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Ali Erginsoy[1,*]

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*Correspondence: ali@erginsoy.com
[1]Independent Scholar, UK

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Keeping the faithful: Sephardi poverty, welfare and cohesion in Georgian London

ALI ERGINSOY

Every autumn, the five members of the Mahamad, the executive committee of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews' Congregation of London, and four adjuncts from the Velhos, the Elders, held a joint meeting to discuss the state of the Nação, or "Nation", as Portuguese Jews in the Western Sephardi diaspora styled themselves. At one such meeting in November 1773, David Alves Rebello, aged 32 and Gabay (treasurer) for that year, delivered a blunt assessment of the Congregation's finances. Among various cuts, Rebello recommended ending the customary annual gift of a silver tray to the Lord Mayor at a cost of £51 5s, explaining that the Congregation needed to cut down on items not related to poor relief, "so that our Poor are not bothersome to the Parishes".[1] On the one hand, this imperative represented the perennial preoccupation of successive Mahamads to avoid friction with the local authorities. On the other, it also encapsulated the tension at the heart of this article. How did the leadership balance meeting the needs of the poor without overburdening the wealthier members whose synagogal taxes funded poor relief? And how did it do so even while striving to counteract the forces of secularization, acculturation, and assimilation conspiring to pull the poor and the wealthy alike away from the Congregation and Judaism? This, therefore, is not a study of poverty and welfare only, or of community cohesion only, but of the intersection between the two. It is also the story of the transformation from a primarily Portuguese Jewish diaspora community to a distinct branch of Anglo-Jewry.

1 "Minute Book: the Mahamad, 1750–1775", Hesvan 5534 (November 1773), LMA/4521/A/01/03/002, Spanish and Portuguese Jews' Congregation (SPJC), London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), 292. Rebello cites as a precedent for discontinuing the tradition of a gift to the Lord Mayor, in place since 1679, that the Ashkenazi congregations "never give him anything, nor do they find it necessary". Clearly, the Mahamad felt sufficiently secure in Bevis Marks's ability to survive by this point that they could dispense with the annual gift, while still seeking to avoid conflict with the parish authorities.

The London Sephardi Congregation was founded by a small group of Portuguese merchants, descendants of Jews forcibly converted to Catholicism after 1497, who re-embraced their ancestral faith after Cromwell readmitted the Jews in 1656.[2] Together with those of Bayonne, Bordeaux, Livorno, Antwerp, Hamburg, Amsterdam, and the Americas, the London Congregation is commonly referred to as belonging to the Western Sephardi diaspora, as distinct from the Eastern, which was formed by Jews expelled from Spain in 1492 who made their way to North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean. In time, the congregation came to be known as Bevis Marks, after the street on which the community's synagogue was inaugurated in 1701. It grew with the influx of mostly impoverished refugees from the Portuguese and Spanish Inquisitions in the first half of the eighteenth century, and, once this had largely abated by 1745, with immigrants from Holland, Italy, and North Africa, reaching a steady population well into the nineteenth century of two thousand individuals.[3]

By matching lists of the *finta* (the compulsory tax on disposable wealth of fee-paying members, *yehidim*) to land tax records and wills, analysis of where yehidim lived during the late Georgian period reveals that just under eighty-seven per cent lived within a one-mile radius of Bevis Marks, primarily in the City of London wards of Aldgate and Portsoken, and in the extramural parish of St Mary Whitechapel.[4] A similar statistical and

2 Harold Pollins, *Economic History of the Jews in England*, Littman Library of Jewish Civilization (London: Associated University Presses, 1982), 29–41.

3 Vivian D. Lipman, "Sephardi and Other Jewish Immigrants in England in the Eighteenth Century", in *Migration and Settlement: Proceedings of the Anglo-American Jewish Historical Conference held in London jointly by the Jewish Historical Society of England and the American Jewish Historical Society, July 1970* (Anglo-American Jewish Historical Conference, London: Jewish Historical Society of England, 1971), 40; A. S. Diamond, "Problems of the London Sephardi Community, 1720–1733: Philip Carteret Webb's Notebooks", *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England*, 21 (1962): 40.

4 Minute Books: the Mahamad, 1767–1802, LMA/4521/A/01/03/002, 251, 311, 392; LMA/4521/A/01/02/002, 56, 169, 250, 350; LMA/4521/A/01/03/004, 33, 161; LMA/4521/A/01/03/005, 18, 170, 297; Ali Erginsoy, "Bevis Marks Prosopography 1767–1802" (hereafter, "BMP Dataset") (Zenodo, 1 January 2024), https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.10448563; "London Land Tax Records, 1692–1932", LMA, online database, https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2170/; "England & Wales, Prerogative Court of Canterbury Wills, 1384–1858", online database, https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/5111/. The analysis took a random sample of 159 out of 326 households of yehidim who were buried in the Novo Cemetery, that is who retained their affiliation to the Congregation throughout their lives. The sample size gives a margin of error of 5.54% at a confidence level of 95%.

residence analysis for the poor of the community is hindered by the lack of records, but scholars have identified the "Jewish East End", comprising the eastern fringe of the City, Houndsditch, Spitalfields, and Whitechapel, all within one mile of Bevis Marks, as areas where poorer Jews, Sephardim included, lived.[5]

Poverty and welfare in the late eighteenth-century London Sephardi community has received some attention from scholars, although much of it is now fairly dated.[6] More recent decades have seen innovative studies from Julia Lieberman and Alex Kerner, while Todd Endelman and Mordechai Rozin have examined the subject in the context of the wider, Ashkenazi-dominated, Jewish community.[7] A comprehensive account of the kind authored by Tirtsah Levie Bernfeld for the Portuguese Jews of Amsterdam has yet to be written.[8]

The quantitative analysis and underlying data used in this study span a period of thirty-five years from 1767, when the congregation started registering both male and female births, to 1802.[9] The study has used

5 Todd M. Endelman, *The Jews of Georgian England, 1714–1830: Tradition and Change in a Liberal Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 72; Mordechai Rozin, *The Rich and the Poor: Jewish Philanthropy and Social Control in Nineteenth-Century London* (Brighton and Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press, 1999), 6; Edgar Samuel, "The Mahamad as an Arbitration Court", *Jewish Historical Studies* (*JHS*) 41 (2007): 9.

6 Moses Gaster, *History of the Ancient Synagogue of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews* (London, 1901); Albert Montefiore Hyamson, *The Sephardim of England: A History of the Spanish and Portuguese Jewish Community, 1492–1951* (London: Methuen, 1951); Neville Laski, *The Laws and Charities of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews' Congregation of London* (London: Cresset Press, 1952).

7 Julia R. Lieberman, "Few Wealthy and Many Poor: The London Sephardi Community in the Eighteenth-Century", *LER História* 74 (2019): 41–61, https://doi.org/10.4000/lerhistoria.4614; Julia R. Lieberman, "New Practices of Sedaca: Charity in London's Spanish and Portuguese Jewish Community during the Eighteenth Century", in *Charity in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Traditions*, ed. Julia R. Lieberman and Michal Jan Rozbicki (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 105–29; Alex Kerner, "The 'Livro de Pleitos': The Leadership of the Spanish and Portuguese Community of London in the Eighteenth Century as a Court of Requests", in *Religious Changes and Cultural Transformations in the Early Modern Western Sephardic Communities*, ed. Yosef Kaplan, Studies in Jewish History and Culture (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019), 258–87; Endelman, *Jews of Georgian England*; Rozin, *Rich and the Poor*.

8 Tirtsah Levie Bernfeld, *Poverty and Welfare among the Portuguese Jews in Early Modern Amsterdam* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012).

9 Susannah Ottaway and Samantha Williams, "Reconstructing the Life-Cycle Experience of Poverty in the Time of the Old Poor Law", *Archives: The Journal of the British Records Association* 23, no. 98 (April 1998): 23, https://doi.org/10.3828/archives.1998.3, recommended a minimum of 25–30 years of parish overseers' accounts to researchers

nominal record linkage techniques to combine a "family reconstitution" of the community with relief and tax data from Bevis Marks's annual accounts. Family reconstitution is a technique used by demographic historians, whereby all the members of a defined community are "reconstituted" in a relational database, based on birth, marriage, and death records. Relationships are drawn between individuals to recreate individual and family life histories that can then be subjected to statistical analysis. This is the first time this has been done for the London Sephardi community, and possibly also the first study to combine a family reconstitution with welfare data for any population in late eighteenth-century London. The reconstitution is based on the published transcriptions of the vital records of Bevis Marks.[10] The nominal record linkage employed Gill Newton's twelve-step methodology, adapted for urban populations from Tony Wrigley and Roger Schofield's original ten-step schema.[11] The database was populated with relief and tax data from the annual accounts and the minute books of the Mahamad and Elders, creating a unique prosopography that gives insights into the gender and age structure of welfare, life-cycle poverty, and the social structure of the community. A tool of microhistory and local history, the reconstitution technique does introduce a limitation, as transnational comparisons become difficult without comparable data for other locations. Realistically, this could only be tackled as part of a much wider study that scholars might undertake in the future.

attempting nominal record linkage, which the span of 35 years for the Bevis Marks Annual Accounts comfortably exceeds.

