Reflections on the Western Sephardic Tradition of Amsterdam

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In this article I will share my view on the historical role of Western Sephardic thinking. Hence, t his article is not devoted entirely to religious leaders. Rather, it encapsulates the story of Jewish devotion, divisiveness, zealotry, and compromise. As far as Western Sephardic tradition is concerned, many people have a rather hazy picture. All they seem to know is that Spinoza was banned from the Amsterdam community for heresy (July 24, 1656). The fame of this particular excommunication's is due to its being continually cited as an example of religious intolerance and fear of change comparable to the indictment of Galileo (1564–1642) and the excommunication from Islam of Salman Rushdie in our own day. Accused of every crime, denounced from the pulpit of every faith, insulted, ridiculed, and held in contempt, these thinkers and writers created the world we know today. Through their words and deeds they demonstrated the inadequacy of the erstwhile conceptions of religion compared to their views—based on reason rather than superstition—that could withstand the rigors of debate and argument.

To better comprehend the Western Sephardic mind, let us go back to the sixteenth century, the century after the expulsion of the Jews from the Iberian Peninsula. Following the Union of Utrecht in 1571, Jews of Spanish and Portuguese origin became attracted to the Lower Lands where little inquiry was made as to people's religious beliefs. Many merchants began to settle in Amsterdam in 1590 but did not openly reveal themselves as Jews.
Dr. Ben Vermeulen, of the Catholic University of Nijmegen, in the Netherlands, delivered an interesting address at the International Coalition for Religious Freedom Conference on "Religious Freedom and the New Millennium." The conference took place in Washington DC, April 17–19, 1998, and the address was entitled "The Historical Development of Religious Freedom." In this lecture he dealt with the development of religious freedom in Western Europe. According to Vermeulen,

The origin of the legal guarantees of freedom of conscience and religion in Western-Europe are found in the civil wars of the 16th and 17th centuries. Western Europe was torn apart by religious strife caused by the Reformation, which disrupted the medieval religious unity of Catholicism. It should be stressed that the impact of these civil wars, raging in particular in France, England, the Netherlands,

and Germany, was enormous…At least a partial solution to help end these horrible civil wars was brought about by treaties that secured religious peace. In these treaties the state declared itself neutral (at least to a certain extent), and guaranteed a certain minimum of religious freedom for every citizen. These peace treaties, such as the Union of Utrecht of 1579 (the Netherlands), the Edict of Nantes of 1598 (France), and the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648 (Germany) may be regarded as the first codifications of freedom of conscience and religion, and even of human rights in general.

These treaties, especially the Union of Utrecht, have influenced the choice of rabbis, chief rabbis, and ministers of the Western Sephardic community for the past 400 years. Indeed, the Union of Utrecht is the very first legal document to provide religious liberties to the Jews, since it called for religious tolerance in accordance with the Pacification of Ghent. In other words, the provinces were free to regulate religious matters, provided that everyone remained free to exercise their own religion. In the words of the Union of Utrecht:

> As for the matter of religion, the States of Holland and Zeeland shall act according to their own pleasure, and the other Provinces of this Union shall follow the rules set down in the religious peace drafted by Archduke Matthias, governor and captain-general of these countries, with the advice of the Council of State and the States General, or shall establish such general or special regulations in this matter as they shall find good and most fitting for the repose and welfare of the provinces, cities, and individual Members thereof, and the preservation of the property and rights of each individual, whether churchman or layman, and no other Province shall be permitted to interfere or make difficulties, provided that each person shall remain free in his religion and that no one shall be investigated or persecuted because of his religion, as is provided in the Pacification of Ghent….

With these treaties, the United Provinces of the Netherlands would subsequently play both direct and indirect roles in the development of enlightenment in the seventeenth century. Its proponents would play leading roles in revising the medieval political institutions of Britain, and in preserving the colonial institutions that American colonists took for granted in the eighteenth century. Indeed, once the United States of America declared its independence, and Napoleon introduced new liberties and civil rights for Jews, life could never be the same anymore.

