

The Star in the Banner: Studies on North American Black-Jewish Communities

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Abstract: The elaboration and development of black-Jewish identities are a multilayered and complex dynamism that does not take to one particular shape or form. Black groups in America have amalgamated Jewish traditions, thoughts, and cultures creatively upon their initial encounters. This bibliographic review paper seeks to ask “in what ways has Jewish identity been appropriated amongst black groups in America?” and “what role has Christianity played in developing these black-Jewish identities?”

Introduction

The African American religious experience in America is a phenomenon that has attracted scholars (Landing, Wynia, Chireau, Pinn *et al*) of all backgrounds to document, explore, and advance relevant research in the field. The intricacies of black religious movements are fascinating to many, but remain shrouded in mystique, at times tangled in webs of misinterpretations and “cultural imperialisms” especially when concerned with the notion of identity. Since the advent of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, identity for blacks in America has assumed malleable properties. It can be argued that religion plays a solid role in the grounding of these identities, both individually and collectively. It is safe to locate Christianity as a point of departure when assessing the black religious experience in America. The Christianization of African slaves has served as an umbrella for the appropriation, re-interpretation, rejection, and syncretism of Christianity to black religious thought. It is within this framework that I investigate the significance of Judaism to African-Americans.

Black Nationalist discourse and black religious thought re-surfaced as a momentous movement during the American Civil Rights era in the 1960s. Much of the discussion revolved

around the Christian integrationist ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the separatist ideologies of Black Muslims, (i.e. Nation of Islam vis-à-vis Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X). Interestingly enough, discourse surrounding African American Judaism remained partially hidden from the aforementioned “mainstream” attention, yet progressed hand in hand with the other black movements.

The nature of this research is not primarily to document the historical development of Black Jewish tradition and thought, thus a large body of information regarding sub sects and their progression will be omitted. However, there is always a dominating group responsible for setting particular trends and those groups will serve as the respective example from which others follow. An analysis of groups such as the Church of God Saints of Christ and the Commandment Keepers of Harlem will confirm this point amongst others. The first section of this paper observes the historical relevance of Christianity in Black Judaism as predecessor and ensures the consideration of context. The following section will comprise of an analysis of groups, specifically their beliefs and traditions, and will attempt to illustrate the manner in which they identify with Jewish belief and practice. The final section consists of a brief discussion on race, religion, and identity.

Christianity and the Black Church

Though Black Judaism in America is mostly associated with states such as New York and Chicago, the origins are deeply rooted in the American south. In James E. Landing’s book *Black Judaism: Story of an American Movement*, Landing argues that the roots of Black Judaism are found in Christianity, particularly in the Holiness and Millennial movements of Protestantism. Landing directs his initial attention to the impact of the first and second Great Awakenings that took place in North America in the 1800s. He considers these events as catalysts for both the study of “nonconventional Jews” and the establishment and indirect influence of the southern black churches on Black Judaism. The correlation between the Holiness or “perfection” movements blended flawlessly with the emerging prophetic movements, which were based on the Second Coming. Landing ascertains that “If Christian perfection was necessary as

preparation for ‘the end,’ the ‘signs’ that would foretell the Second Coming needed to be understood” (2002: 18). Certain aspects of the prophetic movements gradually picked up significance. Landing describes them as:

... a renewed interest in the prophecies [of the Bible]; second, a renewed interest in the millennium, especially the premillennial advent that, according to scripture, could only occur after the Jews had been restored to the Holy Land; and third, a renewed interest in the state and location of the Jews (2002: 18).

Landing describes societies as the London Society for Promoting Christianity Among the Jews, as playing a key role in proselytizing Christianity all around the world, sending missionaries as far as Ethiopia to enquire of the Falashas (Ethiopian Jews). This sort of work was conducted and especially successful in the hands of Henry A. Stern. Stern is credited for bringing knowledge of Falashas to the rest of the world (Landing 2002: 21, 34).

During the Civil War, coupled with the many schisms between the Holiness, Pentecostal, and Bible Prophecy movements, both black and white churches adopted looser interpretations of scripture and placed increasing emphasis on oral traditions. Landing confirms that the focus on oral traditions has a direct correlation with the level of literacy; Holiness movements and “Pentecostals” had less to do with exegetical and textual exercise than the more phenomenological attraction of religious experience (Landing 2002: 32). Thus, the role of the independent churches is fundamental in the development of Black Judaism.

