

“We Endorse the Attitude of ‘Joy and Encouragement’”: Challenges to Conversion Policy in Jamaica in the Early Twenty-First Century

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The buzzwords that had previously been used to promote continued Jewish identification in the Jewish community—“continuity” and “survival”—are no longer convincing, if they ever were.¹ While we strive to grow our communities to be vigorously committed to their faith, and want Judaism to survive as a religion, these desires are not enough. We need to be both able and willing to transform one of the central religious ideals of our faith—the covenantal mission of our people “to be a light unto the nations”—into an apprehension of God and to a steady process of religious growth.

We also need to be able to demonstrate the innate spiritual possibilities of our religion, and the many paths to awareness and enlightenment that it allows and encourages. Judaism has never been, and should never become, a religion that exists only for a few die-hard fundamentalist believers functioning on the distant margins of society. Rather, we need to strive for a religion that is dynamic and developing, a religion that tries to influence the world beyond itself at the same time as it absorbs influence outside itself.

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This was the philosophy to conversion to Judaism that I brought with me to the Caribbean island of Jamaica when I became the first ordained rabbi to lead the community in Kingston in thirty-three years. The approximately two hundred members of the United Congregation of Israelites in Jamaica (UCIJA) were the remnant of a much larger historic Jamaican community whose Sephardic origins go back to the time when the Portuguese forced conversion of the Jews to Christianity in 1497. Spanish and Portuguese Jews began to arrive in Jamaica more than 350 years ago, lured by the prospect of economic opportunities.

Some came directly to Port Royal, which was once the largest city in the Caribbean, functioning as the center of shipping and commerce in the Caribbean Sea by the latter half of the seventeenth century. Others first went to Curacao, Barbados, Nevis, and/or other islands and then continued on to Jamaica. While there was never an inquisition in Jamaica, it was nevertheless illegal to practice Judaism under Spanish rule. It appears that Jews were unofficially free to live discreetly on the island by 1577 and they were permitted to practice their religion openly after the British conquered Jamaica in 1655. The roots of the UCIJA can be traced back to a “Portuguese” synagogue in Port Royal—called the “wickedest city on earth”—that was destroyed by a massive earthquake in 1692.² The central hub of Jewish life shifted first to Spanish Town and then to Kingston, the current capital of the country.

Many of the earliest Jews to pass away in the area are buried across the harbor from Port Royal in Hunt’s Bay Cemetery, which has been restored and surveyed. The number of gravestones in this cemetery that bear skull and crossbones engravings is one of the reasons some argue that there were many Jamaican Jewish pirates looting Spanish ships.³ Shaar Shalom Synagogue, the name of the institution that is used interchangeably with the UCIJA, was rededicated in 1912 after being rebuilt on its present site following severe earthquake damage in 1907. The UCIJA was formed in 1921 merging a Spanish-Portuguese congregation with a British-German one, creating a unified ritual. The synagogue building was located downtown kitty-corner from the Parliament building at 92 Duke Street in Kingston. Until the arrival of Chabad in Montego Bay in September 2014, Shaar Shalom had been the only Jewish congregation on the island for many decades.⁴ The property surrounding the synagogue included a Jewish Heritage Center and

a memorial garden whose relocated tombstones date back to the eighteenth century. At the community's peak in 1881, Jews comprised 4.5 percent of Jamaica's population of 580,000, which was 17.5 percent of the white population.⁵ Today there are perhaps 450 Jews in a population of over 3 million people.

The synagogue began liberalizing in the first years of the twentieth century. British Liberal Rabbi Bernard Hooker had been the last long-serving rabbi before leaving during the political upheavals of the 1970s. There had then been two rabbis who each served for approximately one year each, with the last one leaving in the spring of 1978. In 2011, I became the first rabbi of the congregation in thirty-three years. The hope was that I could unify what had become a factionalized and constantly squabbling ethnic minority that had become alienated from their religious roots. As synagogue Vice President Stephen Henriques—who had served as the spiritual leader for eleven years before my arrival and resumed that responsibility after my departure—told the *Times of Israel*, “The need for a rabbi was really to pull the congregation together and increase the knowledge and awareness of Judaism in the community after being without this level of leadership for so many years.”⁶

