Between Influence and Authority: The Rabbinate of the Seventeenth Century Portuguese Jewish Community of Amsterdam

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes the rabbinate of the seventeenth century Amsterdam Portuguese Jewish community from the perspective of communal and rabbinic history. The Amsterdam community is notable for the mixture of Portuguese and Jewish identity which created an ethnic identity referred to as the Nação (Nation). I argue that the rabbinate was a vehicle for regulation of this identity despite internal confusion on issues regarding Jewish law, behavior and theology. Using primary and secondary sources, I describe the rabbinate as an institution in transition working for a community in transition. Discussion of the historical foundation of the community, the converso issue and the interaction between the rabbinate and the lay leadership demonstrate that the position of the rabbi in Amsterdam was not centralized. Internal rabbinic arguments about issues of Jewish theology, specifically the immortality of the soul and the role of Kabbalah, reveal confusion among rabbis regarding the creation of official positions of the rabbinate. Due to the internal confusion in the Amsterdam rabbinate, it is shown that the rabbis existed in a space between influence and authority inside the community.

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Introduction

The early modern period in Jewish history is full of examples of communities trying to carve out specific identities through the creation of parameters for social behavior. In a remarkably short time, the Amsterdam community of the seventeenth century created a centralized communal government that controlled all aspects of social behavior. Amsterdam's Portuguese Jews created an identity that was based on shared lineage, ethnic cohesion and collective memory of persecution and conversion. Membership in this community was exclusive and referred to as 'belonging to the Nação' (nation). The office of the rabbinate played an important role in setting an agenda for addressing the complexity of Nação identity politics and establishing authority. Nação identity politics is best understood as a Portuguese language environment, connection with intellectual culture in the Iberian Peninsula, and exclusivity of Portuguese Jewish identity. However, the Amsterdam rabbinate of the seventeenth century was itself institution in flux, borrowing elements from other Sephardi communities and creating the position of the rabbi as a public intellectual.[1]

Amsterdam employed and produced a number of rabbis who have been studied individually although the office of the rabbi has never been treated as an institution of its own in the scholarship. That fact that the rabbinate has as of yet been untreated in scholarly research is strange due to the position of the Amsterdam community as a central subject for scholarship in the field of Jewish studies and identity politics. The complex identity politics of the Jewish residents of the city as well as the argument that the Portuguese Jewish community was one of the first 'modern' Jewish communities, has occupied scholars for decades. Yosef Kaplan in

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[1] I would like to thank Professor Carsten Wilke for his guidance and support in the writing of this thesis. His knowledge of the Amsterdam community and the scholarship available proved invaluable during my research.

particular has specialized on the Amsterdam Jews and written extensively on virtually all aspects of the community from the struggle over Jews returning to the Iberian Peninsula to the personal libraries of rabbis in the community. Strangely absent from the wide range of literature is a treatment of the rabbinate as an institution independent from the governing leadership of the community yet subservient to its power.[2]

The institution of the rabbinate was also in a period of transition as it adapted to the social realities of the converso issue in addition to the changing question of rabbinate authority in relation to the newly powerful lay leadership. In Amsterdam, the rabbis were subservient to a new form of Jewish identity based in part on membership to the Portuguese Nação. This sub-ethnic identity forced the rabbinate to enforce social boundaries confused the line between normative Judaism and ideas of European secular culture as well as national identity. The rabbis also needed expertise in European secular culture in order to establish bonds with congregation members who had been educated in Christian universities.

The Amsterdam rabbinate can be treated from the point of view of seventeenth century Jewish identity and, more specifically, converso Jewish identity. The difficult problem of reeducating groups of Jews who had little knowledge of Jewish lifestyle created a set of unique parameters

[2] Among Yosef Kaplan's many articles on the subject he recently published an examination of the modernizing elements in the Amsterdam community *An alternative path to modernity: the Sephardi diaspora in western Europe (Leiden: Brill, 2000).* The late Israeli scholar Meir Benayahu has also published extensively on the Amsterdam Jewish community of the seventeenth century. His 1953 study published by the Rav Kook Institute on the position of the Torah teacher in Sephardi communities of the Eastern Mediterranean, *Marbiz Torah*, has proved valuable for this thesis. Benayahu has also published many articles exploring Jewish religious life in Amsterdam and well as the use of the printing press in Sephardi communities. Finally, Miriam Bodian has treated aspects of the sub ethnic identity that was created by the "hommes de Nação" in her 1997 volume *Hebrews of the Portuguese nation: conversos and community in early modern Amsterdam (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997)*

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for the rabbis to work in. The Portuguese Jews of Amsterdam created a sub ethnic identity that was both Jewish and Portuguese as a means of addressing the converso problematic. This identity was closed, exclusive and the rabbis of the community were hired to help reinforce it through their personal intellectual output and public posture. Rabbis were also expected to directly address the position of the converso problem in Jewish life and religious practice. The sermon was the primary vehicle used to address these issues in the public space of the community.

The Amsterdam rabbinate can also be approached from the perspective of Sephardi rabbinate history which forms the central theoretical approach of this thesis. The rabbis of Amsterdam built upon the foundations of Sephardi communities in the Eastern Mediterranean and Italy of the sixteenth century. In order to understand the office of the rabbi within the Jewish community of Amsterdam, both the specific issues of Jewish identity facing the community, as well as the history of changes to the Sephardi rabbinate, must be treated and analyzed. There have been no conclusive scholarly studies on the rabbinate as an institution with a complex set of parameters for acceptable behavior within the larger Jewish community. Analyzing the rabbinate of Amsterdam is particularly important due to the fact that the community is known for its rabbinic figures. Numerous studies and biographies have been completed on each of the major rabbis of the community. Furthermore, each of the major rabbis of Amsterdam wrote prolifically on various aspects of Jewish lifestyle and religious law.

There is an overwhelming amount of secondary material available on the Amsterdam Jewish community, though analyzing the intellectual output of the rabbis themselves is a logical starting point. In addition to the writings of rabbinic figures themselves, there are many sermons and public proclamations that reflect their views on a number of social issues which are treated here.

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Specific Rabbinic contracts, community ordinances (*takkanot*) and public statements by the lay leadership also have been treated in secondary literature. Internal rabbinic disagreement and confusion can be understood by the number of rabbinic treatises which address the fundamental positions of the rabbis in society vis-à-vis the lay leadership and the community and form a crucial part of the research for this thesis.

Primary documents from the community available exist in Hebrew, Portuguese and Spanish. Due to the scholarly interest in the subject, many have been translated into English and commentated on widely. Research for this thesis was conducted primarily on the basis of secondary material available in Hebrew, English, Spanish, Italian, French and Portuguese. A number of primary sources are treated in the documents which are found within secondary documents or in archives at the Jewish National Library in Jerusalem. Communal histories, foundation myths and internal rabbinic debates have been treated in order to understand the transition that was taking place in the rabbinate in the seventeenth century based on these sources.

The present study will begin with a discussion of the institutional traditions and responsibilities of the Sephardi rabbinate. The duties of the Torah teacher versus the rabbi will be discussed in terms of ordination, contract, exposure to secular culture and interaction with lay leadership boards. Specific examples will be used from the model communities of seventeenth century Amsterdam and sixteenth century Italian and Eastern Mediterranean communities. Chapter two will focus on the history of the Amsterdam Jewish community and will treat the Amsterdam rabbis of the seventeenth century in chronological perspective with careful attention to the varied intellectual and personal histories of the rabbis. The history will be broken in to three timeframes; early foundations of the community, the three communities and the united *Kahal Kados Talmud Tora*. Chapter three will analyze the rabbi's place in community government. The

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lay leadership (*mahamad*) will be analyzed with regard to the authority structure of the community and the independence of the rabbis. Finally, chapter four will examine specific case studies that demonstrate rabbinic involvement in communal coherence and issues regarding Jewish intellectual lifestyle: the sermon and theological debates.

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The Institutional Traditions and Responsibilities of the Sephardi Rabbinate

In order to define exactly what the term 'rabbi' meant for the Jewish community of Amsterdam it is necessary to look at the evolution of rabbinic responsibilities based on the traditions of the Sephardi rabbinate in the Eastern Mediterranean and Italian communities.[3] Throughout the Sephardi Diaspora the term 'rabbi' meant something different in terms of the person's responsibilities and the way in which the community viewed the office. The position of the Torah teacher (*Marbiz Torah*) exerted an important though indirect influence in the creation of the Amsterdam rabbinate and originated in the Iberian Peninsula in the fifteenth century, though it only transformed into an important social, religious and cultural position in Sephardi communities during the sixteenth and seventeenth century. This chapter will examine the specific functions of the 'rabbi' and the Torah teacher in order to demonstrate that the rabbis of Amsterdam reflected a mix of these two communal positions. The question of ordination, connection to secular culture, responsibilities and rabbinic contracts will be treated thematically. Specific examples of the function of the rabbi in sixteenth century Italian and Eastern Mediterranean Jewish society will be treated in order to establish the direct foundation for the rabbinate of Amsterdam in the seventeenth century.

[3] Various Hebrew words designate 'rabbi'; most common among them are *rav* and *haham*. Literally, Hebrew understands rabbis to be people of great intelligence. Simon Schwarzfuchs notes that the terms "rabbi" does not appear in the Hebrew Bible and the common term *rav* appears only in reference to multitude. The term took its present meaning during the diaspora. Simon Schwarzfuchs, *A concise history of the rabbinate* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1993),1. The Amsterdam community referred to their rabbis as *Hakhamim* (wise men) or *Hakham* in the singular. This thesis will use rabbi and *hakham* interchangeable in reference to Amsterdam rabbis.

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For Eastern Mediterranean and Italian communities, the "rabbi" is understood as a religious teacher who served an individual community or *yeshiva* in matters of law, religious life and intellectual development, including of the responsibilities of a judge for the community. The rabbi, who received the appointment from the community, had the authority to issue rulings on legal matters including all matters concerning civil society. Generally, the rabbi also had the power to issue bans and impose disciplinary measures on dissidents in society although this power generally stayed within the hands of lay leadership.[4] Perhaps the most important function of the rabbi was that of being a judge. The Torah teacher, on the other hand, generally maintained distance on legal matters preferring to focus on his role as spiritual guide via preaching.

The historical foundations for the Amsterdam rabbinate are found in the community ordinances (*takkanot*) of the ordinances of the Castilian Jewish leaders assembled in the town of Valladolid in 1432. Community ordinances vary from region to region, community to community, often reflecting particularities within the community. Yet the ordinances of Valladolid created the

[4] This phenomenon varied greatly from community to community. One could compare the Jewish community of Venice and Livorno in the sixteenth century and find that the rabbi had two different set of powers regarding their ability to ban community members. Bernard Cooperman has show that the community of Livorno gave almost no power to its rabbis and was run almost entirely by the lay leadership (*parnasim*). Jacob Sasportas, the famous Amsterdam rabbi who once served the community of Livorno fled the city because of his lack of authority. For more on the lay leadership of Livorno see Bernard Cooperman, "The City as a Place of Regulation, Border and Exclusion: Jewish Settlement in Livorno" (lecture, Jews and Urban Space, University of Maryland, College Park, MD, May 28, 2010), http://www.earlymodern.org/workshops/2005/cooperman/index.php?pid=53 (accessed June 1, 2010).

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position of Torah teacher which later became practice elsewhere. One of the first articles of the ordinances state:

> Wherever there are forty householders or more, they are required to do everything within their power to maintain among themselves a Torah teacher to teach Talmud, *Halakhah*, and *aggadah*. The community is obliged to support him in a fitting matter, with items of the best quality, from the income of the taxes on meat and wine, and from the charity fund… or of the free offerings for the Torah study, so the he need not beg for his needs, or need to appeal to the wealthy individuals of the community. He is to serve as a preacher, chastener and guide in all things related to the service of the Creator… And if the community does not reach an agreement with the Torah teacher with regard to the sum he is to be paid, they are to pay him the amount of the tax of Torah study in that place, or to add to it if it is insufficient- all in accordance with the judgment of the *rab de la corte*.[5]

The Torah Teacher

The Torah teacher, in the tradition of Sephardi Jews in the Iberian Peninsula, was the rabbi of small communities. With the expulsion and subsequent recreation of Jewish life in the Eastern Mediterranean communities the title of Torah teacher as separate from rabbi came into practical existence.[6]

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[5] Meir Benayahu, *Marbiz Torah (Hebrew)* (Jerusalem: Rav Kook Institute, 1953), 13.

[6] Ibid, 12.

