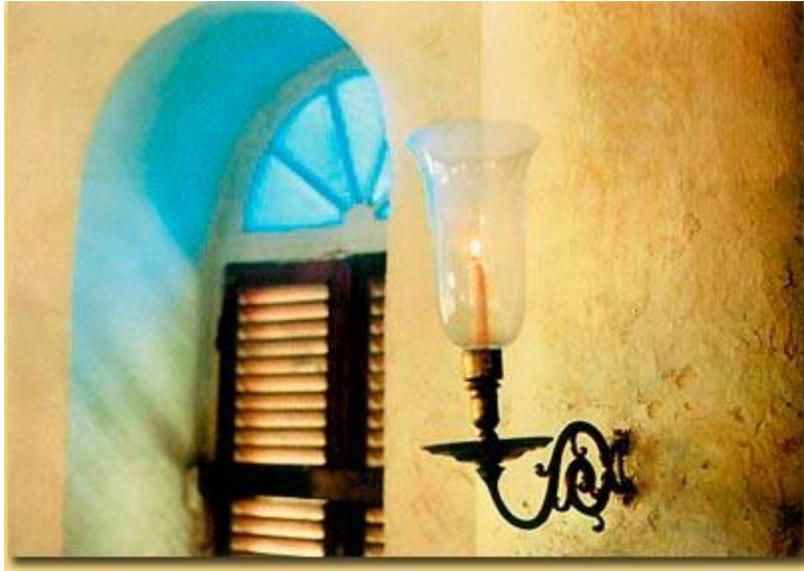


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THE FOUNDING



On the twenty first of March, 1651, the Directors of the Dutch West India Company wrote to Governor Pieter Stuyvesant: "Although we have once before written about the island of Curaçao, 'that, if we should have no revenue whatever from there it might be advisable to abandon it ...' the enclosed contract made with a Jew, Jan de Illan will prove to you the contrary. He intends to bring a considerable number of people there to settle and cultivate, as he pretends, the land but we begin to suspect that he and his associates have quite another object in view, namely to trade from there to the West Indies and the Main. Be that as it may, we are willing to make the experiment, and you must therefore charge Director Rodenborch to accommodate him within proper limits, and in conformity

with the conditions of his contract."

Who were these Jews on whom the Dutch were pinning their last hopes for the retention and development of their island possession in the faraway Caribbean? Both the leader and his group, all came from Amsterdam- at that time a blossoming center of Jewish life and culture in the newly independent Netherlands. Their roots, however, were unmistakably in Spain and Portugal. There, their ancestors had lived for over ten centuries among and alongside the heathen, then Moslem, and finally Christian civilizations. There they had come to enjoy peace and security, reaching the heights of learning, of the professions, and of their contemporary society.

Then came the Inquisition. By the end of the 15th century, this once vibrant and flourishing Jewish community of Spain had either gone underground, as MARRANOS, or into exile. As MARRANOS, "New Christians" or CONVERSOS"- as they were variously known- they crossed the border into still tolerant Portugal and lived there for a hundred years. They even changed the spelling of their names, added on new ones, and adopted Portuguese as their language. Until, once again, they had to flee as the Inquisitors set up their tribunals in Portugal as well. As is so tragically common place in history when persecution sets in, the havens of refuge become rare. Protestant Holland, just then emerging victorious from its war for religious freedom against Spain, was one of those few. Settling there at the turn of the 16th century under the protectorate of the burgomasters of Amsterdam and the freedom-loving House of Orange Nassau, these Spanish and Portuguese Jews helped make Amsterdam the commercial and shipping center of Europe. As for Jewish culture and religion, Amsterdam was to become known as the "NEW JERUSALEM". The majestic Portuguese Synagogue on



the Jonas Daniel Meyerplein, the "Esnoga", still testifies proudly to the greatness that once was theirs. (CGC)

THE HOPE OF ISRAEL (Mikvé Israel)

It was from Amsterdam's well-spring of the Jewish renaissance that one Joao d'Yllan petitioned the Dutch West India Company to bring a company of settlers to colonize Curaçao. He was born in Portugal, had been denounced there for "Judaizing", was now established in Amsterdam and engaged in commerce with relatives in Brazil. He was a good and prosperous member of the Portuguese Synagogue of Amsterdam and had a brother who was a colonel in the Dutch colonial army. He promised to bring fifty families, but succeeded in recruiting no more than twelve. They set sail for Curaçao in the summer of 1651.

If the roots of these settlers were Spanish and Portuguese, so were their names. One historian lists them as being: Aboab, Aboab Cardozo, Chaves, Henriquez Continho, Jesurun, De León, Marchena, De Meza, Oliveria, La Parra, Pereira and Touro. They were not the only ones. Several independent

Jewish businessmen from Amsterdam followed and- some claim- even preceded them. In fact, the very first Jew to set foot and establish himself on Curaçao was one Samuel Coheno, an interpreter, pilot, and Indian guide to Johan van Walbeek, the Dutch naval commander who took Curaçao from the Spanish in 1634. Samuel Coheno was appointed Chief Steward of the native Indian population and certainly stayed on Curaçao until 1641. But it is the d'Yllan group who, in the words of our foremost historians Isaac and Suzanne Emmanuel, surely improvised a Synagogue out of a small house in 1651 and that first house of worship probably stood in the fields where the colonists toiled. If the exact date of its founding is lost in history, there can be no doubt about its existence. In a letter in Spanish, Ishack Rodrigues Cunha, while away from Curaçao, addresses himself "to the illustrious Gentlemen the MAHAMAD of the Holy Congregation Mikvé Israel, Curaçao". The date of the letter was the 2nd of Heshvan 5415 (Oct. 13, 1654).

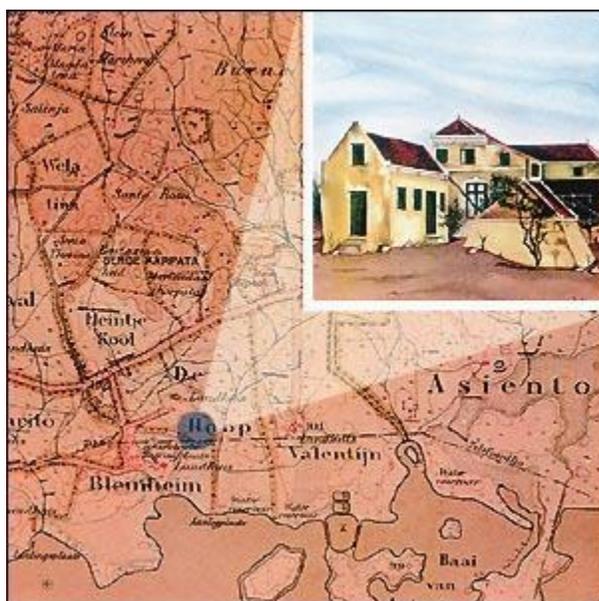
The earliest maps of that era show that the JODEN KWARTIER (Jewish Quarter) was comprised of a number of plantations: BLY EN HEIM (later BLEINHEIM), JUDIO (JEW), ROZENTAK (alias GASPARITO) and DE HOOP (The Hope). There is strong support for assuming a connection between the name that the first settlers had given to their congregation, Mikvé Israel (The Hope of Israel) and the name of this last plantation.

In the spring of 1659, a large group of "more than 70 Souls", comprised mostly of former Jewish colonists from what was once Dutch Brazil, set sail from Amsterdam under the leadership of Ishac da Costa. It was in da Costa's contract that the Jews were first and formally granted religious liberty in the colonies by the Dutch authorities. Important for the future of the Curaçao Jewish community, is the fact that da Costa brought with

him a SEFER TORAH (Scroll of the Law) with some ornaments, "entrusted to him by the MAHAMAD of the Amsterdam Portuguese Jewish Community for delivery to Curaçao". This is the first recorded presence of a TORAH Scroll on the Island. (CGC)

The area of the 1st Jewish settlement on the Island of Curacao. Depicted lower left, is the Jewish cemetery (Begraafplaats) situated between the "Blenheim" and "De Hoop" plantations.

INSET: Watercolor reproduction of the manor house on the "De Hoop" plantation.



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PUNDA



The early Jewish colonists in Dutch Brazil, Barbados, Essequibo and Surinam were pioneers in the cultivation of sugar cane and laid the foundation for the subsequent agro industry of those countries. They did not succeed in developing agriculture on Curaçao. The foregoing should not surprise anyone as Curaçao's climatic conditions are simply not suitable for agriculture due to lack of rain water, etc.

What they did establish, however, was Curaçao's unique situation for international trading and shipping, especially with the Spanish Main and the islands of the Caribbean. They devoted all their resources and their far-flung network of familial relations to these ends. Commerce and shipping flourished and, in only a few decades, Curaçao became the Caribbean center for much of the trading between the mother countries of Europe and their colonies in the Americas.

These commercial activities called for urbanization and so the trek from the fields to the walled city of Willemstad, popularly known as PUNDA (The Point) began. As early as 1660 there is evidence of a Jew, Jeosuah Henriquez, buying a house in Willemstad. Others soon followed. According to historical records, much of the present Heerenstraat was built up by this new class of Jewish merchants and ship owners.



At least three streets in Willemstad attested to their presence: The Jodenstraat (Jews' Street), presumably the present day Windstraat, the Joden Kerk Straat (Jewish Church Street), which became the Kerkstraat and then the Hanchi di Snoa in honor of the Snoa's 250th anniversary in 1982, and the Hanchi di Baño (Papiamentu for "Street of the Bath"), in Dutch the Kuiperstraat, supposedly owing its name to the presence of the ritual bath (MIKVAH) in a house adjacent to the Synagogue. To this day, one of the houses on the Heerenstraat still bears a Hebrew date in its gable, while another

has the inscription BEIT LEVI in Hebrew letters.

All the while, the Jewish population on Curaçao continued to increase through the influx of new immigrants from Holland, Portugal, Bayonne (France) and even from some of the other Caribbean islands. This called for ever larger houses of worship. It is remarkable that in the short span of only fifty years, the Jewish community here established no less than six Synagogues! The original one of 1651, in the fields, was replaced by a larger one in 1681. At about the same time, those residing within the walled city- though all belonging to the same congregation MIKVÉ ISRAEL- consecrated their first city Synagogue in 1674, apparently timed to coincide with the arrival of the first rabbi (Chacham) to Curaçao, Josiau Pardo of Amsterdam. By 1690 this one too, had to be replaced by a larger one, only to be succeeded in six years' time by still another one.



Then by 1703, thanks to a sizeable legacy from Abraham and Sara da Costa, a spacious house was bought by the PARNASSIM near the northeastern corner of the walled city. They had the house demolished and built a Synagogue in its stead, the predecessor to our present building on the same site. To raise the necessary funds for this new building, the PARNASSIM sold the honors of purchasing the four corner stones to the highest bidders, and had various members donate parts of the furnishings, equipment and decorations. Chacham Eliau Lopez consecrated the new Synagogue (referred to in the

archives as the “Old Synagogue”) on SHAVUOT, 1703.

Two of the large brass chandeliers in the present Synagogue, two silver TORAH crowns, several TORAH scrolls, and the center section of the mahogany HEYCHAL (Holy Ark), belonged to this Synagogue of 1703.



A year later the MAHAMAD purchased a comfortable house on the Kuiperstraat to serve as the home of Chacham Lopez de Fonseca, (who had succeeded Chacham Pardo) and of his successors thereafter. There is a strong indication that this is the building now housing the Jewish Cultural Historical Museum.

Inasmuch as from the start, education played such an important role in the life of the early Jewish settlers, MEDRASIM (schools) were built as early as 1701, against the eastern façade of the Synagogue, across from the old

city walls (on the site of the present Columbusstraat).



By 1729, the Jewish population of Curaçao, then numbering about one half of the white population of the Island, had grown so large that the 1703 Synagogue could no longer seat all. A campaign was started to collect funds for building a truly large house of worship. It was to stand on the same site as the then existing Synagogue, which consequently had to be torn down in 1730. While construction was going on, services were held in the homes of Eliau Jeudah Leao and Ishac de Marchena.

Thus began the building of the present edifice (CGC).

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THE BUILDING BEGINS

During this same time, the colonial government was also studying the possibility of extending Willemstad's city boundaries as it, too, had become too small for the population living there. This would require demolishing the already existing city wall (which was very much in disrepair), filling-in the sea and marsh land behind it, and then constructing new defense walls further to the east.

The PARNASSIM approached Governor Juan Noah DuFay and requested that he sell them a strip of land measuring 20 feet by 20 feet in the corner between the city wall (to the east) and the Kuiperstraat (to the north). Governor DuFay inspected the site with Fortress and Buildings Inspector Jan Kock, and agreed to sell them the 400 sq. feet of ground for 800 Pesos, a considerable amount of money at that time! This amount, remitted to Governor DuFay per his signed receipt of June 30, 1730, was supposed to include the demolition of the wall at that point and its rebuilding later on after the Company had drained and filled in the water behind it.

Ten of the twenty feet along the eastern part (probably near the HEYCHAL today), were transferred to the congregation; the remaining ten feet of frontage and twenty feet along the Kuiperstraat were to follow as soon as the congregation needed them to enlarge the community's school located near the city wall. The additional footage was apparently never transferred to the congregation, nor did it ever receive the refund which was ordered by the Company directors to its new Governor, Juan Pedro van Collen, in reply to a letter from the PARNASSIM to the Company in November, 1732. Not only was Governor van Collen not a friend of the "Jewish Nation on Curaçao", but it seems that Governor DuFay had forgotten to register the 800 Pesos in the Company's ledgers. Requiring a "master builder" to take on the responsibility for an edifice of the magnitude they envisioned, the PARNASSIM charged Elias and Manuel Namias de Crasto Jr. of Amsterdam, with the task of finding a "master carpenter" for them. To ensure that he perform according to contract, the PARNASSIM also required that someone stand guarantor for him. The Namiases succeeded in finding Henderik Schielach and contracted him on July 26, 1730.

Collage of period documents relating to the building of our Snoa.

Working under the supervision of Pieter Roggenburg, “chief of master carpenters”, Schielach set to work immediately upon his arrival to design a building modeled after their parent, the “Great Synagogue of Amsterdam”, better known as the ESNOGA.

The 1703 Synagogue was demolished soon after SHAVUOT, 1730, and excavation began for the foundation of their new SNOA on the 15th of Sivan, 5490. This being reclaimed land, they soon struck water. The MAHAMAD convoked the councilors and members of the community to the building site and urged each of them to throw a stone into the foundation pit to make each member feel that he was personally taking part in the construction. Then, in the presence of the entire community, Chacham Raphael Jesurun declared that “This building rises forth in the name of God and for the glory of His Holy Name on condition that, if at some future date the gentlemen of the Mahamad or councilors so decide, they are at liberty to rebuild or sell the site once the building has been razed.”

Construction was started and, not before long, the funds originally collected during the first fundraising (6,456:2:3 Pesos) ran out well ahead of schedule! Additional funds had to be raised urgently: honors were sold for laying the four corner stones (as in 1702), as well as for the foundation of the four center pillars; donors were found for the chandeliers, for the furniture and for the other objects needed in the building. Their efforts were well worth their trouble! With costs far exceeding their wildest expectations (a staggering 20,941:4 Pesos, excluding the land), their SNOA was ready for dedication on the 15th of Nisan 5492 (RDLM).

