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Caribbean Jewish studies of the colonial era: state of the field

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Years ago, at a conference, I was excitedly sharing an eighteenth-century Peri Ets Haim responsum that had recently been accessed but had not yet been catalogued. Dated 1767, the responsum was sent to Amsterdam from the Caribbean and involved a dispute over an enslaved child.[1] The document was fascinating, and the question it posed was revealing. The responsum brought to the fore the dehumanizing and inhumane system of African chattel slavery and the Americas' slave economy, of which Jews were a part. Understood within its cultural context and period, it demonstrated the religious and legal concerns of some Jews in the colonial Americas. However, the first question I was asked about Jews in the Caribbean islands during the early modern period was posed facetiously: "Well, they weren't really Jewish, were they?"

This specifically Jewish religious text, written in Hebrew in correspondence with the centre of western Sephardi Jewish life during the period, was not compelling enough to prove the presence of robust Jewish life in the Americas. The prevailing sense, reflected in this exchange and the questions that followed, was that Jews in the early modern Caribbean were merchants and opportunists – lone rangers on Europe's colonial frontier. Also, part of the exchange was the discomfort in the acknowledgment of Jews as active participants in plantation economies. This exchange took place nearly two decades ago, and the field of Jews in the Caribbean has grown tremendously since then. This growth is reflected by the quantity of scholarship that has focused on the Jews of the Atlantic world and the Caribbean, and the broader discourse within the fields of Jewish studies and history on these particular groups of people in these spaces of significant transition, violence, and creativity. The history of Caribbean Jews has developed from a small ethno-insider curiosity to a vibrant interdisciplinary and critically engaged historical subfield.

Since the last decade of the twentieth century, the focus on non-

1 David ben Refael Meldolah, *Peri Ets Haim* (Amsterdam: John Carter Brown Library, 1767), 10–80.

Ashkenazi narratives in American Jewish history has grown alongside the field of Atlantic history. In step with broader historical trends, new approaches have expanded to consider the Americas holistically and to reflect a non-teleologically written perspective that does not necessarily place New York City at the centre of modern American Jewish history. Jewish historiography has dallied with both colonial and post-colonial historiography, considerations of centre–periphery studies, diaspora theory, and Atlantic history. These larger historiographical trends that decentred empire or worked to incorporate lesser-known histories of marginalized communities, which also encompassed the greater inclusion of Mizrahi and Sephardi Jewish histories, gave rise to the abundance of scholarship on early modern Amsterdam's Sephardi community.[2] This scholarship is significant for the consideration of the field of Caribbean Jewish studies, as Amsterdam, an early modern centre of Sephardi Jewish life and European colonial expansion to the Americas, became central to Jewish presence in the early modern Caribbean.

In his 2007 exploration of the allure and mythologization of seventeenth-century Sephardi Amsterdam, Adam Sutcliffe noted that the number of Jewish individuals in this time and space would soon "be outnumbered by the accumulated conference papers and essays devoted to them."[3] The same could be said for the scholarship, largely produced over the past two decades, on the Jews of the Caribbean. Sutcliffe's analysis points to scholarly fascination with "modernity" and Jewish participation therein as the catalyst for this intrigue. Similarly, the attraction to the Jews of the Atlantic world also lies in the appeal of a particular type of modernity and an interest in cosmopolitanism.[4] Additionally, the Caribbean's seeming exoticism and spaces of Jewish autonomy provide great allure for scholars of Jewish history. Just as Amsterdam's early modern Sephardim are mythologized, so have the Caribbean's Jews and Jewish spaces.[5]

2 Miriam Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation: Conversos and Community in Early Modern Amsterdam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Yosef Kaplan, *An Alternative Path to Modernity: The Sephardi Diaspora in Western Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2000); Jonathan I. Israel and R. Salverda, *Dutch Jewry: Its History and Secular Culture (1500–2000)* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

3 Adam Sutcliffe, "Sephardic Amsterdam and the Myths of Jewish Modernity", *Jewish Quarterly Review* 97:3 (2007): 417.

4 See Maria Cristina Fumagalli, *Caribbean Perspectives on Modernity : Returning Medusa's Gaze* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2009); Paul Gillen and Devleena Ghosh, *Colonialism and Modernity* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2007).

5 Edward Krintzler, *Jewish Pirates of the Caribbean: How a Generation of Swashbuckling Jews*

Perhaps not surprisingly, the Jewish Caribbean was, at least in its initial epoch, in many ways an extension of Amsterdam's seventeenth-century Portuguese Jewish community, as well as part of the narrative of the rebirth of Spanish and Portuguese Jewry and Judaism following the expulsion from Iberia centuries before.[6] With European colonization, and the role that both Sephardi Jews and New Christians played in this project, inquiry into the Americas became a new frontier of academic possibility. Despite its relatively small numbers, historical engagement with the community is revealing in terms of broader Caribbean history, and radical in terms of Jewish history. As Stanley Mirvis argues, in the case of Jamaican Jewish history, "Placing such a small community under a microhistorical lens allows us to reshape our map of the Atlantic Portuguese Jewish Diaspora. Magnification reveals not only the local transformations brought on by living in a tropical slave society, but also Jamaican Jewry's collective contribution to and interconnectivity with the rest of the Diaspora."[7] This shift dovetailed nicely with the fields of history, Black and Africana studies, inquiries into the space of the Atlantic world, and new theorizations of movement, cultural production, and creolization. Drawing on and parallelling the work of Paul Gilroy, J. Lorand Matory, Michael Gomez, and James Sweet,[8] scholarship was pointing to the Atlantic as a space of both rupture and rebirth of identity and community. Gilroy's monumental

carved out an Empire in the New World in their Quest for Treasure, Religious Freedom and Revenge (New York: Anchor Books, 2008).

6 Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation*; Limor Mintz-Manor, "The Phoenix, the Exodus and the Temple: Constructing Self-identity in the Sephardi Congregation of Amsterdam in the Early Modern Period", in *The Religious Cultures of Dutch Jewry*, ed. Y. Kaplan and D. Michigan (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017), 3–33; Yosef Kaplan, "The Curaçao and Amsterdam Jewish Communities in the 17th and 18th Centuries", *American Jewish History* 72 (1982): 193–211; Daniel M. Swetschinski, *Reluctant Cosmopolitans: The Portuguese Jews of Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam* (Liverpool: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization and Liverpool University Press, 2000).

7 Stanley Mirvis, *The Jews of Eighteenth Century Jamaica: A Testamentary History of a Diaspora in Transition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020), 2.

8 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); J. Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and the Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Gomez, *Reversing Sail: A History of the African Diaspora* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); James Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441–1770* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

works on the Black Atlantic shaped the discourse for considerations of the Caribbean Basin and its relationship with the Atlantic world. He writes that the "modern Black experience" "cannot be defined solely as African, American, Caribbean or British alone" but should reflect the tensions of the unique reality of the Atlantic space and the attendant creation of a culture that "transcends ethnicity or nationality."[9] Studied within the framework of Jews in the Caribbean space, considerations of empowerment, race, and freedom are different, but the multilayered and complex intersection of cultures and other influences is similar. The story of Caribbean Jews is neither solely European nor purely American; rather it is a product of the intersection of European colonialism with Africa and the Americas. It is the encounter and interplay between the new social, cultural, economic and racial realities of the Americas and ideas of European modernity and cosmopolitanism.

The early modern Caribbean was a global crossroads where identities, ideologies, and epochs were emerging vis-à-vis shifting imperial, social, and economic realities. Gilroy, considering both the processes and idea of modernity, declares that "[t]hese ideas about nationality, ethnicity, authenticity, and cultural integrity are characteristically modern phenomena that have profound implications for cultural criticism and cultural history. They crystallized with the revolutionary transformations of the West at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries and involved novel typologies and modes of identification."[10] His assertions are critical for the consideration of how to integrate Jews and Judaisms into Caribbean studies more fully. Much recent scholarship of Jews and Judaism in the Atlantic world has adopted the frame and terminology of the Black Atlantic, even if within Caribbean studies, discourse on Jews and Judaisms are a rarity. Caribbean studies is a field moving beyond those narratives that are circumscribed by identity, nation, insularity, and the colonial epistemologies derived from these conceptions. The Jews of the early modern Caribbean fit into these shifts in historical research and narrative in terms of the formation of new identities, new rituals and practice, and the way that some early modern Atlantic Jews problematize established narratives of nation-state and imperial agency: just think of the Portuguese Jews of the colonial Dutch Caribbean, who are Iberian actors in the Dutch realm exemplifying the porosity of empire and identity.

