

Unknown Tidbits Of The Intersectionality Of Jews And Blacks In America

Torah portion—this weekend, is Vaera-in Exodus- Ch 9:1. It includes in it the famous phrase, in Hebrew, “Shlach et Ami V’yavduni”- Let my people go, that they shall serve me.”

We all recognize that the phrase “ Let My People Go” became incorporated into a spiritual that had its roots in the struggle of black slaves to be free from their chains. The phrase was made part of the introduction between my Professor, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose memory we honor this weekend:

“At the first conference on religion and race, the main participants were Pharaoh and Moses. Moses’ words were: “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, let My people go that they may celebrate a feast to Me.”

Relations between Jews and Blacks have been mixed, especially in recent years, from a Louis Farrakhan or a Kanye West. Some of it stems from the influence of the first Christians to preach to their slaves, way back, and teaching them the “ Christ-killer” narrative.

Yet, on the other hand, as the words of the song “ Let my People Go”, there was also an identification with ancient Israel.

There was as well a lot of mixing that took place, over the centuries—Alexander Hamilton, one of the great framers of the Constitution, may have been of mixed African and Jewish heritage. A few years back, we did an on-line zoom session with members of the Jewish community of Jamaica, which is very much a mixed-community of Jews of Sephardic and African ancestry.

Here's a reminder: Avinu Malkenu with a Caribbean beat:

<https://youtu.be/obuEDvzcQyQ?si=4fzY9rBLnddFMSYL&t=6175>

One of the founders of the very influential black civil rights movement, SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) , Julius Lester, converted to Judaism, influence by the fact that he had a Jewish great grandfather who married a freed slave. My sociology professor, back in the 60's, pointed out that then, the predominant mixed race marriages were between Jews and Blacks. Later, I hope to bring in some outside participants to talk with us about their experience as Jews of Color, or Black Jews, or just plain Jews.

So, I want, this Shabbat, to dabble in the theme of intersectionality, to use a contemporary politically loaded word, as it relates to positive connections between our two groups.

First, let's talk about music. Gershwin introduced Jewish musical themes into a musical about blacks- Porgy and Bess. Al Jolson pretended to play a Negro in blackface, as was done a century ago. But what about the other way around?

Tevye der Shvartzer Khazn

The story of Thomas LaRue Jones, the Black cantor from Newark who captivated the Jewish world with his songs **BY EDNA NAHSHON**

JUNE 16, 2022 Tablet Magazine

The writer notes:



“Working my way through a mass of colorful theater posters that featured Yiddish divas and matinee idols, I glimpsed an old black-and-white illustrated placard with a cameo like portrait of a serious-looking young Black man with soulful eyes, dressed in festive cantorial regalia. Titled “Tevye, der shvartzer khazn” (Tevye, the Black Cantor), he was, the undated print declared, “The Greatest Wonder of the World.” A small-type English-language byline at bottom of the poster announced that “Thomas La-Rue” was “the most phenomenal cantor-tenor in America” and “the only one of his kind in the world.” “Tevye,” the renowned Black cantor, the poster announced in Yiddish, “has taken America by storm” with a multilanguage repertoire of Jewish folk songs and cantorial compositions by Yossele (Joseph) Rosenblatt and other Jewish composers.

Here is a little visual about him:

https://www.youtube.com/live/bXu_32enBa8?si=RM3gN-7cIQdbf9_X&t=917

Run to 16:29

Sample of his singing, on the theme of Jewish suffering and hope!

https://www.youtube.com/live/bXu_32enBa8?si=bhS8B97tmZjDxILz&t=1620

go to 29:16

African Zionism

Today, South Africa is leading the attack against Israel at the international court, part of a historical trend in South Africa of the past several decades. It ignores, not only the role that Israel played in the support given to the newly emergent nations of Africa after colonialism, but also the inspiration that Jewish history gave to prominent leaders of the early civil rights movement:

Zionism, Pan-Africanism, and White Nationalism- Tablet Magazine

What we learn about Israel's ethnocentrism by looking at groups inspired by Zionism **BY SHAUL MAGID** DECEMBER 11, 2018

Excerpts

“Black Zionism has its roots before the formal advent of Zionism: in the Pan-African writings of William Blyden and Martin Delaney, and then later in W.E.B Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and Stokely Carmichael.”

“West Indian-born Edward Blyden wrote about it as a resolution to the slavery question in the 1850s, focusing on the newly founded country of Liberia in 1847. Blyden had no particular ideology of Black Nationalism and viewed colonizing Liberia in the way proto-Zionists in the 19th century viewed Jewish immigration to Palestine, as a return to the homeland (although Blyden did not have the messianic tenor of some Jewish proto-Zionists or later Pan-Africanists). Blyden published *The Jewish Question*, a pamphlet, in 1898 (underwritten by his Jewish friend from Liverpool, Louis Solomon), two years after the publication of Herzl's *Der Judenstaat*, which Blyden read and admired. In 1903, a year before Herzl's death, Blyden noted in a lecture “West African Problems,” using a biblical metaphor, that the idea of the black colonization of Africa “give[s] to the African the fullest opportunity for self-development and self-advancement.” Blyden viewed Zionism as a model for his idea, coining the term “Ethiopianism” and calling on blacks to return to Africa to redeem it. In *The Jewish Question*, Blyden writes, “The Jewish question, in some respects, is similar to that which at this moment agitates thousands of descendants of Africa in America, anxious to return to the land of their fathers.”

