

## Mythologizing 1654

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*This essay is dedicated to my teacher Arthur Aryeh Goren, who opened my eyes to the politics and public culture of American Jews.*

WITHOUT MEANING TO sound like the grinch who stole Christmas, I would like to ask why and when the year 1654 became recognized as the founding date of American Jewish history? That this date has been widely accepted by contemporary Jewish and American institutions seems incontrovertible. In preparation for its national celebration in 2004, for example, the American Jewish Historical Society, the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, the U.S. Library of Congress, and the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration created an umbrella group and Web site—"Commission for Commemorating 350 years of American Jewish History"—to honor the occasion.<sup>1</sup> These institutions planned a year-long series of national events, including exhibits at some of their home institutions, a traveling exhibit to "a select number of American communities," as well as "an internet website," "a series of public media productions," "a series of educational initiatives, electronic and in print," and a "scholars' conference." The Jewish Women's Archive, "a national, non-profit organization with a mission to uncover, chronicle and transmit the rich legacy of Jewish women and their contributions to our families and communities, to our people and to our world," launched a redesigned Web site as a direct consequence of their "anticipating increased interest in American Jewish history resulting from the 350th anniversary of Jewish communal life in North America."<sup>2</sup> "The Shearith Israel League of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue" in New York City, which dates the founding of its congregation to the arrival of Jews to New Amsterdam in 1654, released a three-CD set of its Sephardic liturgical music. For these organizations as well as at Jewish

1. <http://www.350th.org>

2. <http://www.jwa.org/350th>

congregations and college campuses across the country, the anniversary constituted a national event.

It is clear *what* we celebrate: the arrival in 1654 of a group of perhaps twenty-three Jews to Dutch New Amsterdam from eastern Brazil, which they had abandoned after the Portuguese Catholic reoccupation of that territory the same year.<sup>3</sup> What is not as clear is *why* this event has come to stand for the origin of American Jewish history. Why this moment and not another?

For Congregation Shearith Israel the connection makes sense: 1654 marks the beginning of their congregational history in New York City. By affirming 1654, they lay claim to being the first congregation in American Jewish history and simultaneously direct attention to the Sephardic identity of the first American Jewish pioneers.<sup>4</sup>

The committee planners, representing the "national Jewish community," declare the flight from persecution by the refugees from Brazil as a basic explanation and theme. This notion of America as an asylum for the oppressed (which has its own interesting history)<sup>5</sup> is linked by them, in turn, to the "integral relationship between American freedom and Jewish continuity." The committee moreover aspired to even higher ground: "the Jewish experience in America—with its commitment to the values of freedom, opportunity, religious liberty, equality and pluralism—is the story of America and American ideals as well."<sup>6</sup>

It is noteworthy that the word "America" was employed by the committee as a convenient synonym for the United States. Not that it is unusual to use the word "America" in this sense. But this usage does have the practical consequence of narrowing the scope of the celebration to the national experience of United States Jewry rather than enlarging it to embrace the multiple Jewish communities located throughout the Western Hemisphere. The Jewish story told about 1654 is identified with the national experience of the United States of America—even though

3. See Leo Herszkowitz, "New Amsterdam's Twenty-Three Jews—Myth or Reality," *Hebrew and the Bible in America: The First Two Centuries*, ed. Shalom Goldman (Hanover, N.H., 1993), 171–83, on the uncertainties associated with the arrival. For background on the settlement of Jews in colonial Brazil, see Arnold Wiznitzer, *Jews in Colonial Brazil* (New York, 1960).

4. David De Sola Pool, *An Old Faith in the New World: Portrait of Shearith Israel, 1654–1954* (New York, 1955).

5. See John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925* (1955; reprint, San Diego, 1991), and note the cosmopolitan interpretation of the American national mission as an "asylum for mankind," 22–23. For the topos of America as a promised land, see Werner Sollars, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York, 1986), 43–50.

