

BERKSHIRE JEWISH VOICES

Traveling with Jewish Taste

Blessing and Peace and Acts of Loving Kindness and Sand in Your Shoes

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



The sun was blazing as we hiked up the short but surprisingly steep Synagogue Hill to the St. Thomas Synagogue, located right in the heart of downtown Charlotte Amalie on Crystal Gade (Dutch for street). When we arrived, we were rewarded with a brisk and cooling breeze, and we stood for a while gazing out at the beautiful view of the town on the sea.

Leafing through the guest book, I saw names of people I knew from all over. Of course, I thought, Jews will visit synagogues, particularly if they are located in exotic places and have histories that differ from the kinds with which we are familiar.

The St. Thomas Synagogue is indeed different from those we frequent here in New England. Officially known by the very long Bera-chah V'shalom Vegimult Hasadim Synagogue (Blessing and Peace and Acts of Loving Kindness), it is a National Historic Landmark and claims to be the oldest shul in continuous use under the American flag and the second-oldest in the Western Hemisphere (after Newport, Rhode Island's Touro).

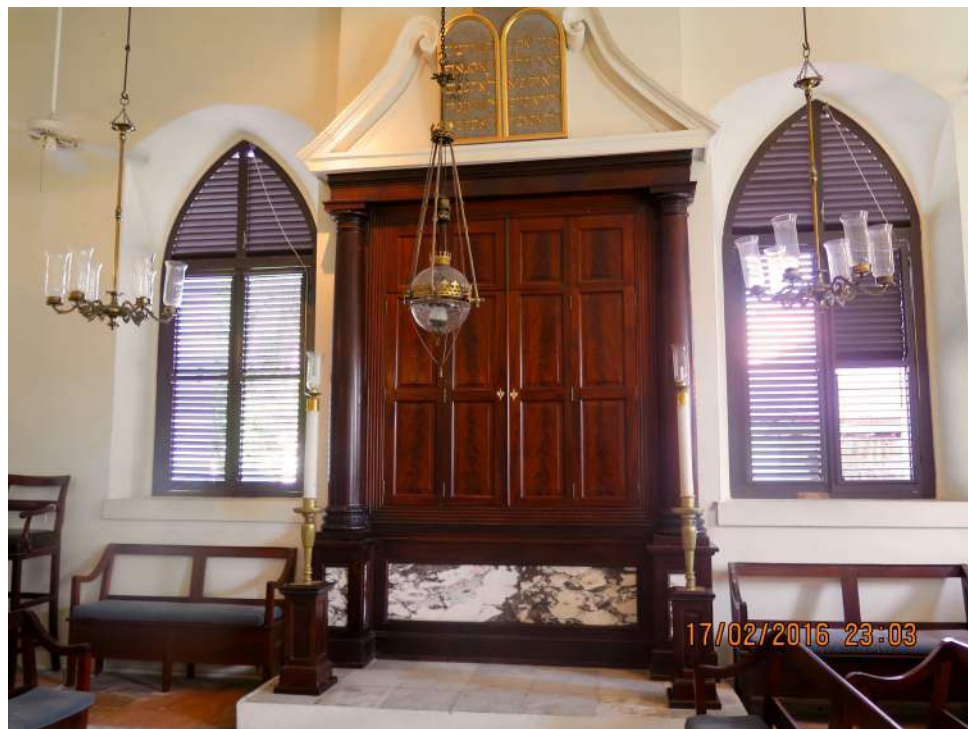
Sephardic Jews, most fleeing the torments of the Inquisition, came to settle in the Caribbean as early as the 18th century and established trade between Old and New Worlds. The National Park Service cites Danish colonial records that refer to Jews as Portuguese from Brazil. These Jews founded their congregation in 1796, and then built their synagogue in 1833.

A second distinguishing feature of the St. Thomas Synagogue is its sand floor. According to the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, there are only five sand floor synagogues in the entire world, and all differ slightly. The one in St. Thomas, for example, has a wooden base, while the one in Kingston has one of brick. While several stories circulate as to the origin of the sand floor custom, most scholars agree that because the founders were all of Sephardic ancestry, they had had to adopt a method of practicing their religion out of the prying eyes – and ears – of neighbors who would be only too willing to turn them into the authorities. A sand floor muffled the sounds of prayer. The practice in Europe became a tradition in the Caribbean.

Although the St. Thomas Synagogue is affiliated with the Reform Movement, the synagogue is structured like a traditional Sephardic space, with its benches facing one another rather than forward. These benches, the ark, and the bimah are all made of mahogany, a wood native to the Americas and probably not seen in Europe that early. Adorning the sanctuary is an 11th-century menorah brought from Spain, and Dutch chandeliers. Most interesting from a feminist perspective are the four pillars representing Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. The matriarchs' presence made me wonder if the *ushpizin* visiting the islands at Sukkot might include women as well.

The congregation may be small – about 70 families – but is active. Between Shabbat services and dinners, study sessions, and participation in the Jewish film festival, things are hopping. Several dozen b'nai mitzvah and weddings from the States also take place each year at the historic synagogue.

If you happen to be in the U.S. Virgin Islands and aren't beach-goers, the St. Thomas Synagogue is a worthwhile place to spend time.



The ark



The view



The sand floor

Carol Goodman Kaufman is a psychologist and author with a passion for travel and food. She is currently at work on a food history/cookbook, tracing the paths that some of our favorite foods have taken from their origins to appear on dinner plates and in cultural rites and artifacts around the world. She invites readers to read her blog at carolgoodmankaufman.com and to follow her on Twitter @goodmankaufman.

Caribbean Spiced Sweet Potatoes

Serves four

For a real taste of the islands, try this twist on sweet potatoes that combines sweet and savory.

Ingredients:

4 cups sweet potatoes, peeled and diced
 1 cup sweet onion, peeled and sliced thin
 1 medium pineapple, cored and diced
 ¼ cup balsamic vinegar
 ¼ cup olive oil
 1 teaspoon sea salt
 ¼ teaspoon black pepper, ground
 ¼ teaspoon fresh rosemary, chopped

Directions:

Preheat oven to 450 degrees.

Line a rimmed pan with foil.

Put potatoes, onions, and pineapple in a plastic bag.

Drizzle oil and balsamic vinegar over all and shake it until all pieces are well coated.

Pour out bag contents into the pan, ensuring they are in a single layer.

Sprinkle rosemary, salt and pepper evenly and toss once more.

Roast for 40-50 minutes or until potatoes start to brown, turning occasionally.