

ONE

Paper Fragments

To gather in this great harvest of truth was no light or speedy work. His notes already made a formidable range of volumes, but the crowning task would be to condense these voluminous still-accumulating results and bring them, like the earlier vintage of Hippocratic books, to fit a little shelf.

—George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

After the Reverend Jacques Judah Lyons was laid to rest in the hallowed ground of Beth Olam Cemetery in Queens in August of 1877, his wife, Grace Nathan Lyons, and their three children were left with the long process of sorting through his library at the three-story house at 7 West 19th Street, adjacent to the monumental fourth Shearith Israel Synagogue (fig. 11). The task must have been overwhelming, as Jacques was one of the most passionate early collectors of American Judaica.¹ Like a charismatic Jewish Casaubon, his interests were wide ranging, and his note taking formidable. Born in Suriname in 1813, Jacques had been the spiritual leader of both Paramaribo's Neveh Shalom and Richmond's Beth Shalome before settling in for thirty-eight years as the rabbi of New York's premier synagogue, Congregation Shearith Israel. Sadly, like Eliot's unfortunate cleric, Jacques died before he could begin writing his *Key to All Early American Jews*. Eventually the family gave up on organizing his notes and boxed away his collection for over forty years. Yet in time, those boxes would shape the way New York Jewish history was written, and particularly women's role—or lack thereof—in early American Jewish life.



Fig. 11. House of Jacques Judah Lyons and Grace Nathan Lyons, to the left of the domed building of Congregation Shearith Israel's Fourth Synagogue on West 19th Street. From William S. Pelletreau, *Early New York Houses* (New York: F. P. Harper, 1900), 175.

It is hard to know to what extent Grace abetted or despaired of her husband's obsession. To be sure, their 1842 marriage had made the collection all the more personal. Grace's lineage was at the intersection of most of the prestigious genealogies of early American Jewry. Named for her maternal grandmother, Grace was closely related to the congregation's most important early leader, Gershom Mendes Seixas. Moreover, large numbers of papers from Grace's family ended up in Jacques's collection, though certainly some items—such as the poems written by Grace's beloved grandmother—had escaped either Jacques's interest or grasp.² Grace may have helped finance her husband's hobby as well, albeit perhaps inadvertently. As the sister of stockbroker Benjamin Nathan, she certainly brought money to their marriage.³ She also inherited an additional \$5,000 after her brother's murder in 1870.⁴ Grace's feelings about her husband's collection, however, are noticeably absent from his voluminous records.

Whatever Grace's thoughts were, for the final sixteen years of his life, Jacques had balanced collecting trips against his pastoral duties. Members of his congregation were not immune to his obsession. Shearith Israel's oldest families, including the Philipsses, Gomezes, Noneses, and Judahs, all donated valuable relics to the growing collection. Jacques was nothing if not methodical. Precious items crossed his desk only to be tucked away in his vast notebooks: correspondence of Jews with George Washington, early circumcision registers, books of *slichot* from Suriname, as well as hundreds and hundreds of small scraps of writing. Although interested in Canada, the Caribbean, and other parts of the United States, Jacques's favorite topic was early New York, and every historian of the city's Jews henceforth would be indebted to what he compiled. Eventually materials related to Jacques's role as minister of Shearith Israel would be sequestered in the congregation's archives, and his print library would be housed at what is now the Jewish Theological Seminary. But in 1908, the couple's three children specifically donated Jacques's manuscripts, newspaper clippings, scrapbooks, notebooks, and photographs to the American Jewish Historical Society, the country's oldest ethnic historical organization, which was also located at the Jewish Theological Seminary at the time. Five years and much work later, the papers would be published as the Lyons Collection.⁵

While most of the Lyons Collection relates to famous men in early Jewish communities, nestled in the albums are a few records by or about early Jewish women, typically in dialogue with the KKSJ (Kahal Kadosh Shearith Israel) synagogue. There is a 1796 note, for instance, from Mrs. G. Philips regarding her husband's punishment by the congregation, an

1819 letter from Grace's great-aunt Anne Seixas acknowledging a \$200 allowance, and a copy of a 1751 marriage contract between Haym Myers and Rachel Louzada. Also somewhat astonishingly, there is a list of girls who had attended the KCSI school in 1795. Most of New York's earliest Jewish records—those prior the 1770s—do not survive. Miraculously, of those that do, one of the very earliest is a small petition penned by Rachel Louzada's mother, Hannah, to Congregation Shearith Israel requesting financial aid on November 9, 1761 (fig. 12). Like many of Jacques's precious scraps, Hannah's letter provides a small window onto the everyday lives of Jewish women belonging to New York's first congregation. Unlike the records of Grace's family, however, this scrap offers a glimpse into the world of New York's Jewish poor.

Hannah Louzada writes:

Sir,

j [I]^o take the liberty to wright to yow now[.] j [I] think the at [that] is time for yow to get my Wenters [winter's] ase Provisions[.] likewise a little money to bay some Wood for the Wenter[.] j [I] would a Come down my self to feetchet [fetch it], but ben desebled[.] my legs heving swelds [swellings.] but j [I] hope ^{str} that at ensent [ancient proverb] not aut a sigt aut of mind [will apply to me.] sir[.] hier j [I] lay suffering for the [] want of wood and provisions[.] j [I] Remende sir your

Most humble servent

hanne Lezade

Remember My Love to your Espouse and the Reste of your familey

Hannah's letter is at once extraordinary and utterly mundane. Perhaps what is most obvious is that the fragment is from what was surely a complex life. It reflects a seemingly random moment in the life of a woman, who would most likely have been entirely forgotten had her letter not accidentally survived. What is not random, however, is the lack of evidence about Hannah herself. Texts by early American Jewish women are rare, and the records that do survive are often fragmentary. Their lives feel almost impossible to piece back together.

New Brunswick 9th Nov 1761

Sir

I take the liberty to write to you now I think
it is time for you to get my Winters ac-
provisions likewise a little money to buy some
Wood for the Winter I would a come down my
self to fetch it but ben. Depletted my legs being
swollen but I hope ⁱⁿ that it ends not out a fig
out of mind I trust I lay supping for thousands of
wood and provisions I Remend. Sir your

Most humble servant

Hanna Rezade

Remember My love to your spouse ^{Dea}
and the rest of your family ^{the disaction}
at the well the post

Fig. 12. "Application for assistance from Hanna[h] Louzada, New Brunswick, N.J.," Nov. 9, 1761. Papers of Jacques Judah Lyons, P-15. Courtesy of AJHS.

The fragmentary nature of Hannah's letter is a poignant reminder of the way in which archives resemble archeological sites. Museums tend to display only the best-preserved artifacts, even though fragments make up the majority of what is found during excavations. When I was doing archival research in Barbados in 2016, for example, I went by the synagogue complex, which was currently under renovation. One of the great discoveries revealed during the project was a set of luminous marble gravestones of leaders of the synagogue: men like Isaac de Piza Massiah the *shamash* (warden), Israel Abaddy the *hazzan* (synagogue official), and Aaron Pinheiro the "Ruler of our Congregation and a Merchant of this Island."⁷ The tombstones were exquisite, in nearly pristine condition, having lain under the floorboards of shops for over a century and a half. Less exquisite but much more numerous were the other debris uncovered by the nearby construction: hundreds of shards of blue-and-white pottery known as delftware, lying just beneath the topsoil.

