

**TSIPORAH'S CHILDREN:
THE MUSIC AND LIVED EXPERIENCES
OF JEWISH BLACK AMERICANS**

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TABLES OF CONTENTS

A Note on Language	4
Introduction	5
History of the American Hebrew-Israelites	7
Ethnicity for Hebrew-Israelites	19
Chazzanim	
Rabbi Eliezer Brooks	21
Thomas LaRue	24
Goldye Steiner	30
Contemporary Musicians	
Joshua Nelson	33
Anthony Mordechai Tzvi Russell	41
Nissim Black	49
Yitz Jordan (Y-Love)	56
Sandra Lawson	61
Analysis	
Respectful Titles	69
A Right to a Truthful Origin Story	70
Needing to Explain Oneself	72
Seeking Community	73
Raising Awareness and Appreciation	74
Negro Spirituals	76
Areas to be Further Explored	77
Is there a Jewish Race?	79
Conclusion	80



Mozes en zijn Ethiopische vrouw Sippora (Moses and his Ethiopian wife Tsipora)

by Jacob Jordaens, c.1650

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

Throughout this article, I will be using the phrase “Hebrew-Israelites” to describe members of the communities known as “Hebrews” and “Israelites.” Some people refer to themselves as “Hebrews,” others as “Israelites.” This phrase is imperfect. Phrases that I will not be using are “Black Israelites” or “Black Hebrews,” since these would identify people in a way that reduces them to their race rather than their peoplehood. As Janice Fernheimer mentions:

“The language that Blacks used to claim Jewishness, as “Hebrews” and “Israelites,” carried with it racial resonances for recognized Jews. American blacks were using these same terms to re-imagine and re-claim their blackness, because they designated racial origins without reference to color, the key factor in American social terms and the devalued term of the U.S. racial antinomy.”¹

I use the phrase “mainstream Judaism” to indicate the Judaism that is widely known throughout the American movements of Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Renewal, and Reconstructionist. This phrase does not include the groups who refer to themselves as Messianic Jews, Hebrews, Israelites, and sometimes “Ethiopian congregations.”² The entire community of Hebrew-Israelites do not always self-identify using the words: “Jewish” and “Judaism.” And while I do not include here an in-depth analysis of the Hebrew-Israelite community, I invite curious readers to do their own research.

In this article, I use the word “Black” as a descriptor of the ethnicity of Americans who are descendants of the slaves brought from Africa. I do not use “African American” because I find this phrase to be inaccurate and ambiguous. Would a white person from South Africa, now

¹ Janice W. Fernheimer, “Black Jewish Identity Conflict: A Divided Universal Audience and the Impact of Dissociative Disruption,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (January 2009): p. 57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773940802555530>.

² Israeli Ethiopian Judaism is very different than what is observed in American Ethiopian congregations. The Ethiopian Jews in Israel practice a Judaism that is completely regarded as mainstream.

living in the United States, be called an “African American?” A Black person from Nigeria who immigrated to the United States has an extremely different background – in experience and ethnic background – than a person born in the United States. Also, one would rarely hear a white American described as a “European-American.” Just as “white” symbolizes many different ethnicities in the United States, “Black” does the same.

The authors in some sources do not capitalize the first letter in the word “Black” in their writing, but I capitalize the first letter, consistent with widely-accepted academic and popular press usage as of this writing.

Finally, while the word “Falasha” appears in works that are cited here, this word is no longer in current usage, as it translates to the words “wanderer” or “landless” in Amharic. As of this writing, the phrase “Beta Israel” is now the widely accepted identification of Jews from Ethiopia.

INTRODUCTION

Tsiporah, the wife of Moses, was a Black woman. As it says in Numbers 12:1, “Miriam and Aaron began speaking against Moses because of the dark-skinned woman he had married. The woman that [Moses] had married was indeed dark-skinned.”³ In the Torah, the word used for what is translated as “dark-skinned” is “cushite” (כְּשִׁיטָה). There is great speculation as to what the Cushite label here refers to. The reason for this translation is that the natives of the Kingdom of Cush had famously very dark skin. It is unlikely that Tsiporah was from the Kingdom of Cush (modern day Jordan and Saudi Arabia), since Tsiporah’s father, Jethro, is described in the Bible

³ Aryeh Kaplan, in *The Living Torah: The Five Books of Moses, and the Haftarah* (Brooklyn, NY: Moznaim Publishing Corporation, 1996), p. 721.

as a Midianite priest whose home and origins are in Midian. However, according to philosophers Radak, R. Bechaye, Ibn Ezra, and Chizkuni, many Midianites somewhat resembled the Cushites. Tsiporah herself was, most likely, unusually dark-skinned.⁴ In post-biblical literature, the word “Cush” is commonly used as a colloquialism to describe dark-skinned people and even dark objects.⁵ These explanations aside, Tsiporah’s ethnic origins may have very well come from The Kingdom of Cush—we simply do not have adequate records.

There is a Midrash⁶ which poses that the Cushite Miriam and Aaron speak of is not Tsiporah, but Moses’s former wife from the years that transpired between his fleeing Egypt as a young man and returning there for the events told at the start of the book of Exodus. The Midrash tells us that during this time, Moses found himself in the Kingdom of Cush, serving the King of Cush and later succeeding him. Moses ruled Cush for 40 years and was given the former King’s widow as a wife, but he refused to live with her or worship the Cushite god. However, most commentators still believe that the Cushite Miriam and Aaron spoke was indeed Tsiporah.⁷ This being said, I find it fascinating that Moses was once again rumored to have been associated with a kingdom of dark-skinned people which he served and possibly even led.

This scriptural backstory provides critical context to the focus of this article. In the United States, where the commonly held belief is that Jews are white, Biblically-rooted Black ancestry gives a special legitimacy to Black Jewry. Black blood is in the foundational genetics of countless Jews around the world. Black Jews are not a new concept; in fact, Black Jews are

⁴ “Moses’ Cushite Wife.” <https://www.aish.com/atr/Moses-Cushite-Wife.html>. Accessed October 1, 2020.

⁵ David M Goldenberg, “The Colored Meaning of Kushite in Postbiblical Literature,” *The Curse of Ham*, 2009, pp. 113-128, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400828548.113>.

⁶ Midrash Yalkut Shimoni Shemot 168.

⁷ Dovid Rosenfeld, “Moses’s Cushite Wife: Ask the Rabbi Response,” aishcom, accessed January 12, 2021, <https://www.aish.com/atr/Moses-Cushite-Wife.html>.

ancient. And their descendants in the United States are enlivening this age-old tradition in uniquely American ways.

Black Jewish Americans are making music that is as thrilling as it is varied. Their music encompasses genres that are as diverse as America itself. It includes music that is new age, Yiddish, classical, folk, rap, pop, and more. The accomplishments of Black Jewish Americans are underrepresented among mainstream Jewish communities, yet have a rich and fascinating history as well as an evolving tradition.

The concept of Jews being Black has confounded many an American—even other Black Americans. For hundreds of years, the common conception of “Jewish appearance” has been of the fair-skinned Eastern Europeans and their equally fair-skinned cousins in the United States. As this article examines, Jews who are Black began emerging in the United States in the latter half of the 19th century. Furthermore, there have been Jewish Black musicians who have added to and changed American Jewish culture.

The purpose of this article is twofold: (1) To give a broad history of the Hebrew-Israelite community in the United States and (2) visibility and exposure of the rich history of Black Jewish American musicians. I seek to explain these groups’ accomplishments and contributions so that they may be viewed in the same light as those of Ashkenazic and the other ethnic groups of Judaism in the United States.

HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN HEBREW-ISRAELITES

The descriptor of “Jewish Black American” does not describe one people, but many peoples of multiple identities and practices: These include (1) the Hebrew-Israelites who

emerged in the late 19th century, (2) Jews from Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Uganda (who will not be examined in this article), (3) Black Americans who converted to Judaism, and (4) the offspring of a Black non-Jew with a non-Black Jew (such as the author). We begin with the people who would call themselves Hebrews or Israelites who originated in the southern United States.

Israelite congregations (sometimes called Hebrew congregations) began to emerge in the late 19th century. The lexicon of their self-identification as well as ritual and religious practices varied greatly, but they all had one thing in common: they believed they were descendants of the ancient Hebrews or Israelites as described in Torah.

Since the days of American slavery, Black Americans related closely to the Torah's stories of a persecuted and holy people who were chosen by God, enslaved, and then freed. As Ulysses Santamaria writes, "[The Jewish] relationship with the Divine being inevitably attracted the Black spirit. What [could be] more secure than a God who is responsive to his people's suffering, aware of their poverty, helping them in exile, leading them from slavery.... The ancient Hebrews were saved from slavery and the Blacks would be too."⁸ Many enslaved and free Black Americans had heard of Ethiopianism: the notion of a Black bloodline beginning with Solomon and the Queen of Sheba giving birth to successive generations of African royalty with Jewish blood. Black Americans were looking for a religious ideology that spoke to their existence and a future journey of liberty. Their former owners' religion was no longer attractive, as it was often used as the centrality of their slavery.⁹ The idea of being rescued from their

⁸ Ulysses Santamaria, "Blacks Jews: the Religious Challenge or Politics versus Religion," *European Journal of Sociology* 28, no. 2 (1987): p. 221, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003975600005488>.

⁹ Santamaria, 223.

painful and challenging lives by a savior or a *messiah* and then being chosen to accomplish great things was very alluring.¹⁰ This idea remained alluring to them even into the twentieth century.

In Jeffrey Melnick's *A Right to Sing the Blues: African Americans, Jews, and American Popular Song*, Paul Robeson said "I do not like to sing in French, German, or Italian.... I do not understand the psychology of these people, their history has no parallels with the history of my forebearers, who were slaves. The Jewish sigh and tear are close to me."¹¹

Churches began to emerge which encapsulated these "Old Testament" ideas. The first was *The Church of the Living God, the Pillar Ground of Truth for All Nations*, founded in 1886 by Prophet Frank S. Cherry in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Cherry taught that all Black people were descendants of the Biblical Israelites who were exiled to Babylonia around 70 CE. He said that they then migrated to Central and Western Africa.¹² Above all, Cherry believed that all true Jews were Black and white Jews were impostors. He justified this by quoting Revelations 3:9: "Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are not Jews and are not, but lie, behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet and learn that I have loved you."¹³

Cherry's group differed from traditional Christian churches in many ways. Cherry taught himself Hebrew and Yiddish. He kept Hebrew and Yiddish books next him as he preached, frequently teaching from the Talmud, and even organized Hebrew classes for the congregants.

¹⁰ Santamaria, 223.

¹¹ Jeffrey Paul Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues: African Americans, Jews, and American Popular Song* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001)..

¹² Tudor Parfitt, "The Emergence of Black Jews in the United States," *Black Jews in Africa and the Americas*, 2012, p. 88, <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674067905.c6>.

¹³ Janice W. Fernheimer, *Stepping into Zion: Hatzaad Harishon, Black Jews, and the Remaking of Jewish Identity* (Tuscaloosa, AL: Univ. of Alabama Press, 2014), pp. 10-11. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/34842>.

Many religious and ritual practices were drawn from Judaism. He forbade the eating of pork, told congregants to face the east when they prayed, insisted men wear yarmulkes, and encouraged women to imitate wearing tallises by donning blue and white capes with tassels at the end.¹⁴

Their worship included Muslim and Christian practices as well¹⁵

In 1896, Prophet William Saunders Crowdy established the *Church of God and Saints of Christ* (also known as *Temple Beth El*) in Lawrence, Kansas.¹⁶ Crowdy strongly believed that Black people were “the chosen people.” He called it a historical truth and divine ordination. He reportedly had a dream on September 13, 1892¹⁷ which revealed to him that Black people were descended from the ancient Israelites. Black people, to Crowdy, were descendants of the ten lost tribes of Israel who then lost their black pigmentation as a result of intermarriage with white people.¹⁸ He further believed that Jesus was a “good historical Jew,” but not their messiah, and certainly not part of any trinity. Crowdy’s movement focused on Moses and the Exodus, and their most significant holiday was Passover because it celebrated the deliverance of the Hebrews from slavery.¹⁹ Yet, he and his followers still practiced Baptism and celebrated a form of the Eucharist.²⁰

¹⁴ Tudor, 88-89.

¹⁵ Nora L. Rubel, “‘Chased out of Palestine’: Prophet Cherry’s Church of God and Early Black Judaism in the United States,” *The New Black Gods: Arthur Huff Fauset and the Study of African American Religions*, 2009, pp. 55-56,

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/297773809_Chased_out_of_palestine_Prophet_Cherry%27s_church_of_god_and_early_black_Judaisms_in_the_United_States.

¹⁶ Fernheimer, *Stepping Into Zion*, 10

¹⁷ “Prophet William S. Crowdy,” Church of God and Saints of Christ | Chief Rabbi Phillip E. McNeil, September 5, 2018, <https://www.cogasoc.org/leaders/prophet-william-s-crowdy/>.

¹⁸ J. David Bleich, “Black Jews: A Halakhic Perspective,” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Thought* 15, no. 1 (1975): p. 53, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23258489>.

¹⁹ Paritt, 90.

²⁰ Bleich, 63.

Among modern Israelite movements, Crowdy's church had, perhaps, the largest scope of influence internationally.²¹ J. Dorman writes:

In 1903, Crowdy sent emissaries abroad to South Africa and also to Cuba and the West Indies. His movement has continued to prosper. Today there are fifty odd tabernacles in the United States, mostly on the East Coast, seven in South Africa, and a few in the West Indies, Swaziland, Malawi, and Mozambique, and the large and quite influential black Jewish community in Rusape, Zimbabwe can be traced back directly to his movement.²²

In 1900, Warren Roberson founded a church in Virginia called *The Temple of the Gospel of the Kingdom*. Similar to Prophet Cherry's church, this group mandated that members were required to learn Yiddish and based their worship and ritual on Jewish practices. Roberson moved the congregation to Harlem in 1917, where he started a social cooperative called a "kingdom." He also opened a "kingdom" in Atlanta, purportedly referred to as a "baby farm," since a great deal of female members bore his children there. This Atlanta community collapsed due to Roberson being indicted on a charge of transporting women over state lines for immoral purposes.²³

Other Hebrew-Israelite groups began to appear in New York City at the turn of the 20th century. *Moorish Zionist Temple* was founded in 1899 by Rabbi Leon Richlieu. Of all Hebrew-Israelite congregations, Rabbi Richlieu's was the most halachic in nature. He referred to himself as a Rabbi and a Jew.²⁴ He claimed to be ordained by three mainstream rabbis and to have

²¹ Parfitt 89-90.

²² J. S. Dorman, "I Saw You Disappear with My Own Eyes': Hidden Transcripts of New York Black Israelite Bricolage," *Nova Religion: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 11, no. 1 (August 2007): Abstract.

²³ Parfitt, 92.

²⁴ Parfitt, 91.

studied in an Orthodox Yeshiva.²⁵ Unlike other spiritual leaders, he claimed a distinctly Ethiopian lineage.²⁶

In 1925, the *Jewish Daily Forward* did an interview with Richlieu where he stated that his studies and religious life were deeply rooted in traditional Orthodox Jewish observance. “We are familiar with the writings of Rashi and Rambam,” he said. “We observe every Jewish holiday... In every possible way, we try to live a truly Jewish life.” Richlieu’s congregants traced their routes directly to Africa: “[There] are a number of Yemen Jews... Moroccan Jews; Egyptian Jews; Abyssinian Jews, about 200 all told.” The reporter also speaks of his excellent Yiddish. Rabbi Richlieu and the Moorist Zionist Temple appear to be the first Hebrew-Israelite group to clearly label themselves as Jewish and Jews.²⁷

Arnold Josiah Ford became a well-known presence in New York City in the 1920s. Raised in Barbados and the son of a Christian evangelist leader, Ford became involved in Moorish Zionist Temple and began to take a leadership role. After the Temple became defunct in 1925, Ford declared himself a Rabbi, and took a faction to a new group he started called Beth B’nai Abraham Ethiopian Congregation and Hebrew School.²⁸ Like Richlieu, Ford was fluent in Yiddish, proficient in Hebrew, and studied Talmud with mainstream Jewish leaders. Unlike Richlieu, his worship and ritual incorporated magic, Kabbalah, Islam, Pentecostalism, and Freemasonry.²⁹ Most of the congregants were from Eastern Africa or South America.³⁰

²⁵ Bleich, 64.

²⁶ Roberta S. Gold, “The Black Jews of Harlem: Representation, Identity, and Race, 1920-1939,” *American Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (2003): p. 185, <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2003.0014>.

²⁷ Gold, 194.

²⁸ Bleich, 64.

²⁹ Parfitt, 92.

³⁰ Gold, 185.

Like many of these Black leaders who followed a non-Christian direction, Ford was enamored with the parallels of the plight of both Black and Jewish people. He writes, “They suffered side by side during the horrible years of the Christian Inquisition and the Christian slave-trade in Africa, the West Indies, and South America.”³¹ This parallel Ford drew between the plight of Black Americans and the plight of the Jewish people was one often drawn by other Hebrew-Israelite leaders of this time.

Ford did not refer to himself or his congregants as “Jews.” He associated the word “Jew” with white Europeans. He preferred “Hebrews,” in keeping with his conviction that he and his followers descended from the ancient Hebrews, specifically, Ethiopia. He felt that white European Jews had been converted to Judaism by Black people and held that Africans were the true Hebrews, but that this knowledge had been hidden over the centuries. Ford believed his forefathers were from Beta Israel (the Jews of Ethiopia). The decision to not be labeled as “Jewish” led to internal dissention as many members sought to be labeled and recognized with the label of Jew.³²

Ford was an accomplished multi-instrumentalist, having played violin, piano, string bass, and banjo. He became aligned with Marcus Garvey, becoming the musical director of the *Liberty Hall of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association*. In this position, he composed a piece called “Ethiopia, Thou Land of Our Fathers,” sung for the first time in 1919.³³ Yiddish newspapers dubbed it, “the Negro Hatikvah:”

Ethiopia, thou land of our fathers,

Thou land where the gods loved to be,

³¹ Bleich, 64.

