

Jewish Religious Architecture

From Biblical Israel to Modern Judaism

Edited by

Steven Fine



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Jewish Sacred Architecture in the Spanish and Portuguese Diaspora

Ronnie Perelis

Upon first seeing the *Esnoga*, the great Portuguese Synagogue of Amsterdam, one is struck by its sheer size and prominence (Fig. 12.1–12.5). Instead of being hidden down a quiet alleyway, or being tucked behind an unassuming façade, as so many pre-modern European synagogues, the *Esnoga* stands tall, elegantly proclaiming the arrival of these former Conversos¹ from Spain and Portugal into the bustling metropolis of Amsterdam. The structure tells us as much about the Jews who built it and prayed within its walls as it does about the larger Dutch society. The *Esnoga* of Amsterdam served as a model for the synagogues of Amsterdam's satellite communities throughout the Western Sephardic Diaspora and is a prism through which to appreciate the internal religious world of these Jews and their self-presentation to their host societies.

The Spanish and Portuguese Jews of Amsterdam have their origin in the Iberian Peninsula. They are the descendants of the native Jews of Portugal and those Spanish Jews who emigrated in large numbers to Portugal in 1492 on the eve of the expulsion from Spain.² This community was forcibly converted to Catholicism en masse in 1497. These forced converts were promised one generation free of Inquisitorial investigation into their religious practices that was extended for another twenty years as a result of the savvy lobbying and generous bribing of Portuguese Conversos in Rome. Once this period was over in the 1530's Portuguese Conversos began to fan out across the wider Iberian world.³ They found new economic opportunities and respite from the intense vigilance of the Portuguese Inquisition in the newly established colonies of

1 On this question see Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981). See also, H.P. Salomon, "The Portuguese Inquisition and its Victims in the Light of Recent Polemics," *The Journal of the American Portuguese Cultural Society*, 5.3–4 (1971), 19–28, 50–55.

2 See the article by Vivian Mann in this volume.

3 Jonathan Irvine Israel, *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism, 1550–1750* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), and idem, *Diasporas within a Diaspora: Jews, Crypto-Jews and the World Maritime Empires (1540–1740)* (Leiden: Brill, 2002). See also, Daviken Studnicki-Gizbert, *A Nation upon the Ocean Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).



FIGURE 12.1 Square between Portuguese and High German synagogue complex, The Netherlands, unknown
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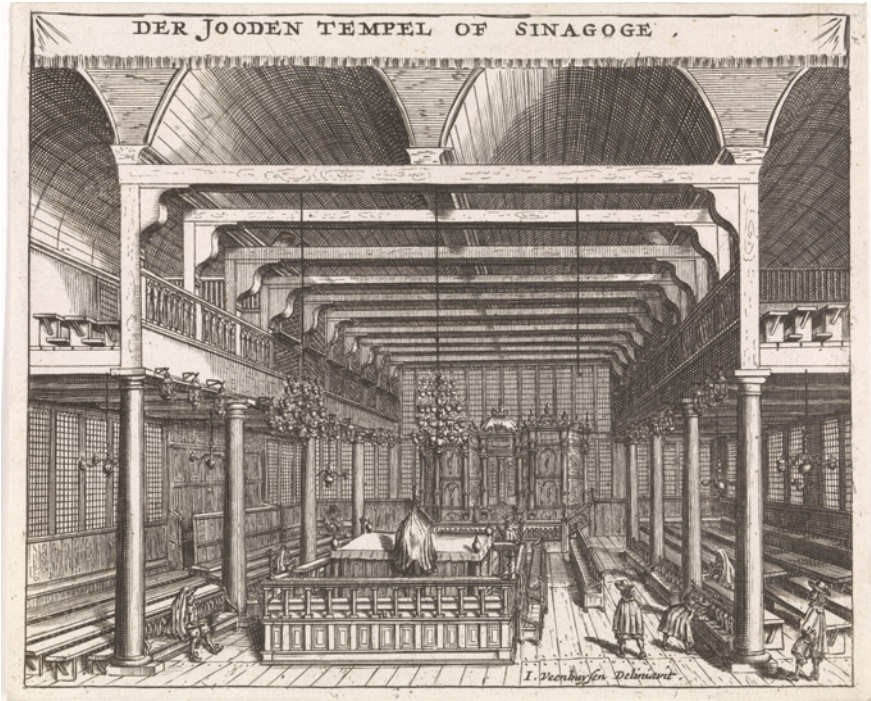


FIGURE 12.2 Interior of first Portuguese Synagogue, Amsterdam, Jan Veenhuysen, 1662
WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

