

EUROPEAN KEHILLOS



Amazing Amsterdam

Amsterdam: You may have used the city's Schiphol international airport for a stop-over, or toured its beautiful canals, the Portuguese Synagogue and, of course, Anne Frank's house. And after last week's historic European Chinuch convention that took place at the Novotel Amsterdam Schiphol Airport Hotel the city has gained another claim to fame.

But did you know that Amsterdam has a Jewish community that is hundreds of years old and that many Gedolei Yisroel have passed through the city and resided there? More importantly, did you know that even today it has a fully functioning – albeit small – frum Jewish Community? Nechama Gold has been investigating its past, present and future.

SOME JEWISH HISTORY

Escape from the far-reaching hand of the Inquisition

The Jewish community in Amsterdam has a rich history. The first Jews to settle in Amsterdam were refugees from the Portuguese Inquisition who arrived in the Netherlands at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The first congregations in Amsterdam consisted of Marranos who were once again able to openly practise their religion. They were mostly affluent and had extensive trading connections throughout the world and they opened three congregations which eventually consolidated into one congregation, Neve Shalom. They built a beautiful synagogue – or Snoge as the Portuguese synagogue is known to the locals – which besides being a popular tourist attraction is still functioning today.

From the beginning of the 17th Century, Amsterdam maintained a limited freedom of religion which was unique in Europe at the time and many Ashkenazim fled to the city following the 1614 Frankfurt riots and after the Chmielnizki massacres of Tach Vetat (1648-49).

The first Ashkenazi immigrants were poor. They were only allowed in Amsterdam because of the financial aid promised to them and other guarantees given to the Amsterdam city council by the influential Sephardic community. This was despite the religious and cultural differences between the Yiddish speaking Ashkenazim and the Portuguese speaking Sefardim. With time, the Portuguese community shrunk as many moved West to the Americas to further their trading opportunities, while the Ashkenazim grew in numbers and stature until at the end of the 18th century the 20,000 strong Ashkenazi community was one of the largest in Western and Central Europe.

Great Rabbonim in Amsterdam

The history of the Rabbonim who lived in Amsterdam over the years is fascinating and teaches a lot of the problems plaguing the Jewish communities of the time.

Menashe ben Yisrael

A famous Amsterdam Rabbi of the Portuguese community in the early 17th century was Menashe ben Yisrael. He visited Oliver Cromwell in London, after they had previously met in Holland, to convince the English authorities to grant the Jews

official permission to enter Britain. He did not receive official permission from the Council of States. Menashe Ben Yisrael returned sadly and came back a second time with his son to plead again. The English merchants were scared to let the Jewish merchants come into Britain and stopped the motion from going through. Cromwell privately allowed some Jews to enter the country as he sympathised with the rabbi. He was deposed shortly later, monarchy was restored and Charles II became the ruler, who was the son in law of the Spanish King who supported the expulsion of the Jews, yet strangely enough it was he who arranged formal permission for the Jews to come to Britain, in spite of his family ties. Recently, it was discovered that Charles had gone to Holland to collect funds for his army and the Dutch Jews agreed to finance him but made him promise that he would let the Jews into England. He kept his promise after he became the British ruler.

The Chacham Zvi and others

During the Shabtai Zvi debacle, Amsterdam became one of the great seats of support for the false mashiach. Rav Yaakov Sasportas was a great Rav and Kabbalist who lived in Amsterdam during several periods in his life and he was the first to recognise the false moshiach Shabtai Zvi as an impostor, writing many letters in this regard. The Chacham Zvi, Rav Zvi Ashkenazi also served as Rabbi in Amsterdam, and his fierce opposition to Shabtai Zvi resulted in his being forced to leave the city. His son-in-law Rav Arye Leib later served the community and was founder of the Beis Hamedrash Eitz Chaim. After his death his son Rav Shaul Amsterdamer, author of Binyan Ariel, took over the rabbanus. A pamphlet titled *Halacha Lema'aseh Rav*, published by him in Amsterdam contains his halachic ruling asserting the kashrus of Dutch cheese.

The Ramchal, Rav Moshe Chaim Luzatto, lived in Amsterdam after being accused by the rabbis of Italy of messianic leanings and it is there that he published his great mussar classic Mesilas Yeshorim.

Minhagim

Amsterdam is one of the few communities in the world where the most ancient West German Ashkenaz traditions are still followed by many in the community, as well as in



Portrait of Rabbi Jacob ben Aaron Sasportas

certain shuls, a tradition that goes back in The Netherlands for at least four hundred years. These minhagim are at least one thousand years old, and some bemoan the fact that not enough effort is invested to preserve these precious traditions. One example of this is the minhag of waiting only one hour between meat and milk!

