Introduction

Opening the Gates

I don’t know about no heaven. I don’t know about no hell. . . .
All I want to do is qualify.
—Rabbi Bill Tate, Beth Shalom Synagogue, Brooklyn, 1999

Relations between blacks and Jews have been both romanticized and vilified. Some point to the fellowship between Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. as evidence of a natural alliance, while others cite the riots in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, as confirmation of a more insidious relationship. Jews have been accused of abandoning their commitment to racial equality and affirmative action policies, while blacks have been charged with embracing anti-Semitism and racial nationalism. The relationship between blacks and Jews has seesawed between a “Grand Alliance” and a “peculiar entanglement” (Salzman and West 1997).

The modern seeds of disaffection can be traced to the restructuring of race categories in the late nineteenth century, a time when blacks and Jews encountered one another in urban metropolises like Philadelphia and New York. Of special importance was the period between 1870 and 1920, when some two million eastern European Jews immigrated to the United States and when modern racial classifications were solidifying (Hattam 2007; Lederhendler 2009; Treitler 2013). Jews had fled the pogroms and persecution of eastern Europe and hoped to remake themselves in America. At the same time, over one million blacks were fleeing the inequities and mob violence of the rural Jim Crow South to remake themselves in the industrial North and Midwest. Yet Jews—who had been viewed as racially distinct in Europe—were able to reframe themselves as ethnics, and therefore whites, within an emerging black-white binary that determined all civic, social, political, educational, residential, labor, and cultural boundaries and opportunities.
This ability of Jews to cross the “color line” and wield economic and political power like other whites has long stoked resentment from blacks. James Baldwin articulated the offense in his 1967 essay “Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They’re Anti-White”:

In the American context, the most ironical thing about Negro anti-Semitism is that the Negro is really condemning the Jew for having become an American white man—for having become, in effect, a Christian. The Jew profits from his status in America, and he must expect Negroes to distrust him for it. The Jew does not realize that the credential he offers, the fact that he has been despised and slaughtered, does not increase the Negro’s understanding. It increases the Negro’s rage. (Baldwin 1985)

During the 1990s, black and Jewish intellectuals across the nation were engaged in a public exchange over the character of Jewish-black relations. A cacophony of voices from the Left and the Right entered the fray, debating the nature and character of Jewish involvement in transatlantic slavery and the civil rights movement, the role of black separatism, and the perception of growing black anti-Semitism and Jewish racism (Sleeper 1990; Martin 1993; Berman 1994; Crouch 1995; Diner 1995; Friedman 1995; Lerner and West 1995; Salzman and West 1997). While a clear tendency could be observed among ghetto-bound black Americans to reject the idea that any authentic relationship had ever existed, liberal Jews like Lerner romanticized a common history of persecution and commitment to civil rights, just at a time when many Jews were in fact abandoning that commitment (Steinberg 2001b). Meanwhile, a new narrative was quietly unfolding off center stage: individuals who self-identified as both black and Jewish began gaining national attention and even legitimacy. Their presence challenged traditional narratives that relegate blacks and Jews to two mutually exclusive social categories.

This book traces the history of Jews of African descent in America and the counternarratives they have put forward as they stake their claims to Jewishness. It examines their struggles as blacks to be recognized as Jews in an era in which Jews have “become” white (Brodkin 1998). In claiming whiteness, Jews have had the freedom to express their identity in fluid ethnic terms, while African Americans have continued to be seen as a fixed racial grouping despite obvious cultural and phe-
notypical variations. Yet, this book argues, such divisions have always been in flux, and an examination of the relations between black and Jewish identity pushes us to reconsider the relationship between race and ethnicity.