“This idea reached a wider audience in W.E.B. Du Bois, who coined the term “Black Zionism” to describe his Pan-Africanism. Du Bois openly stated, “The African movement must mean to us what the Zionist movement must mean to the Jews, the centralization of race effort and the recognition of a racial front.” Du Bois, an ardent fan of Zionism, pinpointed the racial component in Zionism that many overlooked.”

One of the best defenses of Israel’s right was given by a speech by Martin Luther King Jr, just a short time before he was murdered. I was there then.

<http://www.rabbinorbert.com/2015/01/selma-king-and-rabbi.html>

Rustin, the movie, failed to cover Bayard Rustin’s battle on behalf of Israel, when he and A. Phillip Randolph founded Black Americans to Support Israel Committee (BASIC) in 1975 . He declared: “Since Israel is a democratic state surrounded by essentially undemocratic states which have sworn her destruction, those interested in democracy everywhere must support Israel’s existence..(
<https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/history/articles/bayard-rustin-mlk>) “

As a former communist and openly gay, he would have been shocked by the devotion of so many in the LGBTQ community to the cause of Hamas.

How about African Americans who felt they were the original Jews. Many years back, as a young Rabbinic student, I went on Shabbat to a synagogue in Harlem, The Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation, led by Rabbi Matthews.

Black Jews, The Commandment Keepers In Harlem, 1910 (harlemworldmagazine.com)

Black Jews, The Commandment Keepers In Harlem, 1910

JULY 1, 2016



Black Jews started forming Harlem congregations in the 1910s, based on the conviction that Africans were descended from ancient Hebrews and that Christianity was a religion imposed on them during enslavement in America. But few traces of their presence remain in the neighborhood.

(documentary filmmaker Marlaine Glicksman) Her film in progress, called “The Commandment Keepers,” will be screened on April 17 at 92nd Street Y in Manhattan. It traces the congregation’s history, from the early black rabbis’ sermons and writings about their commitment to Jewish rituals to their followers’ persistence in the face of racism and anti-Semitism.

From Wikipedia

Commandment Keepers

Main article: [Commandment Keepers](#)



The founder of the Commandment Keepers, Wentworth Arthur Matthew holding a Sefer Torah.

Wentworth Arthur Matthew founded the Commandment Keepers Congregation in Harlem in 1919.^[5] Matthew was influenced by the non-black Jews he met as well as by Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League. Garvey used the Biblical Jews in exile as a metaphor for black people in North America. One of the accomplishments of Garvey's movement was to strengthen the connection between black Americans and Africa, Ethiopia in particular. When Matthew later learned about the Beta Israel—Ethiopian Jews—he identified with them.^[59]

Today the Commandment Keepers follow traditional Jewish practices and observe Jewish holidays.^[35] Members observe kashrut, circumcise newborn boys, and celebrate Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, and their synagogue has a mechitza to separate men and women during worship.^[60]

The Commandment Keepers believe that they are descendants of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.^[61] Matthew taught that "the Black man is a Jew" and "all genuine Jews are Black men",^[62] but he valued non-black Jews as those who had preserved Judaism over the centuries.^[5] Matthew maintained cordial ties with non-black Jewish leaders in New York and frequently invited them to worship at his synagogue.^[63]

Some years back, I served as a Rabbi in Newport News, Virginia. Across the James River was the city of Portsmouth, and I was told that there had been a community of

Black Jews there. At one time, when I was driving through the countryside, I saw what looked like an abandoned church that had a very visible Magen David in the window, but I could not determine if that was the synagogue. However, I did find some references to them online:

- **Rabbi Capers C. Funnye Jr.** is the spiritual leader of Beth Shalom B'nai Zaken Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation in Chicago. He is also the first cousin of former First Lady Michelle Obama. He was born in Georgetown, South Carolina, but his family moved to Portsmouth when he was a child. He attended I.C. Norcom High School and Norfolk State University before joining the Israelite movement.
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- **Louise Lucas** is a state senator and a civil rights activist in Virginia. She is also a member of The Links, Incorporated (Portsmouth Chapter), a national organization of Black women who are committed to civic and cultural engagement. She identifies as a Black Hebrew Israelite and follows the dietary laws of the Torah.
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- **Michael Twitty** is a culinary historian and a James Beard Award-winning author. He is known for his work on exploring the African roots of Southern food and culture. He is also a Black Jewish convert who practices Conservative Judaism. He was born in Washington, D.C., but he has traced his ancestry to enslaved Africans who lived in Portsmouth and other parts of Virginia⁵.

As I pointed out, we have our own very important intersectionality between our communities, whether it be Jews who are descended from the ancient communities of Ethiopia, like our two young technical crew, or Jews who come from more recent Jewish heritage, or Jews who themselves chose to formally join Judaism, whatever their original ethnicity or religion. Welcome aboard.