

The How and Why of the 1964 Reunion

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50th Anniversary Commemoration

My wife Judy and I are delighted to be back in Dushi Korsow again. This is our fifth visit to Curacao since our departure in 1967. The five years that we spent here from 1962 to 1967 were among the happiest in our lives. We came here as strangers and were welcomed so warmly – mostly by people who, I am sad to say, are no longer with us – that we think of Curacao as our second home. Our third child, Eve, was born here shortly after our arrival, and our Naomi and David were classmates with some of you at the Johan van Walbeeckschool.

After our departure in 1967, we returned in 1982 for the celebration of the 250th anniversary of the *Snoa*; again in 2001 for the 350th anniversary of the establishment of the Mikve Israel congregation; again in 2006 for a series of lectures; and again in 2007 for the celebration of the 275th anniversary of the *Snoa*. Each of those visits was a happy occasion, but there was also sadness attached to each of those visits, sadness because with each visit the number of people who worked with me to bring together Mikve Israel and Temple Emanuel diminished.

On the invitations and the programs for this celebration, what occurred in 1964 is referred to as a merger. I would prefer to call it a reunion. The word merger sounds very commercial; Mikve Israel and Emanuel did not come together to save money or to increase efficiency. They came together because they were two branches of what had been until 1864 one Jewish community. I will not attempt to explain the reason for the fracture in 1864: there were several reasons, some theological and some, we must admit, commercial. But by the time that I arrived here in 1962, it was clear that the time had come for reunion. Mikve Israel families and Emanuel families were inter-married, and even though there were some lingering commercial rivalries, the members of both congregations felt comfortable in each others' company. Although I came here as the rabbi of Temple Emanuel, no one thought it strange that I chose to attend services at Mikve Israel each Shabbat morning. And after the first few weeks, despite, I am sorry to say, the hostility of the rabbi, I was made to feel welcome in the *Snoa*. For that I am particularly grateful to Otto Senior, Sha Capriles, Jossy Capriles, William Cohen, and their wonderful wives, all of blessed memory.

The first that I heard about the possibility of a reunion between Mikve Israel and Emanuel was in April of 1962 when I flew down to Curacao for an interview with the leaders of Temple Emanuel. Now let me explain my mindset at that time and what attracted me to Curacao. I had been ordained as a rabbi five years earlier, and I was serving a little congregation in upstate New York. Neither Judy nor I had ever traveled outside of North America, and we were curious about the rest of the world. After four years in my New York congregation, I felt that I had accomplished about as much as I could there, and the United States had a dynamic young president, John Kennedy, who was encouraging young Americans to go overseas for a few years of service; he called it the Peace Corps. And so I began making inquiries at the offices of the World Union for Progressive Judaism about the possibility of serving some congregation in Europe or Africa. I looked into a few of those congregations, but the ones that I found interesting could not afford to bring over a rabbi with a wife and two-and-a-half children. Then I was told about Curacao where the Dutch government paid for the transportation of the family, and I decided to fly down for an interview.

The interview committee was made up of Charlie Gomes Casseres, Abram Salas, Sjon Anjel Cohen Henriquez, and Benno Levisson. I found all four of them to be intelligent and delightful men, devoted to Temple Emanuel and to liberal Judaism. After the initial interview, I found myself leaning toward accepting their invitation to become the rabbi of Temple Emanuel, but it was on the next day that I was convinced. Abram Salas and Charlie Gomes Casseres invited me to dinner in one of their homes; I believe that it was the Salas home. There I was introduced to two of the most *simpatico* women whom it was ever my pleasure to meet, Ruth Gomes Casseres and Marguin Salas. And it was at that dinner table that I decided that I would accept the invitation to become the rabbi of Temple Emanuel. I should say one more thing about the conversation at that dinner. Both Abram and Charlie were convinced that, with the right leadership, the two congregations, after a century of separation, could reunite. That was my challenge; it was at that dinner table in April 1962 that the process of reunification was begun.

Since I have mentioned Ruth Gomes Casseres, of blessed memory, and Marguin Salas, permit me to say a few words about some of the other women who became dear friends, ardent workers toward the reunited Mikve Israel – Emanuel, and who did everything possible to make Judy and me feel that we were living among family here in Curacao. Several of these women became *tantes* to our three children. At the top of the list, just after Ruth and Marguin, were Dolly Delvalle, Ada Cohen, Irene Moreno, Marlene Brandao, and Leah Taytelbaum. I will never forget Ada Cohen's apple pies and Dolly Delvalle's gazpacho.

