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“Architecture of Autonomy: The Blessing and Peace Synagogue of Suriname”

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He never understood that diversity could also lead to stability. Fortunately, Stuyvesant was defeated by Jews, Lutherans, and other immigrants who persisted in helping the colony prosper in spite of its narrow-minded director general. Equally important, wiser leaders in Amsterdam, who understood that in diversity there was strength, overruled Stuyvesant.

Architecture of Autonomy: The Blessing and Peace Synagogue of Suriname

Aviva Ben-Ur and Rachel Frankel

The Jewish Community of Suriname

On 12 October 1785 the oldest synagogue building in the Americas, located in the Dutch colony of Suriname, celebrated its hundredth anniversary. The colony's Governor Wichers, its Councils of Police, notable citizens from the capital city of Paramaribo, and some 1,600 others attended the festivities. One thousand Chinese lanterns illuminated the tabletops; guests feasted on hundreds of delicacies and were plied with beverages; speeches were delivered; Dutch and Hebrew prayers were recited; and poems were declaimed to the accompaniment of a lively orchestra. To mark the event Surinamese cantor David Baruh Louzada composed a Hebrew poem praising the congregation as a surrogate Jerusalem Temple. The concluding celebration, a splendid ball at midnight, lasted until dawn.¹ This lavish celebration recognized a pioneering institution of colonial Suriname. But even more, the centenary provided Jews an occasion for a nostalgic pilgrimage to a disintegrating religious and political center whose architecture both symbolized unparalleled autonomy and, perhaps, suggested messianic sentiment.²

The synagogue had been consecrated in 1685 as Beraha VeSalom, Hebrew for "Blessing and Peace." Its founders were Jews of Iberian origin, most of whom identified themselves as members of the "Portuguese Jewish nation," who had arrived, beginning in the 1650s, from various parts of Europe, northern Africa, and other regions of the Americas.³ These Portuguese Jews descended from refugees of the Iberian Inquisitions and Spanish Expulsion, and many had been *conversos* (forced converts to Christianity) before openly returning to the Jewish faith. Under tolerant English (1650–1667) and Dutch (1667–1975) colonial rule they established an agrarian settlement in the midst of the Surinamese jungle, some fifty miles south of the capital city. Situated along the Suriname River, this settlement developed into an autonomous village known as Jodensavanne—Dutch for "Jews' Savannah." By the mid-eighteenth century, Jodensavanne was surrounded by dozens of satellite Jewish plantations sprawling north and southward and dominating the stretch of the river. These plots, mostly devoted to the cultivation and processing of sugar and worked by African slaves, at the time collectively formed the largest Jewish agricultural community in the world⁴ and the only Jewish settlement in the Americas granted virtual self rule. From the 1660s, the decade of Jodensavanne's establishment, the few hundred recently settled Portuguese Jews of this enclave held privileges which granted them rights, exemptions and immunities both as an ethnic minority and as burghers. These privileges were arguably the most liberal Jews had ever received in the Christian world.⁵

Architectural Inspiration: Jerusalem and Amsterdam

It would be natural for the founders of Jodensavanne, the capital of an autonomous Jewish community, to be inspired by visions of ancient Jerusalem. The First Temple, built in that city by King Solomon in the tenth century B.C.E., attracted special interest among both Jews and Christians, particularly during and after the Renaissance, since many believed that God dictated architectural instructions directly to the Israelite king. This Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. and was rebuilt by 516/515 B.C.E. as the "Second Temple," only to be demolished again by the Romans in 70 C.E.⁶ According to the Hebrew Bible, only the First Temple had God as its direct archi-

tect,⁷ and Rabbinic tradition stipulates that, upon the arrival of the Messiah, Jews will be responsible for rebuilding the ancient structure. Gathering details on the physical appearance of the Temple was thus an act of messianic anticipation. One scholar fascinated with this theme was Jacob Judah Leon (1602–1675), a Dutch Sephardic teacher so entrenched in recreating the first Jerusalem sanctuary that he earned the nickname "Templo." His detailed, illustrated description of Solomon's Temple, first published in 1642 and subsequently reprinted and translated several times, became accessible to a wide audience, both lay and scholarly. Drawing on the erudite work of Spanish Jesuit predecessors and combining their ideas with his own, Templo conceived a "more sober, less baroque" and pronouncedly Dutch vision of the Temple. The model he displayed in his home attracted visitors from far and wide and directly informed the construction of Amsterdam's Sephardic *esnoga* (synagogue), inaugurated in 1675.⁸ (fig. 1)



Figure 1

The *esnoga*, the Portuguese synagogue of Amsterdam, consecrated in 1675. Southwest view. The auxiliary buildings in the foreground surround the sanctuary building. Photograph by Rachel Frankel, 1996.

Renowned for its majesty, that *esnoga* became an influential model for Portuguese Jewish sanctuaries both in Europe and the New World. While the “mother synagogue” served as inspiration, each community added idiosyncrasies to its own religious architecture. London’s Bevis Marks building (1701) bears typical English detailing and embellishments, Curaçao’s Mikvé Israel (1730) features double-curved gables and a mahogany interior, painted white in 1876 in order to reflect more light, and Paramaribo’s Sephardic synagogue, Sedek VeSalom (1737), is painted white and features a slate roof.⁹ Jodensavanne, situated in altogether different surroundings, produced perhaps the most dramatic architectural variations.

In both Suriname and in the Dutch Republic, congregations used outsiders to design and build their synagogues. In Amsterdam, where Jews were banned from guilds, the congregation’s leaders selected Elias Bouman (b. 1636), a Dutch gentile, as their architect. Another non-Jew, Gillis van der Veen, was its master carpenter.¹⁰ In Jodensavanne, as in Suriname in general, skilled personnel were scarce, so Jews likewise depended on others, presumably gentile Africans,¹¹ to build their synagogue. The architect of Beraha VeSalom remains unknown, but may have been Jewish, as were the designers of an Iberian-Jewish settlement in Recife, Brazil earlier in the seventeenth century.¹² In Amsterdam, master architect Bouman had to contend with municipal regulations, including the prohibition of direct access from the public road to sanctuaries other than Reformed churches.¹³ Jodensavanne’s anonymous designer was apparently unimpeded by such restrictions.

