Diaspora and Belonging: Black Jewish Americans and the State of Israel

by

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“For Jews, Israel evokes particularly resonant, complicated meanings of home. Centuries of migration, history, politics, culture, and religious yearning have layered upon Israel multiple and conflicting meanings of home and homeland. For whom is Israel home, and how so? Has Israel been the ‘homeland’ of Jews since ‘time immemorial,’ as some would claim? Is ‘home’ the current state of Israel, with its contested borders, complex struggles for political power, shifting diplomatic alliances, and persistent violence? How should that home be governed, and who should live there as a fully enfranchised citizen?”

-Caryn Aviv and David Shneer

“As they march stolidly down the street, their chanting fades and I am left angered because their political posturing is a personal attack. But I am not Israeli. I am not responsible for what Israel does as a nation. I have not been to Israel and will probably not go for many years because I do not want to see Jews treating Arabs as blacks were treated in the South. I do not want to see how racist many Jews can be. I fear that if I go to Israel I will have to write a Hebrew version of Look Out, Whitey!

“And yet when a non-Jew attacks Israel I feel threatened. Israel is mine. Don’t non-Jews understand that after the Holocaust, Jews feel more alone and isolated in the world now than ever? Jews no longer expect non-Jews to approve of them, accept them and certainly not love them as members of the human family. Jewish survival depends upon the willingness and ability of Jews to act in their own defense. That is the lesson of the Holocaust. That is why Israeli planes are bombing Beirut.

“I can defend what Israel is doing. That does not mean I like it, or even that I approve. I want Israel to be ‘a light unto the nations.’ I want Israel to be better than other nations, to set a new standard for politics and international relations. It is not going to do that.

“That saddens me. It hurts. But it doesn’t hurt nearly as much as seeing a former student who is also not angry because Jewish life is threatened.”

-Julius Lester
Chapter I

Diaspora, Race, and Identity

This project is a study of Black American Jews and their complex ties to the state of Israel. In this thesis I claim that for some Black Jews who are marginalized within the greater American Jewish community, a close tie to Israel can increase their legitimacy. The main theoretical underpinning of this argument is that social positionality can shape identity formation; I will look at the differences between perspectives of individuals who experience varying levels of marginalization in order to examine how an individual’s position in the diaspora can influence a connection to the homeland. In the case of my project, the extent of an individual’s marginalization depends on a number of factors including how one came to Judaism or the synagogue with which one is affiliated. Specifically, the marginality of Black Jews is due to the distinctive backgrounds that many of them have, a background separate from and largely unrecognized by mainstream Jewish communities.

The individuals who are less marginalized and widely accepted as Jewish by the mainstream, predominantly White Ashkenazi, community in the United States are often legitimized either through birth to a Jewish mother or conversion in a mainstream congregation. These people, who make up the first group of participants in my study, do not identify with Israel as their homeland, although they do have strong feelings about Israel. The second group primarily comes from a tradition of syncretic Black American Judaism that evolved semi-autonomously and remains, for the most part, distinct from mainstream Judaism. This group shows a strong affiliation with Israel and marks it decisively as a site
of home and belonging. This is, I argue, a function of their desire to affiliate more strongly with mainstream Judaism. A third group consists of individuals who are a part of radical or separatist “Hebrew Israelite” communities who often claim to be the true descendants of the Biblical Israelites. Many of these groups have been vocal in denouncing various Israeli actions, and these communities position themselves as other-than or not-Jewish by rejecting not only Israel as homeland but Jewishness as an identity as well.

In studying these individuals I recognize that there is a continuum of different experiences and identities. While each person has a unique location on that continuum, for the purposes of this thesis I have decided to group those who are similarly positioned together. Again, I recognize the generalizations and erasures that this might produce, but will try to address individualities in my more detailed discussion of each participant’s experience. The benefits of such groupings are significant, as they allow me to draw closer comparisons within groups and broader distinctions across groups. I am also able to make more significant conclusions by placing shared experiences or beliefs together in categories.

Through a critical analysis of Jewishness in general and the centrality of Zionism and Israel to Jewish identity specifically, I will uncover some of the convolutions and contradictions in the concept of a singular “American Jewish community.” Based on my interviews with a range of individuals, I will conclude that their relationships to a homeland, in this case Israel, are related to their social positions within American society and dominant Ashkenazi Jewish America. I will emphasize that a marginalized community can use nationalism and ties to a distant place as a discursive strategy for associating with the dominant community in the place they do live. Through an examination of early American Jewish resistance to the Zionist movement and Caribbean-American
immigrants and their discourses of identity, I will show how this pattern is not isolated to the subject of my study, but rather is a widespread trend.

In this chapter I will lay the groundwork for my argument by talking about the concept of diaspora and the significance of diasporic consciousness. I will also explain what I mean by social positionality and, in an introduction to my fieldwork, discuss my research process and participants. First, I will reflect briefly on two major issues in the study of identity, namely the intersectional character of identity and the how race relations are the basis upon which social relationships are built. It is necessary to establish these theories, as they are foundational to my project.

Examining the intersections between religious, national, and racial identity has become essential to formulating an understanding of how our world functions. Religious studies scholar Henry Goldschmidt argues that collective identity theorists have often neglected religion. Instead, “[t]he thriving debates now surrounding race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and nation have tended to overlook the links between these identities and others based on religious discourse and practice” (Goldschmidt 2004, 6). In fact, the intersections are the most important points of departure. This project will continue in the vein of Goldschmidt’s argument that through “working to disrupt the supposed boundedness of race, nation, and religion; by showing how these categories of identity are always already inextricably linked; by demonstrating that they are, in fact co-constituted categories, wholly dependent on each other for their social existence and symbolic meaning” (ibid., 7) a clearer analysis will emerge. Looking at rejections of or subscriptions to racial and religious identities will further this work. If I accept the assumption of the basic that that racial, national, and religious identities intersect, then I want to explore how and why certain people would choose to prioritize one part of their identity and downplay another. The
co-constitutive nature of identity means that its different layers are inextricably wrapped together and it is not actually possible to embrace one while rejecting another. I am interested in examining why certain individuals attempt to separate some parts of identity from others and what the implications of those intentions are.

In discussing the layers of identity that I will examine in this project, it is important to establish that general race relations in the United States also inform the relationships between White and Black Jews. Intellectual historian Demetrius Eudell explains how the legacy of slavery serves as a basic foundation that informs all social interactions in the United States:

In fact, Blacks had to be thought of as less than fully human in order for their labor to be exploited, just as the indigenous peoples of the Americas had to be represented as irrational beings (and also less than completely human) in order for their lands to be expropriated. The logic of this assertion implies that the end of slavery does not have to be defined only as the transition from slave labor to wage labor. It can also be described in terms that understand slavery as a system of social relations—indeed, as a cultural system (Eudell 2001, 8-9).

This system of social relations is not restricted to racialized bodies as they exist in a vacuum, but rather applies to all three-dimensional, multi-identified individuals including people of different races that share a religious affiliation. This basic claim about the continuing legacy of slavery and dehumanization of Black bodies shapes the material that I am looking at, as I examine the delegitimization and exclusion of Black individuals, primarily by Whites, in a specific religious community in the modern United States.

Whiteness is a marker of privilege; by privilege I mean “the institutional power of individuals to construct systems based on their needs and values” (Kendall 2006, 59). Robert Jensen describes this in *The Heart of Whiteness: Confronting Race, Racism, and White Privilege*. He writes, “...Part of white privilege is the privilege to ignore the reality of a white-supremacist society when it
makes us uncomfortable, to rationalize why it’s not really so bad, to deny one’s own role in it. It is the privilege of remaining ignorant because that ignorance is protected” (Jenson 2005, 10). I argue that for the most part, in the United States, Ashkenazi Jews are the beneficiaries of significant White privilege including the privilege that Jensen outlines, and that relations between Black and White Jews are therefore affected by the cultural system that Eudell describes. The complexity of these dynamics cannot be emphasized enough, nor can the relevance to both the construction of legitimacy in the Jewish community and the tensions between White and Black Jews of such dynamics be exaggerated.

**Diaspora**

While racial and religious identities form the lenses through which I view this project, homeland and diaspora are two key conceptual actors in my work. I use “diaspora” to mean a location outside of a homeland. Homeland, as anthropologist Fran Markowitz points out, is vital to an understanding of group identity:

Home(land) is a highly packed signifier that encapsulates a concept and a place and encompasses a feeling born of desire, laced with nostalgia. It brings together memories and longings, spatialities and temporalities, immediate family and ancestors long-gone, the local and the global, and physical sensations with the intangible and that which cannot be spoken (Markowitz 2004b, 23).

If a homeland is symbolically unifying, then being outside of a homeland (i.e. in a diaspora) is necessarily central to a group’s understanding of its role in a (meta)physical location. It is worthwhile to establish a working definition of diasporic consciousness for the purposes of this project.

Transnational anthropologist Steven Vertovec establishes “diaspora consciousness” to mean marked by dual or multiple identifications. Individuals in
diaspora are aware of decentered attachments, of being simultaneously “home away from home,” “here and there” (Vertovec 1999, 450). Vertovec also cites Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge, who say that diasporas “always leave a trail of collective memory about another place and time and create new maps of desire and of attachment” (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1989, i). These collective memories of diasporic consciousness produce a “multiplicity of histories, ‘communities’ and selves” (Vertovec 1999, 451). A diasporic consciousness, then, is the connection and dedication to more than one location at the same time, a constant awareness of and orientation towards a place other than where one is currently located. Diasporic consciousness is the vehicle through which Jewish national identity is formed because, as anthropologist Nina Glick-Schiller writes, “whether localized or long-distance, nationalism brings together those who share a sense of ‘peoplehood’ based on a common culture and history with the political project of building or defending a territorially based state that speaks for its people” (Glick Schiller 2001, 22).

I recognize that there are various definitions of diaspora and that I am only using a particularly limited one. Some scholars in diaspora studies think that diaspora has to be understood as centered around a homeland and about a commitment to a homeland, while others want to take diaspora as its own autonomous space; their utopian world is all diaspora and no homeland. For example, Judaic scholar Caryn Aviv and historian David Shneer argue that diaspora is no longer relevant in contemporary Jewish identity and that instead, we should focus on a celebration of the homes that Jews have found in different locations worldwide. Also notably, Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin argue that diaspora, rather than an exile from a homeland (and the longing for homeland) is a designation that deserves valorization. They write,

We want to propose a privileging of Diaspora, a dissociation of ethnicities
and political hegemonies as the only social structure that even begins to make possible a maintenance of cultural identity in a world grown thoroughly and inextricably interdependent (Boyarin and Boyarin 1993, 723).²

In this project, I use a definition of diaspora that falls in between those two schools of thought. While I write about a commitment to homeland, I contextualize it within a diasporic space. That is to say, my use of diasporic consciousness includes a commitment to the state as it exists currently. When I refer to an individual or group diasporic consciousness, I am not only identifying an orientation to a present-day place that people imagine as a preferable alternative to where they are now, I am also referring to an allegiance to the government of that place. Specifically, when I talk about Jewish diasporic consciousness I am not merely referring to a theoretical or ideological dedication to a conceptual homeland as described in the Bible, but rather a specific and immediate connection to the state of Israel. That does not imply, however, that the homeland or the state of Israel is necessarily more important than the diaspora in shaping people’s consciousnesses. My central claim is that diaspora politics are not necessarily centered on the homeland itself, but rather I suggest that a group’s affinity for a homeland has more to do with their position and politics in the diaspora.

**Social Positionality**

Central to my project is the argument that one’s sense of self can be influenced by a one’s specific position within the social order. In Marx's scholarly work, he establishes the theoretical foundation of my argument that people's relationships with Israel reflect and are shaped by their positions in U.S. society and relationships to mainstream American Jewry. The Marxist debate about
“base” and “superstructure” engages the question of whether and in what ways the economic order influences ideologies, but I argue that this “base” and “superstructure” model can be applied to how a person’s identity is shaped by that person’s social status.

In his Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx writes,

> In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life process in general. *It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness* (Marx 1909, 362-364. Emphasis mine).

While Marx defines “social being” in purely economic terms in this passage, I would extend it to mean a broader social existence including location in a racialized and classed hierarchy. Marx essentially argues for a kind of determinism in which, as cultural historian Raymond Williams says in his classic commentary *Marxism and Literature*, “some power (God or Nature or History) controls or decides the outcome of an action or process, beyond or irrespective of the wills or desires of its agents” (Williams 1978, 84).

Williams, who critiques Marxism extensively, points out that detractors call this idea determinist because “no cultural activity is allowed to be real and significant in itself, but is always reduced to a direct or indirect expression of some preceding and controlling economic content” (ibid., 83). Marx’s argument is not, however, that people have no impact on the social order, rather he posits that human beings create the conditions that determine the social realities of those to come. In his revision of Marxist theory, Williams provides an important deconstruction of the Marxist argument about base and structure. He aptly
describes how the “determining” process for individual actors is independent of their will, “not in the historical sense that they have inherited it but in the absolute sense that they cannot control it; they can seek only to understand it and guide their actions accordingly” (ibid., 85).

I would argue, though, that while individual actions and values may be personally significant for the actors, they are always products of a larger systemic power structure and can never be independent of their place within that structure. In other words, the term “social positionality” may be misleading in that it can imply that the individuals and groups discussed in this project are positioning themselves consciously and politically within a social order. I would suggest instead that this social positioning is a reflection of a power structure and of “determining processes,” not the results of a personal choice or calculated effort. As Williams points out, “in practice determination is never only the setting of limits; it is also the exertion of pressures” and therefore society is not just a limiting force but also a “constitutive process with very powerful pressures which are both expressed in political, economic, and cultural formations and... are internalized and become ‘individual wills’” (ibid., 87). Historian Daniel Lee comments that in formulating identity, individuals must “continually readjust and reformulate their constructions, adapting meanings to the current, but fleeting, concerns that emerge and disappear with the flow of history” (Lee 2004, 87). I wish to examine those current determinants of how Black Jews, specifically, formulate their identity.

**Reflexivity, Research, and Participants**

While this project centers on an exploration of identity it is important to recognize the sensitivities involved in naming and claiming identity. It is also
necessary for me to share who I am and my relationship to these participants and this subject matter (i.e. Zionism, the state of Israel), which I will do in this section. Throughout the paper I will be speaking from a specific location, physical and metaphysical. Academically, my work is informed by an interdisciplinary approach to studying American culture and society with a specific regard to history, anthropology, and sociology. Personally, my project is shaped by my commitment to anti-racist work and my complicated relationship with Israel.

My research methodology was comprised of two main components – original fieldwork and research on preexisting scholarship. I looked at theory, previously conducted interviews, personal accounts, historical records, web sites, newsletters, internet blogs, newspaper articles, Hebrew Israelite educational materials, and archival information for a more comprehensive understanding. The interviews I conducted, while few in number, were incredibly diverse. I interviewed a range of individuals, from people with one Black parent and one Jewish Ashkenazi parent (and who consequently have more access to the dominant Ashkenazi American community) to Black Jews who are fairly isolated from the Ashkenazi community but identify solely as Jews and reject racial identification, to Black Jews in America who have working relationships with the Ashkenazi community and are therefore considered more mainstream. My participants varied in age from seven to over sixty, were half male- and half female- identified, and had different social and class backgrounds and professions. I approached some people that I knew personally and some through their academic work.

Before going further it is necessary to stress that in a way I am generalizing the overall experiences of large and diverse groups of people based on the few individuals I interviewed. I will attempt to remark upon trends I find
in interviewees’ responses, but ultimately I will not be engaging in a case-study methodology and therefore will be ignoring some differences in order to draw conclusions.

At this point it is useful to introduce the participants in my study; I have relationships with many of the people I interviewed and it is important to be as reflexive as possible in discussing openly how those relationships may or may not have impacted responses and openness. Out of the fourteen participants in my project, three were friends that I knew before beginning the project. Ruby-Beth Buitekant and Ari King, who both identify as Jewish primarily in association with their Ashkenazi Jewish mothers, are personal friends and fellow students at Wesleyan University. Both King and Buitekant seemed particularly forthcoming because of our pre-established relationships and their commitment to helping me with my project.

I knew Azriel (Azzie) Respes in high school through our mutual affiliation with the Conservative movement’s United Synagogue Youth (USY) organization and was thereby also acquainted with Yasminah and Yael Respes, other interviewees. Because of our shared connection with USY and the Jewish Conservative denomination, I felt closely linked to the Respes family, even to those members whom I had not previously met, and they expressed similar sentiments. Their generosity in responding to my questions, I believe, came from fondness for my family and enthusiasm for my project, but also from a vested interest in expressing their points of view and valorizing their experiences.

Rabbi Debra Bowen and Elder Earl Bowen are leaders of the Philadelphia-based Congregation Bethel where I spent several Saturdays. The community is predominantly Black and does not affiliate with any mainstream Jewish movement, although they have relationships with several individual congregations and Rabbi Bowen is often invited to speak at various engagements to primarily
Ashkenazi audiences. Lady Tova T’shura was my contact with the Rabbi and also a participant in my research. I was able to participate in prayers and hear from community members in the group study that is a part of their Saturday services. The time I spent there certainly influenced the willingness of the Bowens and T’shura to participate in my study, although I also believe that I was well positioned to act as a mouthpiece for their political and social points of view.

The other three interviews I conducted were the results of my contacting prominent religious and academic figures in search of participants. After extensive e-mail and phone communications, Rabbi Funnye, Dr. Lewis Gordon, and Dr. Julius Lester agreed to answer my questions – in all three occasions communication ended after the interview, although I did visit Funnye’s congregation, Beth Shalom B’nai Zaken Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation (Beth Shalom), and spend a Shabbat with them. Also, in all three cases these individuals have spoken and/or written extensively on their identity and experiences, so I was able to supplement my interviews with that information. I conducted interviews most often in the homes of the participants with the exceptions of Funnye, whom I interviewed in his office; Buitekant and King, who met with me at my on-campus residence; and T’shura and Lester who responded through emails.

I did not interview anyone who identified as Hebrew Israelite nor did I have contact with Hebrew Israelite communities, primarily because I did not have access. I am aware of the history of academic delegitimization of Hebrew Israelite communities (which I will expand upon in chapter three) and as an Ashkenazi woman I also did not feel that it would be appropriate to assert myself in a community where I was not necessarily welcome. Instead, I read widely on Hebrew Israelites and other scholars’ work with them. To supplement my ideas I read websites, books and newsletters put out by Hebrew Israelite communities.
My identity affected the interviews I did do as well. As a White-identified Ashkenazi Jewish woman pursuing my bachelor's degree in African American Studies, examining my complicity in a hegemonic system has become a focal point of my academic trajectory. My relationship with the state of Israel has posed significant challenges to my ability to analyze my own positionality. Strong familial and emotional ties to Israel are complicated by my view of the Israeli government as an oppressive force in the lives of many people, Israeli and Palestinian alike. This project, therefore, is a direct consequence of my interest in examining power dynamics both within Israel and in discourses surrounding Israel as a homeland. I chose to look at Black-identified or –identifiable Americans who consider themselves Jewish primarily because I am interested in how a marginalized group of individuals might perceive a purported homeland that in actuality sometimes rejects that group’s legitimacy. The fact that I am a White woman certainly affects not only my perspective but also the way different individuals may wish to present themselves to me. I was certainly not an “insider” in these interviews; my status as a formal researcher/interviewer also played a role in those dynamics.

Because the project arose out of an internal conflict about my own diasporic identity, the research I conducted was affected by my personal attitudes and feelings about my own relationship with Israel as a homeland. In the interviews, my questions did purposefully probe stated support for Israel and I brought up discrimination between Israelis as well as towards Palestinians in the interviews to understand how other individuals reconcile these contradictions. There is also significant tension between my perspectives both as an outsider and as an analyst. My interest lies in the fact that that even though they may reject my conclusions, all of the individuals I interviewed are and can be read as Black. My motivation is to understand that relationship to Blackness.
Obviously, as a part of the dominant Ashkenazi Jewish community in the United States, my personal identity interacted in significant ways with each interviewee’s positionality. As if I were not already being placed into a position of privilege through my status as researcher, my personal unquestioned status within the mainstream Jewish community in the United States (established through my ancestry, synagogue affiliation, and education) has inscribed my body with additional privilege and power. It is undeniable that these dynamics played a part in both the interviews and the research I conducted. The way I thought about the project, the sources and individuals I had and received access to, and the information I emphasized and valorized all are functions of my background, training, and privilege.

**Categories of Identity**

In the interviews I asked a series of questions about self-identity and the role of Jewishness in that identity before asking about how Israel and homeland played into those dynamics. I did not have one set of questions that I ran through in every interview; rather the conversations were modified depending on the individual and the answers given. Nonetheless, I did ask how each person identified, because a major component of my research depended on acknowledging the value of examining how people self-identify and how that self-identification interacts with a diasporic consciousness. Interestingly, eight out of the thirteen participants who responded to the question (seven-year-old Evonna Respes did not answer) rejected a racial identity altogether and identified simply as “Jewish” with no racially marked qualifier. The remaining five included “Black” or “of color” or “biracial/mixed” coterminously with Jewish. While I will go into a more in-depth analysis of terminology later, it is worth briefly mentioning here
that identifying as Black or African-American implies an automatic association with a larger community. Similarly, the connotation of “Hebrew Israelite” is a more separatist one, including a rejection of mainstream Jewishness. Choosing to use “Jewish” is an alignment with that community. By mainstream, I mean, as historian Jacob Dorman defines, “conventional Ashkenazi and Sephardic Judaism as practiced by Jews of all colors in the United States” (Dorman 1996, iii–iv).

While I asked participants to describe their own identity, I was unable to maintain those terminologies exclusively for the purposes of my project. I have attempted, in the course of this work, to give value and weight to the terms with which the interviewees identified and felt most comfortable, and I struggled to assign different labels or categories to individuals who had so openly and honestly explained their strong feelings about the words they chose to use in describing themselves. Eventually, however, my analysis took me in the direction of examining their answers and other outside research against the backdrop of social positionality and specifically, distance or closeness from mainstream Jewish communities in the United States. Considering that I am primarily a researcher in this project, my need to develop my own terminology (despite the preferences or sometimes outright desires of some of the participants) in my research ultimately came first.

When I was thinking about terminology I specifically wanted to avoid grouping individuals with distinct experiences together in an empty category. I found, however, that to some extent such groupings are unavoidable. While terms such as Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox were not useful, as many predominantly Black congregations are not affiliated with any of those movements, I also did not gravitate towards “Jew by choice” or “Jew by birth” because of the hierarchy they imply. Prejudice towards converts is common, even when converts have participated in traditional halakhic immersion and
conversion, rituals that many Black Jews have chosen not to undergo for varying reasons. Also, as many scholars point out, in this day and age any practicing Jewish individual is necessarily a Jew by choice. I chose not to use the word “convert” for similar reasons. I am not comfortable deciding who has converted and who has not since the individuals I interviewed and studied have converted in different traditions; for the purposes of my project, if an individual considers him- or herself converted and Jewish then I consider that individual Jewish, the same way I would consider anyone born to a Jewish parent Jewish.

I struggled with whether or not to use the terms “White” and “Black” in my thesis. I was both dissatisfied by their reductiveness and reluctant to reinforce the racial binary that persists in the United States, but ultimately decided to use them as descriptors of the social reality as it exists and as it affects the identities of my participants. Racial categories are elusive, and Whiteness in particular is normalized to the point of invisibility despite its power, which poses significant challenges to engaging with identity. As Lee writes,

There is no natural way to be White, act White, or communicate as a White person. There is no a priori metaphysical bond or primordial solidarity between Whites or between the people of any other racial or religious group. White society first emerges when people communicate about sharing “Whiteness.” Communities of people construct themselves and their others as they communicate. A society, such as Whites exchanging race talk, forms itself and its environment in an entirely self-referential, autological manner (Lee 2004, 86).

Of course, Lee’s debunking of identity as naturally or biologically based applies to Blackness too. He highlights the social construction of racial and religious identities in general. But although they are material falsities, categories of identity are relevant in their tangible implications. Goldschmidt points out that at specific instances in American history, “race has emerged as the preeminent category of difference and identity, lending meaning to both nation and religion (as well as gender, class, and other identities). At other times, however, nation or
religion (or other identities) have taken center stage” (Goldschmidt 2004, 9).

What makes Whiteness unique, however, is how it has been positioned in the United States as normative, natural and therefore powerful. Perhaps, then, Whiteness should be named whenever possible to make it visible and less assumed, a conclusion that I ultimately reached, although I rejected “White” as a blanket term for all normative Jews. The widespread conflating of Whiteness with Jewishness erases and silences the Sephardi Jewish community of color as well as other Jews of color in the United States. As Mevorach says,

Efforts to describe Jews in a racial vocabulary is reductive precisely because the grammar of race summons prescriptive analysis – a search for, and selective attention to, specific attributes and vocabularies through which to confirm meanings and present them as a credible representation of particular phenomena. Although the majority of Jews in the United States look white and trace back to immigrants from Europe, American Jews today include Black, brown, and beige Jews of Afro-Asian background (herein the irony that immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East, including Jews, are directed to mark the ‘white’ category on official documents) as well as the children of Jews married to non-Jews who are not white (Gibel Azoulay 2001, 107).

Researchers Diane Tobin, Gary Tobin, and Scott Rubin point out the difficulty of talking about Jewish diversity when the current language is too confining for accurate representation. They ask, “How do we describe a group for which there is no group label?” and point out that “[j]ust as Ashkenazi Jews are a mix of many peoples encountered during centuries of wandering throughout the diaspora, Jews of color have different backgrounds, different life experiences, and different perspectives on their relationship to Judaism” (Tobin et al. 2005, 33). I am unwilling to conflate “White” with “mainstream,” which would erase those Sephardi Jews, who often identify as Jews of color, and others who are not White (including a sizeable community of Black Orthodox Jews) but are a part of the mainstream. For the purposes of this project I will, whenever appropriate, use Ashkenazi in conjunction with White to be more specific.
As I ultimately decided to use “White,” I will also use the term “Black.” I prefer Black to African-American for several reasons. First of all, as anthropologist Katya Azoulay Mevorach (née Gibel Azoulay) points out in her rejection of multiracialism, “The campaign for a multiracial category obscures the fact that Black/African American is already a multiracial category.” She points to the work of anthropologist Melville J. Herskovitz in 1928 who calculated that “at least 71 percent of the Negro population had white or Indian ancestors, while in terms of ethnic diversity an amalgamation of African groups had occurred among the slave population in the United States” (Gibel Azoulay 2001, 93). While Mevorach includes “African-American” in the citation above, I believe that “African-American” obscures the diversity of the Black American community and also implies a voluntary migration to the United States as in similar terms such as “Italian-American,” “Mexican-American,” or even the broader “Asian-American.”

Along that logic, African-American would be a group restricted to African immigrants to the United States. James McWhorter, author of Authentically Black, discusses this in an opinion piece entitled “Why I’m Black, Not African American”:

Modern America is home now to millions of immigrants who were born in Africa. Their cultures and identities are split between Africa and the United States. They have last names like Onwughalu and Senkofa. They speak languages like Wolof, Twi, Yoruba and Hausa, and speak English with an accent. They were raised on African cuisine, music, dance and dress styles, customs and family dynamics. Their children often speak or at least understand their parents’ native language.

