Jew Like Me: An Oral History of Congregation Temple Bethel, a Black synagogue in the West Oak Lane Neighborhood of Philadelphia

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Abstract
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Congregation Temple Bethel is a 58 year-old Black synagogue in the West Oak Lane neighborhood of Philadelphia. It began as a prayer group in the living room of the founder, Rabbi Louise Elizabeth Dailey, and is today a thriving Jewish community. Mother Dailey died in 2001, but she was succeeded by her daughter, Rabbi Debra Bowen, who shares, along with several older members of the congregation, memories of the synagogue’s earliest days. Theirs is a story that deserves telling, in the form of this oral history. The American Jewish community is considered whitewashed, yet a survey of the American Jewish universe increasingly uncovers a constellation of ethnic, class, and social backgrounds. This project is about the changing face of American Judaism, and the emerging identities behind it.

Comments
2008-2009 Penn Humanities Forum on Change
Undergraduate Mellon Research Fellows

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Jew Like Me

An Oral History of Congregation Temple Bethel, a Black Synagogue in the West Oak Lane Neighborhood of Philadelphia

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University of Pennsylvania
Department of History
Senior Honors Thesis*
Submitted April 28, 2009
and
2008–2009 Penn Humanities Forum
Undergraduate Mellon Research Fellowship

*Advisors: Kristen Stromberg Childers, Barbara Savage, Beth Wenger
To my parents:

I've never missed a deadline yet. I love you both.
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Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank the History Department, Penn Humanities Forum, the Jewish Studies Department, and the Center for Undergraduate Research and Fellowships for their generous financial backing of this project.

Next, I would like to thank my current thesis section leader Kristen Stromberg Childers for her support over the past two semesters, and my former thesis section leader, Sarah Igo, without whom this project never would have gotten off the ground. She is sorely missed. In addition, I would like to thank my thesis advisers, Beth Wenger and Barbara Savage, for lending me their tremendous expertise and their valuable time.

I have to thank Anita Gelburd and Susan Miller, whose combined advice made me a history major. And I have to second my thanks to Susan Miller because without a pep talk from her, these pages might never have been written.

Next, I would like to thank the following individuals whose insight was instrumental in helping me understand Bethel: Lewis Gordon, the Director of the Center for Afro-Judaic Studies at Temple University; Adam Mohr, a recent doctoral graduate from Penn's Anthropology Department; Chaz Howard, the university chaplain; Rabbi Robert Alpert, ritual director at Har Zion Temple in Penn Valley, PA; and Valerie De Cruz, director of Penn's Greenfield Intercultural Center.

Joan Bobroff, office manager at Penn Hillel, is responsible for the title of this thesis. And I would like to further thank her along with Jeremy Brochin, Rabbi Michael Uram, and the rest of Penn Hillel, whose support made my initial visit to Bethel possible.
I would also like to thank the other members of my thesis section and the other fellows in the Undergraduate Humanities Forum, for their collective support.

I cannot thank enough all of the Bethelites and their friends, who allowed me to preserve their fascinating stories. Special thanks, obviously, to Rabbi Debra Bowen, whose support and seal of approval made this project possible.

Finally, I have to thank my family, not only for their valuable assistance over the course of this project, but also for their unyielding support and love.
Prologue

Jew Like Me

In Jewish history there are no coincidences.
- Elie Wiesel

Like so many stories by nice Jewish boys, mine begins with mom. My mom was a member of the last of the unfortunate generations of Jewish women who were deprived of the opportunity to participate in that cherished rite of passage that magically turns 12 and 13 year-old Jewish adolescents into adults: the bar (for a boy) or bat (for a girl) mitzvah. But eight years ago, inspired by the fact that I had just completed that chapter in my own life, my mom decided that 27 years had been long enough, and she set to studying for an adult bat mitzvah, an achievement she would attain soon thereafter.

She has been learning ever since, a voracious consumer of adult Jewish education. This love for Jewish knowledge is a passion we share, thus it comes as no surprise that conversations about the courses she's taking have developed into a staple of our relationship. So the summer after my freshman year in college, it was not unusual when she came home one day and told me about the most remarkable experience she had just had. At the time, she was taking a class called “Jews on the Fringe,” whose subject was Jewish communities outside of the American mainstream, and the all important question: who's in the tent? With her classmates, she met gay Jews and army Jews, and Jubus¹, and a series of people so rich that even if they were woven into the so-called “fringes” of the

¹ Pronounced “Jew Boos,” Jubus are Jewish Buddhists, people with a Jewish ethic background who engage in Buddhist spirituality.
tapestry that is Israel, they would still be the amongst most vibrant elements of the cloth. But of all of these extraordinary groups, one stood out in particular, the Black synagogue that would become the subject of this thesis: Congregation Temple Bethel.

As she told me about Bethel, about its founder Mother Louise Elizabeth Dailey and her daughter Rabbi Debra Bowen, about its Kosher butcher, about its mikvah (ritual bath), and about its extraordinary origin story, I knew that I had to see the place for myself. Now it would be dishonest of me to write here that the notion of the novelty of an African-American synagogue did not play a role in my desire to visit Bethel. Honesty requires me to admit that I did have visions of the scene in Keeping the Faith where Ben Stiller's character calls the Harlem Gospel Choir in to lead “Ein Keloheinu,”2 in order to animate his lifeless congregation. But what I really hoped to find—and did eventually attain—at Bethel was a galvanizing Jewish experience, one that would invigorate my ever waning religious energy. I would later be told that Rabbi Sidney Greenberg, the former spiritual leader of Temple Sinai and a friend of Bethel, would often say that whenever he lost his way, he would visit Bethel for Shabbat (sabbath) services.3

So the following school year when I was a sophomore, I was to serve as the education chair on the steering committee of Penn Hillel, and I decided that a field trip to Bethel would be an ideal program. My plans were heavily influenced by Limmud New York, an annual conference on Jewish learning that I attended in January of 2006. The theme that year was “Jews of Every Stripe,” and, in that vein, I wanted my term as education chair to be defined by an unprecedented exploration of the tremendous

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2 Meaning “There is none like our god,” this song traditionally concludes Shabbat morning services.
diversity of the Jewish people, one that would bring a fresh, mosaic perspective on the Mosaic faith to Penn's Jewish community. Unfortunately, my dreams of organizing and executing a complete “Survey of the Jewniverse,” faltered. But I did succeed in achieving my most personal and important goal in what became the signature educational event of that year: Jew Like Me,⁴ a long-awaited field trip to Bethel.

Illustration 1: Flyer for the Jew Like Me trip

Through my mom's professor, Rabbi Jon Cutler, I contacted Rabbi Bowen at the beginning of the spring semester, we set a date, and all we had to do was show up.⁵ It

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⁴ I have to thank Joan Bobroff, Penn Hillel's office manager, for this title, which also happens to be the title of this thesis.
⁵ I also have to thank Tangela McClam, Bethel's Director of Education, who helped in the planning.
was an old school, school bus style field trip, attended by just over twenty people. We had no idea where we were going or what we were in for. As our bus approached the end of the directions, we thought that we had passed our street, so we decided to back track, and made a right turn. That right turn turned out to be the right turn: at the next corner, tucked away in this four block box of row homes, was a building that I immediately recognized as a synagogue. Mother Dailey, who passed away in 2001, had intended her synagogue to be unassuming, and this was certainly true of its location, but hardly true of its architecture.6

Illustration 2: Congregation Temple Bethel

Children sprinkled the steps and the lawn outside the main entrance, ready to greet us. We followed them down into the main social hall, where I met Rabbi Bowen for the first time. And I guess you could say that, in a way, that was the moment that this project began. I'll never forget the first part of that day's program. Rabbi Bowen handed out slips of paper with Jewish symbols in various colors, blue Torahs, green menorahs, and the like, and asked us to find our matching partner. The activity itself was not particularly memorable, but her introduction to it was. She said that “There are no strangers in Israel,” but that it was still important get to know each other a bit better. That day, both parts of that statement carried a deep truth.

Immediately following the icebreaker, Rabbi Bowen submitted herself to our myriad questions, about her story, about their story, and about our story, the story of our people. Then they swiftly shuttled us upstairs into an old chapel that was part of the original church to which the rest of the edifice was added. In that room, their choirs, including their children held a short concert for us, and for the first time I heard Bethel's music. I wish there I could find a fresh way to describe being totally blown away, to relate the experience of having searched for something your entire life, only to find it in the most unexpected of places. I will simply say this: without music, I am prayerless, but, in the presence this music, I had never been more prayerful. The concert ended on an adorable note, as Rabbi Bowen insisted that one of the children read his Birchot HaShachar (morning blessings) for us. Then we returned to the social hall for a snack, as Rabbi Bowen never lets a poor college student go hungry.

7 Because of time constraints, we did not see their actual sanctuary that day.
By this point, sadly, we were running horribly short on time (I ran out to the bus driver with some food to bribe him to stay just a little bit longer—and he did.), but the buzz had been busily building amongst my cohort. We had to leave, but immediately after we started to drive away, we began planning our return. Two weeks later, fifteen strong, we were back, this time for Saturday morning Shabbat services. I consider it no small feat that fifteen college students woke up on a Saturday morning in time to catch a 9:33am train from 30th St. Station.

When we arrived at Bethel an hour later, we were ushered into the sanctuary and joined the service. Once again, we had no idea what we were in for. In almost every respect, the service was exactly what most of us had experienced before, and yet at the same time it was completely different. While the content of the worship was the
same, its modalities left us in a state of heightened reality, captivating us with a singular combination of musicality and spirituality. Between the liveliest “Oseh Shalom”\(^8\) any of us had ever heard, with congregants pulling out tambourines left and right, and an “Adon Olam”\(^9\) solo that many remarked was good enough for an American Idol audition, we fell in love with Bethel all over again. But after the service proper ended, more was still to come, as the choir stepped in front of the congregation and began to sing, setting off what would best be described as an impromptu dance party in the aisles. Lines were formed, circles were made, and a good time was had by all. Many of my fellow students approached me during this celebration and told me that this sort of worship was what they too had long been seeking.

At this point, none of us realized that we had been there for nearly four hours, but we did realize that we were hungry, so, along with the rest of the congregation, we filed into the social hall for a feeding. That meal afforded us another opportunity to get to know members of the congregation, and the verdict was in: this was easily one of the most welcoming and extraordinary synagogues any of us had ever been to. The Bethelites cascade of kindnesses proved endless, as one of the congregants actually took half an hour of his sabbath to drive some of us back to Penn, a full hour if you include the trip back. So ended chapter two in the story of my relationship with Bethel.

I returned over the summer with a few friends of mine from home, all of them were equally astounded by their experience. But following that our relationship was put on hold, as I went abroad that fall; however, the connection was not completely severed.

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\(^8\) A traditional prayer for peace.

\(^9\) A traditional closing song.
as I did include Rabbi Bowen on the list of people who received my update emails.

It was while I was abroad that I actually began thinking about thesis topics. Early on, I knew that I wanted to explore something related to Judaism. On my application to the program, I initially listed an idea whereby I would follow in the footsteps of Michael Chabon's novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* and write an exposé on Jews in the early comic book industry. I also considered the possibility of flexing my newfound French muscles by researching any important French Jew that I could find whose name wasn't Alfred Dreyfus. But none of these possibilities had the necessary gravitational pull to hold down my ever wandering mind.

I remember the exact moment that I first felt that force for the first time, and began falling towards this project. I was sitting in Professor Sarah Igo's office counting off the ideas listed above as well as a few others, when it occurred to me that Bethel's age\(^ \text{10} \) placed it in a unique situation that is familiar to those who know recent Jewish history. Fifteen years ago, Steven Spielberg, in conjunction with the success of his film *Schindler's List*, founded the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation with the goal of preserving the voices of as many Holocaust survivors as possible before they passed away. What I realized was that, in the case of Bethel, many of those who remembered the synagogue's earliest days would, like that Holocaust survivors who testified before them, be quite advanced in age.\(^ \text{11} \) Thus preserving their voices became my quest, because theirs is a story that deserves telling.

I also realized that this topic suited me more than a project that would have had

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\(^{10}\) The congregation was founded in 1951, 58 years ago.

\(^{11}\) In fact, sadly, three members of the congregation who I did not have the chance to interview have passed away over the course of my research.
me pouring over an endless amount archival material. Simply put, more than anything about this experience, I have enjoyed the opportunity to talk to people about it. Every time I felt that this thesis was slipping away from me or was on the verge of collapsing beneath me, an interview replenished my strength. Every time someone found out what I was researching and asked me to explain it, I rediscovered why the work I was doing was so important. The truth that is that the success of this project has hinged on the fact that nothing makes me more comfortable or more impassioned than talking about Judaism—and that, like so many other things, I owe to my mom.
A Note on Method

I must begin these comments on my methodology with a mea culpa. As a researcher, I primarily paid attention to the Jewish questions surrounding Congregation Temple Bethel, and I did not give equal weight to the African American side of the story. The primary goal of this project, however, was to understand Bethel as a Jewish community, though a future researcher might choose to tackle Bethel from another orientation.

Over the course of this project I conducted 28 interviews of 27 people that lasted from 20 minutes to two and half hours. I did record these interviews, and it is my intention, after I have completely cataloged them, to turn them over to the National Museum of American Jewish History for future research. I interviewed both Bethelites and outsiders, and I asked the interviewees a wide variety of questions about their thoughts on Bethel and on Judaism in general.

In terms of other primary research, I spent a great deal of time worshiping with the Bethelites, charting my observations along the way. I also visited the American Jewish Historical Society and the Schomburg Center in New York to conduct a modest amount of archival research.

Unfortunately, I was never able to really hold Bethel's history in my hands the way I would have liked to. When I first approached Rabbi Bowen about this doing this research, she agreed, in due time, to grant me access to Mother Dailey's various personal documents: diaries, sermons, letters, books, etc. Yet when we made this agreement, I
think that she underestimated the scope of this project and that I overestimated her commitment to it. At the time, she may have thought that I would never actually need to look at those documents, and it turns out she was right—fortunately I finished this thesis without them. But just because I was able to finish a draft of this paper does not mean that the story on its pages is complete. Without access to those documents, I must concede that a great deal of mystery still shrouds Bethel, and, in particular its founder, Mother Dailey.

But while this lack of document access was disappointing, that Rabbi Bowen granted me any access at all is still fairly remarkable. Rabbi Bowen informed me in late February of this year that she still had congregants approaching her to ask why she was permitting me to do my work. I must then consider her fairly continuous support a small triumph.

I hope that I can claim another in telling this story with these limited resources.
A Note on Names

With regard to the names of the Bethelites referred to throughout this paper, it is important to note that most members of the congregation take both a Hebrew and an English name, following a practice common in the Jewish world. Instead of making a blanket decision and using only the religious name or the legal name of every individual, I have chosen rather to use the name that the individual used when introducing himself or herself to me. For example, Rabbi Debra A. Bowen's Hebrew name is Mehira bat Sarah, however, since she introduces herself as Rabbi Bowen that is what I have called her. An opposite example would be the case of Eemahrav\(^\text{12}\), who, though her legal name is Annette Register, introduces herself with her Hebrew name.

\(^{12}\) Meaning “Great Mother,” and very appropriate given that she has thirteen children.
A Note on Terminology

One of the great challenges in writing about Jewish diversity is the assignment of appropriate labels to the various groups described.\textsuperscript{13} Traditionally Jews have been divided into two groups: Ashkenazim, descended from the medieval German Jewish communities, and Sephardim, descended from the Jews expelled from the Iberian peninsula at the end of the 15\textsuperscript{th} Century. However, in modern discourse, Sephardim has grown into a catch-all term for all non-Ashkenazi Jews. This means that it inappropriately includes the Mizrahi Jews, the Jews of Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia, who though they practice many Sephardic rituals, have developed their own traditions as well. The overwhelming majority of American Jews are descended from Ashkenazim who emigrated from Eastern Europe, and this has led to this overwhelming simplification of our understanding of Jewish diversity.\textsuperscript{14}

And this is only the Jews’ own classification system. Further complicating matter is the introduction of race. Jews have always had a peculiar status when it comes to race—no one seems to know where they fit in. Admittedly race is a funny thing in the first place. No longer considered biological truth by modern scholars, it is defined by Ian F. Haney Lopez in his \textit{Social Construction of Race} as “a vast group of people loosely bound together by historically contingent, socially significant elements of their morphology and/or ancestry.” On the one hand, that the unifying feature of Jews is the

\textsuperscript{13} Melanie Kaye/Krantowitz, \textit{The Colors of Jews} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), xiii.
\textsuperscript{14} Diane Kaufmann Tobin, Gary A. Tobin, and Scott Rubin, \textit{In Every Tongue: The Racial and Ethnic Diversity of the Jewish People} (San Francisco: Institute for Jewish and Community Research, 2005), 33-34.
practice of Judaism, a religion, would seem to liberate them of the morphological and ancestral descriptors necessary for a racial categorization. Ideally individuals flow freely between religions, without hindrance based on appearances, because the essence of religion is faith, a fundamental spiritual state not confined to humans of specific origins. The problem with applying this model to Judaism is that it contradicts Jewish theology, which is based on the notion of the Jews', the children of Israel's, being the “chosen people.” Ancestry is inseparable from this belief. Taking these matters into account, it would seem that according to Lopez's definition, in looking at the Jewish people, we have a race.

In the United States, the discourse on race has been dominated by the primacy of the black-white binary. However, when it comes to Jews, Melanie Kaye/Krantowitz writes that they “complicate things,” that “Jewish is both a distinct category and an overlapping one.” Generally speaking, we understand that the American Jewish community has been whitewashed, but as is becoming clearer and clearer every day, a survey of the Jewish universe uncovers a constellation of ethnic, class, and social backgrounds. What we mean when we say that the American Jews have become white is that Ashkenazi American Jews have become white. And to contrast this, we have what

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15 Traditionally Jews consider anyone born of a Jewish woman to be Jewish. Though it should be noted that the possibility of entering the community exists, by undergoing a ritual conversion process.
18 This has been the subject of two important recently published books: Melanie Kaye/Krantowitz's The Colors of Jews and Diane Kaufmann Tobin, Gary A. Tobin, and Scott Rubin's In Every Tongue. The question of class will not be stressed extensively in this book, but while much has been written about Jewish influence in this country, little mentioned Jewish poverty has become a major concern of central Jewish organizations.
Diane Tobin, Gary Tobin, and Scott Rubin of the Institute for Jewish and Community Research call, in language that they admit is inadequate, “Jews of color” or “diverse Jews,” catch-all terms for non-Ashkenazi Jews that they use in their book *In Every Tongue*. Thus we establish the unfortunately simplistic language that we will use to address this topic. We will discuss white Jews and their mainstream Judaism as opposed to Jews of color and their exotic Judaism. In particular, we will focus on the Judaism practiced by black Americans, though this presents a new host of problems. First of all, we have to dissect the distinction identified by James Landing in his book *Black Judaism*, that on the one hand there are little “b” black Jews—black persons who by conversion or birth happen to be mainstream “white” Jews—and on the other hand there are big “B” Black Jews—black persons who have developed Black Jewish institutions outside of the mainstream Jewish community. These Black Jews go by many names—Hebrew-Israelites, Israelites, Hebrews, and Black Hebrews—but they are unified in a broader social movement of black people, by black people, and for black people. In his chapter in *A Companion to African American Studies*, “Locating Afro-American Judaism: A Critique of White Normativity,” Walter Isaac criticizes Landing's distinction, asking “Does [Landing] believe (b)lack Jews are really Jews, whereas (B)lack Jews are colorless Jews?”

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20 As opposed to Melanie Kaye/Krantowitz, who in her book *The Colors of Jews*, attempts to switch between labels depending on context, whether she wants to emphasize her subject's ethnic, religious, or racial status. We will avoid this method because our primary concern is the black-white binary.

21 Mainstream Judaism is, importantly, further subdivided into four major movements: the three liberal movements, Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist, and the one traditional movement, Orthodox.

22 I use the term black as opposed to African-American so as to remain consistent with the passage that follows.

Jews are merely black?"

Isaac makes a valid argument that we must be wary of the way our language might implicitly question the Jewish validity of our subjects. Still, all of these categories are importantly distinct, and those distinctions must be maintained. For this reason, save when referring to the whole body of the Jewish people, I will always modify the words Jew and Judaism with one of the words mainstream, white, Black, and black, and, when possible, I will refer to groups such as Hebrews and Israelites as they refer themselves.

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Chapter 1

The Mosaic Religion:
Locating Congregation Temple Bethel in Jewish History

“The fault is in the mirror that reflects, the mind that perceives, the brain that infers. What the mirror presents as true has no authenticity. The mirror is coated with dust and its face is not plain at all. God has no maya; He has no intention or need to delude, nor does He will that it should happen.”
- Sri Sathya Sai Baba

“Once there was a gentile who came before Shammai, and said to him: "I will convert if you can teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot. Shammai pushed him aside with the measuring stick he was holding. The same fellow came before Hillel, and Hillel converted him, saying: 'That which is despicable to you, do not do to your fellow. This is the whole Torah, and the rest is commentary. Go forth and study it.'"
- Talmudic Legend

“Know your history” is a Bethelite mantra. With pride and erudition, the members of Congregation Temple Bethel make numerous references to the ghosts of Jewish past, from Biblical Israel to modern America, reflecting a tradition of learning that is central to their culture:

Bethel is a congregation that has historically been a very studied congregation. A lot of value was placed on research and education and study from the beginnings of our history and to this day.25

The Bethelites have committed to mastering the past of their people; therefore, it is only fitting to embark on an exploration of their history with the ambitious task of locating their story on the grand map of Jewish time and space.

Yet we begin this way, not only because it is appropriate, but also because it is

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25 Eli Aronoff, interview by author, Philadelphia, PA, January 8, 2009. In addition to this testimony, I have visited many Bethelites in their homes, and their bookshelves are stuffed with works on Jewish history and the Bible.
instructive. In order to effectively understand how Congregation Temple Bethel came to be, we must first chart the rivers and streams that lead to its little lake in the Jewish landscape. That is the objective of this first chapter.

Of course this task begs the question: what exactly does the grand map of Jewish time and space look like? Is it, a series of underground tunnels as Paul Johnson proposes, “a history of the world, but from a highly peculiar angle..., the viewpoint of a learned and intelligent victim.”

