“Atlantic Jewish History: A Conceptual Reorientation”

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A Conceptual Reorientation 
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On the twenty-seventh of November 1789, the Surinamese physician, diplomat, and historian David Nassy (1747–1806) stood at the grave of his recently deceased wife Esther as her body was lowered into the ground.¹ Many mourners were likely to have been present, including his Eurafican slaves, Moses, Ishmael, and Isaac, whom he had circumcised and instructed in the Jewish religion.² Esther Cohen Nassy died on the savanna, a region of inland Suriname heavily populated by Jews, just short of her forty-first birthday, after twenty-six years of marriage. From the Portuguese poem her widower commissioned for her tombstone epitaph, we know she succumbed to the “cruel epidemic of smallpox” that ravaged the South American Dutch colony, leaving behind as his sole consolation their only child, a daughter named Sarah.³ Two and a half years later, when conflicts within the local Jewish community made life for him unbearable, Nassy traveled to Philadelphia with Sarah and two non-Jewish slaves named Mattheus and Amina.⁴ He arrived there carrying a letter of recommendation addressed to George Washington from Suriname’s governor Juriaen François de Friderici.⁵ About a year later, in 1793, Nassy tended to victims of the yellow fever epidemic that swept through the City of Brotherly Love. By the close 

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OBSERVATIONS
ON THE
CAUSE, NATURE, and TREATMENT
OF THE
EPIDEMIC DISORDER,
PREVALENT IN PHILADELPHIA,
BY D. NASSY, M. D. Member of the American
Philosophical Society, &c.

PHILADELPHIA:
Printed by Parker & Co. for M. Carey.
Nov. 26, 1793.

Figure 2.1: David Nassy, Observations on the Cause, Nature, and
Treatment of the Epidemic Disorder, Prevalent in Philadelphia
(Philadelphia: Parker & Co. for M. Carey, 1793). Considered
the first medical work published by a Jew in the United
States, its author, David Nassy, drew upon his experience as a
physician in his native Suriname to treat successfully a yellow
fever epidemic that was devastating the city’s inhabitants.

of the year, Nassy had published an account of his
first-hand observations of the catastrophe, together
with details of his methods of treatment, which
likely brought back painful memories of his futile
attempts to save his own wife (Figure 2.1). Nassy’s
account, which appeared with his French original
alongside an English translation, led to his election
as a member of the American Philosophical Society,
where he once lectured on botanical knowledge in
an ancient and modern comparative context.6

Although clearly an elite and exceptionally
educated person, David Nassy is in key ways
representative of Jews in the Atlantic world, a region
where people, commodities, ideas, and technology
were vigorously exchanged among the four
continents of North and South America, Europe,
and Africa. Nassy lived in a time when the American
Jewish epicenter was not in colonial North America
or the United States, but in the Caribbean; when
most Atlantic Jews were of Iberian, not Central or
Eastern European origin; and when most American
Jews lived in slave societies.7

As a self-conscious area of study, Atlantic
history began to develop in the late 1980s, but has
only recently attracted the attention of students
of the American Jewish past. Prominent scholars,
following the historiographical approach advanced
by Bernard Bailyn, divide Atlantic history into five
sometimes overlapping periods: European discovery
and occupation; interacting and conflicting
empires; the mass importation and subjugation of
Africans through the slave trade and the institute
of slavery; wide-scale decimation of Amerindians
through disease; economic and demographic growth; and the political rebellion that resulted in
independent republics, or, in Bailyn’s words, “creole triumphalism.”8 Even though it is too early to
determine how American Jewries fit into this Atlantic periodization, it is already clear that many
of the dynamics of Jewish communities, in relation to both the self and the other, call for a separate
subhistoriography subsumed within the whole. If it is too soon satisfactorily to answer this call,
one may still highlight three major themes of Atlantic Jewish history that bear some elements
of chronology: Portuguese Jewish hegemony; slavery; and the triad of privileges, disabilities, and emancipation. A significant portion of the Kaplan Collection—amassed over the course of more than thirty years, with a broad appreciation of what encompasses “American Jewry”—directly speaks to these three themes.

The “Portuguese Period”

For roughly the first two hundred years of the Atlantic age, most of its Jewish population was of Iberian origin. These Jews were typically former New Christians who established communities all over the Atlantic world and exercised a cultural and political hegemony over other Jews that was to endure until the early nineteenth century. These Jews self-identified and presented themselves to outsiders as those of the “Spanish and Portuguese nation,” or, in shorthand, simply as “Portuguese Jews.” Only in the mid-seventeenth century did Ashkenazi Jews—Germanic Jews who traced their origins to Central or Eastern Europe—begin to migrate to Western Europe, and eventually, though to smaller extents, to North America and the Caribbean. Even after Ashkenazi Jews came to form the majority of the Jewish populations living along the North American Seaboard (around the 1720s) and the Caribbean (in the second half of the eighteenth century), Portuguese Jewish hegemony—as assessed through leadership, synagogue rites, and pronunciation of Hebrew—held sway.