6. <http://www.350th.org>.

the first Jewish settlers arrived to a Dutch territory that was not yet "American" (at least not in the nation-state sense) and in fact not yet even a British colony.

What is at stake here I believe is not only a date but a way of seeing and remembering the Jewish past in the Atlantic world. In recent years, new models have been proposed for interpreting American Jewish history in the context of the Atlantic basin. Rather than focusing on static conceptions of place and nation, these new approaches concentrate on geography and region, movement, and circulation. Scholarly attention is being directed increasingly to networks of commerce, communication, and kinship, the spread of print culture and the emergence of hybrid social, economic, cultural, and sexual relationships within a transatlantic framework of historical analysis.<sup>7</sup>

It is ironic that the celebration of 1654 as a national event predates the history of the founding of the United States it has been identified with; on the other hand, its Jewish meanings have been harmonized by the planners with a kind of whiggish interpretation of American history as the unfolding story of freedom, equality, and pluralism that postdates it.<sup>8</sup> These progressive, liberal values—freedom, equality, and pluralism—strike me as noble and worthy of our embrace (especially if they are left undefined). But for the sake of this celebration are they historically grounded?

The Jews' first eight months in New Amsterdam, for example, were characterized by lack of freedom, inequality, and intolerance. Peter Stuyvesant, who governed the settlement at that time on behalf of the Dutch West India Company, almost immediately petitioned its board of directors to let him expel the indigent, potentially burdensome Jews, and to prevent future settlement by members of this "deceitful race—such hateful enemies and blasphemers of the name of Christ."<sup>9</sup> The governor of the fledgling Dutch settlement, known for his intolerance of religious dissenters like Quakers and Lutherans, quickly directed his wrath at this new group of blasphemers. Only in April of 1655, after enduring a long winter

7. *The Jews and the Expansion of Europe to the West, 1450–1800*, ed. Paolo Bernardini and Norman Fiering (New York, 2001). Note also a number of papers and presentations delivered at the Association of Jewish Studies conference in Boston, December 2003, including those by Aviva Ben-Ur, Lois Dubin, Arthur Kiron, Willem Klooster, Jonathan Schorsch, and Holly Snyder.

8. For the whiggish interpretation, see Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (New York, 1978).

9. *A Documentary History of the Jews in the United States, 1654–1875*, ed. Morris U. Schappes (New York, 1950), 2. For additional documentation, see 2–23.

of uncertainty, would the Jews of New Amsterdam learn that the board of governors had rejected Stuyvesant's plea and granted them permission to remain, albeit mainly for commercial reasons, in their North American outpost.

It would be historically anachronistic, however, to see this victory as a triumph of enlightened principles of religious liberty and civil rights. Clearly, the Jews were not granted residency privileges because the board wanted to affirm their natural rights. In fact, the board prefaced their conditional acceptance of the Jews, who had to be supported by their own nation and not become a burden to the community, by stating that they otherwise "would have liked to effectuate and fulfill [Stuyvesant's] wishes and request that the new territories should no more be allowed to be infected by people of the Jewish nation."<sup>10</sup> Even with the Company's grudging allowance, Jews still had to overcome numerous disabilities. They challenged, for example, their exclusion from serving in the local militia and contested a special tax levied against them precisely because they didn't serve. They were barred from engaging in retail trade, from owning real estate, and, like their coreligionists in Amsterdam, were excluded from local craft guilds.<sup>11</sup>

In short, the Jews who arrived in 1654 to Dutch New Amsterdam under the administration of Peter Stuyvesant experienced *less* freedom, equality, and tolerance than they had previously enjoyed in Dutch Brazil, where many of its Jewish inhabitants had participated in the slave trade, and slave auctions were postponed when they fell on Jewish holidays.<sup>12</sup> They weren't allowed to practice their religion openly and they suffered a kind of reversal of the more familiar pattern of colonial settlement in which Jews achieved, as Yosef Yerushalmi has explained, "certain rights in the colonies that were in advance of those enjoyed in the mother countries themselves."<sup>13</sup> Gradually, of course, these Jews were able to reverse their fortunes under Stuyvesant and gain many privileges otherwise de-

10. Schappes, *Documentary History*, 4.

11. The social, political, economic, religious, and legal obstacles Jews faced in colonial New Amsterdam and New York are surveyed by Abram Vossen Goodman, *American Overture: Jewish Rights in Colonial Time* (Philadelphia, 1947), 69–114; More generally, see Hyman B. Grinstein, *The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York* (Philadelphia, 1947), 39–49.