The religious and intellectual life of the Sephardic community in the Netherlands was marked by tensions between the strict authoritarian orthodoxy of the rabbis and the majority of communal leaders on the one side, and the critical libertarian, individualist views of influential intellectuals on the other. This conflict was all the more acute as it was the consequence of the underground crypto-Jewish existence, which many had formerly led, and their sudden freedom in an open society. A split developed in Amsterdam's first congregation, Beth Jaäcob, because of a bitter religious controversy led by a free-thinking physician, Abraham Farrar. In 1639 the three existing Jewish groups united under the name Kahal Kadosh Talmud Tora, and ever since then services were conducted in one place of worship. The magnificent synagogue dedicated in 1675 became the model for Sephardic synagogues in many other places as well.

The intellectual life of the community, in both its religious and secular aspects, attained a high level. As a center of Jewish learning throughout the Sephardic Diaspora, Dutch Jewry wielded a powerful influence and became a focus of intellectual ferment. The Talmud Torah and Ets Haim seminary was celebrated for the excellence of its teaching, covering not only talmudic subjects, but also Hebrew grammar and poetry. Indeed, the upper classes spoke only in Hebrew. The seminary flourished during the seventeenth century under the leadership of Haham Saul Levi Mortera, and subsequently under Haham Isaac Aboab de Fonseca. Its pupils officiated as cantors, ministers, rabbis, and chief rabbis in numerous communities in Europe, the Americas, the Near East, and in the Far East as well. It also produced quite a few scholars, writers, and poets.

Messianic hopes seemed to be realized with the arrival of Sabbetai Sebi in the middle of the seventeenth century. Many became followers of this false-messiah, and only a minority vigorously

opposed him. The leadership of the community would remain for a long period under the influence of former Sabbateans, including the Hahamim Isaac Aboab de Fonseca, Moses Raphael Aguilar, and Benjamin Mussaphia. Even in the early eighteenth century, when Haham Salomon Aylion was in charge, a controversy arose over the Sabbatean work of Nehemiah Hayon. A prominent Ashkenazic rabbi, Haham Zvi Hirsch Ashkenazi (1656–1780), who had entered the dispute, was excommunicated by the congregation's trustees in 1713.

In their early days in the Netherlands, the Jews of Iberian origin were influenced and challenged by their surroundings, having to debate and defend their faith. In communities such as Ferrara, Venice, Antwerp, Amsterdam, Hamburg, London, and Bayonne, these Iberians—most of whom had been raised as Roman Catholics—were largely unaware of Hebrew and formal Judaism. For their benefit, Bibles, prayer books, and a whole range of works on the essentials of Judaism were published in the vernacular. However, Jewish book printing in Amsterdam was not an enterprise committed solely to didactic works, and many books reflect the broad cultural interest and academic background that these people had brought with them from Spain, Portugal, Italy, and the Ottoman Empire. The encounter between Iberian Renaissance culture and the rediscovered Judaism in environments such as the cosmopolitan, tolerant city of Amsterdam turned these Western Sephardim into the first "modern Jews." This development is exemplified by the life and works of such intellectual pioneers as Haham Saul Levi Mortera, Haham Menasse Ben Israel, Haham Isaac Aboab de Fonseca, and, in his own way, Uriel da Costa. And that was only the beginning, for it would evolve further from the seventeenth century into the twenty-first century. There were also difficult periods, especially in the mid-nineteenth century, when there was no Haham in Amsterdam, and in the twentieth century, when the community suffered from both world wars. Worst of all were the segregation, deportation, and extermination by the Nazis, which nearly resulted in its total destruction.

It might be useful to describe the nature of the Sephardic community in the first half of the seventeenth century as something entirely new, rather than as the re-emergence of a suppressed religious identity. Strong arguments for such a view can be made from the conflicts that divided the Sephardic community at that time. Disputes arose between influential laymen and the religious leadership. The clergy itself was divided between a rationalistic faction and those of a more mystical bent. Each of the famous Hahamim of the seventeenth century left his distinct mark on Western Sephardim. It has been remarked that Western Sephardic culture combines the morality of Calvinism, and the spirit of the Italian Renaissance, delightfully combined with a touch of Kabbalah. Renaissance thinkers in both Italy as well as in the Netherlands strongly influenced Sephardic culture. Aristotle and Virgil were not examined as mere "aliens" but as potential contributors to Jewish culture.