The Portuguese period has its roots in the major forced conversions of Iberian Jews to Christianity in 1391 and 1497 in the Spanish kingdoms and Portugal, respectively. These cataclysmic events created a population of New Christians, some of whom were sincere, others insincere, and a third group, perhaps the majority, who moved back and forth between the two faiths striving to secure spiritual, social, and economic stability. The Expulsion in 1492 of what was at that time Europe’s largest medieval Jewry relocated half of Spain’s Jewish population to Portugal, where these forced immigrants joined an existing Jewish community, all of whose members were forcibly converted to Christianity five years later, bringing to an end open Jewish life on the Iberian Peninsula. These events, following the expulsion of Jews from England in 1290, meant that the entire European Atlantic Seaboard was emptied of confessing Jews at the dawn of the Atlantic age. But several Jewish communities, some indigenous, others Iberian exiles and their descendants, populated Africa’s Atlantic coast. One of these understudied communities is that of Sallé (in what is today Morocco), an important trade center whose Jews maintained close connections to Spain and Portugal and to the Portuguese Jewish community of Amsterdam.

Spain and Portugal, the first European powers to lay claim to the New World, officially banned Jews from all their territories until the independence movements of the nineteenth century replaced those colonies with republics. Seeking economic opportunities, thousands of Christians of Jewish origin, mainly Portuguese—speaking, began to leave the Iberian Peninsula for the New World. New Christians who returned to their ancestral faith played a leading role in reestablishing Atlantic Jewish communities. But sincere Christians of Jewish origins who cultivated networks with openly
Jewish relatives, or were falsely accused of professing the Jewish “heresy,” must also be considered in this initial phase of Atlantic Jewish history, not because historians should consider them as “Jews” (whether they do or not should be irrelevant), but because they were part of the common social fabric of New Christian society. As such, they not only opened up transatlantic networks between sincere New Christians and Jews, but were themselves vulnerable to accusations of judaizing. The three Inquisitorial tribunals in the Americas were located in Cartagena de Indias (in what is today Colombia), Lima, and Mexico City, the last functioning from 1571 to 1820. One New Christian caught in the clutches of the last tribunal was Lorenço Machado, specifically identified as “Portuguese,” and apprehended in la ciudad de México in December of 1598 (Figure 2.2).

We do not know the details of his case, as the trial transcript has not survived, but Machado’s ethnic identity likely had a role in implicating him as a secret Jew. Half of the Jewish population expelled from Spain in 1492 had crossed the border to Portugal, and the term “Portuguese” thereafter became synonymous with “judaizer” outside of the Peninsula. Moreover, Portuguese people living in the Spanish Americas were often scapegoated as contraband traders, and judaizing may have been a trumped-up charge with an ulterior motive. Two years after his arrest, Machado was still languishing in an Inquisitorial prison, subsisting on extraordinary rations of bread that were probably purchased with funds extracted from his confiscated estate. Machado’s arrest came just two years after Luis de Carvajal el Mozo, his mother, and three sisters were burned at the stake along with several other self-proclaimed judaizers. They are a handful of more than 1,500 individuals convicted of judaizing, 200 of whom were either burned at the pyre or died incarcerated in the two and a half centuries preceding Mexican independence in 1821.
Machado may have at one point crossed paths with Goncalo Perez Ferro, a native of Villaflor, Portugal, who was residing in Mexico in 1597 when he was apprehended and tried as a judaizer (judaiçante) (see Figure 2.3). Ferro and his wife, Catalina de León, a native of Medina del Campo, arrived in the same sailing vessel as their relative, the aforementioned Luis de Carvajal, and after living a short while in Pánuco established themselves in Mexico City. Ferro was reconciled by the Inquisition in 1601. The intact survival of his 300-page transcript in the Kaplan Collection is wondrous given the rampage of Inquisitorial archives and dungeons in the wake of the Napoleonic wars and the subsequent dispersal of surviving documents through private purchase, estate sales, or transfer to churches and other institutions both within and outside Mexico. Ferro’s native town of Villaflor, which harbored many Jews expelled from Spain in 1492, was a hotbed of secret Judaism during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Owing to the persecution of New Christians such as Ferro and Machado, as well as marriage across ethnic lines and the malleable nature of cultural identity, the judaizing element of the New Christian population of the Americas assimilated within a few generations or left the Iberian Empire altogether. The few exceptions sociologists and historians have stumbled across in modern times seem to owe themselves to a combination of endogamy and relative isolation.

