Rembrandt's Other Jews: The Amsterdam Ashkenazim in the Seventeenth Century

BART WALLET

ABSTRACT

Critical examination of some two hundred notarial deeds relating to the Amsterdam Ashkenazim offers new insights into the social and cultural history of this community in Rembrandt's age. These sources, which are often very detailed and descriptive, give voice to the Ashkenazim themselves. The entangled processes of establishing Portuguese Jewish and Ashkenazi communities led to clearly demarcated communal borders, borders that were rendered porous, however, in everyday social interactions. Moreover, over the course of the century the Ashkenazi community's social profile diversified, as a vibrant middle and upper class was constituted that connected to translocal Ashkenazi networks. As such, it was a fully diasporic community, simultaneously located in the local and in the translocal spheres.

KEYWORDS

Ashkenazim, translocal networks, social borders, diaspora, Amsterdam

30
Rembrandt, *Four Men Standing, Wearing Hats*, in 1732 inventories as *Een Soldaetje bij 3 Smousen* (A Soldier with Three "Smousen"—an insulting word for Jews), ca. 1650
Black chalk, framing lines in black ink over brown ink, 15.3 × 10.3 cm

Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum (RP-T-1930-55; gift of C. Hofstede de Groot, The Hague)

Knotter, Mirjam and Gary Schwartz (eds.), *Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes: The Artist's Meaning to Jews from His Time to Ours*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2024
DOI 10.5117/9789463728188_WALLET

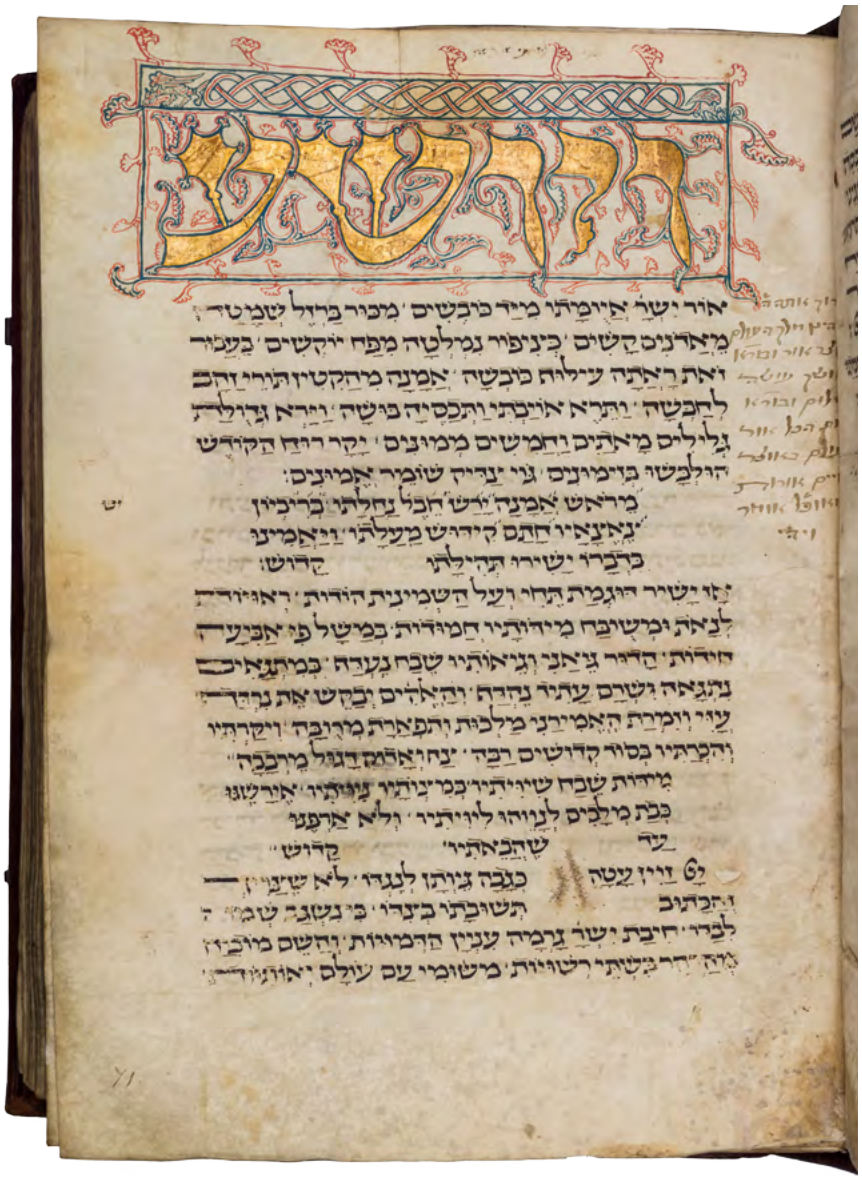
31
The Torah scroll of Rabbi Moses Uri ben Joseph Ha-Levi, ca. 1400
Ink on parchment on wooden scrollers, 119 × 28 × 13 cm

Amsterdam, Portuguese Israelite Community (T57)

When in 1631 Rembrandt settled in the vibrant eastern neighborhood of Amsterdam on and around the Sint Antoniesbreestraat, he found himself in a truly cosmopolitan environment.[1] Many different languages could be heard in the streets, spoken by people hailing from different parts of the world and adhering to a variety of religions. Among these neighbors, Rembrandt encountered Jews. Most belonged to a group known as Sephardim or Portuguese Jews, the name referring to the Iberian Peninsula from which they had been driven in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

While the Portuguese Jews, who numbered about a thousand at the time, have attracted a lot of attention in Rembrandt scholarship and Jewish historical studies alike, it was not the only Jewish community in Rembrandt's Amsterdam. Not long after the Portuguese started their merchant community in Amsterdam, Jewish immigrants from the east, known as Ashkenazim, settled there as well. Among the first was the famous Uri Ha-Levi family from Emden, which plays an important role in the founding myth of the Sephardic community; they are portrayed as the co-religionists who initiated the New Christians, who had been living as Catholics, into religious Jewish life. Two material reminders of their role are the medieval Torah scroll and the Machzor (prayerbook for the Jewish High Holidays) which the rabbi took with him to Amsterdam (figs. 31 and 32). The rabbi left the Torah scroll to the Sephardi congregation upon his return to Emden; the machzor was donated to the Ashkenazi congregation in 1669 by his grandson, the printer known as Uri Fayvesh (Phoebus) ben Aron Ha-Levi.

