

6: Diamonds and disputes: the meaning of 'community'

The first Yiddish speaking female diarist in history was a diamond dealer called Gluckel of Hameln born in 1646 and died in 1724. During Gluckel's lifetime a Hamburg born son in law made a similar sort of history, personal, even humble, but with greater significance than was obvious at the time. The husband of Gluckel's daughter, Freudchen, was another gem dealer, Marcus Moses.

Settled in London, Moses announced in 1705 that he would open a Bet Hamidrash, house of study, in a house in St Mary Axe not far from here. This Bet Hamidrash minyan progression wasn't a unique phenomenon and maybe the genesis of the Polish synagogue aka Chevra Shas and the Rosemary Lane Synagogue near the tower of London that sprang up later in the 18th century. In 1705 though, the fragile tiny Jewish establishment hadn't yet suffered these rivals to exist, so the Great Synagogue only founded 15 years before and Bevis Marks dating back 50 years to Creechurch Lane united to secure an injunction against Marcus's plans. Significantly, rabbinic opinion wasn't considered enough. The synagogue leaderships went to the city authorities the Christian establishment to successfully force Marcus Moses to abandon his separatist plans.

The following year, Moses criticized a contentious halachic decision made by Rabbi Aaron Hart of the Great Synagogue, arguably the first Chief Rabbi of Great Britain and was promptly excommunicated. Rabbis abroad argued against the excommunication or cherem and Moses offered to pay a £500 fine to end it.

Apanus, warden of the Great Synagogue at this time, was the powerfully willed Reb Aberle, son of Moses Norden of Hamburg, and a qualified rabbi himself. Reb Aberle pushed Rabbi Hart to maintain the cherem against Marcus Moses. Significantly perhaps, Reb Aberle was in the same business as Moses, he too was a dealer in gems. This may have been something to do with Reb Aberle's desire to keep other Jews from doing business as the cherem required with Moses.

However, perhaps pushed to an extreme Moses established a minyan keeping the Hamburg liturgical traditions, hence Hambro in the garden of his home in Magpie Alley; the site ahead of us here behind Fenchurch Street Station. He employed his family's tutor from Hamburg, Jochanan Höllischau, to be a minister. Rab Höllischau promptly dissolve Rabbi Hecht's claim on Marcus Moses.

The Hambro was one of the five founder communities of the United Synagogue in 1870, was demolished in 1893, and reopened in 1899 in Union Street in Whitechapel, finally closing in 1936 when it merged with the Great Synagogue. Needless to say, the US doesn't view the Marcus Moses Rab Aberle cherem route as the ideal method for starting new communities.

Before moving on though, it is worth reflecting on the motivation of Rabbi Hart and Hakham David Nieto, rabbinic leader of Bevis Marks, in resisting the establishment of the Hambro Synagogue. Jealousy of membership, income and turf may have sharpened some of the discourse, but they weren't the cause of the fear of division. The Jews of early modern England in the late 1600s and early 1700s wherever they came from

all knew a life of semi autonomy within non-Jewish society. Where for reasons of cost, cohesion, and defensive unity there would be one Jewish community or perhaps two where Ashkenazim and Sephardim lived in proximity with each other, as in London.

To preserve solidarity against a hostile outside world, and most of it was hostile, sometimes violently, required protective measures, unity of purpose effort, and shared investment. Individual liberty was not a priority. Spats and secessions such as the genesis of the Hamburg synagogue then were far more serious in their potential consequences in Hamlin and elsewhere in early modern Europe when Jewish communities were permitted at all than in England, although we can only say that with hindsight.

We should certainly not take for granted our delight when we see new United Synagogue communities thrive even when they originate in breakaway minyanim. At one time, Alei Tzion, or the Yavneh minyan in Borehamwood would have been considered by some to threaten the survival of the whole Jewish community.