

THE PROBLEM with the Black Hebrews of Dimona, Arad and Mitzpe Ramon is that no one in the Government seems to have enough courage to make a decision as to their future, says one Dimona resident. "They should either be made permanent residents, like many other non-indigenous, non-Jewish groups, or they should be deported as crackpots whose messianic vision will probably cause harm to innocent people."

Their story begins seven years ago, in November, 1969, when a group of 34 American Blacks appeared before customs officials at Lod Airport. They called themselves Black Hebrew Israelites and, claiming that their ancestors were exiled from Israel some 4,000 years ago, asked to be admitted to the country under the Law of Return (which at that time stated that anyone who is a Jew or a member of a Jewish family is entitled to immigrant rights).

Yehudit Hibner, of the Interior Ministry, remembers that the Government was unsure what status to give the group.

"Most of them were women and children who had no financial resources. They told us that they had 'come home to be free and not slaves in America.' They claimed to have been thrown out of Liberia, and they had no visas."

"We decided to give them temporary housing and the three-month visitor's visas, automatically granted to anyone carrying a U.S. passport, until an investigation could be made."

IN DIMONA, a town experienced in absorbing different kinds of people from various backgrounds, the exotic "Black Jews" were welcomed with open arms. The children were admitted to schools and jobs were found for the adults in the local textile mills. It was also discovered that another colony, unnoticed by the authorities, had already settled in neighbouring Arad. A former spokesman of the Absorption Ministry's Beersheba office has confirmed that they came in as tourists.

In March, 1970, a second group arrived, claiming to be the fathers and husbands of the Black Hebrews living in Dimona. The Government had by now completed its investigation, and decided what the local press had already discovered: the Blacks were not Jewish as Israel defines Jewish. At best, they could be considered a "Mosaic sect which is close to Judaism."

Nevertheless, the Government was unwilling to break up families, so the newcomers were admitted as tourists, but given no housing privileges. The families in Dimona took in all 70 of them, which caused considerable overcrowding.

With the arrival of this new group, and then another 200-300 more, the love affair between Dimona and the Black Hebrews came to an abrupt end. The Blacks, now too numerous to squeeze into the 10 flats given the original group, moved into the local bomb shelters. Their rock band, which met with great success all over the country, disturbed the peace by practising until late at night. Because of the authorities' refusal to allocate more apartments, the group began what local residents termed a "hate campaign," making derogatory remarks about the "discriminatory behaviour" of Israelis and declaring that their sect of Hebrews would take over Israel as is their biblical right. An article in *The Jerusalem Post* quotes one Black as saying: "How come that white people should

(Photos: Judah Passow)

# SECT PROBLEMS



A group of a few hundred people from the United States who proclaim that they intend to take over the State of Israel on September 22, 1977, cannot be regarded as a serious political or security threat to this country. But the Black Hebrews, who have settled mainly in Dimona, are beginning to be a social problem which the authorities won't be able to evade much longer. JOAN BORSTEN reports.

own the Holy Land when it is known that the original Hebrews were Black?"

WATCHED BY a television team and foreign press correspondents, 30 Black Hebrews entered a Dimona Supermarket, filled their baskets with IL3,000 worth of food, and refused to pay. In another protest, Blacks forced their way into five vacant immigrant flats.

Then Ben-Ami, the group's spiritual leader and spokesman, declared in a national TV interview that there were between two and 15 million Black Jews in America, of whom a million were getting ready to "come home to Israel." Another Black repeated the same story and added that Israel is, in fact, their country, that the Jews in Israel are all impostors, and that only the Black Hebrews are real Jews, the Jews of the Bible.

The Israel Government ap-

parently did not know what action, if any, to take over the Black Hebrews. The group was obviously aware of the indecision and also of the effect that throwing them out could have on world opinion.

When the Supreme Court turned down their appeal to remain in the country as immigrants, some members of the group renounced their American citizenship. After the Interior Ministry instructed customs officials not to let into the country additional members of the sect, newcomers arrived as "pilgrims," complete with genuine round-trip tickets, and "sufficient funds."

All in all, the Interior Ministry succeeded in turning a handful of Black Hebrews away at the airport and deporting 17 who were involved in a Mitzpe Ramon gas station robbery and an intragroup killing.

By the time this reporter first interviewed the group in October,

1974, at least 500 American Blacks were living in a highly-structured society in Dimona. They were happy, healthy, and bursting with self-respect. Parents were "educating" their children, whom they had withdrawn from the local school system. Some members of the group made jewellery and leathercraft which they were selling. Others worked at the "Live Sea," and at the local Dimona textile factories. The rock band, the Soul Messengers, was in great demand. Everyone was still living in the original 10 flats and nearby bomb shelters.

Ben-Ami, who entered the country as Ben Carter but quickly dropped his "slave" name, had developed an aura of authority, spoke in an angry, evangelical fashion, and acted like a man accustomed to deference. And his statements about the group's religious beliefs had lost their 1969 haziness.

"We believe in the Prophets and the Bible and the Truth in the Bible. We believe that the Bible happened just like it's written, but that there are sections which are written one way and have other meanings. We believe in and read the New Testament, and accept Jesus as one of our brothers, a teacher sent by God to teach at the appointed time."

Ben-Ami could also now recite the group's history and purpose by rote. His words were measured and spaced, and his delivery mechanical, as if he had said his piece a thousand times before and grown quite weary of it. And, he managed to leave it unclear whether the "history" had evolved during their stay in Dimona or whether it had always existed but had cleverly not been enunciated until they knew the Government would not bother them.

