethren "towards compleating the same."¹⁵ Apparently a favorable answer was not long in forthcoming, for the work went on. On July 25, 1762, Moses Lopez, parnas for that year, wrote to Joseph Simson and Samuel Judah, the parnasim of the New York congregation, that the Newporters had arranged for "workmen, who are actually at work, to compleat the hechal [the Holy Ark housing the penta-

¹³ *PAJHS*, XXVII, 179.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 179-80.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 181-82.

teuchal scrolls], tebah [lectern], and benches of our synagogue." The construction, Lopez said, was to "be finished by Rosasanah" — that is, by the fall of the year. He added then that the Newporters would appreciate "any offerings of furniture and ornaments towards this pious undertaking." The New Yorkers, he promised, would be given "timely notice of the dedication day, that those gentlemen who please to favor us with their company may not be disappointed."¹⁶

In actuality, Lopez was a trifle premature in writing during the summer of 1762 about "the dedication day." That day did not come for well over a year. It was not until December 2, 1763, that the lovely Georgian building designed by the brilliant *amateur*, Peter Harrison, was consecrated. Harrison, reputedly a disciple of Sir John Vanbrugh, was the most notable architect in Colonial America. The designer of Newport's Redwood Library and Brick Market, Cambridge's Christ Church, and King's Chapel in Boston, he accepted no fee for his services to the Jews of Newport.¹⁷

Ezra Stiles, a Congregationalist minister who was one day to be president of Yale College and whose home stood in close proximity to the new synagogue, was among those attending the building's dedication. He was clearly impressed with what he witnessed:

December 2, 1763, Friday. In the afternoon was the dedication of the new synagogue in this town. It began by a handsome procession in which were carried the Books of the Law, to be deposited in the Ark. Several portions of Scripture, and of their service with a prayer for the royal family, were read and finely sung by the priests and people. There were present many gentlemen and ladies. The order and decorum, the harmony and solemnity of the musick, together with a handsome assembly of people, in an edifice the most perfect of the temple kind perhaps in America, and splendidly illuminated, could not but raise in the mind a faint idea of the majesty and grandeur of the ancient Jewish worship mentioned in Scripture.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

¹⁷ On Peter Harrison, see *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), VIII, 347; also *Old-Time New England: The Bulletin of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities*, XXXVI (January, 1946), 50, 54-55, 58-61.

¹⁸ Stiles, *The Literary Diary*, I, 6; reprinted in *PAJHS*, X (1902), 9.

Stiles's interest in the Newport Jewish community never flagged. A few months after the consecration, in a letter to the Reverend Dr. Nathaniel Lardner, of London, the Newport clergyman again adverted to the new synagogue. Writing to Lardner on June 20, 1764, he said:

We have fifteen or twenty families of Jews here, almost the only ones in New England (and perhaps there are not so many more on this continent). They have erected a small synagogue in New York; and another at Newport, met in for the first time in December last; it is superbly finished withinside at a cost of £2,000 sterling; in the place of the Ark they have deposited three vellum copies, rolls of the Law, one of which is said to be above two hundred years old, which I judge true from the aspect and rabbinical flourishes. They have a chuzzan [hazan, or minister] from Amsterdam.¹⁹

The "chuzzan" was Isaac Touro, a young man who had come to America from his native Holland in 1760 and, at the recommendation of the parnasim of Amsterdam's Portuguese congregation, had been elected minister of the Newport congregation.²⁰ Touro, whom Stiles often described as "the Jew priest" and to whom he attributed "a certain grandeur of utterance, and a . . . bold and lofty sonitus verborum [voice]," had conducted the consecration service which called to the diarist's mind "the majesty . . . of the ancient Jewish worship mentioned in Scripture."²¹

CHARACTERISTIC OF NOBLE THOUGHTS

In many respects, the problems of Newport Jewry had only *begun* with the dedication of its synagogue in 1763, for if the com-

¹⁹ Stiles, *The Literary Diary*, I, 11, note 2; reprinted in *PAJHS*, X, 9. One of these "rolls of the Law" was probably the beautifully accoutered, fine parchment Torah which the Amsterdam Portuguese congregation sent to Newport in May, 1760, after the Newporters had pleaded an inability to purchase a Torah due to their economic straits; Portuguese Jewish Community Archives, Amsterdam [PJCAA], "Resoluçoens dos Sres. do Mahamad, 5511-5527," p. 123. My thanks to Dr. Isaac S. Emmanuel, of Cincinnati, Ohio, for this information.

²⁰ According to PJCAA, p. 100, Newport Jewry had requested their Amsterdam coreligionists to send them a hazan; after examining three candidates, the Amsterdam parnasim selected Touro in May, 1759. Again, my thanks to Dr. Isaac S. Emmanuel for this information.

²¹ *PAJHS*, XXVII, 417; Stiles, *The Literary Diary*, I, 5, 39, 260, 377; II, 29.

munity had realized one of its fondest dreams in the structure's consecration, it also faced a most serious challenge: How were the Newporters to pay for the synagogue? The new building had cost some £2,000 sterling, no small sum in those days, and the expense had had to be defrayed in part by a mortgage at 8 per cent. To make matters worse, the termination of the French and Indian War in February, 1763, had precipitated a depression, and money was tighter than ever. There was nothing for it, it soon became evident, but to conduct another fund-raising campaign, and this the Newporters set about doing without much delay.