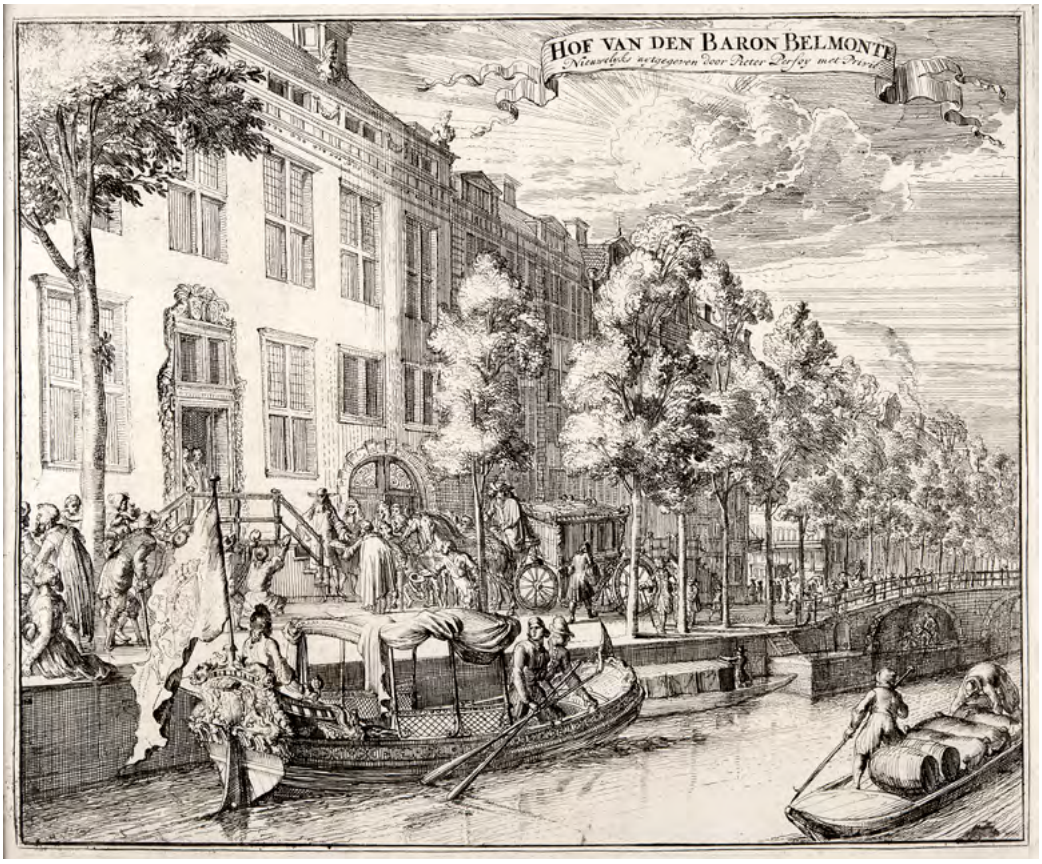
These newcomers were part of a much larger pattern of migration to Amsterdam from the Germanic and Central European lands, including a considerable Lutheran



32
The Amsterdam Machzor. Written in the surroundings of Cologne ca. 1250
Manuscript, ink and watercolor on parchment, 51.7 × 13.0 cm

(M014777; Amsterdam, Jewish Museum, and Cologne, Landschaftsverband Rheinland. Acquired with the support in the Netherlands of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science; BankGiro Loterij, Mondriaan Fund; and the René & Susanne Braginsky Foundation; and in Germany of the Kulturstiftung der Länder, Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung, C.L. Grosspeter Stiftung, Kulturförderung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, Rheinischer Sparkassen- und Giroverband, Sparkasse Köln-Bonn and Kreissparkasse Köln)
Photo: Ardon Bar-Hama

minority comparable in size to the Jewish communities. Ashkenazim were pushed out of the Holy Roman Empire by ongoing wars and economic conditions, which limited the possibilities for Jews to settle and start families. Amsterdam, on the other hand, was a bustling metropolis, in need of a cheap labor force. The earliest Ashkenazim in the city hailed from places such as Frankfurt am Main, Kassel, Worms, Emden, Hanau, Metz, Charleville and Prague.[2] Most of them were rather poor, working as servants in Sephardi households, as kosher butchers for the Portuguese, in petty trade with the Germanic countries and as peddlers and beggars (fig. 33). Ashkenazim living in Rembrandt's vicinity included the blanket maker Abraham Benedictus from Hagenau and his wife Judith Josephs; the kosher butcher Jacob Sampson and his wife Aeltie Moses van Worms; and the tobacco spinner Eleaser Swaeb and his wife Judick, who were caught stealing tobacco from Rembrandt's cellar, which he rented to some Jewish tobacco dealers (see Knotter, p. 51).[3]



33
Romeyn de Hooghe, *Hof van den Baron Belmonte*, published by Pieter Persoy, Amsterdam ca. 1693-95. Detail showing Baron Manuel de Belmonte (Isaac Nunes) giving alms to the poor in front of his mansion on the Herengracht
Engraving, 25.2 × 30.8 cm

Amsterdam, Jewish Museum (M007051; Jaap van Velzen Collection)

Although there are no known portraits by Rembrandt of individual Ashkenazim, they were just as much part of his cultural imagination as the Portuguese Jews. I would therefore like to call them "Rembrandt's Other Jews." In this essay I aim to bring to light the dynamics of Amsterdam's second Jewish community, which within a century would become the largest in all of Europe.

The process by which this second Jewish community was founded took several decades, in constant interplay with the earlier established Portuguese community and with the municipal authorities. In the course of the century, I will argue, the Amsterdam Ashkenazi community developed a profile of its own, deeply interwoven with the social fabric of the metropolis.[4] Scholarship on the seventeenth-century Amsterdam Ashkenazim is scarce, with pre-war amateur historians, mainly David Mozes Sluys and Abraham Mordechai Vaz Dias, still serving as the main points of reference.[5] It is worth noting that these scholars had access to Ashkenazi community archives that were lost in the Second World War. Scholars of the Portuguese community, such as Yosef Kaplan, Daniel Swetschinski and Miriam Bodian, have analyzed how Ashkenazim were perceived from within the Sephardic community.[6] Analysis of the complex ways in which Rembrandt was and was not related to the city's Jews is offered in Steven Nadler's riveting book *Rembrandt's Jews*, as well as in the exhibition catalogue *The "Jewish" Rembrandt: The Myth Unravelled*.[7]

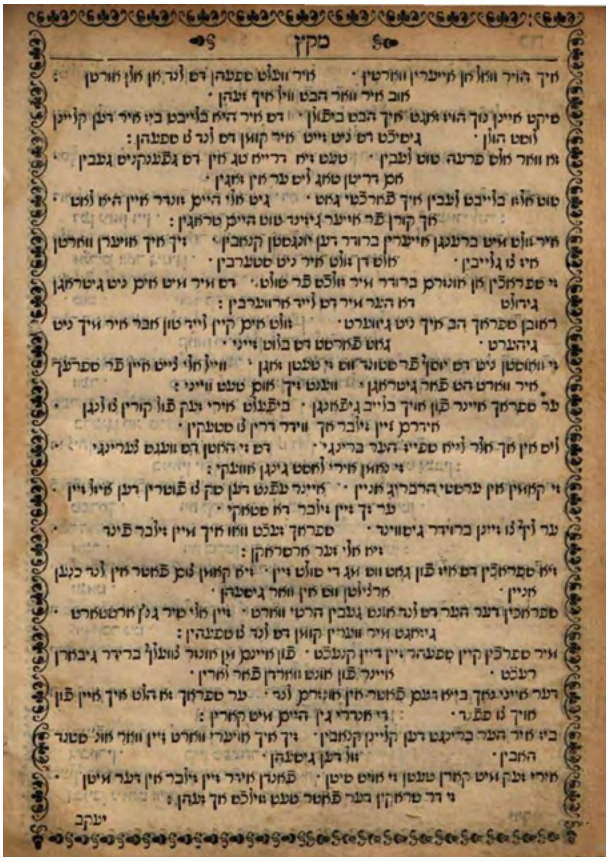
BORDER-MAKING

The first half of the seventeenth century was a formative period for both the Sephardi and Ashkenazi communities.[8] In heavily intertwined processes they defined their identities and negotiated their mutual relations. This process was conditioned by asymmetrical power relations in which the Portuguese community had the upper hand. In order to grasp what happened to the Ashkenazim we have to start briefly with the Portuguese. Theirs was a community composed for a large part of "New Jews," who in a climate of religious mobility had decided to adopt the religion of their ancestors. They became Jews, but were well aware of a certain equivocality in their identity.