Since at the time I was then busy tracing the lineage of a Jewish family who had begun their lives enslaved to other Jews, I was intrigued by these broken serving utensils, which surely had been touched by the hands of enslaved people. There were originally four houses in the synagogue compound, and I knew from synagogue records that several enslaved women either lived or worked in the complex. Most likely they had served people with these very plates. Yet, when I visited the archives in both Bridgetown and London, it was nearly impossible to find even the most basic information about the enslaved women who labored in the complex. Only the smallest shards of their lives were left.

From what objects did the fragments on the cemetery's floor come? Plates, cups, bowls? Maybe the dishes had once been used to serve elegant meals amidst silver and lace on a mahogany table in Bridgetown. Yet somehow their remains had ended up in a trash pit—broken either by accident or perhaps by the 1780 or 1831 hurricanes that toppled the houses in the complex. The fragments are symbols of the fabric of daily life, the things people typically think are not worth keeping.

Hannah Louzada's letter is like one of those sharp fragments. I could hunt and sift through the synagogue complex for weeks and never find the rest of the dish from which the one shard in my hand came. Likewise, we will probably never know all of Hannah's story—too many pieces are simply gone.

We can ask, though, what forces ruptured Hannah's life and broke it into pieces. Hannah was a poor woman asking for charity. Why was she impoverished, like so many Jewish widows of the time? To best

understand her life and the lives of average Jewish American women in the third quarter of the eighteenth century, we should reexamine her letter and consider four structural sources that splintered her life: poverty, education, laws, and mental illness. These four forces were not unique to Hannah but rather contributed to the gaps in the archive, that overwhelming lack of evidence about her and other early Jewish American women that scholars have noted. Silence is its own kind of evidence.

Women and Poverty

Petitions for charity played a decisive role in early American Jewish life. Jews have long placed a value on caring for their own, and giving *tzedakah* (charity) is considered an important mitzvah (obligation, good deed) that has the power to heal the soul and overturn negative decrees from heaven. Yet petitions for charity were also important because poverty was rampant among early American Jews. Early scholarship on colonial Jews written in the 1930s to 1970s often focused on “merchant princes”—men who ruled Jewish communities and wielded great power by virtue of their wealth and economic prowess. This makes sense: successful merchants left extensive records. The princes also exemplified the American dream, thereby creating a pleasing and usable past for later Jewish arrivals.⁸ Yet by the second half of the eighteenth century, most major Jewish communities in the Atlantic World were overwhelmed by caring for the poor. The Inquisition and natural disasters like the 1755 Lisbon earthquake had set Iberian refugees in motion. They were joined by Jews from Italian and German states fleeing war and hostilities and those from Eastern Europe escaping pogroms.

Their arrival meant that the vast majority of Jews even in “wealthy” communities like Amsterdam and London were predominantly poor. For the first two hundred years, only 4 to 7 percent of Amsterdam’s Sephardic community owned more than 2,250 guilders. Even this wealth was moderate (by way of contrast, Rembrandt’s house on Jodenbreestraat—only two blocks from the Portuguese Synagogue—cost 13,000 guilders in 1639). Sixty to 84 percent of Amsterdam’s Sephardim possessed less than 500 guilders, and 16 to 31 percent of congregants lay somewhere in between these two extremes of wealth and poverty. By the end of the eighteenth century, this middle group had shrunk further, swelling the ranks of the impoverished such that by 1780, 65 percent of the community was on poor relief. European centers solved the problem by giving poor Jews a one-way ticket to the colonies, thereby passing the problem along.⁹

Many congregations that were drowning in poor had singled out women as part of the problem. From 1740 to 1741, nearly half of Shearith Israel's budget went toward helping the poor, with women receiving the largest amount of aid and for the longest periods of time.¹⁰ This gendered trend reflected that of the feeder communities to the colonies. As early as 1619, Amsterdam's Portuguese Jewish community identified women as a substantial part of the burden posed by the poor.¹¹ Poor women, however, continued to flood into Jewish metropolises and quickly outnumbered men needing poor relief from synagogues. Widowed women had a particularly hard time escaping the circle of poverty.¹² By the eighteenth century, some Jewish congregations had specific *hevrot* (organizations) to help impoverished women, a development that would be reflected in the Americas in the rise of Jewish women's aid societies in the early nineteenth century.¹³

Not surprisingly, then, requests for money are one of three main types of writings by or about early Jewish American women. Most early records about these women were written by men. Typically, women appear in the minutes of synagogue boards in what I refer to as the "triangle of discontent": either they are mentioned in passing in association with life cycles; they have allegedly "misbehaved"; or (like Hannah) they are requesting charity. With the exception of weddings and marriage contracts, these records are almost all painful. The most common life event for which women are mentioned are death records. These records are all the more poignant when women die in childbirth or of diseases that today are easily preventable.¹⁴

Rarer but more fun to read about are moments of "misbehavior." Although these moments stand out to us because the perpetrators seem delightfully rebellious, they were clearly painful for those involved, as the instances are almost always recorded because the women were censured or punished. Two cases in point involve a bath attendant who allowed enslaved women to use the Surinamese or Barbadian *mikva'ot* (ritual baths)¹⁵ and Mrs. Gomes of Bridgetown, who grew tired of her aging husband and took to the town. When confronted by the synagogue board with how she had "disgraced" the community, "Mrs. Gomes came up and behaved in a most scandalous & indecent mann[er]" and declared she would continue to do whatever she wanted.¹⁶

Sadly, such instances of rebellion are few and far between. Although Laurel Thatcher Ulrich famously remarked, "Well-behaved women seldom make history,"¹⁷ in early Jewish communities, women *had* to "behave well" to get money to eat. Congregants often needed to prove formally or informally that they were "a deserving object of charity"—a category

that not only encompassed need but also moral worthiness.¹⁸ It was not enough to be old, infirm, or unable to work. One had to keep out of trouble, be of good standing in the synagogue, and stay away from vice. In London, for example, Sephardic women who received free medical attention needed to submit themselves to regulations regarding “order and good behavior.”¹⁹ Gaming or alcohol and tobacco use could lead to punishment by the *parnassim* (leaders) of the charitable institution.²⁰

Yet many women could not afford *not* to ask for help. Their petitions were often to cover the most basic of necessities. Mrs. Fonseca of Barbados, for example, pleaded for clothes for her son; Mrs. Abrams of New York requested funds to leave the colonies after her husband died; Hannah Louzada requested money to buy food and wood in order to survive a cold northeastern winter.²¹ They pleaded because women had extremely limited options for making money without losing social standing.²² While colonial American women might increase their fortune as storekeepers, actresses, or hoteliers, the most lucrative of these options was negatively correlated with the “womanly virtue” and the piety associated with white female privilege. Jewish widows whose husbands had run profitable businesses, like Esther Pinheiro, Esther Brown, Rachel Luis, Simja De Torres, and Rebecca Gomez, were often able to prosper.²³ Those whose husbands had failed to thrive had less to build on after their husbands’ deaths. Hannah, for example, appears to have kept a store, but was unsuccessful and had to request funds from Shearith Israel to pull herself out of debt.²⁴ Cut out of colonial economies, women’s pleading relied on ritual abasement to powerful men.