10 Normalized as Excel spreadsheets and imported into a relational database (FileMaker Pro). Technique originally developed by the French historians M. Fleury and L. Henry in the 1950s, then refined by Tony Wrigley and others at the Cambridge Group for the History of Population & Social Structure (CAMPOP). Lionel D. Barnett, ed., *Bevis Marks Records Part II: Abstracts of the Ketubot or Marriage-Contracts of the Congregation from Earliest Times until 1837*, vol. 2, Bevis Marks Records (Oxford: Board of Elders of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews' Congregation, 1949); Miriam Rodrigues-Pereira and Chloe Loewe, eds., *Bevis Marks Records Part V: The Birth Register (1767–1881) of the Spanish & Portuguese Jews' Congregation, London*, vol. 5 (London: Spanish and Portuguese Jews' Congregation, 1993); Miriam Rodrigues-Pereira, ed., *Bevis Marks Records Part VI: The Burial Register (1733–1918) of the Novo (New) Cemetery of the Spanish & Portuguese Jews' Congregation London*, vol. 6, Bevis Marks Records (London: Spanish and Portuguese Jews' Congregation, 1997).

11 Gill Newton, "Family Reconstitution in an Urban Context: Some Observations and Methods", *Cambridge Working Papers in Economic and Social History* 12 (January 2013): 1–34; E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, "Nominal Record Linkage by Computer and the Logic of Family Reconstitution", in *Identifying People in the Past*, ed. E. A. Wrigley (London: Edward Arnold, 1973).

From Jewish charity to Jewish philanthropy

The Congregation's welfare system operated independently of the Old Poor Law but was voluntary and did not have the same legal standing. (The Old Poor Law was a collection of statutes built up since the reign of Elizabeth I, which remained in force until the Poor Law Amendment Act, commonly known as the New Poor Law, was passed in 1834.) The autonomy of London's Sephardi community in this respect differed from that of Jewish communities of Eastern Europe, the Ottoman empire, or Livorno, which existed as corporate bodies with juridical autonomy.[12] It also differed from the Amsterdam Portuguese Jewish Community, which answered to the city for keeping good order, and which occasionally turned to the municipal authorities to enforce its migration policy.[13]

At the "Jewish" centre of the system was the Sedaca fund, administered by the Synagogue's lay leadership, the Mahamad and the Elders. Sedaca reflects how Jews of Iberian origin pronounced the Hebrew word *tsedakah* (צדקה), which literally translates as "justice" or "righteousness" but is commonly used to signify "charity". The principal source of funding for the Sedaca was the finta, augmented by voluntary offerings, legacies, and investment income. The Sedaca disbursed weekly and monthly pensions as well as *ad hoc* payments and benefits in kind; rent or accommodation for qualifying paupers, coal for heating and cooking, meat, and, during the Passover festival, *maçot* (unleavened bread). *Despacho*, travel money for poor members and visitors, who were either seeking or were "encouraged" to travel abroad, also came out of the Sedaca.

The operation of the Sedaca during the Congregation's first century reflected the rabbinical understanding of charity as righteous behaviour for the giver, and of justice and a right due to the recipient.[14] It was a conception that came under increasing strain during the second half of the eighteenth century from immigration, which the Congregation's leadership, lacking the powers of either central or local government, could not prevent. At the same time, the leadership may well have been

12 Francesca Bregoli, *Mediterranean Enlightenment: Livornese Jews, Tuscan Culture, and Eighteenth-Century Reform*, Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 28–30; Daniel M. Swetschinski, *Reluctant Cosmopolitans: The Portuguese Jews of Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004), 15.

13 Levie Bernfeld, *Poverty and Welfare*, 42.

14 David Nieto, *Triumphs of Poverty: Los Triunfos de La Pobreza*, 2nd edn., Veritas è Terra Orietur 3 (New York: Shehakol Inc., 2020).

aware of and influenced by a vigorous debate going on around them in wider English society, through a substantial volume of literature in the form of pamphlets, books and letters since at least the 1720s, about how to deal with the "problem" of the poor.[15] On 23 November 1740, a resolution was put before the Elders that proposed restricting new entrants to the Sedaca to widows or orphans whose husbands and fathers had been on the Sedaca roll before their death, and giving assistance to anyone else only once, but this was rejected by a majority of votes.[16] The minutes do not expound on the reasons, but it appears that the Elders baulked at such a fundamental reinterpretation of the principles of Jewish charity. It was another nine years before the matter came before them again, and when it did, legitimation came from a surprising quarter.

Isaac de Pinto (1717?–1787) was a wealthy financier, *philosophe* and writer on economics, who, although mostly associated with the Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam, spent time in England, where he had extensive dealings with the British government.[17] De Pinto wrote mostly on finance and economics, but he was also the author of a single socio-economic treatise, written in 1748 while he was serving as the treasurer of the Amsterdam Congregation. Entitled *Reflexoens Politicas* (Political Reflections), this treatise analysed the conditions that had led to increased poverty among Portuguese Jews in Amsterdam and the measures needed to reverse the trend.[18] Challenging the assumption that Jewish paupers were entitled to relief from the Portuguese community as a right, de Pinto lamented, "Why are we obliged to support the weak from all over the world . . . what would happen if the doors were opened here in Amsterdam to poor Protestants from Europe, Africa and Asia? Would that act, though apparently a charitable one, not seem ridiculous, ruinous and even impossible?"[19] Instead, he proposed a series of radical measures. These included denying payments to new immigrants, barring newly married couples from claiming relief for three years, and assisting poor Sephardi

15 Steven King, *Poverty and Welfare in England, 1700–1850: A Regional Perspective* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 32.

16 "Minute Book: the Elders, 1732–1763", 4 Kislev 5501 (23 November 1740), LMA/4521/A/01/04/001, SPJC, 22–23.

17 R. D. Sheldon, "Pinto, Isaac de (1717?–1787), Writer on Economics", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (ODNB), https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/63633.

18 Isaac de Pinto, *Reflexoens Políticas, tocante a Constituiçaõ da Naçaõ Judaica, Exposiçaõ do Estado de suas Finanças, Causas dos Atrasos e Desordens que se Experimentaõ, e Meyos de os Prevenir* (Amsterdam, 1748; facsimile Charleston, SC: Nabu Press, 2011).

19 De Pinto, *Reflexoens Políticas*, 6; trans. Levie Bernfeld, *Poverty and Welfare*, 16.

families – de Pinto suggested a third of the total – to emigrate to the Dutch and British colonies in the Americas. The last measure had the dual aim of reducing the burden on the community's coffers and giving such families a chance to escape poverty. Pinto's treatise has been little studied, and where it has this has naturally been in the context of the Amsterdam community.[20] The impact of *Reflexoens Politicas* on the London community's welfare policy appears to have been overlooked by historians. Although never a member of Bevis Marks, de Pinto must have been a familiar figure there from his visits and may have been on intimate terms with the lay executive. He was, in their eyes, "one of us" – not a *haham* (Sephardi rabbi) or *dayan* (judge in a rabbinic court), who were ultimately employees of the synagogue, but a wealthy financier who had the ear of princes and kings. To be clear, what spurred the Congregation's leaders into reform was the rising burden of supporting the poor, exacerbated by high levels of immigration of poor Sephardim from abroad. The evidence that *Reflexoens Politicas* lent the leaders of the London community the philosophical validation to alter the way they dealt with the poor is circumstantial but strong.

The first reform was announced on 30 October 1748, not long after the publication of de Pinto's treatise, when the Elders resolved, "in order to discourage the poor who come from abroad", to restrict Sedaca payments to those who had been resident "in this Kingdom for seven years in a row" (later reduced to five).[21] The only exception was for direct arrivals from Portugal or Spain, which by this time had become negligible. This new policy coincided with growing fears in wider society in London about vagrancy and crime following the demobilization of soldiers and sailors at the end of the Austrian War of Succession in late 1748.[22] The leaders of the Congregation were, conceivably, influenced by this climate or saw it

20 David Strum, "Isaac de Pinto's Political Reflections and the Beginning of the Jewish Political Economy", in *Paths to Modernity: A Tribute to Yosef Kaplan*, ed. Claude B. Stuczynski, Michael Heyd, and Avriel Bar'Levav (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2018), 233–48; José Luís Cardoso and António de Vasconcelos Nogueira, "Isaac de Pinto (1717–1787): An Enlightened Economist and Financier", *History of Political Economy* 37, no. 2 (2005), 263–92, https://doi.org/10.1215/00182702-37-2-263; José Luís Cardoso and António de Vasconcelos Nogueira, "Isaac de Pinto (1717–1787) and the Jewish Problems: Apologetic Letters to Voltaire and Diderot", *History of European Ideas* 33, no. 4 (2007), 476–87, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.histeuroideas.2007.05.001.

21 "Minute Book: the Elders, 1732–1763", 8 Hesvan 5509 (30 October 1748), LMA/4521/A/01/04/001, SPJC, 69.

