

CONFERENCE PROCEEDING***“Liberty of Conscience”
and the Jews in the Dutch Republic***

Miriam Bodian, University of Texas at Austin

Presented at the “Was there a ‘Golden Age’ of Christian-Jewish Relations?”
Conference at Boston College, April 2010

Seventeenth-century Amsterdam has often been viewed as a rare beacon of light and tolerance in early modern Christian-Jewish relations. The monumental synagogue built by the Portuguese Jews in that city, dedicated in 1675 with great civic fanfare, is still an important tourist site and serves as a permanent symbol of the city’s long-term attitude of tolerance to Jews. Much attention has likewise been given to Rembrandt’s richly human treatment of his Jewish subjects, which is viewed as emblematic of a wider shift in attitudes in Dutch society.¹ These are clichés, of course, though like most clichés they are not without a foundation. The problem is that they simplify a complex reality and imply, misleadingly, that the Jews of seventeenth-century Amsterdam lived at effortless ease with their neighbors. That was neither the wish of the Jews themselves, nor the intention of the Christian authorities.

In this essay, I will deal with the issues as they affected the first population of Jews to settle in the Dutch Republic (primarily Amsterdam), namely the Portuguese Jews.² There is, I think, good justification for this. Ashkenazi Jews began to arrive in the Dutch metropolis only in the 1630s. They soon incorporated separately, dealt with the Dutch authorities separately, and, for cultural and socio-economic reasons, maintained a lower profile than the Portuguese Jews until the eighteenth century. During the “Dutch Golden Age” of the seventeenth century—the period I will treat—it was the Portuguese Jews, not the Ashkenazim, who engaged most intensely with their Christian environment.

Let me briefly describe the early, formative years of interaction between Christians and (Portuguese) Jews in Amsterdam, as a Jewish community took root and grew. The beginnings in the 1590s are quite obscure. We know that a small number of “New Christians” from Spain and Portugal—descendants of forcibly baptized Jews—came to Amsterdam in these years for mercantile reasons. Their arrival did not stir attention because, at least formally, they had the status of Iberian Catholics (although their Jewish background was no secret).³ They had apparently not yet organized confessionally even in a private way.

It is possible that they harbored the hope of organizing as a Jewish community. They were certainly aware of the fact that with the signing of the Treaty of Utrecht in 1579, the Dutch Republic

¹ For an impression of Rembrandt’s reputation in regard to the Jews see Susan Morgenstein and Ruth Levine, eds., *The Jews in the Age of Rembrandt* (Rockville, MD 1981); Michael Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt: Jews and the Christian Image in Seventeenth Century Amsterdam* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 2002); and Steven Nadler, *Rembrandt’s Jews* (Chicago 2003).

² The Low Countries had no significant Jewish settlement prior to the arrival of these émigrés.

³ See the remarks made by Hugo Grotius in 1598, in Miriam Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation* (Bloomington 1997), 180-81n. 21.

had become a haven for men and women fleeing religious persecution—Huguenots, Mennonites, and English dissidents, among others. Article 13 of the Treaty guaranteed that “each individual enjoys freedom of religion and no one is persecuted or questioned about his religion.”⁴ But this was more declaration than legislation, and in fact each province remained free to order its religious life as it chose.⁵

In the period when “Portuguese” began settling in Amsterdam, two decades after the treaty was signed, the issue of religious freedom was not at all settled. There was general agreement only on the narrower matter of private belief, or “conscience.” That is, it was universally accepted that a person might *privately* adhere to a creed that differed from that of the “public Church” (i.e., the Reformed Church). Freedom of worship, however—the right to build places of worship and to worship openly in them—was another matter. Many in Dutch ruling circles felt it was incumbent on Dutch non-Calvinists to conform outwardly, even to the point of attending Reformed services.⁶ At the same time, Dutch authorities in some places connived to allow dissidents and Catholics to practice in their own way more-or-less openly. This by no means implied an acceptance on the authorities’ part of a general principle of toleration. Once Jews appeared in significant numbers, the Dutch authorities were forced to consider whether a traditionally despised and non-Christian group could be integrated into the new republic. Consider the view adopted by the legal scholar Hugo Grotius in 1611. Grotius advocated not just freedom of conscience, but freedom of public worship—as long as that worship did not contradict the fundamentals of Christian belief. Accordingly, when Grotius elaborated his views on the status to be conferred on the Jews, in a draft of regulations for the Jews written between 1614 and 1619, he recommended granting Jews the right to practice Judaism only in the privacy of their homes.⁷ That is, he advocated an exceptional, specific restriction for the practice of Judaism.

