

5: 'You say Sabbato, I say Shabbes!': when Ashkenazim were a minority of a minority

In a building in Creechurch Lane, probably in the spring of 1657, the Spanish and Portuguese Jews of London officially formed a congregation. Not everyone associated with the new community though was Spanish or Portuguese, simply because this was the only synagogue in the British Isles. Hence an early gabbai, or warden in United Synagogue English, was Samuel Levy, assisted by one Isaac Purim. Both were considered Todeskos or Germans even though Levy at least was from Krakow in Poland, Lithuania. Therefore, a better term would be Ashkenazim.

Similarly, one of the first keepers of the Sefardi burial ground in Mile End was Mordechai Gimple. Jacob Kaiser managed the community's butchery and an early shochet, slaughterer, was Baruch Benedict.

Elsewhere on the financial spectrum Samuel Halberth of an established Hamburg family and Jacob Adolphus contributed to community funds. Ashkenazim were entering England and entering the written record. Not only at Creechurch Lane, a rich Hamburg Jew called Benjamin Levi was the only Ashkenazi among the 12 Jew brokers permitted at the Royal Exchange. The Royal Exchange, the fortress of London's merchant class had softened towards Jews. The English establishment in general in fact.

By the early 18th century, we know of Spanish and Portuguese Jews living in Richmond, Kew, and Belsize Park and Daniel Defoe wrote about kosher butchers supplying Jews in Highgate. Some Spanish and Portuguese entered English society through marriage. But towards Ashkenazim, the Sephardi synagogue itself was pulling up the drawbridge.

The position was an awkward one between Ashkenazim and Sephardim existed in many cases a social and financial gulf. The persecution suffered by Spanish and Portuguese Jews had forced them to assimilate, even if only outwardly. Some, therefore, had university degrees, some were qualified physicians, some were competent playwrights and poets in Portuguese and a small number were very rich merchants and investors.

A handful of their cousins in Amsterdam had been ennobled, ironically in the name of the same crowns that had expelled them. In England too some moved easily at the top of society. The army contractor, Solomon de Medina, a close associate of John Churchill Duke of Marlborough, was the first Jew to receive an English knighthood without first receiving baptism. To compare some Ashkenazim now in England had found

themselves unable to live in German bishoprics and princedoms, or in the villages of the Dutch provinces where Jewish numbers were often capped.

The Jews of the cities often lived in overcrowded and unsanitary Judengasse, Jewish alleys, where opportunity and freedom were controlled by authorities both Jewish and not. Or they left behind the Ukrainian estates of Polish nobles following the Cossack massacres of the 1640s.

Not just higher education, but professions, crafts, and trade movement, and settlement, landownership, clothing, legal rights, what Jews could say or read were all things tightly curtailed where the Ashkenazim came from. Could not the Sephardim admit as Yehidim, or members, their Ashkenazi cousins even if they were poor, unlettered and unlikely to produce Portuguese poetry? In most cases the answer was no. The Sephardim numbered in the low hundreds were still unsure of their precise legal position in England and they had their own poor to support; including a continuing supply of refugees from the Inquisition. And they were nervous of being seen to encourage a potentially limitless flow of poverty-stricken Jews having less Western European polish than themselves.

They were cautious, so they restricted Ashkenazim from having honours or membership of the synagogue, limited charity available to them and paid poorer newcomers to return to the continent. There was clearly a need for an Ashkenazi community separate from the Sephardim.

Around 1690, the Kehilla which would become the Ashkenazi Great Synagogue was established in a pre-existing building in Duke's Place, not even a stone's throw from the Portuguese in Creechurch Lane. But whereas the Creechurch Lane leadership who moved to Bevis Marks in 1701 would successfully resist opening a branch synagogue at another site for nearly 200 years, let alone countenance an actual schism, the Ashkenazi shul failed to maintain a monopoly for even 20 years. With Ashkenazim regularly falling out, seceding or just ignoring established groups of leaders.

Compare also the buildings. The first purpose-built Sephardi synagogue, Shaarai Shamayim, the Gates of Heaven, known colloquially as Bevis Marks, is a magnificent imitation of the Esnoga in Amsterdam and was intended to be a religious lodestar for Jews of the Sephardic rite of all classes and incomes.

The Ashkenazi New Synagogue, a breakaway from the great was established here in 1761 by natives of Germany in the decaying home of a declining city guild Bricklayer's

Hall. The New Synagogue would eventually be one of the founding communities with the great of the United Synagogue a proud unifier of Anglo-Jewry. But for now, it is enough to note that division and limited funds were from the first among the traits of London's small but growing Ashkenazi community.