Book Reviews

Barry L. Stiefel with David Rittenberg
Jewish Sanctuary in the Atlantic World: A Social and Architectural History,

Although *Jewish Sanctuary in the Atlantic World* is a very fine description of Atlantic Sephardic synagogue architecture during the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, is beautifully illustrated, summarizes the Ashkenazic impact on synagogue architecture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and includes an outstanding appendix that is both comprehensive and a significantly illustrated list and description of synagogue architecture on both sides of the Atlantic from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, the book is a less solid social history of the Atlantic World in the period.

This comprehensive architectural treatment shows that, following the late fifteenth- and early-sixteenth century Spanish and Portuguese expulsion, conversion, or murder of their Jewish populations, the Dutch, and later the English, were willing to provide a sanctuary for the Sephardic Jewish diaspora in Europe and in areas of the New World under their control. Synagogues were creatively established on both sides of the Atlantic, which relied on the European architectural forms employed in building, especially the Calvinistic Protestant Churches designed by Dutch and later English architects. Thus, Hendrick de Keyser and Jacob van Campen, among others, set the style of Dutch Baroque architecture that influenced both the styles of Amsterdam and New World synagogue architecture in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Inigo Jones and, after the Great London Fire of 1666, Christopher Wren, established the mode of Georgian church architecture that impacted both English Anglican and New World synagogue architecture, as the Dutch had done. As Stiefel points out, the Calvinists, with their emphasis on the sermonic, for example, enhanced the importance and centrality of the pulpit, and, in contrast to the Catholic and the Lutheran churches (based on the configuration of the Catholic Church), pulpits also became an increasingly important part of
synagogue architecture on both sides of the Atlantic. Thus, both the interior and exterior design of synagogues throughout the Sephardic diaspora reflected the Dutch and English architectural schools and continued to do so until, in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Ashkenazic Jews from eastern Europe became the dominant Jewish populations on both sides of the Atlantic and began modifying architectural forms of synagogue architecture.

Focusing on architectural style, this is an important and interesting story. Occasionally it is marred by such comments as “it is a most plausible inference” (27), “could have” (29), “may have manifested” (31), “there may have been” (35), “may not have been,” “might have been” (41), “could have been” (44), etc., which, while seeking to appear objective, do not lend to clarity or smooth reading. As indicated above, however, the largest problem with the book is its limitations as social history.

The Sephardic diaspora, following Jewish expulsion from Spain and later Portugal, became Europe’s largest trading diaspora during the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. It involved complex commercial, economic, and political relationships and the development of Jewish settlements on both sides of the Atlantic, including Latin America, the Caribbean, North America, and West Africa. Atlantic world history and the Sephardic settlement had an interesting history described in such works as the ground-breaking book, *Lost Tribes and Promised Lands: The Origins of American Racism* (Boston, 1978) by Ronald Sanders; Thomas Benjamin’s important work, *The Atlantic World: Europeans, Africans, Indians, and Their Shared History, 1400–1900* (Cambridge, 2009); *Atlantic Diaspora: Jews, Conversos, and Crypto-Jews in the Age of Mercantilism, 1500–1800* (Baltimore, 2009), a very fine collection of essays edited by Richard L. Kagan and Philip D. Morgan; Edward Kritzler’s well-written and exciting account, *Jewish Pirates of the Caribbean: How a Generation of Swashbuckling Jews Carved Out an Empire in the New World in their Quest for Treasure, Religious Freedom, and Revenge* (New York, 2008); and others. While the Stiefel book sees the Sephardic diaspora as made up of religious Jews seeking religious freedom in England, Holland, and the New World, this is far narrower than that of other authoritative sources, such as those above. Stiefel’s religious emphasis is not in keeping with such important sources as the Kagen and Morgan collection of essays, the Kritzler book, and others, which see the Sephardic diaspora as significantly economic (including slave trading with west Africa), establishing sugar plantations, seeking revenge against Spain and Portugal through piracy, forging political and economic alliances with the Dutch and the English against the Spanish and Portuguese, establishing complex and varied Jewish societies, struggling to maintain religion in often inhospitable environments, and also, but not exclusively, seeking religious freedom. Other sources far