For the first open Jewish communities of the western Atlantic world, one must turn to Dutch Brazil. The Dutch captured Pernambuco, a region in northern Brazil, from the Portuguese in 1630, creating the only space in the Americas at that time where Judaism was a legal religion. Jews, capitalizing on their multilingualism and transatlantic Portuguese mercantile networks, traded textiles, hardware, and African slaves for sugar, tobacco, and brazilwood. The collapse of the colony to the Portuguese in 1654 triggered a Jewish exodus that clogged the city of Amsterdam with impoverished refugees and stimulated new Jewish trade and agricultural settlements in the circum- and insular Caribbean, and smaller commerce-based ones along the North American
Atlantic Seaboard. Using Amsterdam and London as launching pads, confessing Jews, some of whom had lived as Christians before returning to their Jewish roots, founded Jewish settlements in Dutch-controlled Berbice, Demerara, Essequibo, Curaçao, Suriname, St. Eustatius, Tobago (disputed between various powers), and Cayenne (in what is today French Guiana); Barbados, Jamaica, and Nevis (English since 1627, 1655, and 1620s, respectively); the Danish Virgin Islands; and smaller communities in New Amsterdam/New York, Newport, Charleston, Philadelphia, and Savannah (Figures 2.4, 2.5). On the French islands, where a baptized Catholic’s reversion to Judaism was criminal, Judaism was generally tolerated as an open secret, although Louis XIV expelled Jews from his Caribbean territories in 1685.

The second quarter of the seventeenth century, therefore, is what historian Wim Klooster calls “a watershed in the history of Atlantic Jewry.”22 From then on, New Christians and Jews mainly avoided Iberian and French settlements and settled in the Dutch and English Caribbean. Except for short periods when St. Thomas passed under Danish rule, the Jewish experience in the western Atlantic world was centered within the Dutch and English orbits.

Portuguese-speaking communities of confessing Jews also settled on West Africa’s coast in the towns of Joal, Porto d’Ale, and Recife, all located in what is today Senegal. This “forgetting diaspora,” collectively numbering no more than two hundred individuals, was connected across three continents through economic and social networks that encircled Old and New Christians, Jews, Muslims, and animists within the orbit of a lively trade in hides, ivory, and illicit blade weapons (the papacy had forbidden the sale of arms to the “infidel” since 1364). The Jewish merchants who settled there were former conversos who had returned to their ancestral faith in Amsterdam. On the Senegambian coast, they intermarried with the daughters of local nobles, producing Eurafrikan Jewish children, and maintained close ties with the Portuguese community of Amsterdam, whence they imported Torah scrolls and circumcision implements for use in their synagogue in Joal, established in 1612.23 While no Inquisitorial tribunal operated on the Senegambian coast, the Holy Office periodically dispatched visitors (visitadores) during the second and third decades of the seventeenth century who not only investigated the illegal commerce and the espousal of Judaism there, but also produced a remarkable archive with narrative details of this West African Jewish collectivity.24 One who would dismiss their “importance” misses the broader points that these minuscule communities illuminate. Even small enclaves were intensely connected with the broader Atlantic world, and Christianity, Islam, and African spiritual traditions were not the only religious possibilities available to peoples of African descent.

The two largest and hence most prosperous Jewish communities in the Americas, peaking at roughly 1,700 members in the late eighteenth century, were located in the Dutch colonies of Suriname and Curaçao. The latter was an arid island whose climate did not allow for the production of export goods, but its strategic location just off the coast of the South American mainland turned it into a commercial entrepôt. In Curaçao, elite Jewish merchants owned slightly more than their proportion of trade, brokerage, and insurance. Curaçao is representative of the Jewish Atlantic in
Figure 2.4: Engraved map of Newport, Rhode Island, as surveyed by Charles Blaskowitz, and printed by William Faden in London and dated September 1, 1777, indicating the first Jewish house of worship in that city.
Figure 2.5: Engraved map of New-York, appearing in John Hinton's *The Universal Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure* (vol. 59), New York City, November 1776. The reference key to the fold-out engraved map designates the "Jews Synagogue" in the "Plan of New-York" with the letter "G."
that the overwhelming majority of Jews in the region were intensively engaged in mercantile trade for the entire period. Suriname, on the other hand, along with the English territories of Barbados and Jamaica, were export colonies. Until the latter half of the eighteenth century, most Surinamese Jews lived in the agricultural hinterland, producing sugar, coffee, cacao, and timber cash crops.

A rare map held in the Kaplan Collection, predating 1718, illustrates the visibility of Suriname’s Jews, who formed one-third of the white population, and their impact on the landscape (Figure 2.6). Drafted during the governorship of Cornelis van Aerssen van Sommelsdijck, the map features dozens of Jewish-owned estates dominating a long stretch of the Suriname River, with the “Jewish village and synagogue” (Joods Dorp en Sinagoge) at its median point. Outside the community, this village was known as Jodensavanne, or Jews‘ savanna. Its surrounding plantations, which would have been at that time predominantly sugar estates, bear the Portuguese and Spanish names of their owners: D’Avilar (which appears as the corrupted Duivelyaar), Drago, David, de Pina, Don Pedro, Aron, Serfatijin (a probable misreading of Serfati), Nunes da Costa, Baruh da Costa, Nassy, Nunes, and de Casseres. Jews often named their plantations after biblical toponyms or Hebrew words, such as Hebron, Moria, Mahanaem, Sucoht, Bersaba, Nahamoe, Haran, and Petak Enaim. In the capital city of Paramaribo, where most of the colony’s Jews lived by the end of the eighteenth century, the Jewish imprint is also visible, as the map of ca. 1720s Suriname and Berbice clearly indicates. The urban street plan shows “the Jewish Broadway” (Joedon Bree-straat) as well as the “Portuguese Jewish synagogue,” officially known as Sedek VeSalom (Righteousness and Peace) with the German or Ashkenazi synagogue standing adjacent. The map also identifies the Lutheran church, and numerous Maroon settlements, autonomous communities that runaway slaves founded in the rainforest over the course of the eighteenth century and to whom the Dutch colonial government by the 1770s regularly paid tribute. The colonial government’s bestowal of periodic gifts succeeded in pacifying Maroons, but also unintentionally created an asymmetrical relationship in favor of these former slaves and their descendants. Conspicuously absent on this map are Catholic or Moravian churches. Suriname was an intensely multiethnic population, and Jews were among the more successful groups who vied for special, privileged status.

