

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

What Was the Synagogue?

Sacred Space and the Sephardic Congregation in Amsterdam, 1600-1675

By

Natalya Rowe

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Faculty Advisor: Kirsten Macfarlane
Preceptor: John M. McCallum III

Abstract

This thesis argues that the Portuguese Synagogue of Amsterdam functioned as the central mechanism through which Sephardic leadership constructed communal identity and external legibility, transforming a diasporic minority into a unified, self-regulated congregation positioned for permanent settlement in the Dutch Republic between 1600–1675. Existing scholarship oversimplifies internal Jewish consolidation and its inseparable relationship to outward-facing relations with Dutch authorities as separate processes. However, this thesis argues that these communal issues converged within the synagogue itself. The Eshnoga served simultaneously as a space of religious consolidation, intra-communal order, and meticulously crafted public representation, enabling Sephardic leaders to unify the formerly diasporic congregation while presenting an ordered and credible image to Dutch Christians. Drawing on synagogue regulations, rabbinic sermons and disputes, and the material culture of the 1675 consecration, this thesis demonstrates that the synagogue was not merely an internal or isolated symbol of Jewish life, but rather an active instrument of communal formation and external legitimization. By reconsidering the multi-faceted nature and function of Amsterdam's Sephardic synagogue, this thesis presents a new understanding of sacred spaces within interfaith communities as ongoing sites of early modern transformation rather than a culmination of tolerance.

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Introduction

In 1603, the first Jewish community petitioned to Amsterdam's burgomasters for safe settlement in the newly established United Provinces of the Netherlands. After their arrest by Christian neighbors, Moses and Aron Uri Halevi openly acknowledged their practice of circumcision to other Jewish men, declaring:

It is true that we did what you said we did [circumcise people and practice Judaism], but it was done for the profit and benefit of the city of Amsterdam so as to let it share in a large trade; we could very well have gone to another city, which wanted to give us complete freedom, but we did it here so that it might share in large maritime trade activities [to] make Amsterdam the leading commercial city of Europe.¹

The burgomasters, setting a distinctly tolerant precedent, decided “to give [them] all the freedom in the world to live here.”² Admittance of Sephardic Jews into Amsterdam marked the beginning of the Sephardic congregation, or the Naçao.³ The organization of the community in the early seventeenth century was rapid and dynamic, approaching temporal concerns of safety and spiritual concerns of rejudiazing the former *converso* population with a sense of urgency.

Only seventy years later, the Portuguese Synagogue of Amsterdam, called the Esnoga by its Jewish community, celebrated its consecration among Jewish and non-Jewish, Dutch and broadly European witnesses. The Esnoga, an unusually opulent and public edifice marking a permanent Jewish community, remains a site of great cultural interest among historians of the Netherlands. However, the role of the synagogue itself is often understated within historiography, with its parts isolated and abstracted from each other in varying fields such as

¹ Daniel Swetschinski, *Reluctant Cosmopolitans: The Portuguese Jews of Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam* (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2000), 168.

² Swetschinski, *Reluctant Cosmopolitans*, 168.

³ “Amsterdam Regulations Concerning the Jews (1616),” trans. Miriam Bodian and Wijnje de Groot (1616).

Jewish studies and art history or broadly treated as an inevitable culmination of Jewish economic success in the Dutch commercial sphere.

This thesis argues that the Portuguese Synagogue of Amsterdam functioned as the central mechanism through which Sephardic leadership constructed communal identity and external legibility, transforming a diasporic minority into a unified, self-regulated congregation positioned for permanent settlement in the Dutch Republic between 1600–1675. This work builds on Miriam Bodian’s scholarship of Sephardic cultural history as well as Marc Saperstein’s religious history, further expanding internal Jewish consolidation and its inseparable relationship to outward-facing relations with Dutch authorities as communal issues converging within the synagogue itself.

The Esnoga served simultaneously as a space of religious consolidation, intra-communal order, and meticulously crafted public representation, enabling Sephardic leaders to unify the formerly diasporic congregation while presenting an ordered and credible image to Dutch Christians. Drawing on synagogue regulations, rabbinic sermons and disputes, and the material culture of the 1675 consecration, this thesis demonstrates that the synagogue was not merely an internal or isolated symbol of Jewish life, but rather an active instrument of communal formation and external legitimization visible in the congregation’s regulation and management of its members through the formal structure of the synagogue itself.

By reconsidering the multi-faceted nature and function of Amsterdam’s Sephardic synagogue, this thesis presents a new understanding of sacred spaces within interfaith communities as effective sites for negotiating increased Jewish entry into Dutch public life, previously exclusive to Protestants, while preserving their Jewish identity.

Chapter 1: *Who Are We?* Internal Congregational Culture and Identity

This account relies on a new reading of Sephardic communal life leading up to the 1630s unification of congregation, including the disparate nature of the early community members and the strategies to unify strangers into a community with shared values. In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth-centuries, Sephardic Jewry was in many ways fragmented. The initial community in Amsterdam was not a congregation in the sense of sharing an organized assembly or unanimous beliefs. Rather, Sephardic Jews held little in common with each other beyond what historian Daniel Swetschinski identifies as their experience of exile from Portugal and resettlement in Amsterdam.⁴ Aside from this, some families originally settled in other cities such as Antwerp or Venice, rather than migrate directly from the Iberian Peninsula. Others held Jewish traditions closer to their daily life than others, depending on their knowledge of Torah and safety to practice. Many families held vastly different economic and religious motivations for settling in Amsterdam, and nearly always circumstantial to safety and security concerns.

The establishment of Jewish life in Amsterdam did not initially begin under one codified culture, affirmation of faith, or congregation, but rather three distinct communities with competing visions of Jewish identity requiring a centralized institution to reconstruct a unified Jewish vision. After Ferdinand and Isabella's Edict of Expulsion declared that Jews from all Spanish "kingdoms [were] to depart and never to return," or otherwise face "penalty of death and confiscation" of all possessions, Sephardic families navigated a new period of exile with the hope of eventual resettlement. In his manuscript, David Franco Mendes, the secretary and

⁴ Swetschinski, Daniel M., and David McKay. "Settlement, Toleration, and Association Until 1639." In *Reappraising the History of the Jews in the Netherlands, 2nd Edition*, edited by Hans Blom, David J. Wertheim, Hetty Berg, and Bart T. Wallet. Liverpool University Press, 2021. <https://doi-org.proxy.uchicago.edu/10.2307/j.ctv20zbnkq2.10>.

recordkeeper of the Portuguese community in early modernity, documented the responses from prominent families later constituting Amsterdam's congregation:

In the obscurities of violent Spain, many Hebrews were men of the Mosaic light; and the surnames of their ancestors, such as the Aboabs, who passed from Castile to Portugal guided by the most-learned H.H. Isaac Aboab (surnamed simply "Rabbi" by excellence, author of the books.⁵) In the year 5252 (1492); there likewise the Curiels, the Galaches, and the Abendanas, by the agreement which the said Aboab made with the Portuguese king Dom Manuel, settled 30 known families in the city of Oporto."⁶

Mendes notes the distinct migration path of his congregation's predecessors, who remained in Portugal legally until 1496, where Jews were either forced to flee the Iberian Peninsula outright or adopt a *converso* identity. Also called New Christians or crypto-Jews, these families publicly operated under Catholic identities and names under great surveillance and danger, lasting well into the sixteenth century. During this time, Jewish families held differing and decentralized levels of Jewish affiliation and knowledge without a mechanism to learn Talmud or maintain a Jewish identity as evidenced by the Christianization of surnames. Geographical considerations also influenced the migration of Jews from Iberia abroad, although travel was ultimately decided on local or even familial levels under severe time and accessibility constraints. For instance, the Aboab family resided in Western Spain, making Portugal the most practical refuge given their heightened status enabling negotiation with King Manuel. While this migration pattern constituted many families that would later flee to Amsterdam, other Sephardic Jews from Eastern Spain settled in the Ottoman Empire or Mediterranean, the latter joining the congregation in smaller numbers.⁷

⁵ Please note that the titles of Rabbi Issac Aboab's works were left omitted in their original Hebrew language.

⁶ En las obscuridades de la violenta Hispania, fueron varon muchos Hebreos la luz Mosaica; y los apellidos de sus Antecesores, como los aboabes, que pasaron de Castilla a Portugal guiados del Sapientiss. HH. Ishac Aboab (cognominado simplemta Rabi pr. Excelencia Autor dos livros. En el Ao 5252 (1492) Ahi mismo los Curieles los Galaches, y los Abendanas, por el concierto que el referido Aboab, Hizo con el portuguez rey Dom Manuel acomodo 30 familias conocidas, en la ciudad de Oporto

⁷ Please note that in some secondary literature, Sephardic Jews who remained in Iberia are called *Western* Sephardic Jews, and those who settled in the Ottoman Empire are called *Eastern* Sephardic Jews.

Furthermore, diverse individual experiences of Jews in exile informed varying understandings of Judaism the congregation would later need to reconcile. A large population of Amsterdam's seventeenth-century Jewish congregation would have strong Portuguese roots. This indicates family lineages resisting Spanish pressures of conversion and baptism, instead favoring exile in Portugal, an initially less zealous nation disinterested in surveillance against Jews. Fleeing to Portugal also allowed for greater measures of preserving Jewish identity, partially due to their perceived foreignness, and therefore isolation, from local Portuguese Christian populations. Remaining in the Iberian Peninsula also allowed for a longer connection to the land of centuries long Sephardic Jewish life and gave families more time to adapt Jewish customs in response to the Inquisition.

Discontinuity in Sephardic identity prior to the founding of Amsterdam's Esnoga may be further examined in the naming of the community itself. The Jewish diaspora appears in historical records under many names, often used interchangeably. However, closer examination of these labels reveals the fluidity of their early identity. For instance, early records from the sixteenth century simply refer to the community as the Hebrew Nation. Dutch archives in the seventeenth century, however, refer to the congregation as Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation, identifying a dual origin as non-Christians and Portuguese-speaking people, a useful trait in the increasing trade of the period. Contemporary scholarship tends to prefer terms such as crypto-Jew, or *converso*, indicating a religious duality highlighting a lack of agency in their conversion. Historians also use the word Sephardic as a direct reference to *Sepharad*, the original Hebrew name for Iberia. Most notably, however, is the self-identification of the early congregation as *la*

Nacion or the *Nação*, the Nation, acknowledging a foreignness and linguistic favoring of Portuguese, as opposed to Dutch vernacular or even Hebrew.⁸

Since long-term security was not a viable option for fleeing Spain quickly, theocratic violence marred the Sephardic experience well into the turn of the seventeenth century, again forcing Iberian Jews to search for greater opportunities of safety and security to rebuild Jewish life. The Netherlands, having declared independence from Spain in 1558 in the 80 Years' War, granted Jews broader measures of religious tolerance and economic opportunity within Europe due to the emerging wealth and colonial trading networks Sephardic Jews offered from their multilingual and global engagements in Iberia.

Amsterdam was not only an advantageous option for Jewish settlement in the early seventeenth century for its emerging economic connections, but for its increasingly tolerant attitudes towards Jews. The Union of Utrecht in 1579 established the freedom of conscience allowing for voluntary membership of the public Reformed church, although as Joke Spaans describes, the emerging Dutch Republic faced the problem of balancing religious and political unity with the reality of religious diversity.⁹ The policies regarding Jews in early modernity were heavily varied by local jurisdiction and the opinions of its Christian residents.