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CONSTRUCTION OF OUR “SNOA”

Located at the northeastern corner of the walled city of Willemstad, near the corner of the “Joden Kerk Straat” (Jewish Church Street) and “Agter de Muur” (Behind the Wall), close to the four-meter-high city wall, our Synagogue was squeezed in between several two or three-storied buildings. It was really not until the city walls had been demolished (1861-1865) and the adjacent buildings torn down (1893-1894), that our SNOA finally had the chance to show off the unique architectural style which makes it one of the most beautiful Synagogues in the Western Hemisphere.

Measuring approximately 24 meters in length, 18 meters in width and 15 meters in height, our SNOA strongly bears the stamp of local building traditions and workmanship.

The exterior walls are 70 centimeters thick. They are constructed of limestone rock and coral stone, filled with sea sand and plastered with lime mortar. The side walls are 8 meters high; the front and back walls are 15 meters high in the center (the highest gable).

Though the exteriors are dissimilar (the ESNOGA of Amsterdam has red brick walls, four roofs hidden behind a flat balustrade, and mullioned windows), the interior of our SNOA closely resembles its mother Synagogue. The three high vaulted ceilings, the Holy Ark (HEYCHAL) and the pulpit (TEBAH), the galleries, the benches and the illumination, all bear a marked resemblance to their counterparts in Amsterdam.

The Great Synagogue of United Congregation Talmud TORAH, our mother congregation in Amsterdam, was dedicated on the 10th of Menachem 5435, just 57 years before our own. Some of our forefathers had undoubtedly been present for that consecration ceremony which had taken eight days, just as the Temple's in Jerusalem. Certainly, many had worshipped and still maintained close family ties there. Like the tabernacle in the wilderness, the floor of our richly ornamented Synagogue was (and still is) covered with a thick carpet of fine white sand to remind us of our past: the MARRANOS in Portugal covered the floors of their clandestine Synagogues with sand to muffle the sound of their footsteps. Although the Jews of Curaçao have always enjoyed the broadest possible tolerance and freedom of worship, generation after generation has chosen to perpetuate this custom in our SNOA. In fact, until the end of the last century, part of that sand was imported from the Holy Land.



As in the construction of their 1703 Synagogue, the Curaçao MAHAMAD sold the honors of laying the first four corner stones of the 1732 building to the highest bidders: Mordechai Alvares Correa, Samuel de Casseres, Jacob Henriquez Marao and Manuel Levy. They also sold the honor of laying the foundation stones of the four center columns. These went to Daniel Aboab Cardoze, his wife Ribcah; to Abraham Aboab Cardoze and his wife Leah. These founders are remembered every year during special prayers recited in the Synagogue on PESACH.



The central columns which support the roof beams are 8 meters high and almost 3 1/2 meters in circumference. Their core is made of limestone rock and sand, sheathed in a layer of yellow brick, and covered by a thin layer of lime mortar. Having removed the outer layer of lime mortar during the 1974 restoration, remnants of four wooden pegs (one in each compass direction) were uncovered at a height of two meters on each of the central pillars. These had apparently served as anchors for wall sconces in earlier times. Since several spare sconces did exist, three of these were re-attached to each pillar; the one facing center

was left un-mounted as it would undoubtedly be struck by the RIMONIM of the TORAH scrolls during the processional. In their stead, the names of the Matriarchs of our people: Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel and Leah were attached in raised Hebrew

letters to the columns, symbolizing the indispensable contribution of our women to the Synagogue.

Six smaller columns support the galleries. Although they are all 4 1/2 meters tall and 1 1/2 meters in circumference, only the composition of the four which support the lateral galleries is similar to the larger central pillars. The composition of the two columns supporting the organ is unknown, but one legend has it that they are ship's masts covered by a veneer of cedar wood. While the shaft of all the columns is round, their base is square. The columns are topped by three-tiered, circular capitals to support the cross beams of the roof or balcony.

Although there is no way to prove the contrary, we believe that our Snua's windows were mullioned windows similar to Amsterdam's. We believe that the original windows of our Synagogue were probably colonial style, glass-paned case windows, the two vertical halves opening to the inside. The unreachable second floor windows above the Heychal were opened by using an elaborate system of pulleys and chains.

On May 22, 1867, the Comision de Fabrica informed the Board that the Synagogue windows were in a deplorable condition and had to be replaced. The Commission recommended that the windows be changed to the shutter type to beautify the outside of the building and to make the building cooler. (Shutters became the vogue on Curaçao around the 1850s.)

On August 28, 1868, the DIRECTIVA reported that all of the windows had been replaced and that additional windows had been added. Unfortunately, it does not mention where! All the white painted, shutter windows were replaced during the restoration of 1974; this time by similar, fixed-jalousie type windows in a natural wood stain, also to enhance the outside of the building.

In its March 6, 1902 Minutes, the DIRECTIVA thanks Mr. Morris Cardoze Sr. for having so ably supervised the installation of the colored glass in the windows of the Synagogue.

It is possible that the fixed, blue triangular-glass panes which decorate the arches of our windows today, only date back some eighty years. If so, what was there before? An answer to this question can be found in the fact that the cement arches of all the ground floor windows are different from all (except one) of their counterparts in the galleries upstairs. Could our Snua's ground floor window casements have been square, as are Amsterdam's, and only the gallery's arched as in Amsterdam? Could the fanlights above our ground floor windows have been added later on, perhaps during the 1868 renovation when shutters were introduced? Perhaps the installation of the wooden shutters blocked too much of the light from the outside and created the need for an additional outside light source; thus the fanlights.



The chandeliers are hung from hooks passing through ten magnificently sculptured rosettes attached to the three ceilings of the Synagogue. These iron hooks are anchored by means of a wedge to beams running along the center of the attic floor above each ceiling. The rosettes of the center ceiling had to be re-positioned when their chandeliers were moved forward to make room for the western balcony, built to

support the organ in 1866.

The ceilings of the sanctuary consist of mahogany planks 4 centimeters thick, 40 centimeters wide and approximately 3 meters long. Modeled after Amsterdam, our ceilings and balconies must originally have been their natural wood color. Father Euwens, in two of his histories of the Jews of Curaçao, states that the Board, in the year 1876, finally relented to complaints and pressure from the membership that the Synagogue was too somber and dark because of all the dark mahogany everywhere. So, they (the Board) had all the woodwork painted white 'to brighten the interior.

One wonders nowadays, what the effect would have been like if the ceilings and balconies had been left in their rich original wooden color.



The roof of our SNOA is actually three roofs in one, a common architectural style found in many of the old town and plantation manor houses of Curaçao. Our Synagogue roof is covered with over 16,000 red clay roof tiles, supported on narrow wooden slats which are laid out in neat parallel rows. The framework of each of the three roof sections is constructed of heavy wooden cross and support beams. The center roof is slightly higher and wider than the other two, allowing for the difference in size of the lower laterals.

The floor of each of planks meters long, laid in directly can clearly see that whereas the ceiling in the wall at each



the three attics is made of thick wooden approximately 40 centimeters wide by 3 the same direction as the ceiling planks underneath. From the cutaway view, one the floor of each attic is horizontal below is curved. There is a small window end of the attic.



There is also a "throughway" at the western end of each of the roofs facing the center – to allow one to crawl out of the attic onto the roof itself. Between each of the roofs, and at the two outside ends as well, there is an open rainwater gutter that sheds its overflow water into the downspouts which are concealed inside the pillars at the center and corners of the front and back façades of the building and out onto the courtyard below.

Little could our forefathers who erected this magnificent building, have imagined the changes that would be made to the interior and exterior of their SNOA in the centuries to come in order to accommodate the needs of future generations. (RDLM)

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THE DEDICATION



It is difficult to convey the emotions that overcome us when inserting the large brass key into the lock plate and turning it twice to the right. We feel the large mahogany door swing open slowly, allowing us to pass from the tumult of everyday life into the peaceful twilight of the sanctuary. As our eyes adjust to the serene majesty of the interior of our SNOA, we realize that the haze we first saw is actually the subdued light shining through the blue glass of the windows, reflected off the dark mahogany furniture and absorbed by the white sand on the floor. Although the building has gone through several major changes in its 250-year history, this feeling must have also overcome our forefathers when they entered the building for its dedication 250 years ago.



Chacham Raphael Jesurun consecrated the building on the 15th of Nisan 5492, the first day of Passover, 1732. The MAHAMAD (President Jacob Ephraim Jesurun Henríquez, Vice President Jacob Curiel and Gabay Moses Penso), the Building Treasurer Abraham Jesurun Henriquez, the councilors, the contributors and all the members could well be proud of their brilliant achievement as they sat, elegantly dressed, in their new House of Worship. How their spirits must have soared as they worshipped the Lord Almighty for the first time in their new, candlelit Synagogue during this solemn service of dedication! How great their joy must have been to recite the special prayers of thanksgiving and hope offered from the **TEBAH** or in front of the open **HEYCHAL**; to join in singing the special hymns composed for this occasion; to celebrate the culmination of all that they had worked for, had contributed to and had dreamed of for almost two years.

Standing in this fascinating world created by our Sephardic forefathers, one is overwhelmed by the sacred, "old world" mysticism of our SNOA which makes it so unlike most other synagogues in the Western Hemisphere. This feeling is magnified manifold when, as it was then and is still the case today several times a year on special occasions, the interior of the Synagogue is aglow with the warm, shimmering lights of the over one hundred and fifty candles mirrored many times over in the gleaming brass and silver ornaments of our ancient SNOA (RDLM).

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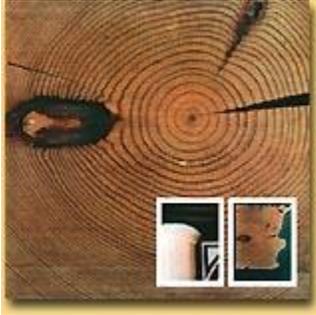
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THE GALLERIES



Until the merger with Temple Emanu-El, it was customary that the women sit in the galleries upstairs. Today there are three interconnecting galleries: the northern and southern ones for the ladies, and the western one for the organ and the choir. The galleries, each supported by two columns (page 31), are 4 1/2 meters above the ground floor. There are two rows of benches along the complete length of the two, meter-wide lateral galleries; the back row is elevated, theater-style, on a pedestal. The western balcony is semi-circular: 3 meters at its center and 4 1/2 meters at its widest, where it joins the lateral galleries. Like its parent in Amsterdam, the original 1732 balustrade was latticed to conceal the women from the sight of the men downstairs. The present balustrade is similar, but not identical to the balustrade of the TEBAH. It probably dates back to 1866 when two galleries were added and major renovations were made to the interior of the building to accommodate the organ.

There is no doubt that the southern gallery is a 1732 original. There are strong indications, however, that the northern gallery (the one above the BANCA) might be of a later date - probably even 1866 when the western gallery was constructed to hold the newly acquired organ. Several facts support this assumption:

Firstly: Although our parent ESNOGA of Amsterdam has two women's galleries (as we now have), there is no interconnecting gallery or passageway between them. Each is reached independently by its own staircase in the corner at the back of the building. Although our SNOA is modeled after Amsterdam's, we could find no hard evidence of the existence of a northern staircase until the one built in 1894. Nor could we find evidence of any kind of a passageway from one gallery to the other along the western wall.

Secondly: The seating capacity of Amsterdam is at least four times greater downstairs than upstairs. Why would Curaçao have needed a ratio of almost 2 to 1 (400 to 200) when it was built in 1732?

Thirdly: Some of the details mentioned in the two invoices of Thomas Chapman (the architect in charge of the interior renovations to prepare for the newly acquired organ), the kind and quantity of building materials used, the amount of time it took to complete the project (eight months), all indicate that the 1866 renovations could have been more than just the construction of a 13-meter gallery, the moving of the central chandeliers, and several other minor items.

Fourthly: Research on the anteroom located at the entrance to the northern gallery, reveals that its construction is not the same as that of the rest of the building. Further, that the room must have been built after 1732, but before 1894, as silver plaques attached to the doors leading into the gallery, contain the engraved date of 1892: that is two years before the northern staircase was built. We suppose that this anteroom was built at the time of the 1866 renovations and that, because of its dimensions, it could have been used as a meeting room for the CONSEJOS before it became a passageway after the 1894 staircase was built.

Lastly: The 1974 restoration uncovered some facts about the galleries that were unexplainable at the time. Based upon the results of the investigations conducted

to determine the safety and feasibility of continuing to use the galleries, it was decided to replace the sagging wooden support beams of both lateral galleries with concealed steel girders encased in wooden moldings identical to the original beams. Having dismantled the galleries, it was found that the connections between the cross beams and the main support beam of the northern gallery were completely different from those on the opposite side of the building. It was obvious that the northern gallery had either been built or rebuilt after the original construction of the building. Furthermore, the state of deterioration of the southern beam was much worse than that of the northern one (RDLM).

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THE EASTERN FAÇADE

One of the major changes to the exterior of the building occurred at the close of the 19th century.

Records show that there were several small buildings, probably with common walls, standing against or near the back (eastern) wall of the Synagogue. The school rooms (MEDRASIM) of the congregation were located in one of these back buildings, possibly in the one at a northeastern corner. We know that a carriage house was located in the middle, between the two rain water drain pillars, and that it apparently extended into the ground floor of the two-storied building to the left (the south). The AJUNTA, the room where the Consejo de la Sinagoga (ANCIANOS) and the Colegio de la Sinagoga DIRECTIVA or PARNASSIM held their meetings, was located on the second floor of this small building. It was reached by a staircase from the inside of the building next to it, the one in the southeastern corner.

In a letter dated November 2, 1892, the CONSEJO writes to the COLEGIO that the roof of the AJUNTA had to be replaced immediately as the room was no longer usable. In the same letter, they also state that it has been the desire of the membership ever since the city walls had been demolished, to move the main entrance from an alley to a main street.

(The Joden Kerk Straat was an alley no more than 2 meters wide at that time and the Concessiestraat had replaced the city wall along the back of the Synagogue). The CONSEJO made several suggestions as to what could be done. These included the demolition of the small buildings in the back of the Synagogue and the construction of a boundary wall with a main portal in their stead; the improvement of the exit for the women, etc. The COLEGIO approved the proposal on December 12, and on February 7, 1893, appointed a **Comision** de Tres (Mordechay Capriles, Dr. Abraham Jesurun and Jacob Penso) to prepare the details. The **Comision** reported as follows on March 29:

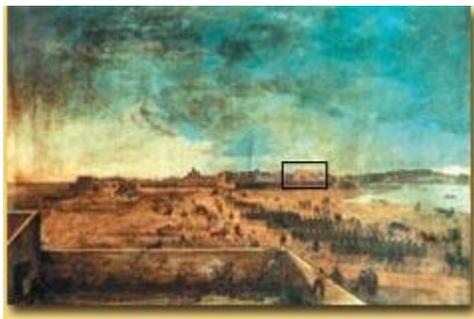
- To only demolish the Ajunta and build a portal in its stead would beautify the street but certainly not the Synagogue.
- There would not be enough room to build staircases to the women's galleries at the back of the building as the new courtyard would be too narrow.