12. See Marc Lee Raphael, ed., *Jews and Judaism in the United States: A Documentary History* (New York, 1983), 14, 23–25. My thanks to Jonathan Karp for calling this reference to my attention.

13. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, "Between Amsterdam and New Amsterdam: The Place of Curacao and the Caribbean in Early Modern Jewish History," *American Jewish History* 72.2 (December 1982): 181.

nied their coreligionists in Europe. After the British took control of New Amsterdam from the Dutch ten years later in 1664, their situation continued to improve, albeit unevenly. So, for example, despite tolerant declarations by English colonial governors of New York during the 1670s and 1680s, Jewish petitions to build a synagogue for public worship were repeatedly denied by the British, just as they had been under the Dutch. Jews continued to worship in private homes. None of the first generation of 1654 apparently would live to see the completion of the community's first public house of worship in 1729, seventy-five years after their arrival.

It is striking, moreover, that by the time their first synagogue building was consecrated, the majority of the community's worshippers were of Central and Eastern European descent rather than of refugee Sephardic origins. This peculiar demographic feature—of Ashkenazim constituting the majority of colonial North American Sephardic congregations—was common throughout the British settlements of the Eastern Atlantic seaboard during the eighteenth century.<sup>14</sup> It was mostly Ashkenazim, not the descendants of the founding families of 1654, who built and worshipped in the first Spanish and Portuguese synagogue in New York City. Even taking into account that the mode of worship remained Sephardic, the congregational history Shearith Israel tells about itself—like the current interpretation of the events of 1654—is more a mythology than a precise historical fact.

Mythologizing, of course, is not falsification; it is an aspect of cultural formation and of a distinctively human need to generate symbolic meaning.<sup>15</sup> Part of my curiosity about the anniversary celebrations, however, concerns why the scholars and lay people involved in its planning were not more critical in questioning the mythologizing history that has come to define the story of 1654.

Professional American Jewish historians, of course, are aware of the historical details recounted above. Many are even sensitive to the fact that the tradition of celebrating the founding myth of 1654 is of recent origin. So too were the planners of the anniversary programs, who have stated on their Web site, with the time references in boldface type, "A

14. Grinstein, *Rise of the Jewish Community of New York*, 40; Edwin Wolf 2nd and Maxwell Whiteman, *The History of the Jews of Philadelphia from Colonial Times to the Age of Jackson* (Philadelphia, 1957), 7–8.

15. See, for example, Thomas A. Sebeok, ed., *Myth: A Symposium* (Bloomington, Ind., 1970), 3–24, 64–80; Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System" and "Ideology as a Cultural System," *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, 1973), 87–141, 193–233; Alan Dundes, ed., *Sacred Narratives: Readings in the Theory of Myth* (Berkeley, 1984).



century ago, and again 50 years ago, the Jewish community [in the United States] mounted an array of activities to reflect upon its experience in America."<sup>16</sup> One minor problem with this periodization, however, is that it misses the fact that just over a century ago, the planners of the 250th anniversary celebrated the occasion in 1905! As Arthur Goren has pointed out, "although the first twenty-three Jews arrived in New Amsterdam in 1654, 1655 was chosen as the anniversary year when the Dutch West India Company overruled Governor Peter Stuyvesant and granted 'a leave of settlement to the Jews.'"<sup>17</sup> For the organizers of the 1905 event, it was the legal permission, not the mere arrival, that constituted the event worthy of remembrance and public celebration.