The two elements that played the largest role in defining their identity were ethnicity and religion.[9] Ethnicity mattered most, since they cherished their Iberian heritage and kept in contact with family members across the globe. Most were not refugees in the proper sense of the word, but first and foremost members of a diasporic community united by links with their country and culture of origin.[10] Ethnic solidarity was expressed by using the term Nação (nation), which was supposed to comprise all descendants of the Jews expelled from Spain in 1492, wherever they lived and irrespective of their present religion.

Next to ethnicity, religion was key to their identity. The Sephardim were Jews by choice—at least, the dedicated core of the community was. This is important to note, since many Portuguese immigrants hesitated to make a choice, preferring to keep their options open. Religion and ethnicity did not always coincide. Part of the Nação was Jewish, but another part was Catholic, and some were even Protestant. There was, moreover, one more problem: in cities such as Amsterdam, Venice and Hamburg, the New Jews also encountered "old Jews" with different ethnicities, among them Italian Jews, Tudescos from Germany and Polacos from Poland. These "old Jews" fostered a culture of Jewish learning, embedded in firm Jewish religious identities. For Sephardim seeking to define the newly formed borders with New Christian family members on the Iberian Peninsula, in the New World and in various port cities, coming to terms with Amsterdam Jews of different backgrounds was an additional challenge, and a complex one.

One of the questions that needed to be answered was what status to accord to the Ashkenazim. As adherents to and scholars of the Jewish faith, they stood immeasurably higher than most Sephardim. Socially, however, they did not come close to the cosmopolitan Portuguese, nor could they ever become part of the Nação. The early modern period offered several models for the structure of Jewish communities.[11] First came the Levantine Model, which was adopted in Venice, Salonica, Constantinople and other, mainly Mediterranean cities. Here, the Jewish communities that were established preserved the practices and kinship relations of a group's region of origin. This gave rise to myriad synagogues and communities, rooted in Hungary, Germany and Poland as well as the homelands of the Sephardim. The Levantine Model was followed by the Colonial Model, with a distinctly different strategy. In this paradigm the first Jews to arrive in a new location established the modes and customs (*nusach* and *minhag*) for the community, to which later arrivals had to conform. What this amounted to, in the Dutch and

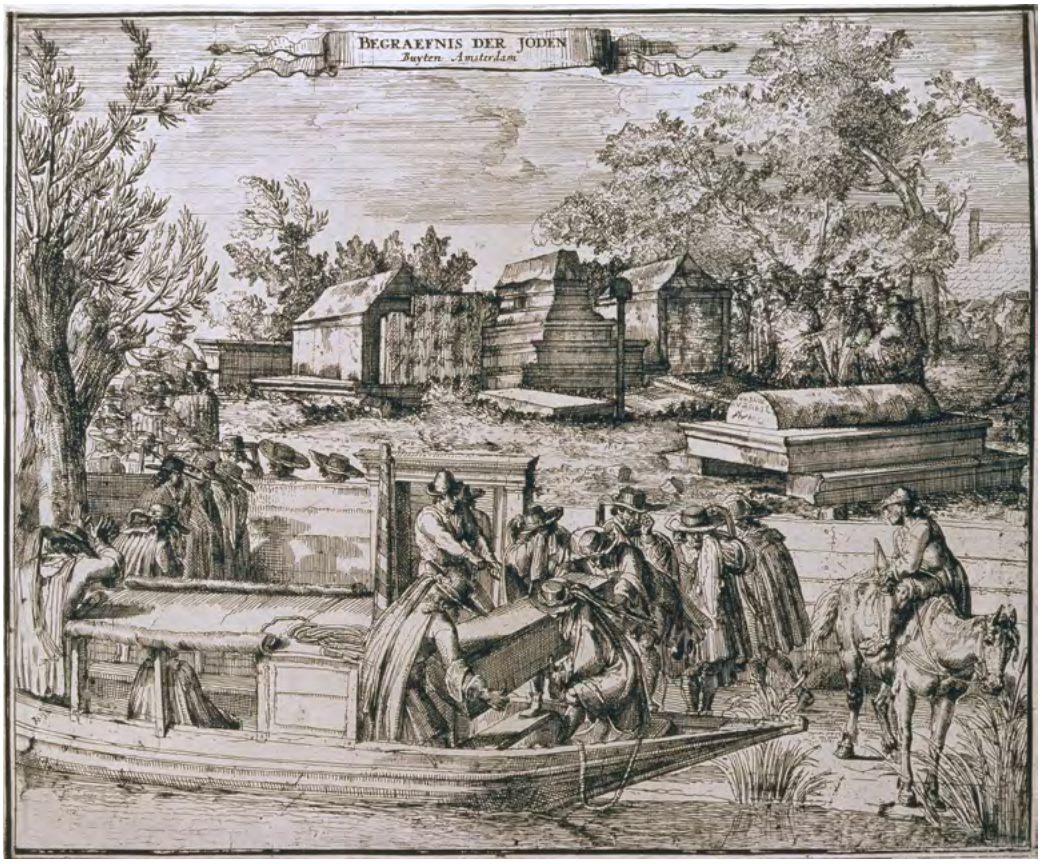


34
David ben Menachem Hacohen, title page of *Sefer Mizmor-le-Todah* (*Seyfer mizmer le-toudeh*), printed by Elijahu Aboab, Amsterdam 1644

Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Library (OTM: ROK A-1378)

British Americas, was that new Jewish communities (with the exception of Suriname) were Sephardi. Until the first half of the nineteenth century most Jewish communities in the Americas were Sephardi, although a significant part of the membership was ethnically Ashkenazi.

Amsterdam followed what can be called the Western European Model, a less fragmented variant of the Levantine Model. Two large Jewish communities came into being, ethnic in nature but distinguished by slightly different codes of religious law (*Halakhah*) and ritual practice (*nusach*). This process took several decades, a period during which other, larger developments in the Jewish world were taking place. The printing revolution resulted in the rapid spread of halakhic codices and prayer books throughout Europe. While this furthered cultural transfer between Sephardi and Ashkenazi domains, it also led to new border-making. The huge success of Yosef Karo's *Shulchan Aruch* (1565), a predominantly Sephardi codification of Halakhah, mobilized an Ashkenazi reaction, as Joseph Davis has demonstrated. Rabbi Moses Isserles wrote glosses to the *Shulchan Aruch*, titled the *Mappa* (1571), commenting on all instances where Ashkenazi codification differed from Sephardi.[12] This consolidation of the halakhic borders between both major traditions intersected with the negotiation of social and communal differences between various types of Jews in Amsterdam. Cross-border collaboration remained possible, sometimes with unexpected consequences: the oldest known book printed in Yiddish in Amsterdam came from the printing press of the Sephardi Elijahu Aboab (fig. 34).