³² Bleich, 64.

³³ Dominik Frühwirth, “‘Ethiopia, Thou Land of Our Fathers!’ From Ethiopianism to Pan-Africanism,” *Vienna Journal of African Studies* 20, no. 38 (2020): pp. 33-54, https://stichproben.univie.ac.at/fileadmin/user_upload/p_stichproben/Artikel/Nummer38/03_Text_on_Ethiopianism_FRUEHWIRTH_doi.pdf.

As storm cloud at night suddenly gathers
 Our armies come rushing to thee.
 We must in the fight be victorious
 When swords are thrust out to gleam;
 For us will the vic'try be glorious
 When led by the red, black and green.

Chorus:

Advance, advance to victory,
 Let Africa be free;
 Advance to meet the foe
 With the might
 Of the red, the black and the green.
 Ethiopia, the tyrant's falling,
 Who smote thee upon thy knees,
 An thy children are lustily calling
 From over the distant seas.
 Jehovah the Great One has heard us,
 Has noted our sighs and our tears,
 With His spirit of Love he has stirred us
 To be One through the coming years.

Chorus:

Advance, advance to victory,
 Let Africa be free;
 Advance to meet the foe
 With the might
 Of the red, the black and the green.
 O Jehovah, thou God of the ages
 Grant unto our sons that lead
 The wisdom Thou gave to Thy sages
 When Israel was sore in need.
 Thy voice thro' the dim past has spoken,
 Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hand,
 By Thee shall all fetters be broken,
 And Heav'n bless our dear fatherland.

Chorus:

Advance, advance to victory,
 Let Africa be free;
 Advance to meet the foe
 With the might
 Of the red, the black and the green.³⁴

Ford fully supported Garvey's movement called "Back to Africa" and became obsessed with the idea of returning to Ethiopia and establishing a strong Jewish colony. In 1930, he took three members of his congregation to Ethiopia, bought 800 acres of land, created a school in Addis Ababa, and began to live and teach there. Ten more congregants joined him by 1933.

However, Beta Israel was not as receptive to him as he would have liked. Ford's religion varied from the Ethiopians' religion in serious ways, particularly because their language of prayer was in Ge'ez, not Hebrew, which he insisted they learn. For this reason, they rejected his gift of a Torah scroll which he had brought for them to use. Ford valued the Talmud and other post-Second Temple traditions and holidays, which they did not. Undeterred, Ford continued to

³⁴ "The WhirlWind Is Upon US," The Universal Ethiopian Anthem (By... - The WhirlWind is Upon US, January 15, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/5207625313927>

35/posts/the-universal-ethiopian-anthem-by-burrell-and-fordethiopia-thou-land-of-our-fath/559985860803735/.

promote his brand of the religion in Ethiopia, even going so far as to play his music at the coronation of Emperor Haile Selassie and then continuing to play regularly in his court.

In the end, however, Ford's efforts to make a strong impression did not result in great change in Beta Israel and his followers did not leave a noticeable footprint. Ford died of a heart attack at age 58, during the Italian invasion of Ethiopia.³⁵ All of 60 congregants had followed him to Ethiopia.³⁶ His congregation back in New York, Beth B'nai Abraham, would collapse in 1930 due to his lack of leadership, as well as serious financial issues.³⁷

Before Ford's death, he left Beth B'nai Abraham to his student, Wentworth A. Matthew, to whom he also sent ordination papers in 1929.³⁸ This was ten years after Matthew had founded his own congregation, The Commandment Keepers Congregation (also known as the Royal Order of Ethiopian Hebrews). The Commandment Keepers were noted for observing Judaism in a form that closely mirrored that of mainstream Judaic practices in the United States.³⁹ Like others, Matthew asserted that he and his congregation were of Jewish Ethiopian ancestry, writing in his autobiography that he was born "in a small Falasha village" in Lagos (Nigeria) and was the grandson of a "very famous Falasha preacher." Tudor Parfitt theorizes that he was probably born in a Beta Israeli outpost on St. Kitts (an island in the West Indies), rather than in Lagos.⁴⁰

Matthew was born into the Christian faith, but later left Christianity. "I got tired of Christianity," he said. "Got the spirit—it wasn't right. Just found this by myself because I wanted Hebrew. Like I was reaching out and discovered this."⁴¹ After a short-lived career as boxer and

³⁵ Parfitt, 93.

³⁶ Gold, 186.

³⁷ Bleich, 64.

³⁸ Fernheimer, 11.

³⁹ Fernheimer, 11.

⁴⁰ Parfitt, 94.

⁴¹ Bleich, 65.

wrestler,⁴² Matthew arrived in Harlem in 1913, and soon after met Arnold Ford. He then hired a Jewish man to tutor him in Hebrew, Jewish practices, and Yiddish.⁴³ Matthew founded the Ethiopian Hebrew Rabbinical College in 1925. In 1970, it was renamed the Israelite Rabbinical Academy. By all accounts, Matthew was a charismatic, popular, and respected leader.⁴⁴

Hebrew-Israelite congregations were being founded across the United States throughout the 20th century, most prominently in Brooklyn, Philadelphia, and Washington DC. After New York, Chicago was the second city to gain a large multi-congregational presence. There are accounts of Hebrew-Israelites preaching in Chicago as early as 1913. In 1915, the Ethiopian Hebrew Association was the first organized Hebrew Israelite community to develop in Chicago. They named themselves “The International Peace and Brotherly Love Movement.” They claimed to have derived from Abyssinia (an ancient name for Beta Israel). Unlike other Hebrew Israelite communities, they preferred to be called a “movement,” not a “synagogue.” They strove to offer lectures and programs to educate the white Jewish community about Abyssinia and the Abyssinian culture. They attempted to convince white Jews that the “real Jews” were Black.⁴⁵ In 1967, the United Leadership Council of Hebrew Israelites (ULCHI) developed as a body formed to represent the, at that time, ten existing congregations of Hebrew Israelite Congregations in the Chicagoland area.⁴⁶ The ULCHI worked with white Jewish communities to form organizations such as Hatza’ad Harishon, an educational organization that “created opportunities for Black Jews to become more closely affiliated with mainstream Judaism and for

⁴² Parfitt, 94.

⁴³ Bleich, 67.

⁴⁴ Anthony B. Pinn, *African American Religious Cultures* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2009), pp. 171-172.

⁴⁵ Parfitt, 86.

⁴⁶ Santamaria, 226.

mainstream Judaism to become more open and receptive to Black Jews”. Hatza’ad Harishon did extensive work to bring the two communities together, including social trips around the country to visit American Kibbutzim, Jewish summer camps, and Zionist organizations. The work of the ULCHI was furthered by The Chicago Fellowship of Racial Jews, who had the same goals of bridging the two communities. An article in the New York Times quoted Ester Bibbins, the president of Hatza’ad Harishon, saying “We are proud to be both black and Jewish.”⁴⁷

Today, Hebrew-Israelite communities are in every major city in the US. Of these, Crowdy’s Church of God and Saints of Christ is still functioning as a congregation, now based in Suffolk, VA and led by Chief Rabbi Phillip E. McNeil. Their practices have shifted somewhat over the years. as they now integrate Jesus’ teachings and the New Testament into their mostly-English liturgical rites. With regard to Judaism, they say that “Judaism is for us neither a race nor a culture, but it is a manner of believing, a tried-and-true means through which love of, and faith in God is channeled into upright living.” Their spiritual leadership has consisted of Bishops, Elders, and since 1931, Rabbis (and all are men). Their lay leadership consists of those with the title of Saints, Sisters, and Brothers. They have a vibrant YouTube presence which features many of their services, sermons, and other material.⁴⁸

Beth Shalom B’nai Zaken Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation (which started as the Ethiopian Hebrew Association, as mentioned earlier) continues to thrive in Chicago today as Chicagoland’s largest Hebrew-Israelite congregation. It led by Rabbi Capers Shmuel Funnye, who is the chief rabbi of the International Israelite Board of Rabbis, which is the main rabbinical body of the Hebrew-Israelite world.

⁴⁷ Santamaria, 226.

⁴⁸ “Church of God and Saints of Christ,” <http://youtu.be/GEP-8lFTKKg>.
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZ5nDlGbJGa90CgluEcolrQ>

Capers C. Funnye Jr. is a unique and significant figure in modern-day Hebrew-Israelite culture. Capers C. Funnye Jr. was born in South Carolina in 1952 and raised in a Christian home on the South Side of Chicago. His paternal relatives are Gullahs from the barrier islands off Charleston, South Carolina. During a summer job in Chicago, friends introduced Funnye to Rabbi Robert Devine, the spiritual leader of The House of Israel Congregation. Devine preached that Africans were the true descendants of the biblical Hebrews, and that Jesus was a black man. This message appealed to Funnye and he became a member of the movement, eventually converting to this movement's Judaism and becoming a Rabbi. Funnye sought to do more outreach into a wider community of Judaism, and thus enrolled at the Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies in Chicago, where he received a bachelor's degree in Judaic Studies.

What sets Funnye apart from all other rabbis in the Hebrew-Israelite community is that he underwent a second conversion in 1985, this one certified by the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. "I didn't want anyone to interpret my conversion as meaning I thought they weren't Jewish enough," he said. "I explained that if I was going to do the kind of outreach I wanted, European Jews had to feel that I was their brother." However, he maintains, "I'm still a Black Israelite. A halakhic conversion wasn't going to take away any of my blackness."⁴⁹

After this second conversion, Funnye taught Hebrew and Jewish subjects at Chicagoland congregations and worked for the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, a group dedicated to fighting poverty, racism and anti-Semitism in the city. He has sent his four children to Jewish day schools. In 1997, he became a member of the Chicago Board of Rabbis. Rabbi Michael Balinsky, the executive vice president of the Chicago Board, says Funnye makes a conscientious effort "to

⁴⁹ Zev Chafets, "Obama's Rabbi," *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, April 2, 2009), <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/05/magazine/05rabbi-t.html>.

play an active role in the mainstream Jewish community without losing his Black Hebrew tradition. He's taken a leadership role for the Jewish community on civil rights issues and outreach to Hispanics and Muslims.”^{50 51}

ETHNICITY FOR HEBREW-ISRAELITES

Ethnic patterns or ethnic legitimacy is a complicated topic in the discussion of Hebrew-Israelites. If one asked a Jewish white person to prove that he was Jewish, he would simply turn to genealogical records. He'd find a long trail of B'nei Mitzvah photos, Jewish wedding photos, Jewish wedding certificates, Jewish death certificates, and he might have heirlooms. Yet unless that person were planning to make aliyah to Israel, a Jewish white person would rarely have a need to prove his Jewish lineage. He knows he's Jewish because his family tells him he's Jewish. (He may likely even have a common Ashkenazic last name.) A Jewish white person effortlessly claims Judaism and he is believed.

For Hebrew-Israelites, claiming to be Jewish based on ethnic background or lineage is quite different. Early leaders such as Arnold Ford or Prophet Frank Cherry commonly held that there was no need to prove Jewish lineage; being Black meant that one had ancient Israelite ancestry. It was not a provable fact, but a steadfast belief. This is comparable to how all Jews believe that they are Jewish—simply from the steadfast knowledge that their ancestors are Jewish. No Jew knows with complete assurance that they are Jewish. The most pure Jewish bloodlines are “Jewish” only because they *say* that they're Jewish. Genetic testing can tell me that my DNA is “Ashkenazi Jew,” but who is to say that that pool of DNA is legitimately

⁵⁰ Zev Chafets, “Obama's Rabbi.”

⁵¹ Capers is first cousin to US First Lady Michelle Obama.

derived from the ancient Hebrews? There is the Y-chromosomal Aaron gene, which identifies the common DNA strand found in Jews called the kohanim, but again, that is a strain of DNA that is only assumed to be linked to the ancient Hebrews. Unless we find the remains of an actual ancient Hebrew, all we know is that this is the DNA found in most Jews that *we believe* to be from the ancient Hebrews.

Many Hebrew-Israelites believe that they are Ethiopian and/or are descendants from Beta Israel. What's challenging for many mainstream Jews to understand is that these people do not need to be able to trace their lineage to ancient "legitimate" Jews. Having "belief" means everything. Every mainstream Jew who claims Jewish ancestry believes that they are descendants from the ancient Hebrews – but this proof cannot possibly exist. This is exactly the same as a Hebrew Israelite. That belief is everything that matters.

Solomonic ancestry is a term used to describe Black people who claim to be Jewish as a result of their descendancy from the ancient King Solomon. Wentworth Matthew has stated:

The black man ... is a direct lineal descendant of Abraham. ... Jacob's descendant, Solomon, mated with the Queen of Sheba, who returned to Africa, where she bore him a son, known in Biblical history as [King] Menelik I. From Menelik sprang a line of kings who ruled continuously in Ethiopia for three- thousand-odd years. There has been an unbroken succession ... to ... Haile Selassie [Mentioned early in the tale of Ford's immigration to Ethiopia]... Hence, all genuine Jews are black men."⁵²

Being an American Black person in itself played a role in the formation of the Hebrew Israelites movement. As mentioned earlier, Christianity was the religion of the oppressors of whom Black people were desperately forging their way away from. To embrace a Jewish-centered faith was in itself a rebellion. Being a Hebrew-Israelite was taking back religion and reclaiming it. Ulysses Santamaria writes, "[Hebrew-Israelites] claim a racial religion, race and

⁵² Gold, 186.

religion being tightly connected, and intertwined with race determining religion, and religion becoming one of the criteria for race.”⁵³ Author James Landing was reticent to call the Hebrew-Israelite religion Judaism. He describes the movement as a “black response to black life,” as a way of saying that the Hebrew-Israelites are unique unto themselves, as opposed to something that grew out of mainstream Judaism.⁵⁴

Jewish ethnicity is complicated because of the meaning that is assigned to it. Does one need to be genetically linked to the ancient Hebrews to be Jewish? Does there need to be a way to prove it? As we examine the stories of Jewish Black chazzanim and explore whether these leaders were even Jewish, a broader question arises: Are Jews a race, or are Jews a people?

CHAZZANIM

RABBI ELIEZER BROOKS

Rabbi/Chazzan Eliezer Brooks was born in Colon, Panama in 1924 of Moroccan Jewish descent. His great-grandfather had been a leader in a Jewish community in Brazil and his parents emigrated to Panama from the West Indies. Brooks found passage to the United States by getting a job as a baker aboard a U.S. Army hospital ship called “The Republic” in 1945 at the age of 21.⁵⁵ The captain of the ship, charmed by how Brooks would sing for the crew “Danny Boy” and other popular songs, sponsored his successful application for American citizenship.

⁵³ Santamaria, 228.

⁵⁴ Fernheimer, 12.

⁵⁵ Amy Finnerty, “Outnumbered: Standing Out at Work,” *The New York Times Magazine*, July 16, 2020, sec. 6, p. 67.

Once settled, Brooks enrolled in the City University of New York, graduating with a bachelor's degree in Psychology. He found work as a teacher, specializing in working with children with disabilities. His foray into professional Jewish leadership was through a Hebrew-Israelite congregation, Rabbi Matthew's Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation. Having made a positive impression, Matthew asked Brooks to be the chazzan for the congregation. Brooks famously sang as a representative of the community at a benefit concert for the mainstream community where he performed Leo Low's "A Dudele" to warm acclamation. In 1960, at the age of 36, he decided to pursue formal Cantorial training, enrolling at Yeshiva University's Cantorial Institute and studying with musicologist Dr. Carl Adler.⁵⁶

Brooks founded Congregation Boneh Y'rushalayim in the Bronx on May 3, 1962. "I realized that if I was going to help the dark-complexioned Jewish people," said Brooks, "I would have to set up my own curriculum of studies."⁵⁷ Congregation Boneh Y'rushalayim was described as "a Bronx Synagogue whose members are Negroes," according to a 1963 article in *The Jewish Telegraphic Agency* (where he is called "an Ethiopian Jew," although, he has not self-identified as such).⁵⁸ The congregation had a relationship with mainstream Judaism, as children from Congregation Boneh Y'rushalayim were invited to participate in the citywide Jewish Dance Festival, as well as march in the first Salute to Israel Parade in New York City. For

⁵⁶ George Kalinsky, *Rabbis: The Many Faces of Judaism* (New York, NY: Universe Publishing, 2002).

⁵⁷ Kalinsky.

⁵⁸ "N.Y. Congregation Engages Ethiopian Cantor; Served in Negro Synagogue," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, July 1, 1963, Vol. 123 edition, p. 4.

reasons that are unclear, the congregation is listed on the directory of *American Sephardi Federation* congregations.⁵⁹ As of this writing, the congregation appears to be defunct.