22 Tim Hitchcock and Robert Brink Shoemaker, *London Lives: Poverty, Crime and the Making of a Modern City, 1690–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 196–9.

as an opportunity to impose restrictions they had previously felt unable to enact.

The second major change came six months later, in May 1749. Describing a drastic reduction in existing allowances to families "in the most miserable state imaginable" as "a little cruel and strict", the Elders approved a version of the 1740 proposal whereby allowances to those already receiving relief would remain unchanged but would be phased out as the recipients died.[23] Regular weekly or monthly payments to new applicants, however, would be made only to the elderly, the sick and disabled, children and widows of synagogue officials, and families coming directly from Portugal or Spain for the first two years of their residence in London. The able-bodied poor, now called "Strugglers", would be entitled to casual payments only, on merit. Julia Lieberman has discussed the establishment around the same time of the Sedaca restructuring of two subscription charities: Bet Holim (House of the Sick) in 1748, and in 1749 Mahasim Tobim (Good Works). These were to fund pauper apprenticeships and extend micro-loans to Strugglers to buy stock or tools for their trade.[24] Both the subscription charity model and the institutions themselves emulated English equivalents.[25] In short, a paradigm shift had come about, from a traditionally Jewish understanding of universal charity to one of targeted philanthropy seeking to address the causes of poverty, with an Anglo-Protestant emphasis on industriousness and morality. In later years, the *ascamot* (the congregation's laws or constitution) would make the link to morality explicit even for those receiving regular pensions on the Sedaca. A major revision in 1781 forbade the Elders and the Mahamad from admitting to their Sedaca lists "any person or family whatever who shall not be worthy thereof, both in regard to their good conduct, and their necessities."[26] The convergence of Jewish charity and Anglo-Protestant philanthropy was complete.

23 "Minute Book: the Elders, 1732–1763", 9 Sivan 5509 (26 May 1749), LMA/4521/A/01/04/001, SPJC, 73.

24 Julia R. Lieberman, "The Founding of the London Bet Holim Hospital in 1748 and the Secularization of Sedaca in the Spanish and Portuguese Jewish Community in the Eighteenth Century", *JHS*, 49 (2018): 114–17.

25 Ibid.

26 "Revised Ascamot of 1781", Ascama 31, LMA/4521/A/01/01/006, SPJC, 92.

The scale and nature of the poverty problem

The Sephardi "poor" are defined here as those who were at any point in receipt of some form of relief, whether a regular pension or casual handouts. This is how the Congregation's leaders defined those in poverty, and how the poor, through petitioning for relief, defined themselves. Obviously, what is captured here is relative poverty, although many will also have been in absolute poverty.

In order to understand better the size of the Sephardi poverty problem, it is useful to provide some population numbers. The consensus figure in the literature, originally calculated by Vivian Lipman, is a steady Sephardi population of two thousand individuals throughout the second half of the eighteenth century.[27] To put this figure in perspective, the average population in 1801 of a parish within the City of London (bounded by the medieval-era city walls) was 658, with the median 508.[28] The total Sephardi population of London would have been comparable to one of the more populous intramural London parishes like All Hallows Barking (2,087) or St Katherine Creechurch (1,727), the latter incidentally where Bevis Marks was located. Extramural parishes tended to have much larger populations, averaging 8,657 in 1801 (median 7,078), with the population of St Botolph Aldgate, the densely populated parish where many Sephardim also lived, at 14,842 in 1801. Some "Out Parishes" of Middlesex were larger still. For example, St Mary Whitechapel, another Sephardi node, had a population of 23,666 in 1801.

Analysing Bevis Marks's annual accounts allows calculation of more accurate figures than Lipman's, which, moreover, can be broken down by year and social strata.[29] The annual lists for the distribution of *maçot* during Pesach, on the one hand, is a good proxy for the universe of poor households, capturing the native poor as well as recent immigrants and even transient visitors. The triennial list of finta-payers, on the other hand, gives an accurate representation of non-pauper households, covering the spectrum from artisans and shopkeepers to the richest merchants

27 Lipman, "Sephardi and Other Jewish Immigrants", 40–41; Endelman, *Jews of Georgian England*, 172; Rozin, *Rich and the Poor*, 32.

28 Parish population figures from "Estimating London's Population", Locating London's Past, https://www.locatinglondon.org/static/Population.html (accessed 20 May 2024); see "Project Information", https://www.locatinglondon.org/static/AboutThisProject.html#toc7.

29 Annual Accounts (5528–5563), 1767–1802, LMA/4521/A/04/01/084-119, SPJC.

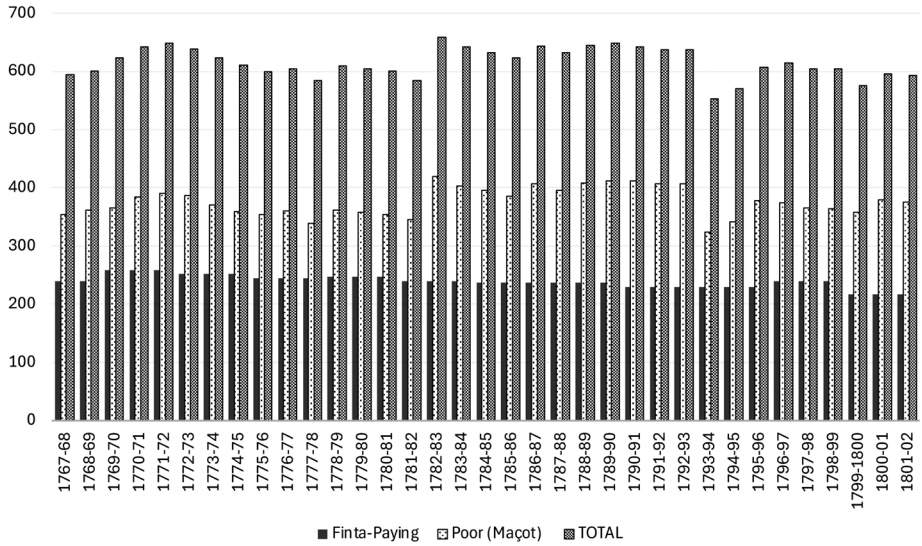

Figure 1 Total households by year (1767–1802).
SPJC Annual Accounts 1767–1802

and financiers. Together, these rosters give a reasonably accurate approximation of the total number of households by year (see figure 1). This reveals that total households fluctuated between about 550 and 650. The average between 1767 and 1802 was 630 and the median 626. Finta-paying households over the same period were thirty-nine per cent of the total, supporting the sixty-one per cent of households that were poor. The sharp rise in poor households in 1782–83 (evident in figure 1) was due to the sudden arrival in October 1782 of a large group of destitute Jews from Gibraltar, about 300 people in seventy-five households, who had been evacuated during the Great Siege laid by Spanish and French forces during the American Revolutionary War.[30]

For the six years between 1794 and 1800, the accounts give breakdowns by household of the *maçot* distribution to *adultos* (adults) – who were allocated eight pounds of flour over Pesach – and *crianças* (children) under the age of four – who were allocated four pounds. The *maçot* list for 1794 provides additional information that allows the population to be calculated to a high degree of accuracy. For that year, the total number of "Poor assisted by the Sedaca" is explicitly recorded as 1,162. This is in

30 Mesod Benady, "The Settlement of Jews in Gibraltar, 1704–1783", *Transactions & Miscellanies (Jewish Historical Society of England)* 26 (1974): 87–110.

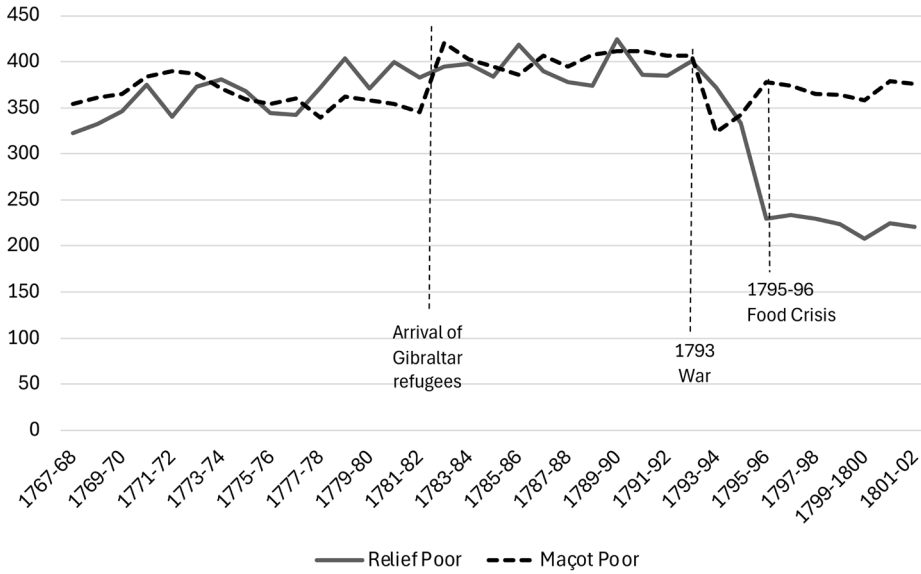

Figure 2 Poor households receiving relief or *maçot* (1767–1802). *SPJC Annual Accounts*

line with J. Rumney's 1933 estimate of 1,100 Sephardi poor, and is also the contemporary figure given by Daniel de Castro, the Congregation's Secretary between 1786 and 1821, for the number in 1795.[31] The average household size for 1794 was 3.65 (1,230/337). Applying the same figure to the 229 finta-paying households in 1794 gives a population of 836 for that category, and therefore a total estimated population for the community of 1,997, virtually identical to the consensus figure of 2,000 quoted for the second half of the century in the literature. However, in many ways, total households rather than total populations are the more useful measure and will be used hereafter.