Within a few weeks of our arrival in Curacao, I realized that Jewish education, both for children and adults, had been woefully neglected. The only rabbi on the island until my arrival was Moshe Amine of Mikve Israel. I am sure that Rabbi Amine meant well, but he could hardly speak any comprehensible language. His Hebrew and his Arabic may have been fluent, but that was about it. He certainly could not communicate with children. When I spoke to a few of the parents about Hebrew education for their children, they told me that Rabbi Amine had said that it

was impossible to teach Curacao children to read Hebrew. Most of the children whom I met here through our own children spoke Dutch, Papiamentu, English and some Spanish. And the Schaarei Tzedek children spoke Yiddish as well. Four or five languages and they could not learn Hebrew?

That was the challenge that resulted in the united Hebrew School that preceded the uniting of the congregations. I chose six children the age of our daughter Naomi – about ten years old – and I told their mothers that I would teach these children to read Hebrew within eight weeks. Those bright children came through beautifully, and that was the beginning of our Hebrew School. Now there certainly were not enough children in Temple Emanuel to start a school, but that is where the Curacao lodge of B'nai B'rith came into the picture. B'nai B'rith, which had members from both Sephardi congregations and Schaarei Tzedek as well, announced that I would conduct classes for any children who were interested. Well, I am happy to say that almost everyone was interested, and that is how we founded the Hebrew School. It began with classes in our home, and within a year we bought the house next door to ours on Mahaaiweg, and that became the united Hebrew School, attended by virtually every Jewish child in Curacao.

It was also through B'nai B'rith that we established adult education classes that attracted between thirty and forty people every Wednesday evening. Those classes also preceded the official reunion of the congregations and helped pave the way for it. I taught two classes; one in Bible and the other in Jewish tradition, and I was delighted that there were at least as many adults from Mikve Israel who attended each week as from my own Temple Emanuel. And there were also a few from Schaarei Tzedek.

I cannot leave the subject of those adult classes which I loved teaching because the people were so eager to learn, without telling a story about one of our very diligent students, Ina Curiel. I was teaching the book of Isaiah, and we were discussing chapter six, where God asks who would be willing to prophesy to the Israelites. God asked: "Whom shall I send?" And Isaiah answered, "Here I am; send me." And I remember saying to the class, "Hebrew is so much more elegant than English. In English, it takes five words: 'Here I am; send me.' The Hebrew is so much better; two words: 'Hineni sh'lacheni.' What could be more elegant?" And Ina looked up very innocently and said "Atami mandami." I had to admit that the Papiamentu was even better than the Hebrew original.

And so, added to the fact that the families of Mikve Israel and Emanuel were, by 1963, all interrelated, that the commercial rivalries were, for the most part, a matter of history, and that not one family in Mikve Israel was actually Orthodox, the joint Hebrew School and the joint adult education brought more and more people to the conclusion that there was no reason for the two congregations to remain separate. But there was still a certain amount of reluctance on the part of some traditionalists on the Mikve Israel side. For one thing, there had never been an Ashkenazi rabbi in the pulpit of Mikve Israel, and for another, I represented the Reform movement. Notable among the dissenters – and I can understand their reluctance – were Norman

Mendes Chumaceiro and Amilcar Namias de Crasto. Norman was a man of considerable influence in the business community, and Amilcar, who everybody called Sjon Bubu, was the guardian of rituals in the *Snoa*.

I want to mention two more items that preceded the reunion and that were factors in preparing the ground for it. First, the radio broadcasts. Back in the fifties and sixties, Central Synagogue in New York sponsored a weekly radio broadcast called “The Message of Israel.” Different prominent rabbis would deliver a sermon either on the weekly Torah portion or some matter of religious interest, and that was accompanied by a few minutes of music by the cantor and choir. I prevailed upon the rabbi of Central Synagogue to send me tapes of those broadcasts each week, and I prevailed upon Radio Curom to broadcast those tapes each Shabbat at 12:30. Each tape had twenty-two minutes of material, and I introduced the program each week with an eight-minute message of my own. Those radio programs were an additional way to introduce me to a wider audience than just the members of Temple Emanuel.

The second item that I want to mention as a preparatory step to the reunion was the founding of the youth group that became known as A.G.Y. Within a few weeks of my arrival in Curacao, I was invited to go to the public schools to offer an hour of Jewish instruction to the Jewish students. In one of those schools, I came in the first day and found about ten teenagers waiting for me in two distinct groups. After I introduced myself, I asked the kids for their names. Five or six of them in one group introduced themselves with names like Tauber and Wiznitzer, and four or five of them in the other group gave names like Delvalle and Da Costa Gomez. As I began talking to them, I realized that these kids did not think of themselves as being of the same religion. They knew each other; they were classmates; but religiously, it was as if they lived on separate planets.