As it turned out, this approach—which in light of practice elsewhere in Europe might have seemed natural—was *not* adopted by Dutch authorities. It is a matter of scholarly debate whether it was primarily practical considerations, or primarily a permissive outlook on religious difference, that led Dutch authorities to quietly allow the Jews to assume a status close to that of non-Calvinist Christians in Amsterdam. Undoubtedly, both practical and ideological factors played a role. The pragmatic and commercially astute regents of the Netherlands recognized that a community of “rejudaized” New Christians could provide key connections with the mercantile centers of their archenemy, Spain (to which Portugal was annexed at the time), without posing the threat of political subversion. Granting these Jews exceptional freedoms would ensure their continuing immigration to, and settlement in, Amsterdam. As for their outlook, the regents were not without negative ideas that set Jews apart from Christians of any persuasion. But they were largely unexposed to late medieval judeo-phobia (as was the Dutch public in general) and, moreover, they shared with a large segment of Dutch society a certain fascination with the descendants of the biblical Israelites.

⁴ E.H. Kossman and A.F. Mellink, *Texts Concerning the Revolt of the Netherlands* (Cambridge 1974), 169-70.

⁵ On the ambiguity of the Union of Utrecht, see Willem Frijhoff, “Religious Toleration in the United Provinces,” in R. Po-Chia Hsia and H.F.K. van Nierop, eds., *Calvinism and Religious Toleration in the Dutch Golden Age* (Cambridge 2002), 38-39. Benjamin Kaplan has examined the claims of some Dutch writers that freedom of conscience was rooted in Netherlands custom or character. But this was national myth-making. See Benjamin Kaplan, “Dutch Religious Toleration: Celebration and Revision,” in *Calvinism and Religious Toleration*, 10-16.

⁶ Jonathan Israel, “The Intellectual Debate about Toleration in the Dutch Republic,” in Berkens-Stevelinck, Israel, and Posthumus Meyjes, eds., *The Emergence of Tolerance in the Dutch Republic* (Leiden 1997), 8.

⁷ Hugo Grotius, *Remonstrantie nopen de ordre dije in landen van Hollandt ende Westvrieslandt dijen gestelt op de Joden*, ed. J. Meijer (Amsterdam 1949). This position on the Jews reflects a new policy, which I will discuss below. Since the Christianization of the Roman Empire, Jews had been granted the right to public worship in their synagogues, in any place where they were allowed to settle.

Early on, there was a misunderstanding that revealed a good deal about how Dutch authorities would deal with the Jews in practice. On Yom Kippur of 1603—by which time Amsterdam’s “Portuguese” were holding Jewish services in a private home, led by an Ashkenazi rabbi from Emden—the rabbi and his son were arrested on charges of receiving stolen goods and circumcising adults. The fact that such accusations had been made and had led to an arrest is not surprising. What is noteworthy is that the charge of circumcising adults (which the rabbi was certainly doing) was dropped, presumably once it was shown that the adults involved were all émigrés of Jewish origin, and not Dutch converts to Judaism. Both father and son were released and allowed to continue their activity, and we hear no more about the incident.⁸ A legend later circulated among the Amsterdam Jews about these events, indicating that the arrests excited great anxiety among members of the embryonic community, but that the outcome served to reassure them that their discreet Jewish worship was in fact tacitly accepted by the authorities.⁹ (It is certainly possible that some money changed hands during the resolution of this case, as it undoubtedly did at later junctures. Still, this would have been likely only if public passions were not inflamed.)¹⁰

The population of the Portuguese Jews of Amsterdam grew rapidly after the Twelve Years Truce was signed between Spain and the Netherlands in 1609, thus ensuring them unhampered trade with Iberian ports. The status of the community remained ambiguous and tentative. Yet there must have been further tacit agreements between the communal leaders and the authorities. Only this can explain how members of the community could have undertaken in 1612 to build a structure that would serve as a synagogue.