Another measure for poor households is the total in any one year of those receiving some form of relief, whether a pension from the Elders or Mahamad Rolls, or casual relief as Strugglers. As there was minimal overlap between the categories, this again represents a good approximation of poor households. As can be seen from figure 2, the *maçot* and Relief lines correlate closely until 1795, when they diverge significantly. The reduction

31 J. Rumney, "The Economic and Social Development of the Jews in England, 1730–1860" (Ph.D., University of London, 1933); Daniel Lysons, *The Environs of London*, 6 vols. (London, 1792–1811), 3: 482, cited in Endelman, *Jews of Georgian England*, 32.

by nearly a hundred in the number of households receiving some form of relief in that year corresponds almost entirely to the discontinuation of assistance to forty per cent of households of Strugglers, the able-bodied poor.[32]

The reason behind the cull of Strugglers from the relief rolls lay in the economic conditions in the country at the time. Britain had been at war with Revolutionary France since December 1793, disrupting European and Atlantic trade and imports. John Bohstedt described 1795 as "a year of desperation for the common people of England", with food prices reaching unprecedented levels by August.[33] It seems perverse that the Congregation's leaders would cut support to those in need at this time of crisis, and perhaps even counter to the instincts of the day. Only five months later, in May 1795, the Speenhamland magistrates in Berkshire introduced the eponymous system of income subsidy for agricultural labourers that came to be widely adopted throughout the south of England during the Napoleonic Wars, until its abolition in 1834 under the Poor Law Amendment Act.[34] The Speenhamland system was much debated and criticized in the decades after its adoption, but its introduction was a response to the subsistence crisis of 1795.[35] A clue as to why the Sephardi Congregation went in the opposite direction can be found in a letter to the Elders from Jacob Abenatar Pimentel, himself an Elder and a director of the subscription charity Mahasim Tobim.[36] Dated 11 December 1794, just six days before the Mahamad's resolution discontinuing support to a large body of Strugglers, Pimentel's letter critiqued the thinking behind poor relief, implying that the Sedaca as it was structured perpetuated a culture of dependency among the poor, before somewhat anticlimactically proposing that the matter be conveyed to a committee. Nevertheless, the letter is evidence that the Congregation's leaders had been debating the philosophical and practical framework of poor relief. The December resolution demonstrates that the Mahamad had decided to prioritize

32 "Minute Book: the Mahamad, 1794–1802", 26 Kislev 5555 (17 December 1794), LMA/4521/A/01/03/005, SPJC, 15.

33 John Bohstedt, *Riots and Community Politics in England and Wales, 1790–1810* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 1.

34 J. D. Marshall, *The Old Poor Law, 1795–1834* (London: Macmillan Education, 1985), 12–17.

35 George R. Boyer, *An Economic History of the English Poor Law, 1750–1850* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 52–84.

36 "Minute Book: the Elders, 1784–1795", 29 Kislev 5555 (21 December 1794), LMA/4521/A/01/02/004, SPJC, 328–32.

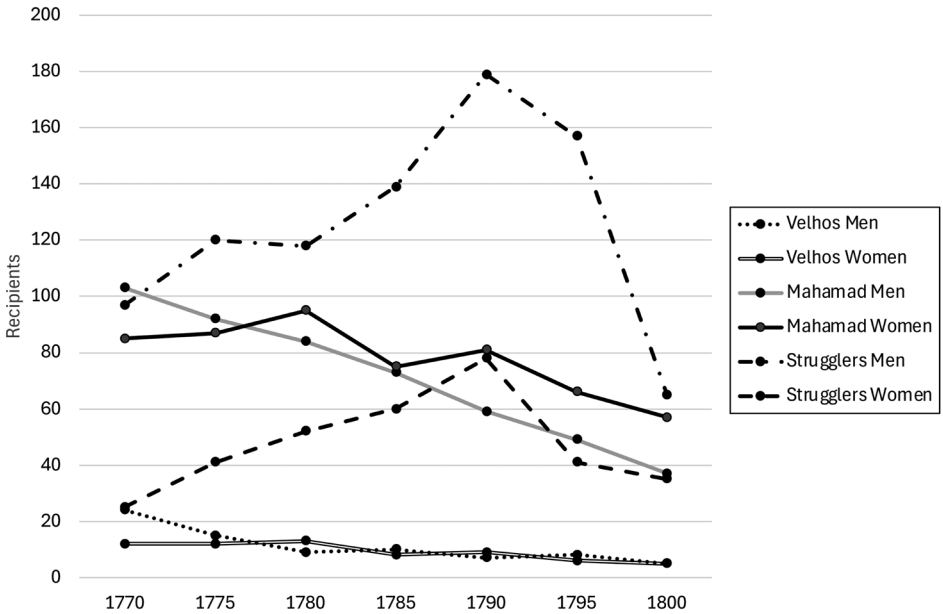

Figure 3 Relief categories by household and gender in 5-year intervals (1770–1800). *BMP Dataset*

those least able to support themselves – widows, orphans, the elderly and the infirm. Strugglers were able-bodied and would have to fend for themselves.

This trend can be seen clearly in figure 3, which segments the three relief categories of the Velhos Roll, Mahamad Roll and Strugglers by gender at five-year intervals between 1770 and 1800.[37] The first thing to note is that households headed by women, overwhelmingly widows, begin to outnumber male-led households on the Mahamad Roll after 1780, before briefly equalizing in 1785 and then maintaining a steady gap in favour of women from 1790. This implies an increasing preference being given to widows on the Mahamad Roll during the period. In the Strugglers category, there is a consistent parallel climb in households led by both men and women (the latter mostly widows with some spinsters) until 1790, with three to four times as many male-led households on the roll as female-led. After this, both went into steep decline from 1795, corresponding to the discontinuation of assistance to about forty per cent of Struggler households in the second half of that year. The more precipitous drop in male-led households on the roll is again indicative

37 Erginsoy, "BMP Dataset".

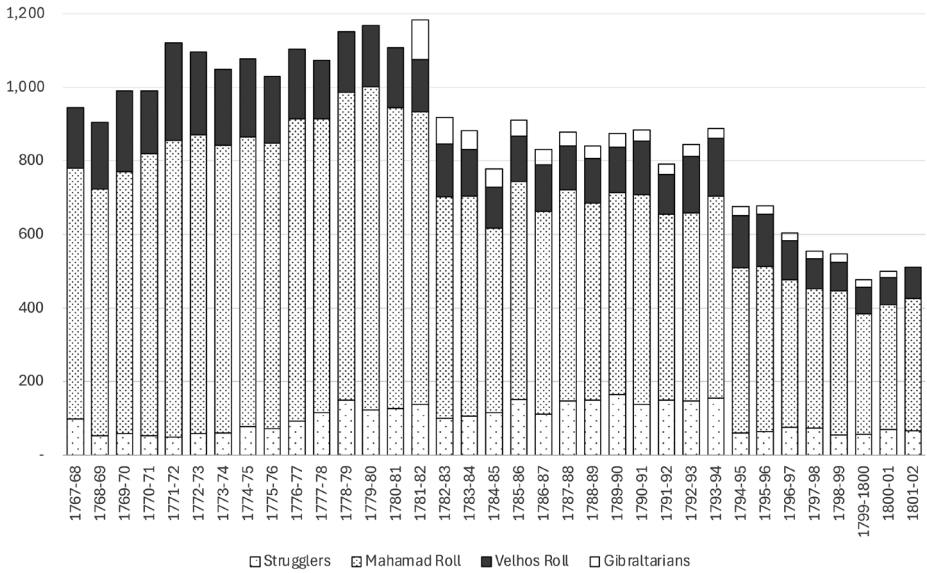

Figure 4 Expenditure on relief by amount (£; 1767–1802). *SPJC Annual Accounts*

of widows being privileged. The men and women on the Velhos Roll are fairly evenly distributed, as these consisted mainly of retired Synagogue officials and their widows or orphans.