That experience motivated me to issue an invitation in February 1963 to all the Jewish teenagers of Temple Emanuel, Mikve Israel *and* Schaarei Tzedek to come to our home one Shabbat afternoon a month for a youth group meeting. I should have mentioned that within a few months of our arrival, we had between twenty and thirty younger children in our home every Shabbat afternoon for an *Oneg Shabbat* – an enjoyable couple of hours of singing Hebrew songs, Bible stories, Israeli dancing, accompanied by the cupcakes that my wife baked every Friday.

With the organization of the new teenage youth group, we had to establish a schedule for those Shabbat afternoons at our home: the first and fourth Saturdays of every month were for the fourth through seventh grade children; the second Saturday was for the first through third graders; and the third Saturday was now reserved for the teenagers. By the third meeting of the teenagers – by then there were about twenty of them from all three congregations – they had elected officers and had chosen the name A.G.Y., like a fraternity, for their group. What did A.G.Y. stand for? Three Hebrew words from the song *Hinei Mah Tov: Achim gam yachad*: Brothers and sisters united. Those kids had the right idea.

All of these items – the Shabbat afternoons at our home, the united Hebrew School, the adult education classes, the radio broadcasts, the youth group – served as preparatory steps toward the reunion of Mikve Israel and Temple Emanuel. It was decided early in 1963 by the Directiva of Mikve Israel not to renew the contract of Rabbi Amine, and at the same time committees were appointed in both Mikve Israel and Temple Emanuel to explore the possibility of the reunion of the two congregations. Between March and July of 1963, the committee, made up of the Directivas of both congregations, met several times to negotiate the articles of merger. I want to mention here the names of the *Parnassim* of the two congregations who met together to work out the details of reunion. From the Mikve Israel side, there were: Otto Senior, president, and Ivan Moreno, Lionel Capriles, Norman Chumaceiro and William Cohen. From the Temple Emanuel side, there were: Charlie Gomes Casseres, president, and Abram Salas, Oscar Salas, George Brandao and Oscar Valencia.

At one of the first meetings, the Mikve Israel representatives complained quite correctly that while Temple Emanuel had a rabbi to advise the committee, Mikve Israel did not. No one was interested in hearing the views of Rabbi Amine who was preparing to leave, nor did we think that any Orthodox rabbi would be willing to participate in discussions that would result in Mikve Israel uniting with a Reform congregation. I asked the Mikve Israel delegates if they were willing to be advised by a prominent American rabbi who was a past president of the Conservative Rabbinical Assembly. They agreed, and we promptly issued an invitation to Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, the son-in-law of the founder of the Reconstructionist movement, Mordecai Kaplan, to come to Curacao for a week to act as counselor to Mikve Israel. Rabbi Eisenstein arrived along with his wife, Judith, an eminent musicologist, on April 1 and attended two meetings with the committee. He also spoke at the Friday evening services of Temple Emanuel that week and at the Shabbat morning services of Mikve Israel. We went over the conditions of reunion with Rabbi Eisenstein, and, after a lot of discussion, he ultimately approved all of our decisions.

I should mention here that the main items that had to be negotiated were: 1) the home of the united congregation, 2) the prayer book that would be used, 3) head coverings, 4) one or two days of holidays, 5) the rights of women in the congregation, and 6) the rabbi for the united congregation. As for the home of the congregation, while the Temple Emanuel delegation loved the very handsome and prominent Temple building on Wilhelminaplein that they had occupied for almost a hundred years, there was really no argument. Everyone agreed that the *Snoa*, consecrated in 1732, was sacred to every Jew in Curacao and was world-renowned. After the reunion, they would decide what was to become of Temple Emanuel.

In April of 1963, I was invited to serve as rabbi of the provisionally united congregation. As for the prayer book, the Emanuel delegation refused to consider the Orthodox Sephardi De Sola Pool prayerbook that was used at Mikve Israel, and the Mikve Israel delegation refused to consider the Union Prayer Book that was used at Temple Emanuel. When I pointed out that there were a few prayers in the Reconstructionist prayer book that had been taken from the British

Sephardi prayer book, the committee agreed to adopt that prayer book and to affiliate with the Reconstructionist movement.

I must reveal here in all honesty that the main concerns of the Temple Emanuel delegation were that the united congregation not be Orthodox, that the extra days of the holidays -- except for Rosh Ha-Shanah -- be discarded, that women be allowed to sit with men and be equal members of the congregation, and that a liberal rabbi fill the pulpit. And the main concerns of the Mikve Israel delegation were that the *Snoa* be the home of the united congregation, that all men would have their heads covered at services, and that the essence and dignity of the Torah service be maintained. If you would like to see a list of all the conditions that were agreed upon before the merger vote, I have them here for you.