- Building a new CASA CONSISTORIAL across the street would create additional problems as the ground floor of the building was used as the coach house for the congregation's hearse.
- It would only make sense to build the portico on the east side if the sanctuary entrance could be moved; and this would not be allowed for religious reasons as the HEYCHAL could not be moved."

The **Comision** suggested that:

- The two small buildings located at the northeastern and southeastern corners of the Synagogue be demolished. There was already a wide, untiled patio alongside the northern wall of the Synagogue behind the corner building. This patio (apparently a garden with trees and shrub) was used for the CABANA (Succah). There was also a narrower patio alongside the southern wall where the gallery steps were located? Having demolished the southeastern corner building, the steps to the CÁMARA CONSISTORIAL (AJUNTA) would then have to be rebuilt in the wide patio on the north side.
- Build a main portal at either corner of the new eastern boundary wall, the height of which was to be the same as the existing walls along the northern and southern patios.
- Remodel the outside of the carriage house and its door so as to become an ornamental part of the back of the Synagogue building.
- The only entrance – 'til then the portal near the southwestern corner of the wall along the Kerk Straat, would then be permanently closed. The men would then use the northernmost and the women the southernmost entrances in the new, projected eastern wall.
- Leave for a later date, the possibility of building a second staircase (from the northern patio) to the ladies' galleries.

The Consejo de Ancianos approved the project, including the laying of the marble tile courtyard and the construction of the second staircase. Because of the high cost, a specially convoked General Assembly was required; it approved the changes on June 8, 1893 by a vote of 41 to 18.



Left: The walled city of Willemstad and its surroundings

Bottom: Details northeastern section with Snoa



On December 8, the DIRECTIVA appointed Isaac M. de Marchena, Morris Cardoze, Moses Maduro and Sol de Casseres to constitute the **Comision de Fabrica**. Demolition of the two small corner houses and the SALA CONSISTORIAL began immediately. On January 29, 1894, the **Comision** reported that the new Ajunta or Sala Consistorial, with its steps and anteroom, could not be rebuilt at the back of the building where it had been because the space available was too small and because the style of the building would not fit with that of the Synagogue.

The **Comision** presented two alternatives:

- To construct a balcony along the exterior of the back wall leading into the two women's galleries connected to the street by staircases at the corners. Further, to build the eastern boundary wall with the three portals as suggested, but only for the men to use.
- To beautify the back of the Synagogue wall so that it would be similar to the front (western)

facade.

- To build an eastern wall similar in height to the northern and southern patio walls and to pave a courtyard all around the building.
- To build the three portals in the eastern wall as planned - allowing one to walk around the building to the main courtyard in front of the sanctuary entrance.
- And lastly, to build staircases to the women's galleries at either side of the building.

It seems strange that mention is made here of "staircases at either side" as one must have already existed somewhere along the southern wall! Was there another staircase, other than the one we know today? Could there have been one at the back of the building as in Amsterdam? Although there is no positive proof of this, one can make certain assumptions. For example: The casement of the east corner window of the southern gallery is different from all the other windows along that gallery. Could there have been a door there to give the women access to the balcony from a narrow staircase at the back of the building? (Note the final remark in the CONSEJO's letter of November 2, 1892!) Could the bottom of that staircase have been in the same south-eastern corner building as the stairs to the AJUNTA? Could the ground floor of that building have been just a covered entryway to provide access to both staircases (to the AJUNTA and to the gallery)? If the men entered the Synagogue complex through a door at the western end of the southern wall, did the women use the same portal or a different one?

The possibility of a staircase other than the one we have, now becomes even more probable when we consider the Board's January 31, 1894 petition to the Governor of the Colony of Curaçao, requesting him "to return to the congregation a 75 centimeter strip of land running along the entire length of the southern boundary wall which, according to them, belonged to the congregation but had been used as part of the Kerk Straat sidewalk by the authorities". (The Kerk Straat was apparently narrower up to the corner of our boundary wall). The Board motivated their petition by stating that this would not only enhance the changes they had planned, but would also allow them to build a main entrance at this corner. Unfortunately, no reply can be found in our archives, but the sidewalk is a straight line today!

The DIRECTIVA gave the **Comision** its approval on February 2, 1894 "to proceed as it saw fit". It is obvious from the present situation that they chose the second alternative.

The **Comision** also received approval to carry out major repairs to the roof, including the construction of two (additional) rain gutters along the outer edges of the roof to avoid damage to the walls. This, in turn, resulted in the construction of the elaborate cornices at the tops of the side walls to contain and screen the open drains, and the addition of the downspouts concealed inside the newly expanded corner pillars.

Six months and three General Assemblies later, on August 30, 1894, the **Comision de Fabrica** turned in its final report, including a detailed breakdown of expenditures totaling fls. 8,541.93 - more than double the amount approved a year before! To make the back (eastern)



wall look more like the front (the western) wall, they also made certain improvements:

One of these was to construct three, third-floor windows on the exterior of the back wall. They serve only as an outward decoration as they are blind on the inside. Their counterparts along the front wall, however, are regular windows. Another was the addition of three windows at balcony level, in between the center drain pillars of the back wall, directly above and behind the HEYCHAL. In this case, two of these three new windows are real; the one in

the middle is blind on the inside.

It is also interesting to note that, in spite of their zeal to make the two façades of the building the same, they did leave certain inconsistencies. For example: The size and the form of the casements of the third floor front windows differ from their counterparts in the back. Those in the front have no fanlights, only blind arches. All the other windows of the Synagogue have fanlights! Also, the three newly constructed windows between the pillars in the back have only two windows as counterparts in the front of the building.

Another difference is the design of the cornices of the four pillars which conceal the water drains in the front and back of the building. The corners of the pillars in the front are rounded, whereas the ones in the back are square.

Across the lintel on the outside of the central portal on the Concessiestraat (now known as the Columbusstraat), the **Comision** attached a wooden plaque with the following verse from Deuteronomy 28:6 inscribed in brass Hebrew letters:



BARUCH ATA B'VO-ECHA (Blessed will you be when you come in) and on the inside, above the same portal, the second half of this verse, also on a wooden plaque with brass letters: UVARUCH ATA B'TZEYTECHA (and blessed will you be when you go out).

As to the new AJUNTA which had been the cause of the entire problem leading up to the 1894 renovations: the buildings across the street were renovated and did serve as a meeting room for the CONSEJOS until 1909. In that year a new, one-story AJUNTA and MEDRAS (school) building was erected within the Synagogue courtyard directly across from the sanctuary entrance. It stood on the same site as the present SALA CONSISTORIAL and multistoried office building which replaced it in 1952 (RDLM).

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THE WESTERN FACADE



Following the tradition of the Great Synagogue of Amsterdam, our forefathers searched for and found an appropriate Biblical verse to engrave over the lintel of their SNOA. They chose, and inscribed in brass letters on a dark blue background, the following text from Genesis 9:27 BISHNAT YAFT ELOHIM L'YEFET VEYISHKON B'OHLEY SHEM (May God enlarge Jafeth and may he dwell in the tents of Shem). They based

their choice on two things: firstly, that the second word YAFT represents the Hebrew numerical equivalent for 490 and secondly, according to Rabbi Emmanuel, that the Jews, (represented by SHEM) were granted religious freedom and protection under the Dutch Government (JAFETH).

Paying close attention to the lintel, one notes that the second word (the letters YOD, PE and TAV) is not only larger than the rest, but also has a mark above each letter.

These marks denote that the letters are also to be understood as numerals and, as numerals, add up to 490, a standard way of indicating the Hebrew year 5490 (the secular year 1730)- the year when the corner stones were laid for this, our fourth Synagogue in town.



Our forefathers also found an ingenious way to solve their dilemma of not writing God's name: the third word in the verse on the lintel. The right-most, or first letter of the third word, is not a non-existent Hebrew letter, but a purposely malformed combination of the letters ALEF and LAMED, the first two Hebrew letters in the word ELOHIM (God), the word they were not allowed to write!

Our forefathers further demonstrated their joy at being able to worship God in complete freedom, by choosing a second verse (Psalms 26:12) to adorn the sides of the arch of their sanctuary door. This Hebrew text, also in brass letters on a dark blue background, reads B'MAKHELIM AVAREYCH ADONAI (In the congregations, I will bless the Lord).



A wide courtyard, paved with old, Spanish-style, grey and white marble tiles - leads to the entrance of the Synagogue. Although this courtyard surrounds the entire building, it is at its widest on this side of the building. At either side of the entrance, are two of the four pillars which conceal the rain water drains which allow the excess water to spill down from the roof and onto the courtyard below without damaging the walls. Except for the addition of two similar drainage pillars at the corners in 1894, the changing of the windows at least twice and the addition of the antechamber at the northwestern corner, the writers have found no evidence of any other major changes to this façade since the

1732 inauguration.

Some drastic changes did however occur to the interior of this wall during the renovations of 1866-1868 in preparation for the installation of the organ. At the

completion of the earlier renovation, Mose Curiel, in a letter to the PARNASSIM dated August 10, 1870, offered to donate two new, beautiful mahogany doors to replace the worn-out entrance doors, as there were no funds left after the renovation for this purpose. The offer, as confirmed by the two silver plaques still attached to the doors today (ANNO 1870), was gladly accepted and, as requested by Mr. Curiel, the doors were inaugurated during ROSH HASHANAH services, 1870. (RDLM)

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NEVÉ SHALOM



An ancient brass oil HANUKKIAH (Hanukkah lamp) was found in the estate of an old Curaçao family in 1979. Upon polishing, the Hebrew letters K.K. NEVÉ SHALOM came to light, making this the only artifact now in the Jewish Museum which can be definitely traced back to the Otrobanda synagogue.

High rentals within the walled city in the early 1730s, caused many families to settle in Otrobanda, the extension of town “on the other side” of the harbor entrance. Soon, there were complaints that the distance and the crossing of the harbor in a rowboat to attend services in Mikvé Israel, constituted a breach of the SHABBAT. Although some started using a home in Otrobanda as a Synagogue, the PARNASSIM refused them the use of a TORAH Scroll, since establishing a second Synagogue would be against the HASCAMOT (By-Laws) of the Congregation.

By December, 1732, the PARNASSIM relented and permitted the establishment of a second Synagogue, NEVÉ SHALOM (Dwelling of Peace), but under the jurisdiction of Mikvé Israel. Their newly constructed sanctuary at Breedestraat (O) 295, was consecrated in 1746 and their own school founded soon thereafter.

All went well for a time, until the leadership of NEVÉ SHALOM started chafing under the rule of the Punda PARNASSIM. The autocratic dominance of Chacham Samuel Mendes de Sola, coupled with the intransigence and lack of diplomacy on the part of the PARNASSIM, gradually made matters worse. Dissension grew into strife, and even physical fights. By 1750, more than half of the Jewish population sided with the oppositionists, while the rest supported the Chacham and PARNASSIM.

Since the Jews accounted for half of the island's white population (then numbering about 3000 souls), and since the Jews were responsible for practically all of the economic activity of the island in matters of commerce and shipping, it is understandable that such a rift seriously affected the well-being of the entire colony. Conscious of this, Fiscal Jan van Schagen, Governor Faesch, and even Protestant pastor Ds. van Rasvelt, tried many times to re-establish peace. However, after only a few weeks of apparent harmony, the deep-rooted strife would break out again in all its intensity.

Excommunication was the order of the day. Inasmuch as this meant that Jews were not permitted to have any dealings with the excommunicated- on pain of a similar fate- economic life was indeed seriously disrupted. On several occasions, Governor Faesch and Fiscal van Schagen reported this to the authorities in Holland. The States General finally appointed a commission, which included two prominent leaders of the Amsterdam Portuguese Synagogue, to seek an early and lasting solution to the conflicts. Their proposal was approved on April 1st, 1750, and His Highness William Charles Henry Friso, Prince of Orange Nassau, being the supreme authority of the Nation, signed an edict:

"There having come to our ears the discrepancies and discords which for some time past have arisen between Parnassim, the Church Council, and the Chacham or Preacher of the Jewish Nation at the Island of Curaçao on the one side, and some members of the aforementioned Congregation on the other, and from which no other than very prejudicial consequences may result for the commerce and prosperity of the aforesaid Island ...We Decree..."



The nine article peacemaking program which followed, received general acceptance and immediate obedience. The Jews were overjoyed with this personal intervention by their beloved Prince. A Solemn Thanksgiving Service attended by all the Island notables, was held in Mikvé Israel, peace reigned once again and both Jewish congregations flourished.

By 1817, however, there were very few Jews still living in Otrobanda. Their numbers not being enough to form a MINYAN, services were discontinued in 1818, and the property sold in 1864. (CGC).

TEMPLE EMANU-ÉL

The founding of the Dutch Jewish Reform Community "Emanu-Él" on May 28, 1864, was not the first manifestation of liberal Judaism on Curaçao. There had been members of the SNOA petitioning for the introduction of certain liberalizations as far back as 1839. This was repeated in 1845 and again in 1848, when some of the reformers actually withdrew from the congregation until the conservatives accepted certain changes. These trends continued and, by 1863, a distinct rift could be observed within Congregation Mikvé Israel: the conservatives, with the Chacham and the MAHAMAD on one side, and the reformers with some of the most influential and wealthiest members on the other side. The situation was

compounded by personal and commercial rivalries. (Oral history has it that the winning of the concession to demolish the city walls by a consortium composed mostly of conservatives, as against another combination of liberals, also contributed towards deepening the schism that followed.)

Were Reform Judaism not the sole underlying cause, then it most definitely became the model and the legal basis for the new congregation. For once Congregation EMANU-ÉL was established, the first thing it did was to appeal to Dr. Samuel Adler, Rabbi of New York's Temple Emanu-Él, for guidance. In fact, New York's Reform congregation and Temple, became the very model for the new Curaçao congregation. It adopted the same prayer book, ritual and liturgical music.



Its sanctuary, too, was to be inspired by its American counterpart: the two spires of New York's first temple became one; and, symbolic of the break with orthodoxy, it was topped by a ball and five-pointed star. (It is only in the early 1960s that this was changed to a six-pointed Star of David). The pulpit was immediately in front of the HEYCHAL, facing the audience which was seated auditorium style. Families, men and women sat together; head coverings and TALLIT were abolished; an organ was introduced, as was a mixed choir; and some special prayers in the English and Spanish languages were added to the service, which was otherwise entirely in Hebrew.

The new Congregation received almost instant support from the Government: it obtained a 2000 square meter plot of land in Pietermaai to build its sanctuary, and received permission to consecrate a cemetery on a piece of land that it had bought on Berg Altena in 1864. Jacob Abraham Jesurun laid the first cornerstone for the Temple on December, 17, 1865 and the Temple was dedicated on September 12, 1867. Its first President was Moises Cohen Henriquez.

A certain rigidity had taken hold of the Temple by the middle of the twentieth century. There had been virtually no contact with the world Reform movement and no significant changes had been effected in its services since its inception in the 1860s. The appointment of Dr. Maurits Goudekot as its spiritual leader in 1946, and that of his full-time successor, Rabbi Simeon J. Maslin in 1960, brought Temple Emanu-Él back into the mainstream of modern Liberal Judaism. The former effected the congregation's affiliation to the World Union for Progressive Judaism, while the latter strengthened Temple Emanu-Él's ties to the Reform movement in the United States.

