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It's older than the US itself — New York's go-to shul

By **Zaki Cooper**, December 30, 2015

Of the many beautiful shuls around the world, there are not many that house communities older than the countries they are in.

But that anomaly applies to the ornate Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, Congregation Shearith Israel, on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. The community dates from 1654, when 23 Jews from Recife, Brazil, of Sephardic origin, found refuge in New York and established the congregation. This is not just over 100 years before the foundation of the US itself, but two years before Jews resettled in England under Oliver Cromwell.

The shul's rabbi, Meir Soloveichik, is particularly proud of the latter fact. Rabbi Soloveichik, part of a rabbinic dynasty and a charismatic intellectual, is keen on the history of the community. He points out that one of his predecessors as the community's rabbi, Gershom Mendes Seixas (1745-1816), attended George Washington's inauguration in 1789 at New York Federal Hall (Washington DC had yet to be declared the capital). A year later, President Washington sent his famous letter to the Jews of Newport, Rhode Island, in which he said: "May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants." Several congregants had fought in the War of Independence against the British, and the shul still holds two damaged Torah scrolls as evidence of the conflict.

The sanctuary is beautiful, with a gold ark, stained-glass windows and bright red carpets, reminiscent of the House of Lords.

An ex-pat friend living in Manhattan says it is the place to go on Tisha B'Av, when a candle-lit service in the sanctuary, dramatically draped in black, evokes a special atmosphere. The service is Spanish and Portuguese style - shut your eyes and you could be at Bevis Marks - but the congregants are an eclectic bunch. One Israeli visitor, a former army general, is impressed by how the community weaves together Jews with very different backgrounds.

This inclusive theme is suitable for a community that counts amongst its members the poet Emma Lazarus (1849-87), whose famous poem, The New Colossus adorns the Statue of Liberty.

Zaki Cooper is a trustee of the Council of Christians and Jews

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