The rise of the independent black churches was in part a response to the socio-economic conditions of the Jim Crow era. Following the Civil War, blacks liberated from the chains of slavery were immersed into a society based on white supremacy. The black church “became the social refuge from a hostile white world” (Landing 2002: 43). As an institution, the black church allowed blacks to organize and re-establish a society based on their own values. In fact, Landing confirms that “black groups had to develop their own buildings, maintain their financial base and assets, maintain a clergy, and ... provide the only schools for

blacks in the South” (2002: 43). The roles of organization and self-sufficiency are strong motifs carried and illustrated through the development of the first Black Jewish congregations. It is important to note that the structure of the black church is strongly reflected in the congregational formation of Black Jewish institutions, a development which will be clarified in the following sections.

Anthony Pinn details briefly the various types of black churches in his work *The African American Religious Experience in America*. He refers to Baptist, Methodist, and Pentecostal churches, however, does not provide details of their history and formation. Pinn’s main argument is that blacks “Africanized” Christianity to suit their existing conditions. He focuses on a concept commonly referred to as the “Invisible Institution,” which is a term “used as a reference to the secret religious meeting held by enslaved Africans, also called hush arbor meetings, during which they worked out religious symbols, myths and doctrine” (Pinn 2006: 12). Furthermore, Pinn argues that the invisible institution manifested itself visibly in the form of the black church. Christianity, according to Pinn, was not necessarily enforced on slaves but assimilated by slaves. For example, “the importance of water baptism and spirit possession complete with ‘dancing in the spirit’” illustrates the “soft presence of African structures” (Pinn 2006: 14). Thus, in order to understand Black Judaism, Christianity must be considered in context of the conversion of blacks. Pinn states that “conversion in the context of black religion and initiation in the context of Africa both involve symbolic death and rebirth through which the individual releases old ways of being in the world and embraces new understandings of life and how it should be lived” (2006: 14).

The type of Christianity associated with the early black church is also responsible for the earliest black-Jewish congregations. Thus far, we have considered the roles of institution, organization, and formation while withholding the theological significances; however, the latter will appear self-evident as we assess specific black-Jewish groups. The significance of the Holiness, Prophetic, and oral traditions coupled with lax scriptural interpretation, serve as the theological framework for Black Judaism. Amidst the Great Migration and the First World War, many Southern blacks

migrated to the North, which was a time known as the “Exoduster” period. The theological affinity to the biblical exodus insinuated much talk of Moses and the Promised Land. Landing substantiates that “the biblical allusions, the messianic declarations, the millennial analogies, the belief that blacks were appointed to a special mission... [joined with] the belief that the end was near... [created] a time for prophets and messiahs” (2002: 45). This religious fervor gave rise to an atmosphere from which Black Judaism arose.

The Church of the Living God

In 1886, Prophet F.S. Cherry founded the Church of the Living God in Chattanooga, Tennessee. The main message portrayed by Cherry was based on a vision where the Lord appeared to him, revealing that the true Hebrews of the Old Testament were black. Cherry believed that even “God and biblical figures such as Adam, Eve, and Jesus were physically black” (Pinn 2006: 78). According to Cherry, all mankind was black until the births of Jacob and Esau. Jacob purchased the birthright of Esau; therefore, the descendants of Esau became red or white and hated by God. The descendants of Jacob became black and loved by God. Blacks who could trace their lineage through the tribe of Jacob were the authentic Jews (Landing 2002: 341). Merrill Singer, however, proposes a different theory. According to Singer, Cherry believed that white people were the offspring of Gehazi, a servant who Elisha cursed with skin “as white as snow” based on the account of II Kings 5:27 (2002: 58).

The sacred texts of the group were both the Bible and the Talmud. Landing suggests Cherry may have mistaken the Torah as the Talmud since “there is no evidence that the prophet knew anything about Talmudic literature” (2002: 343). Arthur Fauset provides the most detailed account of the beliefs and practices of the group in his book *Black Gods of the Metropolis*. What distinguished the group as particularly Jewish was their observance of the Sabbath, Passover, and the Ten Commandments, as well as their strict observance of certain dietary restrictions, such as abstaining from the consumption of pork. They observed purification rites before Passover and attended services on Sunday, Wednesday, and Friday evenings (Fauset 2002: 38-40). Their place of worship was not referred to

as a synagogue but a house of prayer. The walls of the house of prayer were decorated with images of Hebrew characters (Landing 2002: 341). The basis for this distinction is drawn from Revelations 3:9 which references the “synagogue of Satan,” which they, in turn, associated with the “edifices of the white Jews” (Fauset 2002: 34). Male members dressed in yarmulkes, and women wore blue and white capes; in addition to their specific style of dress, all members wore a Star of David.

