Port Jews or a People of the Diaspora? A Critique of the Port Jew Concept

C. S. Monaco, Oxford Brookes University
Port Jews or a People of the Diaspora? A Critique of the Port Jew Concept

C. S. Monaco

Abstract

This article offers a critical examination of the port Jew concept that was first introduced in the late 1990s. The port Jew “social type” has been construed as an alternate path to modernity, a phenomenon that was distinct from the European Haskalah and intrinsic to the supposedly liberal environment of port towns and cities. Drawing on a body of historical evidence (primarily from the Dutch and British Caribbean), this article questions key characteristics of the port Jew thesis and argues that a diaspora framework is better suited for conceptualizing the Jewish Atlantic world.

Key words: port Jews, diaspora, ethnicity, modernity

The emergence of the newly defined port Jew social type is indicative of the changing dynamics within Jewish historical studies. Not only is belated attention being paid to the Sephardi diaspora, but the social science model is also gaining ground. Two anthologies and several international academic conferences devoted to port Jews attest to considerable scholarly attention from across the Atlantic world and beyond. The term “port Jew” was first introduced by Lois Dubin and then formally conceptualized by David Sorkin in the late 1990s, but it has assumed wide acceptance only in the past several years. The original model’s most novel tenets—which include the proposition that Sephardi merchants functioned as harbingers of modernity while remaining utterly detached from the European Haskalah—has largely gone unchallenged. To be sure, both Sorkin and Dubin are themselves split between two distinct ap-
proaches, and others have uncovered some exceptions to the model. But scholars have yet to question the validity of the social type, and, though Dubin is less doctrinaire than Sorkin, her recently revised concept of port Jewry leaves Sorkin’s thesis intact.²

As it happens, my research into the life and times of Moses E. Levy (1782–1854), an elite Sephardi merchant turned social activist and religious reformer, revealed evidence that questions some characteristics of the port Jew type.³ Levy’s 20-year career in the Caribbean, together with his European travels and business networks, resulted in a sophisticated worldview that was much under the sway of the Haskalah. In fact, Levy placed his greatest trust in those fellow elites who also followed German reform and were ready to accept, in whole or in part, Levy’s own reform agenda. In the 1820s, Levy’s goal of founding a Haskalah-inspired agrarian refuge and educational institution for immigrant Jews in the United States drew the support of various “Enlightened Brethren,” including such figures as Mordecai M. Noah, Moses L. M. Peixotto (hazan of New York City’s Shearith Israel synagogue), and the influential Myers family in Norfolk, Virginia. In England in 1827–28, Levy assumed the unique role of Jewish activist. He led hundreds of London Jews in a series of public protests directed at the antisemitic policies of Tsar Nicholas I, an unprecedented solidarity movement that garnered broad international attention.⁴ Nine years earlier, however, his talents as a mediator and reform advocate had come to the fore in the Caribbean port of Willemstad, Curaçao, during one of the most fractious episodes in the history of the island’s Jews.⁵ The case of Curaçao is especially noteworthy because it was there, in the economic and spiritual center of the New World “Portuguese Jewish Nation,” that Levy felt the most isolated and where he surmised that Jews lagged behind “a century or two to any European congregation.”⁶ Not only does Levy, as an individual, contradict the prevailing notion of port Jews, but his observations concerning this guarded community raises questions for the concept as a whole.

One of the central arguments of Sorkin and Dubin is that ports were relatively benign places for Jews—that gentile economic self-interest consistently trumped deep-seated antisemitic prejudices. This assertion overlooks conflicting evidence, including a legacy of “popular hatred” toward Jews in the British Caribbean (to cite a leading eighteenth-century historian of Jamaica).⁷ Although metropolitan notions of commercial utility did inspire England to encourage Jewish migration to its Atlantic colonies, on arrival Jews met with hostility from Anglo-colonists. This faction petitioned to have these descendants of “the crucifiers of the blessed Jesus”⁸ removed from the
islands because they were deemed unscrupulous competitors who were directly encroaching on trades and livelihoods. The exigencies of the British port towns in Jamaica, Barbados, and Nevis during the early modern era were of a radically different character than that of the port of London and underscore the difficulties of maintaining the legitimacy of any single, uniform type, especially within a transnational, Atlantic world context.

Thus, the concept of a social type might be restrictive. The term harks back to nineteenth-century sociologist Émile Durkheim’s theory of collective representation. Distinctions between a social type and a stereotype or cliché can be laden with subjective distinctions between so-called productive members of society and those who reside outside one’s own social sphere. “You appear to choose your social type,” notes one critic, “whereas you are condemned to a stereotype.” Recent work in both anthropology and sociology avoids social types, and the term has gradually retired from the lexicon. It should be further noted that, unlike the familiar “court Jew” (Hofjude), an exemplar of Jewish modernity, the term “port Jew” is without historical precedent and remains (as both Sorkin and Dubin admit) an exclusively modern creation.

Over the past two decades, a cognitive reorientation has taken place in the social sciences. Categorization is beginning to give way to subjectivist approaches where, for instance, ethnicity is understood in terms of individual attitudes, beliefs, and identification rather than a classification of shared traits and commonalities as in the port Jew model. The current trajectory is away from universal classification to a study of the local. I agree with theorists who conceive of ethnicity not as an object or entity but rather as a way of looking at the world—a cognitive rather than objectivist orientation. This article will pursue these and other ramifications of the port Jew concept as well as trace the development of this emerging field and review its current status. Ultimately I believe an entirely new model must be adopted, one that discards types and is based, instead, on recent theories of diaspora.

**Definition and Overview**

As envisioned by Sorkin, port Jews were a social type of the early modern period (a time frame that he broadens to include the early nineteenth century). Sorkin’s thesis applies the term to certain elite Sephardi and Italian Jews who resided in seaports of the Mediterranean, the Atlantic coast of Europe, the American eastern seaboard,
and the Caribbean. This term should not, according to Sorkin, be equated with the phrase “Jews in port cities.” Once outside the parameters of time, place, class, and ethnic/religious subtype, general observations about all Jews who happen to live in port cities consist of a “virtually unlimited subject” that may or may not have anything to do with Sorkin’s original hypothesis. By comparison, Dubin is far more flexible and is willing to extend the port Jew phenomenon throughout the world. Whereas Sorkin deals only with a select few, Dubin focuses on a “port Jewry” or a community ethic that consists of both rich and poor, Sephardim and Ashkenazim, and extends well beyond the early modern.

In 1999, Sorkin proposed five characteristics of port Jews in his influential essay “The Port Jew: Notes Toward a Social Type.” Though only 11 pages long, it posited formal attributes and advocated a specific methodology in a way that subsequent studies have not duplicated. Assigned “classic” status by historian David Cesarani, Sorkin’s article is considered integral to port Jew studies even though many scholars in this field have shifted toward Dubin’s more inclusive orientation. The amorphous topic of “Jews who live in port cities,” which Sorkin has disregarded as an essentially boundless subject, seems to have predominated. Nevertheless, Gemma Romain, co-editor of a recent anthology, summarized the situation in this way:

Although the term [port Jew] has thus been reshaped and redefined, most [view] this as part of the term’s evolution rather than a criticism of the foundations of the term. Sorkin does however make a convincing case for keeping the original conception as specific to the early modern Sephardi diaspora.