By the mid-nineteenth century, Suriname was exceedingly obscure to most westerners, even to those hailing from the colony’s former motherland, England, which ruled Suriname from 1651 to 1667 and then again as Britain from 1799 to 1815. British traveler Edward Sullivan, who set out for Suriname in the 1850s, admitted to initially having “a very indistinct idea as to its whereabouts” and had never even heard the name of its capital city, Paramaribo. But in its heyday Suriname was hailed as a potential second Brazil, the most powerful and richest of all New World colonies, and hopes for its phoenix-like rise from the ashes continued well into the nineteenth century during the British Interregnum.

The economic centrality of the Caribbean reinforced the cultural hegemony of Portuguese Jews over co-religionists both locally and in North America. Portuguese Jews in both regions provided the model for the liturgical pronunciation of Hebrew well into the early 1800s. Their
elite status predisposed many local Ashkenazim toward this accent, which preserved the guttural *ayin*, did not differentiate between the *patah* and *qames* or between the *sere* and *segol* vowels, and intoned the fifth to last and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet, respectively, as an “*s*” and a “*t*.” Thus, Portuguese Jews would have intoned the words for “righteous” and “Sabbath” as “*sadik*” and “*sabat*,” rather than the Ashkenazi “*tsadik*” and “*shobbes*.” Since colonial days, Germanic and Eastern European Jews who worshipped in Portuguese Jewish congregations adopted that pronunciation and cantillation of Hebrew in place of their own ancestral tradition and even gave up their own customary prayer for the dead (the mourner’s *kadish*) in favor of the Portuguese tradition.

The dominance of Portuguese customs among North American Jews is apparent in the Hebrew grammar book published by Judah Monis (1683–1764), an Algerian- or Italian-born convert to Christianity who taught Hebrew at Harvard University for forty years. Monis employed the Portuguese accent in his writing and teaching, as suggested in the Roman-scripted transliterations of his Hebrew grammar primer, published in 1735 and also held in the Kaplan Collection (Figure 2.7). Isaac Leeser, a Central European–born Jew who affiliated with the Spanish and Portuguese communities of Richmond, Virginia, and Philadelphia, employed this accent in the Hebrew-language textbooks he published for North American children beginning in the 1830s. These became the first primers for Jewish schools in the United States. A Hebrew textbook published in 1834 by the American Jew Joseph Aaron, probably of Germanic or Eastern European origin, also employed the Portuguese transliteration system still in vogue among many American Jews. The Lopez calendar (also discussed by Jonathan Sarna in this volume; see Figure 3.2) is an additional example that underscores how literary material culture both reflected and reinforced the Portuguese cultural orientation of most early American Jews, and thereafter of what was probably a sizeable minority of Jews, even into the mid-nineteenth century.
Geographical and cultural fluidity marked the rabbinical and cantorial culture of North America and the Caribbean. Preachers and cantors were readily transferred between Caribbean colonies and the early American republic, and several Ashkenazim were able to perform their duties comfortably according to Portuguese Jewish rite. Moses N. Nathan had served as Minister of the German Congregation Shangaray Yashar of Kingston, Jamaica (note the Portuguese pronunciation of the synagogue’s name), and undertook a prolonged stay in the United States in 1840 to recover his own health “and that of his amiable companion [his wife],” who had relatives in New York. By 1848 he had relocated to St. Thomas and received an invitation to sermonize in Spanish Town, Jamaica, where he had formerly held a position as minister and teacher. A presumably Ashkenazi correspondent whose name has not survived had learned *hazanut* according to the “Portuguese Minhag” from Hazan Lopez of Kingston, Jamaica, but preferred to serve as minister in a “German Congregation [Minhag Polin— Polish-Jewish liturgical rite] in the United States having had much more experience, and being perfectly au fait at the duties of the latter.” Henry Jacobs, who was active in both Kingston and New York and possessed a “Certificate of Efficiency as a Portuguese Reader,” also learned the Portuguese minhag from Hazan Lopez, and so well, he said, “that no would believe that I had been attached to a German Congregation.”

Nathan, the aforementioned unnamed correspondent, Jacobs, and Isaac Leeser were probably representative of the cultural orientation of most Ashkenazi Jews living before the era of mass migration in the American colonies or former colonies. Their fluency in both the “Portuguese” and “German” pronunciations of Hebrew was probably not unusual. As late as 1843, both accents were used in Hebrew language instruction at The Misses Palache’s Boarding and Day School in New York. Leeser’s prayer books, iconic to early American Jewish history and published beginning in the 1830s, likewise adhered to the Portuguese tradition, and were marketed to Caribbean Jews, although he also published a prayer book in 1848—the first Ashkenazi *siddur* published in the United States—that speaks to the encroaching dominance of Central and Eastern European Jews.

