

# American Blacks, Jews intervene with Israel

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## NEWSBEAT/Black Hebrews II

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By JOAN BORSTEN

*"The State of Israël is racist to the core...we call for a full boycott of Israel, its products, and its tourist ventures."* — Asiel Ben Israel, "Minister of the Hebrew Nation of Israelites," in an interview with the "New York Amsterdam News," October 1977.

SOON AFTER his arrival in Israel in March 1970, Ben-Ami Carter, the spiritual leader of the Black Hebrews, made it clear to Israelites that his followers were not, as some rabbis stated, "dark-skinned brethren who practised Judaism according to Ashkenazi tradition." No, they were Hebrew Israelites, a "nation" whose identity, culture, history and language had been stolen by those who call themselves Jews.

Carter announced to all who would listen that there was a world conspiracy to conceal from his followers their true identity as the original Hebrews of the Bible. At a series of press conferences he laid claim to the Land of Israel "to the fullest extent of its biblical boundaries," declared that a million more Black Hebrews were getting ready to "come home" to Israel, and predicted that Armageddon would occur in September 1977.

After a period of catastrophe, pestilence, and famine, he declared, the Black Hebrews would be restored to God's favour and world leadership. From their capital in Jerusalem, "Northeast Africa," Carter prophesied, the Blacks would be a guiding light for the African continent and the entire world. He himself would lead them as the messiah.

Black Hebrews who had arrived in Israel before him and had become amenable to conversion were brought back into line, and friendships with "non-believers" were terminated. Any attempts by cult members to integrate into Israeli society were discouraged by Carter. Children were withdrawn from government schools in order to be educated in the ways of the "Kingdom of God." Relations between Jews and Blacks deteriorated as the cult appropriated public bomb shelters for classrooms, maternity wards, and wedding halls. The group's rock band, "The Soul Messengers," practised until late each night, ignoring complaints from neighbours.

The Black Hebrews also mounted what locals described as a "hate and terror campaign." After the Housing and Absorption Ministries refused to

allocate them additional apartments (because they were not citizens or immigrants), Blacks attempted forcefully to occupy several flats and then an agricultural site opposite Kibbutz Beit Kama.

WHEN THE Interior Ministry refused to issue special work permits for them (because they were in the country as tourists) 30 Blacks, watched by a television team and foreign correspondents, entered a Dimona supermarket, filled their baskets with approximately \$1,000 worth of goods, and refused to pay the bill. Derogatory remarks about the Israelis were coupled with anti-Semitic comments and charges that the "whites" were impostors.

The local press dismissed Carter as a trouble-maker and a crackpot, but in the international media the preacher made headlines as the spokesman of a group of Black "Jews" discriminated against by the "racist" Israelis, "forced" by the government to live 20 per cent, "banned" from public schools and public health facilities.

In the U.S., individual cult members who had been deported from Israel or turned back at the airport mounted a parallel public relations campaign, taking their

case to the Black press, the Commission for the Elimination of Racism, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Organization of African Unity, the Arab League, and the United Nations Ad Hoc Committee on Palestinians.

The "New York Amsterdam News," the largest circulation Black newspaper in the U.S., frequently reported the anti-Israel charges and supported the cult editorially. A Black radio station in Chicago devoted many evenings to the group and, according to one source, "made constant references to 'Brother Sadat' and his 'coming war to kill the evil beast', while pledging further efforts to 'join the nation in Dimona'."

Israeli *hasbara* efforts in American Black communities were torpedoed. Moshe Gilboa, the Israeli Consul-General in Atlanta, complained that the "furor over the case of the Black Hebrews had harmed Israel's image among Negroes in the American South" and had also harmed "the good relations which exist between Jews and Blacks in the South."

THE ANTI-SEMITIC, anti-Israel crusade was documented by the Anti-Defamation League of the B'nai

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# Americans intervene for Black Hebrews

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B'rith in New York. Included in the thick pile of newspaper clippings — some from the "New York Times," "Chicago Tribune," "Chicago Sun Times," "Miami Herald," "Baltimore Sun," and "New York Daily Mirror" — are flyers published for dissemination in the ghettos, pamphlets, and a letter written in December 1973 to all Black congressmen by Shaleak Ben Yehuda, one of the sect's two founders and then the Black Hebrew's "Chargé d'Affaires" in Jerusalem.