In Eastern Mediterranean and Italian communities of the sixteenth century, a Torah teacher was hired by the community to preach and act as a spiritual guide while also sharing some of the aforementioned positions of the rabbi. In smaller communities, the Torah teacher functioned as a rabbi, which meant that he was required to conduct almost all religious duties of the community, while in larger communities there existed rabbis which sat on the rabbinic court and held the title of rabbi and judge (*dayan).*[7]

The important duties of the Torah Teacher were limited and focused on his ability to preach to the community. This required the teacher to be fluent in not only traditional rabbinic literature but current intellectual trends, such as contemporary philosophy, science and Kabbalah. The primary role of the Torah teacher was therefore an educational and spiritual one. His roles were clearly defined by the community's lay leaders in his contract. However, the parameters of the Torah teachers "preaching" obligations are not clearly spelled out in any documents used in Meir Benayahu's extensive study of the institution.[8]

The highest rabbinic authority of a community (*hakham kolel* or chief rabbi) was often a Torah teacher and the selection of the position often came from a pool of Torah teachers that worked in the community or surrounding communities. Simon Schwarzfuchs concludes that this fact "shows that the *Marbiz Torah* (Torah teacher) could be a scholar of great reputation who was waiting to receive a higher appointment of *Harav ha-Gadol* – the great rabbi – *Harav ha-Rishon*

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[7] Schwarzfuchs describes the Torah teacher as a "jack of all trades" in smaller Jewish communities. His was a rabbi, teacher, ritual slaughterer, circumisciser and cantor. Simon Schwarzfuchs, *A concise history of the rabbinate* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1993), 69.

[8] Meir Benayahu, *Marbiz Torah (Hebrew)* (Jerusalem: Rav Kook Institute, 1953), 20-25

–the first rabbi – and kindred titles".[9] This is an example of the indistinct definitions of "rabbis' and 'Torah teachers' that existed in Sephardi communities during the sixteenth century.

Eastern Mediterranean Jewish communities such as Salonika institutionalized the role of Torah teacher under the name *hakham.* Meir Benayahu has shown that these communities ensured that the position of the Torah teacher was paid in order to ensure that the "Torah [was] his fixed occupation and all other labor despised and abandoned".[10] The relationship between the *Yeshiva* and the Torah teacher is an important one. As places of Jewish learning, the Yeshiva functioned as an office for the Torah teacher although he was not tied to it.

The Torah teacher was required to teach and assist the community in intellectual matters. Preaching in the form of sermons was expected allowing the Torah teacher a large amount of intellectual freedom. Robert Bonfil notes, however, that the community leaders of Italian communities did not have any authority over the Torah teacher's right to preach at the time of his choosing or over the content of his sermons.[11]

The Torah teacher reflected a certain level of independence in newly founded Sephardi communities in the Eastern Mediterranean. Often, teachers were sought out from other Jewish communities in order to give legitimacy to new and generally smaller Jewish communities. The institution of the rabbinate thus became an international collective of rabbis traveling from community to community, creating a resume of work throughout the Jewish world. While this model is an invention of Sephardi Jews beginning in the Iberian Peninsula, the success of the

[9] Simon Schwarzfuchs, *A concise history of the rabbinate* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1993), 71.

[10] Meir Benayahu, *Marbiz Torah (Hebrew)* (Jerusalem: Rav Kook Institute, 1953), 26.

[11] Robert Bonfil, *Rabbis and Jewish communities in Renaissance Italy* (London: Littman Library of Jewish civilization, 1993), 156. See also Ibid, Ch. 6, Sect. 4.

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institution is reflected in its growth to Ashkenazi communities throughout Europe. Robert Bonfil concludes, "The institution of 'Torah teacher', brought by Spanish exiles, coalesced with other factors…in shaping the office of community-appointed rabbi within the specific situation in northern and central Italy, where German and French Jews played a major role in the shaping of the intellectual atmosphere."[12]

Rabbinic Ordination

As with most titles, those who bear them often find it necessary to leverage the distinction for financial gain, the institution of the rabbi is no different. Robert Bonfil notes that in theory, "one was entitled to be ordained as rabbi after having displayed extensive knowledge in the pertinent subject-matter. However, the period of study was not defined nor, in a certain sense, were the content of the studies."[13] Given the lack of central authority, recognition as a rabbi was given by individual communities. In many cases in the Eastern Mediterranean, the gentile rulers would also have a certain authority over the rabbinate, as rabbis were often called upon to interact with gentile authorities in the realm of legal and financial situations.[14]

The rabbi, who received the ordination from the community, had the authority to issue rulings on legal matters including all matters concerning civil society. Perhaps the most important function of the rabbi was that of being a judge. The Torah teacher, on the other hand, generally maintained distance on legal matters having to focus on his role as spiritual guide via preaching.

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[12] Ibid, 154.

[13] Robert Bonfil, *Rabbis and Jewish communities in Renaissance Italy* (London: Littman Library of Jewish civilization, 1993), 28.

[14] Ibid, 47.

From an institutional standpoint, Bonfil's definition of rabbinic ordination as 'a proclamation of the fact that, in the opinion of the ordaining individual or individuals, the person receiving ordination was a Rabbinic scholar (*talmid hakham*) at the top of the hierarchical scale of Jewish learning, and therefore capable of issuing halakhic decisions."[15] Traditionally, Sephardi communities have understood their 'gifted students' (*talmidim hakhamim*) to belong to the 'rabbinic class'. In other words, they have the option to continue their studies under the auspice of the rabbinate and enter the class of educated men who spend their time engaged in study rather than trade. Schwarzfuchs notes that as early as the fourteenth century the gifted students were thought of as rabbis in Sephardi contexts. He quotes the rabbinic scholar Asher ben Yehiel:

> Any *Talmid Hakham* whose occupation is the learning of the law, and who makes it permanent and his trade part time, and who studies the Torah continuously and does not interrupt it in order to deal with futile objects but only to pursue his livelihood as he is bound to… [That man] belongs to the class of the rabbis; he has put his neck under the yoke, and one should not submit him to the burden of the King and the princes.[16]

Contract

The contract of the Torah teacher was granted by various elements in the community governing structure. In most cases, the lay leaders (*paranism*) of the community drafted the contract and insured its terms.[17] The terms of the contract varied based on the community but certain

[15] Robert Bonfil, *Rabbis and Jewish communities in Renaissance Italy* (London: Littman Library of Jewish civilization, 1993), 37.

[16] Quoted in Simon Schwarzfuchs, *A concise history of the rabbinate* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1993), 66.

[17] Benayahu notes that in addition to the Paranism, certain individuals (*yehidim*) in the community also drafted and guaranteed contracts but ultimately the lay leadership maintained

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distinctions were common. For example, the Torah teacher was guaranteed a special place in the synagogue during services, as this was one of the sole gathering places for the entire community; a distinctive place was an unusual honour to bestow on individuals. [18] The duration of contracts also varied greatly, usually the contract period lasted for three years, and lifetime tenure was not common, though in one case a Torah teacher was hired by the community for a period of twenty years.[19]

Torah teachers also had the ability to serve multiple communities, which would then share the burden of their salaries. Meir Benayahu shows numerous examples of "traveling" groups of Torah teachers.[20] He notes that each community created unique barriers and restrictions for their Torah teacher and thus the institution had a relative flexibility in the Jewish world.[21] In other words, the Torah teacher became a legitimate form of employment complete with preparatory schooling and strict guidelines of performance. There are examples of communities (most notably Salonika) that prohibited their Torah teacher from breaking his duties and relocating to another community without the explicit consent of the community board members.

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control over rabbinic contracts. Meir Benayahu, *Marbiz Torah (Hebrew)* (Jerusalem: Rav Kook Institute, 1953), 22.

[18] Ibid, 29.

[19] This case took place in Salonika. Ibid, 21

[20] Ibid, 20.

[21] Ibid, 65.

Rabbinic Duties and the Courts

Unlike Torah teachers, Rabbis often acted as judges and stood on a rabbinical courts. The composition of most Sephardi rabbinic courts, especially found in the Eastern Mediterranean, was as follows:

> The rabbi presided at the religious court (*bet din*) with two assessors (*dayainim*). He was supported by officiating ministers, ritual slaughters (*shohatim*), the teacher (*melamed*) employed by the religious school (the Talmud Torah or *meldar*), as well as by other minor officials carrying out various functions within the congregation.[22]

Rabbis have always operated in connection with the lay leadership. The structures of the *mahamad* vary from community to community but usually feature between six and ten board members (*parnasim*) and one treasurer (*gabay).* The election of board members also varied. In certain contexts, like that of Eastern Mediterranean communities, the *mahamad* was elected in the vein of a guild where wealthy members of the society had rights while others did not. In Italian communities such as Livorno, the *mahamad* was elected without the participation of the general community.

Secular Culture

Rabbis maintained a close connection with secular intellectual culture. The Amsterdam rabbinate explicitly demonstrates this relationship but its foundations can be found in the Italian communities of the sixteenth century. Due to declining levels of Hebrew fluency and general interest, Italian rabbis began writing in the vernacular language starting in the beginning of the sixteenth century. Rabbi Leon Modena, mentor to the Amsterdam Rabbi Saul Levi Mortera, is

[22] Esther Benbassa and Aron Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry: a history of the Judeo-Spanish community, 14th-20th centuries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 23.

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said to have composed and read Baroque literature.[23] Rabbis expected to demonstrate command of secular intellectual culture and, more importantly, apply that knowledge to Jewish lifestyle, religious life and spirituality. The connection between secular culture and rabbinic culture began with the confrontation between Jewish culture and Islamic culture during the "golden age" of Muslim rule over Spain in the fifteenth century. After the expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula, the community looked to the office of the rabbi to continue the intellectual development of Jewish society which necessarily included secular culture and kabbalist thinking. For the sixteenth century Italian communities, Kabbalah and its role in the community played a major role in the intellectual debates of the community. [24]

The wealth of the community impacted the scope of the texts that the rabbis engaged with. Due to the relative wealth of a number of sixteenth century Jewish communities in the Eastern Mediterranean and Italy, rabbinic culture enjoyed a boom of intellectual development, both with regard to religious and secular intellectual environments. The wealthy Sephardi families created massive personal libraries, which were open to rabbinic scholars.[25] These trends continued in Amsterdam with the establishment of a printing industry that became the capital of Jewish printing by the middle of the seventeenth century.

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[23] Robert Bonfil, *Rabbis and Jewish communities in Renaissance Italy* (London: Littman Library of Jewish civilization, 1993), 19-20. In addition to works in Italian, Modena wrote in Hebrew and translated contemporary non Jewish medieval texts into Hebrew.

[24] Robert Bonfil, "Change in the Cultural Patterns of a Jewish Society in Crisis: Italian Jewry at the Close of the Sixteenth Century," *Jewish History* 3, no. 2 (Fall 1988) 12. From the public sermon, Kabalistic thinking invaded all forms of Jewish life from prayer books to religious service. Bonfil argues that the final step in the takeover of Kabalistic thinks was Sabbateanism, which also had profound impact for the Amsterdam Jewish community.

[25] Esther Benbassa and Aron Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry: a history of the Judeo-Spanish community, 14th-20th centuries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 49.

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In many Italian communities, specifically Venice, the use of the space of the synagogue itself underwent dramatic restructuring during the sixteenth century, due to the influence of Kabbalah. Modernization was driven by kabbalist thinking, in Bonfil's estimation and the religious space of the synagogue became increasingly private. Robert Bonfil notes that a pseudo-intellectual 'salon' culture become increasingly popular.[26] The Amsterdam community rebelled against this model as it was in direct confrontation with the strict control necessary to "re-educate" the converso Jewish population. Despite these controls, 'profane' religious culture arose in Amsterdam in the form of religious heretics.[27]

The Italian Jewish communities of the sixteenth century were in a state of flux that was typified by a series of contradictions within the communal structure of the society. Social, economic and cultural contradictions existed in the community as well as the issue of relations with the gentile leaders. For example, the gap between rich and poor Jews was profound as the large number of charitable organizations reflects. Robert Bonfil argues that the very fact that so many

[26] "Sacred religious activity, performed in the sacred space of the synagogue, was increasingly being divorced from private religious sentiment, with the latter expressed in a portable space this best labeled profane. This division made room for these sentiments to be expressed alongside such profane social activities as the coffee break, inevitably accompanied by gossip or even entertainment." Robert Bonfil, *Rabbis and Jewish communities in Renaissance Italy* (London: Littman Library of Jewish civilization, 1993), 24.

[27] For more on community and rabbinic controls on Amsterdam life see Yosef Kaplan, "Eighteenth-Century Rulings by the Rabbinical Court of Amsterdam's Community and their Socio-historical Significance (Hebrew)," in *Studies on the History of Dutch Jewry* (Jerusalem: Institute for Research on Dutch Jewry, 1988), 20-25. This treats rabbinic rulings on "secret marriages" that were not given sanction by the community highlights the many social controls that the rabbinate and Mahamad created in Amsterdam. Those who disobeyed were banished, the most serious punishment that Judaism permits.

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contradictions in the life of Italian Jews existed was the reason for the emergence of kabbalistic thinking among the intellectual leadership. Certain scholars argue the Kabbalah was the bridge the linked medieval and early modern Jewish thinking and thus was a major factor in Jewish modernity.[28] Whether or not Kabbalah was a modernizing agent is beyond the scope of this paper, what is important is the incredible influence that Kabbalist thinking had on the preaching and writing style of Italian rabbis which in turn enormously affected the rabbinic leadership of Amsterdam.