Inevitably, there was a public outcry. Particularly vocal was the Reformed preacher Abraham Coster, who had earlier written in his *History of the Jews* (Rotterdam 1608) that these “unclean people” sought to establish a public synagogue “in which they can perform their evil and foolish ceremonies and spew forth their gross blasphemies against Christ and his holy Gospels, as well as their curses against the Christians and Christian authorities.”¹¹ Only a few months after the contract to build the structure was signed, the city council of Amsterdam, faced with complaints, passed a resolution prohibiting anyone “of the Portuguese Nation” from living in the building which was then under construction, or from practicing in it the ceremonies of their religion, “on penalty of having the said house or building razed to the ground.”¹² Despite this, the building was completed and used as a synagogue. To pacify the clergy and maintain appearances, it was arranged that the building would be owned by a Christian, who would rent it, in turn, to the Jews.¹³ (This convenient fiction reflects a pattern that was to repeat itself many times, whereby hostile action initiated by members of the Reformed clergy was thwarted discreetly by the magistrates.) While, then technically, the Jews enjoyed “liberty of conscience” only in its most limited sense (i.e., the freedom to follow one’s creed in private), they were in fact being permitted to gather for services in a building widely recognized as a synagogue.

⁸ See Jacob Zwarts, “De eerste rabbijnen en synagogen van Amsterdam naar archivalische bronnen,” *Bijdragen en Mededelingen van het Genootschap voor de Joodsche Wetenschap in Nederland* 4 (1928), 168ff.; Uri ben Aron Halevi, *Narração da Vinda dos Judeus espanôes a Amsterdam* (Amsterdam 1711), 4-5.

⁹ See Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation*, 20-22.

¹⁰ See Christine Kooi, “Paying Off the Sheriff: Strategies of Catholic Toleration in Golden Age Holland,” *Calvinism and Religious Toleration*, 87-93.

¹¹ Abraham Coster, *Historie der Joden...uyt verscheyde autheuren vergadert* (Rotterdam 1608), unpaginated preface.

¹² The city council’s decision has been published by A.M. Vaz Dias, “Een verzoek om de Joden in Amsterdam een bepaalde woonplats aan te wijzen,” *Jaarboek van het genootschap Amstelodamum* 35 (1938), 185n.1.

¹³ Zwarts, “De eerste rabbijnen,” 209-16 and Appendices 260-64; E.M. Koen, “War en voor vie werd de synagoge van 1612 gebouwd?” *Maandblad Amstelodamum* 57 (1970), 209-12; idem, “Nicolaes van Campen als huiseigenaar van de Portugees-Israëlitische synagoge,” *Maandblad Amstelodamum* 58 (1971).

Such an arrangement was not novel, nor was it confined to synagogues. The fiction adopted for the 1612 synagogue reflected new notions of “public” and “private” worship that grew out of Reformation inter-confessional tensions—tensions that had nothing to do initially with Jews. It is not generally known that Catholics were not allowed to worship openly in Amsterdam, so famous for its toleration, until 1795. Throughout the northern Netherlands, Catholics worshipped in *schuilkerken*, or “secret churches.” These structures were camouflaged by being built in the interior of residential buildings, and congregants were required to enter a side or back door. Yet the existence of these churches was public knowledge, fueling protests by neighbors and clerics. Magistrates, however, regularly permitted them.

Such places of worship could be found in France, the German lands, Austria, and Switzerland. Benjamin Kaplan has explained this somewhat puzzling phenomenon as a “cultural fiction” that served to reduce the provocative effect of visual symbols of religious dissent: “By containing religious dissent within spaces demarcated as private,” he writes, “schuilkerken...preserved the monopoly of a community’s official church in the public sphere.”¹⁴ The fact that *all* native non-Calvinists were required to abide by this fiction made its imposition on the Jews of Amsterdam inherently different from the imposition of “Jewry law” elsewhere in Europe.