In regard to Brooks' religious observance and lifestyle, he says, "In my own life, I lived Jewish. Didn't eat pig, went to synagogue." He married Miriam Martinez in 1967, "a Puerto Rican woman" as he describes her. "Her parents didn't practice any religion, but they were probably Jews," he says. He also mentions that his daughter became Lubavitch.⁶⁰

In 1972, at the age of 48, he became ordained as a Rabbi from Beyt HaMidrash L'Rabonim in Brooklyn, where he had racial challenges. "It was very difficult," he wrote. "I had more difficulty in Brooklyn from the non-Jews than from the Jews. The Hispanic people wrote 'Jew' on my door... On the surface, it may seem like society's changed, but you know, and I know, it remains the same."⁶¹ As a student at Yeshiva University, he says, "Some students showed their dislike, but by and large, most people accepted me as I am."⁶²

Brooks recounts other instances of feeling ostracized:

When I met people at Jewish functions—and especially when I was introduced as 'Cantor Eliezer Brooks'—people would often react with a look of astonishment and say something like, 'How interesting.' After a while, I became afraid to be introduced, but I overcame that feeling. I came to understand that that was the price I had to pay—and I paid it.⁶³

Brooks maintained a relatively low profile in his life and not much has been written or researched about him. Brooks was featured George Kalinsky's 2002 book "The Rabbis—The Many Faces of Judaism." At the time, Brooks stated that he was currently working as a Rabbi,

⁵⁹ "Sephardic Congregations United States of America," SEPHARDIC CONGREGATIONS UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, accessed January 18, 2021, http://americansephardifederation.com/syn_us.html.

⁶⁰ Finnerty.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Kalinsky.

⁶³ Ibid.

and was also the Cantor of Brotherhood Synagogue in New York City. “As a cantor, I am the messenger of the congregation in prayer. As a Rabbi, I am something of a social worker to my community.” Brooks is quite possibly the first Jewish Black American to have a job working regularly on Shabbatot in the role of a chazzan.

THOMAS LARUE

Thomas Jones LaRue was a talented and well-known performer of chazzanut and Yiddish song in the 1920s in Yiddish vaudeville. Many details about Thomas LaRue’s life have been lost to history; however, we know that he was born in Newark, New Jersey around the turn of the 20th century. LaRue’s Jewish faith was due to his mother’s discovery of Judaism when she was an adult. LaRue recalled that his mother experienced great kindness from white Jewish women: “Gradually, her friendship with them led her to their religious beliefs and she accepted them as her guide in life.”⁶⁴ It is unlikely that she officially converted, but it is clear that she adapted a great respect and affinity for Judaism.

LaRue’s mother had her son and daughter educated in the Newark Talmud Torah educational system—a highly regarded Jewish religious school at the time. LaRue flourished there. “I liked to chant the psalms, which have such a religious fascination for me,” LaRue recalled.⁶⁵ In recent years, musicologist and Yiddish specialist Henry Sapoznik has unearthed a great deal of information on Thomas LaRue (as well as several other revolutionary Jewish Black chazzanim). Sapoznik discovered this anecdote:

⁶⁴ Lucien H. White, “Thos. Jones LaRue, Newark, World's Only Negro Cantor,” *The New York Age*, April 8, 1922, p. 5, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/39623034/>.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

[During a] Sabbath service he attended as a young boy... the cantor was taken ill, so LaRue quickly put on a prayer shawl and, before the congregation could orient itself, took to the lectern and in his soprano voice began to intone the prayers. The congregation was ready to storm the podium to take him down, but he sang with such great feeling that they remained standing and began praying.⁶⁶

In 1921, LaRue was discovered by a concert manager who offered him the opportunity to tour with the Yiddish vaudeville circuit. In 1922, producers Goldberg and Jacobs hired him for a role in their play *Dos Khupe Kleyd* (The Wedding Dress) at the Lenox Theater in Harlem. LaRue was very prominently featured and had an entire sequence constructed around him. The billing for the show read:

A giant concert by the world-renowned Black Cantor with a large Newark-based choir under the leadership of the renowned Jewish choir director Joseph Germansky. LaRue will astound Harlem with his amazing singing of the finest compositions from R' Yossele Rosenblatt, Gershon Sirota and Kwartin.⁶⁷

Goldberg and Jacobs cast LaRue in their next play *Yente Telebende*, which once again featured LaRue prominently, but this time allowed LaRue complete artistic control of his featured segment. The show was not only well-attended (even more so than *Dos Khupe Kleyd*), but was a critical success. Z. Karnblit of *Der Morgn Zhurnal* (The Morning Journal) wrote: “There he was: a slender, Black youth in a black frock coat and vest under which he wore a crisp white shirt, who came out singing a Yiddish song, a song beginning even before he stepped out on stage. I could not believe my eyes or ears.”⁶⁸

LaRue ending his segment with with “Eili, Eili,” Karnblit continued:

When I hear at a concert that someone will sing Eli, Eli — it could be the best singer in the world — I run in the opposite...This, however, was a new Eli, Eli by a Black cantor which was so very heartfelt, and which drew so deeply from Jewish martyrdom, the Jewish cry, begging God why he has forsaken him, and producing from this song what

⁶⁶ Henry Sapoznik, “Thomas La Rue Jones: The Black Cantor,” [henrysapoznik.com](https://www.henrysapoznik.com/post/thomas-la-rue-jones-the-black-cantor), August 7, 2020, <https://www.henrysapoznik.com/post/thomas-la-rue-jones-the-black-cantor>.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

even the greatest opera singers could not. Every person in the theater was transfixed by the Black cantor's powerful poetic harmony.

The New York Age reported that on April 5, 1922, LaRue gave a benefit concert, singing cantorial works by Yossele Rosenblatt, Gershon Sirota, and Zavel Kwartin. He was supported by a choir. The concert was well-advertised and drew an audience of the largest names in the musical and theatrical world, including Rosenblatt himself.⁶⁹ Curiously, the choir was a Newark-based choir, possibly at LaRue's request.

LaRue's fame and success grew throughout the 1920s. He was featured in several radio programs, such as in 1923 when WOR in Newark featured him in a program of Yiddish, Russian, and cantorial music.⁷⁰ A few years later, WPAP in New Jersey featured LaRue in a program run by the Association of Reform Rabbis.⁷¹

In 1923, LaRue made his first and only existing recording (on Okeh Records). This record featured the Yiddish song "Misratzeh Berach'mim" and "Yidele, Farlir Nit Dayn Hoffnung." The former is a prayer sung during the morning weekday service during tachanun. Sapoznik writes about the recording:

LaRue is more a singer than a cantor (he misses a series of subtle tonalities which keep him from being able to melismatically explore more fully the modal sinews of the composition.) Yet, LaRue seems to have judiciously hand-picked only a precious few techniques of other cantors (Rosenblatt's signature glissandos into and away from key melodic notes, for example).⁷²

"Yidele, Farlir Nit Dayn Hoffnung" was composed by Samuel Secunda (later known by Sholom Secunda) and words by Isidor Lash. This song discusses the plight of the pogroms

⁶⁹ White.

⁷⁰ "Tomorrow's Radio Programs," *Asbury Park Press*, July 13, 1923, p. 17, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/144202577/>.

⁷¹ Sapoznik, "Thomas La Rue Jones: The Black Cantor."

⁷² Ibid.

during the 19th and early 20th century in eastern Europe. The song examines how God promised the Jewish people prosperity, freedom, and liberty, but that has not happened:

[The gentiles] Make Jewish blood gush as if from a spout.
His life is embittered, a constant ordeal.
As Gentiles take away all they can steal.
The monster, will slay your children his prey...

However, the song ends with a message of hope:

Don't give up hope yet, Mr. Jew
One day it will all work out for you
Pharaoh, Haman and Amolek taught a bitter lesson
But those days are through
Czar Nikolai, has met his destiny
And from Poland, you'll be free
Don't give up hope yet, Mr. Jew.⁷³

It is unlikely that this song was sung arbitrarily. It is possible that LaRue specifically chose this song as it related to his experience not only as a Jew, but as a Black man. The parallels of the persecution and discrimination of both groups of people, most likely allowed him to find a connection to the song. Dick Spottswood, a discographer involved in the unearthing of this record, argues that because Black artists did not have the freedom to profess injustices so publicly in their music. He said that LaRue “makes assertions in Yiddish that he couldn't (in English) make as a black man.”⁷⁴ Sapoznik's review of LaRue's performance is very positive: “LaRue's performances are passionate and present, buoyed by his strong command of the languages and his sure touch of familiar cantorial tonalities imbuing his singing with a powerful and instant veracity.”⁷⁵

⁷³ Henry Sapoznik, “Okeh 14079: The 1923 Thomas LaRue Recording,” [henrysapoznik.com](https://www.henrysapoznik.com/post/okeh-14079-the-1923-thomas-larue-recording), August 16, 2020, <https://www.henrysapoznik.com/post/okeh-14079-the-1923-thomas-larue-recording>.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

LaRue continued to perform in Vaudeville throughout New York City throughout the decade. He performed in the Loews and Keith circuit in neighborhoods that had higher Jewish populations. In Yiddish film theaters (what are known as the lower rung 50-50 vaudeville houses), LaRue would sing short concerts between screenings of films. In the June 1928 issue of *Variety*, it mentioned that LaRue's engagement at the Loews Mount Morris vaudeville house was being extended.⁷⁶

In 1930, he went on a performance tour of Europe and Africa, singing in Israel, Germany, Egypt, and Poland. For his Warsaw performance, audiences were so skeptical of his legitimacy, a fake origin story was concocted for LaRue. He was rebranded "Toyve Ha'Cohen." His origin story of growing up in Newark to a single mother was no more. Sapoznik researched the following biography of LaRue during this tour:

...a Jew descended from generations of the Ten Lost Tribes in the city of Bet El Set between Abyssinia and Arabia," (*Republika Lodz*, November 26) [and another biography of him as] "...a *Shabtis*, [a descendant of the followers of the 17th century false messiah, Shabbtai Zvi] with a father who was a healer and made herbal elixirs as did Toyve himself in New York." (*Dos Naye Lebn*, Bialystock October 24)⁷⁷

Sapoznik further reports:

In *Unzer Grodner Express*, November 21, Ha'Cohen's father was "...named Petrosi, a very cultured man who was a high official in local Abyssinian government, while his mother Alia, died when he was young." And in order to explain (however improbably) LaRue's New Jersey residence, *Unzer Grodner Moment Express* on November 21 noted that his father "...wanted him to be a fully realized Jew, so he was sent to study with a Russian rabbi in Newark."⁷⁸

In Warsaw, Sapoznik notes, he experienced overt racial aggression:

⁷⁶ Sapoznik, "Thomas La Rue Jones: The Black Cantor."

⁷⁷ Henry Sapoznik, "How European Jews Saw the African-American Cantor: The 1930 Toyve Ha'Cohen Tour," [henrysapoznik.com](https://www.henrysapoznik.com/post/how-european-jews-saw-the-african-american-cantor-the-1930-toyve-ha-cohen-tour), August 7, 2020, <https://www.henrysapoznik.com/post/how-european-jews-saw-the-african-american-cantor-the-1930-toyve-ha-cohen-tour>.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

When LaRue stepped onto the stage, Conservatory Hall was largely empty but for some comped guests, a handful of intrepid curious and the ubiquitous confrontational hecklers in the gallery (at one point, they derisively called out “Sing ‘Sonny Boy!’” referring to the Al Jolson hit of the previous season.)⁷⁹

To add salt to the wound, there was a cartoon on the *Unzer Express* humor page drawing LaRue playing the organ, singing from a prayerbook that is upside-down—implying that LaRue could not read Hebrew.⁸⁰

However, Warsaw represented the minority. European and Israeli audiences largely appreciated LaRue’s concerts. In Bialystock, Poland, *Dos Naye Leben* praised LaRue greatly and sought to disseminate the crude reviews in Warsaw:

...He is a genial young man of not just looks but his speech makes it seem as if the waters of the Jewish Diaspora have cascaded down upon him... True, his cantorial prayers sound as if he learned them off phonograph records and lack the burning immediacy of traditional cantorial improvisation, but the same can be said for a hundred percent of modern cantors even those who are currently practicing.⁸¹

This review was made of his October 29, 1930 performance:

...The audience gave him several standing ovations not allowing him to go on with the rest of the concert.... He is an unrivaled master worthy of the kind of praise heaped upon opera singers. In bestowing sincerity, honesty and artistic heart in each of his songs, you experience his true artistry.⁸²

LaRue’s life after this has not been well-documented. The last mention of Thomas LaRue is an advertisement for the annual Chanukah concert at Congregation Ahavath Zion in Newark on December 6, 1953. Unfortunately, we do not know fundamental information on LaRue, including his birth and death date, if he married, and if he had children. It is also not clear if LaRue ever formally converted to Judaism (or felt he needed to). Sapoznik summarizes LaRue in

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

this apt statement: “LaRue inhabited a curious niche within the Jewish community, an uneasy mix of being apart from and a part of it.”⁸³

LaRue was not the only Jewish Black person singing chazzanut during this time period. His contemporary was a woman who had her own unique, yet, enigmatic story.

GOLDYE STEINER

Goldye Mae Steiner was a singer of cantorial and Jewish folk music during the era of Yiddish theater in the 1920s. According the newspapers, she was said have been born in 1897 to the community called “Sheba of Gza [*sic*],” a tribe of Jewish people native to Ethiopia. The newspaper reported that a tribal chief, Manalic LL, heard her singing at the mines in Ethiopia and was so impressed with her singing, he paid for her to travel to Milan, Italy, where she studied formal singing in music conservatories. After her training was complete, she performed in Paris, Berlin, and her native Ethiopia before traveling to the United States in 1925. Whether she came to the United States by fame or by her own will is not clear.⁸⁴ ⁸⁵ One newspaper, *The Morning Call* of Allentown, PA, noted that “The lofty heights that she has reached in her art is supplemented by the fact that she sings in six languages, her repertoire including Jewish, German, French, Italian, Abyssinian and English.”⁸⁶

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Steiner’s origin story has not been substantiated. Information in this paragraph derives from unscholarly sources.

⁸⁵ “Noted African Soprano to Appear at the Lyric,” *The Morning Call*, April 10, 1925, p. 13, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/281199771/>.

⁸⁶ “Goldye, The Colored Cantor,” *The Jewish Criterion* 65, no. 17 (March 6, 1925): p. 31, http://doi.library.cmu.edu/10.1184/pmc/CRI/CRI_1925_065_017_03061925.

In 1925, Steiner toured in the Yiddish production of *Where is My Mother* throughout the northeastern United States, billed as “Madame Goldye.” In 1926, she was billed under the name, Goldye M. Steiner, for her role in “Lulu Belle” on Broadway, dubiously described as “a mixed race Carmen in Harlem.”⁸⁷

In 1928, Steiner performed in the Broadway play “him” [*sic*] written by e.e. cummings [*sic*] at Provincetown Playhouse. *The Daily News* said, “Miss Steiner sang the Frankie and Johnnie Legend with excellent effect.”⁸⁸ The *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* said: “The best scene is one in which Goldye Steiner and a corps of assistants sing and dance ‘Frankie and Johnnie’ with telling effect.”⁸⁹

In October 1928, Steiner starred in *The Daughter of a Lost Tribe* written by Dr. S. Brodye. “The show is described as “Based on life in Africa... and scenes in Abyssinia form the background for the plot,” wrote the *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*. The paper continued: “Madame Goldye, said to be the only colored cantores in the world, has enjoyed music success in Europe and America.”⁹⁰ ⁹¹ The show was rumored to be based on Steiner’s own life.⁹²

After April 2, 1929, when Steiner sang at a benefit for the Hebrew Charity Club in Meriden, CT,⁹³ her name does not appear again in newspapers until 1933. Many newspapers

⁸⁷ Henry Sapoznik, “Goldye, Di Shvartze Khaznte/the Black Woman Cantor,” Henry Sapoznik, August 25, 2020, <https://www.henrysapoznik.com/post/goldye-di-shvartze-khaznte-the-black-woman-cantor>.

⁸⁸ *Daily News*, April 19, 1928, pp. 36-37, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/412437161/>.

⁸⁹ Clifford Gessler, “Players and Plays on Mainland Boards,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, June 23, 1928, p. 12, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/275012492>.

⁹⁰ “Family Theater Will Have African Singer,” *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, October 27, 1928, p. 23, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/135313966/>.

⁹¹ Curiously, the headline for this article reads “Family Theater Will Have African Singer,” as if Steiner’s African status makes a statement on a “Family Theater.”

⁹² Sapoznik “Goldye, Di Shvartze Khaznte/the Black woman Cantor.”

⁹³ “Hebrew Charity Club Holds Benefit Tonight,” *Meriden Record*, April 2, 1929, p. 11, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/676203643/>.

around the country published a singular human-interest story of a unique New York City Easter service. It was conducted by the well-known conductor, Tom Noonan, which featured a unique singer:

Behind Tom Noonan on the stage they saw a jazz orchestra, a volunteer choir, a portly Negress, a Japanese, a Jew, three cornet players... The Negress turned out to be Goldye Mae Steiner,⁹⁴ student of Hebrew and the only colored woman cantor in America. She sang the great Jewish lament then sat down and joined lustily in "Onward Christian Soldiers."⁹⁵

This was the beginning of Steiner singing in Noonan's Sunday afternoon program "Cathedral of the Underworld." Noonan frequently introduced Jewish holiday segments and Steiner was his Jewish music singer. This event would appear in the broadcast listings of Yiddish newspapers.⁹⁶

In 1934, Steiner gave a recital of Jewish songs at Second Baptist Church in Long Branch, NJ.⁹⁷

Steiner's last documented performance is in May 1938, when she sang at a benefit at the Brooklyn Academy of Music for the civil rights organization *The Urban League*. Reportedly, Steiner sang alongside Duke Ellington and Fats Waller. Since then, there has not been mention of Steiner in newspapers or theater billings. Saponzik found a 1942 New York phone listing of Goldye M. Steiner who lived on Morningside Avenue in Harlem.⁹⁸ Like Thomas LaRue, history has left us with large holes in Steiner's true origins. Records do not clearly indicate her dates of birth or death, if she married or if she had children.

⁹⁴ Note here that her name now included a middle name of "Mae"

⁹⁵ Paul Harrison, "The Day in New York," *The Muncie Evening Press*, April 20, 1933, p. 3, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/249186341/>.