In relation to the Amsterdam community it is important to note the socioeconomic background of lay leadership, and the rabbinate of the Italian communities. In most communities, "a small group of highly learned men, most of them wealthy or allied by marriage to wealthy families, confronted a great, uneducated majority incapable of participating in scholarly debates or even understanding them".[29] Most of the learned men referred to in this case were members of a mahamad who maintained control over the behaviour of the community and were responsible for the financial maintenance of the rabbinate. A similar lay leadership was constructed in Amsterdam with important ramifications for the rabbinate.

Amsterdam

The position of Torah teacher proved to be pivotal for the Jewish community of Amsterdam. The men that emerged as rabbis were in effect Torah teachers that were trained as rabbis and, more importantly, intellectuals. The community absorbed waves of crypto Jewish immigrants from

[28] Robert Bonfil states that, "within Jewish society, Kabbalah was one of the most effective mediators between the medieval and the modern worlds, and, as such, functioned as an agent of modernity." Robert Bonfil, *Rabbis and Jewish communities in Renaissance Italy* (London: Littman Library of Jewish civilization, 1993), 14.

[29] Ibid, 13.

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Portugal and faced the problem of reeducating these Jews in normative Jewish practice. David Graizbord comments on Amsterdam that

> Sephardi educators inculcated normative Judaism chiefly by sermonizing, teaching and leading communal prayers, publishing, distributing, and interpreting liturgical and other religious works that had been written or translated into Portuguese and Castilian, handling ritual objects, instructing novices in the care of such objects, circumcising male immigrants, chastising dissidents, and performing various additional religious and educational functions that recent exiles were unqualified or otherwise ill-equipped to perform.[30]

Before the Amsterdam Jewish community was united in 1639 with the creation of the Talmud Torah institution and the Portuguese synagogue, three congregations existed in Amsterdam. Daniel Swetschinski notes that each of these congregations employed its own rabbi or *haham*, who was required to give sermons and also attend community wide festivals and functions.[31] The rabbis of this early period were seemingly a mix of Torah teacher and traditional Yeshiva teacher/legal expert. In Amsterdam, non-Jewish authorities had fewer roles in determining rabbis, as will be discussed in later chapters.

The relationship between the Torah teacher and his employers, namely, the members of the lay leadership varied between communities. In Amsterdam, the role of Torah teacher met its maximum potential in so far as the rabbis of the community each followed different intellectual

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[30] David Graizbord, "A Historical Contextualization of Sephardi Apostates and Self-Styled Missionaries of the Seventeenth Century," *Jewish History* 19, no. 3/4 (2005): 293-294.

[31] Daniel Swetschinski, *Reluctant cosmopolitans: the Portuguese Jews of seventeenth-century Amsterdam* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2000),176-177.

interests outside of their communal duties. It was not explicitly stated that rabbis in Amsterdam function as intellectuals, although it was clearly understood by the community that the rabbi would use his position of influence to provide the intellectual output necessary for the maintenance of Nação identity.

The rabbis of Amsterdam in the seventeenth century built upon the foundations of the Sephardi rabbinate of the sixteenth century. The specifically Sephardi institution of the Torah teacher bore a special significance on the young Amsterdam community due to the need for preachers able to convey religious sentiment to the waves of conversos arriving on the shores of Holland. In addition to the emphasis placed on preaching, the rabbis of Amsterdam were encouraged to produce literary, philosophical and artistic works in their personal time. This served to reinforce the ethnic sub-identity of European culture that the lay leadership wanted to create in Amsterdam. It has been shown that already in sixteenth century Venice rabbis were using secular culture and producing literature and poetry in Italian. The fact that the Amsterdam community was able to train rabbis and create them in the image that fit the particular identity of the community in a span of only fifty years is remarkable for the early modern period.

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The Amsterdam Rabbis of the 17th Century

In the beginning of the Portuguese Jewish community, rabbinic duties were based crucial religious guidance. In a remarkably short time, the expectations of the rabbi from the community underwent a sudden and complete shift. The rabbi needed to demonstrate the values of the Nação most importantly, fluency in Portuguese and sensitivity to the position of conversos, in addition to being a learned man of Jewish thought and law. The expectation from the lay leadership was that rabbis would function as public intellectuals. The Amsterdam rabbinate was a diverse conglomerate of learned men who held different often conflicting views on key issues of Jewish religious behavior and theology. The early foundations of Jewish settlement in Amsterdam will provide historical background for the sudden shift in expectations of the rabbinate.

Gentile authorities did exhibit tolerance towards the Jews and provided them with an extraordinary amount of freedom compared to other European communities in the seventeenth century based on their economic connections. However, the earliest foundations of the Jewish community in Amsterdam remain a mystery. Despite a lack of accurate historical sources it is clear that a Jewish community was living in Amsterdam around 1595.[32]

The Early Community

Two foundational myths have survived regarding the earliest foundations of the community and they will be treated in detail in order to demonstrate the effort to "Sephardize" the history of the community. The myths show that the community wanted to rewrite their own history in order to give prominence to the heroism of the early converso residents of Amsterdam. Many conversos

[32] For more on the controversy over dating the origins of the Amsterdam community see Odette Vlessing, "New Light on the Earliest History of the Amsterdam Portuguese Jews," in *Dutch Jewish History: Proceeding of the Fifth Symposium on the History of the Jews in the Netherlands Volume III* (Jerusalem: Institute for Research on Dutch Jewry, 1993), 43-75.

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did not opt to rejudaize themselves upon arrival in Amsterdam. There was direct participation by rabbis in the rewriting of Amsterdam's early history.

There are two foundation myths regarding the foundation of Jewish settlement in Amsterdam that show how the Portuguese Jews of Amsterdam understood their place. Both of the foundation myths are suggestive and invite the historian to draw whichever conclusion he might desire from the scarce details that exists. [33] De Barrios's account confirms that Uri Halevi was the first rabbi of the community. Once the community organized itself, became stronger and established a 'fixed' identity from which parameters of behavior and collective history were clear, the fact that Uri Halevi was of Ashkenazi origin became a point of controversy. Uri Halevi's grandson, who shared his grandfather's name, composed a version of the foundation events based on testimonies of Uri Halevi and his son Aaron.

Daniel Levi de Barrios in his literary historical account of Jewish society in Amsterdam, *Triumpho del Govierno Popular* (Triumph of Popular Government) begins the Jewish settlement of Amsterdam with the story of Maria Nunes, a beautiful conversa en route to Northern Europe. A ship carrying Nunes and a group of other conversos was stopped by the English. Upon seeing Nunes, one of the English officers became smitten and asked her hand in marriage. News of the event spread, and the Queen summoned her. The Queen, struck by her beauty as well, offered Nunes a life of luxury and prestige in London but Nunes rejected it as she wanted to return to Judaism with her fellow co-religionists in Amsterdam. Eventually, Maria Nunes arrived in

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[33] H.P. Salomon has analyzed all extant documents regarding the early foundations of the Portuguese Jewish community of Amsterdam in H. P. Salomon, *Deux études portugaises/ Two Portuguese studies* (Braga: Barbosa & Xavier, 1991). His treatment of the De Barrios account is found on page 105-108.

Amsterdam along with other family members from the Iberian Peninsula. The story shows the dedication to Judaism of the early converso immigrants to Judaism.

This myth centers on the heroism of the Portuguese conversos fleeing the Iberian Peninsula and choosing to return to Judaism despite offers of resettlement in other localities. The role that Uri Halevi, the Ashkenazi rabbi played in the creation of the community is downplayed and his Ashkenazi background is avoided. De Barrios tried to minimize any Ashkenazi influence on the Jewish community's history.

Uri Halevi's grandson wrote another text about the early days of the Amsterdam community. The text, *Memoria Para os Siglos Futuros* (The Memoir for the Centuries to Come) consists of two parts; the first part details Uri Halevi's comment on how he brought Judaism to Portuguese conversos and the second part consists of two testimonials from Uri and Aaron Halevi.[34] The testimonies tell a story of how two ships originating in the Iberian Peninsula and carrying Portuguese New Christians arrived in Emden and found accommodation near a house which had a Hebrew inscription above its door.[35] Upon arrival, the exhausted travelers saw their host bringing a recently slaughtered duck into a Jew's house. They then asked him for a duck to eat, and when he brought the one they had seen, refusing it on the pretext that it was too fatty for them to eat. This began a discussion with their Jewish neighbor and they revealed there true religious conviction. Uri Halevi then advised them to follow him to Amsterdam, a more tolerant place, where he circumcised them. The Dutch authorities were alerted to the presence of the Jews

[34] H. P. Salomon, *Portrait of a new Christian, Fernão Álvares Melo, 1569-1632* (Paris: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Centro Cultural Portugués, 1982), 109.

[35] Incidentally, Salomon notes that ten men "Iberian Jews" are reported to have been on the ship which is the minimum number that is required for a Jewish quorum for prayer. Ibid, 116.

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in the city and raided their house. The Jews explained to the city magistrates that their presence made good economic sense for the city and their continued existence in the municipal boundaries would bring great benefit to the city of Amsterdam. Upon review, the magistrates granted the Jews permission to stay in Amsterdam which singled more families from the Iberian Peninsula to join them. Uri Halevi then took the place of Hakham and his son Aaron became the hazen of the new Portuguese Jewish community of Amsterdam. The travelers did not speak any Hebrew and required Aaron Halevi, who was able to speak Spanish and the author's father, to speak with them in Spanish. Uri and Aaron Halevi also functioned in the role of community leaders and performed circumcision on all of the men and boys.[36]

H.P. Salomon notes that the many inconsistencies in the story lend weight to its validity as the true account.[37] Reproductions of the testimony of the younger Uri Halevi remained in the Amsterdam community throughout the seventeenth century. Rabbi David Cohen de Lara and Isaac Aboab commented on the validity of the foundation story of Uri Halevi in documents dated from 1684.[38] In fact, it is possible that Rabbi David Cohen de Lara was one of the first to be

[36] The testimony states, "My grandfather [Uri Halevi] was their *Hakham* and my father [Aaron Halevi] their *hazan*. They performed circumcision and were the authors of this Congregation. They fixed the order of prayers and the regulations and taught them how to observe God's commandments." Quoted in H. P. Salomon, *Deux études portugaises/ Two Portuguese studies* (Braga: Barbosa & Xavier, 1991), 115.

[37] Salomon argues that, "there is no structural necessity for the duck's presence in a story whose main purpose is to explain the origin of Judaism at Amsterdam; if, that is, the story is indeed fictional. This is the reason why the duck is the most convincing proof that it all really happened this way." Ibid,118.

[38] Salomon includes reproductions of the relevant Hebrew letters in which both rabbis comment on the virtue and piety of the Uri and Aaron Halevi of the Neve Shalom congregation. It is curious that they are referred to in connection to the Neve Shalom congregation and their connection to Beit Yaakov is mentioned only briefly. This may be due to the controversy that

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circumcised by Uri Halevi due to the fact that he died at the age of seventy one in 1673. Salomon notes that there is every reason to believe that Uri Halevi, the grandson, approached David Cohen de Lara for his testimony due to the rabbis' international reputation as a great rabbinic scholar.

The first part of *Memoria Para os Siglos Futuros* describes how many Jews opted for Judaism and how many did not in Amsterdam. For this reason, De Barrios probably ignored the testimonies of Uri and Aaron Halevi so as not to draw light to this version of Amsterdam Jewish history. De Barrios largely ignored the account of the younger Uri Halevi because of the image of Portuguese Jews that he tried to create in the minds of his readers. H.P. Salomon persuasively argues that De Barrios wanted to show that all of the Portuguese immigrants that arrived in Amsterdam opted for Judaism upon arrival. Uri Halevi's testimony does not corroborate this information and was purposely ignored despite the official approval of senior rabbinic figures that it carried.[39].

The Three Communities

A congregation of Jews began in the early years of the seventeenth century by the name of Beit Yaakov (House of Jacob) which was named after the Portuguese converso James Lopes da Costa, who became Jacob Tirado. The initial services and basic Jewish education was directed by Uri Halevi and his son Aaron.[40] Services and other community functions took place in Jacob

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arose regarding the unification of the congregation in 1639 which will be handled in detail below. Ibid, 131-132.

[39] H. P. Salomon, *Deux études portugaises/ Two Portuguese studies* (Braga: Barbosa & Xavier, 1991),146.

[40] H. P. Salomon, *Portrait of a new Christian, Fernão Álvares Melo, 1569-1632* (Paris: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Centro Cultural Portugués, 1982), 147.

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Tirado's house and later Tirado proclaimed himself to be a community lay leader (*parnas*), the first of the Amsterdam Jewish community. Uri and Aaron Halevi were the first rabbis of the community and they were able to excessive a form of rabbinic authority that did not require the approval of a lay leadership board. They "established the order of prayers" in a custom that was familiar to them (i.e. the Ashkenazi way) and due to the fact that none of the Portuguese conversos were familiar with Jewish prayer and Hebrew, the community was not in a position to challenge their authority. Their rabbinic style shared no elements of the Sephardi rabbinate which created a community problem.

