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Jewish Beginnings in the American Experience

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In the Sukkoth celebration in this Thanksgiving holiday, it seems to me there is a question that begs for a response from us as Jews. "Where do I, as a Jew, fit into the picture?"

There has never been a period in Jewish history which quite compares with the American experience. We are part of the story of America. I do not refer to the nit-picking facts; the figures and statistics about how Jews financed the Revolution, or how many served in the Army. These are the footnotes to history, not history. There is a larger truth about our experience, belonging in and to America. Were it not for America, Judaism would be different from what it is today. And were it not for Judaism, America would be different. This equation reveals a saga of two cultures that met and did not merge, but had instead a most profound effect, one upon the other.

The United States will be 214 years old next July. But the Jewish community in America is far older than that. In Newport, Rhode Island, there is a Jewish cemetery near by to the Turo Synagogue, which is the oldest synagogue building in the United States. This cemetery, dating back to 1677, is itself the oldest recorded Jewish burial ground in North America. When Henry Longfellow visited Newport in 1852, there were at the time no Jews remaining in the city, but the cemetery was there, and Longfellow, who understood Judaism, who understood Jews, and who understood Hebrew, was so deeply moved by the sight that he composed a poem dedicated to that cemetery. Two of the verses are these:

How strange it seems,
These Hebrew in their graves
Close by the street of this fair seaport town
Silent beside the never silent waves,
At rest in all this going up and down.
How came they here?
What burst of Christian hate,
What persecution merciless and blind
Drove over the seas, the desert desolate.
These Ishmaels and Hagars of mankind?

How came they here? That is the first questions we would ask. How came they here? It happened precisely 336 years ago. Just think! Three

hundred and thirty-six years ago, the total Jewish population in the colonies was one. One. That's all. Jacob Bar-Simpson, who arrived from the Netherlands two weeks earlier on August 22, was the total Jewish population 330 years ago. But 330 years ago, the Jewish population increased by 2300 %. For on the fifth day of September, 1654, the good ship, St. Charles, sailed into the harbor of what was then New Amsterdam, and is today New York. On board that ship were 23 Jewish refugees; six men, four women and thirteen children.

It has been a hard journey; a long journey. The journey lasted ten days. That is how long it took to get here from Brazil. You might also say the journey lasted 162 years, for that is how long it was since the expulsion from Spain. Or you might say it took them 1,584 years, for that is how long it had been since Rome destroyed Jerusalem and created the wondering Jew.

After the expulsion from Spain in 1492, and from Portugal in 1497, Jews found rest in Holland. As Dutch subjects, they had helped to colonize Brazil. When the Portuguese attacked, however, and reinstated the Inquisition, 23 Jews fled to another Dutch colony: New Amsterdam. The welcoming committee left something to be desired. They had been captured by pirates, rescued by the French, and by now, they were penniless. Therefore, they were thrown into prison for nonpayment of passage. What they did possess was sold at public Auction.

Peter Stuyvesant, (pro: Sty ve sant) the patron saint of New York, whose name is everywhere mentioned, and everywhere honored, did everything in his power to eject the Jews. They had arrived on the 5th of September. By the 10th they were in prison, and on the 25th of September, Peter sent a letter to the board of directors of the Dutch West India Company in Amsterdam, the company that owned the colony. I found a copy of that letter. Let me share it with you.

September 22, 1654. "The Jews who have arrived would nearly all like to remain here, but learning that they (with their customary usury and deceitful trading with the Christians) were very repugnant to the interior magistrates and also to the people having the most affection for you; the deaconry (pro: dee con ry) (which takes care of the poor) also fearing that owing to their present indigence (due to the fact that they had been captured and robbed by pirates) they might become a burden in the coming winter. We have for the benefit of this weak and newly developing place and land in general, deemed it useful to require them, in a friendly way, to depart; trying also more seriously in this connection, for ourselves and also for the general community of your worships that this deceitful race – such hateful enemies and blasphemers of the name of Christ – be not allowed further to infect and trouble this new colony, to the

destruction of your worship and the dissatisfaction of your worship's most affectionate subjects."

