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# The voices of Jacob on the streets of Brooklyn:

## Black and Jewish Israelites in and around Crown Heights

### ABSTRACT

In this article, I show how categories of identity formation such as “race,” “religion,” “Blackness,” and “Jewishness” may be used—often in tandem—as historiographic tools, helping communities lay claim to contested pasts. I examine the historiographic discourses of Blacks and Jews in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Crown Heights, focusing on the competing claims of Israelite descent advanced by the Lubavitch Hasidim and the Black Hebrew Israelites. Although I trace the roles of both race and religion in these historical narratives, I argue that such categories cannot fully account for the histories and identities of many Crown Heights residents. [*race, religion, history, genealogy, Blackness, Jewishness, Bible, Brooklyn*]

In this article, I examine how both Blacks and Jews in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Crown Heights use narratives of biblical history and Israelite descent to define what are typically described as their “racial” and “religious” identities—and, conversely, how they use both “race” and “religion” to support their claims to Israelite history and define themselves as chosen peoples.<sup>1</sup> My analysis contributes to the extensive literatures in anthropology and related fields on the role of historical narrative in collective identity formation.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, however, I hope to suggest a somewhat new approach to these issues. Most scholars of history and identity, I would argue, have taken familiar identities and categories of identity—such as Blackness or Jewishness, race or religion—as the unquestioned theoretical and methodological foundations of their analyses, then demonstrated how the meanings of these identities may be shaped, and reshaped, by invocations of the past. As insightful as such analyses often are, they tend to reinscribe the taken-for-granted boundaries of both histories and identities. Discussions of Blackness and Jewishness, for example, generally focus on historical narratives that are marked, fairly clearly, as either “Black” or “Jewish,” without examining how the past comes to be defined in such terms. Although such analyses have shed important light on the process of collective identity formation, they have rarely interrogated the underlying ties between peoples and their pasts or demonstrated how such ties are produced.

Take, for example, two of the most significant recent reconceptualizations of Black and Jewish historical consciousness: David Scott’s article “That Event, This Memory: Notes on the Anthropology of African Diasporas in the New World” (1991) and Yael Zerubavel’s book *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (1995). Both authors chart the discursive construction of historical continuity—the quest, as Scott puts it, for an “authentic” past—and Zerubavel explores how competing groups of Jews debate the meanings of their past. These analyses complicate scholarly and popular assumptions about Black and Jewish collective memory (critiquing texts like Herskovitz 1941; Price 1983; Yerushalmi

1982). Yet they do not really examine how events come to belong to the Black or Jewish past. Although Scott argues persuasively that “Africa” and “slavery” must be understood as tropes within historical narratives—rather than brute facts of history with which one may or may not be demonstrably continuous—he rarely questions the exclusive, or at least privileged, ties between these tropes and contemporary Black communities. He asks, for example, “What are the varying ways in which Africa and slavery are employed by New World peoples of African descent in the narrative construction of relations among pasts, presents, and futures?” (Scott 1991:278), and as Jacqueline Brown argues—in an article that has shaped my approach to these issues—he thus “occludes the possibility that white subjectivities have also been produced from the wreckage of slavery’s past” (2000:341). Similarly, although Zerubavel traces the politicized tensions among divergent Israeli interpretations of the past—as well as the underlying tension between religious and national views of “Jewish” or “Hebrew” identity—she rarely interrogates the fundamental ties thought to bind contemporary Israelis to the Jewish and Israelite past. She shows, for example, how the Bar Kokhba revolt of C.E. 132–135 may be narrated as the folly of a false messiah or the glorious struggle of a national hero (Zerubavel 1995:48–59, 96–113, 178–191) but never asks how it comes to be framed as a “Jewish” revolt against “Gentile” Rome, rather than, say, a local—or even “Palestinian”—revolt against foreign occupation.

The question, again, is how events come to belong to one or another people’s past. How, in other words, has history been defined in terms of contemporary identities? This question may seem counterintuitive, if not willfully naive. Of course, one may reasonably reply, precolonial Africa and ancient Israel belong to the Black and Jewish pasts, respectively. These ties are widely recognized as facts of history, and in many contemporary social contexts there is little or no analytical profit in questioning them. Indeed, although I have highlighted the limitations of their analyses, Scott’s and Zerubavel’s assumptions about Black and Jewish history are largely true to the social worlds their texts explore—worlds in which few people actually question the Blackness of slavery or the Jewishness of Bar Kokhba.<sup>3</sup> (For further analyses of Black and Jewish historiographies, see, e.g., Abu El-Haj 2001; Boyarin 1991; Brown 2005; Diner 2000; Ebron 1999; Fabre and O’Meally 1994; Funkenstein 1993; Gilroy 1993; Hall 1990; Trouillot 1995.)

In Crown Heights, however, one finds a historiographic tug-of-war that complicates many of the conceptual categories with which scholars and others are accustomed to interpreting the past. Both Blacks and Jews lay claim to the history of ancient Israel, and their competing claims require a reconceptualization of the ties that bind contemporary peoples to their pasts, as well as the categories of collective identity formation that shape—and limit—contemporary views of history. While my analysis will often be framed

by such categories—by Blackness and Jewishness, race and religion—I will ultimately argue that they cannot fully account for the histories or identities of many Crown Heights residents. To do so, I need to explore the place of “history” in Crown Heights as well as the underlying ties between history and genealogy.

### History, genealogy, and inherited memory

The past is remarkably present in today’s Crown Heights. The neighborhood is home to bustling communities of Afro-Caribbean immigrants, African Americans, and Hasidic Jews, many of whom situate themselves within historical dramas that link their lives in Brooklyn to distant places and times. I did ethnographic fieldwork in and around Crown Heights from 1996 to 1998, exploring the ties and tensions between race and religion in the collective identities of the Lubavitch Hasidim—a tight-knit community of orthodox Jews whose members make up a small but visible minority of the population of Crown Heights—and many of their diverse Black neighbors. I attended a fairly representative sample of local religious institutions. I followed neighborhood politics and volunteered at community organizations. And, of course, I interviewed a broad range of Crown Heights residents. I expected to talk about recent history—above all, the collective violence that thrust Crown Heights into the media spotlight in August of 1991, and the 40-year history of intermittent conflict between the Lubavitch Hasidim and their Black neighbors, aspects of which I discuss below. But I was surprised by the depth of many neighborhood residents’ historical consciousness—by their profound engagement with both the distant and recent past.

Indeed, one can hardly walk the tree-lined streets of Crown Heights without coming face to face with history. The cinder-block walls of a bowling alley on Bedford Avenue are covered with a huge mural depicting the glories of ancient Egypt as well as a pantheon of pop stars and political figures, from Marcus Garvey and Jean-Jacques Dessalines to Duke Ellington and Mohammad Ali. And at Judaica World, on Kingston Avenue, children can buy “Torah Cards” depicting biblical patriarchs, prophets, and kings or a build-it-yourself model of the ancient temple in Jerusalem. These signs of history reflect an assumption about identity that is widely shared, and rarely questioned, in Crown Heights and elsewhere: the foundational assumption that “peoples” and “cultures” are defined by continuity with their “histories” and “traditions,” and that collective identities therefore must—or at least should—be grounded, in some way, in these histories. New York City’s popular hip-hop radio station, Hot 97, may have put it best with its 1998 Black History Month slogan: “If you know your past, you know your self.”

But how, exactly, do we know our pasts? The past confronts us all across a gulf of discontinuity—opened by ceaseless historical change and the existential reality of death. An

inescapable disjuncture separates Crown Heights residents from their various histories, biblical and otherwise. Perhaps especially in the tangled web of diasporas that makes up today's Crown Heights, Blacks and Jews alike may find it difficult to understand the connections between their presents and pasts. Despite the central role of "roots" and "origins" in the construction of many diasporic identities, scholars and others have often argued that diasporic communities have particularly fraught relationships with history—that migrants and their children may be cut off from their pasts in distinctive ways (for discussions of diaspora and history, see, e.g., Axel 2001; Ballinger 2003; Jacobson 1995; Malkki 1995; Nacify 1991; Rushdie 1991; Smith 2003; as well as many of the works on Black and Jewish historical consciousness cited above). In a neighborhood populated by chosen peoples in exile—by descendants of immigrants, refugees, and slaves, living in the wake of displacement following the Nazi Holocaust and Atlantic slave trade—it may be difficult to determine which, if any, of the available histories is actually relevant to one's social life.

How, in other words, does one know which past is one's own? Are Crown Heights residents inheritors of ancient Israel or Egypt? West Africa or eastern Europe? George Washington's revolution or Toussaint L'Ouverture's? The Dutch who settled Breukelen or the countless immigrants who followed? Historical threads of various kinds may be traced from these, and many other, pasts to the present-day lives of Blacks and Jews in Crown Heights. Given this embarrassment of historiographic riches, Blacks and Jews alike often turn to another widely shared, and rarely questioned, assumption: the equation, or conflation, of history and genealogy. They tend to assume that they inherit the legacy—the words and deeds, accomplishments and experiences, sorrows and triumphs—of those people to whom they are tied by biogenetic descent. Memory, they believe, is a property of blood. Social experience is a family heirloom.<sup>4</sup>

According to the Lubavitch Hasidim, for example, the historical continuity of the Jewish people rests on the genealogical ties binding Jews throughout the world to the biblical patriarch Jacob. Like many other Jews, Lubavitchers see themselves—and all others they consider Jews—as descendants of Jacob, who was renamed Israel before fathering the tribes that bear his name.<sup>5</sup> By the same token, they often describe all non-Jews—including their Black neighbors—as descendants of Jacob's vilified brother, Esau. These genealogical ties are thought to ground the present in the past, as the moral characters of Jacob and Esau are thought to determine the social identities of Jews and Gentiles to this day. Indeed, many Lubavitchers interpret contemporary conflicts between Jews and Gentiles—including their own troubled history of conflict with their neighbors—as manifestations of Jacob and Esau's undying hatred. A student in a Crown Heights yeshiva voiced this common Hasidic sentiment when he explained the deadly violence of August

1991 by telling me simply, "Esau hates Jacob and Jacob hates Esau." Sensing I was not convinced, he picked up a Bible and asked me, pointedly, "Do you think this is just a storybook? Do you think the Torah is a thing of the past?"