Other fundamental differences further distinguished the settlement at Jodensavanne from Amsterdam’s Jewish community. Amsterdam’s Jews lived in an urban and cosmopolitan environment surrounded and dominated by gentiles. Their Surinamese co-religionists, by contrast, lived in an isolated, autonomous colonial agricultural settlement where, in 1684, 105 Jewish men outnumbered Jewish women by a ratio of almost two to one, and enslaved Africans constituted 84 percent of the total Jodensavanne population.¹⁴ A small minority of enslaved American Indians, as well as many others who maintained their freedom, also populated the settlement.¹⁵ Moreover, in Amsterdam, the monumental Great Synagogue of the self-described High Ger-

man Jews (Jews of primarily Central European origin) preceded and stood opposite the Portuguese *esnoga*.¹⁶ If Jews of Germanic descent resided in Jodensavanne at all, they were few in number, lived there by virtue of marital bonds, and were banned from property ownership.¹⁷ Although other Europeans and religious minorities lived in rural Suriname at the time of the construction of Beraha VeSalom (including the pietistic sect of Labadists, whose utopian settlement existed further up along the Suriname River), the various European groups lived geographically and socially apart from one another.¹⁸

Prior to Beraha VeSalom’s consecration in 1685, no known synagogue of major architectural stature existed in the Portuguese Jewish communities of West Africa or in the New World. New Christian merchants and religious leaders, who had returned to their ancestral Jewish faith and later relocated to Joal, Senegal, established their synagogue around the year 1612. Located within a compound of private homes, this edifice seems to have been purposely tucked away from view and was probably a provisional structure.¹⁹ Crypto-Jews in Portuguese Brazil, in addition to many confessing Jews (later under Dutch rule), worshipped in private homes.²⁰ Brazil’s first congregation, Kahal Kadosh Tsur Israel in Recife, met in a rented house until its building was erected in 1640/1641. The composition of this first Jewish house of worship in the Americas was undistinguished, described as “some large, multi-level houses...facing Jews’ Street, which served as their synagogue, and which is of stone and lime, with two stores on the main floor; which these Jews also built.”²¹ Around 1637 the Mahamad of Tsur Israel granted Iberian-origin Jews permission to found Brazil’s second congregation—Kahal Kadosh Magen Abraham—and to build it on the Ilha de Antônio Vaz (Mauritsstad, across the river from Recife). The island’s residents wished to avoid profaning the Sabbath and holidays, as reaching Tsur Israel would have entailed a boat ride before 1644, when a bridge was built. Given the status of Tsur Israel as Recife’s “mother synagogue,”²² and the elders’ protectiveness of its standing as the leading congregation in the colony, it is questionable whether the building in Mauritsstad could have been architecturally noteworthy. Later, members of Magen Abraham tried to secede from the parent congregation—rebelliousness which may hint at earlier discord. But it seems doubtful that Tsur Israel would have granted

permission for the building of a second synagogue had they known of any grandiose architectural plans. Finally, what Bruno Feitler calls “informal synagogues” existed in Paraíba, in Penedo along the São Francisco River, in Olinda, and in various other locations in Brazil. It is likely that all were private houses; in fact, some are explicitly referred to as such in archival records.²³

Nor, apparently, did the Beraha VeSalom synagogue have imitable precedents in the Caribbean or North America. Before 1656, Curaçao’s congregation, established in 1651, worshipped in a small wooden house, probably located in the fields where the early colonists labored. The congregation acquired a piece of land around 1687, and in 1692 inaugurated the first of three successive stone synagogue buildings—unremarkable edifices if we are to judge by their frequent demolition and replacement.²⁴ In 1658 David Cohen Nassy founded a Jewish settlement in Nova Zeelandia (in present-day Guyana), but sources do not describe its physical appearance.²⁵ On 12 September 1659 Nassy received permission to establish a parallel colony in Dutch-ruled Cayenne,²⁶ in present-day French Guiana. Colonial authorities granted Cayenne’s Jewish settlers freedom of conscience, including the right to establish a synagogue and school “in the same manner as is allowed in the city of Amsterdam, in accordance with the doctrines of their elders.”²⁷ From admonitions to remain “so far from the [already established] colony on Cajana that they will not interfere with the inhabitants of that [colony],” we may surmise that the Jews of Cayenne lived in their own village.²⁸ Traveling to Cayenne in 1660–1661, Captain Languillet, in the employment of the Dutch, found there about fifteen to twenty Jewish families, all of them planters.²⁹ But these two Jewish communities were not long-lived: Cayenne fell to the French in 1664, and the Nova Zeelandian settlements of Pomeroon and Essequibo to the English in 1665. Material analysis is of no help in determining architectural emulation. The synagogues and cemeteries of the early Jewish settlements of contemporary Guyana and French Guiana have left not a trace.³⁰

Continuing further northward, New York’s first synagogue building, complete with a woman’s balcony, would not be erected until 1728,³¹ and Montreal’s Congregation Shearith Israel was only founded

in 1768.³² The designers of Jodensavanne, far removed from European Christian restrictions and Germanic Jewish populations, and with possibly no architectural examples from which to draw inspiration, were poised to shape a new Jewish environment, at once distinctively messianic, Iberian, Dutch, and African.

Messianism and Design Intent

Beraha VeSalom was constructed on high ground, 30 to 36 feet above the river, to which it was adjacent. It sat in the middle of a spacious rectilinear plaza, measuring 450 feet long by 300 feet wide. Four cross streets defined the plaza’s edges. At the corners of the crossroads were several houses, described in 1788 as “large and commodious,” most of “a mediocre architecture,” though some were “passably attractive.”³³ Lithographs of Pierre Jacques Benoit, the Belgian painter who visited Suriname during the years 1829–1830, and G. W. C. Voorduin, a marine officer stationed in the colony in the 1850s, confirm the synagogue’s hilltop location and its status as the tallest building of Jodensavanne’s center. The site choice is not surprising. According to the Talmud, a synagogue should be located at the highest point of a town and should stand taller than other local houses.³⁴ Furthermore, the proximity of the synagogue to water greatly facilitated the ritual bath and other purification observances demanding naturally flowing water. Many ancient synagogues in both Palestine and the Diaspora were situated near bodies of water, likewise attesting to a concern with ritual purity.³⁵

Considering the expanse of available land, the congregation’s building was modest in size (a paradox addressed later in this article). The ruins of the synagogue measure 94 feet along its east-west axis and 43 feet across its north-south width (4,042 square feet or 375 square meters).³⁶ By contrast, Amsterdam’s *esnoga* (consecrated in 1675) dominated nearly an entire block and stretched 125 feet by 95 feet (11,875 square feet or 1,008 square meters; 36 by 28 meters).³⁷ Even if we consider that additional adjoining land was bestowed upon the Jodensavanne community in 1691 (six years after the synagogue’s consecration), when communal leader Samuel Nassy and Governor Joan van Scherpenhuysen respectively contributed an additional 25

and 100 acres,³⁸ Beraha VeSalom was still relatively small, taking up only three percent of the plaza space (135,000 square feet or 12,542 square meters).