⁹⁶ Saponzik "Goldye, Di Shvartze Khaznte/the Black woman Cantor."

⁹⁷ "Miss Steiner to Sing," *The Daily Record*, April 28, 1934, p. 3, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/497423530/>.

⁹⁸ Saponzik "Goldye, Di Shvartze Khaznte/the Black woman Cantor."

Brooks, LaRue, and Steiner were among this unique and controversial group of Jews who boldly entered a niche field, knowing that their legitimacy would be heavily scrutinized. As articles about them arise and research unearths their stories, we see that they have paved the way for the current generation of Jewish Black singers to step into the limelight.

CONTEMPORARY MUSICIANS

JOSHUA NELSON

Joshua Nelson (not to be confused with the Jewish white musician Josh Nelson) has created a unique brand of Jewish music called “Kosher Gospel.” While Nelson’s name is famously known and sought-after throughout the United States for his Jewish music performances in synagogues and other Jewish spaces, Nelson is famously known outside of Judaism for his authentic gospel performances.

Nelson was born on September 22, 1973⁹⁹ at St. Michael’s Medical Center in Newark, NJ.¹⁰⁰ The third of six children, he grew-up in a multi-generational home on Scotland Road¹⁰¹ in East Orange, NJ, and was raised by his mother, stepfather, and grandparents. His mother was adopted by his grandparents. She was the offspring of a white Romanian Jewish mother and a Black father. Nelson’s grandparents were Jewish and raised him as such. “I learned more about Judaism from my grandmother taking care of my mother than anything else,” Nelson says. “They

⁹⁹ Joshua Nelson in discussion with the author, January 8, 2021.

¹⁰⁰ Rema Rahman, “Singer Joshua Nelson Blends His Jewish and Christian Traditions,” *New Jersey Monthly*, February 4, 2008, <https://njmonthly.com/articles/jersey-living/kosher-gospel/>.

¹⁰¹ Robert Wiener, “Nelson’s Jewish Music Rooted in Black Church,” *New Jersey Jewish News*, January 17, 2018, <https://njewishnews.timesofisrael.com/nelsons-jewish-music-rooted-in-black-church/>.

let us explore and come to our own being—it was a very heavy Jewish identity... I wanted to know all the synagogues in my community, to be able to pray in every one of them.” He reports that he wore his yarmulke daily. “Growing up as a Jew, I knew I was Black, but we were really more Jewish,” he recalls. “We infused African-American culture with our Judaism.”¹⁰²

As a child, for High Holy Days and special services, Nelson traveled to Brooklyn, NY to attend an Ethiopian congregation, the Congregation of the House of Israel.¹⁰³ “We had a super, super Jewish identity as kids,” Nelson said. “My family made sure of it. We were always explaining ourselves. We didn’t want our Jewishness to fall through the cracks.”¹⁰⁴

He walked to Temple Sharey Tefilo-Israel in South Orange each Saturday to attend services and Hebrew school. His mother took pride in the fact that the congregation’s rabbi, Rabbi Harvey Goldman, religious leader from 1985-1998, had marched with Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.¹⁰⁵

Although devoutly Jewish, the course of Nelson’s life took a turn when he was eight years old and he found one of his grandmother’s albums of Mahalia Jackson. “I found an album of Mahalia Jackson music, and it stunned me. I’d never heard a sound like that or phrasing like that! I’d listen to that album every day.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Amy Klein, “Joshua Nelson,” *Hadassah Magazine*, February 17, 2015, <https://www.hadassahmagazine.org/2015/02/17/joshua-nelson/>.

¹⁰³ Rahman.

¹⁰⁴ Tammy La Gorce, “He’s Getting Over,” *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, January 15, 2006), <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/15/nyregion/in-person-hes-getting-over.html>.

¹⁰⁵ Wiener.

¹⁰⁶ Sally Friedman, “Joshua Nelson Gives a Performance like No Other at Cherry Hill Synagogue,” *Courier Post* (CHL, March 23, 2014), <https://www.courierpostonline.com/story/life/2014/03/23/joshua-nelson-gives-a-performance-like-no-other-at-cherry-hill-synagogue/6750973/>.

His singing career began when he was a child. At 13 years old, he produced his first recording, singing “How I Got Over,” a well-known Jackson hit. At 15 years old, he was invited by the Vaughn family to sing at famed jazz singer Sarah Vaughn’s funeral. He was also invited to sing with Cab Calloway (who included a Yiddish inflection in many of his lyrics and rhythmic cadences) at Lincoln Center during these years.¹⁰⁷

His high school took him and his class on a trip to Israel when he was 14, where Nelson had a profoundly religious experience, leading him to spending two years in Israel on a college kibbutz program through Temple University, Hebrew Union College, and Hebrew University, studying political science and Hebrew. While there, he heard the choir at The Great Synagogue in Jerusalem, which to him sounded like Mahalia Jackson’s choir. He suddenly understood he could integrate both his Black and Jewish identities. He took Jewish liturgy and set it to his unique music sound.¹⁰⁸

Outside of Jewish circles, Nelson has had a successful career performing gospel music. Nelson’s success in the gospel music world is well-documented and prolific. His 1999 performance at the Azusa Conference in Tulsa, Oklahoma made his rendition of the song “How I Got Over” an instant hit with radio stations nationwide. It is also a featured song on the Carlton Pearson Live at Azusa 3 album, which has garnered a nomination with the Gospel Industry’s Stellar Award, and is also a featured track on the television series *Greenwood’s* soundtrack. That same year, he performed in Stockholm, Sweden at the Globe Arena to an audience of 30,000, backed by a 5,500-voice choir, full string orchestra, and band.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Friedman.

¹⁰⁸ Klein.

¹⁰⁹ Khale Brewster, “JOSHUA NELSON,” Internet Archive, accessed January 4, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20081120020219/http://joshuanelson.com/biography2.html>.

Nelson has performed for several heads of state. He performed for President Bill Clinton in Selma, Alabama in a program to recognize the Voters Rights Act of 1965 in commemoration of “Bloody Sunday.” In 2001, he sang for Swedish Prime Minister, Goran Persson, at a ceremony marking the opening of the Padei Institute for Jewish Studies. He was then made an official “Ambassador of Peace through Song” by the Swedish government.¹¹⁰

He has also opened for and performed with famous musicians and celebrities. He opened for Aretha Franklin in two performances of her Gospel Crusade Against Aids at Lincoln Center in June of 1997. Most notably, he performed on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, where he sang his hit “How I Got Over.” In 2004, Nelson was presented in Oprah Winfrey and Maya Angelou’s benefit concert, “An Evening of Healing” for the Maya Angelou Center for Minority Research in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.¹¹¹

Nelson has self-produced seven albums, the last of which was produced in 2005, titled *Mi Chamocha?* and credited to “Joshua Nelson and the Kosher Gospel Singers.” One of his albums is titled “The Best of Joshua Nelson,” on which Nelson comments, “This album is for those die-hard Mahalia Jackson fans. A favorite of Oprah Winfrey’s (she works out to Track No. 7, ‘How I Got Over,’).” Interestingly, there is a note on the album, saying that it, “is not intended for a religious Jewish audience.”¹¹² Nelson is heavily featured on the 2005 Klezmatics’ album “Brother Moses Smote the Water.”

Nelson explains in many publications the complex understanding that he sings gospel and yet, remains a devout Jew. When asked if the fact that Jackson devoted her music to Jesus bothered him, he replied, “Nope. I wasn’t trying to copy her religion. I was trying to do her

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² La Gorce.

justice.”¹¹³ Nelson has gone to great lengths to explain that the familiar sound of gospel is not Christian, but African. “It was actually the music of West African slaves who used it to express whatever they were feeling.”¹¹⁴ ¹¹⁵When a rabbi once asked him if gospel’s Christian content conflicted with Jewish liturgical music, Nelson told him, “There is no conflict. I told him, ‘You already know that Black people were not Christians coming off the slave ship.’”¹¹⁶

Commenting further on the topic of the African nature of his music, Hadassah Magazine reported in 2015:

It’s African, it’s not Christian at all—the Christianity came later. The slaves sang spirituals as work songs. When they learned Bible from their slave masters, they used the symbolism from there. It was also the way they communicated. “Down by the Riverside,” for example could have meant, “We’re meeting by the riverside to escape.”

He has commented on the identity of Black Jews as a whole:

Some black Jews disassociate themselves from their Africanism—they take on an identity that’s just Jewish and don’t keep the flavor [of their heritage]... You can still be you and be Jewish—you don’t have to change yourself, you don’t have to get rid of your soul.¹¹⁷

After interviewing Nelson, Robert Wiener wrote: “He noted that the rhythms and melodies of much gospel music have pre-Christian roots in Africa and were imported to America by those who were seized into slavery. Christian worship was imposed on slaves by their masters at Southern plantations.”¹¹⁸ Nelson is making clear that gospel does not belong only to the Christians.

¹¹³ Wiener

¹¹⁴ Friedman.

¹¹⁵ In a discussion with Rabbi Baruch Yehuda, Executive Secretary of the Israelite Board of Rabbis, he also shared this view with the author on April 21, 2020.

¹¹⁶ Wiener

¹¹⁷ Klein.

¹¹⁸ Wiener.

Nelson seeks to infuse Jewish worship with the energy and passion that he has found in gospel music. In the liner notes to his CD *Brother Moses Smote the Water*, Nelson writes: “Who ever said that going to temple had to be boring? I try to make music so the listener will hear something and feel it as well. When a person sings a song, you should feel something.”¹¹⁹

Nelson is creating a bridge between the soulfulness of Black churches and Judaism. “I walk into a church and I sing ‘Hallelujah,’ and if the spirit hits me, I fall down like anybody else who is Black,” he says, “and I will go into a synagogue and do it and I dare anyone to say something to me.”¹²⁰ Clearly, Nelson feels no need to explain himself. He worships in his personal style, and without apology.

Nelson’s music is a separate genre onto itself. *The Los Angeles Times* reported, “He takes traditional Jewish lyrics, then adds soulful gospel backup singers and gospel-style bass, drums and piano. Sing the song as you would at any Black Baptist church in America, and the formula is complete, Nelson said.”¹²¹ Robert Weiner describes Nelson’s performance at Congregation Beth Hatikvah in Summit, NJ in 2018:

His own style is a blend of bluesy and up-tempo religious music, some taken from Jewish liturgy, some from Christian hymnals. With his hands on an electric keyboard, he is equally versatile singing and inspiring hand-clapping when he performs “Mi Chamocha” and “Adon Olam” in Hebrew, and Christian gospel songs such as “How I Got Over” and “Elijah Rock” in English.¹²²

Like others musicians profiled in this article, Nelson has occasionally been frustrated by white Jewish communities’ reactions’ to his being Black:

¹¹⁹ La Gorce.

¹²⁰ Wiener.

¹²¹ Los Angeles Times, “Black Jewish Singer Spreads His 'Kosher Gospel' Sound,” Los Angeles Times, July 3, 2006, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2006-jul-03-et-gospel3-story.html>.

¹²² Wiener.

There's somewhere between 300,000 and 400,000 Black Jews in the United States, and we all have different stories. Some are the product of interracial marriages, or they've converted to Judaism. And some have descended through the centuries. In my family, my grandmother remembers that her grandmother was Jewish, so we go way back. People need to learn that being Jewish is a religion and a people, not a race. When people see a black Jew they say, "Okay, who converted?" They're thinking being black can't mean you were born Jewish. But we're all converts. No one can trace their lineage back to Abraham. Someone's heritage may go back 500 years, another person's may go back 300 years.¹²³

Nelson has sought to allow his Jewishness to find a place in the Black community. In 2000, there was a documentary made about Nelson entitled *Keep on Walking*. Nelson expressed disappointment that the documentary was received favorably in dozens of Jewish film festivals, but was not given nearly that attention from the Black community. "You know, the documentary covered everything -- race, my Jewish background -- but it was totally overlooked by the black community. It was shown at over sixty Jewish film festivals but at only one African-American film festival [which was in Newark]." The problem, he said, is a "Lack of understanding of diversity within the Black community."¹²⁴

Nelson taught religious school at Shaarey Tefilo-Israel in South Orange for 18 years before the demands of life on the road as a performer made that impossible.¹²⁵ Reminiscing on his teaching career, Amy Klein of Hadassah Magazine tells:

Nelson was teaching Hebrew school in South Orange, New Jersey. He saw the students were kind of...bored. He started doing a call-and-response technique they often do in yeshivas and churches. Nelson called out "*Barukh ata*" and had the class answer, and then he responded with a melodious 'Aaammmeen!' [Nelson comments:] 'I realized they were learning this way, and that's how kosher gospel music was born... I felt the music was lacking in the prayers in the Reform movement. That's where I took the soul music and put it to Hebrew. Soul,' he says, 'brings people closer to *Hashem*.'¹²⁶

¹²³ La Gorce.

¹²⁴ La Gorce.

¹²⁵ Wiener.

¹²⁶ Klein.

Nelson has a unique perspective on the Jewish and Black ways of remembering the past. He says, “The structure of my thinking is Jewish and we’re all about remembering. We’re all about Yizkor. We’re all about moving forward by embracing the past and understanding our present so we know where to go. The African American world, the past is so ugly to them that they don’t embrace it, they don’t remember it.” He then relates to the 2021 runoff election in Georgia: “It’s just like what just happened in Georgia. It’s history repeating itself. You have a Black senator, a pastor, and then you have [Jon] Ossoff who’s Jewish. The first Jewish elected Senator, and the first Black elected Senator, ironically from Ebenezer Baptist Church, where Dr. King preached.”¹²⁷ Nelson, here, has made several connections of cosmic design: (1) that Black people could see slavery with the divine intention of God that Jews see ancient slavery of the Hebrews, and (2) that the elections of Jon Ossoff and Rafael Warnock has been ordained.

As of this writing, Nelson serves as the Minister of Music at Hopewell Baptist Church in Newark, NJ, where he has worked for 26 years. The church’s building is the historic former Congregation B'nai Jeshurun. For the past 10 years, Nelson has served as the High Holiday chazzan at East Side Synagogue in New York City’s Upper East Side, led by Rabbis Leah and Perry Berkowitz. When Nelson prays on his own, his Synagogue of choice is a Persian Jewish synagogue in West Orange, NJ.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Joshua Nelson in discussion with the author, January 8, 2021.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

ANTHONY MORDECHAI TZVI RUSSELL

Anthony Mordechai Tzvi Russell is a respected and well-known singer of Yiddish song throughout the United States and Europe. He works with an eclectic group of instrumentalists where he sometimes combines negro spirituals and even hip-hop into these songs.

Russell was born on October 5, 1980 in Fort Worth, TX to a military family, the oldest of four sons. His father was a US Navy officer, and both parents appreciated classical music. His mother studied as a classical pianist before marriage and his father played cello in high school. “There was an appreciation for classical music in the house,” Russell says. “The idea that one would be conversant in classical music was not a foreign idea in my house.” His mother loved singing and was in the choir of nearly every church they attended. She also had a strong interest in the Bible. “My mother was very autodidactic about the language and history of the Bible,” he says. “When I was 9 or 10, I knew that I would someday go to Israel.”¹²⁹ Russell was raised with Church of Christ, Baptist, Pentacostal, and non-denomination influences through childhood. When he was seven years old, his family settled in the San Francisco Bay Area where his father entered work within the federal government.

Russell’s childhood education was unusual. “My mother found the public schooling in our area wanting and decided she could do a better job herself,” Russell says. “I tested out of high school when I was 15. I had already been attending community college for a couple of

¹²⁹ Robert Nagler Miller, “A Harmonious Marriage of Negro Spirituals and Yiddish Song,” Jweekly.com, February 15, 2019, <https://www.jweekly.com/2019/02/14/a-harmonious-marriage-of-negro-spirituals-and-yiddish-song/>.

semesters at that point.” In 2005, he earned a bachelor’s degree in music at Holy Names University in Oakland, CA. and embarked on a career as an opera singer.¹³⁰

Russell reflected on what it means to be a Black man in classical music:

When I began my training, I knew immediately that I didn’t want to be so easily defined by something as obvious as my race. I wanted to be defined by my something else I didn’t choose—my low bass voice—and something I could choose: a repertoire of mostly Mozart, some Handel, a little Verdi, and a little Brahms.¹³¹

He started his career in the San Francisco Bay area, where he performed with various small, regional companies. When asked about the highlights of his operatic career, he mentioned two shows in which he was able to perform with a large number of other Black musicians. The first was Philip Glass's *Appomattox* with the San Francisco Opera Company, on October 5, 2007.

Appomattox tells the story of the last battle of the Civil War. This opera features a large number of leading, supporting, and chorus roles for only Black singers. Russell sang in the all-Black union soldiers chorus as well as in a quartet of liberated slaves who sing to President Lincoln. “Let me tell you, it was so great!” Russell said. “It was like, Black people took over the opera house for exactly one opera. We were having a good old time!” Russell spoke at great length of the enjoyment of performing with other Black musicians and wishes one day to sing in a production of *Porgy and Bess*. “It would be fun to be in a production of *Porgy and Bess* because I really, really, really enjoyed the very specific experience of being in a classically oriented production with a bunch of Black classical singers. There’s nothing like it.”¹³²

¹³⁰ Renee Ghert-Zand, “Just Your Typical 6'1" African-American Yiddish Singer,” *The Times of Israel*, April 27, 2013, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/just-your-typical-61-african-american-yiddish-singer/>.

¹³¹ Anthony Russell, “A Black Classical Singer and Convert to Judaism Embraces the Negro Spirituals Heard at Some Passover Seders,” *Tablet Magazine*, April 7, 2014, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/community/articles/passover-negro-spirituals>.

¹³² Anthony Russell in discussion with the author, December 22, 2020.