In November, 1964, the members of Mikve Israel and Emanuel voted separately on the conditions of merger. The Mikve Israel vote was 52 to 10 affirmative, and the Temple Emanuel vote was unanimous. And so after a year of trial merger, the reunion of the congregation became official, exactly fifty years ago. Seven men made up the first Directiva of the united congregation. Otto Senior and Charlie Gomes Casseres were elected as co-presidents, and they served along with Ivan Moreno, Abram Salas, William Cohen, George Brandao and Lio Capriles.

Before I conclude this lecture, I want to mention a few interesting incidents from the year leading up to the reunion. I don't know if any of you remember the two Jesurun brothers, Albert and Morris, who used to be driven around Punda most afternoons and who used to wave to people from the back seat of their car. They were unfortunately somewhat retarded, but they knew everyone and everyone knew them. Because of the fact that Mikve Israel occasionally lacked a *minyan* for Shabbat morning services, Albert Jesurun was brought to the *Snoa* each Saturday morning to help make the *minyan*, and Morris was often brought to Temple Emanuel. The two brothers were inseparable, except for Albert's hour in the *Snoa* and Morris' at Emanuel.

Albert Jesurun died on April 3, 1963, and Rabbi Amine officiated at his funeral before he left Curacao. Morris died a week later, and I officiated at his funeral. The brothers were buried side by side in the Berg Altena cemetery with a concrete block wall separating them. The mortar between the concrete blocks had not had time to solidify in that one week, and so when I stood at the edge of Morris' grave to begin the burial service, the wall gave way, and I slid into the grave. When I climbed out, I remarked that as the wall of separation between Albert and Morris had fallen, so was the wall between Mikve Israel and Emanuel about to fall. There were a lot of approving nods.

The first time that I walked into the office of Mikve Israel, I noticed a couple of crates stacked in a corner with the letters P-I-G stamped prominently on their sides. I was shocked to find something having to do with pigs on the property of the *Snoa*, and so I asked Morris Cardoze, who was in charge of the office, for some explanation. Well, it seems that these were

crates of wine shipped from Israel to the *Snoa*, and whoever shipped the wine marked the crates with the initials for Portugese Israelitische Gemeente, P-I-G. Despite the disturbing letters on the crates, the wine was kosher.

I must also make brief reference to a very ardent opponent of the reunion under non-Orthodox auspices: Rabbi Isaac Emmanuel who served as rabbi of Mikve Israel from 1936 to 1939. Rabbi Emmanuel was an excellent historian; his books, *Precious Stones of the Jews of Curacao* and his two-volume *History of the Jews of the Netherlands Antilles* are extremely valuable with massive details about this community. Rabbi Emmanuel came to visit Curacao in 1963 as the discussions of the reunion were taking place. He was here to do some additional research on his *History* and to raise funds from Mikve Israel toward publication. As part of his publication agreement with the congregation, he asked for the privilege of preaching in the *Snoa* on a Shabbat. He was granted that privilege on the firm condition that he say nothing about the merger which was then under consideration. He agreed to that condition, but then, when the time came for his sermon, he launched a bitter attack against the merger and against any form of Judaism other than Sephardic Orthodoxy. Mikve Israel president, Otto Senior, was extremely angry at this breach of a promise, and he forbade Rabbi Emmanuel from ever again speaking in the *Snoa*. That was Rabbi Emmanuel's last visit to Curacao. In the final chapter of his *History*, he detailed his opposition to the reunion.

One of the things that I had to do as rabbi of united congregation Mikve Israel – Emanuel was to bless the royal family from the *Teba* each Shabbat. I was happy to do that, but I wanted to do it right, and the language of the blessing was Portuguese, a language that I did not know. And so I asked a few people who might be familiar with Portuguese, and I was advised to go to Sjon Mongui Maduro, since he was the honorary consul of Portugal as well as the dean of the Consular Corps. When I asked Sjon Mongui if he could go over the Portuguese with me, he told me that he did not speak any Portuguese and he suggested jokingly that I might do better to consult with one of the many Portuguese gardeners on the island. I decided not to do that, and I was able to pick up some hints about pronunciation from a few people. And so, each Shabbat morning the congregation heard an American rabbi chanting in Portuguese for the welfare of the Dutch queen. “*A sua majestade Juliana Rainha dos paises baixos... etc.*”

I want to conclude this account of the events leading up to the historic reunion of 1964 with a quotation that has become very dear to me. When Judy and I left Curacao in 1967 after almost five wonderful years here, the congregation gave us several gifts. One of them was a beautiful engraved silver presentation tray. On the upper left of the tray is an engraving of the *Snoa*, and on the lower right is an engraving of Temple Emanuel. The presentation words are on the lower left, and on the top right is this quote from the High Holy Day prayer book: “*V’ye-asu kulam agudah ahat la-asot r’zon’cha b’levav shalem -- May they all form one congregation to do Your will with a perfect heart.*”