If the rainforest synagogue was not notable for its dimensions, its structure compensated. "Everything there is so properly built," community leader David Cohen Nassy marveled in 1788, "and the synagogue has such an indescribable majesty, that although its size is quite ordinary, it elicits the admiration of those who see it for the first time."³⁹ Originally assembled with brick (in early modern Dutch: *gebakken steenen*, or "baked stones") and topped with a flat tile gabled roof, the house of worship stretched 33 feet high, and inside featured a "properly constructed vault" supported by "large wooden columns."⁴⁰ Again comparing Jodensavanne to the Dutch metropolis, the exterior of the Amsterdam synagogue expressed classical symmetrical architecture,⁴¹ whereas Beraha VeSalom's façade resembled Dutch vernacular structures and exhibited asymmetry on its north and south sides. Beraha VeSalom's squared-off gables on the end brick walls also evoked a typical Dutch-style profile. In the Dutch Republic these features would have served two purposes: to create an architectural detail for chimneys, and, concurrently, to provide a practical way to finish off masonry, as pointed top-ends do not typically or practically exist in masonry construction. In tropical Suriname there would have been no need for a chimney to provide heat to the building. Furthermore, it is unlikely that the synagogue contained a hearth for ritual baking, since the colony's kitchens were typically open-air and set apart from edifices in order to avoid the spread of conflagration. These distinctively Dutch characteristics may have been part of the vision of a commissioned (non-Jewish) architect in Amsterdam. Or perhaps the typically Dutch style of the synagogue building expressed Surinamese Jewry's patriotism for the United Provinces—the republic that gave them, and their brethren in Amsterdam, such ample religious privileges. Squared-off gables are also visible in some of Paramaribo's more elegant buildings and Jodensavanne's finer homes, as Benoit depicted them in the 1830s.⁴² The chimney in itself may have also served to distinguish the building from humble dwellings that lacked this status symbol.⁴³

Spatially, Beraha VeSalom also differed from its Amsterdam precedent. The latter synagogue plan, like the imagined layout of Solomon's Temple, is a complex of buildings, at the center of which is the sanctuary building. An asymmetrical courtyard surrounds the sanctuary building on three sides. Auxiliary buildings, such as the religious school, the library, and the *mikvah* (ritual bath), surround the courtyard and form the perimeter of the complex. Although there are several entrances through the wall of auxiliary buildings leading to the courtyard, and then several more entrances leading from the courtyard into the sanctuary building at the center, the western entrance dominates the plan. This perimeter buffer of buildings enclosed and protected the inner sanctuary, concealing it from view. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the design complied with restrictions stipulating that only Dutch Protestant Reform churches could have direct access from a public road to a sanctuary.⁴⁴ (fig. 1)

In contrast, Jodensavanne's synagogue, which stood at the center of a plaza, included the sanctuary and auxiliary spaces all assembled in one building. Instead of being surrounded by a buffer of buildings, the plaza was enclosed only by a wooden fence with four identical gate entrances located at the center point of each of the four sides. Three of the four gates led directly to the three entrances to the synagogue. Of these three entrances (on the north, west, and south sides), the west gate led to a façade in which most likely there were three doors. The center door opened to what probably served as a foyer. This foyer was flanked by two auxiliary spaces, and led to an interior room that served as the meeting place of the Jewish court of justice. The other two doors, as suggested in the schematic floor plan (fig. 3), opened directly into stairwells leading to the women's balcony. The north and south gates brought the visitor to the entrances leading directly into the sanctuary. In contrast to Amsterdam's inner sanctuary building, Beraha VeSalom was built in open view, unfettered by perimeter constructions.⁴⁵

The consolidation at Beraha VeSalom of various rooms within one building with their own separate functions may simply reflect the economical use of materials (shared walls, foundation, and roof). On the other hand, commissioned synagogue architects were concerned

not only with municipal regulations and functional requirements of worship, but also with creating symbolism through their design.⁴⁶ The configuration of Suriname's synagogue thus lends itself to symbolic interpretation: it evokes the freedom and optimism perhaps felt by these uniquely privileged New World Jews, anticipating, with open arms and architecture, the Messianic Age.

Like the early sixteenth-century Spanish founders of the City of Kings (Lima, Peru), whose utopian and Christian urban center plan "reflected a sense of order and a desire for permanence,"⁴⁷ the site plan for Jodensavanne also seems to communicate messianic elements. Unlike any other synagogue in the Sephardic diaspora, Beraha VeSalom was entered through an open plaza—unencumbered and exposed. This imposing layout compensated for the modest size of the synagogue, as if the city planners were focusing less on projected population size and more on emphasizing the precedent of autonomy and environment. This layout invited approach to the synagogue courtyard from all sides: north, south, east, and west. Despite the threat of slave revolts and attacks from maroons (fugitive slaves and their descendants), American Indians, or invading European powers, the town was laid out as if in a perfect world.⁴⁸ Four roads, positioned in parallel and perpendicular pairs beside the riverfront, came together in idealized geometry to form the synagogue plaza. In an environment where the river was the essential medium of transport, it seems odd that in Jodensavanne—which, like other settlements parallel to the Suriname River, was surrounded by thick vegetation and rainforest—two of the four roads ran parallel to the river. What purpose would these roads have served? The construction of these parallel thoroughfares suggests that Jodensavanne's planners envisioned this site as a fledgling town, informed by the relatively new discipline of town planning as conceived by the Dutch.⁴⁹

Moreover, the quadri-directional layout brings to mind one of the three passages in the Hebrew Bible where "ideal (i.e., not extant) town planning is described."⁵⁰ In the first, Numbers 2:1–31, the Lord directed each tribe "to encamp by its own standard, three tribes each on the north, south, east and west sides of a square in the center of which was the tent of meeting." Jodensavanne's quadrilateral town plan was remarkably similar to that of colonial New Haven (1638), and to

the imaginary utopian state described in Johann Valentin Andreae's *Christianopolis* (1619). If the architects of the riverside village did not have these models in mind, perhaps they, like Andreae and the Connecticut visionaries seeking to model their ideal or fledgling settlements on Christian utopianism, drew inspiration directly from biblical directives for creating a "new Jerusalem."⁵¹

The geometrically idealized village square also brings to mind the Jewish anticipation of the messianic age, as expressed in the thrice-daily recitation of the *amidah* prayer:

Sound on the great Shofar the summons for our freedom; set up the banner to gather our exiles, and bring us together from the four corners of the earth soon to our own land. Blessed are You, Lord who will gather in the dispersed of Your people Israel.⁵²