9 Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, book description.
10 Ibid., 2.

Caribbean Jewish history provides insight into communities that inhabited liminal spaces and were both empowered and minoritized. "The specificity of the modern political and cultural formation . . . [called] the Black Atlantic can be defined, on one level, through [a] desire to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity."[11] Gilroy's crucial statement has also been reflected over the past two decades in the scholarship of Jews in the Caribbean. These changes reflect the scholarly and cultural shifts to focus on race, power, and identity. This pivot illuminated a more holistic narrative about Jewish presence in the Caribbean, moving away from one that focuses on Jews as economic actors rather than agents of religious and cultural production. In more recent years, the presence of Jewish slaveholders, multi-racial Jews, and empowered Jews who were navigating new racial realities has come to the fore. Recent scholarship such as Aviva Ben-Ur's *Jewish Autonomy in a Slave Society* (2020), Stanley Mirvis's *The Jews of Eighteenth-Century Jamaica* (2020), and Laura Leibman's *Once We Were Slaves* (2021)[12] demonstrate that Jews were active participants in the shaping of race and nation in the Caribbean Basin and that a Jewish presence raises questions of community, autonomy, and agency.

For example, Ben-Ur's work explores the mythologization of Jewish power and political autonomy in Suriname, which she argues, for scholars, becomes a site of fascination as an alternative Zion. In addition to questions of citizenship and political agency, her book engages other significant questions such as Jewish power, Jewish exoticism, and the porous nature of Jewish 'whiteness' and racialization. These broad themes have distinct histories in the Caribbean. Much as Sutcliffe points to the mystique of Al-Andulus in the allure of Amsterdam's Sephardim, it is the potential for an alternative to an American Ashkenazi narrative that proves enchanting. Not surprisingly, the field of Caribbean Jewish studies largely overlooked Ashkenazi Jewish presence until quite recently. This article will present some of the most significant scholarship and questions in the field of Caribbean Jewish history, focused on the colonial period (not later since those Caribbean Jewish histories contend with

11 Ibid., 19.

12 Aviva Ben-Ur, *Jewish Autonomy in a Slave Society: Suriname in the Atlantic World, 1651–1825* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020); Stanley Mirvis, *The Jews of Eighteenth Century Jamaica: A Testamentary History of a Diaspora in Transition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020); Laura Arnold Leibman, *Once We Were Slaves: The Extraordinary Journey of a Multiracial Jewish Family* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

different questions, islands, communities, and historical methods). With attention to the major shifts in the historiography of the colonial Caribbean, I will demonstrate that Caribbean Jewish studies is both part of a broader academic interest in the Atlantic world and the site for the consideration of Jewish modernity, cosmopolitanism, power, and racialization.

The beginnings of a subfield and the centrality of economics

The history of Jews in the Caribbean dates to the early days of European exploration and colonization. In the wake of the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492, many Sephardim sought refuge in the "New World", including the Caribbean islands. These Jews brought with them their traditions, customs, and professions in various fields such as commerce, medicine, and agriculture. The presence of Jews in the Caribbean provides a rich field for the exploration of the diverse tapestry of cultures and histories that have interacted and interwoven in the Atlantic world, throughout centuries of often violent contact. While often overshadowed by narratives of European colonization and the transatlantic slave trade, the Jewish community's presence in the Caribbean is significant to both Jewish history and Caribbean history. Some of the first publications in the field were books by non-academics, such as Mordechai Arbell, a former ambassador in the Israeli Diplomatic Corps, and Isaac S. Emmanuel and Suzanne A. Emmanuel, the former a rabbi to Curaçao's Mikvé Israel congregation. Both Arbell and the Emmanuels aggregated primary sources and brought attention to communities largely neglected by scholars.[13] While these works are largely uncritical presentations of the material, their volumes served as a counterweight to the oft-produced lachrymose Jewish histories, replacing these with narratives of Jewish opportunity, triumph, and assimilation.

The Emmanuels' three tomes, *History of the Jews of the Netherlands Antilles* in two volumes (1970) and *Precious Stones of Curaçao*, provided an expansive resource that reflected the scope of Jewish life in Curaçao, one of the most prominent examples of Jewish settlement in the Caribbean. In the seventeenth century, Curaçao became a haven for Sephardi Jews

13 Isaac S. Emmanuel and Suzanne A. Emmanuel, *History of the Jews of the Netherlands Antilles* (Cincinnati, OH: American Jewish Archives, 1970); Mordechai Arbell, *The Jewish Nation of the Caribbean: The Spanish-Portuguese Jewish Settlements in the Caribbean and the Guianas* (Jerusalem: World Jewish Congress, 2002).

emigrating from Europe. The community flourished, establishing synagogues, schools, and businesses. These institutions, alongside Jewish involvement in commercial life, played a role in the island's economy and cultural landscape. By focusing on Jews and communal life among the island's Sephardi congregation, Mikvé Israel, the Emmanuel volumes revealed not only the economic activity of the island's Jews but also the vigorous Jewish congregational life from the seventeenth century onwards.

Arbell's *The Jewish Nation of the Caribbean* is a wide-ranging survey of Jews throughout the Caribbean Basin from lesser-known spaces such as Nevis to the Guianas, and larger Jewish communal settlements such as Curaçao, Jamaica, Suriname, and Barbados. Arbell celebrates that "Jews helped transform some of the impoverished islands into sugar and cocoa industrial centers, and created major centers of global commerce." He also explains that though Jews faced challenges of colonial wars, "they saw in the American continent a place where they could live in peace until the time would come to return to their old biblical homeland."[14] Such quotations, which reflect a naive colonial narrative of European ingenuity and salvation alongside Jewish empowerment and opportunity, frame Arbell's volume, which, he writes, aims to "illuminate in a comprehensive manner the history of the Jewish entity during its first hundred years of settlement [in the Caribbean]."[15] Arbell's book paved the way for in-depth scholarly projects. Despite the generous scope of his work, which includes chapters dedicated to the Jewish presence in more than a dozen islands and the coast of Latin America, Portuguese Jews in the early modern period largely settled in Dutch and British colonies, though they traded across imperial lines.

Jewish mercantile activity became the focus of the field, and some of the earliest scholarship on Portuguese Jewish presence in the Americas is best understood in economic terms. In Jamaica, Jews were granted rights and privileges by the British Crown, leading to their active participation in trade and commerce. According to Stanley Mirvis, "these 'New Jews' put down roots as traders, planters, livestock farmers (pen keepers), physicians, writers, fishermen, entertainers, and metalworkers." Jews were a "conspicuous minority" on the island but "ultimately overcame these differences, becoming embedded in the social landscape of their

14 Arbell, *Jewish Nation of the Caribbean*, 8, 28.
15 Ibid., 18–19.

island home."[16] Jews in the Caribbean were involved in business and trade but also participated in the social and political life of various Caribbean islands. They were landowners, and on some islands they were integrated into the local elite. Jews contributed to Caribbean architecture and arts. Jamaica's Isaac Mende Belisario (1795–1849) and [Jacob Abraham] Camille Pissarro (1830–1903) from St. Thomas may be the best-known of these artists. Although Jews experienced discrimination they were generally able to live peacefully in the Caribbean. Scholarship by Aviva Ben-Ur, Stanley Mirvis, Laura Leibman, and Jessica Roitman discussed later in this article also considers the myriad ways that Jews integrated and shaped their Caribbean environments. For example, Jewish merchants played a significant role in the development of Jamaica's sugar industry, contributing to its sugar economy. Futhermore, Jews participated in the trade in goods such as cotton and coffee, as well as the slave trade. This approach situates this community's presence in the Caribbean within the context of the West India Company and British and Dutch mercantile expansion. One of the first leading scholars of this approach is Jonathan Israel, who wrote two far-ranging surveys of European Jewish networks during the early modern period: *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism, 1550–1750* and *Diasporas within a Diaspora*.[17] These surveys focused on the role of Portuguese Jews and New Christians in the establishment of Jewish communities throughout Europe, North Africa, and the Americas because of expanding early modern Jewish trade networks.