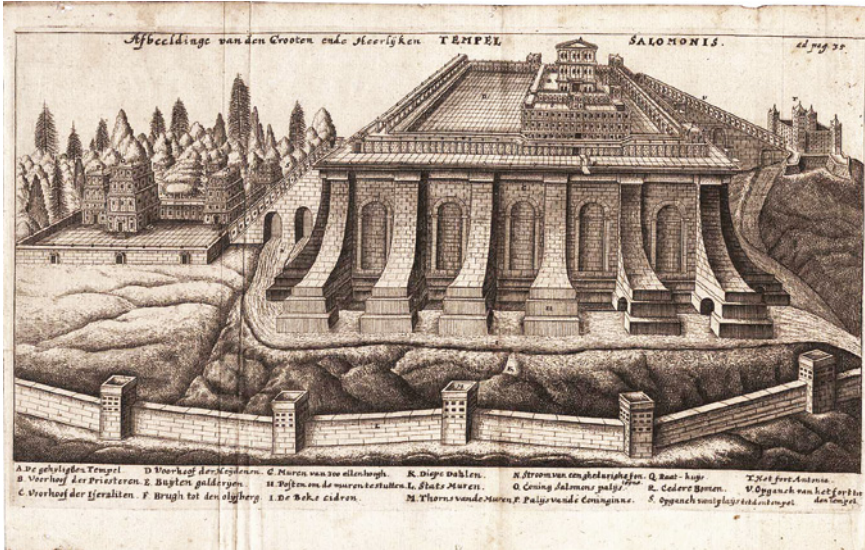


FIGURE 12.3 Engraving from Jacob Judah Leon *De Templo Hierosolymitano*, libri IV, Helmstedt, 1665
WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

the Americas, the trading outposts of the East Indies, Spain and the Spanish Netherlands. When the United Provinces of Holland threw off Spanish domination they embraced a policy of religious tolerance –or at least the absence of persecution– toward non-Calvinists, eventually including Jews. Converso merchants were attracted to the emerging commercial center of Amsterdam and a small group eventually began to openly practice Judaism and identify as Jews.⁴ After years of conducting prayer services in private homes, these “New Jews”⁵ began gathering for religious ceremonies in converted warehouses. In 1639 the three existing Sephardic congregations of *Beth Jacob*, *Neve Shalom* and *Beth Israel* joined together to form one larger, unified community, the *Kahal Kados Talmud Torah*, “Holy Congregation of the Study of the Law.” The *Talmud Torah* congregation took over several adjoining buildings that were used as prayer halls and classrooms and reconfigured them into a new synagogue.

4 Daniel Swetschinski, “From the Middle Ages to the Golden Age, 1516–1621” in *The History of the Jews in the Netherlands*, eds. J.C.H. Blom et al. (Portland: Oxford, 2002), 64–67.

5 Yosef Kaplan, “The Jews in the Republic until about 1750: Religious, Cultural, and Social Life,” *ibid.*, 118.



FIGURE 12.4 Emanuel de Witte, Interior of the Portuguese Synagogue of Amsterdam, 1680
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While this structure was replaced by the monumental *Esnoga* a few decades later, its importance should not be discounted. In this first synagogue we can see intimations of the aesthetic and cultural impulses which will express themselves fully in the famed *Esnoga*. The congregants' sense of security and confidence in their place in Dutch society is apparent in the buildings' prominent location near the Houtgracht, with easy access to the street. Its elegant façade adorned with Corinthian pilasters reflects the image of wealth and taste so important to this community of merchants and financiers. A contemporary engraving by Jan Veenhuysen in 1662 of the interior shows a rectangular hall with



FIGURE 12.5 Portuguese Synagogue, Amsterdam
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galleries on both sides.⁶ (Fig. 12.5) The benches were arranged along the length of the synagogue walls allowing the worshipers to focus on the devotional foci of the building: on the extreme west, the *teva*, elevated reader's table where the *hazan* leads the prayers and reads from the Torah scrolls and the *ehal* (the Hispanicized pronunciation of the Hebrew *hekhal*, shrine), the ark containing the Torah scrolls, on the far east. The interior design of the synagogue space is balanced and allows for maximum visibility- the worshiper is able to see and be seen, the service is harmoniously orchestrated and decorous just as the space is rationally organized along straight lines. While the preachers and poets of the Spanish and Portuguese congregation embraced the *chiaroscuro* of Baroque imagery in their literary productions,⁷ the synagogue's design is staunchly neoclassical. It is in this neoclassical mode that the concept of *Bom Judesmo* is clearly displayed. Yosef Kaplan has shown the ways that the Sephardic Jews of Amsterdam sought to create a Judaism that was decorous and noble, a Judaism

6 David Cohen Paraira, "A Jewel in the City: The Architectural History of the Portuguese-Jewish Synagogue," in *The Esnoga*, eds. Judith C.E. Belinfante et al. (Amsterdam: D'Arts, 1991), 42.