Russell stresses the importance of finding Black community in classical music. “You’re not just joining a chorus; you’re a community for the time you’re working together. It was an amazing experience for me to have a community of people who just *got* it. I was not the only black person in the room,” Russell said. “I have a pictures of myself in [the opera] *Così fan tutte*... and I’m in the back and the picture is so dark that you can only see my eyes. There’s this wig, two eyes, and a smile, and that’s it, because everyone else was completely white, like opera is.”¹³³

A year earlier, Russell sang in Anthony Davis’ *X, The Life and Times of Malcolm X* with The Oakland Opera Theater. Again, he recollected the joy of performing in Black company:

That was another wonderful experience of being in a mostly black cast... It allowed us to be Black in a way that the regular repertoire doesn’t.... It’s hard being a black guy in the opera. People don’t really know what to do with you. There are aspects of my vocalization that conventional opera people were not completely fond of. The classical music scene is not the most welcoming.

In July 2007, Russell performed with the Martina Arroyo Foundation summer session, a program that offers professional mentorship and performance opportunities to young opera singers. Russell described an experience where Martina Arroyo, the famous and world-renown soprano who is the director and founder of the program, explained that an opera singer is not allowed to feel the emotions of the character while they’re singing; it’s the singer’s job to make the audience feel those emotions. This was a reason that Russell was so drawn to Yiddish music. Singing Yiddish music was how Russell truly expressed himself, in a way opera could not:

For me, I totally want to be emotionally engaged while I’m singing. I want to be emotionally present while I’m singing. For me, singing feels like t’filah in that way, because you should be emotionally present while you’re praying. I want to be and I need to be emotionally present while I’m doing it in order for it to really feel like I’m doing something that’s worth listening to.

¹³³ Ibid.

Coming from a classical background to Jewish music performance or leading prayer can be a challenging transition. Russell shares:

I come from a classical background, so their whole thing is you are trying to be not you for a long time until you gather enough fame at which you actually can be you... People have in their mind what you're supposed to sound like and what you're supposed to do. You're not really supposed to interpret your own music; you sing it how your voice teacher tells you how to sing it and that's how it's done. With Jewish music, there's such a possibility for interpretation and realness that you just really don't get in other classical genres. That's why I think I love it.

It was during this period in his life when he began his conversion journey. Russell had been drawn to Judaism for his entire life, however, it was fortune that he was set up on a blind date with a Rabbi in 2009.¹³⁴ He formally converted in Judaism in 2010 at Congregation Sons of Israel, a Conservative shul in Nyack, N.Y.¹³⁵ Russell's Hebrew name is Mordechai Tzvi. "I was exceedingly fond of the Esther narrative as a child; little surprise, given the truly operatic nature of its plot," Russell says. "Thus, Mordechai was an obvious choice. Tzvi comes from a kind of mistranslation from one of my favorite verses, Psalm 42:1, 'As the deer pants for the water...' In the original Hebrew verse, deer is *ayal*, but a more common Hebrew synonym is *tzvi*, meaning deer or gazelle."¹³⁶

At the same time that Russell became a Jew, he also came to the realization that he wanted to be something other than an opera singer. He realized he felt more fulfilled singing the "Un'taneh Tokef" prayer as a guest High Holiday cantorial soloist than he did singing opera. He started researching cantorial music and decided that cantorial music and chazzanut was not for him. "It's a tenor's game," Russell said.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Ghert-Zand.

¹³⁵ Russell, "A Black Classical Singer and Convert to Judaism Embraces the Negro Spirituals Heard at Some Passover Seders."

¹³⁶ Anthony Russell, email message to the author, December 23, 2020.

¹³⁷ Ghert-Zand.

His being drawn to Yiddish music was by happenstance. He was listening to the soundtrack of the Coen brothers' film, *A Serious Man*, and heard the Yiddish song "Dem Milners Tern," sung by bass Sidor Belarsky. This led him to discover the rich history of Yiddish song performance. "This music was perfect for my voice type. These songs really touched me," he said. He immersed himself in researching the recordings and life of Belarsky. Russell found an album of Belarsky's singing and taught himself nine of these songs. "I tried it out for the first time performing a short concert in Yiddish one afternoon in January 2012 at the Sholem Aleichem Kultur Tsenters in the Bronx."¹³⁸ And his journey and career took off from there.

To further his familiarity with the language, Russell completed an intensive Yiddish summer program in Tel Aviv University called Helix, where he completed advanced coursework in Yiddish reading and writing. He also completed an ethnographic one-year-long program to Poland and Belarus. A cohort of artists and scholars met virtually for one year and then embarked on a two-and-a-half week trip to Poland and Belarus.

You can sing Oyfn Pripetchik for days. You can translate it and know what the words mean. But when you are in Belarus and you're in this elderly Belarussian woman's house and there's a pripetchik right there and you can see what it is, what it looks like, and you see her baking with it, that's another level of knowledge and experience that enriches your ability to be able to perform aspects of this culture.¹³⁹

In 2016, Russell attended a festival in Canada called KlezKanada, a weeklong workshop of studying Yiddish music and culture (to which he has returned in subsequent years). Russell returned from this festival feeling energized. "I was very inspired by being there and being in close contact with all these different musicians," he said.¹⁴⁰ He began to embark on getting

¹³⁸ Russell, "A Black Classical Singer and Convert to Judaism Embraces the Negro Spirituals Heard at Some Passover Seders."

¹³⁹ Anthony Russell, in discussion with the author, December 22, 2020.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

involved in creating and performing Jewish music in the San Francisco Bay Area. There, he found his future musical partner, Dimitri Gaskin, an accordionist and pianist. After learning about a contest in Mexico City called “Der Idisher Idol” (sometimes spelled “Der Yidisher Idol”). They signed up and performed “Kinderyorn” in the style of French chanson, earning the award for Best Cover. They returned to California and established themselves as “Tsvey Brider” (“Two Brothers”), with a goal to create and perform new arrangements to Yiddish songs as well as write completely new Yiddish songs. They’ve performed their program of songs throughout the United States and Poland. They will be releasing a songbook of about twelve original Yiddish songs shortly.

Russell spoke of the nature of Yiddish music’s uniqueness in its ability to tell the story of the people who wrote this music:

It’s a guidebook to a very specific context of Jewish life. You can find a lot about Jewish life and history just from the song themselves. In that sense, it’s unparalleled as far as art song is concerned. You can sing a lot of German art song, but you won’t necessarily learn about the history of the German people through German art song... but in Yiddish art song, you’re really creating an entire world every time you open your mouth. It’s very exciting!¹⁴¹

Russell comments on the nature of the Black musician’s existence in the United States:

Black people, especially as performers, are like Joseph. Wherever they happen to be, they will prosper, which is why there is such a rich history in the United States of Black interpreters. If you look at Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn, Billie Holiday, they were interpreting the American Songbook. They were interpreting songs that weren’t necessarily written by Black people or for Black audiences. Yet, they take that music, the words, and the melody, and make them into really great fundamental art in an American context. That is the art and genius of being a Black interpreter of material. There’s quality to that when Black people interpret Jewish music. In many cases, the people who wrote [these jazz stands] were Jewish songwriters, usually from tin-pan alley. So there’s this really interesting history of black interpretation of Jewish material – and this history can go on! We can continue! It’s fascinating!

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

The relationship of non-Jewish Black culture to non-Black Jewish culture is a topic where Russell has a unique perception:

I always describe it in terms of affinity. There's an affinity that each respective people have for the other one's cultures and narratives... The United States is very interesting in the sense that it's the place where the Jewish diaspora meets the African diaspora. American culture to a great degree is the recipient and the beneficiary of the meeting of these two diasporas.

Russell released the album *Convergence* in 2018, which features Russell's unique talent for arranging Yiddish songs with Negro spirituals. When asked for a specific explanation of his process for these songs are created and what inspires this, Russell told the story of the fourth track, called "Lift":

I combined "Lift Every Voice and Sing" with the Yiddish song "[I.L. Peretz's] Hof un gleyb." They were both written in the first decade of the 20th century. I feel like they have these interesting parallel images of overcoming oppression and overcoming prejudice... For me, it felt like there was a direct relationship between these two pieces of music that were written in different parts of the world and for different constituencies but coming from that same sort of place. The 19th century was a horrible century for Jewish people and for Black people. The 20th century represents this beacon of hope. We all know it's more complicated than that, but for at least a couple of decades, people were very full of hope about the possibility of what the future can provide."

He's performed *Convergence* in Berlin and Weimer as a part of the Radical Jewish Culture Festival, in Copenhagen at the Limmud Festival, and other locations across Europe.

Although Russell is a classical artist, his music often weaves many genres. Russell is currently working to create what he calls "the next level of the Black Jewish idiom as a musical sound." To create this idiom, he says, "I've been working in the spaces between R&B

harmonics, Black church music, and the *nign*.” Russell has an example located on his Twitter feed, where he writes “Direct informants are: the nasal hummed intro to Sidor Belarsky's circa 1950 rendition of Atzmon's "Hafle Vafele" from his album *Songs of Israel*, field recordings from "The Hasidic Niggun as Sung by the Hasidim" and various Lomax archive recordings of Black call & response tunes¹⁴².

Russell has been the recipient of unfortunate attitudes in Jewish spaces concerning his Blackness.

Despite all this blackness, I've occasionally been forced to consider whether I'm black enough for the Jews. This question never came from me... but from the expectations of American Jews who have experienced me as a musical performer — of Yiddish. It turns out if you're black and sing in a number of Jewish languages over the course of a performance but don't literally perform some conventional idea of blackness, there are people who have no qualms about making their disappointment with these proceedings known... More recently, I've found game collaborators — Veretski Pass — to create my own highly idiosyncratic musical vision of historic African-American Jewishness, called “Convergence.” But even when I was in the midst of performing that, an audience member still asked me, during the Q&A, whether and when I was going to sing “Ol' Man River... I've been asked if I can really call myself a Jewish singer if I don't sing “Oyfn Pripetshik,” “My Yidishe Mame” and “Rumania, Rumania,” so I seem to have the happy fate of potentially leaving portions of a single audience disappointed for completely different reasons.

Russell has written extensive essays on this racial identity in many online publications, including *Tablet*, *The Forward*, and *Jewish Currents*. A powerful statement comes from the *Tablet* article, where he mentions how bewildered he was when he heard “Go Down, Moses” sung at a Passover seder:

The first time I heard a live rendition of “Go Down, Moses” was at the first Passover Seder I ever attended. Somewhere around the third cup of wine, a room full of Jews sang the classic negro spiritual in lively fashion, followed almost immediately by “O Freedom,” another classic negro spiritual... A feeling of bewilderment and paranoia began to steal over me: Why are they singing these songs? Are they looking at me? Do

¹⁴² Anthony Russell, “As Mentioned in My Interview with @hey_alma Earlier This Year...,” Twitter (@Mordkhevtzvi, October 22, 2020), <https://twitter.com/mordkhetzvi/status/1319330643357110273>.

they expect me to know these songs?... I haven't necessarily lost all of the bewilderment I felt hearing "Go Down, Moses" at my first Seder. Some additional questions I might add to a Seder would be: Is it strange that some Jews have decided to use African-American religious expression in the privacy of their own domestic rituals to tell their own story? Why is it that "Are you Jewish?" and "How are you Jewish?" have oftentimes been the first things that I hear from Jews I meet for the first time? If I walk into a Seder and find Jews singing negro spirituals, may I ask, "Are you black?" and "How are you black?"

Russell currently lives in Acton, MA with his husband, Rabbi Michael Rothbaum.

NISSIM BLACK

Nissim Baruch Black was born on December 9, 1986 in Seattle, Washington. He grew up in the Seward Park neighborhood of Seattle, raised by his parents James "Captain" Church Croone and Mia Black, who were Sunni Muslims. Both of Black's parents were rappers in the late 1970s. His father belonged to the Emerald Street Boys and his mother belonged to the Emerald Street Girls. His grandparents were also musicians and played alongside Ray Charles and Quincy Jones in Seattle.¹⁴³ Black recalls:

My grandfather, all his brothers were, you know, world-class musicians. And even when my mother – my father's side, too. All my uncles, my great uncles, my grandfather's brother – so, on both my parents' side. And then, if that doesn't do it, my mother remarried and I had a stepfather and all his uncles were musicians, playing with Quincy [Jones] and everybody else. So, there has never been a time that I can think that I was breathing without the love of music inside of me from since I was a kid.¹⁴⁴

Drugs were a major part of his childhood. "[My homelife] was very loving, but the streets were in my house. I'd come home from school and there'd be garbage bags full of drugs on the table, and men with guns. There were some very startling moments." His parents separated when

¹⁴³ Samuel Momodu, "Nissim Black (1986-)," Black Past, September 27, 2020, <https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/nissim-black-1986/>.

¹⁴⁴ Jacob Uitti, "Nissim Black Opens Up On New Music, Being 'Hitler's Worst Nightmare,'" American Songwriter, July 27, 2020, <https://americansongwriter.com/nissim-black-interview/>.

Black was a toddler. By age 9, he was smoking marijuana. “And by the time I was 12, I was dealing it. I was the product of my environment,” Black said.¹⁴⁵ In 1998, Black’s mother was arrested when the FBI raided their home.¹⁴⁶ He was 9 years old.

Black had a positive relationship with his maternal grandfather, who would take him to mosque regularly. Black said, “He’d take me to the mosque to pray. Praying was very comforting to me. If anyone had asked me at the time, I would have said I was a Muslim.” However, his grandfather was eventually arrested for criminal activities and taken to prison, which led Black further into drug use. “All the way through junior high school, there wasn’t a day I didn’t smoke,” Black said. “But since everyone else in the house was high, no one noticed.” At 13 years old, he woke up in a park, hallucinating, and vowed never to use drugs again.¹⁴⁷

That year, he attended a summer camp, the Gospel Mission Youth Center, and began to identify as a Christian.¹⁴⁸ This was a positive period in Black’s life: “I had healthy relationships, not just dysfunctional ones. It felt like the home I never had. I never got to be a normal kid til I got to this place.”¹⁴⁹ Converting to Christianity was positive for him in many ways. “The conversion was good for me because I was already part of a street gang, Disciple Nation folks, and this helped me get away from the street mentality for a long time,” Black recalled.¹⁵⁰ This

¹⁴⁵ Harriet Sherwood, “Nissim Baruch Black: the Rapper Who Gave up Bling for Jewish Redemption,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, February 24, 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/25/nissim-baruch-black-rapper-swaps-bling-jewish-redemption>.

¹⁴⁶ Momodu.

¹⁴⁷ Harriet Sherwood.

¹⁴⁸ Emily Burack, “Orthodox Rapper Nissim Black Reintroduces Himself to the World,” *The Times of Israel*, February 28, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/orthodox-rapper-nissim-black-reintroduces-himself-to-the-world/>.

¹⁴⁹ Sherwood.

¹⁵⁰ Burack.

was also the year he began rapping professionally. He started recording under the name “Danger,” working with Seattle rap producer Vitamin D.¹⁵¹

At 17 years old, Black made another set of recordings, releasing his first singles on an independent label under the name D. Black. “The state of hip-hop at the time was focused on a gangsta rap type of thing,” he said.¹⁵² Such activity returned him down the path to addiction. “I ended back in those circles where people did a little bit more than just rap about it. There was violence, drugs. These guys were serious about it.”¹⁵³ During this period, in 2005, Black’s mother had a drug overdose and died.¹⁵⁴

In 2008, Black had a profound moment changed the course of his life: “I got in an altercation with another artist, and this altercation led to a kill-or-be-killed situation.” This moment led him to seriously contemplate and pray over the next steps in his life. “Eventually, all my praying and soul searching led me to Judaism.”

Black’s attraction to Judaism was brought on by his admiration of the ancient Hebrews and Jewish people. He was inspired by their perseverance:

Judaism was screaming to me. The text and the honesty of it. The biggest thing for me was just, like, seeing how they kept messing up. Man, that whole Bible is about mess-ups! Everybody’s a screw up, the nation’s a screw up. You want to know what you are? And to see how much that didn’t deter God from his love, and the whole integrity of the Old Testament, the integrity of it is on the fact that God is saying, “No matter what I’ll never leave you.” And that was just something for me, I wanted to be a part of that relationship, you know?¹⁵⁵

¹⁵¹ Momodu.

¹⁵² Burack.

¹⁵³ Sherwood.

¹⁵⁴ Momodu.

¹⁵⁵ Uitti.