The Jewish community had been declining for many decades, with a particularly drastic exodus during the political infighting of the 1970s when Prime Minister Michael Manley—seen by some as Jamaica's Fidel Castro—moved the country toward socialism and flirted with revolution. The country's Jewish community had always been sensitive to economic and social as well as political changes. Significant numbers of Jews had emigrated even in the nineteenth century, including a sizable contingent to far-away Australia. But under Manley's rule, the entire elite of the country felt that they had to relocate, if only temporarily. And indeed, when the 1980 election brought Edward Seaga to power, significant numbers of those elites returned. But many others did not, including many of the leaders of the Jewish community. By the early twenty-first century, the Jewish population of Jamaica was a fraction of what it had been before independence from Britain in 1962. The synagogue continued to hold services every Friday night and Saturday morning, but attendance was dismal and enthusiasm for Judaism severely diminished.

Some believed that a rabbi could bring new energy to the synagogue, which had languished in part because of religious apathy

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as well as its location in downtown Kingston, perceived as dangerous and certainly far from the heart of the upper middle-class enclaves uptown. As a reporter for *Hadassah Magazine* put it in April 2014, “The most significant step the congregation has taken to reinvigorate the community is hiring Reform Rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan in 2011 to be its first religious leader in more than three decades . . . His challenge: Build a Jewish future—even if it goes against age-old customs.”⁷

The central role that some believed conversions to Judaism could play in this effort to rebuild was highlighted by many of the reporters who visited the Jamaican Jewish community at the invitation of the Jamaica Tourist Board. About a year after my arrival in the country, one reporter for the *Times of Israel* wrote that “Despite the high intermarriage rate . . . most children of intermarriage are raised as Jews, and there continue to be conversions. That, community members say, is what will keep Jamaican Jewry going.”⁸ In the *Hadassah Magazine* cover story of 2014, the reporter almost immediately pointed out that “One way to expand the shrinking community is to welcome converts, including black Jamaicans with Jewish ancestry—about 10 percent of the population—who want to return to Judaism.”⁹

Although it was true that Judaism had not been a proselytizing religion for almost two thousand years, as a rabbi I was strongly committed to advocating for promoting Judaism among non-Jews whether they had Jewish ancestry or not. The reporter for the *Times of Israel* quoted me as expressing the view that Jamaica specifically was potentially fertile territory for Jewish proselytization: “Many Jamaicans, though not Jewish by birth, are interested in Judaism, some intensely. I have never before been in a country where so many people express an admiration for Jews and Judaism and want to draw closer to Jewish spiritual wisdom. It is my opinion that we should integrate some of these outsiders into our religious community.”¹⁰ When Aron and Judith Hirt-Manheimer of *Reform Judaism* visited Kingston, I told them that the congregation could “build a multiracial community in Jamaica that can be a model for the world.”¹¹

Part of the reason there was so much interest in Judaism was because Jamaicans had a strong interest in religion in general. Shortly after my arrival, I was informed with great pride by several people from different backgrounds that Jamaica has more churches per

capita than anywhere else in the world. That enthusiasm for religion combined with an openness to religious experimentation produces a large population of spiritual searchers. Another reason that some Jamaicans find Judaism spiritually meaningful is that whether or not they believe they have Jewish ancestry themselves, they know how intertwined Jewish history is with Jamaican history. This long historical association makes Judaism appear as both authentic and organic, especially in juxtaposition to religions that have only recently begun to proselytize in the country. Finally, there was no legal barrier to those from any ethnic, cultural, or religious background converting to Judaism.

One of the first tasks I faced as the new rabbi was to supervise the conversion of fifteen candidates who had been waiting patiently, some of them for as long as eleven years.¹² A number of meetings were held to establish the criteria and to discuss policy considerations. I argued for a highly welcoming yet vigorous program that would be both spiritually and academically demanding. All of the expectations were put down in writing in great detail. On November 1, 2011, it was agreed to begin the intake interviews at the following meeting. The first four conversion intake interviews were then scheduled for November 22, 2011. The other eleven candidates were interviewed in the following weeks. Fourteen were admitted to the program; one decided not to proceed for personal reasons. My hope was that this cohort would be the first of many such groups.