35
Romeyn de Hooghe, *Begraefnis der Joden buyten Amsterdam* (Funeral of the Jews outside Amsterdam; the Sephardi cemetery Beth Haim in Ouderkerk aan de Amstel), ca. 1680
Etching, 23.5 × 28.5 cm

Amsterdam, Jewish Museum (M001104)

Initially, Amsterdam housed three different Sephardi communities, which opened their doors to some non-Sephardi Jews without offering them membership. They occupied positions in the margins, such as serving in the kashrut sector. This form of integration in the Sephardi infrastructure extended to permission for burial at the prestigious Sephardi cemetery in Ouderkerk aan de Amstel, albeit in a separate section (fig. 35).[13] It cannot be said, however, that integration was a guiding principle in itself. As the three Portuguese communities went into a process of unification, resulting in one Sephardi community, the Ashkenazim were being pushed out. It is therefore no coincidence that 1639 saw the founding both of a unified Sephardi community and a distinct Ashkenazi one.

The first recorded Ashkenazi services were held in Anshel Rood's house for the New Year holiday, Rosh Hashanah, in the year 1635. The Torah scrolls were borrowed from Sephardim. In quick steps, the congregants scaled up. The following year they rented from the Sephardim a large building for synagogue services. In 1639, when an autonomous Ashkenazi community came into being, it numbered some five hundred people. Physical separation from the Sephardim took longer than the establishment of corporate structures. Only in 1642, after significant pressure from the Portuguese, did the Ashkenazim open their own cemetery, in Muiderberg, about the same distance to the east of Amsterdam as Ouderkerk lay to the south. Moving from the synagogue rented from the Sephardim to a new synagogue of their own, on the Houtgracht, was not

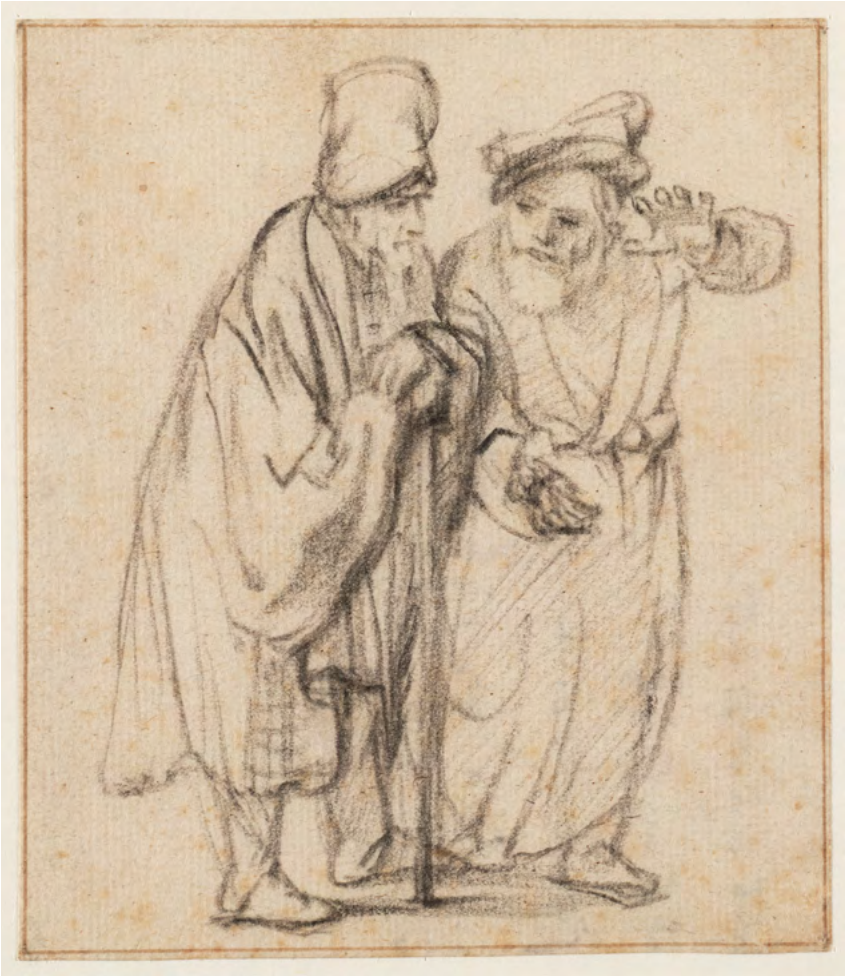
accomplished until 1649.[14] With this step, the religious borders between the two communities were now clearly marked, and religious spaces mostly disentangled. In daily life, however, Sephardim and Ashkenazim still shared the same space, living together in the same neighborhood, a vicinity they also shared with Rembrandt and many other non-Jews. Not all of the contacts were friendly. The board of the Portuguese community, the Mahamad, issued repeated—thus, insufficiently observed—injunctions to discourage members from giving alms to Ashkenazi shnorrers and beggars who assembled at the gate of the Sephardi synagogue on Fridays and holidays. The Mahamad considered these individuals to be afflicted with vices invidious to the morals and spirit of *bom judesmo*, the healthy brand of civilized Judaism for which they stood.[15] The Ashkenazim were definitely in need of re-education. The Portuguese were generously willing to contribute to the required civilizing offensive, but only on condition that the Ashkenazim stayed in their own distinct community, at a distance from theirs.[16]

SHARED SPACES, SHARED LIVES

As much as the two Jewish communities were at pains to distinguish themselves from each other, analysis of notarial deeds demonstrates how much more entangled the lives of Ashkenazim were with both Portuguese Jews and non-Jews than has so far been realized.[17] Living together in the same neighborhood, they encountered each other in myriad ways. The presence of the "other" was part of daily lived experience; everyone who lived there had to come to terms with the diversity of the neighborhood. Even if communal authorities tried to keep the borders up, as Bodian rightly stated, this was not the whole story: Ashkenazim, Sephardim and Christians ran into each other continuously.[18] This happened at various levels: in the streets, but also in shared households.

The city islands of Vlooienburg, Uilenburg and Marken, where nearly all Amsterdam Jews lived, were mixed neighborhoods. Jews and non-Jews lived side by side, in unavoidable interaction with each other. Neighborhood quarrels crossed religious and ethnic lines. For instance, in 1658 a certain Gets Naftali attacked his fellow Ashkenazi Jew Moijses Salomons at the corner of Zwanenburger Bridge. First he used a stick, thereafter simply his fists. Two non-Jews witnessed the event and took Salomons's side, arguing in his favor that Naftali attacked him without any form of provocation. Two years later, when two non-Jews were fighting out a conflict over a fence that presumably altered the property borders, their Jewish neighbors weighed in with eyewitness testimony. In 1672 a certain Roelof killed his mother, and the neighboring Jews and non-Jews all gave witness statements, revealing how well aware they all were of what was going on in each other's households.[19]

We even encounter cases of Ashkenazim, Portuguese Jews and Christians living not only next to each other, but in a shared household. Not infrequently, we find High German and Christian girls serving as maids in the houses of wealthy Portuguese families.[20] Men were employed as servants, as we find out when they give testimony concerning household incidents. Such relationships could become so cordial that Sephardi masters and ladies would include bequests to their Ashkenazi servants in their wills. Of course there were also problem cases. The Ashkenazi maid Beeli Davidts, for

