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Memoria para os siglos futuros: Myth and Memory on the Beginnings of the Amsterdam Sephardi Community*

Robert Cohen

The beginnings of the Sephardi community of Amsterdam are shrouded in a mist of myths. Three different accounts have been repeatedly told, scrutinized, and analyzed by poets, novelists, and historians.

The first myth recounts the story of María Nuñez, a beautiful maiden who fled Portugal in the 1590s with her brother and uncle. Their ship was captured by the English and brought to London, where an English duke fell in love with the girl. As a result, María was summoned to the court of Queen Elizabeth. The queen, struck by María's beauty, promenaded her in a royal carriage throughout London so as to show her people this extraordinary loveliness. Yet despite the duke's devotion and her success in the glittering court, María was steadfast in her intention to proceed to Amsterdam and there return to Judaism. Released by the queen, she continued to Amsterdam, where she was later joined by the rest of her family and married her cousin, Manuel Lopes Homem, "with dances, music, and various games."¹

The second, and equally dramatic myth, tells of two ships carrying ten Marranos with four children that docked in Emden. While looking for a fat goose for their dinner, some of the arrivals met a Jew, Rabbi Mose Uri Ha-Levi, and revealed their identity to him. The rabbi warned them not to proclaim their Judaism openly in Emden, sending them instead to Amsterdam for this purpose and promising to join them there within a few weeks. The story ends with the happy reunion of rabbi and Sephardim in Amsterdam: after being circumcised, the latter took a room "in which they prayed all day every day with great attention."

The third myth is a continuation of the second. The place and cast are the same, the time only a few weeks later. The Amsterdam authorities had been informed of

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the presence in town of Spanish-speaking foreigners who had been circumcised and spent all their time praying. They arrested the rabbi and his son and brought them before the mayor who asked them who had given them permission to start “a new Jewish religion” in Amsterdam. The two Jews answered that they had done so for the good and glory of the city, which they had chosen above all others for its own benefit. The newcomers, they claimed, had brought with them great riches, and were they to be granted residence rights, others, equally rich, would follow and improve Amsterdam’s trade. The authorities had one of the Sephardim, Jacob Tirado, confirm the story, and he finally convinced them that it was in the city’s interest to let them stay. The eminently sensible Amsterdam burgomaster was convinced, the Jews celebrated and wrote to their brethren in the Iberian Peninsula, who thereupon promptly arrived too. The Ashkenazi rabbi became in the myth the first rabbi of the Sephardi community and his son the cantor. Finally, the Ashkenazim of Poland and Germany, having heard of the freedom granted in Amsterdam, also started arriving.²

Such are the myths of origin of the Amsterdam Sephardi community, shorn of all the dramatic details that lend them verisimilitude. Similar myths can be found everywhere and in every culture: the beginnings of Rome, the founding of Plymouth colony, the arrival of the Jews in eastern Europe, Bordeaux, Lyons, and Arles — all have been transmuted into myths. They are all embedded in “a complex of stories, some no doubt fact, and some fantasy, which for various reasons human beings regard as demonstrations of the inner meaning of the universe and of human life.” This definition of myth by Alan W. Watts, in its stress upon “for various reasons,” leaves a wide-open field for the hermeneutics of myth.³

Recently a Dutch scholar, Jacques Waardenburg, has distinguished several kinds of meaning within any given myth. Of the seven different meanings I would like to concentrate on the place myth has within the total cultural context in which it appears, on the social meaning it possesses within the society in which it exists, and on the message it contains. Myths, says Waardenburg, transpose events happening on earth into another realm of reality, where they assume another meaning, which is in turn transmitted back. It is this other meaning or meanings that I would like to uncover.⁴

To do so, one must first place the myths in their historical context. That is, the historical context of the myth, not of the events. The myth of María Nuñez first appeared in Daniel Levi de Barrios’ *Triumpho del gobierno popular*, published in 1683—84. The Mose Uri Ha-Levi myths were first written by his grandson in about 1673 and first printed in 1710—11. Two well-known Sephardim, David Cohen de Lara and Rabbi Isaac Aboab, appended affirmations of veracity to the text, which was also published in Yiddish.