By 1963, there also lived within the membership of Mikvé Israel the desire to bring their Orthodox ritual more in line with their own personal, more liberal outlook. There were no longer any differences in the lifestyles of the members of Mikvé Israel and their brethren in Emanu-Él. They were closely interconnected by marriage, as well as in social and business relations. Dwindling numbers on both sides, and the consistently excellent personal and familial relationships between them, made a reunification desirable to both parties. So, under the guidance of Rabbi Maslin and Rabbi Ira Eisenstein (of the Reconstructionist Foundation of America) to whom Mikvé Israel had turned for advice, a merger agreement was reached by the Boards and ratified by their respective General Assemblies on November 9, 1964. Thus, Curaçao's two Sephardic congregations were reunited after 100 years. United Congregation MIKVE ISRAEL-EMANUEL adopted the

Reconstructionist ritual and Rabbi Maslin served as its first Rabbi (CGC).

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THE THEBAH



Just inside the Synagogue, the platform close to the entrance doors, is the THEBAH. It is made entirely of dark red mahogany and measures 3 x 5 1/2 meters. Standing in the center of the THEBAH, is the beautiful, ornately-carved and decorated, red mahogany SHULCHAN (Reader's Table). The TORAH (Scroll of the Law) is unrolled here and the designated portion is read from the Five Books of Moses during Saturday morning services, as well as on each of the Festivals. It is also from here that the Rabbi or Chazzan (Cantor) conducts services.



The Reader's Table boasts an original construction: depending on the physical stature of the incumbent

spiritual leader, it can be raised or lowered in height by the addition or removal of a set of turned mahogany feet. It also has a concealed sliding platform for the shorter BAR MITZVAH boy or Bat Mitzvah girl to stand on, thus enabling them to read their TORAH and HAFTARAH portions more comfortably. The corners at the top of the table, are graced by four matching beautiful silver ball ornaments which also double as paperweights. Two were donated by Ishac de Marchena (circa 1770) and two by Jacob ben David Senior.



Behind the SHULCHAN is a slightly curved bench where the participants in the TORAH Service can sit while the Torah is on the CHULCHAN. Immediately in front of the Reader's Desk, in fact protruding from the front balustrade of the THEBAH, is the Preacher's Pulpit and the Chacham's chair. A graceful, ingeniously constructed lectern (book stand) sits on the center of the balustrade in front of the pulpit. Also made of carved mahogany, it can be set in either a slanted or horizontal position, depending on the speaker.



An ornately carved, red mahogany balustrade surrounds the THEBAH.

On its four corners stand four tall, exquisitely-designed brass candlesticks. They are exact replicas of those in the Amsterdam Portuguese Synagogue. The design of these candlesticks is said to have been based on a HAVDALAH set: the round BESAMIN (spice holder) at the bottom, then the candle holder, the candle, the dish to catch the overflow wine and finally the wine goblet at the top. Before the advent of electricity, the brass candlesticks on the balustrade of the THEBAH and HEYCHAL, held tall, single candles. Not having hurricane shades around them, these must have blown out constantly until the day- of course- when they were finally replaced with "electric" candles in the early 1900s.



There are also four massive, pointed, ball-shaped brass RIMONIM (the ornamental TORAH finials) standards on the balustrade. Two bear the inscription: "KODES DAVID DE JACOB SUARES" and two read "KODES JACOB DE MOSSEH NAAR".

Contrary to the HEYCHAL, the records of the Congregation make almost no mention of the history of the THEBAH. It is recorded that the THEBAH of the Synagogue of 1703, the building preceding the present sanctuary, was donated by Isaac Haim Senior and his wife Rachel. There is no mention, however, about the present THEBAH. Could parts of it (perhaps the Reader's Table) date from the older Synagogue? Its design elements and its mahogany seem to differ from that of the balustrade and base of the rest of the THEBAH.

Another puzzling factor is that the design of the balustrade of the THEBAH is completely different from that of the HEYCHAL and the BANCA. It is, however, almost identical to that of the women's galleries, which are known to be of a later date: 1866.



One thing is certain and even minuted: the protruding Preacher's Pulpit is a very late addition. It was added to the THEBAH in 1858 for Chacham Chumaceiro, a most eloquent orator, and was most probably the result of the pressure towards modernization (reform) that was highly prevalent at the time, and in which the weekly sermon was a principal feature. We know of at least one member who had protested against the construction of the pulpit, as appears in the Minutes of January 13th, 1858: HUMA TRIBUNA PARA OS SERMOES (a pulpit for the sermons). It is from this place, early in the 1860s, that Chacham Aron Mendes Chumaceiro preached the last sermon in the Portuguese language, which was- until that time- the vernacular of the congregation. Thereafter, depending upon

the background of the spiritual leader, Spanish, Dutch or English were used alongside Hebrew in the service.



The Rabbi's right to the pulpit has always been zealously guarded and defended by all the spiritual leaders throughout the congregation's history. Nonetheless, this has- at times- been the cause of friction and even of conflict between the CHACHAM and the PARNASSIM; so too the matter of the length of the oration. As one can read in the records, successive PARNASSIM have, at different times in history, tried to "limit", "restrict" or even "censure" it. In one case at least, a temporary Chazzan was forbidden to preach since his sermon at the special Montefiore Centenary Service in 1884, which was attended by the Governor and other high dignitaries, had been much criticized and disliked by the

PARNASSIM. Time and again, however, the right and freedom of the pulpit- as belonging to the incumbent spiritual leader of the congregation- have, in the end, always triumphed and been duly upheld.

The introduction of a pipe organ to the Synagogue services and the construction of the gallery needed to support it, brought with it more than changes in the ritual: To support its great weight, two columns had to be added to the interior layout of the synagogue. These, in turn, necessitated moving the complete THEBAH several feet deeper into the Synagogue and closer to the HEYCHAL. In fact, the present position of the THEBAH- further accentuated by the addition of the prominent pulpit - puts it almost at the geographical center of the sanctuary and makes Mikvé Israel- Emanuel's seating and preaching arrangement almost unique in the world. By the same token, it is perhaps closest to the account in Nehemiah 8:4 and :2 "And Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood which they had made for the purpose ... and Ezra brought the Law before the congregation, both men and women, and all that could hear with understanding..."

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THE HEYCHAL



As in every traditional Synagogue, the HEYCHAL (Holy Ark) in the SNOA is situated at the center of the eastern wall. Thus, when worshipers pray towards the HEYCHAL, they are also facing East- in the direction of Jerusalem.



The present HEYCHAL is 5 meters high, 3 1/2 m long and 5 1/4 wide. It has not always been this wide though. When the Synagogue building preceding this one was built in 1703, lack of funds prevented the congregation from building a new Ark. So, they installed their “old” Ark in their 1703 building. Although they started soliciting contributions for a new Ark almost immediately, it was not until 1709 that it could be built by cabinetmaker Pieter de Mey at a cost of 731:4 Pesos. The center part of the present HEYCHAL is, in actuality, this 1709 Ark. The two wings “to lengthen it from pillar to pillar” were added 42 years later, or almost 20 years after the present building was erected! Abraham Mendes de Castro donated the mahogany beams needed for this 1751 extension.

heavy, dark-veined, richly carved ornamentation. It has four doors in base. Above the HEYCHAL are the mahogany, with the Ten letters. Over the Ten is the Biblical verse from Malachi AVDI “(Remember the TORAH of



The HEYCHAL is fashioned of red mahogany with silver the top half and four more at its Tablets of the Law, of a lighter color Commandments inlaid with silver Commandments, also inlaid in silver, 3:22 “ZICHRU TORAT MOSHE Moses, my Servant).



The HEYCHAL is the repository of the SIFREY TORAH (the Scrolls of the Law), dressed in their mantles, crowns, finials and pointers. The SNOA's HEYCHAL houses seventeen TORAH scrolls, all of which are older than the present Synagogue building. In fact, at least two of them date back to the early fifteenth (pre-Inquisition) century. Some are even wound on silver-overlaid rollers. At least twenty TORAH scrolls seem to have been donated to our SNOA in the course of history, many to commemorate special occasions. They were the gifts from: David Mordechay de Castro, Jacob de Benjamin Fidanque, David de Mordechay Senior, Aaron da Costa Gomez, Benjamin de Casseres, Jacob de Abraham de Andrade, Isaac Haim Rodriguez da Costa, Jacob Namias de Crasto, Samuel de Joseph da Costa Gomez, Benjamin Lopez Henriquez,

Abraham and Ribca Jeudah Leao, Isaac de Jacob Leao, Abraham de Marchena, Moseh de

Marchena, David de Mordechay Senior, and Jacob de Sola.

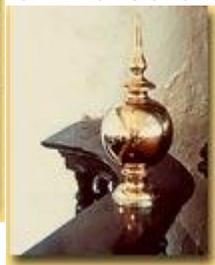
At the time of the merger between Mikvé Israel and former Reform Congregation Emanu-Él in 1964, the two SIFREY TORAHs of the Temple, were ceremoniously paraded from the Temple to the Sinoa. One of these had been donated in memory of Oscar and Julia Semah de Valencia by their children. The awe in which the HEYCHAL is held is expressed in a number of ways:

- It is in front of the open HEYCHAL that, on every occasion when the TORAH is to be removed from the HEYCHAL, the prayer for the Royal Family and the local authorities is recited from the THEBAH in the Portuguese language:

“A Sua Majestade, Beatrix, Rainha dos Países Baixos. Aos sereníssimos Príncipes, Seus Filhos. A sereníssima Princesa Juliana, Sua Mãe. Aos descendentes da Casa Real de Orange Nassau, aos ilustres Membros do Governo destas terras e aos nobres e veneráveis senhores, Sua Excelencia o Governador destas Ilhas e todos os Magistrados nas mesmas.”

- When distributing the honors for the TORAH service, which is likewise still done in a mixture of Portuguese and Hebrew, that of “QUE ABRIRÁ AOS PORTAS DO HEYCHAL (who will open the doors of the Heychal) is traditionally considered the highest. Tradition prescribes that on certain holidays, it is the PARNAS PRESIDENTE himself, at other times the PRESIDENTE DO ANCIANOS (Elders) who is designated to open the doors of the HEYCHAL.
- All weddings take place in front of the open HEYCHAL, so too the naming of female babies and any other special life cycle events.

A more material expression of reverence, is the adornment of the silver escutcheons of the top and bottom center doors with precious stones, undoubtedly the donation of some devout members in years past.



The platform in front of the HEYCHAL is closed off by a mahogany balustrade on which stand four graceful, solid brass candlesticks- exact replicas of those of the Portuguese Synagogue of Amsterdam, and six massive ball-shaped brass RIMONIM standards.

The bronze NEYR TAMID (Eternal Light) hanging over the HEYCHAL, is of a classical, Northern-Mediterranean motif. Of a much more recent date, it was donated in 1914 by Benjamin Shalom Delvalle in memory of his son Jacob who had died at age nine. The buntings and lining inside the HEYCHAL are red throughout the year except when they are changed to unblemished white for the High Holy Days: from ROSH HASHANAH through YOM KIPPUR.

In olden days when their donors were still alive, the scrolls were used in rotation, thus giving each

one its turn to be read from. Nowadays, it is only on the joyous festival of SIMCHAT TORAH that practically all of the SEFARIM, regally decked out in their crowns, finials, breastplates and brightest mantles, are removed from the HEYCHAL for the seven festive HAKKAFOT (processions) around the Synagogue, accompanied by the singing and dancing of the congregants and children. (CGC)

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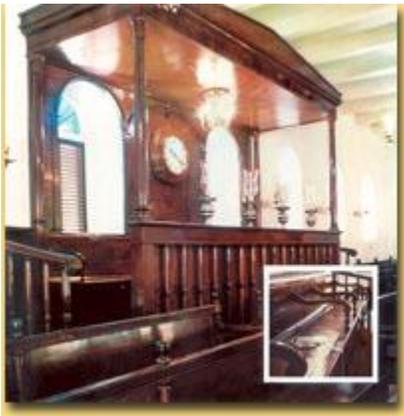
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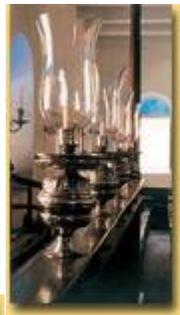
THE BANCA

As in all Spanish-Portuguese synagogues, the BANCA is situated in the middle of the northern wall. This raised, balustraded dais covered by a baldachin, is the seat of the PARNASSIM, also known as the MAHAMAD, the DIRECTIVA, or simply the Board.



In Mikvé Israel, the BANCA is made completely of mahogany. Judging from its architectural style, it is difficult to ascertain its exact age. None of its component parts bear any similarity to those of either the HEYCHAL or the THEBAH. Even its mahogany is of a lighter color wood than that of the other pieces of furniture in the SNOA. Especially intriguing, however, is its baldachin, which reveals a decidedly classical (Grecian) influence. Since many of the mansions in Scharloo were enriched at about the end of the nineteenth century with similar Grecian gables, one is tempted to believe that the present BANCA is of a much later date than either the HEYCHAL or the THEBAH.

The four distinctive the BANCA date Marchena and then these must



silver, pomegranate-shaped candleholders which enhance back to 1750. They were donated by Ishac de Abraham de Ishac de Ishac de Marchena. If this BANCA is not from 1732, have graced an earlier BANCA standing on the same spot.



At the time of the founding of the Congregation, the MAHAMAD consisted of only three members: the Parnas-Presidente, the Parnas (Vice-president) and the Gabai (Treasurer). In 1763, the MAHAMAD numbered five members. But, in a Resolution of the Directors of the West India Company (given in Amsterdam in 1771 at the petition of the congregation), their number was again reduced to three. Today the DIRECTIVA consists of seven members, which is also the maximum seating

capacity of the BANCA after removing two of the four arm-rests with the merger in 1964. The two center ones remain; that is where the Parnas-Presidente sits.

By present-day standards, the power and authority wielded by the early PARNASSIM, is unbelievable. For relatively minor infractions or even a show of disrespect, they could and did excommunicate members; for major ones they were assured of the cooperation of the highest civil authorities to have them actually expelled from the island! No one could even contradict the PARNASSIM without incurring a fine! Their decision was final; the General Assembly of the membership being empowered only to discuss the financial administration and the political government of the Congregation.

There has always been some kind of an advisory and controlling Council in existence: the CONSEJO or ADJUNTOS nowadays called the CONSEJO DE ANCIANOS (Elders). This Council, however, was not empowered to counteract any decision of the PARNASSIM; it acted mostly in a restraining and counseling capacity. Nowadays, the CONSEJO DE ANCIANOS is composed of all members who, at one time or another, have served in the DIRECTIVA for a minimum of two consecutive years.