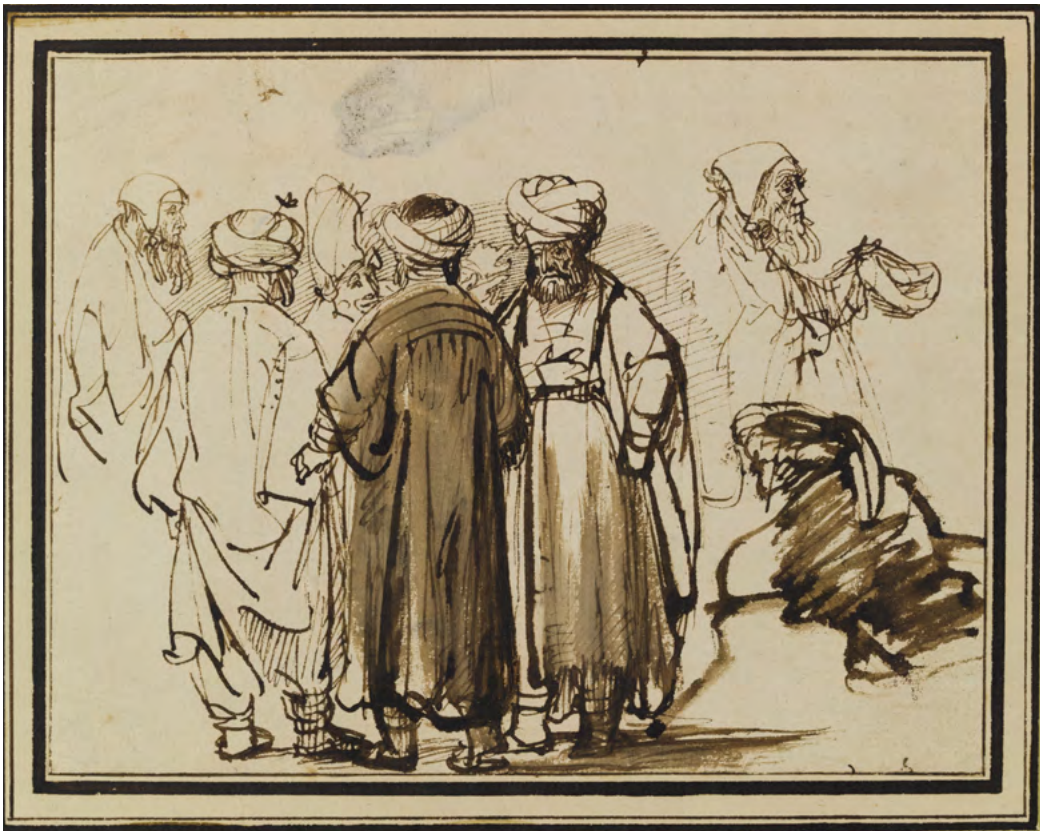


36
Rembrandt, *Two Jews in Discussion, Walking*, ca. 1640s
Black chalk and brown ink on paper, 9.7 × 8.4 cm

Haarlem, Teylers Museum (O+ 070)

instance, was accused of neglecting her mistress Rachel Belmonte, leaving the bedridden lady unattended for two or three days.[21] The High German maid Hester created quite some consternation in 1663 by accusing her master, the Portuguese rabbi Moses d'Aguilar, of trying to force himself upon her. She claimed that all her masters, or their sons, had tried to seduce her. Further investigation, however, indicated that Hester was just as much of a problem, with each of her former masters claiming that she led a dissolute life, stole from them, and had been fired.[22] In other cases, Portuguese men confessed to sleeping with their Ashkenazi or Christian maids, and took responsibility for the children born out of these liaisons. This was the case with Ysak Fonseca and the Ashkenazi maid Maria Hanegum, and Jacob Orobio and the Christian maid Stijntje Thomas van Dithmarschen.[23]

Although it was quite common for Ashkenazim to serve in Portuguese households, sometimes we find the opposite. In 1671 the desperate father of Sara Nietto tried to get his daughter out of the house of Rachel Abrahams, the wife of Jacob Speck Polack. He elicited testimony from Rachel's ex-husband, Levij Davidts, to the effect that she was a nasty, dirty and dishonest woman who kept company with thieves and other unsavory characters. Her present husband had been incarcerated and even temporarily banned from entering the city. In sum, through her employment by Rachel, Sara's honor and virtue were being compromised.[24]



37
Rembrandt, *Group of Orientals*, ca. 1641–42
Pen and wash on paper, 14.3 × 18.6 cm

Warsaw, University Library Print Room (Gabinet Rycin BUW, Inw. zb. d. 4285)

Sexual relations between Jewish men and Christian women were strictly forbidden by the Amsterdam authorities, but as the aforementioned examples unsurprisingly show, much in line with research by Lotte van de Pol, they went on anyway.[25] Likewise, community rules prohibiting marriages between Portuguese and Ashkenazi Jews was sometimes violated. I have encountered at least one such case, when the High German bride Hendel Mayer married Aaron Dias da Fonseca, a marriage that brought forth a daughter and a son. In a second marriage, Hendel was wed to the Ashkenazi Joseph Salomons. Her daughter by her first marriage, Hester Dias da Fonseca, who can be considered a Sephardi, also crossed lines in taking an Ashkenazi man for a husband, David Keizer. In Hendel Mayer's will of 1691 the children from her first and second marriages were treated on equal footing.[26]

Jews of different denominations who shared households acquired cultural and linguistic knowledge of the other. Two Ashkenazim, Aron Levij and Sijmon de Pool, attended services in the Portuguese synagogue in 1670, which we know from an attestation in which they claimed to understand and speak Portuguese and could therefore follow the service. When several members of the Del Soto, alias Delmonte family were put under a ban,[27] Sijmon, a tobacco merchant who worked with one of them, went to Chief Rabbi Aboab da Fonseca asking if he could maintain his employment without being sanctioned himself. The chief rabbi referred him to the Portuguese parnassim, who concluded that it was impossible for him to continue working for his master.[28] This story demonstrates both that some Ashkenazim became sufficiently acquainted with Portuguese culture to understand and speak Portuguese, and that Ashkenazim

might accept the authority of Portuguese officials in matters of faith. If this was an exceptional case, it was an everyday reality that the many Amsterdam Ashkenazim who worked together with Dutch Christians learned the Dutch language. By the late seventeenth century, community documents testify to the growing impact of vernacular Dutch on the Yiddish of Amsterdam Ashkenazim.[29]

Many of the recorded contacts between members of different denominations were of an economic nature. Portuguese Jews, Ashkenazim and Christians did business with each other in numerous sectors. Ashkenazim active in the tin trade would turn to the syndics of the tinsmiths' guild to establish the quality of the tin they acquired.[30] Ashkenazim traded with non-Jewish and Sephardi businessmen in tobacco, gold and jewelry, silk and sheets, and East Indian colonial wares. The high level of intercommunal connection and shared knowledge comes clearly to the fore in the settling of business conflicts. The parties in such a dispute had the option of going to the municipal authorities or to a *beth din* (court of law) of the Jewish community. In some cases, Ashkenazim preferred to bring mutual conflicts to the civic authorities rather than going to the parnassim (the powerful administrative board) or the rabbi. In most cases, however, they acceded to the rabbinic court of their own community, as advised by Halakhah. That is what Elias Salomons and Isaack Abrahams did in 1686 when they had a dispute over storage facilities in Dunkirk.[31]

What to do when a Portuguese and a High German merchant are at odds with each other? Attesting to the growing standing of the Ashkenazi rabbinate is the agreement in 1676 by Michiel Worms and Abraham de Luna Montalto, alias Abraham Segenberch, to submit their business conflict to the Ashkenazi *beth din*, on which Chief Rabbi Meir Stern, Abraham Philips and Levij Salomons had seats.[32] In an earlier case, in 1657, the Frankfurt Jew Jacob Mathijsz had a conflict with Rembrandt's Sephardi neighbor Daniel Pinto concerning a chunk of ginger. The non-Jew Gregorius van der Gilt was with them and witnessed the breakdown of their negotiations. After Mathijsz left, van der Gilt and Pinto decided to go to the Portuguese synagogue and ask for arbitration from the community's "good men." This resulted in Pinto reimbursing Mathijsz after returning the ginger.[33] The very fact that a non-Jew was involved in this communal judicial process shows that it was possible for the various judicial spheres to overlap each other, with Ashkenazim, Sephardim and non-Jews using these spaces to maneuver to their best interests.