As more Jews came to Amsterdam from the Iberian Peninsula, a struggle began over the Sephardi character of the religious institutions in the city. As early as 1604, a Portuguese converso named Isaac Franco (formerly Francisco Mendes Medeiros) petitioned the city magistrates of nearby Haarlem "in order to establish there, for his own and related families, a new Sephardic community freed of the 'Portuguese Nation of Amsterdam' and its 'parnas'".[41] Franco's efforts did not materialize but he was able to secure two "Sephardic" Torah scrolls from North Africa and begin a new congregation in the city of Amsterdam called *Neve Shalom* (Dwelling of Peace). The first act by the leaders of Neve Shalom was to abolish the Ashkenazi influence and import Sephardi liturgy and, more importantly, rabbis versed in Sephardi custom. Isaac Franco created Neve Shalom in a way that was completely Sephardi. All of the steps that he took in the creation of Neve Shalom were from the standpoint of Sephardi lifestyle culture.[42]

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[41] Ibid,149

[42] Salomon notes that the arrival of Joseph and Samuel Palache of Morocco had an impact on the creation of Neve Shalom because they were able to secure a wealth of Sephardi liturgical literature and hymns for the new congregation. Later, the Palache brother assisted Rabbi Isaac Uziel of Fez in moving to Amsterdam where he served as rabbi of Neve Shalom until his death

The rabbis brought from mostly Muslim lands to lead Neve Shalom approached Jewish life from a conservative standpoint. The creation of Neve Shalom represented not only an attempt to make Jewish life in Amsterdam more Sephardi but also more religious.

In addition to Neve Shalom and Beit Yaakov, a third congregation Beit Israel (House of Israel) was founded in 1618. The founding of Beit Israel took place in a time of controversy in Amsterdam. David Farrar, a parnas and physician, began to attack the authority of the rabbinate which created a split in the community that ultimately resulted in the creation of Beit Israel.[43]

In response to the employment of the Sephardi rabbi Isaac Uziel of Fez, Beit Yaakov sought Rabbi Joseph Pardo of Venice to lead their congregation. Pardo was the first rabbi of the Jewish community in Amsterdam from the Eastern Mediterranean. Meir Benayahu has discovered documents that show Pardo left Venice in a state of serious debt.[44] It is unlikely that the

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in 1622. H. P. Salomon, *Portrait of a new Christian, Fernão Álvares Melo, 1569-1632* (Paris: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Centro Cultural Portugués, 1982), 149-150. For more on the life of Samuel Palache and his connections to the Amsterdam community see Mercedes García-Arenal and Gerard Albert Wiegers, *A man of three worlds: Samuel Pallache, a Moroccan Jew in Catholic and Protestant Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003)

[43] David Farrar was held in high esteem by his community yet known for his dislike of rabbinic authority. On the occasion of his death, Rabbi Saul Levi Mortera said of Farrar, "Wherever he went, God's name was invoked upon him. During the first years in this land (Holland), when people used to conceal their Jewish names, he would proclaim his in public, as occasions frequently presented themselves… Even in Spain [here meaning the Iberian Peninsula, and specifically Portugal-Saperstein not] in a place of danger, he did not conceal it, but identified himself as a 'Jew,' a word in which the name of God is contained." Quoted in Marc Saperstein and Saul Levi Mortera, *Exile in Amsterdam: Saul Levi Mortera's sermons to a congregation of "new Jews"* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2005), 155.

[44] Meir Benayahu, "Joseph Pardo- the First Rabbi of Amsterdam (Hebrew)," in *Studies on the History of Dutch Jewry*, vol. 5 (Jerusalem: Institute for Research on Dutch Jewry, 1984), 2-3.

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Amsterdam community would have accepted a Rabbi in serious debt for a position in the community unless it was a situation of extreme importance. Odette Vlessing notes that, "Pardo and his son had been arrested for a debt amounting to 1629 Venetian ducats on October 30, 1610. They were released after the intervention of James Lopes de Costa (Jacob Tirado), who offered to act as guarantor for repayment of the debt. It seems unlikely that Pardo could be nominated rabbi as long as he was in financial trouble, a circumstance that could harm the standing of the Jewish community as a whole."[45]

Why would Beit Yaakov accept a rabbi with questionable financial problems if it was not to establish ownership over the Sephardi identity of the Amsterdam Jewish community? There were a number of rabbis from neighboring Ashkenazi Jewish community in Germany that could have filled the position easily and without the issue of financial bankruptcy. It is clear that a fight for the Sephardi character was under way in the beginning of the seventeenth century and the employment of rabbis became an important front from which lay leaders could exercise power.

The division of the community into three congregations affected areas of education as well as the structure of the rabbinate in the city. Each congregation employed its own rabbi (Hakham) who would deliver sermons on religious occasions to their respective congregation although occasionally they would address other congregations in the city.[46] Educational and charity services were also split between each congregation with little cooperation among the various

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[45] Odette Vlessing, "New Light on the Earliest History of the Amsterdam Portuguese Jews," in *Dutch Jewish History: Proceeding of the Fifth Symposium on the History of the Jews in the Netherlands Volume III* (Jerusalem: Institute for Research on Dutch Jewry, 1993), 47.

[46] Daniel Swetschinski, *Reluctant cosmopolitans: the Portuguese Jews of seventeenth-century Amsterdam* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2000),176.

congregations. Issues of collective Jewish existence such as ritual slaughter and the Jewish burial considerations were shared between the communities.[47]

The United Kahal Kados de Talmud Torah

Before the unification, in 1622, the lay leadership of all three congregations agreed to form an a tax collection board called an *imposta* that was responsible for 'the common wealth and general benefit of the nation and to enable us [the Jewish community] better to preserve ourselves'.[48] The creation of the *imposta* board was the first major step toward unification of the Jews of Amsterdam. Due to the nature of Jewish settlement in Amsterdam, the Jews were not required to collect taxes for the regents of the city. Tax revenue, levied on imports and exports, could be kept inside the community for use in education, charitable societies and the payment of rabbis.

The *imposta* board slowly took over ritual slaughter and control of the Jewish cemetery of Ouderkerk near the city of Amsterdam. Throughout the 1620's, the paranism of Beit Israel, Beit Yaakov and Neve Shalom discussed the terms of agreement that would unite the communities into one single authority. On 3 April 1639, agreement was made over forty two articles of unification and the Kahal Kados Talmud Tora of Amsterdam was created.

The agreement included provisions that Ashkenazi Jews were not allowed membership in the Kahal Kados. All Jewish men of the Nação were included in the community with rights as worshipers and entitled to pray in the synagogue. Daniel Swetschinski notes the ethnic dimensions of the unification:

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[47] Swetschinski notes that all three communities cooperated in the acquisition and maintains of a Jewish burial ground which exists to this day. Upon the unification of the Jewish community, the *imposta* board oversaw the Jewish burial ground. Ibid, 177.

[48] Ibid, 182.

> The criteria for membership of the Kahal Kados de Talmud Tora highlight the two dimensions of the ethnic particularism in Portuguese Jewish consciousness. It made them acutely aware of their difference, not only- and not even primarily- from Dutch Christians, but also, and just as strongly, from Jews of other parts of Europe; and it never allowed them to forget that the Nação was larger than the Kahal.[49]

The exclusive membership of the unification had particular impact on the office of the rabbi. Only rabbis of Sephardi and, specifically Portuguese, origin received employment in Amsterdam after the unification. From the moment of unification, the selection of rabbis to serve the community became an internal problematic and the educational institutions that the Jews had created in Amsterdam began to produce 'home grown" rabbis such as Manasseh Ben Israel.

The Kahal Kados de Talmud Tora created a board (*mahamad*) of six *paranism* and one treasure (*gabai*) which maintained sole authority over the community as well as the right to choose rabbis to serve the community. [50] The paranism were elected by the lay leadership with no community voice in the election process. As one *parnas* would step down, he would elect his replacement. This structure was similar to the governing structure of regents of the city of Amsterdam but had

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[49] Ibid,189. He notes that Uri Halevi and his descendents were the only Ashkenazim that were ever formally recognized as part of the Portuguese Jewish community of Amsterdam.

[50] The first provision of the unification agreement states that "The Mahamad will have authority and superiority over everything. No person may go against the resolutions taken and made public by the Mahamad nor sign papers to oppose it. Those who do will be punished by Herem (excommunication)." Quoted in Ibid, pg. 196. There can be little doubt from this passage that the Mahamad was the supreme authority over the community and that the rabbis of Amsterdam, in effect, had little concrete authority over society despite their relevant influence.

no parallel in the contemporary world. [51] The Kahal Kados de Talmud Tora was a voluntary association unlike Jewish contexts in the Ottoman Empire, where membership was required by the state. It would have been extremely difficult to live as a Jew in Amsterdam during the seventeenth century without being a member of the Kahal yet it was not forced upon individual Jews.

The rabbinic duties of the united community were limited to religious and educational matters. Despite this, the mahamad continually used the rabbis to lend religious rationale to their decisions of social control. The rabbis were put into the strange position of having to enforce a version of Judaism based on an ethnic as much as a religious identity. The paranism helped to clearly define the Nação character of Portuguese Jewish identity by retaining the sole authority of social governance but they needed rabbis to lend a 'religious' stamp of approval to their directives. The rabbis of the community were seen to embody a commitment to Judaism that was at once religious and intellectual. The lines between the two poles were unclear and the works of individual rabbis reflect the extent to which the parameters were flexible.

The Rabbis of Seventeenth Century Amsterdam

Key rabbinic figures must be treated in order to show the chronological development of the rabbinate in the seventeenth century.[52] The community began by hiring outside rabbis to serve

[51] Despite the level of authority that a parnas had in the community, service on the lay leadership board was seen not as a privilege but as an obligation. By the end of the seventeenth century, a number of fines were levied on community members who refused service on the lay board. Ibid, 192.

[52] The rabbis that will be discussed here are in the following chronological order from the beginning of the seventeenth century to the end; R. Uri Halevi (and his son Aaron Halevi), R. David Pardo, R. Isaac Uziel, R. David de Yitzhaq de Cohen de Lara, R. Manasseh Ben Israel, R. Saul Levi Mortera, R. Isaac Aboab de Fonseca, R. Moses Rafeal de Aguilar, R. Yitzhaq Faar and

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the religious obligations of the community as well as to educate the community in Jewish lifestyle. Looking at the entire century, we can see that the lay leadership worked in order to create rabbis that were from the community itself. Rabbi Uri Halevi (1544-1622), an Ashkenazi rabbi from Emden, was the first chief rabbi of the Portuguese Jewish community of Amsterdam. He was the only Ashkenazi to ever serve the community as a chief rabbi. Rabbi Joseph Pardo was a Sephardi rabbi living in Venice who was invited to Amsterdam to serve the congregation of Neve Shalom. Due to his colorful background and financial problems, we can assume that Pardo was not a first choice but his Sephardi origin was crucial for the Neve Shalom community. Rabbi Isaac Uziel of Fez (d. 1622) was invited to Amsterdam by the Beit Yaakov congregation amidst the race to bring more Sephardi elements to the community.

Rabbi Saul Levi Mortera (1596-1660), was actually an Ashkenazi but was educated in Sephardi communities in Venice and spoke fluent Portuguese. He became the chief rabbi of the Beit Yaakov congregation and, since 1639, of the unified community Talmud Torah. Mortera was a strict rationalist who used his platform to rally against converso remaining in the Iberian Peninsula. His collection of sermons, *Giv'at Shual (*The Hill of Saul), reflect both an understanding of the problematics faced by conversos and a negative critique of those that refused to reeducate themselves as Jews given the opportunity.

Some rabbis of Amsterdam had themselves been conversos in the Iberian Peninsula. The experience influenced their decisions on key issues of Jewish law and practice. Rabbi Isaac Aboab de Fonseca (1605-1697) was born in Portugal and lived as a converso (he was given the

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R. Jacob Sasportas. While there are other rabbinic figures that make small appearances in Amsterdam I believe this list to be the most important for the scope of this paper.

name Simão da Fonseca upon his baptism). [53] His family moved to Amsterdam with a brief stop in Saint-Jean de Luz, France, following a common converso route away from the Iberian Peninsula. Aboab was educated in Amsterdam and excelled in his primary and secondary school training.[54] His first rabbinic position was for the congregation of Beit Israel although he worked also with the Neve Shalom congregation and later was elected chief rabbi of the united Kahal Kados de Talmud Tora in 1660 replacing Rabbi Saul Levi Mortera.[55] Aboab was a consummate intellectual who specialized in Jewish law, Talmud, rabbinic responsa (*she'lot uteshuvot*) and Lurianic Kabbalah.[56]

Rabbi Isaac Aboab, like many other Amsterdam rabbis, worked as a translator for his community while serving as chief rabbi. He translated notable works of Kabbalah from Spanish to Hebrew

[53] R. Isaac Aboab is the most famous rabbi of converso origin in the community and the next chapter will discuss his views on the immortality of soul and possible connections with his conversos history.

