

## **Origins of the Jewish Community of New York: The Brazilian Connection**

### **I. Introduction**

New York City is an eclectic melting pot where people have come in search of new opportunities for a better life. It has one of the most important Jewish communities in America. Surprisingly, most people do not know the origins and history of this Jewish community. The first Jews to arrive in New York came from Recife, Brazil. Although they were a group of only twenty-three, their contribution was immeasurable. Wherever they went, they left a mark of their influential presence.

In Recife, Brazil, they founded Kahal Zur Israel, the first synagogue of the New World. In 1654, when they arrived in New York, then known as New Amsterdam, they founded Shearith Israel, the first Jewish congregation in North America. These pioneer Jews had to fight for the creation of Jewish temples of worship, schools, and cemeteries in a time when there was no freedom of religion. During this arduous process, they had a tremendous influence in the battle for equal rights. Today, the achievements of these Jews represent a victory for people of all faiths.

The story of these twenty-three Jewish founders also reflects the possibility of accomplishing successful endeavors regardless of the difficulties encountered along the way. It is truly a miracle that they were able to escape to New York at a time when there was strong anti-Semitism from the Portuguese and a war between Portugal and Holland. They faced great financial hardships when they were expelled from Brazil. After arriving in New Amsterdam, they lived in a state of poverty, hostility, and prejudice. Even though they were discriminated against by the governor, the sheriff, and the Reverend of the Dutch Reform Church, the Jewish pilgrims established one of the most dominant Jewish communities in the world.

Despite an outstanding effort to blend in with the American society, these Jewish settlers managed to maintain their identity and culture. They remained connected to their Jewish roots and passed on their traditions from generation to generation. These few immigrants laid the foundation for what is today the Jewish community of New York.

## **II - Brief History of New York City**

The Dutch and the Dutch West India Company first named New York City New Amsterdam. According to Cityscapes: A History of New York in Images, New Amsterdam's colony was founded "in the search for empire by the Dutch West India Company following the explorations of Henry Hudson" (Rock and Moore 1). The settlement's focus was trade, and the most important one was fur followed by tobacco. The authors also note that the first permanent settlement on Manhattan was established in 1626, when Director Peter Minuit purchased the island from the Indians (1). Interestingly, Rock and Moore mention that Manhattan comes from the word Manatus which may have meant, "island of the hills," a reference to the topography (3).

By 1647, Peter Stuyvesant arrived as the Colony's director and established the first city council (Rock and Moore 6). Stuyvesant had been previously Curacao's director from 1634 to 1644. New Amsterdam was a small colony (in 1652, the population was about 750), but eighteen different languages were spoken there (Schappes 1). The Dutch created numerous important zoning and construction rules as well as imposed provisions for orphans and the poor (Rock and Moore 7). These acts reflect the benefits of their settlement in New Amsterdam, which could also be noticed in Recife, located in the northeast of Brazil (Wainer, Legislação 29). The Dutch conquered and occupied Recife during a period of twenty-four years, specifically from 1630-1654 (Wainer, Legislação 30).

In 1664, New Amsterdam came under English occupation and became the Duke of York's, who was the brother of King Charles II of England (Rock and Moore 14). New Amsterdam's name was then changed to New York (Friesel 26). Today, the Big Apple, the popular nickname to New York, signifies a diverse world of popular entertainment (Rock and Moore 414). New York represents the world and the Jewish community has a meaningful place in it, and this contribution started at least three hundred and fifty years ago.

## **III – The Dutch Brazilian Origins of the First 23 Jewish Settlers of New York: Where did they come from?**

It seems that Jewish history keeps repeating itself: threat and persecution over the centuries obligated the Jews to move and settle in safer places. The first Dutch Jewish settlers of New York came from Brazil, but in fact their peregrination started in Holland. Before Holland, they came from Portugal, Spain, and France, among other countries. For example, between the end of the XVI century and beginning of the XVII century, the first Jewish author in America, Isaac Aboab and his family, moved from Spain to Portugal, then to France, Holland, Brazil, and then back to Amsterdam (Kayslerling, "Aboab" 125). Aboab did not go to New Amsterdam with the first twenty-three Jewish settlers. Nevertheless, his story is interesting to mention because his family escaped the persecutions of the Inquisition in Spain and later on in Portugal, and became refugees in France. In 1612, when Spain and France were going to close a treaty of mutual extradition of refugee heretics, Aboab's family went to live in Amsterdam (Kayslerling, "Aboab" 126). Aboab became Rabbi in Amsterdam in 1619 (Kayslerling, "Aboab" 126). Moreover, in 1642, Aboab received an invitation to become the Rabbi of Recife, which was under Dutch occupation and had great tolerance for Jews ([Enciclopédia](#) 23). There is a legend that the Jews of Amsterdam were rich but that is not accurate (Kayslerling, "Earliest" 13). The Dutch Jews were traveling to Brazil because they had to fulfill their needs in a new country in order to support their families (Kayslerling, "Earliest" 13). In fact, as Kohut remarks, "the first Jewish colony in America was established in Brazil, in 1624, when the Dutch took possession of that country, bringing some Jewish traders with them" ("Literature" 136).

