

*Their ancestors found freedom and prosperity in  
Jamaica's green-mountain paradise. More than three centuries later,  
the Jewish community is fighting for its future.*

# SWIMMING AGAINST THE TIDE



If pride of place and heritage were a rescue remedy, the future of Jamaican Jewry would be assured. And if such an elixir could be bottled, it would be much sought after by other beleaguered communities—even those with more Jews but similar concerns of survival due to intermarriage, assimilation and immigration. 🕊 The 360-year-old Jewish community—the core of whom came from the Iberian Peninsula, forced to flee the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions, taking refuge in Amsterdam and London before immigrating to the Caribbean—is a respected minority on the tropical island famous as the birthplace of reggae artist Bob Marley, for its lilt-ing patois, jerk seasoning, escovitch (a vinegary fish dish brought to Jamaica by Spanish Jews) and warm beaches. Today, the remaining 150 to 200 Jews, who live in suburban Kingston—in Barbican, Jacks Hill, Beverly Hills, Norbrook, Stony Hill and Waterworks—are passionate about their past, their identity and their traditions. At the same time, they are deeply concerned about their future, especially when the younger generation goes abroad for education and does not return. 🕊 Early on, the loss was due to “rampant assimilation,” says Ainsley Cohen Henriques, at 75 an engaging font of historical facts, an active community leader and honorary Israeli consul, who speaks with a mellifluous island accent. Then it became about emigration. 🕊 “Some people had stable relationships with non-Jews and had

**Sanctuary** (right)  
*Jamaican Jewish life  
revolves around  
Shaare Shalom;  
lithograph by Isaac  
Mendes Belisario.*

BY ZELDA SHLUKER

(LEFT) 'KOO, KOO, KOO' OR 'ACTOR-HOT' COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF JAMAICA  
WYATT GALLERY/HTTP://JEWISHTREASURESOFTHECARIBBEAN.COM









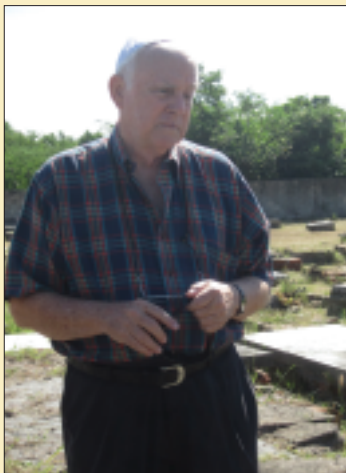
**Reverence** Congregation Shaare Shalom's mahogany Ark is the repository of Torah Scrolls from 360 years of Jamaican Jewish life.

children, but they didn't marry people outside their faith," he says. In contrast, Henriques's first wife, Sheila Chong, a Miss Jamaica of Chinese and Afro-Caribbean descent, was "the first woman of color in Jamaica to convert to Judaism," he says. Marjorie, his second wife—part African, part Scottish—was born Jewish.

The community's high point was 2,500 Jews in the 1880s, when they controlled the sugar and vanilla crops and were major players in foreign trade.

One of the island's most celebrated artists, the Jewish Isaac Mendes Belisario (1795 to 1849), documented Sefardic plantation life. The National Gallery of Jamaica in Kingston (011-876-922-1561/3; <http://natgalja.org.jm>) displays his landscapes as well as his series, "Sketches of Character," hand-colored lithographs of former slaves celebrating holidays in costume (see cover).

The loss of community members is apparent in the empty seats of the island's last remaining synagogue, United Congregation of Israelites Kahal Kodesh Shaare Shalom (92 Duke Street; 876-922-5931; [shareshalom@cwjamaica.com](mailto:shareshalom@cwjamaica.com)) in downtown Kingston. Shaare Shalom can seat 400, but it never does. The white barrel-vaulted



Community leader Ainsley Henriques

synagogue was rebuilt in 1912 after a 1907 earthquake destroyed an earlier one; the first congregation was established in 1692 in Port Royal. Three congregations—two Spanish-Portuguese and one German-English—joined in 1921 to form Shaare Shalom.

"Fifty years ago," says Henriques, whose father was a plantation owner, "we could have a full synagogue, especially on High Holy Days. Today, 70 or 80. We get a minyan [on Shabbat] 90 percent of the time." Seders were once big family affairs—his mother hosted 80 or 90 people. Today, Seders are communal. Like many other families, Henriques's three daughters and seven grandchildren live in the United States.

**T**HE 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. (Board President Stephen Henriques—a cousin of Ainsley Henriques—served as religious leader for 11 years.) New York-born Kaplan, 53, is the author, most recently, of *The New Reform Judaism: Challenges and Reflections* (Jewish

(TOP) [HTTP://JEWISHTREASURESOFTHECARIBBEAN.COM](http://JEWISHTREASURESOFTHECARIBBEAN.COM); COURTESY OF ELIE KLEIN



**Seder** (from left) Margaret Adams, Stephen Henriques, Carl Estick, Winston Davidson, Marie Reynolds and Rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan.