Although the power of the PARNASSIM was autocratic, it was duly based on law. The rights and obligations of the PARNASSIM were set down in detail in the HASCAMOTH (the Regulations of the Congregation). There do not seem to have been any privileges befalling the PARNASSIM, other than the honor of being one. Yet, their immense power must have created an equally heavy responsibility because, from its earliest years, the Congregation was hard put to find capable members willing to accept the position of PARNAS. In fact, as far back as the seventeenth century, a fine had to be introduced to be paid by any member refusing the honor of being nominated to the MAHAMAD. This custom remained in force until the merger with Temple Emanu-Él in 1964. In their monumental History, I. and S. Emmanuel cite numerous cases where, throughout the 300 years of its existence, the MAHAMAD had clearly abused its vast powers. Nonetheless, despite all its shortcomings, it cannot be denied that the authority wielded by the PARNASSIM undoubtedly exerted a positive, stabilizing and constructive influence on the growth and development of the Congregation. It also largely contributed towards the preservation of the Spanish-Portuguese Sephardic Jewish heritage of Mikvé Israel-Emanuel (CGC).

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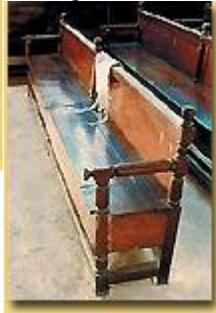
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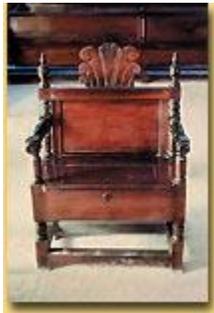
BENCHES AND CHAIRS



custom of assigned seating after the payment of yearly seating; the location could be fined for nameplates attached to the backs of the benches so that non-members would know which places were taken and which were not.



There are several types of benches and chairs in our SNOA. Each one serves a specific purpose. All the benches are made of mahogany. Those on the ground floor are heavier; they have closed straight backs and are less comfortable than their lighter, more graceful counterparts in the women's galleries. The seats of the benches on the ground floor- where only men were allowed to sit when there was separate seating (before 1964)- serve as covers for the compartments underneath where one could store (and lock) his TALLIT and other religious articles. The seating was abolished with the introduction of mixed merger with Temple Emanu-Él in 1964. Before that, dues or "finta" entitled a member family to assigned of that seat was determined by the MAHAMAD. A member sitting in a seat which was not his! In 1932, the Board had



The dark reserved for the be easily during services.

The single-seat benches on the ground floor had a special purpose in the Synagogue. For instance: the ornate ones in front of the pillars- on either side of the entrance- were assigned to the PARNAS DE FÁBRICA (the member in charge of buildings and properties) and to the PARNAS DE CHEVRAH (the member in charge of burials). Four similar benches were located along the wall to the left of the entrance. These were specifically reserved for the teachers in the congregation's MEDRAS (religious school), proof of the importance which our forefathers attached to the religious education of their children and the respect afforded to teachers.

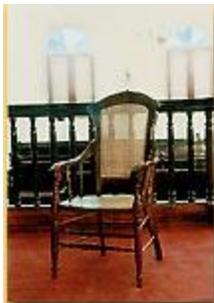


mahogany benches flanking either side of the BANCA, were sexton or SHAMASH and his assistant, so that they would accessible to the MAHAMAD or DIRECTIVA to assist them

In a possible effort Curaçao), chair built as part as a divider CHACHAM'S when they were around the middle

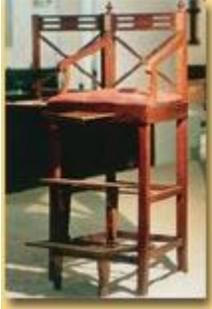


to duplicate a custom in Amsterdam (his pulpit prior to Chacham Aaron. M. Chumaceiro had a unique "swinging" of the TEBAH extension in 1858. The back of that chair serves between the original THEBAH and the pulpit. Known as the CHAIR, he- and Rabbis after him- occupied this special chair not personally leading the service. This custom, discontinued of the twentieth century when Mikvé Israel's spiritual leaders started to personally conduct the complete service, was reintroduced by Rabbi Aaron Peller on ROSH HASHANAH 5742.



During the morning service on SIMCHAT TORAH, two chairs are placed on either side of the HEYCHAL next to each other in front of the side balustrades. The two CHATANIM (Bridegrooms) occupy the chairs of honor closest to the doors and two members of the DIRECTIVA, serving as ACOMPÑADORES

(Companions), sit next to them during the entire service.



It is still customary for parents, celebrating the birth of their son, to borrow the Synagogue's almost 300-year old "Chair of Elijah" for the B'RIT (the circumcision) ceremony in their home. Until recently, it was traditional for the MADRINA (Godmother) dressed all in white, to carry the baby boy on a cushion from his room to the waiting PADRINO (Godfather) already seated on the chair. Upon entering the room, the assembled guests (the men holding lit candles) would welcome the child by singing BARUCH HABAH, the same prayer that welcomes a bride when she enters the Synagogue for her wedding. The PADRINO would then place the baby, still on the cushion, between his knees on the shelf attached to the front part of the chair. The MOHEL, his instruments laid out on the swivel shelf on the side of the chair, and the father, would then proceed to bring the boy into the Covenant.

After the ceremony, the MOHEL would carry the child back to his room and the guests were served hot chocolate and "Pan Levi", a flat cookie traditionally baked by Sephardic Jews of Curaçao. (RDLM)

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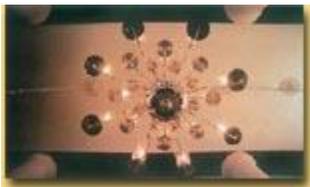
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ILLUMINATION



There is no more breathtaking scene than the SNOA on special occasions, such as KOL NIDRÉ night and weddings, when the building is illuminated by candlelight. There, hanging from the central nave, are four, three-tiered, 24-branch brass chandeliers, each one aglow- exuding an "old world" charm, a warmth and beauty not often felt in modern times. The 23, single-candle wall sconces along the walled perimeter and those on the four central pillars, are also aglow in brilliant flame.

One of the four chandeliers illuminated the "Old Synagogue" of 1703. It is therefore older than the present building. One was donated by Abraham de Chaves in 1706 and the other in 1709 by the brothers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob de Benjamin Henriquez. Of the remaining two, one was donated by Isaac and Esther de Marchena in 1731. The other has neither a donor nor date inscription, so we can only assume that it was purchased- together with some of the wall and pillar sconces - by the MAHAMAD of 1732 to complete the center and side illumination of this

Synagogue. The four chandeliers in the central nave were moved closer together in 1866, when the chandelier nearest the Sanctuary doors had to be moved forward in order to accommodate the western gallery and to support the newly acquired organ.

The arms of the single-candle sconces and the 24-arm chandeliers are wrought of solid brass molded in the “porpoise” motif so popular in the Netherlands at the beginning of the 18th century. Each arm supports a glass hurricane shade held in place by a brass socket on top of a drip dish. The other end is attached to the wall or to the body of a chandelier by an ornate vertical pin. It takes at least three strong men to carry the more than one meter long, solid brass center section of a chandelier once it is lowered for cleaning/polishing.



No evidence has been found that similar chandeliers had hung from the lateral ceilings or from underneath the balconies. We do find reference, however, to the use of kerosene lamps in the Synagogue. In 1903, the Board considered the cost of replacing the kerosene lamps with electrical lights. The latter alternative seemed much cheaper to maintain when compared to the cost of repairing or replacing the kerosene lamps with new ones of the same type. Another reference is made to the effect that the illumination of the Synagogue, especially in the ladies’ galleries, was very inadequate and that the flames (of the lamps) were constantly being extinguished by the wind. The foregoing probably means that the Synagogue was usually illuminated by kerosene lamps during daily evening services and makes one wonder

whether the four central nave chandeliers were lit regularly, or only on special occasions- as now. For, not only does it take several hours to replace the 24 candles in a chandelier, but it takes at least 20 minutes to light one completely!

With the installation of electricity (circa 1903), the kerosene lamps, inside and outside the Synagogue building, were replaced by some 50, single-bulb electric lamps with dainty crystal shades. Inside the Synagogue, these lamps were attached to the center of the walls between the windows of the galleries, and from the main support beams underneath the galleries. To increase the Sinoa’s illumination, these “old fashioned” lamps were replaced early in the 1930s, by larger, enclosed lamps hanging from chains attached to the rosettes in the ceilings; then, in 1974, by modern, 3-bulb clusters. And finally, on ROSH HASHANAH 1979, following the custom of the Sinoa’s forefathers, individual families donated the beautiful, 18th century Dutch-style, solid brass, single and double-tiered electrical chandeliers which now illuminate the sanctuary (RDLM).



One of the eight brass candle-sticks on the balustrades of the Heychal and the Thebah. One of the twelve pillar sconces and one of the twentythree wall sconces along the inside walls.

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THE ORGAN

On October 31, 1864, some five months after the first separatists had resigned their membership in Mikvé Israel to establish a Reform Congregation, a Committee of Eleven was appointed to recommend how to make the Synagogue ritual more appealing. Two of their recommendations were the formation of a choir and the installation of an organ. To finance the new organ, the long vacated NEVÉ SHALOM Synagogue property in Breedestraat (O) 295 was placed on sale. It was sold on November 28, 1864, to Mr. J. D. Rib, the highest of four bidders, for fls.4,655.00.

On February 6, 1865, the PARNASSIM approved one of the three bids received for a pipe organ from Europe, deciding among others: that the organ was to be installed in the center of the women's gallery across from the BANCA. This would have meant installing the organ in the middle of the southern gallery! A year later, however, we read about the construction of the western gallery- specifically for the organ! A decision must also have been taken in the mean time to extend the gallery around to the northern side: "to make it symmetrical with the southern gallery and to avoid an L-shaped structure.



On April 28th, 1865, the PARNASSIM signed a contract with Flaes and Brünjes, organ-builders from Amsterdam. To decorate their organ's mahogany cabinet, the Parnassim chose the verse from Psalm 92 5:1 "It is good to give thanks to the Lord" to appear below the right hand vase "and to sing praises to Thy Name O Most High" under the left one. In the center, above the harp, they inscribed the Hebrew word HALLELUYA. They also had the Hebrew words MIKVE' ISRAEL carved out of the center of the organ's two mahogany wings. The organ was finished and shipped on schedule within a year. Costing fls.5, 812.89- excluding renovation expenses- the new organ was assembled on the especially constructed western gallery. Invitations were extended in the local newspaper and the Sinoa's pipe organ

was inaugurated on October 24, 1866.



The vase decorating the left cornice of the organ with the Hebrew words UL'ZAMER L'SHIMCHA ELYONE (to sing praises to Thy Name Oh Most High) along the base.



A composition of musical instruments at the center top of the organ with the Hebrew word HALLELUYA at the crown.



The vase decorating the right cornice of the organ with the Hebrew words L'HODOT LADONAI (It is good to give thanks to the Lord) along the base.

By this time, a choir numbering almost forty men and women had been organized by Choir Directors S. Curiel and M. Capriles. Seating in the choir seems to have been mixed, even in Orthodox Mikvé Israel! Mr. S. de Casseres wrote three letters to the CONSEJO in May, 1884, complaining that religious laws were thereby being violated. The Board finally acceded to Mr. de Casseres' complaints and, in February 1885, ordered the Choir Directors to have balustrades made to separate the men from the women. This separation proved most impractical, however, and did not last past the turn of the century.

The 1866 contract with the Snoa's first organist, Mr. Christiaan Ulder, states that "he was required to play at all SHABBAT and holiday services and their eves." The listing of the holidays did not include YOM KIPPUR, as the organ was not to be played on that day. Also, "that the playing of the organ should not disturb the religious fervor of the Rabbi or the Chazzan while he was praying". Having received many petitions over the years for the playing of the organ on YOM KIPPUR, the Board finally acceded in 1930. After long consultations with all concerned (as they felt that this could be considered a change in ritual), the matter was brought to a General Assembly on August 7, 1930, and was approved by a vote of 44 to 4!

Chacham Chumaceiro had ruled in 1866, that "no Jew would be allowed to be the congregational organist as Jews were prohibited from playing a musical instrument on the SHABBAT". As a non-Jew could not be found to replace Mr. Ulder after his demise, the PARNASSIM- out of necessity- reversed the Chacham's ruling on August 28, 1895, by a vote of 7 to 2. They contracted A. Charlouis in 1901 and non-Jews (among them E. Palm for 42 years) have been employed ever since.

The Choir Directors employed a young boy to pump the foot pedal of the air bellows for the organ pipes until an electrical air pump was installed in 1930. Although many attempts were made to maintain and even restore the old pipe organ, these were to no avail as time and weather had taken their toll. The pipe organ had to be replaced by a Hammond electric organ in 1947; this, in turn by an Allen computerized digital electronic organ in 1980. Both of these "modern" organs were financed in the traditional way: by fundraising from within the membership. Since its complete restoration in 2003, the 1866 pipe organ has once again resounded as of old in the Snoa. Some 60 years of silence have been broken! (RDLM).

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“LEVANTAR”

The central part of all morning worship services is the reading from the TORAH, the scroll containing the Five Books of Moses.

In our SNOA, the ceremony for removing the scroll from the HEYCHAL, is according to the traditional Spanish-Portuguese Sephardic ritual: The Rabbi first announces in Hebrew and Portuguese, the honors for the Opening the doors to the HEYCHAL (“QUE ABRIRÁ AOS PORTAS DO HEYCHAL”), then for the carrying of the TORAH (“QUE LEVARÁ O SEFER TORAH”) and then for the lifting the TORAH (“QUE LEVANTARÁ O SEFER TORAH”). This is followed by a prayer for the Royal Family and the Government in Hebrew, Portuguese and English. (This prayer dates back to YOM KIPPUR eve, 1595, when a Jewish worship in Holland was invaded by Calvinists. Having discovered no icons or the like, the Calvinists left the Jews in peace- but only after gaining a promise from them that whenever the Jews prayed, they would pray for the prosperity of the Government of Amsterdam. Since the Jews had fled from Spain and Portugal, the prayer was recited in Portuguese and Hebrew. Over the years, it has been generalized to be for the Royal Family and the local government as well.)

The Rabbi and presiding officer, having been joined by the person designated to carry the scroll, then process from the TEBAH, along the path in front of the benches along on the southern side, and ascend to the HEYCHAL. Having taken out the scroll and appropriate prayers having been chanted, the procession descends the steps on the northern side of the HEYCHAL to the singing of ROMMEMU. There they are joined by the LEVANTADOR, the person honored to lift the open scroll.

Ascending the TEBAH, the RIMONIM and the TORAH mantle are removed, special RIMONIM are placed on the tops of the wooden rollers of the Torah and the LEVANTADOR then lifts the TORAH for



all to see. First facing North, he turns counter-clockwise, stopping at each of the four compass directions while the Rabbi, pointing to the scroll with a special pointer or YAD, recites the words, “V’ZOT HATORAH ASHER SAM MOSHE LIF’NEY B’NEY YISRAEL” (This is the TORAH which Moses set before the children of Israel), “TORAH TZIVA LANU MOSHE, MORASHA KEHILAT YAAKOV” (a law Moses commanded us, a heritage for the congregation of Jacob). The scroll is then set down on the SHULCHAN, or Readers Desk, and the honors of coming up to the TEBAH for the reading of a passage from the TORAH (ALIYAH) are successively called. Each person so honored, recites the prescribed blessings before and after the

corresponding portion of the TORAH has been read. The Rabbi then offers a prayer (MISHEBEYRACH) in his honor. He may give a contribution (OFERTA) in memory of deceased members of his family or of the congregation (MATANAH SHEMEN LAMAOR); or make an offering for the well-being of someone who is ill; wish someone a safe trip; for a newborn; for the welfare of family and friends; et al. (MATANAH TZEDAKAH). The MISHEBEYRACH is recited in Hebrew and Portuguese.