[54] It is said that he was the favorite student of Rabbi Isaac Uziel. Lúcia Liba Mucznik et al., comps., *Dicionário do judaísmo português* (Lisboa: Presença Editorial, 2009), 240.

[55] Yosef Kaplan notes that he served important educational roles in the Talmud Torah including the teaching of the Talmud to the older students, an honor that was bestowed on the most gifted scholars of the community. Jaime Contreras, García Bernardo José. García, and Serrano Juan Ignacio Pulido, *Familia, religión y negocio : el sefardismo en las relaciones entre el mundo ibérico y los Países Bajos en la Edad Moderna* ([Madrid]: Fundación Carlos de Amberes, 2003), 271-272.

[56] His library contained between 444-524 Hebrew volumes as well as 53 Portuguese and Spanish volumes. His Hebrew collection specialized in legal texts, halakhic texts, Talmudic exegesis and volumes of response literature. Aboab was a fervent kabbalist and his personal work reflects a deep personal relationship with Kabbalah. He worked to apply kabbalist thinking to the social problems of Amsterdam. This is seen in his treatise *Nishmat Hayyim,* which will be discussed in detail in chapter four. Ibid, 275

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and selected works of the converso Jewish philosopher and Kabbalist Abraham Cohen Herrera.[57] Abraham Cohen Herrera was a rabbi who never held a rabbinic post in Amsterdam but greatly influenced the intellectual ferment of the society. Given Aboab's position on the immortality of the soul, a debate which will be discussed in chapter four, it is not a coincidence that he choose to translate and circulate Herrera's writings in Amsterdam.

Rabbi Manasseh Ben Israel (1604-1657) was the first rabbi to be trained in Amsterdam that reached a level of prominence in the society although he never served the position of chief rabbi of the community. He was born into a family of conversos in Portugal with a brief portion of his childhood spent in France. Manasseh Ben Israel was active with the non Jewish world which directly influenced his preaching style and approach towards Judaism. He traveled widely throughout Europe and used his position to lobby foreign government to grant protections and permissions of settlement.[58]

[57] Lúcia Liba. Mucznik et al., comps., *Dicionário do judaísmo português* (Lisboa: Presença Editorial, 2009), 241. Aboab is regarded as the only translator of Herrera's *Casa Divina* and *Puerta del Cielo*.

[58] Notable are his efforts to gain the admission of Jews to the English kingdom. He used messianic religious arguments as well as practical economic sense to argue that the Jews should be granted to official residence in England. His efforts did not go unnoticed and eventually the Jews were granted the right to live in London and other localities in the United Kingdom. In addition to Western Europe, Ben Israel worked diligently to establish Jewish colonies in the Dutch controlled parts of the new world. He became, in profound way, an ambassador of the Western Sephardi Diaspora as a result of his diplomatic activity throughout Europe on behalf of the Jews. See Jonathan I. Israel, "The Republic of the United Netherlands Until About 1550: Demography and Economic Activity," in *The History of the Jews in the Netherlands*, ed. J.C.H Blom, R.G. Fuks-Mansfeld, and I. Schoffer (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish civilization, 2002), 93-94.

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Rabbi Moses Rafael de Aguilar (d.1680) was a model of traditional Torah teacher/scholar in the Amsterdam rabbinate. In 1642, he accompanied Rabbi Isaac Aboab to Recife, Brazil where he served as *hazan* of the community until his return to Amsterdam in 1654. Rabbi Moses Rafael de Aguilar composed many treatises on the Hebrew language and other aspects of Jewish ritual life. His most famous treatise was titles *Tratado da Imortalidade da Alma* (Tract on the immortality of the soul) and contained his positions on the question of the immortality of the soul.[59]

In addition to the varied scholars of secular culture, Rabbi Isaac Naar (d. 1686) was an academic and doctor. He was educated in the Talmud Tora school of Amsterdam under the supervision of Saul Levi Mortera and was the first rabbi ever to earn an academic degree.[60]

One of the most unusual Amsterdam rabbis was Jacob Sasportas (1610-1698) due to his absolutely stringent views on Jewish law and practice. Rabbi Jacob Sasportas was born in North Africa in the beginning of the seventh century. He traveled throughout Europe until he was appointed rabbi (*hakham*) of the Portuguese community of London. He left London for Livorno quickly due to the outbreak of the plague. [61] In Livorno, he was dismayed by the control that the

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[59] Lúcia Liba. Mucznik et al., comps., *Dicionário do judaísmo português* (Lisboa: Presença Editorial, 2009), 31. His treatise appeals to a sense of calm in the debate and unlike his rabbinic counterparts he does not take a definitive stance on the question of the eternality of infernal punishment. See Chapter Four for more comments on this debate.

[60] Renzo Toaff, *La Nazione Ebrea a Livorno E A Pisa (1591-1700)* (Firenze: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1990), 353.

[61] Ibid, pgs. 354-355. And Joseph Hacker, Dan Hacker, and Hartof Byam, eds., *Registry of the Holland Jewish Community (Hebrew)* (Jerusalem: Yad VaShem, 1986), 187.

mahamad had over the community and the rabbinate in the city and left for Amsterdam where he became the chief rabbi in 1693.[62]

Sasportas is best known for his fervent opposition to the Sabbatean the swept the Jewish world in middle of seventeenth century.[63] He conducted a personal crusade against the supporters of Shabbatai Sevi[64] throughout the Western Sephardi Diaspora and gained a reputation as a fervent Talmudist and rabbinic scholar. Sasportas view the office of the rabbi as not only a position that influenced Jewish society but one that acted as a rigid supervisor and enforcer of Jewish law.

The rabbis maintained a strict hierarchy within the community. There was one chief rabbi who usually sat as the head judge of the religious court (*av bet din*). Surrounding him were two or three senior rabbis that split the duties of director of education (*Rosh Yeshiva*) as well as head of the other social organizations.[65] The senior positions in the rabbinate were limited based on age. Especially in Amsterdam, the rabbinate was a closed organization and entry required exceptional skill and connections with important people on the lay leadership board.

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[63] For more on the episode of the false Jewish messiah Shabbatai Sevi see Scholem, Gershom Gerhard Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi; the mystical Messiah, 1626-1676.* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973).

[64] In the middle of the seventeenth century, a yeshiva student in Izmir declared himself to be the messiah of the Jewish people. Most of the Jewish world embraced the news as fact, including a large portion of the Amsterdam rabbis. Rabbi Sasportas is the most famous rabbi to publicly proclaim that Sevi was not the messiah and he was proven right when Sevi converted to Islam and the ultimate redemption of the Jewish people failed to materialize.

[65] In some cases, the chief rabbi also occupied the position of *Rosh Yeshiva*. This is seen with the tenure of Rabbi Isaac Aboab de Fonseca who served as chief rabbis, *Rosh Yeshiva* and *av bet din*(head of the religious court). Often the mahamad controlled the leadership positions of other social associations. For example, the physician Isaac Orobio de Castro served as the head of the *Ets Hayim* society while on the board of the mahamad.

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There was a relatively wide spectrum of thought in the Amsterdam rabbinate. There were traditional rabbinic scholars who were occupied in normative debate regarding Jewish law and theology in addition there were gifted secular writers who occupied their time with the debates regarding Jewish-Christian relations. Some of the rabbis were interested in Kabbalist thinking while others flatly rejected the ideology in favor of traditional Talmudic thinking. All of the rabbis were versed in multiple European languages especially Portuguese and Spanish.

Each of the major rabbis of seventeenth century Amsterdam was expected by the community to understand the bond between the Nação and the Iberian Peninsula. They were also expected to continue the intellectual traditions of the Iberian Peninsula alive in Amsterdam.[66] The amount of secular literature in various languages found in many Amsterdam rabbis' personal libraries reflect the unique intellectual bond that was maintained between the rabbinate and the Iberian Peninsula.[67]

Negative Reactions against the Rabbinate

The rabbis experienced instances of criticism and negative reaction from the community. The most profound scandals against the rabbinate of the Amsterdam Jewish community happened, by and large, in the first half of the seventeenth century. The split of congregations, David Farrer's

[66] Many of the conversos of Amsterdam had been educated in Christian universities while living in Portugal as Catholics. They had been exposed to secular culture and enjoyed interaction with European arts, literature and music. In order for the rabbis to establish bonds with these congregants, they had too to be versed in Europe high culture and maintain intellectual ties to the Iberian Peninsula.

[67] Yosef Kaplan argues that this type of intellectual bond was not found in other Jewish communities outside of the Western Sephardi Diaspora. Jaime Contreras, García Bernardo José. García, and Serrano Juan Ignacio Pulido, *Familia, religión y negocio : el sefardismo en las relaciones entre el mundo ibérico y los Países Bajos en la Edad Moderna* ([Madrid]: Fundación Carlos de Amberes, 2003), 284.

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attack on rabbinic leadership and the excommunications of Spinoza and Uriel Da Costa[68] This happened because the rabbinate and lay leadership worked to fix an identity that established boundaries of behavior for the community. Many conversos harbored deep suspicions of religious authority and so there was a general distrust of the rabbinate in the community.

David Farrar was raised as Christian in the Iberian Peninsula and educated in a Christian university. Upon arrival in Amsterdam, Farrar became a "stringent observer" of Jewish religious law and an open critic of rabbinic leadership in the city.[69] His strict observance and sharp intellectual abilities exemplified the type of community leaders which emerged as voices against rabbinic authority. He felt that the rabbis were abusing their power and did not express the proper sentiments about the converso issue. Farrar's open attacks on rabbinic authority never resulted in serious ban from the community and he died in good standing with the Amsterdam Jewish community. Farrar specifically attacked the legitimacy of the rabbinate and ultimately helped to create his own congregation as a result. What is striking in his story is the fact that he was not banned from the community and still maintains a relatively positive position in the history of the Amsterdam Jews. The rabbis of the three communities were split about his criticism and some, like Rabbi Saul Levi Mortera, even came to his defense.

Another community voice against the rabbinate was Juan de Pardo who was involved in a number of attacks on the Amsterdam Jews. He is said to have accused the rabbinate of creating a "small inquisition in Amsterdam" and even saying that he was going to thrown letters with

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[69] Yosef Kaplan, "The Portuguese Community of Amsterdam in the 17th Century Between Tradition and Change," in *Society and Community: Proceedings of the Second International Congress for Reseach of the Sephardi and Oriental Jewish Heritage 1984* (Jerusalem: Misgav Yerushalayim, 1991), 143.

scandalous things written on them in the yeshiva of Rabbi Saul Levi Mortera.[70] Baruch Spinoza, the philosopher banned from the Amsterdam Jewish community, wrote against religious authority and challenged the legitimacy of rabbinate power. Spinoza was born in Amsterdam to parents of good standing in the Jewish community who came from Portugal. As a young man, he excelled in his studies at the Talmud Torah School under the leadership of esteemed rabbis such as Saul Levi Morteira. At the age of twenty-four a *herem* unlike any the Amsterdam Jewish community had ever produced was pronounced against Baruch Spinoza.[71] At the point in his life he had not yet published or even written any of his major philosophical works which codified his ideas regarding the divine origin of the Bible and the greater authority of the Rabbis. The leadership of the Amsterdam community feared the criticism of Spinoza and silenced him before he could do great damage to the cohesion of the community.

One possible reason for the negative reactions against the rabbinate was their preserved role in censorship. Censorship was particularly harsh in Amsterdam as the mahamad and the rabbis controlled what was being produced and distributed in the society. For example, most of Miguel de Barrios' work was censored and scrutinized by the Amsterdam Jewish authorities. Daniel Swetschinski reminds us that "hardly any work composed by de Barrios escaped the scrutiny of the *parnasim* and the *hahamim*. On several significant occasions these censors have left us their

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[70] I.S. Revah, *Des Marranes A Spinoza* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1995), 233.

[71] Spinoza excelled in Hebrew to such an extent that the rabbis of the community consulted him for advice in wording the herem against him correctly.

actual reports on the perceived demerits of de Barrios' work."[72] An example of one of the reports on de Barrios's works of poetry comes from Rabbi Yitzhaq Naar:

> *Magnificos Senhores*. On your orders [the mahamad] I examined a book, entitled *Flor de Apolo*, composed by Miguel de Barrios, in which-not to mention the fact that its overall theme concerns amorous and lascivious verses that any Jew would have little justification in publishing-I made the following observations: first, the he invokes Gentile deities and attributes divinity to them (albeit for poetic reasons). I am of the opinion that one should not tolerate to be said in jest things which, if said in truth, are so criminal. Furthermore, that in some places he exceeds all bounds of modesty and propriety and in other addresses particular and known persons. I think that these need to be corrected. On examining his changes, one may grant him permission.[73]

De Barrios was not immune from the Sabbatean controversy and was a firm believer in the false messiah. One of his most famous works, *Harmonia del Mundo*, with its Sabbatean undertones came under the censorship under none other than the famed Rabbi Jacob Sasportas.