Consequently, the classic type is viewed as a valued cornerstone for future study and is deemed essential for all research on the Sephardim that falls into Sorkin’s early-modern to early-nineteenth-century time frame. I have summarized his five characteristics as follows:

**Migration and Commerce.** Port Jews took advantage of their own distinct Sephardi trade network that linked the ancient Mediterranean routes with the emerging Atlantic economy. Trade and migration were facilitated by an extensive network of business associates often linked by kinship. All aspects of commerce were significantly enhanced by this Sephardi network.

**Valuation of Commerce.** Gentile community leaders were willing to put aside inherent religious prejudices in order to attract the increased wealth and commercial opportunities that Sephardi mer-
chants could bring to a seaport environment. Therefore, a utilitarian approach predominated, much in the same manner as the more recognized court Jew phenomenon.

Legal Status. Sephardi port settlements, in both the Old and the New Worlds, were never subject to the rigid dictates of Jewry laws that typified Ashkenazi settlements in continental Europe. Port Jews were afforded liberal legal protections and rights. Technically speaking, they were delineated as commercial corporations and not as autonomous communities.

Reeducation and Haskalah avant la lettre. Having lived many years as Conversos, or crypto-Jews, Sephardim eventually were permitted to publicly reclaim their Judaism. This process necessitated a reeducation component in which study of Hebrew and the Bible went hand in hand with a general knowledge of languages and a more cosmopolitan cultural milieu. In other words, Sephardi port Jews did not need a Haskalah (or Jewish Enlightenment) to become full members of the modern world.

Identity and Belief. Many descendants of Conversos were lax in their adherence to Jewish law, but they nevertheless maintained a strong sense of ethnic identity. This community of eager philanthropists embraced a heightened notion of “men of the nation.” Port Jews, independent in outlook, often questioned rabbinical authority, much like their court Jew counterparts. Consequently, cosmopolitan Sephardim easily integrated their brand of Judaism with secular culture.

Sorkin presents this distinctive Sephardi experience as an alternate route to modernity and ultimately Jewish emancipation. Similarly, though Dubin does not restrict the port Jew model to the Sephardim, her acceptance of Sorkin’s type leads her to reach many similar conclusions, including an emphasis on “the Sephardic role in the inception of Jewish modernity.” In contrast to the Ashkenazi-dominated historiography, with its inevitable focus on the Berlin Haskalah (along with its philosophical adherents, the maskilim), Sephardi port Jews are conceived as attaining a similar outlook and lifestyle by following a distinct, parallel path—a Haskalah avant la lettre. Although Sorkin’s essay seeks to establish the legitimacy of a hitherto unrecognized social type, his initial three categories actually focus on the civil, legal, and commercial environment of port communities, characteristics that do not apply to a collective identity or social type. Only the final two categories delineate a “type” in any conventional sense. Furthermore, Sorkin’s methodological claims (which will be analyzed further on), especially his contention that such seminal concepts as the western Sephardi diaspora as well as what he refers to as “ethnic self-understanding” are both of “limited
heuristic value,” are left unelaborated, his subtitle forewarns, as mere “notes.”

Dubin has lately avoided the term “social type” in regard to her own alternate approach, preferring “port Jew concept” instead, but she has retained the former term exclusively for Sorkin’s variant. This particular wording stemmed from a need to differentiate between the two approaches and did not arise from any objection to social types. Even so, Sorkin has expressed his concern that others may be “diluting the historical specificity of the social type” by using “port Jew” indiscriminately. Indeed, though this term has now become synonymous with this field as a whole, its usage fails to clarify an area of study that has become intertwined with two differing views.

Dubin has introduced certain classicist elements to her expanded version of port Jewry. Influenced by a contemporary description of the merchants of nineteenth-century Trieste “as pursuing their ‘steady work... in the shade of the caduceus of Mercury and the trident of Neptune,’ that is, as inspired and protected by the gods of commerce and the sea,” Dubin reconfigured her concept to meet the needs of expanding parameters. Mercury therefore represents “movement and speed, of both foot and mind” and Neptune serves as the iconic image of the sea (with Jews as, for example, shipbuilders, stevedores, and international merchants). Concerned that her earlier collaboration with Sorkin, with their mutual emphasis on ports rather than trading networks, may have minimized certain inherent qualities of movement, such as the role Jews played as boundary crossers and cross-cultural brokers, Dubin turned to mythology to evoke the qualities of “movement, fluidity, travel, [and] strangeness.” A dual focus was also needed, she adds, to place emphasis “both on the locality and on the larger networks at sea and on land.” Rather than placing port Jew studies within a diaspora framework, Dubin views diaspora studies as an adjunct, just one of many disciplines on which scholars should draw. As a result, this newly retooled and rather indeterminate concept remains unencumbered by any specific theoretical framework—with the exception, of course, of Sorkin’s social type. Dubin and Sorkin have thus configured a Janus-faced model, an amalgamation of both a nebulous port Jewry and a more stringently conceived type.

At first glance, the concept of port Jewry may present a welcome counterpoint to what Sorkin refers to as the “Ashkenazification” of modern Jewish history. Surely some Sephardi merchants achieved a level of acceptance within certain seaport communities that would have been impossible in most of continental Europe (excluding the elite circle of court Jews). The fact that this component of Jewish history has
been inadequately explored by scholars follows the same pattern of neglect regarding the Sephardim as a whole. Some have acknowledged the similarity between the port Jew paradigm and certain topics expressed in Paul Gilroy's influential *The Black Atlantic*. In turn, this work owes a partial debt of gratitude to Jewish scholarship and culture. As Gilroy observed, the very term "diaspora," with its themes of suffering and displacement, is intrinsically Jewish. It should be stressed, however, that each model evolved independently from the other, and neither Gilroy nor Sorkin include any reference to one another.

Yet Black Atlantic and port Jew studies share a common focus on the interpretive and transformative role of seaports. Characteristics such as transience and liminality, previously seen in a negative light, are now heralded as positive attributes. Gilroy's counter-cultural formulation, with its alternate view of modernity, is of obvious relevance to port Jew scholars. What was formerly assumed inferior, as one historian reminds us, is now proudly "held aloft to trump [all] abusers." Undeniable passions have found expression in both models, a reflection of empowerment long denied. But, unlike Gilroy's "double consciousness" perspective with its inherent alienation from the European mainstream, the model of the port Jew never contests modernity. Rather, it becomes linked to it and merely posits an alternate method of arrival. Given this outlook, the case for "Haskalah avant la lettre" becomes especially problematic, as the following historical case study suggests.

**Incident on Curaçao**

As indicated above, the details concerning Moses Levy's extended stay in Willemstad, Curaçao, in 1819 raise many issues vis-à-vis the port Jew model and offer a factual counterpoint to more theoretical concerns. With the largest synagogue in the hemisphere, Curaçao held special prominence and was considered the virtual center of the Jewish Caribbean from the late seventeenth century onward. Curaçaoan Jews maintained cultural and economic links throughout North and South America, Europe, and numerous Caribbean port communities, and they generously contributed to the founding and support of distant congregations. Surely, if the port Jew model is as universal as its originators claim, then its tenets must hold true here. Indeed, as one historian characterized it, Willemstad Jews were "port Jews *par excellence.""