The town plan of Jodensavanne, an unprecedented diasporic village where Jewish rule was dominant and self-determining, symbolically, spatially, and architecturally suggests the ideal of an age of peace and an end to war and oppression, as evoked in Isaiah 43: 5–7:

Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your folk from the East, Will gather you out of the West. I will say to the North, "Give back!" And to the South, "Do not withhold! Bring My sons from afar, And my daughters from the end of the earth—All who are linked to My name, Whom I have created, Formed and made for My glory."⁵³

Despite the sanctioning of slavery in the Hebrew Bible, there is much irony in the apparent design intent. The vast majority of Jodensavanne's inhabitants were held in lifelong bondage with scant chances of manumission.⁵⁴ Perhaps at no time in the village's history were sanctity and brutality more shockingly juxtaposed than when transgressing slaves, secured immobile along the synagogue's fence, were punished with the *spaansche bok*, a system of flogging that tore all the flesh from the back.⁵⁵ For most residents of Jodensavanne, the village probably symbolized not redemption, but hell.

The Place and Role of Women and Eurafrican Jews

An analysis of the synagogue's interior may also speak to the role of gender in the ritual lives of free and enslaved residents of Jodensavanne. Jewish houses of worship have historically not been the realm of women, and many medieval congregations preferred that their female members worship at home. Still, most synagogues reserved special sections or even separate buildings for females,⁵⁶ in conformity with the operative rabbinic law calling for the physical separation of men and women in religious public spheres. In many Jewish houses of worship in Europe women had been seated separately from men since the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, sometimes to the side of the main sanctuary and other times in an elevated balcony above the men.⁵⁷ Not until the end of the sixteenth century, when the attendance of women in synagogue became commonplace, did the women's section acquire full architectural importance. Italy's major synagogues, as well as Isaac Jacobowicz's synagogue in Cracow, Poland, were forerunners of well-planned accommodations for female worshippers.⁵⁸ In Amsterdam's Portuguese synagogue, women wishing to attend services sat separately in an elevated gallery reserved for them and situated directly above the main sanctuary of the men.⁵⁹

Beraha VeSalom also maintained a spatial gender division, but its women's gallery was different from its counterpart in Amsterdam (fig. 2). In Jodensavanne's main sanctuary, traditionally reserved for men, a large ark of beautiful cedar wood, which held the scrolls of the Law, stood along the east wall. Opposite this cedar ark, on a kind of raised platform or second story towards the back of the main sanctuary, was the section for the women, perched above the synagogue's auxiliary spaces. These auxiliary spaces were enclosed rooms separate and inaccessible from the sanctuary (fig. 3).

The most sacred area of the synagogue is the space assigned to the Torah, which, considered in its most encompassing sense, is the Lord's will and deed.⁶⁰ Vestments in which the Torah is stored and the spaces it traverses on its way to being publicly read become sacred.⁶¹ The Torah is kept in the *heikhal* (ark)⁶² and read from the *teivah* (reader's platform), upon which the cantor (or other designated leader) conducts the services. Typical of Spanish-Portuguese synagogues as far back as those of sixteenth-century Ferrara, Leghorn, and Venice

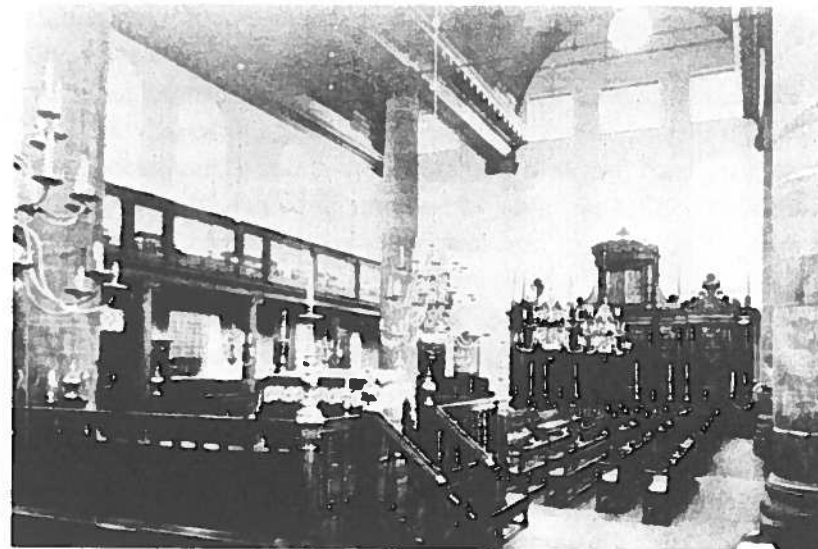


Figure 2

Interior view, facing east, of the *esnoga*. The *teivah* (reader's platform) is in the foreground; the *heikhal* (ark) is in the background. Photograph by Rachel Frankel, with permission of the Amsterdam Portuguese congregation.

(which are thought to have influenced that of Amsterdam) is a bifocal layout with the *heikhal* and *teivah* at opposite ends of the sanctuary. The *heikhal* is always on the side of the sanctuary facing Jerusalem. In the western world, this is the eastern wall. The *teivah* stands opposite it, at the western end of the sanctuary.⁶³

Also typical of Iberian diasporic synagogues is their seating configuration: half the congregation sits on the north side of the sanctuary and the other half on the south side. Between the split congregation is, in some places, an ample void; in others there is simply a direct path linking the *heikhal* and the *teivah*, which stand at opposite ends of the path. This configuration allows each half of the congregation to face both the *heikhal* and the *teivah*. Similar to a soccer stadium, this split-congregation, bifocal layout activates the Torah ritual as the scroll is paraded from one end of the sanctuary to another, from the *heikhal* to the *teivah*, before and after it is read. This processional allows the worshipper to participate as much as possible in the ceremony without actually being a "player"—that is, an active religious official or honoree. In addition, this stadium-like layout, exemplified in Amsterdam,