The life experiences of many in the community reflect an environment where free thought was almost a necessity. How else could one have come to terms with the turbulent life of a converso Jew returning to normative Judaism? Herein lie the intrigue and perhaps also the modern character of the Amsterdam Jewish community. The rabbis were given the position of regulating

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[72] Daniel Swetschinski, *Reluctant cosmopolitans: the Portuguese Jews of seventeenth-century Amsterdam* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2000), 243.

[73] Ibid, 244.

and directing thought in Amsterdam. Naturally, they were the first target of criticism from community members.

The Amsterdam rabbis of the seventeenth century were a diverse group of intellectuals that harbored varied and divergent opinions on Jewish law and practice. The myths regarding the origins of the community reflect the insecurity that many in the leadership felt about the need to retain conversos within the Jewish framework of the city. Negative reactions against the authority of the rabbinate and, by extension, the mahamad reinforced insecurity within the apparatus of power in the city.

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Converso Identity and the Rabbis Place in the Governing Structure of the Amsterdam Jewish Community.

The mahamad of the unified Portuguese Jewish of Amsterdam exercised complete control over matters of authority and social behavior. The issue of social behavior had special significance for the community because many members were returning to Judaism and unclear of the parameters of acceptable Jewish lifestyle. The mahamad fixed a clear ethnic identity of Portuguese Jews that centered on the ethnic superiority of the collective Nação identity while maintaining strict religious observance. The rabbis of the community were used to establish and regulate religious life through their public sermons and personal intellectual pursuits. There were often debates about key issues of Jewish religious law and philosophy between the rabbis which occasionally infiltrated the community to the dismay of the lay leadership. This chapter will analyze one of those disagreements. It will also discuss the nature of the Jewish communal government in the larger picture of contemporary emulations of the biblical republic. Finally, the crucial converso identity of Amsterdam Jews will be reviewed in relation to the duties of the rabbis.

Community Government

Miguel de Barrios' introduction to his *Triumpho del govierno popular* deals with the political motivations of the Amsterdam Jewish community. Miriam Bodian describes the work as "dealing mainly with the Amsterdam Portuguese-Jewish community, its institutions, societies, and outstanding personalities, but including numerous digressions on religious and moral themes, and verses dedicated to men of rank."[74] She argues that de Barrios was quick to

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[74] Miriam Bodian, "Biblical Hebrews and the Rhetoric of Republicanism: Seventeenth-Century Portuguese Jews on the Jewish Community," *AJS Review* 22, no. 2 (1997). 210.

understand that his communal leaders would appreciate a book that portrayed the Jews as "political" and that the Amsterdam Jewish community wanted to model itself on a "republic".[75]

The work details biblical government structures and argues that there are three main categories. The first were the monarchies such as those run by David, Saul and Solomon. The second was aristocracy such as those of Joshua and finally, democracy such as the Israelites in Egypt. De Barrios looks at Jewish history through the Aristotelian categories of governance as a way of presenting the Jews as having the ability to be modern based on their history. Kenneth Scholberg writes a detailed account of the structure of the Amsterdam community.

> The real power [of the community] was in the hands of the political government, i.e. the members of the *Mahamad.* These seven officials, six of whom were called *parnasim* and the seventh *gabay* or treasurer, held office for a year and received no pay for their service. Elections were held twice yearly; three *parnasim* were chosen on Rosh Hashanah and three others and the *gabay* were elected on *Shabbat haGadol*. The *paransim* choose their own chairman and the post changed hands every two months. As the convocation of the *Sanhedrin,* the *Mahamad* sat in a semicircle when it met as a tribunal. The political government exercised great control over the internal affairs of the community and specifically had authority over the rabbinical government in the synagogue and treasury.[76]

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[75] Ibid, 211.

[76] Kenneth R. Scholenberg, "Miguel de Barrios and the Amsterdam Sephardi Community," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 53, no. 2 (October 1962),126.

The Portuguese Jewish community of Amsterdam was able to set up a communal organization in a remarkable short time. Despite the initial controversy that broke out among the conversos of the city regarding the proper direction of congregational life, they were able to create all the institutions necessary for functional Jewish life in the span of roughly fifty years[77]. Among the institutions created in Amsterdam in the first half of the seventeenth century were the *Bikur Holim* society (Visiting the Sick) in 1609, *Talmud Torah* (Jewish educational institution) in 1616, *Ets Haim* society (Tree of Life) in 1637 as well as printing press which was housed in the Talmud Torah until Rabbi Manasseh Ben Israel established his own printing company.[78]

The rabbis' place in this community government was primarily in the realm of religious and judicial leadership. The rabbis were perceived as having real power in the community structure although they were often used by the mahamad who retained the sole authority in the community. Building on the position of the Torah teacher in Eastern Mediterranean communities, the rabbis of Amsterdam interacted with the community in visible and public ways.

Interaction with the Mahamad

The relationship between the rabbinate and the mahamad in Sephardi communities of the Western Diaspora can be understood as one of influence and authority. The rabbis exerted influence over the community but lacked real authority compared with the mahamad who kept them under close supervision. The rabbis were required to provide religious authority to the

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[77] Detailed in the second chapter, section "The Three Communities"

[78] Yosef Kaplan, "The Jews in the Republic until about 1750: Religious, Cultral, and Social Life," in *The History of the Jews in the Netherlands*, ed. R.G. Fuks-Mansfeld, J.C.H Blom, and I. Schoffer (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish civilization, 2002), 118.

actions of the mahamad, generate intellectual output, and address the specific concerns of the community while having no sovereign authority of their own.[79] The mahamad always maintained the authority over rabbinic contracts and the selection of rabbis to serve the community.

The mahamad controlled all social behavior in Amsterdam society.[80] They maintained the sole authority to amend community regulations (*ascamot*) as well as the right to hire rabbis and decide on their contract length. Despite the high profile activity of certain rabbis such as Manasseh Ben Israel, the *mahamad* was the sole authority which had the right to interact with the Dutch officials of the city.[81] The image of the mahamad as the sole authority in the community was not particularly convincing for the community members. Some Jews in Amsterdam viewed the rabbinate as having significant influence and authority, which served the mahamad in a positive way as they were able to avoid direct criticism for their actions.[82]

[79] Evelyn Oleil-Grausz contextualizes the position of the rabbi in relation with the mahamad within the larger Western Sephardi Diaspora. She argues, “Cette solution de continuité dans la chaîne de la tradition fait de la transmission du judaïsme une véritable mission, qui incombe aux chefs spirituels que se choisissent les <nations> judeo-portugaises, les rabbins et leurs auxiliaires. ainsi, les rabbins des communautés d'amsterdam, de Londrès, de Hambourg, du Sud-Ouest de la France, mémé s'ils demeurent soumis a l'étroite tutelle du *maamad* qui les recrute, et s'ils se plaignent souvent de cette infeodation a laquelle n'échappent guère que les autorités rabbiniques les plus renommées, ils jouent un rôle fundamental” Evelyne Oliel-Grausz, "Le circulation du personnel rabbinique dans les communautés de la diaspora sépharade au XVIIIe siècle," in *Transmission et passages en monde juif*, ed. Esther Benbassa ([Paris]: Publisud, 1997), 314.

[80] See footnote 57

[82] Evidence of negative reactions against the rabbinate are found in *herem* (bans of excommunication) issued by the mahamad because of individual criticism on the rabbinate. Yosef Kaplan, "The Jews in the Republic until about 1750: Religious, Cultural, and Social Life,"

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In the middle of the seventeenth century, the rabbinate established itself as a separate tribunal which could compete with the authority of the mahamad. In the opinion of Yosef Kaplan, this change took place under the leadership of Rabbi Isaac Aboab and Rabbi Jacob Sasportas.[83] In 1679/80 Hakham Isaac Aboab de Fonesca composed a treatise regarding the use of the herem (bans of excommunication) in the Amsterdam community. This treatise highlights a number of issues regarding the interaction of the *mahamad* and senior rabbis.[84] At the time of writing the treatise, Aboab was a senior *hakham* of Amsterdam as well as the *Av Bet Din* (Chief Judge) and *Rosh Yeshiva* (head of the education institution) of the Kahal Kados de Talmud Tora. He was the ultimate source of rabbinic authority in the city of Amsterdam.

Aboab's treatise on the herem attempted to clarify the rabbinate position on its usage and push for affirmation of the rabbinate. He does not argue that the herem is over used in Amsterdam and is careful not to accuse the *mahamad* of abuse of power.[85] He presents a detailed historical analysis of the herem's place in Jewish society and the proper community mechanisms that the herem must pass through in order to be valid. A primary point is that a herem is always

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in *The History of the Jews in the Netherlands*, ed. R.G. Fuks-Mansfeld, J.C.H Blom, and I. Schoffer (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish civilization, 2002), 123.

[83] Ibid,137.

[84] Yosef Kaplan notes that on 21 July 1670, the mahamad had all the members of the community sign a series of regulations which redefined the mahamad's authority in managing community behavior. He argues that, "their wording [the regulations] implies a clear tendency to strengthen the authority of the paranism and increase the rabbis' dependence upon them." Yosef Kaplan, *From Christianity to Judaism: the story of Isaac Orobio de Castro* (Oxford [England: Published for The Littman Library by Oxford University Press, 1989), 196.

[85] Simon Schwarzfuchs notes that rabbinate contention of the abuse of the herem has a long history in rabbinate/mahamad relations. He shows that as early as the thirtieth century there were rabbinate disagreements over the abuse of the herem in the Rhine valley. Simon Schwarzfuchs, *A concise history of the rabbinate* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1993), 15.

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strengthened when it is approved by a rabbi.[86] His writing indicates a fear of confrontation between the rabbinate and the mahamad which could threaten the community's authority base. He ends the treatise with the final point:

> The overall point is to prove our [the rabbis] assertion, with cases and examples of similar events, that since the unity of our Holy Kahal was constituted with the approval of all and signed by all in presence of its Hakhamim under pain of herem, those who want to violate this agreement by separating themselves cannot do it, and no one in the world can free them from the punishment they incur through this violation.[87]

Aboab is aware that an extreme position against the lay leadership would result in negative backlash directed towards his office so he appeals for "the unity and conversation of the Kahal and feeding of the poor"[88]. The authority of the *mahamad* does not derive from whether or not it was elected by the population in a democratic fashion.[89] His point is not to challenge the authority of the *mahamad*; instead he would like to create a space for greater rabbinic participation in the regulation of social behavior. He states that, "when there is a Hakham

[86] "The Hakham brings to them the authority that belongs to him by reason and by right, increasing the authority of the Kahal, but its own authority is not lost on account of his absence." "Exhortation to those who fear the Lord, not to fall into sin due to lack of understanding of the precepts of his Holy Law, MS, http://www.earlymodern.org/citation.php?citKey=109&docKey=e (accessed May 25, 2010), 8.

[87] "Exhortation to those who fear the Lord, not to fall into sin due to lack of understanding of the precepts of his Holy Law, MS, http://www.earlymodern.org/citation.php?citKey=109&docKey=e (accessed May 25, 2010), 11.

[88] Ibid, 2.

[89] Ibid, 11.

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salaried or elected by the *Kahal*, whether elected by the *Kahal* or the *Mahamad*, his participation is required."[90]

Aboab's treatise reflects the tense relations between the rabbinate and the mahamad. The rabbis pleaded for more authority in the community citing the historical position of the rabbi as a 'learned man'. While the rabbis were sensitive to the power of the mahamad, they tried to establish their position in society as crucial to community cohesion. Towards the end of the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth century, the Amsterdam rabbinate gained power as a separate tribunal due the efforts of Aboab that are in display in this tract.

The Converso Issue

The Amsterdam community was comprised of Jews whose ancestors had been forcibly converted to Christianity in the Iberian Peninsula. They lived as secret Jews in the Iberian Peninsula although many had lost all knowledge of Judaism. Upon arrival to Amsterdam, the Jews began a process of reeducation of Jewish lifestyle and observance of mitzvoth. This reintegration into Judaism created a number of problems for the rabbinate authority as well as the mahamad, which fixed social behavior in the community. Yosef Kaplan describes the atmosphere in Amsterdam in the following way:

> The volatile atmosphere of Amsterdam during the Republic gave rise among the Portuguese Jews to the phenomenon of "Jews without Judaism." I refer to a broad spectrum of people: some cut themselves off from community life and acted on its margins, despite their ethnic and religious ties with other members of the Portuguese Jewish community; others acted within the community until a certain stage, even

[90] Ibid, 11.

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> attempting, here and there, to reform the Jewish way of life from within by taking a reserved and critical view of rabbinical Halakhah and the traditional leadership.[91]

The Jews of Amsterdam, due to their experiences between two religions, harbored distrust of religious authority and doctrine which they preserved to be constraining such as the question of the immortality of the soul. Thus, the rabbinic leadership of Amsterdam had to address issues of social control while ultimately acting in a subservient way to the mahamad. There were attempts to discredit the leadership of the community and attack the foundations of authority as illegitimate which were described in the previous chapter.