Levy's observations offer a rare look at this preeminent port community. Although originally of Moroccan, "Old Sephardi" ancestry, Levy was easily accepted into the Portuguese Jewish community by virtue of
his marriage and family relations in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, his mul-
tilingual background, and his Sephardic court Jew lineage. Furthermore, as a major supplier to General Pablo Morillo's expeditionary forces in nearby Venezuela and a trusted confidant of numerous high-ranking Spanish colonial officials in the Caribbean, "Don Moisés Levy" was at the apex of a flourishing merchant career. During May and June 1819, he awaited the arrival of a large shipment of foodstuffs that was intended for the Spanish army. Levy had already resolved that his days as a businessman would soon end in order to devote all his resources to his philanthropic agenda—his "Sacred Cause of Reform." While anticipating his long-overdue shipment, he interacted with the island's Jews and promoted an ambitious plan for establishing secular schools for the local youth. Levy recorded his impressions of the Curaçaoan community in a series of letters to his friend and fellow reform advocate, Samuel Myers of Virginia, but until recently these documents remained overlooked in a Norfolk archive. Levy's credibility as a keen and accurate observer is well established; numerous details of his stay, including descriptions of a troublesome hazan, are corroborated by such sources as History of the Jews of the Netherlands Antilles, written by Curaçaos Sephardic rabbi, Isaac S. Emmanuel. In his letters to Myers, Levy presents himself as a fellow modernist. He constantly sets mental boundaries in order to differentiate his "progressive" outlook from those whom he viewed as being mired in the past (the non-modern). Thus, Levy's often judgmental remarks, once distinguished, actually serve as a valuable gauge with which to assess the island's Jews and their cultural and intellectual disengagement from the so-called "Enlightened Brethren" of the day.

"In no part of the world," Levy wrote after first arriving on the island, "have I seen the Jews appear to have as much weight in the community." In fact, in a most atypical scenario, the port closed for business not only throughout Passover but during all other Jewish holidays as well. By Levy's estimation, Jews constituted one-third of the population but still held half the wealth of the Dutch colony and three-quarters of all positions in commercial management. Doubtless, as Levy remarked, the closing of port business was a practical necessity: "The Jews are the principal Commercial people & the drudgery of the Christian Houses of Commerce is conducted by them." Adding to its reputation as being the most "polished" segment of island society, the Portuguese Jewish community had adopted the clothing, comportment, and languages of well-heeled segments of society. Though struck by the robust Jewish presence, Levy's outlook rapidly shifted after he discovered a community in the throes of social disintegration. Far from being a unified class of cosmopolitans who tempered their Judaism with restraint and phi-
lanthropy (per Sorkin's model), Willemstad Jews were caught in a downward spiral of infighting. This was the antithesis of Levy's Haskalah-inspired mission of ensuring unity.

Trouble ensued after the Amsterdam "mother community" dispatched an idiosyncratic hazan, Jeosuah M. Piza, to Curaçao's synagogue Mikveh Israel. Piza, in Levy's estimation, was "cringing, malicious, spiteful & mean," but most congregants considered these deficits as minor compared to his liturgical "innovations." In this case, the hazan intentionally used an unfamiliar Hebrew pronunciation during the traditional blessing of the wine, preferring Hagafen, the variant spoken in Amsterdam, instead of the long-standing island usage of Hagefen, thereby provoking intense indignation. Nothing other than mere habit as well as a preference for "all that is old," according to Levy, was offered as justification for either pronunciation. The synagogue leaders or Mahamad backed the hazan, a decision that emboldened Piza, who then stressed the contentious word to an even greater degree. These actions embittered most of the congregants and led to the formation of two antagonistic camps as well as to a boycott of the synagogue. Given the rather trivial nature of this dispute, Levy could not resist invoking a strong note of sarcasm in his letters to Myers, referring to each warring faction as "Gefens" and "Gafens."

In response to the rapidly escalating imbroglio, the elderly "Gefen" leaders, Abraham de Mordechay Senior and Isaac de Abraham de Marchena, sought Levy's counsel and pleaded for his intervention. Most strangers to the island (Jews included) were kept at a discreet distance from the insular Jewish community, so it is exceptional that these patriarchs embraced the Moroccan-born Levy and valued him as a compassionate and "Benevolent Stranger." Most notably, the lines that actually divided Curaçaoan Jews were based on beliefs that personal honor had been slighted; petty bickering masked a much graver contest for the maintenance of communal standing and prestige. By virtue of Piza's deliberate affront, Senior and Marchena considered the hazan "an impostor with Ecclesiastic decoration." By backing this supposed charlatan, the Mahamad, led by the wealthy merchant Moise Cardoze, not only delivered grave insult to communal elders but defamed their "Holy House" as well. In a type of dramaturgy deemed vital to the ancient code of honor, any discussion between the offended parties was judged "useless and inadequate" and would fail to meet the requisite standards of what they termed the "mantle of honor." This theatrical repartee adhered to known parameters and became an all-consuming passion. Poverty, vanquishment, and even death were deemed preferable to dishonor. "Neutral" outsiders of
suitable rank and disposition, such as Levy, were thus at a distinct premium within this rigidly prescribed culture.\textsuperscript{54}

As Emmanuel further described the incident, family clans or family lineages lined up against foes. Some congregants were excommunicated and many willingly renounced their faith (with suitable legal loopholes so they could be reinstated later). Shunning among the rival groups even extended to the cemetery where bodies were exhumed and reburied elsewhere. Police were stationed inside the synagogue. And, a petition was fashioned seeking justice from the Dutch king. Thus, the largest Jewish community in the hemisphere stood very close to self-annihilation.\textsuperscript{35}

Despite the praise bestowed on Levy by communal leaders, his letters reflected a desire to rid himself of the irrational, petty forces that surrounded him. Levy was thoroughly indoctrinated in the redemptive potential of the Enlightenment and acted accordingly. Notably, his solution to the problem—formal arbitration with each side awarded equal footing—was successfully adopted a few years after Levy departed Curacao, the only change being the presence of government negotiators. Mediation was never part of the island legal or religious tradition, and so this form of adjudication was a genuine innovation (actually one that Levy adapted from the Danish legal practice on St. Thomas). As an innate diplomat and urbane Freemason, Levy was frequently able to transcend his limitations as both a Jew and an outsider and was especially adroit in dealing with the gentile elite. Thus, before leaving Curacao, he met with the governor's secretary, Willem Prince, at the local Masonic lodge, at which time Levy convinced Prince that mediation would serve as the best means to resolve the conflict.\textsuperscript{56} Prince subsequently played a central role in bringing the two factions together. Intracommunal strife, however, was by no means unique, and in previous instances where the rulings of the Mahamad proved futile, disputes had been settled either by the unilateral decrees of the Amsterdam synagogue or by the governor and Island Council.\textsuperscript{57} In the end, Piza (as one might guess) was dismissed. Honor was maintained to the end, and it required the formal destruction of all official records of the affair as well as the stipulation that each side would be restrained from claiming victory.\textsuperscript{58} Levy, regardless of his private reservations vis-à-vis the island community, trusted that the union of all Jews was sacrosanct. He therefore emerged here as a cultural broker, straddling the boundary between the traditional Sephardic culture of Curacao and the values of the European Enlightenment.

