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### **Jewish Autonomy in a Slave Society**

*Suriname in the Atlantic World, 1651–1825*

Aviva Ben-Ur

“Aviva Ben-Ur provides a fascinating glimpse into a Dutch Atlantic world that most of us know little about and a portrait of Jewish life in a slave society that is not only important but also at odds with what we usually understand.”—Trevor Burnard, University of Hull

*Jewish Autonomy in a Slave Society* explores the political and social history of the Jews of Suriname, a Dutch colony on the South American mainland just north of Brazil. Suriname was home to the most privileged Jewish community in the Americas where Jews, most of Iberian origin, enjoyed religious liberty, were judged by their own tribunal, could enter any trade, owned plantations and slaves, and even had a say in colonial governance.

Aviva Ben-Ur sets the story of Suriname’s Jews in the larger context of slavery and colonialism and argues that, like other frontier settlements, they achieved and maintained their autonomy through continual negotiation with the colonial government. Drawing on sources in Dutch, English, French, Hebrew, Portuguese, and Spanish, Ben-Ur shows how, from their first permanent settlement in the 1660s to the abolition of their communal autonomy in 1825, Suriname Jews enjoyed virtually the same standing as the ruling white Protestants, with whom they interacted regularly. She also examines the nature of Jewish interactions with enslaved and free people of African descent in the colony. Jews admitted both groups into their community, and Ben-Ur illuminates the ways in which these converts and their descendants experienced Jewishness and autonomy. Lastly, she compares the Jewish settlement with other frontier communities in Suriname, most notably Indians and Maroons, to measure the success of their negotiations with the government for communal autonomy. The Jewish experience in Suriname was marked by unparalleled Jewish autonomy that nevertheless developed in one of the largest slave colonies in the New World.

**Aviva Ben-Ur** is Professor in Judaic and Near Eastern Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She is author of *Sephardic Jews in America: A Diasporic History*.

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