Hannah’s letter only exists because of how charity worked in early America. Although the poor could often receive a pension from state and local governments, it rarely was enough to live on. Those who could not get by on the pension had two options. Prior to the 1730s, the poor were commonly cared for in the homes of their neighbors, with Jews caring for other Jews. Economic depressions, surges of poor immigrants, and outbreaks of measles and smallpox had changed the “in care model.”²⁵ Starting in 1734, New York City ran an almshouse adjacent to the city common, with shelter for the “deserving poor” and a workhouse for the “unworthy” (figs. 13 and 14). Yet even the deserving were expected to work if able, performing tasks such as “sewing, spinning, laundering, cooking, baking, caring for orphans, or picking oakum in return for food, clothing, and shelter.”²⁶ Collecting oakum was a terrible task that involved “picking apart old salt and tar incrustated ship lines so that hemp fibers could be then sold and used for calking in ships.”²⁷ It was a recipe

for painfully cracked, raw hands. Although there has been heated debate about just how bad the new institutions were, at least some scholars have suggested they represented a “new, more mean-spirited attitude” toward the poor, which many found “intolerable.”²⁸ Those who set up such institutions clearly saw them as places for those of extremely low social standing; one colonist described an almshouse as “a sort of calaboose [jail] for unruly slaves.”²⁹ New Brunswick was hardly any better; the poor were officially at the mercy of the town, and poor women could expect their children to be taken from them and apprenticed.³⁰

Those who could not get by on city pensions alone but still wanted to escape the indignity of the almshouse or workhouse needed to supplement their payments with firewood, food, or extra stipends from the congregations to which they belonged.³¹ For Hannah, this meant she would

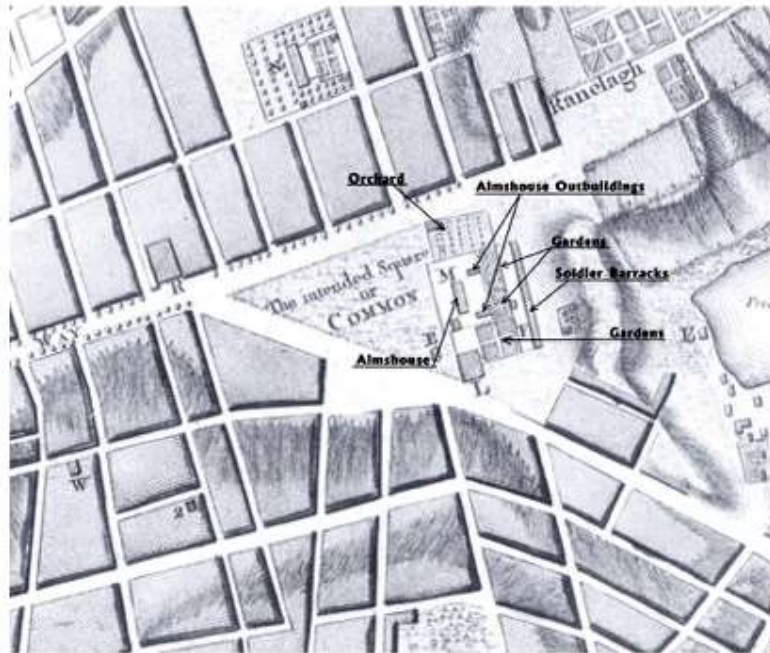


Fig. 13. Site of the New York City almshouse on John Montresor's *Plan of the City of New-York*, 1775. Based on Sherene Baugher, "Visible Charity: The Archaeology, Material Culture, and Landscape Design of New York City's Municipal Almshouse Complex, 1736–1797," *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 5, no. 2 (2001): 182.



Fig. 14. David Grim, *New York City Almshouse, 1722–44* (1813). From Stokes, *The Iconography of Manhattan Island, 1498–1900* (New York: Robert H. Dodd, 1915), vol. 1, plate 32a.

need to rely on the good graces of the Jewish community. Back when New York was New Amsterdam, the West India Company had made it clear that Jews could immigrate only so long as “the poor among them [the Jews] shall not become a burden to the Company or the community, but be supported by their own [Jewish] nation.”³² As there were no Jewish congregations in New Jersey at the time,³³ Hannah applied for assistance to the closest synagogue, of which her husband and brother-in-law had both been members.

Hannah’s application is an important reminder that Jewish communities did not adhere to colonial boundaries but rather encompassed people who flowed into surrounding areas. From Shearith Israel’s point of view, Hannah was a member of the New York Jewish community and, as such, was their responsibility. Remaining a member of nearby congregations was important not only because synagogues provided essentials like matzah for Passover and kosher meat but also because synagogue membership functioned as a sort of “insurance” of the day. Since her

husband had been a member of the congregation, Hannah should have been virtually guaranteed the right to a pension for reasons of poverty, old age, or illness. Indeed, she was given a grant in 1756 after her husband died and then remained on Shearith Israel's pension rolls at least as late as 1774.³⁴ By 1770 she was living in New York.³⁵ The letter from 1761 has her making a request for her "usual grant." Yet she still feels the need to argue her case of poverty, illness, and age using the language of supplication.

A supplicant is a fervently religious person who prays to God for help with her problems, but the term can also refer to someone who respectfully makes a humble plea to a person in power or authority.³⁶ In her letter, Hannah made sure to present herself as both. "I *take the liberty* to wright to yow," Hannah opens, as if she did not rest secure in the synagogue board's benevolence.³⁷ Likewise, she ends her letter with a colonial formula that underscores her subordinate status: "[I] remende sir your most humble servant." In making these gestures, Hannah relied upon eighteenth-century norms for letter writing. Although scholars have tended to focus on how the "middling sort" used the rules and conventions of letter writing to "pursue their claims to social refinement and upward mobility," letter writing was also necessary for the lower classes or those like Hannah who had fallen into poverty.³⁸ Even impoverished youths attending Eleazar Wheelock's "Indian School" (Moor's Charity School) in Lebanon, Connecticut, in the 1760s and 1770s were "schooled" in the art of proper letter writing.³⁹

Both Jews and non-Jews in eighteenth-century America paid close attention to the marks of social deference when responding to charitable gifts from religious bodies. While signing a letter "your humble servant" or "your obedient servant" was to a certain extent a cliché, it was also an important means by which "inferiors signified their dependence on their Superior."⁴⁰ Polite eighteenth-century letters called attention to the social debt owed to those in power in ways that later generations might find painful. A case in point: in addition to signing her epistles "Your Most Obedient and Very Humble Servant," Montauk Indian Mary Occom wrote to Minister Eleazar Wheelock that it is "with Joy to hear that my Son has behaved himself so well" and thanked the minister "for taking so hard a task upon yourself as to take such a vile Creature as he was into your Care."⁴¹ Eighteenth-century ministers in the northeastern colonies understood such self-abasement to be *positive* indicators of the "appropriate" humility the poor should display before God and his congregations.⁴²

Minutes of various colonial synagogue boards similarly implied that

the worthy poor should be grateful when receiving an *obra pia* (charitable gift). Moreover, synagogue boards assumed the poor's appreciation would be enduring. One board, for instance, railed against a man who was "so intoxicated with prosperity as to forget that he ever felt the chill gripe of Penury, and . . . is now ungrateful to God and Man."⁴³ Future wealth did not end the need for gratitude, it only reshaped it as an obligation to contribute to synagogue funds. At least one early Jewish congregation underscored that the *private* nature of religious charity magnified the debt the poor should feel.⁴⁴ Importantly, Hannah calls attention to her subordinate position in both her salutation and her valediction.