The very notion of modernity, no matter how one defines it, is acutely
at odds with the scene that has been presented. A collective reverence for long-deceased ancestors, for clan-like, family allegiances, for aristocratic pretensions, and for passionate sensitivities to a personal honor code are all characteristics that run counter to the modernist claims of port jw scholars. A formal pronouncement from Senior and Marchena, addressed to Levy in Portuguese, also aids in understanding the social dynamics involved. Both men admired Levy, believing him to be "a compassionate being from overseas" who came "to preside like an angel of peace, as a mediator between the majority of its congregants and its Regents!" But the authors also manifested a staunchly conservative rhetoric in which society (the Portuguese Jewish Nation) was conceived as a righteous force that precedes and supplants the individual in time and space. Honor was paramount, and the concept of being one's own master (individualism) could not be posited, let alone realized, within this hierarchical structure. As in many traditional societies, social mores were bound to one unquestioned doxa—what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has defined as the "fundamental acceptance of the established order situated outside the reach of critique." Any deviation, no matter how slight, could not be tolerated. This way of thinking, according to Bourdieu, represents nothing less than the "ultimate form of conformism." Thus the "Gefen" elders may have perceived Levy as a divine messenger of sorts, but worthy intentions alone could not ease the burden of dishonor that continued to weigh on the discontented faction.

From his modernist perspective, Levy privately regarded most Willemstad Jews as beyond the pale, though he noted some individuals who, though uneducated, possessed "a good deal of natural sense" as well as "simplicity of manners & goodness of heart." Hope for improvement resided within the "rising generation," but only if they were afforded an adequate, secular education. Not surprisingly, given Levy's orientation, even the most privileged Jews, with their mansions, fine clothes, and African-Caribbean mistresses, were considered a profound disappointment. In fact, he despaired after discovering that the few genuinely learned and "Scientific men," including the sole Jewish physician, were either deceased or had left the island. Any mutual exchange of ideas was thus extremely limited, given that formal education, beyond the most rudimentary schooling, was virtually nonexistent. Levy did observe that some Jews were at least capable of composing commercial letters in several languages and that the "better sort" had managed to "understand the mysteries of Book-Keeping." All in all, a rigid pattern predominated on Curaçao, one that existed apart, in many ways, from the prevailing European-centered intellectual standard.
Relations with the Dutch Protestant community also prove instructive. High-ranking Dutch Creoles held themselves aloof and regarded even the wealthiest and most reputable Jewish residents as social outcasts. Like their Sephardic contemporaries, the Protestant elite were frequently caught in their own, seemingly endless, internecine squabbles—dubbed by one author as “futile prestige conflicts.” Unfalteringly conservative and intrinsically insecure, they held all civil-administrative positions on the island and were particularly sensitive to their perceived inferior status vis-à-vis the Dutch metropole. Similarly, most Jews segregated themselves within the oldest section of Willemstad—the walled and fortified section of “Punda.” They retained Portuguese as the communal language, and endogamy (with traditional arranged marriages) was rigidly enforced by the all-pervasive famiyas. In addition to social patterns within Willemstad, relatively small numbers of both Jewish and Protestant elite maintained separate plantation lifestyles, with elegant country mansions or landhuizen, replete with slaves. Plantations existed apart as a kind of vestigial status symbol, since the dry and infertile soil had precluded any expectations of profit. Remarkably, this “fixed social map” remained constant for 250 years, and both Jews and the Protestant elite maintained their mutual, self-enforced segregation long after full citizenship was awarded to the former in 1825. For verification that any group can function within the parameters of a stringent honor code and maintain the outward trappings of gentility and affluence, one has only to look to the distinctive behavioral patterns of the antebellum American South, the precise location where many Sephardim immigrated and thrived.

The core “honor-shame” ethic remained in full force for all segments of Curaçaoan society. But island Jews were especially ensconced in this behavior and thus followed the code to its logical extremes. This ancient ethic frequently bound regional cultures together, but the same honor code that evolved to prevent disorder could occasionally turn on itself and lead to the very chaos that most feared. Indeed, as sociologists have noted, the preservation of a strong core sense of self constitutes a potent force and can even propel individuals to willingly risk death.

Emmanuel’s extensive account of the Piza incident was itself a daring and controversial departure from the Curaçaoan norm, because any mention of communal strife was contrary to local mores. He further observed that the Piza episode followed a common motif on the island—it was simply one among many intense feuds, some involving street fighting, whose roots could be traced to at least the 1740s. Economic forces may have aggravated tensions, at least during
1819, when commerce in Willemstad experienced a pronounced downturn. Indeed, in Levy's estimation, Jewish factionalism and insecurity originated in deep-seated jealousy of the synagogue elite's wealth and prestige, since the "Gefen" bloc apparently possessed far fewer resources. "The Rich men & the few talented among them," Levy wrote, "look upon themselves as so much above the lower class that they draw the envy & malice of their inferiors." Even the middle classes upheld aristocratic airs based on family traditions of nobility, a situation that only exacerbated feelings of insult. Nevertheless, intracommunal squabbling was hardly limited to Curaçao alone. Jewish infighting, albeit to a far lesser degree, was fairly endemic among the major (and more liberal) port communities in North America and, indeed, was a frequent aspect of the "mother community" of Amsterdam. Nor was communal discord restricted to the Sephardim. The Ashkenazim of early modern Europe demonstrated similar upheavals in response to arbitrary actions by the oligarchs, sometimes resulting in direct appeals to the monarchy.

Let us review the classic port Jew "type" within the context of Levy's interaction with the Jews of Curaçao. As stated previously, Sorkin's first three categories (migration and commerce, valuation of commerce, and legal status) do not strictly pertain to any social type but are attributes of the port environment in which these Jews resided. These aspects of port life are evident in varying degrees within Willemstad. The last two categories (re-education and Haskalah avant la lettre, and identity and belief) are of most immediate interest. Regarding the former, there is no indication that the Sephardi merchant elite on the island sought or maintained cultural-intellectual involvement with their Protestant counterparts. In fact, the opposite was true. And, as we have seen, education was a neglected concern. To be sure, in the late seventeenth century, Curaçaoan Jews once benefited from the labors of Rabbi Josiahu Pardo, including the founding of Etz Haim Yeshiva (inspired by the institution of the same name in Amsterdam). In the eighteenth century, Conversos from elsewhere in the Americas actually traveled to Curaçao for circumcision and for instruction in Judaism. Yet whatever foundation may have been set previously, by the early nineteenth century the Sephardi community was firmly at odds with the very notion of a Haskalah avant la lettre. In regard to "identity and belief," it would be difficult to envision the same island factions discussed here as capable of abiding any deviation from the norm. And, as has been stated, entrenched infighting of long duration contradicts idealistic claims of communal altruism and unity. Lastly, Sorkin assumes that port Jews inherently possessed a questioning and skeptical disposition,
an independent outlook that could occasionally lead to such notorious freethinkers as Spinoza or Uriel da Costa. Levy actually comes closest to this type, so we are left with his testimony that he failed to locate any kindred spirits. Ultimately, not only did the Jews of Willemstad fall remarkably short of the port Jew ideal but also their everyday lives were antithetical to the type.