To find the members of communities emphatically segregated by ethnicity and religion engaging in frequent encounters with each other and inhabiting entangled social spheres might seem paradoxical. Regarded more closely, it is precisely the institutional stability of both communities that made such day-to-day shared lives possible. The institutions defined the parameters within which individuals could form private identities. As long as communal values were secure and guaranteed, individuals were free to develop within or sometimes even outside these borders. The key issue was that they did not challenge the raison d'être of the community or breach its borders. When someone did, hard countermeasures could be expected. That is what happened when the physician Joseph Abarbanel Barbosa and others challenged the Portuguese community's 1677 ban on buying chickens and poultry from Ashkenazim. Abarbanel argued that the ban was

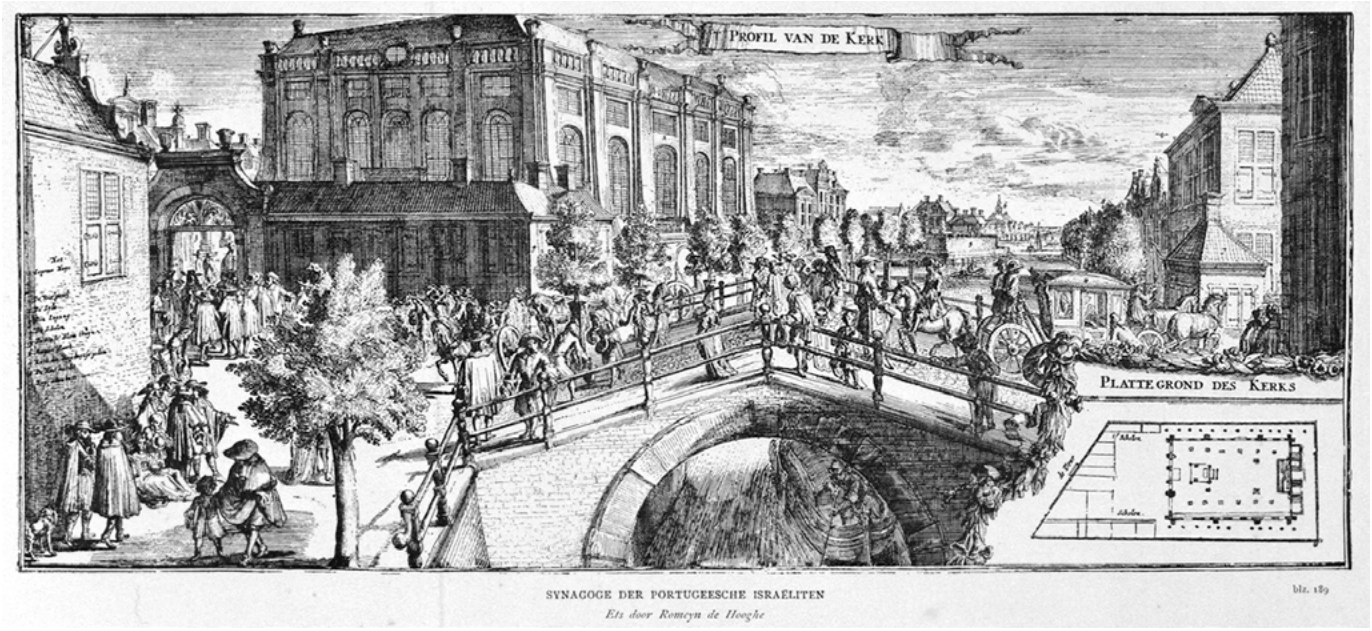
contrary to Halakhah (Jewish law), but the parnassim decided that it wasn't, and excommunicated him. The effects were too much for him and after five weeks he publicly asked for forgiveness in the synagogue.[34]

For Ashkenazim, the existence of their own community provided a secure social, cultural and economic basis that enabled them to develop economic relations with other Amsterdam citizens. They knew that if they foundered financially, the community would take care of them, providing welfare and medical assistance. If they died poor, any orphans they left behind would be taken care of. Poor relief and care of the sick were among the most vital functions of the communal infrastructure.[35] The membership, after all, consisted in large measure of families living from hand to mouth, on the margins of society.[36] Rembrandt models that look like Ashkenazim will have come from this part of the community, recent immigrants from the wave that expanded the size of the community from five hundred in 1639 to about two and a half thousand in 1670.

The struggle for survival led some of these indigents to cross the line into criminality. The notarial files make mention of Ashkenazi thieves, fences and violent brutes.[37] A certain Moijses Tralowitz gained notoriety for his savage behavior, for instance, when he mistreated several people in the house of the Norwegian lodging-house keeper Cornelis Cornelisz on Geldersekade in 1677.[38] Another swindled a sick old lady by selling her silver artifacts for far too little money.[39] The records of the Ashkenazi community show the parnassim intervening on numerous occasions on behalf of the wives of criminal husbands. Their husbands would be on the road for long periods without leaving household money for their families. There were men who were addicted to dice and lost all their money, sometimes even their clothing.[40] In one case, the parnassim summoned a Portuguese Jew, David de Solis, who had gambled with a High German Jew and confessed to using false dice.[41] Worst of all were the husbands who became violent to their wives, beating them severely.

One of the most curious cases to come to the courts concerns a Polish Jew who was arrested in Haarlem in 1656. Acting like a madman, he had been terrorizing local farmers, throwing in windows and smashing roof tiles of their houses. That he was mentally disturbed is made more than likely by another of his perverse provocations. After stepping into a pit latrine up to his chin he entered a farmer's house and lay down on his bed, going on to smear the excrement on the walls and doors of the house. After his arrest, his wife did not want the man back in her house; the Haarlem police ended up taking him to the Ashkenazi synagogue for them to deal with.[42]

While poverty and petty crime were undeniably part of the social profile of the Ashkenazi community, they were fortunately not the norm. In the second half of the seventeenth century a growing number of Ashkenazi families made it into the middle class and even further up the social scale. Amsterdam being a dominant economic center, the city drew translocal Ashkenazi merchant clans.[43] They would make sure to have family members and/or company agents living in the city. Several local Ashkenazim were highly successful and established important family businesses. Typically, these businesses would engage on a local level with Christian and sometimes also Portuguese merchants, while pursuing prosperity in the vast realm known as Ashkenaz—the im-



38
Romeyn de Hooghe, *T Profil van de Kerk*. View of the Portuguese (left) and Ashkenazi Great Synagogue (right), published by Pieter Persoy, Amsterdam, ca. 1695
Etching and engraving, 23.4 × 56.5 cm

Amsterdam, Jewish Museum (M005395)

agined territory of Ashkenazi Judaism, extending 2,500 kilometers from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the east to London in the west.