MORE RECENT HISTORY

One hundred thousand Jews lived in Amsterdam before World War Two, constituting one tenth of the general population. Most Jews lived in the centre of the city and there were almost forty shuls functioning in a relatively small area. Today only two of these are still functioning; the imposing Portuguese synagogue and the more modest Nidchei Jisroel Jechanes synagogue, and they sometimes struggle to get a minyan as most of the Jews have moved to different parts of the city. Only during Yom Kippur large groups of the many Israeli 'yordim' who live in the city converge on the Portuguese Synagogue for Kol Nidrei and Neila, looking for their roots.

Tragically, a huge eighty percent of Dutch Jews perished in the war at the hand of the Nazis. They were assisted by the efficiency of the Dutch police force who were instrumental in carrying out the arrests. Jews were incarcerated in the infamous Westerbork transit camp before being sent east to the extermination camps such as Bergen-Belsen.

The Holocaust not only eradicated entire Jewish villages and towns, but also destroyed the Jewish infrastructure that had been built up in the past 350 years.

Only one fifth of the Jews returned to Amsterdam after the war, only a handful of them religious and the community had a difficult time re-establishing itself. It is thanks to the *mesiras nefesh* of the few G-d fearing Jews that the religious community survived. (see box)

Mr Aron Aronson is a ninety-nine years old Amsterdam Jew whose family has lived in the country for eight generations, and for the past fifty years has served as a weekly baal tefilla in the Nidchei Jisroel Jechanes shul. He survived the war by escaping to Switzerland, where he married, and after the war returned to Amsterdam where he and his wife Bertha set up a home of Torah and Chessed and contributed a lot to the rebirth of the Torah community in Amsterdam. Together with Mr Nissan Cohen on the board of the Kehillah, they fought hard for the religious character of the community and for the appointment of religious chief Rabbis.

His son Mottel shares: "My father served as secretary of the Dutch Aguda and later the World Vaad Hapoel appointed him as the international representative of the World Aguda". He was close to many Gedolei Yisroel, amongst them Rav Ahron Kotler, the Bobover Rebbe, the Satmar Rebbe and many more. His home was a haven of Yiddishkeit and the address for any visitor in town.

Mr Aronson was reported several months ago in the *Jewish Tribune* and later in various other newspapers worldwide, as having made a tremendous Kiddush Hashem when he upheld the psak of the late Rav Meir Just, by refusing to attend a reception at the Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam where he was to be introduced to King Willem Alexander of Orange, the king of the Netherlands. The reason for this refusal was because at the time of the opening of the museum, Rav Just had paskened that since the museum which is in the hands of reform Jews, is open on Shabbos – and to make matters worse closed on Sunday – it was forbidden for a G-d fearing Jew to enter its premises. "I was asked by a Lakewood based newspaper if the museum administration wasn't upset with me for putting them in a bad light" he tells the JT with a chuckle in his intriguing Dutch accent and a sense of humour that defies his age. "I told them - not only they weren't offended, a representative of the museum even came to my house and presented me with the same book that they had given to the king at the ceremony - a book about the historical relationship between the Royal House of Orange and the Jewish community – together with two delicious ginger biscuits nicely wrapped up."



The Bobover Rebbe eating melave d'malka at the home of Mr Aron Aronson (seated left) - 1975. Standing at the far left is his son Mottel Aronson

Rabbonim in recent history

Rabbi Lodewijk Sarlouis

The Chief Rabbi during the Holocaust was Rabbi Eliezer Naftali (Lodewijk) Sarlouis, whose brave behaviour saved many Jews from certain death. The Nazis ordered Rabbi Sarlouis to sign a letter calling on the community not to escape the country. He refused to be an accomplice to their lies and in retribution was the first to be deported to the Westerbork Camp and later killed in Auschwitz.

Rabbi Justus Tal



Rabbi Justus Tal, who served before the war as Chief Rabbi of Utrecht, was one of the few Dutch rabbonim to survive the war, hidden by a protestant pastor. A G-d fearing Jew, he became Chief Rabbi of Amsterdam after the war and fought valiantly for the religious character of the community.

