

THE HEBREW CONGREGATION OF ST. THOMAS

Kehilah Kedosha Beracha v'Shalom u'G'milut Chasadim
Holy Congregation of Blessing, Peace and Loving Deeds



Shalom, and welcome
to a place where history and destiny meet,
where looking up, and looking down,
and looking around
all tell a tale
unlike almost any other.

We have come together here
as a community and as a congregation,
in spirituality and study and service,
one generation to the next,
since 1796—and in our current building since 1833.

In coming here now,
you step into that tradition,
and you help to write the next chapter
in our ongoing and still evolving story.

**SYNAGOGUE HILL
2116 CRYSTAL GADE
ST. THOMAS, VI 00802**



HOW DID THIS STORY START?

Jews first settled in the Virgin Islands in 1655, when it was ruled by Denmark. These were mainly merchants and traders, in the intertwined industries of sugarcane, molasses and rum.

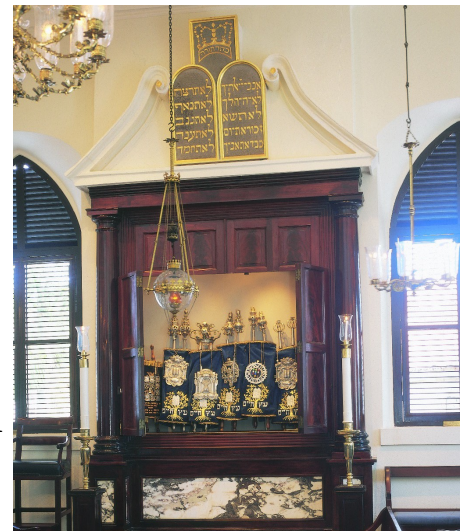
A group of Jewish immigrants found their way to this island through a twisting tale of international politics involving other Caribbean communities, British strategic concerns, and a perception of support for the American revolution. The Jews of St. Thomas purchased a cemetery in 1750, and founded the congregation in 1796.

The first synagogue building on the island was constructed in 1803. It was lost in a fire the following year. The partially rebuilt synagogue burned down again in 1806.

The current property was purchased in 1813, and the original building on this site was used for 10 years. In 1823 that building was replaced by a larger structure on the same spot on Synagogue Hill.

And in 1831, that building, too, was lost in a fire – the third such incident in under thirty years.

But in 1831, the *sifrei Torah* (the Torah scrolls), and the Ner Tamid (the Eternal Light) were saved from the fire. Two of those scrolls remain with us, and in use, to this day.



The present building was dedicated in 1833.
It has stood proudly through flame and storm,
water and wind, for almost 200 years.

It is the oldest synagogue building in continuous use
under the American flag.

It is also the second oldest synagogue building
in the Western hemisphere.

Sand on the Floor



Some say that the sand on the floor of our Sanctuary is an echo of the promise made to Abraham, that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars of the sky, the sand on the shore of the sea. Others say it is a reminder of our wandering in the Wilderness, a memory of Sinai.

The real reason – still looking back over centuries, but not quite as far back – is more painful. The nine Sephardic Jewish families who founded this synagogue remembered their roots on the Iberian peninsula. In the 1790's they were thinking... of the 1490's.

In 1492, the same year as the reunification of Spain under Christian rule, and, in fact, on the very same day that Columbus set sail, Spain decided to end Jewish life in its midst. After well over a thousand years of living and flourishing in Spain, all those practicing Judaism openly were sent into exile. There were those who stayed, many of whom thought, after converting to Catholicism in public, they could continue to practice Judaism in private. They attempted to preserve their Jewish identity. Illegally, in an act punishable by death if they were caught, they would gather in cellars and in secret. And these clandestine groups, or so the story says, used sand on the floor... to muffle the sound of their footsteps as they came together.

The Jewish community of St. Thomas today.

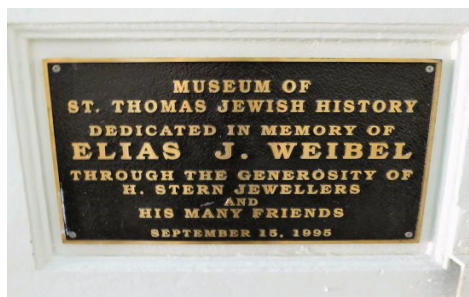
Our membership today stands at around a hundred families on island – as well as thousands of “Chai” members, overseas supporters, those interested in this congregation and its history, or committed to our present and our future. There are also some unaffiliated Jews or those in Jewish families on the island, as well as a small Chabad presence.

And there are many more who hold a sense of connection to Judaism in one form or another. They may be descendants of the nine founding families, or those who simply feel part of our story here. In a place with little history of anti-Semitism, and broad acceptance of a wide variety of cultures and traditions, many people on St. Thomas and St. John proudly refer to this congregation as “our synagogue.”

We remain a vibrant and active Jewish community, with a sense of support for one another, a commitment to our island community and the wider Jewish world, a sense of social justice, and a full range of religious services and cultural and educational offerings. Although the number of Jewish children on the islands is small at the moment, and the on-island population fluctuates partially in response to the economy and to natural disasters, we have a proud history of youth education. The first Jewish Confirmation service in this hemisphere took place in our congregation, in the mid-1880's.

In addition to the historic Sanctuary, the congregation also comes together at Lilienfeld House, a community house across the street, which we use for Oneg Shabbat gatherings following services, communal meals, classes, special events and receptions.