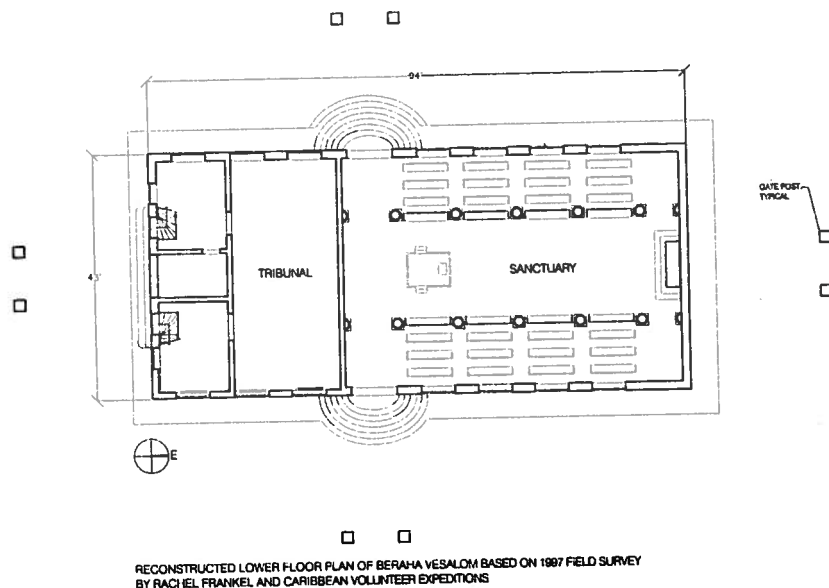
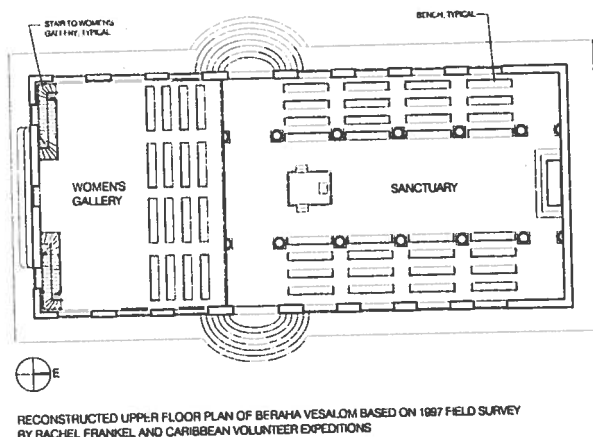


Figure 3
Reconstructed plans of the Beraha VeSalom synagogue. Drawings based on 1997 field survey by Rachel Frankel and Caribbean Volunteer Expeditions.

enables worshippers in both the main sanctuary and the women's gallery above to focus their attention on both the ark and the reader's pulpit without impediments. Whether the Torah is moving or being read, from the viewer's perspective it is always in the foreground (never in the background), and invites those seated to shift their gaze left or right. This floor plan configuration has been exemplified in Amsterdam's synagogue and many other Sephardic congregations, such as those of Leghorn and Venice, ever since the style took shape in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries⁶⁴ (fig. 2).

The extant remains and historical descriptions of Jodensavanne's main sanctuary confirm that it duplicates this north-south, split-congregation, bifocal layout with the seating facing both the ark and reader's platform. However, at Beraha VeSalom, the women's seating did not parallel the men's as it did in Amsterdam and in other Sephardic synagogues. At Jodensavanne women faced the ark and the east wall with the whole of the men's sanctuary in the foreground. The women in their gallery viewed the sanctuary much like a conventional balcony audience does a stage. Thus, the women's gallery was set back from the men's sanctuary, rather than being elevated directly above it along the east-west axes of the building. In comparison to Amsterdam's synagogue, the women's gallery in Beraha VeSalom was visually and spatially restricted. Furthermore, it was elevated, and thus removed from the arena of worship. Thus, the seating arrangement prevented women from dynamically participating in the procession of the Torah. When the holy scroll was taken out from the ark to be read at the *teivah* and proudly paraded around the aisles of the main sanctuary, from the women's perspective the Torah moved from background to foreground. From the men's aisles, both the Torah and its varying locations throughout the religious service were always in the foreground. Left to their own devices, the designers of Beraha VeSalom apparently did not value the rich and inclusive religious experience afforded their sisters in the Portuguese synagogues of Europe, characterized by typical bipolar floor plans.⁶⁵

Ironically, spatial restriction in the women's gallery may have enhanced the role of female worshippers. Copper crowns found in the women's section suggest the presence of Torah scrolls there at least by the mid-nineteenth century.⁶⁶ Did the gallery double as a storage area,

or do these relics indicate actual use? An epitaph in the community's first known burial ground, the Cassipora Creek Cemetery, refers to a female cantor ("hazan"), who died in 1715. Unless this was a carving error, Rachel Mendez Meza's tombstone may indicate that women did indeed serve as religious leaders.⁶⁷ Given the traditional Jewish prohibition against females assuming public religious roles in a mixed gender setting, this cantor likely paralleled the Askhenazic *firzogerin* (foresayer) of Central and Eastern Europe. As early as the thirteenth century in the Rhineland, female lead singers or prayer leaders provided simultaneous auxiliary services in women's synagogues, separate rooms—or even houses, connected to the main sanctuary by a gallery—adjacent to the main (male) synagogue.⁶⁸ In Jodensavanne, this room was designated as the "women's synagogue" or "apartment,"⁶⁹ and was most likely the balcony above the main sanctuary, which was referred to as the men's synagogue.⁷⁰ While archival and architectural evidence demonstrates that there was no separate female synagogue, the locution describing space designated for females ("women's synagogue" or "apartment") supports the possibility that independent worship was conducted in the women's prayer quarters as parallel to the services of men in the main sanctuary.

Furthermore, women were, on certain occasions, endowed with a special religious status. According to her epitaph, [Deborah] Rebecca, wife of Benjamin Henriquez da Costa, died after childbirth in 1771 while "a Bride of Genesis" (*Noiva de Beresit*).⁷¹ This honorary ritual role was sometimes assigned to a bride on the eve of her nuptials. But since Rebecca was both married and pregnant, it is more likely that in this case "Bride of Genesis" referred to the honor of being called up to read the first chapter of the Pentateuch in synagogue on the holiday of Simhat Torah. While such a title was usually conferred when a woman's husband received the honor of "Bridegroom of Genesis," the *Noiva de Beresit* may suggest that there were parallel religious services in the woman's section of Beraha VeSalom. That this honor required some kind of active participation is suggested in the epitaph of Esther Hanna, wife of Joseph Gabay Faro, who passed away just before she was to "undertake the charge of a Bride of Genesis" in 1725.⁷² Similarly, in Curaçao in 1783, Sara Hanna, wife of Joseph Hisquiau Hoheb, died during her so-called "nuptials." The epitaph re-

fers to her husband's "marriage" and to Sara Hanna's departure for synagogue that day, decked out like a bride.⁷³