Despite Levy’s intellectual peripheralization of Curaçaoan Jews, the broader position of the Mikveh Israel congregation within the New World Sephardi diaspora paralleled the role of Amsterdam in the Old World. Indeed, Curaçao, according to historian Jonathan Israel, was “the hub around which . . . all the other Jewish communities in the New World revolved.” It was, to draw on the terminology of social anthropologists, a “sacred center” of high value and was therefore unrivaled among other Jewish communities in the hemisphere. This prestigious ranking was somewhat eroded by the time of Levy’s arrival, but, because of the island’s diminishing commercial importance, the immigration of Curaçaoan Jews to the United States and other locales in the Americas and the Caribbean reinforced Curaçao’s position as a diaspora homeland in its own right. In 1819, the port town of Willemstad contained the most populous (2,000) and most culturally and religiously valued Sephardi community in the hemisphere. Especially given this high standing, the dearth of supporting evidence for Sorkin’s type becomes even more striking.

**Excluding Ethnicity**

Many Curaçaoan Jews shared common origins within the “mother community” of Amsterdam, but the language and culture of the diasporic “Portuguese Jewish Nation” was an even greater cohesive force. The phrase *os da naçaô*, literally “those of the nation,” conveyed a seldom-spoken meaning. It evoked a distinctive drama and historical legacy deemed unfathomable to outsiders and based on the feudal patterns of the Iberian Peninsula. Medieval Spain assumed cardinal importance in the Sephardi imagination. For example, famiya dominated medieval Jewish life, as it did for Christians, and, because each clan possessed a different honor and status grading, conflict often ensued. After large numbers of Spanish Jews fled to Portugal following the Reconquista of 1492, long-established clan rivalries continued as an integral facet of the Converso diaspora. These bilateral kinship networks were headed by patriarchs and functioned, among other things, as corporate business entities. Famiyas perme-
ated all aspects of daily life in both Amsterdam and Curaçao—indeed the entire Portuguese Jewish diaspora. Ethnic origins offer much by way of explanation and context. One would naturally expect, therefore, that port Jew scholars would have examined the Sephardi ethnos in totality, but there has been little progress in this direction. For instance, though much has been written about global trade networks, little notice has been given to kinship system that constituted the basis of this trade network. Topics such as intra- and intercommunal strife, arranged marriages, concubinage, and a rigid honor code are barely touched on, if at all. Indeed, many of the unique features of the Sephardim that Jonathan Sarna has called the “tribal aspects of Judaism” are scarce within the port Jew anthologies. Only after returning to Sorkin’s original essay can one begin to fathom this situation: the methodology does not allow the fullest examination:

Those categories are primarily ethnic and are therefore of limited heuristic value. Instead, we need to extract from the experience of the “men of the Nation” in that sephardi diaspora a social type that can be placed alongside the court Jew and maskil and that will enable us to reconceptualize the process by which Jews entered the modern world.

To exclude Sephardic ethnicity, as Sorkin suggests, because it does not fit the “type” is a startling admission. He offers no theoretical objections, or any other explanation for that matter, aside from a perceived “limited value.”

Following this methodology, Sorkin relegates the scholarship of Yosef Kaplan, Miriam Bodian, Daniel Swetschinski, and other key historians of the Sephardim of early modern Amsterdam under the heading “ethnic self-understanding,” and so all are judged irrelevant to the port Jew type. Because of Sorkin’s reluctance to state what he finds objectionable with the subject of these historians, a brief summary of the period with special weight given to these proscribed authors is merited. My intention is to bring to light expressly that which has been overlooked by the port Jew thesis and not to present a comprehensive examination of the Jews of early modern Amsterdam, the complexities of which are far beyond the scope of this article. What follows is an illustrative synthesis of the leading proponents of Sephardic “self-understanding.”

Well before Jews were expelled from Spain, as Bodian observes, “Spanish Jews had developed a collective image of themselves as aristocrats, priding themselves on their purported descent from the tribe of
Judah, that is, the royal tribe. By the time of their arrival in Amsterdam, these former crypto-Jews—many of whom were the forebears of the Jews of Curaçao—not only reestablished a previously hidden Judaism but simultaneously asserted a cherished Iberian culture. This creative blending of Iberian values and rabbinic Judaism constituted a reinvention of ethnicity unequaled in the Jewish world, according to Swetschinski. As historian Anna Foa describes the scene:

There is no doubt... that Portuguese Jewish cultural life characteristically accentuated the importance of blood and lineage during these years. In this regard, it first of all evoked memories of age-old Spanish Jewish myths of supremacy and nobility. Second, it reflected the Jews' long involvement with Spanish culture and their assimilation of the values that inspired the anti-Jewish defense of purity of blood on the Iberian Peninsula. Those Portuguese who reverted to Judaism appeared now to revive those myths.

Accusations of blood impurity were inverted, and Jews proclaimed their bloodlines were untainted, indeed exceptionally noble—thus the original concept of limpieza de sangre (purity of blood) was turned on its head. Social hierarchy even extended to collective memories of martyrdom, with the most prestige awarded to family members who suffered the auto-da-fé, maintaining their Judaism to the end. Any sense of bitterness toward the Inquisition diminished, and a romanticized past merged with memorials to heroic, agonizing deaths. Thus, a peculiar "martyrology" actually reinforced "Portuguese" or Hispanic identification. The practice of incorporating certain aspects of the Jewish aristocratic tradition persisted for many years—indeed, even twentieth-century genealogies continued to boast of links to "the Portuguese-Jewish nobility of Amsterdam." Because the Dutch capital was devoid of any preexisting Jewish communities during the early phase of Jewish immigration, these New Jews were not required to make political or religious concessions and so were free to retain and develop an even more pronounced Iberian gestalt than other former Converso communities.

Furthermore, a noticeable laxity developed toward religious practice, and many felt free to redefine their Judaism as a religion of rituals and observance that did not necessarily intrude on one's lifestyle. This characteristic, according to Kaplan, reflected the background of formerly baptized, nonpracticing Jews not previously imbued with a halakhic tradition, and it did not signify a trend toward modernity as some have claimed. In addition to any number of differences that
stood between the Sephardi elite’s conception of bom Judesmo (good or “proper” Judaism) and traditional Judaism, the concept of a transcendent “holy” people (the nation) is most remarkable. The end result set mental and physical boundaries, rather than relinquished them, and the Portuguese Nation persisted in delineating itself from secular society at large. Although the Sephardim held diverse opinions and were sometimes prone to infighting, they managed to retain formal communal cohesion and distanced themselves from the social fabric of the Dutch Republic. This stance continued as late as 1796, when attempts by the government to integrate Jews into a modern Dutch state were met with vehement and overwhelming disapproval by synagogue leaders. “The political principles of modern European states,” notes Bodian, “were deeply antithetical to the ideological and sociological underpinnings of ‘Portuguese’ religio-ethnic solidarity.” At the same time, however, there was a faction of Dutch maskilim who were quite willing to defy the status quo in order to champion emancipation, a portent of the general assimilation yet to come. But the active stance or claim of difference manifested by the majority at that time is the precise characteristic that sociologists use to define any group as a diaspora community—a distinguishing feature that is at odds with the portjew concept.