Israel expertly demonstrated how complicated identities allowed Jews and crypto-Jews to expand their networks, while highlighting the permeable boundaries of these communities both in Europe and in the New World. He especially singles out "Western Sephardi Jewry", who "fulfilled a highly distinctive, and perhaps unique, set of functions throughout the maritime, commercial, and colonial expansion of Europe."[18] This economic-centred approach is evident throughout Israel's prodigious scholarship, and particularly so at key historical turns. For example, the Dutch conquest of north-eastern Brazil from the Portuguese in the mid-seventeenth century opened the possibility for

16 Mirvis, *Jews of Eighteenth Century Jamaica*, 1, 2.

17 Jonathan Israel, *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism, 1550–1750* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985); Israel, *Diasporas within a Diaspora: Jews, Crypto-Jews, and the World of Maritime Empires (1540–1740)* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2002); Yosef Kaplan, *An Alternative Path to Modernity: The Sephardi Diaspora in Western Europe* (Boston: Brill, 2000).

18 Israel, *Diasporas*, 1.

Jewish settlement in Brazil. Although the communities that developed, especially in the port city of Recife, grew to become important centres for Jewish religious life, the historiography is understood through an economic prism.[19] Likewise, Israel's study of "The Jews of Dutch America", couches the entire relationship in economic terms: "Curaçao . . . was essentially the maritime, commercial, and financial center with links all over the Caribbean and South and North America, as well as with Amsterdam and the rest of the United Provinces."[20]

Of course, none of this is meant to suggest that Israel is not aware of the religious aspect of the Portuguese Jewish Caribbean experience, as he notes: "As Curaçao's trade links . . . developed, the Sephardi community of Willemstad, Curaçao's capital, became both the largest and the most important – from a religious and cultural as well as economic perspective – of all the Jewish communities in the New World. It held this position from around 1660 at least until the beginning of the nineteenth century. … In ritual matters and questions of Jewish law, Curaçao was without doubt the 'mother' community of the Caribbean, indeed all the Americas, and one that deferred to Amsterdam and to Amsterdam alone." He notes the religious severity of the Mahamadot (elders) of Amsterdam and London, but does not discuss their correlates in the Americas.[21] But ultimately Israel, and other scholars of the period, were focused on mercantile expansion and framing Jewish presence within the robust economic world of the colonial Americas: "At its height Curaçao's trading fleet consisted of some eighty barques, many of them owned by Jews living on the island."[22]

Robert Cohen's *Jews in Another Environment* (1991) was a groundbreaking study of eighteenth-century Suriname that brought together the economic and the religious. Cohen argued that the new environment affected Jewish life and customs. Cohen's book presents the religious freedoms of the Dutch colony as a space where Jews challenged European Jewish norms, were playful in the interaction between religious practice and the environment, and sought local autonomy. For example, his discussion of an episode in Suriname entailing a debate over the beards customarily worn by Jewish men raises similar questions about the rise

19 Israel, *European Jewry*, 87.

20 Jonathan Israel, "The Jews of Dutch America", in *The Jews and the Expansion of Europe to the West, 1450–1800*, ed. Paolo Bernardini (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 335.

21 Israel, *Diasporas*, 520; Israel, *European Jewry*, 162–7.

22 Israel, *Diasporas*, 520.

of local autonomy in Portuguese Jewish religious life.[23] Suriname's communal structure was similar to that of Amsterdam, and Curaçao's authoritarian Mahamad, so that the Surinamese Sephardim were also subject to imported and imposed *ascamot* (congregational rules) and religious regulations. One striking example, discussed at length by Cohen, concerns a 1754 *ascama*, according to which "during those days [between Passover and Shavuot] 'no Jahid [member] may shave or have a shave or haircut, for whatever reason, under penalty of *Herem* [a ban] and a fine of fl.100,–'."[24] This ruling was unpopular as clean shaves were a local custom and more suitable to the tropical climate of the mainland. In 1789, there was "a sudden outburst of sickness among the Sephardi Jews", who blamed the growth of beards for the illness. The local Mahamad allowed the petitioners to shave "for medical reasons", and in response at least twenty members of the community submitted medical affidavits of various medical ailments precipitated by allowing their beard to grow.[25]

This is a minor but revealing example of local autonomy, suggesting the need for a more nuanced understanding of religious authority in the Jewish Caribbean. In this case, it seems that the Suriname Jews were trying to balance their religious traditions with the reality of the Americas. The tropical climate of Suriname, and the local fashioning of facial hair by non-Jewish European men, were catalysts for a challenge to tradition. The use of religious exemption probably points to a discomfort with abandoning tradition and challenging communal authority. These "loopholes" were a means through which American Jewish communities could both recognize the importance of tradition and introduce innovations. Cohen's focus on the impact of the environment on Jewish practice connects the environs with Portuguese Jewish religious dynamism to the colony's prosperity and eventual economic decline.

Fifteen years later, Wim Klooster's work approached the study of Portuguese Jews in the Caribbean from an economic perspective, as reflected in his interest in the concept of port Jews. This term, which characterizes Jews as "travelers, strangers, boundary-crossers and

23 Robert Cohen, *Jews in Another Environment: Suriname in the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 154–6; see Samuel Oppenheim, *An Early Jewish Colony in Western Guiana, 1658–1666: And its Relation to the Jews in Suriname, Cayenne, and Tobago* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Library, 2010).

24 Cohen, *Jews in Another Environment*, 154.

25 Ibid., 154.

cultural brokers",[26] set the stage for much of the scholarship of the past two decades. What is noteworthy about this characterization is the way it marginalizes the religious agency of these Jews, except inasmuch as their religious identity marked them as "strangers". Klooster notes explicitly that the designation "port Jews" is a stand-in for mercantile activity.[27] Phrased differently, Klooster holds that the Jews of the Dutch Atlantic "must be viewed from a perspective much like that used by practitioners of Atlantic history, who place interconnectedness at center stage", but he defines that "interconnectedness" in commercial terms. Here too Klooster is, of course, well aware of the ties between the commercial and the religious aspects of Portuguese Jewish life in the Americas: "The well traveled commercial highway between Brazil and the Dutch Republic enabled Brazilian New Christians to return to Judaism in Amsterdam and Amsterdam Jews to establish a community in Brazil", and similarly, communal commercial ties "facilitated a return to Judaism".[28] His later work, reflecting the changing landscape of the field, considers questions of political and legal autonomy as well.

In a sense, the port Jew model helped scholars understand economic history, and look at the ways that Jews engaged in international trade as Jewish agents in cosmopolitan centres; it is part of the broader narrative of modernity, cosmopolitanism, and agency that Sutcliffe also pointed to. Lois Dubin, who framed her arguments around the concept of port Jews, was referring to "the acculturated Jewish merchants in dynamic port cities who seemed to tread a distinctive path toward integration in early modern Europe", in order "to highlight both the location and function of Jews engaged in international maritime commerce, in settings in which commerce was valued and their commercial prowess appreciated."[29] Since the introduction of the concept of port Jews, studies have focused on these cosmopolitan communities in early modern Europe, and looked at this group as harbingers of modernity both within the Jewish community and more broadly, with particular attention paid to Atlantic Jews "as they

26 Lois Dubin cited in Wim Klooster, "Communities of Port Jews and their Contacts in the Dutch Atlantic World", *Jewish History* 20 (2006): 129.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., 133.