By 1614, when the Portuguese Jews of Amsterdam had established a cemetery and when some of them (there were two congregations) worshipped in a building constructed to be a synagogue, the need for written regulations concerning their status was no doubt evident. In 1616, the burgomasters of Amsterdam issued a set of regulations—the first official Dutch document that acknowledged dealing with persons of the *Joodsche Natie* (Jewish “nation”). It was far from comprehensive. It was, in fact, quite a brief text that primarily addressed a few core anxieties about socio-religious boundaries. The Jews, it stipulated, were “not to speak or write anything (and to ensure that nothing be spoken or written) that may, in any way, tend to the disparagement of our Christian religion; not to attempt to seduce any Christian person away from our Christian religion or to circumcise one; and not to have any carnal relations, whether in or out of wedlock, with Christian women or girls, not even those of ill repute.”¹⁵ These restrictions (particularly the final one) were by no means strictly enforced. More importantly, though, was what was missing from them. These regulations called for no residential or economic restrictions, and no special taxes on Jews. And they said nothing about the autonomous powers of the Jewish communal authorities, or the Jews’ right to public worship. This provided considerable flexibility for the Jews to establish themselves and negotiate boundaries with Dutch authorities in an informal, ongoing way. When the governing body of the province of Holland, the States of Holland, decided in 1619 to leave the status of the Jews in the hands of the municipalities, these meager 1616 municipal regulations became the only Dutch regulations specifically pertaining to the Jews of Amsterdam—indeed the only ones ever to be issued.¹⁶

The laissez-faire attitude of the Dutch authorities stood in stark contrast to that of authorities elsewhere in early modern Europe, who commonly issued lengthy, restrictive, and often humiliating regulations for Jews. In countless ways large and small, the Portuguese Jews of Amsterdam enjoyed an environment that was unusually free of overt hostility. Despite the occasional

¹⁴ Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 2007), 176. On such “clandestine” places of worship see *ibid.*, 172-197.

¹⁵ Hermanus Noordkerk, *Handvesten ofte Privilegien ende Octroyen...der Stad Amstelredam* (Amsterdam 1748), 2: 472.

¹⁶ *Resolutiën van de Heeren Staten van Hollandt ende West-Vrieslandt...*(n.d., n.p., Gemeentelijke Archief, Amsterdam, Arch. 5038, No. 52), 283, 287.

inflammatory rhetoric of angry Reformed clergy, the Dutch did not regard the Jews as a dangerous, polluting presence. I do not know of a single image by a Dutch engraver or painter that represents the Jews as demonic and bestial, in the manner that had become so common in the German states.

But this should not obscure the fact that the Amsterdam Jews were a vulnerable minority. As I have already noted, they encountered opposition from time to time, especially from the Reformed clergy. They were often able to thwart such hostility by turning to the burgomasters and magistrates who, in the interests of maintaining civil peace and promoting prosperity, protected basic Jewish interests. However, the Dutch authorities could not entirely ignore accusations against the Jews made by the Reformed clergy. The *predikanten* represented the public Church and were a powerful force in Dutch society. The authorities' concern was to balance the needs of a growing Jewish community whose presence was desirable with the demands of a clergy clamoring to reign in the "godless Jews." The tensions reflected the more general paradox of "a confessionally pluralistic society with an official intolerant Calvinist Church."¹⁷

Power relations shifted precipitously in the summer of 1618, as hard-line Calvinists (Counter-Remonstrants) defeated the "moderates" (Remonstrants) and began taking measures to crush the latter. For a few years the hard-liners suppressed the moderates, by means of arrests, sentences of exile, and the removal of unsympathetic preachers from their pulpits. There was talk of expelling the Jews, which must have aroused considerable anxiety among the "Portuguese," but no concrete measures were taken.

By 1625, however, the Remonstrant camp had regained enough power to challenge the Counter-Remonstrant leaders. There ensued the first energetic public debate in the Netherlands concerning freedom of conscience—a debate in the late 1620s and early 1630s in which both sides sought to formulate theoretical principles. A leading Counter-Remonstrant, Henricus Arnoldi, took the narrow view that the republic guaranteed only a private, personal freedom, that the gathering of non-Calvinists for services took place not on the basis of any right but only as a consequence of connivance, and that because the Jews constituted a danger to society (since they "insult the name of Christ"), they should not be allowed to settle. The most radical thinker on the other side, Simon Episcopius, defended freedom of conscience in a much broader sense, defining this concept to include the right of all churches to public practice, and, notably, the right of all individuals to freedom from religious coercion.

