Making Klal Yisrael Count: The Difficulties of Defining Black Jewish Communities

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In November 2008, I gave a presentation on my research about Black Jews and was asked a question that I've continued to think about ever since. The presentation was on Hatzaad Harishon, a multiracial nonprofit organization that valued *klal Yisrael* (Jewish peoplehood) and worked to gain greater recognition of and legitimacy for Black Jews in New York City and the surrounding areas from 1964–1972. The question was simple enough: "How many Black Jews are there?"

In trying to offer an answer, however, I brushed up against a host of issues that the term Black Jew raises—for Jewish peoplehood, for definitional claims, and for what Adam Newton terms "blackjewishrelations." In order to answer the question, one first has to define who Black Jews are and that, like any question of Jewish identity, is no simple task. I'll elaborate more on the issue of definition in a moment, but first a little more about my answer in 2008.

In my response to the audience member, I cited a statistic I read in Tobin et al., "In Every Tongue: The Racial and Ethnic Diversity of the Jewish People," which claimed that "20 percent of all Jewish people" or 1.2 million people were Jews of "diverse" backgrounds, a category used to include "African, African American, Latino (Hispanic), Asian, Native American, Sephardic, Mizrahi and mixed-race Jews by heritage, adoption, and marriage." The statistic comes from The Institute for Jewish Community and Research (IJCR)'s 2002 national telephone survey, which suggested there are more than 6 million Jews in the United States, a much larger number than the 5.2 million that the 2000 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) found . The IJCR uses the same categories as the NJPS, but they argue they were able to locate more Jews for two reasons: "the nature of the questions and the order in which they were asked" (Tobin et al.,). They found it "was less threatening to begin the interview with a series of personal questions that inquired about ancestry rather than religious identity." Tobin et al. argue that the numerical discrepancy between the IJCR and the NJPS surveys stems from the IJCR's success in getting "more ethnic and cultural Jews" to respond. The audience member bristled at my response, claiming the number seemed high and the category used to arrive at it was flawed. A respected Jewish social scientist and a member of the Black Jewish community offered a more modest number of 120,000, a number similar to what that NJPS 2000 found for "Jewish adults living in the United States who were born in Latin America, the Middle East, Asia, and the Caribbean (not including Israel)." In 2009, Yavilah McCoy was interviewed by the *Forward* and offered an even smaller number of 20,000 "self-identified Jews of color."

Since so many of these questions hinge on the way the categories of Jew and Black are constructed, let me pause for a moment to unpack some of the terms. While people tend to think of race and religion as separate categories, they are often intermingled. For example, Jewish people had been in the U.S. since the early Republic and had initially been conceived as religious others. During the nineteenth century, however, they were racialized as Hebrews or Israelites after large numbers of Jewish immigrants came to the U.S. seeking refuge from government-sponsored persecution in much of Europe. During this same period, newly freed American blacks were attempting to construct a positive image of selfhood to counter the negative associations white racists attached to Blackness as a racial construct. Many African Americans turned to and identified with the Biblical Israelite narratives that were familiar to them from their experiences during slavery. At this historical juncture when nationalism was on the rise and the "Jewish Question" intersected with the "Negro Problem," Israelitism offered recuperative answers to both, and the social and religious movement of Black Judaism was born. Melding beliefs from American religious traditions of Holiness Pentecostalism and Black nationalism, Black Judaism offered a way for many Black Americans to counter the negative stigma associated with Blackness by appealing to Israeliteness instead.

Yvonne Chireau calls attention to some of the earliest congregations: Williams Saunders Crowdy's Church of God and the Saints of Christ, also known as Temple Beth-el, established in Lawrence, Kansas in 1896; Prophet Frank S. Cherry's Church of the Living God—Pillar and Ground of Truth for All Nations established in Philadelphia in 1912; and Elder Warren Robinson's Temple of the Gospel of the Kingdom, Ever Live and Never Die Church established in New York City in 1917. And perhaps the most famous and influential congregation of all is Rabbi Wentworth Matthew's Commandment Keepers established in New York City in 1919. Rabbi Matthew's congregation was one of the first to observe exclusively Jewish practices, and in 1925 he established the Ethiopian Hebrew Rabbinical College to help train Black Jewish Rabbis and spiritual leaders. As these spiritual leaders went on to found affiliate synagogues in other parts of New York, the U.S., and the Caribbean, Rabbi Matthew's influence and belief system gained considerable reach.