29 Lois Dubin, "'Wings on their Feet . . . and Wings on their Head': Reflections on the Study of Port Jews", *Jews and Port Cities 1590–1990: Commerce, Community, and Cosmopolitanism* (London and Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell, 2006), 15–16; see also Dubin, *The Port Jews of Habsburg Trieste: Absolutist Politics and Enlightenment Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

began to populate the entrepots of the Atlantic and beyond, reaching as far as the Indian Ocean."[30]

Race, place, and space

Together with the economic discourse (and perhaps building on it), there were other scholars, such as Jonathan Schorsch, who were proposing social historical frames. Aviva Ben-Ur's essay "A Matriarchal Matter: Slavery, Conversion, and Upward Mobility in Suriname's Jewish Community" (2009) also addresses questions of the intersection of race and religion in the Americas, as Portuguese Jewish men fathered children with enslaved and free Black women in a plantation society. Erik Seeman's "Jews in the Early Modern Atlantic: Crossing Boundaries, Keeping Faith" (2006) explores the deathways of Jews in both the British and Dutch Atlantic colonies and shows that death rituals were transformed in accordance with local custom and the interactions between Jews and non-Jews.[31] Still, the dominant focus on the economic dimension of the Sephardi expansion into the Americas framed discussions of this colonial expansion as a tension between religion and economics. The one-sided emphasis on the commercial aspect of the Sephardi communities in the Americas can also lead to conceptual confusion, as when Sutcliffe states that the Sephardim possessed "a cultural malleability and a geographical reach unmatched by any other *trading diaspora*".[32] As Aiwah Ong argued, it is unclear that an ethnic community that disperses geographically for mercantile purposes can be considered a diaspora; she considers these communities transnational. Focusing on Chinese immigrants, she argues that many Chinese businessmen accumulate foreign passports as a matter of convenience. In her post-colonial exploration of this community in the Pacific Rim, she theorizes the parameters of migration, transnationalism,

30 Jonathan D. Sarna, "Port Jews in the Atlantic: Further Thoughts", *Jewish History* 20 (2006): 213; see also Dubin, "'Wings on their Feet'".

31 Aviva Ben-Ur, "A Matriarchal Matter: Slavery, Conversion, and Upward Mobility in Colonial Suriname" in *Atlantic Diasporas: Jews, Conversos, and Crypto-Jews in the Age of Mercantilism, 1500–1800*, ed. Richard L. Kagan and Philip D. Morgan (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 152–69; Erik Seeman, "Jews in the Early Modern Atlantic: Crossing Boundaries, Keeping Faith", *The Atlantic in Global History 1500–2000*, ed. Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra and Erik R. Seeman (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006), 39–60.

32 Sutcliffe, "Jewish History in the Age of Atlanticism", 19 (emphasis added).

and diaspora.[33] One of the commercial functions of the Mahamad was its role as liaison between the Jewish community and the civil authorities – in the case of Curaçao, either the West India Company or the Dutch governor. This role, already established in the first decades of Jewish communal settlement, helped ensure the commercial success of the local Portuguese Jews. In the 1680s, Balthazar Beck, Slave Commissioner to Curaçao and brother of the island's governor, Mathias Beck, tried to restrict Jewish trade.[34] Balthazar Beck was one of Curaçao's most antisemitic leaders. He was the factor of the *asiento* (council) at Curaçao and regularly complained about Jewish commercial practices, claiming that Jews sold their wares "at almost cost prices", thus depriving Christian merchants of business. Once the sailors on one of Beck's slave ships strung an effigy that resembled the community's Haham (Pardo) from the mast of their ship while it was in port. The sailors also gave their sheep "Jewish names". The island's Jews complained about Beck's behaviour, and Beck was dismissed from his post. His antagonism to Jews was so well-known that both the Jewish community and island officials adopted the Jewish community's name for Beck, the "Second Haman" (they were situating themselves in a matrix of biblical narratives, specifically the Scroll of Esther). Beck saw the trade network of the "demon Jews"[35] as a threat to his own trade business. The *parnassim*, the wardens of the community, appealed to the West India Company and to two prominent Jews in the West India Company, Jacob Brandon and Jeronimo Nunes da Costa (also known as Moses Curiel). The Company heard the appeal and made it clear to the governor that Jewish trade should continue unimpeded. Most mercantile narratives would end here, but the letter states "that the Jewish Nation on the Island of Curaçao is free to exercise its religion and also engage in the trades as is allowed [the Jews] in Amsterdam."[36] Beyond establishing the commercial rights of the community, this exchange demonstrates that the Jewish colonists came to establish a religious community and that they petitioned for the opportunity to do so. This initial charter highlights both the religious and commercial nature of the Portuguese Jewish community in Curaçao. There is much evidence that even in its commercial undertakings, the

33 Aiwah Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

34 Arbell, *Jewish Nation of the Caribbean*, 143; Emmanuel, *History of the Jews of the Netherlands Antilles*, 1165.

35 Cited in Emmanuel, *History of the Jews of the Netherlands Antilles*, 85.

36 West India Company letter cited in ibid., 86.

Portuguese Jews of the Caribbean also understood themselves in religious terms. Although this self-understanding is shared by many (perhaps all) Jewish communities, it bears emphasis in the Dutch Atlantic context because of the influence of Jonathan Israel who assumes, in David Ruderman's words, "that the principal driving forces in transforming early modern Jewish society were . . . mercantilism and a revolution in European thought".[37] In sum, this focus on the economic dimensions highlighted several important features of Jewish life in the Caribbean: the porous nature of imperial boundaries and actors in the Atlantic world, the rights afforded to Jews in the Americas, the far-ranging networks and relationships between Jewish communities throughout the Atlantic world, and the centrality of race to life in the "New World". Racial categories, and the construction of Whiteness and Blackness, dictated and shaped all aspects of colonial life in the Americas. While there has not been a substantial discussion of race in this section, race served as the primary determinant of social status, legal rights, and economic opportunities in the colonial Caribbean and Atlantic world.[38]

Social and political histories became more central from about the year 2000. These areas of inquiry were extensions of themes that had emerged from the earlier focus on economics. Edited volumes such as Richard L. Kagan and Philip D. Morgan's *Atlantic Diasporas* (2009) and Sina Rauschenbach and Jonathan Schorsch's *The Sephardic Atlantic* (2018),[39] shift the discourse of the Jews of the Caribbean to an Atlantic framework. The scholarship of Schorsch, Wienke Vink, and Ben-Ur all exemplifies the major shift in the field, from highlighting Europe's westward expansion and colonial endeavours, towards an Atlantic world or Caribbean-centric scholarly frame.

In his pioneering *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World* (2004), Schorsch focused on racialization and race-crafting in the Americas, demonstrating how Jews in the Americas were constructing their "whiteness" vis-à-vis Black people who held second-class status at best and were, more than

37 David B. Ruderman, *Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 211.

38 See Victoria J. Collis-Buthelezi and Aaron Kamugisha, eds., *The Caribbean Race Reader: From Colonialism to Anticolonial Thought* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019); Aviva Ben-Ur and Wim Klooster, eds., *Jewish Entanglements in the Atlantic World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2024).

39 Kagan and Morgan, *Atlantic Diasporas*; Sina Rauschenbach and Jonathan Schorsch, eds., *The Sephardic Atlantic: Colonial Histories and Postcolonial Perspectives* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018).

not, enslaved and dehumanized by Euro-American colonials.[40] Whereas Schorsch's work is far-ranging and considers Jewish theologies of Blackness throughout Jewish liturgy, Ben-Ur, with her focus on Suriname in 1651–1825 and the emergence of a Eurafrican Jewish community during this period, challenges teleologically constructed narratives of Jewish racialization and Jewish "whiteness". Like Ben-Ur, Vink demonstrates the intersection of race and religion but considers the vocabulary of creolization differently. Both Vink and Ben-Ur focus on Jews in Suriname and questions of emancipation and community, though their approaches differ. Vink's *Creole Jews: Negotiating Community in Colonial Suriname* (2010),[41] and Ben-Ur's *Jewish Autonomy in a Slave Society* (2020), cover the early modern period into modernity, though Vink's work continues into the twentieth century. Ben-Ur employs a more systematic and methodical approach which provides a more holistic treatment of Jewish belonging and citizenship as Suriname's political landscape changed. Her work delves deeply and unravels the layers of Vink's argument, re-orienting and challenging some of Vink's conclusions through her extensive use of primary sources. According to Ben-Ur, Jews in Suriname were distinctive in their record keeping as "the only ethnic group outside of the nominally Dutch Reformed Protestant government who created serial records that stretch across the entire period of slavery and beyond".[42] This provides a unique opportunity to consider questions of Jewish citizenship, political agency, and the transition to "modernity" from the perspective of the non-ruling class. What Ben-Ur reveals is a more complicated narrative – one of Jewish empowerment and the fluidity of power and its intersection with race and religion.