Chief Rabbi Meir Just

In more recent years, Chief Rabbi Meir Just served the community for 45 years. He was born in Viznitz in 1908 and his father Rav Nissan was the chief composer and gabai of the Ahavas Yisroel. In 1962 he was appointed rabbi in Amsterdam and in 1981 he became Chief Rabbi. All these years Rabbi Just constantly stood guard against all infringement to authentic Torah Judaism. He passed away in 2010 in



R-L rabbi Meir Just with Rav Chaim Shmuel Lopian and his brother Rav Leib Lopian

Amsterdam at the age of 101.

His son-in-law, Dr Raoul Loonstein of Amsterdam is today a mainstay of the city's Chareidi community.

Several other rabbonim have served as Chief Rabbis and in the Amsterdam beis din, amongst them Rabbi F J Lewis of Manchester, Rav Arye Ralbag of New York and Rav Refoel Evers of Amsterdam.

Currently...

Rabbi Eliezer Wolff is the Av Beis Din of the Rabbinate. He is responsible for the Amsterdam Kashrus, the mikvaos, the eiruv and all the myriad responsibilities of a functioning kehilla. Rav Wolff is originally from Strasbourg and is a son-in-law of Rav Marco Meyer of Saint Louis, France. He learnt



in Yeshivas Kol Torah and Ponovez, and served as Dayan in Nice, Toulouse and Marseilles before coming to Amsterdam.

The Amsterdam Jewish Community

From the approximately ten thousand Jews living in Amsterdam today, 2,500 are members of the Ashkenazi Amsterdam Orthodox community Nederlands Israëlitische Hoofdsynagoge (NIHS). There is also a small Orthodox Portuguese community that counts approximately 500 members.

The NIHS has approximately 14 affiliated synagogues. Rabbi Hans Groenewoudt, Rov of the Amstelveen shul, in South Amsterdam, explains: "The Amsterdam Jewish community has shuls located in every area throughout Amsterdam."

Continued on page 16



Rav Malkiel Kotler - Rosh Yeshivas Lakewood speaking in the Amsterdam Cheder

Continued from page 15

The shuls are affiliated to the community, and have to comply to its Orthodox ethos, yet each rabbi is the semi-independent leader of his shul. The congregations are usually comprised of a mixture of Jews of various degrees of observance who live in the area. Most shuls have a group of Shabbos observant members. Our shul in Amstelveen has daily minyanim, activities for the youth, a daily Daf Hayomi shiur. We are part of Dirshu and have a good core group of learners."

The majority of frum Jews in Amsterdam are concentrated in South Amsterdam in an area called Buitenveldert, and in nearby Amstelveen. This is also where kosher shops and restaurants are located.

A rebirth of Torah and Chinuch

Amsterdam had not managed to regain its footing after the devastation of the Holocaust. The religious community is small and seemed to be destined for disappearance, until this was somewhat halted in the 1970s with the opening of the Amsterdam Cheder in 1974 followed by the establishment of the first kollel in 1975. (see later)

The Amsterdam Cheder

When the Amsterdam old-timers were growing up after the war, no religious school existed for them. Mr Mottel Aronson relates: "I grew up in the sixties and attended the Rosh Pinah school and Maimonides high school where I had only three hours of *limudei kodesh* instruction a week! This was obviously not a very ideal situation and eventually my father took me out of there and put me in a non-Jewish high school. That high school ran only in the mornings and for two afternoons a week. My father had brought over Rav Moshe Katz and his family from Israel to give shiurim in Gemoro and Tanach for the older boys in Amsterdam, so that we would get an adequate Jewish education. I was still very young, before my bar mitzvah, and would have preferred to ride my bicycle instead, but I gained tremendously from these shiurim that I was allowed to join, and was ready to go on to yeshiva when I finished high school."

There was a great need for a religious school and in 1974 a brave individual, Mr Uri Cohen started what he called the Amsterdam Cheder. "My father contributed a lot of his considerable financial resources for the school. Initially, most in the community were opposed to the idea. They feared that it would not be viable and forced to close down



Right to left: Rabbi Y U Dunner, Rav Stern, Menahel of Amsterdam Cheder, Rav Malkiel Kotler in conversation in the school garden

by the authorities after which they would have to suffer the humiliation of returning to the modern school. My father understood the importance of a Chareidi school and asked me to help," relates Mr Mottel Aronson. "For three years I ran the school. We worked very hard - we had to collect money in *chassidische* communities abroad to pay our teachers. Eventually most *baalei batim* came around when they saw our success and started sending their children to our school and eventually it got government recognition and support."

By 1993 the Cheder had grown to over 230 pupils. It moved into its current building at Zeeland Street in Amsterdam Buitenveldert. Many prominent Dutch figures attended the opening, most noteworthy was Princess Margriet, sister of (then) Queen Beatrix of Holland, who opened the new building.