Is it the continuous downward slope, described by Heinrich Graetz, simply a series of catastrophes, one after another? Or is it the more moderate model of S. W. Baron, a sinusoidal topography of great heights opposing depressing depths?

These three maps, these frameworks for understanding Jewish history, have many strengths, but they also have one essential flaw. They treat the Jewish people as a single unit marching through history along a linear path that leads through one continent: Europe. Melanie Kaye/Krantowitz, in her book *The Colors of Jews*, calls this the “Eurocentric story”:

The Eurocentric story begins with Abraham leaving his native Ur and settling in the promised land. Other milestones include the destruction of the Second Temple—and now we leave the Middle East, as though no Jews stayed; the Expulsion from Spain (usually the only recognition of non-Ashkenazi experience); and now it's Europe all the way: Blood Libels, Emancipation and Enlightenment, Pogroms, Immigration, the Holocaust; and escaping Europe, the crowning glory, the founding of the Jewish state of Israel...

This is, of course, the epic tale most relevant to the historical memory of mainstream American Jews, as for the vast majority of them it is the story of their ancestors. But

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27 I studied both of these conceptions of Jewish with Professor David Ruderman in his course on Jewish civilization between the 8th and 17th centuries.
because of this story's dominance, argues Kaye/Krantowitz, mainstream American Jews fail to recognize the diversity of the Diaspora,\textsuperscript{29} the colors of the Jews dispersed across the world—and even the colors of Jews in their own midst, Jews like those who worship at Congregacion Temple Bethel. For this reason, the three geographies of Jewish history described above are incomplete and thus insufficient for the task of finding the Bethelites' place within them.

We need a broader, more inclusive map of Jewish time and space if we are to locate Bethel's little lake. This map will still cover the ground of the Eurocentric story and the rise of mainstream American Judaism, but it will also incorporate a survey of the Jewish world beyond those streams, including a chronology of the development of Black Judaism in the United States. Finally, the conclusions that we draw from this map will inform our efforts to place Bethel on it, and from them we will observe what makes Bethel such a unique location.

And of course, where else could we begin to chart our course but with a lonely mountain in the middle of the wilderness.

\textbf{The Mosaic Model}

The Talmud\textsuperscript{30} gives a beautiful midrash (interpretative legend) about the mass of people present at the revelation at Sinai. When a rabbi retells it today, he might begin,

\textsuperscript{29} The Diaspora, the scattering of Jewish communities around the world, began when the Jews were first expelled from the Land of Israel between the 8\textsuperscript{th} and 6\textsuperscript{th} Centuries BCE. After they returned from that first exile, the Jews were expelled once more between the 1\textsuperscript{st} and 2\textsuperscript{nd} Centuries CE. The intricacies of the Diaspora will be further elaborated upon later in this chapter.

\textsuperscript{30} The Talmud was the first written collection of Judaism's Oral Law. It is a record of the discussions between the early rabbis pertaining to Jewish law, custom, and ethics. Its two parts are the Mishnah, which was composed between 70 and 200 CE, and the Gemara, a commentary on the Mishnah, which was composed between 300 and 500 CE.
“Have I seen you before? I feel like I know you from somewhere.” And when the interlocutor returns a blank unknowing stare, the rabbi would continue, “Why of course! I remember where I met you. We were together at Sinai.” It is a profound teaching, that all Jews from all generations stood side by side before the mountain as the God that had redeemed them from slavery listed His laws.

Imagine Moses on top of that mountain, gazing down at the vast expanse of humanity below, seeing the mosaic of faces, the faces of his people, each a beautiful piece of a majestic and holy whole. But tragically, this was the first and last time that all of the Children of Israel would gather so unified; after it, the fragmentation of that magnificent mosaic became their central narrative, rediscovering their rightful places in it their collective challenge. It is with this challenge in mind that we will begin to analyze Kaye/Krantowitz's Eurocentric story of the Jews, a story that reveals that “Know your history” is a mantra for more than just the Bethelites. We will see that as the Jews of this epic march into the future, they constantly hearken back to the past, always looking for a path towards Sinai.

As Kaye/Krantowitz suggested, the first major milestone of the Eurocentric narrative was the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. As the walls of the Second Temple came crashing down, so too did the reign of the priests who inhabited it, and in their stead rose the 71 rabbis of the Great Sanhedrin. The project of the Great

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Avraham Infeld, the former international president of Hillel, the Jewish organization that serves university students, used this story during the introduction to a speech that I attended when I was in Israel.

In this context, the rabbis of the Great Sanhedrin would be best described as judges, as their primary role was to make legal decisions based on Jewish law, as opposed to today's rabbis who serve primarily as spiritual leaders (though they are still responsible for making rulings based on Jewish law). Today, we might also describes these ancient rabbis as sages.
Sanhedrin was to develop a means of maintaining Jewish peoplehood without the Temple at its center. Their response: they developed a religion based on prayer and on the Oral Torah (Oral Law), a collection of traditions not written into the Torah, but that were still considered legally binding. On what basis did the rabbis claim that they were legally binding? They declared that these traditions were revealed to Moses orally at Sinai as he was simultaneously receiving the written Torah. Thus the rabbis legitimated the laws by linking them back to the Revelation. The Great Sanhedrin's discussions of these laws were recorded in the Mishnah (repetition) between 70 CE and 200 CE, which was followed by the Gemara (study), a commentary on the Mishnah by later rabbis recorded between 300 and 500 CE, the two together comprising the Talmud, the great compendium of the Oral Torah.

Another important consequence of the destruction of the Second Temple and the continuing conflict following it was the Roman expulsion of the Jews from the Land of Israel. The resultant Diaspora scattered Jews across the Roman Empire, meaning that the focal point of the Jewish world was ever shifting.

But it comes as no surprise that when the first new center of Jewish life moved to the great Talmudic academies of Baghdad during the second half of the First Millennium, these schools organized themselves after the model of Great Sanhedrin, each having a governing body of 71 rabbis, each committed to studying the Oral Law. By co-opting these practices, they established themselves as a stop on a road that led all the way back to Sinai. But at the height of Baghdadi Judaism, during the late 9th Century, a rival sect emerged called the Karaites, who believed that the Oral Torah had not been revealed on
the mountain; in fact, they taught that it had never been revealed at all. They saw their path to Sinai through an object they could hold in their hands, in this case the written Torah. The two sides battled over which was the appropriate approach to Torah, a battle eventually won by the rabbis.33

Then the scene shifts to Europe, first to Northern France at the beginning of the Second Millennium. There the rabbi Rashi, continuing in the tradition of the sages that lived one thousand years before him, composed comprehensive commentaries on both the Bible and the Talmud. One hundred years later, in Muslim Andalusia, the scholar Maimonides proposed a radical change to the curriculum of Jewish studies. Originally, the curriculum’s progression was Torah, then Mishnah, then Gemara; Maimonides’ proposition flowed from Written Law to Oral Law to Jewish philosophy, which he believed to be the highest possible approach to Torah. But he gave the study of philosophy a curious label: Talmud. In this way, with this term, he places his innovation on a path leading back to Sinai.34 At the same time, the Kabbalah, the tradition of Jewish mysticism, was coalescing, and its central text, the Zohar, was composed by Moshe de León during the late 13th Century and published in Spain. But instead of claiming authorship, Moshe de León ascribed the text to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, a rabbi who lived one thousand years before him, his way of establishing a line of continuity between his work, the founding rabbis, and thereby the Revelation. Two centuries later, with the advent of the printing press and the mass production of texts of Jewish law, it became all the more possible for practicing Jews to believe that their Judaism followed a path

33 The Karaites still exist today, but they are a marginalized sect of about 30,000 people, according to a 2007 article in the Jerusalem Post.
34 From a lecture by David Ruderman.
directly back to the rabbis who wrote the Talmud, and thus directly back to Sinai, a phenomenon that the historian Haym Soloveitchick observed in his 1994 essay, “Rupture and Reconstruction.”

At this juncture however, though the Eurocentric story of Judaism moves forward on its home continent for a few more centuries, we have reached an appropriate point in our narrative to follow a few of those European Jews across the ocean to the New World. It is important that we move our focus to America because we need to understand its Jewish topography in order to locate Bethel. During the 19th Century, the United States would witness the rise of a new, liberal approach to Judaism. But like the Judaism of the Old World, its struggle to maintain a continuous historical narrative back to Sinai would remain at the forefront.

Reform Judaism was the first of the liberal Jewish movements that developed in the United States. The reasons for its emergence were many—including many Jews' desire to have English in their services, organs for their synagogues, and shrimp on their plates—but the most important one was the influx and influence of a large number of mid 19th Century German Jewish immigrants, who wanted to adapt their religion to an American lifestyle. Yet when the Movement released its first Declaration of Principles, the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885, the opening sentences of the sixth principle read:

We recognize in Judaism a progressive religion, ever striving to be in

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36 The other two being the Conservative and Reconstructionist Movements, as opposed to Orthodoxy. This paper will cover the Conservative Movement, but a full discussion of the history of the Reconstructionist Movement, founded by Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan during the mid 20th Century, is beyond the scope of this paper. It is also important to note that a Reform Movement did crop up in Germany during the early 19th Century, led by Moses Mendelsohn, though a full discussion of this chapter in Jewish history is also beyond the scope of this paper.
accord with the postulates of reason. We are convinced of the utmost necessity of preserving the historical identity with our great past.\textsuperscript{37}

It is clear from this statement that the founders of the movement, however committed to an ideology of change, felt it necessary to claim their place on the map of Jewish history. The early leaders of the Reform Movement saw themselves as engaging in an evolutionary process that had persisted throughout the history of their people; thus theirs was a perfectly appropriate approach to the inherent confrontation between the strictures of their tradition and the freedoms of the modern world. In fact, Reform Jews are still building on this argument today. Rabbi Simon J. Maslin, a former president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the rabbinic arm of the Reform Movement, wrote the following a 1996 cover article for the magazine Reform Judaism entitled “Who are the Authentic Jews?”:

Who, then, are the authentic Jews? Those Jews who have, by their tribal exclusivism, their obsession with the punctilios of ritual, their contempt for \textit{k'lal Yisrael}, [the unity of the Jewish people], their manner of dress, their romanticization of the past, and, yes, their fanaticism, separated themselves from the community are certainly not equipped to determine the course of American Jewish life in the 21st century. Who, then, shall?

Two thousand years ago, a determined group of liberal scholars—the Pharisees—convinced the Judean community that the old ways were a dead end. The Sadducees and their following of priests and aristocrats wanted to preserve the old ways; they believed the sacrificial cult and the priestly prerogatives were sacred and eternal, and therefore any compromise with modernity was a desecration. We, the Jewish people, survived because the Pharisees developed a revolutionary type of Judaism which was not centered on the sacrificial cult but rather on the synagogue as a people's house of prayer and study. The Pharisees were able to accomplish this, according to the great British scholar, R. Travers Herford, “because they were the only exponents of Judaism who discovered in it the principle of continuous revelation.”

That is what Reform Judaism, also a revolutionary departure from the old ways, is all about—the principle of continuous revelation. Reform Judaism teaches that God is as present to the thoughtful and sensitive seeker today as to the prophets and sages of antiquity. We are building a movement that looks to the past for inspiration and to the future for challenge, a movement dedicated to *tikkun olam*—to the repair and improvement of our world. We recognize all human beings as children of God, and we accept the divine charge to be "a light unto the nations."  

Yet something happened that the founders of the Reform Movement did not expect: not all Jews bought their program for change. In 1883, Hebrew Union College (HUC), the Reform movement's rabbinical seminary, celebrated the ordination of its first graduating class with a lavish affair that would come to be known as the trefa (unkosher food) banquet; on the menu for the party were all kinds of shellfish and other foods prohibited by kashrut (Jewish dietary law), a decision found terribly offensive by the more traditionally observant Jews in attendance. Three years later, in a reaction to this banquet and the Pittsburgh Platform, the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) was established to compete with HUC. The early leaders of JTS would go on to found the Orthodox Jewish Congregational Union of America (OU) in 1898 and the United Synagogue of America in 1913, the Orthodox and Conservative Movements, respectively. That, and the influx of Eastern European immigrants between 1881 and 1914 sealed the end of Reform Judaism's dream of becoming Minhag Amerika, a Judaism for all American Jews.

Thus began the rise of the Conservative and Orthodox Movements. Unlike the other Movements, the Orthodox Movement was and is not liberally inclined. Its

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40 Sarna, 193.
authenticity was and is maintained by its faithfulness to the notion that there exists an eternally valid Jewish law. This attitude is well summarized in Chaim Potok's novel, *The Promise*, which tells the tale of a young rabbinical student named Reuven Malter who is studying at an Orthodox seminary. At one point in the story, Reuven's teacher Rav Kalman confronts him about a new approach to the study of Talmud about which Reuven's father had written a book. Reuven explains his teacher's outrage towards his father:

No one in the present could possibly be compared in depth of learning to the great ones of the past. So the works of the commentators of the past had to be accepted as valid for the present; and the liberties these commentators had taken with the text could not be practiced today because no one equaled them in knowledge. You could never say that a great contemporary Bible scholar had a better knowledge of the Bible than, say, Rashi, who was one of the greatest medieval commentators on the Bible; nor could you say that a modern scholar of the Talmud knew more than the accepted classical commentators on the Talmud.

This belief, that Jewish law must remain constant through time and place—and that modern scholars have little to add to its interpretation—is the heart of Orthodoxy.

Conservative Judaism on the other hand, like the Reform Movement, espoused a liberal approach to Jewish law, but one that, like the Orthodox Movement, chose to maintain fealty to that law. However, unlike the Orthodox Movement, the Conservative Movement believes that Jewish law can and does evolve across time and space, and thus it has taken on the challenge of driving that evolution. It has also developed a historical argument that links this conception of Judaism back to the rabbis and thereby to Sinai. In a 2004 pamphlet *Conservative Judaism: Loud and Proud*, Rabbi Jerome Epstein,

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In years past, our Rabbis and Prophets pushed and pulled, stroked and cajoled, the not yet religiously committed, urging them to adopt a life of observance. We in the Conservative Movement are following in their footsteps, working tirelessly to create models of Jewish living that will engage our diverse membership...

...Conservative Judaism is not the only movement that has a diversity of belief and practice. Indeed, there is a wide range of opinions within both Reform and Orthodox Judaism—but with a difference.

- In Reform Judaism, halakhah, [Jewish law], is not deemed binding. Therefore, wide differences in practice are not unexpected and have little significance.
- Orthodoxy—which, like Conservative Judaism, accepts halakhah as binding—does not accept that Jewish law is evolving as well.
- Conservative Judaism remains unique in its acceptance of halakhah and in its recognition that the humility of the school of Hillel remains a valuable guide for our own approach to Jewish law. Our position has been to agree or disagree with a particular position (e.g., patrilineal descent), but never to question the sincerity or legitimacy of those putting forth those notions.

The Talmud does not just record diverse opinions; rather, it encourages them by stimulating independent inquiry and analysis and by recognizing the validity of the halakhic process. Conservative Judaism willingly accepts the challenge of preserving the law by continuing this dynamic process. Indeed, Conservative rabbis recognize that scholars in each generation are not merely permitted but are in fact obligated to interpret and reinterpret Jewish law in order to keep our tradition vibrant.42

Here we end our survey of the Eurocentric story of Jewish history through to the rise of the American Judaism. Using this survey, and the analysis of historian David Biale, we will get our first glimpse of the map on which we will locate Bethel. What we have since Sinai argues Biale in the preface to his book Cultures of the Jews, is not one

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history of the Jews, but several histories of the Jews. And what we have instead of one Jewish culture are several “cultures of the Jews,” highly dependent upon the time and place those scattered tiles fell.\textsuperscript{43} Among the variations are dress (Jews did not emerge from Egyptian slavery wearing fur hats and black coats),\textsuperscript{44} architecture (synagogues tend to resemble the other places of worship surrounding them), and food (Ashkenazic Jews \textit{know} that the proper protein to eat at the Friday evening Shabbat (sabbath) meal is chicken, while Yemenite Jews \textit{know} that it’s fish).\textsuperscript{45} But furthermore, Biale writes that a Jewish culture is defined by its reaction to the “folk and textual” traditions of the Revelation, the Bible and the subsequent works surrounding them. As Ephraim Isaac, the director of the Institute of Semitic Studies in Princeton aptly described it:

\begin{quote}
Over two thousand years ago, the Jews were an ethnic group—but even then not a “perfect” one. Since then, Jews have intermingled with many nations...The ancient Israelites were...a sacral association...They were a people bound together by a common language, and common territory, similar historical experiences, and common consciousness. The Ark of the Covenant was the main sacred cult object and formed the center of worship...It is the centrality of concern for the Torah, revealed on Mount Sinai and the great values of our heritage that bind us together as Jews.\textsuperscript{46}
\end{quote}

Yet there is another facet to this fascination with Torah: there persists throughout the ages a collective delusion on the part of all Jews that, in spite of all evidence to the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{footnote}{44}Here I refer to the stereotypical image of an ultra-orthodox Jew—the most religiously observant Jews—of Eastern European descent.\end{footnote}
\begin{footnote}{45}I learned of this last example from conversation with Professor Lewis Gordon of Temple University on September 22, 2008. Ashkenazic Jews are Jews descended from medieval Jewish communities in Germany, who later moved into Eastern Europe, while Yemenite Jews are descended from Jewish communities in Yemen. Shabbat is the Hebrew word for sabbath, which according to Jewish Law spans from Friday evening to Saturday evening. On Friday evenings, Jews traditionally gather for a large, festive meal following worship services.\end{footnote}
contrary, they share a common culture.\textsuperscript{47} By extension, Jewish cultures consider the religion that they practice, which they call Judaism, to be similarly flat across time and space. Biale debunks this notion by suggesting a distinction between Judaism and Jewish religion, asking “Is there or has there ever been one Jewish religion called Judaism?”\textsuperscript{48} The answer, of course, is an emphatic no, but this presumption is still profoundly problematic, as it has caused each Jewish culture to believe that its own Judaism is the Jewish religion in its purest form. In other words, all Jews tend to believe that the Judaism that they practice is authentic.

But obviously this cannot be the case: every manifestation of Judaism cannot be authentic. So Jews quarrel over this issue, each contending that his is a more authentic Judaism than his coreligionist's. Yet all claims made in this donnybrook tend to reduce to the same element of proof: when asked to substantiate the authenticity of its Jewish practices, a Jewish community builds a historical argument that retraces its path back to the mosaic of faces that Moses saw at Sinai. This mosaic model of Jewish history, based on our understanding of the significance that Jews place on proving their presence at the mountain, is the map on which we will locate Bethel.

**A Mixed Multitude**

While it is true that the vast majority of the world's Jews—which we will call the mainstream—fit the ancestral profile of the Eurocentric story,\textsuperscript{49} because of their

\begin{footnotes}
\item[47] Biale, xxii.
\item[48] Biale, xxii.
\item[49] According to some estimates, up to 90 percent of the world's Jewish population can trace its ancestry back to Europe.
\end{footnotes}
predominance they often fail to recognize “the Colors of Jews” dispersed across the world.\textsuperscript{50} First of all, not all present at Sinai were the children of Israel, as the text tells us that in the haste and confusion of the Exodus from Egypt, the Hebrews swept a “mixed multitude” of slaves from other nations into their midst.\textsuperscript{51} Rabbi Capers C. Funnye, leader of the Beth Shalom B’nai Zaken Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation in Chicago and one of the country’s most prominent Black rabbis, commented on this passage:

The Book of Exodus tells us twice very profoundly that a mixed multitude went up with them. Also in the Book of Exodus you have the prohibition of “Thou shalt not feed the kid in its mother's milk.” That's said two or three times, and we have a whole system of kashrut\textsuperscript{52} that evolves out of the mother's milk. There's no synthesis or understanding of Judaism including all types of people. Of Judaism being a mix. That's not been stressed and developed the way the two or three times we're told not to feed a kid in its mother's milk has grown into this elaborate system.\textsuperscript{53}

Rabbi Funnye's observation that mainstream Jews' focus on the esoteric laws as opposed to the diversity of their people is a critique, not only of their white normativity, but also of their utter disregard for Jews unlike themselves; in their view, without undergoing an officially recognized conversion, someone like Rabbi Funnye could not possibly have been present at Sinai.\textsuperscript{54}

But in truth, Rabbi Funnye's explanation of the biblical origins of Jewish diversity are far less significant than the actual origins of the Jewish diversity that we see today:

\textsuperscript{50} Kaye/Krantowitz, 73.
\textsuperscript{51} Exodus 12:38 (\textit{The Jewish Study Bible}).
\textsuperscript{52} Kashrut is the system of Jewish dietary laws.
\textsuperscript{54} It should be noted that this indictment is not entirely accurate in this case because, incidentally, Rabbi Funnye did convert into Conservative Judaism. It should also be noted that Rabbi Funnye was appointed as the first African-American to serve on the Chicago Board of Rabbis. Yet earlier in the same interview, Rabbi Funnye relates stories of his wife’s awkward encounters with mainstream Jews. A full discussion of this phenomenon will follow in Chapter 3 of this paper, when we treat similar incidents involving Bethelites.
Diaspora. While we addressed the Diaspora earlier in this chapter, we focused on the Roman expulsion because it was most significant to the Eurocentric story. The truth is that after the establishment of ancient kingdoms in Palestine, external invaders thrice expelled Israel from the land, the Romans being the third.

The first expulsions came by will of the Assyrians in 722 BCE and the Babylonians in 586 BCE. It is important to note that there are known Jewish communities that were founded during this period and maintained, including the Cochin Jews and the B'nei Menashe of India, groups in central Asia and throughout the Middle East, and, some speculate, even as far as China. But more importantly these expulsions are the origin of the concept of the Lost Tribes of Israel, as a huge swath of the population did not return to Palestine after it was permissible for them to do so. Instead, spread across Africa and Asia, they intermarried and assimilated.

The most famous of these is the Beta Israel community of Ethiopia, which historians believe to be the remnants of tribe of Dan. This group grew to prominence during the mid 1980s, when the modern state of Israel began a series of rescue missions to evacuate them from Ethiopia back to their biblical homeland. Members of another community, the Lemba of South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique, have undergone DNA testing that links them to the greater Jewish community through a genetic marker.