The “unprecedented, cosmopolitan energy” of Amsterdam in the early formation of the Dutch Republic established the necessary conditions required to enable the Jewish diaspora to “flourish in Amsterdam” while also simultaneously challenging the “religious normativeness and

⁸ It was not until the first decade of the seventeenth century that the congregation would self-describe as an explicitly Jewish community, with the full congregation's name being *Kaal Kados de Talmud Torah*, or the Holy Congregation of the Study of Torah.

⁹ Joke Spaans, “Religious Policies in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republic,” in *Calvinism and Religious Toleration in the Dutch Golden Age*, edited by R. Po-Chia Hsia and Henk Van Nierop, 72–86. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 76.

cultural cohesiveness” of the Western European town.¹⁰ Notably, the northern Low Countries and their formation into the Dutch Republic held favorable political conditions for Jews to settle. The republican confederacy was comprised of seven sovereign provinces and bound together by the 1579 Union of Utrecht. The province of Holland accounted for nearly half of the Dutch Republic’s population by the seventeenth-century at eight hundred thousand people.¹¹ Of the eighteen towns voting in the states of Holland, Amsterdam was by all accounts the biggest economic force, resulting in a restructuring of policy implementation favoring greater local autonomy for executing law, such as the debate of admission of Jews. This varied widely in each town, who adapted their policies towards Jews depending on the structuring of local voting. Utrecht, for instance, retained a voting structure favoring nobility and church authority over wealthy merchant because they did not have the same economic conditions as Amsterdam. As a result, Jews were able to petition for settlement in Amsterdam by appealing to the direct economic values and concerns of the community rather than a centralized, Christian monarch which would have been impossible, as seen in Spain.

Amsterdam remained explicitly ambiguous on the legal status of Jews in Amsterdam. Although prominent jurist Hugo de Grotius argued that religious conversion of Jews should be highly encouraged, he considered forced conversion even worse. He wrote, “it may be argued with good reason that it is a greater sin in the eyes of God to feign the true religion and adopt it against one’s conscience” than to “continue to adhere to an erroneous opinion through

¹⁰ Adam Sutcliffe, “The Boundaries of Community: Urban Space and Intercultural Interaction in Early Modern, Sephardi Amsterdam, and London.” In *The Dutch Intersection: The Jews and the Netherlands in Modern History*, edited by Yosef Kaplan, 30. Brill, 2008.

¹¹ Arthur der Weduwen, *State Communication and Public Politics in the Dutch Golden Age* (Oxford: Published for the British Academy by Oxford University Press, 2023), 11.

ignorance,” a pointed criticism of Spanish laws that forced *conversos* into false conversion.¹²

Grotius’s text, commissioned by the States of Holland, indicates an intellectual shift in toleration and legal residency of Jews in Holland and Western Friesland.

Until 1616, Amsterdam issued no guidelines regarding Jewish residence. In 1616, Magistrates of the States of Holland and West Friesland warned the Jewish community they were “to comport themselves with others, as well as with the good authorities of this city, in all modesty, according to the laws of this country and the specific regulations of this court, and particularly according to the resolution issued to them on May 2, 1612; and [they are] also to distribute this proclamation and warning to everyone of their Nation.”¹³ Although permitted residence, the strict rules and warning of punishment forced Amsterdam’s leadership to renegotiate settlement in accordance with Christian modesty.¹⁴ Although permitted residence, the strict rules and warning of punishment forced Amsterdam’s Jewish leadership to carefully manage their public presence in accordance with Christian modesty. Balancing these external constraints with internal efforts to establish a rejudiazed congregation slowed the process of establishing a permanent synagogue. As historian Swetschinski observes, “the group seems to have adopted a Jewish identity only gradually.”¹⁵

¹² Grotius, Hugo, David Kromhout, A. K. Offenbergh, Marijke Blankman, and Cis van Heertum. *Hugo Grotius's Remonstrantie of 1615: Facsimile, Transliteration, Modern Translations and Analysis*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2019, 204.

¹³ "Amsterdam Regulations Concerning the Jews (1616)." Translated by Miriam Bodian and Wijnne de Groot. 1616.

¹⁴ Jews could not convert Christians, intermarry with Christians, or publicly criticize Christianity. For more information, see "Reglement op de Joden" in Stadsarchief Amsterdam and "Resolutie van de Staten van Holland en West-Friesland" in the Nationaal Archief in Miriam Bodian’s *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation: Conversos and Community in Early Modern Amsterdam*.

¹⁵ Swetschinski, Daniel M., and David McKay. “Settlement, Toleration, and Association Until 1639.” In *Reappraising the History of the Jews in the Netherlands, 2nd Edition*, edited by Hans Blom, David J. Wertheim, Hetty Berg, and Bart T. Wallet. Liverpool University Press, 2021. <https://doi-org.proxy.uchicago.edu/10.2307/j.ctv20zkbq2.10>, 54.

These two shifts in Dutch attitudes towards Jews created the necessary preconditions for the congregation to establish an early congregation with the direct intention of creating a spiritual and physical refuge from conversion, essentially creating a place of re-judiazation. The Portuguese synagogue in Amsterdam served as the central site of early Sephardic identity formation even before its physical consecration in 1675 through its flexible nature and ability to create a cohesive congregation even before the final construction of its edifice.

Existing literature regarding Sephardic life in Amsterdam between 1600–1639 well documents the economic life of Jews in the Dutch Republic but rarely examines the role of religious communal organization as the driving mechanism of early congregational cohesion. Historian Noah Gelfand offers a transatlantic comparative analysis between the Amsterdam community and its connected New Amsterdam congregation, arguing that Sephardic Jews were better positioned within the Dutch Calvinist system of governance through economic alliances between the metropole and colonies. The scholarship of Yosef Kaplan remains particularly poignant in demonstrating the prosperous economic connection between multilingual Jews and the emerging trading routes between Dutch, Portuguese, and Spanish merchants.

Undoubtedly, the economic resilience of Sephardic communities proved to be a monumental component of daily life in early modernity, however it does not fully elaborate on *why* the congregation so vigorously pursued trade, and why economic success was important to the marginalized group. David Wacks captures much of the fears, faith, and upheaval of power within fifteenth century Iberia, with a particular focus on exile as a means of understanding the Sephardic identity. Lastly, Mariam Bodian lays much of the historical groundwork for capturing the community cohesion of Sephardic religious identity, arguing that the problem of internal identity formation was a problem of diverging Portuguese, Dutch, and Jewish nationalities,

which this thesis modifying this claim to emphasize a greater relationship between internal identity formation and external socio-political relationships between Jews and Dutch Christians. Altogether, this work expands upon the work of Bodian and Wacks, asserting that seventeenth-century internal identity formation and external negotiations of toleration were parallel concerns working together, utilizing the synagogue as the driving tool to transform the group into a settled, unified congregation.

The Sephardic Jews, unlike their Ashkenazi counterparts, were woven into the economic fabric of Amsterdam, although they largely did not assimilate along linguistic or religious grounds. Rather, they kept a strong sense of heritage during this period of transformation as seen in the synagogue's early formation. Prior to 1639, the Sephardic congregation was divided between three synagogues. *Bet Yaacob* was established in 1603 under the first substantial immigration of Portuguese New Christians, offering a spiritual return to Judaism for crypto-Jews fleeing from Portugal.¹⁶ The second congregation, *Neve Salom*, built only nine years after its predecessor, largely divided the community in what Leo Fuks has described as “unbearably oppressive” conditions and strict measures to establish an orthodox community from *conversos* largely unexposed to Jewish culture and ritual.¹⁷ The first two congregations, however, were unsuccessful in the establishment of a synagogue. *Bet Israel*, the third congregation, established its synagogue along the Amstel River in 1618. This third congregation would become the physical location of the unified 1639 *Kahal Kados Talmud Torah* congregation.¹⁸

¹⁶ New Christians, or crypto-Jews, converted to Catholicism within Spain and Portugal during the Reconquista in the late fifteenth-century. There was indeed a small Jewish community within the Low Countries, however the Sephardic architectural journey within Amsterdam largely began at the turn of the seventeenth century.

¹⁷ Leo Fuks and R. G. Fuks-Mansfeld, eds. *Aspects of Jewish Life in the Netherlands: A Selection from the Writings of Leo Fuks*. Assen: Van Gorcum, 1995, 82.

¹⁸ “The Holy Congregation studying the Law.”

Having considered the preconditions required for Jewish settlement in Amsterdam, we will now consider the role of individuals within the community in their organization of a cohesive group. Establishing the early Sephardic synagogue in Amsterdam offered the well-connected Sephardic families positions of authority legitimized by the structure of the synagogue itself, although were explicit in their written goals of including Jews from all economic and familial backgrounds, regardless of social class status. In the first unified regulatory documents, the Mahamad in a unanimous agreement established the legitimacy of the three Kehillot of Bet Jacob, Neve Salom, and Beth Israel, to “be made common and all one mass without division or any separation.”¹⁹ As the sole place of Sephardic Jewish life in Amsterdam, the unified congregation quickly established policies meant to erase distinctions between members, particularly that of migration background or *converso* status. They stated:

There will be only one congregation in this city of Amsterdam, in which all those that presently exist will be gathered and united, and that with all the penalties and excommunications that seem fit, following the style of Venice, it is prohibited that at any time there can be in this city or its district any congregation, nor can 10 people gather who separate themselves or wish to separate from the congregation to pray with a minyan, except those who pray in the house of bridegrooms or mourners, or those who for other reasons being subject and continuing in the congregation, for one or more times, it would be necessary for them to pray together, and against those separated from the congregation who wish to gather with a minyan and go against this chapter, they will proceed with all the penalties and rigor that seems fit, and from the moment they have committed it they are put in *herem* and separated from the nation.²⁰

In this case, the synagogue becomes the central mechanism to which the early congregation maintained and preserved power over a formerly decentralized diaspora. By the mid-1630s, some congregants were likely to have no exposure to Judaism after a century of the Inquisition and familial adoption of *converso* identity. To maximize efficiency towards the transition back to

¹⁹ Collection of historical documents concerning the Sephardic congregation of Amsterdam, EH 48 D 43 003/004 Cap. I., <https://etshaimmanuscripts.nl/items/eh-48-d-43/>.

²⁰ EH 48 D 43 003/004 Cap. II

Judaism, or rejudaization, the Mahamad consolidated efforts to create a centralized and well-organized synagogue to become the site of Jewish education for congregants who were not read in Torah.