By 1631, the tide had turned again, with Remonstrants wielding the upper hand, ushering in a period of freer public worship for Lutherans and Remonstrants (at least in Amsterdam), and greater security among Catholics (who were not, as mentioned above, officially permitted to worship publicly until 1795, ostensibly for political reasons). In 1639, the three existing Portuguese-Jewish congregations merged and the synagogue was enlarged. Although the Reformed clergy complained about the expansion, no action was taken. Indeed, no explicit legal permission was ever granted to the Jews to worship publicly, but they were obviously being allowed to do just that. Their growing numbers, economic power, and increasing rootedness made it more and more difficult to remember the uncertainty and insecurity of the early years of settlement. By 1675, when the community dedicated the imposing synagogue that stands today, a new generation of communal leaders had come of age. Their confidence is reflected in the famous etching of the interior of the new synagogue by Romeyn de Hooghe, commissioned by the community and embellished with the inscription, "*Libertas conscientia incrementum republicae*"—"Liberty of conscience makes the republic thrive." It should be remembered, however, that the celebration

¹⁷ The phrase is used by Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia, *Calvinism and Religious Toleration*, 2.

of freedom of conscience in the etching has nothing to do with the elimination of religious discipline (the exercise of which was taken for granted by all but a few). It was about the freedom of multiple established confessions to co-exist in a single city.

Only with the increasing diffusion of anti-trinitarian ideas and philosophical criticism of religious traditions in the second half of the seventeenth century did the issue of individual intellectual and religious freedom become a serious topic of public debate. But seventeenth-century secular Dutch authorities, under pressure from the Reformed clergy, remained firm in rejecting arguments for individual autonomy and in silencing perceived challenges to basic Christian beliefs. They did not hesitate to ban books they deemed offensive or subversive, and occasionally imprisoned their authors. The public debate on individual conscience remained a purely theoretical one.¹⁸

Thus far, I have tried to sketch the trajectory of relations between the Dutch authorities and the Portuguese Jews in Amsterdam in the seventeenth century. I'd like to look more closely now at how the interests and aims of these Jews both differed from and converged with the interests and aims of the Dutch regents.

Unfortunately, we know little about the opinions of the "Men of the Nation" who did not belong to the economic or intellectual elite. I will focus (as usual, I'm afraid) on the men who assumed the task of governing or educating the community. The primary aim of these men was not, as it was for the magistrates, maintaining civic peace in the city and in the republic. It was building a viable Portuguese-Jewish community for a growing population of ex-conversos. By 1602, this could mean only one thing: building a *Jewish* community.¹⁹ In contrast to the situation in most fledgling Jewish communities, the task of ensuring that the new community would be recognized as a normative Jewish community was a challenge in itself. Indeed, achieving this would require an ambitious program of "rejudaization"—that is, a program to introduce and establish rabbinic norms among men and women who had been cut off from the Jewish world for generations, who had learned to live as Catholics, and who had become culturally Iberian.

The communal leadership accordingly embarked on an intense internal program of indoctrination and education as émigrés continued arriving from the Iberian Peninsula. Many of the émigrés wanted to take part in this collective transformation, at least in the abstract. But most had little idea how far their conception of the Law of Moses (as Iberian crypto-Jews referred to their ancestral tradition) had diverged from rabbinic practice and belief. Others had become religiously indifferent as a result of the Iberian experience.

Achieving a degree of uniformity of practice meant, for communal leaders and rabbis (who were imported from elsewhere in the early years), wielding both the carrot and the stick. Iberian patterns of thinking and behavior were mobilized in order to inculcate rabbinic ones. The rhetoric of "restoration" was adopted to define the act of individual "return" as part of a larger national drama. Persuasion was used to tease those who remained at the margins of the community fully into the community. Boundaries were drawn, and punishments were meted out to those who

¹⁸ My account of the course of events roughly follows Israel, "Intellectual Debate," 21-36.