One of the congregations to which they appealed was the "Mikveh Israel" — Hope of Israel — Congregation, founded in 1656 at Curaçao in the Dutch West Indies. During the eighteenth century, Curaçao was among the New World's foremost trading centers, and Curaçao Jewry had prospered greatly as a result of the colony's commercial growth. Some of the Newport Jews undoubtedly carried on business relations with their Curaçao brethren, and, in any case, one of the Newport community's leaders, Jacob Rodriguez Rivera, had visited the island during the early 1740's and had married there the widow Hannah Sasportas, daughter of Samuel Rodrigues Pimentel, a Curaçao Jew of some prominence.²²

Curiously enough, the Newporters' request was transmitted to the Curaçao community by a Christian merchant, Frederick De Wit, of a notable Curaçao family. De Wit, who probably traded with Newport Jewish businessmen, appears to have served as a mediator between the Jews of Newport and their Curaçao coreligionists. That Christian gentleman, it seems, delivered himself over to the fund-raising campaign with characteristic Dutch drive and efficiency — and even offered to undertake its sponsorship! In the fall of 1764, a few days after Rosh Hashanah, the Jews of Newport addressed an extraordinary Spanish letter "to the honorable members of the K. K. Mikveh Israel":

Cheered by the hope offered us by the kind protection of Mr. Frederick De Wit, we, through the offices of the above gentleman, request the liberal assistance of your worthy congregation, so that we might be able

²² On Curaçao Jewry, see *JE*, IV, 386–89. See also *PAJHS*, II (1894), 105–6; XLII (1952), 304.

to repay the obligation and mortgage which we were forced to place on our building, and so that we might be able to pay the workmen who constructed it.

For two years we have just about managed to collect enough to pay the interest at eight per cent, an expenditure which, when added to the annual expenses involved in the maintenance of the synagogue, has proved extremely difficult for this small congregation in such adverse times. The third annual due date of the mortgage having arrived, and . . . [in view of the fact] that it will be impossible for us not only to pay the principal, but even the interest, we find it necessary to appeal to our brethren, and to inform them of our deplorable situation, especially when we consider the great risk of eventually losing our valued building.

Mr. De Wit, who has personal knowledge of our plight, has graciously encouraged us, offering to supervise and sponsor a campaign for funds to save the synagogue, and, being an effective speaker, proposes to open the drive for this campaign — an offer which we can hardly commend highly enough, and one which is characteristic of noble thoughts.

We flatter ourselves that since the practice of mitzvot [deeds of religious merit] is so deeply ingrained in your spirit,²³ you will unanimously agree to come to the aid of this effort. May God lead you to such action and may he be pleased to recompense your large congregation with long life, increased favor, and prosperity for many years.²⁴

To what extent the Newport appeal was favorably received in Curaçao, we do not know, but it hardly seems likely that Curaçao Jewry found it easy to resist the *arbeidsvermogen* of their Rhode Island brethren's Christian champion.

We do know more about the response granted the Newport appeal in Surinam, Holland's colony on the Guiana coast of South America. Aaron Lopez, the brother of Moses Lopez, and his business rival, Isaac Hart, must have been gratified with the reply accorded their letters by Surinam Jewry, for on December 3, 1764, a Paramaribo correspondent wrote to them:

My last to you was by Captⁿ Geo. Buckmaster wherein I acq^t [acquainted] you of my safe arrival. I now by these inform you of the success your letters met with. In primus [initially] I have sent one of the letters

²³ This may have been a reference to the gifts which the Curaçao Jews had made in 1730 "toward the building of a sinagoga" in New York; see *PAJHS*, XXVII, 5.

²⁴ Marcus, *AJD*, p. 88.

to our Portugueze Kaal [community] upon which they have assembled imidiately. I have been myself afterwards at thier general meeting and represented your case, and have received a very satisfactory answer, upon which they resolved to grant your demand by a colection, and have already gathered six hundred gilders and haven't half done.

As to they Asschenazims [Jews of Central or East European background] I also dld [delivered] your letter upon which they delayed untill yesterday and they have resolved to do the same way and this week they'll begin. If there be anything further I shall let you know it from time to time. . . .²⁵

The separatism that obtained in Paramaribo between the prideful, lineage-conscious Sephardim and the *tudescos*, or Ashkenazim, was happily not to be repeated in Newport, and both Aaron Lopez and his *tudesco* colleague, Isaac Hart, must have been pleased that, in this one instance at least, the divided communities of Surinam had "resolved to do the same way."

²⁵ E. H. Coutinho, Paramaribo, Surinam, to Aaron Lopez and Isaac Hart, Newport, R. I., December 3, 1764 (MS., Lopez Letters, Newport Historical Society, Newport, R. I.; photostatic copy in the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio).

EVEN IN PURITAN BOSTON

No class of immigrants has increased more rapidly in the United States than the Hebrew. The large estimates which have amazed from time to time the readers of our newspapers, are rather under than above the truth. In 1830, we believe, a man might count upon his fingers all the synagogues in this country, and the whole body of Israelites would not reach a myriad. Now there are in the Union at least a quarter of a million Jews, from eighty to ninety synagogues, and multitudes of smaller communities where a nucleus exists which will soon grow into a synagogue. Of these, the city of New York alone has twenty synagogues and thirty thousand souls. About a twentieth part of its population are Jews. There are synagogues in all the chief cities of the seaboard, — two even in Puritan Boston, five in Philadelphia, five in Baltimore, three in New Orleans, and two in Charleston. In the great Western city of Cincinnati there are four synagogues, with a Jewish population of nine thousand, — nearly as great as that of Philadelphia.

[From *The North American Review* (Boston), October, 1856]