In Brazil, because of the complaints of the *Classis* (governing body of the Dutch Reformed Church in Brazil), Judaism was tolerated but the Jews were ordered to conduct their services in seclusion (Wiznitzer, "Earliest" 54). In 1642, a group of 200 Jews came to Recife under the leadership of Rabbi Aboab (Bloom, [Economic](#) 130). Holland and its colonies attracted immigrants (Shulvass 22). The Dutch tolerance towards the Jews was based on the large amount of capital invested in Holland in shares of the West India Company, W.I.C. (Schappes 4). Trade was a decisive factor in allowing the Jews to live in Holland and its colonies (Kohler 42). As Kohler states: "it required the leveling and humanizing influences of commerce to bring about religious toleration" (42). The Dutch West India Company's purpose was to monopolize trade in their respective domains, to establish and administer colonies, to maintain armies and navies, and to conduct war (Faber 10). Although it is difficult to

determine the extent of Jewish participation in the W. I. C., there are available lists of shareholders showing that the Jews were members of the company (Bloom, “Study” 49). For that reason, religious liberty was guaranteed under article XV of the ruling of the West India Company (Emmanuel, “Light” 4).

In 1654, the Portuguese recovered the city. At that time, Holland was engaged in a war with Britain, and the Portuguese used this situation to recapture Recife (Sandler 41). The Portuguese executed thirteen Jews, even burning one alive, despite the agreement to consider the Jews equal to the Dutch (Emmanuel, “Light” 11). Rabbi Aboab was rescued by the Dutch and went back to live in Amsterdam where he persuaded the wealthy members of the community to build the great synagogue of Amsterdam (Enciclopédia 23). As a poet, Rabbi Aboab wrote about the misery and suffering the Jews went through during the war between the Portuguese and the Hollanders (Kayserling, “Aboab” 127). It was a great loss to Brazil when the Rabbi and his community left, but his teachings were taken and noticed in Holland and in his community in New Amsterdam.

The relevance of this connection is apparent because Brazil became the “mother” of North American Jewry (Emmanuel, “Seventeenth” 32). As the Jews had to leave Brazil, they moved and founded the Jewish community of New Amsterdam. Some of the Jewish passengers that came to New Amsterdam were registered in the Minutes of the Court of BurgoMasters and Schepens, which represent the Dutch Records of New Amsterdam. These same names can also be found in the Minute Book of Congregations Zur Israel of Recife and Magen Abraham of Mauricia. Many scholars, such as Oppenheim, Wiznitzer, Wolff, have thoroughly researched both Records of New Amsterdam and the Minute Book of the Brazilian congregations. Unfortunately, there are some discrepancies and uncertainties about their identities. In spite of that, it is known that Abram Israel, David Israel, Asser Levy, Moses Ambrosius, Judicq de Mereda, and Ricke Nounes were among the passengers. As just these names are mentioned in the Records, Wiznitzer explains that the records mention only the names of all the family heads among the twenty-three Jews (“Exodus” 92). There were six families headed by four men and two widows. Consequently, there were four men, six women and thirteen children

(Wiznitzer, “Exodus” 92). The “twenty three souls, big and little,” were “poor and healthy,” as the Reverend Johan Megapolensis described the group (Sandler 39).

The majority of the Jewish immigrants were Sephardim, but not all (Hershkowitz, “Merchant” 12). The Ashkenazic Jews were from Germany and Italy (Wiznitzer, “Exodus” 93). Asser Levy, for instance, was Ashkenazi. Interestingly, he is one of the most known from the group of the first Jewish settlers who arrived in New Amsterdam. New York City has an Asser Levy Place and an Asser Levy Public School (Hershkowitz, “Inventories” 24). From the group of the twenty-three Jewish settlers, Levy was the “natural leader” (De Sola Pool, Faith 24). Furthermore, Hershkowitz mentions that there was little intermarriage and little business association between Sephardim and Ashkenazim in the early days of the colony (“Merchant” 12). These may have caused the failure of the founding colonial Jewish community to extend itself (Hershkowitz, “Merchant” 12).