The National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) conducted in 1990 was, at the time, the most comprehensive study of the American Jewish population to date. It sampled 2,441 households in which at least one member self-identified (or had once self-identified) as Jewish and found that 2.4 percent of the sample, or an estimated 125,000 individuals, also identified themselves as black. The enormous size of this population caught researchers by surprise but came as no shock to black Jews themselves, who have estimated their numbers to be as high as 1.2 million (Holmes 2006). In the late 1990s, news reports placed the numbers of black Jews closer to about 200,000. More recently, researchers at the Institute for Jewish and Community Research suggested in their 2005 book, *In Every Tongue: The Racial and Ethnic Diversity of the Jewish People*, that 7 percent of all American Jews, or some 435,000 people, were either black, Hispanic, Asian, or Native American (Tobin, Tobin, et al. 2005). But the true number of black Jews largely depends on how we define a Jew. Conservative estimates use a more rigid *halakhic* definition—that is, a definition in accordance with traditional Jewish law—which recognizes only those who have undergone formal conversion or were born to a Jewish mother. In 2013, the Pew Research Center surveyed over 3,400 American Jews, reporting its findings in *A Portrait of Jewish Americans: Findings from a Pew Research Center Survey of US Jews*. In a conservative analysis of the data, sociologist and demographer Bruce A. Phillips estimated that some 7 percent of the roughly 5.3 million Jewish adults in the US identified as nonwhite, and at least 1.7 percent, or about 90,100 persons, identified as non-Hispanic black (Alexander and Haynes 2016). Meanwhile, Brandeis University conducted its own study in 2013 and found that 12 percent of American Jewish adults were non-white and 1.9 percent were black.

If the actual number of black Jews seems elusive, so too is any single Afro-Jewish identity or community. Black Jews are found within the Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform movements, as well as in denominations and approaches that push the boundaries of normative Judaism. For the sake of clarity, I distinguish between black
Jews (those who are born to or adopted by a Jewish parent or who have halakhically converted to Judaism) and Black Jews (members of indigenous black American groups, some of whom trace their Jewish roots to Africa and the Caribbean, and who favor the descriptor “Hebrew” or “Israelite”), with the caveat that individuals often cross boundaries and move between communities (Chireau 2000; Landing 2002). For example, Rabbi Capers Funnye has his roots in the Hebrew Israelite movement but later converted to Conservative Judaism. Today he maintains ties to both communities. He is the spiritual adviser of the Beth Shalom B’nai Zaken Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation in Chicago; he also serves on the Chicago Board of Rabbis and on the boards of the American Jewish Congress and the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs. In June 2015, he was elected as chief rabbi of the International Israelite Board of Rabbis of the Ethiopian Hebrews.

I have encountered many such examples of boundary crossing throughout my research. One participant, an Ethiopian-born Jew who had settled in the Hasidic community of Crown Heights, Brooklyn, expressed a deep religious connection with his Hasidic community but also yearned for the comfort of other blacks and occasionally attended services at an Ethiopian Hebrew congregation in Crown Heights. I met one black convert who felt more alienated among American Ashkenazi Jews and more at home among the Karaites, a Jewish sect that originated in Baghdad, relies solely on the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible), and rejects the oral tradition (including the Talmud and Mishnah) of rabbinic Judaism (Zenner 1989; Hirshberg 1990). Are these individuals “black” or “Black” Jews? Ultimately, the terms are merely analytical abstractions, conveying at best “ideal types”—a concept introduced by the German sociologist Max Weber to provide a common basis for analyzing structural forms and meanings (Hekman 1983).

Black Jewish groups first emerged during the late nineteenth century, just as eastern European Jews were arriving en masse in American cities. Since that time there have been distinct manifestations of Judaism in the religious practices and identities of various African American religious movements, including the loosely defined Hebrew Israelite movement. These groups vary from religiously observant congregations, such as Congregation Temple Beth’El in Philadelphia and the Commandment Keepers in Harlem, to Christian Israelite congregations, such as the
Introduction

Church of God and Saints of Christ. They encompass black nationalist groups, such as the Black Hebrew Israelites of Worldwide Truthful Understanding, whose “public performances of Black Jewishness” represent, as urban anthropologist John L. Jackson Jr. puts it, “displays of black masculinist spirituality” (Jackson 2005). And they extend to self-identified Israelites who have traveled to Israel or attended yeshiva.\textsuperscript{11}