The Black Jews (as Cherry followers were called) also had strong Christian elements within their tradition. They observed baptism and substituted Communion for Passover. Although they were known to avoid celebrating Christmas or Easter, Jesus nevertheless played a central role in their doctrines (Fauset 2002: 39). They believed in Jesus while rejecting his whiteness; they knew Jesus as black. It is difficult to discern whether they saw him as the Messiah, but Cherry castigated white Jews for rejecting Jesus. Nevertheless, Cherry’s congregation is an example of a Christian-Jewish hybrid. The belief structure “is clear evidence of a strong association with fundamental, millennial Christianity” and the ceremonial structure did not follow Judaic tradition but “a veneer of the Old Testament tradition laid atop an existing Christian Organization” (Landing 2002: 345). Cherry’s followers believed that Jesus did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. They also believed that slavery and the deliverance of the black man would follow at the end of the “Age of the Gentiles” when Jesus returns to usher in the millennium (Landing 2002: 342).

The Church of God and Saints of Christ

William S. Crowdy founded the Church of God and Saints of Christ in 1896. In a manner similar to that of Prophet Cherry, Crowdy also received instruction by way of revelation. On September 13, 1893, Crowdy had a vision that he was in a large room where tables descended from above. Each table was stained with vomit and had the name of a church inscribed on it. According to Crowdy, the table labeled “Baptist” had the most prominent stain, which made Crowdy vow never again to attend a Baptist church. In his vision, a clean table finally descended inscribed with: Church of God and Saints of Christ. Crowdy believed this was his divine sanction to establish the true church.

In his vision, Crowdy proceeded to consume a Bible and soon afterwards was revealed the Seven Keys, which were rules and guidelines from which to live by (Wynia 1994: 21).

Crowdy received his visions in Guthrie, Oklahoma and began his preaching there. Soon after, he moved to Chicago and converted many before returning to Lawrence, Kansas where he structured his organization (Wynia 1994: 22). Singer recounts Crowdy's description of African Americans as the "heirs of the ten lost tribes of Israel". Crowdy adopted many Jewish rituals and symbols such as "circumcision of newborn boys, the use of the Jewish calendar, wearing of skullcaps, observance of Saturday as the Sabbath, [and the] celebration of Passover (Singer 2000: 59). For Crowdy's congregation, Passover was celebrated in a literal manner where the blood of an animal was smeared on the outside of the house (Landing 2002: 53).

Due to their Christian character, the congregations belonging to both Crowdy and Cherry shared many similarities. Yvonne Chireau mentions that although Crowdy's church observed Jewish customs and even maintained an office of the rabbinate, Jesus Christ and his teachings were nevertheless emphasized on an equal level. Chireau argues that "selecting components of Judaism and preserving theological and doctrinal perspectives from Christianity was typical of a number of groups in the early establishment of black Jewish Communities in the United States (2000: 21). It is within Crowdy's Seven Keys that the Christian element is truly defined. The Seven Keys of Crowdy are as follows:

1. Repentance of Sin
2. Baptism by burial into water upon confession of faith
3. Received unleavened bread and water for Christ's
Body and Blood
4. Feet washed by elder as is written in John 13:1-23
5. Agree to keep commandments
6. Breathed upon with the holy kiss
7. Taught to pray as it is written in Matthew 6:9-13
(Wynia 1994: 25)

Both Pinn and Landing confirm the Seven Keys were altered in later church publications. The "new" set of the Seven Keys are as follows:

1. The Church of God and the Saints of Christ
2. Wine forbidden to be drunk in the Church of God forever
3. Unleavened bread and water for Christ's Body and Blood
4. Foot washing is a commandment
5. The Disciples Prayer
6. You must be breathed upon and saluted into the Church of God and Saints of Christ with a Holy Kiss
7. The Ten Commandments (Landing 2002: 52, Pinn 2006: 83)

