

Becoming Jamaica's rabbi

A first-person account of leading a Jewish community from the past into the future.

By DANA EVAN KAPLAN / May 3, 2012 14:15



Jews in synagogue 521. (photo credit: Dana Evan Kaplan)

Making any transition is difficult. But moving to a new country to become the only rabbi for an entire island is a huge leap. If that wasn't enough, when I passed through immigration and customs at Norman Manley International Airport in Kingston, Jamaica, on August 31, 2011, I became the first ordained rabbi to lead the Jamaican Jewish community in 33 years.

When I used to take vocational or personality standardized tests, they always indicated that I was adventurous, willing to take risks. After 10 years of faithfully ministering to my flock in Albany, Georgia, trying to maintain a vibrant Jewish religious life in a small and declining southern city, I was offered a new contract and given 30 days to consider it. I started thinking that it might be time to explore other options.

I looked at the Central Conference of American Rabbis' list of congregations in need of rabbinic leadership, and one entry under the World Union for Progressive Judaism caught my eye: Kingston, Jamaica. I had researched Caribbean Jewish history, so I knew that Jamaica had a distinguished heritage and had produced many accomplished Jewish authors, painters and even rabbis. I also learned that the national motto was "Out of many,

one people,” a concept I found appealing.

Eight years earlier, I had written an article for Cuban Studies, an academic journal that deals with the emigration of Cuban Jews in the early 1960s. One of the primary routes this group took was from Havana to Miami by way of Kingston. While writing my article, I corresponded via e-mail with Ainsley Henriques, one of the leaders of the Jamaican Jewish community. He was enormously helpful, providing me with significant details and referring me to additional sources.

Sure enough, several years later, he was once again the contact person for the rabbinic position in Kingston. I hastened to write to him, and we began an extended correspondence via e-mail, phone, and then group conferencing on Skype. The community was indeed looking for a rabbi, and it needed someone who was willing to take on a position that had been vacant for more than three decades in a city that was desperate for a renaissance.

THE HISTORY of the Jews in Jamaica is fascinating, stretching back hundreds of years. Allow me to give you a taste.

The first Jews came to the island with the Spanish in 1494. Of course, they were not practicing Jews, since the entire Jewish community of Spain had been given the choice of converting to Catholicism or going into exile – a double exile – just two years earlier. During that period, large masses of Jews “converted” to Christianity to escape expulsion and persecution. They became conversos, also derogatorily called Marranos, practicing their Judaism in secret. Some of these conversos managed to leave Portugal for Jamaica, hoping to escape from the constant pressure of the inquisitors. We know relatively little of their inner lives. Presumably many, but certainly not all, tried to practice their faith privately, very discreetly.

Many of the Spanish Jews traveled by land across the Iberian peninsula into Portugal, where they were offered freedom of religion. But that freedom was revoked just five years later. The Portuguese king made plans to forcibly convert many Portuguese Jews, particularly younger ones, while expelling the others.

Once he realized that many Portuguese Jews would still leave, he changed course and forcibly converted every single Jew in the country. Fortunately the Inquisition was not introduced there until later, giving the conversos time to adapt to a pressurized and schizophrenic existence.

Although prohibited from emigrating, many still found ways to leave the country, moving to Portuguese Jewish communities in Hamburg, London, Livorno, and especially Amsterdam. Over the next 150 years, some of these former conversos came from Amsterdam to the Caribbean. Many of them settled in Port Royal and later Spanish Town and Kingston, as well numerous smaller towns throughout the island, including Falmouth, Montego Bay and Alligator Pond.

Another wave of Jewish immigrants came to Jamaica after the 1655 British colonization of the island. Although archeologists have not positively identified its remains, a small synagogue was apparently constructed in Port Royal, a hustling and bustling commercial center known for pirates and crime. Much of the city literally sank into the ocean after a massive earthquake in 1692. The bulk of the Jewish community shifted to Spanish Town, and then, after it became the capital in 1872, to Kingston. The separate Sephardi and Ashkenazi congregations merged in 1921 to form the United Congregation of Israelites.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the community was ably led by Rabbi Bernard Hooker, who went on to become the head of the Liberal movement in Great Britain. Hooker became the first major radio talk show host in Jamaican history, giving Jamaicans of all backgrounds advice on everything from whom to date to how to die. This was a time before the Internet, when there was still only one TV channel and a handful of radio stations, so virtually the entire country tuned in to hear the rabbi give his weekly spiel. (Just about every time I meet someone, their first response to hearing that I am a rabbi is, “I used to always listen to Rabbi Hooker on the radio.”) In the mid-1970s, the political environment changed, and many middle-class Jamaicans began to

emigrate. Hooker returned to England and, after two failed attempts to bring in a new rabbi, longtime community leader and professional photographer Ernest de Souza became acting spiritual leader.

De Souza did everything from performing the synagogue rituals to organizing the office, documenting virtually every activity with photographs. He also served an amazing array of communal institutions, including the Board of Governors of Hillel Academy, the Jewish-sponsored private school that had been established in Hooker's time. Tragically he suffered a massive heart attack after Shabbat morning services in March 2000 and died at the age of 66.

After his sudden death, Stephen Henriques stepped in, helping to keep the community together for the next 11 years while holding a full-time job selling heavy farm equipment. His compassionate nature allowed him to empathize with the many different types of people who identified as Jewish in a community that had become highly assimilated and predominately intermarried. Along with Michael Matalon and several other volunteers, he conducted services on both Fridays and Saturdays and met with those interested in converting to Judaism.

AND NOW it's my turn.

Being the only rabbi in the country has been a fascinating experience thus far. Many people call or email me with all types of inquiries relating to Jews and Judaism, since I am now seen as the authority on all such matters. Some have questions relating to the Jewish origins of Christianity, while others want to investigate their own Jewish roots; there are tens of thousands of such individuals in Jamaica.

While I believe that there is much to do here, many people have become accustomed to the way things have been done for so long. On a number of occasions, I made changes in complete innocence which elicited frightful responses. Nevertheless, there is a consensus that we as a community need to change with the times, but in a gradual, thoughtful manner. We want to treasure our Spanish-Portuguese- Jamaican heritage, deepening our attachment to it while exciting and engaging a new generation.

Our religious programming has been well received. We had an exciting series of Purim celebrations, including a retelling of the story of the megilla, which brought out 64 adults and 33 children, and our Passover service brought out well over 100 people, some of whom were returning Jamaican Jews visiting family and renewing their connection with their ancestral synagogue.

Indeed, the excitement is palpable as we move toward a distinctively Jamaican form of Judaism that can enrich the hearts, minds and lives of many people from all sorts of backgrounds and is sure to inspire our Jewish brethren around the world.

The writer is the rabbi of Shaare Shalom Synagogue in Kingston, Jamaica. A widely published author, he holds a PhD in American Jewish History from Tel Aviv University and received rabbinic ordination from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Jerusalem. He is also a visiting research scholar at the Sue and Leonard Miller Center for Contemporary Jewish Studies at the University of Miami.