¹⁹ An early modern community could not exist without a reasonably clear religious identity, and there was no other religious identity around which the Portuguese ex-conversos could gain a consensus to organize themselves except a Jewish one. This gave the upper hand to activists in the community who *wanted* to revert to Judaism. If the community was to survive, it needed to be recognized as Jewish by the Dutch authorities as well as by the wider Jewish world – which meant they had little choice but to establish their religious life on a halakhic basis. Circumstances, then, were at least as important a factor in deciding the character of the community as common will.

violated the boundaries—by traveling on business to Spain or Portugal, say, or by challenging a decision of the communal leaders (the *parnasim*, who together formed the *Mahamad*). Certain books were censored for erotic or heterodox content, while others were written to instruct community members on ritual practice.²⁰

There are ways in which this enterprise mirrored certain measures that became widespread in Europe at this time. Scholars have given this larger European phenomenon the awkward name of “confessionalization.” Simply put, confessionalization meant drawing better-defined theological and communal boundaries and trying to achieve uniformity of belief within a given Church.²¹ It is much of what the Mahamad was attempting to do. Indeed, as a disciplining body, the Mahamad bore a resemblance to the Reformed church council (*Kerkeraad*), which sought to maintain public morality and good order through such measures as banning liquor and closing shops on Sundays. Many of the matters dealt with by the Mahamad were of purely internal interest, but certain matters were known to be of interest to the Dutch authorities as well. It was widely believed (not entirely without reason) that the Portuguese Jews numbered among them “impious people who should not be tolerated in any good republic,” to use Hugo Grotius’s phrase—that is, religious skeptics.²² Dutch anxieties about irreligion among the “Portuguese” no doubt strengthened the hand of the Mahamad in the exercise of its disciplinary authority.²³

The Mahamad was thus in many respects a body that fit well into the emerging structures of Dutch society. But while the *parnasim* recognized the importance of the Dutch government in allowing them to exercise their powers, they did not understand their powers to be derived from, or legitimized by, the Dutch government. Like Jewish communities elsewhere, the Portuguese Jews regarded the Mahamad’s powers as deriving from Jewish law and, ultimately, from the Sinaitic covenant. It was as guardians of a traditional Jewish community that the *parnasim* were seen as empowered to impose the *herem* (ban) that effectively ostracized a rebellious member of the community. I will not belabor the well-known episodes of Uriel da Costa, Juan de Prado, and Baruch Spinoza, all of whom were put under the harshest form of the ban. If such a ban was partly a response to the expectations of the authorities, the Mahamad imposed it in hallowed Jewish tradition, invoking language and ritual that were aimed at the hearts and minds of community members.

Uriel da Costa, for his part, may have felt that the communal leaders were the worst of tyrants; but although the *parnasim* were clearly resented by some community members, Da Costa’s view was highly atypical. The notion of individual religious autonomy was largely alien to the collectively-oriented and strongly patriarchal world of the Portuguese Jews. A person unfamiliar with the seventeenth century world might be prompted to ask how these Jews could have sanctioned religious discipline in their own community after their experience of the Inquisition. The same question could have been asked of the Dutch *predikanten*, for whom the Inquisition was also a familiar part of history. But the prevailing perspective of Dutch Calvinists and ex-conversos alike was decidedly pre-Enlightenment in this period. For the most part, Calvinists and Jews regarded

²⁰ On the enterprise of “rejudaization,” see Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation*, 96-131.

²¹ I am using the term “confessionalization” in its primarily religious sense. On the confusion in the use of this term, see Benjamin Kaplan, *Divided By Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA 2007), 369n.11, and see the literature on this topic in *ibid.*, 393.

²² Jacob Meijer, “Hugo Grotius’ *Remonstrantie*,” *Jewish Social Studies* 17 (1955), 429.

²³ For a detailed discussion of the Mahamad’s disciplinary actions, see Daniel Swetschinski, *Reluctant Cosmopolitans: The Portuguese Jews of Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam* (London 2000), 225-277. See also Yosef Kaplan, “The Travels of Portuguese Jews from Amsterdam to the ‘Lands of Idolatry,’” in *idem*, ed., *Jews and Conversos: Studies in Society and the Inquisition* (Jerusalem 1985), 197-224.

the Holy Office as an odious institution because it burned decent, pious men and women at the stake. It was altogether another thing—a necessary step taken with all due caution—to remove from one’s own midst radical skeptics who scorned the very beliefs for which such pious men and women died.