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56 Tobin et al., 79. Interestingly, Shavei Israel (“Israel returns”), an organization dedicated to helping communities of suspected Jewish ancestry undergo Orthodox conversions and move to Israel. One of their focuses is on finding the Lost Tribes, however, on a map on their website (www.shavei.org) displaying their international activity, Africa remains a dark continent.
57 Tobin et al., 82.
on the Y chromosome associated with the Kohanim, the priestly class of ancient Israel.\(^{58}\)

Another important group are the Igbo of Nigeria, a tribe with an oral history that refers to the Lost Tribes, and with whom Rabbi Funnye’s congregation is working to build a sister synagogue.\(^{59}\)

Why are the Lost Tribes important for our purposes? Because as we shall see, the existence of the Lost Tribes, particularly those in Africa, is the route by which the Black Jews, Bethelites included, trace their way back to Sinai.

Go Down, Moses

Save perhaps for the final words of the greatest speech in American history—

“Free at last! Free at Last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!”—it is the most well known Negro spiritual:

- Go down, Moses,
- Way down in Egypt's land,
- Tell old Pharaoh,
- To let my people go.

It is emblematic of the enslaved Black Christians' identification with the Old Testament exodus narrative.\(^{60}\) That this theology developed after the slaves were converted en masse to Christianity and were first exposed to the Bible is well documented:

From an African-American point of view, the story of the Exodus is not the formative chapter in the creation of one nation—the nation of Israel—but a metaphor for freedom and redemption, and is directly related to the fate of black people in America.\(^{61}\)

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\(^{58}\) Tobin et al., 84.

\(^{59}\) Tobin et al., 86-87.


Daniel Ross, College ’09
Thus it is unsurprising that the first major authority on Black Jews, Howard M. Brotz, constructed his understanding of the genesis of Black Judaism based upon this phenomenon. Of Black Jews, Brotz wrote in 1952, “[they] may be accurately be regarded as sects of Christians who pressed their identification with the Old Testament to the extreme belief that they themselves are Jews.” Walter Isaac, a graduate researcher at Temple University's Center for Afro-Judaic Studies, calls this assertion the “allegory thesis” and offers this critique of its logic: why would a community that we can correctly categorize as Christian decide to label itself Jewish? But Isaac's reaction to Brotz's theory is actually far harsher than Brotz deserved, first of all because that quote fell in a footnote that compared the emergence of Black Jews to a similar phenomenon that occurred in 17th Century English Puritanism, and second of all because, as was documented in my Note on Terminology, the available vocabulary for describing Black Judaism is terribly inadequate. Furthermore, Isaac's critique suggests that Brotz was seeking to invalidate the Jewishness of Black Jews, yet throughout his career Brotz continuously validated their Jewish by calling them Jews, albeit with the Black modifier. In his most important work, The Black Jews of Harlem, published in 1964, he nuanced his 1952 interpretation, arguing that the origins of Black Judaism can be traced to that the type of radical Protestantism that became the religious tradition of the slaves, and which in its essence conceived of itself as a return to the literal word of God, revealed in both Testaments and accessible in the vernacular to all who could read, elicited on its fringes an eccentric

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64 Isaac, 518.
tradition in which the Old Testament not only became held in honor equal to that of the New, but in fact became more venerated and even opposed to the New Testament where they came in conflict.\textsuperscript{65}

The last element in this explication is most significant: the inversion of precedence to the Old Testament over the New was the critical juncture in the evolution of the earliest American Black Jewish communities.

Ironically, the first Black Jewish Congregation was founded by a man named Christian, William Christian, born to a Mississippi slave family in 1856. In 1889 in Wrightsville Arkansas, Christian, who had been preaching since 1875, gathered a small group he first called the Christian Friendship Work, later to become the Church of the Living God. In spite of a series of schisms during the early 20\textsuperscript{th} Century, the church expanded quickly, and by 1906 it had 68 congregations across the Bible Belt.\textsuperscript{66}

According to James E. Landing, author of the most comprehensive work on this subject, \textit{Black Judaism}, what made Christian's church Jewish was not the fact that its members made any attempt at Jewish rituals—they didn't. Rather, the Church of the Living God was the first example of what Landing labels, “Judaic Christianity;” Christian's innovation was not what he practiced, but what he preached: he blackwashed the Old Testament in order to draw a direct line between his black community and the ancient Israelites, making his the first religious expression of black nationalism to incorporate non-Christian elements.\textsuperscript{67}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{67} Landing, 49-50.
\end{flushright}
Church of God and Saints of Christ (CGSC) under the leadership of the Prophet William S. Crowdy. Crowdy was born a Baptist in 1847, the son of Maryland slaves. But after he began having visions in 1892, he chose to move to Lawrence, Kansas, where he founded and incorporated the CGSC on November 8, 1896. While Landing points out the striking similarity between the original tenets of Christian's and Crowdy's movements, Crowdy's was different in one major way: he abandoned the Sunday Sabbath and Christian holidays and rituals in favor of the Saturday Sabbath and the Feast Days as commanded in the Old Testament, though purely based on the scripture, without the layers of rabbinic law observed by mainstream Jews.\(^68\) So committed was Crowdy to the Old Testament that he even preached that the Sabbath began not on Saturday morning, but on Friday evening.\(^69\) Crowdy also had an interesting habit of referring to all blacks as Jews, though the term Black Jews never caught on with his followers, and today they prefer to be called Hebrew-Israelites.\(^70\) Since Crowdy's death, the CGSC has undergone a rather striking evolution: whereas at the outset, Crowdy preached the divinity of Christ, today his followers reject that notion, instead placing Jesus in the line of the Prophets.\(^71\) But Landing, in categorizing the CGSC, places it in the same Judaic Christianity category that he uses for Church of the Living God.\(^72\) This is, in fact, another example of the Brotz's struggle with language, as his first quote seems to hold for Christian's group while his second holds for Crowdy's. Though he died in 1908, Crowdy's influence on all subsequent Black Jewish movements was substantial: he was a well-traveled man who

\(^{68}\) Landing, 49-50.
\(^{70}\) Landing, 55; and Curtis Caldwell, interview by author, Philadelphia, PA, January 11, 2009.
\(^{71}\) Caldwell, January 11, 2009.
\(^{72}\) Landing, 54.
had visited the Northeast extensively, and he actually established his headquarters in Philadelphia 1900, where it stayed until 1917. Thus it comes as no surprise that following his death, the center of Black Jewish activity moved north.

From 1908, the year of Crowdy's death, to 1925, a time frame that lines up nicely with the Great Migration, many Black Jewish congregations were found across the country, in cities like Washington D.C., Philadelphia, Chicago, and New York. During that period, two important Black Jewish leaders from New York, Rabbi Mordecai Herman of the Moorish Zionist Temple and Rabbi Arnold Josiah Ford, became involved with Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA)—Rabbi Ford actually suggested to Garvey that he make Judaism the official religion of his nationalist movement. But as it turned out, Garvey had more influence over them than they did over him, and it was in this way that the racial exclusivity of his ideology became a feature of Black Judaism.

As we observed in the theology of William Christian, Black Jews were already certain that the original Israelites were black. Furthermore, they were certain that every heroic character in the Bible was black: Jesus, David, Job, Jeremiah, Zipporah, and so on. It was the next step in which Garvey's influence came to bear: clearly if the original Israelites were black, then white Jews must be impostors of some sort. Most Black Jews believed that white Jews had simply converted, but some, like Ella J.

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73 The Great Migration was a mass exodus of African-American from southern states to northern states.
74 Chireau and Deutsch 22.
75 Brotz, 11.
76 Chireau and Deutsch, 23.
77 Landing, 46-50. While some might scoff at this alternative rendering of Biblical characters, it is important to remember that for centuries of European artists have done exactly the same, whitewashing the many faces of the Bible in artists' own self image.
Hughley and Moses Farrar, authors of *The Truth about Black Biblical Hebrew-Israelites (Jews): The World's Best Kept Secret*, went so far as to contend that white Jews were actually descended from the biblical enemy of the Israelites, the line of Jacob's brother Esau.78

Obviously this belief made engaging with the mainstream white majority a rather awkward proposition, but in one particular case, a Black Jewish leader was somewhat successful in doing so: Rabbi Wentworth A. Matthew, founder of the Commandment Keepers in Harlem. One of the reasons was his slightly modified position concerning white Jews. Writes Rabbi Sholomo Ben Levy, the current spiritual leader of one of Rabbi Matthew's daughter synagogues:

Rabbi Matthew found himself in the peculiar position of having to both justify his small following of black Jews in Harlem, and also to explain the presence of so many white Jews...He always maintained that the “original Jews” were black people—or at least not European; however, he did not deny the existence or legitimacy of white Jews. In fact, as his services, synagogues, and attire show, he deferred to orthodox conventions on many matter. For example, he maintained separate seating for men and women, he used a standard siddur (prayer book) to conduct his services, worshippers wore tallitzim and kippot (prayer shawls and yarmulkes), they affixed mezuzot, wore tefillin, used standard texts in their Hebrew and rabbinic schools and read from a Sefer Torah.

Rabbi Matthew believed that although the "original Jews" were black people, white Jews had kept and preserved Judaism over the centuries. Since we, black Jews, were just "returning" to Judaism it was necessary for us to look to white Jews on certain matters--particularly on post-biblical and rabbinic holidays such as Hanukkah which could not be found in the Torah. However, it is important to note that Rabbi Matthew felt free to disagree on matters where he had a strong objection. He also recognized that since many customs, songs, and foods were of European origin, that he had the right to introduce some African, Caribbean, and American

78 Ella J. Hughley and Moses Farrar, *The Truth about Black Biblical Hebrew-Israelites (Jews): The World's Best Kept Secret* (Hughley, 1982), 63. This notion also found in a biblical family tree entitled “The Roots of Yisrael,” which was distributed at the Israelite Rabbinical Academy.
traditions into his community.\textsuperscript{79}

Illustration 4: Rabbi Wentworth A. Matthew, founder of the Commandment Keepers in Harlem

In addition to adopting the religious practices of white Jews, Rabbi Matthew also, crucially, denied the divinity of Jesus and the validity of the New Testament. Officially incorporated in 1930, the Commandment Keepers became the unofficial center of Harlem's burgeoning Black Jewish community and the intellectual heart of "orthodox" Black Judaism—that closest to what we see at Bethel. And though he passed away in 1973 and his congregation has since closed its doors, Rabbi Matthew's legacy is substantial. Besides founding his synagogue, he also organized the International Israelite Board of Rabbis and its Ethiopian Hebrew Rabbinical College (now the Israelite Rabbinical Academy).

Here, because we have covered the significant developments in early Black

Jewish history, we arrive at an appropriate point to end the chronology and address this movement's place on the grand Jewish map. It is very clear that their beliefs about their origins fit the mosaic model that we described in relation to the Eurocentric story. The Black Jews, like white Jews, have developed a historical argument that proves their presence at Sinai. Rabbi Eli Aronoff of the 6th and I Synagogue in Washington, D.C.—and, incidentally, the grandson of Louise Dailey, Bethel's founder—summarized this tale very well:

...You don’t have to study history formally to understand a couple of very simple facts. A) We are not native to America. B) English is not our native language. These are just the simple facts. C) When we left from Gorée Island, which is the principle shipping point, we were converted...to Christianity. D) When our ancestors arrived here on the shore—the shores of America—they were not allowed to read, write, or speak their native language, so all of these facts bear a couple of questions. Why were you not allowed to read, write, or speak your native language? What was so insidious about your language, your native language? Why were you converted to Christianity? Of all the people in the world, as a collective group, we know less about our history than any other people in the world. Scandinavians can take us back to the Vikings. It’s great. So why us? Why was our history so stripped from us as a whole? When you start asking these kinds of questions, you come up with what was our ancestors’ native tongue before we left off the shores of Africa? What did they speak, in other words? What was our religion before our conversion to Christianity? We certainly weren’t Christians when we left Africa? What was it? So now the effort at study begins, and ultimately in Jamestown, VA, there were caves, holding cells, basically they were caves where slaves were housed before they were sold off. In these caves is writing on the walls of the caves. And the writing is Phoenician. Phoenician is a euphemism or another term for the Greek term for Ancient Hebrew. So a simple writing up of the facts, and these aren’t debatable facts. It wasn’t like, “well, you know, it could have been.....” This is the short script of history. Literally. So if you’ve got a people who come from a foreign land who when they come off the ship are now – the reason they wrote in the caves – they were in a new land, they didn’t know where they were, whatever, and they were making record of their names and their journey, and their experiences by writing on the walls. This writing in Phoenician, Ancient Hebrew, - now you start getting some sense of who these people
were...Also, [after] a close reading of the Old Testament, you start seeing a lot of the history of our ancestors occurred on the continent of Africa. The famous adventurers in Egypt and Ethiopia and other countries in Africa are mentioned there. So you start getting some sense of who these people were and who are ancestors were and where they come from. At least in the African American community, most famously, Deuteronomy 28 gives the ominous picture of what is going to happen when they disobey God’s law. It is not a far stretch of the imagination to say, well, darn it, this kind of sort of—why does this look familiar? God told Abraham very early on that his seeds’ going to be stranded in a land, oppressed in a land for 400 years. There has always been the famous argument (undecipherable) from Egypt, but the problem with that was that there wasn’t 400 years of oppression. Because Joseph was in charge for some time. He died off, and eventually the whole generation of his brothers died off and it wasn’t until some time later that the new Pharaoh came up and suddenly decided, “Okay, we want revive oppression, so that doesn’t quite add up to 400 years. Why? Because you start reading, start looking at our history, and the history of the Bible...You start saying, there is something here. What is here? Now, what tends to happen is that you take any guy—it is kind of like the story of Mr. Atlas – the famous bodybuilder. You know, you got the weakling guy on the beach, and you have the big, muscle-bound guy. The big muscle-bound guy kind of muzzles around the weakling guy. The weakling guy decides well, ―I'll start working out too because I'm tired of being pushed around.” Now...he’s buffed up. He’s not going to be pushed around anymore. That is kind of what happens. This is with just the facts, but people discover, “Heck, you know, our history has roots in Judaism. Period. Okay. But now, there is the pushback effort...” You take a man who has been downtrodden for so long and suddenly he discovers, “Doggonit, you know the history of my people is really one of the richest and greatest history of people ever. These stories that I’ve been reading about, the Bible, it’s a history of my people, doggonit, you know, I really am somebody. That’s just no longer just a slogan. I have a great epic history. Well now, it gets to be the perspective, the push back—I want it. I want it exclusively to myself because this is what makes me great. This is where my greatness stems from. So now, it’s tantamount to having a child grow up in poverty who discovers “I’m really, the king’s son”, if you will, and now you go from living in impoverished conditions to living in the castle. It’s a huge chasm that he has to cross, and suddenly to live in the castle and it’s just really unprepared for this adventure, and so what you did is take an impoverished kid, and you just kind of like, well, okay, I want to kick everybody in the castle out because I am the king’s son. Well, wait a minute. You really don’t have to kick everybody out. There are plenty of rooms in the castle for you to live in and there’s enough to go
around. Now he wants to be selfish because this is the nature of people.\textsuperscript{80}

I call this story the double diaspora, the central narrative of the Black Jewish experience, a narrative that combines the tragedies of two periods of enslavement and two eras of exiles, to build a historical argument for the authenticity of their Judaism. This is the path across the grand map of Jewish history followed by America's Black Jews.

And it is because this narrative's lack of importance to the Bethelites that we are able to locate their community in Jewish history. What makes the Bethelites unique is that while they believe the story of the double diaspora—it is, after all, a Bethelite who was quoted above—when asked establish their legitimacy as a Jewish community, they give priority to another narrative. Unlike most Jews who, as we have resolved, build a historical argument that takes them back to Sinai, the Bethelites have done something different: they have constructed a spiritual argument for their Judaism, an argument that invokes their continuous closeness with God. In essence, their Judaism rests on this one belief, that they still are as near to God today as they were when they stood amongst the mosaic at Sinai. In next two chapters, we will see why.

\textsuperscript{80} Eli Aronoff, interview by author, Philadelphia, PA January 8, 2009.
Chapter 2

“Almighty, show me the way of the Hebrews.”: The Story of Mother Louise Elizabeth Dailey

Illustration 5: Headstone of Mother Louise Elizabeth Dailey, King David Memorial Park, Bensalem, PA

It is a smallish headstone, nothing distinct about it, save for its modest dignity. Most passersby in the cemetery would not notice it, would not stop to consider it—and even if they did, they would have absolutely no idea how extraordinary it is that the particular woman beneath their feet is buried in this particular ground. In the unlikely story that is Congregation Temple Bethel, the fact that its founder, Mother Louise Elizabeth Dailey, finds her final resting place in King David Memorial Park in Bensalem,
PA is perhaps the most exceptional episode of all. For although this question was of no concern to her throughout her lifetime, Mother Dailey's eternal home provides grave proof of a living truth: that she died Jew.

How do we know that she died a Jew? Because in spite of all of the bickering between Jews about who owns a seat in their tent, nearly all accept one truth: the finality of a funeral in a Jewish cemetery furnishes a fairly forceful closing argument as to a person's Jewish status. No one cross examines the dead. But beyond this simple sense of respect, it is important to note that the halacha, or Jewish religious laws, concerning the procurement and usage of cemeteries are amongst the most closely guarded elements in Jewish tradition: those laws require that only Jews be buried in Jewish burial grounds.

But who exactly is a Jew, and, if one happens to be a Jew, how exactly does one prove it? Today, the strictest applications of Jewish law only recognize children born of Jewish mothers as Jewish, as well as those formally converted under Jewish law. Thus, in order to prove one's Jewishness one must either have documentation of an official conversion or proof that one's mother is Jewish. In the past, a letter from a rabbi would have been satisfactory. But in an article in the *New York Times Magazine* from March 2, 2008, “How Do Your Prove You're a Jew?”, reporter Gershom Gorenberg writes this is no longer the case.

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81 It should be noted, however, that this is not foolproof. Depending upon the practices of the religious authority in charge of the cemetery, other religious authorities might not accept the interred to be legally Jewish.

82 An important note: of the four movements of American Judaism, two, the Conservative and Orthodox Movements, only respect matrilineal descent, while the other two, the Reform and Reconstructionist Movements, also respect patrilineal descent. Further complicating the matter is that many rabbis do not honor each other's conversions. In particular, Orthodox rabbis tend honor only Orthodox conversions, and Conservative rabbis tend to honor both Conservative and Orthodox conversions, while Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis tend to honor most conversions.
Specifically, Gorenberg reports on the problem with Israel, the modern Jewish state, and its marriage laws, which demand that both parties prove that they are Jewish according to Orthodox law in order to obtain a license.\(^83\) The issue is that that letter from the rabbi back home—even if written by some Orthodox rabbis—is no longer adequate evidence of one's Jewish status, meaning that many are forced to resort to more creative means of substantiation. The most potent of these, Gorenberg writes, are images of gravestones in Jewish cemeteries like the one at the beginning of this chapter. Establishing a person's link to his matrilineal gravestones, if they are in Jewish cemeteries, provides the ultimate proof of his Jewish status—because, of course, only Jews can be buried in Jewish cemeteries.\(^84\)

So if we extend this logic beyond the case of marriage in Israel, other than converts, Jews hoping to be buried in Jewish cemeteries would have to have ancestors also buried in Jewish cemeteries. Neither was the case with Louise Elizabeth Dailey. She never engaged a rabbi and underwent a ritual conversion.\(^85\) Her parents were both staunch Baptists, her father in fact a Baptist preacher. Yet in a Jewish world in which, as described above, white Jews constantly question the Jewishness of other white Jews, Mother Dailey, a black woman, finds her final resting place in King David Memorial Park, in grounds administered by such critical authorities. This was a woman who for years could not purchase prayerbooks for her congregation, a woman who lost her job for keeping the Sabbath, a woman who met incredulity at every turn. Thus the fact that she is interred in a Jewish cemetery is, simply put, remarkable. Understanding how this came

\(^83\) In Israel, there is no civil marriage. All marriages are administered through state religious authorities.  
\(^85\) Though she did undergo a conversion process that she administered to herself.
to pass, how this remarkable woman who spent her life trying to “learn the way of the Hebrews,” came to be buried in their midst is the main objective of this biography.

A Tale of Two Biographies

Before we begin, however, it is important that we review the limitations of the narrative to follow. In particular, we must remember that this biography is based almost entirely on the oral testimony of Mother Dailey’s own flock; furthermore, a substantial amount of it actually comes from the mouths of her daughters, in particular Rabbi Debra Bowen, who has assumed her mother's role as the congregation's spiritual leader. Unfortunately, I was not granted access to the sorts of personal documents—diaries, letters, sermons, books, and others—that would have tremendously enriched our understanding of the thinking behind both Mother Dailey's critical decisions and her lifelong goals. I was also not granted access to records—deeds, financial reports, minutes, and others—that would have helped me produce a more factual chronology of both her life and the formation of her synagogue.

Sadly, for the most part I experienced Mother Dailey secondhand, through the lens of a community that has a great deal at stake in the way her story is told. And for this reason, we will have to treat their testimony as we would any other document, especially asking questions about gaps in the narrative, those aspects of Mother Dailey's life that the Bethelites would rather not discuss. We must be especially wary with regard to the testimony of Rabbi Bowen, who has the most at stake in the constructed image of her

86 I was, however, granted access to one audio recording of a weekly radio program that Bethel produced until Mother Dailey’s death. I analyze this recording in the next chapter, in order to explicate the Bethelite's orientation towards God.
mother. Mother Dailey was universally revered—I heard not a single ill word spoken of her over the course of this entire project—and her shoulders serve as the throne that legitimates Rabbi Bowen's authority over the congregation.

In addition to the testimonies, there is also a short biography of Mother Dailey on Bethel's website that I will refer to from time to time. This biography is actually a very instructive source, for while I cannot be sure that Rabbi Bowen actually wrote it, she certainly approved of it, and because it is on the internet, we can conclude that this is Mother Dailey's story as Rabbi Bowen wants the world to see it—and it is full of gaps. In addition, while I was working on this project, the biography was edited and expanded, with the removal of phrases like “in her nativity” from sentences like “The life of our late Founder Rabbi Louise Elizabeth Dailey began in her nativity, Annapolis, MD,” and with the addition of sections like one describing the Judaistic tendencies of Mother Dailey's father. Though I do not know when the first version was written, these revisions represent a telling shift in emphasis towards the Jewish aspects of Mother Dailey's past, one that we will explore later in this chapter.