At the conclusion of the reading of the TORAH, the scroll is re-dressed while a selection from the Book of Prophets- called the HAFTARAH- is read. Following this recitation, which is the same honor as given to a boy of thirteen or a girl of twelve on the SHABBAT of his BAR MITZVAH or her BAT MITZVAH, the scroll is processed back to the HEYCHAL accompanied by the singing of YIMLOCH and HAVU LADONAI.

The solemnity of the ceremonies of removing and replacing the TORAH in the HEYCHAL emphasizes the high level of respect and honor accorded to the word of God. (ALP)

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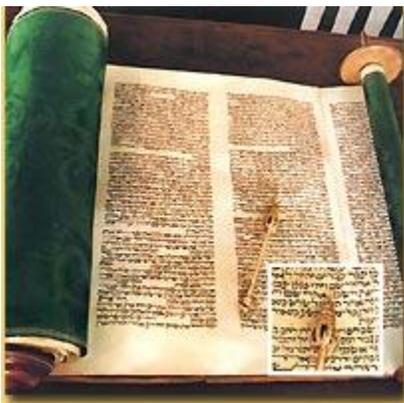
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THE TORAH

The making of a TORAH is unique. Pieces of parchment made from the skins of a Biblically-approved animal, are written upon by a scribe or SOFER. Highly skilled and very pious, this person has the tedious task of hand-copying from one TORAH to another- a monumental task which requires devotion, diligence and patience. A SOFER uses special quills and ink, and must be certain that each scroll is an exact duplicate of the one he is copying from; for even a small mistake can make that TORAH unfit for use. Once completed, the pieces of parchment are sewn together with special thread (GIDDIM) and attached to two wooden rollers (EYITZ CHAYIM), one at each end of the scroll of parchment. Each TORAH contains the complete Five Books of Moses-from Genesis to Deuteronomy.

It is a local custom to protect the TORAH scroll from the heat and humidity of the tropics, by winding a lining along the back of the parchment scroll. This cloth prevents the front of the letters from sticking to the back of the parchment when the TORAH is scrolled (rolled together), bound and placed-standing up- in the HEYCHAL. The color of this inner lining usually matches the color of the outer mantle.



This TORAH scroll is unrolled and open to Genesis 9:27. The YAD, or pointer, lies over the phrase “May God enlarge Yafet and dwell in the tents of Shem”, which is the scriptural verse that is found over the portals of the sanctuary entrance. In keeping with the respect and honor given to the TORAH, many customs have developed regarding the care and treatment of a TORAH. For example: The TORAH is not to be touched on the inside by human hands, so as not to mar the lettering; thus, the use of a YAD. The word YAD means hand, and upon close inspection, one sees that the pointer is a replica of a human hand, usually the right hand with the index finger extended. When reading from the TORAH, the reader (BAAL KOREH) uses the YAD to mark the place of his reading.



Some examples of YADIM which are used in the SNOA on special occasions or holidays: From left to right: an ornate silver YAD with chain used on the Jewish New Year (ROSH HASHANAH); a gilded, left-handed YAD used on the Day of Atonement (YOM KIPPUR); a silver YAD used on SHABBAT and holidays; and a black, wooden YAD used on the Ninth of Av (TISHA B'AV) - a sad day in Jewish history. TISHA B'AV marks the destruction of the Great Temple in Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BCE and probably the destruction of the Second

Temple by the Romans in 70 CE. It is a day of austerity and, except for YOM KIPPUR, is the only other twenty-four-hour fast day in the Jewish year. Even the Synagogue reflects the saddened heart of the Jew during TISHA B'AV as the TORAH mantle, the SHULCHAN cover, the RIMONIM and the YAD are all changed to dark blue or black. It is interesting to note that this date also has a special historical significance for the Sephardic Jews of Curaçao who originally came from Spain and Portugal: the Ninth of Av, 1492 was the date of the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain. (ALP)

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TORAH ORNAMENTS



Further examples of the dignity and honor accorded to the TORAH, are the ornaments which adorn the TORAH scroll as it stands in the HEYCHAL. These are examples of some of the TORAH (SIFREY TORAH) topped or embellished by RIMONIM (finials), K'TARIM (crowns), TAS (breastplate), two types of mantles and a YAD (pointer) leaning on the third scroll from the left.

Traditionally: one scroll is read on SHABBAT, two on holidays and three on a minor holiday that falls on a SHABBAT- such as the intermediate SHABBAT of HANUKKAH when it coincides with the first day of the Jewish month of TEVET.

The YAD is removed by the person opening the HEYCHAL and is given to the presiding officer to carry to the TEBAH. At the end of the service it is replaced after the TORAH has been returned to the HEYCHAL. The TORAH mantles or covers (called CAPAS by our forefathers), are made of various materials and have either no design at all (Spanish-Portuguese Sephardic style), or bear symbols such as the lions of Judah, the Ten Commandments, etc. (Ashkenazi-Eastern European style). The tradition was that these mantles were either hand embroidered on Curaçao or brought especially from Amsterdam. Traditional Sephardic styles were flowing mantles with a slit in the rear and fringed on the front and back. The sixth mantle is a plain velvet cover with fringing on the top and at the bottom. Mantles are usually donated. Although not a Sephardic custom, the name of the synagogue or even the name of the donor is sometimes embroidered on the mantle.

The HEYCHAL of the SNOA has mantles in many colors. Local custom prescribes the use of specific colors for various holidays. This refers not only to the outer mantles and the bands used to bind the scrolls, but also to the covers draped over the SHULCHAN and the small lectern at the front of the TEBAH. Red is usually the color for SHABBAT. Other examples are: green for the "Pilgrim Festivals: PESACH (Passover), CABANA, SUKKOT or Tabernacles) and SHAVUOT (The Giving of the Law); dark blue for TISHA B'AV and white for ROSH HASHANAH and YOM KIPPUR. The colored mantles are required only for the SIFREY TORAHs that are to be read on that day. Every scroll is in white during the High Holy Days; even the buntings and linings inside the HEYCHAL are changed from the usual red, to immaculate white to symbolize the purity and holiness of the "Days of Awe". (ALP)

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CROWNS AND BREASTPLATE

In Jewish literature, the crown often represents the majesty of the TORAH. A TORAH crown has tubular holders or cylinders which fit over the upper spindles of the EYTZ CHAIM. The SNOA has three such crowns: A silver crown made in the 18th century, is a design from Amsterdam. It was made by the silversmith Pieter van Hoven (1658-1735), as shown by the VH silver mark on the crown. The top is closed in an acanthus leaf motif, typical of the period. The tip is a finial of a baluster set into a tulip. The bottom band has shapes simulating the appearance of precious stones. Along the bar which connects the cylindrical holders is the inscription in Portuguese: ELIAO DE M. CRASTO FES KODES SENDO HATAN BEREYSHIT NO. ANNO 5472 (Eliao de M. Crasto consecrated on the occasion of being CHATAN BEREYSHIT in the year 5472). The CHATAN BEREYSHIT is an annual honor given on the Festival of the Rejoicing of the Law (SIMCHAT TORAH). This holiday marks the completion of the cycle of reading the TORAH. One member of the congregation is given the honor of being the “bridegroom” (CHATAN) to the conclusion of the reading from Deuteronomy. He is known as the CHATAN TORAH. Another is given the honor to the beginning portion in Genesis, and is called CHATAN BEREYSHIT. We know from the inscription that De Crasto was so honored in the Hebrew year 5472, corresponding to the secular date 1711. The crown’s Amsterdam mark, however, is the year letter “D”, which represents 1714, or three years after the event. The explanation is simple. Due to the distance and difficulty in communicating between Curaçao and Holland, the crown was made after the honor was given, but the inscription retained the year of the honor. The inscription was most probably done by the silversmith himself as it has a professional block letter look which could, most likely, not have been engraved in Curaçao at that time.



The second silver crown has a history of its own. Also made in 1714, it was given to the congregation in 1716, in memory of Mordecai de Crasto, the father of Eliao de M. Crasto. The family had apparently ordered two crowns from Amsterdam: they used one to honor the son’s being a CHATAN, while the other became an appropriate offering at the death of the father. This open variety has vertical rays which do not join at the top. The acanthus leaf motif was used by the silversmith for both his designs. The lower band here is similar to the closed crown, although it is more elaborately decorated. This crown is also inscribed, this time in a nonprofessional, hand-engraved Hebrew which may have been done locally: “In memory of Mordecai Hezekiah Namias de Crasto, on the day of his death 13 Iyar 5476 who did sacred work for Holy

Congregation Mikvé Israel”. The date corresponds to May 5, 1716. This “open” crown is usually put on the TORAH carried by the CHATAN BEREYSHIT, while the closed crown is for the CHATAN TORAH.

The third crown is simple gilded silver KETER. Probably designed by Johannes Schouten of Amsterdam, it is inscribed "Ishac Haim Rodriguez De Costa 5520" (1760). The crown was probably inscribed for the year he became Vice President of the SNOA, which is the year the crown was bought. Evidence, however, shows that the crown was not donated to the SNOA until the death of his wife Sara in 1803.



The TAS or breastplate hanging from the top of the TORAH has a 1721 Amsterdam year mark and the master mark of Pelgrom Potholt (1680-1751). It is a shell and broken scroll Louis XIV motif. Although it used to have several small, interchangeable center panels engraved in Hebrew for use on special occasions- such as the SHABBAT, each major holiday, and the new month- this one has only the L'ROSHEY CHODASHIM plate for the new month left. The reverse is inscribed "Memoria de Yshac & Esther de Marchena". The breastplate was probably made to commemorate one occasion and was later inscribed in memory of these two pillars of the congregation. (ALP)

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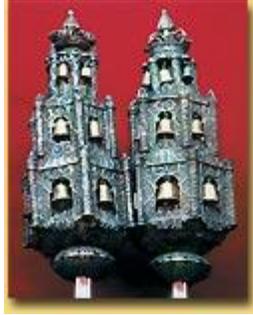
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FINIALS

If crowns represent the majesty of the TORAH, then RIMONIM reflect the blessings that accrue to its supporters. And indeed, the generosity of the members of the SNOA has spanned the years in fine fashion. Crowns were one way of giving thanks for an honor. RIMONIM are also gifts to adorn the TORAH. Unfortunately, spatial limitations did not always allow the donors names or the purpose to be inscribed onto the RIMONIM. In their monumental work, "The History of The Jews of The Netherlands Antilles", Dr. Isaac and Suzanne Emmanuel list several donors who gave, amongst others, RIMONIM as gifts to their congregation.



RIMONIM are also known as "finials", and like the KETER (or crown), they are placed on the upper spindles of the wooden rods around which the TORAH scroll is wound. RIMONIM is the Hebrew word for pomegranate, and these ornaments are probably so called because they originally had a more spherical shape reminiscent of the fruit. Since the wooden rods on which the RIMONIM are placed are called EYTZ CHAIM (Tree of Life), it becomes symbolically appropriate that the pomegranate- widely recognized as a symbol of fruitfulness, unity and concord- was chosen to be the "fruit" on the "tree of life".



Pictured are pairs of RIMONIM that may be considered as typical of the many RIMONIM in the SNOA's HEYCHAL. The basic form of these RIMONIM comes from the campanile or bell tower. They are an early Louis XIV motif using a single/double shell or scallop. Unfortunately, few have year or silversmith mark visible. Most pairs are 44 cm high and may have been made by the same silversmith, since some of them do carry the mark VH- for Pieter van Hoven (1658-1735), - and an Amsterdam year mark "M".

Based on Dr. Emmanuel's description of the heightened religious zeal during the rabbinate of Chacham Jacob de Fonseca and the list of donations mentioned, most of the SNOA's RIMONIM came to the Synagogue sometime between 1764 and 1815. Some of the known donors are: David Lopez Laguna, Samuel de Joseph da Costa Gomez, Jacob Hisquiau Arid, Samuel Hoheb and David Jessurun.



Experts feel that the two filigree finials which have no marks, could have been made by local silversmiths here on Curaçao, as this type of intricate ornamental work was in vogue around that time.

In addition to caring for the needy, the aged and the infirm, the membership also saw to the glory and beauty of their SNOA by donating, on memorable occasions, ritual objects such as these and others. Most are still in use in our SNOA today. (ALP)

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CEREMONIAL SILVER FOR OTHER OCCASIONS



The oldest piece of ceremonial artistic silver in the SNOA is a BESAMIN (or spice box) made in Amsterdam in 1706 by an unknown master. The distance between Curaçao and Holland is again evidenced by the inscription date which is earlier than the spice box itself. The inscription, in Portuguese, translates to: "Jacob son of Efraim Jesurun Henriquez, consecrated to the Holy Congregation Mikvé Israel on the occasion of CHATAN BEREYSHIT (Bridegroom of Genesis) in the year 5465". (The date corresponds to October 3, 1703). The BESAMIN is used in conjunction with a cup of wine and a braided, multi-wicked candle in the ceremony which ushers out the SHABBAT on Saturday after dark. The ceremony is called HAVDALLAH meaning separation, as the SHABBAT is separate or distinctive from the rest of the week. The spices contained in the BESAMIN are usually those which have a sweet smell, to

remind the Jew of the sweetness of the SHABBAT.



The salver and ewer (or tray and jug) are used together. They have Amsterdam marks and the letter "O" signifying 1748. The mark "GB" identifies the master as Gerrit Boverhof (1696-1772) and is generally of Louis XIV style. The tray has two embossed hands open in the position of a KOHEN "a member of the priestly clan" reciting the benediction (Numbers 6:24-26). In the center is a raised oval on which to place the jug. The oval is inscribed in Portuguese "Legacy of Abigail Nunes". The jug is urn-shaped with the lip added for pouring. Like the tray, the jug has

the two benedicting hands embossed on the side near the top. Although the tray and jug seem to have been made to go together, the only motif they share are the two hands which, considering the quality, one may assume might have been added in Curaçao. The set was, and is, still used for the ritual washing of the hands prior to the Passover SEDER, the traditional meal and service which marks the first night of the holiday.



The PURIM bowl is one of two bowls still used on the festival of PURIM (Lots) when the story of Esther is told and money is collected for the poor. Incidentally, this is one of only two times when money is collected in the Synagogue itself. Such bowls are called KUPOT HASHEKEL, meaning "repositories of the coin", and are related to the collection in Exodus 30:11-16. This particular bowl has an Amsterdam mark and the year letter "D" representing 1738. It bears the mark of the master, Abraham Marshoorn (1702-1756). According to Rabbi Emmanuel, it was a donation of David de

Mordecai de Crasto, and represents a beautiful example of work done in Haarlem (Holland) after 1725.

a meaningful year "Y", used by the ceremony, performs this



Though battered through years of usage, this silver tray is object for the Snoa. It carries a Gouda mark and the letter probably 1728. It is referred to as the "wedding tray" and is congregation at the conclusion of every wedding when the groom breaks a glass. In most places, the groom ritual which recalls the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and reminds us of the fragility of relationships- by stepping on a glass wrapped in a napkin. In Mikvé Israel-Emanuel, the custom is for the groom to smash the crystal goblet onto the wedding tray, whereupon the congregation exclaims in unison the words BESIMAN TOV! (May it be for a good omen).