The women's section of Beraha VeSalom could have held at least eighty women, about twenty more Jewish females than resided in Jodensavanne in 1684.⁷⁴ Each row could have included four five-person benches and there could have been at least four rows of benches, with leftover room in the rear of the gallery, where views to the sanctuary would have been more or less obscured. However, when the females in the women's apartment worshipped autonomously, an unobstructed view of the female prayer leader, presumably stationed at the east end of the gallery, would have been possible even from the rear of the gallery. The men's section had a capacity for at least 160 individuals, roughly 55 more Jewish males than the settlement had in 1684. Amsterdam's *esnoga*, in comparison, had a seating capacity for 1,200 men and for over 400 women. Naturally, in 1685 Jodensavanne's Jews would have built a structure that could support an expanding population. The proportion of seats to Jewish residents suggests that the anticipated growth of the congregation in its founding year was modest. In this respect, Jodensavanne's synagogue was similar to early colonial Jewish sanctuaries elsewhere in the Caribbean and in New York.⁷⁵ Beraha VeSalom's design may have been inspired by Solomon's Temple, but its vision was a decidedly modest one—more on the scale of the diasporic lesser sanctuary (*mikdash me'at*) promised by God in Ezekiel 11:16.⁷⁶

This paradox—the modest architectural use of a huge expanse of land, reflected in both the synagogue's dimensions and its seating capacity—suggests that if Jodensavanne was conceived of as an ideal town, its messianism was localized. In the eyes of some Portuguese Jewish settlers, elements of redemption had already materialized in the small village—as hinted in the very name of its sanctuary, Blessing and Peace. The true redemption, though, the true ingathering of Jewish exiles from the four corners of the world, could only be carried out in Jerusalem.⁷⁷

The self-confident messianic intent of Jodensavanne's Jewish founders is emphasized when "Blessing and Peace" is contrasted with the names of North American congregations founded by Iberian-origin Jews (e.g. Philadelphia's Mikveh Israel [Hope of Israel] and Mon-

trear's and New York's Shearith Israel [Remnant of Israel]), which suggest *anticipatory*, as opposed to *actualized*, redemption. A commentary on the *Zohar* (Book of Splendor), which many contemporary scholars attribute to a Jewish mystic (kabbalist) of thirteenth-century Castile,⁷⁸ suggests the messianic anticipation of Suriname's first Jewish settlers. This mystical commentary on the Pentateuch indicates that Eden is to be found in the place of "the secrets of life, blessing, and peace [*beraha vesalom*]." ⁷⁹ Jodensavanne, a village where Jews were permitted to live autonomously and according to the strictures revealed to them by God, was thus akin to Eden—the paradise Adam and Eve enjoyed before their expulsion. Jews' Savannah was intended to be the site of *actualized* redemption. Here, in this secluded place, the messiah had symbolically already arrived.

Just as they apparently did not expect their population to expand significantly, the founders of Jodensavanne's community likely did not anticipate the growth of an entire class of Jews that would become a thorn in the side of the ruling elite. In 1684, one year prior to the construction of Beraha VeSalom, Jodensavanne was home to at least 1,158 people, with Africans outnumbering Jews at least six to one.⁸⁰ The conjunction of Jewish male polygamy, predicated on rape or consensual relations,⁸¹ and the skewed proportion of Jews to Africans, gave rise to a marginal group that disrupted the order of a once neatly bifurcated society. Spawned by Iberian-origin men and African women, these "in-between" Jews—henceforth Eurafrican Jews—were granted membership in the congregation but were sidelined to its margins. The synagogue was an important space where racial status was contested. There, like women, Eurafrican Jews were restricted to designated spaces within the sanctuary. In the case of the latter, however, there was no opportunity within that space for separate but parallel religious ceremonies. Instead, male Jews of African descent were obliged to passively observe the ceremony from the bench of *abelim* (mourners).⁸² These Eurafrican males were classified as congregants (in Portuguese, *congregantes*), as opposed to first-class members, *jehidim* (singular: *jahid*), who were generally of "undiluted" European Jewish descent. Through the years, some Eurafrican Jews succeeded in attaining a *jahid* status, despite their partial non-Jewish, African ancestry. But by the mid-eighteenth century, Jodensavanne's commu-

nal leaders had discovered "the danger and impropriety there is of admitting Mulattos as *jehidim*, and placing them in this community, in which some have intervened in cases of leadership of the synagogue."⁸³ Similarly, in Amsterdam, male converts to Judaism were never appointed to official posts in the Jewish community, rabbinic law stipulating that a convert may not be given a post with coercive communal authority.⁸⁴ Moreover, Amsterdam's Mahamad decreed in 1644 that "circumcised Negro Jews" were not to be called to the Torah or given any honorary commandments to perform in the synagogue.⁸⁵

Females of African (and Native American) descent were, by the mid-eighteenth century, officially unwelcome in the Beraha VeSalom synagogue. In the communal ordinances of 1754, these females ("*Negras, Mulatas ou Indias*") appear as threats to the "decency of the sacred place," and are prohibited from attending, with or without children. A reference to the responsibility of their masters to remove them suggests that this prohibition applied only to the enslaved and that free women of African (or Native) descent were too few in number to justify specific legislation.⁸⁶

For Suriname's free Eurafrican Jews striving for equal status in ritual life and worship, the only option seemed to be secession. Beginning in the late 1780s a handful of Eurafrican Jewish males began an ultimately unsuccessful protest against their exclusion from certain funerary honors.⁸⁷ By the early 1790s they were demanding full congregational membership: *jahid*, rather than *congregante* status which barred them from full participation in prayer rites and confined males to the mourner's bench. By this point, females such as Roza Mendes Meza (a.k.a. Roza Judia) and Mariana Pinto had joined the struggle, presumably not only out of solidarity with their male contemporaries, but also because *congregante* status applied in similar ways to their sex.⁸⁸ The ongoing controversy concerning the social status of Eurafrican Jews would not be legally resolved until 1841, when all ritual distinctions between *congregantes* and *jehidim* were (at least officially) annulled.⁸⁹

These intensifying campaigns, as Robert Cohen has noted, are indicative of the breakdown of internal communal control in Jodensavanne and the village's replacement by Paramaribo as Suriname's dominant Jewish center during the second half of the eighteenth cen-

tury.⁹⁰ By the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the Jewish agricultural community along the Suriname River entered a period of decline. Soil depletion hampered the growth of crops and sugar prices had dropped. Many planters found themselves in default on their loans and absentee ownership further deteriorated the viability of plantations. Slave rebellions and maroon raids on the plantations were a continual threat. But these social revolts also reflected a pan-Caribbean phenomenon whereby Eurafricans came to form the majority of the free population. Their demands and very existence challenged accepted definitions of whiteness and stretched the boundaries of full communal membership.