All of this is not to say that we should reject the accomplishments of Mother Dailey. As we retell her story we will see that there is a lot to admire. Rather, we must simply remember that these stories come to us from the voices of a community that more than admires her: it exalts her.

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87 It is possible that my work prompted the edited version of Mother Dailey's biography, as it appeared shortly after one of my biographical interviews with Rabbi Bowen. It could also be that Rabbi Bowen expected increased attention because of the coming dedication of their new Sefer Torah, which will be covered in the epilogue.

A Preacher's Daughter

Louise Elizabeth Dailey, née Spencer, was born in Annapolis, Maryland on May 9, 1918. She was the third child and first daughter of Reverend James Spencer and his wife Annie. Her father, Reverend James Spencer, was a big man, standing six foot five, with a booming voice. In Annapolis, he founded the Second Baptist Church, and it's not hard to surmise that Dailey's gifts as a spiritual leader, her charismatic and energetic style and her exceptional sermonizing skills, developed from her experiences observing her father in his church. Her mother Annie, on the other hand, was the exact physical opposite of her father. Reverend Spencer used to “carry [his wife] around like she was a toy”: she stood four foot eleven, had “hair she could sit on,” and “never weighed 100 pounds in her lifetime.”\footnote{Debra A. Bowen, interview by author, Philadelphia, PA, January 29, 2009.} Also in contrast to her husband, she was rather quiet in public, although she was known to have a “salty attitude,” always threatening to take care of anyone who bothered her or her children, of which she had nine: Alice, James, John, Louise, Phillip, Florence, and Walter by Reverend Spencer, and Louis and Nellie by her second husband, born in that order.

Louise grew up on Larkin Street, at the time called “the Lane,” in a close-knit community where everybody knew everybody else; it was the kind of neighborhood in which all of the doors were unlocked. The house she lived in, however, was not as easy-going as its surroundings. Reverend Spencer, though a loving and much beloved man, was a very strict disciplinarian, in particular with regard to curfews. He required that his children be home by 9:00 and the first time that a young Louise returned at 9:01 was the last time that she returned at 9:01. Reverend Spencer was also very particular about the
way his family and his flock spent their weekends. On Saturdays, all of the men from the
neighborhood and from his congregation would gather at his house for a day of study.
And on Sunday, “they were orthodox about the observance of the Sabbath.”\textsuperscript{90} He
enforced service attendance religiously, he required that everyone wear hats, and he
prohibited absolutely all work, trips to the movies, and, had television been invented at
the time, that too would have been off limits.

This way of marking the Sabbath is one of the parallels, the connections between
the habits of her family and the traditions of the Hebrews, which Louise would begin to
understand as she started to learn more about Judaism later in her life. Jewish families
who follow Jewish law adhere to a strict set of rules on Shabbat (the Jewish Sabbath),
similar to Reverend Spencer's, albeit not exactly the same—the most obvious difference
being the day they celebrated it. But the two other major similarities are simply uncanny.
While the Spencers did not keep kosher (Jewish dietary laws)—that would have been a
tall order for a family from Maryland, especially a family that was known to sell the best
crab cakes in town for ten cents on Saturday nights—they rarely ate pork.\textsuperscript{91} According to
Rabbi Bowen, Louise never particularly liked pig or shellfish. More significantly though,
they practiced a curious ritual before consuming their chicken: “They had to kill the
chicken, hang him up, let the blood drain. [Then] they had to soak it in salt water.”\textsuperscript{92} As
Louise would later discover, this custom bore remarkable resemblance to melihah, a

\textsuperscript{90} Debra A. Bowen, interview by author, Line Lexington, PA, March 12, 2008. Here, with the word
“orthodox,” Rabbi Bowen is referring to the sabbath observance of Orthodox Jews, who adhere to a
very strict set of prohibitions, though on Saturday as opposed to Sunday.

\textsuperscript{91} To keep kosher is to observe the Jewish dietary laws. Under these laws, the most significant
prohibitions, are against the eating of pork and shellfish, as well as the eating of milk and meat
together during the same meal.

\textsuperscript{92} Bowen, March 12, 2008.
technique employed by kosher butchers to draw the blood from their meat by using salt. The other tradition that the Spencers had that was similar to Jewish custom was the way that they would mourn in the wake of a loved one's death. After someone passed, the family would cover all of the mirrors in the house, and they would sit only on low stools for a seven day period of grieving. These practices resemble elements of the Jewish institution known as shivah, a seven day period of mourning following the burial of a close family member.

If we take these aspects of Louise's youth at face value, it would seem that her constant prayer, "Almighty, show me the way of the Hebrews," was being answered before the first time it ever left her lips. These practices were also outlined in the second version of the web site biography, though neither there nor in any part of my conversations with her did Rabbi Bowen provide an explanation for them beyond their being a divine coincidence. Therefore, we must provide our own account, and three possibilities are apparent.

The first is rooted in Reverend Spencer's background as a preacher and in his knowledge of the Bible. He was known to be a devout man, so perhaps he picked out these customs when he read the Old Testament and decided that he would follow them. But this explanation collapses under the weight of too many presently unanswerable questions, particularly surrounding why Reverend Spencer would have decided to engage in a search for such rules to follow in the first place. And besides that there is one inescapably problematic fact: neither practice is completely outlined in the Old Testament. While Genesis, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy all contain the prohibition
against consuming blood, the practice of melihah is based on the trade tradition and not on the texts themselves. In addition, the customs of sitting on stools and covering up mirrors during periods of mourning come from the rabbinic tradition, meaning that they do not come from the Bible at all, but rather from the Talmud and the subsequent centuries of legal commentary that have become the foundations of Jewish law.

So the Spencer family was following practices prescribed in some of the finer points of Jewish tradition, without knowing it. This is not unprecedented in Jewish history. In a similar situation, the families of Catholic community founded in New Mexico in the late 16th Century, lit candles on Friday evening, avoided pork, and kept other residual Jewish customs even into the 20th Century. When the children asked why their parents did such things, their elders answered: “Erasmos judíos,” “We were Jews,” the crypto-Jews forced to hide their identities as they were expelled from the Iberian peninsula by 15th Century Iberian tyranny.94

Unlike the elder crypto-Jews Reverend Spencer could not explain to his daughter why their family kept the strange practices that it did, but our other two possible explanations borrow from this story, going back to the Spencers' slave ancestors. That slaves brought their religious practices with them from Africa is well documented.95 If we couple this fact with the descriptions of African tribes with Jewish tendencies from the last chapter, we can conclude that, however unlikely, it is possible that those traditions were transmitted across the Atlantic. Or the second possibility is that the Spencers'

93 The traditional way to mark the beginning of Shabbat.
ancestors were slaves on a Jewish plantation. Though they would not have been converted, those slaves would have observed, or possibly even engaged in some of their slave master's religious activities, particularly food preparation, which explains the knowledge of melihah. When they were freed, they might have maintained some of these practices, and they were transmitted through the generations until they reached Louise Spencer. Over time, like the descendants of crypto-Jews, Louise Spencer began to wonder about these odd customs kept by her family; though ironically, she would begin to unravel the meaning of the traditions of her youth when she took her turn serving in a Jewish household.

Washing Windows in the Rain

Louise's father died before she left home, and “it is said that he was poisoned,” though this is unconfirmed. What is known is that he left his wife Annie in a very good financial position, as she never worked a day in her life. Still, after her father's death Louise stayed home to help her mother, but she also began to join her Aunt Maggie at her job as a domestic. During this period, she developed the culinary mastery that would make her “the most extraordinary cook on the face of the earth,” a skill that would serve her well as she began to build her Bethel. As a woman leading a congregation in a traditionally male-dominated community, her food proved to be an excellent leadership

tool: “She was always lifting the men up in this congregation, and they used to love to go
do work for her at her house because they would get a good breakfast, and a good lunch,
and a good dinner.”100

Her best dish was sticky buns, cinnamon rolls which were described as looking
exactly like the Cinnabuns they sell in the mall;101 “everything was good, but she was a
pro at those sticky buns.”102 One of the other highlights of her menu was the “fist tall”103
biscuits that she baked on Sunday mornings.104 She also concocted a beet and egg salad
with Russian dressing that tasted like meat and a recipe for fried asparagus that tasted like
shrimp—everyone ate it with cocktail sauce.105 And last but not least was the way that
she handled chicken. Her children grew up never knowing that there was such a thing as
a whole chicken, as Louise always bought the parts, backs, necks, and feet, but still, when
it came out of her kitchen, it “tasted like filet mignon.”106

Thus it might have been by way of the stomach that she found her way into the
heart of George Dailey, who she married in February 1940. George was handsome and
debonair, a very talented man, a singer and a musician, with an excellent academic mind.
He worked in Baltimore as an engineer for the Glenn. L. Martin Company, which went
through a series of mergers over the years and would later become the Martin in
Lockheed Martin. Soon after they were married, George was offered a position in
Philadelphia, and so they moved north.

102 Miller, July 25, 2008.
103 Bowen, January 29, 2009.
104 Louise Howze, interview by author, Philadelphia, PA, February 5, 2009
When they arrived in Philadelphia, Louise began looking for a job. At that time, the only opportunities available to women who did not hold a degree of any kind were positions as domestics, which fortunately her years working with her Aunt Maggie had prepared her for. Louise was the kind of woman who “washed windows in the rain,” who “worried about the dust behind the refrigerator,” and who was so skilled with wallpaper that her work seemed practically professional.107 Her meticulousness made her highly employable. Even when she lost a job she would pick one up again almost immediately.

One of those jobs she lost was a job that would change her life: at some point in the late 1940s, Louise began working for a Jewish family living in West Oak Lane. It was during her tenure in that house that she began to realize that some of the odd customs that her family had practiced when she was young, the draining of the meat, the covering of the mirrors, and the strictness of Sabbath observance, were parallel to those practiced in this Jewish home. She had always felt an inkling of dissatisfaction in her spiritual life, a sense that she was missing something, and when she observed the traditions of her employers:

She just had an epiphany, and she immediately started praying, “God, show me the way of the Hebrews.” Because she felt an affinity. There is something there. These people are doing things that we did. We don’t know why they did them...

...So, that was the impetus to get [her] studying.... [but] when she first started to practice, she was in fact still Christian. She never called herself a Christian, [though she was] still a believer in Jesus Christ. But she immediately began to observe the Sabbath. She immediately began to keep the high Holy Days, and everything connected with it – everything Jewish, she connected with that.108

107 Bowen, February 26, 2009.
That job catalyzed her journey to Judaism.

Interestingly, the second website biography reports this same epiphany, but does not say anything about her still believing in Jesus Christ. In fact, this is one of the enormous gaps in that narrative. Though the biography begins by explaining that Louise was the daughter of a Baptist preacher, the words Jesus, Christ, Christian, and Christianity appear nowhere in this sanctioned version of her story—not even, at the very least, to suggest that she rejected them. Why this is the case will be addressed in the next chapter, when we discuss the Bethelites’ extreme discomfort with their former religion.

Like many of the early leaders of Black Jewish movements, Louise’s religious transformation began with the observance of Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath, which runs from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday. It was a sensible starting point, as coming out of the Christian tradition, most Black Jews already kept a Sunday Sabbath, so it was just a matter of swapping days. But, ironically, it was her decision to observe Shabbat that lost Louise her position in that Jewish home. Once, her employer asked her to stay past sundown on Friday to do the dishes. Louise refused because of Shabbat, and left that evening without a job and without her pay. So began fifty years of having to cope with others’ misunderstanding of her newfound faith.

**Everyone Called Her Mother**

Louise and George Dailey had five children together: Ceretha, born November 1940; George Jr., born August 1943; Debra, born January 1946; Eunice, born March 1950; and Jon, born July 1953. But well before she had children, people were calling her
mother—actually, everyone called her mother. It began when she was young; she just had that way about her. Her youngest sister Nellie called her mama. In fact, all of her siblings called her sis or they called her mother. Even her mother called her mother.

But this was not simply a family quirk: “Every business person called her Mother Dailey. Everyone across the country called her Mother Dailey. And she knew a lot of people.” By this time, she stood five foot two inches, always striving to reaching 135 pounds, but she was a vibrant little woman, and she commanded a great deal of respect. Her secret: she treated everyone like family.

Mother Dailey's biological children remember spending countless nights on the floor so that the countless children that their mother took in could sleep in their beds. Sometimes parents would ask if they could leave their children with her, and other times they would come as a matter of necessity. One seventeen year-old young man, Charles Register, was taken to Florida with his twin brother and the two were simply dropped off; they had no place to go, so they slept in a school bus. When social services found out, they shipped the boys back to Philadelphia, and upon arrival they moved in with the Daileys. The children used to call him Charles B.J. because “if there was bread and jelly in the house he'd eat it.” B.J. grew up to have a long and successful career working for the city of Philadelphia, but he never forgot that Mother Dailey took him in at his time of most dire need.

In fact, no one forgot the experience of Mother Dailey; everyone who she took in learned from their time in her stewardship. Her own children, for example, have all taken in children exactly as their mother did. For example, almost immediately after she was

married, Eunice was approached by a woman who had nine children and she was asked if she could take one of them. That child became her first daughter, Rachel. In all, Eunice has taken in 156 people, and just last year she had a family of three living in her home for eight months.

It is also not surprising that several of the future leaders of her congregation passed through her door. Willie “Mamma Mae” Miller, who would serve as president of Bethel's hospitality committee for 30 years, lived with Mother Dailey for a long time. And after he moved to Philadelphia in August 1971, Jeremy Goldberg lived with her until he got his affairs in order. Now he is one of Bethel's rabbis. Mother had an open door policy. Often, a young person would move to Philadelphia and seek out Mother Dailey, perhaps having met her during one of her many trips across country or having heard about her from someone who had. Mother Dailey would welcome that person into her home, giving them shelter and food, but she also required that everyone work. Once established, they moved out, but they remained loyal to her—and they remained family.\textsuperscript{110} This was the way she ran her home and this was the way she built her community. In the words of Rabbi Goldberg, “Mother made us a family. To always be a family. Mother made us Bethelites.”\textsuperscript{111}

\textbf{Building Bethel}

To a certain extent, Mother Dailey felt that her leaving Annapolis for Philadelphia was akin to Abraham's journey from Ur to Canaan, that it was a sort of “lech lecha”

\textsuperscript{110} Eli Aronoff, interview by author, Philadelphia, PA, January 11, 2009.
\textsuperscript{111} Jeremy Goldberg, interview by author, Philadelphia, PA, June 22, 2008.
moment in her life, that she was being called to something greater.\textsuperscript{112} And just as Abraham underwent a spiritual journey parallel to the physical trek, so too did she. According to Rabbi Bowen, after leaving her post with that Jewish family, after the epiphany that she had there, she began shopping for churches, hoping to find one that spoke to her. One of the elements of her life that is unclear is how she either did not find or did not choose to join one of the many Black Jewish groups already in Philadelphia at the time. While the peak of Black Jewish activity in Philadelphia occurred between 1900 and 1920, there was still a considerable presence in the city when Mother Dailey began searching.\textsuperscript{113} Of particular importance were Prophet William S. Crowdy's Church of God and Saints of Christ, which was actually headquartered in Philadelphia for a short time after 1900, and Prophet Frank S. Cherry's Church of the Living God, which also arrived during the early 20\textsuperscript{th} Century. She may well have tried worshiping at congregations under the direction of those movements, but in the end, always a stickler, she found every church she visited unsatisfactory: they may have kept the seventh day Sabbath, but they didn't keep the Feast Day (Passover, Sukkot, and other major Jewish holidays) or they may have kept the Feast Days and Shabbat, but they didn't keep kosher.\textsuperscript{114} She needed something different.

So she created something different. In the late 1940s, the Daileys moved from their small apartment to 1527 Ogden St., a house just large enough to hold what Mother Dailey was beginning to build. It began as a simple Saturday prayer group, a chavurah

\begin{footnotes}
\item[112] “Lech lecha” refers to God's command to Abraham to move from his home in Ur to Canaan. Debra A. Bowen, interview by author, Philadelphia, PA, January 29, 2009.
\item[114] Bowen, January 29, 2009.
\end{footnotes}
(fellowship), just her sisters, cousins, and children, meeting in their living room, reading scripture and giving testimonies, describing the ways that God had played a role in their lives over the past week. At this point, Mother Dailey began to emphasize the importance of the Old Testament, in particular the Ten Commandments, and more significantly, she began to use Hebrew, or as she called them, “sacred” names for God, Yah (short for Yahweh), and particularly Elohim. She had not yet denounced the New Testament and Jesus—at least not publicly—but she wanted to ensure that the people who came to worship with her understood that the God they were praying to in her home was different from the God they had been praying to before.

The group grew rapidly, as neighbors and friends began to join, and suddenly it was too large to fit in that little house on Ogden Street. So in 1950, Mother Dailey purchased a new home at 1511 Swain St., and she set to remodeling the first floor so that it would be an amenable place to hold services. And in 1951, the Bethel Holy Commandment Church, the precursor to Congregation Temple Bethel, was officially started.\textsuperscript{115} How she managed this given her financial situation is unclear. Her children remember that when they were young they “were poor, but [they] didn't know that [they] were poor.”\textsuperscript{116} And given what she would have made as a domestic, it seems unlikely that she could have afforded to make these moves with her own money alone.

By all accounts, however, Mother Dailey was something of a financial genius: “She was a child that came through the Great Depression. That experience imbued her with a certain financial conservatism. She knew how to take pennies and stretch

\textsuperscript{115} The Bethel Holy Commandment Church officially started in 1951, its official date of incorporation was April 12, 1956.

\textsuperscript{116} Debra A. Bowen and Eunice Purnell, interview by author, Philadelphia, PA, February 26, 2009.
them.\textsuperscript{117} She paid for everything in cash, and because of that, to this day her synagogue carries no debt burden. Over the course of her career, she commanded an extraordinary amount of capital, because like most religious institutions, Bethel regularly collected contributions from its congregants. But there was always something funny about the money at Bethel. When the financial committee met to tabulate donations before sending them to the bank, the money would pass through several hands and several counts before finally being placed in an envelope with the sum clearly written across the front. When the runner arrived at the bank to deposit the cash, the teller always found that the number on the envelope did not match the amount in the envelope—invariably, there was extra money. How did this happen? No one knows.\textsuperscript{118}

What do we do with a story like this? Without a look at Bethel's books or its other financial documents we do not have the evidence to make any conclusions as to how this money appeared out of nowhere. In fact, we do not have the evidence to develop any meaningful understanding of the financial workings underpinning the institution. In the next chapter, when we discuss what it means to be a Bethelite, we will see the enormous emphasis that the congregation places on collecting donations. If this aspect of the culture was as strong then as it is now, it could certainly be the mechanism underlying the large amount of cash that Mother Dailey would have needed to make these investments for her congregation. We also should not pretend that she did not benefit from her new occupation: according to Rabbi Bowen, at the time of her death

\textsuperscript{117} Aronoff, January 11, 2009.
\textsuperscript{118} Purnell, February 26, 2009.
Mother Dailey was worth 1.3 million dollars.\textsuperscript{119}

But while we are unable to answer our questions surrounding the hows of Bethel's finances, we are able to address something far more significant: what the results of those finances meant to the Bethelites. Exactly how that extra money ended up in those envelopes brought to the bank is substantially less important than the fact that the Bethelites saw this as a miracle, as God's actively showering favor upon their community. Even if Mother Dailey was not actually a "financial genius," she certainly was a genius at drawing meaning from her congregation's prosperity. In effect, she used her successful investments in Bethel to enrich the Bethelites' sense that God was constantly watching out for them, thereby by strengthening their faith in both God and in herself.

Unfortunately, one person who did not believe was Mother Dailey's own husband, George: "He was Baptist born, Baptist bred, and he said he would be Baptist dead."\textsuperscript{120} As his wife began to water the roots of her blossoming community, George grew more and more distant from her and from their children, often spending a great deal of time away from home on work or visiting his family in Baltimore. Eventually he left for good, choosing his own mother over his children and their mother, though he and Mother Dailey did not divorce until several years later. Mother Dailey did marry a second time, to a man she met in Georgia named Loncie Cross although the marriage was very short-lived. It ended when the social pressure from the Christian taboo against second marriages became too burdensome, though Loncie and Mother Dailey remained the best

\textsuperscript{119} Bowen, March 12, 2008. I was discussing these financials with Valerie De Cruz, director of Penn's Greenfield Intercultural Center, and she suggested that we should not immediately dismiss this as Mother Dailey's, and later Rabbi Bowen's taking advantage of their community. The amount of responsibility placed upon the spiritual leader might actually warrant such lucrative compensation.\textsuperscript{120} Bowen, January 29, 2009.
of friends, and to this day, her children still consider him to be their father.\textsuperscript{121} Her flock never thought much of the fact that there was no man in her life, and if anything they believed that it made her “more vibrant, more able to function...she was more dedicated to [their] lives. It might have been part of her dedication because she didn’t have a man to be worried about.”\textsuperscript{122} Tellingly, there is no mention of either husband in either version of the web site biography.

However, a new and important man did enter her life just a few years after the incorporation of Bethel: Bishop Simon Peter Rawlings, the second chief apostle of the House of God. The House of God was founded in Washington, D.C., by Bishop Rufus Abraham Reid Johnson, on April 4, 1918. Its followers are called Hebrew pentecostals, and they articulate their beliefs in “The 24 Principles of the Doctrine of Jesus Christ and His Apostles,” a creed that pulls from a variety of Old Testament and New Testament texts to enumerate several specific articles of faith.\textsuperscript{123} They are best described as messianic Jews, Jews who believe that Jesus was the messiah but who still observe many elements of Jewish practice including Shabbat, the Feast Days, and the dietary laws.