Publication Society and the University of Nebraska Press). His challenge: Build a Jewish future—even if it goes against age-old customs.

“Many people have become accustomed to the way things have been done for so long,” Kaplan wrote in a *Huffington Post* article eight months after his arrival. “Nevertheless, there is a consensus that we...need to change...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.” Those honored customs include services using an English-language prayer book and Classical Reform music from the 1898 Union Hymnal.

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. “Many Jamaicans, though not Jewish by birth, are interested in Judaism, some intensely,” says Kaplan. “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 wis-



William and Gabrielle Remalls.

dom. It is my opinion that we should integrate some of these outsiders into our religious community...” After completing four conversions, the process was halted, however. Ainsley Henriques, who until recently chaired the Jamaican *beit din*, says conversions were never stopped, but are being “subjected to a more rigorous procedure,” to make sure people are not being “converted for the wrong reasons or motives.”

One of Kaplan’s four conversions is Marie (Miriam Batya) Reynolds, 53, a child psychotherapist. On Sabbath mornings, one can hear her beautiful voice singing the late Debbie Friedman’s “*Mi Shebeirach*”—Kaplan’s innovation. Reynolds embodies the synagogue’s hope for the future. Born in North London, she went to school “with mainly Jewish classmates, including my best friend who began teaching me *alef-bet* so I could become Jewish and join her Brownie pack.” When her family moved to Jamaica, she was “active in church, but...recognized discrepancies between what Christianity taught and what I read in the Bible, [including] the idea that the Sabbath had been changed. In 1998, I began to keep...Shabbat.”

(TOP) COURTESY OF DANA EVAN KAPLAN; JUDITH HIRT-MANHEIMER



## The House of Living Memory

Jamaican Jewish history is visible not only in Congregation Shaare Shalom but in the adjacent Jewish Heritage Centre (011-876-922-5931; shaareshalom@cwjamaica.com), where walls display images of generations of movers and shakers, art and ritual artifacts. It houses the Jamaican Jewish Archives, an outgrowth of Ainsley Cohen Henriques's research on his family tree. He founded the Jamaica Jewish Genealogical Society in 1999; today, the database has 25,000 names. "It's nice to have your children and grandchildren know who they are," Henriques says. "I read that I was descended from a



famous rabbi named Henry Pereira Mendes. I said...I must keep going." His roots are typical: His first Jamaican forebear, a Hebrew teacher, arrived in 1745 from Amsterdam, followed by others in his Bellanfante family line. "I am properly mixed," he says humorously. "English, German, Sefardic, Ashkenazi. My last name is Portuguese."

In 2010, Henriques cochaired The Jewish Diaspora of the Caribbean International Conference, which brought 200 scholars to Kingston. Essays from the conference—on history, art, slavery, cemeteries, archaeology, architecture and religious authority—have been gathered in *The Jews in the Caribbean* (The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization). It is edited by conference cochair Jane S. Gerber, director of the Institute for Sephardic Studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

Henriques also orchestrates an annual cleanup effort with the Caribbean Volunteer Expeditions to inventory the island's 21 Jewish cemeteries (only one is in active use). Led by New York architect Rachel Frankel, vice president for the International Survey of Jewish Monuments, the group has collected a treasure of historical, genealogical and iconographic information on aboveground stones with multilingual epitaphs. In January, they found a huge tombstone that may belong to a lost Jewish cemetery in the town of Lucea, a 20-minute drive west of Negril.

The Hunts Bay Jewish Cemetery—its earliest grave dates to 1672—is just outside Kingston. Skull and cross-bone imagery on its oldest stones may reflect early responses to messianism, Frankel notes on her blog ([www.rachelfrankelarch.com](http://www.rachelfrankelarch.com)). Others believe the imagery symbolizes piracy as a Jewish vocation (read the late American-born Jamaican resident Ed Kritzler's *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*).

The 19th-century Falmouth Jewish Cemetery, three hours northeast of Kingston, has a staunch advocate in Marina Delfos ([www.facebook.com/JewishJamaicanJourneys](http://www.facebook.com/JewishJamaicanJourneys)), a tour guide with a master's degree in arts and heritage management from London Metropolitan University. Delfos can tell you about the gravesites of Dr. Louis Ashenheim and Caroline Moss (Dr. Ashenheim's grave lies adjacent to the grill-enclosure around Moss's, above), Moses De Campos Carvalho, Rebecca Moralos, Alexander Bordeaux, David Lindo and Geoffrey Pinto. Although Delfos is not Jewish, she is passionate about Jewish history and the cemetery's restoration.

"I am not sure where this connection to Judaism comes from," Delfos says. "When I discovered 20 years ago that the oldest cemetery on the island was Jewish, I was fascinated—we are not taught our Jewish history in our schools in Jamaica. Over the last 15 years, I have read books that have contributed to my interest in Judaism.