There are currently about one hundred and fifty children in the Amsterdam Cheder.

Rabbi Yitzchok Uri Dunner and the European Chinuch Convention

Rabbi Yitzchok Uri Dunner, son of Dayan A D Dunner of London, joined the Amsterdam Kollel seven years ago. When the kollel closed, he joined the staff of the Cheder and is currently teaching *limudei kodesh* to the boys of the three top classes in the school. With his initiative, the school hired Torah Umesorah's executive educational consultant Rabbi Yisroel Meir Rubinfeld to help with strategy and staff

training. Seeing his invaluable expertise, Mr Boruch van de Kamp, an affluent parent in the school, decided to bring the concept of the American Torah Umesorah Convention to Europe. An event took place in the Novotel conference centre about which much was reported in the Jewish press.

Hasjalsjelet - continuing the chain of our Mesorah

Another important involvement of Rabbi Y U Dunner is the youth group Hasjalsjelet. (Yes, this is how they spell Hashalshet in Dutch.) Rabbi Dunner has revived the group with various events for the boys of the community, including a weekly Thursday night learning session spiced with *divrei Torah*, *cholent* and a heart-warming *kumzitz* and a yearly shabbaton to which the kids look forward all year around.

Additionally, Rabbi Y U Dunner gives many shiurim all around town, both in private homes and in different shuls. His shiurim in *gemoro*, *hashkofo* and *mussar* are having a positive impact on many people in the wider community. Recently the women of the Kollel have restarted the girls' division with *Oneg Shabbos*, fun programmes and a Shabbaton planned for the winter holidays.

The Amsterdam Kollel

There were two idealistic *baalei batim* living in Amsterdam, Mr Moshe Yehuda Magnus and Mr Nechemia Roosen who wanted to use their extensive means for the betterment of the Jewish community. They realised that in order to infuse life into a community, one must inject it with the living Torah, and they decided to start a kollel. The aim of the kollel was twofold. In an indirect way, *the Gemoro* says that a town needs *asoro batlonim*, the Rambam explains that a town needs to have at least ten people that are supported by the community and are completely dedicated to Torah learning and *askonus*. The mere presence of *bnei Torah* in the community has an uplifting influence on everyone. More directly - the *avreichim* reach out in various ways to the wider community.

The Amsterdam Kollel made a good name for itself in Europe and was led by several high calibre *talmidei chachomim*. It was founded by Rav Pesach Rosenzweig, a university chaplain in Holland for many years. Later came Rav Meir Leib Rogosnitzky of Cardiff, Rav Kornfein of Switzerland, and Rav Isser Malin from Jerusalem. Many may still remember the longest standing Rosh Hakollel in Amsterdam; Rav Yaakov Shatz who stayed in Amsterdam as Rosh Kollel for sixteen years.



Hasjalsjelet youth organisation on a weekend - 2018

He and his wife worked hard, trying to implant Torah in the city. As one person put it: "they managed to put the word Torah on the Dutch map."

When Rav and Rebetzin Shatz left for Israel, Rav Yaakov Ball of Manchester took over as Rosh Hakollel. After three years the kollel was forced to close when it lost its main supporter. Thanks to the efforts of Dr Raoul Loonstein and Mr Danny Elburg, a community kollel was re-started last year. A strong group of yungeleit from England and their wives, who have all gone through the Ner Le'elef Leadership Programme, are carrying out a tremendous amount of good work in the community. In addition to their daily sederim, where they hear high level shiurim from Rav Yaakov Ball, they are involved in teaching and chavrusa learning amongst the community members. Amongst other things, they have undertaken that every month each one gives a shiur in a different shul in the city.

Beis Hamidrash Eitz Chaim

Approximately fifteen years ago a new minyan was established for Chareidi families. They named the Beis Medrash Eitz Chaim as a continuation of the original Eitz Chaim founded by Rav Arye Leib who was rov in Amsterdam at the beginning of the 18th century. This shul was until the Second World War a meeting place for talmidei chachomim where the Kol Torah was constantly heard. In 2008 Rabbi Pinchas Leibush Padwa, son of Rav Yosef Padwa of Stamford Hill and previously of Zurich was appointed rav of the beis medrash. His arrival was enthusiastically received; he and the rosh hakollel Rav Yaakov Ball gave many shiurim in the community and their presence was viewed as a sign of the revival of Yiddishkeit in the city. Four years ago Rav Padwa left Amsterdam to take up a Rabbinical position in Israel, and the spiritual leadership of the shul went over into the capable hands of Rav Yaakov Ball. Rav Ball continues the community's upward trend and delivers many shiurim to the Kollel yungeleit as well as to the baalei batim and also in shuls all around the city. Other maggidei shiur in Eitz Chaim include Rav Uri Einhorn who gives the daily Daf Yomi shiur. Rav Einhorn is a veteran educator in the community and until several years ago also served as menahel of the Amsterdam Cheder.

