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Sunscreen and synagogue: Spring break in the Caribbean

By CONTRIBUTED CONTENT

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It was Shabbat on Spring break, and I was in the Dutch-Antilles Island of Curacao. So, like many traveling Jews, I put on my sunscreen, adjusted my sandals, and started my search for the local Jewish community. My quest led me quite quickly to congregation Mikve Israel, the oldest temple in the Western hemisphere.

I stepped into the grand sanctuary of the snoa, a Ladino Judeo-Spanish word for synagogue. The layout of the mahogany elevated *bimah*, (pulpit) in the middle of the room, was exactly like the grand sanctuary of Yousefabad Kenisha, a Judeo-Persian word for a synagogue, of my youth in Tehran, Iran. Even though fine white sand covered the Caribbean temple's floor, and Persian handwoven rugs covered the floor of its Middle Eastern counterpart, both synagogues had similar Sephardic practices.

Sephardim are primarily the descendants of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula, but the term also includes the Jewish communities of the Middle East and North Africa who practice the same laws and customs. Mikve Israel-Emanuel synagogue was founded in 1723 by expelled Spanish and Portuguese Jews who re-established their lives in the more tolerant societies of the

independent Dutch provinces. Likewise, in my current hometown of Chicago, the Portuguese Israelite Fraternity congregation was founded in 1914 by the descendants of survivors of the Spanish Inquisition who re-established their lives in the United States.

The congregants at the island synagogue were comprised of an eclectic tapestry of races and cultures. Jews from North and Latin America, Europe, and Asia, were well represented. The European congregants, in particular, mostly Dutch citizens, were either vacationing or living in the Caribbean on a part-time basis. KLM airlines run a non-stop flight between Amsterdam and Curacao regularly. Other non-local congregants, like me, were passengers of the nearby docked cruise ships; eager to maximize their short stay on the island by visiting its most notable landmark. Today, an American teenager was celebrating her destination *bat mitzvah* with her entourage of guests who had joined her on this special day.

To my left, dressed in a long floral gown with a matching colorful headwrap and dangling earrings, sat my new Curacaoan friend, Jemyma. She grasped the star of David around her neck and swayed from side to side as the *Hazzan* recited the prayers in a deep and gripping voice. Similarly, at the Portuguese Israelite Fraternity congregation in Chicago, blending different traditions from members' ethnic backgrounds add to the richness of the experiences of the Jews in the diaspora. The membership constitutes a variety of nationalities from Latin American nations such as Mexico, Brazil, and Venezuela, to Middle Eastern countries such as Israel, Iran, Iraq, Morocco, and Tunisia.

After the service, I walked up to Hazzan Tracht, the spiritual leader of the congregation, to wish him *Shabbat Shalom* (a peaceful Sabbath). We then walked toward the tiled courtyard outside, and soon developed a warm rapport. I was intrigued as to why the floor was covered with sand and soon learned that the sand symbolized the time when the Spanish and Portuguese Jews had to muffle their footsteps during prayer at the time of the Inquisition.

I mentioned my memoir and my upbringing in the Middle East. The *Hazzan* was interested to know more about the story of a Jewish girl from a distant world so different to the Caribbean

paradise of his existence. As we shook hands to say our goodbyes, I asked Hazzan Tracht why he was the "Hazzan" and not the "Cantor?" With his pleasant demeanor he told me that the answer was quite simple, as in Dutch, *Kantoor* means office.

If you happen to be vacationing in the island of Curacao, don't forget to take a short walk to the juncture of the cobble-stoned streets of Hanchi Snoa and Columbusstraat in the capital city of Willemstad. There, under the clear blue sky and behind the row of multi-colored colonial buildings at the waterfront edge of Saint Anna Bay, you will see a bright yellow building with expansive white trimmed windows. The sign on the large wooden gate is a welcoming invitation that reflects the ideology of tolerance and respect for all: "Visitors are welcome to worship with us."

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