"I wasn't baptized or raised in any particular faith," she continues, "and I find more and more an inexplicable connection to Judaism, the history, the traditions, the faith and community of a people. As I explore my spirituality, it is something I need to investigate and will be talking further with Rabbi Dana Kaplan on this."



**Plantation Life** Isaac Mendes Belisario depicted the prosperity of Sefardic landowners in ‘Cocoa Walk Estate’ (c. 1840).

While on vacation in New York in 1998, she experienced “a life-changing visit” to the Museum of Jewish Heritage—A Living Memorial to the Holocaust. “As I viewed the exhibit on Jewish life and the festivals,” she recalls, “I experienced a deep connection in my soul. I began attending Shaare Shalom and embarked on over a decade of study of Jewish texts. I wanted to be able to read the *Tanakh* in the original language and follow the prayers meaningfully, so I took an online course in Hebrew.”

Another convert, Nigel Chen-see, 54, a synagogue board member, has Chinese and Jamaican roots. His first taste of Judaism was at a bar mitzva at Shaare Shalom in 2011. “Compared to what I was accustomed to as a Roman Catholic,” he says, “I found the synagogue...austere; the service interesting, especially the Torah readings in Hebrew; the prayers flowery but uplifting; and the situation of being led by a layman—the rabbi wasn’t to arrive for months—strange, if

not ‘unholy.’” But once he started attending Friday night services, he says, “Fridays were never the same.”

The only way to experience Jamaican Jewry’s culture, warmth and diversity is to attend services, which are held Friday nights and Saturday mornings. Those who do not drive on Shabbat can take an hour-long walk from a Kingston hotel such as the Spanish Court ([www.spanishcourthotel.com](http://www.spanishcourthotel.com)), where kosher-keeping guests can be accommodated with salmon dishes. Jamaica has no kosher restaurants, but Jewish-tourism promoters have discovered Israeli caterer Vered Maoz ([red.maoz@gmail.com](mailto:red.maoz@gmail.com)), who will prepare kosher dairy, vegetarian and vegan Israeli and Greek dishes for destination events and cruise-ship visitors.

**T**HE SYNAGOGUE’S MIX of traditions is apparent in balconies that recall Orthodox Sefardic origins, when women sat apart; the Reform organ behind the rabbi’s *bima*; and a floor covered in white Ja-

maican sand (perhaps meant to muffle Conversos’ prayers). A mahogany Ark holds 13 Torah scrolls; except for one, they are damaged remnants of past synagogues. Services are filled with the sublime organ music and voices of a choir and congregants.

Like Reynolds, two other choir members are black (as are half the congregants). Dr. Winston G. Mendes Davidson, 67, synagogue vice president, is a convert whose interest in Judaism was sparked in his forties when he researched the origin of his Mendes surname and discovered his maternal great-grandfather was Jewish. He heads Jamaica’s School of Public Health & Health Technology at the University of Technology in Kingston. Fellow cantor Justice Carl B. Abraham Estick, 70, on the other hand, descends from one of Jamaica’s first Jewish families.

Reynolds appreciates the synagogue’s diversity, “unique in its meld of Jews of all hues, ranging in observance from Reform to Conservative



and traditional or Orthodox. It can create a very welcoming atmosphere for...all creeds who worship with us.”

For example, William J. Rennalls, a dreadlocked native, has visited the synagogue on and off for the past few years. He has chosen to have his 3-year-old daughter, Gabrielle, “grow in the Jewish faith,” he says, “and I pray she may one day [become bat mitzva] at Shaare Shalom.”

Describing the rituals he wants to change, Kaplan explains that Shaare Shalom’s storied prayer book “grew out of two 19th-century sources,” combining High British Reform, Sephardic and Ashkenazic rituals and has English and English transliteration. “One of the reasons for its creation,” he says, “was because as early as the 20th century...most Jamaican Jews could not read the prayers in Hebrew. [Yet] Judaism draws its inspiration and its beauty in large part from its Hebraic content. If we are to move forward, it is essential that we learn Hebrew and...develop a set of ritual expectations that follow a uniquely Jamaican way of life.”

Currently, Hebrew is taught to *bnei mitzva* by member Margaret Adams. Some of the four or five annual celebrants are ex-pats whose families return to Shaare Shalom for the event.

Kaplan says he has “hopes of writing down a set of practices that reflect Jamaican Jewish ritual, of crafting prayers that resonate with the sounds of Jamaica and songs that are authentically Jewish and Jamaican.”

Reynolds agrees: “I’d love to see Jamaican liturgical melodies or adaptations.” (Think “*Adon Olam*” to the tune of Bob Marley’s “One Love.”)

As to Jamaica’s Jewish future, says Kaplan, “If we can overcome our differences, we can build a vibrant, growing, multiracial community that could become the model for Jewish renaissance around the world.”

A rescue remedy of sorts. **H**

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