Living descendants of slaves in America neither knew their African ancestors nor even have elder relatives who knew them. Most of us worship in Christian churches. Our cuisine is more southern U.S. than Senegalese. Starting with ragtime and jazz, we gave America intoxicating musical beats based on African conceptions of rhythm, but with melody and harmony based on Western traditions (McWhorter 2004).

McWhorter effectively posits that Black encompasses the experience of descendants of slaves in the United States (or in the Americas in general). In addition, “Black” includes those individuals who are not citizens of the United
States, although they might be living here and experiencing the reality of their Blackness within the U.S. racialized paternalistic hierarchy.

Another contentious term that warrants explanation is “Jew” or “Jewish.” In his dissertation, Dorman discusses his decision to use the terms “Black Jew” and “Israelite” interchangeably, saying, “I capitalize the words ‘Black Jews’...when I mean to connote forms of Judaism established and defined by African Americans. I use lower case ‘black Jews’ when I speak of African Americans who are Jewish, but are not adherents of Black Judaism” (Dorman 1996, iii-iv). In his on line essay “Who Are We? Where Did We Come From? How Many of Us Are There?” Rabbi Shlomo Ben Levy, a Black rabbi, reminds us,

It is also important to remember that not all of these groups accept the terms used to describe them. Some, in fact, reject the term “Jew” precisely because it connotes, in the minds of most people, a white ethnic group. Therefore, the use of this appellation could be misinterpreted as a desire to be white or a denial of African heritage. In either case, its application could be regarded as an affront by some. The groups who feel this way prefer the term Hebrew or Israelite because they believe it avoids a connotation with “whiteness,” or conversely, implies a connection with “blackness” (Ben Levy, “Who Are We?”).

I will only use “Hebrew Israelite” to refer to those historical movements and their modern-day counterparts that prefer not to affiliate with mainstream Judaism or reject White Jews as legitimate and therefore prefer “Israelite” to “Jew.” The term “Black Jews,” then, will generally be used as a subcategory of Jewish people along with Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews, since many Black Jews are unaffiliated with either the Ashkenazi or Sephardi traditions.

The difficulty, of course, is not only in the implications of the terminology itself but also in the overlaps and mixings within categories. Whenever possible I will give specific background information in discussing different personalized experiences. For example, there is a range in how interviewees identify. Rabbi Bowen explained about her congregation,

The reason why we identify ourselves as Jewish and not some of the other
terms – Hebrew Israelite, Pentecostal, whatever – is because we are more mainstream and people do not take time to discriminate. There are many people of color who claim to be Hebrew Israelites and they support concepts and theories that we do not. Many of them are anti-establishment, some are messianic, you have a whole spectrum and I don’t want to be misidentified. I’m just a Jew. Just a Jew.

Funnye echoed Bowen’s sentiment, relating,

We identify with the African experience with Judaism, drawing on traditions from Uganda, the Beta Israel of Ethiopia, the Belimba of South Africa, the Igbo of Nigeria, and other traditions in Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, and Burunde... I am a Jew. Other terms, such as Israelite, come from the rejection by other Jewish communities of those individuals. But I identify as Jewish.

Members of the Respes family not only emphasized their desire to be identified as Jewish, they also rejected any racial signification. Gamaliel Respes noted,

I can’t deny that I do have some type of ethnic African in me, I don’t know what tribe. I do know that on my mother’s side there is British blood, I know that there is Caribbean blood in me, I know that there is Spanish-Portuguese blood in me. So why should I just identify myself as African-American and deny these other heritages that I have?

His daughter, Yasminah, said, “And it doesn’t matter what my skin color is, and if I have African-American blood or African blood or Native American blood, I’m Jewish. And that’s all that matters.” And Illannah Respes mentioned, “When someone asks me I’ll say ‘I’m a Jew. I’m a proud Jew’...But of course people look at color and say, ‘You’re Black and White’ or ‘You’re Black.”’

Other participants included their racial identity along with Jewish identity. Lester, for example, identified as a “black Jew.” He also noted that he is a member of two mainstream congregations: one is Reconstructionist and the other Conservative. King, who also noted his affiliation with Ashkenazi congregations, identified himself as Jewish, but racially he said, “My dad is Black, my mom is White, making me biracial, mixed.”

Of course, there is no single way that Black Jews negotiate their dual identity. In an interview with the Washington Jewish Week, Black Jewish scholar Carolivia Herron, when asked whether being Black or Jewish is more important
to her, answered “I feel 100 percent both” (Fingerhut 2007). In contrast, Pamela Harris, who was interviewed by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, said that her Jewish identity is most important: “My community is the community of B’nai Israel [children of Israel]” (Pomerance 2008). And Sandy Lowe, a middle-aged woman of Cuban, Chinese, and American Black descent on her father’s side and a second generation descendant of Ukrainian immigrants on her mother’s side, said:

I was born on Tenth Street in Greenwich Village between Jane and Horatio, and I say I grew up a regular little Jewish colored girl. I think of myself as being Jewish, not white. I don’t think of Jews being white because they’re Semites — they don’t come from Europe, even though they come from Europe — no more than you would think of an Arab as being white. Most people don’t think of Arabs as being white. They’re Semites, and so are Jews and that’s their origins. I know they spent several hundred years in Europe, but Jews can self-identify. To me, Jewishness is not just a religion, it’s a culture, and I come from that part of the culture that was oppressed, that connected its oppression with the oppression of everyone else, that developed an ethos and a theory around what it meant to be thrown out and dispossessed in the world. That’s what it means to me to be Jewish. I know there are ways that other people have of being Jewish, but that’s not my way (Funderberg 1994, 245).

Lowe’s comments illuminate the complexity of identity in general and Jewish identity specifically. How can we talk about a “Jewish identity” when there are so many competing and conflicting ideas of what that means? What I will do in this thesis is engage with these different conceptualizations and how they are formed with an awareness of the ever-changing, dynamic nature of identity.

**Chapter Overview**

Because Jewishness is the identity in question for the purposes of this project (it is that which my participants are claiming and emphasizing as central, even at the expense of or substitution for racial identity), my second chapter examines the different ways that Jewishness serves as a marker of identity.
Although I will look at the intersection of racial and religious identity, I will emphasize that religious and racial identities are not static, fixed, and singularly defined, but rather varying and constantly changing. Again, while in my discussions of the participants I will examine the different functions that Blackness has signified and continues to represent, Jewishness is the contested identity here and will therefore be my focus. At various points in divergent and overlapping discourse, Jewishness has been constructed as race, religion, ethnicity, and nation. I will examine the centrality of diaspora and homeland to Jewishness with an emphasis on the role of modern Zionism in the Jewish national consciousness. Examining the tensions and complexities of Jewish identities is important because Black Jewish legitimacy is contested so frequently by more mainstream Jewish institutions and individuals. Moreover, examining the role of diaspora in Jewish identity can further illuminate how a marginalized community might emphasize their strong affiliation with the Jewish homeland in order to underscore their Jewishness.

In my third chapter I will provide a general demographic social survey of Jews of color in the United States as well as a discussion of the scholarly literature of these communities. I will give statistics about current day communities of Jews of color in the United States. In addition, I will briefly relate the stories of several Hebrew Israelite or Black Jewish communities in the United States historically and discuss their lasting impacts on communities today.

The vast majority of my analysis, namely personal findings from interviews and a case study on African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem in Dimona, will come together in my fourth chapter. I will look at the differences in perspectives between Black Jewish individuals who are relatively less marginalized and those who are more marginalized. I will also discuss the Dimona community, a group of individuals who occupied an extremely marginalized position in the wider Jewish
American context while they remained in Chicago, but after over thirty years of residence in Israel have begun to actually shift their positionality and have become more accepted by the mainstream. This case study is illuminating in that it suggests a promise of mobility in diasporic identification.

My final chapter will consist of examinations of the diasporic consciousnesses of pre-1948 American Jewry and Caribbean immigrant families. I will be comparing these examples to Black Jews’ commitments to the state of Israel as a way to negotiate their marginalized positionality within the larger, predominantly Ashkenazi, American Jewish communities. Finally, I will draw the conclusion that a connection to a homeland can be a tool in political maneuvering within a diasporic context. As Dorman writes,

Black Judaism is but one response to the negation of the African American in a country that has been, and continues to be, infused with racism. Thus, Black Judaism is a counter-hegemonic identity; an effort on the part of African Americans to define themselves in a positive sense as Israelites with an exalted historical background in contrast to the internalized racist stereotype of uncultured “Negroes.” The racism of the first decade of the twentieth century supplied the grounds, in fact the very terms, of the counterracism at work, expressed in the view that the so-called Negroes are not a race but the chosen people (Dorman 1996, 1).

Dorman also argues for a revisionist perspective on the theory that Black people would not adopt Judaism unless there were tangible benefits from such an identity (ibid., 198); Dorman says that those benefits are that Black Judaism becomes a “psychically rewarding receptacle for their metahistorical needs” (ibid., 9). These needs are derived from what postcolonial philosopher and revolutionary Franz Fanon calls “The Face of Blackness.” He writes,

Ontology—once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the wayside—does not permit us to understand the being of the black man. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. Some critics will take it on themselves to remind us that this proposition has a converse. I say that this is false. The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man. Overnight the Negro has been given two frames of reference within which he has had to place himself. His metaphysics, or, less pretentiously, his customs and the sources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in
conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him (Fanon 1994 [1952], 110).

Fanon describes his experience of Blackness: “Shame. Shame and self-contempt. Nausea. When people like me, they tell me it is in spite of my color. When they dislike me, they point out that it is not because of my color. Either way, I am locked into the infernal circle” (ibid., 116). Dorman’s suggestion that Jewishness offers Black Jews something other than the ontological status of Other that Fanon describes is important, especially since Black Jews are often relegated to the periphery of American Jewish society even as they are searching for inclusion. I would extend this theory to apply to potential benefits of a diasporic consciousness within a diasporic context – for the most marginalized Black Jews I interviewed, an allegiance to the state of Israel is a declaration of one-ness, of solidarity, of investment in a nation and a home, and a way to imagine a utopian other space outside of the racial hierarchy of the United States.
Chapter II

Nation and Race in American Jewish Identities

“For many Jews, Israel as a physical place remains an emotionally laden, highly effective symbol of Jewish solidarity that often induces powerful feelings of pride, ownership and belonging.”
- Caryn Aviv and David Shneer

In this chapter I will engage with Jewish identity in an attempt to explore its different constructions and the layers of those constructions. Through an examination of the importance of homeland and diaspora to Jewish identity, I will begin to uncover the relevance of the Zionist movement to American Jews and how it succeeded in becoming a central part of Jewish identity. I will begin with general reflections on identity and nation and then move on to more detailed histories of the participants in my project.

Identity is simultaneously socially constructed and socially relevant. As discussed earlier, identities can be co-constructing, overlapping, mutually reinforcing, and dependent on social conditions. In his introduction to the book Mapping Jewish Identities, scholar of Jewish studies Laurence J. Silberstein introduces this concept of identity as a dynamic process focused on becoming. He writes,

Rather than objectify or reify a particular identity, individual or collective, and trace its development over time, a spatialized approach to identity treats subjects according to the various sites in which they are located and the various positions that they occupy. As a subject moves among various sites, social, political, or cultural, he or she is positioned in different ways (Silberstein 2000, 4).

Silberstein emphasizes not only the importance of space and location in identity formation, but also the role of memory. He claims that the importance of
memory contributes to the inherently unstable condition of identity (ibid., 3).

Nation as a general concept is dependent on collective memory, and the claim to land is related to origin myths specifically. For Jewish identity in particular, this construction is contested; not all Jewish individuals and organizations agree that the Jewish people make up a nation, although many agree on the traditional system of matrilineal descent to determine Jewishness. Some assert that Jews make up a religious group or an ethnic subset of an assimilated alternative national identity.

And yet central to this project is the importance of national identity in American Jewishness. The construction of a Jewish nation is not only vital to the justification for the establishment of a Jewish homeland, but it is also a guiding force in diasporic relationships with that homeland. Although nation connects with and overlaps with ethnicity, gender, and religion, I will be focusing on the constructions of Jewishness, namely race and nation, that most directly inform the lives of the participants in my research.

In a discussion of contemporary Jewish identity, it is difficult to avoid the subject of Israel. For many Jews, Israel represents belonging and inclusion. In her dissertation, philosopher Janice W. Fernheimer writes, “The establishment of the modern state of Israel in 1948 and the Law of Return, which enables any Jew to claim automatic citizenship along with other material and political benefits, further increased both the ‘normalization’ of Jews as a nationality and the stakes for having one’s Jewish status recognized and authenticated” (Fernheimer 2006, 135). In Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin’s book of interviews that explore (White) Jewish connections to Israel, Dreams of Zion, James J. Katz, an undergraduate student, talked about belonging in Israel: “In Israel, my Jewishness was not tolerated or even encouraged, but simply taken for granted... I think of Israel, not as a place to live when I’m old, or to be buried after I die. I think of Israel as a place to
raise my children” (ibid., 57). When interviewed, sociologist and Jewish studies scholar Samuel Heilman echoed that theme, remarking, “I found myself in a Jewish state and in its capital, I discovered that what made me feel at home was finding a place where being called a Jew was not something that made me stand out, but rather something that made me feel included and an insider” (ibid., 83).

The irony, of course, is that not all Jews are welcome in the same way in Israel. Ethnographer Lisa Anteby-Yemini notes in particular how Ethiopian Jewish immigrants are marginalized (Anteby-Yemini 2004) and scholar of Jewish studies Hagar Salamon writes,

The dominant Jewish narrative based on shared religion and origin, and thus the very existence of this community presents paradoxes to Jewish identity. Ethiopian Jews serve as a prism through which symbolic dimensions of Jewishness are refracted in many directions. Woven through these paradoxes is a continuous thread along which fundamental questions about the nature of race and ethnicity are negotiated in constant process. The arrival of the Ethiopian Jews to Israel over the last two decades has offered a new frame of reference for defining Jewish Israeli identity – a Jewish “Other” (Salamon 2001, 75-76).

In general, Jews of color have been less welcome than their Ashkenazi counterparts in the Jewish homeland. In discussing the paradoxical construction of Israel as the homeland for all Jewish people, anthropologist Virginia Dominguez writes,

There are specific power struggles and historical explanations for the relative higher and lower statuses accorded different cultural traditions in Israel, but I want to suggest here that behind it all is the paradox of peoplehood and the awkward but crucial relationship that exists between the Jewish people and Israeli society as semiotic objects. Can a people really exist without a culture by which they can be identified and distinguished from others? Can a people really be pluralistic? And if part of the Zionist project is the cultural and social reunification of the Jewish people (after centuries of dispersion) what form will (or should) that Israeli Jewish culture take, who will decide what to promote, on what do they base their arguments, and what do the arguments reveal about the assumption of peoplehood? The frequent Israeli discourse on ethnic groups and ethnic differences takes on, in light of these questions, a special significance. For it is not just about relative deprivation and relative privilege; it is about acknowledging difference while asserting sameness (Dominguez 1989, 101-102).
This question of peoplehood that Dominguez points to is important, and
the erasure of difference in the construction of a national identity is vital to
understanding the relationship between Jewishness and Zionism. In the text that
follows I will engage with the concepts of nationalism, exile, and diaspora as they
specifically apply to the Jewish experience in the United States. Zionism is
obviously inextricable from these discussions, and Israel’s role in Jewish identity
will be explored in detail. I will also examine how race and the racialization of
Jews in the United States have, at different points, contributed to and conflicted
with the Zionist movement and Jewish nationalism.

**Jewish Conceptions of Exile and Diaspora**

In this section I will examine Jewish ideas of diaspora and how they have
influenced Jewish communities historically. I will discuss the importance of the
promise of homeland to diasporic Jewish communities in particular. A discussion
of Jewish Diaspora and the longing for homeland first necessitates an explanation
of Jewish nationalism and Zionism in particular.

The term “diaspora” comes from one of the first Greek translations of the
Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew word that was translated from Deuteronomy 28:25,
“za’avah,” has many meanings. It was translated as “dispersion,” but more
frequently means atrocity, outrage, horror, or terror. Though they contest this
definition and work to construct a post-diaspora Jewish identity, Aviv and Shneer
describe the traditional Jewish understanding of diaspora effectively. They
translate the phrase “ve-bayitah le-ze’avah le-chol mamlechot haaretz” as “thou shalt
become a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth.” They argue that in its origins,
Jews’ dispersion among other nations had a more threatening tone than what
“diaspora” currently implies (Aviv and Shneer 2005, 3).
While Aviv and Shneer ultimately posit that the ominous origins of “diaspora” underscore equally ominous consequences in the modern world, my focus rests instead on how Jews’ negative constructions of their exilic existence are closely linked to the words used to describe it. The more common Hebrew word for exile, “galut” (golus in Yiddish or Ashkenazi Hebrew), is also an inherently negative term. While many groups have used the term “diaspora” to explain their communities’ geographic dispersion and the meaning of “exile” in English is negative as well, Jewish Diaspora, galut, suggests spiritual exile, not just dispersion from a homeland. Aviv and Shneer describe galut as a “diminished spiritual and eschatological condition, connected to the negative idea of exile, homelessness, and a yearning for a return to Zion under the guidance of the Messiah” (ibid).

Political scientist Gabriel Sheffer suggests that Jewishness is a “classical” or traditional diaspora. In other words,

World Jewry is an ethnonational entity whose identity is anchored in noticeable primordial and ethnonational-symbolic foundations. These include the idea of common ancestry, biological connections maintained through endogamy (until recently), a historical language, collective historical memories, a discernible degree of national solidarity, a deeply rooted connection to the ancient homeland (but not necessarily to present-day Israel), and shared patterns of collective behavior. It should be emphasized that... the Diaspora’s identity is also based on instrumental factors, such as societal pressures, deprivation, and economic considerations, which contribute to continuous transformations (Sheffer 2002, 335).

The land of Zion, therefore, is constructed as the traditional mythic Jewish home in the world to come (ibid., 3-4). Diaspora is significant because of the symbolic assurance of belonging that homeland promises. This possibility of a home, Markowitz writes, is “the ultimate peaceful retreat, a this-worldly alternative to social fragmentation and tumultuous traveling,” and the wish to return to that home or homeland of past generations “still beckons as an antidote to partial belongings and unfulfilled dreams” (Markowitz 2004b, 22).
Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism, taught that the Jews were a nation and would be welcome nowhere but in their own homeland (Eisen 1986, 91). When interviewed in *Dreams of Zion*, Jewish scholar Sylvia Barack Fishman illuminated this connection and the importance of homeland, saying,

> So this is the bottom line: I love Israel because I feel at home there... As a Jew, I am part of [a] dual vision and [a] dual responsibility. I care about people in many places and try to help in ways that I can. Still, looking after Israel is a personal privilege, because Israel is my family. (Salkin 2007, 6).

In the same text, Matthew Brooks, the executive director of the Jewish Policy Center and of the Republican Jewish Coalition, said, “We carry a responsibility to support Israel and to keep her strong. As Americans and as Jews, we are eternally connected to that tiny piece of land at the crossroads of three continents, where amid all the diversity, we find ourselves at home” (ibid., 9).

Sheffer points out that “during the twentieth century there were two distinct periods in world Jewry’s history; before and after the establishment of the Jewish state.” He describes pre-1948 Jews as constituting a “historical stateless diaspora” and post-1948 Jews as a “historical state-linked diaspora” (ibid., 334). This distinction fits into the Boyarin brothers’ assertion that diaspora is “less and less solely an external category applied to certain groups, and increasingly a category through which these groups articulate themselves” (Boyarin and Boyarin 2002, 27).

Other people see Israel as a promise of Jewish continuity. In his interview, Assemblyman Dov Hikind of the 48th Assembly District in New York said, “Israel stands as a bulwark against the inconceivable – the systematic annihilation of Jews. Israel is where Jews will always be welcomed, where the value of every Jewish life is immutable” (ibid., 80). And Jewish liturgical composer Danny Maseng positioned Israel as psychically vital to Jewish continuity. He said, “I cannot imagine my life without Israel and I would not count on the survival of
the Jewish people – spiritually, psychologically, or physically – without Israel” (ibid., 87). Zionism, therefore, has become constructed as essential to the survival of religious and national Judaism.

Glick Schiller defines nationalism as a “set of beliefs and practices that link together the people of a nation and its territory” (Glick Schiller 2001, 17-18). Peoplehood and land are usually tied together closely in nationalist discourses, and this is particularly true in Zionism. She explains,

The nation is understood to be people who share common origins and history as indicated by their shared culture, language, and identity. Central to nationalism is the belief that a nation has the right to control the territory that is its homeland by having its own state, whose territorial boundaries stretch to the borders of the homeland (ibid., 18).

Political scientist Yossi Shain argues that while nation presupposes a homeland, Jews are distinct in their religious emphasis on homeland. Zionism, defined here as the belief in and work towards a Jewish homeland in the state of Israel, requires Jewish identity for membership in this Jewish state. Shain argues that because Jewishness is a prerequisite, the center of Zionism is necessarily religion, and that emphasis on religion inextricably ties diaspora Jews to Jews within Israel (Shain 2000, 170). He writes, “The concept of ‘the Land of Israel’ made the character of the Jewish Diaspora unique, since, by religious definition, living outside the Land is a sign of Jewish failings, and an eventual return to Zion is viewed as an integral part of God’s plan” (ibid., 174). Shain constructs Jewishness as a religion primarily and even exclusively, which he then traces as foundational to the importance of homeland in Zionist ideology. Evidently, Zionism not only positions homeland as central, but also privileges it spiritually and morally. I would posit instead that Zionism is a nationalist response to a historic diasporic experience.

**The Rise of Zionism in American Jewish Identity**
The idea of home resurfaces as central to diaspora and diasporic consciousness and the Zionist movement capitalized on that focus by promising a Jewish homeland. Naming a physical place as home is a statement of power and a claiming of rights. Aviv and Shneer write, “By arguing that a place is home, Jews express a sense of entitlement, control, and familiarity. Home is a place where people practice identity and intimacy” (Aviv and Shneer 2005, 23). They also assert that before Israel was established as a homeland, many Jews saw their diasporic lands of residence as homes. They say that Jews have “always had many diasporas and homelands – from Sephardic Jews who were expelled from medieval Spain in 1492 and longed for a mythic return, to nineteenth- and twentieth-century German Jews, who, before the Holocaust, viewed Germany as their homeland” (ibid., 6). Furthermore, after mass Jewish immigration to the United States from Eastern Europe, many Jews saw America as their homeland.

One Eastern European Jewish immigrant writer, Mary Antin, said, “Not ‘may we be next year in Jerusalem,’ but ‘next year – in America!’” (ibid., 7). The line “may we be next year in Jerusalem,” is read at the end of the Passover Seder as a beacon of hope for freedom in the future (a specific freedom located in the land of Israel), and is loaded with religious and national longing and promises of belonging. Antin’s replacement of Jerusalem with America in this key Jewish liturgical phrase symbolizes how for some Jews, the United States had replaced Zion as homeland.

Indeed, many nineteenth century American Jews established roots in the United States, and most believed that their best strategy for survival was assimilation. Their goal of making a home in this new land was emphatic and clear. Reform movement leaders, who were in the forefront of anti-Zionism and assimilation movements, rooted their arguments in American tradition and, most
notably, in the words of John Quincy Adams, who said that immigrants must “cast off the[ir] European skin, never to resume it” (N. Cohen 2003, 47). They also used Jewish scriptural texts: for example, they quoted the prophet Jeremiah who, when counseling the first exiles from Jerusalem to Babylon, said, “seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to the Lord in its behalf, for in its prosperity you shall prosper” (ibid). Identifying with American values and interests gave Jews a stake in the honor and success of the United States (ibid). Moreover, Reform movement leaders pointed out that the greatest Jewish cultural achievements were products of lands outside Palestine, proving that the interchange of ideas with foreign societies not only enriched Jewish culture but also was essential to the security and vitality of the Jewish faith itself (ibid., 27-28). They repeated that they neither required nor wanted a home other than the United States, and that American life was not exile, since it was not a life of suffering: life in a land of their own would be far worse; it would be separate and function as a new ghetto (ibid., 47). As historian Naomi Cohen writes, “if, as Reform posited, America was the one true homeland of American Jews, the culture created in a Jewish state would not be their culture” (ibid., 47-48). I will discuss the anti-Zionist movement led by American Reform Jews in greater detail in chapter five.

While many were clearly uninterested in establishing a Jewish state, some American Jews did establish firm Zionist beliefs and practices. As early as 1921, major monetary support was coming into Israel from the Diaspora. The Twelfth Zionist Congress approved a $6 million budget in 1921, 75 percent of which came from American Jews. After Israel’s establishment in 1948, it was Jews in North America who were most able to financially support the new state. After the Holocaust, the need to form a specifically Jewish homeland took on more urgency and Zionism gained more ground. Aviv and Shneer argue that Zionist
discourse reconstructed the hierarchy that situated Diaspora below homeland in order to encourage such financial support (ibid., 12), and they say that from the beginning, “the (re)building of the Jewish state would depend on Diaspora dollars, most notably American Diaspora dollars” (ibid., 11). Shain, however, says,

From its founding, Israel sought to dominate the terms in which Jewish interests and Jewish identity were conceived. Israeli Zionist leaders felt that they had the right to demand obedience and support from Jewish-Americans in making Israel strong, secure, and economically sound. The fact that Israel considered its version of Jewish existence superior was translated de facto into the total negation of diasporic life as inferior (Shain 2000, 176).

Shain does agree with Shneer and Aviv, however, that American Jews’ role became more and more key to Israeli success as Israel became increasingly dependent on American funds. Shain explains that American Jews rejected the idea of shelilat bagolah (the negation of the Diaspora), as evidenced by relatively low levels of economic, political, and economic support for Israel until the 1956 Suez war,\(^7\) which was seen as a successful campaign against a growing threat.
Shain’s underlying theory is that originally, American Jews envisioned themselves as “an essential partner in the struggle for Jewish empowerment,” and separated themselves from other diasporic Jewish communities as such (Shain 2000, 177). It was only after Israel’s military conflicts that relations began to change and Israel was centralized among world Jewry—Sheffer points out that the first peak in money transfer to Israel happened after 1956, and the 1967 Six Day War,\(^8\) which was portrayed as a huge triumph of Israeli (masculine) military forces, furthered this trend (Sheffer 2002, 352).

The 1967 war was incredibly important in establishing Israel’s centrality to Jews worldwide, and Zionism became the primary articulation of diasporic consciousness in the United States at that time. The rhetoric of the war was charged with references to the Holocaust, and after its military domination in the face of seemingly impossible odds, Israel became symbolic of heroism and power.
Although American Jews demonstrated an awareness of the problems inherent in the Israeli military occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and the Sinai Peninsula, and mass displacement of the Palestinian people, they still conceived of Zionism as a source of Jewish pride (Aviv and Shneer 2005, 14).