This proliferation of publications culturally and linguistically oriented toward Portuguese Jews raises an intriguing question about nomenclature and the attendant malleable nature of ethnic identity. Iberian-origin Jews who remained in the Western hemisphere after leaving the Peninsula and after returning to their ancestral Judaism never identified as “Sephardi.” In fact, nowhere in the early records of Atlantic Jewry do Iberian-origin Jews refer to themselves as such. The label came to be commonly applied in the nineteenth century, reflecting the impact of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement and Central European *maskilim* who glorified the medieval Iberian Jews they termed *Sephardim*. The letters and documents accessible via the Gershwind-Bennett Isaac Leeser Digital Repository of the University of Pennsylvania provide a telling way to gauge the gradual shift in nomenclature from “Portuguese and Spanish” to “Sephardi.” By the mid-nineteenth century, the terms are often used in tandem, as in the 1850 contract to hire Moses N. Nathan as hazan “according to the customs of the Spanish & Portuguese Jews, commonly called “Minhag Sephardim” (Figure 2.8). But ever more frequently, Portuguese Jews and Ashkenazim alike (including David de Meldola of London, Abraham de Sola of Montreal, Dr. M. Mayer of Charleston, and Nathan
himself) allowed the term “Sephardim” to stand on its own. Isaac Leser referred to the “Sephardi tradition” when he began to publish his liturgical works in the 1830s, and Mayer Kayserling titled his history of medieval Iberian Jewry, published in the 1850s, *Sephardim*. 

Historians of early American Jewry have followed this cue, going so far as to name the first period of American Jewish history the “Sephardic” period. This is unfortunate because taking history on its own terms means historicizing, and the first step in that direction is to recover the nomenclature employed during the period under study. Doing so is not simply honoring the ways people in the past referred to themselves and others, however incongruous those terms may seem today. Rather, the reclamation for which I am arguing is fundamental to correcting our understanding of an entire cultural orientation and the political realities that informed it. The ethos of Portuguese and Spanish Jewry of the Atlantic age was originally quite distinct from the “myth of Sephardic supremacy” propagated by Mayer Kayserling and other enlightened German Jews since the late eighteenth century. Far from championing a Jewish community thoroughly integrated into local society while remaining uncompromisingly Jewish, Portuguese Jews of the Atlantic world prided themselves on the privileges they received that elevated them above local African-origin populations and allowed them to be religiously, linguistically, and ethnically distinguished from the white Christian groups among whom they lived. Moreover, their dominant historical memory was not harmonious integration into non-Jewish society, but forced conversion, dissimulation of Catholicism, Inquisitorial persecution, and exile. A key component of Portuguese Jewishness, then, was not full integration into the ruling non-Jewish society without assimilation, but rather the privilege of fostering a corporate identity, very much a carryover from the European Christian Middle Ages. Perhaps most importantly, only the term “Portuguese” can explain how Jews saw themselves—and were seen by others—as part and parcel of the Portuguese Empire and its inter-Atlantic Diaspora. Portuguese language and culture in the seventeenth century linked Jews in the Americas to Portuguese trading partners all over the Atlantic world, regardless of those partners’ religious orientation. Diplomatic missions dispatched from Brazil to Suriname at the turn of the nineteenth century specifically sought out the local Jewish community of Paramaribo, and

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Figure 2.8: Gershon Kursheedt and M. N. Nathan, contract for Nathan to serve as cantor and preacher of the Hebrew Congregation Dispersed of Judah, New Orleans, LA, October 1, 1850, p. 1.
Portuguese soldiers captured by enemy forces in those turbulent times and forced onto Surinamese soil immediately called for the political and monetary intervention of the local Portuguese Jewish rulers. Lusitanian politicians even made overtures to Suriname’s Portuguese Jews to repatriate to their ancestral land, with the assurance that the motives that had caused their forefathers’ exile from that realm no longer existed.  

Slavery in the Atlantic Jewish World

Portraits of Caribbean and U.S. Jewish communities have often elided the relationship of Jews to the slave societies in which they lived. This silence is one aspect of what I call “defensive” or “protective history,” an enduring historiographical paradigm detectable in a wide range of minority group disciplines. Writers whose personal identity tends to overlap with the minority group they are analyzing often seek to celebrate, praise, and showcase. Within the context of Jewish studies, this has typically meant that the links between Jewish communities and the institution of slavery are either assiduously avoided, explained away, or fetishized as having “fabulous...content” (so reads the anonymous dealer’s description of Judah Benjamin’s ruling in a runaway slave case from Louisiana, dated 1838). As I have argued elsewhere, the experience of slavery must be central to any analysis of a slave society.