“Houses of Prayer” in Paramaribo

In the early eighteenth century some of Jodensavanne’s Jews had already moved to Paramaribo, where they constructed new prayer houses and cemeteries and established themselves primarily as merchants. These new religious edifices were both of wooden construction. The first, completed in 1716, replaced an earlier building that was converted into a house for the sexton of the Spanish-Portuguese congregation. A new congregational building, Neveh Salom (Oasis of Peace), was completed in 1723, completely rebuilt between 1835 and 1842, and rededicated in 1837 (fig. 4 and fig. 5). Neveh Salom was sold in 1735 to the High German Jewish community, with the stipulation that it maintain its Portuguese rite, and Iberian-origin Jews built a new prayer house, Sedek VeSalom (Justice and Peace), that same year. That structure was significantly altered when its roof was raised to provide gallery space for the women in 1813⁹¹ (fig. 6 and fig. 7).

Despite the grandeur of these buildings, Portuguese Jews considered Sedek VeSalom merely a “house of prayer,” not a “synagogue,” hearkening back to a 1678 communal ordinance that attempted to eternalize Beraha VeSalom as the colony’s only synagogue.⁹² In proclaiming the rainforest congregation as irreplaceable and inimitable, Jodensavanne’s leaders attempted to exert long-distance control and ensure their own political clout and religious authority.⁹³ But over the course of the eighteenth century the 1678 precept was increasingly ignored, and both congregations, Sedek VeSalom and Neveh Salom, effectively assumed the functions of a synagogue.



Figure 4

The house of prayer Neveh Salom, built in Paramaribo in 1723 and rebuilt from 1834 to 1842.

The south and west façades of the building. The sanctuary is entered from doors on the south façade (under the pediment and columns), the north (not shown), and the center door on the western façade. Each of the two doors flanking the center door on the western façade opens onto a respective staircase, which leads to the second story women’s gallery. Photograph by Rachel Frankel, 1997.

At the end of the eighteenth century, a third prayer house, this one for Jews of Eurafrican descent, appeared in Paramaribo. This was probably the first successful effort by *congregantes* to organize communally since the founding of the Eurafrican Jewish brotherhood Darkhei Jesarim (The Ways of the Righteous) in 1759.⁹⁴ The common on which the prayer house stood was known as the *sivaplein* (“siva square”), after the Hebrew word for “society.”⁹⁵ Its existence was short-lived—by 1794 the building was advertised for sale and by around 1800 it was demolished⁹⁶—and nothing is known of its architecture. However, the earlier two prayer houses in Paramaribo exist to this day and manage, against great odds, to survive.⁹⁷ Although these two buildings share some architectural features with the one at Jodensavanne and with other Portuguese synagogues in the Caribbean, they lack Jodensavanne’s singular elements. Absent are the messianic design elements in the synagogue complex plan, the Dutch-style



Figure 5

The house of prayer Neveh Salom, interior view looking east. At left, a portion of the women's gallery is shown where it wraps along the north side of the sanctuary. The *teivah* (reader's platform) is in the foreground; the *heikhal* (ark) is in the background. The minimal fenestration on the east wall and the sand-covered floor are similar to the *esnoga* of Amsterdam, and probably to Beraha VeSalom. Photograph by Rachel Frankel, 1997.

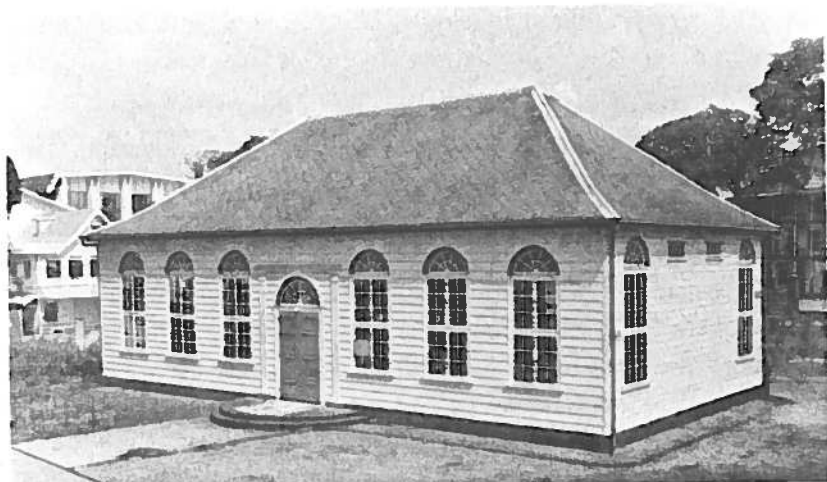


Figure 6

The house of prayer Sedek VeSalom, built in Paramaribo in 1735 and at a later date renovated to include a women's gallery. The original interior was recently removed from the building and sent to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. North and east façades of the building. Photograph by Rachel Frankel, 1998.

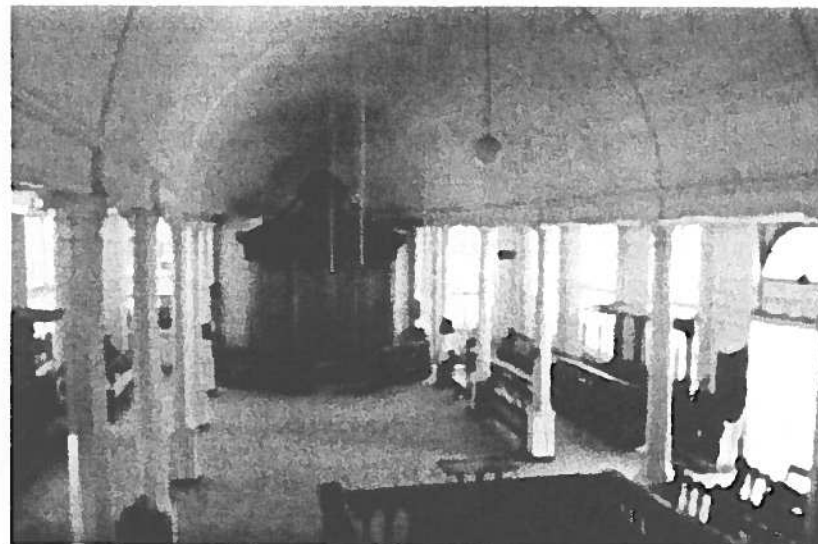


Figure 7

Interior of Sedek VeSalom, looking east from the women's gallery. The *teivah* (reader's platform) is in the foreground below; the *heikhal* (ark) is in the background. Photograph by Rachel Frankel, 1998.