Shain writes that the 1967 success was “redemption from the image of the weak Jew,” and points to commentaries by prominent Jewish scholars like Martin Peretz, who says that the war was “the return of power to the Jewish people,” and Alan Dershowitz, who writes that it was “a pinnacle event in his life that enabled him to express his Jewishness openly” (Shain 2000, 180). Consequently, the number of Jewish immigrants and tourists increased after 1967, Jewish leaders openly expressed their political and diplomatic support for Israel, and donations reached an unprecedented peak (Sheffer 2002, 352). Because of the increase in American donations, Israel became more dependent than ever on the United States. This awareness of Israeli dependence gave American Jews a sense of purpose around which to organize (Shain 2000, 181). One of the most powerful organizing forces, the American Israeli Political Action Committee (AIPAC), which had been founded in 1952, began to gain momentum and strength after these wars. Consequently, increasing numbers of Jewish Political Action Committees formed as well (Sheffer 2002, 352).

As the years went on, Jewish diasporic support of Israel became a mixture of “anxious protectiveness towards a precarious, threatened homeland in a hostile world and pride in the military might of the swaggering sabra” (Scheman 2001, 23). The continued priority status of the Israeli military reflected Israel’s role as the champion of world Jewry. Philosopher Naomi Scheman writes about her memories of how Israel was described as a safe haven for Jews and a vital leader in combating anti-Semitism. She recalls,
My parents were not anti-Zionist, but on the whole, Israel did not loom large in my consciousness (I still have not been there). From time to time, to commemorate some occasion or other, we planted a tree in Israel, and we had relatives living there, one of whom lost two sons in the Six Days’ War, which immediately preceded my wedding in 1967 and lent it an air of somber celebration. But it was clear that our calling as Jews was here, in America, in solidarity with those whose lives here had not yet achieved the success of ours. The displacement of the Diaspora had in my mind less to do with the destruction of the Second Temple than with the anti-Semitism that at the turn of the century had driven my grandparents and so many of their generation from Europe, and that culminated with the Holocaust and the destruction of Europe as a home for Jews. The ending of the Diaspora consequently had less to do with a return to Israel than with an end both to the continuing threat of anti-Semitism, which made the state of Israel an arguable necessity, and to the whole range of other threats that put other groups of people at similar peril (ibid., 19. Emphasis hers).

In the 1970s, as Israel took on increasing importance in Jewish communities, many leaders saw Israel as a way to sustain and bolster American Jewish continuity (Aviv and Shneer 2005, 14). Emphasis on Hebrew language instruction replaced traditional Yiddish, and religious schools began teaching Sephardi pronunciation of Hebrew as used in Israel. The Israeli flag was placed at the center of the sanctuary next to the ark and, in some services, blessings for the state and armed forces of Israel were introduced every Shabbat (Shain 2000, 181). Shain argues that even the centering of Holocaust memorials was emblematic of this change:

The institutionalization of Holocaust memorials became instrumental in garnering support for Israel, first, by creating a linkage between the dangers facing the Jewish state and the Jewish experience of genocide; second, as vehicle in the struggle to discourage growing Jewish assimilation; and third, and above all, as part of the Jewish effort to capture the moral center of American public life (ibid., 180). Holocaust memorializing discouraged Jewish assimilation, and trips that connected visiting concentration camps to touring Israel directly defined Israel as the antidote to anti-Semitism. Aviv and Shneer explain that “[u]sing tropes of history and biblical inheritance, diaspora business organizations offer an emotional promise to visitors to renew their spirituality, their Jewish identity,
and their sense of place in a hostile world” (Aviv and Shneer 2005, 57). The tourism industry further strengthened connections between Israel and American Jews as American youth especially established trends of gradual migration through extended visits to and temporary employment in Israel. For many upper-middle-class American Jews, “shuttling between America and Israel through gradual migration has been the process, rather than the outcome, by which some of them came to call a new place ‘home’” (ibid., 54). Israel became home for many of these Jews through their constant movement back and forth between diasporic communities and Israel, through their learning the language and setting down roots with jobs and homes, and also through their feelings of protection and security in Israel.11 As Scheman writes, “If, in Robert Frost’s words, ‘Home is where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in,’ the failure of the world to take in the refugees from Hitler was an overwhelming argument for a Jewish homeland” (Scheman 2001, 23). These rationales for and connections to Israel on the part of American Jews only strengthened with time, and the activity around Israeli activism and support grew as well. British historian Lord Max Beloff even remarked, “Israel had become the new religion of American Jews... Jews were to be found less often praying to God than raising funds, mobilizing support and engaging in political lobbying on behalf of Israel” (Shain 2000, 181). One possible explanation for this strengthening connection is, as Jewish studies sociologist David Mittelberg argues, that Israel is the one place in the modern world where Jewish values are normalized and dominant, so Israel becomes a place of opportunity for Jewish people in the Diaspora to support the centralizing of daily-lived Jewishness (Mittelberg 1999, 125).

The relationship between American Jews and Israel is complex but deeply interconnected. In their argument that Zionism is ultimately based upon the need for unity against a powerful outside world, the Boyarin brothers point out
that the permanent slogan of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies establishes this solidarity clearly. It reads, “We [the Jewish people]... are one, in Israel and around the world” (Boyarin and Boyarin 2002, 31). Along these lines, Mittelberg documents how personal identification, Diaspora Jewish education, and young adult Jewish resocialization within Israel are the primary impacts of “the Israel connection” (i.e. Jewish American diasporic consciousness) on Jewish identity (Mittelberg 1999, 127). This impact facilitates a “day-to-day partnership and common fate and destiny of Jews in North America and Israel, each enhancing thereby the other’s Jewishness” (ibid., 128).

Post-Zionist historian Yakov Rabkin argues that the relationship between Diaspora Jews and the state of Israel is so strong that it has effectively facilitated the replacement of Jewish identity with Israeli identity (Rabkin 2006, 51). Rabkin quotes the Lubavitcher Rebbe at the beginning of the twentieth century who complained that those who embraced Zionism viewed themselves as “good Jews” even though Zionism pushed Jews away from Judaism (referred to here in religious terms) instead of bringing Jews closer to “the truth” (ibid., 50). Aviv and Shneer agree with Rabkin; they say, “Jewish communal organizations worldwide have gradually made support for Israel a civic religion around which to build a modern secular Jewish identity” (Aviv and Shneer 2005, 12). Indeed, the fact that non-religious Israeli holidays like Independence Day and Jerusalem Day have become a part of the Jewish calendar (ibid., 193) may support this claim, but the significance and centrality of Zionism is what I would like to emphasize here. If, as Rabkin says, “Zionism casts itself as a replacement for Judaism, which it recognizes as a respected but by now obsolete predecessor,” (Rabkin 2006, 50) then Zionism, or nationalism, is the key defining characteristic of Jewishness, and Israel is centralized as the land around which the nation is centered.
The Function of a Racialized Jewishness in Social Positionality

In this section I will examine how Jewishness has been constructed as a race and what the implications of a racialized Jewish identity are in terms of historic Jewish social positionality in the United States. Religion and Black studies scholar Eddie S. Glaude notes that race and nation are often interchangeable and inextricable as both words are used to describe cultural or physical differences between groups of people. As Glaude points out, the Oxford English Dictionary defines nation as “an aggregate of persons with a common ancestry as to form a race or people.” The Latin word nationem means “breed, stock, or race,” and race, in one of OED’s definitions, is “a tribe or nation with a common descent” (Glaude 2000, 64). Perhaps it is not surprising that Zionism echoed larger nineteenth century trends of blending race and nation, because as Glaude points out, “To belong to one nation or race is not to be a member of another; using the term can be a way of calling attention to different historical experiences, languages, stories that only some of us share, and, perhaps, biological inheritance” (ibid).

In their advocacy and organizing efforts as well as in various aspects of everyday life, many Jews constructed Jewish identity as a racial designation and, by extension, attempted to qualify Israel as a racialized community. The racialization of Jews had begun much earlier when Jewish communities were Othered in Europe and elsewhere. As historian Sander Gilman writes in his seminal work The Jew's Body, Jews were seen as physically distinctive and inferior in post-Enlightenment Europe. He describes how the Jewish body – large, flat feet; a distinguishable voice; a circumcised penis; a large nose; and diseased, darker skin – became central to the construction of Jews as Other (Gilman 1991).
Despite the discriminatory racialized stereotypes Jews historically faced in Europe, one way that many Jews identified themselves was through an articulation of “race as a basis of unity” (Jacobson 1998, 184). Jews embraced race as a legitimate designation and used it to express their uniqueness (Goldstein 2006, 11-12). Jacobson writes that even in pre-Holocaust Europe, in the era of pogroms and the Dreyfus Affair, some individuals (especially Zionists and intellectuals) were looking for secular and political definitions of Jewishness since for them, religion had “ceased meaningfully to explain their ties to the ‘folk’” (Jacobson 1998, 184). Jacobson says, “Racial perceptions of Jewishness are not simply a subject for the annals of anti-Semitism... Among the secularized Jews of the haskala, or Jewish enlightenment, responses to ‘the Jewish Question’... rested solidly upon racial notions of a unified Jewish ‘peoplehood’” (ibid., 175. Emphasis his).

Racialized language in Jewish self-expression was one strategy by which Ashkenazi Jewish Americans in the late nineteenth century positioned themselves. Although “[i]n Europe... Jews were difference” (Kaye/Kantrowitz 2001, 120. Emphasis hers) in the nineteenth century United States, Jews found possibilities for social mobility and assimilation into American society through the articulation of Jewish racial distinctive-ness. But racialized discourse, while encouraging some forms of assimilation, also discouraged others. Historian Eric Goldstein argues, “American Jews drew comfort from a racial self-definition because it gave them a sense of stability at a time when many familiar markers of Jewish identity were eroding” (Goldstein 2006, 11). The small Jewish population and the ease with which Jews adopted American styles of dress and language facilitated the construction of Jewish acceptability at that time, even if Jews did not fully assimilate into White America. Politically and socially, until the late nineteenth century Jews made it clear that they would pose no threat to the
existing social order and therefore were “rarely seen as anything other than a stable part of the white population,” (ibid., 35) even though they were not completely accepted as White. Jews embraced a racial designation and their non-threatening status and reaffirmed it whenever possible. Even the American Zionist poet Emma Lazarus who wrote the words inscribed on the Statue of Liberty writes in her 1887 Epistle to the Hebrews, “Judaism was emphatically both a race and a religion” (Jacobson 1998, 184. Emphasis Lazarus’s). In the nineteenth century, the articulation of race was a strategy for insuring a secure place in the United States’ changing social landscape but it was also a means for the establishment of a Jewish community in a way that would not threaten the dominant social order (Goldstein 2006, 12). At the turn of the century, with mass Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe and race tension building, Jewish racialists found it more difficult to navigate these delicate categories.

Goldstein asserts that for many Ashkenazi Jews, claiming Jewishness as a race was not representative of a desire to distance the Jewish community from mainstream White America, although some continued to make a case for Jewish racial exceptionality and separation from Whites. As racial uncertainty spread through dominant White communities, however, increasing numbers of Jews began to question if they could continue to identify Jewishness in racial terms and still claim Whiteness. Increasingly, a racialized Jewish identity began to mean that Jews were unassimilable, a point upon which Zionist organizers relied greatly in their separationist argument. Some Jewish leaders thought that a redefinition of Jewishness back to religious terms would solve the problem but others found race “a comforting means of self-understanding, one that provided a sense of security as they continued toward their goal of greater social integration” (ibid., 87). In general, most twentieth century Jews were unable to decide on a single definition of Jewishness, although they continued to position themselves as
White. Ultimately, the belief in a Jewish racial (and therefore unassimilable) identity formed a cornerstone of Zionist ideology, and individuals who subscribed to a view of Jewishness as a religious identity were more assimilationist.

Regardless of whether or not Jews believed that they were a separate race, they were almost all invested in maintaining a closeness to Whiteness and a clear disassociation with Blackness. One powerful strategy Jews employed for asserting their Whiteness was creating clear and purposeful distance between themselves and Black Americans, “America’s principal racial outsiders” (ibid., 51). Widespread Jewish attempts to claim Whiteness and Jewish efforts to detangle themselves from any designation of Blackness marked a fundamental change in the racial conceptualization of (Ashkenazi) Jews as White. This set the groundwork for the normalization of “Jew” in America to mean “Ashkenazi, phenotypically White Jew.” This intentional conflation of Jewishness with Whiteness has implications both in terms of the historic delegitimization of American Jews of color and also in terms of the presentation of Israel as a White nation.

Early Zionism defined Jewishness primarily in terms of a nation but employed specifically racialized discourse in ideological arguments. Goldstein writes that in a time where the future of the Jewish homeland was uncertain, Zionism looked to race as tangible and scientifically proven evidence that Jews had the ability to build a nation. Zionists often “appealed to ties of ‘flesh and... blood’ in making the case for Jewish nationalism” (Goldstein 2006, 92). In his influential work on Jewish diaspora, Galut: Modern Jewish Reflections of Homelessness and Homecoming, sociologist of religion and Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary Arnold Eisen writes,
Political Zionists pointed to concrete progress, which was indeed impressive, and – a strategy more relevant to our concerns – engaged in a relentless critique of the diaspora. A political solution would be found, they argued in effect, because one bad to be found. The conditions of exile, which they subjected to intense scrutiny, simply would not support continued Jewish existence. This remains a prominent thrust of Israeli self-justification even today. Second, political Zionists had to show that their Judenstaat [Jewish State] would be Jewish in more than name or population. Their appeal among the East European masses depended upon convincing them that normalization would not uproot Jews entirely from their past. This too remains a prominent theme of current discussion. (Eisen 1986, 95)

Part of the appeal that Eisen discusses had to do with the racialization of Jews, but the important point to bring out here is, as Eisen implies in the quote above, that Eastern European Jews were the desirable ones targeted in the Zionist campaign. Therefore, as Fernheimer writes,

Historically, many Zionist leaders had understood greater Jewish peoplehood in racial terms and appealed to this concept to persuade Jews to migrate to and work in Eretz Yisrael. But this larger vision of Jewish peoplehood has generally been circumscribed by Ashkenazi prejudice, and thus excluded black or darker-skinned Jews from Iraq, Iran, Yemen, America, or Ethiopia. This prejudice is reflected not only in Ashkenazi imaginings of Israel as a “Jewish” and thus “white” state, but was also reinforced by American nationalist goals (Fernheimer 2006, 135-136).

Historian Roberta Gold argues that Zionists used racial claims in their desire to “legitimate the Zionist colonial project by casting Jews as part of the civilized - i.e., white - race.” She points out that in 1914 Chaim Weizmann wrote about Zionist hopes that “England will chance upon an empty piece of land in need of a white population, and perhaps the Jews will happen to be these whites” (Gold 2003, 205). Chaim Weizmann later became Israel’s first president.

While in many ways Israel was constructed as necessary because of Jewish assertions of racial and national difference (and unassimilability) between Jews and other Whites, Israel was, from the outset, purposefully and strategically constructed as a White country. Jacobson writes, “America’s client state in the Middle East became, of ideological necessity and by the imperatives of American nationalism, a white client state” (Jacobson 1998, 188. Emphasis his). Because of
Israel’s designation as the Jewish homeland, Jews in the United States reinforced their own status as White. While Tobin et al. argue that “[d]iverse Jews, by their very existence, explode the myth of Jews as the ‘white race,’” Jews were interested in positioning Israel and Jewishness as White for political reasons, not for statistical representations (Tobin et al. 2005, 31). Tobin et al. write, “This misrepresentation of Israel (a blend of Africans, Asians, Arabs, Latinos, and Europeans), Jews, and Judaism becomes harder to believe when it is obvious that Jews are people of color” (ibid). The misrepresentation makes sense within a wider racialized context, since the erasure of the real diversity of Jews and Israel ensures Jewish and Israeli Whiteness (and therefore power). Fernheimer says, “Consequently, when Jews ascribe Jewishness to essence, they tend to privilege the religious aspects, and when they emphasize aspects of ‘peoplehood,’ their conception tends to exclude darker peoples even if they simultaneously assert that ‘Judaism is colorblind’” (Fernheimer 2006, 135-136).

Scholar of Afro-Judaic studies Walter Isaac points out that by the twentieth century the “Jew’s presumed fact of whiteness,” (emphasis his) defined as a “social and literary condition in which Euro-American Jews are bound to a racially stratified society that presumes white (European) superiority over the inferior black (African)” emerged to reinforce hegemonic racialized distinctions. He expands,

Not only is ‘the Jew’ understood to be entirely separate from ‘the Negro,’ but also white Jewish legitimacy is taken for granted, while a hermeneutic of suspicion is called forth when black Jews appear. In a very literal sense, the presence of black Jews cannot be true (W. Isaac 2005, 515).

I would argue that this Jewish fact of Whiteness also functions to ensure the social, political, and military viability of the Israeli state; therefore the exclusion of Black Jews is directly linked to the legitimization of Israel as White and therefore worthy. And, as Isaac points out, in current day discourse, “whether
white Jews adopt such phenotypifications or not, popular American social discourse has categorized them as ‘white’ (i.e., black Jews are not really Jews)” (ibid., 514). This Whiteness, first ascribed to American Jews and then extended to include Israel in general, functions to Israel’s advantage as well, in political and economic alliances, namely with other “democratic” capitalist countries.

Therefore Israel’s centrality to Jewish identity and to Jewish White identity is unmistakable, as the diasporic consciousness of American Jews evidences. In looking at how Zionist discourses and Israel figure into American Jewish identity, it is worth noting that a function of homeland is that it requires a diaspora. As Eisen says,

> Within a Jewish state, Jewish tradition could evolve freely without the threat to the nation, because whatever emerged inside that state would presumably be Jewish, by definition. What else could it be? Outside a Jewish state, however, Jewish culture would be overwhelmed by the cultures in which Jews lived... The nation would disappear. But the Spiritual Center... could not be a center if there were no Jews on its periphery (Eisen 2986, 96. Emphasis his).
Chapter III

The Reality and Denial of Jewish Diversity

“Jews have always resembled the peoples among whom they live, whether in Africa, Asia, or Europe. Why should American Jews be an exception? In a land where racial and ethnic boundaries are becoming increasingly blurred, the American Jewish community is also shifting.”
-Diane Tobin, Gary A. Tobin and Scott Rubin

While working on this project, when I would talk to various individuals about its scope, the overwhelming response I received was, “There are Black Jews?” The majority of the people I talked to, regardless of their race, religion, class, gender, age, educational and social background or geographic location were surprised to learn about the existence of Black Jews apart from the handful of converts, Ethiopian Jews, and half-Jewish, half-Black individuals visible in the media or in their home communities. The construction of American Jewry as White is partially based in the fact that the majority of American Jews are phenotypically White, but the erasure of a large and growing community of Jews of color in the United States is too powerful to be written off as an oversight. W. Isaac writes,

In the United States there are various groups of African Americans who also refer to themselves as Jews, Hebrews, or Israelites... The White Jewish community has never acknowledged the black Jews’ legitimacy, and as a result researchers have sought out information that might confirm the black Jews’ religious claims. At first, searching for the Jewish authenticity of blacks might seem important for nothing more than determining the black Jews’ status according to halakha (Jewish law). However, it is exactly this need to verify black Jewish legitimacy that highlights the distinctly racial component of contemporary Jewish identity, for if the Jews are not a race, why then would the black Jewish community’s status as Jews be in doubt? (W. Isaac 2005, 512-513).

In this chapter I will extend W. Isaac’s description of Black Jewish communities
in describing the diversity of American Jewry. I will examine trends of Black conversion to Judaism, unions between White Jews and Black non-Jews that produce Black Jewish children, and the rise of (often) syncretic Black Jewish communities that exist independently from the Jewish mainstream. I will also engage with W. Isaac’s analysis of Black Jewish marginalization by looking at different experiences of discrimination and through an examination of the construction of Jews as White. Examining experiences both from individuals who exist on the periphery of the mainstream and from those who are halakhically legitimized by mainstream Judaism will provide a basis for my larger argument that this position of marginality affects how different people self-identify.

The greater marginality of certain communities and individuals is, in large part, due to the distinctive background that many of them have; the Black Jewish communities briefly described in this chapter that emerged semi-autonomously in the early twentieth century were largely unrecognized by the mainstream Jewish establishment at that time and therefore their descendants are widely delegitimized by mainstream Jewish congregations today. Through an examination of Jewish slaveholding and constructions of Blackness I will establish that relationships between Black and White Jews are situated in historic race relations in the United States overall.

**Jewish Diversity Today**

The global Jewish population today is remarkably varied, as Tobin et al. document in their extensive study entitled, *In Every Tongue: The Racial & Ethnic Diversity of the Jewish People*. They note that Jewish communities exist on every continent but Antarctica, and in 120 different countries, including predominantly Black countries like Ethiopia, Uganda, Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya (Tobin et al.
Some of these communities are ancient and some are more contemporary. Tobin et. al estimate “millions” of people of color who have either converted to Judaism, have Jewish heritage, identify with Judaism or are on the path to Judaism in South Africa, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Burundi, and elsewhere in Africa. A community in Uganda, the Abuyadaya, has been practicing Judaism for almost a hundred years and other such communities exist in India, Burma, Brazil, Peru, and around the world (ibid., 25). As Funnye says, “Jews around the world tend to look like the communities in which they are found... Jews in China look Chinese, Jews in Poland look Eastern European, Jews in Ethiopia look Ethiopian” (Fishkoff 1999).

Jewish diversity is a fact in the United States as well. While the majority of American Jews are of Ashkenazi descent, there is considerable diversity that is not often recognized by or reflected in an average synagogue or community. A study by the Institute for Jewish and Community Research (IJCR) in 2000 found that over seven percent of the 6 million American Jews, or 435,000 people, identify as African American, Asian, Latino/Hispanic, Native American or mixed-race. This number includes 85,000 individuals who said that they are a race other than White but did not classify themselves more specifically (JStats 2008).

Additionally, the National Jewish Population Survey in 2000 found that 120,000 Jewish adults living in the United States were born in Latin America, Asia, the Caribbean, or the Middle East (outside of Israel). IJCR estimates that more than half of this adult foreign-born population consists of people of color, and so they added another 65,000 to the number of Jews of color that they had counted thus far. Combined with the Israelis with Sephardi or Mizrahi heritage living in the United States and the American Jews with Sephardi heritage (who are often considered people of color), this number is equivalent to 20 percent of
American Jews, or 1,200,000 American Jews of color (ibid). As anti-racist poet and theorist Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz declares, “The number of Jews of color is large enough that Jewish Whiteness should never be assumed” (Kaye/Kantrowitz 2007, 100. Emphasis hers).

The Hebrew Israelite community is diverse as well. The Israelite Board of Rabbis, the current seminary for Black rabbis, identifies six member congregations, but there are many non-affiliated communities and individuals as well. Some Black congregations identify exclusively as Jewish while others mix Jewish worship with Christian traditions. Some have relationships with Ashkenazi or Sephardi mainstream congregations while others claim that Black Jews are the only true descendants of Israel (Tobin et al. 2005, 46).

Jews of color include children of mixed parentage, Jews by descent, individuals attracted to Judaism as children, and people whose parents or grandparents were drawn to Judaism in the past. As Kaye/Kantrowitz points out, “In addition to observant Jews who are black, and blacks who observe Judaism... there are those who simply have a Jewish mother, which makes them halakhically/by Jewish law Jewish; or a Jewish father, which may make them Jewish by family, practice, or culture” (Kaye/Kantrowitz 2007, 46). Evidently, the diversity even within the wider Black Jewish community is considerable.

Tobin et. al. make the argument that Jewish diversity is essential for Jewish survival. They point out that most Jews of color “are deeply identified as Jews regardless of their path to Judaism or their degree of institutional or religious affiliation. This is a fundamental indicator of a community’s long-term viability” (Tobin et al. 2005, 28). Moreover, the number of Jews of color worldwide and in the United States is growing constantly through intermarriage, adoption, conversion, reimmersion, and the reclaiming of Jewish identity (Kaye/Kantrowitz 2007, 101).
Therefore, the number of American Jews of color and Black Jews specifically is on the rise. Despite this fact, the historic and widespread marginalization of Black Jews in the United States is enduring. Dorman notes that most Black Jews today are not connected to the Harlem communities established in the 1920s. He says, “Every black Jew who identifies as a Jew does so out of great love for the Jewish heritage and often at the price of ignorant and unwelcoming comments; nearly everyone who has spoken with me has said how much ‘easier’ it would be to assimilate into African America” (Dorman 1996, iv).

As Dorman implies, Jews of color and Hebrew Israelites have not always been warmly embraced by American mainstream Jewry. Jewish diversity has had historic tensions that linger today. Even with individual and community efforts to align with Ashkenazi and Sephardi traditions and rituals, and regardless of demonstrated support for Israel, many Black Jews are delegitimized and relegated to the periphery of Jewish society. As W. Isaac remarks, “After all, if there are no black Jews, then how can Judaism be against them?” (W. Isaac 2005, 533). This position of marginalization and alienation from the mainstream, to which I will return later in the chapter, is vital in understanding these individuals’ relationships with their faith and professed global community – the greater Jewish community.

**Biblical Origins**

Before any analysis of Black Jewish marginalization, however, I will discuss a range of historical explanations for the present day Jewish diversity I just examined. One such explanation goes back to the historical and mythological origins of Judaism, which are located at the geographic crossroads of Africa, Asia, and Europe (Tobin et al. 2005, 67) in what is known today as Israel. The
narratives of the Hebrew Bible, the Torah, are situated in that region and, as I argue in the last chapter, the land there is still very much at the center of Jewish consciousness. For many Black Jews in the United States and worldwide, the link between historical Israel and historical Africa represents “a cornerstone of their identity” (ibid., 118).

Ethiopian scholar Ephraim Isaac points out that Jewish diversity goes back thousands of years:

Over two thousand years ago, the Jews were an ethnic group – but even then not a “perfect” one. Since then, Jews have intermingled with many nations and absorbed many proselytes... The ancient Israelites were not a racial unit but a sacral association.... They were a people bound together by a common language, and common territory, similar historical experience, and common consciousness. The Ark of the Covenant was the main sacred cult object and formed the center of worship. They had a primary unit of social and territorial organization, ...and extended family that was then patrilineal. ...It is the centrality of concern for the Torah revealed on Mount Sinai and the great values of our heritage that bind us together as Jews (E. Isaac, 2004).

The original Israelites in the Torah were probably a diverse group themselves and it is unlikely that any of them were as fair-skinned as they are shown in current day Ashkenazi depictions. Different origin narratives trace Black Jews to the original Israelites who came out of Egypt in the Exodus story or to the lost tribes. Others point to Jewish origins in Ethiopia, formally known as Abyssinia.

**Jewish Slaveholding, Conversion, and Cultural Diffusion**

Another theory that focuses on why so many Black Jews originally came to the United States from the West Indies proposes that they were descended from the African slaves of Sephardi slaveholders (Brotz 1964, 47). As early as the seventeenth century, Sephardi Jews from Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands founded settlements in the northern regions of Latin America and the Caribbean. Unions between these Sephardi Jews, some of who were slaveholders, and Black
slaves and free Black people were common (Chireau 1999, 22). As Jonathan Schorsch documents in his text on Jewish slaveholding, *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World*, “The forced intimacy of slavery inevitably gave rise to complex interpersonal relations between members of different social groups, relations characterized by hostility, adoption, compromise, and affection outside the usually sanctioned social norms” (Schorsch 2004, 218).