Given this rather ambiguous periodization and recognizing the conflicting meanings that have been assigned to the celebration, why continue to date the beginnings of American Jewry to 1654? This is not to say that continuing (what pedantically might be called) a fifty-year-old tradition is a bad thing. Still, a more critical reflection on the formation of this periodization and its ideological motivations could very well enrich the upcoming programs.

Earlier celebrations of anniversaries of 1654–55 have reflected the strong identification of American Jewish history with the immigrant history of the Jews of New York City. It is noteworthy that the principle organizers of the first national celebration (held in New York City) were Congregation Shearith Israel of New York City and the American Jewish Historical Society, also established in New York City.<sup>18</sup> According to David De Sola Pool, *hazzan* and historian of Congregation Shearith Israel, "As might be expected, Shearith Israel took the initiative in arranging for the celebration of the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the official recognition of the Jewish settlement in the United States."<sup>19</sup> To say that the first "national" celebration went forth from New York City is not to claim that the national celebration was limited to New York City. As Goren notes, "the organizers did appoint a nation-wide committee with representatives from all the states. This was probably not much more than a cosmetic gimmick, but it does show that NY was aware that it was running a national celebration and wanted there to be a sense of country-wide par-

16. <http://www.350th.org>.

17. Arthur A. Goren, *The Politics and Public Culture of American Jews* [henceforth PPC] (Bloomington, Ind., 1999), 230, n. 16, citing the 250th anniversary program and contemporary newspaper accounts.

18. Goren, PPC, 37.

19. De Sola Pool, *Old Faith in the New World*, 392–93.

ticipation."<sup>20</sup> But in terms of the story told and the place being identified, both are certainly centrally concerned with the history of the Jewish community of New York City.

The "national" celebration of the 350th anniversary of the arrival of Jews to New Amsterdam inadvertently continues an anniversary tradition that is New York-centric in terms of date, place, focus, and historiography. Given that the largest Jewish community in U.S. history has been located, for almost all its history, in the five boroughs of New York City and its suburbs, this should not come as a surprise. But as recent scholarship has demonstrated, Jewish life in New York City is not and never was representative of the diverse experiences of Jews who have lived and continue to live in different towns, cities, and regions of the United States. Ewa Morawska's study of the Jews of Johnstown, Pennsylvania, Joel Perleman's revealing study of the Jews of Providence, Rhode Island, or William Toll's study of the Jews of Portland, Oregon, to cite a few specific examples,<sup>21</sup> or regional studies of Jews in the American South, in the pioneer West, and of the crypto-Jews of the Southwest amply demonstrate just the opposite.<sup>22</sup>

Speaking broadly, we might further ask why "American" Jewish identity and historiography have remained coterminous with the United States national experience.<sup>23</sup> When the tercentenary of 1654 was celebrated in 1954, the stated reasons for the celebrations were formulated precisely along national lines of harmonization between the Jewish and American experiences. Indeed, as Goren showed in his pioneering study

20. E-mail communication from Arthur A. Goren to Arthur Kiron, November 10, 2003.

21. Ewa Morawska, *Insecure Prosperity: Small-Town Jews in Industrial America, 1890–1940* (Princeton, N.J., 1996); Joel Perlmann, "Beyond New York, a Second Look: The Occupations of Russian Jewish Immigrants in Providence, R.I. and in Other Small Jewish Communities, 1900–1915," *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes* 10.3 (1989): 375–88; William Toll, *The Making of an Ethnic Middle Class: Portland Jewry over Four Generations* (Albany, N.Y., 1982).

22. *A Portion of the People: Three Hundred Years of Southern Jewish Life*, ed. Theodore Rosengarten and Dale Rosengarten (Columbia, S.C., 2002); Harriet and Fred Rochlin, *Pioneer Jews: A New Life in the Far West* (Boston, 2000); Judith S. Neulander, "The New Mexican Crypto-Jewish Canon: Choosing to be 'Chosen' in Millennial Tradition," *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review* 18.1–2 (1996): 19–58; Eva Alexandra Uchmany, "The Participation of New Christians and Crypto-Jews in the Conquest, Colonization, and Trade of Spanish America, 1521–1660," *The Jews and the Expansion of Europe to the West, 1450–1800*, ed. Bernardini and Fiering, 186–202.

