

Installation of New Haham at Portuguese Synagogue of Amsterdam: Reflections from Rabbi Marc D. Angel



I had the honor of spending the weekend of March 16-18, 2012 with the community of Amsterdam's famous Portuguese Synagogue, Talmud Torah. I was invited to install their new Haham, Dayyan Pinchas Toledano. The Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam is the "mother" Congregation of my own Congregation Shearith Israel, the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City, founded in 1654. Our two Congregations share over 350 years of historical association and both maintain the Western Sephardic minhag. The installation of Haham Toledano underscored the historic connection of our Congregations, as well as the long-standing personal respect and friendship which Haham Toledano and I have shared over the years.

The Portuguese Synagogue of Amsterdam, dedicated in 1675, is one of the glories of the Jewish people. It is a grand building, remarkably beautiful and impressive. It has seating for nearly 3000 people. In recent years, it has been restored to its pristine beauty.

When one enters the Portuguese Synagogue of Amsterdam, one enters Jewish history. The Sephardic community of Amsterdam was established by ex-conversos who fled the fires and persecutions of the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions in order to return to Judaism. When they built the Esnoga, they were making a statement: we have survived the flames of the Inquisition, we are thriving, we are committed to the future of Judaism, our grand synagogue building is a testimony to our strength and our love of Torah, we have overcome adversity and we look to the future with optimism and confidence.

The Sephardic community of Amsterdam boasted world-class Hahamim, thinkers, writers, poets. It produced notable traders and merchant princes; during the 17th century, its adventurous members travelled to the New World to establish communities in South America, the Caribbean, and in North America. Over the years, the Portuguese Synagogue of Amsterdam continued to house a vital, dynamic and creative Jewish community.

During the early 1940s, the Jews of the Netherlands became victims of the Nazi onslaught. Jews were rounded up, deported to concentration camps, and murdered in large numbers. I was told that 90% of the members of the Portuguese Synagogue were murdered during the Holocaust. This proud and mighty community—born in the flames of the Inquisition—was disastrously stricken.

But a remnant survived. With pride and tenacity, the community has worked to restore its magnificent synagogue building; to revitalize its spiritual life; to revive the spirit of courage and faith that has characterized the community for the past four centuries. It has appointed an illustrious Haham, Dayyan Toledano, to provide religious guidance and inspiration. Its lay leadership is dedicated, hard-working, tenacious, and hospitable.

When I prayed in the Esnoga, I felt that I heard the voices of the ghosts of past generations—all those good, pious souls who sacrificed so much for Judaism, who worked so hard for the Jewish community and the Jewish People. It was a haunting, ineffably moving experience for me.

When I left Amsterdam to return to New York, my thoughts lingered on the glories and tragedies of the Portuguese Synagogue. I felt a surge of spiritual uplift from the beautiful Shabbat I had spent in the Esnoga, and the magnificent ceremony of installation of Haham Toledano on Sunday, attended by four hundred of the city's Jewish community. I felt hope and optimism that the community will gain strength and spiritual vitality in the months and years ahead, and restore glory to Kahal Kadosh Talmud Torah.

Od Avinu Hai. Am Yisrael Hai.