Since no documentation existed at the time, I attempted to explain the purpose and scope of the conversion effort that we would be undertaking in Jamaica. The Giur and Affirmation of Status Program was to be based on the principle that “the Jewish community of Jamaica welcomes those who have chosen to become Jewish and cast their lot with the Jewish people. We welcome all sincere converts regardless of their former religious faith(s).”¹³ We began by emphasizing that we were committed to helping those interested in converting to Judaism. “We at Kahal Kadosh Shaare Shalom make an effort to help people who are interested in converting to Judaism.”¹⁴ Since “preparation for conversion to Judaism is a sacred process,” therefore “individuals who choose to follow in the footsteps of Ruth deserve the full support of the entire congregation.”¹⁵ While traditional Judaism required the rabbi to send the prospective convert away three times, “Shaare Shalom

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Synagogue does not follow this practice. Rather, we endorse the attitude of ‘joy and encouragement.’”¹⁶

The intention was also to offer an affirmation of status program for those returning to Judaism. Because of the large number of Portuguese Jewish refugees who had arrived in Jamaica hundreds of years earlier as well as other waves of Jewish immigrants, there were large numbers of Jamaicans with Jewish ancestry. Many of them had Portuguese Jewish last names but no memory of actual Jewish ancestors or practices. One of the prominent members of the congregation, Dr. Winston Mendes Davidson, a professor and medical doctor who also served as lay cantor, came from this background. Isaac Mendes Belisario (1795–1849), presumably from the same family tree, was a famous Jamaican artist who was a practicing Jew.¹⁷ Estimates ranged widely over how many Jamaicans had Jewish ancestry but even at a relatively low guesstimate of 10 percent, that would still amount to over three hundred thousand people.¹⁸ In addition to bringing back the “lost sheep of Israel,” allowing Jamaicans of Jewish ancestry to return to the Jewish community could strengthen Jewish life on the island.

Even though the congregation was ostensibly affiliated with the World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ) through the Union of Jewish Congregations of Latin America and the Caribbean (UJCL), there was no attempt by those organizations to promote Progressive Judaism. Indeed, some of those in the congregation brought religious and social attitudes with them that might dismay and even shock most American Reform Jews. Our congregation harbored a number of traditionalists who saw being Jewish as a matter of birth—birthright—and believed all others claiming to be Jews were imposters. This attitude passed to some of those considering conversion. There were a number of potential converts who expressed hesitations along the lines of “There is a sliver of thought in my mind that says to me that those who are ‘truly’ Jewish have an ‘in’ with God!” My efforts to convince them that one did not need to have Jewish ancestors to convert to Judaism were generally not successful. Some of the Jamaican Jews emphasized that their common ancestry was what gave them a mutual commonality that transcended personal, political, and even religious differences. As the Hirt-Manheimers observed: “For [community leader] Ainsley [Henriques], as with other congregants we met,

reverence of one's ancestors seems to tie him to the Jewish community as much as religious conviction."¹⁹

While from a Progressive Jewish point of view, it would not make any difference whether an individual had such ancestry as long as they were committed to Judaism, it was felt that those with Jewish backgrounds would be more acceptable to the Jewish community of Jamaica. Some Jamaican Jews felt that they belonged to a specific niche in Jamaican society and to allow those not from that niche to join their community might diminish what many viewed as their elite social status. This was, of course, difficult to determine with certainty. Most white Jamaicans were understandably reluctant to speak openly about race and class. So it is worth noting that Joseph "Big Joe" Matalon, a member of one of the most prominent Jamaican Jewish extended families, told a reporter in 2012 that many Jamaicans may claim Jewish ancestry as a way of claiming a partially white racial background. He seemed to imply that some black Jamaicans believed being accepted as part Jewish and hence part white might elevate their social status. "It is important to be white . . . When they tell you that their great-great-grandfather was Jewish, they're saying they're white."²⁰ How this perception might have influenced Jewish communal attitudes toward conversion to Judaism was left unarticulated.