Picking up on Schorsch's themes of racialization and autonomy, Ben-Ur's groundbreaking body of scholarship deals with issues of emancipation, social and political status, and the social realities of the Americas. Her *Jewish Autonomy in a Slave Society* reoriented the field not only by delving into the complicated and fluid categories of race, religion, and community, but also by firmly situating Jews as of the Americas and not simply agents of economic opportunity. Further, through the focus on the community of Eurafrican Jews that emerged as the product

40 Jonathan Schorsch, *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

41 Wieke Vink, *Creole Jews: Negotiating Community in Colonial Suriname* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2010).

42 Ben-Ur, *Jewish Autonomy*, 16–17.

of sexual violence and social inequalities, she brings to the fore the changing Portuguese Jewish community. Moreover, her consideration of Eurafrican Jews who sought full membership of the exclusive Portuguese Jewish community complicates ideas of race and religion. Placed in conversation with Stanley Mirvis's concurrent *Jews of Eighteenth Century Jamaica*, a shift in the scholarship is even more apparent. Mirvis also argues for Jewish rootedness in the Americas and frames his work within both legal questions and ideas of affection. It is Mirvis who argues for seeing Jamaica's Jews as part of the island's empowered class, with significant points of intersection with other White Euro-Americans.

Material culture and new approaches

Also contending with issues of race and belonging, Laura Arnold Leibman's *The Art of the Jewish Family* (2020) illustrates the importance of the Caribbean to New York, and expands the methodology of the field.[43] Her reliance on material culture presents new opportunities to consider heretofore ignored voices. Focusing on domestic space, Leibman organizes her narrative around five objects: a letter, a set of silver beakers, a miniature watercolour portrait on ivory, a commonplace book, and a silhouette. These objects, owned by women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, reveal "what it meant to be Jewish in an era when legal restrictions against Jewish men were increasingly eliminated and Jews were often asked to cleanse themselves of Jewish difference in order to become citizens."[44] Most importantly, Leibman, like Ben-Ur, radically shifts much of the extant discourse to include the lives of women.

Leibman's argument, again like Ben-Ur's, places Caribbean Jewish history in dialogue with broader trends in Caribbean studies. Leibman is part of a major shift in the field that considers the presence of the non-elite – those who were most likely not to leave written records. Like Elizabeth Pérez, a historian of Afro-Diasporic and Latin American religions, whose 2016 book *Religion in the Kitchen*[45] focuses on the informal spaces in a single Lucumí house Temple on Chicago's Southside, Leibman uses the home to consider the malleability and cultivation of American Jewish identity.

43 Laura Arnold Leibman, *The Art of the Jewish Family: A History of Women in Early New York in Five Objects* (New York: Bard Graduate Center, 2020).

44 Ibid., 8.

45 Elizabeth Pérez, *Religion in the Kitchen: Cooking, Talking, and the Making of Black Atlantic Traditions* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

Although these authors use different approaches, with Pérez bringing ethnography and historical analysis together, and Leibman utilizing studies of material culture and historical analysis, both employ these new methodologies to great effect. Pérez argues that the "micropractices" of cooking and talking "get under the skin of practitioners, equipping them with the repertoire of skills, dispositions, and habits necessary for religious norms to be internalized, then reproduced."[46] Likewise, Leibman's groundbreaking third chapter uses a small ivory portrait of Sarah Brandon Moses to reveal how she fashioned herself religiously and racially from biracial to white. Leibman's work can also be considered alongside works such as Teresa A. Singleton's *Archaeology and Material Culture of Santa Ana de Viajacas* and Bates, Chenoweth, and Delle's *Archaeologies of Slavery and Freedom in the Caribbean*, which utilize material culture to explore the private lives and identity of enslaved Blacks in the Caribbean.[47] These studies reveal the creativity and challenges of the domestic sphere, and reveal "ordinary lives" in the Caribbean. Here again, the dialogue between Caribbean Jewish history and broader Caribbean studies continues and reflects the methodological innovations and shifts in the scholarship, and the particular challenges of Caribbean history, together marking a shift from textual study to work on space, place, and material culture.

Leibman's study of the Brandons and the possibility of material and visual culture to illuminate ignored histories is continued in her 2021 book *Once We Were Slaves*. Like Ben-Ur, Leibman focuses on Jews of colour and eschews apologist narratives of the "more benign" Jewish enslavers. Rather, she follows the Brandons from their enslavement in Barbados through the Atlantic world to New York and Philadelphia as they refashioned their identities and became part of the colonial social elite. Leibman reveals "Sarah and Isaac's ability to change their lives and their designated Race", which "tells us as much about the early history of race in the Atlantic world as it does about the lives of early American Jews."[48]

The history of Jews in the Caribbean is an important site for the

46 Ibid., 9.

47 Teresa A. Singleton, "Archaeology and Material Culture of Santa Ana de Viajacas: A Coffee Plantation in Western Cuba", *Proceedings of the XX International Congress of Caribbean Archaeology*, ed. E. Glenis Tavárez and Manuel A. García Arévalo, 2 (2003): 725–30; Lynsey Bates, John M. Chenoweth, and James A. Delle, *Archaeologies of Slavery and Freedom in the Caribbean : Exploring the Spaces in Between* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2016).

48 Leibman, *Once We Were Slaves*, xiv.

consideration of race, religion, politics, and power especially since the status of Jews was fluid, and more malleable (generally) than other minority communities. Jewish difference was marked religiously as racial categories developed and shifted throughout the colonial period. While Jews were able to participate as free people in the colonial economy, the political, social, and legal limitations on them shifted in ways that differed from those of other minoritized religious communities who arrived from Europe, such as Quakers and Moravians. As Europe's colonial project and the system of African chattel slavery led to race being the primary category of belonging, Jews as free people were constructing their own "whiteness" vis-à-vis the disempowered. The status of Jews differed in different spaces in different periods, at the whims of imperial powers, but is revealing in terms of the shifting importance of religious and racial categories.

Despite the radical difference in Black and Jewish arrival and legal status in the Americas, scholarship from Black studies and Africana studies has greatly impacted the theoretical tools utilized to explore the Jews of the Caribbean. My own previous work has both heavily utilized theoretical frames of Black Atlantic history in analysing religious identity and community among Jews in the Caribbean, and has also sought to complicate uncritical appropriation of terminology and theory. I argue that utilizing theoretical frameworks from scholars of the Caribbean and the Black Atlantic is critical to theorizing this diaspora community and thinking through the circulation of people, goods, and ideas in the Atlantic world as well as considering relations of power and the re-formation of religious community and identity not in isolation. However, these ideas and theories should also be interrogated and challenged, as Jews were an often empowered class. Therefore, the idea of "the minority" or "the minoritized" necessitates clarification, and perhaps is a major site for the consideration of the intersection of race, religion, and power.[49]

The pioneering historian Natalie Zemon Davis's work on Suriname similarly demonstrates the intersection of Black studies and Jewish studies. Her 2016 article "Regaining Jerusalem: Eschatology and Slavery in Jewish Colonization in Seventeenth-Century Suriname" considers "the

49 See Michele Gillespie and Robert Beachy, eds., *Pious Pursuits: German Moravians in the Atlantic World*, 1st edn. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), vol. 7, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv287sgxw; Kristin Block, *Ordinary Lives in the Early Caribbean: Religion, Colonial Competition, and the Politics of Profit* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012); Susanne Lachenicht, "Refugees and Refugee Protection in the Early Modern Period", *History of Refugee Protection*, special issue, ed. J. Olaf Kleist, *Journal of Refugee Studies* 30:2 (2017): 261–81; Israel, *Diasporas*.

formative moment in the relation between Africans and Jews and between Jews and Christians in Suriname through the person of the seventeenth-century ex-converso David Nassy and his family."[50] This brilliant article contemplates a particular moment of empowerment and freedom for Jews as they subjugated others. Sadly, she died before completing her book on eighteenth-century Suriname, though several of her essays illuminated the determining moments in Surinamese Jewish history, and between "Africans and Jews *and* between Jews and Christians in Suriname."[51]

In general, scholarship on the Caribbean's Jews illuminates the fluidity and dynamism of racial categories and the intersection of race and religion in the social, legal, and political environments of the early modern Atlantic world. Jews as free people can best be understood as a minoritized "white" community in the Dutch and British early modern Caribbean. While Jews often held secondary political status, they were part of the empowered social structure both professionally and in terms of their ability to own land and participate as enslavers in the Caribbean's slave economy. In some settings, like Suriname and Jamaica, they had militias, and throughout the Caribbean they were land- and ship-owners.[52]

The question and process of Jewish emancipation is a subject through which to see the unique space that Jews occupied in a racialized environment, which assumed an intersection of Whiteness and Christianity. For example, Jewish suffrage was secured "in 1831 – just six months after free people of color achieved the same rights. On the eve of the abolition of slavery, Jews and free people of color had just entered Jamaican civic society together" (slavery was abolished by the British Parliament in 1834 though full emancipation was not granted until 1838).[53] Likewise, Ben-Ur untangles the complicated meaning and process of

50 Natalie Zemon Davis, "Regaining Jerusalem: Eschatology and Slavery in Jewish Colonization in Seventeenth-Century Suriname", *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 1 (2016): 11–38.

