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Sephardic Sacred Space in Colonial America

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Schedule Information:

Scheduled Time: Tue, Dec 18 - 10:45am - 12:45pm **Building/Room:** Sheraton Centre Toronto / Eight
In Session: [Spirituality in the Synagogue: The Music and Architecture of Synagogues in America and Europe](#)

Author:

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Abstract:

The Touro Synagogue (Newport, RI), the oldest synagogue building in the United States, has provoked a certain amount of controversy regarding its origins: while the architect (Peter Harrison) is known, scholars have disputed whether the essential attributes of the structure should be traced to (1) eighteenth-century British pattern books, (2) descriptions of the Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam provided to Harrison by congregants, or (3) the Bevis Marks Synagogue in London (which Harrison had ample opportunity to visit while in England). The origins of the structure are important as most of the Spanish-Portuguese synagogues in colonial America and the Caribbean bear the same basic and unusual design features as the Touro structure. In this paper I argue that the answer to this controversy lies in the structural ideal behind both the pattern books and the synagogues in Amsterdam and London: the temple and tabernacle as described by Rabbi Jacob Judah Leon in his messianic study, *Retrato del Templo de Salomo* (1642) [A Relation of the Most Memorable Things in the Tabernacle and the Temple of Salomon (1675)]. I look to how the synagogues' architects mimicked both the ratios prescribed by Leon de Templo and key symbolic design features of the Temple. By echoing the divinely-given structures, eighteenth-century Sephardic Jews in colonial America hoped to draw their worship closer to God and to help bring about the messianic era. The weight given to the temple for eighteenth-century architecture helps us understand the role messianism continued to play in Sephardic and converso communities in colonial America long after the debunking of Sabbatai Tzvi. In this paper I trace the influence of Leon de Templo's plans and description upon the Synagogue in Amsterdam, London, and Newport through both structural and textual evidence. Second, I address the significance of imitating the Temple for both Leon de Templo and the builders of the synagogues. Third, I place my analysis within the context of archival materials on the Newport community and 18th century descriptions of the Touro synagogue. This paper is part of a larger project on the Sephardic community in 18th Century Rhode Island.

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