Some comparisons of these data can be made with the parish poor relieved under the Old Poor Law. The scholars responsible for the London Lives project have calculated that between 1762 and 1790, the relatively wealthy City parish of St Dionis Backchurch supported on average just under 80 paupers out of a population of just under 800 people, or 10 per cent, with substantial pensions.[38] This compares to an average between 1767 and 1790 of 194 heads of households out of 621 in receipt of a Velhos or Mahamad pension, or 31 per cent, more than three times the figure for St Dionis Backchurch.[39] The London Lives project has calculated that in the year ending at Easter 1803, at least 8 per cent of the population of the capital were in receipt of regular or casual relief. This compares to 63 per cent of London Sephardi in 1802. Figure 4 shows the expenditure on the main relief categories in pounds. Very striking is the 25 per cent drop in expenditure on the Mahamad Roll in 1782–83 from the previous year. This followed the revision in 1781 of the ascamot, which imposed strict

38 "Background – the Parish Poor – London Lives" [n.d.], https://www.londonlives.org/static/ThePoor.jsp (accessed 20 May 2024).

39 Annual Accounts (5528–5550), 1767–1790, LMA/4521/A/04/01/084-107, SPJC.

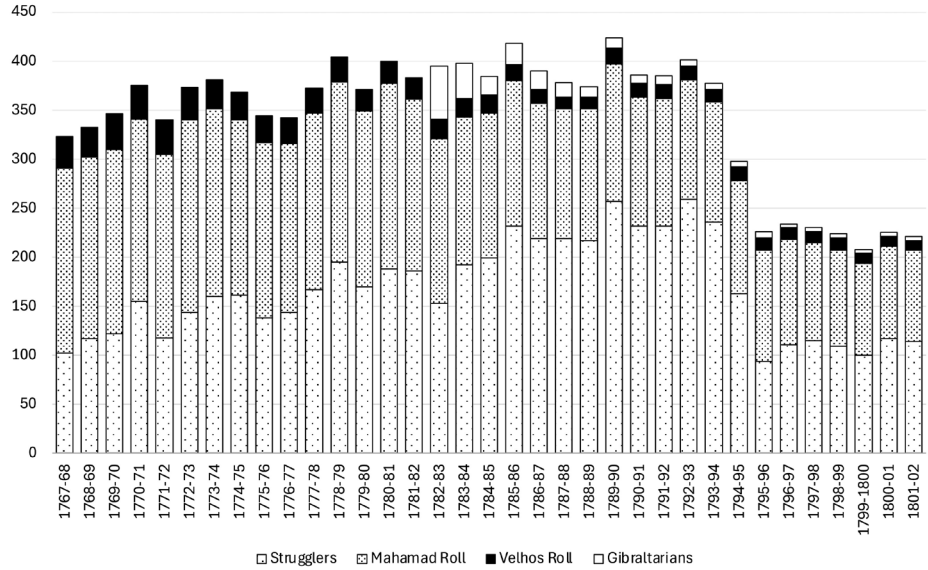

Figure 5 Relief categories by household numbers (1767–1802). *SPJC Annual Accounts*

new conditions for relief.[40] New entrants to the Sedaca had to have been born in or lived in England for at least five years. Also, no one married to a Tudesca (Spanish for "German woman", that is, Ashkenazi) could be admitted to the Mahamad or Velhos Rolls; they would have to make do with casual relief not exceeding ten shillings at one time and no more than twice a year, and only then in cases of illness or similar emergencies. The steep drop in expenditure on the Mahamad Roll from £800 in 1781–82 to £600 in 1782–83 seems to support the argument that these new clauses were designed to trim this most expensive relief category.

Figure 5 tells the story from a different perspective, that of relief categories by household numbers. It shows Struggler households increasing their share over Mahamad Roll households from 1783–84 up to the cull of Strugglers from the roll in 1795. The Mahamad Roll consistently accounted for 65–70 per cent of relief expenditure throughout the research period, while spending on Strugglers was in the 5–18 per cent band. This supports the argument that the tougher policy on Strugglers from 1795, unlike the restriction on the Mahamad Roll thirteen years earlier, was not driven by budgetary concerns, but by an ideological bias against those considered to be the "able-bodied poor", mirroring influential attitudes

40 "Revised Ascamot of 1781", Ascama 31, LMA/4521/A/01/01/006, SPJC, 91–2.

among the elite in wider English society, where the Old Poor Law was increasingly being criticized, including by social thinkers such as John Townsend, David Davies and Frederick Eden.[41]

In conclusion, poverty in the Sephardi community was extensive and endemic throughout the period, with a disproportionately higher incidence of poverty in comparison to the broader local (Christian) community. Yet, the Congregational leadership, often in response to external events, cut back in stages the number of poor it supported, thereby keeping control of welfare spending. This is a significant finding that will be returned to later here.

The profile of the Sephardi community as an overwhelmingly immigrant one affected members' ability to earn a living in London. The dataset reveals that even as late as 1793, only 53 of the 401 households (13 per cent) receiving relief were headed by men or women born in London.[42] In other words, 87 per cent were immigrant households, most from such non-English speaking lands as Holland, Italy, Morocco or the Ottoman Empire. The Bevis Marks Aliens Register of 1803, compiled by the Synagogue at the request of the authorities, catalogues a narrow range of mostly unskilled trades and occupations traditionally associated with the Jewish communities of London.[43] Todd Endelman has argued that for most Jews it was difficult to obtain the kind of employment that provided a steady income because of the unstable character of the trades they followed and the lack of training in any specialized calling.[44] In his letter to the Elders of 11 December 1794, Pimentel made a similar point, bemoaning that in contrast to the well-provisioned shops of the neighbourhood, "With what Article can our Poor supply you? With cane strings, 'barley sugar', and sweet Cakes! A Mechanic is scarcely to be found & few Jewish Servants but what are of German extraction."[45]

The struggles of Joseph Uzily

We get insight into the realities of poverty in the Sephardi community through the experience of an individual whose struggles are well documented in the historical record. On 31 October 1771, the Mahamad

41 Boyer, *Economic History*, 24–5.

42 Erginsoy, "BMP Dataset".

43 "Declaration of Aliens forms, 1795–1803", LMA/4521/A/01/18/006, SPJC.

44 Endelman, *Jews of Georgian England*, 186–7.

45 "Minute Book: the Elders, 1784–1795", 29 Kislev 5555 (21 December 1794), LMA/4521/A/01/02/004, SPJC, 328.

commissioned legal opinions from two of the most eminent jurists of the Kingdom.[46] They were John Dunning, who had stepped down as Solicitor General the previous year, and Edward Thurlow, his successor in the post, Attorney General since January 1771 and a future Lord Chancellor.[47] The case involved one Joseph Uzily, a Sephardi Jew identified in the opinions only as "A" and described as "an idle person and capable of Earning his Living", who the Annual Accounts indicate had been receiving casual relief as a Struggler from 1767 until 1771.[48] The minutes record that Uzily had turned up at a meeting of the Mahamad, with his children (twins aged two) in tow, demanding to be put on the permanent Mahamad Roll, and that he was "insolente" (insolent).[49] When he was refused, Uzily filed a complaint that caused the President of the Mahamad and his deputy to be summoned before the Lord Mayor's Court to explain the rejection. Thurlow and Dunning opined that the Congregation's system of poor relief, funded by a tax on wealthier members, was entirely voluntary and that it had no legal obligation to relieve "A". Moreover, there was nothing hindering him from applying for relief to the parish where he lived, which they stressed did have a legal obligation towards paupers of all faiths.[50] It seems unlikely that Joseph attempted to secure relief from his parish of settlement. The Congregation's records show Joseph continuing to receive casual payments as a Struggler: 5s in December 1771, just weeks after his appearance at the Mahamad meeting, 5s again in March 1772, and 7s 6d in April 1772, when his wife, Esther, gave birth.[51] She was more or less continuously pregnant, giving birth to at least fourteen children, only five of whom survived past the age of 12, until her own death in September 1782, apparently in childbirth.[52] These were the classic conditions of

46 "Minute Book: the Mahamad, 1750–1775", 16 Hesvan 5532 (31 October 1771), LMA/4521/A/01/03/002, SPJC, 227.

47 John Cannon, "Dunning, John, First Baron Ashburton (1731–1783), Barrister and Politician", ODNB, https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/8284; G. M. Ditchfield, "Thurlow, Edward, First Baron Thurlow (1731–1806), Lord Chancellor", ODNB, https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/27406.

48 Annual Accounts, 1761–1771, LMA/4521/A/04/01/084-119, SPJC.

49 "Minute Book: the Mahamad, 1750–1775", 6 Kislev 5532 (13 November 1771), LMA/4521/A/01/03/002, SPJC, 231.

50 "Opinions of Lord Thurlow and J. Dunning, 5–6 November 1771", LMA/4521/A/03/02/002/006, SPJC.

51 "Minute Book: the Mahamad, 1750–1775", 27 Kislev 5532 (4 December 1771), LMA/4521/A/01/03/002, SPJC, 231; 27 Adar I 5532 (3 March 1772), 238; 27 Veadar 5532 (1 April 1772), 241.

52 Rodrigues-Pereira and Loewe, *Bevis Marks Records Part V: Birth Register*; Rodrigues-

young family life-cycle poverty, where the oldest children were not yet working or old enough to look after the youngest to allow the wife to work; or where the wife was pregnant or nursing and could not work. Joseph Uzily may or may not have been an "idle person", but the family was certainly in need.

