

THE SOUL OF SEPHARAD

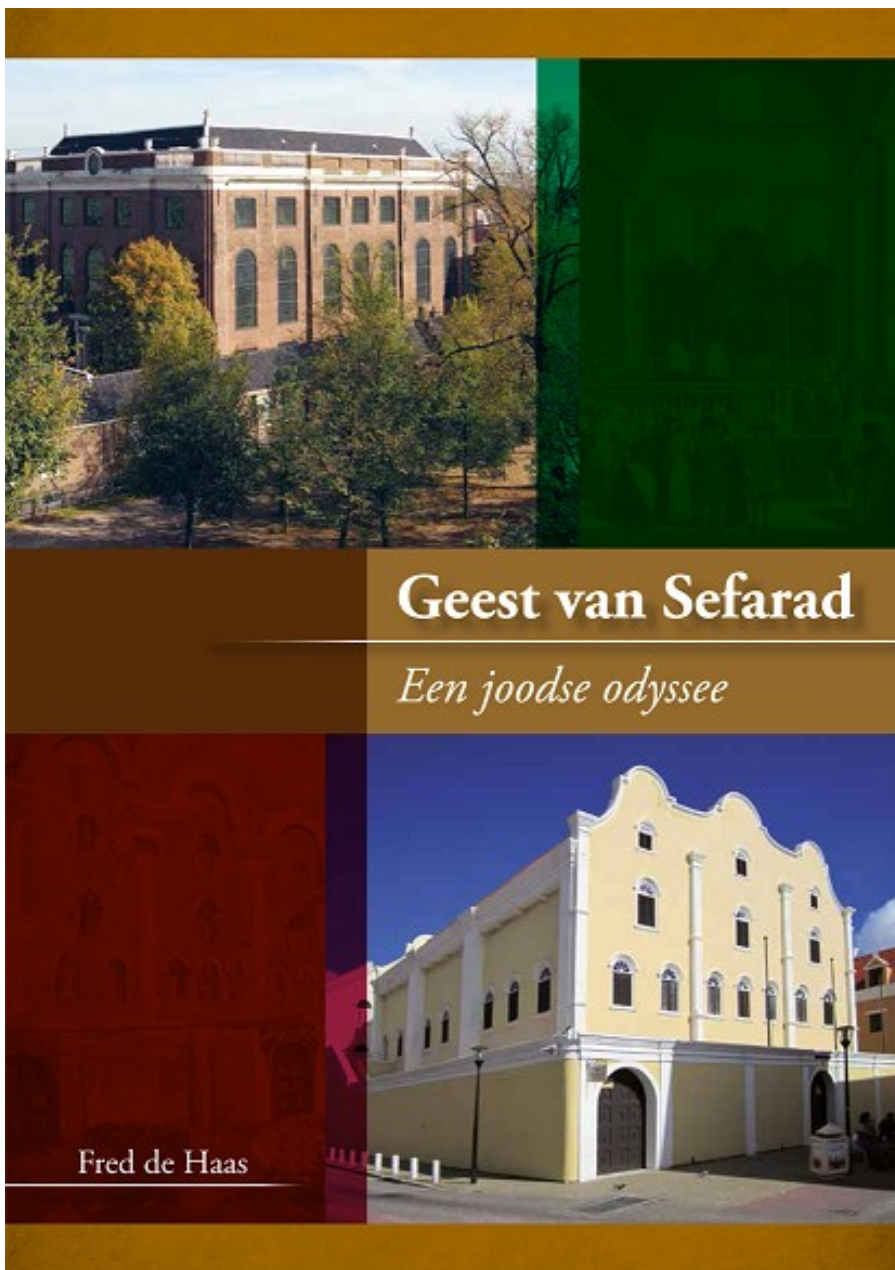
The Soul of Sepharad A Jewish Odyssey

A book review by Ron Gomes Casseres

In one of several interesting sermons during the recent High Holidays, Hazzan Tracht challenged us to think why each and every one of us is a Jew. Is it because we were born that way or because we have some kind of spiritual connection to our Snoa building or is it because we feel some kind of obligation to our parents and grandparents? Hazzan Tracht's own reply to the question why we should bother being Jewish was most enlightening, and his sermon was for many of us a learning experience.

I am not, however, writing this short article to review Hazzan Tracht's sermons. Instead, I want to tell you about a recently published book, in Dutch, entitled "Geest van Sefarad" by Fred de Haas. What is the connection between Hazzan Tracht's question about why we should bother being Jewish and the soul of Sepharad?

Sepharad is of course the base-word for Sephardic, a word we use and hear a lot in our congregation. Some 54% of our members have Sephardic ancestors, but other than knowing that this term refers to Spanish & Portuguese Jews who came here after traveling through Amsterdam to escape the Inquisition, how many of us know the history of Sephardic Jews in the Roman Empire, in the Ottoman Empire and finally as subordinates of Spanish and Portuguese Kings and Queens? Have we all heard of the pogroms that took place as long ago as 1391 and the *aljamas* in villages where Jews lived together, had their synagogues and beth-dins? And have we read some of the contents of the Edict of Granada in 1492 which featured so very importantly in the lives of our Sephardic ancestors? To me too, much of this was new and all of it is described and very easily and enjoyably read in Fred de Haas' "Geest van Sefarad".



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But there is more, much more. “Geest van Sefarad” continues well beyond historical saga and Curaçao’s Sephardim. Fred de Haas includes chapters on Sephardics in Brazil and in the Caribbean and of Curaçao Jews who moved to Coro, Venezuela. De Haas writes a whole chapter on Sephardic Spanish, or judeo-español, and confirms again that Ladino in its authentic form was never spoken in Curaçao. And he naturally connects that judeo-español with our very own Papiamentu and the work that Shon May Henriquez has done to show the Sephardic-Jewish origin of many words and expressions that we speak daily in Papiamentu.

One very interesting aspect of the book is that it includes a number of QR squares (those funny little squares with scribbles that take you directly to an internet website) and YouTube addresses which include everything from an interview for Spanish TV with, among others, Lio Capriles and René Levy Maduro, to YouTube video clips with delightful music, songs and prayers that we will recognize - *Bendigamos*, *Baruch Haba* and *Kol Nidre* - even if these are not our Snoa’s versions. The book ends with a number of Sephardic songs that are also wonderful to listen to.

So what does all of this have to do with Hazzan Tracht’s Rosh Hashana sermon on why we should bother being a Jew? Well, one of Hazzan’s conclusions is that Judaism includes messages of morality, of the uniqueness and value of all life on earth, of Tikkun Olam, the perfection of the world, and of the importance of education, messages which the world needs to hear and to continue hearing from all of us who are Jews.

Similarly, I believe that those of us of Sephardic ancestry need to know more of the history of our ancestors so that we, as liberal Sephardic Jews, can carry on the message of the perseverance, the devotion, and the hard work of our Sephardic ancestors to create a new world in the Americas. Think only of the huge risks they took to cross the oceans from Western Europe to this little rock of an island to start anew here, and centuries later leaving us this wonderful, unique legacy of our Congregation and our Snoa. That too is a message that the world needs to continue hearing. And it is now our responsibility to ensure that this Sephardic message continues to resound also in Curaçao for decades to come.

I may not agree with all that Fred de Haas says and writes in his “Geest van Sefarad”, but I will say and recommend to you that it is a book that is a must-read to know more of our own Sephardic history, of the soul of Sepharad and of how our own history intersects with and is part of a larger world history. It is available at Mensing’s and well worth a trip to pick one up. You will not regret it.