Figure 8

Ruins of the Beraha VeSalom synagogue. Photograph by Rachel Frankel, 1995.

building profile, the interior auxiliary spaces, the setback and perpendicularly aligned women's gallery, and most conspicuously, the brick construction. Beraha VeSalom was most distinguished in its building materials. The use of brick in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Caribbean was not only a status symbol, but also evidence of reluctance to creolize.⁹⁸ Materials such as wood and thatch, which grew in the wild, indicate some degree of adaptation to local usage, while the technology for producing "baked stones" was a European importation.⁹⁹ Finally, the materials of Paramaribo's prayer houses either reflect limited expectations for the urban community's longevity or its inability (or unwillingness) to invest in more expensive architecture. Brick, as stone, can endure indefinitely; but the wooden *gebedshuizen* of Paramaribo, subject to fire and rot, were ephemeral. Only Beraha VeSalom, it seems, was built to last.

The Demise of Jodensavanne

As Paramaribo's Jews established their new communities, Jodensavanne continued its downward spiral. At the time of the hundred-year anniversary celebration in 1785, Beraha VeSalom was already a relic of the past, visited and cherished largely as a historic monument by Jodensavanne's former inhabitants and their descendants. By 1787 meetings of the Sephardic communal government (Mahamad) were no longer held at Jodensavanne, but in Paramaribo. The devastating fire of 1832 destroyed most of the village's edifices, but spared the synagogue. By 1833 the only residents of Jodensavanne were synagogue officials, the "trusted slaves" of wealthy Jews living in Paramaribo and abroad, and "some elderly people too much connected to the ground of their forefathers" to abandon "the lonely existence of this village."¹⁰⁰

Detailed descriptions from this long period of decline help to explain the mystique of Jodensavanne. An account from 1788 depicts a sumptuous synagogue interior. The *heikhal* was "of a beautiful architecture, and ornamented with very well executed sculptures which reflect much honor (considering the infancy of the colony when it was built) upon the one who fashioned it."¹⁰¹ Among the sanctuary's ornaments were "crowns of silver with which the Scrolls of the Law are decorated, and other necessary furnishings of the same metal, large

candlesticks of yellow copper with several branches, and chandeliers of several kinds, which cost the individuals who donated them a considerable sum."¹⁰² As late as 1827, an inventory listed ten Torah scrolls, some topped with ornamental silver pomegranates, as well as silver and gold crowns, silver pointers (an embellished implement that eases the reading of the text), and sacramental cups.¹⁰³ A visitor in 1833 described the synagogue as "the principal jewel of this currently very impoverished village," though it was by that time bereft of ornaments, save "copper crowns which are lit at the evening service with wax candles."¹⁰⁴

Suriname's Jewish community was reluctant to allow Jodensavanne to die. In 1838 the Hozer Holim¹⁰⁵ (Aid to the Sick) brotherhood in Paramaribo conceived of a plan to resuscitate the decrepit village. Praising its "beautiful location where one can admire nature in its full glory," the health of the air, its formerly large population, considerable buildings, splendid synagogue, extensive wood trade, and military presence, brotherhood leaders bemoaned the present state of Jodensavanne, "almost abandoned and approaching its complete decay."¹⁰⁶ Only a fundraising campaign would enable its remaining inhabitants to generate an economic revival. The brotherhood proposed two objectives. First, they would erect buildings in Jodensavanne as new residences for the poor whose own houses had become uninhabitable. These buildings would also entice artisans and other productive migrants to establish themselves in Jodensavanne. Second, they would provide new residents with monetary advances so that they could purchase items necessary for their work.¹⁰⁷

The brotherhood's campaign may have been at least partially successful, as a synagogue inventory of 1848 lists ten functional Torah scrolls, some enrobed in silken textiles. For their embellishment were a few pairs of silver pomegranates, some with dangling bells, and multi-pronged copper crowns engraved with the names of donors. The interior was illuminated with dozens of large and small copper and silver chandeliers, a few bearing engraved names, and silver memorial lamps. Wooden calendars for ritually counting the Omer (the 49 days between the second day of Passover and the first day of Pentecost) and two copper charity boxes adorned the walls. Reliquia, also suggesting the active use of the congregation, included a silver cup, a spice box

to observe the departure of the Sabbath and holidays, a copper candelabrum for Hanukkah (described as a “Maccabean lamp”), and silver pointers to guide the Torah reader.¹⁰⁸

But nostalgia alone could not rejuvenate a village past economic viability. In 1865, worshippers visited the synagogue for the last time. Then, in 1873, its roof collapsed, and no subsequent repairs were made. Over time, visitors dismantled the masonry, pilfering bricks for their own use (fig. 8). But abandonment and vandalism have not mitigated the long-enduring enchantment of this autonomous Jewish settlement. Today it is identified by the ruins of its synagogue and cemetery and is widely regarded as a “national” or “Jewish shrine.”¹⁰⁹

Conclusion

A creative contemplation of the architecture of the Beraha VeSalom synagogue, informed by archival research and historical context, suggests that messianic sentiment may have animated some of Joden-savanne’s founding settlers and anonymous architect. But this interpretation is admittedly speculative. More importantly, the foregoing discussion speaks to the underestimated role of messianism among early modern Sephardic pioneers. Messianism was one of the many religious currents informing early Sephardic communities in Brazil and the Caribbean and is only now receiving serious attention.¹¹⁰ During the mid-seventeenth century many Europeans considered the Americas to be the end of the earth, and messianists—Christians and Jews alike—often regarded the dispersal of Jews all over the world as a prerequisite for the coming of the Messiah.¹¹¹

Both Isaac Aboab (1605–1693), who served in the Dutch colony of Pernambuco in the 1640s and 1650s as the first New World rabbi, and João de Yllan (1609–1696), Curaçao’s first Jewish settler, were later secret followers of Sabbatai Zevi.¹¹² Another devotee was Moises Pereyra, who was born in Madrid in 1635¹¹³ and became a denizen of Barbados in 1671. Pereyra had set out on a journey to the Land of Israel in 1666, following in the footsteps of his likeminded father, the wealthy merchant Abraham Pereyra.¹¹⁴ Recent archival research demonstrates that by at least 1650 de Yllan maintained commercial ties with David Nassy, the mastermind of a number of Jewish colonies in the Caribbean, including Suriname.¹¹⁵ With the debacle of Sabbatai

Zevi behind them, Nassy and his contemporaries may have viewed their self-ruling agrarian community in Suriname as a diasporic fulfillment of the messianic promise. Millennialism coexisted with the ruthless pragmatism characteristic of most early modern pioneers.¹¹⁶ In the Jewish context, this meant that a diasporic “Eden” would not be built without slavery.