

Opinion

Shabbat in Jamaica: 'Out of many, one people'

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A Jewish reggae artist came to play at the synagogue, offering a taste spiritual and uniquely Jamaican Jewish experience to the community. (photo credit: Rabbi Dana Evans Kaplan)

Many of us think of Israel as the melting pot of the Jewish people, as the one place where Jews of every color, nationality and level of religious commitment can live together. And Israel is that place.

In June, I discovered another haven of Jewish diversity: Jamaica. The island's tagline, "Out of many, one people," comes to life on a Friday night service at the more than 100-year-old combination Sephardic-Ashkezanic synagogue, Shaare Shalom. Located in Kingston, a hotbed of crime and

violence with scents of ganja wafting through its corridors, the 400-seat shul is majestic, with its sand-covered floor, high beams and turquoise window coverings.

Though the crowd was on the smaller side that Friday evening, one can picture the weeks when the pews are fuller with a mix of spiritual seekers, converts, followers of Rastafarian faith (a religious movement of Jamaican origin holding that blacks are the chosen people) who relate to the Jewish message, and lost Jews who are slowly returning to their religion. Clearly not all of the attendees were Jewish according to Jewish law, but that's expected. Many Jamaican Jews were long ago assimilated — likely intermarried — but they still have a Jewish spark.

Black next to white. Young next to old. Born Jewish next to convert. In every row there was a tapestry. I noticed; this is nothing unique to the natives. In Jamaica, everyone is “coffee with a little milk,” as one resident put it — or the other way around.

The first Jews arrived in Jamaica as early as 1492. At its height, in the 1800s, according to genealogist and Jamaica historian Ainsley Henriques, the community numbered more than 2,500. Politics and lack of prosperity led the Jews to leave at various points. Today, it is believed that about 400 practicing Jews live on the island.

That Shabbat, I met Terry Hall-Knight whose mother had been converted to attend a Christian boarding school abroad. Hall-Knight first connected to Rastafarianism and later found her Jewish roots and married a Jewish man. Today, she sends her son to day school.

“I was very angry with my grandfather for severing that link,” said Hall-Knight. She described her Judaism as “Jamaican Judaism,” defined as a Judaism that embraces the Jamaican tagline. She says she adheres to Bob Marley's belief in “one love.”

“Vivid in my heart” is the memory of the Friday night service led by Israeli reggae artist Lior Ben-Hur, who the synagogue's spiritual leader, Rabbi Dana Even Kaplan, brought to Kingston. On Saturday night they had a concert; the synagogue seats were full.

Nigel Chen See, a Chinese Jamaican, discovered Judaism later in the life while attending a friend's son's Bar Mitzvah.

“The story of Torah speaks to me,” said Chen See, 55. “I feel at peace with Judaism.”

Chen See attends services weekly. His wife and children remain Christians.

The cantor is a Jamaican-born black. The rabbi an American Jew.

Each Friday night Rabbi Kaplan reads aloud a prayer he penned for the people of Jamaica: “May all the people of our beautiful island nation live happily and prosper. ... Teach us to respect the many ways that we may serve You in a country with so many religious faiths and traditions. ... We join together in one love, one heart.”

Shabbat in Jamaica was a teachable moment. It was a reminder that there are Jews everywhere; that Jews can look any way; and that our differences divide us only if we let them.

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