7 Harm den Boer, *La Literatura Sefardí de Amsterdam* (Madrid: Instituto Internacional de Estudios Sefardies y Andalusies, 1995).

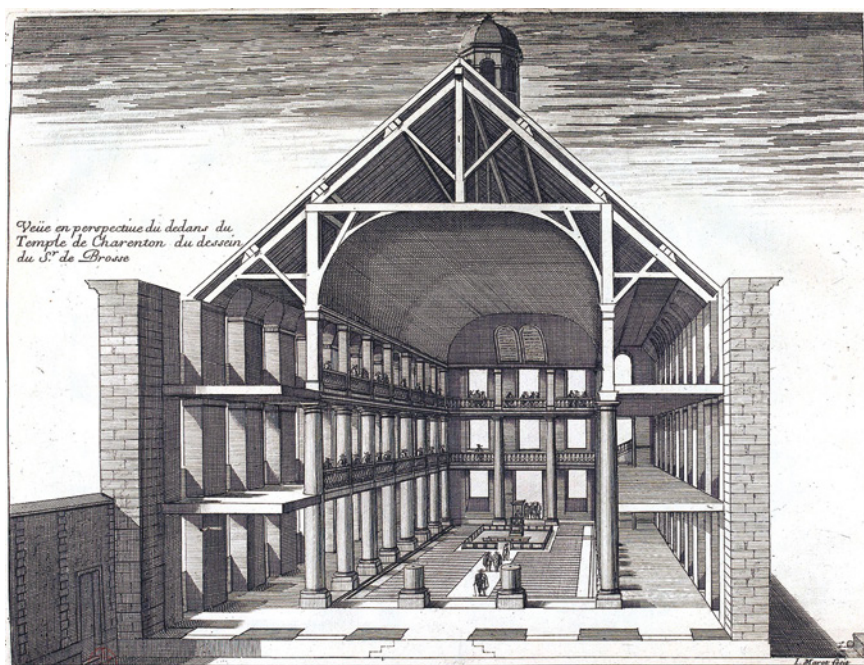


FIGURE 12.6 Charenton Temple, France, unknown, 1648, interior
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that accorded with their high station in society and their noble heritage.⁸ A well-orchestrated prayer service and an elegant synagogue space was integral to this self-image. Christian visitors to the synagogue often remarked on the chaotic nature of the services – at least in comparison to their western Christian liturgies – and the leaders of the community consistently enacted decrees to ensure greater order during the prayers.⁹ Side conversations were forbidden; the derisive “drowning out” of the name of the evil Haman during the public reading of the book of Esther on the festival of Purim was declared uncouth – along with spitting. The fact that these decrees were continuously re-instituted points to the inevitability of human disorderliness; within the fixed zone of the synagogue’s design, however, the leaders of the community were able to establish a space conducive to order and reverence in a way that their decrees could never insure.

8 Yosef Kaplan, “Bom Judesmo: the Western Sephardic Diaspora,” in *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*, ed. David Biale (New York: Schocken, 2002), 639–669.

9 Yosef Kaplan, “For Whom did Emanuel De Witte Paint the His Three Pictures of the Sephardi Synagogue of Amsterdam?,” in idem, *An Alternative Path to Modernity: the Sephardi Diaspora in Western Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 32–37.

The Sephardic Jews of Amsterdam were not merely tolerated, they were appreciated as an important element in Dutch economic life and as a source of deep intellectual curiosity for their Christian neighbors. The synagogue was a particular sort of contact zone where a regular presence of Christian visitors to the synagogue had the effect of framing the service as a form of performance as much as an act of devotion. It can be argued that this heightened sensitivity to optics and Christian opinion is connected to the Iberian obsession with *honra*.¹⁰ As seen throughout the dramas of the early modern Spanish stage, there was an intense concern with the public perception of one's honor, referred to as *honra*, which often was of greater importance than an individual's actual moral and ethical qualities. The importance of *honra* takes on an additional valence for these Jews because of their recent experience under the watchful eye of the Inquisition while living in Portugal. The community's concern with appearances is informed by these two Iberian legacies as much as the tolerance and philo-semitic curiosity among their Dutch hosts. A sign of the importance of the prestige of the community in the eyes of its Christian neighbors can be seen in the visit of such eminent figures as Cosimo III de' Medici (1639) and the Stadholder Frederick Henry (1642) along with the steady stream of tourists and locals who made it a point to observe these Jews at prayer.¹¹

Beginning in 1670¹² the community began planning the construction of a new synagogue complex on the other side of the Houtgracht canal not far from the original Portuguese synagogue. It can be argued that the Sephardim were spurred on to this project by the construction of the Great Ashkenazi Shul directly across the *Esnoga's* site, which began in 1669. According to this interpretation, the new synagogue complex was as much about the religious and educational needs of the Sephardic community as it was about maintaining their cultural and economic superiority over their poorer, less worldly coreligionists.