The last fifty years have brought unprecedented diversity to American Jewish communities. In 1965, a shift in immigration policy brought Jews from Yemen, Syria, Ethiopia, Morocco, and Mexico to the US. In addition, a small but growing number of nonwhite Americans have converted to Judaism over the last five decades (Tobin, Tobin, et al. 2005; Kaye/Kantrowitz 2007). Perhaps the most significant development is the rise in interracial marriages—particularly between black men and Jewish women—since the civil rights era. In many cases their children have been raised with both black and Jewish identities. Until the historic \textit{Loving v. Virginia} Supreme Court decision of 1967, antimiscegenation laws throughout much of the nation criminalized intermarriages and delegitimated their children (Zack 1993). The court’s ruling challenged the hegemony of the “one-drop rule” and opened new possibilities for the offspring of black-white marriages to claim a biracial or multiracial identity.\textsuperscript{12} Parents of multiracial children mobilized to petition the Office of Budget Management to include a multiracial category on the 2000 census (Daniel 2001). Today, with one in forty Americans self-identifying as “multiracial,” many scholars maintain that the one-drop rule has become obsolete (Hollinger 2005; Roth 2005). Some have called for a new language of identity (Somers 1994; Brubaker and Cooper 2000). The categories become multilayered when dimensions of ethnicity and religion are added to the mix.

Judaism embodies both of these dimensions, and its intersection with race yields new and often-shifting identity constructions. In their 2016 book, \textit{JewAsian: Race, Religion, and Identity for America’s Newest Jews}, the sociologist Helen Kiyong Kim and her partner Noah Samuel Leavitt, associate dean of students at Whitman College and former advocacy director for the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, explore the racial, ethnic, and religious dimensions of identity among Jewish Asian American children and find that “how one identifies racially cannot be isolated from one’s social interactions and larger context.” Indeed, the highlight-
ing of one dimension complicates assumptions about the other (Kim and Leavitt 2016). Like the American multiracial population in general, the staking of new identity claims has been articulated by monoracial and biracial black Jews alike.

Early attempts at dialogue between the Jewish mainstream and Black Hebrew and Israelite groups in the United States went largely unnoticed by most American Jews. One of the more significant encounters occurred in 1964, when Irving J. Block, an ecumenically minded Conservative rabbi and founder of the Brotherhood Synagogue (Beit Achim) in Greenwich Village, teamed up with Yaakov Gladstone, a Canadian Jew (who at the time was teaching Hebrew songs to members of the Hebrew Israelite Congregation of Mount Horeb in the Bronx), to found Hatzaad Harishon (The First Step). The vision of Hatzaad Harishon was to bring Jewish community assistance to black Jews, while also bringing “black and white” Jews together (Berger 1987). The group’s board was what Jewish educator and activist Graenum Berger called “a mixed group of black and white Jews, including some ‘black’ rabbis and white rabbis.” Initially, Hatzaad Harishon had many successes: Some black Jewish children received scholarships to Jewish schools, and several Hebrew Israelites enrolled in seminaries to study Jewish education. Some joined Ashkenazi congregations, some formally converted, and some spent summers in Israel. Between 1966 and 1972, members even produced a mimeographed newspaper that had national circulation (Berger 1987). Rabbi Block, who had “trained” young black Jews for their bar mitzvahs, believed that it was “time—and long overdue—to integrate Black Jews into activities of the mainstream American Jewish Community” (Berger 1987; Block 1999). Yet while Hatzaad Harishon disrupted the dominant narrative of Jews as white people, the group was consistently plagued by internal disagreement over the definitions of Jewishness (Fernheimer 2014). It disbanded in 1972.