At the same time, it must be noted that the authority of Western Sephardic clergy was limited to advice and consent. Following the Venetian example, the "Mahamad," a standing committee of seven wardens invested with absolute power, governed the congregation. The Mahamad's decisions were binding on all, and no verbal or written opposition was brooked. Thus, for example, no member could take another member to court without the Mahamad's permission, nor could he print a book without its prior approval. Scholars like Juan de Prado, Uriel da Costa, and Baruch de Spinoza were formally excommunicated. Excommunication was a regular tool employed against behavior or speech the Mahamad deemed inappropriate. If a sermon in the synagogue was not to the liking of the wardens, they would excommunicate the preacher.

Haham Levi Mortera was profoundly committed to rabbinic tradition, while he also followed the Maimonidean method of argumentation in his writings. (See H. P. Salomon, Saul Levi Mortera and his "Traktaat betreffende de Wet van Mozes," Braga 1988, 31–60.) The Haham struggled against superstition, prejudice, and hypocrisy in order to establish truth and reason as the basis of piety. Thus, Mortera promoted justice, free inquiry, and freedom of expression and thought in support of Judaism. He was of course not the only writer to be critical of superstition. In this he was preceded in his own century by Grotius (1583–1645), Isaac de la Peyrere, and Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679). His thinking also ran parallel, but not identical, to that of Montaigne (1553–1592), Descartes (1596–1650), Uriel da Costa, and Baruch de Spinoza, whose arguments he applied to the study of Jewish religion.

Most of the religious literature intended for the guidance of the Sephardic communities was composed and printed in Amsterdam. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many new congregations would be established throughout Europe, the British Empire, and the colonies in the New World. It was an honored and honorable position that the main printer, Haham Menasse ben Israel, held, but it was not a well-paid one. And, like most of the Sephardic ministers and rabbis, he had to supplement his income. Menasse ben Israel set up his own printing press, and, at the request of Efraim Bueno and Abraham Sarphati, on 13 Tebet 5387 (January 1, 1627), he published the first Hebrew prayer book in Amsterdam. Haham Isaac Aboab de Fonseca served as a proofreader. Between 1627 and 1710, Amsterdam printing houses produced a total of 146 liturgical books and booklets. Seven months after his first publication, on July 15 1627, Menasse Ben Israel printed an interesting liturgical manuscript, *Imre No'am*, by Yosef Shalom Gallego (1614–1628). Gallego was one of the first Hazanim in Amsterdam. The importance of Gallego in the growth of what later became Western Sephardic liturgical music has been well established.

Imre No'am gives some indication of Gallego's prominent role as an educator in the community. He relates that the followers of Haham Joseph Pardo were in the habit of gathering in the synagogue on the three Sabbaths preceding the fast of the Ninth of Ab, mourning the destruction of the Temple. Gallego wrote against this custom, urging the members of his congregation to observe the Ninth of Ab with greater strictness, in observance of the Sabbath.

In Amsterdam as elsewhere, the proclamation of Sabbetai Sebi as a messianic figure in 1665 evoked extraordinary enthusiasm, and the standard liturgy was temporarily changed accordingly. Kabbalah in its various systems and schools had spread and become a central part of Jewish theological discourse, giving Sabbateanism, whose founders and leaders were all Kabbalists, an elevated position. This came in addition to the mythic and folk elements that nourished Sabbateanism. Discussion about the liturgical changes continued for years. The Sabbatean movement refused to accept the reality of Sabbetai's defection from Judaism to Islam. He had disappointed many, but the sincere hope for redemption continued to encourage many to believe the ideas of the Kabbalah.

The Sabbatean movement was a thorn in the flesh of Haham Jacob Sasportas (Oran 1610–Amsterdam 1698), who was appointed Haham on April 4, 1693. He was of prestigious decent being the eleventh generation after Nachmanides (1194–1270). The opinion among the members of the Mahamad was mixed, but in the end they supported Haham Sasportas. He was an experienced rabbi, having led the rabbinate in Hamburg from 1659 until 1664, when he became Haham in London. He travelled to Scandinavia, but, returning to Amsterdam in 1672, he was appointed president of Yeshiba de los Pintos. Raphael Meldola published his Responsa in 1737.