The rabbis had to balance religious orthodoxy with the needs of the community which meant that the maintenance of the identity of the Portuguese Nação took center stage in the rabbinic responsibilities of the community. The journey of Manasseh Ben Israel to England in order assist Sephardi communities in need and his intellectual output in European languages are examples. The sermons of Saul Levi Mortera are another example of the attempt to balance a Nação identity with a Jewish identity in order to make them virtually the same. Works such as *Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel* written by a converso based in Ferrara in 1553 Samuel Usque, about a century before Menasseh Ben Israel, highlight the intellectual struggle that was taking place in converso community as to what type of Jewish identity they would create. Usque addressed the book to the "gentlemen of the Diaspora of Portugal" and given the choice of language it is clear that his audience was specifically the converso populations that now faced a problematic decision: enter normative Jewish observance or assimilate completely. This was the

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[91] Yosef Kaplan, "Wayward New Christians and Stubborn New Jews: The Shaping of a Jewish Identity," *Jewish History* 8, no. 1/2 (1994), 29.

situation facing Amsterdam in the seventeenth century and the leadership of the community was able to create an alternative with the Nação identity.

Because of their experience living as Christians, Judaism was not a consuming lifestyle for many conversos in Amsterdam. In other normative Jewish communities in Europe, Judaism was the only form of life that they knew and social behavior outside of the Jewish social norms was inconceivable. The creation of the Portuguese Nação identity which placed Judaism into a specific compartment of an overall Nação identity addressed the need to create a consuming lifestyle for the Jewish residents of Amsterdam. Normative Judaism had to be balanced by the rabbis and made to fit into a specific social behavior as opposed to being the all encompassing form of Jewish behavior as in the case of other Jewish communities. Many Disagreements arose in the rabbinate during the course the seventeenth century about how to address this problematic.

The rabbinate directly affected the creation and maintenance of the Portuguese Nação identity. They spoke Portuguese, maintained connection with intellectual culture in the Iberian Peninsula, and helped to educate the community over the place of conversos in Jewish society with an eye towards the distinctiveness of Portuguese Jewish identity. Three rabbis were natives of Portugal and born into the identity of the Nação. The rabbinate interaction with the mahamad reflects a strained relationship over issues of authority and power within the community. Rabbis attempted to defend their position in the community as unique, intellectual and worthy of special respect from the community and the mahamad. Ultimately this strategy proved successful for the rabbinate as the end of the seventeenth century saw the creation of a more powerful rabbinate which could compete with the mahamad for greater authority within the community.

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The Sermon and the Theological Debates

There are a number of specific cases one can treat in order to see the impact of the rabbinate on the society of Portuguese Jews in Amsterdam. This chapter will deal with one public case and one internal case which demonstrate the job responsibilities, positions and problematics of a number of key rabbinic figures of the Amsterdam community. The public case is the use of the sermon. The sermon played an especially important role in the job descriptions of Amsterdam rabbis, as it was their primary public vehicle to address issues of identity, social, and Jewish practice. All of the important rabbinic figures of the community gave sermons, but none were more influential than those of Rabbi Saul Levi Mortera's. The internal rabbinic debate regarding the immortality of the soul highlights dynamics of rabbinate disagreement in Amsterdam and how that disagreement affected the position of the rabbinate. The sermon became the place where the public could interact with the internal rabbinic debates informing the content of sermon.

The Sermon

Sermons and the ability to preach had a specific significance to the Amsterdam rabbis of the seventeenth century. Sephardi communities have a long tradition of preaching in the synagogue and other community spaces which is typified by the Torah teacher.[92] The position of the Torah teacher, was established in Amsterdam and became the primary vehicle for rabbis to address the specific spiritual questions of the community.

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[92] Robert Bonfil notes that, "the realm in which one feels most clearly the transformation which took place in the Jewish cultural atmosphere during the period under discussion [sixteenth century Italy] would seem to be that of the sermon." Robert Bonfil, *Rabbis and Jewish communities in Renaissance Italy* (London: Littman Library of Jewish civilization, 1993), 298.

The sermon proved to be an effective tool for addressing the general public regarding issues of social behavior and conduct. This trend began in the Eastern Mediterranean Sephardi communities and also affected the Italian communities of the sixteenth century. Robert Bonfil notes:

> The need fulfilled by the sermon in Italy was no different in principle from that which it fulfilled in any other Jewish community: namely, the need to reinforce adherence to the system of values to which the society was committed in principle, a genre which gave a certain pleasure to its audience, strengthening social bonds around these same values, as well as conveying a contemporary dimension to the cultural heritage of the group.[93]

The sermon for the Amsterdam community was a vehicle to address the problem of converso identity, the difficulties that arose during the reeducation process to Judaism and the contours of acceptable behavior for members of the Portuguese Jewish Community.

Marc Saperstein has compiled an English study of Mortera's sermons in the Amsterdam Jewish community. The sermons reflect the amount of patience required for the 'new Jews' of Amsterdam to be included into religious life after so many years of exile. Notes on the process of the sermon, for example, are sprinkled throughout most of his work. Mortera would literally have to guide his fellow Jews through the sermon process noting:

> It has always been our practice, which we began some years ago, to preach every Sabbath on one verse from the weekly lesson in the order in which they were written. According to the order to which we have been drawn up to now- year after year always to base our

[93] Ibid, 298-299.

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> sermon on the order of verses that come in the weekly lesson- our sermon today should be on the verse…[94]

Mortera and the other rabbis faced the continuing challenge of reassuring his congregants that they were accepted as Jews and that their history as conversos would not harm them in the world to come. At the funeral of Sarah Farar, the wife of Abraham Farrar and mother of the physical David Farar, Mortera addressed the issue of the sins of conversos directly. During a conversation about their former lives in Portugal and the sins that they had committed while conversos, Mortera addressed the crowd:

> For if he [Abraham Farar] looked into his deeds from the day he was circumcised, he would have found that he committed no sin. Since all of his sins were forgiven on the day of circumcision, it is certain that from that day on he never left off observing God's Torah with all his might and with all his soul, going to the synagogue early in the morning and in the evening. This is in addition to the sacrifice of his blood that he offered before God. Indeed it is true that on that day of circumcision, a person is considered to be a new creature…[95]

Mortera understood the fears of his community and sought to develop a clear divide between their former lives and their current lives as Jews. The rabbis of Amsterdam did not agree about how to approach the issue of converso identity. This allowed the residents of the community to seek individual rabbis for consolation regarding their personal statues as conversos. The internal

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[94] Marc Saperstein and Saul Levi Mortera, *Exile in Amsterdam: Saul Levi Morteira's sermons to a congregation of "new Jews"* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2005), 71

[95] Ibid, 147.

rabbinic debates regarding theology reflect the tension in the rabbinate which ultimately leaked in to the community in the form of sermons.

Theological Debates

The communities of Italy in the sixteenth century had many debates about the nature of Kabbalah, its place in community worship and the question of whether to print Kabbalah influenced prayer books. Leading rabbis of the community debated the merits of the issue via treatises and sermons. For the Amsterdam community a different theological debate took over the rabbinic discourse: the immortality of the soul.

Due to the large number of converso Jews in Amsterdam, it is clear that debates regarding the soul would provoke serious interest from the community. These Jews were raised in the Catholic Church and thus understood the weight that Catholicism gave to issues regarding the afterlife and the eternality of the human soul. In addition to their own experience of Catholicism, many of the residents still had family members living as Christians in the Iberian Peninsula. The question over Judaism's authoritative position on the soul became paramount by the seventeenth century.

Judaism is unclear on the issue of the immortality of the soul. There are no specific positions to be found in Jewish religious literature that definitively argue for the death or life of the soul after the body dies. There is the *mishnaic* understanding that "all of Israel has a part in the way to come" but this is somewhat ambiguous regarding the immortality of soul. Individual rabbis made their own judgments on the matter throughout the Diaspora. The subject was extremely sensitive

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due to the fact that dissidence was not uncommon in the Amsterdam population and a severe position on the question could upset many congregants.[96]

In the 1630s a controversy over the rabbinic position on the immortality of soul arose in Amsterdam. Four major rabbis were involved each took different positions on the topic. The conversation took the form of intellectual treatises composed in either Hebrew or Spanish. Rabbi Isaac Aboab de Fonseca wrote *Nishmat Hayyim* which concerned issues of salvation and punishment in the afterlife.[97] Rabbi Manasseh Ben Israel wrote a treatise on the resurrection of the dead in the 1620s.[98] Both Rabbi Saul Levi Mortera and Rabbi Moses Raphael d'Aguilar

[96] Yirmiahu Yovel makes a clear case for the connection between dissidence and "marranism" in the city of Amsterdam in his "Marranisme et dissidence: Spinoza et quelques predecesseurs.". Yovel's point regarding the position of the rabbis in Amsterdam society is particularly applicable regarding the debates around the immortality of the soul. "le problème des rabbins d'Amsterdam, comme de ses imprimeurs, enseignantes et vulgarisateurs, était d'injecter une nouvelle dimension de savoir dans ce qui n'était encore que volonté brute et indéfinie, et, surtout, de construire sure ce fondement l'édifice complexe des coutumes juives et des règles de vie, selon la tradition d'antan" Yirmiahu Yovel, "Marranisme et dissidence: Spinoza et quelques predecesseurs," in *Cahiers Spinoza.*, vol. 3 (Paris: Editions Replique, 1980), 69-70.

[97] This work was never published. Alexander Altmann devotes a large portion of his detailed article concerning theological debates in Amsterdam to a discussion of the extant copies of *Nishmat Hayyim* and possible dates of origin. See Alexander Altmann, "Eternality of Punishment: A Theological Controversy within the Amsterdam Rabbinate in the Thirties of the Seventeenth Century," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 40 (1972), 4-10.

[98] Manasseh Ben Israel composed his treatise in various forms and in various languages. Benjamin Braude, in his article treating the multiple languages of Manasseh Ben Israel's writing, notes that his intended audience was Jews given the amount of Hebrew terminology that he used as opposed to other trestise that relied on solely European languages. Benjamin Braude and Anne Tomiche, "Les contes persans de Menasseh Ben Israel: Polemique, apologetique et dissimulation a Amsterdam au XVIIe Siecle," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, no. 5 (September/October 1994), 1131

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composed tracts on the question of immortality in Jewish thought.[99] The debate had two dimensions: the validity of Kabbalah in Amsterdam Jewish thought and punishment of Christian practices by Iberian conversos in the afterlife. The latter debate bore more profound significance in the life of the community while the former was an ongoing rabbinic question with immediate roots in the ongoing debates over Kabbalah in Venice.[100]

The primary disagreement formed between Rabbi Aboab and Rabbi Mortera. According to Alexander Altmann, the problem began when Mortera challenged the popular understanding that all Jews had a place in the salvation of the world to come. Mortera claims that "Kabbalists" were responsible for the popularity of the false doctrine of salvation for all Jews.[101] Jews had to live their lives according the Halakhah and perform the necessary mitzvoth and only this proper Jewish lifestyle would ensure a place in the world to come. Through his defense of religious lifestyle, Mortera confirms that the soul is indeed immortal or at least has the possibility to participate a share in the world to come.[102] However, Altmann cites another argument, put forth

[99] These articles are discussed in detail in the aforementioned article by Alexander Altman.

[100] Jewish thought in Venice had profound influence on the rabbis of Amsterdam especially Saul Levi Mortera who was educated in the city under the leadership of its chief rabbi. It is natural the debate regarding the nature of Kabbalah in practical Jewish life would have found a place in the rabbinic discussion of Amsterdam.

[101] Alexander Altmann, "Eternality of Punishment: A Theological Controversy within the Amsterdam Rabbinate in the Thirties of the Seventeenth Century," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 40 (1972), 11.

[102] Yosef Kaplan notes that Mortera was a strict rationalist and he maintained a harsh view of conversos that remained in the Iberian Peninsula. The question of the immortality of the soul allowed Mortera a platform from which to attack anti rationalist viewpoints in Jewish philosophical discussion. Yosef Kaplan, "The Jews in the Republic until about 1750: Religious, Cultral, and Social Life," in *The History of the Jews in the Netherlands*, ed. R.G. Fuks-Mansfeld, J.C.H Blom, and I. Schoffer (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish civilization, 2002), 133.