When Bishop Rawlings came to Philadelphia, some of the locals told him that he had to visit Bethel Holy Commandment Church on Swain St. So he joined them for services one Sabbath morning, and he was stunned by Mother Dailey's talents as a orator; when asked to describe her voice, her daughters used to say that she “spoke in opera.”\textsuperscript{124} Bishop Rawlings immediately invited her to speak at a House of God conference in

\textsuperscript{121} Bowen and Purnell, February 26, 2009.
\textsuperscript{122} Willie Mae Miller, July 25, 2008.
\textsuperscript{124} Bowen and Purnell, February 26, 2009.
Atlanta, Georgia, and she accepted. Why did she choose to join the House of God as opposed to other organizations like the Church of God and Saint of Christ and the Church of the Living God? Mother Dailey’s grandson Rabbi Eli Aronoff describes the thought process that he suspects his grandmother went through when Bishop Rawlings first approached her:

So if you could imagine you are in this small organization. You are meeting in a house in North Philadelphia. It is just a small group of people, and suddenly a guy comes along – very engaging fellow. Bishop Rawlings was, and he offers you the chance and the opportunity to be part of a larger organization, with that comes a lot of things. You get lots of support. You have lots of backup, and it certainly gets you a greater presence. You can reach out to a greater number of people for whatever needs you may have. But Bethel, in some sense, while it was part of the House of God, it was rather unique in that it was not founded by the House of God, so we were quasi-independent organization. Always. So you’re given this opportunity to be part of this larger organization that by and large, they have a lot of common principles that you have...Well, what would it be like if we can all get on the same page...Even in those days this was an international organization because there were congregations in Canada, congregations in Jamaica, West Indies, and some Islands, and so the potential was enormous. I think anybody could see potential there, 125

For Mother Dailey, three things were at play when she decided to join the House of God. The first was her immediate fondness for Bishop Rawlings. The second was that she and her congregation could maintain relative autonomy. And the third tempted her grand vision and ambitions with the opportunity to reach so many people with her message about the Almighty Elohim of Israel.

The alliance between Bishop Rawlings and Mother Dailey proved to be very fruitful for them both. First and foremost, George Dailey Jr. married Bishop Rawling’s daughter, and later, Debra Dailey would marry Larry Scott, son of one of the junior

bishops in the organization. Thus, quite literally, Bishop Rawlings and Mother Dailey became family. In addition, as Rabbi Aronoff explains, Mother Dailey rapidly rose to prominence in the House of God:

What really happened was that she had certain leadership qualities, amongst them just being very capable of being a great communicator. Being able to say what she felt and thought, and not being afraid to express herself. [Bishop] S.P. Rawlings was more laid back. They were the perfect complement to each other which at the end of the day was how that relationship worked. It was good cop – bad cop if you will. He could say something - ‘this is what I want done’, and then Rabbi Dailey was the enforcer. So he didn’t have to be the enforcer. Certainly that is not suggestive that he was an ineffective leader. Absolutely not. But they had the ability to play off of each other. She always referred to him as the head of the organization. He was the chief. She was the enforcer. That was the basic nature of the relationship. How did he see her? He saw in her someone who could be the perfect complement to him who would not seek to overshadow him, who would not seek to usurp his power, who always support his policies, and so this is how this relationship came to be.\footnote{Aronoff, January 8, 2009}

Mother Dailey eventually attained the third highest position in the House of God, that of General Mother. In that role, she traveled six weeks out of the year to teach all over the country, and she was so successful that today the organization still recognizes her contributions during its period of growth under the tenure of Bishop Rawlings.\footnote{“Bishop Simon Peter Rawlings,” The House of God, Inc., http://www.houseofGod.org/articles/history/sp_rawlings.php (accessed July 29, 2008).}

Mother Dailey brought many other things to the House of God, in particular elements that moved the organization ever farther away from some of its Christian tendencies and ever closer towards Judaism. Under her leadership, both men and woman began bathing in mikvahs (ritual baths) and men began wearing yarmulkes (skull caps). But one of her most influential decisions had nothing to do with the minutia of religious
practice, but rather the minutia of being a community, of being a group of people who prayed together:

When she first went to the House of God, they were wearing every color under the sun. She was a stickler for unity. You understand what I’m saying? Clothes can bring you together in unity. Not in spirit, but in unity. One community looks alike. They belong together. She got them all in white suits and white dresses, but they didn’t have to all be the same – just white suits. She wasn’t doing something great or anything, but it brought them up to a closeness.

...On the Sabbath, she used to have us wear the same uniform. It is the biblical thought about unity. Nobody would be out-dressing nobody...We’ve gotten away from the uniform, but we still wear white in the summer and blue in the winter, but we can dress it up, you know? She used to have it that everybody had the same thing, and nobody could look at nobody. But then before she left, we started breaking away from that too. You understand what I’m saying?

But one thing when you came in the door, you didn’t know who was in charge because she looked like we did. She was sitting on the rabbi’s chair, but you still didn’t know whether she was in charge or what because everybody had on the same thing. Everybody looked alike.¹²⁸

To this day, Bethelites wear white in the summer and blue in the winter.

Bethel continued to grow during its years with the House of God, so much so that it twice required the purchase of new, larger homes. In 1956, Mother Dailey moved the congregation from Swain St. to 1431 Brown St., only a few blocks away. In fact, all of those first three locations were within three blocks of each other. Then the big move happened in 1969, when Mother Dailey purchased the old Comdale Baptist Church at 7350 Lowber Avenue, back in West Oak Lane, where her Jewish journey began—and where it would end.

¹²⁸ Miller, July 25, 2008.
In the Wilderness

It is unclear when Mother Dailey first stopped believing in the divinity of Jesus, when she first rejected the Trinity and that most central doctrine of Christian faith. It might very well have been before she even joined the House of God. But she was always cognizant of the danger that she would put herself and her family in should she act on those beliefs without considerable care. She was well aware of the subversive nature of both her faith and her ideas, and during the early times she always feared that should she announce to the world she would be proclaimed the anti-Christ.\(^{129}\) Her fears were not unfounded, as her daughter Debra relates in this story.

My mother did something unheard of in the early days. She visited the Bible-belt of the south spreading her message that The Eternal is One, and people believed, and followed her. In an area where people could be lynched for denying the deity of [Jesus], she made an impact. Her life was threatened, but she was courageous and remained unfazed. I was with her on one of her trips to Manning, South Carolina (in the late 50's or early 60's) when a group of about 8 Deacons of the local Methodist church showed up on a Sunday morning to run her out of town. She had conducted a service at their church on Sabbath, and people were overwhelmed at the intensity of her message. The Deacons had approved her using the facility initially, but after the reviews, they changed their minds. They sent threats that she had better not come back, but she ignored them. On this morning however they showed up, and so did a huge snake in the house that we were staying in. No one knows how the snake got there because the woman with whom we were staying with, Mrs. Johnson, said she had lived there all her life and had never had a snake in here house before. I was the one who discovered it, slithering across the floor, headed straight for the room that my mother was in. I had been singing; when I saw the snake, I screamed, my mother turned around saw the snake, flipped backwards onto the bed, and began to pray out loud. We eventually managed to run out of the house, and neighbors were called to try to find the intruder. It took nearly 2 hours to find and kill the snake. The Deacons were there watching the scene, but not helping. They informed Mother that she had been invited to hold her service at their church, but she had better not show up because she was no longer...

\(^{129}\) Bowen, March 12, 2008.
welcomed. They threatened actions against her if she showed up. She did not fight, but sent the word out that they would be having the meeting outdoors, and they did. There were hundreds of people who showed up, and there was singing, and clapping, and praying. My mother spoke to the crowd, without a mic in her opera voice, and people were crying because they were so moved. They said they had never had a service like that before. That was the beginning of the on-going relationship with that town.\footnote{Debra A. Bowen, email message to author, March 3, 2009. Incidentally, Mother Dailey purchased a home in Manning, SC and started a small community there. Now her first daughter Ceretha lives in that home and leads that community.}

Given the circumstances, Mother Dailey moved very slowly in her efforts to push the House of God theologically away from Jesus and the New Testament. But by the early 1970s, she had waited long enough. In addition, the younger Bethelites, some as young as ten years old, had started to press her on this issue—they were restless.\footnote{Elton Evans, interview by author, Philadelphia, PA, February 20, 2009.}

What follows is the story as the Bethelites tell it. In 1974, she brought her concerns before the national leadership of the House of God, catalyzing a crisis within the organization: either Jesus was out, or she was out. Eventually she succeeded in winning over the majority to her cause. But unfortunately, Bishop William Denson, Bishop Rawlings's long time friend who in fact gave the opening sermon at his inauguration as Chief Apostle,\footnote{―Bishop Simon Peter Rawlings,‖ The House of God, Inc.} was one of the men she could not convince.\footnote{Eunice and Harold Purnell, interview by author, Philadelphia, PA, February 25, 2009.} While Bishop Denson's inertia weighed down the rest of the House of God, Mother Dailey and Bethel, having always maintained relative autonomy status within the larger organization, broke free in 1976.\footnote{My efforts to contact the House of God for their perspective on this crisis were unsuccessful, and because of the lack of secondary literature on the subject, we are forced to rely on the Bethelite's version of the story.}

Of course the transition was not that simple. Over the years, the Bethelites,
particularly Mother’s own family, had developed strong friendships with members of House of God congregations across the country. After the schism, these relationships remained civil, even amiable, but obviously they became far more difficult to maintain, and eventually most of them just faded away. In addition, Mother Dailey never had much luck with men named George; just as her husband left her to return to his mother, her son left her to stay with his wife.\footnote{Remember that George Dailey Jr. married the daughter of S.P. Rawlings. He is now a member of the national hierarchy of the House of God, serving as their director of operations in Africa and as chairman of their Board of Apostles. “National Hierarchy” The House of God, Inc., http://www.houseofGod.org/articles/history/national_hierarchy.php (accessed July 29, 2008). Miller, July 25, 2008.} Debra, on the other hand, had long since ended her marriage to Larry Scott, so she was not lost.

The schism was equally challenging to the Bethelites for the obvious theological reasons. While the younger generation had been pushing for the change, the older generation found it harder to swallow that they had been worshiping the wrong God for their entire lives:

> Basically they believed it, but they just couldn’t understand it. There’s a difference in believing something and understanding. I mean if you’ve been in something all your life or most of your life, you just don’t drop it. It’s just like eating with your right hand, and it’s about trying to make you eat with your left hand. You might get it done eventually, but it’s difficult. But basically, we’d been doing everything we were supposed to do except calling on the wrong God. Cause we used to wash feet, used to do—just like communion but in a different sense, and we cut all that out. And they were like, “why she stopping that?”\footnote{Miller, July 25, 2008.}  

In the end, the majority of Bethel stayed with Mother Dailey, but not without considerable attrition; the Bethelites have never really cared to count their numbers, but is seems that up to a third of the community left after the break from the House of God.

On the other hand, some people from other House of God congregations left those
communities to join Bethel, as was the case with the man who would eventually become Eunice Dailey's husband, Harold Purnell. Harold first met Mother Dailey in 1969 when she spoke at the House of God congregation at 11th St. and Catharine St. By that point she was already delivering a message that was different from those of most of her Hebrew pentecostal colleagues, a less Christian message. About a third of the worshipers at that congregation at 11th and Catherine were so captivated by Mother Dailey's words that they became Bethelites.¹³⁷

The Bethelites describe Mother Dailey as a Moses-like figure, and they say that during the period immediately after the schism, they were wandering through the Wilderness, following her. Rabbi Bowen relates how her mother approached her job as Bethel's spiritual leader during this time:

My mother said that when Moses brought the Hebrews out of Egypt, he didn’t bring just the 600 thousand warriors, but he had to bring the women and the children, the old and the infirm. It was the entire tribe that he had to bring out of the wilderness to get to the promise land. And she said “My goal is not just to bring you, young boys, who can run, but I need to take the whole tribe.” And so in many cases, we had to move slowly in order to get everybody on the same page. For some people, they learn quickly. This is it. For others, it took longer. Her goal was to bring everybody.¹³⁸

This description highlights two of Mother Dailey's greatest strengths as a teacher: her understanding of roles and her sense of pacing. With regard to roles, she understood that she alone could not acquire all of the knowledge her flock needed to move forward as a Jewish community, so she deployed the “young boys,” to study Judaism on their own—either in texts, through classes, or, in some cases, with white rabbis—and bring back their

¹³⁸ Bowen, March 12, 2008.
learnings. She used this same tactic as a mother to build her children's vocabularies, requiring that child bring a new word and a dictionary entry proving its existence to dinner every evening. Yet Mother Dailey also recognized that if she suddenly introduced all the Jewish knowledge that they had collected, she would overwhelm the older members of the community. Therefore, she deliberately paced the rate at which she added various Jewish traditions to the practices of her people.

Mother Dailey, like Rabbi Wentworth Matthews who we discussed in the last chapter, had decided that she wanted her community to learn and adopt the traditions of white Jews. It appears as though she did not know of Rabbi Matthew's congregation, or at least she had no contact with it, until far after she made this decision. The Bethelites first encountered Rabbi Capers Funnye in 1996, and Rabbi Sholomo Ben Levy around the same time, 20 years after their break with the House of God. So her choice to study the traditions of white Jews was made in something of a vacuum, at least in the context of the greater Black Jewish community. How then do we understand the decision? Rabbi Aronoff suggests that Mother Dailey chose this path because she wanted to learn the “way of the Hebrews” and she felt that Bethel “did not have to reinvent the wheel, [because] it did not matter who was spinning it.” Furthermore, because there is no evidence in the oral history to suggest that she personally taught her community the nationalist version of the double diaspora narrative explained in the last chapter, she had no qualms about adopting the “way of the Hebrews” as practiced by white Jews.

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139 Aronoff, January 11, 2009. Rabbi Aronoff was one of those “young boys.” He studied under Rabbi Morris Shoulson, an Orthodox rabbi whose only condition for tutoring Rabbi Aronoff was that he take his newfound knowledge back to Bethel
140 Aronoff, January 11, 2009.
So during the early 1980s she went to Brooklyn to purchase a set of siddurim (prayerbooks) and a Torah Scroll. At that juncture, she successfully acquired two Torah Scrolls and two sets of siddurim, though we do not know from whom. Unfortunately, after these initial purchases, the next time Mother Dailey went to New York, she was not permitted to make any more. According to Rabbi Bowen, word had gotten out in New York's mainstream Jewish community that someone had made these sales to Mother Dailey and the result was outrage: mainstream Jews were furious that a “non-Jew”—which is what they considered Mother Dailey at the time—had been sold such sacred objects. Potential sellers turned her away to protect their business. She could not even purchase Siddurim directly from the publisher.

But the Bethelites made do with what they had. And by this point, another problem had begun to occupy Mother Dailey's mind: as had happened so many times before, Bethel's building no longer sufficed for its purposes, but unlike before, she had no place to go. Then, as Rabbi Bowen tells it, in 1981, she had a vision as she was looking over the empty lot next to 7350 Lowber Avenue: God, she realized, had already given her the land she needed.141 She immediately commissioned the construction of an extension to the then structure of the church, adding on the sanctuary in which Bethelites worship to this day, and, in another financial mystery, she managed to pay for it entirely in cash. In addition to this new building, it was time for Bethel to adopt a new name: still called Bethel Holy Commandment Church, on April 11, 1981, the board of directors voted to change its name to Congregation Temple Bethel, effective October 1982.

What is fascinating is that none of the remarkable accomplishments described in

141 Bowen, March 12, 2008.
the past two sections of this chapter—her rise to power in the House of God, her bold decision to schism from that community, and her leadership following that schism—are recorded in either version of the web site biographies. In fact, in the second version of the biography, this entire chronology is reduced to this paragraph:

Change began immediately; she began to observe the Sabbath on Saturday, and to keep a kosher home. She also began a prayer group in her living room; people heard about it and came to pray and to hear this speaker with the indomitable spirit. The group grew by word of mouth, and soon she had a group too large for her living room to accommodate. This was in fact the early beginning of Congregation Temple Beth`El (sic). Over time, it became a formal entity, and Mother purchased three additional buildings in an attempt to accommodate her growing membership. Once settled at the present location on Lowber Avenue in West Oak Lane, she realized that what she needed was a Synagogue that would allow her community to worship The Most High as Jews should. She presented the idea to the congregants, and they joined in the building project which resulted in our current edifice.¹⁴²

This is as opposed to the enormous first paragraph of the biography which is dedicated to enumerating the parallels between the customs kept by the Spencer family and Jewish tradition. Why would this biography highlight these curiosities of Mother Dailey's youth instead of the successes of her adulthood? The first reason, which we will discuss in detail in the next chapter, is that the Bethelites are rather uncomfortable with their Christian past. The second reason, which we will discuss in detail later in this chapter, is that the Bethelites have attempted to develop a narrative of Mother Dailey's life that demonstrates a lifelong spiritual connection with the Jewish people.

A Mother in Israel

In 1989, just 11 years before her death, Mother Dailey finally met the man who would arrange for the ultimate memorial to her Jewishness: Rabbi Sidney Greenberg. Rabbi Greenberg was the spiritual leader of Temple Sinai, a Conservative congregation in Philadelphia, for over fifty years. He passed away in 2003, but in the twilight of his career, he and his wife Hilda made a remarkable, serendipitous discovery when they made a wrong turn down Lowber Avenue. Mrs. Greenberg describes that experience:

I was driving the car. We were going to make a shivah call, [a visit to a mourner's home], and I mistakenly made a left turn to the wrong street, but it turned out to be the right street. And when I made that left turn. I had to stop for a stop sign. And I said to my husband, “Look, there was an empty lot there, and across the street from that empty lot, my husband and I had an apartment where we lived when we were first married. And across the street was this empty lot. And here I can to this area again. And I see a synagogue there. So I pulled the car over to the building, and there were two men with kippot, [skullcaps]. And I asked them something about the synagogue. And my husband equally had questions for them. And they said “Yes, we're a congregation of Black Jews. Why don't you come and visit us?” And we did, and that was the beginning of a relationship.\(^\text{143}\)

Over the next decade, that relationship blossomed into a beautiful friendship.

The first time the Greenbergs attended services at Bethel, they fell in love:

I remember going there for Shabbat morning, and at Temple Sinai, after the service was over I would go right home. At Bethel you don't go home. You just remain on and on and on. And I remember seeing how they created classrooms out of the sanctuary in the afternoon, and they divided the children according to age groups. And it was amazing that the children didn't rebel. They were there all morning; here they're still in shul. And when they saw three stars they won't home. That's when we went home.\(^\text{144}\)

The Bethelites would refer to Mrs. Greenberg as Lady Greenberg and to her husband as

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\(^\text{143}\) Hilda Greenberg, interview by author, New York, NY, August 3, 2008.

\(^\text{144}\) Greenberg, August 3, 2008.
Rabbi Greenberg. And they always insisted that the Rabbi speak when they joined them; Rabbi Greenberg, a known talker, always obliged, while Mrs. Greenberg, a known rabbi's wife, always cut him off.

After years without access to the mainstream Jewish community, Mother Dailey finally had the kind of friend she needed to provide her community with what it needed. Bethel was in desperate need of new siddurim, and she was still blacklisted from purchasing them, even directly from the publisher. But fortunately, in 1992 Rabbi Greenberg finished editing his own version of the siddur, and he placed an order for a set for Bethel in his synagogue's name. He wrote them a check from Temple Sinai, Mother Dailey wrote a check to Temple Sinai, and that was that.

Their wonderful friendship lasted until Mother Dailey passed away on March 27, 2001. Six months before her death, she asked her daughter Debra to make arrangements for the funeral. She had already purchased a crypt in Whitemarsh Cemetery, certain that the authorities of a Jewish cemetery would never allow her in. But when she asked Rabbi Bowen to start planning for the inevitable she mentioned that she wanted to be buried with her people. Rabbi Bowen called Rabbi Greenberg to ask for help, and he immediately gave her a phone number and instructions; his synagogue had a plot of land set aside for its congregants in King David Memorial Park and Mother Dailey would be buried there. Rabbi Bowen engaged a Jewish funeral home, Joseph Levine and Sons, and all of the preparations were made.

Since the mid 1980s, Mother Dailey had been recording a weekly radio broadcast, and the Sunday before she died, Mother Dailey recorded that broadcast as usual, but not...
feeling well afterwards, she asked Rabbi Bowen to inform the station that she wished to take some time off because she was ill. On Monday, while Rabbi Bowen was at the bank, she received a phone call informing her that her mother had fallen ill and that she needed to be taken to the hospital. When Mother Dailey arrived, the nurses asked her to remove all of her jewelry, and she had a diamond ring that she had never taken off before; she slipped it off her finger, and then her children knew that the situation was grave. After running some tests the doctors discovered that her blood sugar was alarmingly high, and ordered her into intensive care, her body already beginning to fail. The next day, she went to sleep and never woke up.

Through Levine and Sons, Rabbi Bowen had purchased a kosher casket, a plain pine box, and the funeral was held in their chapel, which was completely filled by friends and loved ones. Rabbi Greenberg, at his insistence, was one of the two eulogizers. Rabbi Funnye was the other.

What was that day like? Merrill Brown, the funeral director who made the arrangements with the Daileys, remembers:

It was distinct in the fact that she was a Black woman who led a synagogue. I mean you don't have so many of those. I've seen Black Jewish people, but I've never seen one to this degree where so many children and siblings and the chapel was really full. And everything was very very respectful and done beautifully.146

A fitting, dignified close to an extraordinary life. In the end, after all that she had done for her people, her last wish was granted; she was buried among the Hebrews.

But before we leave this story, we must address one important question, in fact the

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145 In order for a casket to be kosher, it must be made only of materials that will degrade into the dirt, essentially only wood and glue.

most important question: what exactly made Mother Dailey a Jew? Or rather, what was it about her that so captivated Rabbi Greenberg, that so utterly convinced him of her Jewishness that he arranged for her burial in a Jewish cemetery? This is not meant to suggest that the validation of a white Jew is what determines the veracity of a Black Jew's claim to Jewishness; rather, our focus is determining how Mother Dailey and the Bethelites justify their Jewish status to other Jews.