This project, which was completed in 1675, included a towering Synagogue at its center with a series of classrooms, offices and living quarters for the clergy located in the surrounding courtyard. In its monumentality, the *Esnoga* shared many traits with its predecessor, but because of the enormity of the building and the purpose-built nature of the entire space, the grand *Esnoga* embodied and projected the community's values with greater force (Figs. 12.1–12.5)

10 Yosef Kaplan, "The Self-Definition of the Sephardi Jews of Western Europe and their Relation to the Alien and the Stranger" in *Crisis and Creativity in the Sephardic World, 1391–1648*, ed. Benjamin R. Gampel (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

11 Paraira, "A Jewel in the City," 43.

12 Leo Fuks, "The Inauguration of the Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam in 1675" in *Aspects of Jewish Life in the Netherlands* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1995), 83–84.

The preparation for this project began in 1670 with Isaac Aboab de Fonseca, the chief *Haham*, rabbi of the community, initiating a fundraising drive; the building committee was able to buy the large piece of land on the Houtgracht, directly across from where the Ashkenazi community of Amsterdam was building its own *Great Shul*. After receiving several proposals, the committee selected the plan submitted by Elias Bouman. Bouman was already engaged as the mason for the construction of the Ashkenazi synagogue and was well acquainted with the Amsterdam Sephardim having built several residences for prominent members of the community. Bouman was a successful and well-known master-builder who was involved with the expansion of Amsterdam's urban center that encompassed the area surrounding these new synagogues. He went on to be named master mason of Amsterdam in 1681.¹³

On April 17, 1671, four prominent members of the Amsterdam community donated 2,310 guilders for the honor of laying the four foundation stones of the future building.¹⁴ Their magnanimous donations were accompanied by the sizeable contributions of six hundred and ten fellow members. This project was clearly embraced and valued by the community, as evidenced by the speed with which the funds were collected and put to use. By 1672 the Synagogue was almost complete, when war with France interrupted its progress until 1675.¹⁵

Elaborate dedication ceremonies, preserved in a commemorative pamphlet published at the time, are another clear indication of the community's enthusiasm for this project and of the ways that it was more than just a functional building. In the introduction to the collected sermons given throughout the days of the new Synagogue's inauguration, the Amsterdam printer David de Castro Tartas offers a glimpse of the pageantry of those eight days.¹⁶ He describes how the congregation entered:

with the Torah scrolls (*Sepharim*) ... encircling the *Esnoga*, accompanied by torches, the kindling of lights which adorn the building; with pleasant choruses of music, with celebrated instruments, and with Divine lyrics whose harmony was so delicate (*suave*), and angelic that it felt like a house where God is present ... and in order to imitate the dedication of the Holy Temple, there were eight days of festivities, always with the

13 Paraira, "A Jewel in the City," 46.

14 See Fuks, "The Inauguration of the Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam in 1675," 84; Wischnitzer, *United States*, 11, 25, 31.

15 See Wischnitzer, *European Synagogue*, 91.

16 *Sermoes que pregarão os doctos ingenios do K.K. de Taalmud Torah des ta cidade de Amsterdam*, David de Castro Tartas Amsterdam 1675. I thank Yoram Biton (at the time of Columbia University) for his assistance in accessing this fascinating document.

same solemnity, accompanied each day by a sermon given by the rabbis of the congregation.

He directly addresses the reader who was not able to attend these glorious celebrations: "I assure you my benevolent reader, that these [celebrations] were more like Holidays (*Pascuas*) with liberty in the Temple than festivities of captivity in a Synagogue."

This ritual was modeled upon the numerous dedication ceremonies described in Scripture for the tabernacle, Solomonic and post-exilic temples of Jerusalem, not to mention the rededication of the temple by the Hasmoneans mentioned in the book of 2 Maccabees, Chapter 1, for Catholics a biblical text that these former Christians might well have known (but Jews in general did not). The date of its inauguration is charged with obvious symbolism. It is dedicated on the Friday preceding *Shabbat Naḥamu* each summer, on which Isaiah 40:1-26 is recited marking the end of the three weeks of mourning for the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. That Sabbath initiates a period of Divine "comfort" that is marked by a series of seven readings from the prophets (*haftarot*) filled with prophecies of messianic redemption. As Tartas tells us, there were eight days of dedication "in imitation of the Holy Temple": in place of the ark of the covenant the Jews of Amsterdam bring their Torah scrolls, in place of the sound of the Levites chorus there are the chords and rhythms of contemporary musicians, no less angelic and pointing to the presence of the Divine in their newly constructed sacred space.

