

Title:

The American Promised Land, a Sephardic New Haven

Abstract:

Control of lands in the “New World,” the Americas, reflected the power struggle of the European empires and rulers. Amongst such struggles, one persecuted minority group, the conversos, were protagonists in the creation story of Jewish communities along the South American Atlantic coastline. From the early period of the arrival of Europeans to the American continent, the depiction of indigenous peoples as the Lost Tribes of the Israelites was used as one of the incentives for Christian colonization and conversion. In contrast, for the peninsular Jewish inhabitants and their descendants who had been converted by force, the seas and faraway lands were always a symbol of freedom. For them, this combination of myth and hope, together with a growing transatlantic maritime commercial line, created new possibilities. Therefore, to rebuild their Jewish identity in a place of freedom and liberty, the Western Sephardic diaspora reconnected to its pre-expulsion past and formed new colonies. This is how Recife became the famous “port of the Jews”. Recife was connected to the larger city of Pernambuco, which was continually disputed and fought over by the Dutch and Spanish. In this talk, I will discuss how historical figures such as Samuel Pallache, the Pirate Rabbi, and his disciples, Moses and Abraham Cohen Henriques (the brothers Cohen) and Menaseh ben Israel, managed to build communities and create a new Promised Land for the persecuted Jews of Europe.