But being humble and grateful was not enough: Hannah also underscores her suffering. By including physical laments in her petition, Hannah accentuates her needs and aligns herself with the "deserving" poor. Analyses of English pauper letters have sometimes focused on how the poor failed to achieve the refined "schooled English" of the upper and middle classes by focusing on the poor's use of monosyllabic words, inadequate punctuation, Anglo-Saxon lexis, and clause tone groups (rather than sentences) as the major discourse units.⁴⁵ To be sure, Hannah's letter shares these attributes. Yet focusing on Hannah's linguistic flaws underplays the letter's rhetorical cleverness. Historian Claire Schen notes that the "men and women who beseeched parishes for relief sought to emphasize their genuine need by weaving 'true' stories of suffering . . . in[to] their accounts."⁴⁶ Such suffering aligned their bodies with biblical models like Job, who stood at the nexus of suffering, humility, and redemption.⁴⁷ We see this strategy at work in Hannah's letter when she reminds her reader that she is "desebled, my legs heving swelds." She also calls attention to how feeble she is: she is decrepit and lies "suffering for the want of wood and provisions." Hannah seems extremely aware that the synagogue board was more likely to fund the infirm, aged, and sick, and she presents herself as worthy of their attention.

Hannah's abasement was not all show. Women could not be elected to synagogue boards that distributed funds, and prior to the 1820s they did not play central roles in organized charities aimed at women and orphans. As someone dependent upon the congregation, Hannah lost much of the agency over her life. In 1756, for example, the congregation voted to help support her and her youngest son, Benjamin, but also "Resolved that Mrs. Hanah Louzada should be dispatched to Lancaster & her son Benja: should be maintain'd here [in New York] by the Congregation."⁴⁸ They could either starve together or live apart. Receiving charity shaped Hannah's life and the way she wrote.

Charity is the reason for Hannah's letter, but it also points to a structural reason our understanding of early Jewish women in New York is so fragmented. Although stylized in its pleas, Hannah's letter reflects real disparities in power between men and women and between those with and without means. Most impoverished early American Jews appear in synagogue records *only* when soliciting or receiving funds, the rest of their lives vanishing under the stigma of poverty. Yet the letter's survival is also surprising. Synagogues rarely held on to petitions written by the poor themselves, preferring instead to summarize the requests in board minutes.⁴⁹ Even board minutes got lost. Although Lyons was a dedicated collector of Shearith Israel's minute books, the first he found was numbered twenty-five, suggesting twenty-four earlier volumes had been misplaced or destroyed over time, though one would miraculously later turn up in London.⁵⁰ In this context, Hannah's letter is fairly phenomenal, a lone voice representing the hundreds of pleas now lost.

Perhaps its survival was due to the one rhetorical ploy Hannah made that I have not yet discussed: affection. In her postscript, Hannah asks that the unnamed Sir "Remeber My Love to your Espowse and the Reste of your family," suggesting the families had once been close. Perhaps this is why the synagogue official who catalogued the letter under "accounts" decided to keep this scrap written by the woman he apparently knew better as Anne (fig. 15). In the end, Hannah's petitions for charity seem to have been successful in keeping her out of the almshouse, which started keeping track of arrivals and departures in 1758. Although the records are sketchy for the period before the Revolutionary War, Hannah's name does not appear.⁵¹



Fig. 15. Detail of verso, "Application for assistance from Hanna[h] Louzada, New Brunswick, N.J.," Nov. 9, 1761. Papers of Jacques Judah Lyons, P-15. Courtesy of AJHS.

Women and Education

Just as Hannah's letter showcases how charity disenfranchised Jewish women's voices, so too it calls attention to the role education played in creating the silences of early Jewish American women in the archives. Hannah's letter is "unschooled" in ways that resemble non-Jewish paupers' letters but arises out of a more distinctly Jewish—and Sephardic—history.

As I noted before, Hannah's letter uses an "open" rather than "schooled" form of English typical of other paupers' letters. Whereas refined or schooled English had been passed on for centuries "from master to apprentice in a scriptorium or printing workshop, or from teacher to pupil in a school or drawing room, using books as authority for what might be called 'best practice,'" open (or nonstandard) English was "free of Schooling but Open to other influences."⁵² As one reader put it, Hannah writes in "phonetic and almost unintelligible English."⁵³ More specifically, her letter favors monosyllables, has no punctuation, rarely relies on Latinate vocabulary, and lacks the kind of sentence construction favored in elite eighteenth-century education. We see this in charming phrases like "j would a Come down my self to feetchet." Yet strangely her handwriting is actually quite lovely and fluid, differing markedly from the letters of other English paupers of the era, who often had to erase and start words again.⁵⁴ I would argue that Hannah's language was shaped by her not being a native speaker. The first hint of her linguistic history comes from her signature (fig. 16).

The curlicue under her name has a special name: *rúbrica*, meaning "flourish." It was an essential part of official signatures in Iberia and the Spanish colonies, such that a signature without a *rúbrica* was deemed less

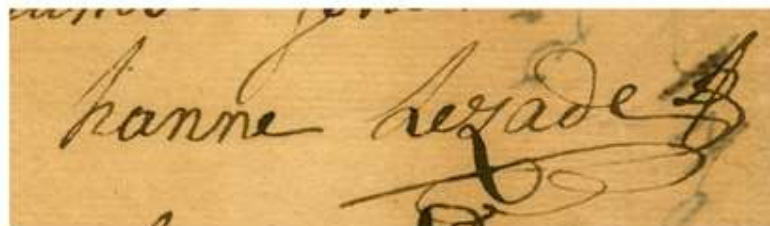


Fig. 16. Signature from "Application for assistance from Hanna[h] Louzada, New Brunswick, N.J.," Nov. 9, 1761. Papers of Jacques Judah Lyons, P-15. Courtesy of AJHS.

authentic than a *rúbrica* alone. Those who could not sign their names used a *rúbrica* instead.⁵⁵ The *rúbrica* underneath a name was also typical of signatures of Sephardim who learned to write in Spanish and Portuguese during this era, though it was sometimes passed down for a generation or two after leaving Iberia.

More evidence that English was not Hannah's first language comes from other surviving letters. In the 1770s, Hannah wrote two more surviving petitions, both addressed to Aaron Lopez, one of the wealthiest Jews in early America. The first of these she wrote in the elegant baroque Spanish that was typical of Spanish and Portuguese Jews of the era. Once again, the letter's longevity is due largely to the fluke of a nineteenth-century male collector, in this case George G. Champlin (1862–1937), a librarian who created an autograph collection that he later donated to the New York State Library (figs. 17 and 18).⁵⁶ Ironically, the letter most likely caught Champlin's eye because of her famous addressee, Aaron Lopez.

In many ways the 1770 letter from New York is familiar, as it uses the same rhetorical ploys Hannah used a decade earlier in English: she is old (seventy and some years old at this point) and greatly in need (she owes money to a doctor and for rent). Lopez, in contrast, is powerful and good. Not only is his family noble, but his character is stellar: "I have heard of your good reputation, and that you were Father of the poor and a Good Jew." His heights and her worthiness are emphasized through her ritual abasement. Once again she "dares" to write him (*tomo el atribimiento de Escribirlo*). Her valediction repeats her subservience by signing off "Your Servant who kisses your hands" (*Servidora de vmd Q.S.M.B. [Que Sus Manos Besa]*). She positions herself as devout—while simultaneously reminding Lopez of his religious obligations—by repeatedly emphasizing that it is God who will move Lopez to perform charity. These are the same strategies that appear in her English epistle.