Nonetheless, the issue of Jewish slaveholding and its impact on the formation of Black Jewish communities is often contested. Anthropologist Howard Brotz argues that Jewish slaveholders did not convert their slaves (Brotz 1964, 47). Advocate for Ethiopian Jews and author of the comprehensive work *Black Jews in America: A Documentary with Commentary* Graenum Berger maintains that Southern Jews did not convert their slaves because then, by Jewish law, that slave could not be sold to a gentile or forced to work on the Sabbath. Berger specifically points to a Jewish congregation in Charleston, South Carolina, that circulated a clear set of rules prohibiting the acceptance of proselytes of color (Berger 1970, 22). Schorsch also says that “Jews for the most part kept their religion from the great majority of their slaves” (Schorsch 2004, 218).

Some evidence proves that at least a few Jews did convert their slaves. In Suriname, for example, census records from 1788 show that there were 1,311 “White” Jews, and 656 “free mulatto” Jews and Black Jews combined (Landing 2002, 178). Figures in 1791 were comparable. Historian Rabbi David Eichorn writes,

That the Jews took advantage of the opportunity and that they converted their Negro slaves to Judaism in sizeable numbers is shown from the 1791 census figures. Even though most of these slaves were probably converted involuntarily, numbers of their descendants have continued to be faithful adherents to Judaism to this present day. Many a Jewish tourist in the Caribbean area has been amazed to see the Négro porter or maid in his hotel wearing a Star of David and, upon inquiry, has been told, simply and proudly, “I, too, am a Jew” (Eichorn 1965, 123-124).
Afro-Caribbean anti-colonialist scholar CLR James also says that the Jews “spared no energy in making Israelites of their slaves,” and that in the islands the majority of Jewish slaveholders treated their slaves according to Biblical law, for example, many Jews did not allow (or rather, require) their slaves to work on Saturdays.¹²

Whether or not slaves (were) converted to Judaism, it is clear that slaves belonging to Jews were exposed to Jewish practice and belief and even occasionally participated in various rituals (Schorsch 2004, 226). For example, Schorsch documents how some women slaves in Curacao slaughtered fowl, without supervision at times, and presumably in accordance with the dietary laws of *kashrut*. Also, in at least once instance a family rented a woman slave to hold the *halakhically* mandated vigil over a dead body before its burial (ibid., 227).

There is additional evidence that Maroon communities maintained some Jewish practice or at least Jewish syncretisms, including “isolation and washing (cleansing) during and after menstruation” and the maintenance of the word “treyf” (meaning not kosher and forbidden) to mark taboos (ibid., 229). It is likely that many Jewish practices became the way of life for their slaves as well, who have carried such traditions through generations and influenced the resurgence in modern Black Jewish communities (ibid., 228-229).

A 1794 letter from the scholars of the Jewish community in Suriname to the Surinamese governor notes that some of the children of Jewish planters and their female “slaves or mulattos... having been born out of wedlock after [the] manumission [of their mother], were instructed by their mother of whom they were born and took the name of Portugese Jews” (ibid., 228-229). Schorsch presents this information as evidence that these women either saw enough of Jewish life that they wanted to pass it on to their children or else recognized the social status their children would receive in the community as Jews. Regardless,
Jews of color were the result of these naming practices. Jewish identity did, indeed, hold promise for the offspring of Jews and enslaved people, at least for a time. Documents show that in eighteenth century Jodensavanne, Suriname, some people of color attended services at the local synagogue and participated in communal ritual life. Some Black or mulatto Jews married in the synagogue according to halakha, which Schorsch explains as a function of the demographic instability of the community and the fact that stricter exclusionary practices were not yet firmly established. This access, however limited, to the Jewish community set foundations for future Black Jewish communities.

**Hebrew Israelite Communities in the United States**

The first reports of Black Jews in the United States surfaced in the late nineteenth century (Gold 2003, 182). One of the first communities described as Black and Jewish is the Church of God and Saints of Christ in Lawrence, Kansas. Williams Saunders Crowdy, a former Baptist preacher, established the congregations, also known as the Temple Beth-el congregations, in 1896. Crowdy chose some Jewish beliefs and rituals while maintaining the structure of a Christian church. He taught that Black people were descended from the ten lost tribes of Israel and called his congregations “tabernacles” (Kaye/Kantrowitz 2007, 46). This community, like others such as Prophet Frank S. Cherry’s Church of the Living God – Pillar and Ground of Truth for All Nations in Philadelphia, and Elder Warren Robinson’s Temple of the Gospel of the Kingdom, Ever Live and Never Die Church in New York City, adopted Jewish practices derived straight from the Old Testament. As Chireau writes,

The... group’s appropriation of Judaism constituted what some writers have characterized a Hebraic-Christian or Judeo-Christian formation, in
which aspects of Old Testament tradition were integrated with Christian elements... Members of the Church of God, for instance, maintained the office of the rabbinate, celebrated Passover, and observed a Saturday Sabbath while incorporating New Testament principles, emphasizing the work of Jesus Christ and his teachings, and practicing such rituals such as baptism (Chireau 1999, 21).

The remnants of a Christian belief system, combined with the community’s Blackness and physical/social separation from mainstream Jewish communities have historically led many scholars to question the legitimacy of these groups’ claims to Jewishness, as W. Isaac discusses. Anthropologist James Landing, for example, summarizes various scholars’ research on Black Jews but ultimately concludes that “the origins of Black Judaism had nothing to do with contemporary Jews or Jewish life, because the personalities involved knew nothing about it” (Landing 2002, 70).

Black Jewish communities gained membership and media attention beginning primarily in the 1920s. There are records of eight Black Jewish communities originating in Harlem between 1919 and 1931 (Kaye/Kantrowitz 2007, 46). Most notably, the Commandment Keepers and the Moorish Zionist Temple were founded in 1921. Both Jewish and Black publications followed the progress of the Black Jewish communities in detail. In the 1920s, news reports described the all- or mostly-Black congregations in racially specific terms (Gold 2003, 183) and in these articles the communities were intent on defending their legitimacy as Jews.¹⁴ Notwithstanding these attempts, the congregations were still rejected by the mainstream Jewish community in the United States. In addition to their immediate marginalization within a Jewish context, these new groups faced obstacles in attracting and keeping members. In 1929 the Moorish Zionist Temple counted only fifty members and the Commandment Keepers had just one hundred (Gold 2003, 184).

Regardless of low membership, an increasing number of communities
emerged in Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, Chicago, New York, and New Jersey. Emigration patterns from the U.S. South may have played a part in the growing communities; the migration of West Indian and South American Black people and later movement of Eastern European Jews to the cities of the United States may have allowed for further exchanges between these two groups, especially since they often lived in the same urban ghettos during the early twentieth century (Chireau 1999, 22). Much of the Black Jewish groups’ leadership came from West Indian and foreign-born individuals (Gold 2003, 185).

One such leader was Nigerian-born Wentworth Arthur Matthew (ibid., 215). Matthew, who had grown up in St. Kitts, became the Rabbi of the Commandment Keepers Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation in Harlem (ibid., 216). Matthew ridiculed stereotypical Afro-Christian practices like shouting during services and speaking in tongues as “niggeritions” (Chireau 1999, 21-22). He instead taught that during slavery “they took away our name, language, religion, and science,” the only possessions the slaves had, and that slaves were “pumped full” of Christianity to make them more docile. He said,

> The word Negro is a badge of slavery which comes from the Spanish word niger meaning black thing. Those who identify themselves with Negroes identify themselves with black things, not human beings... All so-called Negroes are the lost sheep of the House of Israel which can be proved from Scripture, and they all have birthmarks that identify their tribe (Brotz 1952, 326).

After taking Hebrew lessons from a European Jewish immigrant, Matthew purchased Jewish ritual materials such as a Torah scroll, an ark in which to put the Torah, prayer shawls, and yarmulkes. He learned Orthodox Jewish rituals and some Yiddish, familiarized himself with Jewish institutions, and founded his own Rabbinical College (Ehrman 1977, 216).15

While Matthew taught that ancient Hebrews were Black, he never denied the legitimacy of Ashkenazi Jews, whom he claimed “kept and preserved”
Judaism over the centuries. It was important to consult Ashkenazi Jews on post-biblical and rabbinic holidays like Hannukah, since they could not be found in the Torah, Matthew said, but he also introduced African and Caribbean traditions in his attempt to counter the heavily Europeanized conventions of mainstream Judaism (Ehrman 1977, 216). The combination of these new practices and Matthew’s teaching that conversion was unnecessary since his congregants were reclaiming a part of their heritage, distanced the Commandment Keepers from mainstream Jewish congregations. In an effort to explain his ideology and bridge the divide between his community and mainstream communities, Matthew spoke at Ashkenazi synagogues around the United States and at B’nai Brith lodges internationally. He also applied several times to join the New York Board of Rabbis, but he was rejected. Eventually Matthew concluded that Black Jews would never be fully accepted by Ashkenazi Jews, especially not if they maintained independent congregations and Black identity politics (Blackjews.org).

Some Black Jews in the early- and mid-twentieth century (and still today) claimed that Jews of European ancestry were not legitimate Jews. This is unsurprising considering the fact of their own rejection by White Jews. Rabbi Arnold Ford, for example, not only taught that Black people were the original Jews but that only Black Jews were real Jews. Ashkenazis, he said, were descendants of converts or individuals who had learned about Judaism secondhand from Africans. Chireau writes, “Black Jewish dogma, as represented by the statements of these leaders, expounded tenets of spiritual and cultural provenance that foreshadowed the beliefs of later religious movements with racially exclusive, nationalist concerns, such as the Nation of Islam” (Chireau 1999, 24).

Nonetheless, many Black Jewish leaders were supportive of a homeland in Israel. One of the first Black Americans to call for the establishment of a shared
homeland for Black Jews and others in Palestine was Rabbi Mordecai Herman, also a member of Garvey’s UNIA and an organizer at the Moorish Zionist Temple (ibid., 23). Herman distributed a flyer in the 1920s paraphrasing the Balfour Declaration of 1917. The flyer identified a photograph of several people posing in front of a Zionist flag as “the large consulate which has been maintained by the black Jewish princes from Ethiopia for the good for Palestine” (Landing 2002, 143). Herman publicly said,

Listen, brother, it is my present belief that Palestine will be free, for reasons which can not yet be explained to the world. It is a fact that our Jewish brothers in Europe and America can not hold and defend Palestine; but our black Jewish brothers in India, China, and Abyssinia have a little more skill in warcraft, than the normal and heroic Jew…. Quick work is being carried out by the Moorish Zionists to bring together all Black Israelites to one place in Palestine for military reasons, and, therefore, funds are being collected to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and shelter the homeless. Also, Jewish schools are being built for implanting in the young the Jewish religion and ways (ibid.).

Herman clearly had a vested interest in ensuring the establishment of a Jewish homeland and he saw the necessary steps rooted in both educational and military preparations.

Some of these communities lost their relevance and followers drifted away, but many continued to live lives influenced by Jewish customs and a relationship with Israel. Whether or not White Jews recognized these individuals and congregations, they established physical and symbolic roots and passed on their teachings to the generations that returned to Jewish practice. Many Black Jews and Hebrew Israelites today trace their heritage to these early communities.

**Black Conversion to Mainstream Judaism**

Another important group of Jews of color consists of those who convert to mainstream Judaism through *balakhic* ceremonies. These individuals, despite
their status as a growing demographic, are commonly erased in discussions about Jewish diversity and community. Some of these converts are adopted into White Jewish families and convert in childhood while others make the decision as adults.

Tobin et al. report that in the Institute for Jewish & Community Research study, exposure to Jews and Jewish tradition in childhood influenced many people’s decisions to convert later in life. They point to the close contact between White Jewish and Black communities through neighborhoods, schools, and employment (Tobin et al. 2005, 118-119). One Black Jewish participant in the study, identified only as Martin, said that his exposure to Judaism in his formative adolescent years influenced his decision to convert. He said, “Intellectually, I’ve known I wanted to be a Jew probably since I was in high school. In the high school I went to, there were two kinds of people: there were Jews, and there were blacks. It was pretty much fifty-fifty. So, at a very early age, I was exposed to Jews” (ibid., 121).

Latesha Jones learned about Judaism through Jewish friends and, at the age of 29, felt more comfortable in a synagogue than in the Baptist church in which she was raised. She said of the Jewish community, “I felt like this is my place.” She decided to convert, subsequently changed her name to Elisheva Naomi Chaim, and worships at Conservative and Orthodox congregations. Another woman, Sivan Ariel, left Catholicism for Judaism. Ariel, who may have some Jewish ancestry, called her conversion a homecoming and said, “Some of us know beyond a shadow of a doubt we’re here because we’re home” (Pomerance 2008).

The rate of Black conversion to Judaism is increasing. An article in The Atlanta Journal-Constitution from June 2008 noted three different mainstream Jewish congregations that had considerable numbers of Black individuals in
conversion classes. At Congregation Shearith Israel in Virginia-Highland, a synagogue affiliated with the Conservative movement, forty percent of the people in classes on Judaism led by Rabbi Hillel Norry are Black. At the nearby Marcus Jewish Community Center in Dunwoody, about 20 percent of the two dozen participants in the introduction to Judaism classes are Black. Learning and support groups are popping up in response to Black interest in Judaism, and Rabbi Norry said, “Business is booming... On any given Shabbos [Sabbath], there’s 10 non-Jews at our service, visiting or studying to be Jewish” (Pomerance 2008).

There are also substantial efforts to provide access to individuals who may be distant from the Jewish community but are interested in learning, Rabbi Celso Cukierkorn’s online Introduction to Judaism class is an example of one such program (Tobin et al. 2005, 131).

**Children of One Black Parent and One (White) Jewish Parent**

Another significant group of Black Jews are those born to one Black parent who is not Jewish and one White Jewish parent. Rates of interracial marriage and relationships are increasing and Ashkenazi Jews are disproportionately represented as the White partners in these unions. While this trend has been acknowledged anecdotally, there are no numerical figures documenting these relationships (Gibel Azoulay 1997, 62). Nonetheless, the children of many of those unions are among the increasing numbers of Jews of color.

This trend first gained attention in the early 1970s. Historian Lenora Berson notes that many such marriages resulted from college romances (Berson 1971, 205). There are a number of explanations for this phenomenon and Berson
points to a few in a reductive but perhaps accurate generalization about why
Ashkenazi Jews so often sought Black partners:

A complex of reasons makes Jews more likely than other Whites to marry
Negroes, Jews seek higher education in greater numbers than other
groups. They are more inclined to be intellectual and committed to civil
rights. They are frequently in rebellion against stifling family bonds.
Breaking the taboo of marriage with an outsider is a tempting form of
revolt. A Negro partner represents extreme defiance (ibid., 205).

Berson is not the only person to note involvement in the civil rights or other
social movements as a key location of interaction and partnership between
Ashkenazi Jews and Blacks. Mevorach writes about how for many Jewish youth,
the civil rights movement filled a void left by their estrangement from Jewish
communal life (Gibel Azoulay 1997, 75). 17 Jewish involvement in the civil rights
movement is widely documented and discussion of the romantic relationships
between Blacks and Whites during that time period was so common that the
term “civil rights marriage” emerged. While many of these marriages did not last,
it is estimated that twenty to thirty thousand Black Jewish American children
were born from these unions and contribute to the Black Jewish population
today (Kaye/Kantrowitz 2001, 44).

In fact, since the mid-1960s Jews have increasingly married non-Jews; the
most conservative estimates put religious intermarriage at 13 to 15 percent and
some make claims for as high as 50 percent (Gibel Azoulay 1997, 115). But even
before the upsurge in civil rights activity in the Northeast it seems that Black and
Ashkenazi Jewish New Yorkers were marrying in large numbers. One Teacher’s
College study from 1960 says that in the North, Blacks and White Jews met
through political engagement in the NAACP and the Communist Party. (These
organizations were two of the few integrated institutions in the 1920s to 1950s.)
Kaye/Kantrowitz suggests that this trend began much earlier than the 1960s, and
that the 1960s was merely a time of increase in this community of Black Jewish families.

She also notes that one recent study found that 59 percent of Americans born to White women in interracial marriages are Jewish and another study found that one-third of White people in New York City who were married to or sexually intimate with Black Americans are Jewish (mostly Jewish women) (Kaye/Kantrowitz 2007 45). The implications of these trends on the number of Jews of color in the United States should not be underestimated, especially as they continue to manifest themselves.

**Historic Black Jewish Marginalization**

Since the (re)emergence of Black Jewish communities in the United States, Black Jews have experienced widespread marginalization by mainstream Jews. In this section I will examine some examples of such exclusion through looking at the experiences of people and groups at different points in the Black Jewish identity continuum.

While Black Jews from syncretic communities face the most marginalization, Black Jews who are considered *halakhically* Jewish (namely those who are born to a *halakhically* recognized Jewish mother or those who convert in a *halakhic* ceremony) face marginalization within mainstream American Jewish communities as well. In his memoir, *Lovesong*, Julius Lester writes of several such experiences:

As much as I love Judaism, it was still not easy for me to venture into the world of Jews. Many of them have mixed feelings about converts and some are not shy about expressing those feelings. The comment I hear most often is, “Didn’t you have enough problems being black?” The remark startles me because what the person is really saying is that he has problems being Jewish. I generally respond by saying, “Being Jewish is a joy for me.”

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There was a woman who said sweetly, “Oh, you’re like Sammy Davis, Jr.” I said, “I wouldn’t know. I never met him.”

...I was not polite to the woman who said to me, “Well, you’re not really Jewish, you know.” I looked at her with Grandmomma’s eyes and said angrily, “How dare you!” (Lester 1988, 240).

Buitekant, too, mentioned feelings of marginalization in her interview. She said,

I think the worst is definitely feeling looked at in a congregation or feeling really, really inappropriate when I’m in a space that I shouldn’t necessarily feel inappropriate in. And it’s also because the Jewish part of me is the White parent so in terms of being Black and Jewish it’s kind of this... I don’t consider myself a Black Jew because my dad who’s Black doesn’t have a relationship with Judaism but I definitely get racialized as Black in most situations so it still plays out in different ways... But I’m very aware that I have a unique relationship that is from a White parent when I’m dealing with Judaism which also, when I explain religious and racial backgrounds to people who don’t know me makes so much more sense to them, makes it so that they get it right away when I’m like ‘Well, my mom’s White’ and then they say, ‘Oh oh well that makes sense, that would be the Jewish part’ because there are so many assumptions about what a Jew is supposed to look like, at least in the US or at least in places I’ve been. So that’s probably the worst – is just the confusion until an explanation and then also its just frustrating when people feel like they get you when you know that they don’t, or they don’t want to.

Clearly halakhic Jews still do face some experiences of marginalization as Buitekant and Lester describe, but it is on a much smaller scale than the complete denial and delegitimization that Black Jewish semi-autonomous communities face.

In her article “The Black Jews of Harlem: Representation, Identity, and Race, 1920-1939,” Gold looks at newspaper reporting patterns to show that while the Black community accepted Black Jews as legitimate, White Jews questioned their authenticity. Gold argues that “in White Jewish discourse, the figure of the black Jew was useful precisely because it was a metaphor, not meant to be taken literally, and was thus an indirect way of claiming American Jews’ attainment of White racial status” (Gold 2003, 180. Emphasis hers). People claiming to be actual Black Jews pose(d) a threat to Jewish Whiteness.

Gold presents the differences in Black and (White) Jewish reactions to Black Jews as related to their different social locations – both groups had unequal
access to economic, political, and cultural institutions in the United States but in
general Ashkenazi Jews had more opportunities and mobility. Because Jews had
so much to gain from assimilating and being ascribed Whiteness, they had more
to lose from being grouped with Blacks (ibid., 181). This is probably why Jewish
publications included detailed genealogies from Black Jews; for example, the
\textit{Jewish Daily Forward} ran a feature story on Vertella Valentine, the Black Talmud-
Torah valedictorian, outlining in detail her family’s journey from Africa to
Jamaica to Harlem. Gold points out that the article’s title itself, “The Converted
Great-Great-Grandfather and the Observant Grandfather of the Negro Girl of the
Harlem Talmud Torah,” emphasized the publication’s focus on family
background and Jewish legitimacy. Black publications did not discuss family
backgrounds at all (ibid., 187).

In the White Jewish search for Black Jewish legitimacy, several different
tropes emerged. The most frequently referenced modes of measuring
authenticity had to do with knowledge and practice of Jewish law,\textsuperscript{18} but
knowledge of the Yiddish language\textsuperscript{19} and other specifically Ashkenazi cultural
markers were also sought after by reporters and presented by Black Jews as proof
of their legitimacy. As mentioned earlier, the Black press did not question Black
Jews’ legitimacy. Gold suggests that they had no practical reason to do so and
instead portrayed Black Jews in a “tolerant spirit of black unity” and “vigorously
condemned” White challenges. Gold says that they “executed a kind of racial
closing of ranks, defending the veracity of an identity, Jewishness, on which they
possessed no particular expertise” because they recognized that the question at
hand had implications for Black social positionality in general (Gold 2003, 217).

Rabbi Shlomo Levy, a modern Black Jewish rabbi, discusses the problem
of legitimacy, saying,
If one used Orthodox Jewish Law, called ‘Halackah,’ as the basis for defining who is a Jew, one would have to know the religion of the mother of each person; because, by this law, one cannot decide to be a Jew unless one’s mother is a Jew. If the person or group claimed to have converted to Judaism, then one would have to know if they underwent certain rituals that involve the taking of special baths, (mikvot) and in the case of a man, the symbolic pricking of his penis... Halakhic law offers a very precise definition of who is a Jew. However, since fewer than ten percent of the 5.3 million White Jews in America observe Orthodox Jewish Law, this standard cannot be applied to Black Jews unequivocally, nor could I verify baths or pricked penises if I wanted to (Levy, “Who are We?”).

For Levy, the central contradiction to proving Jewish status is the implication that Jewishness is a race. He emphasizes that Jewishness is not a race, because “if it were, then no one could join it or leave it without being genetically altered.” Rather, it is a “creed: a living culture with an ancient history.” Because it is a living culture, different communities have different traditions and, Levy argues, European traditions are not inherently more legitimate than African ones. Instead they merely “exercise a hegemony” over other traditions. Levy claims that Black Jews resist and reject this hegemony (even though they adopt many Ashkenazi traditions), and that this rejection is what places Black Jews on the margins of the larger Jewish society (ibid.).

The academic delegitimization of Black Jews is a major site of such marginalization. Scholarly analyses of Black Jewish communities, often undertaken by mainstream White Jews, are significant not only in how they represent Black Jews in academia but also in the social trends they reflect. Landing, in his chronicle of Black Jewish expression in the Americas, discusses the designation “Jewish” at length. He says,

Black Judaism is defined... as a form of institutionalized (congregational) religious expression in which black persons identify themselves as Jews, Israelites, or Hebrews (sometimes as Hebrew-Israelites) in a manner that seems unacceptable to the ‘Whites’ of the world’s Jewish community, primarily because Jews take issue with the various justifications set forth by Black Jews in establishing this identity. Thus, ‘Black Judaism,’ as defined here, stands distinctly apart from ‘black Judaism,’ or that Judaic expression found among black persons that would be acceptable to the world’s Jewish community, such as conversion or birth to a recognized
Jewish mother. ‘Black Judaism’ has been a social movement; ‘black Judaism’ has been an isolated social phenomenon. Thus, ‘Black Judaism’ will be seen to be more emphatically a black expression than a Jewish one (Landing 2002, 10).

Landing’s distinction, however, has been criticized at length, most notably by Walter Isaac. W. Isaac points to Landing’s reinscription of White normativity, noting that a “recognized Jewish mother” is a euphemism for a mainstream, often Ashkenazi, woman and that “conversion” is coded language for a conversion ceremony overseen by Ashkenazi Jews or Jews of color who are legitimized by Ashkenazi Jews. W. Isaac notes,

By building on these premises, he has, in effect, theorized the Jewish people as two groups – ‘the world’s Jewish community’ and ‘black persons [who] identify themselves as Jews.’ Although the primary reason Whites may be repelled by black Jewish identities has little to do with black Jewish justifications and much to do with White American Jewry’s fact of Whiteness (buttressed, as we have seen, by the black Jewish differential), Landing ignores the fact that (b)lack Judaism and (B)lack Judaism have been, historically speaking, quite interrelated and composed of the same persons, groups, or families (W. Isaac 2005, 520).

Brotz, who was at one point widely regarded as an authority on Black Jews, writes in his article “Negro Jews in the United States,” that, “Black Jews may be accurately regarded as sects of Christians who pressed their identification with the figures of the Old Testament to the extreme belief that they themselves are Jews” (Brotz 1952, 330). W. Isaac counters what he calls Brotz’s “allegory thesis” – the assertion that Black Jews arose from the Black church, saying,

The thesis rests on two propositions: (i) the existence of early black Christian identification with the stories of Hebrew enslavement and exile contained within the Christian scriptures, and (2) the power of such religious identifications to play formative roles in the construction of personal and collective identities among black Americans. The allegorization hypothesis has enjoyed a sustained acceptance both in the media and scholarly writings, for it allegedly provides an explanation for the African and Judaic syncretisms characteristic of black Jewish congregations (W. Isaac 2005, 518).

As discussed earlier, Isaac points out that all communities negotiate multiple group identities and “embody the conflation of various group histories and
endorse a multifaceted narrative that transgresses the formerly accepted margins of cultural differentiation” (ibid). Black Jews are not unique in their embrace of both Blackness and Jewishness.

Isaac suggests that the delegitimization of Black Jews serves a more ontological purpose – he says, “The entrance of black Jews immediately places in question the notion that a racially harmonious Judaism exists.” (ibid., 528. Emphasis his). In order to maintain a unified Jewish community, Jewish institutions and individuals simply negate the fact of Black Jews. White Jews, Isaac says, do not hate the Black person who enters their synagogue or community because “for them, he or she is simply not a Jew” (ibid., 530). While this is certainly more true for Black Jews who trace their heritage to ancient Israelite communities or to traditions that are separate from halakhic Jewish practice, halakhic Jews of color face some marginalization as well.

**Blacks in the (White) Jewish Imagination**

As the fact of Jewish slaveholding evidences, Jews have been a part of the historic Othering of Black bodies. David Stein, scholar of Black Studies, puts it most accurately: “A specter is haunting the United States—the specter of slavery. Now, one of the questions we must engage in is how to converse with this specter; how to dialogue; how to reckon with the specter of American slavery” (Stein 2007, 103). The marginalization of Black Jews within the Jewish community cannot be separated from this reckoning, although Black Jewish marginalization also should also not be reduced to just a discussion of the lingering effects of Jewish slaveholding.

foundational Ashkenazi Jewish view of the Black person as inferior. Melamed explains that the term “racist” is not useful in a discussion of premodern culture but that Jewish scholars were working on the fringes of European society, which fully endorsed and indoctrinated what would be now called racist worldviews. He writes, “As a minority group, they were influenced by the majority culture that surrounded them in this and many other matters” (Melamed 2002, 2). In his work, Melamed found that the image of the inferior Black person was established in the writings of the Sages, not in the Torah. He calls this image an “authentic product of rabbinical culture” and notes that as such, “it had far-reaching influence, notably on the image of the black as inferior and other, and on the image of skin colour in general in Jewish cultural history, down to our own day” (ibid., 3).