51 Natalie Zemon Davis, "Regaining Jerusalem: Jewish Slaveowners celebrate Passover in 17th-Century Suriname", 21 April 2016, https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/regaining-jerusalem; Zemon Davis, "Regaining Jerusalem: Eschatology and Slavery", 12.

52 Ben-Ur, *Jewish Autonomy*; Mirvis, *Jews of Eighteenth Century Jamaica*; Jacob Andrade, *A Record of the Jews in Jamaica from the English Conquest to the Present Times* (Kingston: Jamaica Times, 1941), esp. 136–42 for Emmanuels and list of ships and deeds for land in Jamaica.

53 Stanley Mirvis, "The Moment of Parallel Emancipations in Jamaica", Yale University Press, 1 June 2020, https://yalebooks.yale.edu/2020/06/01/the-moment-of-parallel-emancipations-in-jamaica/.

Jewish emancipation in Suriname. Until 1825, when Jewish emancipation ended the special privileges granted to the Surinamese Jewish community due to their participation in the sugar economy, the Jewish community had enjoyed a unique level of autonomy. Jews had been granted the freedom of religion, their own court system, and civic guard by the British and this was maintained by the Dutch. In 1825, Jewish emancipation was granted when Willem I repealed "the special status of the colony's Jews", rendering "All the 'privileges, licenses, and exceptions' enjoyed by the 'adherents of the Israelite religion' in the Dutch West Indian settlements . . . null and void".[54] This differed considerably from the English context, especially as Jewish emancipation made Jews a religious community and weakened their corporate autonomy as an ethnic group; the decree gave Jews equal status to *ingezetenen* (citizens), and only the ban on marriage between Jews and Christians remained.[55]

Religion and entwined communities

Scholars of Caribbean Jewish history must engage with the entanglement of race and religion. Although religion is always an assumed category, scholars such as Jessica Roitman place religion at the centre of their historical analysis. Her attention to religion, religious community, and Jewish life in the Dutch Atlantic carefully explores religious identity and the power of community in colonial spaces. Her fascinating article "There are no Secrets Here" (2023) considers the scandalous case of adultery involving Abraham da Costa Andrade Jr. and Sarah de Isaac Pardo, a married woman, in eighteenth-century Curaçao. Bringing together the dynamics of the close-knit Portuguese Jewish community on the island, the intimate spaces of the household, and the public streetscape, Roitman brilliantly highlights communal dynamics, theories of privacy and gossip, and the realities of colonial life. With a focus on this case that shook the Jewish community, she also brings to the fore the shared spaces among the island's Jews, slaves, and servants. This affair, which resulted in Sarah Pardo's pregnancy and "gossip" throughout the island, "highlighted tensions in social relationships but also reinforced the norms of the Jewish community and eighteenth-century Curaçao society."[56]

54 Ben-Ur, *Jewish Autonomy*, 221.
55 Ibid., 227.
56 Jessica Roitman, "'There are no Secrets Here': Sex and Scandal in the Streets of Curaçao", *Studia Judaica* 2:52 (Kraków, 2023): 397.

Additionally, Roitman's co-authored chapter with Ben-Ur, "Adultery Here and There: Crossing Sexual Boundaries in Suriname", considers the same case alongside three others of adultery in the Portuguese-Jewish Dutch Caribbean. Evaluating how the religious community handled each case, they argue that the "status and reputation of the accused couple were more crucial in determining vulnerability to prosecution than the sexual transgression itself". Here, too, religion was central to the discourse and inquiry, and they argue that "Jewish law in the Dutch Atlantic colonies most often worked alongside Dutch civil law." Despite the focus on Portuguese Jewish infidelity and the communal handling of such cases, Ben-Ur and Roitman argue that these Caribbean Jewish cases were "representative of a broader trend in Europe and the colonial Americas"[57] wherein race, wealth, and religious status played a significant role in the construction of identity and social station with its attendant privilege.

Roitman's "'There are no Secrets Here'" also raises an important development in Caribbean Jewish studies – that which Ben-Ur and Klooster refer to as "entanglements".[58] The Curaçaoan paramours had exchanged what were supposed to be clandestine love letters. These "incriminating love letters were written in the island's Creole language, commonly known today as Papiamentu, but in the colonial government's sources referred to as *neger spraak* (Negro speech)." They revealed that Pardo and da Costa Andrade spoke and wrote with one another in "a Caribbean Creole that emerged from Iberian and African languages."[59] That Papiamentu, rather than the imperial crown's Dutch language, was utilized further reveals the shared spaces of colonial Curaçao, and that despite the often imagined insularity of Jews in the early modern Caribbean, the reality of the Americas was one of intersections, interactions, and entanglements.

Alongside themes of race, power, and political status are internal Jewish tensions between "Old" and "New" worlds. Among the concerns were ritual practice and Jewish continuity far from centres of Jewish religious and legal life. These concerns impacted marriage and ritual practice along with almost every aspect of Jewish communal life. Miriam Bodian's now classic analysis of Portuguese Jewish life highlighted the importance of

57 Aviva Ben-Ur and Jessica V. Roitman, "Adultery Here and There: Crossing Sexual Boundaries in the Dutch Jewish Atlantic", in *Dutch Atlantic Connections, 1680–1800: Linking Empires, Bridging Borders*, ed. Gert Oostindie and Jessica V. Roitman (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014), 186; *BRILL eBooks* 29 (2014): 186; https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004271319_010.

58 Ben-Ur and Klooster, *Jewish Entanglements*.

59 Roitman, "'There are no Secrets Here'", 382.

the *dotar*, the dowry-fund confraternity, in the western Portuguese Jewish diaspora.[60] Others explored the presence of the *dotar* and a host of socio-religious Jewish institutional practices. What much of this work revealed is what Black Atlantic scholars such as Matory and Gomez highlighted as the necessity of considering the Caribbean as part of the dialectical relationship between worlds.

Jonathan Sarna and Zev Eleff's essay "The Etrog Trade in the New World" (2021) deploys the *etrog*, the citron used during the holiday of Sukkot, to highlight the tension between European "Old World" Jewish practice and the Americas.[61] The authors chronicle both the harvest of citrons in the Americas and the debates over their Halakhic viability for ritual use. They encapsulate the tensions between "Old" and "New" World religious authority as they explain that "the widespread anxiety concerning grafted (*murkav*) etrogim was, on the surface, a debate concerning Jewish law in botany. At a deeper level, though, it also reflected pervasive fears about assimilationist trends in the new world."[62] Sarna and Eleff are pointing to the development of the Americas' Judaisms and agency. I have similarly argued that material culture was central to the establishment of "New World" centres of religious Jewish authority, especially through the act of gifting and exchange.[63] Sarna, Eleff, and I focus on the emergence of the Americas' religious authority and practice to shift the discourse on the Caribbean, so that the Americas communities become "centres" in their own right, and are not constructed in the scholarship as Europe's periphery or mimetic spaces.

Similarly, Ben-Ur and Klooster's *Jewish Entanglements in the Atlantic World* proposed to "self-consciously reframe the study of colonial and early American Jewry within an Atlantic paradigm."[64] They argue that thus far, the Atlantic space has not thoroughly framed discussions of the Jews of the Atlantic world, and their volume seeks to de-centre Europe and the United States. By focusing on the Atlantic space rather than the bounds of nation-states or imperial boundaries, they suggest that "some broad conceptual

60 Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation*, 7.

61 Jonathan D. Sarna and Zev Eleff, "The Etrog Trade in the New World", in *Be Fruitful! The Etrog in Jewish Art, Culture, and History*, ed. Warren Klein, Sharon Mintz, and Joshua Teplitsky (Jerusalem: Mineged Press, 2021), 194–211.