#### **IV - The First Group of Jewish Immigrants to New Amsterdam**

Kohler, Daly, Wolff, Oppenheim and Wiznitzer differ on details on the Brazilian exodus and consequent arrival in New Amsterdam. But, basically they all accept the important facts of the approximate date and group’s origins. The first twenty-three Jews arrived in New Amsterdam about September 7, 1654 (Oppenheim, “Barsimson” 39). The author mentions that they were “involuntary passengers on the ship St. Charles, diverted by pirates from their intended voyage from Brazil to Holland after the occupation of Recife by the Portuguese” (Oppenheim, “Barsimson” 39).

The first group of Jewish immigrants to New Amsterdam were so poor that they were unable to pay the master of the Bark St. Charles, Captain Jacques de la Motthe, for board and passage (Records I 240). In response, the Captain did not allow any of their goods to be carried from the ship. In September 7, 1654, the Jews were kept and their goods were sold at public auction (Daly 7). Since the amount was insufficient, two of the Jews from the group, David Israel and Moses Ambrosius, were held as collateral for the payment of the balance in accordance with the contract (Records I 244). The Captain transferred the debt to the Crew and the two Jews were released because the crew agreed to

wait until the “arrival of the ships from Patria” with funds from Holland (Records I 259). On the other hand, Asser Levy who was to become a very litigious figure in the Colony is mentioned first in the Court Minutes of New Amsterdam of September 14, 1654, not even a week after his arrival (Records I 242). He sued Ricke Nounes demanding repayment of 8 ½ pieces of Eight disbursed on his account at Gamonike [Jamaica] and fl. 15 for a waistcoat and other things delivered to the defendant (Records I 242). The defendant acknowledged to have borrowed 5 pieces of Eight at Gamonike, and 7 fl. advanced to her husband (Records I 242). But, she countered with a claim the plaintiff demanding, on the other side, payment of 12 pieces of Eight disbursed for freight for the plaintiff, with other items making together fl. 41.11, so that by account a balance remained due to her of fl. 22.5 (Records I 242). Perhaps, here is the first case of a Jewish woman exercising her rights for justice in America. As Hasia Diner and Beryl Benderly state, American Jewish history begins in lower Manhattan with Ricke Nounes and Judicq de Mereda (Praise 7).

It is known that the conditions of the group were so deplorable that they had to be supported by the Church (Sandler 40). Reverend Megapolensis, in a letter to the *Classis* of Amsterdam, in March 1655, reports:

Some Jews came from Holland last summer, in order to trade. Later a few Jews came upon the same ship as DePolheymius; they were healthy but poor...so, we had to spend several hundred guilders for their support. (Hastings 335)

Just upon their arrival, the twenty-three Jewish immigrants experienced the difference of treatment the Dutch gave to them in New Amsterdam, as they were used to receiving in Amsterdam and Recife. The Jews of early New York fought for respect against prejudice and bigotry (Huhner, “Burgher” 9). Peter Stuyvesant, the Governor-general of the colony, supported by the clergy, moved every possible step in order to get rid of the Jewish newcomers. He officially requested them, in a “friendly way,” to depart. On September 22, 1654, just a few days after the Jewish group’s arrival, Stuyvesant wrote to the Amsterdam Chamber of the Dutch West India Company, demanding that the Jews “be not allowed to trouble” New Amsterdam (Sandler 41). He mentioned that the group were

“hateful enemies of the Christians” (Schappes 1-2). Peter Stuyvesant’s words sounded as anti-Semitic then as they sound now. Fortunately, the governor’s words fell on deaf ears.

Thus, there was “another enemy of the Jews” at that time (Huhner, “Burgher” 10). Cornelis van Tienhoven, the “Shout”, or Sheriff of New Amsterdam, who escalated from being a clerk to a position of authority in the colony (Huhner, “Burgher” 10). On January 1655, the Amsterdam Jews petitioned to the Lords, Directors of the Chartered West India Company (Schappes 2). They asked to extend the same rights they had to the Jews of New Amsterdam (Schappes 2). The land was extensive and spacious (Oppenheim, “Barsimson” 40). The more loyal people, like the Jews, the better it would be to increase the population and trade in the colony (Oppenheim, “Barsimson” 40). At that time, there were obstacles to the giving of permits or passports to the Portuguese Jews to travel and reside in New Amsterdam (Schappes 2). For that purpose, they assigned four reasons why the group should be allowed to stay in New Amsterdam, despite Stuyvesant’s objections (Schappes 2). Their reasoning are briefly stated below (Schappes 2):

- 1 – The Jews could not go to Spain or Portugal because of the Inquisition.
- 2 – The Jews have risked “their possessions and blood” to defend Dutch interests in Brazil.
- 3 – The French and English allowed Jews in their colonies.
- 4 – There were Jews who were “principal shareholders” (persons who had invested at least 6,000 guilders each) in the Dutch West India Company.