Melamed’s point about the foundational and far-reaching nature of Jewish conceptualizations of Blacks and his note about the influence of outside, dominant cultures on that formulation are vital to understanding Jewish relationships with and views about Black people and Black Jewish people today. While the long and complex history between Jewish and Black communities in the United States falls outside the scope of this project, Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews have historically constructed Blacks as the ontological Other, even when they themselves were not accepted as fully human Whites. Radical critic and scholar Sylvia Wynter writes,

The strategies of capitalism as a mode of domination depend on the modes of social repression which assigned standardized prescribed ego identities to their assigned places for the functioning of the social machine. The social machine homogenizes—as in its constitution of the “(N)egro,” a process during which it homogenized multiple cultures, multiple genetic strains into one entity—as in its ‘blanchification’ of the ‘(W)hite’ American in which it homogenized multiple cultures, multiple genetic strains into one entity. But once it has homogenized, it has a need to differentiate, to demarcate, to inscribe, so as to produce the multi-layered levels necessary to the hierarchical structures of production (Wynter 1979, 152).
Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jewish communities in the Americas fulfilled their roles in this hierarchy through owning slaves themselves and through accepting the “fact” of slaveholding. More recently, through positioning themselves as White and conflating Whiteness and Jewishness, White American Jews are again fulfilling their role in a hierarchy by excluding Black Jews and casting them as inauthentic or illegitimate. This obviously has wider implications for not only the relations between White Jews and Jews of color, but also for how Jews of color and Black Jews specifically conceptualize their own identities.
Chapter IV

“I’ve Never Met an Anti-Israel Black Jew”: Black Jews, Legitimacy, and Israel

Israel is that special place we pray about every day. Over twenty percent of our congregants have visited and members have lived there as well – we are absolutely committed to Israel as central to our identity. Israel is what is important.

-Rabbi Capers Funnye

In order to develop my argument and explore its complexities, I conducted original fieldwork and interviews over the course of six months. The fourteen participants in my study come from a range of social and class backgrounds, ages, and family histories. They are united, however, in their self-identification as Jewish and in that others commonly identify them as Black. I will demonstrate how each of these participants’ sets of social and personal experiences, which I argue determine their social positionality, affect their feelings about Israel as a homeland. Specifically, I want to engage with the point that Dr. Lewis Gordon, founder of the Center for Afro-Judaic Studies at Temple University, made in his interview:

I’ve met many White Jews who are anti-Israel, I’ve met anti-Israel lighter Jews, but I’ve never met an anti-Israel Black Jew. And even in cases where that person was treated badly in Israel. And I mean, we – and I stress we – have to be the absolutely most committed people to the existence of Israel that I have ever encountered. And mind you, I’ve met Black Jews who are critical of Israel, but I’ve never met a Black Jew who has said there shouldn’t be an Israel and who says, “I will not go to Israel and blah blah blah.” I’ve never encountered that. And I think part of it is connected to something that is a lived reality for us, that people don’t understand outside of many Black communities.
In this chapter I want to engage with several questions. What does it mean that Black Jews are supportive of Israel even when they are discriminated against in Israel? And what is the “lived reality” to which Gordon refers – how does it shape this commitment?

Answering these questions is difficult because of the wide range in the participants’ experiences and identities. While I recognize that the most accurate representation of these various experiences would take the form of a continuum, for the purposes of my analysis I have split the participants into two groups: the first group consists of those individuals who are unproblematically considered Jewish by mainstream Jews, and therefore, I argue, do not need to affirm a tie to Israel in order to prove their authenticity. People whose Jewish identity is questioned by mainstream Jewish individuals and institutions and who tend to be unconditionally supportive of Israel make up the second group. After an analysis of the interviews, I will also briefly contrast those two groups with more radical Hebrew Israelites that have no desire to be affiliated with mainstream Jewish groups. Their opposition to the state of Israel is, in fact, a part of their conscious distancing from that mainstream Jewish community. Finally, I will discuss the African Hebrew Israelite Community (AHIC) of Jerusalem in Dimona as a case study of a group who switched from a rejection of Jewishness to a desire to be affiliated with more mainstream Jewish structures. The group moved to Israel, and through its demonstrated commitment to the state has gained more acceptance from the wider Jewish community, as evidenced by their recently granted permanent residency. My goal is to engage the connection between social positionality and identity through looking at these groups.

“I definitely don’t consider Israel a homeland”: The Rejection of Homeland as a Function of Social Positionality
Exploring differences in diasporic consciousnesses necessitates an examination of why these differences exist and where they come from. My first group of participants, those whose Jewishness is not called into question and who have relatively significant access to mainstream Jewish communities, consists of Ari King, Ruby-Beth Buitekant, and Dr. Julius Lester.

Buïtekant and King have almost complete access to Ashkenazi communities in the United States both through their family connections and their religious experiences: King grew up attending two different Reform congregations in Oakland, California on the High Holy Days and Buïtekant attended a combination of Quaker Meetings and services at a Reconstructionist synagogue. They also have significant educational privilege as both attended private high schools and currently attend Wesleyan, a private university. King and Buïtekant were both born to Black non-Jewish fathers and Ashkenazi mothers, so their Jewishness is not contested halakhically. They are both 22-year-old seniors at Wesleyan University.

Lester, on the other hand, was not born Jewish, although his maternal great-grandfather was Jewish. He converted in a mainstream community and has been a part of predominantly Ashkenazi Jewish congregations and communities in New England since 1983. He also locates himself within the mainstream Jewish denominations of Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Orthodox, although he said, “I do not wholly identify with any of the Jewish movements and when asked, I describe myself as ReConSerVaDox. There are elements I like in each of the movements but none wholly represents/expresses who I am as a Jew.” Lester presently belongs to two congregations, one is Reconstructionist and the other is Conservative. There are clearly some significant differences in Lester’s
experiences both as a convert and as someone whose major encounters with Judaism began in his adulthood in comparison with Buitekant and King.

All three individuals identified racially as well as religiously. Lester separated his racial and religious identity, saying:

My social identity is obviously black, but my spiritual identity is Jewish. However, socially I also identify with Jews and I kvell [am proud] at Jewish accomplishments and consider it a shande [travesty] when a Jew does something he or she shouldn't. And the same is true with how I identify with blacks. I get angry at Jews for anti-black racism and get angry at blacks for anti-Semitism.

While she theoretically rejected racial categorization, Buitekant ultimately conflated her Jewishness as inextricable from her White racial heritage. She said:

I identify as biracial - Black and White - with an important distinction that I consider race to be a socially constructed concept and thus am often more comfortable using bi-narrative as it is a more accurate definition of what race is. Since people are more comfortable and familiar with the term race - I am comfortable using that word to describe myself keeping my own definition in mind. I consider myself Jewish and definitely identify my Jewishness as having a White racial background and thus I identify my Jewishness with Whiteness more than with Blackness.

While they each spoke about peoples' occasional confusion about their identities as Jews of color, their experiences of discrimination were minor in comparison with the institutional marginalization that other Black Jews face. Lester experienced the most prejudice as a Black convert. King, on the other hand, explained that he enjoys confusing people about his identity: “I like when people are baffled as to what I am – I get that question sometimes, like ‘What are you, exactly?'” He added:

I really like on various standardized tests circling Other or putting biracial. I can say I’m Jewish and feel good about that, I can say I’m Black and feel good about that. I think it’s a great combination... I can’t say that I have felt any hatred or bigotry, which might be due to me being on the lighter side. I have been around people who are mixed who are darker and have encountered some sort of problems or have heard about various things from friends and family who are darker and have encountered negative aspects.
Buitekant described feeling upset when people questioned her identity, although she also mentioned that once people hear that her mother is Ashkenazi they are satisfied and do not question her further.

Also worth noting is that both Buitekant and King were a part of an Adult B’nei Mitzvah program at Wesleyan where they have had the opportunity to further engage with their Jewish identities over a year-long course of study, culminating in a Bat and Bar Mitzvah, respectively. They each noted the importance of this experience in the formation of their conceptions of Jewishness. Buitekant said that until college, “I would say I was Jewish, that was something I would proclaim, but that didn’t mean that much to me aside from knowing that there was more that I wanted to learn.” When she got to college, however, experiences with the Wesleyan Jewish community opened opportunities to engage with Jewishness even more:

I got connected with the Jewish community and felt really comfortable doing so, it felt like there were people who were really interested in communicating with me and teaching me and answering questions that I had even if I thought they were really simple things but that I had never had the opportunity to ask. So... and then the Adult B’nei Mitzvah program at Wesleyan which is designed to give people who have never had a Bar or Bat Mitzvah the opportunity to have one at a college age was such a great thing in terms of my education about Judaism and personally my relationship with it. And it didn’t necessarily like make me feel one way or the other about what I or how I necessarily feel about being Jewish but it gave me so many more tools to grapple with and think about Judaism and where I am with all of it so it was definitely an educational type of thing.

King also mentioned that when he was growing up he was identified as Jewish by his name and by his synagogue observance on High Holidays, but he never had the opportunity to have a Bar Mitzvah because he didn’t attend Hebrew School. He “thought it would be cool to have the ceremony,” and so joined the program:

I thought it was a great opportunity to do it here, have it be my choice as opposed to my parents making me do it. So having it was a big commitment but it opened a lot of doors for me in the way that I made new friends, was doing things that I thought I missed the boat on – when I went to college I never thought I would have a Bar Mitzvah I always thought that when you were thirteen you could have one but afterwards it
was too late. So it was a big commitment but I enjoyed it thoroughly and as I said, I got to learn a new language, which was very difficult, learn a lot of new information, and meet great people.

Buitekant and King’s Bat and Bar Mitzvah ceremonies signaled an acceptance by a predominantly Ashkenazi Jewish community at Wesleyan, an acceptance that is translatable into a greater Ashkenazi recognition of their Jewish legitimacy. They were encouraged to engage with Jewishness as a religious and cultural set of experiences and to affirm their own Jewishness, further evidence of their solid (if occasionally questioned) position within the mainstream Ashkenazi community.

Lester did not speak of childhood experiences since he converted to Judaism as an adult. However, much as King spoke about consciously making a step towards Judaism through his Bar Mitzvah, Lester writes about his choice to convert in *Lovesong*. He writes,

> I choose and I am chosen. I choose to accept responsibility for the Sabbath. I choose to accept responsibility for bringing God into the world once a week. The unseen soul is as real as what is seen. That experience enters history with the Jews. To guard and embody that experience with attentiveness to the nuances and intricacies of holiness is the Jews’ task. It is that for which God chose Jews (Lester 1988, 171).

What sets Lester apart is that for Lester, the idea of Jewish chosenness is of the utmost importance. He sees Jewish chosenness as central to Jewish survival while Buitekant and King reject a separationist approach. He writes that “[i]f Jews do not hold to separateness, Jews cease to exist” (ibid 174). Furthermore he says, “Jews are a people... That is what is so confusing to others about being Jewish. It is not a belief system or even subscribing to a particular religious practice. It is belonging to a people, not only those living but also those who are not” (ibid., 173). This emphasis on memory and peoplehood are part of what attracted Lester to Judaism and what he values most. King had a hard time with the exclusionism he felt was inherent to nationalism or even Jewish subcategories. When discussing Judaism, he said, “It’s just a spiritual thing, a knowledge and
informational thing... I guess to me it is just a religion amongst many and I try not to think about it in terms of separating Jews from non-Jews.”

While all three individuals emphasized strong connections with Jewishness and Jewish identity, all of them specifically did not identify with Israel as a homeland and also did not mark Africa or any other distant place as a homeland. Rather, they identified mostly with their regional American homes. Their conflicted relationships with Israel are, I argue, a different kind of diasporic consciousness than the one which I am exploring in this paper. While Lester said specifically, “I do not think of Israel as a homeland,” he further explained that his feelings about Israel are “mixed and have been since my conversion”:

I think Israel as a Jewish state is a necessity, so I am a Zionist in this sense. At the same time how Israel has regarded Palestinians causes me great pain. My first trip to Israel was in 1992 during the first intifada. When I saw Arabs being stopped on the streets and searched, I was reminded of being stopped by police on the streets of New York and questioned. However, I understood the Israeli necessity to do so, and I understood the pain and humiliation Arabs experienced... Although I think of myself as a Zionist, the place I feel least Jewish is in Israel. In 1991 I went to the Great Synagogue for Slichot services and was stopped by someone and told that “only Jews” could attend services. When the man was led to understand that I was a Jew, he relented. He did not apologize... I feel least Jewish in Israel also because I do not want to be associated with the Haredi [ultra-Orthodox]. In Israel I see a distinction between Israelis and Jews, and Jews are those who are openly religious and in Israel these are the most reactionary elements of Israeli society. I do not want to be associated with them. And my sense is that most Israelis do not want to be associated with these elements either, and thus see themselves as Israelis and not Jews.

Lester made a distinction between a connection with Israel as an ancient homeland and a relationship with the contemporary state. For Lester, Israel’s necessity derives from its Biblical significance. He said,

When I spent time at a yeshiva on the West Bank, I felt very Jewish. Not because of the school but because this was the land of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The silence there was quite extraordinary, and I felt that if I stayed long enough I would see one of the patriarchs ride by on a camel. While I could never live in Israel, if I did, I could only live on the West Bank...
He emphasized, “That Israel remain a Jewish state is important to me. Whatever discrimination I encountered in Israel has nothing to do with there being a place for me in Israel... I feel strongly that as Jews we need a country where we are not subject to the whims of a gentile majority. We need Israel.” This tension between recognition of the discrimination and social unrest in Israel and affiliation with Israel was a theme in Lester’s responses, and he was the only one in this group who talked about his emphatic support of Israel’s right to exist. He said, “When I learn of a bombing inside Israel I am angry and I mourn. When I hear of the Israeli army killing Palestinians, I am angry and I mourn. I would be devastated, however, if Israel ceased to exist.” Lester’s responses clearly set him apart from Buitekant and King in other ways, as well. He mentioned that he considers himself a Zionist and that he believes that Israel is necessary and important, demonstrating the strongest diasporic consciousness out of the three by a large margin. This follows the trend that my thesis describes, since Lester has experienced the most marginalization in the group and is therefore an outlier of sorts, located on the continuum in this group but close also to the second participant group that supports Israel and names it as their homeland.

About Israel, King was clear that he did not consider it a homeland:

No, I don’t feel like Israel is a homeland for me in the same way I don’t feel like Africa is a homeland. A lot of Black people will talk about the motherland, the homeland, that’s where we’re from, that’s where we belong. To a certain extent that’s true, but I think that I can’t really say that unless I have been there or have lived there. My home is my home in Oakland with my family. But that’s not to say that I look down or criticize those who do feel that way. That is the homeland that Jews feel like they belong, just like a lot of Black people feel that Africa is the homeland, that they were taken from there to come here, they were forced out. I think some of those sentiments might be shared with Jewish people, that they were forced out and that’s where they belong. Me, personally, I don’t feel that it’s my home.

King mentioned that while his most immediate association with Israel was “conflict” he also thought of Israel as the unknown: “I’m interested, because I
have some association with it, but at the same time I don’t know enough about it or pretend to know enough about it to understand what is constantly going on.”

Despite an awareness of the Israel-Palestine conflict King noted, “Rightfully so or unrightfully so, I always side with Israel. I think that’s a natural thing because I have an association with it—along the same lines if there was a discussion going on between California and New York, I’d always support California.” So even though King didn’t claim Israel as a home, he still equated it with his home, California, in discussing his affinity for it.

Buitekant also described conflicting emotions about Israel, only some of which were rooted in its political and social condition. While she noted, “I do think that being Jewish, it is important to have some kind of relationship with Israel,” she also said,

I definitely don’t consider Israel a homeland for me. I was really uncomfortable with being in Israel for the first day and have “Welcome home” be the greeting – that was really uncomfortable for me because I don’t claim Israel as a place that would be home and I don’t think that I ever will, as of right now at least. I think that that can be useful I think that can also be really destructive when people are excluded which is, after all, the point.

Buitekant echoed King’s dissatisfaction with the exclusionism inherent to diaspora and peoplehood. For her, the problem is diaspora in general. The exclusivity of a diasporic consciousness and, more broadly, nationalism, is what she struggles to reconcile and is perhaps why she rejects African diasporicism as well. She said,

I was just literally two days ago talking to somebody about this and trying to equate it with people who think that Black people in the United States have to have a relationship with Africa because... and just the term African-American in general, which is to imply that I would have just as much of a relationship with Africa as I do with the US which is completely not true – I have a really vague theoretical and complicated relationship but it has nothing to do with my daily life aside from the fact that I’m Black in the United States which is a very different thing than being in Africa right now. So I don’t think for me personally that African-American is the most appropriate term and I don’t think that a relationship with Africa is something I want to claim, not to say that I
couldn’t ever or that people shouldn’t, but that being Black in the United States is its own very unique thing that doesn’t necessitate a relationship with Africa whereas being Jewish in the United States I think for me does necessitate a relationship with Israel and I don’t know why – I mean I know for some reasons why that relationship is very different or why I make that distinction but I don’t know totally I’m still hashing it out very much... I don’t think I’m ever going to know where in Africa my family is from which makes the idea of claiming Africa, this huge expansive space, really problematic for me because that doesn’t really mean much other than I can trace a way that I’m racialized now as being from a continent which doesn’t help.

Interestingly, like King, Buitekant named her regional location in the United States as home. She said, “I am really comfortable claiming regional spaces like Atlanta or the South, so in terms of homeland I guess that’s what I have.” Lester, too, said “I am so American and cannot imagine living anyplace except here or, France, maybe, but that’s another story.”

The point that all three participants made clear is that they do have complicated feelings about Israel but definitively do not identify it as their homeland. Their discomfort in naming Israel their homeland, combined with their wider critique of exclusionism, supports my argument that their positionality does not place them in a situation where they need to disassociate with their Blackness nor do they particularly need to prove their Jewish legitimacy. They can be concerned about exclusivity because they are guaranteed a position on the inside. They can criticize Israel or nationalism or Jewish communities for excluding others because they understand what it is to have legitimacy questioned, while still having the security of authority. Their privilege through Ashkenazi mothers or mainstream conversion not only guarantees them accepted places in the mainstream Jewish community but also provides them with access to authenticity. That being said, while they distance themselves from a concrete political commitment to the state of Israel, their comments do connote a different kind of diasporic consciousness through a connection to a theoretical homeland. Buitekant’s comment that she does feel a need to engage
with her relationship to Israel, Lester’s clear connection to the Biblical land of Israel, and King’s admission that he always supports Israel in conversation or debate all suggest a connections that perhaps fall outside of this project’s working definition of diasporic consciousness, but are salient nonetheless.

Also, Lester is clearly distinct from Buitekant and King in some important ways. He subscribes to the idea of Jewish chosenness and also believes in the necessity of Israel as the Jewish homeland. Lester’s status as an outlier fits into my thesis, however, since he has experienced the most discrimination of the three and also is the most oriented towards Israel, although he does not claim it as his own homeland.

“I’m Just a Jew”: Identity and Israel in Marginalized Black Jewish Communities

In contrast to the first group, the second group of participants discussed strong connections to Israel. This group includes the Respes family, Rabbi Debra and Elder Earl Bowen, Dr. Lewis Gordon, Lady Tova T’shura (a.k.a. Eudora Burton) and Rabbi Capers Funnye; all are Black Jews who affiliate with the mainstream but are marginalized in different ways. Each member of this group identified as exclusively Jewish, with the exception of Gordon who included his racial identity equally, and all claimed Israel as their homeland.

The Respes family (whom I will identify by their first names because they share a surname), includes Gamaliel, who is 50 years old and the son of the late Rabbi Abel Respes; Yasminah, age 22, who is Gamaliel’s daughter; Yael, age 31, who is the oldest granddaughter of Rabbi Respes; Evonna, Yael’s seven-year-old daughter; Azzie, Yael’s brother, who is 23; and Illannah, age 23, another granddaughter of Rabbi Respes.
The foundations of the Respes family’s Jewish orientation lie in the story of Rabbi Respes. Respes, who was raised in North Philadelphia, spent time in his youth at the Israelite Bible School but did not stay for long after learning that the group believed in Jesus and much Christian doctrine (Landing 2002, 349). His father, who had been active in an unknown Black Jewish movement, had taught Respes that Black people were descendants of the Tribe of Judah (ibid., 348), and Respes began preaching about the Jewish faith on street corners. He attracted a following and met Bishop Murphy, a Black Israelite leader who spoke Yiddish and Hebrew and invited Respes to join his congregation. Respes arrived to find that they ate pork and practiced aspects of Christianity, so he left shortly afterwards and took some members with him (ibid., 349).

Respes had a series of revelations, after which he founded Congregation Adat Beyt Moshe, the Colored House of Moses, in his home. He began studying Hebrew, observing Passover, and abandoned all remnants of Christian beliefs. Central to his doctrine was the group’s eventual physical move and spiritual transition to Israel, and Respes taught that Israel could only be restored to glory under Black leadership (Landing 2002, 349). Respes wrote to President Eisenhower asking for his support in establishing a colony of Black Jews in Israel, but did not receive a response (ibid., 350).

Perhaps because of his vested interest in Israel, Respes came under criticism from members of his community about the lack of attention he paid to the race question and affiliation with a “White man’s” religion. Many race-conscious members left and the group moved from Philadelphia to Elwood, a small town in Atlantic County, New Jersey. Still committed to ultimately moving to the Holy Land, Respes and seventeen other congregants visited Israel in November of 1970 on a fact-finding trip. He reported a “lack of race prejudice” and expressed a desire to raise the community’s children in Israel. He later
recalled being encouraged to believe that the community would be welcomed “in the mainstream of life in Israel, even to marriage” (Ross 1977, 224).

In order to make the move, Respes indicated a willingness to undergo ritual conversion. This announcement, which set him apart from other Black Jewish groups, brought him to the attention of Rabbi Isaac Trainin, a member of the New York Federation of Jewish Philanthropies' Jewish Council on Synagogue Relations. Under Trainin’s tutelage the entire congregation formally converted to Judaism in 1972 (Landing 2002, 350).

Despite their readiness to move, deteriorating relations between the Hebrew Israelites who had recently immigrated to Israel and the Israeli government discouraged Respes, who postponed the trip indefinitely (ibid.). In the mid-1970s, Respes said that he was not resentful towards the Israeli government or society because he understood “the situation” (Ross 1977, 224) however, he hoped that Blacks would eventually be welcomed as Jews in Israel (ibid., 223). He pointed to the problem of his being unable to prove his Jewishness because he did not have a certificate of circumcision, and he also mentioned that Black Jews' general inability to produce a history of their Jewishness cast doubt on their legitimacy. His credentials, including his position as Rabbi, fluency in Hebrew, and popularity as a lecturer on Black Judaism for the United States Jewish Welfare Board were not proof enough (ibid., 224).

Illannah is in the process of fulfilling her grandfather’s dream through making aliya (literally “ascending” or “moving up,” meaning moving to Israel) and identified herself as a “religious Zionist”:

As for how I identify myself, when I’m filling out applications and such I never put Black, I do put Other, but I will put “Jew.” I think also something that I’ve always thought and been taught is to say you’re Jewish is to say you have Jewish qualities or you do certain things. That’s why when someone asks me I’ll say, “I’m a Jew. I’m a proud Jew.” rather than just be like “I’m Jewish, I attended services.” But of course people look at
color and say “You’re Black and White” or “You’re Black.”

Yael pointed out, “We don’t deny that we’re African-American, Indian, German, Portuguese, Caribbean, whatever,” but her cousin Yasminah emphasized that “what I practice in my day-to-day life is I’m Jewish. And it doesn’t matter what my skin color is, and if I have African-American blood or African blood or Native American blood, I’m Jewish. And that’s all that matters. And I should not have to prove it to you.” Yasminah’s emphasis on legitimacy demonstrates that she has been marginalized in the past and feels mistreated since her primary (or even sole) identity is Jewish.

Azzie made room for his racial identity in his answer to the question “How do you identify?” but emphasized that the Jewish part is what he considers important. “I’d say a Sephardic Jew, of mixed colors, but a Jew until the day I die... Bottom line is, it’s us and Hashem. Whoever wants to label me as whatever they want – Zionist, Jewish, Black, whatever – OK that’s up to you,” he responded.

Other members of this participant group responded along the same lines. Gordon identified as Jewish but also said, “I’m a mixed person but I’m a Black person by the way the US defines Black. And so that creates a problem. Because of that there is a failure to understand how it is possible to be say, if you’re born in Puerto Rico, 100% Puerto Rican, 100% Jewish, 100% you know... Black.”

Gordon then emphasized the intersection between different aspects of identity in line with Goldschmidt’s argument that, “in the societies of the Americas there are no such things as race, nation or religion, per se – only race, nation, and religion as they are constructed in and through each other and through other categories of difference” (Goldschmidt 2004, 7). For Gordon, who approached his own personal identity through an intellectual analytic lens, it is possible for someone to be “just a Jew” and to be Black in the United States. He did not deny,
as other participants did, the significance of his racial identity in his own personal, social, or political life but rather emphasized how the intersection is most important.

Funnye, the rabbi of Beth Shalom B’nai Zaken Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation (Beth Shalom) in Chicago, also privileged his Jewish identity over his Blackness. Funnye actually converted to Judaism twice. The first time was in 1973 in a Black congregation called the House of Israel under the spiritual leadership of Robert Divine. Funnye described him as “very devoted... but not as full of knowledge of Judaica as other leaders I later met.” His subsequent conversion, in 1985, was in a mainstream halakhic ceremony presided over by two Orthodox and two Conservative rabbis. In that same year, Funnye was ordained as a rabbi from the Israeliite Board of Rabbis in Queens, New York. He worked at Beth Shalom, the second oldest congregation of predominantly Black people in the United States, founded in 1918. Upon the head rabbi’s death in 1991, Funnye took over. He explained,

The congregation is not affiliated with any of the major movements but we have friends in every movement. I believe this has significant advantages because I can ask all rabbis and different rabbis to work with me on a Beit Din for conversions, for example. We are a traditional congregation in that we follow Wentworth A Matthew’s teachings of the Commandment Keepers. We use the Artscroll siddur [prayer book], an Orthodox publication, and most of our services are in the Sephardic tradition.

In terms of Funnye’s personal identity, he said, “I am a Jew. Other terms, such as Israelite, come from the rejection by other Jewish communities of those individuals. But I identify as Jewish.” Funnye does require a traditional conversion according to the rules of halakha for every person who wants to become a member of his congregation, including a course of study, ritual immersion, and circumcision for males. He explained his decision to require this ritual conversion allegorically:
Everyone who wants to be a member of our congregation has to convert if he or she is not already *halakhically* Jewish. I believe very strongly in *halakha* especially in how it relates to one connecting with Jewish communities. We don’t require that every visitor or every person who wants to participate in our services convert, but if you want to be a member and join our congregation then yes, conversion is necessary. Imagine it like this: you have been homeless for a while, and you are passing by a huge mansion. Someone walks by and says, “Here are the keys to that mansion, it is yours!” The first thing you want to do is bathe, cleanse yourself from the past and prepare yourself for what you are about to experience.

