

# A Synagogue Drawn in the Sand

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There are only five sand floor synagogues in the world – four of them in the Caribbean. How has the tradition been maintained for hundreds of years?

By Dana Evan Kaplan



When I first came to Jamaica, in March 2011, community historian and patriarch Ainsley Henriques took me to see the synagogue in the historic downtown section of Kingston. Even though I knew the synagogue had sand floors, the actual visual image of all that sand shocked me momentarily. And even though I knew that Jews do not take off their shoes to enter synagogues, I nevertheless asked him, "Should I take off my shoes?"

The Shaare Shalom Synagogue in the Jamaican capital is one of five functioning synagogues with sand floors. The others are the Portuguese Synagogue of Amsterdam (also known as the "Esnoga"), built in 1675 and considered the "mother synagogue" of Spanish Portuguese Jewry; the Snoa in Curacao (1732), Zedek ve Shalom in Suriname (circa 1735), and Beracha Veshalom Vegmiluth Hasidim in Saint Thomas (1833), part of the U.S. Virgin Islands. The Suriname synagogue was fully restored by the Israel Museum and is without a doubt the highlight of the Mandel Wing for Jewish Art and Life.

The term "sand floor" refers to what is usually a wood base with a relatively small covering of sand. In Kingston, there is a brick base which has an empty space of about 38 cm above it. On top of this space bricks there is a wood covering made from pine. The sand is then poured onto the wood base. A good deal of sand is lost through attrition and erosion, so the supply requires replenishing every five or six years.

David Matalon, the president of the United Congregation of Israelites in Kingston, arranged for about 10-12 bags of sand (each weighing between 27 and 31 kgs) to be filled from Lime Cay and other offshore cays near the Kingston Harbor. The sand was transported to the synagogue and poured over the existing sand. Contrary to what you may imagine, the sand does not become dirty or unusable. The sole reason for bringing new sand is to ensure there will be enough to fully cover the wooden base. At any given time, there is about an inch and a half of sand on the synagogue floor.

### **Exile, not paradise**

The current synagogue building in Jamaica dates from 1912, but previous Spanish-Portuguese synagogue structures in the country presumably also had sand-covered floors. The origin of the practice is shrouded in mystery, and the explanations offered range from practical to historical to midrashic.

The custom may have originated in Amsterdam, where sand was used to dry mud on people's shoes. The Esnoga synagogue was near the edge of town, where most of the streets were unpaved and, thanks to the weather, often muddy. It was, therefore, practical to line the floor in the synagogue with sand to keep it tidy. There are a number of churches and taverns in the Netherlands dating to the 17th century that likewise have sand floors.

The most common explanation, however, is that the practice originated in the early 1600s in the northern region of Brazil, where Spanish-Portuguese conversos (forced converts) who had returned to Judaism were trying to retain their ancestors' traditions while subject to the hostile eyes of Iberian ecclesiastical authorities.

Because synagogues were not permitted to operate, the conversos who were still committed to practicing Judaism had no choice but to meet in private homes. Though these gatherings were an open secret, the Jewish community felt it was better to be as discreet as possible. As such, they put clay and sand on the floor of the prayer rooms to muffle the sounds made by the comings and goings

of worshipers, and the prayers themselves. Regarding the midrashic connection, it is said that the sand symbolizes the terrain of the Sinai Desert, through which the Children of Israel wandered for 40 years after the Exodus. Among earlier generations, this may have been understood as emphasizing the idea that, even though they were living in a tropical paradise, they were still in exile.

On a more positive note, there are those who believe that the sand symbolizes God's promise to Abraham to make the Jews as populous as the sands of the sea: "I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the seashore" (Genesis 22:17). This theme recurs throughout the Tanakh, like the verse in Hosea that says, "Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured nor numbered" (Hosea 2:1).

Though I have not been able to find sources that specifically suggest these verses as the theological justification for the placement of sand, it does seem logical. Of course, it is also possible that the decision was strictly pragmatic. Perhaps the original builders felt that since there was sand everywhere else, they might as well have sand on the synagogue floor, too. Perhaps they wanted to save money. It might also have been useful in minimizing the presence of small reptiles, bugs and insects of various types.

Whatever its source, one still wonders how the custom stood the test of time, how it prevails as standard practice so long after the original meaning and purpose has become obscured. I believe the answer lies in the dedication of the Spanish-Portuguese Diaspora community in the Caribbean. This group is perfectly reconciled with the fact that they may not understand what the tradition means or why it was developed, but are determined to perpetuate the tradition as faithfully as possible.

While customs relating, for example, to complex recitations of long Hebrew incantations are more difficult to preserve, practical traditions such as the appearance of the synagogue are maintained with great fervor and fastidiousness by each new generation. Even in generations where Jewish literacy was at a nadir, everyone would know about the tradition concerning the floor of the synagogue and would take the minimum steps necessary to perpetuate that tradition.

As such, the sand floors of Caribbean synagogues are not simply tread upon but cherished. They are part and parcel of Jewish life and observance in our corner of the world; they are our connection to Abraham and the generation of the Exodus as well as our unique take on Jewish tradition.

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