Therefore, Stuyvesant was overruled and the Jewish pioneers were allowed to stay in New Amsterdam. The Governor might have felt threatened by the arrival of only 23 Jews because the population consisted of approximately 750 people speaking 18 different languages (Schappes 1). They were described by many accounts, as sailors and thieves. Therefore, the arrival of 23 well educated immigrants, but of an alien religion, could have been a threat to the religious establishment of the colony. Stuyvesant held the belief of a unified church and state, so the Jews became a potential threat.

Following this development, in March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1655, Abraham De La Simon was brought before the Court of Burgomaster (Daly 11). The Sheriff communicated to him that he could not keep his store open on Sunday (Daly 11). The Court applied a stiff fine to the Jewish shopkeeper for daring to disrespect the Christian Sunday. Back then, the struggle for the separation of church and state had begun. The Sheriff Tienhoven was substituting for Stuyvesant who had gone to West Indies to protest against interference with trade and against the seizure of Dutch vessels by English privateers (Huhner, “Burgher” 12).

The Sheriff also said that the Governor and Council resolved that the Jews who had come in the preceding autumn, as well as the other Jewish fellows who had arrived from Holland should depart (Daly 11). Daly believes that because of this order, many Jewish immigrants left for Rhode Island and settled in Newport, where they were later joined by others who came directly from Curacao (14-15).

Hence, Jews in Holland continued to lobby and intercede with the Directors of the Dutch West India Company in favor of their brothers and sisters living in the New World. The Directors of the Company knew that the presence of the Jews was beneficial to New Amsterdam. They felt that the loyalty of these Dutch Jews, who were of Portuguese and Spanish decent, together with the Jewish capital investments in Holland outweighed Stuyvesant’s prejudice and intolerance (Schappes 4).

On April 26, 1655, the Amsterdam Chamber of the West India Company replied to Stuyvesant’s letter. In conclusion, it was decided that the Portuguese Jews could travel and trade to and in New Amsterdam and live there (Schappes 4). The date W.I.C. gave the right to the Jews to live and remain in New Amsterdam marks the official settlement of Jews in North America. It also marks the beginning of the Spanish Portuguese Congregation now called Shearith Israel (Wischnitzer 11). As a result, it is interesting to observe that the Spanish Portuguese Synagogue is directly related to the Portuguese expulsion of the Jews and the Dutch from Brazil.

The fight for Jewish equal rights, however, continued as long as Peter Stuyvesant was Governor. Even though Jews had been assured the right to remain in New Amsterdam, Stuyvesant continued to cause trouble and difficulty for the Jewish people. Later in that same year, precisely, on August 28, Peter Stuyvesant and the New Amsterdam Council decided to exclude Jews from the military service



(Schappes 5). By this resolution, Stuyvesant denied a civic right and imposed a special tax applied only to the Jews (Schappes 5). The interesting part is that Stuyvesant justified his tax resolution by stating that each male person over 16 and less than 60 years “contribute for the aforesaid freedom towards the relief of the general municipal taxes 65 stivers [\$1.20] every month” (Schappes 6).

Asser Levy and Jacob Barsimson really struggled with Peter Stuyvesant for the burgher right (Hershkowitz, “Jewish Merchant” 12). In November 5, the New Amsterdam Council had to pronounce themselves on the petition of Barsimson and Levy to be granted permission to keep guard with other burghers, or be free from the tax which others of their nation pay (Schappes 6). The petition was denied, but the right to stand guard was won later (Schappes 6). In this case, Levy and Barsimson were demanding equal treatment, rights, and obligations for them and their fellow Jews. Equal rights in the colony were progressively achieved but every stage involved a specific struggle for the early Jews.