For Funnye, conversion is a necessary step, even for members who trace their ancestry to non-practicing Jews from countries participating in the Inquisition (commonly called *Anousim*). In an interview with the *Jerusalem Post* he said,

> Although I felt a distinct connection with the ancient Israelites, the majority of American Jews are Ashkenazi... So I didn’t consider going through conversion to be taking anything away from me. To me, personally, I saw it as adding something. It was saying, I am your brother. I remove every semblance of doubt, that any in your quarter might have regarding my sincerity (Fishkoff 1999).

This formal conversion has earned Funnye substantial recognition in the Ashkenazi community, including a seat on the Chicago Board of Rabbis. Unlike Rabbi Matthews’ failed attempts at membership on the New York Board of Rabbis, Funnye’s petition was endorsed unanimously. Funnye commented that his position was meaningful because “all my predecessors were denied, and from the bottom of my being I could not stand to see this door continually shut in the face of our people, simply because I did not go to HUC, JTS, or Yeshiva University” (ibid). Nonetheless, Funnye’s synagogue is still excluded from membership in the Conservative movement, a denomination with which the Beth Shalom might like to affiliate, so they are still clearly on the margins of the wider Ashkenazi community.

Rabbi Debra Bowen, the leader of Temple Bethel in Philadelphia, does not require a conversion according to *halakha*, but rather has a separate process for committing to a Jewish life:
First of all, conversion is a Christian concept; it has nothing to do with Judaism. Judaism adapted it. We do have a process of תגנה, a return to our culture, because in essence the reason why we’re here is because we believe this is where we belong. And our leadership, we do not believe that we are the only ones who belong here. There are Jews of color who think that if you don’t have color, you’re not a real Jew. They would not entertain anything you say, they would not believe you, they would call you phony, the whole nine yards. I say I am not here to judge whether anyone else is a Jew. That is really not our job. Our job is to love תורה and to honor חסן and to make sure my community honors and loves חסן and the whole question of legitimacy is not one that we will discuss. Are you legitimate? I don’t think at the end of the day it really matters and so we do not convert but there is a process of תגנה where a person decides to come because they like to learn, they study, they indicate they want to be a part of the community, they go into the mikveh [ritual bath]– we have a mikveh – and then they are a part of our community. The men will be circumcised – we have adult men who were circumcised and that really is the kicker – if you’re for real, think about this. Do you really want to do this?

For both Rabbi Funnye and Rabbi Bowen the transition to Judaism is central to their symbolic creations of legitimately Jewish communities. Funnye subscribes to halakha, the directives of the ancient rabbis of Europe, while Bowen has a different ceremony that includes elements of halakhic conversion (i.e. ritual immersion, circumcision) but is markedly separate.

Temple Bethel was founded by Bowen’s mother, Rabbi Louise Elizabeth Dailey, in her home. Dailey worked in the home of a Jewish family and recognized traditions in the house such as mourning rituals, observance of the Sabbath, etc. as familiar, even though she had grown up in a religious Baptist family. As Bowen put it, “Little other things that her family had always practiced, she now found in Judaism.” She began studying Jewish traditions and the Old Testament alone, and began a prayer group. It rapidly expanded and moved buildings several times to accommodate a growing community. Rabbi Dailey also traveled throughout the South preaching what she had learned and founded a small community in Manning, South Carolina, which still exists. When asked how they identify, Rabbi and Earl Bowen identified as “just Jews.” Bowen expanded,
I say just Jews because you can identify us as Jews of color but of course we have members who are not of color... In mainstream Judaism they don't say you know, I'm White – so why bring the color distinction in? If you bring the color distinction in it means that you want to be thought of as something exotic or different, and I'd like to be thought of as a person who honors Torah and believes in one God...

Similarly, Lady Tova T’shura (a member of Bethel) said, “I am Jewish. That is my way of life.” She did not mention race, or perhaps did not think it important enough to mention in comparison with the obvious weight of each individual’s Jewishness.

The people I interviewed often referenced being Jewish as a gift, but also as something that is fundamental and essential to everyday life. Gamaliel Respes responded,

Judaism is everything to me. I cannot picture myself being anything other than a Jew. It predates everything that I am. All that I am and what I am. I guess that maybe the fact that coming from the background that I’m coming from and the fact that if I wasn’t a Jew being in the United States I wouldn’t have an identity. Judaism I know, the way I was taught was ethnically, nationality, I am directly descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the tribe of Judah. I can’t prove that I can go back there but that’s the way I was taught and that’s how I feel. So I can’t be and I can’t feel anything else. Yes, Judaism today is a religion, but to me it’s a way of life. It’s everything that I do. Am I always observant and religious? No, but I’m Jewish. I can’t think of anything else. When people say, “What are you?” I say “I’m Jewish.” ...Yes I do have British blood, I know I have Spanish, I know I have some type of ethnic African, I know I have West Indian, I can’t prove what they are, but again to me I feel that I am a direct descendant from the children of Israel. So Judaism is everything.

Seven-year-old Evonna Respes’ answer to the question “What does being Jewish mean to you?” is particularly endearing, and insightful as well:

It means really special, like we get to do lots of good laws and we get to learn lots of stuff. Like when I go to a Jewish school we learn lots of holidays and really get to go to art class and get to learn the teachers say what holiday is coming up and so it’s Rosh Hashannah or Sukkot, all kinds of holidays. And what’s good to be Jewish is that one day I get to go to Israel and I get to see the blue and white flag and I get to learn lots of Hebrew and I get to speak a lot of Hebrew and I get to dress really pretty there and I get to wear my scarf as a skirt, it’s really pretty as a skirt.
It is interesting to note here that Israel is clearly already a part of her consciousness, so much so that she is eager to articulate it and emphasize it in her response. Her mother Yael echoed her sentiments, adding that being Jewish to her is non-negotiable; it is her way of life:

Being a Jew, what it means is a way of life. We didn’t decide to just wake up and say, “Oh, I want to be Jewish today.” Out of all the religions in the world... No, my grandfather didn’t do that. And although I give my grandfather so much praise because if it wasn’t for him in seeking Hashem and seeking the Torah I wouldn’t have my life today but more than that Hashem also came to my grandfather and my grandfather accepted it so I feel like not so much I owe that much to accept and love and appreciate being a Jew every morning because there are some people that don’t even know who they are. I know who I am, we all know who we are.

Always constant, however, were indications that each of these individuals had faced exclusion or discrimination at different points from Ashkenazi or mainstream Jews. T’shura said that the most positive thing about her identity was “that I am privileged to serve Hashem in a congregation that is not prejudice [sic]” but that the most negative aspect was when people “question how Jewish I am.” She spoke specifically about the struggles her youngest son, Micah, has faced in Jewish day schools. Micah, age 12, attended Trocki Hebrew Academy for two years where he “experienced hidden prejudice, to the point that he wants to be white.” T’shura added, “At twelve he recognized very early that people treat white and black people differently regardless of race or faith base.” Micah changed schools and is now attending Abrams Hebrew Academy where, instead of being told that he is behind his peers, his test scores showed that he is gifted mathematically and he has been in their high academic math program. T’shura attributed this to God’s work, saying “This is why I love Hashem, because He is always good and merciful to his people, even when we hurt each other.” She therefore focused on God’s role in the positive outcome of a discriminatory situation rather than emphasize the actions of Ashkenazi Jews who questioned her family’s legitimacy.
The Bowens talked about their feelings of ostracism from mainstream Jewish communities despite a desire for creating and maintaining lasting connections. Rabbi Bowen said,

We have to be aware that you deal with what you’re given. Recently I read an article where a couple received an Orthodox conversion and went to Israel to get married. The conversion wasn’t accepted – that’s just the norm. Within the various arms of Judaism, people discriminate. If you were Sephardic, you are not open and welcome to Ashkenazi and if you are Orthodox you certainly look down on all the others. It’s something that has gone on within Judaism for years and it is time for the walls to be broken down. And here we come, with our Black faces, expecting to be accepted? When those among the community themselves are not accepted.

She explained their situation in the context of a larger problem of Jewish exclusionism and seemed to acknowledge that the Bethel community was separate, not “those among the community.”

Also, Bowen related how some traditions in their community, such as the inclusion of music on the Sabbath, come from never being told otherwise. “We never heard you weren’t supposed to. And the yeshivas and institutions of study and learning for the most part have been closed to us,” she said. Moreover, according to Bowen, many members of Bethel have tried to send their children to Jewish day schools in the Philadelphia area and have been told that their children “wouldn’t feel comfortable” at those schools. Elder Bowen said, “I think it’s one reason why... we decided to develop our own academy as a way of certifying people to get through various levels of study. So you know, we kind of turned that into a positive, just look at ways in which you can do the same things, create your own institutions.” He spoke of their educational academy as “trying to build an institution that will sustain itself over the next generations.”

Elder Bowen was most frustrated with his efforts for inclusion in the Jewish Museum of Philadelphia. He said,

The thing is that if you have a museum that tells the history of Jews, our history we think is a pretty important part but – and I talked directly to
the Executive Director – they offered some lip service but I think, you know, there is a lot of reluctance, a lot of resistance, a lot of ambivalence, to include us. And where that’s coming from I’m not quite sure but I think that if we could ever overcome that and the Jewish Museum would in fact extend that to our community which is, in fact, almost 60 years old, part of that history would mean that whenever people come to Philadelphia and come to the Jewish Museum they could see that. It would be an important part of our legacy, to have some part of our history included in the museum because it’s one of the ways of maintaining our history for other generations. But I think when you start to hit on things like that in the mainstream Jewish community, that’s a very sensitive area because a lot of Jews are not really... it’s almost like before integration in the Civil Rights. I don’t know if we can go to school together, or sit together on the bus. I think intellectually a lot of Jews that I’ve talked to, they say things that are politically correct but when it gets down to actually taking action there is a lot of reticence so I kind of compare it to the Civil Rights Era.

The Bowens acknowledged that they do not always receive recognition of the religious affiliation of Temple Bethel – Rabbi Bowen’s basic philosophy is, “If you accept us, Baruch Hashem [bless God]. If you do not, at the end of our day we will be lighting our candles on Shabbat, we will be davening [praying] in our Temple and we will continue to live our Jewish lives.” Her attitude towards those who discriminate against them is, “And if you think of it like that, and I’m not mad at you if you don’t accept me, if I’m not Jewish enough, Baruch Hashem. At the end of the day, it really doesn’t matter to us.” Furthermore, to emphasize their goal of community building rather than making overtures to the outside Jewish world, Elder Bowen said,

But I think what my wife has said is absolutely true in a sense that what we’re interested in is, you know we’d love to be accepted into mainstream Judaism, that would be nice if it happens but if it doesn’t happen, our main focus is how we can build our community, build infrastructure that is necessary to propel the next generations to keep going and the generations after that. It is through building that, through the infrastructure and the self-sustaining efforts that at some point people have to – whether they want to or not – they have to acknowledge that and respect that for what it is. You build, you build internally and then external things might happen but you have to build the internal capacity to sustain yourself and our primary emphasis is on that now, on our children, on school, on education.
For this group, fighting the exclusion of the larger mainstream community is not central to their efforts. In direct contrast to Buitekant, Lester, and King, that wider community does not legitimize Bethel members in a way to permit such a critique. But at the same time, the community does strive for acceptance both in their quest for inclusion in the Jewish Museum and also in their identification as Jews. Rabbi Bowen explained,

The reason why we identify ourselves as Jewish and not some of the other terms – Hebrew Israelite, Pentecostal, whatever – is because we are more mainstream and people do not take time to discriminate. There are many people of color who claim to be Hebrew Israelites and they support concepts and theories that we do not. Many of them are anti-establishment, some are messianic, you have a whole spectrum and I don’t want to be misidentified. I’m just a Jew. Just a Jew.

The Respes also emphasized this point. Yael emphatically disassociated herself and her family from any Hebrew Israelite movements, to the extent of holding such groups responsible, at least in part, for their experiences of exclusion:

The Israelites, briefly, it’s pretty hard for us to differentiate and we talked about the Ashkenazi side and even the Sephardi side not welcoming us, or whatever. But then we have the whole other flip side of the Hebrew Israelites that totally messed it up for the Jews of color who are true Jews and follow the Torah. Even followers of my grandfather, some went off and did their own thing, it’s sad because they give us a bad name. We do not want – and we’re always adamant – that we’re different. We don’t do the New Testament.

Azzie agreed, “We’re not going to say, “We’re Jewish” but not actually practice.” Funnye’s insistence on conversion according to a halakha that does not recognize him as a rabbi is another example of a political move away from affiliation with Hebrew Israelites. So in a way, this group actually participates in exclusionist discourses by trying to reposition themselves as on the inside. Their justification for why they belong on the inside, as opposed to groups like the Hebrew Israelites, is their commitment to Jewish practice and, most notably, diasporic consciousness.
Affiliation with Israel is, I argue, one of the central ways in which the participants’ alignment with mainstream American Jewry is expressed. In the interviews I conducted, themes of longing and belonging were remarkably frequent threads. Rabbi Bowen explained, “We have an affinity with Israel because it is the homeland. In 1977 we took a group of 44 individuals over including our choir and we sang all over Israel and had the most phenomenal experience... We certainly have an affinity for Israel – how could you not?” She brought up that Israel is, in fact, part of Africa and therefore the homeland of humanity and a place where her congregation belongs in more ways than one.

It’s just – look at it geographically. Let’s take out the Suez Canal and then you have the continent of Africa, the Middle East was something that was “created” and I don’t think that that is so significant as our connection because Africa is a continent, several different countries all of them with their own personalities and idiosyncrasies so the fact that in part of Africa – we believe that our culture is an Afro-Asian culture and it’s less about geography and more about the connection to Avraham that we feel.

When I asked T’shura what she thinks of when she hears about Israel, she responded, “I think of my homeland and I long to go there and worship at the Wailing Wall... [Israel] belongs to Hashem and he will never let him [sic] people down.” She described her connection to Israel as a homeland as “like when you hear that you were born some place other than where you were raised; you still feel a sense of commitment and longing to see that land where you were born or where your parents or grandparents were born.”

Similar to Lester’s earlier comments, Gamaliel explained his connection to Israel in explicitly Biblical terms:

Jews should be able to call Israel their homeland... That is the land that was promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as a homeland for Jews who want to come there and live as Jews. I believe that each and every person who feels that they are a Jew, according to halakha, should be able to go back and have that affiliation and live as a Jew.

Rabbi Funnye also affirmed his connection to Israel and right to belong there in Biblical terms, saying,
People can fight all they want about where Israel is located, but it doesn’t matter. Is Israel in Africa? In the Middle East? That’s not important. Israel is the important thing to focus on. The way I see it is in Biblical terms – our connection to the land is directly Biblically related. It is the center point of the Torah and the center point of our lives today as Jews, and what continent it is located on does not mean anything.

In the Respes family, this affinity extends beyond support for and identification with Israel to a heartfelt desire to find fulfillment through moving there. Illannah said, “I completely feel that it should be an Israeli state – it was given to the Jews from God,” a sentiment that Yael echoed: “I feel as though it is an Israeli state, a Jewish state, it was given to us, we want it, it’s ours.” Other cousins also expressed their desires to make aliya. Azzie said, Honestly, I’m not afraid to go to Israel tomorrow. Not afraid at all...I will go tomorrow if someone was like, here, go live in Israel. Because that’s where my heart is, honestly, because when I was over there and I think about all of my friends who are there right now, I get so mad and jealous because I want to be over there so bad. I wanna be there. And I’ve been telling a lot of my friends this, if I go over there I’m not coming back.

Yasminah said that most of her family would “love to have the opportunity to live there.” She added, “I want to make aliya, I want to go to med school in Israel... If we could do it tomorrow we’d all be there.” And Yael described, “I went to Israel in 1994 and damn near had a nervous breakdown because everything that I had learned and everything that our grandfather had taught us – it was right there. I did not want to leave. It was crazy... We all feel like that’s where we belong.”

Illannah described her first visit to Israel as “just the most uplifting and most spiritual experience that I have ever had with Torah and God and everything that I have learned it just inspired me to want to pursue moving back to the land and living my life there.”

Despite some negative experiences in Israel, the interviewees seemed to genuinely feel that Israel is the holiest, safest, and best place for them. Rabbi Bowen related, “when we have gone to Israel we were stopped at the airport and questioned, interrogated, stayed there for hours and eventually let in.” Once they
were in Israel, however, she said it was “wonderful.” Just as negative experiences in the diaspora with mainstream Jews did not preclude the wishes of my participants to align themselves with the Jewish American establishment, neither did negative experiences in the homeland deter a forceful and unwavering allegiance to Israel. And, as Gordon suggested in his interview when he said that he has never met an anti-Israel Black Jew, this trend extends beyond the small group of participants in my research to a much larger group of Black Jews throughout the United States. Additionally, his insistence that Black Jews as a group are unconditionally supportive of Israel is significant in its implications for constructing those Black Jews as, again, on the inside of the Jewish community.

There was also a significant measure of idealization of Israel as a color-blind haven in the responses I received. Azzie said, “Any color, doesn’t matter who you are. If you’re a Jew you wanna be in your homeland” and Yael agreed. “I mean over there, there is no color issue. It’s a religious land. It’s different. It’s all about sects there; it has nothing to do with color. At the end of the day, there’s a common denominator and that is the religious aspect. There is no Reform, Conservative, there is Jewish,” she said. Yasminah contrasted her experience in Israel as a member of the majority to her feelings of marginalization in the United States:

I also went on Birthright in the summer of 2004 and it’s one of the things, you’re in Israel and this is your homeland. And everyone around you — there are Arabs, there are Christians, there are some other people around you — but for the most part, it’s Jewish people. Being there on Shabbat, things close down. On Yom Kippur — I wasn’t there on Yom Kippur but — everything closes down. Everyone is the same as you whereas when you’re here you have to explain everything you do, every Shabbat, when my boss calls me on Shabbat to go into work, people just don’t understand because they’re not Jewish whereas when you’re in Israel — this is my homeland, this is where Jewish people are supposed to be. So you know in 1948 when Israel was made a state, it was declared that anybody who is Jewish can come back and live here and obviously you have to do the process but you can come back here and you are always welcome to have a home here... All Jewish people have a connection to Israel and I don’t think it matters if you’re religious or if you’re not religious. It’s our
homeland, it’s where you can be Jewish and not have a question about it. Despite widespread documentation of conflict between religious sects in Israel, between the religious and secular communities in Israel, and between Sephardi and Ashkenazi communities, most of the interviewees seemed convinced that Israel was a utopia for Jews. For them, Israel represented a place where their traditions, observances, and very identity would be understood and recognized as the norm, a place where their Blackness would not invalidate their Jewishness and instead would be accepted and embraced.

While he supported the basic views of the larger group, Funnye’s concern about Israel as a place that should place value on various Jewish backgrounds and traditions was more critical:

Yes, absolutely Israel is my homeland. That doesn’t mean that the connection is felt in the way of support without critique. Righteousness is righteousness and justice is justice. I believe that we need to pursue righteousness and justice in our Holy Land, that is our goal. Judaism has evolved in different lands and has taken the form of different cultures and customs in different places. All cultures are relevant and they should all be able to be synthesized in Israel. The Sephardi and African traditions of Judaism are ancient and important parts of our heritage. Ethiopia is one of the oldest continuous places of Jewish history. It was not only the birthplace of humanity, but it was never colonized and we trace our roots there as the Talmud itself teaches. It is also one of the oldest continuous Jewish communities in history! And there is Judaism in many other African societies as well... Ethiopia must be central to Israeli identity just as Ashkenazi identity is central.

Funnye’s point about Israel's responsibility to maintain equality between different subsections of its society was echoed in my interview with Gordon, who talked about the differences in treatment between Ethiopian immigrants and Russian immigrants as an important critique of Israel:

And it’s highly problematic... I could understand if someone wanted to put me through that because my background is mostly secular, but I don’t understand how you could have these profoundly religious Jewish communities from Ethiopia or other parts of Africa who faced death for their Judaism and are fluent in Hebrew or a Hebrew hybrid or related language such as Amharic, treated that way when there are people from Germany, Poland, and Russia who are not subject to such expectations and who are not interested in Judaism. You know, in Israel there is full
time Russian television and now a situation in which there are Russians there who don’t even have to learn Hebrew. I’m not saying that the absence of speaking Hebrew or practicing Judaism means that the Russian Jews are not Jews. I’m saying that there is a double standard imposed upon African Jews. In my first book... I talk about the dangers of what happens if communities define themselves broadly in White terms. If defined broadly in terms of Black, one faces different political questions. For instance, if Israel were to define itself as a world of color, as Jews or people of color, it would have to make different kinds of alliances and different kinds of decisions, different policies. But once defined as a fundamentally White society, it becomes, it becomes much like a situation of ancient Judea aligning with Rome.

Gordon’s fundamental critique, then, goes back to Israel’s self-definition as a White, European society as opposed to a community of color or even a Black country. How a country constructs its face affects its allies, its political and social values, and the treatment of its citizens. In the case of Israeli treatment of Palestinians, however, Gordon did not continue his objections. Rather, he said,

I find it extraordinarily powerful that the Jewish state preserves the Old City with a large golden domed mosque, the Al-Aqsa Mosque, right smack in the holiest site of Judaism. Really, think about what that means. There are many criticisms of Israel, but in Somalia there are Muslims that are digging up Jewish graves and throwing the bodies into the sea and then creating mosques there. Do you see what I’m saying? There are certain horrible things that, when the Jewish state was founded, could’ve been done to “purify” the land, but those things were not done. The thing about Jerusalem that a lot of people don’t know – and again, this is about asking the right question – what do you see the most when you look around Jerusalem in terms of religious symbols? ...You see mostly crosses and Muslim symbols, for instance, prayer towers. Really, what does that mean? In other words we cannot criticize Israel as being solely a place of Judaism. Clearly the effort to make Israel White is a problematic decision. Clearly there are issues that have to be resolved around Muslim Palestinians and issues around refugees. But Iran and Iraq would not tolerate and preserve non-Muslim institutions in the way that the Jewish state has. And a lot of the critics of Israel would say that too.

Obviously, despite their strong support of Israel, Gordon and Funnye are noticeably more willing to critique Israel than the other participants in this second group. Their relative locations on the continuum of identity and personal experience inform their political opinions and willingness or ability to be critical, since both are legitimized by mainstream Judaism more than their counterparts in the participant group. Funnye’s authenticity was determined when he was
accepted on the Chicago Board of Rabbis and he has also become a public figure; Gordon is a well-known academic and, partially due to White family members, moves easily in Ashkenazi communities. Their positions as Jews are relatively more secure and therefore their social identities make open and public discussions of dissatisfactions with Israel possible.

In general, the conflict between Israel and Palestine did not take up much time in our conversations; as Azzie put it, “Honestly, whatever’s going on over there, it doesn’t give me fear.” Gamaliel’s analysis was more detailed. He said,

I’m sure that the Arab population feels, and no doubt they are treated as “second class citizens” but look at the history. There has always been a Jewish presence in some way in that land since the time of Abraham. In 1948 the British Mandate, when they decided to divide the land and the Arabs had the decision to live in peace and live according to that division and they chose not to. To me, you go to war, you have to accept the outcome. When you don’t get victory, and now, you want to come back and kind of like replay the game. The treatment of the Arab-Israelis, I understand that… I can’t speak for them, but I understand that they are very loyal citizens and to group them all together is the same as grouping anybody all together. So I’m sure that there are bad and good in any group and if they want to be citizens of Israel and they can be but I think we have to be very careful that the Arab population – and this is probably controversial – but it’s a Jewish state and that means we don’t want the Arab population to be the majority. How you can control that I don’t know, but it’s a Jewish state. To me, there are any other number of “Arab” nations and when the Arabs were displaced, I didn’t see them holding up their hands, opening up their arms to welcome their so-called brethren in. It was always let’s take Israel back. Not, come and we can integrate you into our people. You’re all Arabs and you always talk about how you’re there for each other but you didn’t – and that’s never talked about in the media. They always talk about the homeless Palestinians but they didn’t have to be – Jordan could have taken them. Jordan was scared that the Palestinians would come in and overtake the country. There was no unity because they were scared that these other Arabs would come in and dominate their native Arab population. It’s a fake unity, they are only unified against Israel.

Gamaliel’s distrust of the Arabs, unwillingness to place blame of any sort on Israel, and references to the media all place his views in staunch support of Israel. This is perhaps deeply connected to his underlying concern with the validation of a society which he believes holds a place for him. Yasminah’s point that “in 1948 Israel was a Jewish state… that’s where we belong and that’s where other Jewish
people should be able to go if they feel that they want to live there,” underscored their concerns with legitimacy and belonging. She added, “And as far as the Arabs saying that it’s their land too, their history says that Mohammad descends from there too but they weren’t given the land, we were.”

Funnye’s thoughts on the Israeli-Palestinian situation emphasized that peace, specifically through dialogue, is necessary for Israel’s success and security. He said, “I advocate for a political solution whereby the Palestinian people have autonomy alongside Jewish autonomy. I’m not saying that Israel has done no wrong in the whole situation, and the Palestinians deserve a country too, but the Jews need our own country.” Therefore, while he acknowledged that Israel plays a role in the conflict, his personal concern was about Israel’s security and how best to reach that goal. This willingness to accept that Israel is unproblematically a Jewish land goes back to this participant group’s perpetuation of an inside-outside model where they place themselves on the inside. Their marginalization causes a desire to be included in the Jewish community and also precludes association with any group.

Funnye did say that he disagreed with Israel on some issues, but that his differences of opinion did not diminish his support for the homeland. “There are things we may not agree with that Israel does, but we still love it. Just as there are things that the American government does that we disagree with and fight and protest but we still participate in American government,” he explained. When I probed further into his criticisms of Israel, his main critique was not regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but instead the situation of Ethiopian Jews in Israel. “Certainly I am critical of Israeli policies that shut their doors to over 15,000 Falashas and that lent credence to the religious authority when it nullified the culture of the incoming Ethiopian community,” he said, but “that doesn’t mean that bad decisions erase the good that Israel represents or that we love
Israel less.” Instead, Funnye suggested a responsibility to Israel: “It is our role to hold Israel accountable because of how much we actually love Israel, and to bring these issues up in public discourse.” Here, Funnye implies that pressure applied from the Diaspora can affect situations within Israel, and that the goal of Jews of color should be to put that very pressure on the Israeli government to make changes for a more just society. In general, then, not only does this participant group identify strongly as Jewish and support Israel as part of that identity, they also look to Israel as the promise for inclusion in a religious and national community, including the discourses and debate of Jewish and Israeli society.