The myths as such, then, first appear at the time when both Ashkenazim and Sephardim were well-established in Amsterdam. In 1673, when the second and third myths were being written, the Ashkenazim had just built their Great Synagogue. By the time de Barrios had written the first one, the Sephardim had built just opposite the Great Synagogue their famed Esnoga, a monumental

memorial of wealth and status. Myths are a very similar kind of monument. They convey an image, just as the synagogues do.⁵

The Social Memory

The image they conveyed was one of wealth, of substance. The imposing structure of the new synagogue stood for solid respectability, an architectural proof of acceptance. Its message was not the cry of huddled masses fleeing a teeming shore. Rather, it projected the message Jacob Tirado and Mose Uri Ha-Levi had given the city authorities: “and they will make this city of Amsterdam the head of all places in Europe in trade, for till then there was little trade in Amsterdam.” The social meaning emerges equally clearly from the stones of the Esnoga as from the words of the myth.

The creation of a common social memory is also true for the Ashkenazim, though in a slightly different form. They too had built an imposing structure, they too had created a myth. Two of the Sephardi myths of origin, it should be remembered, were born among the Ashkenazim. Written by an Ashkenazi, they appeared simultaneously in Portuguese and in Yiddish. Their social meaning, therefore, endowed also the Ashkenazi memory. The myth of Mose Uri Ha-Levi incorporated both communities: “When the German and Polish Jews heard that here [in Amsterdam] Spanish and Portuguese Jews lived, they came and lived here as well.” In fact, the myth had a corollary in the form of a myth of religious dependence. It suggests that without their Ashkenazi neighbours, the Sephardim would not have found Amsterdam, would not have been granted permission to settle and, above all, would not have become Jews once more.⁶

The Religious Memory

But Jews they were. The towering building of the Esnoga was more than a monument to wealth: it was a house of worship. The myths of María Nuñez and Mose Uri Ha-Levi are, first and foremost, a religious statement. María Nuñez braved the dangers of man and nature and withstood the temptations of love and royal favour for one purpose only: to escape the Inquisition and become a devout Jewess in mighty and liberal Amsterdam. The Sephardim who so fortunately met Mose Uri Ha-Levi in Emden could not read the Hebrew inscription over his door, *Emet veshalom yesod ha'olam*: truth and peace are the foundations of the world. All the same, they came to him to be instructed in that same truth, for they did know that they were “sons of Israel.”

This religious sentiment is expressed over and over again. Isaac Orobio de Castro stated in his *Carta Apologética* to Juan de Prado “that where divine Providence grants me a life of liberty [in Amsterdam] I shall be a real Jew.” Daniel Levi de Barrios expressed the same feeling in his poem for the consecration of the Esnoga: “The shadows lift when, from the people who most glorify the great God, the ancient light for the holiest law rises...” The image of Amsterdam as a bulwark of freedom even resounded in the poetry of Romein de Hooghe, who sang on the same occasion: “Neither the Seine nor the Tagus offer you safety, Amstel’s more prudent maiden knows and favours your temples within her walls.”

The consecration of the Esnoga in 1675 was, like the myth, primarily a statement of faith. In a geographical, but certainly also in a spiritual sense, María Nuñez had come home, so the myth seems to say.⁷

The Myth of the Myth

The Amsterdam myths have until recently been interpreted only in the historical sense. With very few exceptions, historians have set themselves the task of proving the myth true. They sought the kernel of historical truth within the myth, and with amazing patience and ingenuity they set out to find the historical sources of the myths of origins. Often to their own surprise, they found them. María Nuñez had existed: on 28 November 1598, at the age of twenty-three, she did indeed marry her cousin, Manuel Lopes Homem, in Amsterdam. There had been a ship: on 27 April 1597 the agent of Holland in London reported the capture of a Dutch ship carrying four Portuguese merchants and “a Portuguese daughter dressed in men’s clothes... who wanted to go to Amsterdam to get married, and whose parents were held in the Inquisition in the holy house, as they call it.” Rabbi Mose Uri Ha-Levi, a historical figure and a former resident of Emden, was arrested in Amsterdam in the fall of 1603. Jacob Tirado, alias Guimes Lopes da Costa, had lived in Amsterdam from 1598 to 1612. Every detail of the myths was checked and proven “true.” Only the beauty of María Nuñez and the fat-content of the goose, it seems, have escaped the historians’ scrutiny. The historians’ battle over the exact date of the events was fought out for years in books and learned journals, with stout champions defending alternately 1593, 1597, 1602, and 1604.⁸

The diligent fact-finders who had examined the myth of María Nuñez ceased their labours at the same point where the myth ended. María Nuñez had married her cousin and presumably had lived happily ever after, a mother in Israel in the Jerusalem of the West. In fact, she did nothing of the sort. The myth also includes, in addition to María, three of her four siblings, all children of Gaspar Lopes Homem and Mayor Rodrigues. One sister and two of her brothers lived as professing Jews in Amsterdam, active both in international trade and in the Sephardi community. One brother was a member of the board of *Parnassim* of the Neveh Shalom synagogue and a founding member of the community’s dowry fund. But neither María nor her younger brother Manuel remained in Amsterdam. Actually, the myth did state that Manuel became the chief auditor of the king of Spain and a favourite of the Conde Duque [de Olivares]. But the historians, having set out to verify the myth, were captivated by it and insisted that here de Barrios *must* have made a mistake. In fact de Barrios was perfectly correct: following a stay of some years in Antwerp as his family’s business agent, he moved to Seville and thence to Madrid, where he became a leading expert on foreign trade at court.

