

The First Published Jewish Sermon in America
May 28, 1773

Rabbi Haim Isaac Karigal (1729-1777), from Hebron, Israel, delivered the following sermon to the congregation at Jeshuath Israel (Touro) Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island, on May 28, 1773. Rhode Island, founded in 1639, was the first colony to extend equal financial and legal opportunities to Jews. Newport served as an ecumenical haven. Its Code of Laws defined the Commonwealth as a "Democracie" and stated that "...all men may walk as their consciences persuade them, every one in the name of his God..." Jewish settlement in Newport dates to 1658, when fifteen Jewish families emigrated from Barbados, soon joined by Jews from elsewhere in the West Indies, Spain and Portugal. Just prior to the Revolution, there were approximately 1,100 Jews in Newport. They were central to Newport's civic affairs, and enterprising Jewish shipping families were in large part responsible for the city's emergence as a major commercial port.

As a port city with a strong Jewish population, Newport's synagogue attracted its share of foreign dignitaries. Among the most distinguished of Newport's religious tourists was Rabbi Isaac Karigal of Hebron, who visited on the invitation of Ezra Stiles, a Newport resident and non-Jewish Hebrew scholar, who would later become president of Yale University. In America, Karigal sought out the company of fellow Judaic scholars; and through these circles he became acquainted with Stiles, then a Newport-based Biblical student. The two corresponded about interpretations of Biblical texts. Their friendship was cemented in 1773 with Karigal's visit to Newport. The sermon was delivered in Spanish to the predominantly Sephardic congregation, led by Rabbi Isaac Tuoro. It was translated into English and published by the Congregation, whose leaders apparently were aware of its historic importance as a founding Judeo-American religious document. It is an impressive, inspiring, and yet troubling testament to both the vital contributions of New England's colonial Jewish community and to the ultimate disintegration of that community as a cohesive unit. The publication of this sermon speaks volumes about the persistence of American Jews in the face of staggering, and seemingly insurmountable, obstacles.

There was excited anticipation for Karigal's address. Karigal had traveled the world - Europe, the Ottoman Empire and the West Indies - and had a good grasp of the international Jewish condition. The sermon must have been either instructive or infuriating to the Rhode Island colonists. Although it begins in a traditional manner, commemorating Shavuot, Karigal very quickly alludes to a more pressing problem for the colonists. Delivered on May 28, 1773, the same year as the Boston Tea Party and only three years before the colonists would declare independence, the sermon became a lesson in obedience to the Crown. Karigal uses biblical teachings to decry "public commotions and revolution" and warns the congregation that only God establishes and destroys kingdoms. One can only imagine the controversy that followed Karigal's sermon: would the Jewish settlers support a revolution in a land that had treated them so well? In fact, most of the Jewish colonists in Newport were, like Rabbi Touro, staunch Tories; and after the Revolution, the community largely dispersed. The excerpt below picks up as Karigal's sermon begins to allude to the political turmoil in the American colonies. You can see a photo of the original document here: <http://hjcny.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Karigal-Sermon-photo.pdf>

Excerpts from: A Sermon Preached at the Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island

In the precepts of the Decalogue is exhibited an epitome of the divine Law, consisting of the fundamental principles of religion, both respecting our faith or belief in the ONE SUPREME BEING, the creator of the universe, and respecting the institutions of morality. Those precepts in respect of the *Deity* and *morality* are entirely out of the present question; it being indubitable that neither of them can be subject to the least change or alteration in any time or place. The moral, part of its own nature, would be constant and permanent and of unchangeable obligation, even without the additional circumstance of having been dictated by the divine wisdom and authority: Since all morality consists in loving our neighbor as we do our own selves - *but thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself*, Leviticus XIX.18. This admits of no change, unless human nature be altered. Here I might conclude this subject, being certain that every one, who will keep the moral law with exactness, not only because it is consistent with reason, but because it is a divine and unalterable institution, there will be no doubt but that he will also observe all other precepts-both those whose reasons are comprehensible by us, and those which, on account of their obscurity, are not to be investigated; considering that they are all permanent at all times and places, except when the divine legislator commands the contrary; - as in the precepts relating to the sacred worship of the temple, and others that depend on our residence in the holy land; the observation of which is, by our wickedness put in suspense, although they are not for that reason entirely abolished; because our restoration depends upon ourselves, if with a true contrition, repenting of our crimes and abominations, we promise amendment, - and consequently, of us only depends the approximation and renewal of the observance of those precepts again.

