

CRISIS AND CREATIVITY:
HOW JEWISH LEADERS LOBBIED FOR RIGHTS AND RENEGOTIATED COMMUNITY
WHILE BESIEGED IN DUTCH BRAZIL, 1645–1654

by

JASON GUTEKUNST PERLMAN

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Advisor: Susannah Shaw Romney

Reader: John Shovlin

This paper examines the actions of the leaders of the Sephardic Jewish community of Dutch Brazil, the first openly Jewish community in the New World. Jewish colonists of Portuguese descent played an important role as merchants and cultural intermediaries throughout the period of Dutch control in Brazil, from 1630 to 1654. However, in 1645, the Catholic Portuguese colonists rebelled against Dutch rule and seized the sugar-producing heartland of the colony, killing Jewish colonists and besieging the capital, Recife. It was only in the following years of war and crisis that Jewish colonists proved themselves indispensable to the Dutch authorities and gained guarantees of equal rights — more extensive religious and economic freedom than any other Jewish community in Christian lands enjoyed at the time. Previous scholarship has represented these gains as the result of pragmatic Dutch policy or lobbying by Jews in Amsterdam on behalf of Jews in Dutch Brazil. This paper, however, is the first to focus on the role of Jewish leaders in Dutch Brazil through close reading of key documents in context, drawing on the methodology of Atlantic history. This paper argues that these Jewish leaders creatively responded to a series of crises, learned how to negotiate the complexities of the early modern Dutch Atlantic empire, and forged a particularly strong partnership with the local Dutch colonial authorities that allowed them not only to gain unprecedented rights for their fellow Jewish colonists but also to assert their own authority over all Jews in the colony. Although their efforts were unable to prevent the fall of Dutch Brazil in 1654, the strategies developed in Dutch Brazil provided a model for the leaders of later and longer-lived Jewish communities in New Amsterdam, Suriname, Curaçao, Jamaica, and Barbados, all of which numbered veterans of Dutch Brazil among their founders.

*To receive a copy of this complete thesis, please email Jason Perlman at
jgp384@nyu.edu*