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by Mortera which has special significance to rabbinic understandings of Christianity in Amsterdam. He quotes Mortera's own words, "by believing in the eternality of sin and punishment we support the religion of the Christians who say that Adam's sin was eternal and that, on this account, only God, who is eternal, could make atonement for it by his incarnation and death."[103] Mortera is here confirming his initial declaration that Kabbalah is not a valid source on this topic and that the Talmudic tradition is the only "trustworthy Kabbalah"[104]

Rabbi Aboab responded to the position taken by Mortera in his treatise entitled *Nishmat Haayim.*[105] Aboab begins the work with the question ""Is there eternal punishment of souls or not? And what did our rabbis, of blessed memory, intend by saying, the following have no share in the world-to-come?"[106] Aboab argues that Kabbalah is a legitimate resource for understanding rabbinic literature and thus, the kabbalist understanding that every Jew has a place in world to come, no matter how grave his sins does bear weight.[107]His answer directly confirms the kabbalist understanding of the topic in a direct attack on Mortera. Rabbi Moses Raphael de

[103] Alexander Altmann, "Eternality of Punishment: A Theological Controversy within the Amsterdam Rabbinate in the Thirties of the Seventeenth Century," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 40 (1972), 12.

[104] Quoted in Ibid, 16.

[105] Whether *Nishmat Hayyim* is, indeed, Aboab's response to Mortera has been the subject of debate among scholars. Altmann presents a convincing case that it was his reaction by showing that the structure of the document is in line with the arguments put forth by Mortera and supported by the bet din of Venice which also supported Mortera's opinions on the debate. He shows that the order of Aboab's arguments leaves little doubt that he was reacting to the position of Mortera. Ibid, 14-20.

[106] Quoted in Ibid,16.

[107] Aboab was born in Portugal and lived the problematic of converso identity in his personal life. Surely this experience informed some of his attitudes regarding the immortality of the soul. Saul Levi Mortera, while sensitive to this identity, did not live as a converso in his personal life.

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Aguilar took a similar stance, arguing that converso Jews have a place in the world to come but their ability to act in accordance with Jewish law in the "lands of freedom" bears heavily on their place in that world to come.[108]

The complex philosophical nature of the debate between the two rabbis is beyond the scope and length of the present paper. The fact that two of the rabbinic authorities of the city were unable to agree upon a major facet of Jewish spiritual culture is the most revealing point that is being made here. The rabbis resort to an argument over the validity of kabbalist thinking regarding the afterlife in order to avoid directly taking a position on the afterlife of conversos.[109] This device was used due to the fact they were aware of the gravity of statements on the sanctity of conversos in the afterlife. A clear position, which offended the mahamad in any way, on these issues could have resulted in termination or ban from the post of rabbi in the city.

Alexander Altmann summation of the debate shows that the young community of converso Jews in Amsterdam gave special weight to this otherwise internal rabbinic argument. His position

[108] De Aguilar took this position when asked by the converso, doctor and Parnas Isaac Orobio de Castro. The rabbi answers a series of questions which the doctor brought before him in order to find a 'true explanation' to the conversos issue. Yosef Kaplan, *From Christianity to Judaism: the story of Isaac Orobio de Castro* (Oxford [England: Published for The Littman Library by Oxford University Press, 1989), 116-117.

[109] Aboab's argument rests on a strict interpretation of kabbalist thinking of the world to come as well as a liberal approach to issues of messianism in Jewish thinking. For example, Aboab argues that punishment for sins committed in the present life only to extend until the Jubilee year when the messiah return to earth. It is hard not to read the Christian overtones of this thinking and so Aboab confirms his positions by citing kabbalist text. In a way, Aboab does take a clear position on the issue preferring instead to argue that things will be taken care of when the messiah arrives. Alexander Altmann, "Eternality of Punishment: A Theological Controversy within the Amsterdam Rabbinate in the Thirties of the Seventeenth Century," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 40 (1972), 38.

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deserved to be quoted in full as it bears significant weight on the inner workings of the rabbinate in Amsterdam:

> The conflict between Aboab and Mortera may seem to have been a mere rehash of the old rivalries between pure Talmudists, philosophizing rabbis and Kabbalists. This estimate would be justified had the controversy been purely academic. What makes it historically interesting are the non-academic, pragmatic arguments which were advanced on both sides and which evoked so much feeling on the part of Aboab's followers. The point pressed home by Aboab and his faction was the assurance of ultimate salvation for all Jewish souls. It was prompted, we suggest, by a sense of concern for those Marranos who had, as yet, not returned to the fold or, having returned, had either been remiss in their duties or had relapsed into their old ways. In other words, the issue at stake was the recognition of all Marranos as inseparably belonging to the people of Israel and sharing in its election and privileges. Underlying this claim was the mystical notion of the exalted nature of Jewish souls which had been increasingly stressed in the kabbalistic tradition.[110]

The issue at the heart of this debate pertained to the religious identity of conversos entering Judaism from Christianity. The rabbis, most likely at the request of the mahamad, had to create boundaries of identity that gave clear distinction to the amount of Christian influence over their lives. In the middle of the seventeenth century, conversos from Southern France began to immigrate to Amsterdam. These people were considered to be members of the Nação but refused circumcision due to their constant travel to the Iberian Peninsula and the danger that circumcision could bring someone if caught by the inquisition. Refusal of circumcision was a

[110] Ibid, 17.

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boundary that the community leadership was unwilling to break and they quickly had Rabbi Isaac Aboab and others to issue statements such as the following:

> Those members of the Nation [Nação] who keep the commandments of the Torah before being circumcised have no part in divine grace, and they are condemned to eternal damnation. Hence every converso who arrives from the Iberian Peninsula must be circumcised within three months of his arrival. If not, he will be excommunicated.[111]

This passage composed by Aboab reflects the amount of flexibility that the rabbis had over religious matters. While he discredits the idea of eternal damnation in his discussion of the immortality of the soul, so as not to offended or isolated conversos of Amsterdam, he clearly uses the idea in order to establish boundaries of social behavior in the case of circumcision. One can assume that Amsterdam was full of "Jews without Judaism" as well as some "Rabbis without Judaism." In other words, a new form of secular Judaism that permeated every level of Jewish life including the rabbinate was created in Amsterdam.

The ethnic identity of the Nação allowed many conversos to adopt cultural patterns that featured religious identity but were generally secular. They could embrace their knowledge of European languages and their traditions of Iberian Jewry while maintain ambiguity on matters of religious identity. By the promise of eternal damnation proved to be an issue that was too big to ignore and required the assistance of rabbinic authority. It is not a coincident that the known heretics of

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[111] Yosef Kaplan, "Wayward New Christians and Stubborn New Jews: The Shaping of a Jewish Identity,"*Jewish History* 8, no. 1/2 (1994), 32.

the Amsterdam community, specifically Uriel Da Costa and Baruch Spinoza, both argued against the idea of the immortality of the soul.[112]

Other rabbis took positions on this debate but none as clear as rabbi Mortera and rabbi Aboab. Rabbi Moses Raphael de Aguilar wrote a tract entitled *Tratado da Imortalidade da Alma* in the 1660's. He does not make a clear position compared with the other rabbis discussed here; instead, he tries to establish a collection of historical facts and varying viewpoints on the issue.[113] His argument is based in spirituality and would have surely found a number of adherents among the Amsterdam Jews due to its personalized version of Jewish spirituality. Despite the protestant undertones of his ideas, de Aguilar is informed by his own understand of Jewish thought viewed through this life experience as a converso. Yet from his spiritual understanding of the world he does lean towards the understanding that the soul is in fact immortal.[114]

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[112] These two thinkers approached the topic from two different viewpoints. Uriel Da Costa wanted to shed his troubled past as a Christian by rejecting anything that could be understood as Christian theology. This led him to attack certain pillars of rabbinic authority in Amsterdam. The American Scholar Steven Nadler has argued that Spinoza rejected the immortality of the soul due to his rigid philosophical system which disallowed ideas of hope and fear in human thought because they were based in superstition. In his book *Spinoza's heresy: immortality and the Jewish mind*. Oxford: Clarendon, 2004. Nadler argues that Spinoza's ban from the Jewish community was due in large part to his rejection of the immortality of the soul. This radical thesis seems plausible in light of the rabbinic debates treated here.

[113] He opens the treatise by stating his objective of clearing the misconceptions of the debate, "Porquanto neste breve tratado procuramos mais a brevidade e a instrucao, do que o ornament e elegeancia de palavras, coligirei simplesmente aqui os argumentos que mais hao sempre persuadido depois" David Weitman, *Bandeirantes espirituais do Brasil: rabinos Isaac Aboad da Fonseca e Mosseh Rephael d'Aguilar : século XVII* (S. [i.e. São] Paulo, SP: Maayanot, 2003), 137.

[114] See Article XIV-XVI. Article SIV states, "Toda substancia espiritual e incorporea; a alma human e espiritual e incorporea, como mostramos. Logo, e necessariamente imortal." Cited in David Weitman, *Bandeirantes espirituais do Brasil: rabinos Isaac Aboad da Fonseca e Mosseh*

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This debate reflects the extent to which the community, uneducated in the ways of Judaism, looked to the rabbinate for spiritual advice. The debate is about spirituality and the larger questions of man's place in divine creation. It was not about the details of daily Jewish practice or the proper observance of mitzvoth. The fact that such profound disagreement took place among the rabbis reflects a particularity of the Amsterdam rabbinate; namely, the lack of cohesion in addressing the spiritual needs of the community. In normative Jewish communities, a debate on the immortality of the soul would remain an academic one with little community participation. But in Amsterdam, the rabbinic debate became a concern of the entire community and, more importantly, concern of the lay leadership. The need for communal unity became paramount in handling this issue, as is evident in the arguments put forth by Aboab.[115]

Rephael d'Aguilar : século XVII (S. [i.e. São] Paulo, SP: Maayanot, 2003) 145. At times, de Aguilar uses deeply philosophical language that borders on Spinozistic thought but he is able to ground his argument in deeply religious Jewish perspective. The relationship between Spinoza's thought and de Aguilar's is a subject worthy of more detailed study.

[115] One can see a definitive trend in Aboab's writings regarding community cohesion. He consistently warns against debates that will harm the integrity of the community and possibly result in its dissolution. His 1679/80 treatise on the place of the herem in Amsterdam is a prime example of this style of writing.

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Conclusion

The position of the rabbinate of seventeenth century Amsterdam was between influence and authority. The rabbinate was primarily responsible for spiritual guidance and regulation of a new form of Judaism that mixed ethnic and religious identity. The rabbinate acted on the front lines of this identity, described here as belonging to the Nação, thorough their sermons and internally in debates regarding the nature of Amsterdam Judaism. Community members and the lay leadership expected the rabbinate to provide them with religious rationale which would place the community inside the Jewish nation while allowing them to maintain their separate identity.

The rabbinate responded to the problems of the Amsterdam community by borrowing institutional frameworks from Eastern Mediterranean and Italian communities. The position of torah teacher was relevant in addressing social problems in the society. Debates about public worship, the role of Kabbalah and secular culture were also continued in Amsterdam from Italian communities specifically Venice.

The history of the Amsterdam community shows sudden development and institution building. The community went from a group of conversos with no Jewish knowledge run by an Ashkenazi rabbi to a center of Sephardi Jewish culture, Jewish printing and a place of rabbinic training in the span of fifty years. The incentive to maintain membership in the community instead of staying Christian was high in Amsterdam due to the wealth of the community and the economic connections that exist among the community members.

The lay leadership of Amsterdam supervised a balance between the sensitive Jewish identities of congregates with normative Jewish practice through their control of the rabbinate. The composition of the rabbinate; a mix of Sephardi rabbis with varying opinions on Jewish matters,

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reflects confusion on the part of the mahamad over the drive of religious leadership in Amsterdam. This might not have been done on purpose but the outcome, little rabbinic cohesion on important issues as reflected in the sermons and public statements of rabbis, had serious consequences for community cohesion which is seen in the number of dissents to arise in Amsterdam.

The infancy of the Nação identity is seen with the relations between the mahamad and the rabbinate. By hiring rabbis that represented a varied spectrum of belief on key issues concerning the place of conversos in Jewish society, the mahamad was directly creating a sense of religious chaos. Rabbis interacted directly with the community through sermons and writings. Therefore, the community was subject to the internal debates with the rabbinate leaving them with only one option of identity: the Nação.

By the end of the seventeenth century, the rabbinate began to realize a place for more authority within the community by arguing for community cohesion. Instead of writing and pontificating about details of Jewish law, rabbis took a more active role in the implantation of Jewish law in the society and the supervisor of the 'holy community'. The secular intellectual lives of rabbis also began to decline towards the end of the seventeenth century.

The identity that the Portuguese Jews of Amsterdam created was not normatively Jewish or fully Portuguese. It was a third way of approaching identity. One is tempted to call this marriage of ethnicity, secular culture and religious sensibility a form of Jewish modernity. The transformation of the rabbi in Amsterdam from religious teacher and judge to public intellectual and spiritual guide reflects the fragmented approach that the rabbinate had to issues of social behavior and identity. The rabbinate was not a united organization, rather one which was plagued

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by internal debate and disagreement over the proper way to guide the society. Without the identity of the Nação, the rabbinate of Amsterdam would have had no points of cohesion from which to mold the community. The desire for more authority for the rabbinate reflects its position as an institution without internal intellectual cohesion and stuck between influence and authority.

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