Figure 6 shows Struggler households with children under the age of five as a proportion of total Struggler households at five-year intervals, fluctuating between a high of 26 per cent in 1785 and a low of 17.4 per cent in 1801. Even after the reduction in Struggler numbers in 1795, the proportion of households at risk of life-cycle poverty did not change substantially, rising from 18.6 per cent in 1790 to 22 per cent in 1795, before dipping again to 17.4 per cent in 1800. If the Mahamad had recognized Struggler households with small children as a special need category, especially during a subsistence crisis, one would expect the figure at end-1795 to be higher. This is not particularly surprising, as life-cycle poverty was not properly identified as a potential cause of poverty until B. Seebohm Rowntree did so in 1901.[53]

Uzily's desire to join the Mahamad Roll was understandable; the difference between relief levels on the Mahamad Roll with that of the Strugglers Roll was substantial (see figure 8). However, the Mahamad were inflexible in applying the ascamot. As an able-bodied Struggler receiving only casual relief, he would have had to find other means to eke out an existence.

A strand of scholarship on poverty and welfare in the long eighteenth century has focused on the "economy of makeshifts", whereby paupers employed stratagems such as kinship and neighbourly support, crime, prostitution, and begging to help make ends meet.[54] Many of these stratagems can also be seen among the Sephardi poor in London. Some extended families in the community were large, providing kinship networks of potential support. Uzily's wider family was small, consisting of his father, David (d. 1782), mother, Hannah (d. 1795), and brother, Mordecai (d. 1811), yet there is evidence of family solidarity. The records of Mahasim Tobim show that David put up his own monthly Sedaca allowance as collateral for three small loans to Joseph in 1766, 1772, and

Pereira, *Bevis Marks Records Part VI: Burial Register (1733–1918)*, 49.

53 B. Seebohm Rowntree, *Poverty: A Study of Town Life* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1901; London: Forgotten Books, 2016).

54 Alannah Tomkins and Steve King, *The Poor in England 1700–1850: An Economy of Makeshifts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 1–19.

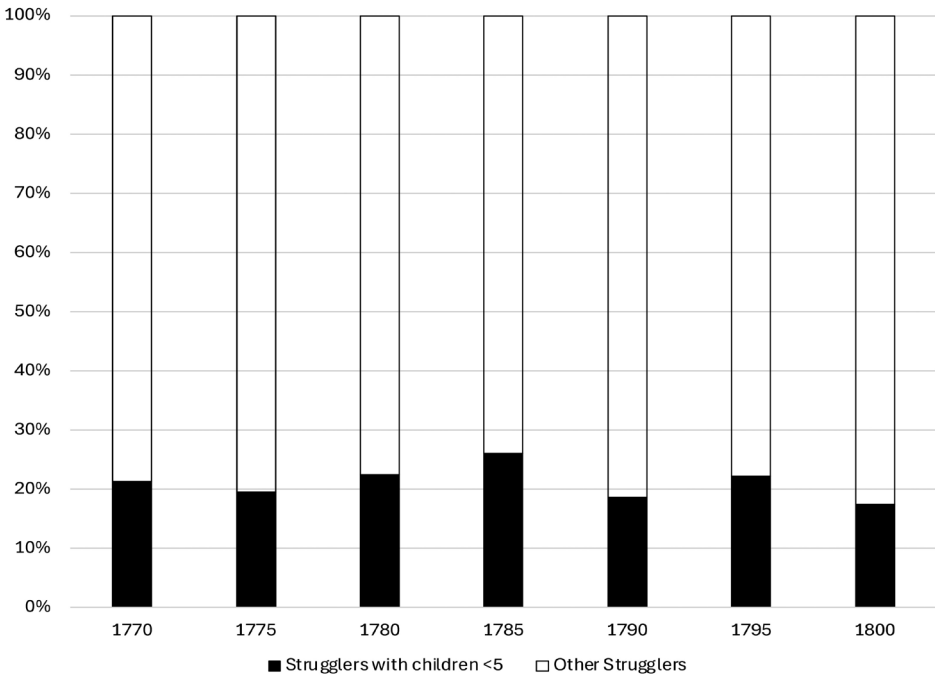

Figure 6 Struggler households at risk of life-cycle poverty (1770–1800). *BMP Dataset*

1775.[55] While the charity provided these interest-free loans to Strugglers to help them buy stock or tools for their trade, paupers could have different ideas. Already in 1767, the treasurer of Mahasim Tobim was complaining that the poor were misusing the loans as a makeshift: "Few are the poor who want to work; yet, the money we lend them is spent on food instead of being put to use for tools and supplies. The little they must repay us monthly, they take it out of their mouth. Therefore, what we do on their behalf seems of little use to them."[56]

Another tool of social control at the disposal of the Mahamad, and in the "economy of makeshifts" for paupers, was assisted emigration, called *despacho*. Would-be emigrants to the American colonies received the equivalent of three years' assistance, while the despacho for destinations in Europe with Sephardi communities, like Hamburg, Amsterdam, Venice or Livorno, was one year's assistance. This was a calculated gamble

55 "Minutes of Mahasim Tobim 1753–1780", LMA/4521/B/11/01/001, SPJC, 107, 136, 146.
56 Lieberman, "Few Wealthy and Many Poor", 51, trans. Lieberman from "Minutes of Mahasim Tobim", 22 Adar Seny 5527 (23 March 1767), LMA/4521/B/11/01/001, SPJC, 112.

that it would be cheaper over the long term to pay paupers to go away than to maintain them in an open-ended arrangement. The minutes of the Mahamad reveal that in April 1772 Joseph received a despacho of £2 2s "to take his family by the road when he is ready to leave" to an unnamed European destination.[57] Yet, Joseph does not appear to have kept his side of the bargain, pocketing the despacho even though he did not travel, yet another example of the "economy of makeshifts" in action. In later years the Mahamad sought to punish failure to emigrate. The 1781 revision of the ascamot dictated that if any person or family receiving despacho did not emigrate, or having emigrated returned, they were barred from relief for three years if they had received despacho equivalent to one year's assistance, and ten years if they had received three years' despacho.[58]

Another revision introduced by the ascamot of 1781 explicitly excluded anyone from benefits if they had summoned the Mahamad or the Elders "before any Magistrate or Court of Justice to complain of failure to answer his petition or grant the charity he required, or any other complaint against our government".[59] Yet the records show that in August 1783, Joseph did just that again, this time with another Struggler named Moses Spenco.[60] Once again, the Uzily family's history tells a story of life-cycle hardship: Esther had died eleven months earlier in childbirth, leaving him with three children, the youngest three and the oldest fourteen. His father, whose Sedaca allowance underwrote loans to Joseph, had also died in 1782. The Mahamad and the Lord Mayor were even less sympathetic than on the previous occasion. Joseph and Spenco were refused, and in a humiliating performance, made to apologize publicly before the entire Congregation. Joseph remarried in 1785 and had three more children with his second wife, Rachel (d. 1826), continuing to receive casual relief at least once a year until 1789, and then for eleven more years between 1791 and 1802. Long spells on the Strugglers Roll were not unusual. In the thirty-five years between 1767 and 1802, 115 Strugglers received casual relief for more than ten consecutive years, 20 for more than twenty years.[61] Uzily's life course has not been tracked beyond 1802, although the records

57 "Minute Book: the Mahamad, 1750–1775", 27 Nisan 5532 (30 April 1772), LMA/4521/A/01/03/002, SPJC, 244.

58 "Revised Ascamot (5542)", 1781, Ascama 31, 2nd para., LMA/4521/A/01/01/006, SPJC, 91.

59 Ibid., 93.

60 "Orders and Resolutions of the Mahamad 1776–1788", 26 Menahem 5543 (24 August 1783), LMA/4521/A/01/02/002, SPJC, 211.

61 Erginsoy, "BMP Dataset".

indicate that he died in 1810, leaving behind a widow and three out of seventeen children from two marriages who had survived into adulthood.

Not on the parish

Bevis Marks was known for "looking after its own".[62] Few parish pauper records for areas of London where Sephardim lived alongside the wider population have survived to test this perception, but fortuitously St Botolph Aldgate is one where they have. A review of 6,385 settlement and bastardy examinations of the parish between 1767 and 1799 have not thrown up any positively identifiable names that match those in the dataset.[63] The absence of matches is not definitive proof that no Sephardim accessed parish relief, but it does suggest that if they did, it was rare.

The most obvious incentive for Sephardi paupers to choose Old Poor Law relief over the Congregation's own system would have been if relief from the parish exceeded that from the Congregation. The London Lives project discovered that the levels of parish relief in the capital were "remarkably generous", certainly in comparison to non-metropolitan areas.[64] From the 1803 parliamentary returns the study found that the average expenditure in London per individual pauper was approximately £6 12s per person per year, while the figure for England and Wales as a whole was just £3 12s. The project also tracked expenditure on individual paupers in the City parish of St Dionis Backchurch for the thirty years between 1762 and 1790, and found that taking those in receipt of casual relief and pensions together, the average annual expenditure per pauper was £5 7s 11d a year, and the typical weekly pension either 2s or 2s 6d per week. Figure 7 shows the average expenditure on relief per pauper in the London Sephardi community in a similar timeframe, between 1767 and 1802, and by category. The average annual expenditure per pauper for all categories taken together was £2 10s 2½d. Although less than 47 per cent of the figure for St Dionis, this hides a lot of variation. A direct comparison is difficult to make without knowing the relative weightings of pensioners

62 "Opinions of Lord Thurlow and J. Dunning".

