

## From the Parnas

By Mark I. Wolfson

Rabbi Michael Tayvah

First of all, I would like to wish the entire congregation a Shanah Toba - a happy, healthy, joyous, prosperous, and spiritually uplifting year. I hope to see all of you and personally greet you during the High Holiday season at Mikveh Israel.

Yesterday I attended the funeral of our dear friend and congregant Rabbi Michael Tayvah (G. Meekha'el 'Azaryahu b. Shemuel). Michael was born on February 19, 1962 and passed away on September 10, 2012 at the very young age of 50. I was privileged to know Rabbi Tayvah and we chatted frequently when he came to services and joined the congregation for meals at Mikveh Israel. I was shocked and saddened when he told me last December that he had been diagnosed with stage IV pancreatic cancer and that he was unlikely to live another year.

Rabbi Tayvah was fascinated, drawn to, and was a great and knowledgeable spokesman for the Spanish & Portuguese Western Sephardic minhag and music. Prior to coming to Mikveh Israel in 2010, he had spent 3 years as the Rabbi of the Spanish & Portuguese synagogue in Curaçao, our sister congregation and namesake, Mikvé Israel in Willemstad, Curaçao, which merged with the Reform Congregation Emanuel in 1964.

The history of this synagogue, the oldest continuous Jewish community in the Americas, is a fascinating one that dates back more than 350 years. The Dutch West India Company, which for all intents and purposes was the sovereign authority for all lands controlled by the Dutch, granted permission to a small group of Jews to settle and create a community on the desert island of Curaçao, which was captured from Spain in 1634.

The Jewish families that moved there were remnants of Spanish & Portuguese families that were forcibly converted to Catholicism in 1495 and kept the memory and traditions of their heritage over several generations under the watchful and ever-present Inquisition. In the late 1500's, some of the families were able to move to Amsterdam, where they were able to live openly as Jews beginning in the early 1600's. As I have written previously, the families, most of them wealthy merchants, formed a thriving community that flourished in Jewish life, Jewish thought, Jewish learning, publication of Jewish books and in all manner of secular life as well.

As they became more confident and established, they also began to follow the Dutch explorers and settlers into outposts in the New World. By the 1630s, many Jews had settled in Brazil in the parts that were captured by the Dutch from the Portuguese. Recife and the neighboring town of Olinda were captured by the Dutch

under Admiral Lome in 1631 and by 1639 Recife was a thriving Jewish community of thousands, who were traders and merchants, craftsmen, professionals and scholars. Isaac Aboab de Fonseca, one of the founders and most prominent leaders of the Amsterdam Jewish community, came to Recife to become the Hakham of the congregation along with Raphael de Aguilar who served as its reader.

Largely because of the prominence of the Jews, the Portuguese, under Joam Fernandes Vieyra decided to reconquer Brazil and Recife in particular. The war between the Dutch and the Portuguese raged through the late 1640's and early 1650's as the Dutch struggled to hold onto Brazil and their prized possession, Recife. During the siege of Recife by the Portuguese, the Jews suffered and died both from hunger and by the sword. By 1654, it was clear that the Dutch were not going to be able to hold Recife and the Jews, fearing complete massacre at the hands of the Inquisition, capitulated and were granted amnesty by the Portuguese and the right to leave peacefully. Most of the families fled back to Amsterdam, and many settled in the islands of the Caribbean, including Curaçao. One boat containing 23 Jews sailed into New Amsterdam in September 1654, founding the Jewish communities of North America.

The Jews who settled in Curaçao joined a community that had been established 3 years prior in 1651. Though the original Jewish settlers in Curaçao came to exploit the tropical land for agriculture, they soon discovered that the desert island would not produce crops and instead moved into the port town of Willemstad to establish a very successful shipping and trading port using their contacts among fellow Portuguese Jews. Over the next several decades, the Jews became very successful financially, and the community thrived. They poured some of their wealth into large and beautiful synagogues, the last of which, built in 1732, is still in use today. The Torah scrolls were acquired from pre-expulsion Spain and Portugal.

The community, as were all Spanish & Portuguese congregations, under the strict control of the Mahamad - an oligarchy of five men whose word was law within the Jewish community. They accepted Dutch citizenship in 1824, having lived previously under Dutch protection as foreign nationals, "Hebrews of the Portuguese nation".

Today, the community is a mixture of the old and the new. The feelings of pride in the traditions and proud history of this congregation run deep, like the sand that lines the floors of the building. There is much more to say about this 350 year-old community. That will have to wait for another entry.

For now, we remember with love and fondness a former leader of that community and a respected member of ours, Rabbi Michael Tayvah.

I wish a Shanah Toba to the entire congregation.