

Black Judaism
Rabbi Melanie Aron
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When the New York Times ran an article entitled “Obama’s Rabbi,” in April, 2009, few people outside of Chicago had heard of Rabbi Capers C. Funnye (pronounced *fu-NAY*), rabbi of Beth Shalom B’nai Zaken Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation. But Rabbi Funnye’s cousin Michelle was the First Lady at the time, and the focus on her family brought new attention to the existence of a community of which few were aware.

In addition to those African Americans who convert to Judaism and those who have been raised in mainline Jewish families, a whole world of institutions variously called Black Israelite, Black Judaism, Black Hebrews, or Ethiopian has existed in the United States, the Caribbean, and to some degree Africa itself over the past 120 years.

Black Judaism is often described as having originated with a preacher from Lawrence, Kansas, William Saunders Crowley, who spread the message that America’s blacks, through their roots in Africa, were the descendants of the ancient Hebrews. By 1900, congregations preaching this message had been established in Chicago, Detroit, New York, Philadelphia, and the West Indies. The movement was not Jewish in the sense of practicing Judaism, but its participants viewed themselves as the true Jews even as their theology tended to be a mixture of Christianity, mysticism, and Afrocentrism.

A prominent figure in the movement in New York in the early 20th century was Rabbi Wentworth Arthur Matthew who established the Commandment Keepers Ethiopian Hebrew Congregations. Born in St. Kitts, he saw himself as carrying on the tradition of his grandfather who he believed was from Gondar, Ethiopia. When he came to Harlem, he encountered various Black Israelite groups, many of whom kept Shabbat and the laws of Kashrut. He was mentored by Rabbi Arnold Josiah Ford, who spoke Hebrew, Arabic, and Amharic and was an associate of Marcus Garvey. Rabbi Ford was later killed in Ethiopia, where he was living in a community which he had established of African Americans who had returned to Africa, by the attacking Italian army. In 1924, just five years after opening his congregation, Rabbi Matthew established a rabbinical college, and by the 1960's he had thousands of Black Israelite followers in congregations on the East Coast and in the Midwest. Though he studied with Ashkenazi rabbis and introduced a fairly mainstream Orthodox liturgy to his congregation, as well as a *mechitzah* with separate seating for men and women and a weekly Torah portion, Rabbi Matthew's efforts to join the New York Board of Rabbis were rebuffed, and he and his congregation had little contact with the mainstream Jewish community. One of his followers, Rabbi Yehudah Moshe BenLevi, who had for a time attended a Conservative congregation in Newark, studied with a Sephardic Rabbi, and put together the movement's first prayer book. Rabbi BenLevi objected to the requirement often placed on Black Israelites that they convert to mainstream Judaism, arguing that they were like the *anusim*, the Conversos, who needed only to return, not to convert, because they had been forced away from their Judaism.

Through the years several graduate students have written dissertations on the Black Israelites, bringing attention to the various sub-groups, and some Black Jews have attempted to send their children to mainstream Jewish day schools and yeshivahs, with varying degrees of acceptance, but it is really Michelle Obama's cousin who has been most successful in breaking through the barriers.

Rabbi Capers C. Funnye's family are descendants of a community of African Americans who lived on the barrier islands off Charleston, South Carolina, and were more able than most to preserve their African heritage. His upbringing through college was in the mainstream AME African Methodist Episcopal Church, one of the largest and best known Black American Churches. However, when at college at Howard University, Funnye became dissatisfied with Christianity and got involved with Rabbi Robert Devine of the House of Israel Congregation, whose theology was perhaps closest to the Messianics. Over time, Rabbi Funnye moved towards the more Jewishly-oriented Black Hebrew Israelitism taught by Rabbi Ben Levi, whose roots were in the Commandment Keepers tradition.

In 1985, Rabbi Funnye took two major steps. He was ordained by the International Israelite Board of Rabbis, a Black Israelite group, and he also formally converted to Judaism under the auspices of the Conservative movement. He later went on to pursue graduate studies in Judaism at the Spertus Institute. The congregation he serves now is one of the largest in his movement and, most significantly, he is a member of the Chicago Board of Rabbis, the first ordained Black Israelite clergy to be accepted. Then in the winter of 2009, on the eve of Barack Obama's inauguration, Rabbi Funnye spoke at Stephen S. Wise Free

Synagogue in Manhattan. 700 people came out that night in a snow storm, about a quarter of them from Black Jewish synagogues in Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx. According to the New York Times, Rabbi Funnye was the first Black Israelite rabbi to be invited to speak from the pulpit of a mainstream Jewish Congregation. He has continued to be a bridge-builder, bringing white and black Jews together as well as working with Muslim and other minority religious communities.

I am grateful that I have the email I sent Kristin on July 11, organizing the music for this evening and mentioning that I would probably be talking about an interesting book that Michael had just picked up for me at the UCSC library titled *Black Judaism: Story of an American Movement*, by James Landing, published in 2002. Otherwise, I might be accused of choosing tonight's topic in response to President Trump's attacks on Congressman Elijah Cummings. Cummings's district includes 30,000 Jews, and they have not been reticent in speaking out in support of the Congressman whom they view as a friend and an ally. Among Cummings's numerous accomplishments is a well-regarded program that brings non-Jewish students to Israel. Victor Blackwell, now a CNN Anchor, is among the graduates of that program. Baltimore itself won praise this week from Andrew Rehfeld, the new president of the Hebrew Union College. He is a graduate of Baltimore City College High School, which was 85% black when he attended and was an exceptional academic institution.

The 2009 article in the New York Times highlighted some of the struggles Rabbi Funnye has experienced and the ways in which he has mellowed. "You know", he said, "as a young man I was angry about the way we were laughed at and ignored.

I sometimes went down to the kosher meat market here in Chicago, put my face right up in the face of one of the Orthodox rabbis and yelled, 'I ain't never seen no white Jews before!' I was so hurt I became obtuse and bitter. But I don't feel that way anymore." He paused. "There's no need to shout. People are ready for a dialogue, to talk and to listen."

We pray that this will be the case and that the good work Rabbi Funnye is doing in building bridges will see fruit all over our country.

(For more information about Black Jews, watch a movie trailer at <https://vimeo.com/39732240>).