

Black Hebrew 'messiah' moderates his stance

NEWSBEAT/JOAN BORSTEN

"From 47th Street and from Dimona there is a different view of Israel. We've been here for eleven years and something has rubbed off. Our position has been moderated. I see the community as a flower that will blossom and be beautiful unto the landscape of Israel. I feel we have a lot to contribute to the State."

Ben-Ami Carter

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DIMONA. — Ben-Ami Carter, self-proclaimed messiah of the Black Hebrew cult, has changed his tune — at least publicly. Militantly anti-white, anti-Semitic, and anti-Israel for almost a decade, he says today he is willing to let his male followers join the Israel Defence Forces and vote in national elections — if the government agrees to the recommendations made by a commission headed by David Glass MK. That report, commissioned in August 1978 and submitted to the Interior Minister in June 1980, suggests that Israel settle the Black Hebrews on a piece of Negev land and eventually give them permanent residence visas. In return, Carter will stop the flow of new recruits from America which have over the years has swelled the cult's ranks from a few hundred to an estimated 2,000.

Gone is the fanatical evangelist who laid claim to the Land of Israel "to the fullest extent of its biblical boundaries," and accused "those who call themselves Jews" of stealing the identity, culture, history and language of the Hebrew Israelites. No more is the former Chicago truck-driver declaring that a million more Black Hebrews are ready to "come home" to Israel, or predicting that after a period of catastrophe, pestilence, and famine the Black Hebrews will be restored to God's favour and world leadership.

Gone also are charges of Israeli racism, and the anti-Semitic cam-

paign his followers ran in the U.S., which included calls for an economic boycott of American Jewish businesses and a congressional ban on aid to Israel.

Today Carter is the reasonable, conciliatory black American preacher, leader of a small bank of refugees from the ghettos of America who want nothing more than to tend their vegetable patches, work hard, and contribute to the State of Israel.

Is he sincere? Some members of the local and international press, as well as some American Jewish organizations, believe that the once belligerent black nationalist has undergone a genuine change of attitude. Carter himself writes off his past condemnation of the State of Israel as simply an effort to "precipitate some interest in the community, as we were seeking relief from the hardships." Actually, he adds as a justification, "we were not so much condemning the State as what was happening to us here."

Many of the Israelis and Americans familiar with the cult, however, describe Carter as a clever pragmatist, still privately convinced that his mission is to "establish the Kingdom of God in Jerusalem, North East Africa and become a guiding light for the African continent." They believe he is still indoctrinating his followers with a hatred for whites and Jews.

What motivates Carter today, they say, is that time is running out. To combat challenges to his authority, boost morale, and stem complaints about the overcrowding and financial hardship, he needs to wrest major concessions from the Israeli government — even if the price is public moderation of his extremist views.

The past three years have un-

doubtedly been difficult for Carter. When Armageddon did not occur as he predicted in September 1977, some leaders of the group defected — among them Tommy and Hazel Whitfield who have recorded their experiences as Black Hebrews in a soon-to-be-published book and in an NBC-TV documentary. Non-leaders have also left — many more, observers feel, than Carter is willing to admit. Stories of a life-style similar to the People's Temple cult in Jonestown, Guyana, which began to filter back to the press in late 1978, have since become more widespread.

In addition, residents of Dimona and Arad, furious because the government has not solved the "Black Hebrew problem" — members of the cult are still living 40 to a room in various apartments, causing sewage to overflow and property values to decline — have taken the law into their own hands. It is now very difficult for Carter to rent flats to house his followers.

New reports have surfaced about malnutrition, poor education and illegal use of American passports. Some members of Carter's organization in Chicago have been jailed for fraud and theft. The police have apparently compiled a new secret report recommending deportation of some Black Hebrews whom they describe as wanted American criminals.

Even more alarming to Carter, after he successfully convinced Glass that the answer is a settlement and permanent residence visas, are the rumours that Interior Minister Yosef Burg disagrees with the recommendations made by his fellow NRP member.

It is definitely advantageous to the cult, say the Black Hebrews' critics, to present a new image to the Israeli public. Carter's

vocabulary is now dotted with words like "co-exist" and such phrases as "contributing to the state" and "doing whatever is required of us citizens." The man who previously took his case to such international figures as Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, Kurt Waldheim, Leonid Brezhnev and Idi Amin, now describes his battle with the Israeli government as "a family problem, like between Gush Emunim and the government, and Natorel Karta and the government."

Carter insists that his moderate new stance was born of the purest of motives. "I've been with you for 11 years," he says. "I've learned something about you. I'm a little closer to you. I understand you better. And I'm not as extreme. I don't want this roof to fall down."

After years of being ignored by the government, he received "with unrestrained joy" the Glass report which devotes 147 pages to describing the cult and assessing what the country should do with its followers. Carter commends the Knesset Member frequently for his in-depth research, impressed that he reached his conclusions after numerous interviews conducted not only in Israel but in the U.S. Carter, in fact, is Glass' foremost champion these days.

"The only thing that we had some reservations about was the location of the village which Glass recommended," said Carter. "We didn't feel that Ramat Hovav is a very good area because of this great chemical complex being built there and the intentions to use that area to store waste chemicals from all over Israel. We're familiar naturally with Love Canal, Niagara Falls, where they buried all those chemicals and they kept penetrating until they entered into the homes and bodies of the people. We had ecologists from the Univer-

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sity of the Negev check the site out and they said, 'don't touch it'."