63 Sharon Howard, "London Lives Pauper Examinations" (Zenodo, 2018), https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1419487. The database was also queried for anglicized surnames known to have been employed by Portuguese Jews (e.g. Martin for Martines, Brandon for Brandão, Keys for Chaves, King for Rey), in combination with identifiably Jewish given names.

64 "Background – the Parish Poor – London Lives".

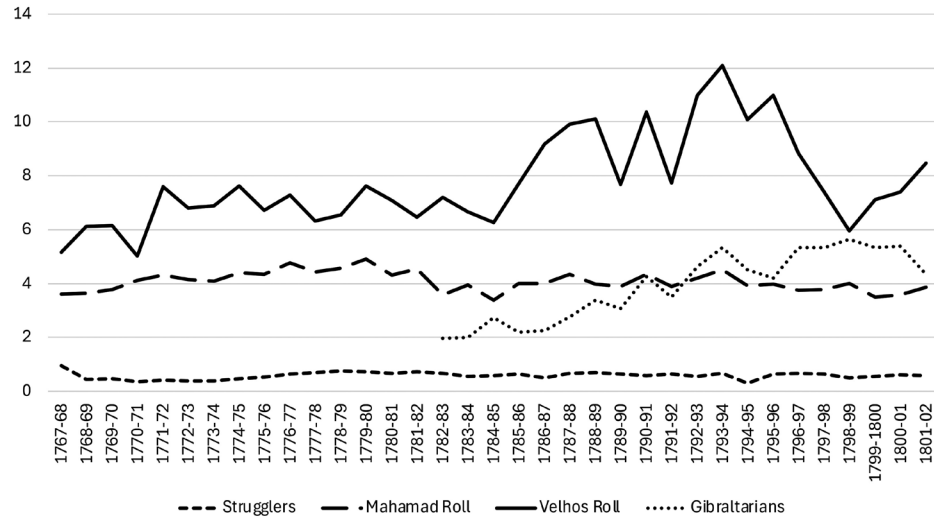

Figure 7 Average relief per recipient by category (£; 1767–1802). *SPJC Annual Accounts*

and those in receipt of casual relief in St Dionis. A more accurate comparison would be between average weekly pensions for the "typical" pensioner, in Bevis Marks's case those on the Mahamad Roll. This came to an average over the period of £4 1s 6d per annum, or about 1s 8d per week, against 2s to 2s 6d per week for a pensioner in St Dionis.[65] It appears that any monetary difference in favour of the parish system was not on its own enough to tempt the Sephardi poor away, assuming the parishes would have welcomed them. Parish vestries were just as keen to maintain the status quo as the Mahamad was. Vestries still collected the poor rate from Jewish ratepayers, without having to relieve an additional body of paupers. But even if parish vestries had been keen to take on the Sephardi poor, there were other obstacles in the way of such an option. Only a minority of the Sephardi poor could prove legal settlement in a parish, which could only be established by birth, serving an apprenticeship in the locality, being hired for a year, holding a local office, paying local taxes, or by renting or owning local property.[66]

Even if a Sephardi pauper could prove legal settlement, there was also the deterrent of the Workhouse Test. Introduced by Act of Parliament in 1723, this gave parishes the option of forcing paupers seeking relief

65 Erginsoy, "BMP Dataset".

66 Lynn Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers: The English Poor Laws and the People, 1700–1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 28.

to accept being incarcerated in the correctional conditions of the workhouse, so-called "indoor" relief as opposed to "outdoor" relief in the community.[67] By the mid-eighteenth century, most London parishes had invested in accommodation of this type, including parishes with Sephardi populations. The workhouse of St Mary Whitechapel housed 600 inmates by 1776, and another in Christ Church in Spitalfields up to 300.[68] St Botolph Aldgate operated another large workhouse, housing 300 inmates in 1776, on Gravel Lane off Houndsditch. In 1803, the workhouse housed 45 per cent of the parish's permanently relieved poor,[69] meaning that there would in theory have been an almost even chance of a Mahamad Roll pensioner seeking parish relief going into the workhouse. Yet the Register of Pauper Admissions for the crisis year 1794, for example, contains no identifiable names of Sephardi Jews.[70] This is unsurprising, as any Sephardim entering the workhouse would have undergone a settlement examination, which, as previously noted, has not produced any matches.

An explanation often given, not least by Jeremy Bentham in 1778, for Jews not entering workhouses, was that these institutions could not cater for their dietary requirements and observances on Jewish holidays.[71] This is overstated. There is evidence that Sephardi Jews in all social strata were not particularly scrupulous in their religious adherence during the eighteenth century.[72] In 1767, the Elders themselves decried as a "scandal" and a "disgrace" that there were "many Jews among us", including yehidim, "who publicly break the Sabbath, eat unclean food, and do not attend the synagogue, even on solemn festivals".[73] A more significant deterrent than the dietary regime to entering the workhouse may have been fear that the anti-Jewish sentiment in the general population could translate into physical or verbal violence from the other inmates. As Endelman

67 Paul Slack, *The English Poor Law, 1531–1782*, New Studies in Economic and Social History (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 40–47.

68 Peter Higginbotham, "The Workhouse in Whitechapel, London: Middlesex", https://www.workhouses.org.uk/Whitechapel (accessed 20 May 2024).

69 "Background – Workhouses – London Lives", https://www.londonlives.org/static/Workhouses.jsp (accessed 20 May 2024).

70 "St Botolph Aldgate: Register of Paupers Admitted to the Workhouse", LMA, Ms. 2678/5, London Lives, accessed 20 May 2024, https://www.londonlives.org/browse.jsp?div=GLBARW11104 (accessed 20 May 2024).

71 Rozin, *Rich and the Poor*, 53.

72 Endelman, *Jews of Georgian England*, 140–43.

73 "Minute Book: the Elders, 1764–1783", 12 Hesvan 5532 (4 November 1767), LMA/4521/A/01/04/002, SPJC, 43.

noted, "The hatred and the anger of the untamed strata of English society frequently spilled over into acts of violence and petty hooliganism."[74] Then there would have been the disincentive that the Workhouse Test was actually designed to engender – incarceration in an institution that only the most desperate would accept. In short, for the minority of Sephardi poor entitled to parish relief, the alternative of "outdoor" relief by the Mahamad was far more palatable, the disadvantages of the Poor Law system outweighing the marginal advantage of slightly higher relief levels.

Welfare and the wealthy

Julia Lieberman has argued that from the 1780s onwards, the issue of how to care for the poor "became so divisive that it played a crucial factor in prompting many *Yehidim* to abandon the Congregation altogether".[75] She contends that members wrote angry letters to the Mahamad and the Elders announcing that they were leaving the Congregation, and that "a recurring complaint was that the care of the poor required too much of them". She accepts that as the individuals concerned often converted to Christianity soon afterwards, the burden of supporting the poor may not have been the main reason for their defections but was nevertheless indicative "that congregants did not agree with the burden that the Congregation put on them". Synagogal taxation was indeed a contentious issue in many Sephardi congregations. In Amsterdam in 1748, Isaac de Pinto complained that multiple levies were "so large, burdensome, and forced that if we did not recognize the extreme necessity as well as the sincerity of the motives and authors thereof, there would be many misunderstandings of tyranny".[76] In London, yehidim had further cause for complaint, as in addition to the finta, they were also subject to the parish poor rate. Unfortunately, Lieberman cites only two letters in support of her argument, neither of which proves the point. The first correspondent, Isaac Mendes Furtado, appears to complain, amid a litany of broader grievances, that the poor were receiving insufficient help. The second letter is the one by Pimentel quoted earlier in this article.[77] Although Pimentel implies that the Sedaca encouraged dependency

74 Endelman, *Jews of Georgian England*, 114.

75 Lieberman, "Few Wealthy and Many Poor", 43.

76 De Pinto, *Reflexoens Políticas*, 8.

77 "Minute Book: the Elders, 1784–1795", 29 Kislev 5555 (21 December 1794), LMA/4521/A/01/02/004, SPJC, 327–32.