Others were more forthcoming. When the Hirt-Manheimers spoke with Patrick Mudahy, whom they identified as "one of the congregation's most vocal critics of Rabbi Kaplan's conversion efforts," Mudahy told them, "We have to be careful who we take in . . . We have to maintain our blood line." The authors described Mudahy as "a born Jew who had been raised as a Christian," who had returned to "the faith of my ancestors" as an adult seeking connection to his roots in the aftermath of marital difficulties. The Hirt-Manheimers wrote that "when asked how the community could survive without an infusion of new blood," he responded, "Like Masada, it is better to die in honor than to die in shame."²¹

As a newcomer to the country, I found the issues of race and class not as obvious of a barrier as the synagogue itself, which was seemingly unable to shake off the habit of rote ritual, of repeating the same exact words in Hebrew and English hundreds of times, week after week, without considering what might have been done to make religious services more meaningful and uplifting. When I arrived to assume my rabbinic post, the congregation

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was using a locally produced prayer book edited three decades earlier by then lay-leader Ernest Henriques de Souza, which was an eclectic mix of the *Union Prayer Book* with Rabbi Moses Gaster’s Sephardic British Orthodox siddur, *The Book of Prayer and Order of Service According to the Custom of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews* (6 volumes, 1901–1907), as well as other texts. While the prayer book was poorly edited, with some prayers being cut off in mid-sentence, the concept of a uniquely Jamaican siddur was intriguing. De Souza had been attempting to meld the Reform theology of the UPB with the Sephardic heritage of one of the congregations that had become the United Congregation of Israelites, represented by the prayer book edited by Gaster (1856–1939), who had served as *chacham* (presiding rabbi) of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews of Great Britain from 1887 to 1919. De Souza, a professional photographer, had become the lay spiritual leader of the congregation upon the departure of the last Rabbi in 1978. His family, like most other Jamaican Jewish families, was highly assimilated: his mother had been Catholic, while his cousin, The Rt Rev Neville Wordsworth De Souza, was the Anglican bishop of Jamaica.

After De Souza’s death, Stephen Henriques assumed the position of spiritual leader, which consisted primarily of reading the prayers in the synagogue without any changes whatsoever. As a reporter for *The Gleaner*, a prominent Jamaican newspaper founded by two Jews in the 1840s, described it, “There is a set order in which the service is conducted, item by item, every week. There is no shift, and he does not find it boring.”²² The small group that attended services religiously probably agreed with Henriques that there was a spiritually uplifting impact of reciting prayers word for word, week by week. However, I hoped to dramatically expand the numbers and cultural backgrounds of those attending and participating, and to do that would require updating De Souza’s vision and creating a worship service that could be used in an organic fashion with the congregation, changing as the congregation changed.

While this may appear to be quite a specific critique of a relatively small element of Jewish practice, the worship service was the main vehicle for communicating not only what Judaism believed in but what the Jewish spiritual experience might be like to those considering embracing the religion. My goal was not to import creative religious ideas from North America or elsewhere but rather to draw on

a wide variety of influences in order to nurture and develop a truly distinctive Jamaican Judaism. This would be a synthesis of the Spanish Portuguese as well as British German synagogue histories set in the context of Jamaican culture. I advocated for creating a distinctive Jamaican Jewish ritual, of crafting prayers that would resonate with the sounds of Jamaica, and songs that were both authentically Jewish and Jamaican. The ultimate goal was to build a vibrant, growing, multiracial community that could become the model for Jewish renaissance around the world.

While many of the more ambitious goals of the *giur* program were never realized, we did complete the conversion of a number of devoted individuals utilizing the natural and cultural assets available to us in Jamaica. The actual ritual process included a *mikveh* ceremony at the Rockfort Mineral Baths, nestled at the foot of the Long Mountain just east of Kingston. While this facility looks like a large swimming pool with several much smaller mini pools surrounding the large pool, it actually captures mineral water running down from the mountain and releases it to continue its descent. Therefore it meets the strictest halachic standards. This was not our primary concern but it seemed like an appropriate location that had the added benefit of meeting the most stringent religious requirements. We followed the immersion in the *mikveh* with a ritual conversion ceremony the following Friday immediately prior to the *Kabbalat Shabbat* service at our synagogue. The conversion candidate was now officially a Jew.