Despite the synagogue's top-down hierarchy, the lay members were not without a voice to raise concerns. The Mahamad, although the centralized authority, established a solution to mitigate internal concerns among men and correct earlier congregational harshness:

On the 28th of July they gathered, the gentlemen deputies with the three elected gentlemen to discuss the matter contained above, and they agreed that they would proceed in the manner that seemed best. Also the gentlemen deputies agreed, and they order because they understand that it is thus convenient, that the gentlemen who presently serve in the Mahamad of Neve Shalom, should remain continuing in their offices, and that they not elect a new Mahamad until a general election is held. Moreover they order that it be published from the bimah [Torah reading platforms/pulpits] of the three congregations that any person who has something to advise for the good government of the Nation in the General Assembly, should make notes in writing, without saying their names nor being signed, [and] put them in a box that will be placed in each of the Kehillot [congregations] for this purpose.²¹

The anonymous suggestion box allowed community members to actively participate in the emerging congregation without fear of retribution or social pressure to conform. Furthermore, this box indicates a receptiveness of the elite authorities to receive input from their congregants, rather than strictly impose their will onto the community. The suggestion box is also housed in the synagogue, requiring the writer not only to actively participate in its events, but further to fully immerse themselves within the congregation's concerns, problems, and hopes. The

²¹En 28 de Jul se juntaron los SS disputados con los SS tres electos para tratar lo contenido atras, y acordaron que Seguiria en el modo q' bien paresca, tambien acordaron los SS disputados, y Eordenan por que entienden que assi conviene, q' los SS q' al presente sirven en el Maamad de Neve Salom, se queden continuando en sus cargos, y que no elijan nuevo Maamad hasta se hazer eleccion general, mas eordenan que se publique delas tebas delas tres congregaciones que todo la persona que tuviere que advertir para el buen gobierno dela Nacion en la Junta general, haga apuntamientos, por escrito, que ni desir sus nombres ni ser firmados echarla en caxa que en cada una de las Keylor se pondra para el efecto. "Regulation of the United Sephardic Congregation Talmud Torah of Amsterdam, 1639," in Collection of Historical Documents Concerning the Sephardic Congregation of Amsterdam, translated by Abraham de Israel Zagache. Amsterdam, 17th century, Ets Haim Library, Amsterdam, <https://etshaimmanuscripts.nl/items/eh-48-d-43/>.

synagogue role, therefore, extended beyond the institution offering a Jewish education, but also a community where all members were personally invested and responsible for its future, regardless of economic or intellectual status. The Mahamad agreed upon this policy with the hope that such results “from it will be pleasing to the Blessed God” with great intention to align the laws of the congregation to the holy commandments.²²

The Mahamad will have authority and will be superior over everything, and no person or persons can go against the resolutions that the Maamad takes, nor will they sign papers to oppose them, and those who do so will incur the penalty of herem because finally it is ordered and understood that the Maamad must be superior in the government of the nation, of the Kahal, and its dependencies, expecting that those who govern will always arrange things with great consideration without passion, and with zeal and fear of God, because the Mahamad that is elected at the entrance of their office before the Maamad that served, will take an oath with the doors of the Heikhal open, promising to serve their office with truth and justice and fear of God, without favoritism nor disdain to the prejudice of parties, and this will be observed inviolably.²³

In this authoritative document, the Mahamad establish hierarchical legitimacy by positioning themselves between the sacred Holy Ark and the congregation. Upon swearing the oath of office in front of the exposed Torah, the special arrangement of the synagogue creates a transfer of authority originating from the Torah to the synagogue’s constructed Ark, to the newly governing Mahamad. Here, the synagogue becomes a witness and participant of the governing body. Furthermore, the synagogue transmits God’s authority, divinely present in the Torah, through the open ark, to the governing body. This extends to the power of *herem*, or excommunication granted to the Mahamad, which the Ark affirms and protects. The Mahamad’s statement

²² "Regulation of the United Sephardic Congregation Talmud Torah of Amsterdam, 1639," Ets Haim Library.

²³ "Regulation of the United Sephardic Congregation Talmud Torah of Amsterdam, 1639," Ets Haim Library, Cap. XII. “El Mahamad tendra autoridad, y sera superior sobre todo, y ninguna persona, o personas podran -r contra las resoluciones que - Maamad tomare, ni firmaran papeles para encontrarlas, y los q’ lo hizieren incuriran en pena de herem por que finalmente se ordena, y se entiende, que el maamad a’ de ser superior en el gobierno de la nacion, del Kaal, y sus dependencias, esperando q’ los que governaren dispondran siempre las cosas con grande consideracion sin pacion, y con elo, y temor del Dio, por que el Mahamad que fuere electo en la entrada de su cargo delante del mahamad, que serviere, tomara -uramento, con las puertas del Hehal abiertas, promitiendo de servir su cardo, con verdad, y justicia, y temor del Dio, sin respetos, ni desprecios en persuicio de partes, y esto se observara inviolablemente.”

indicates that those who challenge their authority also challenge the sacred space and writing of God through the conversion of religious holiness to political authority.

As this chapter demonstrates, the Sephardic community faced the challenges of dislocation and exile alongside their establishment of a centralized congregation. Furthermore, they overcame these challenges through the efforts made in establishing a formal institution of Jewish life in Amsterdam. The Esnoga, as we will see, transformed as a clear mechanism through which branches of Jewish identity, including religious obligations and internal communal structure were centralized.

In the following decades, individual rabbis shaped the Jewish identity of Amsterdam with their own interpretations of Jewish law, both internally and in the context of Jewish-Christian relationships. Rabbis, like other individual members of the congregation, held widely varying experiences influencing their opinions of Sephardic life. These differing opinions are most clearly expressed in inter-rabbinic disputes, particularly between older and conservative generations to younger rabbis in part influenced by emerging humanist and Reformation scholarship in Northern Europe.

By crafting a singular institution of public Jewish life, rabbis gained measures of authority over congregants through the synagogue's formalized process of voting and policies of economic and social management of its members, which are displayed in the next chapter. Therefore, the 1639 unification of communities into the official Sephardic congregation further enabled the synagogue to become a tool of self-regulation and organization made further visible in the 1639 consolidation. Chapter two will explore in more detail the internal structure of the synagogue through the two decades of consolidation and rabbinic disputes to better understand the synagogue's members of authority and their role in leveraging internal Jewish organization

as a method of establishing a cohesive Jewish identity to earn credibility in Amsterdam with the goal of congregational stability and permanent settlement.

Chapter 2: *What Are We?* Intracommunal Authority of the Synagogue

Having established the community's initial formation alongside dislocation and rejudaization, this chapter turns towards examining how Amsterdam's Parnassim and Board of Delegates established a cohesive Sephardic Jewish identity in the 1639 merger of the Bet Jacob, Neve Salom, and Beth Israel congregations. This unification occurred during the critical period of Jewish toleration (1608-1639), when the renegotiation of Jewish-Christian relations produced incongruent rabbinic opinions on Sephardic socio-political acculturation in the Dutch Republic, which eventually culminated in the 1675 consecration of the Beth Israel Portuguese Synagogue. Rabbinic authorities in the Esnoga, particularly Saul Levi Morteira and Menasseh ben Israel, established the united Beth Israel congregation despite previous religious disputes regarding varying interpretations of Jewish law and their relationship to Christians to better position the congregation towards permanent settlement in Amsterdam.

The 1675 consecration of Amsterdam's Portuguese Esnoga has been read as the culmination of Sephardic communal consolidation. This thesis argues instead that the synagogue's emergence was neither inevitable nor simply institutional. Through the career of Menasseh ben Israel, whose theological dispute with Saul Levi Morteira over converso identity and rabbinical authority reveals internal fractures prior to the 1639 unification, this chapter traces how the question of Jewish public representation was first argued internally, then exported transnationally through the English readmission campaign, and finally absorbed into the community's material self-presentation at the Esnoga's consecration. Menasseh's death in 1657, and Morteira's eulogy for him, mark the moment the community's internal dispute was formally closed, making the 1675 building not an endpoint but a resolution.

Contributions of individual rabbis the early modernity have been thoroughly explored by historians through a vast array of well-preserved sermons and polemics. Menasseh ben Israel, most notably, has long attracted the interest of Anglo-Christian historians surrounding the readmission of Jews into England. And with compelling reason, as a 63% increase in Jews in London occurred only eight years after his 1655 Whitehall Speech to Oliver Cromwell, marking the establishment of a Jewish community in England after three centuries of exile.²⁴ Saul Levi Morteira, lead rabbi of the Portuguese congregation, has also captured the attention of scholars of Judaism. Gregory Kaplan describes Morteira as a “young intellectual prodigy whose exegetical revelations permanently changed the spiritual landscape of Amsterdam’s Jewish community,” with firsthand experience of shaping “crypto-Jewish conversos into halachic Jews” following in accordance with the biblical commandments set forth in the covenant between God and the Jews.²⁵ Marc Saperstein further addresses the role of Morteira in the burgeoning congregation, citing his emphasis on communal discipline, separation of Jewish and Christian people, and strict regulation of observing halachic law as a major appeal to both the *parnassim*, or governing board of the congregation, and the external Dutch government.²⁶

This paper builds upon the work of Kaplan, Saperstein, and other scholars within the field of Early Modern Jewish-Christian relations but also connects individual rabbinical sermons and people as agents within a complex political and religious structure, the *Naçao*, balancing communal organization and safety in a wider Christian structure unfriendly to Jews. The authority of the *parnassim* and rabbinic council is often uncontested in contemporary

²⁴ Lucien Wolf, “The Jewry of the Restoration, 1660–1664,” *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* 5 (1902): 19, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/stable/29777625>.

²⁵ Saul Levi Morteira, *Arguments Against the Christian Religion in Amsterdam*, ed. Gregory Kaplan (Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 17, 27.

²⁶ Marc Saperstein, *Exile in Amsterdam: Saul Levi Morteira’s Sermons to a Congregation of “New Jews”* (Hebrew Union College Press, 2005,) 7.

scholarship. However, rabbinic disputes, particularly between Menasseh and Morteira, suggest a diversity of Sephardic opinion on maintaining communal safety requiring authority to be repeatedly challenged and codified in the 1639 merger of congregations and 1675 consecration of the Portuguese Synagogue. This analysis challenges the prevailing scholarship separating the Sephardic community's internal communal formation and external political negotiation, and in turn demonstrates that Sephardic acculturation into European society emerged as a negotiated response to toleration rather than a linear process of integration.

Sephardic leadership worked to consolidate power and unify the congregation through internal regulation and homogenization of Judaism, allowing for Dutch Christians to see the congregation as undoubtably loyal, yet external subjects of the Dutch Republic. Through a rereading of intra-communal rabbinic disputes, this paper argues that Amsterdam's Sephardic leadership leveraged their precarious position as both marginalized and privileged actors in the congregation to continually renegotiate tolerance through communal unification and regulation as a response towards internal cohesion and external vulnerability.

Rabbinical ideals of the observant Sephardic Jew shaped approaches to communal discipline, as leaders sought to present an orderly and legible institution to Calvinist magistrates amid normalized anti-Jewish sentiment and violence. The nature of the Rabbi's role was unique insofar as they were situated as leaders of the community while remaining subject to the same violence as lay Jews—unable to access the rights of religious observance or civic inclusion enjoyed by Protestants. The *converso* population relied upon the wisdom and authority of the rabbis because of their own spiritual vulnerability from the loss of Jewish identity and culture through forced conversion and political vulnerability as an exiled minority within a newly established nation-state. Rabbis were tasked with the enormous challenge of maintaining stability

and safety within the Netherlands, a challenge only considered possible through group cohesion and order.

The Whitehall Conference of 1655 is a closely studied moment of interfaith relations in Western European history. The conference, according to Andrew Crome, represented the increasing “pressure on the government to readmit the Jews...reaching a peak in the period leading up to the conference.”²⁷ Called by Cromwell under the Protectorate, the Whitehall Conference was the first public discussion regarding readmittance of Jews to England since Edward I’s 1290 Edict of Expulsion. The debates of the assembly, both from Jewish and Protestant theologians, offer historians a richly documented episode when interfaith relations shifted alongside seventeenth century globalization and theological interpretation.

Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel, of the Sephardic Naçao in Amsterdam, represented the Jewish voice for readmission and has long attracted the interest of English historians as the sole Jew at the Whitehall Conference. Much of his writings to Christian theologians and Cromwell himself survive in well-preserved form, and historians acknowledge his critical role in the conference for his connection of English millenarianism to Jewish messianism in his multilingual publications.²⁸ Understanding the critical nature of his role, Menasseh publicly appeals to the diverse crowd at Whitehall:

Dedicating this discourse to you I can truly affirme, that I am induced to it upon no other ground then this, that I may gaine your favour and good will to our Nation, now scattered almost all over the earth.²⁹

²⁷ Andrew Crome, “Friendship and Enmity to God and Nation: The Complexities of Jewish-Gentile Relations in the Whitehall Conference of 1655,” in *Friendship in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age*, ed. Albrecht Classen and Marilyn Sandidge (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 749.

²⁸ Crome, “Friendship and Enmity to God and Nation,” 749.

²⁹ Menasseh ben Israel, *Hope of Israel* (1652), <http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/books/hope-israel-written-menasseh-ben/docview/2264216606/se-2, 3>.

The 1656 readmission debate marked not only a political shift in Anglo-Jewish history, but a broader reconfiguration of Jewish life alongside questions of visibility raised by Menasseh ben Israel. Despite its unclear verdict in 1656, the conclusion of the conference and the year of Menasseh's death, the readmission debate both marked the beginning of the larger Jewish community in London, increasing in population size by over 62% from 1661–1663, but also marked a change in wider seventeenth century discourse between emerging Jewish communities negotiating visibility and settlement among early nation-states.³⁰ Menasseh's contribution to interfaith relations remain well documented within histories of Cromwellian politics and English Millenarianism. While these approaches are essential in contextualizing Menasseh within the Christian and Anglo perspective of the mid- seventeenth century, contemporary scholarship has not traced the continuity of Menasseh's theological argumentation from its development prior to the English campaign.

Through a rereading of Menasseh's writing, the English readmission texts reveal themselves as a continuation of his earlier, and less successful, Dutch Sephardic disputes in the Naçao. Menasseh's ability to connect to English Protestant theologians, previously described as cosmopolitan or pragmatic, can also be understood as an internal argument about Jewish communal boundaries and converso identity restructured for a Protestant audience on a transnational stage. This evolution of Menasseh's writing has been abstracted from its original Sephardic and rabbinical context, creating an overemphasis on the relationship between Menasseh and Protestant theologians as the crux of his argument in the Whitehall conference. Through reinterpreting Menasseh's unique understanding of Sephardic-Christian relations in the

³⁰ "Patents of Denization" and banking accounts in the ledgers of Alderman Backwell, in Lucien Wolf, "The Jewry of the Restoration, 1660–1664," *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* 5 (1902): <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/stable/29777625>, 19.

period of emerging Jewish life in Amsterdam, we can understand that communal identity in relation to Christian neighbors and considerations of external presentation to Christians was not solidified among rabbis of the Portuguese Synagogue. Rather, communal identity remained a disputed subject in which its resolution would aid in the consecration of the synagogue in 1675.

Menasseh's 1655 argument presented at Whitehall was directly informed by internal fracture of Menasseh's early career in Amsterdam, an essential yet overlooked continuity required to understand the foundations informing Menasseh's theology and the broader formation of the Esnoga's relationship to Christians. Ben Israel's sermons, polemical treatises, and diplomatic pamphlets, despite being well researched, shed a new light in understanding Menasseh's writing as a product of both public-facing English millenarian discourse and private Sephardic intellectual and institutional concerns over authority and community.

Amsterdam's Sephardic congregation, the Naçao, divided authority between members of the congregations, creating the infrastructure for rabbinic debates and intra-communal hierarchy. The *parnassim*, or lay governing board, comprised of lay merchants with primarily economic interests. Conversely, the *Mahamad* represented the council of elected leaders responsible for fiscal management, discipline, and *herem*, or excommunication. All rabbis within the congregation had to appease both boards, holding religious authority over the congregation at large while meeting the demands of the *parnassim* and *Mahamad*.

The *Mahamad*, tasked with communal policy towards non-Jews, hesitated to engage with English millenarian or Christian theology due to strict limitations on Jewish religious speech and concerns of heresy. As Achsah Guibbory stated, English millenarians understood Sephardic *conversos* to be "receptive to their projects, for Jews, too, were expecting the end times foretold

by Hebrew prophets.”³¹ Although under two different frameworks, one of English millenarianism and one of messianism, both groups were nevertheless imminently awaiting the Messiah in a perceived time of prophetic imminence.

The cultural distinctiveness of Amsterdam’s Sephardim, and structure of authority, largely shaped Menasseh’s theological grounding. Daniel Swetschinski’s early account of the Jews in the Netherlands describes Morteira as a Venetian Jew who assumed the role of *haham* of Beth Jacob after rabbinic disputes split the congregation in 1618.³² Morteira’s emphasis on communal discipline, separation of Jews and Christians, and strict halachic boundaries appealed to the *parnassim* and the Dutch government.³³

Morteira’s rejudiaizing initiatives were a central point of development in the congregation’s early Jewish identity. Marc Saperstein and other acclaimed historians of this congregation’s early years acknowledge his character as a “staunch defender of Judaism.”³⁴ However, Saperstein also underscores the contentious relationship between Morteira and “his rabbinic colleagues in the Portuguese community” with the relationship between “Morteira and Menasseh had been complicated, and at times quite tense.”³⁵ Continued scholarship is required to further investigate the precise nature of their relationship, particularly when situating Menasseh within the widespread beliefs held by the congregation’s rabbinical authorities.

³¹ Achsah Guibbory, *Christian Identity, Jews, and Israel in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 225.

³² Daniel M. Swetschinski, "From the Middle Ages to the Golden Age, 1516–1621," in *The History of the Jews in the Netherlands*, ed. J. C. H. Blom, R. G. Fuks-Mansfeld, and I. Schöffer, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans and Erica Pomerans (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2002), 80.

³³ Halachic boundaries included keeping kosher, observing Shabbat, Torah reading, and prohibition of intermarriage between Jews and Christians.

³⁴ Marc Saperstein, *Exile in Amsterdam: Saul Levi Morteira’s Sermons to a Congregation of “New Jews”* (Hebrew Union College Press, 2005,) 7.

³⁵ Saperstein, *Exile in Amsterdam*, 164.

In the early period of the congregation, correcting *converso* separation from halachic Judaism was the central point Saul Levi Morteira believed would unify the Amsterdam congregation's diasporic members.³⁶ As the leader of the Amsterdam congregation for nearly forty years, Morteira's collection of sermons are vast and allow historians to systematically date each sermon based upon his chronological preaching of the Torah.³⁷ In 1645, Morteira's sermons in the *Giv'at Sha'ul* were published. Organized chronologically, each sermon contained a *derush*, or a conceptual problem to be solved within the sermon pertaining to the congregation. Despite his unpredictability in structuring his sermons, Morteira often spoke directly to the rejudaization of the congregation. In his sermon regarding the *Ve-zot ha-berakhah*, the rabbi stated:

Even though several nations have compelled some of our people to abandon their faith, those who were truly Children of Israel never refrained day or night from returning to the inheritance they received from their ancestors, paying no heed to dangers or misfortunes. Those who forgot were descended from those who became mixed with us.³⁸

Morteira is clearly describing the expulsion of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula, and likely refrains from mentioning Spain and Portugal by name due to its clear appearance by the congregation, but also to remind the congregation of other periods of diaspora, such as Exodus and the Second Temple period. The audience, having faced antisemitic violence directly, is reminded by Morteira to remain steadfast in their Judaism, neither falling to fear nor assimilating into the Christian homogeneity. Morteira also demarcates who a truly Jewish person is by their

³⁶ Yosef Kaplan describes a hierarchical status of Sephardic Jews who remained Jewish, and those that became conversos and later rejudiazed, stating that "officials and rabbis of the community fought strongly against this tendency" in "Wayward New Christians and Stubborn New Jews: The Shaping of a Jewish Identity," *Jewish History* 8, no. 1/2 (1994): 27–41, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/stable/20101189>, 30.

³⁷ Marc Saperstein, *Your Voice like a Ram's Horn: Themes and Texts in Traditional Jewish Preaching* (Hebrew Union College Press, 1996,) 112.

³⁸ Morteira, "A Delightful Treasure Sermon" (Deut. 33:1–34:12), in Saperstein, *Your Voice like a Ram's Horn*, 115.

willingness to return to Judaism, a key point meant to both welcome former Sephardic conversos but also strictly enforce a halachic Judaism in Amsterdam's congregation.

The Sabbath of Repentance speech is the longest translated sermon on the relationship between Jews and Christians and sets the precedent for Sephardic Jews in Amsterdam to consider their Christian neighbors. Morteira further reinforces the distinctiveness between Jews and Christians in this *Ha'azinu* speech, with particular emphasis on God's love for Jews.³⁹ In this sermon, Morteira confronts the socio-political conditions of Amsterdam, arguing that since the Torah no longer separated Jews from neighbors, fear grew of Gentile influence on Jews. Therefore, God established rabbinic law and gave Christians the Torah to help guide the Jewish people towards keeping commandments:

Were it not for Christianity, which preserves the Bible, the Jews would revert to idolatrous worship of the sun. But God also put a natural hatred of Jews in Christians to prevent intermarriage.⁴⁰

Historians have long addressed the role of Early Modern Christian Hebraism in Protestant spheres to reinforce the supremacy of Jesus Christ, but in his 1630s sermons, Morteira uses the same argumentation in favor of orthodox Judaism. Christians played a role in preserving the Abrahamic commandments of the Old Testament in the period of Jewish exile, and Morteira urges his congregation to reclaim what once was lost in accordance with the divine will of God. Not only does this indicate Morteira's acute understanding of trending theological arguments from Christians, but also a sense of urgency to subvert these claims for his congregation. Namely, we will see that Menasseh doesn't flip messianic and Christian Hebraist claims like Morteira but rather works alongside them.

³⁹ Morteira, "A Delightful Treasure Sermon" (Deut. 33:1–34:12), in Saperstein, *Your Voice like a Ram's Horn*, 115.

⁴⁰ Saperstein, *Your Voice like a Ram's Horn*, 123.