Slavery in relation to Jewish history must also be normalized. Slavery has existed in every known sedentary society, and it is thus wholly unsurprising that it is openly countenanced in the Hebrew Bible, rabbinical texts, and responsa literature, and implicitly in the many slavery-related documents of the Kaplan Collection. We find in the collection several advertisements for the sale of slaves by Jewish owners or dealers, bearing last names such as Cohen and De la Motta (Figure 2.9). The business card of

Figure 2.9a-b: Jacob Cohen & Co., advertisement for the “public auction of an estate including an entire gang of 60 Negroes accustomed to the culture of cotton”; E. De la Motta, advertisement of the delay, due to weather, of the sale of a cargo of sugar and brandies. Charleston Courier, February 7, 1807.

Figure 2.9c: Marx E. Cohen, “Plantation, Brick Yard and Negroes for Sale,” The Charleston Mercury, April 6, 1855. Cohen was a plantation owner who stipulated that slaves were not to be sold separately.
R. H. Davis and his partners announces the “sale of negroes, publicly and privately” in Richmond, Virginia (Figure 2.10). The unquestioning acceptance of slavery among the vast majority of Jews throughout history runs contrary to acrobatic attempts by generations of scholars to interpretively deny this reality.46 What is missing from their analyses is the historical understanding that, before the European revolutions of the late eighteenth century, hierarchy and privilege were very rarely questioned and in any given society, varying forms of exploitative labor practices, often overlapping in severity, coexisted.

To underscore Moses Finley’s distinction, in the case of indenture or hired labor, a person’s work is owned. In slavery, by contrast, both the person’s labor and body are owned.47 In practice, however, the actual experiences of slaves and hired laborers, or sailors, for that matter, often overlapped, with the important distinction that indenture or service at sea was not biologically heritable, as was the uterine system of slavery. An enslaved woman’s child was automatically a slave, regardless of the father’s identity. Jews in the Atlantic world (unless they had recognized sub-Saharan African descent) were classified as white and hence permitted to own human property. Under certain conditions, free people of African ancestry could—and many did—own slaves. Slavery, particularly when domestic, could be compared with the long experience European Jews have had as employers of Jewish and gentile female servants, known in the responsa literature as meshartot and shibbot. The interactions between domestic servants and their masters and mistresses engendered many of the same types of situations and complications as did slavery, as we may surmise from Rebecca Kobrin’s analysis of servitude among nineteenth-century U.S. Jews.48

Another direct experience of Atlantic Jews with slavery was at the hands of the Barbary pirates who captured passengers and crew members at sea and auctioned them off on the North African mainland. On August 10, 1726, an English ship sailing from London to New York was seized and brought to Sallé. Besides the crew were eleven Dutch Christians, five Jewish men, and one Jewish woman, all “carry’d into Slavery, and their Goods confiscated.” Nine other passengers, all English, were for unspecified reasons not detained (Figure 2.11). Atlantic Jews had an institutional mechanism in place to respond to such crises: communal funds collected for ransoming co-religionists. Portuguese Jews of the Atlantic world specifically designated a separate charity chest for “captives” (caixa dos cautivos).49 London’s Portuguese Jewish community even had an official in charge of Jewish captives, known as the president of captives (parnas dos cautivos).50 Some wealthy Jews, like Isaac Bravo of Suriname in 1716, legated hundreds of guilders for the redemption of captives.51 Jewish victims beyond the Atlantic realm were keenly aware of this communal largesse,
and some undertook long and dangerous journeys to the Americas to tap into it. Among them were Johanan ben Jahacob de Gurgias, who requested funds to redeem his family members imprisoned by the “Turks” in 1767. Jahacob and Ishak de Haim Acohen of Macedonia requested assistance of Suriname’s Mahamad in 1752 for financial aid to help rescue their “afflicted and captive families.” Moses Treves, described in the archives as a “stranger” and “resident of the Levant, who claims to be a pilgrim,” arrived in Suriname in 1788 to raise funds from various lands to liberate his wife and children, imprisoned by Muslims. In 1754, two Livornese Jews appealed to London’s Portuguese community for the rescue of six Jews captive in Malta.

Robert Davis argues that Barbary pirate raids on European populations helped condition whites in the Atlantic world to oppose the institution of slavery. If we extend his theory to the Atlantic Jewish world, it is possible that the periodic requests Jewish communities received to aid their captive co-religionists gradually conditioned Suriname’s Jews against tolerating the existence of Jewish slaves within their own colony. In 1819, just a few years after the battle of Algiers, when the U.S. and British forces bombarded the North African coast, Suriname’s Portuguese Jewish community ruled that it was no longer acceptable for Eurafican Jews to remain in slavery. Tellingly, the communal records use the term captives (cativos) to describe these Jewish slaves. Generally speaking, the Dutch had a very weak legacy of abolitionism, in contrast to Jews of the Anglophone Atlantic world. Sabato Morais’s “Thanksgiving Discourse for the Year 1864,” in which he called slavery “human degradation,” an obstacle to “progress and civilization,” and an institution that made the Union worthless, is a very late expression of the abolitionist sentiment that had been building up in England since the late eighteenth century.

