

Aviva Ben-Ur, *Jewish Autonomy in a Slave Society: Suriname in the Atlantic World, 1651–1825*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020. 358 pp. (Cloth US\$ 55.00)

What happened, from a Jewish perspective, at the intersection of the African and Jewish diasporas in the Atlantic World during slavery? Taking Suriname as her case, that is what Aviva Ben-Ur describes and analyzes in this book. She convincingly shows how White Jewishness creolized by adopting African elements and how Blacks became creolized Jews.

Suriname was obviously not exemplary of Jewish Atlantic history across the board, but in showing the uniqueness one learns about the general rule as well. For instance, Suriname Jews were different from other Jewish communities in the Americas by being much more involved in plantation agriculture than in commerce. Furthermore, they had so much autonomy that they have sometimes been called a state within the colonial state. They had their own capital town, *Jodensavanne* (Jews Savannah), where the *Mahamad* (regents), not the colonial state, ruled. They had their own militia, and the jurisdiction of the regents even overruled colonial authorities and their laws. For example, though often contested, Jews, unlike the rest of the (free) population, had the right to work and trade on Sundays and other Christian holy days. Ben-Ur concludes that Jews in Suriname were not only permitted, but actually obliged, by their regents to be different and to behave Jewish structurally. If not they would be punished, often helped by the colonial authorities. Finally, Suriname was the only land in the Atlantic World where, because of the conversion of enslaved people to Judaism, people of Eurafrican descent likely came to constitute the majority of the Jewish community by the early 1800s.

At first children of Jewish fathers and enslaved or free Black women were raised by their fathers in the Jewish faith. They were probably converted to Judaism because there were not enough White Jewish women and the men had to have lawful heirs. During the next generation there were enough Jewish mothers of color to shift back to the rule of the mother deciding Jewish identity. According to official sources at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, one in every 14 Portuguese Jews was of African origin. Ben-Ur is convinced that this is a significant underestimation and that “perhaps the majority of Suriname’s Jewish community by the turn of the eighteenth century would have been descended from an African mother” (p. 155).

These Eurafrican Jews, enslaved and free, did not have the same rights as White Jews. Since the founding of the Jewish community in Suriname in the early 1650s, a differentiation was made between those who had full rights (*jahid/jehidim*) and congregants with limited rights. The latter were second-

class Jews assigned to the back benches of the synagogue. Jewish men who married Jewish women of color were also degraded to the status of congregant. However, if their sons married White Jewish women for two consecutive generations they could recapture jahid status.

By the mid-eighteenth century Jews of color had become so numerous, so powerful, and so fed up with their limited congregant status (with some of their eminent members being given lesser positions in public ceremonies and funerals) that, in the early 1790s, they founded their own congregation and even their own prayer house. They obviously felt confident enough to go their own separate way. The Mahamad regents, not surprisingly, were furious and started legal prosecution of the initiators, though they also started to abolish all legal distinctions between White and non-White Jews.

Ben-Ur uses the Jewish holiday of Purim to show how White Jewishness creolized by integrating African cultural elements in their style of living. This developed into a popular and general feast in which the crowds in the streets of Paramaribo included Jews and non-Jews, enslaved and free, all masked and costumed as soldiers, sailors, Maroons, and Indigenous people, including men dressed as women, and everyone singing and shouting and yelling obscenities, even attacking enemies under the cover of the masks. This one-day event, which followed a day of fasting, was extended to a whole week in Suriname. It resembled very much the way in which carnival in Roman Catholic slave colonies creolized with African festival traditions.

It is a pity that the book is limited to the Portuguese-Jewish perspective. Ashkenazi Jews are hardly treated even though they formed almost half of the Jewish population in Suriname by the turn of the eighteenth century. And it would have been interesting to learn about the perspective of Blacks concerning their reasons for converting to Judaism, or why Jews of color never questioned slavery. Nonetheless, this is a rich and welcome book for anyone interested in (Atlantic) Jewish diaspora history.

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