He had been preceded by his sister, the beautiful and steadfastly devout María Nuñez. By 1612 her husband had left Amsterdam, first for Lisbon and then for Seville. Historical evidence for women being what it is, we cannot trace María as clearly as her husband, but it is safe to assume that she followed him. The only allusion to her post-mythical existence comes in the intriguing form of a literary

variant of the myth. It is perhaps significant that this allusion is found not in Amsterdam, but in Seville, where Miguel Cervantes wrote his famous story, *La española inglesa*. In the story a beautiful Spanish girl is kidnapped by the English and brought to England, where she is secretly raised as a Catholic and betrothed to another crypto-Catholic. The match, though supported by a benevolent Queen Elizabeth, is threatened by the machinations of an English count who also desires the girl. After many mishaps the lovers are reunited in Seville, where they marry and live openly as Catholics. The story's remarkable resemblance to the María Nuñez myth might lead one to speculate whether her story was known in Seville, where Cervantes might have heard and used it. If so, María Nunes was a literary figure before she became a mythical one.⁹

Conclusion

The María Nuñez who came full circle in her migrations, from Lisbon to Amsterdam to Seville, is in herself of no importance. Many other New Christians travelled similar routes. Many obscure rabbis like Mose Uri Ha-Levi came to Amsterdam. Were it not for the myths, both would have been forgotten. Elie Wiesel noted recently that "myths die, while history does not. In fact, history enjoys the privilege of recording their death." The Amsterdam myths prove the opposite. As mythical figures, the protagonists of the Amsterdam myths live on. Their importance lies not in their historicity, but in their mythicity. The historical meaning is but one of many possibilities of the hermeneutics of myth. The true historical question is how they came to live forever in the myth, and therefore in the collective memory of Dutch Sephardim.

As a mythical figure, María Nuñez could not be a merchant's wife in Seville. Myths are symbolic constructions of reality, not reality itself. But even if they detract from reality, they can be used to bind people together. The myths of origins of the Sephardi community in their social meaning were directed towards the outer world. Like the Esnoga, they symbolized the community's ideal status. In their religious meaning the myths were directed mainly, but not exclusively to the inner self of the community. They are a created collective memory, "the brainchild not of primitive minds, but rather of sophisticated intellectuals [for whom] the myth becomes an argument."

The argument put forth in the different Amsterdam myths was the creation of a memory. It provided the Amsterdam Sephardim with a past they could live with in the present of the late seventeenth century and carry with them in the future. The title of the myth of Mose Uri Ha-Levi is therefore as apt for the myths as for the underlying motives: *Memoria para os siglos futuros*: not only a memoir for future centuries, but also, and especially, a memory for future generations.¹⁰

NOTES

1. Daniel Levi de Barrios, *Triunfo del gobierno popular y de la antigüedad holandesa* (Amsterdam, 1683), pp. 455—56. For a later version see David Franco Mendes, "Memorias do estabelecimento e progresso dos Judeos portuguezes e espanhões nesta famosa cidade de Amsterdam," *Studia*