23. See John R. Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, N.J., 1994).

of the American Jewish "Golden Decade" from 1945 to 1955: "the tercentenary committee defined the principal goal of the observance as a celebration of America's democratic ideals."<sup>24</sup> Their interpretation of the anniversary also points to the anxieties of "conservative and cautious" Jewish leaders living in the aftermath of the Holocaust and amid the Red Scare when Jews were being stereotyped as communists. But at the time, this national interpretation was not without its critics, among them intellectuals like Horace Kallen, Mordechai Kaplan, and Ben Halpern: was not the essence of America cultural pluralism, not homogeneity? Why should the Jewish experience in America be identified with and subsumed by the American? How should the Jewish experience be understood on its own terms?<sup>25</sup>

Almost fifty years earlier, in 1905, the organizers of the 250th anniversary celebration publicly ushered in the national interpretation of American Jewish history and again under the specter of intensifying anti-Semitism, rising anti-immigration sentiment, and the horrifying physical violence against Jews occurring in the Ukraine and other places in Eastern Europe.<sup>26</sup> Under these conditions, the two most significant themes found in the speeches delivered on that occasion were the twinning of the story of the first Pilgrims and the first Jews and the invocation of the Jewish role in Columbus's voyages to the New World.<sup>27</sup> It was the hand of providence, public speakers proclaimed, that had guided the first refugees to a new land that would provide a safe haven for Jews and all people seeking religious freedom. An objective history, it was believed, would counter the misconceptions and intensifying anti-Semitism of the time. With a proper understanding of the past in place, Jews would be able to hold their heads high. People would have to acknowledge and respect the fact that Jews belonged to the earliest moments of the "Age of Discovery" and that they reflect, both symbolically and historically, the very purpose of the American republic as a beacon of freedom. In other words, and not entirely unlike the implicit apologetic impulse that accompanies most if not all efforts to harmonize a minority identity with a majority culture's self-understanding, Jews (so the argument went) have as much claim on the American experience as anyone else because they've been part of that experience since the beginning.<sup>28</sup>

24. Goren, *PPC*, 198–204.

25. Goren, *PPC*, 202–03.

26. Goren, *PPC*, 34–42.

27. Goren, *PPC*, 39–40.

28. Goren, *PPC*, 39–40.

It is curious that as we look further back into the nineteenth century, we don't find public celebrations of 1654 as the "national" beginning of American Jewish history. At the time of the founding of the American Jewish Historical Society in 1892, for example, the 400th anniversary of Columbus's discovery of America was uppermost in mind. The two were linked, however, in terms of the rhetoric of liberty, and this attention in turn led to the opening up of the archives of Shearith Israel for historical research.<sup>29</sup> Interest in the history of Shearith Israel, however, had not yet generated a new historical consciousness, let alone a new historiography, that the origin of the congregation and the history of American Jewry were one and the same. The formulation of a national American Jewish history was still in its infancy.

If the invention of American Jewish history and its subsequent professionalization did not commence until the last two decades of the nineteenth century, as Ira Robinson has convincingly argued, Jews in America had shown signs of historical self-consciousness, and even a concern for exact documentation, before then.<sup>30</sup> In general, the American interest in writing postbiblical Jewish history, albeit not about the Jews of the United States, was already two hundred years old by 1892.<sup>31</sup> But there does not seem to be evidence of any Jewish national celebrations before the 1890s.<sup>32</sup>

In 1854—the year that in hindsight might have been the occasion of a bicentennial celebration—Shearith Israel apparently was preoccupied with matters of ritual decorum and religious intolerance and did not have a fixed notion of 1654 as a founding date.<sup>33</sup> We do find mention during this uncelebrated "bicentennial," for example, of the anniversary dates 1650, 1655, and 1656 in the *Jewish Calendar for Fifty Years* (published out of Montreal jointly by Abraham De Sola, the leading Sephardic religious figure in Montreal, and Judah Jacques Lyon, *hazzan* of Shearith Israel in New York).<sup>34</sup> In his history of Shearith Israel, published 101 years

