

## From the Parnas

By Mark I. Wolfson

This Shabbat we have the privilege of welcoming Mrs. Sipora Rodrigues-Lopes Groen and David Groen, mother and brother of our member Debby Groen. David Groen will present a talk on his book *Jew Face*, which he wrote about his parents Sipora and Rabbi Nardus Groen. The book is a story of love and heroism in Nazi-occupied Holland during World War II. David Groen gave a wonderful interview on WCWP 88.1FM, public radio in Brookville, Long Island. Click [here](#) for the link.

The book tells the story of Sipora and Rabbi Nardus Groen. Rabbi Groen passed away in 2007. After he died, PA US Representative Joe Sestak introduced into the Congressional Record a tribute to Rabbi Groen. (You can read the tribute [here](#).) As the Tribute relates, he was born in Rotterdam in 1919. He was born in Rotterdam in 1919. During World War II, he worked for the Dutch Underground, selflessly risking his life on a daily basis, helping Jews to escape capture and death. At this time he met his future wife Sipora, who was working as a nurse in the Jewish hospital. Throughout the war, Rabbi Groen courageously helped the Jewish people, saving countless lives, including Sipora's. He escaped 4 times from Nazi prisons and once from a concentration camp.

Rabbi Groen came from an orthodox Ashkenazi background, while Sipora's background is Spanish-Portuguese. Throughout his life Rabbi Groen worked in communities where he could bring these two cultures together in harmony. In addition to serving in the Dutch Marines, after the war he served the American Marine Corps at Camp Lejeune. Then he worked as a psychologist at a Jewish orphanage helping young Jewish Holocaust survivors with the trauma of the war and the decimation of their families and communities.

He then brought Sephardim and Ashkenazim together as chief rabbi of Suriname, before returning to the Netherlands to become a leader in uniting these two different cultures as the Rabbi in Eindhoven, Netherlands. He spent the next 20 years in the United States, mainly serving the Beth Israel Synagogue in Lansdale, PA. He served the next 10 years as the chief rabbi of the eastern six provinces of the Netherlands before retiring and moving to Florida, splitting his time between the Netherlands and Boynton Beach.

Rabbi Groen's lifetime of serving and uniting his own culture of orthodox Ashkenazi Judaism and Sipora's proud Spanish-Portuguese heritage, mirrors that of our own congregation, where here at Mikveh Israel we have brought together Jews from all backgrounds and cultures under the Western Sephardic minhag and community. From our early beginnings in the mid-1700's, the congregation has been a conglomeration of Jews from different Ashkenazi and Sephardi cultures around the world. Since that time, we have brought them together to pray as brothers and sisters of one community, holding steadfastly true to the Western Sephardic minhag that we

inherited from our "mother" congregation in Amsterdam, the birthplace of Western Sephardic Judaism.

Western Sephardic Judaism was officially launched in 1602 when Uri Halevi, himself Ashkenazi, came to Amsterdam and began circumcising and instructing in Torah the ex-conversos (crypto - Jews) immigrants and refugees from the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal. These Jews joined Congregation Bet Jacob, founded by prominent merchant Jacob Tirado. In 1616 Rabbi Saul Levi Morteira of Portuguese descent from Venice, the first Haham of Amsterdam, was appointed the senior minister of Bet Jacob. In 1638, Bet Jacob merged with the two smaller Sephardic congregations in Amsterdam, Neve Salom and Bet Israel, and formed a unified synagogue which they named Kahal Kadosh Talmud Torah. This congregation became the center for Jewish Learning, excelling in the teaching of Talmud, Hebrew grammar, and poetry and producing many gifted Hebrew writers and poets, as well as prolific printers, rabbis, scholars, physicians, philosophers, playwrights and even Kabalists. Kahal Kadosh Talmud Torah became the mother congregation of many communities including Hamburg, Recife, Suriname, Curacao, London, Livorno, The Hague, Jamaica, Barbados, St. Thomas, New York, Philadelphia, Newport, Bordeaux and many others.

In the words of Rabbi Marc D. Angel, Rabbi emeritus of our sister congregation Shearith Israel in NYC and founder of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals ([www.jewishideas.org](http://www.jewishideas.org)) on the installation of Talmud Torah's new Haham, Dayyan Pinchas Toledano in March of this year:

"When one enters the Portuguese Synagogue of Amsterdam, one enters Jewish history. The Sephardic community of Amsterdam was established by ex-conversos who fled the fires and persecutions of the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions in order to return to Judaism. When they built the Esnoga, they were making a statement: we have survived the flames of the Inquisition, we are thriving, we are committed to the future of Judaism, our grand synagogue building is a testimony to our strength and our love of Torah, we have overcome adversity and we look to the future with optimism and confidence."

Please join me in welcoming Mrs. Sipora Groen and David Groen to KKMI. I am very much looking forward to hearing his talk and chatting about Jewish life in the Netherlands.