

The Absorption of Outsiders: Gibraltarian and North Africans in London's Portuguese Jewish Community

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In June of 1822, Judah Aloof, a native of Gibraltar and dues-paying member of the Spanish and Portuguese synagogue, Congregation *Sa'ar ASamayim* in London, was blessed with the birth of a son.¹ To mark the occasion, the twenty-one-year old Aloof requested that the President of the congregation confer upon him the honor (*misva*) of opening the doors of the armoire that housed the Torah scroll, so that it could be retrieved and read at the reader's lectern.² The congregation's President, however, denied the request, directing the Secretary to inform Aloof that persons who "refused to pay their accounts" would be barred from receiving honorary functions.³

Aloof was a *yahid*, a status conferred only upon Jews solvent enough to pay at least one Great British Pound, annual dues that entitled them to participate in congregational ballots and enjoy ceremonial honors. In Portuguese Jewish congregations throughout the Atlantic world, the honor of being called to the Torah was highly coveted and a public marker of social status.⁴ Congregational affiliates who could not afford to pay the yearly levy were classified as

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1 Judah Aloof's place of birth is indicated in *Mocatta v Mercado*, February 21, 1824, The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNAUK), C 13/2186/27.

2 In Portuguese-inflected Hebrew, a synagogue honor is referred to as a *misva* (plural *misvot*) and the armoire as the *ehal*. Judah Aloof's birthdate of 1801 is recorded in Jewish tombstone inscriptions, *Genealogy and Family History*, <http://www.cemeteryscribes.com/getperson.php?personID=16803&tree=Cemeteries> (last accessed April 30, 2016).

3 Information pertaining to the excommunication case appears in *Minutes of Meetings of the Mahamad, 1822–1824*, London Metropolitan Archives, London, United Kingdom (LMA), LMA/4521/A/01/03/008, *passim*, and *Minutes of Meeting [sic] of the Mahamad, 1824–1826*, LMA/4521/A/01/03/009, *passim*.

4 See, for example, Arnold Wiznitzer, "The Merger Agreement and Regulations of Congregation Talmud Torah of Amsterdam (1638–39)," *Historia Judaica* 20 (1958): 109–132, 121–122.

“non-contributing members of the congregation” or simply as “congregators,” could not vote or receive synagogue distinctions, and were typically eligible for charitable aid.⁵ Withholding dues, as Aloof apparently did, could jeopardize *yahid* status. However, the President specified that if Aloof promised to pay, his word would suffice and he would be granted the ceremonial privilege.⁶

Unfortunately for Aloof, this exchange took place during formal prayer services, with the Secretary acting as a courier between the President and Aloof. The latter must have received the President’s pronouncements as a public affront, for he answered: “Certainly not,” and “I want no misva.”⁷ He also made it a point not to invite any officers of the congregation to his son’s ritual circumcision, held in his house, and refused to accept the leaders’ generous offer to lend him the religious accouterments from the synagogue customarily used in such ceremonies, such as candles and the chair reserved for the baby’s godfather.⁸

As the officers were discussing the conflict at a formal meeting, they learned that for several weeks Aloof and several other members (*yehidim*) and affiliates (“congregators”) of the congregation had been holding religious services in private homes, a violation of the congregation’s first bylaw, which prohibited worshippers from organizing formal prayer within a six-mile radius of the Synagogue.⁹ The officers seized on the opportunity. Aloof, along with several of his associates, newcomers hailing mainly from Gibraltar and North Africa, were excommunicated from the congregation.¹⁰

Scholars have argued that the excommunication crisis of 1822 was symptomatic of a fissure that developed between “Portuguese Jews”—longstanding members of the community, who had resided in Britain for generations and had largely acculturated to Anglo society—and “Berberiscos,” newcomers who hailed predominantly from North Africa. These scholars remark that “more

5 Minutes of Meetings of the Elders, 3 Tebet 5597 [11 December 1836], LMA, LMA/4521/A/01/04/006, 416–417 (for the terms “non contributing [sic] members” and “congregators”).

6 Minutes of Meetings of the Mahamad, June 7, 1822, LMA, LMA/4521/A/01/03/008, 215–216.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., 216.

9 Ibid., 215; Albert M. Hyamson, *A History of the Jews in England* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1908), 311–312 (for the year—1809—that the radius was raised from 4 to 6 miles); Ascarnot [sic] or Laws and Regulations of the Congregation of Spanish and Portuguese Jews called שער השמים, London, Revised and Amended 5610–1850, LMA, LMA/4521/A/01/01/008, vii (for the bylaw).

10 Moses Gaster, *History of the Ancient Synagogue of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews, the Cathedral Synagogue of the Jews in England, Situate in Bevis Marks* (London, n.p., 1901), 169 (for “North Africa and Gibraltar”); Minutes of the Meetings of the Mahamad, June 24, 1882, LMA, LMA/4521/A/01/03/008, 229 (for the excommunication).