The *Esnoga* is not only related to as a substitute for or imitation of the Temple in an abstract sense, its construction embraces concrete elements of the idealized architectural image of the Solomonic temple. While the idea of a synagogue functioning as a *miqdash me'at* (b. Meg. 29a) goes back to Talmudic times, the structural borrowings and allusions of the Amsterdam *Esnoga* and the Solomonic Temple can be linked to the surge in popular and scholarly interest in the realia of the Temple in the years preceding the building of the *Esnoga*. In 1643 the *Haham* Jacob Jehuda Aryeh Leon Templo constructed a wooden scale model of the Temple of Solomon while living in Middleburg. In 1643 this model made its way to Amsterdam and became a popular tourist attraction, so much so that the *Mahamad* criticized Templo for opening the model up to visitors on the Sabbath.¹⁷ Templo wrote an illustrated treatise delineating the architectural details of the biblical Temple, *Portrait of Solomon's Temple* (Middleburg 1642, Fig. 12.6) in Spanish and Dutch and subsequently

¹⁷ Kaplan, "For Whom did Emmanuel De Witte Paint his Three Pictures of the Sephardi Synagogue in Amsterdam?" in idem, *An Alternative Path to Modernity*, 29–50.

translated into German, English, French and Latin, and Hebrew.¹⁸ Leon's architectural treatise spread his ideas about the aesthetics, structural features and symbolism of the Temple's construction to an audience of both Jews and Christians interested in fully exploring the meaning of the biblical text and mining it for any millennial portents.

Scholars generally of the *Esnoga* see both a direct and an implicit impact of Templo's model and treatise on its design.¹⁹ The building's towering height (19.5 m.)²⁰ rectangular dimensions, along with the classical lines of its façade are reminiscent of Solomon's Temple as depicted in Leon Templo's treatise. The courtyard, with its annexes for offices, classrooms and other functions follows the series of concentric walls, with their galleries outlining the different zones of the Temple mount complex. The most striking feature that the *Esnoga* owes to Leon Templo is the series of sloping buttresses placed on the exterior walls of the synagogue. There are four of these buttresses on the western, northern, and southern walls, the buttresses frame tall windows which fill the interior with light. On the eastern wall where the *ehal*, the Torah shrine, is placed, there are six buttresses each framing a niche on the external wall as depicted in Leon Templo's *Retrato del Templo de Selomo*. The exuberance and pride captured in Tartas' descriptions of a festival "befitting the Temple in times of liberty more than a synagogue in the captivity" is symbolically inscribed in these structural details; The *Esnoga's* structural language invites the visitor to reconsider the nature of the building they are about to enter.

Above the doors of the main entrance to the *Esnoga* there is a Hebrew inscription in gold characters declaring that the synagogue was built "In the year, 'And I, in Your abundant kindness, enter Your house'" (Ps. 5:8). This verse serves in Jewish liturgy as an entrance formula to the synagogue, it is the first line printed in the Siddur of the Spanish Portuguese rite. Another indication of the interplay between the synagogue's architecture and the community's liturgical life can be found in the fact that the script of the inscription is in the same font that is used in the printing of books in Amsterdam at this time. There are small stars over the word for "Your House" indicating that the numerical value of this Hebrew word equals the Hebrew year of the building's construction, 5432, 1672

18 Laura Liebman, "Sephardic Sacred Space in Colonial America," *Jewish History* (2011), 25, 13–41; A.K. Offenber, "Bibliography of the Works of Jacob Jehuda Leon (Templo)," *Studia Rosenthaliana*, 12:1–2 (July, 1978), 111–132; "Jacob Jehuda Leon (1602–1675) and his Model of the Temple" in *Jewish-Christian Relations in the Seventeenth Century*, eds. van der Berg and van der Wall, 110–111; Helen Rosenau, "Jacob Judah Leon Templo's Contribution to Architectural Imagery," *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 23.1 (1972), 72–81.

19 Wischnitzer, *United States*, 94.

20 Paraira, *Esnoga*, 48.

according to the Christian reckoning. This is the year that the Synagogue was scheduled to be finished before the outbreak of the war with France which halted construction. This inscription also alludes to the name of Rabbi Aboab (*Aleph-Bet-Aleph-Bet*). The numerological word play of this inscription underscores, this time in a scriptural form, the identification between this synagogue and God's house- the Temple.

