

The Post's Joan Borsten reports on a meeting with the leader of the Black Hebrews, Ben-Ami Carter

"WE WOULD like the press to judge us by the things we have done, and not by the things they would possibly like us to do," Ben-Ami Carter, self-proclaimed messiah of a cult of American blacks settled in the Negev, last week told *The Jerusalem Post* during a meeting arranged at his request.

"The newspapers make it seem like we're some kind of bandits down in Dimona. It's not true," said Carter, a former Chicagoan. He went on to accuse the Israeli press, and *The Post* particularly, of waging an oppressive campaign against his followers.

The Post has published two series of articles on the Black Hebrew community in the past two years, questioning the cult's values, behaviour and methods of controlling its members. Carter claimed that the reporting was neither fair nor objective.

"It made us appear as if we're very hostile to Israel, anti-Jewish, anti-white, anti-Judaism — and that's not true. There have been some very negative statements that have been made against the Jewish State, reactionary statements, not all of which have been the official position of our community.

"Just as when MK Moshe Dayan stated that the reason for the low performance of the American army was because of the low educational standards of black Americans. Your prime minister said he [Dayan] was giving a personal opinion. Well, there have been several who said certain things after certain incidents, but they were not voicing the official position.

"We would like to clarify these things, because naturally it causes certain hostility and misunderstanding. And it does not allow the positive things we would like to express and do on behalf of the state. In 12 years, we have never raised one finger against the Jewish population or the state... Now here we are, 1,200 Israelites after 12 years. We've been through the Yom Kippur War. We volunteered our services during the troubled times.

"But because we have differences of opinion, we're said to be anti-Jewish, anti-white, anti-Semitic. I'm Semitic, we're Semitic. We're Israelites returning from exile and we're not anti ourselves. If we actually had ulterior motives, if I wanted to activate something against the Jewish population, the best place would have been in the States, where there are 40 million blacks and three to four million Jews, and where the upper hand would have been ours."

Carter cited several articles which appeared in the national press, all of which he felt reflected biased reporting.

'I'm not a dictator like Somoza or the Shah of Iran, but just like Moses or Joshua or David'

"In the newspaper they wrote about a truckload of stolen goods from Mitzpe Ramon and the fact that somebody was arrested, but it never appeared in the story that we had receipts, that we had purchased these things and that the brothers had been freed. None of them are serving any time.

"And you wrote recently that we had attempted to purchase a house in Arad, and that the neighbours had put up a gate. We tried to buy one house in Arad. That was about two years ago. The price they asked was \$20,000 or \$40,000, and we had political problems there and didn't get the place. And then six months ago, you wrote that we had again tried to buy a house. We wouldn't be so naive, knowing that we didn't succeed with the first one.

"Also, you continue to write we were kicked out of Liberia. That is a lie.

"My question is, what is objective? Try to give us a chance. This is our life. After 12 years, what are we going to do? Everything we have in Israel: 250 children were born here. What gives you the right to tell me that I'm not a Jew and you are? We're Israelites, you're Israelites, you're Jews, I'm a Jew... I mean, I'm a descendant of the tribe of Judah, my nationality. I'm an Israelite returning from exile. But every time we sit down to discuss our problems and come up with some family solutions, it's always written up and presented to the public as if we're tyrants."

AFTER AIRING his grievances against the paper, Carter answered questions put to him by *Post* staffers:

POST: What is the status of the community in the eyes of the government?

CARTER: I would like to feel there has been a slight thaw and an improvement in that we were given the old absorption centre in Dimona and three-quarters of the community have moved into this area from extremely overcrowded conditions of 20 to 30 per apartment. Now our average is about 10 individuals. The area was run down, impoverished, and we had to do all the work ourselves. In Mitzpe Ramon we are also being allotted apartments for the families that are there.

Also, a few members who left have been allowed to return. I'm interpreting that as a thaw because previously no one was allowed to return. Now, if someone leaves because of an emergency, they're allowed to return.

What about the Glass Commission report (which recommended settling the community on a moshav in the Negev and giving all members permanent resident status)?

At this point, I feel the Glass report is either dead or dying.

What about your illegal immigration? We do not consider it illegal immigration, but we have agreed totally and continuously to stop (new members from coming). The neces-

sary steps were taken to halt it five months ago, after we moved to the absorption centre, as a sign of our good intentions, to show we are not doing anything against the government. Every time someone is visiting the community, I send a copy of their name and passport number to the police station and mayor and the amount of time they stay. And when they leave I send them another letter. This has not been requested — it is something we do unilaterally.