By November 29, 1655, Abraham deLucena, Salvador Dandrada, and Jacob Cohen petitioned to the Director General and Council of New Amsterdam for themselves and in the name of others of the Jewish nation (Schappes 7). They requested the right to travel and trade on the South River of New Netherland, at Fort Orange and other places situated within the jurisdiction of the Government of New Amsterdam (Schappes 7). The Jewish struggle for equal rights in New Amsterdam continued, as they still didn’t have the right to own property. In December 1655, Salvador Dandrada had to petition to the Council of New Amsterdam for the right to own a house (Schappes 8). Eventually, the case was resolved since the owner of the house returned to Holland and, therefore, helped exert pressure on the Council.

More was about to come. In February 22nd, 1656, the Jews finally obtained the right to purchase a Jewish cemetery. This was achieved after the authorities had denied it before (June 1655). Furthermore, in June 14, 1656, Joseph D’Acosta, a principal shareholder in the Company among the Directors of the Dutch West India Company, sent a letter to Stuyvesant. He requested prompt obedience and mentioned that the Jews might exercise in all quietness their religion within their houses (Schappes 12). For that purpose, they must build their houses close together in a convenient place on one or the other side of New Amsterdam – at their choice – as done in Amsterdam (Schappes 12).

In the beginning of 1657, an ordinance was passed in New Amsterdam, which stated that for trade privileges the “burgher right” was vital (Schappes 12-13). Asser Levy appeared in Court and petitioned to be admitted as a burgher (Huhner, “Burgher” 15). He asked for the same rights and showed a burgher certificate from the city of Amsterdam, proving that he was a burgher there (Records VII 154). As obstacles were still imposed upon the Jewish people, the Directors in April 20, 1657, requested from Stuyvesant extension of the same rights they had in Holland to the Jews in New Amsterdam (Schappes 12-13). Therefore, they urged that the Jews should not be excluded nor shut out from the Burgher right (Schappes 13).

The Jews of New Amsterdam continued to encounter other obstacles in their path for survival in the Colony. An interesting event happened in June 1658, which was just four years after the arrival of the Jewish pilgrims. Two lawsuits were brought against Jacob Barsimson. The court proceedings took place on Sabbath (Records II 367). Barsimson did not show up in court. Curiously, he was not cited for contempt of court (Records II 367). This might have suggested that some degree of tolerance towards the Jewish observance of the Sabbath occurred for the first time in the judicial system of New Amsterdam.

In October 1660, Levy was fundamental in attaining equal protection of the Law for his fellow Jews. Levy was in the forefront of securing civil rights (Stern, “Namesakes” 234). Asser Levy and Moses Lucena got the licenses from the authorities to become butchers, and as Jews were exempted from slaughtering hogs (Schappes 16). When the British took over New Amsterdam in 1664, Levy signed the oath of allegiance to the British crown (Stern, “Namesakes” 234). In 1665, Asser Levy was sworn again under the English as a slaughterer of animals (Oppenheim, “Meat” 42). Since Levy appears as a litigant so many times in the Court Minutes, it seems that he was one of the first citizens to appeal for justice and defend his own case in the beginning of the colonial Jewish life.

In conclusion, one realizes that the Jews contributed immensely to the advancement of equal rights in the colony of New Amsterdam. Schappes concluded that American life and history would not have been the same without these pilgrim Jews and the ones that came every century thereafter (XX). In Schappes words:

The names and activities of hundreds of Jews, when taken alone might never appear in the pages of an American historical volume, but American life and history would have never been the same if these Jews have never come, worked, prayed, written, or petitioned or sued or complained, or fought, or died, or simply were Americans, Jewish Americans. (XX-XXI)

American history is now richer, by the Jewish contribution to American democratic ideals (Schappes XXI). As Miranda in “The Tempest” of Shakespeare said when she saw men for the first time: “O brave New World that has such people in it!” Shakespeare’s words can be transposed to the admiration for the tenacity of these first Jewish settlers of New York, and all the generations of immigrants that followed. In an outstanding effort to maintain their identity, but also to become Americans, Jews helped obtain equal rights and liberty for Americans of all races and religions.

In the world of today, especially after nine eleven, when anti-Semitism strikes at the core of western societies, it is important to realize that the danger to one human being or religion endangers the entire world. That is exactly what the first Jewish settlers of New Amsterdam fought for. While assimilating a new culture, they remained connected to their traditions. They peacefully took a position against a discriminating Governor, Sheriff, and the Reverend of the Dutch Reformed Church, and against all imaginable odds, founded one of the most important Jewish communities in the world. New York City is now a place of enormous cultural and financial influence for the entire world, and remains a city embracing people of all races, religions, and beliefs. That is what makes this story and the journey of the first Jewish pilgrims so fascinating!

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