Upon entering, the eyes are immediately drawn upwards towards the light streaming through the series of seventy-two windows symmetrically arranged along all four walls. (Fig. 12.2–12.5) The broad central nave is a wide-open space framed by four massive ionic pillars²¹ supporting a barrel-vaulted ceiling. The galleries situated over both aisles are supported by a series of twelve stone pillars. With this arrangement, the four pillars supporting the nave's ceiling create a centralized space of liturgical activity anchored by the dual foci of the shrine (*hekhal*, or *ehal* according in the Western Sephardic transliteration) and the *tevah*, the Torah reading table. The rational spatial arrangements at the heart of the 1639 synagogue are expanded upon dramatically, endowing the elegance and harmony of the classical lines with a sense of majesty and awe.

The *ehal* housing the Torah scrolls fills the width of the central nave. Its neo-classical façade is framed by six ionic columns, echoing the columns and clean lines of the rest of the synagogue. Two rectangular tablets representing the ten commandments are placed directly above the door of the cabinet where the scrolls are kept. This feature is standard in other Spanish and Portuguese synagogues. While the Sephardic synagogue of Venice, which was built in 1656 features two tablets over the *ehal* it is not clear at what point in its history this detail was added.²² Gad B. Sarfatti in his thorough discussion of the iconography of the ten commandments points out that while there are earlier medieval depictions of the 2 tablets in Jewish manuscripts as well as in Christian art, there is no evidence of the use of the tablets as part of synagogue ornamentation until late fifteenth- century Italy. Until the sixteenth century the Ten Commandments were painted on the inside of the ark's doors. By the end of the sixteenth century, however Sarfatti refers to six Italian synagogues that have the tablets of the law crowning the ark.²³ It may very well be that, as Sarfatti adduces, the use of the Ten Commandments as a synagogue symbol spread from

21 Krinsky, *Synagogues of Europe*, 331, 391.

22 Wischnitzer, *United States*, 90–91.

23 Gad B. Sarfatti "The Tablets of the law as a Symbol of Judaism," in *The Ten Commandments in History and Tradition*, eds. Ben-Zion Segal and Gershon Levi (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1990), 383–418.

Italy to other Jewish communities. However, the Esnoga's use of the tablets appears to have had a more local, Northern European inspiration.

An intriguing possibility lies in some of the new Protestant churches being built in France and Northern Europe in the seventeenth century. These churches sought to inscribe their Protestant vision into the very architecture of these new buildings. As an expression of Protestant bibliocentrism, the main focus of these new churches was no longer the altar, but rather the lectern, which was placed in the center so that the maximum number of congregants could listen to the sermon and participate in the readings from Scripture. Another aspect of these churches' bibliocentrism can be seen in the use of the tablets of the law as a central ornament. The Huguenot Temple of Charenton of 1623 near Paris has been posited by some to be the inspiration for the layout of the Portuguese Synagogue of 1639 (Fig. 12.6). With its barrel vaulted ceiling and galleried aisles, the Charenton Temple shares basic design features with Amsterdam's Church of the Remonstrants along with a prominent image in Henricus Hondius's well-read architectural treatise, *The Five Orders of Architecture* (Amsterdam, 1620).²⁴ Charenton and the idealized engraving in Hondius'



FIGURE 12.7 Jewish Savannah on the Surinam River, Brussels, 1839. Pierre Jacques Benoit
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²⁴ Wischnitzer, *United States*, 85.

Five Orders both have two curved stone tablets of the Law placed prominently on the wall opposite the entrance. The design parallels between the two Portuguese synagogues of Amsterdam and these Protestant churches is striking.²⁵ The possibility that the *Esnoga's* use of the tablets of the law as a prominent feature – one that will become prominent throughout European synagogue architecture – is testament to the complex interactions between Jews and Christians in early modern Amsterdam: Protestants turn towards Hebrew Scriptures in their re-imagination of Christian sacred space while the Spanish and Portuguese Jews, in their own attempt to solidify their return to Judaism use the tablets of the law as a fitting synagogue symbol, central to their liturgical identity.