Despite rigorous ethnic boundaries, the Amsterdam Sephardim contributed greatly to the cultural, intellectual, and commercial achievements of the Dutch Republic, achievements that far exceeded their Ashkenazi counterparts. It should be mentioned, however, that the strict discipline and conformity to the ideal standard of bom Judesmo, which has been described as an all-restrictive yoke, did not include the Sephardi poor who were cast off and stigmatized as unwanted deportees. Thus, not everyone could have possibly expected to evolve into a refined upper-class, a gente política. Cultural distinctions between life in the metropolis and the colonial ports, though a familiar theme among historians of the Atlantic world, have yet to be fully developed within the portjew literature. Indeed, I would suggest that any adherence to a bounded, unitary model, such as the portjew concept, would naturally resist any independent pursuit of divergences from the norm. Nonetheless, local variations within the Portuguese Jewish Nation have only recently been studied in any detail. Just as the elite Sephardi merchants of London—sometimes referred to as “semi-Jews”—were more assimilated into the upper-class stratum than their Amsterdam counterparts, further research may prove that a more conservative faction developed in the Netherlands Antilles.
If the traditional features of Curaçaoan Jews are compared with the “self understanding” of the Amsterdam Sephardim, obvious disparities as well as similarities surface. From sociological and anthropological perspectives, and given that we are dealing with a single western Sephardi diaspora, any sense of ethnic continuity that may have persisted throughout the centuries and in different locales should not be an unexpected phenomenon. Some postcolonial theorists, however, view diasporization in terms of free-floating, transnational social formations rather than within more discrete ethnic frameworks (a discourse that Sorkin doesn’t address). Ethnic boundaries disappear within a version of diaspora that stresses hybridity and change, a point of view and a particular vocabulary that is beginning to surface in Dubin’s recent work. A growing consensus among social scientists, however, has accepted a modified version of diaspora, a model that is both ethno-parochial and transnational. Identities may be significantly altered over time and under various circumstances, but most scholars believe that an ethnic “thread of continuity” must remain. Otherwise, the group would simply cease to be identifiable.

Port Communities

Both Sorkin and Dubin assign great value to the idea of commercial utility in their vision of tolerant port communities. The gentile elite, according to this thesis, willingly suspended its prejudices in order to benefit from the increased wealth that skilled Jewish merchants, along with their trade networks, could channel into port towns and cities. The supposed absence of oppressive Jewry laws and a dearth of excessive taxation reflected this enlightened pragmatism, or so it is assumed. The image of Jews conducting their affairs in a comparatively benign port milieu—not from a marginalized bottom rung but in relative parity—remains an integral element of the port Jew concept. Dubin has gone one step further by claiming that the particular circumstances of the British Atlantic colonies resulted in greater “relaxation and renegotiation” of political and religious conventions as compared to the Old World.

Dubin’s thesis notwithstanding, I believe the case of the British Caribbean offers a solid counterargument to the proposition that port towns were tolerant spaces. Britain certainly encouraged Sephardi merchants to settle in their colonies during the early modern era, principally because of their proven expertise with the Spanish trade and bullion routes as well as their links with crypto-Jewish business interests in South America. England expected to reap the benefits
of expanded trade and to augment its share of gold, so these Jews were deemed vital to the country's strategic economic interests. Nevertheless, any investigation of island culture reveals that Creoles (white, island-born Protestants) as well as an influx of British-born adventurers were markedly different than the metropolitan elite who were encouraging Jewish immigration. Often these Protestant colonists were the younger sons of privilege who were forced (owing to primogeniture) to join "many persons of obscure Births and very indifferent Characters," as one contemporary observer put it, in seeking their disparate fortunes abroad. Benefit to empire was of scant concern when contrasted with immediate personal needs, and daring quests for wealth and status were already under duress by daily life in the Caribbean. A host of virulent tropical diseases, deadly hurricanes, slave insurrections, losses at sea, fires that regularly ravaged port towns, and the ubiquitous assaults of pirates and foreign powers all accounted for a reduced life expectancy and presented major impediments for both gentiles and Jews. According to one study, the mortality rate for the "hundreds of thousands of Europeans" who moved to the British Caribbean in search of its celebrated riches "was even worse than the Africans' appalling demography." Jews appear to have fared better (for yet unexplained reasons), but a high death toll resulted in a bleak situation for Anglo-islanders because they were incapable of sustaining their own population. In spite of common adversities, Protestant merchants perceived Jews as possessing an iniquitous economic advantage. They appeared to reap immense profits with minimal exertion and risk. By 1740, the Jamaican Assembly had noted that Jews held an overbalance of commerce and "have almost entirely engrossed the whole retail trade of this island." Consequently they were envisioned as "a great growing evil," cruel agents who were driving the Christian citizenry from their trades and literally taking bread from the mouths of their children, a particular grievance that was repeated throughout the islands. Anglo-colonists felt greatly impeded in what they saw as their natural right: returning to England as wealthy men (and as rapidly as possible). Disparities between local Caribbean interests and the métropole therefore become imperative in contextualizing the broad array of measures taken against Jews on the British islands.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, colonial governors were expected to tolerate Jews. Indeed, synagogues were permitted in those locales where the Jewish population was at its highest (Jamaica, Barbados, and Nevis). "They observe most of their ancient feasts and fasts," noted one member of the Jamaican elite, "marry, cir-
cumcise, and bury, according to the custom of their fore-fathers." But the majority of Jews were nevertheless adjudged "selfish and tricking" as well as "fraudulent in their trade." Widespread hatred spawned local anti-Jewish legislation, such as disproportionate taxation, restricting the right to testify in court, and impeding access to valued trading licenses, among other slights. There were unsuccessful attempts, in the form of petitions to the king, to entirely remove Jews from the islands, not for their supposed connivance in coin-clipping (a capital crime) or "debasing of gold and silver wares" but solely because "they were descended from the crucifiers of the blessed Jesus." In fact, a quasi-medieval character manifested itself on the islands, as further evidenced by offerings of gold doubloons—fancifully disguised within baked pastry shells and called "Jew Pyes," "Tarts," and "Tartlettes" in descending monetary value—presented by leading Jews to officials in each incoming colonial administration on Jamaica and Barbados. This was a ritual of subordination unique in the hemisphere.