He married his wife, Adina, who is also Black and grew up in his childhood neighborhood. They began attending a Messianic Jewish community just south of Seattle, near where they were living, and leading Torah-Christian Bible studies out of their apartment.¹⁵⁶

Black's first album, *Cause and Effect*, was released in 2007 and is indicative of the "gangsta rap" genre. In 2009, he released his second album, *Aliyah*, which highlights his transition to Messianic Judaism. As the magazine *Tablet* reports:

The track "Close to Yah," which features Lucciauno, opens with a shofar blast and the Priestly Blessing. Black and Lucciauno proceed to rap with fiery conviction: "Yahweh, Jehova/ My search for the truth is drawing me closer/ Now as the end approaches the wicked all scatter like roaches while I stay focused on the light that illuminated Moses." Reviewers were pleased with Black's shift away from the pointless adulation of guns and violence into spiritual seeking.¹⁵⁷

Black's time with Messianic Judaism did not last. "I read through the Tanakh twice, and I couldn't get into Christianity anymore. For the first time, I felt the connection with Torah. I became fascinated with halachah." Black put his music career on hold so he could dedicate himself to converting to mainstream Judaism. He separated from Sportin' Life Records, which he co-owned with his stepfather Deveon Manier, and began studying with Rabbi Simon Benzaquen at Sephardic Bikur Holim Congregation in Seattle.¹⁵⁸ In 2013, he and Adina both officially converted and remarried in an Orthodox marriage ceremony.¹⁵⁹

A year earlier, as he was nearing his conversion, Black was contacted by many friends and Rabbis across the world asking him to return to music. "I prayed to Hashem," he said. "I

¹⁵⁶ Emily K. Alhadeff, "Nissim Black Has a Spiritual Message for the Hip-Hop World," *Tablet Magazine*, September 16, 2013, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/nissim-orthodox-hip-hop>.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ Burack.

said, ‘Enough is enough.’ I went to my shtender and I talked to Hashem in my own words for five hours.”¹⁶⁰

Nissim began creating music that was still rap and hip-hop oriented, but was now rooted in his new Jewish life experiences. The 2013 album *Nissim* has a markedly softer and gentler rap style, featuring inspirational tracks such as “Miracle” which contains the lyrics: “You’re on the path to the impossible, but it is possible to see it.” His 2017 album *Lemala* contains songs with Hebrew titles such as “Z’man Cheruteinu” and “V’taher Libeinu.” His song “Fly Away” contains lyrics such as:

I wanna know what’s my purpose, Tachlis
 I wanna glow
 I wanna show my inner greatness not fear
 Nobody knows my pain
 But I’m ready to make a change
 Thus here is my heart of anger
 Replace and rearrange it
 See, I need freedom for me
 To be all I can be
 Look from heaven and see
 I chose to leave it to me.

Black’s subsequent album “Gibor” follows this same trajectory. The songs feature strings, soft percussion, and words are spoken very clearly and slowly. The songs are either directed toward God or are on spiritual and Jewish themes. Each of his albums are accompanied by highly produced music videos which show him in Chassidic black and white garb, beard, and hat.

As of February 9, 2020, Black’s most popular YouTube video is “Mothaland Bounce” with 4,480,958 views. The song harkens back to a more traditional rap style: less spiritual and more beat-based, with quickly spoken lyrics. “I’m casting a net a little bit further — a lot further

¹⁶⁰ Alhadeff.

— than what my current audience has been,” he says.¹⁶¹ The video is dance-heavy, features an all-Black cast, and nods to the 1980s film *Coming to America*. The lyrics cover a grand overview of his life, such as:

Black and Yiddish
 I been wit it, Sammy Davis Cousin
 Tried to dodge the industry but now my name is buzzin’
 They all saying that I’m conscious
 I say that it’s nonsense
 So I say I been on since on had an on switch
 From Seattle the rainy city where my mom lived
 Now in Jerusalem the golden city that was conquered
 But still we moving onward
 Mother land conquest
 Smell me like an arm pit.

As of this writing, Black’s newest single is “The Hava Song,” which has garnered over 40,000 views on YouTube since it was released on December 8, 2020. The song is one of Black’s only songs to feature a “traditional” Jewish melody: the century-old “Hava Nagila” attributed to A. Z. Idelsohn and Moshe Nathanson

In March 2016, Black moved with his wife and six children to Israel. Two years later, he was in both the Israeli and American Jewish news media. Black had tried, unsuccessfully, to enroll his daughter into a school, facing blatant racial discrimination in the process. He spoke with Menachem Toker on Radio Kol Chai, a Haredi and National Religious radio station in Israel, saying:

“My children were at home and not at school because there was no school that received them ... We tried to get our 10-year-old into a school that fits our Hashkafa [religious observance] and they rejected us because of our skin color. They can ask my Rav about me, or even say it’s because of my profession. But to reject us for our skin color, is unacceptable.”

¹⁶¹ Burack.

The Yiddish World also reported on the story, explaining that Black had a very forgiving attitude toward it all:

The rapper said that he is not angry at the school principals and those who do not accept his children, and he promises that he will continue to look for the best school in terms of Hashkafa and those who will not see him and his children only in their color, but rather as human beings.¹⁶²

In an interview with Jewish Telegraphic Press, he spoke about how the prejudice is disheartening:

One of the biggest issues is misconceptions. A person's skin color, or their career choice, doesn't always necessarily have to reflect your prejudices. That definitely played a role. And it's unfortunate — it's like that with any system, right? Once there's a system that people have accepted, it's very, very hard for people to ever really get out of the box of that way of thinking that keeps them stuck inside of that system. So unfortunately, it was very hard for us there.

Black and his family have moved to the growing Orthodox community in the town of Beit

Shemesh, where they have found a positive fit:

We were able to get the kids into school in Beit Shemesh, which ended up being a way better choice for our family. There are some places where it's going to be very, very hard for them to ever change. And at the same time, you just sort of have to move where it's going to fit your situation a little bit better. And I feel like we did that. It was a tough thing because nobody ever wants to leave Jerusalem. But at the end of the day, it turned out to be the best decision we could have made.

Black describes that his family is happily settled now:

My kids are in school now. They're all happy here. Baruch Hashem, they have tons of friends. And two of every type of color and shade come to my house on Saturday. It gets a little annoying, the house is loaded with kids, but Baruch Hashem, the kids are happy. And we still live in a very haredi neighborhood. It was so shocking to my kids to feel accepted. My son, when he first got invited to a tehillim group [recitation of Psalms]

¹⁶² "Nissim Black's Children Rejected By Schools; Rav Chaim Kanievsky Tells Him 'Dark Skin Is a Positive'," *The Yeshiva World*, August 28, 2018, <https://www.theyeshivaworld.com/news/israel-news/1580886/nissim-blacks-children-rejected-by-schools-rav-chaim-kanievsky-tells-him-dark-skin-is-a-positive.html>.

on Shabbos from a bunch of yeshivishe boys, he was tripping out. Because that just never happened in Mea Shearim. There's just every type of love and acceptance over here.¹⁶³

YITZ JORDAN (Y-LOVE)

Yitz Jordan was born on January 5, 1978 in Baltimore, MD.¹⁶⁴ An only child, his mother was Puerto Rican and his father was Ethiopian.¹⁶⁵ Jordan had been drawn to Judaism since he was a child. He recalls, "I wanted to be Jewish ever since I was seven years old, I saw a commercial that said, 'Happy Passover from your friends at Channel 2' and I went drawing six-pointed stars on everything at my mother's house."¹⁶⁶ He then said to his mother, "I want to be Jewish."¹⁶⁷

Jordan's parents were supportive. In fact, his mother would bring home copies of the Baltimore Jewish Times or challah as a treat.¹⁶⁸ A colleague of his mother invited him to a Seder, which led to Jordan's first acquisition of a yarmulke, "an electric-blue, 1950s keepsake from 'Ira

¹⁶³ Laura E. Adkins, "Hasidic Rapper Nissim Black Opens up about His Creative Process, Spirituality and COVID Recovery," Jewish Telegraphic Agency, December 17, 2020, <https://www.jta.org/2020/12/17/culture/hasidic-rapper-nissim-black-opens-up-about-his-creative-process-spirituality-and-covid-recovery>.

¹⁶⁴ Wikipedia contributors, "Y-Love," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Y-Love&oldid=994709784> (accessed January 7, 2021).

¹⁶⁵ Jerry Portwood, "Y-Love Is Ready for Love," OUT (Out Magazine, May 15, 2012), <https://www.out.com/entertainment/music/2012/05/15/y-love-yitz-jordan-hip-hop-jewish-gay>.

¹⁶⁶ LEADEL.NET, "Exclusive Video: Jewish Hip Hop Artist 'Y Love'," The Jerusalem Post | JPost.com, November 7, 2010, <https://www.jpost.com/Jewish-World/Jewish-Features/Exclusive-video-Jewish-hip-hop-artist-Y-Love>.

¹⁶⁷ Portwood.

¹⁶⁸ Aviva Engel, "Rapper and Entrepreneur Y-Love Launches News Site for Jews of Color," The Times of Israel, July 19, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/rapper-and-entrepreneur-y-love-launches-news-site-for-jews-of-color/>.

so and so's' bar mitzvah." At 14, he began to wear the yarmulke and observing Shabbat.¹⁶⁹ His grandmother, Clara Lopez, was a particularly strong source of support for him. "She wanted to be Jewish her whole life," he said. "She acted as my translator for the rest of the family. She was like, 'He's wearing a yarmulke, I'm telling you he's not going to want to do this, or eat this. He's going to be busy that day.'"¹⁷⁰

Outside of the home, Jordan dealt with extreme violence in East Baltimore. "I was shot at in high school," he said, explaining that neighborhood hoodlums fired two bullets at him as punishment for "acting too white."¹⁷¹

He enrolled in Maryland's Towson University, but left in 1996. He relocated to Brooklyn, NY, where he converted to Orthodox Judaism in 2000, working with Rabbi Meir Fund and eventually becoming a Bostoner Hasid.¹⁷² Jordan then traveled to Jerusalem and enrolled in Yeshiva Ohr Somayach. It was here when he began using freestyling as a tool to learn complex Jewish texts.¹⁷³ He enrolled in a rabbinic ordination program, but decided instead to pursue teaching and music.¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁹ Trymaine Lee, "Black and Jewish, and Seeing No Contradiction," The New York Times (The New York Times, August 27, 2010),

https://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/28/nyregion/28blackjews.html?_r=1.

¹⁷⁰ Engel.

¹⁷¹ "Brooklyn, NY - Tale of Tragedy and Triumph For a Struggling Hasidic Black Convert Rap Star," Vos Iz Neias, September 14, 2008, <https://vosizneias.com/2008/09/14/brooklyn-ny-tale-of-tragedy-and-triumph-for-a-struggling-hasidic-black-convert-rap-star/>.

¹⁷² "Brooklyn, NY - Tale of Tragedy and Triumph For a Struggling Hasidic Black Convert Rap Star."

¹⁷³ Portwood.

¹⁷⁴ Engel.

Afterward, he returned to Brooklyn, lived on Avenue H in the Flatbush neighborhood, and worked in Manhattan as a computer programmer.¹⁷⁵ During this period, in 2001, Jordan began performing at open mics around the city under the name “Y-Love.”¹⁷⁶

In 2009, Jordan stopped following the Chassidic lifestyle. According to a Facebook post, dated January 25, 2009, he said, “I moved out of Brooklyn all at once - started coming out of the closet to my friends, and started trying to be more open and honest to and about myself...and eventually would go OTD [off the derech or off the way]”¹⁷⁷ He has mentioned a sense of sadness at the loss of his Orthodox life: “My whole background has been in the Orthodox world. Even though I’m not observant now, or living geographically in the community, in my heart of hearts, I’m still Orthodox in my belief system.”

Y-Love announced in 2012 that he is gay. He has discussed this extensively in interviews, namely in OUT magazine¹⁷⁸ and Jewish Journal.¹⁷⁹

Jordan staunchly affirms that his music is authentically Jewish. “Jewish music is music created by Jews to communicate Jewish concepts to a Jewish heart to a Jewish soul. If that music is hip-hop, dance hall, salsa, meringue, country, whatever, it's all about the content and I hope that the religious world one day will wake up to it,” he says.¹⁸⁰ Jordan feels that hip-hop makes complete sense in the context of Jewish history:

¹⁷⁵ “Brooklyn, NY - Tale of Tragedy and Triumph For a Struggling Hasidic Black Convert Rap Star.”

¹⁷⁶ Jesse Serwer, “Walk Wit' Me: Black Jewish MC Has Rhymes For You Little Yentas,” *XXL*, April 2008.

¹⁷⁷ Yitz Jordan, “Left the Hasidic World!,” Facebook, January 25, 2009, <https://www.facebook.com/500983605/posts/10151425776388606/>.

¹⁷⁸ Portwood.

¹⁷⁹ Danielle Barrin, “Self-Love for Y-Love,” *Jewish Journal*, May 23, 2012, https://jewishjournal.com/mobile_20111212/104379/self-love-for-y-love/.

¹⁸⁰ LEADEL.NET.

Music is no stranger to Judaism, from time immemorial. Immediately after the redemption from Egypt, what's the first thing that happened? The song at the sea, we learn through tradition, was a freestyle. Everyone was inspired at the same time to sing the exact same words, and that was a miracle. And if a miracle manifested itself that way, we know that God likes musical praise. That being said, I think it is perfectly understandable that eventually hip hop would be a type of music that would be used for that purpose. We know that the Book of Psalms was written using the types of musical instruments which were contemporary to King David's day. Today we have digital equipment. I am not just some guy making Jewish music. I learned how to rhyme in yeshiva ... It's not like Jewish culture isn't my culture. I'm sitting there eating gefilte fish on Shabbos too. At no point am I any more black than I am Jewish. I don't ever get to prioritize or classify or turn one on and one off.¹⁸¹

Being Black directly influences his opinions of his musical contribution. He speaks here about how his music is actually, very relatable to other Jews:

There is a polarized feeling that a lot of Black Jews go through. Black people represent the ultimate in other. By doing hip hop, and by doing it with Ashkenazi artists, rapping about Torah, in Yiddish, I break down a lot of that otherness. I'm the guy who went to yeshiva with you, rhyming about the same thing that we both learned in the same class. I'm not other. I'm the voice of your community with a different accent.¹⁸²

Rabbi Meir Fund, who officiated Jordan's conversion when he lived in Brooklyn, feels that hip-hop is harmful. "I am proud of Yitz Jordan's efforts," Fund said. But "music of this type will not benefit the listener spiritually." Jordan responds by saying, "Dissing styles of music is counterproductive to the Jewish community," Jordan said. "I have faith that in the future it will change, and all Jewish music will be seen as equally Jewish no matter what style it happens to be in."¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ Erin Macleod, "Matisyahu and YLove on Why Rap, Reggae and Rabbinical Teachings Fit Together Naturally," Wayback Machine Internet Archive, October 19, 2006, <https://web.archive.org/web/20111023013828/http://www.montrealmirror.com/2006/101906/music1.html>.

¹⁸² Macleod.

¹⁸³ "Brooklyn, NY - Tale of Tragedy and Triumph For a Struggling Hasidic Black Convert Rap Star."

Jordan raps in a mix of English, Hebrew, Yiddish, Arabic, Latin and Aramaic. His songs are heavily infused with content about his life experience, Judaism. Almost all of his songs include Jewish themes, in some respect. In his song “Mt. Sinai,” he discusses Moses, the Israelites, the twelve tribes, and the prayer of “k'dushah.” In his song “Mehadrin Rhyming,” he speaks of Rashi and the Kohanim.” Jordan also collaborates regularly with other Jewish musical artists, such as DeScribe on his single “Change” and Ta-Shma on his single “Journeys.”

Being both Black and Jewish has brought uncomfortable moments into Jordan’s experiences. “Being black affects everything,” he said. “I had kids stare at me like I was a gremlin in Borough Park.”¹⁸⁴ In his song, “From Brooklyn to Ramle,” Jordan says (at 1:41):

The same racist systems create the same victims
Half-hour in the pizzeria, they ain’t even ask me,
Manhattan I could spend ½ hour hailing taxis
That’s how I live on the daily
Black man charedi
Can’t let these haters faze me
If I did, I’d go insane.

Another time, while praying at the Kotel, he said, a group of black-hatted Jews taunted him by repeatedly calling him “shvartze.” He also remembered being aware that he was being served last in the kosher pizza line.¹⁸⁵

In spite of all this, Jordan’s face is well-known in the modern Orthodox neighborhoods of Brooklyn. An article in *The New York Times* reports:

Walking along Kingston Avenue one afternoon last week with Shais Rison, Mr. Jordan, who is known as both Yitz and Y-Love, was greeted by young white, Orthodox Jews with handshakes and head nods. “I love your music, man!” one told him. In Basil, a new kosher cafe, he beamed between bites of pizza as one of his songs played over the speakers.

¹⁸⁴ “Brooklyn, NY - Tale of Tragedy and Triumph For a Struggling Hasidic Black Convert Rap Star.”

¹⁸⁵ Barrin.

Jordan is proud that his music has reached young Black Jews in the United States, and in Israel, where there is a very large population of Black Jewish children. He says:

“A black Orthodox Jewish kid is far less likely to grow into an Orthodox Jewish adult because you have a lot of racism in the school system, not so much institutionalized but more like social racism.... When people hear my music or see my face on a T-shirt, they can relate.”

Here, Jordan is hoping that his presence can be a symbol and role model of the Black Jewish future.

Jordan’s newest venture has not been musical, but community oriented. He and Rabbi Shais Rishon (aka MaNishtana) have founded a website called the Tribe Herald, which is a news site for Jewish diversity and inclusion. The site was launched on June 19, 2020. The need for the site was due to acts of violence that disturbed Jordan greatly. “We heard stories of Jews of Color having to take sides, and people from biracial families getting into conflicts. We decided we needed somewhere where people can come together and talk about this and get support. All of these needs started to come up for our community,” Jordan said.¹⁸⁶

RABBI SANDRA LAWSON

Sandra Lawson was born on October 14, 1969¹⁸⁷ and was raised in St. Louis, Missouri¹⁸⁸ in a household that included her mother, father, and brother. Her parents did not raise her with religion. However, this changed when Lawson’s parents were facing divorce and her mother

¹⁸⁶ Engel.

¹⁸⁷ Sandra Lawson in discussion with the author, January 8, 2021.