A magnificent, 7-branched silver MENORAH is traditionally placed on the center of the balustrade in front of the HEYCHAL for KOL NIDRE and for weddings. This

special MENORAH was presented to Chacham A. M. Chumaceiro by his friends in Amsterdam in 1861. The candles, standing inside their seven, magnificently-etched crystal shades (now irreplaceable) are, by tradition, lit in a certain sequence before KOL NIDRÉ service: the GABAI (Treasurer) lights the outer six candles and the SHAMASH the center or seventh light. (RDLM, ALP)

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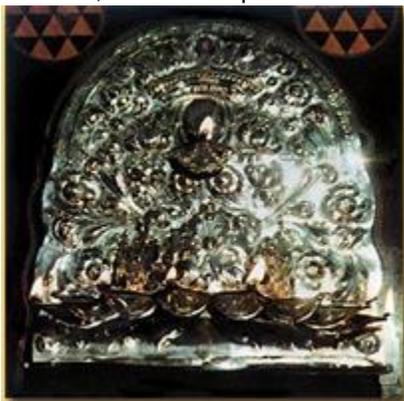
THE HANUKKIAH



The festival of HANUKKAH is a time for joy and celebration. The kindling of the HANUKKIAH or HANUKKAH MENORAH is attended to in the SNOA by the rabbi, his assistant, and, symbolic of this spirit, by the children. The HANUKKIAH is mounted on the balustrade in front of the HEYCHAL. On successive nights, one light, then two, then three ... are lit until- on the eighth night- all eight lights are aflame. Mikvé Israel's silver HANUKKIAH was donated to the congregation in 1716, making it sixteen years older than the present Synagogue building. It bears the Hebrew inscription: "In the year 'beaten for the light' to kindle an eternal flame, was consecrated by Jacob de Efraim Jesurun Henriquez to the Holy Congregation of Mikvé Israel." The date is indicated by markings over some of the Hebrew letters in the original words for

"beaten for the light". The numerical equivalent of these letters is 477, referring to the Hebrew year 5477 or 1716 C.E.

The HANUKKIAH was made by Pieter van Hoven, master of two of the Snoa's crowns and of the BESAMIN box. It has an Amsterdam mark and the letter year "F", which is indeed 1716. Near the top is a shield cover over which there is a crown with the Hebrew inscription: "For the commandment is a lamp and the law is a light." The eight oil lamps at the bottom are attached to a half crown; there is also a single oil lamp under the cartouche near the top. The cartouche, which is not engraved, helps to act as a reflector for the light from the SHAMASH or helper flame. Since, according to Jewish tradition, we are not permitted to use the light of the lower eight lamps, for example, to read, the reflector behind the upper lamp is therefore not only decorative, but may have a practical religious use as well.



The Maccabees fought against the mighty Assyrian-Greek Empire for religious liberty and won their victory in 165 B.C.E. After they had cleansed the defiled Temple in Jerusalem, they held a rededication ritual, which lasted eight days; thus the reason for the eight lights in the HANUKKIAH. Their struggle for freedom and their victory has been remembered by Jews ever since. So, too, the members of the SNOA are grateful for the years of freedom and religious liberty that they have enjoyed for over three and a half centuries on Curaçao under the enlightened rule of the House

of Orange and the successive governments of this country.

If we have been looking back into the history of Mikvé Israel-Emanuel and its SNOA, it is only fitting that at the close, we should direct our gaze to the future of our congregation. Our future is our children and our children are our future. For it is only through their devotion to Judaism, through their loyalty to our congregation, their attachment to their Sephardic heritage, and their love of our SNOA- that we can be sure that this Synagogue, which our forefathers built for us and for all generations to come, shall be bequeathed by them to the generations that follow. As they kindle the lights of rededication on Hanukkah year after year, so too they rekindle the faith that led our founding fathers, when setting foot on Curaçao in 1651, to name their congregation MIKVÉ ISRAEL, “the Hope of Israel.” For it is indeed the children that constitute our MIKVÉ ISRAEL, and “may the Lord ever be with them and with us,” EMANU-EL! (CGC, ALP)

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BEIT CHAIM BLEINHEIM

Rabbi Isaac Emmanuel writes that, following the pattern of the Moors, the Jews in Spain erected imposing cemeteries. It seems that these Spanish Portuguese Sephardim carried this tradition with them into exile. Those they founded include the famed cemetery of Oudekerk (near Amsterdam) in 1616, and BEIT CHAIM (The House of Life) BLEINHEIM of Curaçao around the year 1659.



Beit Chaim Bleinheim is appropriately situated to the West of the JODEN KWARTIER, in the midst of the plantations and the first synagogue in those fields. The graves of the first settlers do not carry stones with inscriptions. Since the stones had to be hewn in Amsterdam and later in Italy, it is safe to assume that the early pioneers had no means to import them from there. The oldest inscription on record is that of Jeudith Nunes da Fonseca, who died on the 5th of Shevat 5428 (1668). It is made of potters' clay and the fumes of the adjacent refinery (established in 1916 nearby) have long since rendered the words illegible.

The date and history of BEIT CHAIM BLEINHEIM make it the oldest Jewish cemetery still in use in the Western Hemisphere. Aside from its antiquity, BEIT CHAIM BLEINHEIM is of immense cultural value for its rich array of elaborately and artistically sculptured tombstones.

Rochelle Weinstein, a noted authority on Jewish sepulchral art, disputes the popularly held belief that attributes the Spanish Sephardic practice of having figurative, often narrative scenes on their tombstones, to their Catholic background and assimilatory tendency. She cites that carved and figured memorials are to be found just as well in Dutch and North German (Ashkenazi) Jewish cemeteries, and even in the famed cemetery of Prague.

Rabbi Isaac Emmanuel, in his scholarly work “Precious Stones of the Jews of Curaçao” divides the subjects on the sculptured stones into four groups:

1) allegorical representations, 2) bas-reliefs indicating the professions, 3) scenes recalling the last days of the deceased, and 4) Biblical tales relevant to the names of the interred. The last group speaks most vividly to our imagination: a Mordechai in triumphal procession (as in the Book of Esther); a Moses with the Tablets of the Law; an Elijah throwing his mantle to Elisha, and a Solomon rendering judgment over an infant about to be hewn in two.



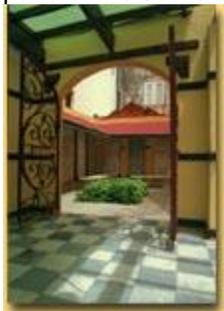
Once Curaçao's early Jewish settlers had taken up residence within the walled city of Willemstad, burials at BEIT CHAIM BLEINHEIM required either a long and circuitous route by carriage or wagon over country roads, or transportation by barge across water. The latter seems to have been the rule. A special black funeral barge would take the coffin and immediate relatives from Punda over the sometimes choppy waters of the Schottegat, to a pier at the foot of the hill whereon BEIT CHAIM BLEINHEIM is situated. In the CASA DE RODEOS (House of Circuits), the Chazzan would lead the seven circuits (RODEOS) traditionally conducted for an adult male. Thereafter, the body would be brought to its final resting place under the ground.

Rabbi Emmanuel calculates the total number of people buried in BEIT CHAIM BLEINHEIM to be between 5200 and 5500, but states that only about one half are identified by tombstones. Unfortunately, only about one third of the inscriptions are still legible today, and it seems that these, too, are doomed to extinction. As one of the many efforts to preserve this priceless heritage, replicas were made of twelve of the most artistic stones and put on display in the courtyard at the entrance to the Jewish Cultural Historical Museum. (CGC).

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THE JEWISH HISTORICAL CULTURAL MUSEUM

Crossing the Cabana, one passes from the Synagogue courtyard through an open doorway, into the patio of the Jewish Historical Museum which was established in 1970.



The Museum occupies two buildings which date back to 1728. These were originally the Rabbi's residence and the "Bath-house". When the "Mikvah" or Ritual Bath fell into disuse in the middle of the 19th century, the buildings were sold and for many years occupied by non-Jews. During their recent restoration by the Curaçao Foundation for the Preservation of Monuments, the "Mikvah", lost for generations, was sought . . . and uncovered! It is now the first thing which draws the visitor's attention as he enters the Museum's patio.

Lining the patio walls are nine replicas of a number of the beautifully-carved tombstones in the 17th century "Blenheim" cemetery. The two buildings, reconstructed in their original colonial style, provide an appropriate setting for the great variety of priceless ceremonial and cultural objects collected during the over 350 years of Jewish life on Curaçao. Among them:

- a Torah scroll brought by the first Jewish settlers to Curacao (believed to be from the time of their expulsion from Spain in 1492);
- a large, battered, 200 year old silver tray from Holland, still used for the smashing of the wineglass during wedding ceremonies in the Synagogue. (It is the custom at Mikvé Israel for the groom to dash a crystal goblet down onto the tray rather than to crush it beneath his foot);
- two "Chairs of Elijah" (circumcision chairs) -one (over 300 years old) belonging to Cong. Mikvé Israel, and the other (over 100 years old) from former Temple Emanuel -both of intricately carved, lustrous mahogany that belies their age.

- a silver Havdallah spice-box dating back to 1704.
- unique, hand-wrought silver K'tarim (Torah crowns) from the first half of the 18th century;
- colorful, hand decorated Ketubot (marriage contracts), the oldest dated 1739;
- and countless other small, but no less significant memorabilia, such as coins minted by local Jewish families, commemorative stamps honoring famous Curaçao Jewish enterprises and culture, plaques and brooches made with the hair of deceased relatives, amulets, etc.

A complete Seder table, set with all the ritual objects and symbols for the Festival of Pesach (Passover), is the centerpiece of the second floor exhibit area.

If you would like to contact us via email please do so:

museum@snoa.com

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The Curaçao Jewish Community Today

For close to three centuries, the **Sephardic Jews** (i.e. Jews of Spanish–Portuguese origin) of Congregations **Mikvé Israel** and **Emanu-El** were the only Jews on Curaçao. For over 200 years, they were united in one congregation, Mikvé Israel. Then, in 1864, there was a rift and Sephardic Jewish Reform Congregation Emanu-El was founded, constructing their own building on the Wilhelminaplein, just a couple of blocks from their “mother” synagogue. In 1964, after exactly 100 years of separation, the two Sephardic congregations reunited, creating **United Netherlands Portuguese Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel**, which follows the Reconstructionist philosophy.

Since the 1920's, there has been an influx of Ashkenazi (Central and East European) Orthodox Jews on Curaçao. In 1933, they founded “Club Union”, their social center. In 1959 they consecrated a synagogue building, “Shaarei Tzedek”, next door. Both the club and the Synagogue, first located in a compound in the old Jewish residential area of Scharloo, are today situated at Lelieweg # 1a in Mahaai, a suburb of Willemstad.

[Scharloo is well worth a visit as, along Scharlooweg- the main street of this small area just a few minutes drive from the old Synagogue- one can see the ornate mansions in which many of the old Curaçao Jewish and (white) Protestant families lived in former generations.]

Some 450 people now belong to the two Curaçao Jewish congregations; 75% of them are members of Mikvé Israel and the remaining of Shaarei Tzedek. Regular Shabbat and Festival services are held in both synagogues. Both congregations have an expanding program of religious education for children and adults. There is a B'nai B'rith Lodge, a local chapter of W.I.Z.O. and a B'nai B'rith Youth Organization for the teenagers. Today, as they have for more than three and a half centuries, members of the Curaçao Jewish community continue to play a vital part in Curaçao's economic, commercial, cultural and social life.

The visitor should make an effort to visit both of the historic cemeteries of Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel. Historic “Beit Haim (“House of Life”, a traditional euphemism for cemetery) Blenheim” was consecrated in 1659. This historic cemetery located some twenty minutes from Willemstad, contains hundreds of fascinating monuments with unique examples of Jewish sepulchral art and interesting inscriptions in Portuguese, Spanish, Hebrew and other languages. Approximately one hundred (of the 2,500, 17th and 18th century) still visible grave markers, are recognizable/readable today. Originally laid out in open country near the first agricultural settlements belonging to the original Sephardic settlers, the cemetery is unfortunately surrounded today by a tremendous oil refinery and its stones are perpetually subjected to the deteriorating and corrosive influence of this refinery's fumes. The last burials held in this cemetery were in the 1950s.

The newer, “modern” cemetery located on Berg Altena, is much closer to Willemstad. Originally much smaller than it is today, Reform Congregation Emanu-el purchased and consecrated “Beit Haim Berg Altena”, for its own use after the rift in 1864. Some twenty years later, Orthodox Congregation Mikvé Israel purchased a large piece of land adjacent to the cemetery and started burying there (as well) in 1888. It should be here noted that the boundary walls physically separating the Mikvé Israel and Emanu-EI cemeteries, were demolished as the first act of the “de jure” merger of the two Sephardic congregations in 1964.

Congregation Shaarei Tsedek- after its founding- buried its dead in Beit Haim Blenheim. When Blenheim was no longer available for burials, they continued their burials in the northeast corner of the Mikvé Israel’s cemetery on Berg Altena.

Mention should also be made of the Curaçao Community Hebrew School which is housed in quarters in the newer residential area of Curaçao. Classes are conducted here four times a week in the afternoons. The premises are also, among others, used by Mikvé Israel-Emanuel for its adult (education) classes and meetings. The BBYO has its own Club House (in a separate building) on the premises and various other activities are organized there.

This, briefly, is the story of the historic synagogue and the Curaçao Jewish Community today. Anyone who wishes to study the history of Curaçao Jewry in greater detail, should consult the two excellent, scholarly works by Rabbi Dr. Isaac and Suzanne Emmanuel. Rabbi Emmanuel was a former Rabbi of Congregation Mikvé Israel. The first of these, *Precious Stones of the Jews of Curaçao*, was published in 1957. *A History of the Jews of the Netherlands Antilles*, the second- and even larger work in two volumes- was published in 1970. Both of these monumental works are out of print and are no longer available for purchase. They can, however be consulted in most of the major libraries of the world.

To all our friends from near and far who want to visit our island, we wish you a warm welcome. We hope that you will enjoy your visit to Curaçao, home of **the oldest active Jewish community** and **the oldest synagogue in continuous use in the Americas.**” To those of you who visit our Synagogue (and we know you will), we extend the traditional blessing– as inscribed over the courtyard portals: **“Blessed may you be in your coming, and blessed may you be in your going.”** - Deut. 28:6.

Let them give glory unto the Lord.

and declare his praise in the islands.