**The Implications of Diassociation: The Rejection of Israel as a Rejection of Jewishness**

Diasporic consciousness can also work in reverse. By this, I mean that a radically different conceptualization about a homeland can be as powerful in rejecting a community as a diasporic consciousness is in aligning with that community. In the case of more radicalized Hebrew Israelite groups who reject Jewish identity, a denial of Israel as a homeland becomes an additional tool to distance themselves from the mainstream Jewish community. In his book, *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity*, anthropologist John Jackson discusses his encounters with the Worldwide Truthful Understanding (WTU) Black Hebrews, who are one such group.

In this discussion of his experiences with WTU, Jackson notes their reliance on the Bible to explain how Ashkenazi Jews’ claims to Jewishness are false. One WTU man reads the Bible daily and understands it as describing how “the real Jews of God’s covenant were displaced and replaced with imposters, those who, according to Revelation, ‘say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie’” (Jackson 2005, 109). Jackson explains,
I have heard these guys wax historical about the King James version of the Bible, the only translation “sanctioned by God and around for all these years.” They emphasize the book of Revelation and its invocation of “fake Jews,” people now commonly accepted as Jews, they say, embracing a complex kind of anti-Semitism that explicitly overidentifies with Jewishness while concomitantly denouncing it (ibid., 115).

Communities like WTU reject Ashkenazi Jews as legitimate and while such communities are diverse and distinct and the WTU are only one example, for the most part they are historically united in a belief that the true Israelites are Black and descended from Africa. As Prophet Cherry said in a sermon, the White Jew is a “fraud and interloper” (Gold 2003, 211) By and large, they teach that individuals who identify as “Jews” (primarily people of Ashkenazi descent) are imposters and that they are the ones with a true and unique relationship with God. Due to their often racialized tirades against White Jews, these groups are often labeled Black supremacist groups (Jackson 2005, 110).

Since they reject White Jews as legitimate, Hebrew Israelites often reject the Ashkenazi-founded and controlled State of Israel as legitimate as well. The Hebrew Israelite scholar Melchizedek Lewis writes,

Most of the people who now call themselves Jews are not descendants of the children of Israel; their biblical claim to divine territorial pre-eminence in what is erroneously called the Middle East is fundamentally flawed. They are proselytes, converts to the religion of Judaism (Lewis 1998, 170).

Ben Ammi, the founding prophet of the Hebrew Israelites who would later move to Israel (discussed at length later), called White Jews criminals, saying:

The Jews carry out the very kind of abominable deeds which they claim Hitler perpetrated. They are the same Jews who stole the Palestinian’s homeland and drove them out like animals into refugee camps where they are living in inhuman conditions... let us tear away the veil from these Israeli criminals (Landing 2002, 406).

Hebrew Israelite scholar Rudolph Windsor’s scathing critique of the modern state of Israel is based in its treatment of Falashas, or Ethiopian Jews. He says that the entire Jewish world, but especially Israel, has claimed that there is
no “adequate proof” that the Falashas were Jews as an excuse to exclude Blacks from Israeli citizenship. He writes, “By their behavior, the white Jewish world made it plain, by implication, that they could not believe they could be associated with black Jews” (Windsor 1986, 120). He also called the entire “Jewish establishment” racist (ibid., 122) and disassociated himself from it completely. Here, too, is the implicit connection between a disassociation with the actions of the Israeli government and those of the Jewish people (usually referring to mainstream, Ashkenazi communities worldwide) as a whole.

**The Hebrew Israelites of Dimona: A Case Study in Shifting Positionality**

The African Hebrew Israelite Community (AHIC) of Jerusalem in the small development town of Dimona, referred to as the Hebrew Israelites for short, were at one point considered Black supremacists. Many of their beliefs were in line with the WTU community discussed above. AHIC was founded in Chicago in the mid-1960’s by Ben Ammi, néé Benjamin Carter, a foundry worker. In 1966, Ben Ammi had a vision and organized a group of about 300 individuals to return to Liberia in order to build “a community of righteousness.” The AHIC website says of Ben Ammi:

> In 1966, he received a vision in which the angel Gabriel revealed that the time had come for the descendants of the Biblical Israelites among African Americans, to return to the Promised Land and establish the Kingdom of God! A year later, despite his own anxiety, and the skepticism of many, he led 350 African Americans from inner-city Chicago on a journey to the bush of Liberia, West Africa (AHIC, “Ben Ammi”).

In 1969, however, he received another vision in which he was told that the community should live in eastern Africa instead of western Africa – Israel, specifically (Markowitz 1996).
As Markowitz writes, "The Hebrews completely rejected America as their homeland. They equated the debilitating racism that Black people encountered daily there with the biblical anti-home of Babylon and pushed to the side whatever homely feelings they had for their cities, neighborhoods, and family residences." In interviews Markowitz conducted, various community members echoed this theme. One individual, Rakhamim, said,

America – what a nightmare! That was a nightmare to be in America. I was jumpy the whole time I was there. Every time a door slammed... That's a horrible place! You walk on the street, everybody got a gun, all calling names, and they saying they gonna shoot somebody, and they mean that. You can't speak to nobody hardly. You speak to somebody and they say, 'You know me?' What are you talking about? And you better not open your mouth. They just shoot you for nothing and just walk away. And nobody gonna lock them up. That's just the way they live. And who want to live like that? (ibid).

The AHIC website says, “In today’s world, man has created so many diversions from and substitutions for the true worship of God that the people have lost their way. We... were astounded by the drastic changes required for those of us who desired to fulfill our responsibility to God as Hebrew Israelites” (AHIC, “Our Philosophy). Another Hebrew Israelite, a young college student named Yafa, told Markowitz that after one class with the Hebrew Israelites she knew she had found her place and would emigrate to Israel. She explained,

I had always been looking for an identity. An identity as a people, not just to be second-class, groping in the darkness. I was always asking these questions, challenging thing when I was a kid, a teenager. I got to college – and I was tired. I wanted to do just like everyone else, follow the path. I went to this class just because of my sister... It was like a spiritual awakening. Things I had always felt but never heard. I thought, ‘This is it,’ and I was ready then to join the community (Markowitz 1996).

After Ben Ammi’s second vision, the Hebrew Israelite community moved to Israel and claimed the right to live there under the Law of Return. The AHIC believed that Israel was to be a place “where all nations would come seeking the presence and wisdom of God,” and so they were pursuing a divine mission to establish a “Kingdom of God” in the Holy Land of Israel. This Kingdom of God
was built upon “the precepts of righteousness which emanates the presence of
God and serves as a living example for all men” and would be “a society where
solutions to the seemingly irreversible problems that plague mankind - rampant
disease, drug abuse, sexual abuse, corruption, ecological destruction,
disintegration of the family unity, etc. - can be found” (AHIC, “Our Philosophy”).
They saw themselves as answering the call for the ingathering of the exiles in the
land of Israel (Markowitz et al. 2003, 304). Upon the Hebrew Israelites’ arrival in
Dimona in the 1970s there was significant tension between the community and
the Israeli government because the government was deliberating over their legal
status.

Part of the ambivalence had to do with the Hebrew Israelites’ practices
that were not in line with Jewish law or Israeli law or simply diverged from
typical Jewish practice. They followed (and continue to follow) a strictly
structured life based on Ben Ammi’s Biblical interpretations, and a hierarchy of
princes and ministers have run the community. Some of the community’s
principles adhere to Jewish law.25 For example, the Hebrew Israelites are strict
vegans and thereby followed kasbrut by default (Lounds 1981, 59), although
observance of Shabbat and other holy days has not been obligatory (ibid., 62).
Unlike traditional Judaism, there are no coming of age Bar or Bat Mitzvah
ceremonies (ibid., 60) and polygyny is practiced widely (ibid., 61). They also
observe New World Passover and Sisters Day, which have no equivalents in the
Jewish calendar (Markowitz 1996). As Prince Asiel, the highest-ranking prince
and second-in-command to Ben Ammi, explained in an interview with American
Jewish Life magazine, the community followed all written law as found in the five
books of Moses, but did not abide by the oral law of the Talmud. He said, “Most
of the European Jews took the traditions of the Mishnah and the Talmud and the
writings of the sages... Most of us maintained that because we didn’t have access
to those writings, the Tanach was the fundamental document that we stayed closely aligned with” (Prince Asiel. Personal Interview). The fact that the Hebrew Israelites are Black and not halakhic Jews has compounded the skepticism of mainstream Jews about their non-traditional practices, their syncretic uses of the New Testament, and their acceptance of Yeshua ben Yosef (Jesus) and Ben Ammi as messiahs (Markowitz 2006, 135).

Faced with social rejection and a legal challenge to their right to be in Israel, the Hebrew Israelites claimed that they were the true nation of Israel, the original Hebrew Israelite nation and community. This claim obviously did not fit into the dominant Israeli narrative of a Jewish State, and ultimately the Israeli government denied the legitimacy of their claim and denied them all rights and benefits of the state, including citizenship, much to the shock of the members of the AHIC. Israeli officials said that the Hebrew Israelites had been raised in Christianity and never converted, and therefore were not Jewish and could not be citizens under the Law of Return (Markowitz et al. 2003, 305). Although they were told they did not belong, the community decided not to leave. Since they were not legally given recognition, small groups of Hebrew Israelites entered the country on tourist visas that they subsequently overstayed (Markowitz 1996).

After Prince Asiel, who had not yet immigrated to Israel, was prevented from visiting Dimona in 1977, he accused the Israeli government of “outright racism” and asserted that Israel had isolated the 1,400 Hebrew Israelites, keeping them in Dimona while not allowing Black Americans to visit them (“Israel and Its Black Hebrews,” 1977). These comments, along with several scandals, led to the deportation of more than 50 members of the AHIC. Following these deportations, the rest of the community renounced their American citizenship and gave up their passports, becoming stateless and therefore precluding more deportations (Nessman 1993).
In reaction to their disappointing reception in Israel and in line with their teachings up to that point, the Hebrew Israelites began publicly denouncing the Israeli government and the Jewish establishment in general. Ben Ammi called Israel a “racist, Jim Crow country like South Africa” based on the Hebrew Israelites’ failure to receive housing, jobs, education, and health benefits (Landing 2002, 399). They claimed that European Jews were not true Jews, and Ben Ammi even encouraged Black Americans to “rescue Israel from the usurpers” (Ibid). They argued that they were a nation and that their identity, culture, history, and language were stolen by people, now known as Jews, who were jealous of their status as God’s “chosen people” (Lounds 1981, 52). Their emphasis was specifically on nationhood instead of religion, because “religions have only divided men.” Instead, they regarded “the true worship of God as a continuous process: 24 hours a day... 7 days a week” (AHIC, “Our Philosophy”).

Markowitz points out that the Hebrew Israelites redrew the map of Africa to include Israel – in books, pamphlets, and oral ceremonies the Israelites say that, “the term ‘Middle East’ is a capricious geographic label with no historical or Biblical connection to Israel... Instead, they proclaim that Israel is an African land, originally populated by dark-skinned, African people” (found in Markowitz 1996). In a brochure published by the community, the Hebrew Israelites claimed, “Prior to the excavation of the Suez Canal (1859-69) the entire Arabian Peninsula and what has become known today as the ‘Middle East’ were connected with the African continent. African people lived and moved freely throughout this region of the world” (AHIC Public Relations brochure). Markowitz describes this emphasis on Israel as moving “beyond resisting racism and unsatisfying identity in America to building their own culture in Israel-as-Africa” (Markowitz 1996). Their emphasis on Israel did not, however, mean that the Hebrew Israelites wanted to align themselves with mainstream Jewish
communities. Even to this day, they refer to themselves as a Hebraic or Judaic group but reject identifying as “Jewish” and have for decades refused to undergo a traditional conversion, even though such a process would make them immediately eligible for citizenship in Israel (ibid).

In the early 1980s, however, the AHIC’s views on Israeli policy changed. The New York Amsterdam News reported in 1981 that Ben Ammi offered an olive branch to Israeli officials by stating that he and the Hebrew Israelites were hostile to the enemies of the Jewish state and would be willing to fight in the defense of Israel. He said, “We’re ready to compromise...we’ve moderated our position” (Boone 1981, 14). The Hebrew Israelites removed anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic slurs and almost all claims of preceding and superseding Jews from their publications and public statements. Their new narrative said, “After the destruction of the second temple in Jerusalem, some Israelites fled northward into Europe, North Africa, and Asia, where they became the ancestors of today’s Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews. Consequently, every sort of Jew, no matter of what history or color, holds a rightful place in present day Israel” (Markowitz et al. 2003, 306).

As relations between the AHIC and the Israeli government began to stabilize, the Hebrew Israelites were reinstated as American citizens in 1990 and also given a grant to build a new school and pay off their debt. In March of 1993, the Israeli government granted the Hebrew Israelites temporary residency status with plans to grant them permanent residency in 1995, barring any negative developments (Nessman 1993). They did not receive permanent residency in the 1990s or in the early 2000s, as the Minister of the Interior decided time and time again to extend their temporary residence status (Markowitz et al. 2003, 305). Over time they made their move towards the mainstream through a demonstrated commitment to the Israeli state. After living in Israel for years and
becoming more familiar with the language, customs, and laws of the land, the Hebrew Israelites have become more integrated into Israeli society. Also, they pay taxes and contribute to the greater communities in which they live.

A major factor in their gradual assimilation was the death of a Hebrew Israelite by a Palestinian gunman. In January of 2002, the first Israel-born Hebrew Israelite, singer Aharon Ben-Yisrael Alis, was killed while performing at a Bat Mitzvah in Hadera, at the young age of 32. This event solidified the AHIC’s commitment to Israel in the eyes of many Israeli citizens, and soon after Alis’ death, the community won the right to volunteer for the alternative national service that Israeli citizens can complete instead of military service.

In July 2003, the Hebrew Israelites were finally granted permanent residency status by the Ministry of the Interior. Permanent residency meant voting rights, service in the Israeli army, and the right to establish their own legally recognized residential communities (Enav 2003). It also meant considerably more security for the community, which by 2003 had been there for more than 30 years. Their service in the army has also provided them with more social capital and general acceptance by other Israelis as well. In Dennis Fox’s web blog about his visit to Dimona he writes, “I had expected some separation between the community and the rest of Dimona, but there is no physical barrier, making it more like a neighborhood than a separate village. It’s just across the street from non-community houses and institutions. Outsiders frequently come through, and are met politely” (Fox 2006). Conditions in the AHIC neighborhood, however, are not ideal. A San Francisco Chronicle article reported that “[l]iving conditions are overcrowded and rudimentary – a situation exacerbated by a local unemployment rate of 10 percent, and the low wages earned by many of the men who work at nearby construction sites” (Haas 2002). But these conditions are true of the larger Dimona community and are not
specific to the AHIC necessarily. So in their struggle for better living conditions, too, they are more united with the larger Israeli society.

Therefore, in some ways the Dimona community is an example of a community whose strong support for, affiliation with, and commitment to a homeland was linked to eventual, if limited, acceptance and legitimacy. Their story is one of compromise and negotiation, but also of a vehement and proven dedication to the state of Israel. And, despite their history of continued refusal to identify as Jewish, Prince Asiel said that “[t]he Hebrew Israelites are just a part of the larger Jewish community,” (Prince Asiel. Personal Interview) marking a move towards a more significant association with mainstream Judaism.
Chapter V

Comparisons and Conclusions: The Relationship Between Diasporic Consciousness and Social Positionality

As evidenced in this project, diasporic consciousness and an affiliation with a homeland can be useful negotiating tools in identity politics. I do not mean to suggest that any of the feelings expressed about Israel and Israel as homeland are disingenuous, but I would like to rather look at the political implications of those feelings in the context of personal identity and identities. Specifically, I examine how a relative position of marginalization can inform self-identification with a homeland. That is to say, how are personal feelings of connection to Israel shaped by the political and social realities of individuals’ lives? Again, the intersection of different identities acts upon this consciousness and it is never Jewishness alone or Blackness alone at work in any of these instances. Gender, sexuality, age, and class are all operating here also, but the constraints of this project do not permit a complete deconstruction of each individual participant.

The first group of participants I interviewed is made up of Buitekant, King, and Lester. Their Jewish identity is not in question by the mainstream Jewish establishment, and so they have no particular need for a special relationship with Israel. This is not to say that each of these individuals is not grappling with their own relationship with Israel, nor is it to say that any of them are unaware of their connection to Israel through their Jewishness, but in the interviews none claimed Israel as their homeland although Lester came closest.
Also, they each positioned themselves at an intersection between a racialized identity and a Jewish identity.

The second group of participants in my project, consisting of the seven Respes family members, Dr. Lewis Gordon, Rabbi and Elder Bowen, Lady Tova T’shura, and Rabbi Funnye, identified exclusively as Jewish with one exception. While none of them denied their racial heritage, most of them emphasized that their personal ancestry is mixed and that their sole affiliation is with Judaism. In terms of their relationships with Israel, participants in the second group supported Israel across the board. Some supported Israel to the extent of minimizing the Palestinian plight; others supported Israel despite negative racialized experiences they or their family members had there. Very few were critical of Israel at all; the exceptions are Funnye and Gordon. There is a demonstrated spectrum that exists even within this small group: Funnye and Gordon, the participants who were most critical of Israel, had the most access to and comfort with the mainstream community – Funnye through his conversion and working relationships with mainstream Jewish communities, and Gordon through his Ashkenazi family and high academic distinction and position in predominantly White universities. Interestingly, the criticisms of Israel primarily had to do with the treatment of Jews of color, particularly Black Ethiopian Jews, in Israel. Often, their critiques did not mention Palestinian refugees. Also noteworthy is that with every criticism came an equally resounding affirmation that the disapproval did not supersede support for Israel. I argue that their overwhelming support is necessitated by their desire to affiliate with the mainstream Jewish communities – Ashkenazi and Sephardi – and insistence on their legitimate Jewish identity. Moreover, it shows how their marginalization predicates that support for Israel.

In an inverse situation, some Hebrew Israelite groups reject Israel as an
additional tool for a denunciation of Jewishness. Their argument is that the true descendants of Israel are Black Hebrew Israelites and they want nothing to do with the (White) Jews, who they see as imposters. One such group, the African Hebrew Israelite Community, claimed the land of Israel as rightfully theirs and emigrated to Dimona to establish their righteous community. An AHIC member, Samaheyan Bat-Yisrael, said that her life in Chicago was “desolation” but she found salvation in Dimona. She said, “We were slaves there. Here I know I’m safe” (Haas 2002). After over thirty years of affiliation with Israel and negotiation with the Israeli government, the Dimona community did successfully position themselves within the existing social order in Israel through their victory in the battle for permanent residency.

While this project has focused on one example of how social positionality can affect personal identifications through an analysis of different Black Jews’ diasporic consciousnesses, I believe that this trend is not limited to one group’s experience, but instead it is far-reaching. The rest of this chapter will present two significant examples in support of my study. In the first, a historic look at pre-1948 opposition to the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine, I will examine how the anti-Zionist rejection of Jews as a nation was predicated on the desire for Jewish assimilation into the American mainstream. The second case, which examines contemporary Caribbean immigrant identity politics, shows how phenotypically Black immigrants position themselves as separate from Black Americans by maintaining their nationalist identities in order to gain social capital. Ultimately, I will conclude that a position of uncertainty within a wider society can influence a how a community chooses to identify. This often results in purposeful separation from the most marginalized groups despite shared pre-existing familial and historical ties.
The Desire to Assimilate: Jewish Anti-Zionism in the Early 20th Century

Although current day American Jewish communities are overwhelmingly and emphatically supportive of Zionism in general, when Zionism first entered political discourses in the United States it met significant resistance. As mentioned earlier, Zionism defined the Jewish people as a nation and emphasized the importance of place and location within that national identity. Most (Orthodox) rabbis at the time decided that the new Zionist definition of Jewish identity was “a total inversion of traditional values” because “what until now was regarded as mere means to an end becomes the object, and that which was formerly the object becomes the means” (Rabkin 2006, 27-28). Rabbinical thinkers like Rabbi Israel Domb were outraged, and they countered that a Jewish nation must be founded on an allegiance to the Torah and scripture rather than a commitment to an ethnic group or particular territory (ibid., 27). Opposition to Zionism organized quickly, and even those rabbis who had previously encouraged settling Palestine turned against the Zionist movement. Their insistence that Jewish uniqueness was based on the Torah and practice of mitzvot (commandments), and not a land or a language, was unwavering (ibid., 29). This initial resistance to Zionism is different from the more widespread opposition that this section will address, but it is important to note that Zionism had many detractors from different groups and for different reasons.

Most Jewish opponents to the Zionist movement were primarily concerned with jeopardizing their newfound and increasing social mobility. An association with Israel or a need for a separate homeland would negate their new American-ness. As Jews gained entry into White society and began to enjoy economic as well as social success, many Jewish Americans were disinterested in drawing attention to themselves or asserting Jewish uniqueness. It was only later,
once Israel was established and Ashkenazi Jews were firmly assimilated into the White “mainstream” of the United States, that many Jews became staunch Zionists.

The anti-Zionist movement was led primarily by rabbis of the Reform movement, who were also invested in Jewish assimilation. Reform Judaism began in Germany as a faith based on European Enlightenment principles such as optimism, rationalism, and progress (Kolsky 1990, 1). In the late nineteenth century, German-speaking Jews immigrated to the United States from Central Europe and adopted Reform Judaism, which was remarkably successful. As historian Thomas Kolsky writes, Reform Judaism “welcomed enthusiastically the promise of Jewish emancipation in the modern world, minimized the dangers and significance of anti-Semitism, and professed an almost religious love for the United States as a promised land” (ibid., 2). Nineteenth century Reform spokesmen denounced Zionism for teaching that anti-Semitism was incurable and instead emphasized the importance of the United States as a homeland and the value of assimilation. Interestingly, this emphasis of the anti-Zionists on claiming American-ness as their primary identity is comparable to the Black Jews’ claims of Jewishness over racial identity, because in both cases the groups were privileging one aspect of their identity over another to decisively mark an affiliation with a particular group. For the anti-Zionists, identifying primarily or even exclusively as American both distanced them from their Jewishness (and difference) and demonstrated their desire to align with mainstream (White) America. The Black Jews in my study claimed Jewishness over Blackness, choosing to position themselves as closer to or part of the greater Jewish community.

Between the early 1880s and the 1920s, however, the size and class of American Jewry changed dramatically: it grew from 250,000 Jews of
predominantly German descent to four million people, the majority of whom were from Eastern Europe. Kolsky argues that these new Jewish immigrants were predisposed to identify in national or ethnic terms, which made them more likely to join the Zionist movement, unlike the integrated German Jews. He notes that while some Zionist leaders were German Jews, the majority of the movement’s members were Eastern European (Kolsky 1990, 2). Historian Henry Feingold says, however, that Zionism was unpopular even with Eastern European Jews because it ran in opposition to assimilation. Feingold points out that Eastern Europeans were hard-pressed socially and economically and that they wanted to re-root themselves in the dominant American culture.

The already established Jewish community was also eager to rid the new immigrants of their distinguishing foreign culture. Jews were largely distrustful of Zionism because of the impediment that the Zionist proposition for a Jewish homeland posed to that process. The Reform movement leader Rabbi Emil Hirsch, acting as a spokesman for a group of Reform rabbis, unequivocally declared that “Jews did not wish to be restored to Palestine,” (Feingold 1974, 200), and Rabbi David Philipson, an outspoken anti-Zionist Reform rabbi, said, “To my mind... political Zionism and true Americanism have always seemed mutually exclusive. No man can be a member of two nationalities, Jewish and American... There is no middle way” (ibid., 204). Here, again, is a clear example of how rhetorics of homeland are important to social positionality. These Jews did not reject the idea of homeland altogether, rather they denounced a separate homeland and looked to the United States as home instead.

When the Zionist movement grew and strengthened in the 1940s after the atrocities of Nazism were revealed, several Reform rabbis, led by Louis Wolsey, mobilized and formed the American Council for Judaism (ACJ). The ACJ, which was established in 1942, was the only American Jewish organization
created specifically for the purpose of fighting Zionism and the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. Its roots were in the Reform religious movement, but it quickly transformed into a secular anti-Zionist group. The rabbis who established the ACJ faded into the background when Lessing J. Rosenwald and Rabbi Elmer Berger took over the leadership positions of the organization in 1943. Under Rosenwald and Berger, the membership of the ACJ became mostly middle- and upper-middle class lay Reform Jews of German descent who were primarily concerned with the threat that Zionism posed to their access to dominant American society (Kolsky 1990, 1). In a letter to anti-Zionist Jewish leader Bernard Richards, New York banker and philanthropist Jacob Schiff argued that “thanks to the preaching and machinations of Jewish Nationalists we are gradually being forced into a class by ourselves... whose interests are different than those of the... American people” (Feingold 1974, 204).

The Council rejected Jewish nationalism as a whole and instead emphasized the religious character of Jewishness, denouncing Jewish separatism. It further asserted that no one group could speak for all Jewish people (Kolsky 1990, 3-4). These statements are clear strategies for battling the newfound threat to Jewish social gains in the United States – if Jewishness was not a national identity then Jews could associate with American nationalism, and if no one group could speak for all Jews then the anti-Zionists had space to reaffirm their association with the United States. Moreover, by rejecting traditional separatist discourses of Jewish chosenness, the anti-Zionists were making a clear step towards Americanization. Again, the anti-Zionists wished to negotiate their position in the United States through a relationship with a homeland, but instead of embracing (the possibility of) a distant homeland they looked to the United States and assimilation as the promise of home.28 The ACJ did support Jewish rights to unrestricted immigration into any country they wished, including
Palestine, and worked tirelessly to expand immigration privileges as an alternative to Zionism. Instead of the formation of a Jewish state, the Council supported the establishment of a democratic state in Palestine where Arabs and Jews would share representation in the government and equal rights (ibid., 4). This constant referencing of democracy is normalized in modern discourse, but in the political uncertainty of the 1940s, it was a clear statement of support for all that the United States professed to symbolize.

Eventually, of course, the anti-Zionist campaign failed and a Jewish state was established. Different scholars argue over the causes, but it is clear that the Holocaust played a major role in their inability to fight the creation of Israel. It is important to note, however, that the resistance to Zionism was the sustained attempt of one community to escape their low status and assimilate into the wider (White) American society. In the face of historic Jewish marginalization in the United States and elsewhere, and motivated by the fear of returning to that status, anti-Zionists struggled to define the Jewish community in more palatable terms. The anti-Zionist movement towards mainstream (White) American national identity directly correlates to how, when interviewed, the first group of participants rejected a homeland elsewhere because of their comfort with the position that they occupy in the United States. The second group of Black Jews in my study, who position themselves as closer to the religious-national mainstream Jewish community, recognized that the acceptance they find in those communities is tenuous at best, and were also concerned with presenting themselves as easily assimilable into mainstream American Jewry. Several participants made a point to distance themselves from more radical and separatist Hebrew Israelite groups, for example, and all of them marked their affinity for Israel in that effort.
“A West Indian Black Has a Lot More Things Going on with It than Just a Good Old Black”: Social Positionality in Caribbean Immigrant Discourses of Identity

After the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, immigration to the United States changed dramatically. National-origin quotas were abolished and unlimited visas were issued to family members of current U.S. residents and citizens. One result was that immigrants from the Caribbean began to arrive in unprecedented numbers, and that trend has continued steadily. For many Caribbean immigrants, coming to the United States can be confusing and upsetting. American racism can be hard to understand for immigrants, even if they have a grasp of the history of race exploitation in the United States. As sociologist Mary Waters says, “The immigrants enter the United States with experience of a very different racial and ethnic categorization system – one that recognizes a variety of categories between black and white” (Waters 1999, 49). In the United States, where race is such an essential piece of the social structure and identity is constantly assumed or demanded (in forms for employment, educational institutions, and the government, for example), “learning that they were black according to American racial schemes and learning how to fill out the various questions on race, ethnicity, and nationality were important parts of the immigrant adjustment experience.” This process is often described by those immigrants as one of the most “surprising and troubling aspects of life in the United States” (ibid., 53). An examination of how the diasporic experiences of Caribbean immigrants influences their identity in the United States is important because it is yet another example of how a group can use their relationship with a homeland to impact their position in the United States.

