Rabbi Isaac Aboab da Fonseca (1605-1693), first rabbi of the Americas

Rabbi Isaac Aboab da Fonseca was born in 1605 in the town of Castro Daire, Portugal. His birth name was Simão da Fonseca. His parents were “marranos”, Jews who had been forcibly converted to Christianity. When Isaac was seven, the family moved to Amsterdam. Many Portuguese Jews who for a century lived as Jews in secret to escape the Inquisition, emigrated to Amsterdam, where freedom of worship was declared in 1596, something inconceivable until then in Christian Europe. There, they created a community that became very prosperous in every way. Arriving at Amsterdam, the Aboab family was finally able to practice their religion openly. Simão renamed Isaac, with its ancient Jewish last name: Aboab (also spelled Abohab). In Amsterdam, Rabbi Aboab studied with one of the few rabbis who at the time were in the city: Rabbi Isaac Uziel, a native of the city of Fez in Morocco. At eighteen Rab Aboab was ordained as a Rabbi (hakham) of the Beth Israel community, one of three Sephardic communities that existed at that time in Amsterdam. In 1638 he was named as one of the four Rabbis in the main community of Amsterdam: “Talmud Tora”.

In those years the Dutch colonized several parts of Brazil. And many Jews from Amsterdam, who were prominent in international trade, moved to the city of Recife, in Pernambuco, Brazil. In 1641, Rabbi Isaac Aboab was sent to Recife as the rabbi of “Kehal Zur”, the new congregation in Recife, the first Jewish community in the Americas. Rabbi Isaac Aboab da Fonseca was therefore the first official rabbi in the Americas. Most European citizens of this city were Jews from Amsterdam. In Recife Rabbi Aboab developed a beautiful congregation, modeled after the Jewish community in Amsterdam. “Kehal Zur” had a synagogue, a Mikve and a Yeshiva, where Rabbi Aboab taught Torah, particularly Talmud.

Rabbi Aboab da Fonseca enjoyed a few years of prosperity in Recife. In 1645 the Portuguese began to attack the Dutch colonies in Brazil. The long history of these battles is too extensive to be discussed in these few lines. What we can say is that the Portuguese, when achieved victory, allowed an honorable surrender to all Dutch, but not to the Jews, who were ordered to convert. Several Jews escaped, among them the 24 Jews who in 1654 would reach the city of New Amsterdam, now "New York".
On 26 January 1654 the Portuguese occupied the city of Recife in 1654. Rabbi Aboab escaped to Amsterdam. Back in Amsterdam, he was appointed as the chief rabbi of the Sephardic community in that city. In 1656, he was one of the rabbis who excommunicated Spinoza.
During the years 1664-1666 began a messianic movement around Shabbetai Zevi. Back then, most rabbis of the world, Sepharadim and Ashkenazim, believed that Shabbetai Zevi was the Messiah. And although he was not militant, Rabbi Aboab was no exception. In 1666 when the Turkish Sultan gave Shabbetai Zevi the choice between death and conversion to Islam, he decided to convert. Jews understood then that they had been victims of a huge hoax, with devastating consequences for the global Jewish community.

Despite all these difficulties, the Jewish community in Amsterdam flourished under the Rabbinate of rabbi Aboab and it produced, among other things, hundreds of Talmide Hakhamim who served the community and wrote thousands of books in Spanish and Portuguese.

In 1647 rabbi Aboab wrote a Hebrew grammar book that has not yet been published "melekhet ha-Diqduq. He also translated from Spanish to Hebrew (sic) a Qabbala book written by Abraham Cohen Herrera, called " Las puertas del Cielo" in Hebrew "Shaar HaShamayim".
Rabbi Isaac Aboab da Fonseca died in Amsterdam on April 4, 1693, at the age of 88 years.