Still, the first Black Jews to draw significant public attention were not American-born but Jews from Africa. Although some eight thousand Ethiopian Jews had already been secretly moved to Israel via Sudan by the 1980s, the 1984 Israeli airlift, code-named Operation Moses, brought international attention to their plight. The Ethiopian Jews, also known as the Beta Israel (House of Israel), had been persecuted by Christian Ethiopians and were under threat of starvation in the Gondar Province...
and surrounding areas. Word of their rescue was widely publicized on January 4, 1985, when the New York Times reported that Israel had air-lifted ten thousand Ethiopians. Over the next several years, under the widely publicized Operation Queen of Sheba (1985) and Operation Solomon (1990), close to another sixteen thousand Ethiopian Jews were flown into Israel. By 1996, there were fifty-six thousand, and by 2002, some eighty-five thousand Ethiopian Jews were living in Israel, including twenty-three thousand who had been born there. The vast majority were employed in agriculture and manufacturing and were concentrated in the cities of Netanya, Rehovot, Haifa, Hadera, and Ashdod (Weil 1997; BenEzer 2002; Parfitt and Semi 2005; Spector 2005). In the wake of this new attention, other self-identified African Jews, such as the Lemba of southern Africa, the Abayudaya of Uganda, the Igbo of Nigeria, and even the Tutsi of Rwanda, began seeking recognition as Jews, although with varying success. Some have described this identity quest in West and sub-Saharan Africa as a “Jewishly related phenomenon” (Lis 2014; Brettschneider 2015).

Here in the United States, black Jews grew more vocal as well. In 1988, the civil rights activist Julius Lester chronicled his Orthodox conversion to Judaism in Lovesong: Becoming a Jew. In 1996, James McBride told the story of his Orthodox Jewish mother and black father in pre-civil rights America in The Color of Water: A Black Man’s Tribute to His White Mother. In 2001, Rebecca Walker, the daughter of acclaimed civil rights lawyer Mel Leventhal and renowned author Alice Walker, wrote the New York Times best seller Black, White, Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self. Other black Jews who have risen to prominence include author Walter Mosley, civil rights lawyer Lani Guinier, actors Yaphet Kotto and Lisa Bonet, former Charleston police chief Reuben Greenberg, musicians Lenny Kravitz and Joshua Redman, gospel singer Joshua Nelson, and New York publisher Elinor Tatum, as well as, of course, the entertainer Sammy Davis Jr. They also include in-vogue performers like Yitz Jordan (a.k.a. Y-Love), an Orthodox hip-hop artist, and the Canadian-born black Jewish rapper Aubrey Graham (a.k.a. Drake).

Professor Lewis Ricardo Gordon, a secular Jew and founding member of the Caribbean Philosophical Association and Temple University’s Center for Afro-Jewish Studies (founded in 2004), traces his Judaism through his Jamaican mother and calls his “New World” Judaism a “cre-
olized world” that enabled “the possibility of black normativity” (Tobin, Tobin, et al. 2005). His embrace of secular Jewishness stands in stark contrast to the religiosity of groups like Beth Elohim Hebrew Congregation in St. Albans, Queens, which describes its customs as being more closely aligned with those of the contemporary Conservative movement, “with clear Conservative and African American influences,” as its webpage explains. “For example, a layperson would notice that we maintain separate seating for men and women in our sanctuary, but we believe in the complete equality of women. We allow travel on Shabbat, follow a biblical definition of kosher foods that prohibits the eating of pork and certain kinds of sea food but does not require the separation of milk and meat products.” The congregation also observes the Jewish holy days of Passover, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Chanukah, Tu Bishvat, and Purim.15 Yet despite these many commonalities with observant Ashkenazi16 and Sephardi17 Jews, members distinguish themselves as Hebrew Israelites or simply Hebrews—terms they feel resonate with their African roots.

This viewpoint, that the Israelite is part of a particular Jewish tradition that evolved through the African diaspora, has been echoed by the Hebrews and Israelites whom I interviewed for this book. One participant in the study, a member of the Church of God and Saints of Christ—which, according to its website, is “the oldest African-American congregation in the United States that adheres to the tenets of Judaism”—explained, “The distinction between having a Jewish identity per se for yourself versus having an Israelite identity is that the notion of an Israelite allows you to not have to dispense with your African American cultural heritage and identity.”