In 1698 Haham Salomon Jessurun d'Oliveira (1675–1700) succeeded Sasportas. Under his leadership new rules of Hebrew grammar were introduced. He was a rationalist, and was replaced two years later by Haham Salomon de Ja'acob Aylion (1700–1728). Aylion was born in Safed in Palestine and grew up in Salonika. He spread mystical teachings all over Europe. In 1689 he arrived in Amsterdam, but a year later he moved on to London to succeed Haham Jacob Abendana, who had died suddenly. The rationalists in London organized against him, and so he returned to Amsterdam in 1700. Haham Aylion's tenure in the 18th century was characterized by his pre-occupation with superstitious beliefs, which resulted in political problems and a rather unhappy community. Haham Aylion died on 30 Nissan 5488 (April 9, 1728). His responsa are not published, but can be found in the Ets Haim library in Amsterdam. In 1728 the trustees appointed Haham David Israel Athias (1728–1753) and Haham Isaac Abendana de Britto (1728– 1760). They would rotate positions as Haham of the Congregation and President of the seminary until Haham Athias' death in 1753.

On a personal note, my great-great-great-grandfather, Haham Samuel A'Cathan (1692–1770), was the son of the Chief Rabbi of Sale near Rabbat in Morocco. He came to Amsterdam, and in 1715 married the daughter of Haham Samuel Ahuby, a Sephardic rabbi in Belgrade, which was part of the Ottoman Empire. Haham A'Cathan succeeded his predecessor, Haham de Mesa, when he died in 1761, and was appointed Ab Beth Din. He was more of a teacher and preacher than a communal leader, and, consequently, sent for Haham Salomon Shalem (1762–1781) from the Ottoman Empire to head

congregational affairs.

It was a controversial time. Haham Shalem chaired the Rabbinate while the above-mentioned Haham Zvi Hirsch Ashkenazi, or, as he was universally known, Haham Zvi; arrived from Altona. In the beginning he was very highly regarded; however, his incorruptible honesty and unselfishness soon made many enemies. One of these was Nehemiah Hiyya Hayyun, who managed to render his position in the congregation untenable. In his outspoken opposition to this unprincipled man, Haham Zvi had drawn upon himself the ill-will of the Mahamad of the Amsterdam Western Sephardic community, and that of the authorities of his own Ashkenazic community. The latter brought the matter before the magistrates, who, in order to obtain full information upon the subject, consulted not only the theological professors of Amsterdam, Utrecht, Leiden, and Harderwijk, but the trustees as well. It was no wonder then that, with this array of counselors, Haham Zvi was relieved of his office (1714). He went by way of London and Emden to Lemberg, where, after officiating as rabbi for a short time, he died in 1718. During the whole of this period the power of the trustees was almost absolute. From time to time however, the Haham was asked for his advice. The trustees modified at will the statutes of the congregation, and procured the approval of the magistrates. For the lay members of the congregation there remained nothing but implicit obedience.

The year 1795 brought the results of the French Revolution to the Netherlands, including emancipation for the Jews. On September 2, 1796, the National Convention proclaimed the following resolution: "No Jew shall be excluded from rights or advantages which are associated with citizenship in the Batavian Republic, and which he may desire to enjoy." Moses Moresco was appointed member of the municipality at Amsterdam, while Moses Asser became a member of the court of justice there. The old conservatives, at whose head stood the Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi Jacob Moses Löwenstamm, were not desirous of emancipation rights. Indeed, these rights were, for the greater part, of doubtful advantage, since their culture was not so far advanced that they could frequent general society. Besides, this emancipation was offered to them by a party which had expelled their beloved Prince of Orange, to whose house they remained so faithful, that the chief rabbi at The Hague, Saruco, was called the "Orange dominie." The men who supported the old régime were even called "Orange cattle." Nevertheless, the Revolution appreciably ameliorated the condition of the Jews. In 1799 their congregations received, like the Christian congregations, grants from the treasury. In 1798 Jonas Daniel Meijer interceded with the French minister of foreign affairs on behalf of the Jews of Germany, and on August 22, 1802, the Dutch ambassador, Sir Rutger Jan Schimmelpenninck, delivered a note on the same subject to the French minister.[1]