"We would have preferred an agricultural settlement, but there again we understood one of the problems was the high amount of investment that would be required for such a large community. And it wasn't our intention to cause any undue hardship upon Israel or the citizens. So what happened is that they decided to establish more of a village, but to give us a little piece of land to allow us to express ourselves in organic farming, and thus we can understand and even this we accepted."

Proudly Carter adds that in his report, Glass "completely exonerated" the cult of charges, first reported by *The Jerusalem Post* in January, 1978, of mysterious disappearances, imprisonment of those who defy group laws, beatings, child abuse, and confiscation of passports.

In actuality Glass writes that after interviewing one Black Hebrew woman imprisoned in Neve Tirza, and two of the Black Hebrews' Jewish neighbours, "the Committee is unable to decide if there is any truth in the accusations." To this he adds, as a footnote, that an ex-cult member in New York spoke of a "regime of fear and terror" and described the Black Hebrews' long-term goal as "carrying out many evil deeds like-

ly to cause injury to Israel, its character and independence."

Nonetheless, Carter insisted that "all of these things were thoroughly investigated and were found not to be true, entirely without basis." He then generously went on to say that if there is indeed a police report which lists individuals with criminal background living in the community, he is all for "giving them a chance to leave."

"I would like to say that because someone has stolen some uranium from some French ships is not a reason for everyone to declare that the Jewish race is a race of war mongers," he stated. "If there are individuals of criminal background they should state this and refer to them as criminals and not to the entire community. They are judging us. I see them using the same tactics against us that they were using against Jews in Germany preceding and after the Second World War. First of all character assassination, making it look like we are a threat to this and a threat to that. I hear the same things that they used against you when they began to actually go into the Holocaust. I saw them present the list of the criminals. We can sit down and I believe work out something."

What Carter does not say, of course, is that all of the cult members have taken new names and destroyed as many links to their past lives as possible. Identifying a



Black Hebrew women.

(Micha Bar-Am)

particular cult member, unless he or she has been arrested for committing a crime locally, is virtually impossible.

As another example of the cult's willingness to meet the government "half way" if it results in a settlement and permanent residence is Carter's firm pledge to stop bringing in new recruits. Although "it is forbidden to number ourselves," Carter currently admits to having as many as 1,400 followers living in Israel -- the same population count he gave one and a half years ago. Jews in Arad and Dimona, who insist new members regularly arrive,

estimate the Black Hebrew population as approximately 2,000.

"I wholeheartedly agreed that on the beginning of the government applying the (Glass) recommendations, showing the community some good will, we would not allow anyone else to join us. Not an infant, not a tot, not a brother or sister. That point would be the cut-off," Carter said.

"I never said anything about bringing tens of thousands of Black Hebrews to Israel, not once in any interview have I ever stated that. Possibly my spokesmen did. But I never had any intention of bringing

them. First of all there aren't any tens of thousands of Black American Israelites that desire to come, secondly we have no ways or means of bringing them here. That would certainly have to be an act of God Almighty."

Instead, the messiah plans to search locally for new souls to save. On that sensitive subject, so near and dear to the hearts of the National Religious Party of which both Glass and Burg are members, Carter offers no olive branches.

"We won't convert. If they are already Israelites, there is no matter of conversion, just a matter

of turning from a path that leads unto death to a path that turns into light. I don't think that Burg or Glass, being men of religion, would ask us not to go out and try to convince Israelis that our path is the correct one. I feel that what we are saying needs to be heard thoroughly and investigated. When there is a closer relationship between us and the Israeli people, there will be a desire on behalf of them to allow what we are saying to be put to the test and given a chance," he said.

"There may be already a dozen Jewish people from all over Israel who are sympathetic to us. They are not living here in Dimona, but we would consider them part of the community."

During the almost two years it took Glass to prepare his report, Carter and the cult were uncharacteristically quiet and restrained. They adhered strictly to the agreement made with members of the American Jewish community to "refrain from critical comment in the media," though their attack on Israel continues in other forms. Since the report was presented, they have acted like model citizens and made numerous pro-Israeli statements. What will happen if Burg rejects Glass' recommendations?

Carter is confident that a solution is in the offing.

"The pressures now are so intense that the neighbours are becoming much more violent in their thinking against the Interior Ministry, and whether they want to or not, it will spill over into a con-

frontation with the community. Like what has happened recently with the apartments. Now they are telling everyone to rent us no apartments. What will we do? Be out in the fields somewhere? We have no place to go, no place to live."

The group still has friends in Africa -- a guest book includes signatures of supporters who recently visited Dimona from Liberia, Ghana, and Ethiopia. And the group's fate still concerns the American black community so much that last month leaders met with Israel's Ambassador to the U.S. in New York.

"To deport us after 11 years of being here and 13 years away from the States would be more than a notion," warned Carter. "Black America would not stand for it, and there would be intense international pressure on the State of Israel."

"I never suggested that there would be any mass suicide here, but I would say that in reality it would be a tragedy for everyone involved if they would send the Army down on us. We have no intentions of committing any mass suicide, but we've been out of the States for 13 years. Our children from 13 years and under know nothing about slavery, Negroes, and we certainly have no intention of their being cast back into the pits of hell. They've been born in Israel, raised in Israel. This is all that they know and no one is ever going to make them slaves." (This is the second of a continuing series of articles. The first appeared on Friday, October 10.)