62 Ibid., 203.

63 Hilit Surowitz-Israel, "Gifts from the Center: Gifting and Religious Authority in Colonial Curaçao", in *Jewish Experiences across the Americas*, ed. Katalin Franciska Rac and Lenny A. Ureña Valerio (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2022), 83–107.

64 Ben-Ur and Klooster, *Jewish Entanglements*, 2.

and thematic parameters have already crystallized. Atlantic Jewish history should endeavor to combine obvious religious and economic approaches with less apparent ethnic, racial, linguistic, and political perspectives. According to this scheme, there are four elements that might serve as the bedrock of Atlantic Jewish history: the demographic and economic centrality of Caribbean jewelry among hemispheric American Jewish communities; Portuguese Jewish hegemony among Jews in the Atlantic world; Slavery; And the triad of privileges, disabilities, and Jewish emancipation."[65] These themes frame current discourse on Caribbean Jewish history. Each of these umbrella topics brings together considerations of race, community, diaspora identity, and politics (among other topics), and forces a consideration of Jews within a broader society and in dialogue with non-Jews. Ben-Ur and Klooster's book demonstrates that the field of Caribbean Jewish history has developed in tandem with other disciplines concerned with the Atlantic space.

Whereas earlier studies in the emerging field of Caribbean Jewish studies sought to demonstrate the presence of Jewish communal life, and mirror the sometimes intense commitment to rejudaization and Jewish communal life, Oren Okhovat's "Portuguese Jews and Dutch Spaniards: Cultural Fluidity and Economic Pragmatism in the Early Modern Caribbean" (2023) is part of a recent move to study concurrent Jewish institutional life and robust interactions of Jews with non-Jews. As Roitman's "'There are no Secrets Here'" revealed, colonial life was intimate, entangled, and afforded little privacy. Okhovat furthers this insight by looking at the deep economic and social ties that Jewish merchants had with others. He begins by introducing Phelippe Henriques, "captain and owner of a ship manned by a Dutch crew",[66] who wrote a letter in 1699 to the governor of Curaçao, Bastiaan Bernagie, detailing an ambush on his ship by Spaniards off the cost of Cartegena. The interactions described, together with the fact that by the mid-seventeenth century "most urban Spanish Caribbean centers where Portuguese Jews traded were majority-Black cities, add[ed] an extra layer of connections to Portuguese and Luso-African worlds of which

65 Ibid., 8.

66 Oren Okhovat, "Portuguese Jews and Dutch Spaniards: Cultural Fluidity and Economic Pragmatism in the Early Modern Caribbean", *Colonial Latin American Review* 32:1 (2023): 74–96; Okhovat, "Atlantic Commerce and Pragmatic Tolerance: Portuguese Jewish Participation in the Spanish *Navíos de Registro* System in the Seventeenth Century", in Ben-Ur and Klooster, *Jewish Entanglements*, 74.

Amsterdam and Curaçao were also an integral part."[67] These examples, which point to daily social and economic interactions, reveal the deep entanglements and "how tolerance was further entangled with pragmatic economic decision-making that broke down political and social barriers across imperial divides."[68] Taken together – alongside other examples detailed by scholars such as Toni Pitock in his study of the Frank family, their transatlantic trade partners, and the Pragers, who were North American insurers –ongoing connections and relationships between Jews and others in the Caribbean should be assumed to be a constant in Caribbean Jewish life.[69]

The Franks, whose business brought them into constant contact with Christians, were long-standing members of New York's Shearith Israel congregation. Pitock's study is unique in its focus on Ashkenazi Jews involved in the transatlantic trade, and brings to the fore the intimacy of the entanglements as "their conviction that they could maintain a separation between the religious and the secular domains was shattered when two of their children married Christians in the 1730s."[70] Natalie A. Zacek also considers marriage and relationship patterns among early modern Caribbean Jews and non-Jewish whites, enslaved Blacks, and Free People of color.[71] This recent scholarship offers the perspective of the entwined realities of colonial life that were generally pragmatic and mundane, but were also subject to the whims of colonial social, economic, legal, and political realities.

With a multitude of methodological shifts, Caribbean Jewish studies has developed into a distinct subfield that demands interdisciplinary work that considers the fields of Black/Africana studies, religion, history, literature, and arts (to name just a few). This intersectional approach is necessary to have a fuller understanding of the colonized and creolized Caribbean spaces and communities. Nonetheless, some of the challenges of this field are distinct from broader Atlantic, Americas, and Caribbean

67 Okhavot, "Atlantic Commerce", 75.

68 Ibid.

69 Toni Pitock, "Imperial Enterprise: The Franks Family Network, Commerce, and British Expansion", in Ben-Ur and Klooster, *Jewish Entanglement*, 99–115; Pitock, "Pragers & Co.: Merchants in the Post-Revolutionary Era", lecture, Association for Jewish Studies Annual Meeting, Boston, MA, 18 December 2022.

70 Pitock, "Imperial Enterprise", 100.

71 Natalie A. Zacek, "Great Tangled Cousinries?: Jewish Intermarriage in the British West Indies", in *A Sefardic Pepper-Pot in the Caribbean: History, Language, Literature, and Art*, ed. Michael Studemund-Halévy (Barcelona: Tirocinio, 2016), 136–55.

studies as Jews are both empowered and minoritized: they are both of the Americas and a diaspora community, and their status as Jews assumed difference, or difference that had to be "overcome". The place of Jews throughout the early modern Caribbean is an exciting site for exploring themes of race, space, and religious identity. While early histories focused on Jews as economic agents, more recent scholarship considers Jews as agents of social, political, and religious production, and has revealed the intricate networks and identities they navigated and created during the colonial period and beyond. Most importantly, the centrality of the Caribbean to the development of America's Jewish life comes increasingly into focus, thereby decentring late nineteenth-century Ashkenazi narratives of America's Judaisms.

Challenges and future considerations

When David Hancock opened his 2002 essay by stating that "[w]e are all Atlanticists now", he was pointing to a major shift in both European and American historical studies: "Atlantic Studies is certainly a growth industry in the historical profession. . . . The field is in fact fluid and undefined, an imprecise geographical expression."[72] Caribbean Jewish studies followed suit and is equally both challenged and motivated by the fluidity of the field and its geographic expanse. Scholars in the field are contending with the spatial expanse as "a congeries of entities – cultural, political, economic – distinctive in themselves each with peculiar, anomalous features."[73] This has allowed scholars from disparate fields such as Jewish studies, European history, American history, and religion to contend with this exciting new frontier of scholarship. But it has also made this area of study boutique. Both Jewish studies and Caribbean studies are relatively small subfields, and the intersection of the two is far slighter.

The interdisciplinary field of Caribbean Jewish history demands that scholars be conversant across numerous disciplines and have facility with multiple languages (documents are written in Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, English, French, and Hebrew, among others). Moreover, the historical records are scattered widely, reflecting both the transience of Caribbean Jews and the fluidity of the Caribbean Basin throughout the

72 David Hancock, "We Are All Atlanticists Now", in *The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800*, ed. David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 3.

73 Bernard Bailyn, Preface, in ibid., xv.

colonial period. Records of many Caribbean communities are scarce, and numerous records have succumbed to the hot and humid climate or natural disasters such as hurricanes, fires, and floods. As Ben-Ur and Roitman declared, the "spottiness" of Jewish communal sources from the early modern Caribbean "is both an opportunity for historians and a hindrance."[74] Studies of the Caribbean have approached this dilemma differently. Jon F. Sensbach, a scholar of early America and the Atlantic world, whose book *Rebecca's Revival* (2006) pieces together the "forgotten life of a black visionary from German, Danish, and Dutch records", chronicles Rebecca's life from enslaved to free, and as she becomes a leader in the Moravian Church.[75] Her three-continent journey traversing the Atlantic as a significant figure in Black Atlantic Christianity is pieced together with scant evidence, employing new methodologies for Caribbean history that are reliant on methodical historical work and supposition. More recently, historical studies are employing critical fabulation to recover voices and histories of the marginalized, a methodology traditionally associated with literary studies. Ben-Ur and Roitman confront this challenge of the paucity of sources differently by "winnowing rather than speculating." Each of these approaches is critical to the Caribbean's historiography, especially of the minoritized and the subaltern.