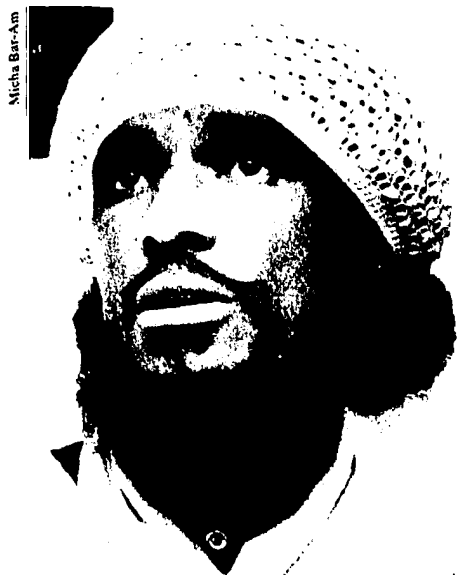
I must emphasize that even visitors have to come in clandestine, incognito, because we aren't allowed to have visitors. So anyone coming to visit their children, their families, they have to come the same way. If they [the police] find they're coming to visit the community, they're deported.

There have been reports of intimidation of members, of you not allowing them to leave the group.

We live in Dimona, a development city, one minute now, previously 30 seconds, from the police station, about 10 seconds from the bus station. It would be utterly impossible for me to keep anyone against their will. Where would I keep them?

Then why are such stories being put out by your former members?

There are those who leave the community, and those who have made themselves adversaries of the community. What your enemies say about the Jewish State is one thing, and what yordim say is another. In the end it is a personal vendetta and



members, in most of the urban areas — Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia — who call themselves Black Hebrews.

And what are those in Africa doing? Helping the indigenous population, teaching, offering their services. Trying to upgrade the standards of the people there. The community would also like to be helpful to the State of Israel and not be the oil on the propaganda wheel of the adversaries of the country. The ideological rationale in Africa is to assist. This is all associated indirectly with the State of Israel. We wanted it to be directly associated with Israel, but naturally, because of the negative things that are said about the community, when we go and try to make it seem like it's all a part of the good will of Israel, it isn't well received.

Most of the children who come out of your school system, whose parents have left the group, have problems because their educational level is low.

It's been hard. Initially those who were teaching were actually not qualified. Now we have college graduates who are helping us. We've had to supply facilities in the air-raid shelters — without blackboards or other supplies. That's what we had to work with. What we've accomplished I feel has been miraculous.

How do you explain the rather negative criticism of Bayard Rustin (head of the Black Americans to Support Israel Committee)?

He over-reacted and he certainly made a great error in the things he said. His very derogatory statement about me being a dictator, was very painful. But I would like to say, with us in this room here being Jewish and Israelites, I would like to go back to our creation as it is written in the Scriptures. First of all, the God of Israel was a dictator and is a dictator. Secondly, in the days of the prophets and which will be in the coming days, there has never been any elected official... set over Israel (who wasn't) chosen by God. Thirdly, as we look forward to the days of the messiah, the messiah will not be an elected official or chosen by the people. Mr. Rustin, neither knows Jewish history, the God of Israel or the plan of the God of Israel. I'm not a dictator like Somoza or the Shah of Iran, but just like Moses or Joshua or David [were] dictators — [with] councils and consultations. Certainly there are those that counsel me, there are those in charge of every different area in the community. But I would like to say, being an Israelite, that in the days of the messiah we will be ruled over by a dictator.

Have you ever considered conversion? Yes, but we refuse to convert (because) we returned from a very harsh captivity of 450 years. For 450 years everyone else has been telling us who we are. When we came home to Israel, we felt now we had the chance to tell who we were. And everybody again started saying, 'You're not, you're not.' And we decided this is it, we're home now.

When you say "home" and after 450 years, what do you mean?

Israel is home and we were in captivity, in slavery in America for 450 years. Two thousand, 4,000, 6,000 years ago we were part of the Israelite nation, from Israel exiled into Africa and into the United States.

Where do you think the Supreme Court went wrong when they ruled you weren't Jews?

I don't think there was a serious enough investigation into the things we were saying or into the possibility of mainly the tribe of Judah and portions of other tribes being amongst the black population of Africa.

Would you be prepared to stand aside for six weeks to six months to see how the group would function without your control?

No, being I feel that the position I hold was ordained onto me by God, and I feel that at the time he would want me to be removed from the people that he would move me. I'm still in the flesh, only one individual, its only the spirit of God that has kept those people obedient. Not me in any kind of way. I'm not that large in stature, I don't have an army. The only thing I have is the word of God. I don't feel [the government's] reservations about the group] are due to my personality. Everything anyone has asked which is reasonable, I've agreed to. Today everyone in Israel is crying out for a strong leader, so I'm saying why is it when you see strong leadership that there is a complaint? If there is strong positive images that could help the state, you should be asking them to stand up, not sit down.

How many Black Hebrews are there in the world?

Actively participating at one level or another, keeping the laws and statutes and commandments? I would say 200,000.

Do all of your followers in Africa and America accept you as the messiah?

Well... messiah, deliverer, one light on the path, these are all just attributes. They all see me as spokesman and overseer of the community.