Morteira, like other Jews and Christians of this period, was acutely aware of the need to publicly defend his religion in an increasingly tolerant and globalized Europe. The rabbi, feeling “moved to write...after listening” to Calvinists, justifies his written medium by arguing that “speaking about these things usually causes the arguments to become intertwined so they become confused, which does not occur in writing.”⁴¹ Morteira’s views reflected the common rabbinical measures of the time, and their hesitancy to engage in interfaith dialogues with Catholics and Protestants. Indeed, Morteira had reasonable cause to avoid speaking directly to Christians regarding the status of Jews in the Netherlands. After the Union of Utrecht (1579) granting freedom of conscience, Jewish settlement was negotiated on a local scale rather than a national standard. Morteira’s skepticism of Jewish-Christian relations is further explored in this sermon, speaking directly to the congregation, “consider, in the first place, that all foreigners outside their own lands maintain reverence for some prince...but for the people of Israel there is no place” to have reverence for a Jewish leader.⁴² For the early Sephardic congregation, the covenant between God and Jews directly allowed for Jews to safely leave the Iberian peninsula. However, it also reinforces the status of Jews as foreigners in Amsterdam, both religiously and politically, with a strong emphasis against integration. Conversos still trapped in Iberia were compared to Israelites trapped in Egypt, with only divine mercy freeing them. Morteira frames this as a danger only halachic observance and reverence to Hashem can save them from.⁴³

Morteira’s writings are explicitly polemical, serving as a warning to his congregation regarding the dangers of Judeo-Christian fraternity. *Providencia* employs a poignant image of

⁴¹ Saul Levi Morteira, "Providencia de Dios con Ysrael," MS B16, Ets Haim Library, Portuguese Synagogue, Amsterdam, transcription, translation, and introduction by Gregory B. Kaplan, <https://heskaamuna.org/morteiraheskatext.pdf>, 8.

⁴² Morteira, "Providencia de Dios con Ysrael," 8.

⁴³ Please note that this sermon was transcribed by manuscript and not printed, as Menasseh ben Israel would be the first Jew in Amsterdam to print. This was most likely due to censorship in accordance with Amsterdam’s municipal policies, but its public-facing language is still evident.

Protestants and Catholics drowning at sea, both a visceral image understood by Sephardic merchants and a warning against the denial of the Laws of Moses. Protestants, despite generally receiving less scrutiny in Morteira's polemics, also "lowered themselves to such a state so that they do not pertain to the seed of Israel," even after purging themselves from Catholicism.⁴⁴ Christianity is explicitly understood as a deviation from the covenant with God and Jews, even in a reformed state like Calvinism.

Current scholarship does not connect Saul Levi Morteira and Menasseh ben Israel's relationship beyond a shallow link, an oversight that must be corrected to see the influence Morteira had on Menasseh's divergence from the standard Sephardic rabbinical response. Historians are uncertain of the precise date of the first Sephardic congregation in Amsterdam, Beth Jacob, although likely formed between 1600–1609.⁴⁵ Neve Salom, the second congregation, was established shortly after by conversos directly from Iberian peninsula, followed by Beth Israel in 1618, mostly comprised of former Beth Jacob congregants who held a differing opinion on the role of conversos in the congregation. A clear distinction of authority between Menasseh and Morteira is established through the infrastructure of the synagogue, likely pushing Menasseh towards outward-facing endeavors rather than internal affairs. Despite being a "highly regarded leader" in the words of David Price, Menasseh's printing business, particularly in the Dutch Brazilian colony, alienated him from the lay *parnassim* and rabbinic colleagues.⁴⁶

Menasseh's theological writings prior to the readmission debate indicated a growing interest in divine providence that directly confronts Morteira's stricter vision of Jewish authority.

⁴⁴ Morteira, "Providencia de Dios con Ysrael," 4.

⁴⁵ Amsterdam's Archive Inventory description states that Beth Jacob was founded in 1600, and Daniel Swetschinski states that the same congregation was founded "almost certainly before 1609." In "From the Middle Ages to the Golden Ages," in *The History of the Jews in the Netherlands*.

⁴⁶ David H. Price, *Defending Judaism: Jewish Writing and Religious Toleration in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford University Press, 2025), 76.

In his 1636 *Resurrection of the Dead*, Menasseh frames the Jewish exile not as a punishment but as a providential design from God, more in line with the later millenarian language he would later utilize in England. Already prominent among Christian spheres, Menasseh wrote *Resurrection of the Dead* despite being a solitary rabbi in his ecumenical and conciliatory attitude towards Christian doctrine.⁴⁷ Despite the Talmudic prohibition against discussing the Torah with non-Jews, Menasseh became a forerunner in Jewish dialogues with Christians in Western Europe.⁴⁸ In favor of such dialogue for the benefit of the Sephardic congregation, Menasseh wrote:

For we worship the same God, submit to His commandments, and after the difficulties of this life expect a better life. And everything in the first book is aimed at this, all should understand that we all inwardly agree on such necessary doctrine against the Sadducees, who are a plague both to souls and commonwealths. May God the greatest and best bless your labours and studies more and more, both those undertaken privately and those undertaken on behalf of this most flourishing commonwealth.⁴⁹

Writing as a junior rabbi three years prior to the congregational unification, Menasseh likely wrote *Resurrection of the Dead* as an internal bid for authority in the congregation through a display of deep theological competence in both Jewish and non-Jewish sources. He also addressed the concerns of the community with great effort, connecting the shared belief of divine judgement and moral accountability between Sephardic Jews and Dutch civic authorities as a source of trust and shared goals between formerly isolated groups.

As his public relations increased in the Christian world, his rank and salary decreased within Menasseh's Jewish community, formally placing Menasseh in a lower rank than Morteira

⁴⁷ Daniel Swetschinski, *Reluctant Cosmopolitans: The Portuguese Jews of Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam* (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2000,) 233.

⁴⁸ "Until here, you have permission to speak; from this point forward you do not have permission to speak, as it is written in the book of Ben Sira: Seek not things concealed from you, nor search those hidden from you. Reflect on that which is permitted to you; you have no business with secret matters." Babylonian Talmud, *Hagigah* 13a, translated via Sefaria, <https://www.sefaria.org/Chagigah.13a.4?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>.

⁴⁹ Menasseh ben Israel, *De la Resurrección de Los Muertos* (1636), trans. Walter Hilliger (Sefaria Library, 2021), https://www.sefaria.org/On_Resurrection_of_the_Dead%2C_Translator's_Introduction.2,6.

in the 1639 unification of congregations, a decision made by both rabbis and the lay leadership interested in declaring that “the Nation should remain united” among deputies, who were “obligated to observe and accept what is determined,” thus maintaining order and stability.⁵⁰ This period would mark a shift in Menasseh’s growing correspondence with Christian intellectuals, “offering his knowledge to the Christian Republic of Letters.”⁵¹ Despite the significant financial losses incurred from his absence from the Esnoga, Menasseh continued to engage in Jewish-Christian debates, which he viewed as serving the best interest of the congregation.

A particularly notable, yet underrepresented dialogue occurred in 1642, during Menasseh’s oration to Prince Frederick Henry of Orange and Queen Henriette of England, marking a subtle shift away from the precedent of Morteira’s traditional sermon framework in favor of a classically influenced dialogue. As in the Resurrection of the Dead, Menasseh deploys language of divine providence alongside Protestants. However, Menasseh crafts a typological symbolic elevation of a gentile ruler, particularly an English Catholic ruler, into sacred Jewish history. He states:

It was ancient times by the illustrious and valiant Priest Mattahias that Judea was freed from the tyrannies and grave subjugation of the cruel Antiochus Epiphanes, and therefore that most famous William, the most illustrious Father of your Highness, freed Holland from the tyrannies and cruelties of Spain.⁵²

Here Menasseh is referencing the Maccabean Revolt of 167 BCE as an analogy between ancient Jewish liberation and Dutch independence from Spain. Not only does this function as an appeal

⁵⁰ “College van Afgevaardigden van de Drie Gemeenten” (College of Deputies of the Three Congregations), inv. nrs. 13–14, Section 4, Amsterdam 334, Archives of the Portuguese-Israelite Community, Amsterdam.

⁵¹ Sina Rauschenbach, *Judaism for Christians: Menasseh ben Israel (1604–1657)* (Lexington Books, 2019,) 29.

⁵² Menasseh ben Israel, “Speech at the Visit of Queen Henriette Maria of England and Prince Frederik Hendrik of Orange in the Sephardic Synagogue of Amsterdam,” 1642, fol. 7, MS EH 47 E 05, Ets Haim Library, <https://etshaimmanuscripts.nl/items/eh-47-e-05>, 8.

to the House of Orange, but it also crafts a biblical deliverance narrative between the Dutch and Sephardic Jews. Among Christian Hebraists, this argument proved to be particularly compelling as a form of spiritually resisting tyranny as a justification for rebellion. Furthermore, Menasseh's rhetorical emphasis on the liberation of Judea and the Maccabees was effective within Humanist scholarship due to what Sina Rauschenbach describes as a period in which "Dutch Calvinists interpreted their history as Salvation History that mirrors events from the Old Testament," a particularly legible argument alongside the first Hebrew appointments at the University of Leiden and first Hebrew printing press in the Dutch Republic in the few decades prior to the 1642 oration.⁵³

The 1642 visit of Queen Henriette proved to be a remarkable moment of public, interfaith dialogue between Menasseh and Christian monarchy, notably both Protestant and Catholic. Scholars have long characterized the relationship between Jews and Christians in the early modern period as confined to private, individual correspondence until the watershed moment of the Whitehall Conference distinguishing the advancement of interfaith dialogue and coexistence. While the Whitehall moment was undoubtedly a fascinating circumstance of intellectual reevaluation of Jews in mid-seventeenth century England, previous public dialogues between Christian monarchy and Jewish intellectuals occurred throughout this period, despite their underrepresentation in the broader argument for Jewish citizenship within emerging global powers.⁵⁴

⁵³ Rauschenbach, *Judaism for Christians*, 18.

⁵⁴ Also, I use the term "citizenship" slightly anachronistically, however, there is merit in understanding the goals of the Sephardic congregation as state-verified safety from religious persecution, civic inclusion, and economic freedom, and alongside the growing emergence of nation-states in Northwest Europe, the concept of early citizenship can be helpful in grounding language of "belonging" in material terminology.

Menasseh's well-documented framing of Jewish dispersal in providential terms culminates in his formal readmission campaign to England, marking his well-documented divergence from traditional rabbinic writing exemplified by senior rabbi Morteira. As a figure of rabbinical authority in Amsterdam, despite his own demotion, Menasseh petitioned to Oliver Cromwell, claiming God "doth give and take away Dominions and Empires, according to his owne pleasure; exalting some, and overthrowing others."⁵⁵ Furthermore, he references Daniel's plea to God in revealing King Nebuchadnezzar's dream as a reminder of God's divine absolute authority over man, including monarchs.⁵⁶ Menasseh affirms that "Thalmudists likewise" hold no authority except for that given from God directly, converging Jewish and Christian providential thought as well as evening out standard expectations of morality and proper conduct for both religions. The rabbi also underscores the blessings God grants to those who "blesse thee," actively positioning Jewish readmission into a broader millenarian argument. Menasseh also recognized the key timing of this debate, as 1656 was "in line with the law of correspondence between the old world and the new, the world before Christ and the years of Christ."⁵⁷

This moment in Protestant English history is correctly historicized as a period of immense political and religious upheaval, and Menasseh carefully crafts a new Jewish opinion to replace anti-Jewish sentiments previously uncontested through attentiveness to Christian

⁵⁵ Menasseh ben Israel, *Menasseh ben Israel's Mission to Oliver Cromwell: Being a Reprint of the Pamphlets Published by Menasseh ben Israel to Promote the Re-Admission of the Jews to England, 1649–1656* (Macmillan, 1901.) 76.