Yet linguistically the letter presents us with a Hannah we have not previously met: one schooled in the arts of baroque Spanish. To be sure, the letter has some marks of hesitance or poverty. The letter is not just missing pieces along the edges, it has errors that are crossed out and rewritten, as if the piece of paper was too precious to waste. Letters are likewise inscribed above the line, suggesting time and care put into rereading and correcting—mementos of the anxiety over what was at stake. While critics have suggested that such moments are typical of the "unschooled" poor, Hannah's use of Spanish is anything but uneducated.⁵⁷

First, it is worth noting Hannah need not have written to Lopez in

Amigo y Sr. Sr. Sr. Lopez New York de Mayo
1770

Don Benito Permita q' las siglas hallen a un
grande fabel Valud en Compasillo de toda su noble
familia; En quien me recomiendo mucho y de
aun q' no somos conocidos, le dire a un quien
soy, y de que familia, y me llamo Han-
Louzada muge de Mosé Louzada, q' es
y suegra de Haim Myers, el que opo
Tiempo ~~estaba~~ ^{estaba} en Rodisland, 110 años
muge, y en Siega the setenta y tantos años
y muy pobre y endeudada por henda de
y tambien aun Dotor p' averme ayudad
en mis enfermedades el qual me quiere tribu-
tar como padre de pobres y Buen judío
espero q' no me dejara faltar de lo q' es
involuntare en su Buen Coracon ayudar
pues q' lo soy o pique de perder el poco theatro
q' tengo, y como he oydo Buena fama de
uñ q' para Padre de pobres como ~~lo~~
el atribimiento de escribirle espero q' no sea
en valde, lo lo q' me ofrese p' guarder a un
por mucho y la ga a un no lo n muy tos lumentes

Fig. 17. Letter from Hannah Louzada to Aaron Lopez, 1770, p. 1.
Champlin Collection of Autographs, no. 596, NYSL.

Spanish. She could clearly write in English, and while Lopez was born in Portugal, he maintained an extensive correspondence in English. Even his own children wrote to him in English. Indeed, Lopez's only correspondents who wrote to him in Spanish and Portuguese were other immigrants—Jews who were born like him in Iberia, such as his cousin James Lucena, or in non-English-speaking Sephardic communities, such as Rabbi Isaac Carigal.⁵⁸ Hannah's use of Spanish, then, functions as a deliberate, rhetorical plea. It stresses kinship: she, like Lopez, is a member

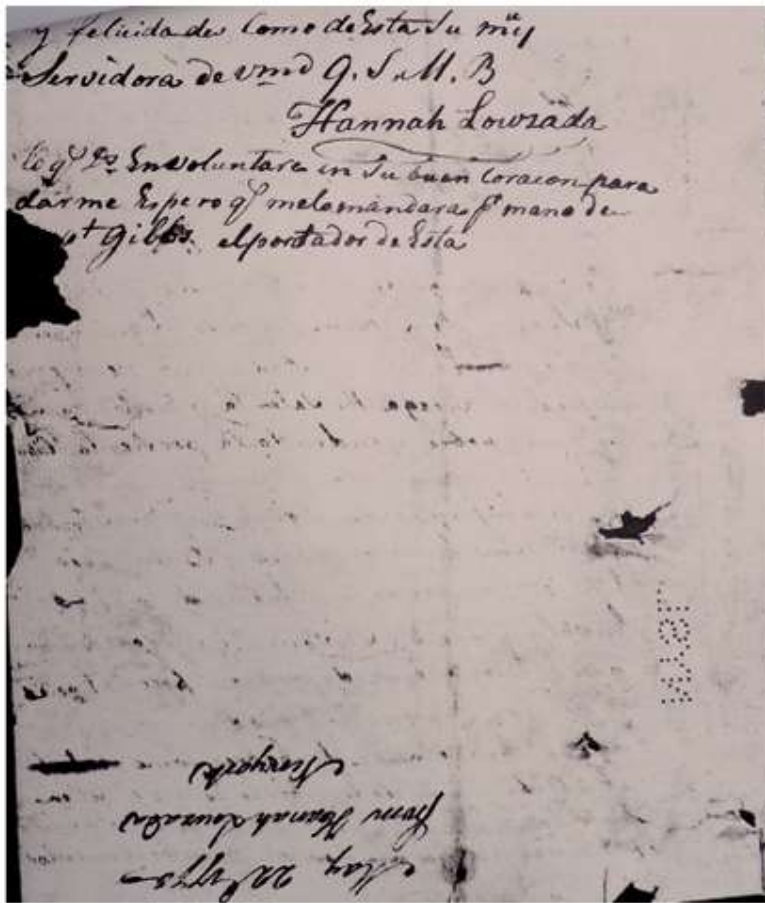


Fig. 18. Letter from Hannah Louzada to Aaron Lopez, 1770, p. 2.
Champlin Collection of Autographs, no. 596, NYSL.

of the *nação*, Jews of the Portuguese nation. Hannah further underscores this affinity in her opening by saying she will tell him something of her family and that she is “Hannah Louzada, wife of Moses Louzada” (*han[na] Louzada muge[r] de Mose Lowzada*). Furthermore, by writing in Spanish, she makes clear that she is a *nação* by birth rather than merely by marriage, a distinction that carried great weight, as some Western Sephardic communities demoted members who married Ashkenazim during this era.⁵⁰ Hannah’s use of Spanish provides us with valuable information

about her life history. Not only do we learn for the first time that she was born sometime between 1690 and 1700, as she is seventy something years old (*setenta y tantos annos*), but also that she was most likely born in Iberia.

She also appears to have been educated there, for unlike her English, Hannah's Spanish reveals many of the inflections of "schooled" discourse proper to elite Spanish education during the eighteenth century. First and foremost, her Spanish style reveals the impact of Iberian letter-writing manuals. As historian Rebecca Earle notes, "Writing to a new correspondent . . . involved a complicated series of etiquettes."⁶⁰ Hannah negotiates these etiquettes through formulas such as the *Servidora de vmd Q.S.M.B.* with which she closes her letter. In one of the most popular letter-writing primers, *Manual de escribientes* (1574), Antonio de Torquemada "devoted nearly 20 percent of the entire discussion of letter-writing to the art of choosing the correct salutation and closing."⁶¹ Hannah had either read manuals such as Torquemada's or was trained by those who had.

Second, while Hannah's English is monosyllabic, lacking punctuation, and without the touches of neoclassicism favored during the era, her Spanish is the opposite. It is formal and graceful and punctuated by abbreviations that show a remarkable fluency. We see all three of these elements in her opening, in which she prays, "May God grant that these lines find you enjoying perfect health" (*D' [Dios] Bendito Permita q' [que] Estas Reglas hallen a vmd gozand[o] Cabal Salud*). The phrases are melodious as well as elegant, with three pairings of end or beginning rhymes: *Bendito Permita; Estas Reglas; Cabal Salud*. Hannah's letter also shows the marks of a native speaker, as in the substitution of *Biega* for *viega*.⁶² Using Spanish rather than Portuguese might suggest that Hannah was born in a city in Spain, such as Seville, which was known for its large population of *nação*.⁶³ However, since elegant Spanish was a mainstay of elite Portuguese education during this era as well, she might equally likely have been born in Portugal and been trying to impress upon Lopez her high origins.⁶⁴ What her Spanish does suggest, however, is that she chose to represent herself linguistically as a woman of quality who had fallen on hard times.