Yet the equation of history and genealogy is not always adequate to secure the link between a people and its past—even when supplemented by the authority of the biblical text. Although many Black Crown Heights residents agree that the Bible is not "a thing of the past"—that contemporary communities may be defined by their ties to biblical patriarchs—they tend to have a rather different understanding of the history and genealogy of ancient Israel. In and around Crown Heights, and throughout the United States, small but thriving communities of Black Hebrew Israelites see African American and Afro-Caribbean peoples as the true descendants of the patriarch Jacob and sometimes describe White "so-called Jews" as descendants of Esau—and insidious imposters. The Hebrew Israelites practice syncretic forms of Judaism, outside the mainstream of U.S. Jewish life, yet in a complex dialogue with more mainstream Black Jews (who are often among their harshest critics).<sup>6</sup> Much like Lubavitch Hasidim, they invoke symbolically charged biblical texts to demonstrate their descent from the ancient Israelites. Moreover, their biblical and historical narratives are echoed, in large part, by many Rastafarians, Black Muslims, Afrocentric Christians, secular Black nationalists, and other Black Brooklynites who may have little interest in being Israelites themselves but nevertheless insist that the "real Jews" were Black. All told, a large minority of Black Crown Heights residents feel a genealogical tie with the biblical Israelites, and thus question Hasidic claims of Israelite descent.<sup>7</sup>

At their core—and in some sense prior to categories like race and religion or Black and Jew—the collective identities of Lubavitchers, Hebrew Israelites, and many other Crown Heights residents rest on claims to inherit the memory of ancient Israel. Ironically, however, this noble past—thought to set the Israelites apart as a "peculiar people" (Deut. 14:2)—is claimed by many of their neighbors as well. Much as they share and contest the streets of a Brooklyn neighborhood, Crown Heights residents share and contest the identity of "Israel." This identity, I argue, cannot be reduced to hegemonic categories like "race" and "religion," although, as I discuss below, the contest over it is often waged in such terms.

### Race and religion as historiographic tools

Lubavitch Hasidic and Hebrew Israelite claims to the biblical past are not entirely different from the claims of immigrant ethnic groups to inherit the memory of the "Old Country" and the "Old Neighborhood," wherever they may be—or, for that matter, from the claims of countless amateur genealogists to inherit the memories of their distinguished ancestors.<sup>8</sup> As I argued in the previous section, these claims reflect a set of widespread assumptions about history,

genealogy, and collective identity. But claims of Israelite history and genealogy are distinctive in crucial ways.

Perhaps above all, the Israelites are widely regarded as the “chosen people” of a universal God—“a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod. 19:6), destined to play a starring role in the messianic redemption of creation. According to Lubavitchers, Hebrew Israelites, and many others, the long-awaited messiah will be a direct descendant of the Israelite king David, and the Israelites of today will work hand in hand with their redeemer to implement God’s plan for the end of history—an end that was very much on the minds of many Crown Heights residents when I conducted my field research in the mid- to late 1990s. This singular status lends cosmological depth to any claim of Israelite descent.

Yet while Israel’s glorious future is fairly clear—at least to many who read the Bible as a divinely authored, prophetic text—its past lies shrouded in the mists of time. Even if one accepts the historical reality of biblical figures like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (as Lubavitchers, Hebrew Israelites, and many others do), tracing one’s family tree back to a patriarch who died 3,500 years ago may be a challenge. And this, I think, is where categories of identity like race and religion come into play. They are, among other things, historiographic tools—techniques for suturing oneself to history, for claiming a particular past as one’s own. Tenuous or contested claims of historical and genealogical continuity may be bolstered by evidence of some fundamental similarity between ancestors and descendants, whether a distinctive physical body, distinctive practices and beliefs, or some other distinguishing sign. Popular discourses of race and religion thus offer Crown Heights residents and others ready-made terms with which to articulate their ties to the past.

Most Rastafarians and Hebrew Israelites, for example, use phenotypic signs of race to define the boundaries of Israelite identity. Hebrew Israelite interpretations of the story of Jacob and Esau often tie the Bible’s description of Esau as “red” and “hairy all over” (Gen. 25:25) to the pink skin and relatively thick body hair of White Americans—a connection thought to prove both Esau’s Whiteness and Jacob’s Blackness (by way of the North American Black–White racial binary). And many Black Brooklynites cite King Solomon’s self-declaration “I am black and comely” (Song of Sol. 1:5) as unmistakable evidence of his African descent.<sup>9</sup> Although some scholars have questioned the centrality of phenotypic signs in the construction of racial identities and hierarchies (see, e.g., Brown 2000; Wiegman 1995), this use of the physical body as an interpretive key to identity resonates with the widespread understanding of Blackness as one among “a limited number of unequal or ranked categories theoretically based on differences in . . . biophysical traits” (Smedley 1998:693). Hebrew Israelites, Rastafarians, and many other Black Brooklynites thus turn familiar discourses and perceptions of race to somewhat unfamiliar ends—imagining their

continuity with ancient Israel in terms of an inherited racial Blackness.

The Lubavitch Hasidim, by contrast, draw no clear connection between Israelite descent and racial phenotype. Lubavitch theology proclaims, and most Lubavitchers believe, that Jews are distinguished from Gentiles by a unique “godly soul” (Hebrew: *nefesh elokis*) inherited from their biblical patriarchs, rather than by external signs. According to Lubavitchers, this Jewish soul links Jews around the world to each other and their God and predisposes them—whether they know it or not—to follow the commandments of the Torah. It is thought to be fundamentally, ontologically different from the “animal soul” (Hebrew: *nefesh bahamis*) shared by Gentiles and Jews.<sup>10</sup> When I asked Lubavitchers how the Jewish soul was transmitted from the patriarchs to present-day Jews, many took pains to distinguish their views of Jewish descent from racial biology—an understanding of Jewishness they tend to associate with Nazi antisemitism, even though Jewishness has often been defined by “race” in the United States as well (on the racialization of U.S. Jewish identities, see, e.g., Azoulay 1997; Brodtkin 1998; Gilman 1991; Goldstein 2006; Itzkovitz 1999, 2005; Jacobson 1998; Pellegrini 1997; Rogin 1996). One Hasidic community activist defined the Jewish people as “the seed of Abraham” and “first family of monotheism,” and when I asked why this family is only reckoned matrilineally, he replied, impatiently, “We’re talking about a soul—the inheritance of a soul, or a type of soul. It’s metaphysics, not genetics.” This inherited Jewish soul troubles the common equation of religion with personal—and therefore voluntary—faith.<sup>11</sup> But the Lubavitch Hasidim link their godly souls to criteria of identity that seem unmistakably religious, such as ritual practice, supernatural belief, and the meticulous observance of rabbinic law. Much like Hebrew Israelites, they turn a familiar category of identity formation toward somewhat less familiar ends.

Lubavitchers thus tend toward a religious understanding of Jewishness, while their various Israelite neighbors tend toward racial understandings of Blackness. These categories of identity often play significant roles in their social lives. Indeed, I have argued elsewhere that in many contexts Blacks and Jews in Crown Heights define Black–Jewish difference as a matter of race and religion, respectively (Goldschmidt in press). Yet despite their divergent ties to discourses of race and religion—Blackness and Jewishness, bodies and souls, genetics and metaphysics—these Crown Heights residents ultimately claim nothing more or less than an inherited relationship with an eternal God. This embodied chosenness transgresses the distinction between “race” and “religion,” as these categories are typically understood.

As I describe below, race and religion may be mixed and mingled, fairly indiscriminately, in the service of history and genealogy. The result, in Crown Heights, is a contested field of overlapping categories, narratives, and

identities. The Lubavitch Hasidim and Black Hebrew Israelites use these shared symbolic resources in dramatically different ways and tell dramatically different stories of Israelite history. But their collective identities nevertheless take shape within a common set of discourses—what Michel Foucault (1972) described as a “discursive formation”—and therefore cannot be distinguished quite as clearly as Blackness is typically distinguished from Jewishness or as race is typically distinguished from religion. (For discussions of the intimate ties between race and religion, see Goldschmidt in press; Goldschmidt and McAlister 2004; Khan 2004; Prentiss 2003; van der Veer and Lehmann 1999.)

An analysis of this underlying discursive formation offers a somewhat unexpected perspective on Black–Jewish difference in Crown Heights—a neighborhood where Blacks and Jews are generally imagined to have little in common. As I noted in passing above, the neighborhood is well known for a history of intermittent conflict between the Lubavitch Hasidim and their neighbors—a history typically described, by Crown Heights residents and others, in terms of the intractable racial or religious differences between the neighborhood’s Blacks and Jews. They may understand their differences in different ways, but Crown Heights residents nearly always agree that Blacks and Jews are profoundly different: “As different,” one Hasidic woman told me, “as an animal is from a tree.”