- Rosenthaliana* 9 (1975):7—8. The full text of the de Barrios version is most easily available in Carl Gebhardt, *Die Schriften des Uriel da Costa* (Amsterdam, 1922), p. 234 and German translation, pp. viii—ix.
2. Uri ben Aron Ha-Levi, *Narração da vinda dos Judeos espanhòes a Amsterdam* (Amsterdam, 1711), reprinted in facsimile edition by J.S. da Silva Rosa (Amsterdam, 1933); de Barrios, *Triumpho*, pp. 460—65; Franco Mendes, *Memorias*, pp. 6—7. For a detailed bibliographical description of the *Narração* see S. Seeligmann, "Ueber die erste jüdische Ansiedlung in Amsterdam," *Mitteilungen zur jüdischen Volkskunde*, 17 [N.F. II, 1] (1906):1—13.
 3. For the most recent statement on Jewish myths of origins see Joseph Shatzmiller, "Politics and the myth of origins: The case of the medieval Jews," in Gilbert Dahan, ed., *Les Juifs au regard de l'histoire. Mélanges en l'honneur de Bernhard Blumenkranz* (Paris, 1985), pp. 49—61; Alan W. Watts, *Myth and Ritual in Christianity* (London, 1953), p. 7.
 4. Jacques Waardenburg, "Symbolic aspects of myth," in Alan M. Olsen, ed., *Myth, Symbol and Reality* (Notre Dame and London, 1980), pp. 41—68.
 5. For the 1673 date of the *Narração* see Seeligmann, p. 3; for the Yiddish edition, see L. and R. Fuks, "Jewish historiography in the Netherlands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries," in *Salo Wittmayer Baron Jubilee Volume on the Occasion of his Eightieth Birthday*, I (Jerusalem, 1974), pp. 449—50. For myths as monuments of historical knowledge see J.J. Bachofen, "Der Mythos als Quelle geschichtlicher Erkenntnis," in Karl Kerényi, ed., *Die Eröffnung des Zugangs zum Mythos: Ein Lesebuch*. Wege der Forschung, XX (Darmstadt, 1967), p. 121—23.
 6. For a similar argument see Daniel Swetschinski, "Kinship and commerce: The foundations of Portuguese Jewish life in seventeenth-century Holland," *Studia Rosenthaliana* 15 (1981):53, who stresses the self-serving aspect of the myth at a time when relations between Sephardim and Ashkenazim deteriorated.
 7. Isaac Orobio de Castro is quoted in Y. Kaplan, "The Portuguese Jews in Amsterdam: From forced conversion to a return to Judaism," *Studia Rosenthaliana* 15 (1981):39; for the quotations of de Barrios and de Hooghe see D.H. de Castro, *De Synagoge der Portugees-Israelietische Gemeente te Amsterdam* (Amsterdam, 1950), pp. 34—35.
 8. For the historical kernel school and the arguments concerning the correct dates see among others H. Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden* (Leipzig, 1891), pp. 579—81; J.M. Hillesum, *Uri Ha-Levi. De eerste mohel, chazzan en predikant der Portugeesche Joden te Amsterdam in het jaar 1593* (Amsterdam, 1904); Cardozo de Bethencourt, *Aankomst der Joden te Amsterdam* (Amsterdam, 1904); Seeligmann, *op. cit.*; *Idem, Bibliographie en Historie. Bijdrage tot de geschiedenis der eerste Sephardim in Amsterdam* (Amsterdam, 1927), pp. 11—23; Izak Prins, *De Vestiging der Marranen in Noord-Nederland in de Zestiende eeuw* (Amsterdam, 1927), pp. 170—71, 174—75; J. Zwarts, "De eerste rabbijnen en synagogen van Amsterdam naar archivalische bronnen," *Bijdragen en Mededelingen van het genootschap voor Joodsche Wetenschap in Nederland* 4 (1928), pp. 147—271; W.C. Pieterse, *Daniel Levi de Barrios als geschiedschrijver van de Portugees-Israelietische gemeente te Amsterdam in zijn 'Triumpho del Gobierno Popular'* (Amsterdam, 1968), pp. 43—47.
 9. For the later, non-mythical careers of Manuel Lopes Pereira and Manuel Lopes Homem, see E.M. Koen et al., ed., "Notarial records relating to the Portuguese Jews in Amsterdam up to 1639," *seriatim* in *Studia Rosenthaliana*, particularly nos. 152, 153, 188, 270, 282, 357, 565, 599, 1271, 1342, 1500, 1505, 1516; H. Pohl, *Die Portugiesen in Antwerpen (1567—1648). Zur Geschichte einer Minderheit* (Wiesbaden, 1977), pp. 164, 173, 188, 207; Jonathan I. Israel, "Manuel López Pereira of Amsterdam, Antwerp, and Madrid: Jew, New Christian, and Advisor to the Conde-Duque de Olivares," *Studia Rosenthaliana* 19 (1985):109—26, who was the first to note the parallel of the María Nuñez myth with Cervantes' *La española inglesa*.
 10. Y. Kaplan, "The travels of Portuguese Jews from Amsterdam to the lands of idolatry, 1644—1724," in *Idem*, ed., *Jews and Conversos. Studies in Society and the Inquisition* (Jerusalem, 1985), 197—211; Elie Wiesel, "Myth and history," in Olsen, p. 21; Waardenburg, pp. 54, 58; Shatzmiller, p. 61.

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