Amsterdam became a major hub in the trade networks of such Ashkenazi family businesses as the firms of Goldschmidt (Goldsmit), Oppenheim and Gomperz (Gomperts). Wolf Goldsmit, son of the court Jew of Hessen-Kassel, settled in Amsterdam and married a local Ashkenazi girl. He built up the family business in close contact with his relatives in Kassel and Frankfurt am Main, including the well-known banker Benedict (Meyer Baruch) Goldschmidt. One of his activities was trade in jewelry, a prominent client being the Frankfurt art collector Abraham Schelkens.[44] The Gomperts family, originally from Cleve, Emmerich and Wesel, spread out into the Dutch Republic.[45] In Nijmegen Benedictus Levij Gomperts established himself in the early eighteenth century as banker and financier (*solliciteur-militaire*) of the armies of the Dutch Republic, a role similar to that fulfilled by family members in the Holy German Empire. The Amsterdam branch became the firm Philip Levij Gomperts and Sons, an integral part of the large family network stretching across Western and Central Europe. One of the Amsterdam partners, Cosmanus Elias Gomperts, became a major sponsor of the local Hebrew printing industry. Cosmanus, married to the eldest daughter of the famous woman writer Glikl von Hameln, ran a printing firm himself in 1688–89 and 1692–97. In the interim he sponsored the unsuccessful firm of the convert Moses bar Abraham.[46]

Ashkenazi merchants were likewise embedded in both local Jewish and non-Jewish and translocal Ashkenazi networks. Sadock Salomons Perelsheim, a scion of one of the oldest Ashkenazi families in Amsterdam and frequently serving as a parnas, had extensive contacts with the family firms of Oppenheim and Bacharach. The Oppenheims were based in Frankfurt am Main and Coblenz, Bacharach in Frankfurt am Main. Parts of Perelsheim's business correspondence with Samuel Bacharach "zur Rost" is kept in the notarial archives, as is his correspondence with Abraham Tracht, alias Abraham Bacharach "zum Drachen."[47] One of Sadock's sons caused his father quite some distress,

when on a business mission to Frankfurt he decided to run off with the money. He was caught in Wesel, released and again put in prison in Bingen am Rhein. His father, although seriously disappointed, decided to forgive his son for his youthful trespass, on condition that henceforth he abide strictly to his father's strictures.[48]

Some of these Ashkenazim reached a socioeconomic level quite comparable to that of well-established Portuguese families. One such success story is that of Joseph Salomons and his wife Hendel Mayer. Joseph traded in textiles and products from the Dutch East Indies, among other goods. One lively account has him having coffee at his house with two of his Christian clients, a striking instance of social mixing. Upon his death in 1691, Salomons had shares in quite a number of ships. The debtors who owed him money range from prominent Amsterdam firms to Jewish and non-Jewish firms across Central Europe. Most telling, however, is the inventory of Salomons's house on Batavierstraat. The table is of marble, the closet of ebony; the candelabras are of silver, as is an exquisite fruit bowl. Salomons owned a Torah scroll topped by a golden crown with little clocks on it and a shield bearing the name of his deceased son. His collection of Hebrew books was impressive. Among the items stored in the cellar were fifteen barrels of Arnhem tobacco. But most striking is his large collection of paintings, mostly depicting biblical stories. In one room there were paintings of the anointing of King Solomon, Daniel in the lions' den, Queen Esther and seven other large paintings; another held a depiction of David with the head of Goliath, a woman's portrait, flower pots, and nineteen more paintings.[49]

In sum, during Rembrandt's life the Amsterdam Ashkenazim developed from a small, insignificant band of migrants into a sizeable, socially varied community, ranging from petty criminals to respectable business families. This community fitted seamlessly into the mosaic of local society. It maintained extensive ties with Portuguese Jews as with non-Jewish neighbors and business contacts. It was also typical of Amsterdam immigrant society in that it was deeply embedded in translocal Ashkenazi networks. Frankfurt am Main was very significant for the Amsterdam Ashkenazim, but Coblenz, Prague and London were also among the locales where they had significant contacts.

COMMUNAL CHALLENGES

In the decades when Rembrandt lived in Amsterdam, first on and around Vlooienburg, later on the Rozengracht, the Ashkenazi kehillah faced two major challenges that threatened its internal stability. They were hot topics of conversation in the city and could not have escaped Rembrandt's attention.

The first challenge was the arrival of a new group of Jewish immigrants from 1648 onward. Following on the first wave from western Germany, larger numbers of Ashkenazim, called Polacos, came to Amsterdam from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, driven from their homes by the Khmelnytskyi pogroms, the war with Russia and the invasion of Sweden. They established their own minyan in Amsterdam, with services in the Lithuanian liturgy.[50] To the dismay of the existing Ashkenazi kehillah, the Portuguese supported this split in Ashkenazi worship. Their backing played a role in the official recognition granted in 1660 to this third Amsterdam Jewish Nation by the mu-

39
Unknown maker, *Sabetha Sebi, Vermeynden Messias Der Ioden* (Shabbetai Zvi, Alleged Messiah of the Jews), Netherlands, after 1666
Engraving, 30.5 × 20.2 cm

Amsterdam, Jewish Museum (M007382; Jaap van Velzen Collection)

nicipal authorities. The new immigrants differed from the High German Jews in their customs, their pronunciation of Yiddish and their tradition of learning. Whereas most High German Jews were raised in the Western Ashkenazi traditions of Torah and Talmud study, the East European Jews had developed new, more sophisticated methods of studying Talmud, called pilpul.[51] Their learning was highly regarded by the Amsterdam Sephardim, and proved useful for the expansion of the Jewish printing industry, which acquired a dominant position within the Sephardi and Ashkenazi diasporas. One of these learned individuals was a certain Jecousiël Isaacx, who worked as a corrector for Hebrew books for ten years before deciding in 1665 to return with his family to Poland.[52] The ongoing fights between the two communities, and the growing complexity of relations between three different Jewish communities, led the burgomasters in 1673 to terminate the Polish Jewish Nation, who were forced to give up their autonomy and join the Ashkenazi community.[53]

The second challenge was constituted by the Sabbatean movement. In 1665 the widespread conviction took hold in the Jewish world that a Sephardi from Izmir named Shabbetai Zvi was the long-awaited Messiah (fig. 39). In Amsterdam, the Sephardim embraced this creed in overwhelming numbers. But so did the Ashkenazim, who took pride in the circumstance that the messiah's Ashkenazi wife, Sarah, had lived for a while in Amsterdam. Her brother, who was still living in the city, was later nicknamed Samuel

Mashiach. When in 1666 the news broke that the messiah had converted to Islam, the upheaval was huge. Part of Amsterdam Jewry, however, believed that Shabbetai Zvi's conversion was an ingenious strategy to conquer the world of Islam and lead to the proclamation of the messianic age. Among them were the Ashkenazi parnassim, who in 1667 received a Sabbatean prophet, Shabbetai Raphael, with all honors, and even coerced their rabbi, R. Isaac Dekkingen, to host the prophet in his house. As late as the beginning of the eighteenth century, the shammash—warden and secretary—of the Ashkenazi community, Leib ben Oizer, confessed to having been a secret believer in Shabbetai Zvi for decades. He belonged to a secret society that was in contact with other crypto-Sabbatean circles and that kept the messianic fire alive. It was not until the 1710s that he admitted to having been misled. He composed a history and evaluation of the Sabbatean movement to warn his offspring not to participate in such messianic movements in the future.[54]

CONCLUSION

During Rembrandt's years on the Sint Antoniesbreestraat, the neighborhood where he spent most of his Amsterdam years, he witnessed at close hand the establishment of a Jewish community markedly different from the prominent Sephardi one with which he was familiar from the start. These new High German and Polish-Lithuanian arrivals were no less colorful, adding Ashkenazi traditions to the multicultural setting of early modern Amsterdam. While the communal borders with the Portuguese community were strictly drawn, in social life Ashkenazim and Sephardim often lived entangled lives. Gradually the Ashkenazi community was woven into the fabric of Amsterdam society, while maintaining intensive contacts with the wider Ashkenazi diaspora.