From 1806 to 1810 the Kingdom of Holland was ruled by Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, whose intention it was to so amend the condition of the Jews that their newly acquired rights would become of real value to them; the shortness of his reign, however, prevented him from carrying out his plans. For example, after having changed the market-day in some cities (Utrecht and Rotterdam) from Saturday to Monday, he also abolished the use of the "Oath More Judaico" in the courts of justice, and administered the same formula to both Christians and Jews. To accustom the latter to military services he formed two battalions of 803 men and 60 officers, all Jews, who had been until then excluded from military service, even from the town guard. The union of Ashkenazim and Sephardim intended by King Louis Napoleon did not come about. He had desired to establish schools for Jewish children, who until then were excluded from the public schools.

Upon the death of Haham Daniel Cohen d'Azevedo (1751–1822), the congregation appointed no Haham, but a Bet Din. This court, consisted of Dayan Jacob Ferares (1772–1852), Dayan Salomon Cohen Paraira (–1828), Dayan Raphael Montezinos (–1866), Dayan Isaac Mendes de Sola (–1849), Dayan Aaron Mendes Chumaceiro (1810–1882) (in 1860 Haham of Congregation Mikveh Israel in Willemstad, Curaçao), Dayan David Lopes Cardozo (1852–1890), Dayan Elazar Aaron Vaz Dias (1813–1885), Dayan Jacob Lopes Cardozo (–1873), and Dayan Jacob Mendes Chumaceiro (1833–1900).

In the nineteenth century the rabbinate spent much time on the correct pronunciation of Hebrew and the perfection of its grammar. New prayer books were printed with Dutch translation. Dayan David Lopes Cardozo was the last rabbi to preach in Portuguese.

On August 12, 1900, the trustees appointed a native-born rabbi as the congregation's Haham, the legendary Isaac Palache (1858–1927). A few weeks earlier, on July 8, 1900, Palache's competitor, the Rev. Aaron Rodrigues Pereira (1859–1922) was appointed Haham in The Hague. Pereira's honesty, his friendly personality, and his prodigious knowledge, made him a famous and beloved personality.
Under the leadership of Haham Palache, new immigrants arrived from the Ottoman Empire. In 1919 the trustees appointed Dr. Haim Benjamin Israel Ricardo (1892–1944) as Rubi (adjunct rabbi). After Palache's death, Dr. Ricardo was promoted to Dayan. Ricardo was an outspoken Religious Zionist. Most congregants held him in the highest esteem. He was a very social gentleman who would visit congregants and bring hope while they were suffering the consequences of the Great Depression. But Zionism at that time was not politically correct or really popular among Dutch Jewry. Consequently, in 1929, the trustees brought a famous and very learned Ottoman Rabbi to Amsterdam. They appointed rabbi Eliyahu Frances (1928–1944) as Dayan. The Dayanim Ricardo and Frances led the community harmoniously through the depression and World War II.
Rabbi Eliyahu Frances was born in 1875 in Salonika. He studied foreign languages and became the secretary of the Chief Rabbinate in Salonika. The trustees appointed Frances as Ab Beth Din. He became very popular, since he had high intellect combined with great knowledge being strict in the law, he strengthened the tradition, while also being open to the needs of the community. He was pleasant and modest. In 1938 he visited his father, who lived in Jerusalem. He was one of the candidates for Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv. When he did not win that position, he returned to the Netherlands. In due course, he was among the Jews deported and murdered by the Nazis.
Reform Judaism in the Netherlands has never been popular among Western Sephardim. A group of German refugees established a Reform congregation to which the Amsterdam Sephardim donated a Sepher Torah. The relationship remained cordial but distant. While most Western Sephardim lived as secularists, they loved their synagogue, their rabbis, their music, and were very proud of their tradition. In this climate of mutual respect and high tolerance, the majority of the Sephardim felt no need for Reform Judaism.
When Nazi Germany invaded the Dutch Kingdom in May 1940 there were around 140,000 Jews in the country, of whom some 120,000 lived in Amsterdam. About 4,300 of these were Sephardim. Comparatively little has been written about the community's history during the war years. At the end of World War II, a ravaged community of some 600 survivors returned to where the refugees from the Inquisition had once built up a flourishing Jewish culture.
The Ashkenazic Rabbi, Justus Tal (1881–1954), led the community in Amsterdam between February 1944 and May 1945, while all other Rabbis were deported and murdered. Together with Rabbi Barend Drukarch (1917–1998) and the congregation's sexton, Salomon Mendes Coutinho, worship services continued until the very end of the war, Shabbath May 5th 1945. Services were conducted, at a private home of the sexton, one week in accordance with Ashkenazic, the other in accordance with Sephardic tradition. In these final days of WWII it was permitted to Dutch Ashkenazim and Sephardim alike to consume rice and beans on Passover.

