SEPHARDIC RABBIS: Rabbi Hayim Carigal (1732-1777) and Yale University

The first Jews who came to America in colonial times, were Sephardic Jews who had escaped from Recife, Brazil, where they were persecuted by the Portuguese Inquisition. In September 1654 a group of about 25 Jews arrived as refugees at the port of New York, which was then called New Amsterdam. Over time other communities were formed in the American colonies. The most important of these communities was established in the city of Newport, Rhode Island.

Newport Jewish community flourished especially in the eighteenth century, with the leadership of Aaron Lopez. Aaron Lopez arrived in Newport in 1752. He was originally from Lisbon, Portugal. There, he was known as Don Duarte Lopez. For 150 years his ancestors had lived in Portugal as "Marranos", i.e., pretending that they were Catholics, to escape the Inquisition, which forbade the practice of Judaism. Aaron Lopez became an important and very successful businessman. At one point he had his own fleet of 80 merchant ships.

Rabbi Hayim Rafael Carigal (or Karigal) was born in 1732 in the former Sephardic Kehilá of Hebron. He studied at the Yeshiba of Hebron, founded and maintained by Abraham Israel Pereira, from Amsterdam. Rabbi Carigal was a prodigious student and was ordained a rabbi at the age of 17. Although it was the spiritual center of the Jews throughout the world, the Jewish community of Israel, was very poor. And it needed the ongoing support from the Jews of the diaspora. Rabbi Carigal was appointed by his colleagues to be a "Shaliach deRabanan" a representative of the Rabbis, to raise funds to help the Yehudim of Israel. In those days, the rabbis assigned to these missions were chosen based on their erudition. The wisest men were elected for the mission because it was expected of them not only to raise funds for Israel, but also to teaching Tora to the Jews of the diaspora.

Rabbi Carigal reached Newport, Rhode Island, in 1773. He was welcomed and hosted by Mr. Aaron Lopez, who said that Rabbi

Carigal was the most prominent Jewish scholar who has ever reached the Americas.
Ezra Stiles was a Protestant Minister, friend of Aaron Lopez. Stiles fervently loved and admired all matters related to Judaism, and especially the Hebrew language. He said that without a solid knowledge of Hebrew language, it was impossible to understand the Bible.
When Stiles learned of the arrival of Rabbi Carigal to Newport, he came to the famous “Touro” Synagogue to hear the sermon of Rabbi Carigal. According to Stiles memoirs, it was on the day of Shabuot, May 28, 1773. Rabbi Carigal, as was the custom in the Sephardic communities, delivered his sermon in Spanish, with a few words in Hebrew. Stiles was fascinated with the personality and erudition of Rabbi Carigal and asked to meet with him. Ezra Stiles and rabbi Carigal met 28 times. Stiles became one of the greatest admirers of Rabbi Carigal. He asked the rabbi many questions about the Jewish religion and the Hebrew language, and carefully recorded all the answers he received. Before leaving Newport, Stiles commissioned a portrait or Rabbi Carigal.
In 1778 Ezra Stiles was appointed as the 7th president of Yale University. Stiles established that all freshman students take a Hebrew language course. And while this course is no longer mandatory, much remains in Yale of what Rabbi Carigal taught Ezra Stiles. Among other things, the seal of Yale University, who reads the Hebrew words URIM VETUMIM.