As we discussed earlier, there was no claim to be made based on Jewish law: Mother Dailey was not born to a Jewish mother nor did she undergo a formal conversion. The evidence also suggests that, unlike other Black Jews, she was not one to trace her way back to Sinai through the double diaspora narrative, thus that was probably not what persuaded him. Here the website biographies are most instructive, in particular the second version. Of all of the events in Mother Dailey's life, this biography most emphasizes her great epiphany, her realization that the peculiar practices her family kept during her youth were parallel to those of the Jews she was working for.

At first glance, this would seem to be a rehashing of the sort of historical arguments that most Jews use to justify their Jewishness. But what follows the description of this epiphany is not a “therefore” clause linking Mother Dailey back to Sinai through her ancestry; instead, the author writes, “She felt that this was more than a co-incidence (sic), and it was then that she began to pray for guidance and asked if The Most High would teach her 'the ways of the Hebrews' with whom she so identified.”147 Thus Mother Dailey's was not a historical connection to Judaism, but a spiritual one. And it was this spiritual argument that must have impressed Rabbi Greenberg: Mother

147 "Louise Elizabeth Dailey (Second Version),” Congregation Temple Bethel.
Dailey asked God if she was a Jew, and He said yes.

Illustration 6: Mother Dailey in her High Holy Day garb
Chapter 3

“Total Praise”:
What it Means to Be a Bethelite

“...My heart and my flesh pray fervently to the living God.”
- Psalm 84

To be a member of Congregation Temple Bethel is to believe, above all else, in a living God; says Rabbi Bowen, the synagogue's spiritual leader, “We were taught that God is alive and well and living in the universe.”\(^{148}\) For the Bethelites, God is not a fictional character in the Bible, nor some incomprehensible abstraction: He is not the creation of man, but the Creator of man. Not only does His presence persist in the world, but also His hands are active agents in people's lives.\(^{149}\) In the words of Rabbi Bowen, God is

Not a process, not a metaphor, not a man. Unique in the universe. Not male, not female. He is unique in the universe. That is the teaching of Louise Elizabeth Dailey. That's why we worship Him. And you can actually feel His presence. When I start to talk about Him I start getting chills. This thing is a part of my life.\(^{150}\)

This attitude stands in stark contrast to the beliefs of most American Jews. According to a 2006 survey by the Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion, 8.3 percent of Jewish Americans identify as atheists and only 42.9 percent have “no doubt that God exists.”\(^{151}\) Though I did not conduct a formal survey of the members of Congregation

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\(^{148}\) Debra A. Bowen, interview by author, Philadelphia, PA, February 26, 2009


\(^{150}\) Bowen, February 26, 2009

\(^{151}\) Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion and Baylor University Department of Sociology, *American
Temple Bethel I feel comfortable writing that theirs is not friendly territory for non-believers. The Baylor Survey also goes beyond the simple question of belief in God to ask what respondents believe about God, presenting four classifications—Totalitarian, Benevolent, Critical, and Distant—with varying degrees of anger and involvement in earthly affairs.\textsuperscript{152} Two thirds of America's Jews believe that God is inactive or that He doesn't exist, with 41.7 percent believing only in a Distant God, 16.7 percent believing in a Critical God, in addition to the 8.3 percent who are atheists. Thus the Bethelites' beliefs do not match the general patterns of belief held by other Jewish Americans. After speaking with Rabbi Bowen and conducting a prayer exchange (in which members of his congregation attended services at Bethel and vice versa), Rabbi Kenneth Carr of Congregation Or Ami, a Reform synagogue in Lafayette Hill, observed that in contrast with his own congregants, Bethelites feel a “much more immediate sense of God's presence in their lives...God is very real and very present for them.”\textsuperscript{153}

In this respect, they have far more in common with other black Americans, two thirds of whom think that God interacts with them on a quotidian basis, with 52.8 percent

\textit{Piety in the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century: New Insights to the Depth and Complexity of Religion in the US: Selected Finding from The Baylorel Religion Survey} (Waco, Texas: Baylor University, 2006). A few important caveats with these findings must be noted. First, the survey categorized religious affiliation through self-identification, and while Jewish was one of the options listed, further self classification by denomination was only available by write-in and was not reported in the results. Second, in their report, the surveyors described Jewish affiliation as meaning involvement with “Religious organizations tied to one of the three major branches of Judaism (Conservative, Orthodox, or Reform).” Thus this data greatly reduces what is likely—were we to break the information by denomination—a far more complex reality with regard to the religious beliefs of America's Jews. Furthermore, while 2.6 percent of white Americans identified as Jewish, 3.7 percent of black Americans identified themselves as such. Data demonstrating the divergences and convergences between those groups of respondents was unavailable but would have been supremely useful.

\textsuperscript{152} The Totalitarian God is active and angry, while the Benevolent God is active and content. The Critical God is inactive and angry, while the Distant God is inactive and content.\textsuperscript{153} Carr, Kenneth. Interview by author. Lafayette Hill, PA. May 23, 2008. Rabbi Carr's congregants joined Bethel for Shabbat services on May 16, 2008, and prior to that a group from Bethel had done the same at his synagogue.
believing in a Totalitarian God and 13.5 percent believing in a Benevolent God. Given that Congregation Temple Bethel grew out of a Black religious tradition, it is hardly surprising that the Bethelites share a similar notions about the nature of God as those who still adhere to that tradition. In fact, when they speak of a “living God,” whether or not they remember this, they hearken back to their roots as an affiliate of the House of God, whose official name, in its entirety, is “The House of God, the Holy Church of the Living God, the Pillar and the Ground of the Truth, the House of Prayer for All People, Incorporated.” Rabbi Bowen certainly recognizes the influence that her community's spiritual past has had on its spiritual present:

We were taught that God is alive and well and living in the universe. And I think that's the thing that makes the communities of color so profound: our total and unequivocal belief in the one Elohim of Israel. That He is yet alive and well and living in the universe.

Given Bethel's origins one might be tempted to view the results of their transition to Judaism as the product of substitution; just swapping out the words “the one Elohim of Israel” for the words “our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” in the quote above leaves us a perfectly suitable Christian equivalent. And this substitution interpretation of Bethel's history does hold some water, providing a particularly effective lens for understanding the way that they pray, which we will discuss later in this chapter.

But while the substitution interpretation works well for explaining the way that they worship, it is not up to the task of providing a comprehensive description of the

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154 As we know, it is the number of Gods that is the principal point of divergence.
155 They also refer, of course, to Psalm 84, the epigraph to this chapter.
156 Bowen, February 26, 2009.
157 Since my first meeting with Bethel, I have visited the synagogue with over 30 people and I have spoken with many others who have seen it on their own. From this lot, I have listened to substitution view more than a few times.
Bethelites' Jewish identity. We cannot simply say that Bethel is a Black church masquerading as a synagogue under the guise of Hebrew and Torah. The substitution interpretation does not answer the question, “What does it mean to be a Bethelite?” But in this chapter, by attacking the problem from many vantage points, we will answer this question. First, we will establish that the double diaspora narrative described in the first chapter does not fully explain the Bethelites' Jewish identity because the community came to Judaism via a different route than other Black Jews. Second, we discuss how the Bethelites have turned their synagogue into a sort of family business, in which every person is involved in its maintenance. Third, we will explore how becoming Jewish has changed the way Bethelites interact with people they encounter as they move through the world. Finally, we will locate Bethel's place on the so-called “Jewish spectrum,” ending by drawing an instructive comparison between the beliefs and practices of Bethelites and those of Hasidic Jews.\textsuperscript{158} As we take all of these angles to understand what it means to be a Bethelite, we will see that, above all else, the members of this community live to be members of this community, and to together live lives of “total praise” to the living God.

It's the power of prayer. You say 'it's going to happen anyway.' The scripture says in all thy ways acknowledge Hashem (God) and He shall direct they path. That means ask Me: I'm here, I'm God, I'm in the universe. Don't just sit around and let Me be omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent: use Me. I'm the God of Israel.\textsuperscript{159}

\textsuperscript{158} Hasidism is an ultra-orthodox movement that emphasizes the spiritual and joyful aspects of Judaism. It developed in Eastern Europe during the 18\textsuperscript{th} Century.

\textsuperscript{159} Bowen, February 26, 2009.
The Dead God

Jesus could not be God...the reason we rejected Jesus is because he died.  
- Rabbi Debra Bowen

In the first chapter of this thesis, I argued that the double diaspora narrative is the central, most significant aspect of the Black Jewish identity. Like many African Americans, the leaders of the earliest Black Jewish movements made the connection between the story of Israel's enslavement in Egypt and their enslavement in America. But unlike their peers, they understood this historically based affinity to have significant theological consequences, thus they dedicated themselves to studying and following the commandments of the Old Testament. This sense of historical kinship with the biblical Hebrews further developed into a notion of literal lineage: Black Jews fixated on the idea that not only could African-Americans trace their ancestry directly back to the ancient Israelites, but also that they were—and still are—their only true descendants. Thus in their eyes, the white Jews surrounding them were converts at best and impostors at worst.

But there is one character who is critically absent from the double diaspora narrative: God. This is because the question at the heart of the double diaspora, the one that it is actually intended to answer, is not a question of religion, but a question of history. All of the various groups whose ideologies include the double diaspora had and still have their own conceptions of God. Some, like the Rabbi Wentworth Matthew's Commandment Keepers congregation and its offspring, worshiped and still worship only

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160 Bowen, February 26, 2009.
162 This phenomenon, the African Americans' development of Afro-centric histories in order to build a sense of heritage, is well-documented. See Yaacov Shavit, *History in Black: African-Americans in Search of an Ancient Past* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2001).
the incorporeal God of the Old Testament. Others, like the early Church of God and Saints of Christ (CGSC) under Prophet William S. Crowdy, practiced a sort of messianic Judaism, worshiping like Jews but still subscribing to the divinity of Jesus. And still there are others like the modern CGSC, whose members have maintained the Jewish aspects of their faith, but have withdrawn their belief in Christ, instead considering him to be in the line of prophets.

For these communities, the double diaspora narrative was and is a means to an end: through it they lay claim to both a tile in the mosaic at Sinai, and, more importantly, to the choseness of the ancient Israelites. As Rabbi Eli Aronoff, Mother Dailey’s grandson and Rabbi Bowen’s nephew, explains it,

> You take a man who has been downtrodden for so long and suddenly he discovers, “Doggonit, you know the history of my people is really one of the richest and greatest history of people ever. These stories that I’ve been reading about, the Bible, it’s a history of my people, doggonit, you know, I really am somebody.” That’s just no longer just a slogan. “I have a great epic history.” Well now, it gets to be the perspective, the push back—I want it. I want it exclusively to myself because this is what makes me great. This is where my greatness stems from. So now, it’s tantamount to having a child grow up in poverty who discovers “I’m really, the king’s son’, if you will, and now you go from living in impoverished conditions to living in the castle.”

Yaacov Shavit, a professor of Jewish history at Tel Aviv University, writes that this sort of reinterpretation of “History,' for modern African Americans, became a 'faith,' a promise of total redemption” from their roots in slavery. But it also became a principal selling point for Black Jewish leaders, as demonstrated by the content of much of the early literature produced by the various movements, which heavily emphasized this claim to a

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163 Eli Aronoff, interview by author, January 8, 2009, Philadelphia, PA. Also quoted in chapter one.
holy history and heritage.\(^{165}\) This message was a way to both draw converts to and generate unity within their communities. Unsurprisingly, it persists as an aspect of Black Jewish identity to this day. On the “History” page of the website of Chicago's Beth Shalom B'nai Zaken Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation (BSBZ), home of America's most prominent Black rabbi, Rabbi Capers Funanye, is this statement: “Although some credible scholars have attempted to determine the racial classification of the ancient Israelites, we believe they were people of African descent.”\(^{166}\)

Consider this in contrast to these words from Bethel's website: “We are the descendants of father Abraham. We do not, however, claim exclusive rights to this heritage.”\(^{167}\) Besides its striking certitude, this statement, unlike BSBZ's, is totally inclusive and it completely avoids the subject of Africa. In short, it contains no hint of the double diaspora narrative. This is because unlike their Black Jewish peers, the double diaspora narrative is not at the heart of the Bethelites' Jewish identity.

That is not to say that they do not believe in or that they do know of the double diaspora narrative—they absolutely do. This is clearly evidenced by the fact that the recapitulation of it that I quoted in chapter one—part of which I quoted again in this chapter—came from the mouth of Rabbi Aronoff, a Bethelite through and through.

Rather, the Bethelites give it a different level of priority in the formulation of their Jewish identity.


\(^{166}\) Rabbi Capers Funanye was America's first black rabbi to be appointed to the Board of Rabbis of a major city, in his case Chicago. He is the cousin of the First Lady, Michelle Obama, and he was profiled in a New York Times Magazine article entitled “Obama's Rabbi.” The citation for the website is: “History,” Beth Shalom B'nai Zaken Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation, March 19, 2009, <http://www.bethshalombz.org/about.html>.

identity. Notice that when Rabbi Aronoff tells this story, he distances himself from it, speaking not his own thoughts, but the thoughts of “a man who has been downtrodden for so long...only to discover...he is the king’s son.” It is not as important to him and his community as it is to other Black Jewish groups. For Rabbi Aronoff and the rest of the Bethelites, at the heart of their Jewish identity lies not a story, but an affirmation: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.”

I do not mean to argue here that a belief in the oneness of God is not a central religious tenet for other Black Jewish communities—it absolutely is. But in terms of emphasis, the Bethelite identity is far more circumscribed around a certainty that God is one. The principle reason for this profound persistence on the point of God's oneness is actually fairly straightforward: the decision to reject the divinity of Jesus, the concept of the Trinity, and the validity of the New Testament was the most important moment in the history of Congregation Temple Bethel.

The Bethelites rejected Jesus, the Trinity, the New Testament because they felt that in concert, the man and the book undermined their commitment to the absolute monotheism prescribed by their Jewish faith. Many Bethelites profess excitement at the thought that their children will never hold any Christian beliefs, that they “will not know him.” In fact, to this day, the members of Congregation Temple Bethel are uneasy at the mere mention of Jesus' name, preferring instead to refer to him as “J.C.,”

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168 These are the words of the Shema, a prayer lifted from Deuteronomy 6:4 that is considered to be the watchword of the Jewish faith.
169 It is important to note that I attribute agency to the Bethelites as a whole, and not solely to Mother Dailey. While Mother Dailey’s importance in taking the community in this direction should not be understated, it was, in the end, a community decision, made by a vote.
170 Annette Register, interview by author, May 21, 2008, Philadelphia, PA
“that man,” or by an arsenal of personal pronouns, and sometimes much worse.\footnote{During many of the interviews I conducted, if I said the words “Jesus Christ,” an awkward pause would immediately ensue.} For example, on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement and the holiest day on the Jewish calendar, one man said that he did not need “a man on a stick” to make up for his sins.\footnote{I choose not to identify him specifically, but suffice to say he is a leader within the community.} There are two reasons for the intensity of this resistance to Jesus. The first, particularly affecting the older generation, is the lingering fervor of the convert: having grown out of a religious community, the House of God, that so strongly identified with the Christian conception of Jesus, the Bethelites had to assume the opposite position with equal or greater emotional energy. The second comes from one of Mother Dailey's teachings, in which she stressed the importance of using the sacred names for God—Yahweh, Yah (short for Yahweh), Elohim, and El (short of Elohim)—in order to give power to those names. On the flip side, to the ears of a Bethelite, the use of the name Jesus “gives power to his name.”\footnote{Elton Evans, interview by author, February 20, 2009, Philadelphia, PA.} Or, as Mother Dailey preached during one of her weekly radio broadcasts:

The Almighty gave us a new name. I said you used to call me Jesus only. But I heard El say: my name is not Jesus. Hallelujah. I am the Elohim of Israel. Yes. I'm going to give you a new name. And I'm going to write it down in heaven. Yes I want to be called by the name of El of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob, of Daniel, of Jeremiah, of Ezekiel.

Truth be told, those are amongst the only words in this entire thesis that I can attribute to Mother Dailey with absolute certainty, because I heard them with my own ears. They come from a single 45-minute broadcast from the mid 1980s, one episode of Bethel's weekly radio program that aired every Sunday between 11:30 PM and 12:00 AM.
on WCAM AM of Camden, New Jersey.\textsuperscript{174} But while this was the sole primary source I obtained that preserved Mother Dailey's voice unfiltered, it is still an remarkably instructive artifact.\textsuperscript{175} By simply analyzing the show's logistics, we learn that it aired during one of the worst possible time slots on one of the region's weakest frequencies beamed by a station without a content niche—in short, no one was listening. We can also see that Mother Dailey overran her half-hour time allowance.\textsuperscript{176} But most importantly, we know that this is how Rabbi Bowen wants to present Mother Dailey to the world, that it is this recording of her mother and this recording alone, that she feels comfortable sharing without her finest sieve. And what is the nature of this broadcast? It is nothing less than a total polemic against Christianity and an overt advertisement for Congregation Temple Bethel.

The program begins with Bethel's choir chanting the words of the Shema—"Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is One"—in Hebrew, followed by a brief introduction and another musical selection, this one by a soloist. Then Mother Dailey begins to preach. There are obviously other people in the room listening to her message, as they can be heard in the background. Rabbi Bowen said of her mother's vocal style, "she spoke in opera," like a soprano, which is a polite way of saying that, though lyrical, her voice was so fiery and shrill that it was impossible to tune out.\textsuperscript{177} She jumps off from a passage in Isaiah, and at first she adheres to a call and response format, having a man read a line of the text for her, which she repeats back, usually with some explanation.

\textsuperscript{174} During the 1990s, the program moved to WNAP 1100 AM, Philadelphia's gospel radio station.
\textsuperscript{175} And it took me eleven months just to get that!
\textsuperscript{176} During the course of the program, she actually wished aloud for more time.
\textsuperscript{177} Bowen, February 26, 2009.
Over the course of the sermon, she drifts in and out of this pattern, using it as a foundation for what she really wants to say: “Come down here so I can teach you the truth. What I got is good for your soul.” The following are selected quotes from the broadcast in which she articulates that truth:

...You walked in the ways of the heathens and you didn't know who I was. Hallelujah! You called me by false names. Hallelujah! But I want you know I am Yahweh. Hallelujah! And not only that: I'm not two. I'm not three. But I told you in Deuteronomy 6 and 4, Hear oh Israel, Hear oh Israel. The eternal our El is one...

...El don't have no family. Hallelujah! Glory to his name. El don't have no outside children. Hallelujah! But I heard him say, the only family that I have is you Israel...They tried to make El commit adultery, tried to give him an illegal son. But hallelujah, I heard him say: I called my son out of Egypt, and that son was Israel. Yeah!

...I know you don't like me for this. You're going to call me a cult. I know that. But if Israel isn't a cult, then I'm a cult but I'm standing on Israel's cult...

...El is too pure. El is too clean. El is too holy. El don't need another man's wife to do his work...Even the sun knows that. I'm talking about s-u-n...

...We've been taught lies all of our lives. We've been taught that we had two Gods. We've been taught that we had three Gods. God the father, God the son, and God the holy ghost. Hallelujah and Hallelujah. But I heard Satan said: I'm going to deceive the people when you threw me out of heaven and...I'm going to make men worship me and going to make them think they're worshiping you. I know you said besides you there's no other, but I'm going to give you another God. I'm going to tell men that they can't be saved unless you go through this other God...People took the son and tried to make him God...You got all messed up in the New Book; that's what your problem is...

While it is very clear from these passages that Mother Dailey believed that she and her community lay claim to the heritage of Israel, unlike the Black Jewish leaders who preceded her, it was not her primary pitch to potential members. Instead of a new
history, she offered them a new religion. There are three reasons for this. First, unlike their predecessors, the Bethelites did not reject “white” Christianity as part of a proto-nationalist movement, but rather they jettisoned the Christianity of the House of God, a predominantly African-American church. Second, because of their initial affiliation with the House of God and their geographic location, Bethel grew up isolated from the theories and theologies of other Black Jewish groups, and came to Judaism independently, much later, and as a matter of religious necessity. Third, Mother Dailey recognized that while the members of her community had many questions about their heritage, they had many more questions about God.

Most of her flock stayed with or came to Bethel after years of feeling intellectually unsatisfied with and spiritually unfulfilled by Christianity. One Bethelite convert, Tangela McClam, remembered her religious school teachers' vain attempts to explain the Trinity to her using an egg: three elements—yolk, white and shell—make one egg. But even at a school girl age Tangela knew that she could not and would never believe that one God could be divided into three parts. Willie “Mamma Mae” Miller, who lived with Mother Dailey before the schism with the House of God, expressed similar frustration with the narrative of the New Testament:

I was at work one day – you’re not going to believe me. I was working on a machine at a ‘light switch’ company, and this was one that pushed metal together. And it happened to push something in my finger, and it was very painful. And I said how am I going to save my hand? It’s the only good bone. How can they hang him on a tree and not break a bone. If he didn’t have nothing there, he would tear off. You know, he would fall off because that would tear. You understand what I’m saying? And I just

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178 It should be added that there is no evidence to suggest that the House of God has any nationalistic tendencies. It champions itself as the “House of Prayer for All People.”

analyzed that. And I thought what is wrong with this picture? They couldn’t hang him and not break a bone. You understand what I’m saying? So I just kept it in my mind. Then I just believed that something was wrong with the picture...It just became more vivid then that they couldn’t have hung him on a tree.\(^{180}\)

Many more speak of the unnamed sense that they had been looking for something their entire lives that they didn't find until they walked through Bethel's doors.

What they found when they entered that synagogue, what brings Bethelites together more than anything else is their unmistakable sense of purpose: to give praises to the one and only God of Israel.

I am humbled by the fact that God would allow me to worship him. I am not worthy. I am not worthy. But I thank him for allowing me. And that's what you see in Congregation Temple Bethel. That's what our babies are taught. There is a God: he was the same God that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob worshiped. And we are privileged to worship him too.\(^{181}\)

The Family Business

...But it is so interesting that our community—we have so many things that we do. Our calendar is so full. We are constantly interacting with each other. We are in fact a family. Every night of the week with the exception of Thursday, the synagogue is open, and there is something going on. There is either a Hebrew class, a Torah study or the youth are doing something, or some auxiliary is doing something. And on Shabbat and we are there until Havdalah, but then when Havdalah is over, then the kids are there, and we sit around and eat. We have activities for the kids. It may be a movie night, whatever. We never get home 11:00 on a Saturday night. And then Sunday, we are right back, the women are having meetings, board meetings, whatever, we spend a lot of time together.

