

4: Toleration is not equality: the readmission of Jews to England

Before us is the Royal Exchange, first built in 1571 by two Elizabethan cloth dealers, in imitation of the bourse of Antwerp. This was where London's Juda merchant class made deals. A merchant class which had its habits and its interests, and which desired no competition. In continental Europe, despoilment, Talmud burnings, and massacre shifted the centre of Ashkenazi gravity eastwards towards Poland. While elsewhere, intermittent protection from popes and local elites developed in some places into ghettoisation, interrupted by sporadic expulsions and violence.

In the Iberian Peninsula, enforced baptism, judicial looting, and finally expulsion at the end of the 15th century ended a millennium of Jewish communal life. Most Spanish and Portuguese Jews disappeared into the majority population. If not immediately, then after trying and failing to maintain their Judaism with suspicious eyes on them at church and the threat of a violent death ever present.

Some Jews though, maintained a surreptitious existence for decades, generations even centuries. A glimpse of the fear inherent in the undercover, rudimentary life of Sephardim hiding their Judaism is given in the deposition of one Gaspar Lopez to the Inquisition in Milan, just 30 years before the building of the Royal Exchange. Lopez said that in London, whenever any refugee false Christians come from Portugal to go to England and Flanders, and hence to Turkey or elsewhere. In order to lead the lives of Hebrews, they come to the house of the said Alves who helps them to go whether they want to go for this purpose.

In the early 1600s, Amsterdam was one of very few cities in Europe where Jews could live and worship openly and without harassment or significant legal disability. The royal House of Orange was supportive, but official toleration had brought public support too. This culture originated in the peculiarities of the province of Holland's history of revolution against occupying Catholic Spain.

Born in Madeira to refugee parents in 1604, Manoel Dias Soeiro grew up in Amsterdam. He became a rabbi, headed a small yeshiva, and was fully engaged in international cross-communal intellectual life. Publishing under the name, Menasseh Ben Israel, Rabbi Soeiro published *Esperança de Israel* in 1650, Hope of Israel, advocating the Jewish settlement in the Americas in response to enquiries from a Scottish Calvinist minister.

Three years later the king killing Puritan, Oliver Cromwell was appointed Lord Protector of England. Cromwell was religiously and politically extreme and as a regicide treated with suspicion or hatred by rulers ranging from the fellow Calvinist House of Orange to the Catholic Habsburgs of Spain. But he invited Manasseh Ben Israel to England to stay with him. Rabbi Soeiro travelled to London and publicly argued for Jews to be re-admitted to England. Cromwell mounted a conference to debate the issue. Despite the millenarianism, current at all levels of society in this time, when social and political innovations seemed to come thick and fast. Traditionalist church clergy and London merchants maintained a predictable opposition to Jewish readmission.

Many of the more extreme Protestants and soldiers who had fought for Parliament in the civil war were in favour, albeit some of them suggesting the readmission be conditional on Jews not attempting to convert Christians. The conference failed to declare whether Jews should be readmitted but as Edward the First never legislated in 1290 against the Jewish presence, most delegates agreed that no law against readmission existed. Jews were, perhaps, free to enter England if they wished.

When Cromwell opened a naval war against Spain, Spanish merchants in London had their goods impounded. One such merchant, Antonio Robles, declared that he was no Spaniard but of the Jewish nation. He acknowledged he had heard mass at the Spanish Embassy in Salisbury Court of Fleet Street, but Robles claimed the Spanish Inquisition was to blame for his father's death; and to his mother, little less. Those bloody officers having by torture spoiled her limbs. The rest of his family were, Robles said, some burned, others sent to galleys, others whipped. Roble's goods were returned, but more importantly, other hidden Jews in London who had not found Cromwell's unspoken permission very reassuring now declared themselves. They were not Spaniards and their Catholicism was a sham. The price of life, a mere cover for secret Jewish practice. A qahal was established at Creechurch Lane at the eastern end of the city in which Robles was a senior member.

Cromwell now had in London and at his service paying duties and, in some cases, providing intelligence. Elements of a Sephardi network which spread from Hamburg to the Atlantic once Cromwell's unroyal navy had emptied the place of Spaniard's Jamaica. As Manasseh Ben Israel had asked Cromwell, "Do we not see that those republics do flourish and much increase in trade to admit the Israelites?"

Archaic principles buckled, Solomon Dormido, nephew of Manasseh, applied for the right to a brokerage on the Royal Exchange in 1657. The city allowed him to do his deals

and dispensed with the requirement for a Christian oath. The loyal of Spanish and Portuguese Jews who maintain their faith and practice through generations of concealment, ignorance and danger is a unique human phenomenon. But this first chapter of modern Anglo-Jewish history is primarily one of pragmatism on the part of the first early modern English Jews, and on the part of the native English they encountered at the Royal Exchange and elsewhere.