⁵⁶ Daniel 2:20-23 NIV, "Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his. He changes times and seasons; he deposes kings and raises up others. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning. He reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells with him. I thank and praise you, God of my ancestors: You have given me wisdom and power, you have made known to me what we asked of you, you have made known to us the dream of the king."

⁵⁷ Geoffrey F. Nuttall, "Millenarianism in the English Commonwealth," *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis* 67, no. 1 (1987): 71–79, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/stable/24033603>, 74.

scholarship and language, both stylistically and the careful usage of English and Portuguese rather than Hebrew. Menasseh further disarms the belief that Jews were a threat to English Christians in a reminder that Jews do not proselytize, stating that they do not “seduce anyone,” but rather want to reside in London to “always bring profit to the people of the land.”⁵⁸ Although Sephardic rabbis, including Morteira, were multilingual and familiar with Christian providential thought, Menasseh diverged from the longstanding hesitation among orthodox Jews to publicly dispute their legal and religious status to a Christian audience. In this moment, the rabbi presents Cromwell two options, either exclude Jews from England and face condemnation like Biblical tyrants or welcome their presence and align England with God’s redemption of mankind. This dilemma, while phrased with delicacy and precision, is a daring case made for readmission in a period of immense violence and discrimination against Jews.

The contours of his argument are demonstrated Menasseh’s 1650 work, *Hope of Israel*, illuminating his shift towards outward-facing rabbinic dialogue post 1639 Talmud Torah unification. Writing as a third-ranked rabbi post-merger, his outreach towards Christian philo-semites directly opposed the newly senior rabbi Morteira’s anti-Christian stance. The first publication of *Hope of Israel* was directly responding to Antonio de Montezino’s 1644 *Andean Testimony* and appeared in both Spanish and Latin for a Christian intellectual audience. Menasseh employs Sephardic eschatology in ways legible to Puritan millenarians, framing the work as for his “Country-men, who wait for the redemption of Israel,” referencing Romans 11:25-26 on Jewish conversion and the return of the Messiah.⁵⁹ His careful argumentation allows

⁵⁸ Menasseh ben Israel, *Vindiciae Judaeorum*, in Menasseh ben Israel's Mission to Oliver Cromwell, 137.

⁵⁹ Ben Israel, Menasseh. *The Hope of Israel*. London, 1652.

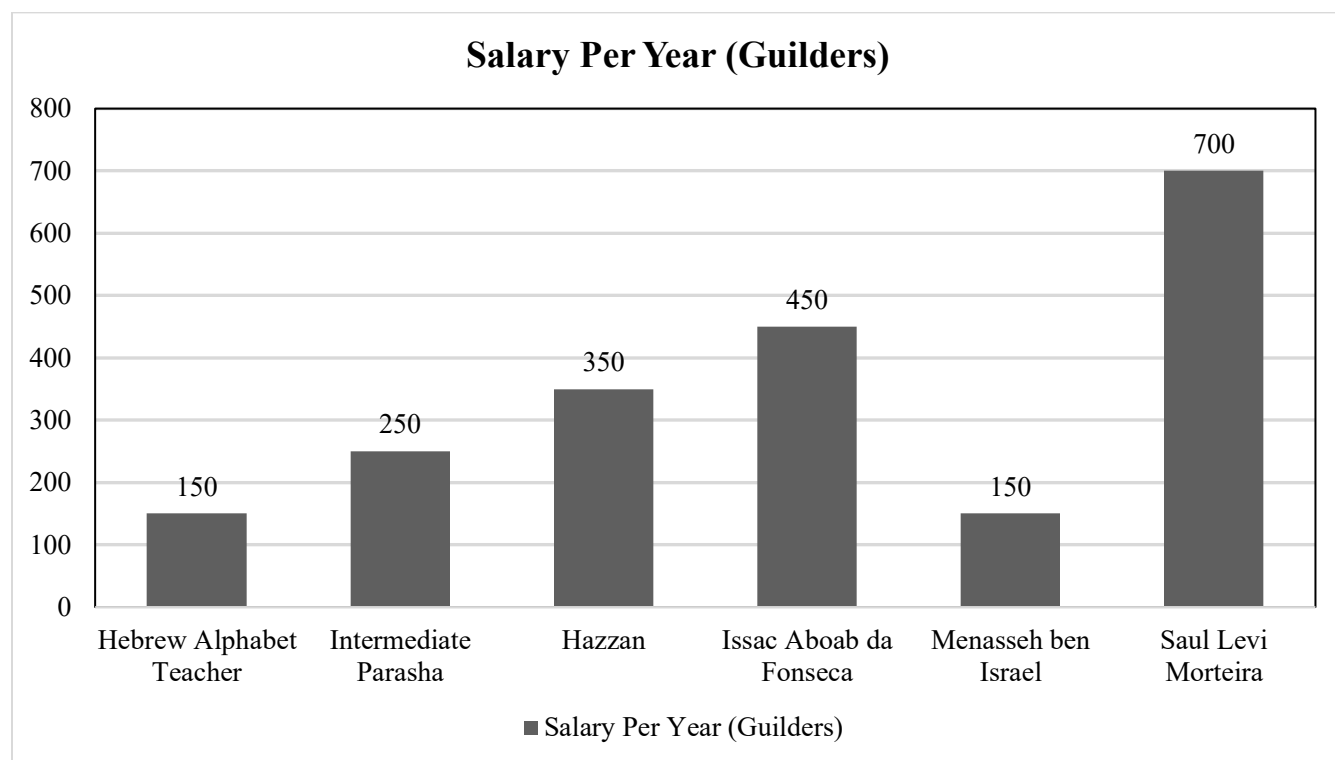
him to flatter Parliament along Christian frameworks while still preserving the validity of Jewish messianism, indicating a full shift of the rabbi towards cooperation between both religions.⁶⁰

Having considered Menasseh's internal argumentation for the readmission campaign, it is now necessary to consider the internal synagogue structure as a means of understanding how rabbinic opinions influenced the social reality of the congregation. The bureaucratic restructuring of the synagogue during the unification of the Kahal Kadosh Talmud Torah congregation further codified rabbinical hierarchy within the synagogue, establishing a well-structured hierarchy of authority within the institution. Many of these changes took place in Autumn 1638 in the Founding Regulations of the United Portuguese-Israelite Congregation, outlining strict policies for both laymen and rabbis with positions of power. Here, the Mahamad granted itself the responsibility to elect three assessors of good reputation, six *parnassim*, or administrators of religious life, one newly appointed *gabay*, treasurer, and eight neutral members of finances.⁶¹ With voting power dispersed among a council of men, further policies were enacted to create internal efficiency. For instance, changes to the board were required to be published a month prior to its effect in the *livro*, or public register. Elections for annual positions were held after Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and separation of finances and the Mahamad were strict, forbidding men to hold overlapping positions. These self-imposed restrictions were undoubtedly tedious and lengthy as indicated by many surviving Sephardi records from this period pertaining to meeting minutes or financial logs.

⁶⁰ Note in Morteira's eulogy that Menasseh's trip to England was explicitly mentioned in as a noble effort for readmission. While both rabbis disagreed on the relationship between Jews and Christians, Morteira's acknowledgement of Menasseh's expedition indicates the trip was undertaken with legitimacy and awareness of Amsterdam's Naçao. Further scholarship comparing the funding of his trip to the *parnassim*'s budget might further explore the dynamic of this relationship.

⁶¹ Founding Regulations of the United Portuguese-Israelite Congregation, 22 Elul, 1638, Amsterdam Archives 334 Inv. 16

The hierarchical structure of the synagogue was not only codified on paper but held material consequences for even the leaders themselves. The 1638 readjustment of salaries illuminates the shifting internal power dynamics of the rabbinate between each other and to the parnassim and Mahamad.⁶²



As historian Arthur der Weduwen indicates, the average household income in seventeenth-century Dutch Republic was five hundred guilders, placing both Menasseh and Morteira at opposite extremes for annual income.⁶³ Whether Menasseh ben Israel's substantially lower salary was indicative of a punishment towards his differing opinion from the elder Saul Levi Morteira is not readily knowable, as no records indicate Menasseh or Morteira personally commenting on the change of their salary. However, this salary deduction indicates the priorities of the

⁶² Founding Regulations of the United Portuguese-Israelite Congregation, 22 Elul, 1638, Amsterdam Archives 334-Inv. 16.

⁶³ Arthur der Weduwen, *State Communication and Public Politics in the Dutch Golden Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 2023), 17.

congregation were neither foreign travel to England nor hosting debates for readmission elsewhere. Instead, most of the Sephardic funds remained towards the reeducation of the Jewish congregation *within* the synagogue itself, funding its daily operations rather than advancement outside of the synagogue.

Menasseh ben Israel, despite his lifetime of service to Amsterdam's Sephardic community and decades-long effort for readmission of Jews to England, died shortly after the Whitehall Conference, never to see his congregation again or the emerging Jewish community in London. Saul Levi Morteira, as senior rabbi, delivered his eulogy with the traditional sermon formatting outlining a conceptual problem solved through interpretation of the Torah. Amid Menasseh's unpopular campaign for readmission and his fraught relationship with Morteira, the senior rabbi addresses the late rabbi's merits:

He recognized the glory of his place, for the same thing that happened to the righteous Joseph happened to him. The sages gave a parable of thieves who entered a cellar and stole a barrel of wine. The owner said to them, "you have drunk the wine now return the barrel to its place." Even so the Bible tells us, *The bones of Joseph which the children of Israel brought up from Egypt were buried at Shechem* (Josh. 24:32). So it was with this *tsaddiq*: his lofty ideas stole him from his place (for thoughts are called "friends" and "brothers," as in the verse, *How precious to me are Your friends, O God* [Ps. 139:17]), and brought him to England in his desire to establish there a community that would call upon the name of God in that country.⁶⁴

In this eulogy, Morteira reconciles Menasseh's aims with the outcomes of 1655 by declaring that Menasseh's intention was reverent to God, and therefore a mitzvah itself. Invoking Joseph also serves to bolster late Menasseh's righteousness, injustice at his absence from the Naçao because of Christians, and ultimate recognized efforts to save his people.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Cecil Roth, *A Life of Menasseh ben Israel: Rabbi, Printer and Diplomat* (Jewish Publication Society, 1934), 227.

⁶⁵ Genesis 37–50 describes Joseph as one of the twelve tribes of Israel, son of Jacob and Rachel, and the righteous one, overcoming enslavement in Egypt at the hands of his brothers and becoming ruler of Egypt.

When recontextualizing Menasseh ben Israel within the Portuguese Jewish congregation in Amsterdam, the rabbi no longer serves as an essentialized Jew commonly characterized in English Christian Hebraist writings, but a deeply engaged member of his congregation with diverging opinions than his colleagues, especially Saul Levi Morteira. Scholarship on early modern Jewish thought in the Christian world has assumed that Jewish arguments surrounding Christian relations were predominately interfaith and public facing. However, many Early modern rabbinical authorities' negotiations and understanding of Christianity was shaped through intra-religious disputes regarding the position of *conversos* and questions of legal protections. For this reason, it is essential for historians to understand the Jewish-led argument for readmission from its complete chronology, beginning with an internal record of the forces shaping the thrust of the argument prior to arriving at the Whitehall Conference. When this oversight is corrected, Menasseh employs early variants of providential theology in his earlier writings and to vastly differing audiences.