- Rabbi Debra Bowen

“Our Brother Dan Ross”—to be perfectly frank, that was one combination of


\(^{181}\) Bowen, February 26, 2009.
words that I never expected to hear. Over the course of this project, I spent Shabbat at Bethel multiple times a month and I had the pleasure of getting to know many Bethelites. My presence in their midst has become so normalized that when it comes time for guests to be recognized during services, I am identified in the crowd not as a visitor, but as a member of the congregation. But it wasn't until the morning of February 14, 2009 that I was finally welcomed in to the family, when a Bethelite pointed me out from the bimah (pulpit): “It's good to see our Brother Dan Ross again.” That was nearly two years after I had first walked through Bethel's doors.

And yet there is a disconnect here. Every Shabbat, members of the hospitality committee collect names and information from new faces they see, and every Shabbat they tell those new faces, in front of all assembled, that from the moment they walked through that door, they became family. Then, they thank everyone in attendance that morning, saying “You could have gone anywhere to worship today but you chose to worship here at Congregation Temple Bethel.” This whole ritual begs two questions. First, why did it take me so long to actually become a member of the family? And second, why would the members of the hospitality committee feel the need to thank everyone, including their fellow Bethelites, for attending services? One answer suffices for both: truly becoming a member of the Bethelite family means that you must be recognized as having done more than just coming to services. You must be seen a productive member in the family business, an active agent in maintaining the synagogue.

\[182\] The words brother and sister are not conferred titles like some that will be discussed later, but they are signs of respect within the community. Louise Howze, interview by author, Philadelphia, PA, February 5, 2009.

\[183\] This is usually done by Eudora Burton, who currently chairs the hospitality committee.
Thus I became family when the Bethelites finally began to understand that my project is a service to their community. And thanking all present to worship is a way of reminding Bethelites of the very least they must do in order to keep up appearances amongst their peers.

The typical Bethelite has a solid middle-class job and a lifestyle that is best described as “comfortable and stable.” Twenty-eight families in the community had enough income to donate at least 1,000 dollar to the purchase and dedication of Bethel's new Torah, an event which will be covered in the epilogue of this thesis. Many work for the Postal Service, hold office jobs, or are machinists. Some are teachers, nurses, police officers, or other public servants. Others own their own business like a catering service, or a commodities trading firm.

Bethelite parents expect their children to do well in school, and their academic accomplishments are often announced at Shabbat services and celebrated publicly before the whole community; approximately 90 percent of them go on to complete some college-level studies. Bethelites also commit a great deal of energy to providing their children with a solid Jewish education. Between the end of Shabbat morning services and beginning of evening services, the main sanctuary is divided into seven sections and the children attend Sabbath School. Subjects include that week’s Torah portion, bible stories, holidays, and Hebrew. Like most Jewish children, they undergo a bar or bat mitzvah, in which they are expected to lead certain parts of Shabbat services, depending

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184 In fact, Rabbi Bowen recently called me Bethel's own personal intern.
185 Howze, February 5, 2009.
186 This information was gathered from the program for that dedication ceremony, which listed 30 Platinum Donors, each of whom gave at least 1,000 dollars to the cause.
on their desires and their abilities. The current generation of Bethelite children does not seem to mind all of these requirements too much, and typically the community has had excellent success in retaining membership across generations. Between 75 and 80 percent of those belonging to the first post-schism generation have remained Bethelites.¹⁸⁸

As mentioned above, members of the community are expected to contribute their time to its maintenance, especially because the only salaried employee of the congregation is Rabbi Bowen. To that end, like many other religious groups, Bethel has a number of functional groups called auxiliaries that address the congregation's various needs. These include the choir, the nurses, the ushers, the hospitality committee, the security team, and others. Often Bethelites take on roles that utilize their professional skills. Aviva Howze, for example, is police officer and thus was an obvious choice to head the security auxiliary. Tangela McClam, on the other hand, is a teacher, and when she approached Rabbi Bowen about an opportunity to serve her community, Rabbi Bowen asked her to name her title. Tangela said “director of education” and Rabbi Bowen said “done.”¹⁸⁹ In one last example, though surely there are many others, the head of the kitchen is Gabriel Kendall, who owns his own catering business.

When it comes to religious leadership, however, professional skills are not a prerequisite for high office. In a striking example of this, before she took over for her mother as spiritual leader—and as the synagogue's only salaried employee—Rabbi Bowen was a practicing accountant. Rabbi Matthews works for the Postal service, Rabbi

¹⁸⁸ Howze, February 5, 2009.
Goldberg is a retired machinist, and Rabbi Aronoff used to run his own commodities trading firm. This is because at Bethel, the rabbinate is a professional obligation for one person: Rabbi Bowen, and before her, Mother Dailey. The other rabbis, all male, are auxiliary to her, and though they are knowledgeable and experienced, they are not rabbis in the seminary-graduate sense of the term. Rather they are older members of the Bethelite community who have moved through a three-level ministerial hierarchy—from minister to zaquain (elder) to rabbi—per decisions of a review board that prizes the demonstration of scholarship and the ability to teach. A similar path exists for the women, who move through the ranks from minister to “lady” to eemah(mother), or, if instead a woman is married to a man who becomes a rabbi, then she is conferred the title rabbinit (rabbi’s wife). This system of titles teaches us about three things that this community holds in high regard. First, we can see that the Bethelites appreciate their elders. Second, we learn that the Bethelites value learning, as a one of the conditions for ascension through the hierarchy is the demonstration of an adequate level of study. Last, we observe that the Bethelites have taken this system as an opportunity to introduce Hebrew into their communal vernacular, highlighting the value they place on this language.

190 This, it must be observed, is a rather odd organization from the perspective of gender, to have a woman as the central figure, with the next layer of leadership being a group of men. But the most important question to ask about this problem is whether this structure is necessary for Bethel to remain Bethel. Truth be told, having met or observed Mother Dailey’s other living children, I think that in terms of temperament and skill sets, in choosing her daughter Debra as her successor, she made the only choice that she could have if her desire was that the position remain in her family. Had the best option been one of her sons, I believe that she would have chosen him. But because there has only been one leadership transition, it is impossible to conclude whether female central leadership is a necessity to Bethel.

191 Lady is used more as an actual title, whereas eemah is a term of respect for older women. Howze, February 5, 2009.
But interestingly, in addition to establishing Bethel's order of precedence, this leadership hierarchy serves another purpose within the community: it also happens to be its tax code. Every year at Passover, Bethelites are asked to pay their annual membership dues, with the biggest bill—500 dollars—falling to Rabbi Bowen and the smallest bill—five dollars—falling to members under the age of twenty. Yet unlike white synagogues, in which the dues structure is based on factors external to the member's involvement in the community (income, marriage status, children, etc.), Bethel determines what to ask of its members based on their place within the internal hierarchy of the community, meaning that rabbis pay more than zaquains and “ladies,” zaquains and “ladies” pay more than ministers, ministers pay more than young adults, and young adults pay more than children. These dues supplement the collections the Bethel takes at every service.

This is how the family business of Bethel is run: Bethelites are expected to give both their time and their money to the community to ensure that the whole enterprise rolls smoothly along. And how are these obligations presented to them, what convinces them to give so much? Not a sense of commitment to their community, but rather the tug of duty towards God.
“The only black Jew they knew was Sammy Davis, Jr.”

A Reform rabbi once asked an ultra-orthodox rabbi if he had any respect for his approach to Judaism. The ultra-orthodox rabbi responded: “The fact that you are still willing to call yourself a Jew, in spite of all that that means, in spite of all of the terrible things that have happened to our people over the millenia, even when you could just as easily leave that word behind and never have to worry about it again, the fact that you are still willing to call yourself a Jew commands my respect.”

- Rabbi Shmuel Lynn

The above picture of a black kid eating a slice of Levy’s Jewish Rye was a popular advisement that attempted to convey the message that one does not have to be Jewish to enjoy Levy Jewish Rye. It did this by showing a black person—who everyone knew could not be Jewish—eating a sandwich made with this well-known Jewish bread. I don’t know how successful this advertising campaign was at increasing sales for the sponsoring company, but I do know that it had the effect of further embedding the stereotype that black people are not Jewish; if fact, the very idea that they could be contributed to the advertisement’s irony and subtle humor. Since I was a black Jewish child whose name happened to be Levy, I understood this and similar messages to mean that I did not exist or that my identity was not acknowledged. Like Ralph Ellison’s classic novel Invisible Man, we became Invisible Jews.

- Rabbi Sholomo Ben Levy

When the Bethelites choose to call themselves Jews, it's not so much that they demand our respect—it's that they command it. In the diverse world of Black Jewish

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192 Sammy Davis, Jr. was an African-American entertainer, a member of the Rat Pack, who converted to mainstream Judaism. Elton Evans, interview by author, 20 February 2009, Philadelphia, PA.

193 Rabbi Shmuel Lynn, an ultra-orthodox rabbi who runs an extracurricular course on Judaism called the Maimonides Leadership Fellowship, told me an extended version of this story when he was interviewing me for his program.

movements, alternative labels abound. The members of Rabbi Funnye's synagogue, for example, prefer to be called Hebrews or Israelites. Most of these groups choose a label that is some combination of the these words: Black, African, African-American, Hebrew, Israelite, Ethiopian. But in spite of the wondrous diversity of their nomenclature, almost all of the literature on this subject lumps these groups together as “Black Jews,” an inadequate catch-all that Bethelites consider a “term of convenience.” Simply, they would rather be called Jews, nothing more, nothing less. This is for two reasons. First, in spite of all of the historical connotations wrapped up in the word Jew, they understand another set of connotations to be connected to labels Hebrews, Israelites, and others: they have been attached to nationalist movements. Second, they prefer to think of themselves as Jews unmodified, or just Jews, which is in fact the way they prefer to think of all Jews, avoiding the vast sea of labels that we use today.

The problem with this, at least in America, is that we have such a strong image of what a Jew is. It is an image so strong that when one Bethelite was explaining how he knew he had been a Jew his entire life, he said that bagels and lox used to be a special treat for him when he was a child. In the United States, we have a whitewashed Jewish community in which everyone has relatives that came through Ellis Island and everyone loves to have bagels for Sunday morning brunch. Thus in choosing to take on the mantle

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197 David and Lois Best, interview by author, January 18, 2009, Philadelphia, PA.
198 Aronoff, January 8, 2009.
of the word Jew, the Bethelites put themselves in a position that would generate a great many awkward encounters as they moved through the world.

Of course they came across a wide variety of manifestations of disbelief. One of the most common questions they have faced is “When did you become Jewish,” basically meaning, “when did you convert?” This question poses problems for Bethelites because according to their theology, they never converted to Judaism, but rather they reverted back to the faith of their forefathers. One Bethelite, Aviva Howze, has a provocative way of engaging in this line of dialogue:

The question is always because we're African-Americans and they're Europeans, “Well, how did you become Jewish?” And I'm like, “How did you become Jewish? Is it because you're European? Or is it because I'm African-American? Because I know there are Asian Jews, and it's not to me. It's not a race. Some people even say it's not a nationality.”

Aviva says that this is a subject she feels comfortable discussing, but only in certain situations.

It all depends on the demeanor of the person, because you can tell when someone's curious, or doesn't get it, or hasn't been exposed to different nationalities, or should I say races, within Judaism. And that's different from someone who's just being very sarcastic.

One time I was at work. And a lady asked me, “Oh, you're last name is Howze? But you're African-American, but that's a German last name. And it could also be Jewish. But aside from that, she didn't know that my first name was Aviva. Just knowing your history is very important, and a lot of people may say, where did you get your last name from? So it all goes back to history. And when you're just doing history you have your religious part of history and your cultural part of history. And so when it came down to that, my answer to her was, I got my last name from my slave master. There have been a lot of times when I've been offended and demoralized, but there are a lot of times when I can understand, “wow, this person is curious.”

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200 Howze, February 5, 2009.
201 Howze, February 5, 2009
Bethelites often run into questions about their religion like those above at work because they staunchly require that they be allowed Friday evenings off so that they can celebrate Shabbat. Says Willie “Mamma Mae” Miller,

...I’m proud that I can come to service on a Sabbath and I don’t care about my job. That’s the first thing I tell them. When they say they’ll hire me, that’s the first thing I tell them. I may be good and maybe not because I never work on a Friday night, and never on Sabbath, and then some other days that I won’t be here. So that is the conditions that I give them for hiring.\(^{202}\)

Of course making those arrangements wasn’t always so simple. Rabbi Bowen, when she was working as an accountant, refused to work on Fridays evenings, and was almost fired for it, though her employer eventually let her make up the hours at other points during the week.

Rabbi Bowen's sister, Eunice, ran into a similar problem with authority when her children were in public school in Colmar, PA. Because of Jewish holidays, Eunice's children missed a number of school days every year, but because the school leadership did not believe that they were Jewish, they were heavily fined. Schools also happen to be a hotbed for questions like, “What did you get for Christmas,” and thus they haven't always had the best relationship with Bethelites.

Living in a Christian world has always posed certain problems for Jews, but some of these are particularly pronounced in the case of the Bethelites. After learning that the Bethelites had renounced their belief in Jesus, many shocked Christians showed up at their door, bibles in hand. Said Rabbi Aronoff of these situations, “we completely annihilated the New Testament [from our faith, but] we would have to protect ourselves if

\(^{202}\) Miller, July 25, 2008.
sometbody attacked us.”203 Rabbi Bowen recalled that the proselytizers would show up
during the community's weekly Torah study sessions, and it would fall to one of the
rabbis, often to Rabbi Plummer, the most knowledgeable with regard to the New
Testament, to defend the Bethelite position. When recollecting these incidents, Rabbi
Bowen is not particularly bitter:

We have been told that we are going to hell. Now that really scares me
because I am worshiping the same God, Abraham, and all the prophets that
they teach about on Sunday morning. David was not a Christian. He was
a Jew. Isaiah, Jeremiah, all these guys were in fact Jews, and so if I end
up afterlife in the same place where they are, I’m going to be in good
company there. I’m going to be in very good company...

...These people are not being mean. They really believe this stuff. If I felt
they were just being rude spirited, we could be upset with them, but they
really believe in this Christian dogma, and therefore, we see this all the
time with TV’s televangelists. You know? They want to convert all Jews.
That’s their Christianity.204

On the other hand, she regrets the disintegration of her familial ties over the issue
of religion:

...If you have family members who have affairs and things and you are
not a Christian, many times you don’t get invited. I have people who have
never come into my house to visit me here. People will not speak to me. I
have family members who attended my mother’s funeral and they were
irate that she did not have a Christian funeral.205

Sad, yes. But in the end, there isn’t much love lost between Bethelites and Christians.

Both sides don’t seem particularly interested in the other, besides Christians seeing Bethel
as a small sea of potential converts and Bethelites seeing Christianity as an ocean of
poorly informed ill intentions.

203 Aronoff, January 8, 2009.
204 Debra A. Bowen, interview by author, Line Lexington, PA, March 12, 2008.
205 Bowen, March 12, 2008.
But of course the inter-religious, or rather intra-religious, relationship that we care most about is the one between Bethelites and mainstream Jews. Little is known about the very first instances of contact between white Jews and the Bethelites. We do know, as was pointed out in the last chapter, that Mother Dailey acquired her first Torahs and prayerbooks from white Jews, but we do not know from whom specifically. We also know that this channel closed once the sellers blacklisted Mother Dailey from making further acquisitions.

Then there is the telling story of their first trip to Israel. In 1977, 42 Bethelites joined Mother Daily on a voyage to the Holy Land where they would pray at the Western Wall, explore the sites of their favorite biblical stories, and experience a tremendous sense of connectedness with their newfound heritage. But before all of that, they had to get through customs. When they arrived, they met an unfriendly surprise: Israeli security.

We stayed there at the airport because something had just gone on before us—acting up—[and they] stripped us of all our ID and we had to call the embassy and everything. To get to the hotel that night… Some people had gone before us and claimed that they were Jews and had land [there].

We were dressed. You know, we were really dressed. Cause you know at that time when you flew, everybody was really dressed up, and we were held up at the airport for about two or three hours. They took everything—passports—all our stuff. But when it was over, she apologized—it was a lady who was in charge-- very, very strict. We laugh about it now...²⁰⁶

The group she was referring to, the one that came before them, was Ben Ammi's Ben-Israel's African Hebrew Israelite Nation of Jerusalem, commonly called the Black Hebrews. Originally from Chicago, they began entering Israel by way of Liberia in 1969, using tourist visas—but they never left. They moved to the Negev town of Dimona, and

²⁰⁶ Miller, July 25, 2008
claimed legal residency under the Law of Return, which gives people of Jewish ancestry a fast track to Israeli citizenship. The Chief Rabbinate of Israel denied their claims to Jewish status, but the government did not deport them and today they have a thriving community. Still, the debacle put the Israeli government on alert to watch for large groups of African Americans entering their country, and the Bethelites happened to fit their profile.

Yet we also know about interactions with white Jews that were quite positive. Consider the contributions of white rabbis such as Rabbi Morris Shoulson, the local mohel (a man who conducts ritual circumcisions), who met Rabbi Aronoff at a bris (circumcision ceremony) during the 1980s, took him under his wing, and insisted that he bring the traditions he taught him back to Bethel. Later we have the story of Rabbi Greenberg and his wonderful friendship with Mother Dailey that was covered in the previous chapter. And today the Bethelites have strong relationships with several local mainstream rabbis, and have organized prayer exchanges with these communities.\textsuperscript{207}

But when I tell most white Jews about my research, they are surprised and fascinated by the novelty of the idea that there could be a community of black Jews. They never stop to consider that from the Bethelite perspective they are just as exotic. When the Bethelites conduct a prayer exchange with a white Jewish community, joining them in their synagogue for worship is an experience that is just as fresh and exciting for them as it is for the white Jews making the trek in the opposite direction:

\textsuperscript{207} Unsurprisingly, the communities most open to dialogue with Bethel come from the most liberal branches of American Judaism, two Reconstructionist synagogues, Rabbi Jon Cutler’s Congregation Tiferes B’nai Israel in Warrington, PA and Rabbi David Kaplan’s Temple Beth El in Newark, DE, and a Reform synagogue, Rabbi Kenneth Carr’s Congregation Or Ami in Lafayette Hill.
...Our children when they see Jews that are not of color, they say “who are these Jews that are white.” That’s amazing. And then we have Caucasian members of the congregation, but they are not real Caucasian, You know. They’re Jews. They see a host of other Jews that are not of color. “These Jews aren’t of color! That’s amazing!”

And what exactly do the Bethelites think about their white Jewish brethren? First of all, they very much enjoy engaging with them in a religious context, loving the opportunity to share ways of praising God. When Congregation Or Ami joined them for services on May 16th of last year, they brought their choir to perform, and, after hearing them sing, Rabbi Bowen remarked that Bethel “reserved the right to steal any of their music.” Second of all, and more significantly, they express a sense of the shared destiny of the Jewish people that often leaves them disappointed in their fellow Jews. Mamma Mae spoke of actually being embarrassed—“as a Jew”—by the Bernie Madoff scandal.

She also talked about a job she once held:

...I worked two years for a Jew who confronted me every time I took the days off - Harry Silver...He had a company...he would grumble every time I took off but I stayed there ten years. I ran the company. I’m proud because I'm really so glad that people who can’t really afford not to work on the Sabbath still make it a priority to not work on the Sabbath. You understand what I’m saying?...I can’t really afford it. I mean, I could be making double money. You know, but it’s not important. It’s more important that I serve Hashem.

I see these other communities somewhat sadly because they don’t really honor the Almighty. They don’t honor Torah. I mean that I felt it ever since I accepted being a Jew. But I didn’t know any better than making it different. Do you understand what I’m saying? But I’m committed to being a Jew—not Jewish—a Jew...

Mamma Mae's simple way of putting it, that it's more important to her to serve Hashem,

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208 Bowen, March 12, 2008.
209 Willie Mae Miller, interview by author, Philadelphia, PA, April 9, 2009.
that that's what it means to be a Jew, and that identifying herself with an adjective—or, God forbid, any sort of linguistic modification or moderation—will not cut it: that is the definition of a Bethelite.

“Nobody has a Monopoly on Charisma.”

\[\text{God dwells wherever man lets Him in.} \]
\[\text{- Hasidic proverb}\]

When I talk to outsiders about Bethel, they often ask me to locate the community's place along the so-called “Jewish spectrum.” What they want to know is where they fit in—in terms of level of observance and style of worship—along a supposedly continuous line that runs from Reform to Conservative to Orthodox Judaism. This is, of course, a fool's errand: this lexicon employed by mainstream American Jews has no meaning when applied to Bethel because the connotations carried by its words do a grave injustice to our attempts to understand this community. But because she too has to deal with this question, Rabbi Bowen has publicly identified herself and her congregation as “conservadox,” somewhere in between Conservative Judaism and Orthodoxy in that they are an egalitarian community that adheres to halacha more strictly than would an average Conservative Jewish congregation.\(^{212}\) I disagree with her self evaluation. Their observance of halacha, as Orthodoxy defines it, would actually be considered minimal. Along with many other examples, Bethelites drive their cars, use their cellphones, and

\(^{211}\) This is how Rabbi Bowen explains how her community worships differently from other Jewish communities.

collect money on Shabbat, they employ musical instruments and microphones during their services, and they eat poultry and dairy together, all of which would be frowned upon in a very observant Jewish context. Furthermore, their services are very English heavy, necessitated by the limited number of congregants with sufficient knowledge of Hebrew.

The best attempt I've heard at using the language of mainstream Judaism to describe this community belongs to Rabbi Leonard Gordon of Germantown Jewish Centre, a Conservative congregation about two and a half miles from Congregation Temple Bethel. He explained:

The metaphor I've come up with..., having seen the building and the shul (synagogue), is that this is sort of what Reform Judaism might have looked like if Reform Judaism was based on the American Black church rather than the German protestant church. That it's simply that they took the Black church and a lot of it's modalities and said...this is what worship looks like—we're going to do this as Jews...The very lengthy Saturday that they do, that's so similar to a Black church's Sunday, you know with sort of worship and song and a band and a choir and then a shared meal...whereas American Reform was based on the sort of German Protestant high-decorum one-hour Sunday service.213

Or, another way of putting it: Bethel is a little less Martin Luther, and a little more Martin Luther King. In fact, this explanation recalls the substitution interpretation that we discussed at the beginning of this chapter; and we will see that it does accurately account for much of what we see and hear at a Bethelite service.

