CHAPTER 10

Where Have All the Caribbean Jews Gone?

Florette Cohen-Abady

It is no simple matter to mark the arrival of the first Jewish settler to the Caribbean. No single center was created to document immigrant arrivals as had been the case in Colonial Virginia, Mexico, and Canada. In addition, many of the immigrant arrivals had been forced to convert to Catholicism, making it unlikely that they would have disclosed anything of their Jewish past or continuing practice.

Some have claimed that the Crypto Jews who accompanied Columbus’ first expedition—Juan de Cabrera (Pinto), Rodrigo de Triana (Nina), and his interpreter Luis de Torres (Santa Maria)—should be counted among the first Jewish arrivals to the New World. Luis de Torres is favored, being one of 39 crew members who remained at Hispaniola’s La Navidad settlement for more than a year. The first functioning Jewish community (1649) was probably that of the Sephardim who made their home in the coastal region of Paramaribo in Dutch Guiana, today’s Suriname.

It is usually the case that wherever Jews go, antisemitism lags not far behind. However, Tel Aviv University’s Kantor Center issues an annual report documenting Jew-hatred and it has yet to document a single incident of Caribbean antisemitism since its inception several years ago.1 Even if some hate crimes were unreported, it begs the question as to why today’s Caribbean Jews experience less social tensions during a time period when few nations are exempt from antisemitic and anti-Israeli hate. The minute number of Jewish Caribbean residents may only provide partial answers. Social scientists have long held that rates of antisemitism have been frequently high in cultures where few or no Jews reside.2

This chapter has several goals. It offers an historical overview of Jewish migration to the Caribbean Islands. Like the cultural anthropologist, I try to understand Island culture and context. Thus, there are interviews with the Jewish residents. The lack of global anti-Israeli based antisemitism is juxtaposed with that of the rest of the world where, with few exceptions, attacks

2 Steven K. Baum, Antisemitism Explained (Lanham MD: UPA, 2012).
on all things Jewish are occurring with greater frequency and intensity. In addition, to understanding the relative lack of Jew-hatred, the chapter seeks to address the perplexing matter of why—given such a positive environment—Caribbean Jews seem to be disappearing. Social identity theory, valuing of higher education, democratic and ethical principles, justice, and toleration of minorities all serve to fashion an answer to the following question: where did all the Caribbean Jews go?

Jews of the Caribbean

Jewish migration to the Caribbean has its roots in King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella's expulsion in 1492 of the Jews from all Spanish-held lands, including the Basque region, the islands of Sardinia and Sicily, and the kingdoms of Valencia, Andalusia, Castile, Catalonia, Aragon, Galicia, Majorca and Minorca.

When Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella announced the Alhambra Decree ordering Jews to vacate within 90-days or convert, few knew what to do or where to go. Neighboring Portugal became the first option with those electing to leave at times paying dearly for their Portuguese haven.

Within five years of Spain’s order, the Portuguese Edict of Expulsion was announced. By definition, all remaining Iberian Jews were illegal, forced to leave the Peninsula or convert to Catholicism. Some historians have suggested that Portugal's New Christians may not have initially faced persecution as boldly as their Spanish cousins. But it hardly mattered, as, for the next four centuries, Jews left for Western Europe and the New World, with few ever returning to their community and culture, to hold beliefs and keep rituals as did fellow Christians.

Protestant nations had begun to colonize the Caribbean Islands by the 17th century. These nations permitted Jews to reconvert to Judaism without persecution. The New World’s colonies were now a viable option for living. The colonial powers welcomed Jewish expertise in trading, shipping, and banking. When Portugal reoccupied the Dutch-held parts of Brazil in 1654, newly arriving Jews established themselves in sugar production throughout the Islands.

Jews who sailed to the New World were followed by the Church Inquisitors and so remained in peril in the New World as well. Many New World Conversos found creative means of survival, acting as brokers, traders, financiers, pilots, cartographers, and as makers and users of the astronomical tables and nautical instruments used for trade (and often piracy) against Spain.

There are reports of Jews who engaged in piracy to free the American and Island colonies from the Spanish—some acquiring a semblance of renown, as