It follows that for the Portuguese Jews, as for many Dutch Calvinists, “freedom of conscience” was not an ideal. It had great benefits for dissident Christians and for Dutch society as a whole. But its benefits for Jews were indirect. Historically, Jews in Latin Christendom had been allowed to worship publicly as Jews wherever they were allowed to settle, and this remained true even amid the trials and tribulations of the late medieval period. So while it was true that no one prevented the Jews of Amsterdam from practicing Judaism, neither did anyone in Prague, Livorno, Constantinople, or any other place where Jews were allowed to reside. The freedom that truly distinguished the Jews of Amsterdam—which they seem to have been unable to articulate—was not freedom of conscience, but freedom from the special status of the medieval Jew.

To illustrate, I’d like to look at an early Hebrew text from Amsterdam that touches on the nature of Dutch-Jewish coexistence. It is found in a rabbinic query by an early rabbi of the Portuguese-Jewish community of Amsterdam, sent to a colleague in Salonica in 1616. The rabbi opened with the following statement:

Today a tranquil and secure people dwells in Amsterdam, and the officials of the city have sought to expand the settlement and to establish laws concerning it. Among these [laws] they have allowed every man to believe in divine matters as he chooses, and each lives according to his faith, as long as he does not go about the markets and streets displaying his opposition to the faith of the residents of the city. And since “this city is near to flee to” [Gen. 19:20], conversos of our time, great in number and prominence, have gone there and have entered under the wings of the Divine Presence.²⁴

The exuberant sense of novelty the author expressed in this passage could not have been stirred by the simple fact that the government permitted the practice of Judaism. As noted, there was nothing novel about governments doing this. The author was most likely Joseph Pardo, who grew up in Salonica and lived for a time in the Venetian ghetto—both places where Jews lived in autonomous communities and freely practiced Judaism.

The difference had to do with a departure from the classic mechanism for permitting Jews to settle among non-Jews in medieval and early modern times. This mechanism was the granting of a privilege—literally a “private law” issued for the Jews as a *group*. In the medieval period, this privilege invariably included special restrictions as well as special taxes. It was granted for pragmatic reasons, and could be (and often was) revoked, or not renewed. It offered limited legal protection based on time-honored custom, but did not inhibit Christian governments from using coercion to convert Jews, harass them, or expel them.

In contrast, the status of the Jews in Amsterdam, after the initial years, came to resemble that which had been worked out for non-Calvinists—about whom the only issue had been whether they should be allowed to worship publicly. The solution to this problem—namely, requiring non-Calvinists to worship in churches that looked like private homes—may have seemed like a grievous form of discrimination to Catholics and Lutherans. But for most Portuguese Jews, this restriction and a few other restrictions particular to their community were beside the point. They experienced exceptional freedom because they were not bound by a privilege enumerating a

²⁴ Abraham ben Yosef Halevi, *Sefer ein mishpat* (Salonica 1896/97), No. 45.

host of prohibitions unique to them as Jews. The author of the passage quoted above makes clear that the only significant restriction on Jews *or anyone else* in Amsterdam is that they must keep their religious beliefs private, if they are not Calvinists; otherwise, they can go about the markets and streets as they please. The status of the Amsterdam Jews as essentially just another dissenting religious group (with exceptions, as noted, in a few matters) constituted a significant step toward the normalization of the legal status of European Jews, one that was eventually achieved with Emancipation.

There is an emotional excitement in the passage quoted above that seems connected to the *normality* a Jew could feel walking along the canals of Amsterdam. There is no easy way to document the atmosphere of casual acceptance of religious difference that observers of seventeenth-century Dutch society noted. Willem Frijhoff has described it with the phrase “the ecumenicity of everyday life.”²⁵ For whatever reasons, this “ecumenicity,” this neighborliness toward Catholics, Collegiants, Anabaptists, and so on, expanded to include, in a significant way, the classic outsider in European life. It was a remarkable moment. And the Portuguese Jews, who had experienced religious repression and coercion in its most extreme early modern European form, must have relished it deeply.

²⁵ See Willem Frijhoff, “Le seuil de tolérance en Hollande au XVIIe siècle,” in *Homo religiosus: Autour de Jean Delumeau* (Paris 1997), 650-7.