Moses Curiel donated the Brazilian jacaranda wood for the *Tevah* and the *Ehal*. Curiel was also known as Jeronimo Nunes da Costa, the agent of the Portuguese Crown to Holland from 1670–1690.²⁶ This dual identity was common for many of the international merchants and financiers of the Sephardic community who shuttled between their lives as open Jews within the freedom of Amsterdam or London and other Dutch and English ports and their business pursuits often deep inside the Iberian world where their Judaism had to remain a secret.²⁷ The Brazilian origin of the wood is not incidental, rather it points to the global network of travel and trade that was essential to the economic activity of the Western Sephardim. The Jews of Amsterdam established satellite communities in northern Europe, such as Hamburg, Leipzig and London as well as throughout the Atlantic colonies of the Dutch and British empires in places such as Curaçao, Suriname (Fig. 12.7), Kingston and New Amsterdam. The synagogues of these satellite communities shared an aesthetic language with the metropolitan *Esnoga*: the basic liturgical arrangement of the *Tevah* and the *Ehal*, as well as the east-west placement of the chairs would make the prayer space recognizable to any Western Sephardic Jew.²⁸ These communities relied on Amsterdam for the training of their Rabbis, the writing of their

25 Ibid., 84–86.

26 Jonathan I. Israel, "An Amsterdam Jewish Merchant of the Golden Age: Jeronimo Nunes da Costa (1620–1697), Agent of Portugal in the Dutch Republic" *Studia Rosenthaliana* 18 (1984), 21–40.

27 Yosef Kaplan, "The Travels of Portuguese Jews from Amsterdam to the 'Lands of Idolatry' (1644–1724)" in *Jews and Conversos; Studies in Society and the Inquisition*, ed. Yosef Kaplan. (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1985), 197–224.

28 Sharman Kadish, "Sha'ar ha-Shamayim: London's Bevis Marks synagogue and the Sephardi architectural heritage," *Ars Judaica* 3 (2007), 31–52.

Torah scrolls and the printing of their prayer books. This religious dependence helped insure the preservation of a unified liturgical and musical praxis among these far-flung communities. The itinerant nature of many of these Jewish merchants also insured that the norms of the Amsterdam community would circulate throughout this wider network.

Another important feature that many of these Atlantic synagogues shared was their prominence in the public sphere. The beautifully preserved Mikveh Israel synagogue (1732) in Willemstead, Curaçao is situated in the main commercial area of this Caribbean port. The synagogue can be easily seen along the harbor's skyline in a map from 1786; the "joode-kerk" is listed as number 19 on the key of important city sights.²⁹ In Suriname, the majority of the Jews lived in a predominantly Jewish agricultural zone known as the Jodensavane. With full control over their public space, the community could fulfill the Talmudic recommendation to place the Synagogue on the highest spot in the town (t. Meg. 4:23). As seen in the lithograph from Pierre Jacques Benoit, *Vue de la Savane des Juifs sur la rivière de Surinam* (1839)³⁰ the Synagogue of *Beracha veShalom* (1685) was on the highest hill in the center of the settlement.³¹

The lone colonial era synagogue building still standing in North America is the Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island (Fig. 12.8–12.9). Like the other New World synagogues, congregation *Nephuse Yisrael* (The Scattered of Israel)³² as it was originally called, was situated on a hill in the center of Newport. Again, the location is indicative of the prominence and self-confidence of this small community of international merchants as well as the tolerant attitude of their neighbors. The renowned American architect Peter Harrison designed the building. Laura Liebman has shown how the synagogues of the Western Sephardic diaspora, particularly those in the Americas, share more than the basic bi-focal arrangement of *tevah* and *hehhal* with the *Esnoga*. Despite local variations many of these synagogues incorporate the neo-Solomonic

29 "Te Eyland Curacao, Anno 1786," (from National Maritime Museum) in *Our Snoa* (Curaçao, 1982), 19.

30 <http://jcb.lunaimaging.com/luna/servlet/detail/JCB~1~1~597~230111:41--Vue-de-la-Savane-des-Juifs-sur>. Pierre Jacques Benoit, c. 1782–1854, *Vue de la Savane des Juifs sur la rivière de Surinam*. (Photo: John Carter Brown Archive of Early American Images)

31 Rachel Frankel, "Antecedents and Remnants of Jodensavanne: The Synagogues and Cemeteries of the First Permanent Plantation Settlement of New World Jews" in *The Jews and the Expansion of Europe to the West 1450–1800*. Eds. Paolo Bernardini and Norman Fiering (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001) 394–438.