This sense of difference was reinforced on August 19, 1991, when the neighborhood was engulfed in violent conflict following the deaths of Gavin Cato and Yankel Rosenbaum—an Afro-Caribbean boy struck by a car in the motorcade of the Lubavitcher Rebbe (the spiritual leader of the Lubavitch community) and an orthodox Jew stabbed by a Black teenager in the ensuing unrest. Over the following three days, Crown Heights residents faced off in angry demonstrations, hurling rocks, bottles, slogans, and slurs. The neighborhood seemed divided into warring camps of Blacks and Jews.<sup>12</sup> Yet a brief interaction on the margin of this conflict points to the limitations of such binary framings. In an unpublished letter to a local Jewish newspaper (which the writer later shared with me), a Lubavitcher who lives just steps from the scene of the accident that killed Cato—and the epicenter of the violence that followed his death—described a tense conversation soon after this violence in which “one lone rioter from down the block (and his Doberman Pincher [*sic*]) gave a great 45 minute monologue on who the true Jews are (meaning them) and how the fakers (meaning us) would soon be ‘dead meat’ in more ways than one.” Here the difference between Blacks and Jews is articulated in terms of, and complicated by, a distinction between “true Jews” and “fakers.” Jewishness itself—or rather, Israelite descent—shifts back and forth between Blacks and Jews, defined simultaneously in terms of race and religion. Or again, in an interview with one of the countless journalists who flocked to Crown Heights in the wake of the vio-

lence, a dreadlocked Trinidadian immigrant explained that he grows his Rastafarian hairstyle following the same biblical passage that leads Hasidic men to grow beards.<sup>13</sup> “We are the real Jews,” he concluded, “We are the Israelites. . . . It’s in the Bible mon” (Logan 1991:110).

To understand these conflicts—and commonalities—scholars must bracket their assumptions about the racial and religious differences between Blacks and Jews, and instead explore the tropes of identity formation that transgress the boundaries of these categories and communities. I therefore argue for a shift of focus from categories to narratives, for an analysis of the ways many Crown Heights residents use race and religion to support their claims of Israelite descent.

### **“The voice is the voice of Jacob, and the hands are the hands of Esau”**

Although they have lived for over 60 years in a neighborhood—and nation—in which collective identity and social hierarchy are largely defined in terms of race, the Lubavitch Hasidim have organized their communal life around a distinctive religious vision of Jewishness. They have tried to craft a Jewish identity outside of the terms of race, yet their efforts to do so have been constrained, at every turn, by the racialization of U.S. society and by the inextricable ties between religion and race. In this section, I explore Lubavitch perceptions of Jewishness then show how this religious identity is articulated with race through narratives of Israelite descent.

Today’s Hasidic communities—Lubavitch, Bobov, Satmar, and many others—all trace their roots to an 18th-century eastern European mystic known as the “Ba’al Shem Tov,” yet are distinguished from each other by their fervent devotion to multigenerational dynasties of charismatic leaders, or Rebbes, from specific regions of eastern Europe.<sup>14</sup> Most Hasidic communities mark these social and geographic origins by adapting the name of the town where their Rebbes first established a dynastic court, and for much of the 19th century, the Lubavitch community—or Chabad-Lubavitch movement—was centered in the White Russian town of Lubavitch (near Vitebsk, in today’s Republic of Belarus).<sup>15</sup> In the 1910s, however, the community was forced from Lubavitch by the turmoil surrounding World War I. And in the mid-20th century, many Lubavitchers and other Hasidim fled Europe as refugees from the Nazi Holocaust. The Lubavitcher Rebbe of the time arrived in New York City in March of 1940 and settled in Crown Heights with hundreds of his Hasidim. In the 1950s, under the leadership of a new Rebbe—Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who led the community until his death in 1994—Lubavitchers began an ongoing series of outreach campaigns to nonorthodox Jews throughout the world, aggressively encouraging their “return” to Hasidism. These efforts have proved quite successful over the years, and the Lubavitch community

now includes a large minority of formerly secular Jews from the United States, Israel, Russia, Latin America, North Africa, and elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> The 10,000 to 12,000 Lubavitchers living in today's Crown Heights thus constitute a diverse cross section of the global Jewish diaspora.

When Lubavitchers first settled in Crown Heights, it was an overwhelmingly White and predominantly Jewish neighborhood—home to a relatively assimilated elite of European immigrant families. But the Hasidim were hardly the only new arrivals in the 1940s and 1950s. The African American and Afro-Caribbean population of Crown Heights grew fourfold between 1940 and 1957, by which point Blacks made up some 25 percent of the local population. This influx marked the beginning of the trends of Black settlement and White flight that transformed Brooklyn, and many other U.S. cities, in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>17</sup> In 1960, Crown Heights remained 70 percent White, but by 1970 it was 70 percent Black. Yet in 1969, in a dramatic public address to his Hasidim, the Lubavitcher Rebbe took an unequivocal stand against any exodus from the neighborhood, warning that the fabric of religious life and generational continuity could be torn by what he described as a “plague” of “precipitous flight” from thriving Jewish communities. And so, while most of their Jewish neighbors left for south Brooklyn or the suburbs, the Lubavitch Hasidim remained in Crown Heights.<sup>18</sup>

The neighborhood, however, continued to change around them, becoming, in Philip Kasinitz's description, “the center of West Indian life in the United States” (1992:143). Since the mid- to late 1970s, the dominant cultural and demographic presence in Crown Heights has been its transnational communities with ties to Haiti, Jamaica, Trinidad, Guyana, and many other Caribbean countries.<sup>19</sup> In 1990, the 200,000 residents of Crown Heights (as its boundaries are semiofficially defined) were roughly 65 percent Afro-Caribbean, 15 percent African American, 10 percent Hispanic, 8 percent White (nearly all of which was Hasidic), and tiny fractions both Asian and Native American.<sup>20</sup> There are, in fact, one or two families of Black Lubavitchers in Crown Heights, as well as a few non-Hasidic Black orthodox Jews and a fairly large number of Hasidim from North Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America who may not appear “White” by contemporary U.S. racial standards. But the Lubavitch Hasidim nevertheless stand out in today's Crown Heights, in both demographic fact and popular imagination, as a predominantly White community living in a predominantly Black neighborhood.

Yet according to most Lubavitchers, this racial Whiteness has no real bearing on their sense of self or social life. Their lives, they say, are shaped by the dictates of the Torah, without regard to race. Most Lubavitch Hasidim are, in fact, fervently devoted to the observance of religious law, the charismatic leadership of their late Rebbe—whom some consider a messianic figure—and to a Jewish spirituality grounded in kabbalistic thought that informs nearly every

aspect of their personal and communal lives.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the Lubavitch community, as both sect and social movement, is organized around a fairly explicit set of claims about the divinely ordained distinction between Gentiles and Jews. To understand this distinction, one needs to turn—as Lubavitch historiography is wont to do—to the ancient origin of the Jews.

According to many orthodox Jews, the difference between Jews and Gentiles was established for all time with the birth of the patriarch Jacob and his brother Esau. Jacob, as I have noted, is thought to have fathered the 12 tribes of Israel and thus the entire Jewish people, whereas Esau is thought to have fathered Israel's Edomite enemies and thus (by a complex logic I cannot detail here) the Roman Empire, European Christendom, and in some sense the entire Gentile world.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, according to many Lubavitch Hasidim, the eternal struggle between Jacob and Esau defines all relationships between Jews and Gentiles—and the central narrative of cosmic history. One may thus learn a great deal about Lubavitchers' understandings of Jewish–Gentile difference by examining how they interpret the biblical narrative of Jacob and Esau.

In Genesis 25, the patriarch Isaac's wife, Rebecca, gives birth to twin sons: Esau, the firstborn, and his younger brother, Jacob. The Bible paints ambivalent portraits of both Jacob and Esau, but according to rabbinic commentaries (which are read as infallible accounts by contemporary Hasidim), the life of Esau was a sordid tale of idolatry and crime, while the life of Jacob was a heartwarming story of selfless devotion to his parents and their God. The text states, for example, that “Esau became a skillful hunter . . . but Jacob was a mild man who lived in tents” (Gen. 25:27), and rabbinic tradition has long taken this to mean that Esau was a vicious murderer, while Jacob studied the Torah in a yeshiva. Indeed, one of the most remarkable images of continuity in orthodox Jewish historiography is the common claim that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all had access to the Torah before its revelation at Mount Sinai—and spent their days studying its text, much like the Talmudic sages and some contemporary Jews.

Perhaps most noteworthy, the biblical text describes how, when Isaac was on his deathbed, Jacob placed goat skins on his own arms to mimic Esau's hair and received the blessing his father had intended to give to his firstborn son—the blessing of God's covenant with Abraham, which Jacob had purchased from Esau, unbeknownst to their father, for a bowl of lentil stew. According to the text, a blind and dying Isaac was at first confused—although ultimately deceived—by the hair on Jacob's arms, and he wondered aloud why “the voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau” (Gen. 27:22). Yet according to rabbinic commentators and contemporary Hasidim, Isaac's seeming confusion over his sons' identities captured the essence of their characters and the difference between their descendants. His reference to “the voice of Jacob” has long been interpreted by orthodox

Jews as a prophetic allusion to the intellect and spirituality of the children of Jacob, while his reference to “the hands of Esau” has been interpreted as an allusion to the brutality and materialism of the children of Esau. Finally, the biblical text states that Esau “harbored a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing which his father had given him” (Gen. 27:41), and most rabbinic commentators have described Esau’s jealous rage as the defining feature of all relationships between the brothers’ descendants—the source of what many consider the Gentile world’s undying hatred of Jews.

A symbolically charged picture of the children of Jacob and Esau thus emerges in canonical rabbinic literature and contemporary Hasidic discourse: an image of Jews and Gentiles as clearly defined peoples, and moral principles, locked in eternal hatred and struggle—as was prophesied, according to some, in God’s warning to Rebecca: “Two nations are in your womb. Two separate peoples shall issue from your body” (Gen. 25:23). The impact of this biblical narrative on Lubavitch perceptions of collective identity first became clear to me in August of 1996, as I listened to a Hasidic community leader describe the violence that rocked Crown Heights five years earlier as a conflict between Jacob and Esau.