On Jamaica, "Jew Pyes" and other "oblations" augmented an already oppressive "Jews tax" that the island Legislative Assembly varied at their pleasure, extraordinary sums that routinely reached £1,000 per annum and above. This special tax was ostensibly levied, in the language of the assembly, "for and toward the defense of this their island." But, in reality, its function was to curb competition and to augment the income of the island's ruling class by forcing Jews to disproportionately subsidize public works. In 1692, a catastrophic earthquake destroyed most of the pirate haven of Port Royal (including its "Jew Street")—considered one of the great emporiums and markets in the New World—and also caused massive damage throughout Jamaica, a calamity that increased tensions as well as calls for even greater taxes on Jews. Aside from outright jealousy of Jewish commercial success, their relatively high numbers in a few port towns was perceived at the time as contributing toward hostilities.

Laws were often designed to give maximum offense to Jewish residents, including an act that placed "convicts, Jews ... sick, decrepified, or disabled persons" together as a pariah class. Edward Long, the oft-quoted, eighteenth-century historian of Jamaica, noted that even those Jews who had undergone the expensive and lengthy process of naturalization were effectively placed on an equal plane with free blacks because both groups shared an almost identical social stigma and "limited freedom" and could neither vote nor hold elected office. The Plantation Act ratified by Parliament in 1740 offered Jews who were willing to settle in the New World colonies the right to become naturalized citizens after seven years' residence (a legal privi-
lege denied Jews in England), thereby overruling the objections of island legislatures in the process. Between 1740 and 1753, out of a population of about 1,000, only 150 Jews became naturalized in Jamaica. However, 32 years after the passage of the act, a Treasury official complained to his superiors at Whitehall that Jamaican Jews had yet to fully avail themselves of the opportunity afforded them. The majority remained “Aliens, not Naturaliz’d, or, in any manner made Free Denizens.” Evidently most Jews did not consider the advantages gained by naturalization, or even denization, sufficient enough to pay for the privilege. Other means were instituted, as one scholar recently concluded, “to circumvent Parliament’s attempt to level the playing field for attaining the status of an English subject in the colonies.”

Given this record of popular antipathy, it may not be entirely unexpected that the first synagogue attack in the western hemisphere occurred in a British port town on Barbados. At the time of the incident in 1739, Barbados was a wealthy colony whose reputation for overindulgence and ostentation was matched only by an excessive cruelty toward both slaves and indentured servants. The island populace was also experiencing acute social and economic constraints owing to its diminishing position as a prime sugar producer. During the summer of 1739, a mob confronted the Jewish residents of Speightstown (a.k.a. “Little Bristol”), the island’s second leading port, after several wealthy Jews struck and publicly shamed a visiting member of the colonial gentry—later proven to be a notorious impostor and thief. Although this individual had obviously pilfered a large sum of money while acting as a guest of honor at a wedding, Jews had dared to cast judgment and ridicule on a member of the elite. They had strayed, in other words, from their place in the social order and had adopted a stance of equality that was prohibited—a code that is redolent of ghetto norms. Such transgressions threatened Creole identity and hence had to be quashed as firmly as any slave rebellion. In retribution for this “daring Insolence,” the mob forcefully ejected the families of “Jew Street” from their homes and then destroyed the Semach David (“Sprout of David”) synagogue.

The port of Bridgetown in Barbados also had its “Jew Street” (alternately known as Swan Street), which has been described by historian Steven Fortune as a “semi-ghetto” where Jews arranged their
businesses and homes tightly together as a protective enclave out of concern “for their own safety.” Eli Faber has depicted the state of affairs in seventeenth-century Barbados in even bleaker terms. Jews were considered as an internal threat, suspected of aiding French and Dutch intrigues in the region. Thus, they were “quarantined” in the Jewish quarters of Bridgetown and Speightstown. Many Barbadian Jews also maintained close relationships with the Jewish community in Nevis, a British sugar colony and entrepôt in the Leeward Islands that, like Barbados, reached its economic peak during the late seventeenth century. The archaeological remains of the now-abandoned Jewish community correlate with similar findings elsewhere in the Caribbean. For example, the location of the synagogue and cemetery in the least desirable section of the capital of Charlestown—literally between a brackish, mosquito-laden bog and the town jail—in still another “Jew Street” illustrates how the Sephardi merchants’ subaltern status was reflected in the built environment. The peculiarities of this hierarchical setting, according to one archaeologist, reflected a degree of stress analogous to “European Jewish communities during the medieval period.”

It is worth noting that, in 1685, in contrast to Britain’s official policy toward Jews, France’s Black Code (*Code Noir*) formally ordered the expulsion of all Jews—identified as the “declared enemies of the Christian name”—from the French colonies. In this respect, the Jewish experience on the islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe, Saint-Domingue (Haiti), and Cayenne (French Guyana) was the converse of their coreligionists in the British Caribbean. On the French islands, it was the local colonial authorities who frequently ignored metropolitan directives and allowed a select number of “Portuguese” Jewish merchants onto the island under the premise that they would advance the economy. Having arrived, however, Jews were in a vastly more vulnerable position than they would have been in the port of Bordeaux, for example. Their reception wholly depended on the character and prejudices of each island administrator, the Catholic Creole faction (generally hostile to Jews), and the legal decisions of individual magistrates. The open practice of Judaism was forbidden, and Jews, if indeed they were permitted residency, frequently had their entire estates forfeited on their demise because their wills were not recognized by the courts. In 1765, in a scene reminiscent of the English islands, a petition signed by 152 Haitian Creole merchants accused Jews of coin-clipping, claiming fraudulent bankruptcies, establishing a commercial monopoly in the interior of the colony, and causing the ruin of French Catholic merchants. Throughout Marti-
nique and Guadeloupe, Jesuit agitation and popular animus toward Jewish merchants was of long duration, and, by the late eighteenth century, most Jews had withdrawn from both islands. Although a few exceptional individuals did well for themselves despite the existence of the Black Code (such as the Gradis family of Bordeaux, whose wealth and influence assured the right of family members to reside in Haiti and other islands while holding coveted letters patent), the port communities of the French Caribbean, like the British, cannot be placed within the framework conceived by Sorkin and Dubin.

Conclusion

Even if radically reconfigured, the term “port Jew” has, I believe, little to offer that would offset its inherent weaknesses. In this one respect, I agree with Sorkin’s assessment that, once the parameters of a type have been lost, then all that remains is a conglomeration of Jews who happen to live in port cities, “a virtually unlimited subject.” Diaspora, however, easily encompasses this seemingly boundless subject. What better paradigm to express the intrinsic duality that Dubin describes? The roles that Jews played—both as residents of a fixed community and as boundary crossers and cross-cultural brokers—are part and parcel of diaspora studies, as are the related qualities of “movement, fluidity, travel,” and otherness. The prototypical port Jew would be displaced by a people of the diaspora. Research would then be unrestricted to any time frame and unencumbered by standard boundaries, including the usual dichotomy that restricts most scholars to either the Old or the New Worlds.