-Isaiah 42:12



Aerial photograph of Willemstad 1982 showing the fortress (Fort Amsterdam) and the city walls of Willemstad 1732

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A Brief Historical Sketch

- 1499** The island of Curaçao is discovered by Spanish explorer Alonzo de Ojeda during Columbus' third voyage of discovery.
- 1634** Samuel Coheno, most probably a converso or crypto-Jew, sets foot on Curaçao. (*A translator, he accompanies the expedition of the Dutch West India Company under Admiral Johan van Walbeek. Records show that he remains for eight years as Administrator to the Indians and then returns to the Low Countries.*)
- 1651** There is no evidence of an actual Jewish community being established on Curaçao until 1651 when a Portuguese Jew, Joao lhao (or d'Illan), founds an agricultural settlement along the northern shore of the Santa Anna Baai in Curaçao. And so it is that Sephardic Congregation Mikvé Israel (i.e. "The Hope of Israel") is founded, making it, today, **the oldest active Jewish congregation in the Americas.**
- 1654** When the Christian Inquisition follows the Portuguese flag to Brazil, the pioneer Dutch Jewish settlers who had sought religious tolerance there since 1651, are forced to flee. One small group goes to New Netherlands (now New York), but the majority flees back to the Low Countries. Later on, some of them immigrate to the small Dutch haven of Curaçao where there is already a small settlement of Sephardic Jews from Amsterdam.
(*Emigration from Amsterdam continues steadily during the second half of the 17th century. The strategically located, excellent natural harbor of Willemstad, the expanding economy and the liberal Dutch atmosphere, are among the great attractions for adventuresome Sephardic Jews in the seventeenth century.*)
- 1659** The "Beit Haim Blenheim" cemetery of Congregation Mikvé Israel, thought by many to be the oldest "Caucasian" as well as the oldest Jewish Cemetery in the Western Hemisphere, is consecrated near their plantations. [*Although there may be older graves, the oldest tombstone recognizable to researchers, is that of Judit Nunesda Fonseca, dated 1668(?)*.]
- 1668**
- 1674** -The eminent Hakham (Sephardic equivalent of Rabbi) Josiao Pardo arrives from Amsterdam to serve Congregation Mikvé Israel.
-In that same year, a building is purchased by the Jews of Curaçao to serve as their first synagogue within the walled city of Willemstad. (*Services, during the preceding two decades, had probably been held in private homes or in rented quarters near the fields.*)
- 1692** A second city building is consecrated in 1692. And, as the Jewish Community expands and flourishes,
- 1703** a third building- their first synagogue to be built in the city- is consecrated in 1703.
- 1715** The Jewish community founds a Benevolent Society, making this the first of many benefactions. (*Of particular interest to Americans is the fact that when Congregation Shearith Israel (the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York, oldest Jewish congregation in the United States),*
- 1729** *was building its synagogue in 1729, the Jewish community of Curaçao sent a generous donation. Not very long afterwards, the Jews of Curaçao again demonstrated their feelings for the small Jewish community in the British colonies, by sending donations to Newport, Rhode Island, to help pay for the construction of the oldest existing synagogue building in the United States today, the "Touro Synagogue", consecrated in 1763.*)
- 1730** Begun in 1730, this sixth Curaçao synagogue (The current home of the old Sephardic community of Curaçao is the Synagogue on the corner of Hanchi di Snoa and Columbusstraat.), is consecrated on the
- 1732** eve of Passover 5492, making it the **oldest synagogue building still standing and in continuous use in the Western Hemisphere.**
(*Through most of the 18th century, the Jewish community of Curaçao was the largest, the wealthiest and the most influential Jewish community in the Americas. In the 18th and 19th centuries, there were Jewish schools, burial societies, philanthropies and all the other tokens of a thriving Jewish community. Leading Hahamim (Rabbis) served the congregation, as did Hazzanim (Cantors) and Hebrew teachers (generally known by the title Ribi or Rubi), until the last quarter of the 19th century.*)

- 1740** In the year 1740, a second congregation is organized for the convenience of those Jews living in Otrobanda (i.e. the section of Willemstad to the west or “on the other side” of the harbor entrance). The new congregation, Nevé Shalom” (i.e. “Peaceful Habitation” – Isaiah 32:18), consecrates its own synagogue building in 1746. *(Through most of the years of its brief existence, this second congregation was under the authority of the Directiva of Congregation Mikvé Israel.)*
- 1746**
- 1750** There is an unfortunate controversy between the two congregations which can only be settled by the direct intervention of Prince William Charles Henry Friso of Orange Nassau. The Prince issues a decree ordering “...that all the dissenting members of the Jewish Portuguese nation on Curaçao...shall again join the congregation to be governed as of old by the Parnassim and Board of the Synagogue according to the Jewish Portuguese constitution...” The prince’s decree also calls for the holding of “...a solemn and general thanksgiving and prayer-day...” to celebrate the end of the quarrel. Both Jews and Christians attend this service conducted by Hakham Samuel Mendes de Sola on August 19, 1750.
- 1761** Hakham Ishaac Carigal arrives on Curaçao shortly after the death of Hakham de Sola (1761) and is prevailed upon to remain and to lead the community until the return of the next Curaçao chief rabbi, Hakham Jacob Lopes da Fonseca, who has been studying at the Eits Haim Seminary in Amsterdam and who would return to Curaçao in 1764.
- 1762** *Of particular interest to students of American Jewish history is the fortuitous arrival on Curaçao of Hakham Ishaac Carigal in the year 1762. (Carigal is to achieve fame in the American colonies one decade later when he serves the new synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island, and enters into his now famous friendship with the learned minister Ezra Stiles, who would later become president of Yale University. Carigal is also known to have covered most of the world in those days of hazardous travel, seeking funds for the “yeshivot” (Talmudic academies) of Palestine.*
- 1764** Hakham Lopes da Fonseca conducts the religious affairs of the community for an amazing fifty-two years, until his death in 1815.
(For the next forty-one years, the leadership of the congregation is in the hands of a succession of Hazzanim and Dayanim (lay leaders), until the arrival of the eminent Hakham Aron Mendes Chumaceiro from Amsterdam.)
- 1856** -Hakham Chumaceiro (whose descendents still live on Curaçao) serves Mikvé Israel nobly during a period of economic decline. *(By the middle of the 19th century, many Jews had left Curaçao seeking greater economic advantage elsewhere in the Caribbean and on the North and South American main-lands. This exodus continues until well into the 20th century.)*
- ˆ Congregation Nevé Shalom is dissolved, which leaves only one active congregation on Curaçao.
- 1864** -The community is split over the question of “modernizing” and “embellishing” the orthodox ritual of the Synagogue, and Dutch Reform Emanu-El Congregation is formed by the dissenters.
-The rift is deep and painful and even leads to the consecration by the Reform group of a new Jewish cemetery on Berg Altena.
- 1866** -Mikvé Israel inaugurates its 634-pipe Flaes & Brunjes organ on the especially constructed balcony above (and behind) the Thebah.
-The Curaçao Ladies Benevolent Society is founded to care for the poor among the congregation’s ladies.
- 1867** The Reform group- the first Sephardic Reform congregation in the world- consecrates its Temple on the Wilhelminaplein in 1867 just a couple of blocks south of historic Synagogue Mikvé Israel.
(In the absence of a professional spiritual leader for Temple Emanu-El during its early years, questions of ritual are submitted to Rabbi Samuel Adler, the eminent leader of Temple Emanu-El of New York, who serves as the “father” of Temple Emanu-El on Curaçao.)
From a high of close to 2,000 in the late 18th century, the Jewish population of Curaçao shrinks to a few hundred in the early decades of the 20th century.
- 1916** (The Shell refinery is established adjacent to the “Beit Haim Blenheim” cemetery on what was known since 1651 as the “Jooden Kwartier” or “Jewish Quarter.”)
- 1920** There begins an influx of Ashkenazim (Central and Eastern European Jews) to Curaçao in the 1920s and 30s. This results in the establishment of their own social “Club Union” on the Bargestraat in

Scharloo in 1933. *(In the early years of this community, services were held in the club rooms.)*

1933

1954 *The Netherlands Antilles consisting of six islands, becomes an autonomous member of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.*

1957 Publishing of *Precious Stones of the Jews of Curaçao (1656-1957)*, written by Rabbi Isaac S. Emmanuel.

1959 -Ashkenazi Orthodox Congregation "Shaarei Tzedek" (i.e. "Gates of Righteousness") is incorporated at Scharlooweg 39-41.

(In the late 1950's and 1960's, it becomes clear that the two Sephardic congregations cannot continue to survive separately. Ideological differences between the members of Congregation Mikvé Israel and Temple Emanu-El have disappeared and there is hardly any residue of the animosity which had led to the 19th century split. And so, conversations aimed toward a reunion of the two historic congregations, are initiated.)

1962 B'nai B'rith Curaçao Lodge 2389 is founded, to act among others, as a bridge between the two Jewish congregations on Curaçao.

1963 A period of trial merger begins between the two Sephardic congregations on Curaçao, with services being conducted in the historic 1732 building.

1964 -The reunification of the two Sephardic congregations becomes a fact with the official name of the congregation now becoming the "United Netherlands Portuguese Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel".

-*(Although the congregation has always prided itself with the excellent state of repairs of its Sanctuary, age has taken its toll and certain drastic maintenance measures are needed in the 1960's and 70's.)*

-The wooden-plank ground floor in the Sanctuary is completely replaced with a cement floor- covered, of course, with its traditional thick blanket of white sand. (The flooring under the Thebah, Heychal and Banca are not replaced as this would have meant dismantling these furnishings.)

1968 The Mikvé Israel Sisterhood is established

1969 - The George Maduro Chapter of BBYO is founded.

- The Heychal doors are first opened in the Snoa during a Friday evening service.

- Curaçao erupts with riots caused by labor unrest.

1970 -The **Jewish Cultural Historical Museum** opens its doors in a fully restored 1728 building adjacent to the Synagogue

-Publication of *History of the Jews of the Netherlands Antilles*, by Rabbi Dr. Isaac S. and Suzanne A. Emmanuel.

1974 -*(Even more drastic maintenance measures are required and a major restoration of parts of the building has to be undertaken.)* The old, clay-shingle roof is replaced with an identical, but new one; the rotten wooden beams and braces in the attic/roof, and the ladies' galleries are replaced with new wood and steel (covered by a wooden façade); the electrical installation is replaced; the walls are completely re-plastered and repainted (both inside and out); and the Sala Consistorial, Administration and Rabbi's offices are completely renovated.

-The Mongui Maduro Foundation, established to perpetuate the memory of Salomon A.L. Maduro, incorporates his Judaica and Antilliana books and other collectables into a library in the old plantation house at Rooi Catootje.

1975 *(Reconstructionist Federation grants women full equality in religious practice.)*

1976 *(Women are admitted for the first time as full members in B'nai B'rith Curaçao Lodge.)*

1980 *(Beatrix is crowned Queen of the Netherlands.)*

1982 -The Snoa building's 250th Anniversary is marked with a week of activities.

- "JoodenKerkstraat" (Jewish st1:Street Church Street) is re-named "Hanchi di Snoa" (Alley of theSnoa) by the Curaçao Island Council in honor of the Snoa's 250th Anniversary.

1985 The congregation installs its first desk-top computer for administrative purposes.

1988 Documents and manuscripts stolen from the congregation's archives, are scheduled for auction at Christie's in Amsterdam. The Congregation, after vain attempts to stop the sale, purchases back the

- most important documents.
- 1989** (The Temple building is sold.)
- 1990** *Pope John II visits Curaçao.*
- 1992** -During an official visit to Curaçao, the Royal family (Queen Beatrix, Prince Claus, Crown-Prince William Alexander and the Princes Johan Friso and Constantijn), attends a special service in Mikvé Israel-Emanuel to commemorate “400 Years of Religious Freedom under the House of Orange”.
- The “maquette” (scale model) of the Snoa, donated by the Curiel families, is unveiled at the Beit Hat’ futsot Museum of the Diaspora in Tel Aviv, Israel.
 - The “TNO cement rot” proof project is conducted on the outside walls of the Synagogue.
 - A woman opens the Heychal doors in the Snoa for the first time during a Friday evening service.
- 1995** - The Snoa is placed on the official list of National Monuments.
- The two-year “Areivim project” established on behalf of the Community Hebrew School, is co-sponsored by the two Curaçao Jewish congregations and several private donors.
 - A joint, Jewish community service attended by many local dignitaries, is conducted in the Snoa in memory of Yitzhak Rabin.
 - The congregation introduces *Kol Haneshamah*, the new Reconstructionist Daily and Shabbat prayer books, into its services.
 - The “3,000th Anniversary of the Establishment of Jerusalem” is celebrated in the Snoa.
 - The Anne Frank Exhibition is displayed in the WTC on Curaçao.
 - Renowned author and speaker Elie Wiesel delivers a lecture entitled “Against Indifference” to some 1400 guests at the WTC.
- 1997** *Willemstad is placed on the UNESCO World Heritage List).*
- 1998** -The Congregation’s By-Laws are amended (for the first time since the 1964 merger) to grant women full statutory equality with men in all congregational affairs.
- The “Sisterhood” is dissolved.
- 1999** The first women are installed into the Directiva of Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel.
- 2000** - First steps are taken to professionally re-organize and catalogue the congregational archives.
- The image of MI-E’s (1716) silver Hanukkiah is engraved on the face of the State of Israel- 5761 half-shekel Hanukkah coin in honor of MI-E’s 350th Anniversary.
 - Women are granted full equality in ritual and a two-year transitional procedure is put in place.
- 2001** -Mikvé Israel-Emanuel celebrates the 350th Anniversary of its founding with a week-long celebration. Guest of Honor is Crown Prince William Alexander of the Netherlands.
- “Beit Haim Blenheim” is declared a “historical site”.
- 2002** -Men and women are granted full equality in the Snoa’s rituals and the first women are called to the Torah during Shabbat morning services.
- The (1866) pipe organ is dismantled and shipped to The Netherlands for restoration. *(The restoration costs are covered primarily by a gift presented to the Congregation by the Government of The Netherlands as part of the Congregation’s 350th Anniversary celebration.)*
- 2003** - The congregation’s first female president is installed.
- The restored pipe organ returns to Curaçao, is re-assembled and then inaugurated during festive ceremonies.

For more information about our congregation, please use the following contact information:

Address: Synagogue Mikvé Israel-Emanuel
P.O.Box 322
Curaçao,
Netherlands Antilles

Tel: 599-9-4611067

Fax: 599-9-4654141

E-mail: **Please use one of the following options:**

Mikvé Israel-Emanuel Synagogue and/or congregation:

info@snoa.com

Board of Directors:

directiva@snoa.com

Rabbi:

rabbi@snoa.com

For any purchases of Giftshop items:

giftshop@snoa.com

For the Jewish Cultural Historical Museum items:

museum@snoa.com

Opening hours: The Snoa and its adjacent Jewish Historical Cultural Museum, are open to visitors on **weekdays** from 9:00 AM to 4:30 PM. A small entrance fee is charged for the maintenance of these historical buildings. Both are closed (for tourism) on Saturdays, Sundays, Jewish Festivals and public holidays.

The Snoa is also open, but only for **worship services**, on the Shabbat [Friday evenings from 6:30 to 7:45 PM and on Saturday mornings from 10:00 AM to 12:00 noon] and on the first (and last days) of a Jewish Festival.. (Appropriately dressed) worshipers are most welcome to join the congregation in worship.