

Hebrew Cemetery

By Lorrie Klemons, publicity

The crocuses will soon be in bloom and the true essence of springtime with all of its glory and splendor lies just around the corner. For those of us lucky enough to be around year after year, we know that this cycle of life repeats itself on an on-going annual basis. Mother Nature is a divinely

inspired miracle. Life, in and of itself, is a divinely inspired miracle.

How one leads that life is a choice. Living a life that matters is a choice. Living a Jewish life is a choice. On March 29, Jews around the world will sit down to the first Seder as the seven- or eight-day celebration of Passover com-

mences. This, too, is a choice we make, whether or not we celebrate our liberation as slaves from the land of Egypt.

Whether or not we choose to participate in the Jewish traditions that have been handed down from generation to generation for the past 3300 years since receiving the Torah at Mt. Sinai.

When we were slaves, we had no choices and in a sense, that

made life easier for us. It isn't always easy to make the right choices. Everyone has different needs. Everyone has different goals. Everyone has a different belief system and a different level of observance of their Judaism. What does matter is that we maintain the basic Jewish values of Torah, Prayer and Acts of Loving Kindness. What matters is that we never forget that we were slaves in a foreign land and that we were liberated through Divine intervention.

We did not become a Jewish people until we assembled at the foot of Mt. Sinai and received the Ten Commandments and the Torah. Up until that time we did not know what celebrating the Sabbath meant. We did not know what it meant to keep kosher or to observe the laws of monogamy. We didn't know what it meant to be an ethical person. Mt. Sinai was the beginning of our people hood

and it is that which we celebrate during Passover.

At this beautiful season of the year, please consider becoming part of the people hood of the 600+ families that are members of the Hebrew Cemetery. Your tax deductible annual dues of \$72 will help maintain a dignified and sanctified resting place for all those who precede us in eternal life. If you would like to make a donation to memorialize a loved one or to help fund the Norman Steinberger Funeral Assistance Fund, send your check payable to the Hebrew Cemetery to 4229 Peggy Lane, Charlotte, NC 28227. For more information about membership benefits, graves, prepaid funeral costs, endowments, and/or including the cemetery in your estate planning, contact Cemetery Director, Sandra Goldman at 704-576-1859 or 704-944-6854 or director@hebrewcemetery.org. ✪

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The Jewish Traveler

By Maxine Silverstein

SAINT THOMAS, U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS

This past December, my husband Gary and I took a real vacation. We do so much traveling for our business (Mann Travels), that it was a wonderful treat to go on a relaxing ten-night cruise on the Ruby Princess out of Fort Lauderdale. It was during Hanukkah and we were fortunate to have Hanukkah services nightly on our cruise. The first night of Hanukkah, there were over 300 passengers at this service. The ship's staff even made homemade latkes, which was a special treat. It was great to celebrate Hanukkah at sea.

Our first port of call was Saint Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Island. It had been quite a few years since we had visited this busy city. What a fun place – interesting sightseeing, great shopping and wonderful restaurants – in only 32 square miles with a population of 56,000 inhabitants. During the First World War, the United States bought the Virgin Islands for \$25 million in gold. In the 1950, St. Thomas became a tourist mecca and enjoys this status today.

It was an easy walk from our port in Saint Thomas to visit the Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas at 16 A&B Crystal Gade. Jews first began to settle on the island in 1655 when it was ruled by Denmark. They were mainly traders in sugarcane, rum and



Gary Silverstein with Rabbi Moch.

molasses. One of the first Jews in the Virgin Islands was Gabriel Milan, whom King Christian of Denmark sent in 1864 to be governor. He was the first of three Jews who have served as governors. In 1796, the Jews of St. Thomas founded this congregation.

Only nine Jewish families belonged to the congregation in 1801, but by 1803 it had increased to 22, with arrivals from England, France, and Curacao. The present building was constructed in 1833. It was amazing to think we were visiting the oldest synagogue in continuous use under the American flag. With only two exceptions – Hurricane Marilyn in 1995 and a major restoration in 1999-2000 – this has been a dedicated synagogue structure holding services since 1833. This beautiful temple, declared a National Historic Landmark, is an architectural and historical gem in the middle of the Caribbean. The synagogue was built in the Sephardic style, since its original congregants migrated as a result of the Spanish Inquisition. In keeping with this style, the seating permits congregants to face one another instead of seating theater-style. Also the bimah is opposite the Ark in which the synagogue's six torahs are housed. The sand on the floor is a remnant of the days of the Marranos, Jews who, during the Spanish Inquisition, were forced to convert to Christianity, but secretly continued to practice Judaism. Since practicing Judaism was punishable by death, they met



Maxine Silverstein visits the Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas.

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