On August 19, 1996, the Crown Heights Jewish Community Council held a public event to mark the fifth anniversary of the violence of 1991, and to support the recently announced federal prosecutions of Charles Price and Lemrick Nelson for the murder of Yankel Rosenbaum on the first night of that violence.<sup>23</sup> It was, in fact, five years to the day since Rosenbaum’s stabbing, so the event was at once a rally, a press conference, and a memorial service. Several Hasidic community leaders and prominent politicians spoke before a few hundred Hasidim, a handful of Blacks, a few police officers and Guardian Angels, and eight or ten television news cameras. They spoke from a stage set up on the corner of President Street and Brooklyn Avenue—the very site where Rosenbaum had been stabbed to death.<sup>24</sup>

Not surprisingly, most speakers urged the crowd to remember Rosenbaum’s murder and the violence of 1991. These calls to “remember” resonated with the broader Lubavitch concern for Jewish continuity. Indeed, nearly every Lubavitcher who spoke at the memorial situated Rosenbaum’s death within a Hasidic narrative of Jewish history by referring to the violence of August 1991 as a “pogrom.” Although most Black Crown Heights residents describe the violence of 1991 as a “riot” or “rebellion,” most Lubavitchers recall a “pogrom” against their community—a term that calls to mind the history of eastern European religious violence rather than U.S. racial violence, Kishinev and Odessa rather than Detroit and Watts.<sup>25</sup> The chairman of the Crown Heights Jewish Community Council, for example, spoke gravely of “the first pogrom here on American soil.”

But this vision of Jewish history and identity did not go uncontested. Even during the memorial, there were con-

flicting narratives of the violence of 1991. For example, then senator Alfonse D’Amato—a vociferous supporter of the Lubavitch community—proclaimed that “striking out violently against a person because of his race, his color, his creed, his sexual orientation, because he or she may be different, is absolutely intolerable.” By equating Rosenbaum’s murder with hate crimes based on race and sexuality (in the only sound bite from the event to make it onto television news), D’Amato undermined Hasidic efforts to situate the violence of 1991 within a specifically Jewish history. This violence therefore might have marked the Lubavitch community’s dislocation from its Jewish past, with Rosenbaum cast as the victim of a U.S. “race riot” or a crime equivalent to gay bashing. Interpreted through the narrative of Jacob and Esau, however, this tragedy became a bitter reaffirmation of the ties that bind contemporary Jews to their biblical patriarchs.

The first major speaker at the memorial event—and the only Hasidic leader to give a lengthy address—was Rabbi Shmuel Butman, the director of the Lubavitch Youth Organization. Rabbi Butman began his address with a brief commentary on the previous week’s Torah portion, which he tied to the prosecution of Price and Nelson. After drawing his audience into a historiographic field structured by the text of the Torah, he then turned to a pair of biblical narratives that helped him define the meaning of Rosenbaum’s death. He first compared Rosenbaum’s stabbing to Cain’s murder of Abel, quoting God’s warning to Cain that “the voice of the blood of your brother cries out to me from the ground” (Gen. 4:10) and telling the crowd, “The voice of the blood of our brother Yankel Rosenbaum . . . is screaming to us.” He then paused to welcome Governor George Pataki—shifting again between past and present—and picked up the thread of his exegesis with the story of Jacob and Esau:

We further see in the Bible, at the second time where the word “voice” is mentioned, and it says: “Hakol kol Yaakov, v’hayadayim y’dai Esav.” “The voice is the voice of Jacob, and the hands are the hands of Esau.” After the hands of Esau have committed this atrocious murder, on this very spot, the voice of Jacob—and in our case the voice of Jacob Rosenbaum—is calling out and says to all of us: “I have waited, day after day . . . year after year, for everyone who attacked me to be apprehended, and it is the responsibility of everyone, of all public officials, of all honest and decent citizens, to work that every one of those attackers should be apprehended and that justice should finally be done!”

Rabbi Butman went on to discuss the legal proceedings against Rosenbaum’s murderers and his hopes for the future of Crown Heights. But the rhetorical crux of the address was his remarkable claim that “the hands of Esau have committed this atrocious murder” and his subtle shift from “the voice of Jacob” to “the voice of Jacob Rosenbaum.” For

Lubavitchers in the audience, Butman's invocation of the biblical text linked the violence of August 1991 to the very essence of Jewish identity—equating Rosenbaum's killers with the Gentile world, and Rosenbaum himself (whose first name is a diminutive form of Jacob) with the Jewish people. But how were these historiographic equations sustained? How was Rabbi Butman able to hear, and speak, the voice of Jacob on the streets of Brooklyn?

Butman used a series of religious discourses and rhetorical strategies to establish the continuity between Yankel Rosenbaum and the patriarch Jacob. Unlike Rosenbaum, the biblical patriarch was not a murder victim, so Butman first drew an analogy between Rosenbaum's stabbing and the murder of Abel. He then used the long-established rabbinic principle that passages in the Torah may be linked interpretively through linguistic similarities to read “the voice of the blood of your brother” alongside “the voice of Jacob”—linking Abel, Jacob, and Rosenbaum as innocent victims of violence.<sup>26</sup> And finally, he used a disarmingly simple act of rhetorical ventriloquism to merge his own voice with those of Abel, Jacob, and Rosenbaum. Butman prefaced his thoughts on Rosenbaum's legacy by claiming that “the voice of Jacob—and in our case the voice of Jacob Rosenbaum—is calling out and says to all of us.” Speaking in the first-person voice of a murder victim—and the composite voice of Jewish history—he urged New York's political elite to pursue Rosenbaum's murderers. Through this merging of voices, Rabbi Butman brought millennia of Jewish history, as most Lubavitchers see it, to bear in contemporary Crown Heights. Rosenbaum's death thus became an exemplary moment in a history shaped, since the days of Jacob and Esau, by unending Gentile violence and hostility.

Yet as persuasive as these rhetorical strategies may have been, I doubt they conveyed Rabbi Butman's understanding of Rosenbaum's murder to anyone in the audience aside from his fellow Hasidim. The success of his rhetoric ultimately depended on the fact that most Lubavitchers are taught, from a young age, to interpret Jewish–Gentile relations in terms of Jacob and Esau. For example, on an audiotape of Bible stories for Hasidic children, a Lubavitch rabbi explains, “*Hakol kol Yaakov*—the voice, the sound of Torah and [prayer], that is Yaakov's portion. While the hands—*Hayadayim y'dai Esav*—the hands which mean force, and fighting, and ammunition, those are the hands of Esav.” Later, near the end of the tape, he describes how Esau passed his hatred of Jacob down to his descendants, then draws on the authority of religious law to assure his listeners, “It is a well known halacha—a Torah rule—that Esav hates Yaakov.” The voice of Jacob thus speaks, on tape, to young Lubavitchers, telling them that Gentiles will always hate them.<sup>27</sup>

Hasidic adults often bracket this “Torah rule” in the course of their everyday lives, building respectful, if not intimate, relationships with non-Jewish neighbors and colleagues. But most nevertheless interpret Gentile anti-

semitism, in Crown Heights and elsewhere, as a manifestation of Esau's jealous rage. For example, a Hasidic acquaintance once told me that antisemitism remains essentially the same in all times and places, regardless of any superficial historical changes. When I tried to explain why I interpreted antisemitism in terms of its shifting social contexts, she replied, “You're on to something very interesting. Because according to [Hasidic thought], and a Torah perspective, there are very deep spiritual reasons for antisemitism, having nothing to do with sociology.” “Like what?” I asked, and she replied in a definitive tone,

Esav hates Yaakov. It goes back to that. Now you've gotta talk to a rabbi about this, not me, but Esav hates Yaakov. That was one of the givens in the world, until—until Moshiach [the coming of the messiah], until we ultimately have the redemption in front of our eyes. That's a given: Esav hates Yaakov. . . . It's something that's just inherent. It's like, uh—like you talk about water, y'know. Water condenses, it has certain properties. A non-Jew has certain properties, y'know, and a Jew has certain properties. Like we say a leaf is made up of such-and-such—it's the same thing. It's one of those givens, that Esav hates Yaakov.

“But how,” I asked, “does this hatred go from Esav and Yaakov in the Torah—y'know, thousands of years ago—down to today?” She replied,

Again, you have to go to a rabbi, I'm just theorizing. But y'know, Esav hates Yaakov, these are the ruling powers of the world. Like Rome was descended from Esav, that's what they say. . . . And I guess the Roman Empire, y'know, left its mark. Even today, like you have the pope. So there's still that thing: Rome versus Yaakov. . . . Rome set the pace, y'know, Rome sets the pace. Which it did with Christianity. Most of the world is Christian, right?

Unlike the children of Jacob, the children of Esau may or may not be defined by genealogical continuity with their biblical patriarch. But this Hasid nevertheless saw a historical continuity in “the ruling powers of the world” from biblical times to the present. She bridged the gap between today's Crown Heights and her Israelite origins through a seemingly effortless shift from past to present tense: “Rome set the pace, y'know, Rome sets the pace.” But still, I pushed, does she see a real relationship between her Black neighbors and ancient Rome? “We're not really dealing with ‘Rome’ out on the streets here,” I said. “Yeah,” she replied, gesturing toward her window, where the muffled sound of tape-recorded bells wafted in from the bell tower of the Episcopal church next door, “but there's a church.”

Like most Lubavitch Hasidim, this woman tends to define Black–Jewish difference in terms one might loosely describe as “religious”—in terms of Judaism and Christianity, church bells and the pope, the authority of the Torah

and the coming of the messiah. Yet she naturalizes this religious difference in a way that resonates with popular perceptions of biological race—describing Gentile antisemitism as “something that’s just inherent. . . . Like we say a leaf is made up of such-and-such.” She is able to move fluidly between racial and religious accounts of difference because these categories are not significant to her in themselves. They function, in a crucial yet limited way, as historiographic tools—providing a range of conceptual terms with to articulate a narrative of Israelite (and Edomite) descent. “Race” and “religion” thus merge within, and perhaps emerge from, an underlying equation of history, genealogy, and collective identity.