As the names suggest, many early Black Jewish congregations were not exclusively Jewish in orientation, and their beliefs and practices evolved over time. The term *Black Jew* has been used by and applied to a variety of groups with a wide continuum of religious beliefs, rituals, and practices. At one end are Black Jews who would be recognized by members of the recognized Jewish community as Jews either because they were born to an authenticated Jewish mother or because they had converted according to halakhah. On the other end are Blacks who identify as either Hebrews or Israelites through race and/or nationality, but who may share very little if any ritual practice with the recognized Jewish community. Moreover, some of these groups may actively argue that *they* and *not* the recognized Jewish community are the "true Jews." In the middle are a variety of other groups who may use any of the terms: Jew, Hebrew, or Israelite, and who may perform rituals and practices that incorporate elements of recognized Judaism, Christianity, or both. Each group's choice of terms for self-identification is affected by a variety of cultural beliefs. Some groups eschew the use of the term "Jew" because it has come to be associated with whiteness in the U.S. context. Instead they prefer the terms Hebrew and Israelite because they are associated with ancient African roots, and have become a way to assert racial pride



Photo credit: Jewish Multiracial Network.

and affiliation with African customs, cultures, and traditions. For many Black Judaic groups, Hebrewism or Israelitism, and thus also identifying as Black Jews is a way of reclaiming African heritage.

Although these groups differ on how they define and trace their biblical ancestors (through Moses, King Solomon, Queen of Sheba) and whether or not they see themselves as one of the Lost Tribes, they all trace some kind of lineage from the ancient Hebrews or Israelites depicted in the Torah. Moreover, these groups share a belief that their biblical descendants were Black and spent time in Africa, either because they emphasize that ancient Israel was part of the African continent, because they believe that they are descendents of Ethiopians, or because they believe their descendants lived in exile in Africa after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. Some groups also trace Jewish heritage through ancestors from Africa who practiced Jewish rituals such as circumcision or refraining from eating pork and were later brought to the U.S. or the Caribbean as slaves. Other groups claim Jewish heritage through ancestors who were the offspring of unions between Jewish slave owners and slaves living in the Caribbean. Since many of the Jewish people involved in the slave trade were of Sephardic origin, people who claim this line of descent may identify primarily as Sephardic, rather than as Black Jews or as Jews of color, which of course returns us to the earlier questions of categorization and the relationship of Black Jews to broader conceptions of Jewish peoplehood.

The problem stems from the perception, shared by many Jews and non-Jews in the U.S. that Jews have become "white." The predominant black/white binary of U.S. cultural apperception forces Jews to choose one or the other, though they may prefer to identify as neither. In this context Jews who do not fit the lighter-skinned Ashkenazi "norm," may self-identify more strongly as "other," regardless of whether others identify them as persons of color. Admittedly, as the IJCR's category "Jews of diverse backgrounds" suggests, the net may then get cast so widely as to not have significant meaning *unless* it is read against the grain of the perception of Jews as white. Shifting that perception to be more inclusive of a broader scope of Jewish peoplehood means taking Jews of color seriously, something many organizations and scholars have begun to do.

In November 2010, the International Society for the Study of African Jewry held its first meeting in London. Among others, groups such as Kulanu, B'chol Lashon, Jews in all Hues, and the Jewish Multi-Racial Network boast large memberships and garner attention from organizations within and outside the Jewish establishment. A slew of recent and forthcoming publications attests to a strong market for research in this area: Jacob Dorman's *Chosen People*, forthcoming from Oxford, focuses on African American Israelites

and Black-Jewish relations; Don Seeman's *One People, One Blood: Ethiopian Israelis and the Return to Judaism* (2010); Edith Bruder's *The Black Jews of Africa: History, Religion, Identity* (2008); Emanuela Trevisan-Semi's *Jacques Faitlovitch and the Jews of Ethiopia* (2007); Marla Brettschneider's *The Family Flamboyant: Race Politics, Queer Families, Jewish Lives* (2006); and Lewis Gordon's establishment of the first center of Afro-Jewish Studies at Temple University in 2005. Meanwhile, Jews of color are also telling their own stories in myriad cultural productions: the recent musical *The Colors of Water*, written by Yavilah McCoy and Anita Diamant with editing by Janet Buchwald; Y-Love's (Yitzchak Jordan) rap music; Shais Rison's blog www.manishtana.net and Jewish dating service for Jews of color; and Aliza Hausman's work in progress, *Memoirs of a Jewminicana*, to name just a few. Given the burgeoning growth in community, scholarly, and creative production, I expected I might have some stronger ground to stand upon when revisiting the question, "How many Black Jews are there?" Instead I will end this piece with a request. The time has arrived for an authoritative survey of Black Jews in the U.S. and Africa, as part of a broader group of Jews who view themselves to be "of color" in the U.S. context. The new survey's results would allow me to answer the question, without causing other scholars to bristle. Of course, it will need to be clear about definitions and categories, explicitly defining who counts and why. The new survey instrument and study would be even more respected if Jews of color were included in both its design and implementation. A survey that combines some of the methods of Tobin et al. so as to reach more Jews of color, but clarifies its categories so that it might acquire the authority and respect that NJPS has long received, and includes the input of Jews of color would be a welcome resource to scholars in this area. It is time to broaden the visuals we use to represent, clarify the definitions we use to construct, and sharpen the methods we use to count Jews of all hues.

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