Sadly, the appeal does not seem to have worked, as on July 26, 1770, Hannah wrote to Lopez again from New York, this time in English. She returned to key themes from her previous English plea to Shearith Israel: subservience, age, infirmness. Necessity drives her to write, she explains. So does fear. She is "unable to do anny thing for my self," and yet "Quarter day" (when her rent was due) was rapidly approaching. Her

friends have “helped” her, but it was not enough. For the first time, we see Hannah invoke the bonds of sympathy outright: “I hope your heart,” she writes, “which is Naturally tender will be moved with Kind Compassion for a Poor Fellow Creature who is laboring under great distress.”⁶⁵ It is unclear if the new plea worked and if Lopez came to her aid.⁶⁶ It would be the last letter she wrote that was saved by collectors.

The third piece of evidence about Hannah’s education comes earlier, from 1750 when she had to help make an inventory of her husband’s estate. Hannah’s first known signature is in Hebrew, which the court reporter seems not to have recognized as writing and hence put as “her mark” and translated for her (fig. 19). She similarly signed the court’s form in Hebrew (fig. 20).

Hannah’s Hebrew signature is interesting for several reasons. First, it suggests that she identified strongly as Jewish, so much so that she signed

A photograph of a handwritten document. At the top, it says "1750 September 17". Below that, in Hebrew, is "חנה לוזאדה" (Hannah Louzada). Underneath the Hebrew name, the word "mark" is written in cursive.

Fig. 19. Signature of Hannah Louzada in Hebrew, estate inventory of Moses Louzada, filed Oct. 10, 1750. County of Middlesex, New Jersey. Photocopy AJA.

A photograph of a handwritten document. At the top, in Hebrew, is "חנה לוזאדה" (Hannah Louzada). Below that, the name "Hannah Louzada" is written in cursive.

Fig. 20. Signature of Hannah Louzada in Hebrew, court's form in estate inventory of Moses Louzada, filed Oct. 10, 1750. County of Middlesex, New Jersey. Photocopy AJA.

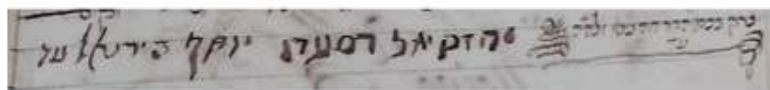


Fig. 21. Groom's and witnesses' signatures from the *ketubah* of Jehezquel Sehadya and Ribca Lealtad, September 30, 1734 (14 Tishri 5495), London. Bevis Marks *ketubah* registers, V. 116, LMA/4521/A/02/03/005, LMA.

her name in Hebrew rather than the Roman alphabet, at least when faced with non-Jews who would not judge her handwriting. When compared to signatures on Western Sephardic *ketubot* (marriage contracts) from London from the second half of the eighteenth century, Hannah's signature falls midway between those who could not sign in Hebrew at all and those who were very well educated and signed their names in elegant Rashi script (fig. 21). While her *nun* conforms to the Sephardic Solitreo script, her *heh* resembles block lettering more than Rashi or Solitreo.

Thus, like the bridegroom Jehezquel Sehadya who writes in a mixture of block and Rashi script (fig. 21), Hannah's signature suggests a rudimentary Hebrew education typical either of those too poor to attend school for much time or of first-generation Iberian immigrants who arrived in London, Amsterdam, or Hamburg at an age when their schooling had already substantially begun (but was not complete). Hannah's expertise in Spanish suggests the latter scenario. Thus, while Hannah and Moses's *ketubah* has not been located (suggesting a colonial marriage), it is reasonable to assume Hannah came from one of the main Western Sephardic feeder communities to the colonies when she was between eight and twelve years of age, that is, somewhere between 1705 and 1711, depending on her date of birth. After arrival, she appears to have received a rudimentary Hebrew education, perhaps one that focused more on reading than writing.

Taken as a whole, Hannah's letters and signatures suggest English was most likely her third written language. By the 1770s, when her last letter was written, Hannah had become more comfortable with English but never completely fluent. However, Hannah was not the only early Jewish American woman who was not fluent in the authoritative language of the colony in which she lived. There was no public education in colonial America, and women were less likely to be educated in the language of business.⁶⁷ This lack of schooling was a problem encountered by other Sephardic women throughout the Americas. We find, for

example, Jewish men in Suriname complaining that many Sephardic women spoke the Afro-Surinamese creole language of Sranan and could not read or write Dutch at all; they were forced to sign wills with an *X*.⁶⁸ Likewise, when Sara Pardo and Abraham Andrade carried on an illicit love affair in Curaçao in 1775, Sara wrote her letters in the local creole language known today as Papiamentu but referred to in colonial sources as *creoles taal* or *Portugeese neegers spraak* (Portuguese Negro speech), a dialect that Dutch authorities had to pay to have translated for the official records.⁶⁹ Non-elite Jewish women's lack of literacy in the language of colonial authority and business made it harder for them to support themselves. It also made it harder to create documents that were likely to be preserved. This pattern did not begin to change until the nineteenth century, when public education became available.⁷⁰

Women, Property, and Colonial Laws

Just as charity and education disenfranchised colonial Jewish women, so too laws regarding property rights provided a third structural issue that led to petitions for *tzedakah* like Hannah's being so rampant. British common law about coverture meant that upon marriage, all of a woman's movable property, as well as cash brought to the marriage, inherited, or earned, belonged to her husband. Moreover, she could not make any contract—or even a will—without his permission.⁷¹ Although Jewish women who married with a *ketubah* were guaranteed the money they brought into the marriage, the contracts did not always seem to trump local laws.⁷² When a woman married in the colonies, all of her property belonged to her husband. Indeed, this was true in New Brunswick until 1852, when a statute guaranteed that married women could continue to own any property they brought to a marriage.⁷³

Certainly Hannah's husband, Moses, could have written a will that left some of his money to her. Hannah's sister-in-law Blume, for example, inherited £200 and the use of her husband's real and personal estate to bring up their children.⁷⁴ Unfortunately Moses did not have the foresight to write a will. This oversight was not all that atypical. People often died unexpectedly of sudden illness. Moreover, it cost money to have a will written and witnessed, and most people could not afford it.⁷⁵ Had Hannah lived in West Jersey, a 1676 law would have guaranteed that, as a widow, she would receive a third of her husband's estate, even if he died intestate.⁷⁶ Hannah's husband died, however, in East Jersey. Thus, like

residents in most British colonies before the revolution, she was subject to English law and custom. Based on primogeniture, these laws held that if an individual died intestate, all his estate devolved on his eldest (legitimate) son.⁷⁷ His widow and younger children did not receive a penny.

This law had horrible repercussions for Jewish women like Hannah. Prior to her husband's death, she had been reasonably well off. Like Cora Wilburn nearly a century later, who would write from firsthand experience about "Jewish Women Without Money," Hannah's poverty affected someone who had once been used to a full stomach; yet, unlike Cora, Hannah was not so "genteel" that she was afraid to beg for food after her fall.⁷⁸ The estate inventory of Hannah's husband indicates a distinctly middle-class existence: among his items were nineteen pewter plates, a mahogany desk, a chest of drawers, a looking glass, twelve common chairs, a table, curtains, three feather beds with sundry sheets, and a wide range of food provisions. He also owned two enslaved people—a woman named Jenny and a man named Tom.