32 Liebman, "Sephardic Sacred space in Colonial America," 26.



FIGURE 12.8 Touro Synagogue, Newport, RI, 1763. Architect: Peter Harrison
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FIGURE 12.9 Touro Synagogue, Newport, RI, 1763. Architect: Peter Harrison, interior
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aesthetics of Leon Templo and Christopher Wren in obvious and subtle ways. As in the Amsterdam *Esnoga*, and the Bevis Marks synagogue in London, the Touro synagogue utilizes twelve columns to support the galleries over the side aisles, this deeply symbolic number may allude to the twelve tribes of Israel and their eventual reunification. A less obvious neo-Solomonic detail is found in the layout of the structure. It conforms to the biblical proportions of the Temple in Ezekiel's vision (*Ezek.* 41) of 100 to 37 which were discussed at length by Leon Templo and Christopher Wren. Liebman shows how the *tevah* is situated at the liminal point between these two dimensions; the place where the Torah scroll is read, and from where the *hazan* leads the prayers, is the point of contact between the human and the divine. The 100:37 ratio can be found in the *Esnoga*, in Bevis Marks and in many other Spanish and Portuguese synagogues and functions as an important key to unlocking the layered religious language inscribed within their architecture.³³

Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia is a fascinating example of the ways that the architectural sensibilities of the Amsterdam synagogue along with the liturgical aesthetics of the Spanish and Portuguese rite combine to maintain a fundamental link between present and past³⁴ Mikveh Israel was founded as a congregation in 1740 and has had four buildings in its long and illustrious history. Its current building on Independence Mall was built in 1976 by the H2L2 architecture and design firm based in Philadelphia.³⁵ Its modernist aesthetic at first seems deeply foreign to the Neoclassical elegance of the Amsterdam synagogue, however there are deeper continuities inherent in this space. The *tevah* and the *ehal* are arranged on the opposite extremes, with the long benches arranged on the east west axis. Instead of a women's gallery over the aisles, the women's section runs parallel to the men's section on a raised platform, in this way they are able to enjoy maximum visibility while remaining separate from the male-centered zone of liturgical performance. This arrangement allows for greater female presence within the sanctuary while maintaining orthodox religious standards. The building has no windows along its walls, however, like its

33 Ibid., 27–28.

34 For a discussion of the impressive Shearith Israel Synagogue of New York on Central Park West (1897) see Wischnitzer, *United States*, 95–104; Ronda S. Angel, "Architecture and visual arts of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City" in *Haham Gaon Memorial Volume*. eds. Solomon Gaon and Marc D. Angel (Brooklyn: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1997), 223–233.

35 I wish to thank Ms. Catherine Zaremski of H2L2 for this information. For more information regarding the original plan for the synagogue see: Susan G. Solomon, *Louis I. Kahn's Jewish Architecture: Mikveh Israel and the Midcentury American Synagogue* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2009).

antecedents, it is bathed in light that comes from skylights running along the north and south walls.

The sleek lines of this modernist space are a striking counterpoint to the many artifacts incorporated from the community's previous synagogues: the *tevah* crafted of Italian Carrera marble was originally designed for the 1859 synagogue building, the mahogany reader's desk dates to the 1782 building; the Walloon style chandelier over the *tevah*, as well as the sight of the 19 Torah scrolls each in their striking vestments of silk brocade and silver finials, include some examples that date to colonial times.³⁶ These classical features inform the liturgical activity of the synagogue. While the superstructure is contemporary, the central zones of religious activity are endowed with a "traditional" identity that anchor it in its colonial past. Reverence for the past, exemplified in the fastidious preservation of the details of the prayer rite is a central feature of the Spanish and Portuguese synagogues still active today. Visitors to the synagogue in Amsterdam, Bevis Marks, New York or Philadelphia are struck by the rigidity of the musical repertoire and the careful attention to the nuances of their particular customs.

Possibly the most impressive moment of the Sabbath service in all synagogues, is the carefully choreographed procession of the Torah scrolls from the *ehal* to the reading table and then back to the *ehal*. In the Western Sephardic rite this ceremony is endowed with extra solemnity and grandeur. The *hazan* and the dignitaries of the congregation march while a specially appointed and trained *levantador* (Torah raiser) holds the Torah scroll upright. The group walks in synchronized fashion to the singing of Psalm 29, each step coinciding with a new note. The Torah procession exemplifies the interplay between past and present, between the traditional and the contemporary that dialectically unfolds within Mikveh Israel's sacred space: the congregants are at once connecting to a ritualized past- a classical period from where the *rite* originates – and at the same time this active reverence for the past unfolds within a modernist space, in line with their contemporary identities and self-perception as twenty-first century American Jews.

The congregants of most Spanish and Portuguese Synagogues today are not the genetic descendants of the cosmopolitan merchants that set off across the globe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In most cases, the majority of the active members are of Eastern European or of Middle Eastern origin. However, these buildings, even when re-imagined in a modernist key, such as in Philadelphia, maintain deep bonds to their Western Sephardic legacy. These sacred spaces powerfully convey the ethos and spiritual sensibility of their Sephardic founders as they ventured westward to a new and very different world.

36 http://www.mikvehisrael.org/e2 cms_display.php?p=past_our_history.