We meet for a variety of services and activities in many other locations on St. Thomas and St. John, feeling a connection to the beauty of the islands beyond the building itself. And we maintain two historic cemeteries, our archives, and the Weibel Museum directly behind the Sanctuary.



The congregation originally followed the Sephardic rite; its ritual and religious life reflected traditional Judaism as practiced by the descendants of Spanish, Portuguese and North African Jews. This is seen most visibly today, of course, in the orientation of seating and furniture in the synagogue itself.

As the Jewish population here shifted over time, so, too, did our religious practice. In 1947 the congregation formally affiliated with the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, today called the Union for Reform Judaism. Some memories and echoes of early Sephardic traditions remain with us.

We are, then, today, a Reform synagogue, with diverse roots, serving a wide range of practice. We are a Jewishly-committed, diverse, welcoming and inclusive congregation. We bring together native and newcomer, young and old, single and married, a diversity of personal belief and practice, a multi-racial Jewish population, traditional families, interfaith and same sex couples... all the ways in which Jewish families appear today.

We are an on-island community, but also open to the world – visitors who come for an hour, or families who choose to celebrate special occasions in the sacred space of this very special Sanctuary. Indeed, people come from all over for life cycle events with us. We host Bar or Bat Mitzvah services (often working closely with the teachers and tutors, the clergy and community of a home congregation), many weddings, anniversaries celebrations and renewal of vows, and even child namings. Frequently families who come here express a sense of appreciation for the experience of stepping into history, and becoming part of our story.



As a congregation, we count on your visits... and we were challenged by the storms. But we carry on. In September of 2017, in the aftermath of Irma, facing curfews after Maria, nevertheless, we persisted. There has been a service in our Sanctuary or held by our congregation every Shabbat, on either Friday night or Saturday morning, for over 220 years. Through creativity and determination, we did not miss a Shabbat. An unbroken chain of communal commitment, going all the way back to the 1790's... and stretching forward, from 2017, on into the future.

Throughout our entire history, this congregation has survived – and thrived – as a kind of partnership with the Jewish community of the hemisphere, or, indeed, the entirety of the Jewish world. We have contributed to, and been sustained by, Jewish life in other places. In that way, then, our story is your story, and this is your place, too.

Staying Connected

For those who wish to maintain that sense of connection, we have a special category known as “Chai Membership.” Chai is the Hebrew word for life and, indeed, the thousands who read themselves in to our life here are the life-blood of the Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas. A small community with a long-history and a world-wide reach, we need you!

Your visits, your interest and your support help us maintain this historic synagogue building, allow us to provide a spiritual home for those who come here, and also sustain the community that lives here year-round, and full-time.

It is only \$36 to become a Chai Member for a year- or, actually, only \$360 for a life-time Chai membership! Chai Members receive our bulletins, hear about our services and events, and are

If you are interested in becoming a Chai Member, please go to our website www.synagogue.vi (currently under construction), or fill out the Chai Membership form on the last page.



Other information

Our spiritual leader is Rabbi Michael Feshbach. He began his time with us in the summer of 2017, just two months before Irma and Maria. He came to St. Thomas from the Washington area, where he had been Senior Rabbi of Temple Shalom in Chevy Chase, Maryland. He can be reached at rabbifeshbach@synagogue.vi, or through his website, www.michaelfeshbach.net.



Our website is www.synagogue.vi, and we are on Facebook as The Hebrew Congregation of St Thomas. (The website is currently under construction.)

We hold services for Shabbat (Friday night, Saturday morning, or both), High Holy Days, major holidays such as Sukkot, Simchat Torah, Passover and Shavuot, minor holidays such as Chanukah and Purim, and modern ones such as Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes Remembrance Day) and Yom HaAtzma'ut (Israel Independence Day).

Erev Shabbat/Friday night services are at 6:30 PM most weeks. The first Friday of the month services are frequently followed by a Shabbat dinner at our Community House, across the street from the synagogue. We also meet on most Saturday mornings for Shabbat Morning Worship and Study at 10:30 AM. But there are many special services or calendar adjustments; check our website (currently being revised) or call the congregation to check in case this timing changes.

We are active in the community, hosting major speakers (Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, author Alice Hoffman, Israeli Ambassador Dani Dayan), educational and outreach efforts (including a major scholarship program presented every year in honor of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.) cultural programs (an ongoing Israeli Film Series) and well known island "events" (our annual Arts and Antiquities Auction.)

The synagogue is open for visitors Monday to Thursdays from 9:00 AM- 4:00 PM, and Fridays from 9:00 AM to 3:00 PM. Free tours of the synagogue are given in season (October through July), by volunteer docents.

Welcome, and thank you for your interest!

**Staying Connected,
Supporting the Community**

At the Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas we have a special category known as "*Chai*" membership. Chai is the Hebrew word for "life." These members are part of the **life-blood** of this synagogue.

Contributions from visitors help us maintain this historic synagogue, while providing a spiritual home for everyone who travels to our shores. As a *Chai* member, your loved ones will be remembered at our Shabbat services and their *yahrzeits* will be recorded in our newsletter, which you will receive monthly.

**Yes! I want to become a Chai Member
and help sustain
The Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas:**

▷Annual Chai - \$36 ▷Life-time Chai \$360

▷Cash ▷Check ▷Credit Card

▷Additional Donation \$ _____

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Phone _____ Email _____

Credit Card: Amex/Visa/MC Card # _____

Exp. Date _____ Sec. Code _____

Signature _____

The Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas

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