The Jews of Amsterdam, Holland, then did what Jews have always done toward their brothers in trouble. They applied pressure to avert the evil decree. And they were successful. On April 26, 1655, the board of directors of the Dutch West India Company sent the following letter to our good friend Peter Stuyvesant (pro. Sty/ve/sant). [April 26, 1655] *"Honorable, prudent, pious, dear faithful... We would like to effectuate and fulfill your wishes and request that the new territories should no more be allowed to be infected by people of the Jewish nation, for we foresee the same difficulties which you fear. But after having further weighed and considered the matter, we observe that this would be somewhat unreasonable and unfair, especially because of the considerable loss sustained by this nation, with other, in the taking of Brazil, and also because of the large amount of capital which they still have invested in the shared of this company. Therefore, after many deliberations, we have finally decided and resolved that these people may travel and trade to and in New Netherland and live and remain there, provided the poor among them shall not become a burden to the company or to the community (in the future poor Jews would not be supported by the Manhattan churches) but be supported by their own nation. You will now govern yourself accordingly... The Directors of the West India Company Department of Amsterdam."*

And so, they stayed, and grew, and prospered. But what were they thinking when they first came ashore? No one can really say. But we know what they were not thinking. They were not thinking that this land would become their permanent home. They were not thinking that here they could demand, expect, or even hope for religious equality. And certainly nothing that Peter ever did or said gave them such hope. This America was to be for them nothing more than another step on a very long journey. Another stop in the saga of the wandering Jew. They were forbidden citizenship in other places. Not once in all recorded history were they afforded equal status. Why should it be different here?

But it was different here, by more than anyone could foresee. As far as religion was concerned, America was a strange land with strange ideas. Every other country in the world had an official religion, but in America there was no denomination that was everywhere in the majority. The Puritans were dominant in New England, but were dissenters everywhere else. The Quakers were hated in Boston, but they controlled Philadelphia. The Catholics, a tiny minority, still was represented by a Catholic proprietor of Maryland. Throughout the interior, there were Presbyterians, and Baptists, and Dutch Reformed. And nobody

much cared for the other person's religion. Somehow the Jews came to be looked upon as just another religion. Biblical Judaism was respected and revered by all of the various Christian denominations. The Puritans are a case in point. They did not like the Jews, but they were in love with our customs, our history, and most of all, our Bible. They patterned themselves on that Bible. They gave themselves Biblical names. America was their Canaan, and they believed they were the later-day Israelites. For them the Atlantic Ocean was the Red Sea, King George was Pharaoh, and there was talk of making Hebrew the national language! Can you imagine what that would have done to our Bar Mitzvah program!

The Plymouth Colony Code of Laws in 1636, the Massachusetts Code in 1647, and Connecticut Code of 1650, were all based on the Laws of Moses. And the New Haven Code of 1639, over one half of the laws came directly out of the Jewish Bible.

When the Christian colonies thought about Jews, they followed the precedent of the old world, and discriminated against their Jewish neighbors. But mostly they forgot to think about it because of the diversity of religious communities. There were other thoughts about religion. In 1663, the colony of Rhode Island petitioned Charles II for a charter which stated: "No person within this state colony... shall be in any way molested, punished, degraded or called in question, for any difference in opinion in matters of religion."

In 1685, the Jews of New York requested permission to build a synagogue. They were told it was against the law. A few years later they built a synagogue anyway.

Jews had come as refugees into a land filled with refugees. They came as a minority religion into a land filled with minority religions. But mostly they came into a land that was experimenting with freedom. America was looking for people who were willing to forget the old ways, and the old stereotypes. The Jews who landed here 336 years ago and those who followed later – were looking for such a land. They did not know then what America was yet to become. They did not even dare to dream. But the promise was here.

It was not to be another step along the way. Something was different here, and they were part of it: the new land: the new hope: the new dream. Slowly there emerged an awareness of America's promise. It echoed in the names they gave their synagogues. In New York they called it Shaared Israel – this remnant of Israel. In Savannah, Georgia, they called it Michvah Israel – the hope of Israel. In tiny little Rhode Island, they named their Newport synagogue, Yeshuat Israel – the salvation of Israel. Remnant or hope or salvation, with these names they expressed the recognition that they were home. They were

Americans. They loved it fiercely. They defended it bravely. And when that generation passed away, they left for all of us a precious legacy: that we might sing with all Americans, with equal fervor, and with equal truth, "Land where my fathers died!" This holiday of Sukkoth, the day we give thanks to God, we have the right to say: We are home. We are Americans. The long journey continues, but it is not the journey of persecution and flight. It is a new pilgrimage as we continue to share and enlarge America's promise of freedom and human dignity. Amen.