The historian of the Atlantic world Jack P. Greene has posited that the emerging early-modern societies in the Americas were shaped by a “distinctive set of place-specific and time-specific experiences” that made each one unique. This axiom carries some legitimacy. But port towns and the people who resided there were not entirely places and individuals of their own creation. As Greene admits, there were certain “manifest similarities” as well. When analyzed within a diaspora framework, however, each Sephardi community mentioned here can be linked to one another by an ethnic “thread of continu-

ity,” a collective memory and reverence for the homeland, a stance of separateness from their host environment, and a feeling of allegiance to all others in the diaspora. Social scientists identify such societies as “dispersed communities of co-responsibility.” Order as well as chaos also become part of the conceptual apparatus—an ambiguity that may not easily coexist with modern sensibilities.
One of the factors that undoubtedly accelerated broad interest in
the Sorkin-Dubin model was that it appeared to offer a Jewish alterna-
tive to the influential Black Atlantic phenomenon. We might ask, why
not a Sephardi Atlantic or, in a broader context, a Jewish Atlantic (a
phrase already in scholarly parlance)? Not only would this allow us to
take permanent leave of the port Jew social type, but it would also serve
as an appropriate theme with which to engage the diaspora network of
interconnected families that extended throughout the Atlantic basin.
This field could very well involve a variety of interpretive and analytic
methods extending beyond the historical archival approach, such as
literary texts, art, demographics, and ethno-musicology.

Jewish Atlantic Studies would necessarily require expanding research
horizons. However, as is often true with other subaltern groups, the lack
of extensive archival documentation regarding the Sephardim—espe-
cially in such seldom-studied regions as the Caribbean—has resulted in
a fragmentary and disjointed record. Historical myopia may indeed pre-
vent scholars, as one Caribbean author has expressed it, from studying
“the fragments whole.” I have faith that, once having discerned the
complex web of diaspora, and having placed social types aside, a fuller
understanding of the whole will emerge.

Notes

1 Recent anthologies include David Cesarani, ed., Port Jews: Jewish Com-
munities in Cosmopolitan Maritime Trading Centres, 1550–1950 (London,
2002), and David Cesarani and Gemma Romain, eds., Jews and Port Citi-
ies: 1590–1990, Commerce, Community and Cosmopolitanism (London,
2006). In 2003 and 2005, the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Re-
search, University of Cape Town, and the Parkes Institute, University of
Southampton, sponsored international conferences devoted exclu-
sively to port Jews at the University of Cape Town. These events fol-
lowed an initial conference in Southampton in 2001.
2 Lois Dubin, “‘Wings on their feet... and wings on their head’: Reflec-
tions on the Study of Port Jews,” in Cesarani and Romain, Jews and Port
Cities, 16–17.
3 C. S. Monaco, Moses Levy of Florida: Jewish Utopian and Antebellum Re-
former (Baton Rouge, La., 2005), 43–45.
4 For a select cross-section of newspapers and periodicals that covered this
episode, see “Großbritannien,” Allgemeine Zeitung (Augsburg), Dec. 24,
1827; “Meetings of the Jews,” Times (London), Dec. 5, 1827; “Diary for the


6 M. E. Levy to Samuel Myers, May 4, 1819, Myers papers, Jean Outland Chrysler Library, Norfolk, Virginia (hereafter JOC).


8 Ibid.

9 For a critique of Durkheim’s use of social types, see Steven Seidman, *Contested Knowledge: Social Theory Today* (Malden, Mass., 2004), 46–47.


14 Ibid.


29 For additional details of Levy’s stay on the island, see Monaco, Moses Levy of Florida, 72–81.
30 Levy to Myers, June 8, 1819, JOC.
31 Isaac S. Emmanuel and Suzanne A. Emmanuel, History of the Jews of the Netherlands Antilles, 2 vols. (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1970) 1: 304–28. Isaac Emmanuel credits his wife Suzanne as co-author but states that she worked primarily as an invaluable research assistant and editor.
32 Levy to Myers, May 4, 1819.
33 Ibid.
34 Ab° de Mord. Senior and Ishac de Ab° d Marchena to [M. E. Levy], May 28, 1819, and Moise Cardoze to Senhor M. E. Levy, June 1, 1819 [Portuguese], “oversized, miscellaneous file,” Myers Papers, JOC. I am grateful to Jeffrey D. Needell at the University of Florida for his expert translation and comments.
35 Emmanuel and Emmanuel, Jews of the Netherlands Antilles, 267–82.
36 Monaco, Moses Levy of Florida, 76.
37 Emmanuel and Emmanuel, Jews of the Netherlands Antilles, 267–82.
38 Ibid., 304–28.
39 Senior and Marchena to [Levy], May 28, 1819, Myers Papers, JOC.
40 Ibid. Also cited in Monaco, Moses Levy of Florida, 76.
43 Levy to Myers, May 4, 1819, JOC.
44 The role of concubinage among Curacaean Jews is discussed in Eva Abraham-Van Der Mark, “Marriage and Concubinage among the Sephardic Merchant Elite of Curaçao,” in Women and Change in the Caribbean: A Pan Caribbean Perspective, ed. Janet Momsen (Kingston, Jamaica, 1993), 38–49.
45 Senior and Marchena to [Levy], May 28, 1819, Myers Papers, JOC.


49 See especially Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South (New York, 1982).

50 Ibid., xv, 61.


52 Benjamin, Jews of the Dutch Caribbean, 144.

53 Levy also remarked on the “gloomy” state of commerce. See M. E. Levy to Samuel Myers, Aug. 30, 1819, JOC. This economic situation coincided with the Panic of 1819 in the United States. According to Wim Klooster, the British occupation of the island in 1807–16 exacerbated a decline that was put into play earlier during the French occupation of the Dutch Republic in 1795. See Klooster, “The Jews in Suriname and Curaçao,” in Bernadini and Fiering, Jews and the Expansion of Europe to the West, 360.

54 Levy to Myers, June 8, 1819, JOC. Isaac Emmanuel’s assessment in Jews of the Netherlands Antilles questions the assumption of wealth-based conflict. I have maintained that the perception of class and power ranking within the synagogue, rather than wealth per se, was probably at the core. See Monaco, Moses Levy of Florida, 77.


65 Ibid., 88, n. 6. Sorkin also states that the work of these historians is of “incontrovertible scholarly value.” Their only irrelevance, it appears, is to his conception of port Jews.


67 Swetschinski, *Reluctant Cosmopolitans*, 323.

68 Foa, *Jews of Europe after the Black Death*, 68.


74 Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Jewish Nation*, 160.


82 Steven A. Fortune, Merchants and Jews: The Struggle for British West Indian Commerce, 1650–1750 (Gainesville, Fla., 1984), 41.


85 Ibid., 46–48.

86 Fortune, Merchants and Jews, 11–12.

87 Ibid. See also Eli Faber, Jews, Slaves and the Slave Trade: Setting the Record Straight (New York, 1998), 102.


89 Ibid., 2: 293.

90 Ibid.


93 Ibid.


96 Acts of Assembly, passed in the island of Jamaica; from 1681 to 1737, inclusive (London, 1743), 68.

97 For reference to the “limited freedom” of Jews and free blacks, see Long, History of Jamaica, 2: 321.


100 Dicey to “The Lords Commissioners of His Majesty’s Treasury,” May 1, 1772.


104 Fortune, *Merchants and Jews*, 12.


109 Ibid., 308.