In addition to being minister and leader of his congregation, Crowdy was also considered a prophet. By bridging the Hebraic tradition with Christianity, Crowdy assumed a role of leadership (prophet) but also provided (through Jesus Christ) a practical example to follow. Crowdy stressed the life and works of Jesus Christ as an ethical compass for the group. The heart of Crowdy's message was based on the redemptive message of Jesus, which was concerned with human oppression and treating one another with dignity (Wynia 1994: 52). It is important to note that although Crowdy points to Jesus as a model of conduct, he and his congregation do not refer to Jesus as the Messiah (Pinn 2006: 82).

Thus far, the two groups assessed have all shared the commonality of a Christian base for their Jewish beliefs. Landing references smaller similar groups in his book *Black Judaism*, which I have omitted for fear of redundancy. The congregations of both Cherry and Crowdy serve as the primary model for what Chireau describes as "Hebraic-Christian or Judeo-Christian formations" which is a characteristic of the earliest black Jewish congregations (Chireau 2000: 21). It is fair to say that Crowdy and Cherry found their Jewish identity by means of Christianity. The upcoming groups in the following sections will illustrate the other side of the spectrum where black Jewish identities are formed through a rejection of Christianity.

The Commandment Keepers of Harlem

Two of the most significant names associated with the Commandment Keepers of Harlem are Arnold Josiah Ford and Wentworth Arthur Matthew. Arnold Ford provided the basis for “orthodox” Black Judaism by removing many Christian elements from its structure. Ford emphasized the Hebrew language, denied Jesus Christ as Savior, and incorporated Judaic symbols and dress (Landing 2002: 129). Wentworth Matthew became the most well known black-Jewish rabbi in Harlem and continued Ford’s work.

Arnold Ford’s philosophy was grounded both in Ethiopianism and Garveyism. As a member of Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), his political commitment seeped through his heavy nationalistic undertones. For Ford, all of Africa and Arabia was inhabited by Ethiopians at the time of Abraham. He believed there was no difference between the Semite and the Ethiopian (Landing 2002: 133). It was Ford who, like Garvey, proposed that blacks return to Africa as the rightful children of Israel. Chireau confirms that “Garvey’s brand of black nationalism and the older ideals of Ethiopian destiny came to be a dominant feature of African American Judaism during this formative period (2000: 23). Ford elaborated on his theories of origin and believed the original Hebrews were the Hausas of West Africa, who eventually migrated to Egypt. He believed Nigeria was the cradle of the Hebrew race and that the ancient traditions must be passed down orally (Landing 2002: 135). The oral traditions reflected a cabalistic understanding. Since the Nigerians lacked the written Torah (due to the burning of books by Europeans), the Ten Commandments were hidden in the form of tribal markings. Ford believed “only Africans exhibited the high moral and intellectual character of Hebrews, for they did not use the credit system out of trust in one another and deliberately made fetishes grotesque to deter their worship by other people” (Landing 2002: 135).

Ford accepted the rabbinate of Beth B’nai Abraham (House of the Sons of Abraham) in 1923. He was fluent in both Hebrew and Yiddish as he studied the Torah and Talmud under the patronage of white Jews (Chireau 2000: 26). He was a strong advocate of emigration since he believed the United States was

not the true home of the real Jews. In fact, Ford rejected the word “Jew” and replaced it with “Hebrew” considering “Jews” were western whites (Landing 2002:135). He eventually retired to Ethiopia as an official delegate to the coronation of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1930. He established himself in Addis Ababa and pursued efforts to secure territory in Ethiopia for black Jewish émigrés. Ford would die in 1934 in Ethiopia without ever realizing his dream (Chireau 2000: 26).

Rabbi Matthew continued Ford’s work and established the Commandment Keepers of Harlem as a congregation in 1919. Pinn recounts Rabbi Matthew’s teachings as a rejection of African American identity grounded in slavery. Like Ford, (who ordained him Rabbi), he argued that “African Americans are Ethiopian Hebrews, a part of the original Israelites spoken of in the Bible” (Pinn 2006:85). Rabbi Matthew connected the lineage of blacks to the offspring of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Bernard J. Wolfson documents the founding of the Ethiopian Hebrew Rabbinical College in 1940 to Rabbi Matthew. Within this school, he ordained over twenty black rabbis (2002: 48).