Figure 2.11: Reports of Jews taken into slavery, The Post-Boy, September 1–3, 1726. It is not widely known that Jews, whose role in the slave trade has been grossly exaggerated, were themselves sometime captured and taken into slavery.
Privileges, Disabilities, and Emancipation

The increasing aversion to slavery brings us closer to our final theme: the civil and political status of Atlantic Jewish communities. As we have seen, Jews in the Caribbean, aside from those with the requisite degree of African ancestry, were legally classified as white. However, as non-Christians, they were ascribed a not-quite-“white” status, as reflected in colonial censuses, where they were often distinguished as “Jews,” and in their position as social inferiors to Christian free colored people, particularly by the late eighteenth century. Even though Jews mingled vigorously with Christians of various denominations, socially and commercially, their worlds were “largely parallel to, rather than thoroughly intertwined with” Christians, generally drawing the boundary at marriage, which—for both Christians and Jews—was a sacrament typically available only to members baptized or born/converted into the community of faith. This legal or de facto barrier prevented Jews from attaining the social and financial benefits accrued though acquisition of land and capital, as well as political connections. Their exclusion from Christian militias and from holding government offices, as well as their initial ban from public schools, pushed the “principal source of local prestige and patronage” out of their reach.

As in Europe, emancipation for Jews in the Caribbean meant not a release from slavery, as it did for unfree peoples of African and indigenous descent living in the Americas, but the elimination of disabilities and privileges in order to be accorded equal status with other citizens of formative republics. This mandate, which positioned Jews at the very center of the debate about political identities in the emergent nation-states of the era, required them to disassociate themselves from Jewish nationhood and to consider their Jewishness as solely a creed. An important element of this process, epitomized in the emerging Reform movement in Central Europe beginning in the second decade of the nineteenth century, was religious transformation.

Whereas in Europe the Reform movement was formally introduced with an ideological platform tied to the promise of Jewish emancipation, a policy advocating “modernization” or religious innovation never took root in most areas of the Caribbean, and when it did the motivations were entirely different. Reform, generally speaking, entered long-standing Caribbean Jewish communities with a lowercase “r,” if at all. In Suriname, for example, the new practice of synagogue officials to don Christian clerical dress was formally introduced with absolutely no discussion or controversy whatsoever. Departures from Hebrew pronunciation and ritual were both subtle and gradual and were not attached to any political ideology, but rather confusion engendered by clerics trained by different cantors or by an occasional rebellious hazan who departed subtly from a cherished melody or order of prayers and quickly repented. Never were these perceived changes linked to the religious revolutions that divided Central European Jewry beginning in the second decade of the nineteenth century.
The Portuguese communities of the Caribbean seem to have almost entirely succeeded in bypassing these disturbances. Rabbi Isaac M. Wise, the leader of the Reform movement in the United States, once commented that the Portuguese congregation lacked the “awful confusion” of the “old synagogues of Germany and Poland.” Isaac S. Emmanuel, the Salonikan-born leader and lay historian of Curacao’s Portuguese Jewish community, interpreted Wise’s observation in this way: “Portuguese congregations did not need Reform.” The island’s breakaway Reform congregation, Emmanuel writes, was born in 1864 not out of ideological fervor, but rather long-standing family grudges. As evidence, Emmanuel points out that once in their new house of worship the rebel congregation’s older members “found it hard to pray bareheaded and without taleteth.” Isaac Leeser, who maintained “a friendly correspondence” with traditionalist Haham Chumaceiro of Curacao, followed these events closely, judging by the pages of the Occident and correspondence he received from Moses Nathan of St. Thomas in 1864. If this interpretation of religious transformation is both accurate and representative of Caribbean Jews as a whole, it would underscore both the enduring hegemony of traditional Portuguese Jewish culture and the weak appeal of Jewish religious trends from Central Europe, including the ideological and pragmatic changes filtered through the United States in more radical forms.

The close relations between rabbinical leaders in North America and the Caribbean we have just considered can be understood as one of the aftereffects of the Atlantic age. A sizeable minority of letters amassed in the Leeser collection either emanate from the Caribbean or directly reference the region. While the bulk of the Leeser correspondence (totaling about 1,700 letters) hails from the United States and Canada, the Caribbean region (including Jamaica, St. Thomas, Curacao, Barbados, and Venezuela) accounts for the second largest bulk of letters (over 100), suggesting that the Caribbean was of greater importance to Leeser than the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, the German principalities, Hapsburg Empire, and Palestine combined. If Leeser is representative of U.S. Jewish clergymen in general, we may surmise that a quarter of a century after the Atlantic age is said to have eclipsed, the Caribbean region and its Jewish populations remained distinctly on the horizons of U.S. Jewish leaders.