29. De Sola Pool, *Old Faith in the New World*, 284.

30. Ira Robinson, "The Invention of American Jewish History," *American Jewish History* 81.3–4 (1994): 310.

31. Lee M. Friedman, "Biblia Americana: The First American Attempt at Post-Biblical Jewish History and Some Successors," in his *Pilgrims in a New Land* (Philadelphia, 1948), esp. 16–17.

32. Though preparations for the celebration of 1892 were already underway in 1887 in New York City. See De Sola Pool, *Old Faith in the New World*, 325.

33. See Grinstein, *Rise of the Jewish Community of New York*, 263–87.

34. Quoted at length in I. J. Benjamin *Three Years in America, 1859–1862*, trans. Charles Reznikoff (Philadelphia, 1956), 1:56; De Sola Pool, *Old Faith in the New World*, 180. On Judah Jaques Lyons, the first major collector of Judaica Ameri-



later, David De Sola Pool does not describe nor provide any evidence of a bicentennial celebration by the congregation in 1854.<sup>35</sup> In his remarkable chronicle of his travels to America between 1859 and 1862, Isaac Joseph Benjamin ("Benjamin II") stated that the "first Jews who migrated to America went from Portugal to Brazil." He does not provide a date but clearly does refer to "America" in its hemispheric sense.<sup>36</sup>

The arrival of the first Jews from Brazil to New Amsterdam, meanwhile, was mentioned five years later when Shearith Israel celebrated the cornerstone-laying of its new synagogue but no date was given. Interestingly, Arnold Fischel, the minister of the congregation who delivered an address on that occasion, did state that "more than two hundred years have gone by since our ancestors, the founders of our congregation, set foot for the first time on this island." Fischel went on to say that the "first synagogue in this city was built one hundred and thirty years ago [1729], and since then the Congregation has met for religious services."<sup>37</sup> At the dedication ceremonies of Shearith Israel's completed new building the next year, 1860 (the "19th Street Synagogue"), a historical awareness of a 206th anniversary of the congregation does come into focus, but the idea of a national Jewish communal anniversary had not yet formed.<sup>38</sup>

What may be the first published statement of American Jewish periodization appeared in 1844. Isaac Leeser, writing for a non-Jewish work surveying "religious denominations at present existing in the United States," mentions that "probably the first settlement of Jews took place in New Amsterdam, when it was under Dutch government, about 1660." Leeser adds that he had "learnt that a correspondence is yet in existence which took place between the Israel and the Dutch authorities of New Amsterdam," but acknowledges he "has never seen it, wherefore he

cana, see Grinstein, *Rise of the Jewish Community of New York*, 89; De Sola Pool, 178–82.

35. Note, however, that he seems to presume something like it in at least one passing remark. See *Old Faith in the New World*, 140.

36. Benjamin tells his readers his precise source of information on this history, "the geography of South and North America by William Rapz (Philadelphia, 1857, 2nd edition)," and quoting it from p. 50. See I. J. Benjamin, *Three Years in America*, 1:50.

37. As quoted by Benjamin, *Three Years in America*, 1:53–54; see also *New York Times* (July 13, 1859), cited in Grinstein, *Rise of the Jewish Community*, 39.

38. De Sola Pool, *Old Faith in the New World*, 57–64. The anniversary celebrations were also observed by Benjamin in *Three Years in America*, 2:53–56; and see 1:55 for a quote of another contemporary description that appeared in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated*, September 29, 1860.