Howard Brotz is the first known student to conduct an academic study on the Commandment Keepers. Brotz documented the congregational activities, as well as the groups’ theological bedding found in the Twelve Principles of the Doctrines of Israel and Scriptural Proof. The Twelve Principles were compiled in Matthew’s *Minute Book* reminiscent of Crowdy’s Seven Keys. The Twelve Principles start with the New Creation (one) and conclude with the Theocratic Age (twelve). In between are principles “referring to dietary laws, kosher foods, and ritual practices such as observance of the Ten Commandments, divine healing, washing of feet, holiness, and the restoration of Israel” (Brotz as cited in Landing 2002:228). Brotz observed that the principles included Bible passages meant to supplement their understanding. However, Brotz states that the correlation between principle and scripture was not so clear, thus allowing Matthew to establish a system where only he could explain the principles. In essence, this gave him an aura of mystique and sacredness (Brotz as cited in Landing 2002:229).

Rabbi Matthew was an advocate of esoteric knowledge, especially in the “Cabbalistic Sciences”. Though he led his congregation through Sabbath services where the Twelve

Principles were observed, his Ethiopian Hebrew Rabbinical College (of the Royal Order of Ethiopian Hebrews and the Commandment Keepers Congregation of the Living God, Inc) offered additional biblical studies (Pinn 2006:86). Offered in a wide variety of languages, such as Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and French, the classes aimed to study hidden meanings in books on Jewish history, the Old Testament, and the Talmud. According to Rabbi Matthew, the training “allowed the well trained, through assistance of angelic forces, to cure various illnesses, bring about prosperity through control over those with evil intentions, and bring children back from the dead” (Pinn 2006:86).

There is an obvious distinction between the Commandment Keepers of Harlem and the congregations of both Crowd and Cherry. Ford and Matthew clearly endorsed a more nationalistic approach promoting a theology based on origin. The dream to create a black-Jewish community in Africa seemed to be their pinnacle of understanding. Both Prophet Crowd and Cherry used Christianity to make sense of their current condition, however, simultaneously turned to Judaism to authenticate the experience. The Black Hebrew Israelites continued in the line of Ford and Matthew, but took the vision to a much higher physical reality. With Ben Ammi as leader, they re-draw the map of Africa to include Israel, thus maintaining that Africa was also the home of the Jews. Through much struggle and turmoil, they eventually relocated from Chicago to Dimona, Israel.

The Black Hebrew Israelites

Ben Carter, also known as Ben Ammi, is the leader of the Black Hebrew Israelite community and was a member of the A-Beta Hebrew Israel Culture Center in Chicago. The organization believed that African Americans should relocate to Africa, following in the footsteps of the philosophy of Marcus Garvey. Due to a vision he experienced in 1966, Ammi believed “it was time to establish the kingdom of God by leaving the United States” (Pinn 2006: 87). Many of the members were appalled by the lifestyle and crime rate of the inner city, which increased their desire to leave the United States (Markowitz 1996: 197).

In May 1967, three leaders of A-Beta flew to Liberia to investigate the possibility of relocation. Upon their return,

members began selling their possessions to finance the trip since the pioneers secured a forested settlement. Though many of the Black Hebrews were raised in the city, Liberia initially became a home of refuge (Singer 2000: 64). But the struggles were soon to come as the Chicago community could not cope with the hardships of their new home. Rather than relocate to an urban settlement, the pioneers secured a settlement in the remotest areas of Liberia. In addition, at the time there was no clear direction of leadership. The community slowly disintegrated from interpersonal conflict and many wished to return to United States. According to Singer, one member stated: “In the land of captivity [the United States], you light a match and you have a gas flame. In Liberia, if you wanted to eat you had to chop your tree down, bring it back, chop it up, build a fire” (2000:64). Rakhimim, a member interviewed by Fran Markowitz, states:

We chose to stay there about three and a half years in order to get rid of the foolishness of America. To make a person born again. To die from the hell we came out of, to get rid of it-to learn...Liberia was always conceived as the place where we would learn to be righteous. Those of us who wanted to do right shedded of the hate and came home to Israel (Markowitz 1996: 197).