### “The Lord will send you back to Egypt in ships”

The genealogies of Jacob and Esau are not as clear, however, as Lubavitchers imagine. As I have noted, a broad range of Black Crown Heights residents—whom Lubavitchers and most other Jews consider Gentiles—claim varieties of Israelite history and identity. Even Black Christians, who make no consistent claim to Jewishness, often express a sense of continuity with ancient Israel. For example, in addition to the local Episcopal church, my Hasidic acquaintance’s living-room window looked out over the home of James E. Davis—an African American Baptist minister, police officer, and politician, who was born and raised in Crown Heights and served the community on New York’s City Council from 2001 until his tragic death in 2003.<sup>28</sup> When we spoke in 1997, Davis explained that Christians are linked to Jews through their common devotion to “the God of Abraham” and shared ties to “the father of faith.” And then, in the same breath, he shifted from symbolic descent to genealogy, from theology to history, religion to race:

Now me, as a Black man—and other Blacks—we go a step further. We believe that we’re Jewish! . . . There’s many of us who believe that there’s something called Ethiopian Jews, who are Jewish but they’re Black. . . . And there has been documented proof that slaves, many slaves, came out of those Ethiopian Jewish groups. . . . So, because we don’t have a history, how can a Jewish person of Crown Heights—how can a Jewish person tell me that I’m not Jewish? He can’t, ’cause he doesn’t know my history! So therefore, I’m more Jewish—I’m more their brother than they even realize.

And moments later, on a historiographic roll, Davis mused about the “Lost Tribes” of Israel. With tongue only partially in cheek, he said: “I’ll tell you where they are! They’re right here in Brooklyn. They’re in Crown Heights. They’re called *Black* people!”

Across the street from a Hasidic home in which Blacks (with the exception of mainstream Black Jews) are distinguished from Jews by their descent from Esau, one thus finds

an African American home in which Blacks and Jews alike are defined by shared descent from Jacob. Here one sees the complex pattern of residential integration and social segregation that often characterizes Black–Jewish relations in Crown Heights: two homes, two histories, not 20 yards apart. Yet one may also glimpse an underlying commonality: These divided communities both define their identities through Israelite history and genealogy.

Davis’s view that “we [Black people] don’t have a history” highlights the historiographic stakes in his claim of Israelite descent. Like many Black Crown Heights residents, Davis drew on such narratives of Black Jewish history to craft a response to what he (contra Herskovitz 1941) saw as the historical discontinuity at the heart of the African diaspora.<sup>29</sup> He later described the Atlantic slave trade as a time when “our history was thrown out the window, and the Devil attacked a whole people.” Yet this traumatic experience opens a space of possibility. He told me Black Americans may seem “down and out” today, but he confidently predicted, “How great a Black people we will be when we know our history. Then we can jump on some of them blessings of Abraham!”

This is, in some sense, what a small but substantial number of African American and Afro-Caribbean people have done over the past hundred years. For Black Hebrew Israelites, the Black–Jewish identification exemplified by Christians like Davis has developed into enduring Black Jewish—or rather Israelite—identities. In this section, I examine the biblical narratives and historiographic principles at the heart of these identities. First, however, I trace the history of the Hebrew Israelite movement and examine the links Hebrew Israelites establish between racial Blackness and Israelite descent.

As many historians have noted, African American Christians have felt an affinity with the biblical Israelites since at least the late 18th century, when some began to read and preach the narrative of Israel’s exodus from Egypt as a story of their own redemption in the Americas. This Black–Jewish identification was central to the rhetoric of the 20th-century civil-rights movement (as evidenced by Martin Luther King Jr.’s self-identification with Moses in his renowned “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” sermon) and it remains an element of African American Christian identities to this day. For various reasons, Afro-Caribbean Christians may not have developed such ties with the biblical Israelites quite as early as their African American counterparts. But similar forms of Black–Jewish identification were prevalent in the Anglophone Caribbean by the early 20th century and helped define such social and religious movements as Ethiopianism, Rastafarianism, and Garveyite Black nationalism.<sup>30</sup>

Several short-lived Black Jewish sects emerged in the late 19th century, but today’s Hebrew Israelite communities may generally be traced to the Black-nationalist milieu of Harlem in the 1910s and 1920s, in which Black identification with ancient Israel was combined with a growing knowledge

of Jewish ritual gained, in part, from firsthand experiences of immigrant Jewish life in New York. There were at least eight different synagogues of Black Jews or Hebrew Israelites in Harlem in the 1920s (Brotz 1964:10), most of which were founded by Afro-Caribbean immigrants affiliated, to varying degrees, with Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association. Although the Hebrew Israelite movement initially seems to have provided these immigrants with a means to differentiate themselves from African Americans, it quickly grew to include a diverse cross section of the African diaspora. By the mid-20th century, a single synagogue—the Commandment Keepers Congregation of the Living God, founded by Rabbi Wentworth A. Matthews—emerged as the voice of the movement, and most of the eight or ten Hebrew Israelite synagogues active in the New York area today claim ties of some kind to Rabbi Matthews and his congregation. New York remains the center of gravity of the movement, but Hebrew Israelite sects and synagogues are based throughout North America and in the state of Israel.<sup>31</sup>

During my field research in the mid- to late 1990s, there were two Hebrew Israelite synagogues in the area of north Brooklyn surrounding Crown Heights, each of which drew congregants from throughout Brooklyn and the rest of the city.<sup>32</sup> The liturgical contrasts between these synagogues demonstrate the internal diversity of the Hebrew Israelite movement. One is housed in a former private home in Bedford-Stuyvesant that was first used as a synagogue by the “modern orthodox” Young Israel movement, and although a returning Young Israel member would consider few of its congregants Jewish, he or she would hardly feel out of place in its services. The liturgy is marked as “African” in subtle ways but is essentially identical to an orthodox Jewish prayer service. Ten blocks away, however, on the border of Bedford-Stuyvesant and Bushwick, another Hebrew Israelite synagogue holds prayer services that consist largely of original songs sung in Hebrew and English to the accompaniment of exuberant “African” drumming. The traditional Torah reading is complemented here by a sermon in which formal translations of the weekly Torah portion alternate line by line with fiery commentaries in vernacular English. As a vice president of this synagogue told me, “We do our own thing here. Not like [the other synagogue], they're more conservative there.”

These liturgical contrasts are tied to significant differences in the synagogues' interpretations of Israelite identity. The first—and far smaller—of the two congregations leans somewhat closer to a “religious” Jewishness and is a bit more open to ties with White Jews, whereas the second leans closer to a “racial” Blackness and a separatist brand of Black-nationalist thought. But all Hebrew Israelites, from the movement's origin to the present day, share the defining claim that Black people in the Americas are the true descendants of ancient Israel and are thus the chosen people of God. Although their Israelite descent is often marked and defined

by biblical narrative, ritual practice, and supernatural belief, it does not support a religious identity that is separable from race. Rather, it reveals the true meaning of Blackness.

Many Hebrew Israelites stress the significance of race by clearly distinguishing “Israelites” from “Jews”—a distinction not only between Blackness and Whiteness but also between race and religion as such. For example, the Brooklyn-based Hebrew Israelite author Cohane Michael Ben Levi argues that “an Israelite is a descendant of the ancient nation of Israel, while a Jew is a member of a religion called Judaism which attempts to practice the laws and customs of ancient Israel. . . . One may change his (or her) religion many times. On the contrary, one may never change who you are at birth, namely your nationality” (Ben Levi 1997:78). Or as a congregant at the second synagogue described above explained when I told him that my parents' families came to the United States from Germany and Russia, “Then you're a Germano-Russian, or a Russo-German, whose fathers converted to the Hebrew God some time back there. Because there sure weren't no Europeans in Israel.” This language of “nationality” marks the distance between Hebrew Israelites and mainstream U.S. views of race. Indeed, just as they eschew conventional Jewishness, most Hebrew Israelites are deeply critical of conventional Blackness—describing themselves and other Black Americans as “so-called Negroes.” But the binary opposition between “Israel” and “Europeans,” along with the basic assumption that “one may never change who you are at birth,” mark their commitment to some form of racial Blackness.

Yet this racial identity remains inextricably tied to religious discourses. Much like Lubavitchers, Hebrew Israelites draw on both race and religion to support their claims of Israelite descent—telling stories of Israelite history and identity that cannot be defined in terms of either category alone. For example, in a pivotal moment of the Sabbath liturgy at the “more conservative” synagogue described above, continuity with ancient Israel is envisioned in terms of the Torah's transmission from generation to generation.<sup>33</sup> Immediately after their reading of the Torah, congregants chant a prayer that is not contained in their modern orthodox prayer book. Speaking in unison, in cadenced, reverential tones, they proclaim: “This is our Torah. This is our Law. Our fathers delivered it. Intact, it was to us transferred. Intact, we will transfer it.” With the exception of brief weekly sermons and occasional extemporaneous prayers, this is the only time in a four-hour-long service that congregants depart from the Hebrew text of their prayer books—a liturgical innovation that accentuates their expression of Jewish continuity.

Yet unlike Lubavitch narratives of Israelite descent, Hebrew Israelite claims of continuity with ancient Israel are often complemented—although not contradicted—by an acute sense of historical discontinuity, which most Hebrew Israelites attribute to their displacement from their ancient homeland. Like James Davis, they describe the Atlantic

slave trade as a time when “our history was thrown out the window.” For example, a congregant at the “more conservative” synagogue described above explained that in the wake of their dispersion, Israelites in the Americas have been forced to rebuild their ancient traditions from “drops of Torah.” He gave one example from his childhood in Trinidad:

When we were growing up my mother would always make a cross of salt, somewhere in the room, when we went to sleep at night. To protect from evil spirits—and in Trinidad we had spirits! But it was only a few weeks ago that [my rabbi] showed me where this is from in the Torah, and the importance of salt in Torah—like when you bless the bread, you put it in salt. So we were following the Torah and we didn't even know it!