Owning enslaved people was not unusual. Slavery was not abolished in New Jersey until 1804, and even then emancipation was only gradual.⁷⁹ Little is known about Jenny and Tom, but it is possible they were born in New Jersey, as many enslaved people were by the second half of the eighteenth century. Enslaved men and women in New Jersey were asked to do a wide range of skilled and unskilled work. It is unclear what happened to either Jenny or Tom after Moses's death, though Jenny was possibly sold north into Canada by Hannah's son-in-law, Haym Myers.⁸⁰ Owning enslaved people meant Hannah was used to having help both with housework and manual labor.⁸¹ Moses's whole estate was valued at over £240.⁸² Had Hannah inherited even a widow's third, she would have been at least not completely impoverished. Alternatively, this fate would have been avoided if she could have relied upon her oldest son's affection to support her in her poverty. Unfortunately, however, her oldest son, Jacob, had been declared insane.

Jews and Mental Illness in Early America

This leads me to the fourth issue that fragmented Hannah's life. Hannah's oldest son's mental illness had a devastating impact on her life as the family struggled to care for him, declare him incompetent, and regain access to the house, furniture, and belongings that Hannah would have once thought of as her own.⁸³ While today the role Jacob Louzada

played in his mother's poverty may seem like random bad luck, mental illness was on the rise during this era. Was it a particular problem, though, for early American Jews?

Although we do not know the particulars of Jacob's case, at least one author has noticed what seems to be a "disturbing pattern of insanity" among early American Jews, conveniently listed by Malcolm Stern in his monumental *First American Jewish Families: 600 Genealogies, 1654–1977* (fig. 22).⁸⁴ Dr. Stern's propensity to mark individuals as "insane" seems "to verge on the libelous."⁸⁵ Later scholars' reticence in addressing Stern's findings is not without reason: during the very era Stern covers, anti-Semitic discourse—and even some assimilated Jews—equated Jewishness with illness.⁸⁶ By the late nineteenth century, anti-Semites depicted Jews as an "essentially 'ill' people and labeled the origins of that illness as incest/inbreeding. . . . The illness dominating the discourse of the anti-Semitic science was madness, and its origin was in the 'dangerous' marriages of the Jews: their refusal to marry beyond the inner group . . . even when such 'inbreeding' was not consanguineous."⁸⁷ Concerns about reinforcing anti-Semitic stereotypes may have led scholars to neglect Stern's annotations as a resource in their analyses.

So, how should we understand Stern's annotations? For example, even if we reject Jewish endogamy as a source of mental illness among Jews, could the extremely small pool of possible Jewish spouses in the colonies and the legacy of cousin and uncle-aunt marriages caused by the Inquisition be to blame?⁸⁸ To be sure, Iberian refugees from families who had

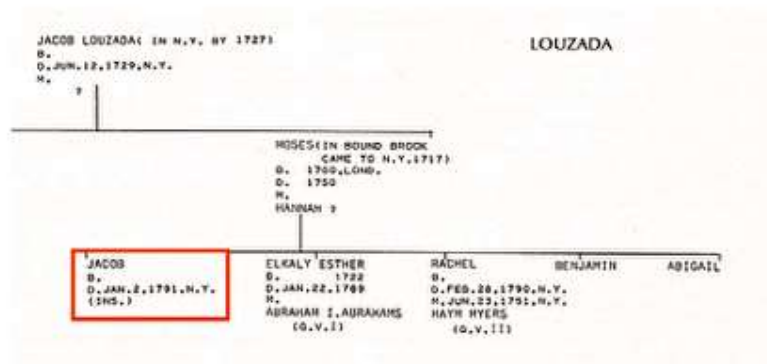


Fig. 22. Detail of Stern's Louzada family tree, with Jacob marked as "Ins[ane]." From Malcolm H. Stern, *First American Jewish Families: 600 Genealogies, 1654–1977* (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, 1978), 179.

maintained Jewish practices in secret had often married close relations in order to ensure that the offspring would have Jewish bloodlines and to confirm that both parties were sympathetic to Crypto-Judaism, which, if revealed to the Inquisition, could result in death. Other “New Christian” families had married kin because of Iberian prejudice against Jewish ancestry. Moreover, some “New Christians” deliberately married relations in order to safely maintain Crypto-Jewish traditions or Jewish bloodlines. As a result, uncle-niece and cousin marriages were common.⁸⁹ Many Sephardic Jews came to the Americas married to close relations: marriages of uncles and nieces were so common that Rhode Island’s incest laws had an exception for Jewish marriages.⁹⁰ Hannah was of the generation of Sephardic American Jews who had come in waves of clandestine immigration directly from Iberia in the 1720s to 1750s. Thus, while we do not know her ancestry, it is more likely than not that she was related in some way to her husband. Might this be behind Jacob’s problems?

Perhaps. But when we compare Jewish rates of “insanity” in early America with other populations, we find Jews were no more likely to be declared mentally ill than anyone else. Today mental illness impacts roughly one in five adults in the United States, and some scholars have suggested Americans are “less often insane or seriously disturbed” in 2000 than in early America.⁹¹ Yet, of Stern’s six hundred early Jewish families that span from the colonial period to the present, only twelve had a person *at any time* who was either insane or committed suicide. Committing suicide was only twice as common as dying in a duel, and a person was three times more likely to drown than die by their own hand. Moreover, drowning was more likely to “run in families” than either “insanity” or suicide, even if one sets aside the incidents in which multiple family members died in the same shipwreck.⁹²

All this suggests that Jews were not disproportionately prone to mental illness during this era, and that, in fact, Stern’s data most likely greatly underrepresents what we would consider incidents of mental instability today. Stern indicates suicide or “insanity” only when it is noted in the records, typically because of a court case or questions at the time of burial. As one scholar notes, “To get officially noticed as insane . . . people had to act bizarrely or repeatedly endanger lives.”⁹³ Even then, others—typically family or neighbors—had to testify that the person was “delusional, violent, and, perhaps most critically, unable to manage his or her normal affairs.”⁹⁴ People who were mentally disabled but did not become a public burden were unlikely to have been noted.

Recent genetic studies also suggest that we should interpret Stern's annotations with caution. Geneticists have found that the actual risks of consanguineous marriages (such as between cousins) vary tremendously.⁹⁵ While nineteenth-century scientists were more likely to ascribe "madness" to "inbreeding," today's genetic studies are more likely to focus on genetic mutations causing inherited diseases or mental disabilities, such as "remarkably low intellectual functioning."⁹⁶ This shift in designation says as much about changing visions of "insanity" between the nineteenth century and today as it does about advances in genetics as a science.