¹⁸⁸ Keren Rivas, “Rabbi Sandra Lawson Named Associate Chaplain for Jewish Life, Jewish Educator at Hillel ,” Elon University, June 20, 2018, <https://www.elon.edu/u/news/2018/06/20/rabbi-sandra-lawson-named-associate-chaplain-for-jewish-life-jewish-educator-at-hillel/>.

regularly took her and her brother to a church to make a show of her excellent parenting. This left a negative impression on the young Lawson and her view of Christianity:

[My mother] found a minister, who I did not like very much. His name was Rev. Stuart and I saw him as a creepy little man who spouted out homophobic rants, and sexist rants during his sermons. I found it strange as a 13-year-old that we went to his church; I always saw my mother as a feminist and could not believe that we had to sit and listen to this guy. She would tell me that she would take the good stuff and leave the bad stuff.¹⁸⁹

During this period in Lawson's life, she learned that her earliest maternal ancestor was an Ethiopian Jewish man who immigrated to the United States. He did not marry a Jewish woman, so he did not pass down his Jewish identity to his children. Even so, Lawson remembers never eating pork or shellfish as a child. When she asked her mother why this was the case, she was simply told "Pork was bad for us."¹⁹⁰

She attended St. Leo University in St. Leo, Florida, where she majored in sociology and graduated magna cum laude.¹⁹¹ Her first exposure to Judaism occurred completely by chance. Needing a humanities credit, she begrudgingly took a course. "I took a course on the Old Testament, taught by Dr. Francis Githieya," Lawson said. Githieya's exceptional teaching made a significant impact on Lawson. "The class provided my first real introduction to the Torah, and I was fascinated by the stories and the rich history of the text," she said. "The class also changed my view of religion."¹⁹²

She joined the United States Army during her junior year and worked as a Military Police Investigator working on cases of child abuse and domestic violence. After graduating and completing her service in the Army, Lawson worked for the Ant-Defamation League, then as a

¹⁸⁹ Sandra Lawson, "My Story: My Jewish Path and Rabbinic Path," Rabbi Sandra Lawson, accessed January 5, 2021, <https://www.rabbisandralawson.com/whoiam>.

¹⁹⁰ Lawson, "My Story: My Jewish Path And Rabbinic Path."

¹⁹¹ Rivas.

¹⁹² Lawson, "My Story: My Jewish Path And Rabbinic Path."

personal trainer in Atlanta, GA. One of her clients, Rabbi Joshua Lesser, invited Lawson to attend a service at his Synagogue, Congregation Bet Haverim. She recalled, “I wanted to go, but I was scared -- mostly out of fear that I would be treated differently because I was black.”¹⁹³

The day Lawson finally did attend a service, she was enamored by the experience. People treated her very kindly. She also appreciated the casual atmosphere of children (and even dogs) running around, which contrasted starkly with her experiences in church as a child. “Every church I had been to, the children would have been forced to sit still in the pew as if somehow shackled,” Lawson remembers. During the service, a special moment arose that touched her: “There was this prayer called a Prayer for the End of Hiding, a prayer which begins ‘we as gay and lesbian Jews...’ and the entire community was saying this prayer, even the straight folks. I fell in love with CBH then and knew that I had to be a part of the community.” She converted to Judaism in 2004.¹⁹⁴

Lawson has strong views about the concept and wordage used around conversion:

Even though I went through a formal conversion, I don’t feel like I converted. I don’t even like the term ‘Jews by Choice.’ I see the term as a fancy way of saying ‘convert’ and another way to separate out people who are different in the Jewish community. Once someone is Jewish, then they are Jewish. Any attempt to make someone different in the Jewish community, I see that as against Jewish law. I instead feel like I got in touch with my Jewish roots and I am back where my family should have been all along.”¹⁹⁵

Lawson’s journey to becoming a Rabbi directly coincided with her Black identity. “I had several separate isolated identities,” Lawson said. “I was gay over here, and Jewish over here and black over here... I made a conscious decision to unite all of my identities... I felt that I could use my identities as a bridge builder.”¹⁹⁶

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

Lawson had begun working as a lay leader at CBH and also began doing interfaith work.

Here, she began to have the first thoughts of entering the Rabbinate:

I enjoyed working with clergy, but I soon began to realize two things: One, if I wanted to affect real change, I needed to have the title rabbi. The other reason was I really wanted to bring more attention to the racial and ethnic diversity in the Jewish community which meant becoming more than just a lay leader, it meant becoming a rabbi.¹⁹⁷

She then embarked on several educational endeavors. She received a Master's Degree in Sociology at Clark Atlanta University, then became an adjunct professor in Sociology at community colleges in Atlanta and Baltimore. While in Baltimore, she enrolled at Towson University with aims to attain a Ph.D. in Jewish Studies. Soon after she began, Professor Susanna Garfein sat her down and said, "Before you try to make this work, you need to figure out what it is you want to do." This affected Lawson greatly.¹⁹⁸ Lawson left Baltimore and moved to Philadelphia where she enrolled in the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 2011 and graduated in 2018.¹⁹⁹

Lawson has expressed exhaustion when people, whom she doesn't know, probe her with questions about her identity; questions that white Jews do not get asked:

Upon meeting me, Jews of Ashkenazi descent like to ask me a myriad of questions, from how are you Jewish, to when did you convert, to don't you have to be Jewish to go to rabbinical school? These questions never happen in a context of wanting to know me; they are about the questioner's own curiosity and trying to see how I fit into Judaism, as if by answering these questions, it will tell them everything they need to know about me. When people ask me these questions, I never know how to respond, sometimes I will respond "I'm just Jewish," but often, I want to respond with something comical. I might even remind them that Jews have always been a multi-racial-cultural people. I try to use my energy to educate other Jews about what it means to be Jewish in today's society, but sometimes it is really exhausting.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Sandra Lawson in discussion with the author, January 8, 2021.

¹⁹⁹ "Sandra Lawson," APB Speakers, accessed January 5, 2021, <https://www.apbspeakers.com/speaker/sandra-lawson/>.

²⁰⁰ Lawson, "My Story: My Jewish Path And Rabbinic Path."

Racism has been a regular and constant part of her life in Jewish spaces. Lawson tells three stories below about racism she has encountered in Jewish spaces:

One day I was invited to speak to a group of donors and board members in the Florida office. My job on that occasion was to explain some of the ideology of white supremacist and anti-Semitic organizations in the United States, and to encourage listeners to increase contributions that would be used to combat extremism. At the end of my presentation, I told the folks in the room that right-wing extremism affected me both personally and professionally because I was partnered with a woman and I was Jewish. After I outed myself as a Jew, the group had no interest in discussing anything else: How was I a Jew?

I never got the chance to sit, eat and chat with most of the guests because I found myself backed into a corner by two tall white Jewish men asking me questions about my Jewish identity. It turned out that one of the men was married to an Asian woman. They were parents of a biracial child, and he was desperate to learn if there were other Jews of color in this country. “Now you know there are other Jews of color in the United States,” I told him. The other man’s questions were impertinent and invasive. He had a hard time understanding how, why and under what circumstances I converted. He assumed that I should answer whatever personal questions he asked. This is not an uncommon experience for me.

One day, I was at a retreat for rabbinical students. There were rabbinical students from every rabbinical school on the East Coast. The retreat also featured rabbis from across the movements. On the second day of the retreat, as I was standing in line for lunch, one of the rabbis started asking me questions about my conversion. When we sat down to eat he continued his line of questioning. We were at a table full of rabbinical students, but he seemed focused only on me. I had never met this rabbi before, but the first thing he wanted to discuss was conversion. I told him that I usually like to get to know people before I disclose personal details. He responded that he loved to hear conversion stories and converts often like to share their stories. I reminded him that in today’s society, all Jewish stories are amazing, and if you only focus on those who look different, you are missing out on hearing the stories of others. Afterwards, several students came up to me to tell me how uncomfortable they felt with his questions and thought I handled it pretty well. One student who is white told me people never ask about her conversion and rarely assume she’s converted.

... One Shabbat morning, I was visiting a synagogue, and wearing a tallit and kippah and reciting the Amidah with the rest of the congregation. A man tapped me on the shoulder and asked me how I knew the Amidah. I told him I am Jewish. His behavior made me feel as if my presence at this synagogue was disrupting his ability to pray. To be comfortable, he needed to know who I was and why I was there.²⁰¹

²⁰¹ Sandra Lawson and Donna Cephas, “Racism in the Jewish Community,” *Evolve*, May 15, 2019, <http://evolve.reconstructingjudaism.org/racism-in-the-jewish-community>.

Lawson says that, as a Black Jewish convert, she is treated very differently than white Jewish converts. “Your average Jew knows that once you’re Jewish, and I believed this when I converted, you’re never supposed to be asked if you’ve converted. You’re a Jew and that’s all that matters. White people forget that when it comes to people of color.”²⁰² ²⁰³ This respect is generally extended to all white people who have converted, but in Lawson’s experience, she and other Black Jews are rarely extended this courtesy.

Lawson released a provocative tweet on May 30, 2020. The tweet read, “Let me be clear. You are either racist or anti-racist. Those are the two choices. The latter meaning you are working everyday either emotionally or physically to dismantle the racism that we all have been taught since day one in the United States.”²⁰⁴ This tweet has garnered much attention, as the message here is complex. Lawson clarified this tweet, saying:

That tweet has probably gotten the most attention of anything I’ve ever tweeted. We are moving away from this idea of, “I’m not racist.” Yet the United States of America was designed, from its inception, to benefit one group of people over another group of people. At the time, that meant the country was white and British. Over time, other European groups were allowed into that privilege of whiteness. Eventually, Germans, Italians, Irish and, at some point, Eastern European Jews, were allowed into whiteness...

As far as racism goes, this means you’re either racist or you’re anti-racist. There is no middle ground of being not racist. You’re not doing anything to dismantle the system that exists to privilege one group of people over another. As far as Jews are concerned, I recognize that Eastern European Jews were not seen as white. But whiteness evolves, and other groups have been able to benefit from white privilege. So, if you are a Jew, coded as white or seen as white, yes, you can have white privilege and you can also suffer antisemitism. Both of those things can exist at the same time.²⁰⁵

²⁰² “Racism in the Jewish Community,” *Evolve* (Reconstructing Judaism, January 30, 2020).

²⁰³ Lawson is referring to the commonly known guideline stated in the Mishna and in Gemara Bava Metzia against embarrassing others.

²⁰⁴ Judy Bolton-Fasman, “Rabbi Sandra Lawson on Personal Identity, Racism and Music as Prayer,” JewishBoston, November 9, 2020, <https://www.jewishboston.com/rabbi-sandra-lawson-on-personal-identity-racism-and-music-as-prayer/>.

²⁰⁵ Bolton-Fasman.

In the dozens of articles that are written either about Lawson or by Lawson, the word “tired” or “exhausted” is used by Lawson frequently. One gets a sense that Lawson has found the Jewish world’s curiosity about her very confounding. She explains:

We need to move beyond origin stories of converts, especially those of us who are Jews of color. It seems to be a curiosity that the majority of white Jews need to understand; it’s not necessarily important to me or relevant to my current Jewish experience. Many Jews of color are tired of the same questions of, “Tell me how you came to be Jewish.” ... I want to move the conversation so that we are not continuing to otherize Jews of color, because my origin story as a Jew is a convert. But it’s not the origin story for many, many other Jews of color, and we continue to shape this narrative that Jews of color are outsiders who came in.²⁰⁶

A major part of Lawson’s identity (and her Rabbinate) is her musicianship. “Musician is a new label for me, one that I’ve been slow to adopt,” Lawson said. “Music is something that I’ve always been inspired to do. I never put any energy in that direction, but I’ve always had this fascination with trying to learn how to sing and play guitar. I’ve taken lessons here or there to try to learn something, but it never really stuck.”²⁰⁷

Lawson found music to be particularly helpful when she was in Rabbinical school and learning Hebrew. “Hebrew is rhythmic, and you can sing-song it.” She recounted a story of taking a Hebrew class and being given as assignment where she was supposed to teach a Hebrew lesson. She struggled to sit down and write out what she wanted to say to in order to teach. So, when it was time to teach the lesson, Lawson reached for her guitar and instead, *sang* the lesson. The teaching was a success and her teacher lauded her, praising her for her innovative teaching style.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁶ Bolton-Fasman.

²⁰⁷ Sandra Lawson, in discussion with the author, October 16, 2020.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

Lawson's music also impacted her work as a chaplain. When she found it challenging to connect with her patients in a dementia unit, she decided to bring her guitar in and sing "You Are My Sunshine" and "This Little Light of Mine" with them. "The light came on," she said. "They were singing. Some of them talked to me afterward... Whatever happens with music, it opens up a little portal in the brain and they would let me in. And then, just as quickly as it would open, it would close, and I would sing again... Every chaplain job I've had since then I've incorporated music with seniors."²⁰⁹

Music has been a useful tool for her personal prayer. She explains:

Music also gave me access to praying. I can read the prayers, but if I can find an entry point into understanding what the prayers mean in my heart, music has been really good for that. Music has also allowed me to explain some challenging things that I've experienced, and I can express myself in ways that I can't really do in a speech.²¹⁰

Lawson uses music in her service leading and tells how music can enhance other's prayer experiences:

...The more you sing, the more your heart is open. So, for example, our morning liturgy is all about gratitude. We say, "Thank you, God." Or I take upon myself the blessing from our creator to love our neighbors and love myself. I say thank you for restoring my soul, breathing life into me. And I translate the last part as, "God is awesome." Those songs are about gratitude before we even get to the call to prayer. We sing these songs and pray these songs to open our hearts so that when we get the call to prayer, we are open to receiving whatever the Divine has for us. We get whatever we need to receive at that moment before we get to the Amidah. To feel the Amidah, our hearts have to be open to pray openly and full. That's how I feel about music.²¹¹

Lawson utilized her musicianship by leading Shabbat services at an unconventional locale during rabbinical school. She applied for a grant from Reconstructionist Rabbinical College's Auerbach Entrepreneurial Grant Program, which supports what it calls bold experiments that

²⁰⁹ Sandra Lawson, in discussion with the author, January 8, 2021.

²¹⁰ Bolton-Fasman.

²¹¹ Ibid.

reconstruct Jewish experience for the 21st century. She used the grant to hold monthly services at Arnold's Raw Food Cafe in Lansdale, PA – a café that caters to vegans and raw foodists. "I want to help create sacred spaces wherever people are," she said, "to give them the opportunity to do Jewish stuff without having to go home, dress up, and drive a few miles to a synagogue."²¹²

Lawson said that she does not use the guitar to accompany every prayer throughout her worship leadership, but in the occasional necessary moment of prayer, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic "It's helped me open up, and in this weird virtual world, to connect with people," she says. "One of the challenges I've often had with the guitar in a prayer service is I have often seen it as a barrier to connection, where online, it's almost the opposite. It's a way for me to connect with people."

Lawson has served as an Associate Chaplain for Jewish life and Jewish educator at Hillel at Elon University in Elon, NC since July 16, 2018. She lives in North Carolina with her wife, Susan Hurrey.²¹³

ANALYSIS

RESPECTFUL TITLES

Each musician profiled in this article discusses how racism has been a part of their Jewish experience. LaRue, Brooks, and Steiner were constantly referred to as "Black Cantor" "Negro Cantor" "Colored Cantor" or "schvartser khazn" – listed as a preface to their name or even in place of their name. This is deeply problematic because they are identified first and foremost by

²¹² Kristin E. Holmes, "Breaking with Tradition, Rabbinical Student Does Shabbat Service Arnold's Way," <https://www.inquirer.com> (The Philadelphia Inquirer, June 12, 2016), https://www.inquirer.com/philly/news/20160612_Breaking_with_tradition__rabbinical_student_does_Shabbat_service_Arnold_s_Way.html.

²¹³ Rivas.

their race, as if their race is the most relevant aspect about them. In one article showing a radio program line-up, it listed “Thomas LaRue, colored cantor” and later in the same line-up, it said “Zachary Caulli, tenor.”²¹⁴ This gives the impression that LaRue was not recognized for his artistry; but for his color (which is ironic, given that this was radio). I think this would be as strange as seeing a program of speakers that would read: “Our speakers tonight will be Rabbi Michael Jackson, and Female Rabbi Vanessa Williams.” I believe it is important that nobody should be introduced formally with anything other than their self-identified title. If one doesn’t know someone’s self-identified title, one should advertise them no differently than if they were a straight, white man. A bad example would be “An evening with the first ordained Black Cantor, David Fair.” A good example would be “An evening with Cantor David Fair. Cantor Fair is the first ordained Cantor that is Black.”

A RIGHT TO A TRUTHFUL ORIGIN STORY

The three chazzanim profiled in this article were often referred to as being from Ethiopia. In *The Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, it wrote “N.Y. congregation engages Ethiopian Cantor” when speaking of Eliezer Brooks. As noted above about Thomas LaRue, his origin story was also changed to him having been born “between Abyssinia and Arabia.”²¹⁵ The reason for this purposeful misnomer is that in the 1920s, a visitor from a faraway land was more palatable to White audiences than a Black American who was born and raised in the United States.

²¹⁴ “Tomorrow's Radio Programs,” *Asbury Park Press*, July 13, 1923, p. 17, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/144202577/>.

²¹⁵ Sapoznik, “How European Jews Saw the African-American Cantor: The 1930 Toyve Ha'Cohen Tour.”

In the case of Goldye Steiner, I hypothesize that she was not from Ethiopia at all, but the United States. Steiner's origin is likely another fabricated story to create exoticness. Here, Steiner's origins are reported by *The Morning Call* reported in 1925:

... Famous, gifted native African soprano from Abyssinia in Africa... born in the secluded portions of Africa, yet her inborn musical talented were so unusual that they attracted the attention of Manalic LL who immediately took her in charge and sent her to Milan, Italy. Here, she studied in the conservatories and after completing the course, went to Paris and then to Berlin.²¹⁶

Likewise, *The Jewish Criterion* reported:

Goldye, colored cantor's life reads like a story from a thousand and one nights. Goldye, the colored cantor, one of the most beautiful women in Africa, was born in Abyssinia, Africa, twenty-eight years ago. Once a tribal chief met her at the mines, and after hearing her sing his interest was so great that he sent her to Milan, Italy, to cultivate her voice... Goldye is a member of the Jewish tribe known as 'Sheba of Gza.'[sic]²¹⁷

A tribal chief having heard Steiner from "the mines" and then "sent to Milan" all sound rather quixotic. Even the article itself says that her story "reads like a story from a thousand and one nights." The story certainly does sound incredible, as if it were fiction.