Despite their generally being labeled as “Black” in America, the immigrants do experience a degree of choice in how they identify. Waters
explains, “History and circumstance have conspired to give West Indian immigrants... a variety of choices and possibilities in terms of describing their racial and ethnic identities. There are layers of ethnic and racial appellations available to them, and there is a great deal of variation in how individuals choose to deal with those layers” (ibid., 48). There is also considerable opportunity to move back and forth between identities.32

Racial identification has “important affirmative meaning for immigrants” (Rogers 2001, 167). Rogers explains, “Afro-Caribbeans identify both racially and ethnically. They see no need to make a dichotomous choice, but instead embrace both their racial and ethnic identities” (ibid., 174-175). In Rogers’ study, most of the respondents expressed a shared identification with Black Americans in terms of a “sense of awareness and attachment to a racial group” (ibid., 176).

Although these immigrants do identify as Black, they primarily associate with their national (or religious33) identity as a way of negotiating their social position within the greater American racial binary system. A Jamaican male teacher, age 41, who had been in the United States for five years, said:

I think of myself as a black person when it comes to fighting some of the structures. A West Indian among blacks and whites when it comes to being different and distinct, full of pride, having a solid history and solid background, educationally and socially and everything else, achievements in school, in politics, in government, in economics, and breakthroughs. Some of the West Indians who have come here and done very well here, I identify with that” (Waters 1999, 63).

In their examination of the interactions between Black Haitian immigrants and Black American teens in a Miami inner-city high school, sociologists Alex Stepick, Max J. Castro, and Marvin Dunnet look at how Haitian students distance themselves from their Black American counterparts. The high school in their study is located between Little Haiti and Liberty City, which has the highest concentration of Black Americans in the greater Miami area. Haitian immigrants first began entering this particular school in the early 1980s, but by
the late 1980s, when Stepick et al. began their research, the school was half Haitian and half Black. By the mid-1990s the school was about 80 to 90 percent Haitian (Stepick et al. 2003, 15).34

In general, anti-Haitian discrimination by the government and by U.S. citizens has been widespread and intense.35 In this high school, Haitian and American Black students quickly clashed as well. Administrators temporarily closed the school several times due to conflicts that ensued when students “severely ridiculed” and physically harassed individuals who looked Haitian or spoke Creole or accented English (ibid., 117). Both the school system and the students in the school insisted that the Haitian students assimilate to the prevalent racial order in the United States (ibid., 115).

Despite these pressures, immigrants often resist. They see significant differences between themselves and Black Americans and assert those distinctions. Waters says, “Education in particular divides the groups. Many of the immigrants set great store on education for both themselves and their children, and they quickly come to believe that black Americans do not value education the same way” (ibid., 66). One 36-year-old Jamaican female teacher who had already lived in the United States for ten years said,

The general trend for American blacks is that you look after your emotional life first and then you go to school, while we are different, most of us were brought up that you go to school and then you get married. West Indians are always pushing ahead, trying to get to school and finish, while Americans, maybe because they are Americans, feel that they have it forever, so why the rush (ibid., 66).

It is worth exploring how this perception arises when many of the Black Americans interviewed in Waters’ study describe themselves “as being characterized by two values above all else – a love of family and a love of education” (ibid., 69). Structural discrimination and inequity in schools in
particular, which I define as systematic racism, can help explain this discrepancy.\textsuperscript{36}

Due both to the discrimination they face and to their negative impressions of the Black American community, Caribbean immigrants consistently refuse to identify with Black Americans, effectively positioning themselves separately in the social order. Respondents in the Stepick et al. and Waters studies consistently perceived Black American youth, families, and value systems to be distinct from their own and negatively marked by the dominant White culture. Waters points to how immigrants define themselves as the “in-group” and Otherize Black Americans:

Individual West Indians who do not work or who engage in criminal activity are defined as exceptions to the general rule that West Indians are good people. Their behavior is attributed to situational or environmental factors. Individual African Americans who exhibit the same behavior are regarded as reflecting deep character flaws (Waters 1999, 71). She notes that this is a commonly observed psychological phenomenon, but I would like to note that it is a clear reflection of the racial hierarchy in the United States. This is exactly why middle-class immigrants described themselves and even their poorer counterparts as more likely than Black Americans to have an intact husband-wife family (ibid., 69) even when, as Waldinger says, “on most if not all counts, West Indians experience the same fate as their African American counterparts.” This discrepancy points to the “pervasiveness of racial discrimination, notwithstanding the signals that might differentiate West Indians from their U.S.-born counterparts and any distinctive group resources that the immigrants possess” (Waldinger 2001, 87).

Rogers’ study supports Waldinger’s conclusion, saying that the Afro-Caribbeans he interviewed are “hardly convinced” that identifying ethnically would remove the racial stigma of Blackness and that they have “no illusions about their own vulnerability to racism” (Rogers 2001, 187). This evidence also
strengthens the point that Afro-Caribbean immigrants do not distinguish themselves from Black Americans out of a desire to distance themselves from the racism itself. But the Caribbean immigrants seemed more interested in distancing themselves from American Blacks, as opposed to the participants I discussed in chapter four, who were more interested in actively identifying as Jewish. In both instances, the groups embrace a relationship with their homelands in a way that impacts their positions in the United States, but in my research on Black Jews that takes the form of an identification with Jewishness and in the case of the Caribbean immigrants it is an emphasis on Caribbean or island identity as a strategy for distancing from Black Americans.

Over 70 percent of Haitian Miami students in the Stepick et al. study asserted that they had no desire to become U.S. citizens in a 1989 survey. These students responded that being and becoming American meant, “Don’t give a shit. Dirty. Rude. Less class. Black Americans are disrespectful of their peers and grownups. They don’t wash enough. I am an American citizen by birth, not choice. Too much crime, fighting and killing, especially among children. My mother automatically stereotypes black Americans as thieves” (Stepick et al. 2003, 126). In their study, Stepick et al. reported that one female student who arrived in 1986 said simply, “I don’t like it here.” Another female student agreed, noting that she had visited Haiti and wished that she could live there. Giving the example of a young male student who “adopted the appearance of being an African American,” Stepick et al. imply that even those who assimilate to Black American body language, speech patterns, sports, dress, and hairstyles (ibid., 122) reject American identity. This student said that despite his outward appearance, “I don’t like it here just like everyone else” (ibid., 126).

In Waters’ study, too, the immigrants she interviewed said “over and over” that they did not want to be confused with Black Americans because they had
different cultures. One woman explained that the two groups were “looking in
different directions, having different motivations.” Waters asked one 27-year-old
man who was born in the United States but identified as being from St. Thomas
how other people identified him. He said, “I am quite sure they think I am a
black American.” When further questioned about whether he told others that he
was from a West Indian country he responded that he did:

Oh yes, I make it very clear. Sure. It’s important. Because of the way I
think in general. It’s a difference in the way I act, in the way I carry
myself. In my priorities and everything I do. I don’t think like the
average black, I would say (Waters 1999, 291).

A 37-year-old woman from St. Kitts who had been in the United States for
sixteen years added,

The blacks here should have more of life – they don’t try to promote
themselves. They in too much drugs, on the streets, doing wrong things.
Getting into trouble. We West Indian do things a lot different from their
self. We try hard to work. But I feel that the majority of them depend on
someone to give a hand out all the time. You just have to get up and work
for your own. But they figure that, OK, I was born here, and because I
was born here, I supposed to get this (ibid., 65-66).

Caribbean immigrants adopted a variety of strategies for distinguishing
themselves from Black Americans, and, as Waters notes, “There is a great deal of
relief in realizing that whites will treat one better, but also anger and ambivalence
because one also understands that people can’t always tell that you are not black
American” (ibid., 293). One 20-year old woman from St. Thomas who moved to
the United States when she was six years old explained that this distinction was
important: “A West Indian black has a lot more things going on with it than just
a good old black. I think West Indian gives more – a stronger identity than to say
just black” (ibid., 290-291) Participants in Waters’ study described carrying
keychains with the flags of their home countries to signify their difference from
Black Americans, for example. One second-generation Caribbean immigrant,
believing that West Indians’ job or home applications would be looked upon
more favorably, learned an accent from her mother (ibid., 293-294). A 26-year-old Guyanese female worker who had been in the United States for 10 years said, “I prefer to be recognized as Guyanese. I wear a pin that has the flag. And then they would say, ‘Oh, she's Guyanese.’ Because constantly, you can't keep telling everybody, ‘I’m from Guyana,’ you know” (ibid., 73).

Part of why these individuals all feel the need to distinguish themselves as separate from the Black American community is due to their tenuous position near the bottom of the economic and social/racial societal stratum, which informs their identity. Through self-identifying in terms of nationality (and maintaining ties to their homelands) rather than in terms of race, these immigrants distance themselves from the most marginalized Black community and establish themselves as closer to the dominant White society.

**Concluding Remarks**

Markowitz writes that “home persists as one of the few remaining utopian ideals,” as the retreat of “permanent, stable, sanctified homeplaces piques cultural imaginaries of better elsewheres and propels political action aimed at resolving the intersecting, even if often contradictory, claims for personal home spaces with the sovereign territory of nation-states” (Markowitz 2004b, 22). In this paper, I expand upon Markowitz’s idea that the need for stability and a clearly delineated social reality is central to the diasporic consciousness. This longing for belonging often translates into the assertion of a special or specific identity through identifying with a distant homeland.

There is a clear parallel between the Caribbean immigrants’ insistence on identifying as West Indian rather than African-American or American Black, and Black Jews identifying primarily as Jewish, not Black. Pre-1948 anti-Zionist
rejection of Jewish nationalism in order to position American Jews as mainstream also follows the trend of social positionality influencing identity formation. Nation and race are central in each of these examples, but both function as factors in an equation centered on a homeland, real or imagined, and the need to belong. In the case of the anti-Zionists, the idea of establishing a separate homeland threatened their conception of the possibilities of belonging, and they instead looked to the United States as a place that would function as their homeland, or at least their home. Perhaps, as Markowitz suggests, this “possibility of a home, the ultimate peaceful retreat, a this-worldly alternative to social fragmentation and tumultuous traveling, continues to resonate, and the call to home … still beckons as an antidote to partial belongings and unfulfilled dreams” (ibid., 22).

This project engages with one marginalized group’s hopes for acceptance in a distant homeland; I discuss how Black Jews’ relationships with and commitments to the state of Israel function as a way to negotiate their marginalized positionality within the larger, predominantly Ashkenazi, American Jewish community. Jewish identity (national or religious) becomes primary over racial identity, as Yasminah Respes said, “As far as my identity, I definitely consider myself a Jew before and above anything else. I’ve always felt that way.” Israel is the ultimate articulation of that Jewishness and it lies at the center of the discourses of many of the participants in this project and in other interviews. One Black Jewish woman, interviewed in the Los Angeles Times said of her visit to Israel, “I have never been accepted in America as I was in Israel” (Tugend 2004). For these individuals, Israel represents a utopia where their observance and their very identity would be embraced as the norm and where their Blackness would not delegitimize their claims to Jewishness.

As Markowitz says,
Home(land) is a highly packed signifier that encapsulates a concept and a place and encompasses a feeling born of desire, laced with nostalgia. It brings together memories and longings, spatialities and temporalities, immediate family and ancestors long-gone, the local and the global, and physical sensations with the intangible and that which cannot be spoken (Markowitz 2004b, 23).

The promise of home is strong enough to inform how people identify themselves.

As I have explored, diasporic consciousness can be and is used as a tool for negotiating oppressive power structures and reaffirming a sense of self and belonging.
Endnotes

1 By physical location I mean where the group is actually situated; metaphysical location is the group’s abstract or symbolic position in a society.

2 The Boyarins add: “Indeed, we would suggest that Diaspora, and not monotheism, may be the most important contribution that Judaism has to make to the world, although we would not deny the positive role that monotheism has played in making Diaspora possible. Assimilating the lesson of Diaspora, namely that peoples and lands are not naturally and organically connected, could help prevent bloodshed... Diaspora can teach us that it is possible for a people to maintain its distinctive culture, its difference, without controlling land, a fortiori without controlling other people or developing a need to dispossess them of their lands... The renunciation of difference seems both an impoverishment of human life and an inevitable harbinger of oppression. Yet the renunciation of sovereignty (justified by discourses of autochthony, indigenousness, and territorial self-determination), combined with a fierce tenacity in holding onto cultural identity, might well have something to offer to a world in which these two forces, together, kill thousands daily” (Boyarin and Boyarin 1993, 723).

3 For more on discrimination against converts to Judaism see McClain 1995, 210-212.

4 Halakha is the body of Jewish law including the Biblical laws (613 commandments) later Talmudic and Rabbinic, and customs and traditions.

5 Fernheimer also writes, “... There are monetary and legal consequences of recognition. If one is recognized as a new, Jewish immigrant, one is entitled to a variety of benefits that can include temporary housing, rent/mortgage subsidies, free Hebrew language instruction, an interest-free moving loan, a free one way ticket to Israel, tax exemptions on household goods, and reductions in property taxes” (Fernheimer 2006, 136-137).

6 Throughout the twentieth century Jews from all around the world immigrated to Israel and each distinct community contributed different religious, cultural, and linguistic traditions that, when combined, made for an extremely diverse society. Generally, these differences are collapsed into a broad East-West binary. Jews from Asia and Africa are lumped into the category of “Sephardi” or sometimes “Oriental” (in Hebrew, “Mizrahim”) and Jews of European descent are called “Ashkenazi.” Within these two groups there are subdistinctions and stereotypes, especially because from the founding of the State relations between Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews were tense, particularly surrounding the privilege awarded the Ashkenazi Jews in Israel. As Salamon says, “A dynamic of paternalism and power relations, ubiquitous in encounters between East and West, rears its head across the public sphere in education, economics, and politics, and emerges at many levels of social relations and cultural expression” (Salamon 2001, 78). For more on this see Salamon and Kaye/Kantrowitz 2007.

7 The Suez War was a military attack on Egypt by Britain, France, and Israel beginning on October 29, 1956. The attack followed Egypt’s decision of July 26, 1956 to nationalize the Suez Canal after the withdrawal of an offer by Britain and the United States to fund the building of the Aswan Dam. The nationalization ran contrary to British economic and military interests in the region, and the British government decided in favor of military intervention against Egypt to avoid the complete collapse of British prestige in the region. However, direct military intervention would both damage Anglo-Arab relations and run the risk of angering the U.S. who did not support military action. As a result, the British government concluded a secret military pact with France and Israel that aimed at regaining the Suez Canal. While the campaign was unsuccessful, the United States ultimately enforced an end to the fighting because of its concerns for a larger Cold War fallout. A United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) was established but this conflict marked a decisive step in escalating tensions between Egypt and Israel that led to the Six Day War of 1967.

8 The Six Day War of 1967 was fought between Israel and neighboring Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, although Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria also contributed troops and arms to the Arab forces. In January of 1967 Syria informed the UN Security Council that Israel was expanding its illegal occupation of the Demilitarized Zone by liquidating the remaining rights of Arab cultivators. After a military build-up on both sides of the Armistice Demarcation Line, Israel accused Syria of initiating a major clash, and said that Israeli aircraft eventually had silenced Syrian gun positions and shot down six Syrian planes, including one near Damascus. In May President Nasser of Egypt expelled the United Nations Emergency Force (which had been
stated there since the Suez War) from the Sinai Peninsula, in response to a fabricated Soviet claim that the Israeli army was gathering to attack Syria. Egypt, with the support of other Arab countries, amassed 1,000 tanks and nearly 100,000 soldiers on the Israeli border and closed the Straits of Tiran to all ships flying Israeli flags or carrying strategic materials. On June 5, 1967, Israel launched a pre-emptive attack against Egypt’s air force and Jordan, which had signed a mutual defense treaty with Egypt on May 30, then attacked western Jerusalem and Netanya. At the end of the war Israel had gained control of the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights. Overall, Israel’s territory grew by a factor of three, including about one million Arabs placed under Israel’s direct control in the newly captured territories. The aftermath of the 1967 War only increased tensions and ultimately led to the 1973 Yom Kippur between Israel and the combined forces Egypt and Syria who were fighting to regain the land lost in 1967.

9 A *sabra* is the Hebrew word for a small prickly cactus fruit—people born in Israel are commonly termed *sabras* in reference to a tough (masculine) exterior but sweet inside.

10 These experiences induce powerful emotions, such as pride, religious awe, anger at historical persecution of Jews, camaraderie, a sense of entitlement towards the ‘land of Israel,’ nostalgia, and longing for a ‘return to Zion.’ Participants who experience emotional and identity transformations through these organizations are encouraged to translate those feelings into action. For young American Jews, this involves several possibilities: dating and marrying other Jews, joining Jewish organizations, becoming a Jewish professional, becoming involved with the Jewish political establishment, donating money, or simply creating a social circle of Jews (Aviv and Shneer 2005, 57).

11 Mainstream Ashkenazi American organizations have used and expanded historical, religious, and cultural tropes in Judaism to encourage Jews to feel a sense of connection and belonging to Israel and, throughout Israel, to one another. Aviv and Shneer write, “These organizations have encouraged ‘diaspora Jews’ to connect to Israel through philanthropy, education, tourism, lobbying, and business ventures. We call these networks of power, finance, and culture that have used Israel to foster diasporic Jewish identities the ‘diaspora business’” (Aviv and Shneer 12).

12 According to Johannes Hartog, slaves belonging to Jewish people who “were willing” to do work on Saturdays earned wages equivalent to those of a free laborer “so that their doing labor might be interpreted as emanating from their own free will and thus not constitute a transgression” (Schorsch 2004, 227).

13 “In 1721, the Black woman Mirjam Mesiah Pelingrino married a man named Jahacob b. Abraham (very possibly a convert), while in the same year a man who was probably a slave converted by the same family, the Black Jahacob Mesiah Peligrinno, married the Black woman Ribca Meatob. In 1725, Joseph Rodriguez del Prado married Jael Israel da Costa, with planters David J. C. Nassy and David Hm. de la Parra serving as the two witnesses required by halakhah. In 1729, Ismael Judeu married Hanna, daughter of Gabriel de Mattos, with planters I. Manuel de Solis and Jps. de Meza acting as the witnesses. In the two latter cases, Sephardic planters ‘sponsored’ the weddings, probably monetarily” (Schorsch 2004, 228).

14 The *Jewish Daily Forward* interviewed Professor Riechelieu, the leader of a Harlem synagogue of two hundred members in 1925. He said, “We have spent priceless hours studying... We are familiar with the writings of Rashi and Ramah... We observe every Jewish holiday... In every possible way we try to live a truly Jewish life” (ibid). Prophet Cherry and other leaders also dissociated clearly and publicly from Black Christians in attempts to legitimize their Jewishness, referring to Black clergy as “damn fools” and “vultures,” for example (Chireau 1999, 21).

15 Matthew actually adopted Orthodox practices in the synagogue: men and women sat separately; congregants used an Orthodox prayer book and wore prayer shawls, yarmulkes, and phylacteries; members affixed mezuzot in their homes; and Rabbi Matthew used standard texts in his Hebrew school and Rabbinic school (Blackjews.org).

16 “B’nai B’rith International, the global voice of the Jewish community, is the most widely known Jewish humanitarian, human rights, and advocacy organization. Since 1843, BBI has worked for Jewish unity, security, continuity, and tolerance. BBI’s reach extends to more than 50 countries around the world” (bnaibritth.org).

17 “Despite the fact that the overall percentage of Jewish youth were actually involved in social activism vis-à-vis the Jewish community, their participation in relation to their percentage in the larger community was high. As in other countries and other periods, social activism might be interpreted as an attitude toward life that exemplified the best Judaism had to offer” (Gibel Azoulay 1997, 75).

18 The most-cited markers were knowledge of and adherence to Jewish law. In the *Forward* story on Professor Riechelieu, for instance, the first section is a list of Riechelieu’s halakhic credentials:
he wears a skullcap, he studies Jewish texts, he observes holidays, etc. Gold writes: “The reporter Zalowitz is impressed by the tome of Maimonides that he can see in the Professor’s room, and one may wonder if Riechelieu, who is clearly bent on proving his legitimacy, has not taken some care about where he lays down his book. But whoever took the initiative, both parties are interested: Zalowitz is as fascinated by Riechelieu’s halakhic knowledge as Riechelieu is delighted to demonstrate it” (Gold 2003, 201).

19 Although many Black Jews did not speak or read Yiddish, they were influenced by Yiddish language and culture. Some leaders spoke Yiddish and introduced it into the public representations of their synagogues. Several articles report “Bayis Tefes” [House of Prayers in Hebrew, but with Yiddish pronunciation] as a second name for the synagogue run by the Commandment Keepers. Yiddish, not Hebrew, orthography also appeared in the large sign outside the Moorish Zion’s building, announcing “Moorish Tzion Tempel.” Gold points out that these spellings and pronunciations aligned the Black Jews with specifically Eastern European traditions (Gold 2003, 202).

20 Dimona is one of the many development towns in the Negev Desert established by the Israeli government in the 1950s to settle the land and deal with the influx of immigrants from North Africa. These development towns have been controversial because they are usually economically more depressed and have low levels of high school graduation and high levels of unemployment. Also, these towns are generally filled with Jews of color from various countries. In the 1980s Russian immigrants were also sent to live in Dimona. Most recently it has become a part of Israel’s solar program and thus gained attention.

21 These are the penitential prayers recited on the Jewish High Holy Days.

22 Respes said, “I know it sounds like something out of fiction, but I was engulfed by flames when a bolt of lightning struck the ground near me and was not at all burned, and it got me to wondering.” Ross writes, “It was not long after that... when he said he dreamed that a black Bible had been placed in his hands, ‘and I heard a voice, imploring me to seek God’” (Ross 1977, 224).

23 Funnye is referring to the American Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox movement seminaries.

24 Taglit-Birthright Israel is a program that fully subsidizes young Jewish Americans (age 18 to 26) on a ten day long peer-led trip to Israel with the intent of cultivating connections between these youth and Israel.

25 These leaders approve marriages; unions outside of their recommendations are discouraged. Homosexuality, premarital and extramarital sex, tobacco, and alcohol are strictly prohibited, and all community members are required to adopt Hebrew names (Haas 2002). Women are required to follow laws of purification regarding their menstrual cycles, as per traditional Jewish practice (Haas 2002). They also circumcise their male children and observe the Sabbath (Lounds 1981, 61) and other Biblical holidays like Passover and Sukkot (Prince Asiel. Personal Interview).

26 The scandals I refer to here are a 1972 axe murder in the community and their neighbors’ accusations of child abuse, a charge Ben Ammi vehemently denies.

27 From its inception, Reform Judaism was based on anti-nationalist ideals. The movement’s basic statement of its principles, the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885, defined Jews in terms of a religious community and denied that Jews constituted a nation. Reform Jews believed that Judaism was a religion with a universal message and that there was no room within Jewish tradition for nationalism.

28 The foundational view of the Council was that a free and democratic society would best insure the well being of Jews world-wide, rhetoric that also supported and affirmed foundational American beliefs. The Council claimed that the Zionists exploited the Holocaust to generate sympathy for the creation of a Jewish state and condemned such efforts as undemocratic and a retreat from the “universal vision of Judaism” (Kolsky 1990, 3-4).

29 In 1946 the ACJ accepted each of the recommendations of the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry (AACI). These recommendations called for granting one hundred thousand Jews permission for immediate entry into Palestine. The AACI also called for the eventual transformation for the country into a “democratic state - neither Arab nor Jewish – wherein Jews and Arabs would live together as free and equal citizens.” From 1946 until 1948, the ACJ considered AACI’s recommendations to be the best solution for the Palestine problem (Kolsky 1990, 4).

30 Parts of this section on Caribbean immigrants in the United States were written for a course I took on Immigration and assimilation with sociologist Dr. Alex Dupuy. Professor Dupuy was essential to how I conceptualized these social dynamics and formulated this part of my project.
For middle-class immigrants, especially, this new binary is confusing because in the Caribbean, mixed ancestry and middle-class status are valuable social capital. Upon arrival to the United States, they realize that it matters less. Waters describes how some immigrants deal with the discord by accepting the established racial categories and their identification as Black, while other deal by developing what Waters calls a “raceless persona: that is, they denied that they had ever thought of themselves as black or that being black made a difference in their lives” (ibid., 54-55).

All of the immigrants discussed here are phenotypically Black, but it is important to examine how race plays into immigrants’ identifications because of the differences between the significance of race in their home countries and its importance in the United States. In his article “Black Like Who?” Reuel Rogers discusses what his fieldwork uncovered about the role of race in Afro-Caribbean immigrants’ self-conceptions. Rogers argues that while most immigrants primarily identify with their ethnic or home country, they also “readily” identify as Black and “see no contradiction between their ethnicity and their racial group identity.” Although American racism, Rogers offers, is not the only reason for racial identification, racial divisions make identity along race lines nearly inevitable. But, as Waters adds, “both American whites and American blacks sometimes misunderstand the strong regional, national, or ethnic identities of West Indians as a denial of racial identity” (Waters 1999, 64).

For more on Caribbean religious identity, see Elizabeth McAlister’s essay, “The Madonna of 115th Street Revisited: Vodou and Haitian Catholicism in the Age of Transnationalism” in Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration.

Precise numbers are unavailable because the school district only asks for country of origin from foreign-born students. Native-born students are categorized only as Hispanic, Black, Asia, non-Hispanic white, or other. Second-generation Haitians are labeled in school statistics simply as Black (Stepick et al 2003, 15).

Haitian immigrants suffered unparalleled prejudice and discrimination during the 1970s and ‘80s. For more, see Stepick et al 2003.

Waters writes, “...For...many other immigrants, the image they hold of black Americans often does not include good hard-working black Americans, who are often invisible in their neighborhoods and in the mass media. Rather their image of American blacks often includes the images of the underclass, including drugs, broken families, and criminality” (Waters 1999, 48). While many of the immigrants’ perceptions of Black Americans are shaped by images in the media and in popular portrayals, some of their opinions are formed from interpersonal interactions. The immigrants report that they often receive a “hostile reception from black Americans in the streets of the city” and describe Black Americans “yelling at them ‘to go home’” on the subway, in the supermarket, at school meetings, and on the street” (Waters 1999, 73).
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