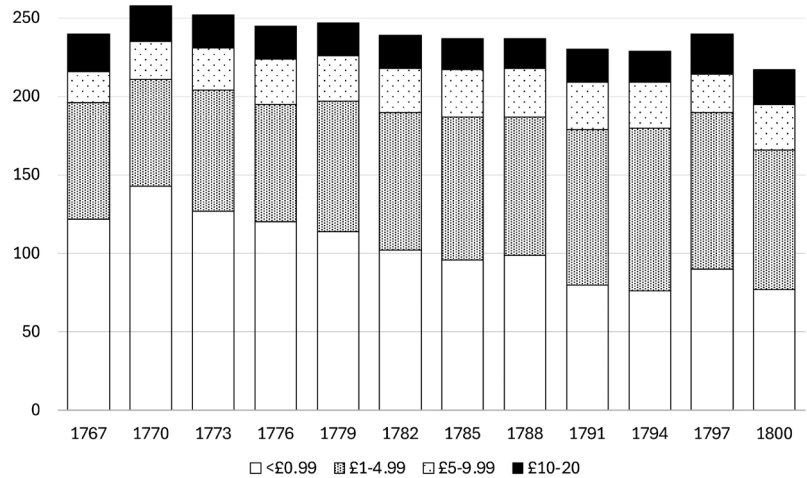

Figure 8 Finta segments by household numbers (1767–1800). *BMP Dataset*

among the poor, nowhere does he say that the burden on yehidim was excessive or that he was considering leaving. In fact, he remained a stalwart of the Congregation until his death in 1823.

More significantly, Lieberman's other assertion that the core of wealthy congregants financing the poor fell in number while the poor kept growing is not supported by the evidence.[78] As described, the total number of households in receipt of relief fell over the period (see figure 6). At the other end of the social scale, figure 8 shows the segmentation of yehidim by the finta, the triennial assessments for disposable income, by number of households between 1767 and 1800. While there was a slight downward trend in the total number of yehidim over the period, peaking at 258 in 1770 and dipping to 217 in 1800, the reduction was in the least well-off segment paying finta of under £1. The lower-income artisans and tradesmen making up this bottom segment were the least likely to leave the Congregation, as they were precisely the group that would go onto the Mahamad Roll in their old age.

Figure 9 shows the same trend through a "stress coefficient", obtained by dividing the total relief expenditure by the number of yehidim in each segment. The relative burden on all segments is seen to be falling except those paying a finta of less than £1, where it was more or less steady. The finding contradicts the idea that yehidim were abandoning the

78 Lieberman, "Few Wealthy and Many Poor", 61.

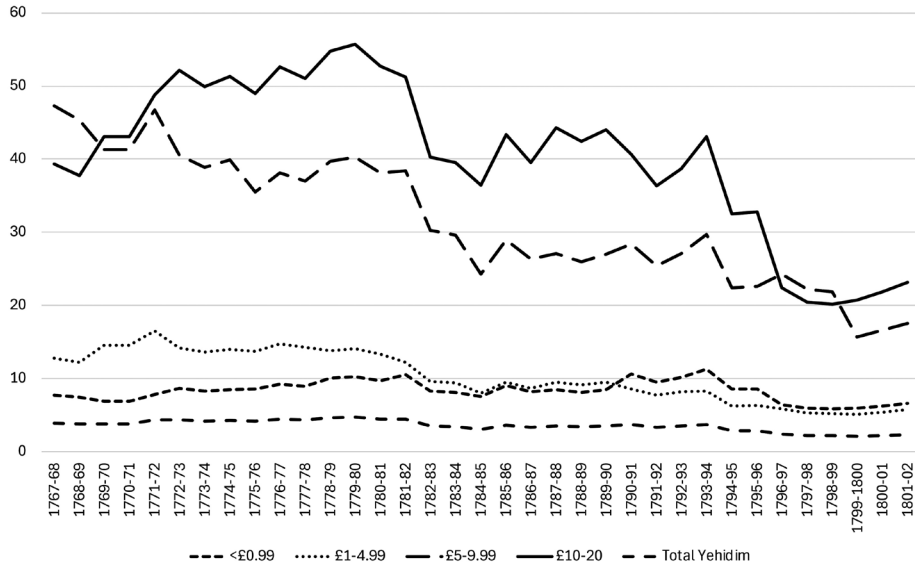

Figure 9 Nominal "stress coefficient" showing the relative burden on finta-payers of funding poor relief (1767–1802). *BMP Dataset*

Congregation because of the burden of poor relief. On a more general note, it demonstrates the value of more widely combining qualitative and quantitative data and analysis in social history, a methodology that has been lacking in studies of the Portuguese Jewish diaspora.

Conclusion: the gravity of place

This article has sought to examine the issue of cohesion, not through the centrifugal forces pushing Sephardim away, but the centripetal forces holding them in – welfare provision, family and community. Another way of expressing this would be the gravitational pull exerted by the locality. This is not as revelatory as it sounds. The very first article of every iteration of the ascamot after 1664 explicitly prohibited ("Duly considering how important is our Union") setting up another Sephardi congregation in London.[79] Punishable by instant *herem* (excommunication), the prohibition was similar to the wording in the merger statutes of the three Amsterdam congregations in 1639, itself apparently based on the example of Venice, and was further replicated in Sephardi congregations

79 "Book of Ascamot (5493–5535), 1732–1775", LMA/4521/A/01/01/005, SPJC; "Book of Ascamot (5545–5580), 1784–1820", LMA/4521/A/01/01/007, SPJC.

throughout the Americas.[80] In all these centres the prohibition can be seen as an assertion of authority – spiritual, economic, and administrative – over the entire community. However, for different congregations it represented different priorities. In Amsterdam, it was financial, a way of gaining better control over poor relief.[81] In London it was more existential. The ascama adopted in 1732 explicitly frames "the importance of our unity" in terms of "preserving the congregation without causing scandal to the natives of this city".[82] Whatever the motivation, the effect of the prohibition was to place Bevis Marks at the centre of gravity of Sephardi London in a spatial sense.

The main effects of the pull of place were on the poor. The revised *ascamot* of 1781 dictated that anyone receiving assistance of any kind was obliged to attend Synagogue every Sabbath and festival and on other days of the week as much as possible.[83] Failure to do so without a satisfactory excuse could result in the loss of the whole or part of the assistance for three months. While the Mahamad might have seen this harsh sanction as an opportunity to instil greater outward observance among the poor, the effect would have been to circumscribe where the poor could live. So as to comply, they would have had to reside within walking distance of Bevis Marks. The poorer, and therefore more affordable, parts of the East End were where the poor had been living long before 1781 anyway, so the effect might better be described as reinforcing existing barriers to spatial mobility. A corollary, however, would have been preserving communal identification and access to kinship networks. How rigorously the regulation was enforced is a moot point. Edgar Samuel has remarked that the London Congregation took their ascamot very seriously and that the community aptly fitted M. J. Bernardete's description of a Sephardi community as an "ascamatocracy".[84]

Higher up the social scale, Sephardi artisans, small traders, and shopkeepers also preferred to stay in the Aldgate-Whitechapel area, attracted by the same community and kinship networks and lower rents. The gravitational pull of the locality on the richest segment was

80 Miriam Bodian, "The 'Escamot' of the Spanish-Portuguese Jewish Community of London, 1664", *Michael: On the History of the Jews in the Diaspora* (Tel Aviv University, 1985): 10–11, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23495324.

81 Swetschinski, *Reluctant Cosmopolitans*, 186–90.

82 "Book of Ascamot (5493–5535), 1732–1775".

83 "Revised Ascamot of 1781", Ascama 31, 5th para, LMA/4521/A/01/01/006, SPJC, 92.

84 Samuel, "Mahamad as an Arbitration Court", 9.

much weaker. The wealthiest Sephardim had carriages and had been taking up residence away from Aldgate-Whitechapel since the end of the seventeenth century. A scattering acquired country homes on the fringes of London, while a larger concentration could be found in Hackney, a rural hamlet 2½ miles from Bevis Marks.[85] The well documented defections and conversions that accelerated towards the mid-nineteenth century began not among the poor and middling sort in the area near Bevis Marks, but among the heirs of the rich who had grown up outside its orbit.[86] Some merchants and brokers maintained a residence above their offices in the City, or in the elegant new houses on Devonshire Square and Goodman's Fields just to the east.[87] From 1800, these areas started to become unfashionable, and affluent Sephardim followed their Christian counterparts to the West End. Eventually the Mahamad and Elders allowed the establishment of the first new Sephardi synagogue in Wigmore Street in 1853, but not before a small breakaway faction had set up the reformist West London Synagogue in 1842. The area around Bevis Marks, and worship in the Synagogue itself, was abandoned to the lower strata of the community, by then becoming mixed through marriage with Ashkenazim. The "Union" of the Congregation was broken, the centre unable to hold against more powerful social forces. As this study has shown through the lens of poverty and welfare, the seeds of the community's transformation from a primarily Portuguese Jewish diaspora community into a distinct Anglo-Jewish one can be found in the soil of the late eighteenth century.

85 Adam Sutcliffe, "Identity, Space and Intercultural Contact in the Urban Entrepôt: The Sephardic Bounding of Community in Early Modern Amsterdam and London", *Jewish Culture and History* 7, no. 1–2 (August 2004): 101–2, https://doi.org/10.1080/1462169X.2004.10512012; Malcolm Brown, "The Jews of Hackney before 1840", *JHS* 30 (1987): 78–80.

86 Todd M. Endelman, *Radical Assimilation in English Jewish History, 1656–1945*, Modern Jewish Experience (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 25–33.

87 Endelman, *Jews of Georgian England*, 128.