We might also question what exactly either Stern or the colonial records meant when they deemed an individual such as Jacob Louzada "insane." Colonial designations of mental illness varied considerably and encompassed a wide range of issues. Other than "insane," commonly used terms and phrases were "crazy," "distempered," "distracted," "crazy brained," "out of their wits," "deluded," "overcome with melancholy," "not in his right mind," "completely bereft of his senses," and "one part off the moon," the latter echoing the equation of "lunatics" with the moon.⁹⁷ Yet also included in the insane category were people who were "simple" or "idiots"—people deemed "too dumb" to manage their own affairs.⁹⁸ Other problems that we would rarely today associate with mental illness were often conflated with insanity during this era, including epilepsy, "vice" (women's nonreproductive sexual activity), and substance abuse.⁹⁹ Gender bias in determining who was insane may explain why women were twice as likely to be placed in this category in Stern's records.¹⁰⁰ Poverty, class, marital status (all but one of Stern's "insane" were single),¹⁰¹ and ethnicity all made one more vulnerable to being labelled mentally ill. Moreover, the "cosmic loneliness" of life in the colonies, widespread alcoholism fed by diluting water with spirits to prevent disease, and chronic pain were as much to blame as anything else.¹⁰²

Though Jews did not suffer mental illness more than other people and "insanity" covered a wide range of issues, the problems that confronted the afflicted and their families still had a detrimental impact on the Jewish poor. Because state and local communities only stepped in to help when "insane" people were a danger to themselves or their families could not care for them, "insanity" disproportionately impacted families like the Louzadas, who lacked resources. Indeed, while some things improved for Sephardic Jews when they migrated to North America, care for the mentally ill was not one of them. Early modern Iberia had a well-developed support system for people—and their families—grappling

with mental illness. There were a large number of institutions specifically dedicated to caring for the mentally ill, who were distinguished from the poor and infirm.¹⁰³ The mentally ill had a privileged place in both "Catholic theological teaching on charity . . . and in reform programs."¹⁰⁴ Insanity also may have worked to the advantage of certain crypto-Jews: more than a hundred trial transcripts from Inquisition records include defendants "who either pled insanity or for whom insanity was alleged."¹⁰⁵ To be sure, being deemed insane was not a free ride: "a determination of *locura* (madness) by any judicial or civil authority was grounds for economic dispossession, annulment of marriage, and prohibition of exercise of a trade."¹⁰⁶ Nonetheless, it could save a person's life.

Given the extensive support system for mental illness in Iberia, the treatment of mental illness in the British colonies must have struck Sephardic refugees as debilitating. Unlike Spain, which opened its first insane asylum in 1419,¹⁰⁷ the first "freestanding hospital [built] for the insane" in the colonies that would become the United States did not open until 1770,¹⁰⁸ twenty years too late to help Hannah with her inheritance issues. Before then, communities were legally responsible for their own mentally ill, but only if the afflicted had no relatives or property. Many early American Jews with means cared for their mentally ill relatives at home, a trend which may account for their not appearing in court and legal records as "insane." Harmon Hendricks's sister Sally, for example, who suffered from "a very unsettled disposition," spent her life "shuffled back and forth between relatives, none of whom was ever particularly overjoyed to see her."¹⁰⁹

However, if like Jacob Louzada those who were deemed mentally ill (rather than their relatives) had inherited a home and all its belongings, their money was managed by the town's selectmen and was used to pay all the expenses the "insane" person incurred. The town would not assume fiscal responsibility until all of the inheritance had been depleted.¹¹⁰ Even then, towns often dealt with the problem by running the mentally ill person out of town so that they would become someone else's problem.¹¹¹

In Jacob's case, his family attempted to gain control of the estate in 1762 by making his brother-in-law, Haym Myers, Jacob's legal guardian. This ploy only held for a couple of years before Jacob came of age, vacated the ruling, and took full possession of the estate.¹¹² Whatever the nature of his illness, it did not hinder his ability eventually to prosper. When the Revolutionary War broke out, Jacob sided with the British, serving as the master of the ship *Pool(e)* and overseeing four men.¹¹³ As

the revolutionary forces took New Jersey, however, Jacob was forced to flee the family's homestead, first to New York and then Nova Scotia. The property had flourished since his father's death. There were eighty-eight acres and a couple of "goodly dwelling houses," valued at roughly £880, with furniture adding another £68 4s. In the end it was for naught. The New Jersey state legislature confiscated and sold all Jacob had, and the British refused his pleas to reimburse him.¹¹⁴ Even before he lost everything, however, Jacob did not seem inclined to help out his mother, who had played a role in ensuring his original designation of "insane." When Hannah wrote asking for help from Lopez in 1770, she mentioned she was Moses Louzada's widow and the mother-in-law of Haym Myers but conveniently neglected to mention her first son.

Indeed, throughout the struggle, Hannah was destitute. In all, three "begging letters" from Hannah survive: one from 1761 and two from the summer of 1770. While one has been anthologized, her name was unfortunately mistranscribed as "Hannah Paysaddon," an error repeated by later scholars.¹¹⁵ Given that all of the scholars involved are typically meticulous, the mistake says more about the systematic fragmentation of women's lives in this era and in the surviving archives than the quality of their scholarship. Lack of communal care for the mentally ill, along with British inheritance laws, unequal education of Jewish women, and religious structures all contributed to break up Hannah's life, necessitating her letters. The same structural forces kept most early Jewish women on the brink of poverty. Yet by 1774, Hannah's frantic petitions had stopped, as her name moved from the *tzedakah* to the *escava* list, finally joining the women the congregation chose to remember, yoked together in the memorial prayer for the dead.¹¹⁶

Conclusion

Thinking about the 1761 letter Hannah wrote to Congregation Shearith Israel as an object owned by Hannah is by some reckoning odd. After all, Hannah possessed her letter only briefly before it made its way north and across the Hudson River, toward the city that Hannah would sometimes call her home. Yet the very transience of the letter as Hannah's property is also revealing, as it underscores how forces combined to keep all of Hannah's things constantly in motion to others, slipping out of her hands.

My goal in focusing on Hannah's letter has been to think about what it reveals about the lack of women's voices in the colonial archive. On

some level this focus on silence may seem grim. For a long time, early American Jewish studies has focused on Jewish versions of rags-to-riches stories, of men who escaped the Inquisition's flames and started vast mercantile empires or help fund the Revolutionary War. These tales were evidence of early Jewish patriotism and provided a sort of hope that Jews had a place in the American dream.

There is a downside to this dream story, though, as it suggests that people who do not succeed have themselves to blame. One historian, for example, suggested Hannah was unable to succeed because she was "incompetent" at business and "a chronic complainer."¹¹⁷ I would argue, however, that while Hannah died poor and alone, there were a lot of reasons for her lack of success, almost none of which were her fault. Moreover, the structural processes that splintered Hannah's life continue to impact American Jewry. Despite being a "model minority," many Jews today face the same problems Hannah did.¹¹⁸

Myths of Jewish success both today and through histories that focus solely on wealthy Jews undercut our ability to understand the structural sources of poverty. Model minority myths promote the idea that certain ethnic groups naturally achieve "universal and unparalleled academic and occupational success."¹¹⁹ To be sure, one of the most nefarious problems with model minority myths is that they suggest other, "inferior" minorities are poor by choice or lack of effort.¹²⁰ Yet model minority myths are also harmful for those identified as "good" ethnic others, as they suggest that individuals within the group who do not succeed have only themselves to blame—that is, that Jewish women like Hannah were "incompetent" rather than coping with structural issues not faced by everyone else. Jewish success, however, was universal neither in the past nor in the present. Jews in early America were a diverse lot, and Hannah's life story reminds us that other factors such as age, gender, and education played key roles in determining who required resources and support. While Jewish poverty is less rampant today than in 1761,¹²¹ many, like Hannah, are elderly immigrants whose ability to access services is impeded by language barriers.¹²² Focusing on the gaps in our stories about the past widens our sense of what it meant to be Jewish in America and can help us begin to break some of the silences about struggles that Jews have always faced in the United States.