Chapter 3: *Who Do You Think We Are?* Public-Facing and Material Nature of the Esnoga

As we saw in Chapter Two, Menasseh ben Israel emerges not as the essentialized Jewish figure of Christian Hebraist imagination, but as a specific voice within the Esnoga diverging from other rabbis like Saul Levi Morteira. Chapter three expands from this period of internal debates giving way to a codification of beliefs to prepare the community for outward-facing engagement with Dutch authorities. This congregational unification, presented in the physical expression of the Portuguese Synagogue, enabled the congregation to utilize the physical nature of the Esnoga as a tool towards stability and civic legitimacy within Dutch public space. Thus, the Portuguese Synagogue utilized its architectural visibility into a tool towards negotiating claims for permanent settlement and civic recognition.

The synagogue and its function towards repositioning the broader Sephardic identity formation in the Dutch Republic can be first understood through its physical, temporal relationship to the diaspora. Sephardic synagogues can be traced throughout Europe and the transatlantic, with Sephardic identity evolving in architectural style from al-Andalus's Mudéjar to Dutch vernacular towards a syncretism between them. By 1670, the newly unified Sephardic congregation began construction of the Portuguese Synagogue, also called the Esnoga. Purposely designed ten meters shorter than King Solomon's Temple, the Esnoga's design meticulously reconstructs Jewish identity as it existed before the destruction of the second temple.⁶⁶ Above the entrance lays the Hebrew inscription, "But I, through Thy Great love, may come into Thy

⁶⁶ Leo Fuks, *Aspects of Jewish Life in the Netherlands: A Selection from the Writings of Leo Fuks*, 86.

house.”⁶⁷ Despite their restrictions on freedom of expression within Dutch policy limitations on public expressions of faith outside of Calvinism, the Portuguese synagogue undoubtedly illuminates a strong testament to the survival and exterior displays of faith within the Amsterdam community.

The Portuguese synagogue displays strong cultural syncretism of Dutch architecture, offering Sephardic Jews greater safety within the community and deeper cultural integration without compromising tenants of Jewish faith. The synagogue, designed by Elias Bouman, architect of Ashkenazi synagogues, and inspired by city architect Daniel Stalpaert, utilized bricks and ornamental curving buttresses on the building’s exterior, not commonly seen in Jewish architecture. These architectural practices originated from Northern European design common in the era of the Protestant Reformation, intersecting Judeo-Christian art under shared visual imagery within the Old Testament, with particularly renewed cultural interest in the reconstruction of the Temple from Jesuit Juan Bautista Villalpando.⁶⁸

Sephardic disenfranchisement from Dutch life, and their subsequent negotiations for settlement may be directly observed through the reciprocal relationship between the Jewish congregation and the Christian print and art culture in the early Dutch Republic. The Portuguese synagogue functioned not only as a political or religious edifice, but also a measurement of public enfranchisement and permanence Jews were permitted to maintain within the emerging mercantile city. The evolving Christian perceptions of the newly unified Jewish community can be best understood in the prints and paintings of the structure, displaying measures of cultural and visual syncretism and grandeur commonly associated with Reformed church art and opulent

⁶⁷ Psalm 5:8, NIV.

⁶⁸*The Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam*. Edited by Pieter Vlaardingerbroek. WBooks, 2013, 68.

cosmopolitan centers, such as Amsterdam Centraal. Thus, the synagogue itself becomes a measurement of the evolving Jewish and Christian relationship within public space.

Sephardic cultural integration into Dutch life can be further understood through 1680s Dutch Calvinist paintings. In the first decade of its consecration, the Esnoga was especially well received within the broader Christian community for its grandeur and wealth. In *The Snoge from the Southeast*, Haarlem townscape painter Gerrit Adriaensz Berckheyde articulated the splendor of the architecture in the traditional Dutch mannerist and realist style common during this period.⁶⁹

The Dutch Calvinist depictions of the consecration of the Esnoga mark a key point in which the Esnoga transforms as a site of Dutch civic achievement as an ordered and self-governing site from its original status as a foreign intrusion or private matter.



Figure 1. Gerrit Adriaensz Berckheyde, *The Snoge from the Southeast*, c. 1680.

⁶⁹*The Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam*, 91.

Long vertical lines and gentle, warm tones reflecting light from the canals offer an appreciation of the synagogue and broader Jewish community for the Calvinist audience devoid of religious or political affiliation. This painting creates a distinct cultural position within Amsterdam beyond religion or exile, but instead as a constructive minority within the community. While not a measure of full assimilation, this painting appreciates the Esnoga for its beauty within the city as opposed to a strong distinction separating it from its surrounding buildings. *Interior of the Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam*, painted in 1680 by Dutch Calvinist painter and proponent of realism Emanuel de Witte details the interior of the synagogue shortly after its consecration.



Figure 2. Emanuel de Witte, *Interior of the Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam*, 1680. Rijksmuseum.

Similarly to Berckheyde's painting, de Witte illuminates the beauty of the structure. However, he also accounted for the vibrant and dynamic community *hiddur mitzvot*, or blessing of

ornamentation, within the synagogue. This permanent settlement marked the legal advances for Sephardic Jews previously made impossible under Christian law, marking greater agency and autonomy of the congregation. The building itself, located east of the Amstel and visible in all directions, aided in the physical negotiations of their agency within the Dutch Republic.⁷⁰

The repositioning of Sephardic identity within Dutch society must also be examined through a metaphysical, spiritual understanding of the synagogue. To understand this sentiment, a careful return to theological understandings and writings of the earliest synagogues offers a clearer perception of the synagogue. The First and Second Temples of 900 BCE and 70 CE served as the center for Jewish life, and were ordained by God, when commanding Solomon declared, “As for this temple you are building, if you follow my decrees, observe my laws and keep all my commands and obey them, I will fulfill through you the promise I gave to David your father. And I will live among the Israelites and will not abandon my people Israel.”⁷¹ Prior to this, the exiled Jewish people spent nearly 400 years in the Mishkan, or Tabernacle, awaiting the construction of the final temple. The Mishkan, in Jewish religious and literary contexts, serves as the portable temple allowing for the preservation of Jewish life in the absence of the final, permanent temple. The Mishkan acts as a preservation of Jewish spirit and identity while facing displacement, allowing for group cohesion while in exile. The synagogue evolved as a metaphysical site rooted in a Biblical, spiritual return, rather than just a physical return. Judaism in exile, therefore, becomes a method in which the diaspora can justify their suffering as temporary and purposeful, with a flexibility to recreate God’s dwelling in new lands.

Sephardic perceptions towards the Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam further indicate the preservation of Jewish identity in exile. The Edict of Expulsion, dated to the Jewish month of

⁷⁰See Jacob van Ruisdael, *View of Amsterdam from the Amsteldijk*, 1680.

⁷¹1 Kings 6:11–13, NIV

Ab, remains the saddest date in the calendar commemorating the destruction of both Temples in Jerusalem, and further adding to its loss in the fifteenth-century.⁷² Of the Jews who left the Iberian Peninsula, the community who fled to Amsterdam held strong convictions of rebuilding what was hidden and lost according to God's divine plan.⁷³ The preservation of identity, therefore, is not simply within the building's architecture or physical nature, but also within the theological function of the temple for the congregation's hope of God's return. The Mishkan preserves the Jewish spirit and identity while in displacement, allowing for group cohesion while in exile.

Written memory of the Sephardic congregation's understanding of identity within exile is extensive and displayed in both religious and secular contexts. The Hebrew word for exile, *galut*, connotes varying emotional responses towards exile and dispossession of a physical Jewish identity. Shame and guilt engulf the Jewish exile as a fundamental component of spiritual separation from God, furthering the tension and anguish the community faced in their desire for physical return to the holy land, but more importantly, a spiritual return to be worthy of God's presence. In 1638, the congregation's central board of directors, the Mahamad, released the congregation's unified policies and formulated the foundation of the larger 1675 congregation within the Esnoga:

This congregation was established for the Jews of the Portuguese Nation, and Spanish, who are present in this city, and of those who come in the future, and Jewish persons who come here from other nations are admitted to pray, if appropriate by the Mahamad.⁷⁴

⁷²Marc Angel, *Voices in Exile: A Study in Sephardic Intellectual History*. Hoboken, N.J.: New York, N.Y.: KTAV Pub. House, in association with Sephardic House, 1991, 6.

⁷³ This perception originates from Exodus 25-31, where Jewish theology understands the Mishkan as hidden by God, rather than destroyed. In the time of waiting before God reveals its hidden location, Jews are encouraged to find temporary places of belonging.

⁷⁴ "This congregation was established for the Jews of the Portuguese Nation, and Spanish, who are present in this city, and of those who come in the future, and Jewish persons who come here from other nations are admitted to pray, if appropriate by the Mahamad." from "Collection of historical documents concerning the Sephardic congregation of Amsterdam", EH 48 D 43, trans. Abraham de Israel Zagache, Ets Haim Bibliotheek, Netherlands, <https://etshaimmanuscripts.nl/items/eh-48-d-43/>. "Que esta congregación se haze para los Judios dela Nación

Despite their exile and separation from both their biblical and cultural homelands, the Sephardic community expressed joy towards an increasingly populated congregation within exile. Rather than focus on a return impossible in the seventeenth century, the congregation and its leadership instead focused its attention on preserving Judaism within Northern Europe. The Mahamad even articulated an acceptance of all Jews, regardless of prior national affiliations.⁷⁵

On the first Shabbat of August 1675, Issac Aboab da Fonseca reaffirmed the acceptance of all Jews in the first sermon delivered in the Portuguese Synagogue. The lead rabbi of the 1630-1654 *Zur Israel* congregation in Dutch occupied Brazil and prominent rabbi in Amsterdam's congregation in the 1660s, da Fonseca recounted the fall of Adam through original sin. He connected the redemption of Mount Sinai and the idolatry of the golden calf in his oration; the rabbi urged the newly established congregation to return to the House of God and redemption.⁷⁶ Da Fonseca and the other six speeches were delivered in Portuguese, although the congregation also spoke Spanish conversationally. The call to redemption not only urged the congregation towards a cohesive Jewish identity rooted in scripture but reinforced the cosmopolitan attitudes of the congregation. Historian Leo Fuks underscores the "high cultural level" reached by the Sephardic community with multilingual prose and verse also reflected Western Europe's growing emphasis on classical structure of oration.

Sephardic Jewish hope and redemption, or *ge'ulah*, may be better clarified in the context of exile through an understanding of the synagogue's role in redemption. The synagogue

Portuguesa, y Española, que al presente están en esta ciudad, y de nuevo vinieren a ella, y que las personas tu daicas que aquí vinieren de quales quiera otras naciones podrán ser admitidos a rezar, pareciendo bien a Maamad que serviere."

⁷⁵ The Ashkenazi temple was constructed shortly before the consecration of the Esnoga, although much smaller and less grand. While the two communities were not fully unified due to linguistic, cultural, and economic differences, the Sephardic welcoming of Ashkenazi Jews in their congregation's policies reinforces the Jewish identity as a central characteristic over other intersecting identities, such as language fluency or geographic origin.

⁷⁶ Leo Fuks, *Aspects of Jewish Life in the Netherlands: A Selection from the Writings of Leo Fuks*, 90.

functioned as both an emotional and physical return to the homeland while making attachments to the Dutch Republic for survival. The Sephardic biblical and physical imagination of diaspora are clearly identified as an Early modern repositioning of Jewish identity within Dutch culture.