But these “drops” are not as “intact” as his synagogue’s liturgy claims—indeed, they may even take the form of a cross. A profound uncertainty is introduced if one can “[follow] the Torah and [not] even know it.” Hebrew Israelites accommodate this ambivalent sense of continuity and discontinuity through a distinctive narrative of Israelite history.

According to Hebrew Israelites and orthodox Jews alike, the ancient Israelites were exiled from their promised land in C.E. 70 because they failed to follow the laws of the Torah. The Roman Empire merely executed God’s judgment against his wayward chosen people. According to Hebrew Israelites, most of the ancient Israelites then fled to Africa and the surrounding areas, where they settled among other Black peoples and established a diasporic civilization stretching from West Africa to the Fertile Crescent—*From Babylon to Timbuktu*, in the title of Rudolph Windsor’s (1969) influential work of Black Israelite history.<sup>34</sup> But unfortunately, according to today’s Hebrew Israelites, the Israelites in diaspora gradually assimilated with their African hosts, until their roots were but a distant memory. This erosion of identity culminated in the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade, when countless Israelites were brought to the Americas in chains and lost all knowledge of their ancient origins.

Instead, the White “so-called Jews”—whom some Hebrew Israelites see as Edomite impostors and mortal enemies of Israel—are nearly universally seen as the true descendants of Israel. How did this tragic reversal take place? According to Hebrew Israelites, orthodox Jews, and academic historians alike, Israel conquered Edom in the second century B.C.E. and forcibly converted many Edomites to Judaism. According to historians, the conflict between Israel and Edom then subsided, and the boundaries of these peoples gradually blurred (see, e.g., Cohen 1999:110–129). According to many Hebrew Israelites, however, the ancient Edomites adapted aspects of Israelite culture and religion without surrendering their hatred of Israel, and this complex period of colonial hybridity marked the origin of today’s “Jews.” Ultimately, according to the Black Hebrew Israelites,

Israel’s defeat by Rome allowed Edom—the Jews—to assume Israel’s rightful place. As the true Black Israelites dispersed throughout Africa, White Edomites slowly filtered into Europe, passing as Israelites and gaining converts to their Jewish religion. This history explains why the identity of Israel is, in the words of one Hebrew Israelite author, “the world’s best-kept secret” (Hughley 1982).

Unlike the Hasidic history outlined above, this Hebrew Israelite history seems to introduce a troubling gap between past and present. It supports claims of historical and genealogical continuity yet is built around a core of discontinuity, rupture, and loss. It is a history of reversal and deception, the death and rebirth of a people—a history, in the words of the Brooklyn-based author Melchizedek Lewis, that “[begins] with the three patriarchs and [culminates] in the startling revelation of a people who have become strangers to themselves” (1997:34). Even if one accepts its factual claims, this history does not seem to establish an intimate bond between today’s Black Brooklynites and their ancient Israelite origins.

But I have yet to examine the central text of Hebrew Israelite historiography—the skeleton key that unlocks the hidden continuity of Israel’s past. Much like Lubavitch Hasidim, Black Hebrew Israelites use the biblical text as a historiographic tool. Yet whereas Hasidic historiography rests on the story of Israel’s origin in Genesis 25, Hebrew Israelite historiography rests on the story of Israel’s dispersion in Deuteronomy 28. According to Hebrew Israelites, every twist and turn of their long and painful history was prophesied by Moses as the Israelites stood on the banks of the Jordan, at the end of their 40-year exodus from Egypt, waiting to enter their promised land.

In the first few verses of Deuteronomy 28, Moses promises the people of Israel that if they obey God’s law, God will help defeat their enemies and bless them with material plenty. But in verse 15, Moses warns that if they disobey the law, God will curse them instead. Then, in a series of passages of unparalleled brutality, Moses threatens Israel with a litany of curses—the prophetic price of future disobedience. For example,

The Lord will let loose against you calamity, panic and frustration in all the enterprises you undertake, so that you shall soon be utterly wiped out because of your evil-doing in forsaking me. . . . The Lord will strike you with [boils], with hemorrhoids, boil-scars, and itch, from which you shall never recover. The Lord will strike you with madness, blindness, and dismay. You shall grope at noon, as a blind man gropes in the dark. . . . The Lord will scatter you among all the peoples from one end of the earth to the other. . . . The Lord will send you back to Egypt in ships, by a route which I told you you should not see again. There you shall offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but none will buy. [Deut. 28:20, 27–29, 64, 68]

These are “the terms of the covenant” (Deut. 28:69), the threats—and just a few of the worst—that accompanied God’s promises to his chosen people.

Some 3,000 years later, in Brooklyn in the late 1980s, a man I later met at a Hebrew Israelite synagogue was searching for his spiritual roots. He had been raised an Anglican but had never felt comfortable with Christianity. As a teenager he studied African history and Islam. And then, in his early twenties, he decided to take a closer look at the Bible. At the time, he later told me, he was living in Brooklyn and working in the Bronx, so he bought the Bible on audiotape and listened during his long commutes. He listened to the whole thing—Old and New Testaments, Genesis to Revelation—sitting in his car with a Bible open on the passenger seat, highlighting key passages when he stopped at red lights. One can imagine, perhaps, the voice of Charlton Heston or James Earl Jones resonating in the hermetic space of a car crossing the Brooklyn Bridge. In this deep voice, and ancient text, my acquaintance finally found what he was looking for: “When the tape got up to Deuteronomy 28, it was just ‘Wow!’ I had to stop the car, and I played the tape over and over, and I knew it was talking about us.” He told me he started to cry, sitting in his car on the side of the road, overwhelmed by the power of his realization: “The dispersal from the land, taken in slave ships, the breakdown of the family, and health problems like glaucoma, and skin problems. These are all the things that afflict African people in America! I knew it had to be us.” And, he said, he knew what he had to do. Although he kept going to church for a while, he claims he knew from the moment he heard Deuteronomy 28 that “all that had to change. I had to change my life to begin keeping Shabbat.”

Of course, children raised as Hebrew Israelites need not come to such dramatic realizations, as they are taught from a young age to interpret their history through the lens of Deuteronomy 28. For example, at a Passover seder held at a Hebrew Israelite synagogue, one young girl was reluctant, at first, to taste the bitter herbs the liturgy asks Jews to eat in memory of their slavery in Egypt. As the girl sat pouting, her lips firmly sealed, a woman in her thirties patiently explained that the herbs would help her remember the bitterness of slavery. The girl thought it over for a moment, then turned and pointed to a poster hung prominently in the synagogue’s social hall: an image of a slave bound around the neck in irons and chains, a haunting reproduction of an antique photograph from the U.S. South, captioned with a number of biblical texts, including Deuteronomy 28:48: “You shall serve—in hunger and thirst, naked and lacking everything—the enemies whom the Lord will let loose against you. He will place an iron yoke upon your neck until He has wiped you out” (see Figure 1). Gesturing toward this chilling image of Israelite slavery in the Americas, the young girl said emphatically, “That’s slavery.” She then turned and ate her bitter herbs.

These moments of identity formation rest on the central premise of nearly all Hebrew Israelite historical narratives:



**Figure 1.** “An iron yoke upon your neck.” Israelite slavery in the Americas, as interpreted through Deuteronomy 28:48. Note the striped garment, which a number of Hebrew Israelites identified as a traditional Jewish prayer shawl.

that the curses of Deuteronomy 28 are a prophetic history of the slavery and racism Israelites have suffered during their exile in the Americas. As a Hebrew Israelite I met on the subway late one night in 1997 said of Deuteronomy 28: “Our whole history is in that thing there.” Or as Ben Levi explains,

In their own unique manner, the prophecies and words of the Holy Scriptures describe the punishment meted out to the so-called Negroes for their disobedience and rejection of God’s law. . . . If Africans and African-Americans understood this important fact, they would see these writings as a mirror of themselves. The particular experience as it is written, explains and clarifies the peculiar mystery behind the loss of identity of the Black man and his scattering among the nations of the earth. Many nations have been enslaved, yet the nation of Israel alone bears all the signs described in the curse pronounced against them by their Creator. No other nation on earth has a historical experience which comes close to fulfilling the words of Deuteronomy 28. [1997:3–4]

Like many other Hebrew Israelite authors, Ben Levi then details the parallels between Deuteronomy 28 and Black history as he sees it.<sup>35</sup> According to Hebrew Israelites,

Moses's promise that Israel will be cursed "in the city" (Deut. 28:16) has been fulfilled in rampant gang violence. His threat of a cursed "basket" and "kneading bowl" (Deut. 28:17) speaks of poverty and underdevelopment, and the "strange and lasting plagues" (Deut. 28:59) he warned of are none other than AIDS, diabetes, and the many other diseases that disproportionately afflict Black Americans. The "ruthless nation" he said would "swoop down [on Israel] like the eagle" (Deut. 28:49) is clearly the United States, whose national symbol contains an eagle.<sup>36</sup> And, above all, Moses's threat that "The Lord will send you back to Egypt in ships" (Deut. 28:68) undoubtedly foresaw the horror of the Middle Passage. In all of recorded history, Hebrew Israelites often ask, what other nation has been taken into slavery on ships?

The curses of Deuteronomy 28 thus help Black Hebrew Israelites craft historical and genealogical continuity from the very stuff of discontinuity, by reading the history of the African diaspora into the text of the Hebrew Bible. The identity of Israel remains secure in spite of the fact—no, because of the fact—that God's chosen people have been "scatter[ed] . . . from one end of the earth to the other" (Deut. 28:64). Like Lubavitch Hasidic narratives of Israel's origin, this narrative of Israel's exile draws freely on popular images of both race and religion—slave ships and sacred texts, U.S. politics and biblical prophecy, urban violence and divine chosenness. Much like Lubavitchers, the Black Hebrew Israelites weave race and religion into narratives of Israelite history and identity.