Conclusion: Archival Reflections

Noah Gelfand’s observation that few historians of Jews in seventeenth-century New York have placed that population in a transatlantic perspective applies a fortiori to Jewish communities throughout the Atlantic world. The field of American Jewish history has many basic reasons to integrate historiography’s latest trend. The long and continuous experience of Jews with global dispersion easily lends the Jewish past to a cross-continental and transoceanic approach. For the two millennia preceding the rise of the Atlantic world, Jews were bound to neither territorial sovereignties nor specific locales. The Kaplan Collection, originally conceived as bearing upon the history of Jews in the Americas, fortuitously lends itself to an Atlantic Jewish perspective. Although the collection is heavily oriented toward the post-1825 period—the time most historians agree the
Atlantic era ends—even those relatively few sources representing early America directly speak to some of the main themes that are now emerging as defining the nascent subfield of Atlantic Jewish history. The role of the assembler of an American Jewish collection is in itself a historiographical statement. Although Jews and Jewish communities always lived within a broader context, they also often lived within specificities distinctive to Jews. The ever-expanding Kaplan Collection serves as an ongoing reminder of both broader context and specificity. Its precious documents communicate this relentless message: Atlantic Jewish history cannot be written without archival repositories close at hand.
Notes

1. The epitaph is fully transcribed in Aviva Ben-Ur and Rachel Frankel, Remnant Stones: The Jewish Cemeteries of Suriname: Epitaphs (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 2009), 205. My assumption is that the body was buried on the day of death.
3. Ben-Ur and Frankel, Remnant Stones, 205.
11. The formal end of Iberian Jewry, as marked by the expulsion of the Jews of Navarre, is technically 1498, as discussed in Benjamin R. Gampel, The Last Jews on Iberian Soil: Navarrese Jewry, 1479–1498 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).


24. Mark and da Silva Horta, “Sephardic Communities on Senegal’s Petite Côte.”


32. Gershwind-Bennett Isaac Leeser Digital Repository, University of Pennsylvania Libraries, M. N. Nathan to Isaac Leeser, St. Thomas, May 1, 1848. This letter and subsequent references to Leeser correspondence may be viewed on-line at: http://ubwebser.cajs.upenn.edu/leeser_map/index.html.

33. [No name recorded] to Isaac Leeser, Kingston, Jamaica, May 7, 1849, 7. The Hebrew phrase in parentheses, indicating “the rite of Poland,” was used by many Yiddish-speaking Central European Jews, particularly those “German” Jews from Prussian Poznan. See http://ubwebser.cajs.upenn.edu/documentDisplay.php?id=LSDCBx1FF6_35.


37. Ben-Ur, Jewish Identity in a Slave Society.

38. M. N. Nathan to Isaac Leeser, St. Thomas, 5 August 1847 (“Why do you not start up and effect the same for the Sephardim of whom you are the head?”); see http://ububwebser.cajs.upenn.edu/documentDisplay.php?id=LSSTCAT_item200; David Meldola, to Isaac Leeser, London, May 9, 1851 (“you are ignorant of the state of the present Sephardim congregation…”); see http://ububwebser.cajs.upenn.edu/documentDisplay.php?id=LSDCBx1FF8_42; M. Mayer to Isaac Leeser, Charleston, SC, October 5, 1857 (“What necessity can be shown in Philadelphia for two Sephardim congregations?”; see http://ububwebser.cajs.upenn.edu/documentDisplay.php?id=LSDCBx2FF4_70; Abraham de Sola to Isaac Leeser, Montreal, June 9, 1857 (“I warmly congratulate you on your becoming Hazan of the Synagogue Beth El Emeth Minhag Sephardim”; see http://ububwebser.cajs.upenn.edu/documentDisplay.php?id=LSDCBx2FF4_53; M. Mayer to Isaac Leeser, Charleston, August 10, 1859 (“Have you seen and read Dr Kayserling’s work: ‘Sephardim. Romanische Poesien der Juden in Spanien?’”; see http://ububwebser.cajs.upenn.edu/documentDisplay.php?id=LSDCBx2FF6_21); M. N. Nathan to Isaac Leeser, St. Thomas, December 11, 1863 (“There has been some demand for your prayer books (Sephardim) Pentateuch, and small English Bibles”; see http://ububwebser.cajs.upenn.edu/documentDisplay.php?id=LSSTCAT_item193).


42. Ben-Ur, Jewish Identity in a Slave Society.


45. Ben-Ur and Frankel, Remnant Stones, 40. A slave society (in contrast to a society with slaves) is one
whose economic undergirding is unfree labor whose absence would cause the entire economy to collapse.


49. Ben-Ur, Jewish Identity in a Slave Society, Isaac S. Emmanuel and Suzanne A. Emmanuel, History of the Jews of the Netherlands Antilles (Cincinnati, OH: American Jewish Archives, 1970), 1:90, 97 (only the English translation of the term is given).

50. Ben-Ur, Jewish Identity in a Slave Society.

51. Ibid.

52. Ibid.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid.


57. Ben-Ur, Jewish Identity in a Slave Society.


60. Ibid., 111.


62. Ben-Ur, Jewish Identity in a Slave Society.


64. Emmanuel and Emmanuel, History of the Jews of the Netherlands Antilles, 1:511. I assume I. S. Emmanuel, not his coauthor wife, is speaking because he is autoreferential in this section of their book.

65. Ibid., 1:378. See also pp. 380–381.


67. The end date of the Atlantic period varies among scholars; some even date the end of the era to 1888, the year the last American colony (Brazil) abolished slavery.