When one looks at the photograph of Steiner, one can see that her facial features do not appear to be that of a native Ethiopian. Steiner's features are like those of most Black Americans, whose ancestors have mixed with a variety of Europeans.

Sapoznik shares my skepticism: "The great singing reviews which Goldye garnered for her appearance in [the show entitled] "*him*" may call into question her claimed Abyssinian birth/European upbringing given the critical American vernacular nature of "Frankie and Johnny" given her late quinary adoption of English with its prominent foreign accent."²¹⁸

²¹⁶ "Noted African Soprano to Appear at the Lyric," *The Morning Call*.

²¹⁷ "Goldye, The Colored Cantor," *The Jewish Criterion*.

²¹⁸ Sapoznik "Goldye, Di Shvartze Khaznte/the Black woman Cantor."

Anthony Russell discusses how meaningful it was to be in the company of other Black musicians. I relate to this sentiment wholeheartedly; indeed, this concept is easily understood among every Black person I know. Knowing that one is the only person of color in a room is an unsafe feeling—one becomes anxious, fearing that an offensive statement could be made and one has no back-up for support. There is also the worry about physical safety. If a crime is committed or anger flies, all Black people know that they will not be treated with the consideration they would if they were white.

Classical music has not been an area of the arts where Black participation has been widely appreciated. Black classical musicians are still seen as an oddity. Within the greater Black community, classical musicians are often made to feel like outsiders for doing something so out-of-the-box. For this reason, when I was in *Porgy and Bess* with Opera Theater of Pittsburgh, I felt a community like I had never felt before. I was truly with my people. I wasn't made to feel strange; I was just like everyone else – and it felt good to feel normal.

Many Jewish white people take for granted the feeling of being around people who look like them. They are completely normal. They fit in – at least, by skin color. They will never be at a B'nei Mitzvah and be handed garbage to throw away, as if they were with the caterers. They will never be at a wedding and have someone ask them to get them a martini, as if they were wait staff. All Jews of color want is to feel normal, and to not stick out. I envision a space where Jews of color in mainstream Judaism can pray together and create our own unique brand of Judaism.

NEEDING TO EXPLAIN ONESELF

Joshua Nelson, Anthony Russell, and Sandra Lawson all speak of constantly having to explain their Judaism. They describe being asked to explain how they could possibly be Black

and Jewish. They are also constantly asked if they have converted, which, as Lawson discusses, is against Jewish law. My hope is that Jewish white people will hold their curiosity, understanding that people do not want to explain themselves to strangers. Jewish Black people are looking for community and want to be treated like any other member of that community. It would be very unusual for a Jewish white person to ask a Jewish white person that they don't know, "Where is your family from?" My plea is, if someone wants to know a Jewish person of color's story, simply try to be their friend. Talk about weather, sports teams, and pets. If one makes the effort to be in relationship with someone, one will inevitably hear their story. And sometimes, one is not going to learn all that one would like to learn about someone, and that is okay. Sometimes, one is left with a mystery.

SEEKING COMMUNITY

Joshua Nelson spoke about how the documentary made of his life called *Keep On Walking* was overlooked by the Black community, but embraced by the Jewish white community. It can be challenging for Jewish Black people to be in relationship with Christian Black people. I have often felt ostracized by Christian Black people (or made to feel "not Black enough") because I do not worship Jesus. We Black people with one white parent often feel like we have to defend our right to be called Black. Admittedly, our light skin tone affords us privileges that darker-skinned Black people do not have, such as more romantic options, employment options, and being treated more humanely by police. This results in resentment, which is quite justified and understandable. What can often happen is a feeling of abandonment from our Black families, leaving us with a need to feel accepted by the Jewish white community. Joshua Nelson conveyed to me that he feels extremely loved and accepted by Jewish white

communities as well as his Christian Black community. However, this reception is rare. All this is to say: what Jewish Black people need is to be treated and spoken to as one would any Jewish white person. We want to belong.

RAISING AWARENESS AND APPRECIATION

The purpose of this article is to raise awareness and appreciation for the rich history and the ever-evolving work of Jewish Black Americans. Synagogue leaders have a responsibility to expose their members to all of the minority groups that lie within Judaism. Otherwise, they deny their members the wealth of music, visual art, poetry, writings, and the richness of everything one can gain from learning about another culture. There is much that synagogue leaders can do to honor Jewish Black Americans and raise such visibility:

Invite a Jewish Black leader to be an artist-in-residence or scholar-in-residence.

Rabbi Sandra Lawson is the Jewish Educator at the Elon University Hillel Center. Joshua Nelson is an academic scholar whose expertise is the intersection of Black and Jewish culture. Anthony Russell is a respected scholar of Yiddish music and culture. These people are easy to get in touch with via email, Facebook, and Instagram. The unusual and unique choice to bring in such scholars/musicians would undoubtedly draw interest from the average synagogue.

Include a Jewish Black Rabbi in one's teaching. When teaching a class in global Jewry or in a modern Jewish history class where important rabbis are mentioned, mention a Jewish Black American Rabbi. Besides Rabbi Capers Funnye and Rabbi Sandra Lawson, other mainstream Jewish American Black rabbis include: Rabbi Georgette Kennebrae, Rav Tiferet Berenbaum, and Rabbi Alysa Stanton. Each of these rabbis currently have an expansive internet presence and would be relatively easy to speak about for 5-minutes. If one is interested in

hearing about modern Hebrew-Israelite culture, I was able to speak on the phone with Rabbi Baruch Yehuda with ease.²¹⁹ When planning Torah study, make a concerted effort to include one of these Rabbis on a source sheet.

Feature photos with people of color on your synagogue website. When any Jew or aspiring Jew contemplates going to a new synagogue, the first thing they do is visit a website. The website tells someone what that synagogue's values are. A website gives a clear impression of a synagogue's size, wealth, and attitude toward class. The choice of which photos of people appear on a website say a lot. Photos reveal who that synagogue wants to show as an example of who they are and who they want to attract. Pictures on synagogue websites are rarely chosen arbitrarily. I have observed that when faced with a choice of which photo will be shown most prominently in the synagogue newsletter or synagogue website, leadership will almost always choose the photo of the most attractive people. All synagogues should choose to put a person of color in photos on their website. This choice tells all who go to the website that here is a synagogue which cares about racial diversity. Here is a synagogue where a person of color can say, "At least I won't be the only person of color there." As a gay person, I myself look for a synagogue that shows pictures of two men or two women holding hands. A person who uses a wheelchair is looking to see themselves in pictures, as well. Pictures on a synagogue website truly do matter.

Share the music of these musicians in your worship services and teach them in your religious school: Lawson's "I Am Human (Oseh Shalom)" is very singable would be appropriate for a general Shabbat (and would appropriate for children). Joshua Nelson's "Adon Olam" is be

²¹⁹ Rabbi Yehuda is very generous with his time. He graciously made time to speak with me even though he was sitting shiva.

a great selection during Black History Month. Anthony Russell's "In der Fremd" would be excellent for an anthem for Kristallnacht or Yom HaShoah). 4th and 5th graders would find it incredibly fun to learn a rap by Nissim Black such as "Fly Away" or Y-Love's "Mt. Sinai." One can also teach spirituals, as I explain below.

NEGRO SPIRITUALS

There has been a conversation among socially conscious synagogues in regards to spirituals: "Can we, as white people, sing spirituals in a way that isn't cultural appropriation?" I think it is an excellent conversation to have.

Spirituals are not being written en masse anymore. They inhabit a specific time in history. Not only were spirituals written to give outlets for expression, but they were sung to signal fellow enslaved persons where to go or what to do in times of dire straits. ("Down By the Riverside" might have been sung to say, "We're meeting at the riverside at sunset to plan our escape" or "Wade in the Water" might have meant "we need to swim across the lake because then the dogs cannot trace our scent.")²²⁰ This was an important period in American history and this music deserves to live and be exposed.

Synagogues can and should showcase these songs. As highlighted above by Joshua Nelson and Anthony Russell, there's a very special relationship between the non-Jewish Black community and the White Jewish community in the United States. Jews and negro spirituals have a right to meet each other.

As a Jewish Black person, I feel comfortable with spirituals being sung in synagogues by White people—with the following caveat. There must be respectful framing and context. One

²²⁰ "Pathways to Freedom: Secrets: Signs and Symbols: Music," Pathways to Freedom: Maryland and the Underground Railroad, accessed January 20, 2021, <https://pathways.thinkport.org/secrets/music2.cfm>.

must explain the history behind spirituals: Who wrote them and why? I think it would also be appropriate to say why the leaders of the synagogue want to feature spirituals. This should be accompanied with a discussion on how your synagogue is making strides to become an antiracist synagogue. There could be a sermon discussion entitled “Making Temple Shalom Antiracist: Examining our Relationship to People of Color.” This would undoubtedly be a memorable evening in the life of your congregation. This would be an opportune week to invite an antiracism/diversity educator to lead a workshop at your synagogue and help moderate that discussion.

Practically speaking, spirituals could be sung on the Shabbat before Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. Spirituals that include themes from Jewish tradition include: “Down By the Riverside,” “Wade in the Water,” “Go Down Moses,” “Lil’ David Play on Your Harp,” “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands,” “Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho,” and “Elijah Rock.” Incidentally, many of these spirituals have been staples of Jewish summer camp repertoire for over 50 years—several are featured in the popular Jewish songbook *Shireinu*.²²¹

The negro spirituals derived from the enslaved person in the United States – and those slaves are my ancestors. To me, these songs of Black Americans are the birthright of every Jewish Black American.

AREAS TO BE FURTHER EXPLORED

In the course of my research on Black Jewish American musicians, I have identified some key areas deserving of future research and scholarship:

²²¹ *Shirenu: Our Songs: a Songbook for Camps, Conclaves, Kallot and Retreats* (New York: Transcontinental Music Publications, 2001).

An analysis of the musical practices of the Hebrew-Israelites is sorely needed. There was a small amount of information about Prophet Cherry: His services began with the beating of a drum and the music was gospel.^{222 223} The Commandment Keepers incorporated a saxophone and English-language hymns in their service.²²⁴ Hatza'ad Harishon held a fundraising benefit from 1967-1970, which featured Shlomo Carlebach and Theodore Bikel.²²⁵ Other than these observations, there does not appear to be a musical analysis of the Hebrew-Israelites in easily accessed academia. However, there are countless YouTube videos of the music of Hebrew-Israelites. How does it compare and contrast to the music of Black churches? Are there any discernible patterns among congregations?

The Jewish Black chazzanim of the United States deserve to be researched. Henry Sapoznik has done an enormous amount of research on Thomas LaRue, Goldye Steiner, and three other Jewish Black chazzanim: Willie “The Lion” Smith, Mendel, and David De Kollscritta. (I choose to not include the last three because there is so little information available on them.) However, he has not published his research in an academic journal. There is little to no information on these people; what information I did find was through the use of historic newspaper websites. These chazzanim deserve to have their stories told. It is unfortunate that the true story of Steiner’s origin is likely lost to history. It is my hope that a musicologist can focus an entire article to Steiner and unearth information to verify her true origins. Was she the daughter of a Jewish parent? Was she a Hebrew-Israelite? Did she convert to Judaism?

²²² Santamaria, 224.

²²³ Parfitt, 89.

²²⁴ Gold, 196.

²²⁵ Fernheimer, 86.

An emerging voice in the world of Jewish Black musicianship that deserves to be followed is a singer and composer named Marques Hollie. Hollie has written a monodrama called *Go Down, Moshe*. As his website describes:

Go Down, Moshe... explores the intersection of his Black and Jewish identities by reinterpreting the Passover story told from a first-person perspective, using negro spirituals, traditional nusach, and the narratives of formerly enslaved people. Marques began developing the work while a member of the Union for Reform Judaism's JewV'Nation Fellowship, and is continuing to develop and present the work as a member of the 2018-2019 cohort of LABA: A Laboratory for Jewish Culture at the 14th Street Y. On Thursday, April 18, 2019, Marques presented an excerpt of *Go Down, Moshe* at the second LABA Live presentation.²²⁶

Highlights of the show include the original compositions of "Mah Nishtana" and "Harriett's Nigun" (referring to Harriett Tubman). Hollie also portrays William Dorsey Swan, the only known drag queen who was an enslaved person.

IS THERE A JEWISH RACE?

Joshua Nelson said, "People need to learn that being Jewish is a religion and a people, not a race."²²⁷ Lawson said, "Jews have always been a multi-racial-cultural people."²²⁸ The fact that Jews are a people and not a race is a challenging concept for many people. Due to the religious discrimination of the early 20th century and the Holocaust, Jewish white people have been made to feel that they are wholly different than Christian white people. It is very common for Jewish white people to fully admit to having hair texture, hair and eye color, facial features, and even their height that sets them "racially" apart from a Christian white person.

²²⁶ Marques Hollie, "Go Down, Moshe," Marques Hollie, Jewsician, accessed January 19, 2021, <http://www.marqueshollie.com/go-down-moshe>.

²²⁷ La Gorce.

²²⁸ Lawson, "My Story: My Jewish Path And Rabbinic Path."

Perhaps the hardest evidence to counter to the racial misconception of Judaism is a DNA testing service such as 23andme, which told me that I was 54.1% Ashkenazi Jewish. It's understandable that when a Bob Rosenthal, whose family came from Poland, has been told his entire life that a Jew looks like him, he will be very confused (possibly disbelieving) when a Black person walks up to him and says, "I'm Jewish, too."

Jews have a different relationship to race than Christians do. It's in the fabric of Christianity that everyone can be converted to Christianity. There are Christian mission trips to exotic countries where the goal is to convert as many people to Christianity as possible. Jews don't think this way. Judaism requires intense study and commitment to allow someone to join the religion. This comes at odds with the long-held assertion that Jewishness is genetics, not belief. This is why there is often great discrimination toward those who have converted. Unfortunately, there is great controversy on whether Jewishness is a belief system or a genetic system.²²⁹

I submit that we Jews are not a race; we are a people. We are diverse in every way there is. Christians are much more evolved in their thinking about peoplehood than Jews tend to be, I think Christians are fully accepting that a Christian can look any way a human being can look. Some Christians are religious; others are not. I wonder when the Jews going to get there?

CONCLUSION

Tsiporah and Moses had two sons, as we read in Exodus 2:22: "When [Tsiporah] gave birth to a son, Moses named him Gershom. 'I have been a foreigner (*ger*) in a strange land,' he

²²⁹ Chris Bodenner, "What Makes a Jew a Jew?," The Atlantic (Atlantic Media Company, April 13, 2016), <https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2016/04/what-makes-a-jew-a-jew/478161/>.

said.”²³⁰ His other son’s name we discover in 18:4: “The name of the other one was Eliezer, because, ‘My father’s God (*El*) was my Helper (*ezer*), rescuing me from Pharoah’s sword.’”²³¹ Gershom’s son, Jonathan, was an apostate priest and the leader of the tribe of Dan.²³² Eliezer’s son was Rehabiah, the Chief. Gershom and Eliezer are not spoken off to great extent, but the little we do know about them is telling. These Hebrew Black men were respected leaders. They themselves had children, as read in Judges 18:30: “The children of Dan set up the idol and Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of [Moses],²³³ he and his sons served as priests for the tribe of Dan until the day they were exiled from the land.”²³⁴ Eliezer was said have had many descendants, as we read in I Chronicles 23:17: “And the sons of Eliezer were: Rehabiah the chief. Eliezer had no other sons, but the sons of Rehabiah were very numerous.”

Gershom and Eliezer each have names that lend themselves to interpretive metaphor. Gershom derives from the word “ger,” which means “stranger.” One might say this foreshadowed the way Jewish Black people would feel in American Jewish communities. Eliezer derives from the word “ezra,” which means “help.” Jewish Black Americans would certainly need help in their journey to attaining equal status with other Jews in the United States.

²³⁰ Kaplan, 265.

²³¹ Kaplan, 345.

²³² Rabbi James Rosenberg, “The Story of Moses' Second Son,” Jewish Rhode Island, February 2, 2017, <https://www.jewishrhody.com/stories/the-story-of-moses-second-son,6119>.

²³³ According to Rabbi Jack Abramowitz:

The priest of this idol was a Levite named Jonathan, whose father was named Gershom and whose grandfather was ostensibly named Menashe. The letter “nun” in the name Menashe, however, is written suspended above the line. Rashi cites the Talmud in Baba Basra (109b) that Jonathan was actually the son of Gershom, the son of Moshe. Out of respect for Moshe, the letter nun was partially inserted so that his name should be read as if it were Menashe. It was not fully inserted, however, so that Tanach should not conceal the truth of the matter.

²³⁴ Jack Abramowitz, “Judges 18:30 - One+One,” OU Torah (OU, June 11, 2013), <https://outorah.org/p/4334/>.

However, Tsiporah's name carries a special metaphor. Her name derives from the word "tsipor," which means bird. Birds sing. Few other animals "sing" to attract a mate. There's even a bird called a "songbird." I can tell Tsiporah's song is still being sung today. This song was sung by Goldye Steiner, Thomas LaRue, Eliezer Brooks, Nissim Black, Yitz Jordan, Anthony Russell, Joshua Nelson, and now, if I may be so immodest to say, Cantor David Fair. As I step into the role of the first ordained Cantor who is Black, I feel it is my personal duty, and honor, to continue singing this song. May this song's chorus swell in the voices and souls of each and every Jewish Black American.

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