The next day at the morning Shabbat service, we called up each new Jew for a Torah honor. As part of the Torah service, we read a blessing that I had written for the welfare of the country, borrowing from Bob Marley:

Adonai, may all the people of our beautiful island nation live happily and prosper. May we be appreciative for what we have and may we willingly share it with those who are in need. Help us to communicate with one another and to appreciate each other's strengths as well as weaknesses. Teach us to respect the many ways that we may serve You in a country with so many religious faiths and traditions. May the people of our country be safe from strife and affliction and may we be healthy and vigorous in both body and spirit. We join together in one love, one heart, and let us say amen.

Notes

1. The terms “continuity” and “survival” were used frequently by Jewish leaders from the time that the first demographic studies began appearing showing that intermarriage rates were increasing until recently, when a consensus began developing that focusing on these themes was not persuasive and indeed might be counterproductive. As an example of how these two words were seen as integral to any presentation of Judaism in America, see Abraham J. Karp, *Jewish Continuity in America: Creative Survival in a Free Society* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998).
2. Nick Davis, “Jamaica’s ‘Wickedest City’ Port Royal Banks on Heritage,” *BBC*, July 25, 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-18601357>.
3. Ed Kritzler, *Jewish Pirates of the Caribbean—How A Generation of Swashbuckling Jews Carved Out an Empire in the New World in Their Quest for Treasure, Religious Freedom—and Revenge* (New York: Anchor, 2009), and many articles such as Ross Kenneth Urken, “The Forgotten Jewish Pirates of Jamaica,” *Travel + Leisure*, May 16, 2016, https://www.travelandleisure.com/trip-ideas/jewish-pirates-jamaica-kingston?xid=PS_smithsonian.
4. Menachem Posner, “Just in Time for the Holidays, Jamaica Lands Permanent Chabad Presence,” September 18, 2014, https://www.chabad.org/news/article_cdo/aid/2706138/jewish/Just-in-Time-for-the-Holidays-Jamaica-Lands-Permanent-Chabad-Presence.htm.
5. Marilyn Delevante and Anthony Alberga, *The Island of One People: An Account of the History of the Jews of Jamaica* (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2005).
6. Debra Rubin, “Jamaican Jews See Intermarriage, Conversion as Their Future,” *The Times of Israel*, December 24, 2012, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/jamaican-jews-see-intermarriage-conversion-as-their-future/>.
7. Zelda Shluker, “Swimming against the Tide,” *Hadassah Magazine*, April/May 2014, <https://www.hadassahmagazine.org/2014/04/30/swimming-tide/>.
8. Debra Rubin, “In Jamaica, the Jewish Future Is in Intermarriages and Conversions,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, December 19, 2012, <https://www.jta.org/2012/12/19/lifestyle/in-jamaica-the-jewish-future-is-in-intermarriages-and-conversions>.
9. Shluker, “Swimming Against the Tide.”
10. Ibid.

11. Aron and Judith Hirt-Manheimer, "Tracks of Time in Jamaican Sands," *Reform Judaism*, Spring 2014, <https://reformjudaism.org/tracks-time-jamaican-sands>.
12. Paul Foer, "Becoming Jewish in Jamaica," *The Times of Israel*, April 20, 2012, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/becoming-jewish-in-jamaica/>.
13. The United Congregation of Israelites, "Giur and Affirmation of Status Program," October 31, 2011.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Tim Barringer, Gillian Forrester, Barbaro Martinez-Ruiz, eds., *Art and Emancipation in Jamaica: Isaac Mendes Belisario and His Worlds* (New Haven, CT: Yale Center for British Art, 2007).
18. While the official UN Population estimate for Jamaica is 2,948,279 people as of mid-year 2019, the actual population is certainly much higher.
19. Hirt-Manheimer, "Tracks of Time."
20. Rubin, "Jamaican Jews."
21. Hirt-Manheimer, "Tracks of Time."
22. Paul H. Williams, "Long-Standing Jewish Lay Reader Happy to Serve," *The Gleaner*, August 12, 2017, <http://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/news/20170812/long-standing-jewish-lay-reader-happy-serve>.