"IN THE LATTER part of 1960," parroted Ben-Ami, "there was a spirit of God that moved over all the world. It was the resurrection and return of the Children of Israel to the Land of the Promise."

"And the words came forth and revived the people, calling them together in a little temple on Chicago's south side. And it was told to them that the time had come to get up out of the land of captivity and to begin the journey home... in the same manner that our forefathers came out of ancient Egypt. 'Everyone cast aside everything that they had, sold all their worldly belongings and picked up their cross. From here, being guided by the prophecies, they moved to Liberia because just as our people, when they left out of ancient Egypt, could not enter directly into Israel, also at the end of this captivity, we could not enter directly into Israel. There were certain mores of the decadent society of America — modern Egypt — which had to be cast off in the wilderness."

"We understood that at the end of the mission in Liberia, the mission of the Children of Israel would be to establish the Kingdom of God in Israel and bring salvation to all men..."

"In 1977 the Kingdom of God will be in its glory in Jerusalem. Our business is to establish the Kingdom of God for the saving of all men, all the afflicted people."

Members of the group were also anxious that, with the end of the world so close at hand, the truth about Ben-Ami should now be made known.

"The time is all ready for the Messiah," said one. "If he's ever going to come, it's right now. Furthermore, the Messiah is walking, talking, and living in the land of Israel, going about the business of bringing peace justice and mercy to this poor sick world. He didn't come like all the world expected, but he's here."

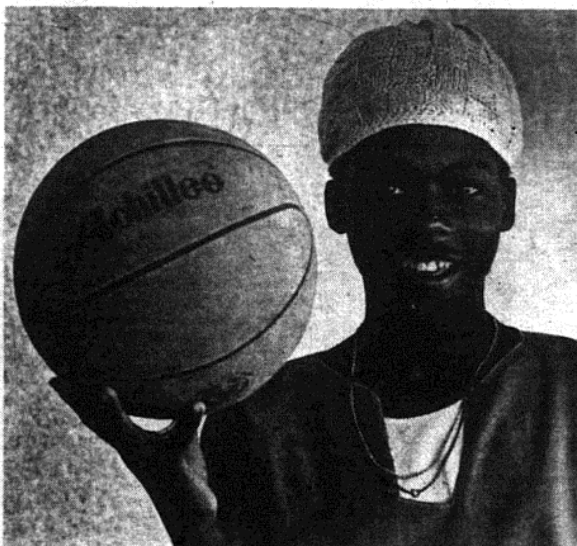
THE MARCH towards "salvation" and 1977 was about to begin in earnest. By December, 1974, the Black Hebrews had published a manifesto claiming that "the country to the fullest extent of its biblical boundaries belongs to us."

The document, sent to a long list of international and African organizations, asked for "support of our right to this country" and claimed that "the appointed time has come."

Declaring that Israel is located in "northeastern Africa," it emphasized that "we are not a religious sect and we have not returned to Jerusalem to live together with the European Jewish Community presently occupying our land."

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(Top of page) Spiritual leader Ben-Ami. (Left) Eafi Amiel, rock saxophonist. (Right) Ball player from Detroit.



# SECT PROBLEMS

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Last summer, some American-born Israelis at a Black Hebrew rock concert found themselves dancing to anti-Semitic lyrics. Shortly afterwards, the record company which had already released one album for the group, had to cancel their contract for "unspecified reasons."

At about the same time, Mr. "Shaleak Ben-Yehuda" published a book, *Black Hebrew Israelites from America to the Promised Land*.

Formerly a Black Moslem (as he claims are all the "brothers"), Ben-Yehuda openly blamed the plight of American Blacks on the "Jewish power structure," and said that the U.S. funds given to Israel since the Yom Kippur War had been given at the expense of American Blacks. He also casually mentioned the "mysterious disappearance" of a Liberian official who once gave the group a hard time.

When this reporter returned to Dimona recently, Abshalom (speaking for Ben-Ami, who "is not with us now but will be returning") revealed that September 22, 1977, is now prophesied to be the "end of the days." He also predicted that there will be a great war, to humble all nations, and great slaughter.

**AWARE THAT** the colony now numbers at least 750, all of them here illegally, and that their statements are becoming more and more anti-Israel and anti-Semitic, and that they probably will not sit quietly at home in Dimona waiting for the end of the world, the Interior Ministry has again promised a decision on the Black Hebrews. It is most probable, however, that any action will be shelved once more, because the issue is just too sensitive.

Deportation of the whole group would undoubtedly mean a UN debate, criticism from liberal American Jews, and Christians who think the group is "harmless," and it would add fuel to Arab propaganda about Zionist racism. Besides, as was recently pointed out in a letter to *The Jerusalem Post*, there is no internal pressure to throw the Black Hebrews out (except from the Dimona and Arad municipalities), because most Israelis still think that the group are Falasha Jews from Ethiopia or Cochin Jews from India, or Blacks from New York who have undergone halachic conversion.

And so the Black Hebrews go on giving concerts at Israeli weddings and universities, playing basketball at our army bases, reinforcing their numbers (just last week another group of Black "pilgrims" mysteriously disappeared from their Jerusalem hotel), and eagerly awaiting September 22, 1977.

It seems that the Government is also waiting for September 22, 1977, hoping that the Black Hebrews will either do something so atrocious (but not harmful to the general population) that it will be easy to justify throwing them out, or that when the end of the world doesn't come, Ben-Ami's followers return to Chicago. □