There have been some authors who, touched with a vehement desire of finding out new methods of commenting upon the sacred scriptures, instead of illustrating them, have involved them in obscurity by expositions full of imaginary

conceptions, remote applications, and expressions so excessive high and refined, that they cannot leave the least impression. I shall explain myself more clearly by repeating the following texts of the royal psalmist. He says: Would you know when the divine law delights and tranquilizes the soul? It is only when that law is interpreted in its genuine sense, purity and perfection, without any mixed opinions and conceptions founded in air; *The law of the Lord is perfect converting the Soul* (Psalms XIX.7). Do you know when the divine testimony instructs the ignorant? It is only when justly explained according to its true principles, *the testimony of the Lord is sure making wise the simple* (Psalm XIX.8) Then only do the sacred statutes rejoice and cherish the heart, when commented with rectitude and sincerity: *The Statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart* (Psalm XIX.9). The divine precepts then only enlighten the eyes of the understanding, when the explanation thereof is pure and clear - which is not to be expected unless it proceed from the fountain of tradition; *the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes* (Psalm XIX.8). Through the interposition of all these things the DIVINE FEAR will be constant and abiding, because it will be then purified, refined and freed of all alloy or human invention; *the fear of the Lord is clean enduring forever* (Psalm XIX.10). This is the method which the inspired David points out to us as a true manner of instruction, and as a natural way of attaining the divine fear. Upon this subject all preachers ought to employ their time, and to this matter all instructors of congregations ought to conform themselves. But there have been professors, who instead of teaching their auditories and disciples the essential points of religion and morality, have employed their time in doctrines and discourses, (or at least in amusements and vanities) and subjects that are entirely out of our reach, and beyond human comprehension.

Thus, my noble and kind hearers, have I displayed before you the excellency of the *divine* study. The Calamities we have endured have not been casualties or accidents. In the Talmud (*Sabbath*) we read the following remarkable sentences, written upon the destruction of the HOLY TEMPLE! "The famous ULLA says that this ruin proceeded from the principle that the people in those times did not know what it was to be ashamed before each other, committing in public, and without any reserve, the most horrible and heinous crimes - *Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination?*(Jeremiah VI.15.) But what is the wonder that it should so happen? - When they despised every manner of instruction, and when the word of the Lord was esteemed by them as a shame, contempt and baseness! Rabbi *Isaac* says, we need not wonder that in those times, there should be no shame, when we might see that the small and poor aspired to be in every thing on a level with the great and powerful, all order and regulation being lost, no respect paid to age, no regard to the dignity of employments, and the whole in confusion. The ecclesiastic ministers would give their vote upon civil matters: Princes and magistrates would not only interfere in religion, but take upon them to decide the most difficult points of it. In short, every one would step out of his bounds, and consequently the whole was public disorder and mismanagement; which is so wisely described to us by the prophet Isaiah - *As with the people, so with the priest* (Isaiah XXIV.2). And what was the consequence of such disorder and confusion? That pointed out by Rabbi *Hanninah* in the following words, 'There was not one single person who would dare to rebuke his neighbor, and exhort him to the right way.' The same is confirmed by Rabbi *Febudah* saying, 'That the loss of Jerusalem was owing to the contempt and ignominy with which they treated every one who applied himself to the DIVINE STUDY.' These same opinions of those learned and eminent men, instead of contradicting one another, are very similar and consistent: It being certain that wherever any of the mentioned vices exist, they must of course be accompanied with all the rest.."

We have thus clearly described the abominations that caused the destruction of the TEMPLE, and ruin of our holy country. There have not been wanting some critical men, who, because they know something of the ancient histories, think they are able to penetrate the natural cause of the rise, increase and decline of empires and republics. This they dare to utter, not thinking at the same time, that such public commotions and revolutions are effects proceeding from the council of the divine creator, who establishes and destroys kingdoms and empires for reasons reserved only to his infinite wisdom. *And he changeth the times and seasons; he removeth Kings and seteth up Kings* (Daniel II.21). With the same liberty and arrogance with which these men talk of the misfortunes and calamities of other nations, they have been bold enough to speak of those of ours. And indeed there have been at all times some that have considered such events as casualties and natural accidents, and as happening without any interposition of the divine providence. To confuse however opinions so heretic and ill grounded, I shall proceed according to the promise made at the beginning of my discourse, to cite for that purpose some passages of history. I shall not allege any sacred historian, nor shall I produce any rabbinical authorities, being confident of the high degree of credit they would meet with, but will only relate some facts delivered by the most authentic Roman historians.

Editors note: Portions of the introduction to this article quote materials from, "Jewish American Literature, a Norton Anthology," and Glenn Horowitz Booksellers reviews