As the liberation of the European continent was on its way Major Dr. Salomon Rodrigues Pereira (1887–1969), Haham of The Hague, returned to the Netherlands with the Royal Dutch Princess Irene Brigade, as its chaplain. Soon after the war, the trustees appointed Rodrigues Pereira Haham. He continued to live his life as a freeman in the city of Hilversum, and would visit Amsterdam during the holidays. To mark his fortieth anniversary as Haham of the Sephardic community in The Hague and his work after World War II in Amsterdam, Queen Juliana conferred Knighthood in the Order of the Dutch Lion on him. The Haham did his utmost to rebuild what had existed before the great catastrophe, although he only worked part-time.

In 1968 Haham Rodrigues Pereira recommended that the trustees appoint Rabbi Barend Drukarch as Dayan. Both the holocaust survivors, as well as the new immigrants arriving from North Africa and the Near East, and from Surinam and the Dutch West Indies, found in Rabbi Drukarch everything they wished for and more. In 1980 the trustees appointed him Haham.
In 1981 Rabbi Simon Haliwa of Tetuan, Morocco arrived to lead the Congregation. He was well liked, but as a result of differences with Haham Drukarch, he moved on to become a rabbi in Nice, France. At

that time Haham Drukarch, assisted by Chaplain Samuel Behar, led the congregation. The congregation opened a second synagogue in Amstelveen. In 2012 Rabbi Dr. Marc D. Angel, Minister Emeritus of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York installed Dayan Dr. Pinehas Toledano as the Haham in Amsterdam.
In conclusion, the extraordinary legacy of the Western Sephardim included its great *hidalguismo*, its reverence for its past and the dignity of its culture. It traces its origins to the Iberian Peninsula, Italy, North Africa, and the Ottoman Empire. Characteristically, its long-standing tradition of tolerance was directly reflected in the policies of the Chief Rabbinate throughout its early history, and into modern times.

This is the list of Senior Ministers appointed by the Mahamad to Haham of Congregation Talmud Torah, the Portuguese-Israelite Community of Amsterdam in the Netherlands, as traditionally recited annually, preceding ‘Arbit, on the Eve of Kippur:

Haham Joseph Pardo (1602–1619)*
Haham David Pardo (1619–1657)
Haham Saul Levi Mortera (1616–1660)
Haham Abraham Cohen de Hereira (1602–1635)
Haham Isaac Uziel (1610–1622)
Haham Menasseh Ben Israel (1622–1657)
Haham Isaac Aboab de Fonseca (1660–1693)
Haham Jacob Sasportas (1675–1698)
Haham Salomon Jessurun d’Oliveira (1675–1700)
Haham Salomon de Ja’acob Aylion (1700–1728)
Haham David Israel Athias (1728–1753)
Haham Isaac Abendana de Britto (1728–1760)
Haham Salomon Shalem (1762–1781)
Haham David A’Cohen d’Azevedo (1781–1792)
Haham Daniel A’Cohen d’Azevedo (1792–1822)
Dayan David Lopes Cardozo (1852–1890) [not on list]
Dayan El’azar Aaron Vaz Dias (1852–1885) [not on list]
Haham Isaac Palache (1885–1927)
Haham Salomon Rodrigues Pereira (1945–1969)
Haham Barend Drukarch (1968–1998)

*These are the dates the Hahamim were in office.

[1] Koenen, Hendrik Jakob (1843). *Geschiedenis der Joden in Nederland (History of the Jews in the Netherlands)*, p. 387.