In Stepping into Zion: Hatzaad Harishon, Black Jews, and the Remaking of Jewish Identity, the Jewish studies and rhetoric scholar Janice Fernheimer argues that Black Hebrews and Israelites have employed a rhetorical strategy of “interruptive invention” to challenge a dominant narrative or paradigm and that the simple articulation of “a new or revised concept, term, identity, definition, or idea” can tear at and, in time, rupture that paradigm, making “rhetorical space for further discursive invention to occur” (Fernheimer 2014). In fact, many Black Hebrews and Israelites have drawn upon the same rhetorical strategies that whites have long employed. Through biblical exegesis, they have placed themselves at the cen-
ter of the Hebrew Bible—the quintessential story of exile and return, of bondage, deliverance, and redemption—and rewritten themselves back into history. Just as religious studies scholar Edward E. Curtis IV observes in his work on Black Muslims, these new narratives link religion to the historical destiny of black people as a whole (Curtis 2005).

Cohane Michael Ben Levi, an Israelite who recognizes the charismatic self-proclaimed messiah Ben Ammi Ben-Israel as the “Anointed Messianic Leader of the Kingdom of God,” invokes “Jew” and “Israelite” as related but contrasting terms, the former meaning “white Jew” and the latter signifying those legitimately descended from the ancient Hebrews. He spends much of his book, *Israelites and Jews: The Significant Difference*, reiterating that “so called Negroes” are in fact “Israelites” and argues that “the Israelites like the Egyptians were Black People” (Levi 1997).

Racial Projects

The counternarratives of Israelites like Ben Levi, which challenge the prevailing account of biblical history, might be seen as “racial projects.” A racial project is a concept put forth by sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant to explain the dynamic between the meanings one attaches to race and the distribution of social resources in accordance with these meanings. The concept, integral to Omi and Winant’s theory of racial formation, links the abstraction and symbolism of race—how race is articulated, interpreted, and represented through language, imagery, and media—to concrete structural outcomes, such as access to tangible goods and resources. It links structure with representation (Omi and Winant 2014). “Racial projects do the ideological ‘work’ of making these links,” they write in the second edition of their seminal work, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, connecting “what race means in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized, based upon that meaning” (Omi and Winant 1994). Thus, the challenges of Black Jews to rabbinic hegemony—through biblical exegesis and the reinterpretation of key terms, verses, and passages—can be seen as a competing racial project to redefine the role of blacks in world history and to claim the favored status of the chosen people.
One could argue that Jews have also engaged in racial projects since arriving in the United States. At the turn of the twentieth century, eastern European Jewish immigrants were eager to shake off the yoke of Orientalism and to recast themselves, first as Westerners and later as white ethnics, in order to gain both social acceptance and access to valued social resources. What was once stigmatizing to European Jews, however, presented a new racial paradigm for American blacks. Indeed, early Black Jewish groups emerged during this same period. Embracing an Orientalist framework and situating themselves within an East/West binary by claiming descent from the ancient Israelites, they introduced new narratives that elevated their place in history. Religion scholar Judith Weisenfeld's historical investigation of the Commandment Keepers Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation argues persuasively that the cosmopolitan environments of northern cities like New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia between the 1920s and 1940s encouraged new religious movements in which people of African descent actively reshaped racial meanings through their engagement with religion, identifying themselves as Moorish, Asiatic, Ethiopian Hebrew, and even raceless (Weisenfeld 2016).

This book uses the case of black Americans who embrace Jewish identity to argue for a more fluid relationship between race and ethnicity than has generally been appreciated and to demonstrate how racial projects emerged within the context of religion. The counternarratives employed by Jews of African descent call attention to their agency and their ability to reassert their humanity and worth as people of the book.

