

The Great Plague of 1655: by Colin Shindler

BY COLIN SHINDLER

Ring a ring a roses

A pocket full of poses

Atishoo, Atishoo

We all fall down

The origin of this familiar nursery rhyme is often attributed to the Black Death of 1348 when Jews in several European countries were accused of poisoning wells in order to deliberately cause the pandemic. Jews were subsequently murdered in great numbers for their “crime”. Many, including the Church fathers, sympathised with this expunging of the “godless” from society. Jews in England escaped such scapegoating simply because they were no longer there. They had been expelled by Edward I a half a century before and dispersed.

Following their readmission in 1656, the Anglo-Jewish community of probably a couple of hundred were suddenly confronted by the Great Plague of London in 1665. This took the lives of upwards of a 100,000 people.

The Spanish and Portuguese Sephardim had come to the capital from Protestant Amsterdam due to the efforts of Menasseh ben Israel. Born Manoel Dias Soeiro in Lisbon in 1604 to outwardly Catholic parents, his father had spent four years in prison, frequently tortured on the rack, by the zealous practitioners of the Inquisition, for being a secret Jew. The first Jews of London were therefore welcomed in the name of freedom from Catholic persecution.

The newcomers were allowed to establish a synagogue during the tolerant reign of Charles II in Creechurch Lane in the City of London. In the summer of 1664, they employed a rabbi, Jacob Sasportas from Amsterdam, who brought with him his son, Samuel, as shochet (ritual slaughterer) and Solomon Lopes as gabbai (beadle).

Within a few months, the Great Plague began to spread its deadly wings. Inhibited by a severe winter, the number of deaths rose dramatically in the spring of 1665, such that King Charles decamped for Oxford together with his queen, Catherine of Braganza, who brought

her doctor, Fernando Mendes, with her. Mendes was similarly a Portuguese converso who declared his Jewishness as soon as he stepped onto English soil.

The Haham of the community, Jacob Sasportas, took the first opportunity to desert his flock and travel to Hamburg, fleeing “from fear of the destroying hand of the Lord which was against our community in London”. The older members of the community who had been displaced by Sasportas and his family stepped back into the breach.

One was Samuel Levi, originally from Kraków who had met a non-Jewish visitor to the synagogue, John Greenhalgh, in early 1662. Greenhalgh later wrote that Levi knew Latin and a little broken English and that his mother lived in Jerusalem. Greenhalgh wrote that “when they grow old, they transport themselves thither to end their days and lay their bones there in the Holy Place as (Levi) called it”.

Two wardens also remained in office, Isaac Barzilai and Isaac Azevedo, as did the gabbai, Isaac Israel Nunes, who lost two children in the epidemic. While the well-to-do were able to escape the city, the poor Jews perished. Many were unable to work as second-hand goods traders.

The historian, Wilfred S Samuel, suggested in 1936 that there were “six identifiable plague entries in the oldest burial register at Bevis Marks synagogue” and that probably another 15 victims were buried in unmarked graves in Mile End cemetery. The children of Abraham de Morais, Rachel and Ester, were buried there in March 1665, early victims of the Great Plague.

The balance sheets from the Creechurch synagogue suggest that it continued to operate at the height of the epidemic. The tax to supply kosher meat was still collected, as was the impostas, the tax on earnings — reduced by a third to cope with less income.

The Great Plague coincided with the rise of a messianic revival and no doubt the human desire for a saviour and redemption from their woes in these dark times played into this need. The appearance of the false messiah, Shabtai Zevi, undoubtedly appealed to the beleaguered Jews of London in 1665. The senior gabbai of the Creechurch Lane synagogue,

Benjamin Levi, was described by the great historian of British Jewry, Cecil Roth, as “an impassioned votary of the pseudo-messiah and acted as the medium through which many of the reports from the Continent were disseminated in England”.

When he visited the synagogue, Greenhalgh wrote that he was “strangely, uncouthly, unaccustomedly moved” by what he saw: “Tears stood in my eyes the while, to see those banished Sons of Israel standing in their ancient garb, but in a strange land, solemnly and carefully looking east towards their own country, confessing their sins and the sins of their forefathers, humbling themselves and bowing down together before the God of their Fathers.”

Unlike the Black Death in 1348, Jews were not blamed for the Great Plague of 1665. No Jews were burned at the stake. Full civil rights were yet to be won, but Protestant England took pride in its Jewish community and defended its right to be different.

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[Even at the height of the Great Plague, Anglo-Jewry kept its synagogues open - The Jewish Chronicle \(thejc.com\)](#)