In the eighteenth century the Ashkenazi community developed into the largest of Europe, with no fewer than twenty-three thousand members, dwarfing the five thousand Sephardim. The demographic balance between both communities had changed forever, and in the course of the eighteenth century the power relations shifted as well, not only between the two Jewish communities but also in their respective status with the municipal authorities. Internal as well as external borders needed to be renegotiated, and a new balance of power had to be struck. The position of the Amsterdam community within the much wider network of the Ashkenazi diaspora added much to its new status.[55]

NOTES

1 I would like to thank the editors of this volume and Maarten Hell for their comments on previous drafts of this paper.

2 Vaz Dias 1940.

3 Amsterdam City Archives (SAA), OR, entry no. 5001, no. 681, fol. 157, 21 December 1651; entry no. 5001, no. 681, fol. 76, 20 April 1651.

4 In another article, to be published in an edited volume by Janne Nijman and Dave De ruysscher, I will analyze the political and juridical status of the High German Jewish and Polish communities in Amsterdam, arguing that its internal structures mirrored the political dynamics of the city.

5 Most importantly Sluys 1940; Vaz Dias 1940.
6 See, for instance Kaplan 2000, 51–107; Swetschinski 2000, 156–57, 184, 188–89, 202–02, 251–52; Bodian 1997, 125–31.
7 In Nadler 2003, see 28–34, 54–55, 83–84, 118, 148, 154–55, 169, 199, 207; Amsterdam 2006.
8 Throughout this essay I will use Portuguese Jews and Sephardim, and High German/Polish Jews and Ashkenazim as interchangeable terms.
9 Swetschinski 2000, 165–224.
10 Wallet 2022.
11 For a more general analysis and comparison of several ways of structuring Jewish communities in Europe, see Ruderman 2010, 57–98.
12 Davis 2002.
13 Hagoort 2005, 41.
14 Kaplan 2021, 105–71.
15 Kaplan 2002; Kaplan 1987.
16 Kaplan 2000, 70–72.
17 This is enabled by the large notarial deeds project of the Amsterdam City Archives; see Hell 2022.
18 Bodian 1997, 129; for a similar analysis from the perspective of the Portuguese community, see Sutcliffe 2008.
19 SAA, archive number 5075 Notarial Archives (NA), no. 2205, notary (not.) Adriaen Lock, 28 November 1658; no. 2209, not. Adriaan Lock, 15 November 1660; no. 4075, not. Dirck van der Groe, 1 December 1672.
20 Cf. Levie Bernfeld 2020.
21 SAA, NA, entry no. 5075, ACA, no. 4084, not. Dirck van der Groe, 8 January 1677.
22 SAA, NA, entry no. 5075, no. 2214a, not. Adriaen Lock, 16 and 17 March 1663.
23 SAA, NA, entry no. 5075, no. 4759, not. David Staffmaker Varlet, 17 March 1693; 4077, not. Dirck van der Groe, 11 December 1673.
24 SAA, NA, entry no. 5075, no. 4073a, not. Dirck van der Groe, 7 April 1671.
25 Van de Pol 2001, 173–85.
26 SAA, NA, entry no. 5075, no. 4242, not. Dirck van der Groe, 13 June 1691.
27 On this conflict, see Hagoort 2005, 73–75.
28 SAA, NA, entry no. 5075, no. 2233, not. Adriaen Lock, 27 August 1670.
29 Sluys 1940.
30 SAA, NA, entry no. 5075, no. 526, not. Jacobo Westfrisio (Jacob Jansz. Westfrisius), 10 March 1744; 1946, not. David. Doornick, 16 October 1647.
31 SAA, NA, entry no. 5075, no. 4121, not. Dirck van der Groe, 31 May 1686.
32 SAA, NA, entry no. 5075, no. 4082, not. Dirck van der Groe, 2 April 1676.
33 SAA, NA, entry no. 5075, no. 2202, not. Adriaen Lock, 24 April 1657.
34 SAA, NA, entry no. 5075, no. 4085, not. Dirck van der Groe, 30 July 1677; see further on this case Kaplan 2000, 136–39.
35 Especially in the first period, the Portuguese Abodat Ahesed society also played an important role in taking care of poor Ashkenazim; see Levie Bernfeld 2012, 117–21.
36 Egmond 1993 focuses almost entirely on the eighteenth century.
37 For a comparison with Sephardim see Levie Bernfeld 2012, 216–22.
38 SAA, NA, entry no. 5075, no. 4085, not. Dirck van der Groe, 24 March 1676; 2252, not. Adriaen Lock, 16 June 1677.
39 SAA, NA, entry no. 5075, no. 4740, not. David Staffmaeker Varlet, 5 February 1680.
40 See e.g. SAA, NA, entry no. 5075, no. 4085, not. Dirck van der Groe, 13 September 1677; 4086, not. Dirck van der Groe, 1 April 1678; 4150, not. Dirck van der Groe, 10 April 1691.
41 SAA, NA, entry no. 5075, no. 4075, not. Dirck van der Groe, 29 December 1672.
42 SAA, NA, entry no. 5075, no. 2201, not. Adriaen Lock, 30 September 1656.
43 I use *translocal* here as an alternative to *transnational*, as I feel that it helps to write history "beyond the nation-state" and moreover better fits the dynamics of early modern Western Europe. The concept is inspired by Appadurai 1995.
44 SAA, NA, entry no. 5075, no. 4116, not. Dirck van der Groe, 25 July 1685.

45 Kaufmann-Freudenthal 1907, 326–69.
46 SAA, NA, entry no. 5075, no. 4146, not. Dirck van der Groe, 30 August 1690; no. 4147, not. Dirck van der Groe, 14 September 1690; no. 4149, not. Dirck van der Groe, 8 August 1691.
47 SAA, NA, entry no. 5075, no. 4086, not. Dirck van der Groe, 3 March 1678; no. 4755, not. David Staffmaker Varlet, 5 September 1692.
48 SAA, NA, entry no. 5075, no. 4095, not. Dirck van der Groe, 9 July 1680.
49 SAA, NA, entry no. 5075, no. 4243, not. Dirck van der Groe, 25 November 1691.
50 Sluys 1940, 319–20.
51 Reiner 1993.
52 SAA, NA, entry no. 5075, no. 2218b, not. Adriaen Lock, 11 June 1665.
53 Teller 2020, 25–71; Kaplan 2000, 78–107.
54 Shazar 1978; Radensky 1997.
55 For an analysis that takes the eighteenth century as its main point of departure see Wallet and Zwiep 2018.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bart Wallet is Professor of Early Modern and Modern Jewish History at the University of Amsterdam. He is co-editor-in-chief of *Studia Rosenthaliana: Journal of the History, Culture and Heritage of the Jews in the Netherlands*, editor of the *European Journal of Jewish Studies* and co-editor and author of *Reappraising the History of the Jews in the Netherlands* (2021). He is currently leading a research project on Jewish urban cultures, especially in Amsterdam.