The symbolic understanding of the time in the “wilderness” painted a picture reminiscent of the Exodus. The community felt they lost divine favor as religious traditions, such as Passover became increasingly difficult to observe. The community experienced great difficulty finding an “unblemished” kid for sacrifice, causing Ben Ammi to inform members that through revelation God told him the sacrifice of animals was never desired, rather, obedience was the greatest sacrifice (Singer 2000:65-66). By means of his insights, Ben Ammi slowly elevated to the status of sole leader of the community.

Ben Ammi was convinced the next relocation would be Israel. For Ammi, Israel was the true home of Black Hebrews, and he considered Liberia simply a test. In 1969, the group began relocating to Israel. They claimed the right to Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return. They had requested settlement in Jerusalem but the Israeli government gave them a settlement in the Negev desert town of Dimona. They were

denied Israeli citizenship, work permits, as well as state benefits (Michaeli 2000:74). In 1986, many members were arrested and some deported due to working illegally and abusing visitor permits. In 1992 a truce was made between the Israeli government and the Black Congressional Caucus of the U.S Congress where the group was granted temporary residence, under the conditions that no new members would join until immigration issues were resolved (Markowitz 1996:197). The deal brokered between both governments “allowed the Hebrew Israelites to expand their housing and develop a specialized school that combines an education in modern Hebrew, science, math and Israeli civics with Hebrew Israelite spiritual tenets” (Michaeli 2000:74).

Upon his initial arrival to Israel, Ben Ammi told Israeli authorities that he and his people were not Jews but Hebrews: “Our customs are different from yours. We believe only in the Torah, not what was added later” (Singer 2000: 67). Ammi believed that the term “Jew” was a corruption of the word Judah. Like his predecessors, he believed that white Jews were interlopers. He would later soften his views and adopt a more inclusive perspective. The group’s beliefs, rituals, and lifestyle reflected “action as opposed to genealogy” (Pinn 2006: 89). The Africanisms of their tradition were very visible and served as the ground for Markowitz’ application of Foucault’s “subjugated knowledge” which is defined as:

... a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity...a particular, local, regional knowledge, a differential knowledge incapable of unanimity and which owes its force only to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it... (Markowitz 1996:194-195)

She argues that the “Divine Geography” (Israel being physically drawn into the map of Africa) is a counter hegemonic strategy based on Foucault’s notion of “subjugated knowledge,” being converted from idea to practice (Markowitz 1996:193). The conversion of this theory to practical action is illustrated in the

group's distinct beliefs, rituals, and lifestyle. Ethan Michaeli observes that "men wear long African print shirts with the biblically prescribed fringes known in Hebrew as *tsitsit*, as well as head coverings called *kippot*. Women wear long modest dresses and follow the biblical rules concerning menstruation, known as *niddah*" (Michaeli 2000:75). The amalgamation of African tradition and Jewish tradition illustrates that the group's connection to Israel-as-Africa surpasses genealogy and translates into practice.

The Black Hebrews consider Ben Ammi to be the Messiah and believe they are locked in an "apocalyptic struggle with the forces of evil" (Michaeli 2000:75). The group eventually labeled Ammi as "Adoni Rabbey" (My Lord and Master) for leading them out of the United States to the promised land of Israel (Pinn 2006:75). The Hebrew Israelites observe all the Jewish rituals such as Passover, Yom Kippur, and Sabbath; however, some are combined with African American Christian activities (i.e. Gospel Music) (Pinn 2006:75), which are presumably solely based on musical aesthetics as opposed to a message of Jesus.

Ben Ammi would later soften his beliefs that only blacks were God's chosen people, especially after the Israeli government ameliorated their living conditions. The main catalyst for this change, however, was after the Jewish residents of Dimona provided "food, work, and other necessities to the Hebrew Israelites when the political situation prevented official support of any kind" (Michaeli 2000:81). After this event, Ammi would state that some Jews were also part of the "Chosen People". Following a failed Iraqi attack on a nuclear reactor in Dimona, Black Hebrews hid in bunkers side by side with their neighbors. Ammi stated that the destiny of Israel was undeniably tied to Black Hebrews. "We want the whole load. When it's time to cry, we will weep together. When it's time to rejoice, we will rejoice together" (Michaeli 2000:82).