### History, identity, and destiny

I have argued that for many Crown Heights residents, "race," "religion," "Blackness," and "Jewishness" all function, above all, as symbolically charged tropes within historical narratives, rather than clearly bounded categories of identity formation. Black Hebrew Israelite and Lubavitch Hasidic narratives of Israelite descent tend to be structured by racial and religious tropes of continuity, respectively, but this is by no means an absolute or unambiguous divide. Although collective identities are typically imagined as either Black or Jewish, either racial or religious, these terms are mixed and mingled—in fairly idiosyncratic ways—within Crown Heights residents' narratives of history.

Taken together, these categories and narratives—along with the practices and institutions they support—form what Foucault (1972) described as a "discursive formation." By exploring this underlying formation, rather than focusing on any one of its constituent categories, I have tried to offer a new understanding of identity and difference in Crown Heights—and suggest a somewhat new approach to the relationships between historical narrative and identity formation. What, then, have I shown about the histories and identities of Crown Heights residents by charting the broader formation in which they take shape?

I clearly have not shown that race and religion, or Blackness and Jewishness, are fundamentally the same. To argue that categories and identities like these are defined within a common discursive formation is not to argue that they may be reduced to a single theoretical model or structural principle.<sup>37</sup> A discursive formation, for Foucault, is a "system of dispersion" (1972:37) capable of producing wildly divergent statements and practices—not "an ideal, continuous, smooth text that runs beneath the multiplicity of contradictions, and resolves them in the calm unity of coherent thought," but "a space of multiple dissensions; a set of different oppositions whose levels and roles must be described" (1972:155). My analysis of Lubavitch Hasidic and Hebrew Israelite histories offers insight into "dissensions" and "oppositions" operating at different points in the process of identity formation.

I have touched on several distinctions that may, in fact, be understood in terms of the Blackness of the Hebrew Israelites, the Jewishness of the Lubavitch Hasidim, and the relative significance of race and religion in these communities. I have noted, for example, the divergent roles of Black bodies and Jewish souls in shoring up claims of Israelite descent. I have considered how experiences of antisemitism and anti-Black racism inform divergent narratives of Israelite history. And I have described a disparity in public perceptions of these Black and Jewish Israelites: As Hebrew Israelites are the first to acknowledge, Jews are widely seen as the "children of Israel," while Blacks are not. My analysis of their common claims to Israelite history and identity should not blind observers to such important distinctions, or to the different positions of these communities within the hegemonic patterns of identity formation in the United States.

At the same time, however, I have explored significant differences between Lubavitchers and Hebrew Israelites that cannot be glossed in terms of a clear distinction between Blackness and Jewishness or race and religion—differences operating, perhaps, on a deeper level of discursive structure, closer to the heart of these communities' distinctive understandings of identity and history. Although Lubavitchers and Hebrew Israelites share several basic assumptions about the sanctity and authority of the biblical text, as well as the links between history and genealogy, they interpret this text and narrate their histories in dramatically different ways. Lubavitch narratives of Israelite descent tend to focus on the story of Israel's birth in Genesis 25, while Hebrew Israelite narratives focus instead on the story of Israel's exile in Deuteronomy 28. Lubavitchers identify, it seems, with the purity of Israel's origin, while Hebrew Israelites identify instead with an Israel in disgrace and dissolution. This historiography of dispersion allows Hebrew Israelites to accommodate the twists and turns of their history, creating an (un)broken continuity with ancient Israel, even if this continuity has been lost—or stolen—in their centuries of exile. The

Lubavitch historiography of origin, by contrast, lends itself to a seemingly motionless history—uniting past and present in the pure simultaneity of an eternal conflict between Jacob and Esau.

The Lubavitch Hasidim and Black Hebrew Israelites thus disagree on both the content and form of Israelite history—on its fundamental narrative structure as well as its central characters and events. Although they both claim continuity with ancient Israel, their historical narratives resonate with a contrast, drawn by Stuart Hall, between two patterns of identity formation in diaspora—one of which imagines collective identities to be “eternally fixed in some essentialized past,” whereas the other imagines identities as “subject to the continuous play of culture, history and power” (1990:225). These divergent historiographies of Israelite identity reveal as much, or more, about the differences between Lubavitchers and Hebrew Israelites as do broad-brush distinctions between race and religion or Blackness and Jewishness.

Despite these differences, however, their narratives of Israelite descent also point to unexpected commonalities. Above all, I think, their histories and identities rest on a set of shared assumptions about the chosenness of Israel. Lubavitchers and Hebrew Israelites may disagree about the relative significance of race and religion, as well as the basic contours of Israelite history, but they tend to agree that the descendants of Jacob—whoever they may be—have been chosen by God to play a unique role in the apocalyptic end of history, whereas others have not.

The implications of this chosenness are far more ambivalent than simple divine favor. God’s chosen people have been forced to endure long centuries of exile, as well as the unrelenting hostility of jealous Gentile nations. And in the end, according to all Lubavitch Hasidim and most Hebrew Israelites, the messiah destined to emerge from Israel will redeem every one of God’s creations, not merely a chosen few. Yet according to many Crown Heights residents, and others, the children of Israel will play a starring role in the drama of redemption—a drama unfolding this very moment, or in the near future. They are God’s chosen agents in human history.<sup>38</sup> For Lubavitchers and Hebrew Israelites, this is a history, an identity, and a destiny worth fighting for. A Hebrew Israelite I knew fairly well, for example, was perfectly happy to accept the Jewishness of White Jews—indeed, he often expressed a desire for greater contact and solidarity with his Hasidic neighbors—but he nevertheless insisted that the messiah could not come until the entire world acknowledged the Blackness of ancient Israel. He was well aware of the messianic fervor sweeping the Lubavitch community in the 1990s, but he scoffed at the messianic claims surrounding the Lubavitcher Rebbe. The Torah, he reminded me, states quite clearly that the messiah will be a descendant of King David. “And let’s face it,” he said with a smile, “their Rebbe don’t look much like David.”

This claim clearly rests on a racialized understanding of what it means to “look like David,” but it is not exactly a claim about race. Discourses of race and religion shape the struggle over chosenness in and around Crown Heights, but they do not determine its ultimate goals. Many Crown Heights residents use these conceptual categories—in different combinations, and with varying emphases—to bolster their claims of Israelite descent. But these claims are at once far simpler and far more complex than Blackness or Jewishness, race or religion. They are claims to a past thought to set today’s Israelites apart from their neighbors—although it turns out many of their neighbors claim this past as well—to a present that transcends their painful sense of exile, and to a future that gives meaning to their everyday lives.

This sense of purpose—of historical agency—is one of the many social phenomena scholars and others often attempt to gloss with conceptual categories like “race” and “religion.” Such terms have, in fact, come to define many people’s understandings of self and other, identity and community, history and society. Yet these terms, one must remember, designate analytical abstractions as well as social facts. Scholars must take care not to apply them in an uncritical fashion to the people we study. As I show in this article, they highlight significant differences between Blacks and Jews in today’s Crown Heights, while masking significant similarities. No identity or community—or discourse or narrative, for that matter—is entirely racial or religious, Black or Jewish, or what have you. Even in a polarized neighborhood like Crown Heights, people’s lives and beliefs—their histories and destinies—are more complex, and more interesting, than such categories generally imply.

## Notes

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1. Like most Crown Heights residents, I generally use *Black* as a catch-all term for people of recognized African descent,

including both native-born African Americans and Afro-Caribbean immigrants. I usually capitalize terms denoting racial and religious identities, because standard English requires me to capitalize *Jew* and simple fairness requires me to treat Blacks and Jews alike in such textual details.

2. The literatures on historical narrative and identity formation are too large to summarize here, but a few of the texts I have found particularly helpful (in addition to texts cited in the body of my article) are Boyarin 1994, Friedman 1992, Handler and Gable 1997, Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, Lambek 2002, Shryock 1997, and Zerubavel 2003. My analysis has also been shaped by radically skeptical accounts of historical continuity like Appiah 1986, Knapp 1989, and Michaels 1992—although I would take issue with certain aspects of the arguments in these works.

3. At a few points in both Scott's and Zerubavel's texts, however, the boundaries of "Black" and "Jewish" history seem to be in doubt. Scott (1991:278–279) refers briefly, for example, to Rastafarian memories of slavery. Although Rastafarians clearly tie their collective identity to the history of slavery, they complicate Scott's frequent references to "peoples of African descent" by claiming Israelite descent as well. And Zerubavel (1995:21, 27) refers briefly to a group of mid-20th-century secular Zionists known as the "Young Hebrews" or "Canaanites," who repudiated all ties to the history of the Jewish diaspora. Although she notes that their radical reconceptualization of Hebrew history was soundly rejected by the Israeli public, an analysis of their claims might have helped Zerubavel shed light on the unquestioned foundations of more mainstream Israeli histories.

4. This assumption places many collective identities on the familiar, yet shifting, terrain of anthropological kinship analysis. For discussions of Black and Jewish concerns with kinship and identity see, for example, Boyarin and Boyarin 1993, Brown 2005, Cohen 1999:241–340, Dominguez 1986, Gilroy 1992, Kahn 2000, Schneider 1977, Schwartz 1997:77–119, Weston 2001, and Williams 1995. For an analysis of genealogy and descent as tropes of historical continuity, see Zerubavel 2003:55–81.

5. Conversion to Judaism clearly complicates these assumptions about Jewish genealogy in significant ways. At the same time, however, it reinforces the links between history, genealogy, and Jewish identity, as converts are thought to take on the genealogy of Israel. Rabbinic law generally requires converts to mark their new identities by adding the phrase "son of Abraham and Sarah" or "daughter of Abraham and Sarah" to their Hebrew names. Indeed, Lubavitchers and other Hasidim often describe converts as non-Jews who somehow—by inscrutable cosmic design—inherited a Jewish soul. Conversion is thus understood as a belated recognition of one's true genealogy.