The claim of Black Hebrews that Judaism is a black religion seems no more groundless than those articulated by Jewish pundits like Rabbi Harold Goldfarb, who insisted in 1977 that blacks can’t be Jews because Jews are Europeans and therefore white. Goldfarb, then executive director of the Board of Rabbis of Greater Philadelphia, asserted that “a white man who claims to be Jewish is in fact a Jew, unless there is reason” to doubt his claim (Goldfarb 1977). Based on such reasoning, no person of African descent would have a foundation for making a claim as a Jew, short of proof of formal conversion.

A Jew is someone who both considers himself or herself to be Jewish and is considered to be Jewish by relevant others (Dashefsky, Lazerwitz, et al. 2003). Yet determining who the “relevant others” are can be a
thorny question. For Orthodox Jews, the answers to the most important questions in Jewish law lie not in the Torah itself—the most sacred text of the Jewish religion—but in a trove of teachings, opinions, interpretations, and commentaries transmitted by rabbis in the centuries following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. While these writings form the core of rabbinic Judaism, multiple opinions on any given topic are presented and weighed against one another without any definitive conclusion provided.

Early Judaism evolved from a temple-based to a book-based religion marked by exegesis (Neusner 1995). After the destruction of the Second Temple, the Hebrew Pentateuch—that is, the Five Books of Moses—became the center of Judaism. The handwritten scroll of the Pentateuch, the Torah, became a ubiquitous foundational reference point of rabbinic religion (Neusner 1995). As a document written without vowels, many words of the Sefer Torah required contextual interpretation, which was provided by an oral tradition that became the domain of trained rabbis. Thus, the reciting of the Torah on the Sabbath was more an act of recitation of a known discourse, based upon the possession of specialized knowledge, than a deciphering of text (Neusner 1995). Specialized knowledge remained located within the rabbinate, which solidified their power as gatekeepers in determining who is a Jew.

Around 200 CE, Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi (Rabbi Judah the Prince) recorded and systematized the Oral Law—the legal commentary on the Torah—into sixty-three tractates, known as the Mishnah. Succeeding generations of rabbis wrote their own commentaries in a series of books called the Talmud Yerushalmi (Jerusalem Talmud), widely known as the Palestinian Talmud, around 400 CE (Steinsaltz 1976; Telushkin 1991). A century later, Babylonian Jewish scholars recorded a more extensive set of discussions and commentary, known as the Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud). The Mishnah and later rabbinic commentaries, known as the Gemara, together comprise the Talmud (Telushkin 1991; Neusner 1995).

Talmudic scholars, the laureates of rabbinic Judaism, note special status for the ba’al teshuva, which translates as “master of return” and refers to one who returns after a lapse to a fully observant Jewish life. In fact, the Talmud notes, “In the place where a ba’al teshuva stands, a perfectly righteous person cannot stand” (Berachot 34b; Sanhedrin 99a). Many of those who identify as Israelites or Hebrews fall outside the bounds of
rabbinic Judaism yet refer to themselves not as converts but “reverts,” souls who were lost, ignorant, or had been disconnected from their true Jewish selves.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, just as Jewish claims to whiteness and Western roots were winning adherents, some blacks found religious expression in Judaism and took on Hebrew identities. An early precedent for nonrabbinic Judaism occurred within the context of eighth-century Islam, when a sect of Jews rejected mainstream rabbinic practice in favor of a more Bible-based religion that developed its own set of legal exegeses from Torah (Astren 2004). Known as Karaites, they carried the status of safek akum—that is, their legal status as Jews was questioned within the rabbinic world, and their identities as Jews were placed in doubt (Bleich 1975). While Karaite practice remains active in America today, it is not recognized as part of modern-day Judaism.