For the 3000 Black Hebrews who settled in Dimona their statement is clear, Israel is part of Africa and they have a divine claim to the land as true Hebrews. They maintained no nationalistic connection to the United States since they saw it as representative of Egypt – a place filled with bondage and a threat to their identity. The apocalyptic worldview of the Black Hebrews culminated in their return to the Promise Land. Even

though they found themselves “among people they [initially] disdained, practiced a form of religion totally unfamiliar to the Israelis, [they] wished neither to emulate Jews [nor] to practice Judaism” (Landing 2002:424). The steadfastness of their tradition and their beliefs transcended geographic boundaries and resonated deeply within their African Jewish identities.

Discussion and Conclusion

The four black-Jewish groups discussed here were chosen to serve as an archetype and model from which many smaller groups emulated, diverged, or shared similar theological affinities. The development of Black Judaism is initially flavored by a Christian story that eventually fades into the background as groups increasingly become “orthodox”. Within the two main types of Black Judaism here presented, black-Jewish identity is understood through symbolic association and physical lineage. The thread of cohesion between groups is in the redefining of identity, criticism of socio-political climates, and the use of the Old Testament as a cosmological tool.

The concept of identity is fundamental to all black-Jewish discourse. Fran Markowitz acknowledges identity in her assessment of the Black Hebrew Israelite community. In another article “Soul Citizenship”, Markowitz, Sara Helman and Dafna Shir-Vertesh argue that, through the example of the Black Hebrews’ hardships to settle in Israel, “soul citizenship” suggests “a model of citizenship that opens new space for misplaced people(s) to gain membership in the states that meet their cultural aspiration and nourish their souls” (Markowitz et al 2003:302). This idea of race and religion is expanded upon in Henry Goldschmidt’s article “The Voices of Jacob on the Streets of Brooklyn”. Goldschmidt illustrates how Black Hebrews and Lubavitch Hasidic Jews in the Crown heights area of Brooklyn use race and religion as hagiographic tools in order to validate genuine lineage to Israelite descent¹. He argues that race and religion function as “symbolically charged tropes within

¹ The discourse between Black Judaism and Rabbinical/Normative Judaism is an ongoing discussion primarily focused on the monopolizing claims of authenticity. The topic is expansive and cannot be addressed entirely in this paper.

historical narratives, rather than clearly bounded categories of identity formation” (Goldschmidt 2006: 390).

Identification with narrative is an important element in Black Jewish identity. The socio-political context from which it was born, combined with the physical realities of African American hardships, made it easy for blacks to feel they were simply continuing the biblical narrative of Moses and the Exodus. To bring this issue into a more contemporary light, Susannah Heschel compares the theological affinities between the writings of Abraham Heschel and Martin Luther King, Jr. Though King is a known Christian ethicist, Susannah Heschel is able to draw the comparisons based on King’s understanding of the Old Testament. She draws points of intersection through their understanding of the Exodus, the immanence of God, and his responsiveness to the needs of his people and the nature of the prophet (Heschel 2000: 171-172). A careful look at these similarities is reminiscent of most, if not all, Black Jewish congregations.

Black Judaism is a religious movement as well as a political statement. Like many other black religious traditions, it has reflected an attempt to redefine identity in light of one’s present context. The manner in which it has been assimilated and understood by different black groups is multifarious, thus resulting in multi-dynamic black-Jewish identities. The role of Christianity in the development of Black Judaism is monumental. The Holiness, Prophecy, and Millennial movements have all contributed to the theological formations of Black Judaism². The messianic expectations of black-Jewish eschatology can also be attributed to the “other worldliness” dimension found in Christian apocalypticism. In Bernard Wolfson’s interview with Rabbi Funnye, Funnye states that black Jewish movements “were in the vanguard of black self-realization and were the forerunners of black nationalism and black power” (Wolfson 2000:51). This is arguably true, but many continue to overlook the movement due to media attention

² Black Judaism is a Bible based tradition. Anthony Pinn clarifies this point by illustrating that for Black Jews “great attention [is] given to a fairly literal reading of the Old Testament, and this sacred text [tends] to take precedence over Talmudic tradition for most of these communities” (Pinn 2006: 90).

surrounding Black Muslims and Christian Civil Rights ethics. Black Judaism is a unique story that continues to unfold. With increasing research being conducted within the field, further discourse and new discoveries will not only increase the understanding of black Jews, but also add a new dynamic to the black religious experience in North America.

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