[Leeser] is unable to say any thing with precision farther than he has stated above."<sup>39</sup>

William Burder's *History of All Religions*, published in 1872 and intended, like Leeser's "The Jews on their Religions," for a non-Jewish audience, provides a more precise accounting.<sup>40</sup> The author, as is clear from the appearance of his name among the list of contributors to the section on the "History of All Religious Denominations in the United States," was Sabato Morais, *hazzan* of the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia. Morais traces the beginning of the America Jewish history to 1694, the year he believed the first congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, was established. Curiously, in a (1966) reprinting of the article in the *American Jewish Archives*, the author of the unsigned preface to the piece contended "Morais' notion of American Jewish beginnings was faulty—he overlooked for instance, the establishment of a Jewish community at Dutch New Amsterdam, now New York City, in 1654."<sup>41</sup>

Rather than providing a faulty account, it could be the case that Morais simply had a different concept of origins than those considered valid a century later. It is highly unlikely, for example, given that Morais was married by Judah Jacques Lyon during the "bicentennial" year (1854) and was in close contact with Shearith Israel, Mikveh Israel's sister Sephardic congregation, that he was unaware of the New Amsterdam story.

39. Isaac Leeser, "The Jews and their Religion," *He Pasa Ekklesia: An Original History of the Religious Denominations at Present Existing in the United States*, ed. I. Daniel Rupp (Philadelphia, 1844); the concluding section of his essay on pp. 366–69 is entitled "The Jews in the United States." Quotations are from 366–67. In a graduation address at Columbia College in New York City, delivered in Hebrew in 1800 by Sampson Simson, allusion is also made to the first arrivals to New Amsterdam "more than 150 years ago" (i.e., ca. 1650). I would like to thank Arthur Goren for calling this source to my attention. A facsimile of the address appears in "Sampson Simon's Hebrew Oration," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* [PAJHS] 37 (1947): 431. For the transcribed text and translation, see Isidore S. Meyer, "The Hebrew Oration of Sampson Simson, 1800," PAJHS 46 (1956): 51–58. See also Shalom Goldman, "Two American Hebrew Orations, 1799 and 1800," *Hebrew Annual Review* 13 (1991): 33–41 (see pp. 37–39 for the Hebrew text and English translation).

40. William Burder, *The History of All Religions: From the Earliest Records to the Present Time. With Accounts of the Ceremonies and Customs, or the Forms of Worship Practiced by the Several Nations of the Known World* (Philadelphia, 1872), 581–87. See also *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly*, August 1877, for an illustrated issue containing a history of Jews in America.

41. [n.a.] *American Jewish Archives* 18.1 (April 1966): 29.

Rather, it seems more likely that for Morais, writing in 1872, Jewish life in America began when a quorum of Jewish men were able to pray publicly in a synagogue for the first time. Morais's exact words in Burder's *History* would suggest as much: "The first appearance in our country of a *community of men* [emphasis added] professing Judaism dates from the year 1694 . . . in Newport, R.I. The synagogue they erected and the burial ground they purchased are still objects of considerable interest. . . . The next settlement of Jews was in New York in the year 1729. Before that period, scarcely any of the ancient faith could be met in that city."<sup>42</sup>

It is not that 1654 or 1729 is wrong and 1694 is right. Rather, this example is one of several possible counterweights to the implicit assumption that the mere arrival of a group of Jews constitutes the most significant marker of origins.

Whatever date or position one stakes out regarding the beginnings of American Jewish history, understanding these various mythologizing moments and interpretations can help illuminate American Jewish self-understanding. The current celebration of 1654 is problematic to me because of the ostensive "disconnect" between the anachronistic, abstract values that committee planners have assigned to it and the historical conditions under which seventeenth-century Jews lived. Significantly, the reaffirmation of 1654 as the 350th anniversary of American Jewish history also reiterates, however inadvertently, a national, indeed apologetic, impulse. Perhaps along the circulating currents of the Atlantic rather than behind the fixed boundaries of the nation-state more fruitful models of interpretation of the "American" Jewish past are to be found.

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42. Burder, *History of All Religions*, 581–82; *American Jewish Archives*, 18.1 (April 1966): 29–30.