Another challenge to rabbinic hegemony came later during the nineteenth century from Kansas, Philadelphia, Chicago, and New York, where organized groups of Negro Americans who self-identified as Jews, Israelites, or Hebrews claimed their own right to interpret scripture (Landing 2002). Tudor Parfitt, a distinguished scholar and expert on Judaizing movements, argues that the conversion of black slaves to Judaism in both Amsterdam and the Caribbean during the colonial period, along with persistent rumors of lost black Jews in Africa, contributed to the belief among millions of people of African descent that they descended from the ancient Hebrews (Parfitt 2013). Religious scholar Allen Dwight Callahan, former professor of New Testament at Seminário Theológico Batista do Nordeste (Brazil), shows that, among African Americans, the most widely cited verse in the Bible is Psalms 68:31 (Callahan 2006):

> Princes shall come out of Egypt;
> Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.\(^{18}\)

While the psalm is actually a celebration of the centrality of the Temple in Jerusalem, the verse has often been taken as a prophecy of the exaltation of African peoples. It held special importance for early African American Hebrews (Landing 2002). The early groups relied on translations of Greek and Latin texts that themselves were translations of
the Hebrew Bible. As a result, some terms lost their original intent. For example, the Hebrew term *kush*, which refers to a vast region encompassing “the area south of Egypt descending into Central Africa and extending east to the Red Sea,” was translated as “Ethiopia,” thus perpetuating the link between color and geography that had existed in early biblical discourse (Goldenberg 2003).

Scholars situate the roots of organized Black Judaism in the Protestant Pentecostal movement of the nineteenth century (Baer and Singer 1992; Fauset 2002; Landing 2002). Two distinct black Protestant groups emerged, both founded by Masons. The first was the Church of the Living God, founded in Arkansas in 1888 by former slave William Christian (Landing 2002). Christian’s teachings were a form of Judaic Christianity that was rooted in his claim to genealogical descent from the ancient Israelites, a strict adherence to the Ten Commandments, and an embrace of Jesus as an Israelite (Landing 2002). Without a Torah scroll or knowledge of Hebrew, members interpreted their Judaism and constructed their liturgy using Christian elements (Landing 2002). The second group was the Church of God and Saints of Christ, founded in Kansas at the turn of the century by William Saunders Crowdy, a former Baptist deacon and Union Army cook (Landing 2002). Crowdy set up tabernacles in Lawrence, Emporia, and Topeka, Kansas; and later in Sedalia, Missouri; Chicago; Philadelphia; New York City; and eventually South Africa, ordaining men as needed. Like William Christian, Crowdy believed in direct genealogical descent from the ancient Israelites. His group also engaged in such biblical practices as eating unleavened bread and foot washing, which were likely holdovers from their Pentecostal roots (Landing 2002).

Historian James Landing speculates that the Crowdys, as the community is often called, provided the ideological seedlings for Black Judaism to mushroom in Chicago and New York. Although groups with varying identifications as Jews mingled in these cosmopolitan settings, any connection between the Crowdys and Black Hebrew groups like the Commandment Keepers is purely speculative. The latter, which had a strong Caribbean membership in New York, appears to be the first group to link traditional Judaism with an idea of nationalism and race that explicitly substituted blackness for whiteness. They were also among the first to argue that all blacks were Jews. Today, the group situates itself
within a normative rabbinic style of Judaism mixed with its own Afro-American traditions.

Re-staking Identity

During the 1990s, many biracial Jews, black converts to Judaism, and Black Hebrews took to organizing. In December 1993, the California African American Museum in Los Angeles sponsored the symposium “Where Worlds Collide: The Souls of African-American Jews.” Two years later, the Alliance of Black Jews was formed (Wolfson 2000). One of its founding members, a biracial woman born to a Jewish mother of German descent and an Ethiopian Jewish father, described to me its first meeting, which was held at Rabbi Funnye’s Beth Shalom B’nai Zaken Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation in Chicago:

We had to have a kosher lunch because we were in his [Frunyee’s] building. But then we went to Leon’s Barbeque, like a whole group of us. And we got a picture of us in front of Leon’s saying treif [not kosher]. We didn’t get ribs obviously.