"The Black Community in America should be aware that the government of the United States has allocated the Jewish State of Israel in its present crisis over two thousand billion dollars," wrote Ben Yehuda. "A great percentage of this figure consists of Black America's tax dollars. This has brought about economic hardships on Black Americans and has reduced the social programmes geared toward the Black community's survival. In addition, the eight hundred million dollars raised by the United Jewish Appeal for the recent Yom Kippur War was given primarily by Jewish merchants in America whose businesses survive solely from economic exploitation of the Black community."

Shaleak concluded with a call for the total economic boycott of all Jewish-owned businesses, the creation of a Black congressional lobby aimed at denying further funds to Israel "for use against Black Americans living in Israel," and "an immediate and complete investigation and release of Black Hebrews now jailed and held incommunicado in Ramle prison."

In his book, "Black Hebrew Israelites from America to the Promised Land," published in 1970, Ben Yehuda repeated — and elaborated on — these allegations.

Another item in the ADL file is an October 1977 "Amsterdam News" interview with Asiel Ben Israel, "Minister of the Hebrew Nation of Israelites," who charges that the 1,000 Blacks living in Dimona are "kept in total, complete isolation — they cannot leave, and any person who tries to visit them is refused entry. If they persist, they are jailed and deported as we were."

It is significant that this is the most recent clipping of its sort in the ADL file. In the last 12 months the Black Hebrews have refrained from attacking the State of Israel and its "racist" policies.

ACCORDING to authoritative sources, the Black Hebrews' silence is the result of a meeting held last November in Dimona with Bayard Rustin, one of Israel's strongest supporters in the American Black community. Rustin reportedly told Carter to change his tone, and promised to take the cult's case to his friends at the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Conference, and the ADL.

In February 1978, rather than lose Rustin's support, the three Jewish organizations took the unprecedented step of writing a critical letter to Interior Minister Burg. (Some ADL leaders, among them Arnold Forster, general counsel, opposed their organization's decision to write the letter, saying the Black Hebrews were an internal Israeli affair.) Stating that the Black Hebrew problem "has already been utilized by enemies of Israel to falsely raise allegations of racism and to embarrass Black Americans who have been outspokenly committed to Israel's support," the letter outlined a series of recommendations:

- The community should be allowed to join the Histadrut (and be entitled to all the employment, medical and cultural benefits, including

assistance with the booking and business aspects of the "Soul Messengers").

- There should be a discussion with the Interior Ministry as to the feasibility of relocating the Black Hebrews on a kibbutz where they could produce "vegetarian food" for the cities of Israel.

- Former members of the Dimona community who have been deported, but still have wives and children in Dimona, should be allowed brief visits to their families prior to the resolution of the problem.

- Both the government and the leadership of the Dimona community should refrain from making critical statements for a period of six months.

As a result of this letter, which was never acknowledged by Burg, the Histadrut extended membership facilities to the Black Hebrews. And on March 7, 1978, a thoroughly reformed, conciliatory Shaleak Ben Yehuda (author of the 1973 letter to Black congressmen), informed Rustin and "other participants in the Dimona conference" that "both communities in the land of Israel...are now coming together in one spirit, a spirit of righteousness...moving in this direction our communities can be goodwill ambassadors in Israel and the Jewish communities, speaking in synagogues on an international level throughout the world."

The Shaleak memorandum states that the Black Hebrews:

- accept Histadrut membership "as a show of devotion at this point in our history";
- wish to be accepted fully as citizens of the State of Israel with all the rights and responsibilities this implies;
- agree to insist that any new members go through the "normal immigration" procedures required of all new citizens of Israel;

- agree to refrain from critical comments for seven months.

Bernard Resnikoff, the Israel representative of the American Jewish Committee, attributes the Black Hebrews' volte-face to a genuine change in attitude. Carter says Resnikoff is not the same belligerent spokesman of two years ago. Now he is friendly, affable, pacific, reasonable.

Both Forster, who has interviewed the Black Hebrews for American radio and visited them in Dimona, and Zev Furst, director of the ADL's Israel office, have not been convinced that "any meaningful change has occurred in the attitude of the Black Hebrews toward Israel and the Jews." "We wish it were otherwise," says Furst.

The third installment of this series will appear tomorrow.