6. Of course, quite a few African American and Afro-Caribbean Jews, in Crown Heights and elsewhere, define their Jewishness in more "conventional" terms than the Black Hebrew Israelites, and participate in predominantly White Jewish communities, from Reform to Hasidic. For a social analysis of these more mainstream Black Jews see Azoulay 1997. See also Lester 1988 and Walker 2001 for memoirs of Black Jewishness—through conversion and descent, respectively. Although many Black Jews and Hebrew Israelites feel a strong sense of affinity with various African Jewish communities, I am hesitant to include such communities (like the Beta Israel of Ethiopia, the Lemba of southern Africa, and Abayudaya of Uganda) within the largely U.S. category of "Black Jews."

7. Blacks and Jews are by no means alone in such claims. On a broader historical scale, the cast of "Israelites" is nearly endless. The roster of Israelites in the Americas includes, among many others, the Puritans and the Mormons, the White-supremacist Christian Identity movement and Black-supremacist Nation of Islam, the United

States itself, and a host of Lost Tribes on the margins of the post-colonial world.

8. This parallel is inspired by the journalist Jack Hitt's insightful and irreverent account of the debate over the "race" of Kennewick Man. Hitt compares White and Native American claims on this 9,200-year-old skeleton to his own childhood claim of descent from Charlemagne. See Hitt 2005, especially pp. 39–40.

9. Most translations render this verse "I am black but comely" or "I am dark but comely." Academic scholars offer various interpretations of Solomon's "blackness," but none read it as a reference to racial phenotype. Hebrew Israelites and many other Black Brooklynites dismiss these translations and interpretations as deliberate attempts to disguise the Blackness of ancient Israel.

10. The foundations of this belief were developed in the late 18th century by Rabbi Shneur Zalman, the founder of the Lubavitch community. The Alter Rebbe, as Zalman is known, drew on a long tradition of kabbalistic thought about Jewishness, but he placed the concept of the "godly soul" at the heart of his distinctive theological system. This concept has taken on new significance over the past half century, as Lubavitchers have worked to convince secular Jews throughout the world that they already possess the soul of a Hasid. For more on the godly and animal souls, see Koskoff 2001:32–34 and Loewenthal 1990:54–57.

11. Much like "race," the category of "religion" has been the subject of debate in recent years. Although nearly all societies have systems of thought and practice oriented around supernatural entities of some kind, a growing number of scholars have argued that the popular concept of "religion" is a product of Western—and above all Christian—social thought (see, e.g., Asad 1993; Chidester 1996; Masuzawa 2005; Smith 1998).

12. The contested details of the violence of 1991 lie beyond the scope of this article. For more information, see Girgenti 1993, Goldschmidt in press:ch. 1, Mintz 1992:328–347, Rieder 1995, and Smith 1993. For an overview of previous Black–Jewish conflicts in Crown Heights, see Mintz 1992:139–153.

13. The passage he had in mind was most likely Leviticus 19:27: "Ye shall not round the corners of your heads, neither shalt thou mar the corners of thy beard."

14. For a summary of Hasidic history, see Mintz 1992:1–8. For the history of the Lubavitch community, see Hoffman 1991:15–27 and Loewenthal 1990. And for more on Hasidism, see Belcove-Shalin 1995 and Hundert 1991.

15. The Lubavitch community is also known as the "Chabad" or "Habad" movement. The term *Chabad* is an acronym for the kabbalistic concepts of "chochma," "bina," and "da'as" (wisdom, understanding, and knowledge), which are central to Chabad-Lubavitch religious thought.

16. For analyses of the Lubavitch community's outreach campaigns, see Fishkoff 2003 and Hoffman 1991.

17. For a broad analysis of White flight, see Lipsitz 1998:5–8, 25–33. On the complex roles of Jews in this trend, see Brodtkin 1998 and Gamm 1999.

18. For an analysis of the Lubavitch community's profound attachment to Crown Heights, see Goldschmidt 2000.

19. For introductions to Caribbean Brooklyn, see Kasinitz 1992 and Waters 1999.

20. My sketch of the demographic transformation of Crown Heights is based on census data compiled and published by the New York City government. My interpretation of the 1990 data assumes (on the basis of my field research) that the vast majority of "non-Hispanic White" Crown Heights residents are, in fact, Lubavitch Hasidim. For details and sources on Crown Heights demographics, see Goldschmidt in press:ch. 2.

21. The Lubavitch community has been well known, and controversial, in recent years for the fervent messianic expectations that surrounded the Lubavitcher Rebbe during the last decade of his life. For introductions to Lubavitch messianism, see Friedman 1994 and Mintz 1992:348–364.

22. In the biblical text, Esau is identified as the father of the Edomites, a tribe with whom Israel had a history of intermittent warfare. But by the first or second century C.E., while living under Roman imperialism, rabbinic commentators (and presumably other Jews) came to associate Esau with the Roman Empire. In the Middle Ages, European Jews identified Esau and Edom with the Roman Catholic Church and European Christendom. For many contemporary orthodox Jews, Esau has come to signify the entire non-Jewish world. On the evolution of “Esau” and “Edom,” see Cohen 1967.

23. Both Price and Nelson were accused of violating Rosenbaum’s civil rights—Price by inciting his assault and Nelson by stabbing him to death. Nelson had been acquitted of the stabbing by a state court in 1992 but was retried on federal civil-rights charges, whereas Price was first arrested in 1996 following an extensive investigation. Both men were convicted in February of 1997, but their convictions were overturned on appeal. Price ultimately pled guilty, rather than face a second trial. Nelson was tried for the third time—and convicted for the second time—in 2003, but the torturous progress of his case undercut the finality of this verdict.

24. I attended and taped the entire memorial event. All direct quotes in the following four paragraphs are from my tape recording.

25. For more on these “riot” and “pogrom” narratives of the violence of 1991, see Goldschmidt in press:ch. 1.

26. This principle has been known for nearly 2,000 years as *gezera sheva*, or “derivation from an equal.” See Handelman 1982:57–58.

27. In fairness, I should note that this interpretation is interwoven throughout the tape with an interpretation that links Jacob and Esau to the good and evil impulses within every Jew, thus locating their eternal struggle in a moral and psychological realm.

28. Davis was murdered on July 23, 2003. His shooting, in New York’s City Council chamber, stunned the city. His sometimes controversial political career was exemplified, ironically, by his tireless work against gun violence.

29. I am not claiming that such a discontinuity is or is not at the heart of Black history. My point is simply that Davis, like many Black Crown Heights residents, narrates Black history in such terms. There has been a great deal of debate among anthropologists and others about the relationships between Black Americans and their African past. See Herskovitz 1941 for the classic anthropological analysis. For recent reconceptualizations of these issues, see Gilroy 1993, Hall 1990, and Scott 1991.

30. For the history of antebellum slave identification with Israel, see Chireau and Deutsch 2000, Levine 1977:30–55, Raboteau 1995, Smith 1994, and Sollors 1986. For the longer history of U.S. national identification with Israel, see Bercovitch 1978, Cherry 1971, Sollors 1986, and Tuveson 1968. And for Afro-Caribbean identification with Israel, see Barrett 1988, especially pp. 68–102, 111–133; Chevannes 1994, especially pp. 33–42, 116–188; and McAlister 2004.

31. On the early Hebrew Israelite movement, see Brotz 1952, 1964; Chireau 2000; Gold 2003; Landes 1967 (based on fieldwork done in 1933); and Landing 2002. On today’s Hebrew Israelites, see Berger 1978; Higgins 1998; Landing 2002; Markowitz 1996; Markowitz et al. 2003; Michaeli 2000; and Singer 1982, 2000.

32. Some congregants at each of these synagogues lived in south Crown Heights, alongside the Lubavitch Hasidim, but they did not form a majority. Unlike my discussions of the Lubavitch community, my discussions of the Hebrew Israelites do not focus specifically on Crown Heights. Yet they speak to the collective identities of many Crown Heights residents.

33. This is a central trope of historical continuity in orthodox Judaism as well. For example, the opening lines of the mishnaic text *Pirkei Avot* assures Jews that “Moses received the Torah at Sinai and handed it down to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders,” and so on.

34. Windsor’s work has had a huge influence on subsequent Hebrew Israelite authors, most of whom draw extensively on his research and arguments. Windsor often draws, in turn, on Joseph Williams’s work *Hebrewisms of West Africa* (1930). Williams was a White U.S. missionary who worked in Jamaica and seems to have admired Jamaicans far more than Black Americans. His book attempts to explain this supposed Jamaican superiority by showing that the Jamaicans descended from the Ashanti, who descended, in turn, from the Israelites, who according to Williams (1930:15, 93) were decidedly not Black. Williams’s late-Victorian racism and diffusionist social thought have thus been put to entirely new uses by contemporary Hebrew Israelites.

35. For the parallels discussed here and many others, see Ben Levi 1997:3–16, Hughley 1982:18–23, Lewis 1997:132–145, and Windsor 1986:67–87.

36. The Hebrew Israelites are hardly alone in their scriptural interpretation of the eagle found in the great seal of the United States. This eagle has often been glossed by God’s claim, in Exodus 19:4, to have borne the Israelites out of Egypt “on eagles’ wings” and by the eagle in Revelation 12:14, which rescues a woman often taken to represent Christ’s true church. In each case, the eagle has served as a sign of the chosenness of the United States. For these and other interpretations, see Bercovitch 1978:124–125 and Tuveson 1968:118–119.

37. This was, more or less, the claim many scholars made about “ethnicity” in the 1970s and 1980s—that it offered a unified theory of race, religion, and other differences. I am making no such claims. For critical reviews of the scholarly literatures on ethnicity, see Omi and Winant 1994:14–23 and Williams 1989.

38. This analysis of chosenness as a form of historical agency is inspired, in part, by Susan Harding’s analyses of born-again Christian end-times narratives. See especially Harding 1994.

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