The synagogue and its many forms through which the Sephardic congregation understands its function in Jewish life transformed the previously diasporic congregation into a permanent and public reminder of Judaism in Amsterdam. The structure represents this celebration of Jewish rituals within a Calvinist cityscape, and of the residency of the community formerly entrenched in exile. Despite their supposed foreignness to each other, these differing positions coexist together in harmony within the synagogue due to its flexibility and adaptability within the emerging early modern landscape.

Sephardic spiritual life operated within the given political reality of the Dutch Republic, influencing social life and leadership responses creating a partially integrated Jewish community previously unintended by conservative rabbinate, such as Morteira. Visual depictions of Amsterdam during this time reveal Dutch artists and intellectuals reconsidering the long-standing physical separation of Jews through idyllic Dutch realist paintings, a shift captured in fictionalized types rather than observed reality.



Figure 3. Romeyn de Hooghe, *Interior of the Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam*, 1675. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

Romeyn de Hooghe's 1675 etch of the Portuguese Synagogue's consecration serves as both a record of Jewish life and a political argument for Sephardic civic legitimacy. The print features Amsterdam's maiden, personifying Freedom of Conscience from the Union of Utrecht granting religious liberty to Jewish residents. This visual imagery reframes Jewish settlement in Amsterdam from a contested foreign occupation into a celebrated and distinctly Dutch civic achievement. The synagogue becomes the symbol to which Amsterdam's Christian magistrates can prove their exceptional tolerance and benevolence to a broader Dutch audience, with the etch likely posted in public squares and designed as a source of pride and recognition. In turn, this repositioned the Sephardic congregation as grateful beneficiaries and symbols of Dutch virtue rather than external margins within Dutch society.

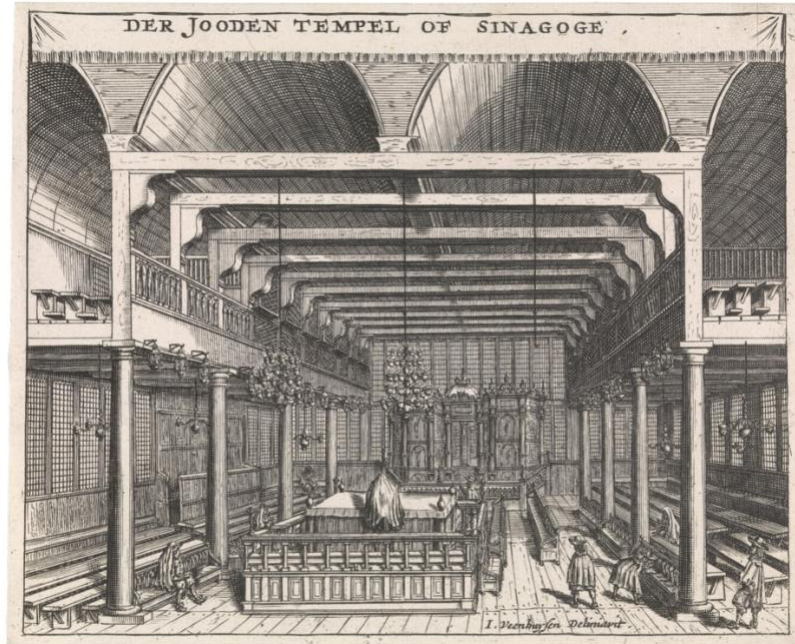


Figure 4. Jan Veenhuysen (attributed), *Interieur van de Portugese Synagoge aan de Houtgracht te Amsterdam*, 1664. Rijksmuseum.

Rather than observing the ceremony, the Dutch Christians are bestowing the Jewish figures religious freedom. Coupled with the ornamental printing and orderly characterization of Jewish men in pews, this work indicates a willingness to have Jewish coexistence and enhancement of Dutch urban life in Amsterdam without explicitly referencing earlier, long-standing stereotypes that “all Jews [were] hereditary enemies of all Christians.”⁷⁷ In many ways, this reflects the shifting attitudes towards Jews in correspondence with the Dutch republican ideals, in which “the virtues of a republic (self-rule of citizens, liberty, justice and consensus) always thrives thanks to the direction of a selfless council of citizens.”⁷⁸ While these images clearly favor Dutch Protestants through their depiction of benevolent, patronizing attitudes towards the Jews, this emerging relationship nonetheless positively enabled the Nação measures of self-determination and settlement within Amsterdam previously unseen.

⁷⁷ Grotius, *Remonstrantie of 1615*, 200.

⁷⁸ Arthur der Weduwen, *State Communication and Public Politics in the Dutch Golden Age*, 5.

Conclusion

By the 1675 consecration of the Esnoga, multilingual accounts of the structure were printed for a wider European audience. The Jewish Temple in Amsterdam, as described by Romeyn de Hooghe, celebrates the inauguration of the synagogue with shared common themes across five languages: Dutch, French, Portuguese, Hebrew, and Latin:



Figure 5. Romeyn de Hooghe, The Etcher: Contemporary Portrayal of Europe, 1662-1707 <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/object/Tekstblad-bij-een-prent-van-het-interieur-van-de-Portugese-Synagoge-te-Amsterdam-tijdens-de-inwijding--1296dae2f636887892bf5839aeb534dc?tab=data>.

In their linguistic variances, the same positive message is clear. The Portuguese synagogue reflected the glory, magnificence, splendor, and holiness of the shared God of Judaism and Christianity. Psalm 91 reads across the different languages, calling attention to the refuge, protection, and shield the synagogue brings to the Jewish people in Amsterdam. Furthermore, the celebratory tone marks this moment as a significant event for Jews and their Christian neighbors

worth acknowledging in vernacular and intellectual languages. The organization of the broadsheet clearly indicates a desire for a wide audience, and the listing of both Jewish and Christian authors reveals a culmination of interfaith dialogue and relationships previously unseen in the decades prior. The Portuguese Synagogue, in its comparison to Psalm 91, transcended prior religious and political divisions standard for the period.

This broadsheet questions the traditional binary of early modern Jewish life as either formed strictly internally or in the context of Christian Dutch life. Reading this celebratory post through a single lens could not properly explain why a Jewish celebration would include the positive words of Christian intellectuals, particularly in French and Latin, while also containing the writings from the congregation itself in Portuguese and Hebrew. Only through holding all languages simultaneously does the synagogue's dual function as a tool for internal regulation and mechanism for public Jewish life become apparent. Therefore, the investigation of the century prior to the consecration is required to fully understand the unique circumstances of the Esnoga's interfaith celebration.

At the outset of this thesis, I argued that prior economic and religious reconstructions of Sephardic life in Amsterdam have artificially separated internal Jewish consolidation from external relations with Dutch authorities, treating these as parallel but isolated occurrences. While these approaches have merit in understanding Dutch toleration and Sephardic religious culture in Amsterdam, a reconsideration of their intersection was critical because internal self-regulation and external legitimization were not simply simultaneous occurrences, but interdependent processes. This is evident in the cultivation of the Esnoga throughout the seventeenth-century. Cultivation of a cohesive Jewish identity gave allowance for communal discipline, including rabbinic disagreements over the relationship of Jews and Christians, which

in its resolution reinforced petitions for autonomy to the Dutch authority. In turn, such needs for external legibility shaped internal governance within the congregation. Rather than occurring in isolation, these processes converged within the Esnoga itself, transforming the synagogue into an instrument of congregational unity and tool for presenting a unified Jewish congregation towards a Christian audience.

By 1675, the Esnoga in Amsterdam stood as a distinct achievement of communal consolidation and strategic self-presentation. The consecration ceremony publicly showcased a congregation that transformed from its diasporic refugee status into a self-regulation body led by the Mahamed, establishing religious leadership capable of managing the community's disputes and crises with a physical structure reinforcing the community's permanent settlement. The Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam was no longer a temporary meeting place for a fleeting Jewish population, but a formal Jewish institution designed and oriented towards both internal order and external respect.

Yet, as discussed in the previous chapters, this congregational stability was not inevitable, but rather the direct result of interpersonal tensions and resolutions in the seventeenth-century. Furthermore, the 1675 consecration cemented hierarchies between Mahamed and rabbinate, merchant elites and lay families, and Ashkenazi and Sephardic groups that remained contested long after the institution's crystallization. The synagogue's dual function as place to unify the congregation and reflect its cohesion to a Christian audience was not meant to function as a simple resolution to ongoing matters of Jewish autonomy and obligation, but rather an ongoing place to ensure the future of Jewish life in Holland.

This thesis builds upon the rich literature understanding Jews in early modernity, including their material and religious relationship to their Christian neighbors. However, the role

of the synagogue itself, and particularly the Esnoga, is understood as an architectural feat or expression or expression of faith rather than the sum of its parts, which creates a new mosaic casting a unique light on the experiences of minoritized communities alongside the rise of European modernity and broader interfaith relations.

While the Esnoga represents a particularly opulent case of architectural and congregational self-preservation, it was not the only instance of religious minorities navigating precarious toleration alongside problems of material space in early modern cities. The synagogue's private worship space and public-facing demonstration of order invites comparative questions of how other minority communities leveraged their built environment towards establishing a settled community. Future research could productively examine whether the conditions that enabled Amsterdam Sephardic congregation's success were replicable elsewhere. Comparing less successful Jewish settlements beyond the Dutch metropole, such as New Amsterdam and Recife, could better clarify whether Amsterdam's commercial dynamic and decentralized governance was exceptional or a transferable model for minority communities seeking autonomy in early modernity.

Sephardic life in both the Dutch Republic and the Iberian Peninsula, despite maintaining Judaism's non-proselytizing status, conducted private rituals under intense Christian surveillance. Not completely unlike many religions of the seventeenth-century, the Sephardic community had no moment of existence without carefully considering its strategy towards crafting a positive public image with the goal of maintaining tolerance. Establishing legibility to a Dutch audience was a necessary strategy employed by Jewish leaders to maintain its community's existence.

Indeed, the synagogue acted as a public expression of Jewish identity and autonomy in Amsterdam. However, it was not simply a reflection of post-consecration material realities, but also an instrument of producing the congregation's capacity towards self-governance. Early modern narratives often centralize the rise of the state as a centralized bureaucracy with religious communities either absorbed or destroyed by political power. However, the success of the Esnoga, an insulated and self-regulated community within the economic center of Holland, suggests an alternative reading of this period. The Portuguese Nation didn't assimilate into Dutch culture or politics, particularly given the decentralized nature of the states. Instead, it worked parallel to Christian authorities, offering a new interpretation of institutions like the Esnoga as alternative models to the traditional narrative of Europe's path to modernity enforcing assimilation.

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Components of this research were developed in an earlier essay, “Menasseh ben Israel and Saul Levi Morteira: Early Modern Rabbinical Hierarchy and the Jewish Readmission Debate, 1618-1656,” for Professor Kirsten Macfarlane’s course, *Christianity and Judaism in Early Modern Europe* (Winter 2026.)

Note on Source Availability

Several digitized archives made this thesis possible to complete, including the Ets Haim Library Manuscripts and Inventory 334: Archive of the Portuguese-Israelite Community in the Amsterdam City Archives. Please note that translations are mine unless otherwise cited.

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