Very recently a new heimishe minyan was started adjacent to the Eitz Chaim Beis Medrash, known as Kehal Chassidim, frequented by younger members of the Chareidi community.

In conclusion

Young people who are living in large communities where they are spoilt for a choice of *Mosdos haTorah*, are often unaware of the tremendous effort and *mesirus nefesh* that lies behind every successful kehilla.

The Gemoro in Shabbos tells the story of Rava who in the intensity of his Torah learning didn't notice that he was sitting on his finger until blood started pouring from it. A *Tsedoki* who witnessed this, scoffed him with the words *Ama peziza* – yours is a rash nation – because you preceded your mouth to your ears (said *na'ase* before *nishma*), and you are still continuing with this trait.

Yes, the *Tzedoki* was right – Rava agreed – we are indeed an *ama peziza*, a rash nation. We do things that don't always make rational sense. We send our sons to learn Torah, when we are reducing their chances of building a lucrative career; we build kollelim although we don't always know if they will make any difference; we invest in schools when no financial support is forthcoming; we move to communities where our long-term success is far from guaranteed. Yes, for one who sees the world as run by nature, we do rash things. We do it because we know that without Torah, the world in all its rationality has no reason to continue turning on its axis and

INTERVIEW WITH MRS Yael Ball

JT: Where are you from and why are you living in Amsterdam?

YB: I am originally from Antwerp and my husband is the son of Rav Yaakov Ball. We came to Amsterdam last year from Eretz Yisroel to be part of the new kollel.

JT: Coming from Antwerp, how does it feel to live in a small community like Amsterdam?

YB: It's very different. It has the feel of a small kehillah. People are much closer to one another and they care a lot. Soon after we came here my baby contracted a virus and had to be hospitalised. One lady galvanised the entire kehillah, and I had loads of people coming over to visit, bringing food and doing everything possible to help out. I was new here, and everyone felt responsible. It's not just the people from our shul, it's everyone.

Another thing is – yes, there are different types like everywhere – but it matters less. At public events for example, you will see frum people and secular people, everyone joins – there is more *achdus* between all Yieden which is very nice. For example – a lady started a mother and toddler group in her house and I went with my little one – you should've seen the variety of women who came – it was so interesting to meet everyone.

Also, the area where most Yieden live is a pleasant, residential neighbourhood. There's lots of greenery, it is quiet and calm, which I enjoy very much. The centre of the town is different of

course – we have TONS of tourists here, and you see loads of Israelis.

JT: How has the Kollel impacted the community?

YB: The kollel is comprised of a group who did the Ner Le'elef training programme, so they really are here to make a difference in the community. The kollel has a monthly publication with divrei Torah on the parsha, yomim tovim etc; they organise or join learning programmes in various shuls; they help out at the yearly yarchei kallo; they are really here to help and encourage the community to grow in their *ruchniyus*. We have received a lot of feedback as to the impact that we are making, we've made a presence here.

JT: That is amazing. Do you also teach?

YB: I'm lucky because I know the language so I can have a job. I work in the offices of the Amsterdam Joodse Gemeente (Jewish Community) – in the department for the planning of events and programmes. Additionally, the Jewish community has an online Sunday School for Jewish children in The Netherlands who live in places where there is no Jewish education and every Sunday I teach Yiddishkeit online to a group of kids.

JT: Do you have any plans to stay in Amsterdam long term?

YB: We are very happy here at the moment, but the housing cost is high and without the kollel's support it would be difficult – yet, maybe – you never know!

we rely on our Father in Heaven. We do the effort – the result is thriving communities all over Europe.

May the Amsterdam Shuls and Torah Institutions continue to grow and flourish until they will be transplanted to Eretz Yisroel with the coming of Moshiach Tzidkeinu.

The author would like to thank the many friendly Amsterdam residents who helped with information and photos for this article, particularly Mr Mottel Ahronson and Shaye Groenewoudt.



The Amsterdam kollel in operation. Rabbi Yaakov Ball is seen in the middle