

Mikve Israel-Emanuel: The Oldest Synagogue in Continuous Use in the Western Hemisphere

By Susan K. Horn



Last spring, while on a cruise to the Southern Caribbean, I had the good fortune to be in Curaçao on Shabbat. Having done a little research, I wanted to attend services at Mikve Israel-Emanuel.

The Congregation was established in 1659 by a group of about 70 Sephardic Jews from the Portuguese congregation in Amsterdam. They brought the first Sefer Torah with them, which dated from the 1300s. The official home of the congregation was consecrated in 1732. The current bright yellow building was built during the 1800s, with an organ. It is modeled after the Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam, complete with sand on the floor, a central Torah lectern, and an ornate Ark.

The synagogue is about a 15-minute walk, across the bridge, from the cruise dock; but with unmarked streets, friendly natives helped me by pointing the way. Everyone is taught Dutch, English, and Spanish in school. Arriving early, I was greeted by an armed guard, who asked me to have coffee at the cafe across the street until I was granted admission, about 15 minutes before the 10 AM scheduled service. There were about a dozen others from the cruise ship there as well. The dress code was strictly enforced, as one member of the group wearing bermuda shorts was turned away. Arriving late, my husband found the doors to be locked while hearing the service ongoing inside.

The entrance leads into a courtyard, with offices and larger rooms on one side, and the synagogue in the middle. There is also a school forming part of the courtyard. Distributed from one of the larger rooms were prayer books, Bibles, and a Torah service pamphlet. The egalitarian congregation uses the Reform prayer book, except for the Torah service, which is according to the Sephardic rite (hence the pamphlet, written by the congregation).

The Ark displayed ten Torahs, seven of which have two scrolls, while three have a single scroll. The service is in English, conducted by Hazzan Avery Tracht, who is the resident spiritual leader. There appeared to be enough congregants, without the tourists, to form a minyan. The oneg Shabbat afterwards provided an opportunity to chat with members of the congregation.

There is a museum attached to the synagogue complex which is open during weekdays.

More information may be obtained at snoa.com.