As the field of Caribbean Jewish studies grows and develops, there are several key areas for future consideration. The primary challenge is the integration of the field into the mainstream of Caribbean studies. This would entail framing the relevance of Jews to a broader field of scholars, who may be largely unaware of their presence or significance. The population of Jews in the Caribbean is statistically quite small, and the interesting space that they inhabit for the consideration of race and religion is not well recognized, largely due to late nineteenth and twentieth-century legal shifts such as Jewish emancipation, in which Jews were simply seen as "white" people who are part of a religious community. This is further reinforced by the immigration in the Second World War era of Ashkenazi Jews from Europe to the Caribbean. Moreover, contemporary geopolitical issues and concerns regarding Israel, Zionism, and critiques of colonialism have further complicated the embrace of Caribbean Jewish history within the larger field of Caribbean studies.

74 Ben-Ur and Roitman, "Adultery Here and There", 187.

75 Jon F. Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), https://www.hup.harvard.edu/books/9780674022577.

As the field of Caribbean Jewish history expands there are several avenues for consideration and development. Among them are a greater focus on women and gender, the environment, art, and theology. The focus on women and gender has been particularly under-studied, partly because of the dearth of records left by women in colonial and patriarchal societies. As mentioned earlier, scholars like Laura Leibman and Natalie Zemon Davis utilized, or are utilizing, new methodologies to recover the narratives of women. However, little attention has been given to theories of gender, the role of LGBTQAI+ figures in Jewish Caribbean life, and the everyday lives of women in the Caribbean. Further, life in the Americas often assumed a change in gender norms and the roles of men and women in various colonial economies. Some questions for consideration include: how were the roles and shifting norms of women and men reflected in Jewish life and Jewish communities? Did Jewish men and women acculturate to local practices, or did they maintain particularisms in their social and religious lives? There is a large body of Caribbean Jewish literature written by women and about the lives of Caribbean Jewish women. Perhaps these stories and methodologies can help inform and reshape the presence of women in Caribbean Jewish history.

Just as social roles may have been altered, so was the natural environment during European colonization. As Jews arrived in and settled the Americas as part of the project of westward expansion, they were an integral part of the changing colonial landscape. The new social and topographical realities of plantation economies led to significant engagement with the land, especially in places like Suriname. Whereas there has been robust literature on Jews and their participation in enslavement, there has been little attention given to Jewish agricultural practices and Jewish engagement with the natural environment. Barry Steifel's *Jewish Sanctuary in the Atlantic World* (2013) engages the built environment and demonstrates the impact that Jewish diaspora, freedom of worship, race, and prosperity had on how Jews in the Atlantic world created and transformed sacred space in the early modern period. He explains that "postexilic Sephardim" altered their environment in their creation of synagogues, which was deeply influenced by the fact that they "lived in motion, traveling between continents, nations, and ports".[76] In this vein, writings by Jews on the natural world that they were

76 Barry Stiefel, *Jewish Sanctuary in the Atlantic World: A Social and Architectural History* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2013), 5, 217.

encountering, and the influence that the environment had on Jewish life, would highlight the impact of the Caribbean on Jews and Judaisms. Just as Sarna and Eleff considered the etrog, other scholars of Caribbean Jewish history could consider agricultural pursuits, medicinal botany, and changes in foodways (the entire food system) as a prism through which to forge a more holistic understanding of the Caribbean's Jews.

Another area that has not received the full attention of scholars of Caribbean Jewish history is art. Although Isaac Emmanuel, Ben-Ur, and Rachel Frankel have written on Jewish tombstones in Curaçao and Suriname, and Philip Wright has done the same for Jamaica,[77] little notice has been given to the artistic production of Caribbean Jews. Only in recent years have the nineteenth-century painters Mendes *Belisario* and Pissarro become figures of Caribbean Jewish interest.[78] With which arts were Jews in the Caribbean engaged? Did they train in the Americas or Europe? What media did they use? And how did they imagine and represent ideas of home, diaspora, and the Caribbean landscape?

Similar questions can be asked of the theological writings of Caribbean Jews. This overlooked area should be further considered within a broader Jewish framework, and in terms of the creolization of American Judaisms. Recent years have brought greater engagement with responsa from the Americas, but there has been little inquiry into the broader body of Jewish writings. Lastly, there has been little analysis of how other communities in these Caribbean spaces have influenced or have been influenced by Caribbean Jewish religion and theology. Some scholars have been quick to place Jewish theological practice and production in the context of European centres of Jewish life, as if Caribbean communities were simply mimetic spaces. However, closer examination is likely to reveal that the "long nineteenth century" brought significant changes to Caribbean Judaisms. Just as Kristin Block's *Ordinary Lives in the Early Caribbean* (2012) argues that Christianity, especially Quakerism, was used strategically

77 Isaac Samuel Emmanuel, *Precious Stones of the Jews of Curaçao: Curaçaon Jewry 1656–1957* (New York: Bloch, 1957); Aviva Ben-Ur and Rachel Frankel, *Remnant Stones: The Jewish Cemeteries of Suriname*, 2 vols (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2009–12); Richard David Barnett, Oron Yoffe, and Philip Wright, *The Jews of Jamaica: Tombstone Inscriptions, 1663–1880* (Jerusalem: Ben Ziv Institute, 1997).

78 T. J. Barringer, Gillian Forrester, and Barbaro Martinez-Ruiz, *Art and Emancipation in Jamaica : Isaac Mendes Belisario and his Worlds* (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 2007); Jackie Ranston, *Belisario: Sketches of Character: A Historical Biography of a Jamaican Artist* (Kingston: Mill Press, 2008); A. Muhlstein, *Camille Pissarro : The Audacity of Impressionism* (New York: Other Press, 2023).

and was altered by the colonial encounter, a closer look at Judaism in the Americas may reveal the same.[79] Likewise, the impact that Caribbean Jewish communities had on America's Judaism is a critical challenge to a late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century North American Jewish narrative being projected onto the early modern period. This seems a ripe area of inquiry as quite a few North American Jewish religious leaders first served in the Caribbean before moving northward.

Finally, Caribbean Jewish studies, in its quest to decentre Ashkenazi narratives, has privileged Sephardi history. Just as Portuguese Jews dominated the Jewish Caribbean's political, social, and religious economy during the early modern period, they are foregrounded in the scholarship. Within decades of the establishment of Portuguese Jewish communities, Ashkenazi Jews were circulating in the Caribbean and establishing communities as well. Unfortunately, many of the studies focus on the way that Ashkenazi "inferiority" was constructed by Sephardi Jews and codified through relationships between Portuguese Jewish communities and colonial rulers.[80] This has led to a lacuna in the scholarship on Jews and Jewish communities in the colonial Caribbean. Ashkenazi Jews appear as footnotes or as static objects that allow for the exploration of Sephardi history, with little regard given to them as a developing and dynamic community during the same period. Generally, scholarly focus on Ashkenazi Jews in the Caribbean emerges with communities of Ashkenazi Jewish Holocaust refugees with no attention given to their antecedents.

In his afterword to the second edition of Armitage and Braddick's *British Atlantic World* (2009), J. H. Elliott pictures Atlantic history as "the story of the creation, destruction, and recreation of communities as a result of the movement, across and around the Atlantic basin, of people, commodities, cultural practices and ideas . . . [the story] of change and continuity in the face of new experiences, new circumstances, new contacts, and new environments."[81] Caribbean Jewish history reflects this dynamism and the attendant challenges. The Caribbean's Jews are critical

79 Kristin Block, *Ordinary Lives in the Early Caribbean: Religion, Colonial Competition, and the Politics of Profit* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

80 See Michael Hoberman, Laura Arnold Leibman, and Hilit Surowitz-Israel, eds., *Jews in the Americas, 1776–1826* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Wim Klooster, "Jewish Involvement in the Age of Atlantic Revolutions: The Threat of Equality to the Jewish Way of Life", in Ben-Ur and Klooster, *Jewish Entanglements*, 156–76.

81 J. H. Elliott, "Atlantic History: A Circumnavigation", in Armitage and Braddick, *British Atlantic World*, 2nd edn. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 239.

to a fuller understanding of the early modern Atlantic, the development of the Caribbean, the porousness of identity and empire, and the formation of religious community.