“He is worthy to be praised!” “Let us praise El!” “Praise Hashem!” “Today we will give the Almighty total praise!” These are the words of synagogue leaders when

213 Leonard Gordon, interview by author. Philadelphia, PA. May 20, 2008. An important note is that Rabbi Gordon has not, in fact, attended services at Bethel, though he has visited the synagogue. His theory is based on the testimony of his congregants who have spent Saturdays at Bethel.
they speak from the bimah during services, constant, consistent reminders as to why the community has gathered, and what it hopes to accomplish, together.\footnote{This is actually quite similar to the hour-long praise session for the Holy Spirit led by Black evangelists described in Glenn, Hinson, Fire in My Bones: Transcendence and the Holy Spirit in African American Gospel, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 21.} However, by taking the various exclamations listed above and dropping in Jesus for He, El, Hashem, and Almighty, we can see how someone might conclude that their Judaism is just a matter of substitution. This trick can be reversed as well, taking a call and response exchange recorded in Glenn Hinson's Fire in My Bones: Transcendence and the Holy Spirit in African American Gospel:

The Holy Ghost has been here this evening! (Yes!)
And more than that, the Holy Ghost is here even now.

(Yes!/Amen)
And I tell you, if I were you if I were
you,
and didn't have the Holy Ghost, (Yes!)
(Come on!)
I wouldn't
let this revival close.
(Yes!/Amen!)

\footnote{Hinson, 21}

It is not uncommon to hear Rabbi Bowen, in the middle of a service, open an exchange like that with her flock, swapping in the words Hashem or Elohim for Holy Ghost.

It should also be remembered that Bethel's religious past lies in a pentecostal movement,\footnote{The House of God identifies itself practicing as Hebrew pentecostalism.} which has left a residue to this day: the “baptism with the Holy Spirit.”\footnote{I owe the identification of this phenomenon to Adam Mohr, who received his PhD in Anthropology from Penn.} W. E. B. DuBois describes this phenomenon, using a different terminology, in his The Souls of Black Folk:
Finally the Frenzy or “Shouting,” when the Spirit of the Lord passed by, and, seizing the devotee, made him mad with super natural Joy, was the last essential of Negro religion and the one more devoutly believe in than all the rest. It varied in expression from the silent rapt countenance of the low murmur and moan to the mad abandon of physical fervor,—the stamping, shrieking, and shouting, the rushing to and fro and wild waving of arms, the weeping and the laughing, the vision and the trance. All this is nothing new in the world, but old as religion, as Delphi and Endor. And so firm a hold did it have on the Negro that many generations firmly believe that without this visible manifestation of the God there could be no true communion with the Invisible.218

Illustration 7: A Bethelite experiencing the physical manifestation of the divine spirit, Photo taken from the AP

Bethelites call this experience the “physical manifestation of the divine spirit,” and they occur fairly regularly during services, most commonly during peak emotional moments, especially those precipitated by music.

Bethel’s musical style, both chorally and instrumentally, is probably the most pronounced piece of evidence for Rabbi Gordon's interpretation. Originally, immediately after its break from the House of God, Bethel tried to eliminate musical instruments from services, as they learned that that practice was contrary to Jewish tradition. That didn’t

last very long; it's too important to Bethelite worship. Besides recomposing or adding flair to many traditional Jewish prayers with their gospel style—Oseh Shalom and Adon Olam are favorites—they have also taken old Negro spirituals and simply changed the words. For example, “Ride on King Jesus” became “Ride on King Elohim.” In fact, some of their music selections are revisions of contemporary gospels songs, ripped right from the station that used to broadcast Mother Dailey's show.

So, yes, Rabbi Gordon's suggestion is effective. But it is also limited. While it proves an excellent approach to understanding how Bethelites worship as Jews, it fails to account for how Bethelites live as Jews. The Bethelites allocate a greater amount of energy—physical and spiritual—to being Jewish than any group I have ever seen or studied. Except for one: the Hasids.

Hasidism (meaning piety) is a form of ultra-orthodoxy that emphasizes both the spiritual and the joyous aspects of Judaism. Briefly, the movement began in Eastern Europe during the early 18th Century under the leadership of the Polish Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer, usually called the Baal Shem Tov (Master of the Good Name) as a reaction to both the oppression of Jews from without and the over-academization of Judaism from within. And though it developed 300 years ago, in a country 5,000 miles from Philadelphia, the similarities between its followers and the Bethelites are profoundly striking.

Let's start at the center: both are founded upon the notion that God is a living, omnipresent force within the universe that every person can experience. God's presence is magnified and illuminated by a tzaddik (a righteous person), a rebbe (rabbi), a central

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charismatic leadership figure, often dynastic, who has complete authority over his community, just like Dailey did and Rabbi Bowen does. Hasidic communities, like Bethel, also seek to fulfill all of their various needs from among their own, to become self-sustaining. They also have a characteristic, slightly eccentric style of dress, that borrows from the customs of the society around them, embodied below in the two images that highlight their headgear: the kolpik, an Eastern European style fur hat, and an ornate kippah, typical of Black Jewish communities. Both communities worship in an ecstatic, highly lyrical style, using music and tunes absorbed from their cultural environs. And, above all else, both Bethelites and Hasids are utterly and completely devoted to giving praise to God.

Illustration 8: A Hasidic kolpik and a Bethelite Kippah

In an interesting coincidence, Rabbi Robert Coleman, a black Jew who actually converted to Lubavitcher Hasidism, one of today's most prominent ultra-orthodox

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220 Hasids, however, do not us instruments when they worship.
movements, published a magazine in Brooklyn in July 1977 called *The Voice of America's Black Jews*. In it there was an article by Ahiah Hashim, entitled “Why Black Jews Need a Rebbe,” which suggests the following: “...Black Jews could benefit greatly from the type of leadership exemplified by a Rebbe....If there is one thing that any community is in dire need of, it is the compassionate understanding that only a Rebbe can provide. The intricate and divergent complexities of the Black Jews make them exceedingly receptive to leadership by a Hassidic (sic) Rebbe.” How surprised would he have been to discover that, as he was writing this, 100 miles to his south the “Rebbe” he was calling for was already doing her work, as Rabbi Bowen describes her mother's teachings:

> Our God is alive and well and He directs the righteous. And sometimes we don't acknowledge it because people feel if you become religious, if you mention God. There's no scientific evident that God exists. It really isn't practical to mention God. But we believe in God. We believe that God works, He speaks. We've seen Him work. We've seen Him do impossible, miraculous things. Difficult things He give us the power to do. Impossible things, He still does. And that's part of the reason we have such joy in our services. The Temple is no longer with us—it was destroyed. But God is still alive. And He warned us: what structure on earth can encompass Me?...I think what the Jewish people need to know is that we don't have a temple, but we still have a God. That's the basis of our faith. That's why we're here. We don't show up because we're obligated to do it, because Abraham did it and Isaac did it and Jacob. We show up because we know we're going to be in the presence of the Most High and there is no better feeling on the face of the earth. Have you ever prayed until you cried? Have you ever prayed knowing that you're actually talking to somebody and perchance they hear you? We see that happen all the time. We're not just davening [praying], we're not just singing “Oseh shalom bimromav.” We believe it. It's a request. Bring peace to the universe. It's our request. And the more we ask, the more we feel it. We pray until we feel it. We pray until something happens. Our God is alive. And that's the difference. I think that it's spirituality. And

221 Here Mother Dailey's gender is ironic because Hasidic Jews only allow men to be rabbis.
that's what Mother taught us: spirituality.\textsuperscript{222}

This exceptional sense of spirituality forms the foundation of the spiritual argument that the Bethelites have constructed to take them back to Sinai. Unlike most other Jews who use history to build this bridge, the Bethelites feel so connected to God in the present that they see no reason to dwell on the past: they must have been a piece in His original mosaic. And besides, worrying about such things only distracts them from the one thing that is of any true importance: the fact that God is alive and deserving of total praise.

\textsuperscript{222} Debra Bowen and Eunice Purnell, interview by author, February, 26, 2009, Philadelphia, PA, bracketed words by Eunice Purnell.
Epilogue

“...All of this was done in front of the eyes of all of Israel...”:
Congregation Temple Bethel Dedicates a New Torah

Illustration 9: The Bethelites march around the synagogue with their new Sefer Torah, image taken from The Jewish Exponent

These are the symptoms of “Torah fever”: insomnia, loss of appetite, and elevated spiritual energy. These symptoms may last for up to two weeks, though they are not cause for alarm. Still, this condition is highly contagious, and it tends to strike many members of closely knit community at the same time. The only recorded outbreak of “Torah fever,” as reported by Philadelphia's Jewish newspaper, The Jewish Exponent, occurred in the West Oak Lane neighborhood of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and quickly reached epidemic proportions. Its causes, while not completely understood, are described in the following account.\(^{223}\)

\(^{223}\) The idea for this introduction was taken both from my own observations of the event and from the reporting in an article covering the event in the Jewish Exponent, Philadelphia's weekly Jewish newspaper.
On March 29, 2009, in an extraordinary and unprecedented turn of events, Congregation Temple Bethel became the first congregation of color to acquire a brand new Sefer Torah (Torah scroll). A Sefer Torah is a highly sacred, hand-written copy of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Hebrew bible and the holiest of the Jewish tradition. It is used for ceremonial purposes and for ritual readings. Assembling this highly ornate and painstakingly copied text, written on parchment and bound to two wooden scrolls, is an expensive and labor intensive process, making such an acquisition the crown jewel of any synagogue. What makes this occasion so remarkable is that for years, Black Jews could acquire nothing but the disrepaired hand-me-down Torahs of white synagogues—if they could acquire anything at all. In fact, even if they were fortunate enough to have the means and the connections to purchase a used Sefer Torah, they were often egregiously overcharged for it. Furthermore if they took a Sefer Torah already in their possession to a white Jew to be repaired, it might never be returned to


224 This is according to Rabbi Viñas, the sofer (a scribe trained in the art of writing sacred Jewish texts) who supervised the acquisition.

225 The text of the Torah is also contained in other commonly bound and printed books for functional use such as study.

226 In at least one case, however, a white congregation actually gifted a Black congregation with a used Sefer Torah. In November of 1970 the *Philadelphia Tribune*, Philadelphia's African-American interest newspaper, reported that Rabbi Gerald Wolpe of Har Zion Temple, a large Conservative synagogue in the Philadelphia suburbs, donated one of his congregation's Sefer Torahs to Adath Emeth Israel, a Black congregation in Germantown, PA. It is unclear exactly how Mother Dailey acquired the first Torahs for her own congregation, but according to testimony, it appears that during the late 1970s and early 1980s, after Bethel broke from the House of God she traveled to New York and purchased them there. In addition, it is significant that the Torahs acquired by Black Jews were in disrepair, as according to halacha, a scroll becomes not only practically but also legally unfit for ritual use if there is any significant damage to the text.

227 According to Tiferes Stam, an online Judaica store, a new Sefer Torah might cost anywhere between $25,000 and $50,000. According to Rabbi Manny Viñas, who supervised Bethel's acquisition, congregations of color would be charged a severe markup for used Torahs, possibly double their actual value.
them or it might swapped it out for one in even poorer shape. The reason for this terrible treatment: most white Jews didn't believe that these Black Jews were “real” Jews. Many still don't. Thus allowing an object as sacred as a Sefer Torah to fall into or remain in their hands were acts akin to desecrating it.

Illustration 10: Rabbi Viñas with Rabbi Bowen

Enter Rabbi Rigoberto Emmanuel “Manny” Viñas. Rabbi Viñas is a sofer, a Master Torah Scribe sanctioned by Yeshiva University, a leading seminary of the Orthodox Movement. It was under his supervision that Bethel purchased and dedicated

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228 Manny Viñas, interview by author, March 29, 2009, Philadelphia, PA.
its Torah. Rabbi Bowen connected with him through Be'chol Lashon (Hebrew for “in every tongue”), a project of the Institute for Jewish and Community Research, an organization dedicated to expanding relationships among the world's diverse Jewish communities. Given his involvement with Be'Chol Lashon, Rabbi Viñas' engagement with Bethel was not surprising. But the story behind his commitment to both Be'Chol Lashon and Bethel resonates far more deeply with the story of the Bethelites than meets the eye. Himself the descendant of Cuban crypto-Jews, Spanish Jews who were forced to convert to Catholicism during the 15th century but secretly maintained many Jewish practices, Rabbi Viñas and his family “formerly returned to Judaism and [so he helps] other people return to Judaism."

As a sofer, Rabbi Viñas had participated in many dedication ceremonies like Bethel's, but as he introduced himself and addressed those present in that day's packed sanctuary, he explained what made this one different for him than all of the others:

"Here I am surrounded by brothers and sisters who are lovers of Torah. And interestingly enough, of course the last words that we are going to be filling in in the Sefer Torah, which is a Sephardic Torah scroll written very very carefully; it's a beautiful Sefer Torah...and I pray that god gives you the strength to enjoy it for many many years...I wanted to share with you that we're going to fill in the words l'aynei kol yisrael, [meaning], “that all of this was done in front of the eyes of all of Israel...” You know

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229 Rabbi Viñas admitted that he does receive some criticism from his colleagues for his willingness to work with non-Orthodox congregations in general, much less a congregation such as Bethel which is outside of the mainstream Jewish world; many say ask why he would give a Sefer Torah to a community of non-Jews. As such, he did not inform them of his decision to help Bethel.

230 Manny Viñas, interview by author, March 29, 2009, Philadelphia, PA. Rabbi Viñas had not known in advance that, like his own family, Mother Dailey had been unknowingly keeping Jewish customs during her youth. When I informed him of this, he was thrilled. One major difference, however, is that Rabbi Viñas returned to mainstream Judaism, becoming a rabbi in the Orthodox movement. When I discussed my initial interpretations of that passage from Mother Dailey's biography, that her father either had extensive knowledge of the Old Testament or that they were residual practices from their time working in a Jewish household, he suggested that, given his own story and some of his own research, I reevaluate and include the possibility of their being parts of African tribal traditions transmitted across the Atlantic. I did so.
sometimes when you go to a congregation, only part of Israel is there. But today, I am surrounded by all of Israel.\textsuperscript{231}

Counting the faces in the crowd, it was easy to see what he meant. From his view up on the bimah (pulpit), the synagogue, filled with visitors from white congregations from around the area and Black congregations from around the country, he must have proudly witnessed the mosaic makeup of the Mosaic religion.

The ceremony lasted four hours. It began when a procession carried the new Torah into the sanctuary, as the congregation's other Torahs were removed from the ark (where they are stored) to welcome their new roommate. Most of the ceremony was conducted beneath a hupa (wedding canopy) to symbolize the joining of the congregation with its new prized possession. Under it, Rabbi Viñas completed the Torah's last letters, with the assistance of a series of Bethelites honored for their contributions to the cause. This was followed by the reading of four select passages from the new Torah, during which time other members and friends of the congregation were awarded group aliyot (plural for aliyah, the honor of blessing the Torah before it is read). After that, the Torah was marched around the sanctuary a traditional seven times, to much song and dance and general excitement. Several presentations were made to recognize those involved in planning the dedication, and a congratulatory citation from the city of Philadelphia was delivered. Finally the ceremony concluded and those who had made it through the whole affair filed in to a reception.\textsuperscript{232}

That day, the Bethelites universally expressed disbelief in their good fortune, that

\textsuperscript{231} It should be noted from these remarks that the Sefer Torah was written in the Sephardic style. The Sephardic and Ashkenazic traditions use different scripts for their Sefer Torahs. Rabbi Bowen said that she chose this style because Bethel tends more towards Sephardic traditions.

\textsuperscript{232} My parents attended with me, but lasted only two hours and left.
they should be so blessed. Said Eemahrav, “I never thought I'd live to see this, for him, [God], to send his approval [like this].” She added that now “There is nothing that I'm afraid to ask God for,” and in the printed program given to those who donated to the Torah cause, she wrote the following:

Our eternal gratitude to Elohim, in His infinite mercy and compassion for allowing us this great honor. We are humbled by His consideration in allowing us not only to return to the knowledge of our heritage, but to assure us of his approval by allowing our community to purchase this Sefer Torah through Mitzvot (commandments). And now to The Only Wise Elohim be All Glory, All Dominion and All Power forever. Amen.

Many Bethelites also related the occasion back to the ambitions of their founder. Zaquain Mordechai said that that day he had “[seen] Mother's dream come true”: “I saw people of different races sitting down and worshiping one.” As she welcomed everyone to ceremony, Rabbi Bowen remarked that, “Today our service is in honor of our Rabbi Louise Elizabeth Dailey, Sarah bat Rivkah, may she rest in peace.”

But if this ceremony was truly in memory of their founder, then an intriguing coincidence—the sort of little fact that one might expect a community as spiritual as Bethel to emphasize, to simply adore—was not pointed out. The date of the dedication happened to fall the day after Mother Dailey's eighth yahrtzeit (death anniversary). Furthermore, this date was chosen, not by Rabbi Bowen, but by Rabbi Viñas, and it is exactly the kind of fluke that usually leads Rabbi Bowen to say that “Coincidence is God's way of remaining anonymous”—which is exactly what she said when I asked her

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233 Dates of Jewish holidays are calculated according to this calendar, as are death anniversaries, called yahrtzeits in Hebrew. The Hebrew calendar is a lunisolar calendar consisting of twelve 29 to 30 day lunar months. Because these months only add up to a 354 day year, eleven and a quarter short of the 365.25 solar year, the calendar follows a 19 year cycle that includes seven years with an intercalary lunar month. In addition, according to this calendar, the day begins at sunset. Thus though according to the Gregorian calendar her death anniversary was two days prior to the dedication on March 27, her yahrtzeit, Nissan 3, was observed the day before the dedication.
about it. But that's just it—only said that after I asked her about it. On a day replete with symbolism, in front of a crowd that included all of Mother Dailey's living children, gathered to celebrated a Torah that had spent the past two weeks resting in Mother Dailey's old bedroom on Mother Dailey's old bed, the anniversary of Mother Dailey's death was an afterthought. Why?

Because the Bethelites assembled that day, not to commemorate a death, but to exalt a new life. Said Rabbi Bowen during the ceremony: “To us Torah is in fact life.”

On the sign outside the synagogue and on the programs inside sanctuary were the words “Congregation Temple Bethel is expecting.” But in terms of new life, what was happening at Bethel was more than simply the acquisition of a Torah; it was also a change of orientation. In a sense, March 29, 2009 marked, as many Bethelites observed, the fulfillment of Mother Dailey's original intentions, that her flock should be able to worship the Almighty in the way of the Hebrews; but it also marked the violation of another, that her congregation should maintain a quiet existence tucked away on Lowber Avenue. Indeed, the significance of the dedication caught the attention of The Jewish Exponent, and more significantly, the Associated Press, which ran an article that appeared in newspapers as far away as Israel's major daily, Haaretz.234 Couple this with the growing prominence of Rabbi Capers Funnye of Chicago, a cousin of First Lady Michelle Obama who was profiled in the New York Times Magazine a week after the dedication, and we can see that lately Black Jews have been receiving a great deal of attention.

234 I was quoted in the latter piece, though I did not know it made Haaretz until several of my friends forwarded it to me.
But this leads us to an important question: is Bethel ready for this spotlight? Rabbi Viñas certainly hopes so, as he said of mainstream Judaism: “We need a blood transfusion, a spiritual blood transfusion. Let's find strength in each other—let's grow. We have everything to gain...” But as he and I look forward to an ever more colorful understanding of the Jewish world, we must consider this situation from the Bethelites' perspective.

Bethel became the first congregation of color to acquire a brand new Sefer Torah largely because it has been so self-sufficient and independent. It may seem odd to argue that point given that the process inherently required the cooperation of external forces, but assembling the means to purchase the Torah also necessitated the coordination of internal efforts. As was explained in the last chapter, the congregation has developed into an extremely unified community, a family. That unity, along with its size, made Bethel capable of acquiring its Sefer Torah.

Illustration 11: The stork image from the Torah dedication program

Yet on March 29, 2009, the Bethelites unveiled something else in addition to their new Sefer Torah, something a bit less glamorous, but equally shiny: for the first time, members of the security auxiliary wore badges identifying themselves from among the crowd. I have been working with Bethel for over two years now, and the most striking change that I have observed during that time has been the increasingly pronounced presence of these guards, most of whom are quite young, no older than 16. In fact, I didn't even know that the security auxiliary existed—probably a good thing—until January of this year, when one of the young men on the committee told me that he was Rabbi Bowen's personal bodyguard. What makes Bethel's security auxiliary so interesting is not that the Bethelites feel the need to protect themselves—most other synagogues do as well—but that they ask congregants to do so. Where other synagogues would hire rent-a-cops, the Bethelites prefer to dress their own. The question, of course, is why.

The answer is that much to my and Rabbi Viñas' chagrin, the Bethelites are not yet prepared to leave their quiet existence and leap to the forefront of the Jewish world. Deep down they remain uncomfortable with the amount of attention they have received in the wake of the Torah dedication. They acquired their new Sefer Torah not because they wanted people to read about it in Tel Aviv or San Jose, but because they needed it to worship God. Thus the boys of Bethel brandished their badges on that day to send a message to us in the mainstream Jewish community who would see this as a moment to bring them into the fold: the Bethelites have built a fence around their Torah, and they

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236 According to Rabbi Bowen though, Bethel has always had a security auxiliary. I prefer not to treat this in text, but I do think that Rabbi Bowen's own anxieties have something to do with this auxiliary's rise in prominence.
have graced us with the opportunity to look in, but they are not yet ready to come out. They have no time to become the spiritual saviors of the Jewish world because, as always, for the Bethelites God comes first, and the rest of us will have to wait.

Illustration 12: Two members of the security auxiliary, with their new badges, flank the new Torah

This is a reference to a passage from Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers), a collection of sayings by the earliest rabbis.
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