The group soon disbanded, but other organizations quickly stepped in to fill the void. The Ayecha Resource Organization was founded in the early 2000s by Yavilah McCoy, a black Orthodox diversity consultant and recipient of a Joshua Venture Fellowship, to provide support, information, and resources for “Jews of Color” and “Jewish diversity.”

MORESHET: Network of African Heritage Jews, founded in 2000, is an Internet-based outreach program run by a group of international volunteers under the auspices of America’s Black Holocaust Museum in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and in partnership with the American Jewish Committee. In 1997, the Institute for Jewish and Community Research in San Francisco, under the directorship of the late Dr. Gary Tobin and his wife Diane, began a research initiative and community-building project called Be’ chol Lashon, meaning “In Every Tongue.” It advocates a more open attitude towards those who would like to convert or return to Judaism and argues that, given the increasing rates of out-marriage to non-Jews, the shift is critical to the Jewish people’s survival. Its website invites viewers to “imagine a new global Judaism that transcends differ-
ences in geography, ethnicity, class, race, ritual practice, and beliefs. Discussions about ‘who-is-a-real-Jew’ will be replaced with celebration of the rich, multi-dimensional character of the Jewish people.” The group has created a national network of multiethnic-multiracial Jews, supports multicultural Chanukah and Shavuot celebrations in the Bay Area, and holds an annual “think tank” that brings together Jews from Uganda, Ethiopia, and southern Africa, as well as representatives from the United States and Australia. By 2005, a conference entitled Jewish Leaders of Color was held at New York University's Bronfman Center for Jewish Student Life. Combined with a strong Internet-based support system, these events have greatly enhanced communication between black Jews and other Jews of color and have created a forum for addressing issues of cultural and color diversity within the Jewish American community.

With the proliferation of the Internet in the late 1990s and user-friendly search engines like Google (founded in September 1998), many self-identifying black Jews from different backgrounds and sometimes isolated circumstances began to communicate and refine collective identities as black Jews, Hebrews, and Israelites. Computer-supported social networks have become a prime location for sustaining alternative social identities, where boundaries are more permeable, interactions more diverse, and hierarchies more recursive. The black Orthodox Jewish blogger, MaNishtana, maintains a website (https://manishtana.net/) and Twitter account (@MaNishtana) in which he documents his experiences as a Jew of color. A Facebook group, Black and Jewish, provides a forum for exchanging information and resources, such as family histories, personal biographies, books, theological orientations, and ritual practices. In 1998, the Yahoo! Group Aframjews—the self-proclaimed “premier online community for Jews of African Heritage”—was launched. Ayecha, which ceased operating in 2008, began operating a Yahoo! Groups Listserv for “born and converted Jews of Color” in January 2001. Other groups, such as the New York-based Kulanu (All of Us), founded in the early 1990s by Jack Zeller, have supported “lost” Jews and “emerging Jewish communities,” mostly on the African continent, bringing them into contact with Western rabbis and often helping them with conversion. As a result of these initiatives, many Jews of African descent have been encouraged to come together, talk, reflect, and debate what it means to be black and Jewish, both within and outside the global black and Jewish communities.
A parallel re-staking of identity claims has occurred within Judaism itself. In 1983, the Reform Jewish movement broke with eighteen hundred years of rabbinic tradition and began recognizing Jews of both patrilineal and matrilineal descent. The shift had huge repercussions for biracial Jews who traced their Jewish ancestry through their fathers. As American Jews began to experience less anti-Semitism and to marry non-Jews, the Jewish community became fearful of losing community altogether. Debate over the “loss of community” was reinvigorated with the publication of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, which reported a shrinking commitment by American Jews to Judaism and to the Jewish community. As social scientists described “a crisis of community,” one major institutional response by Reform and Conservative institutions has been to promote Jewish ritual practice, outreach to the non-Jewish partners of members, and interethic marriage. A few have even advocated for actively seeking converts (Tobin 1999). A second, less visible response has been to reach out to disenfranchised Jewish populations and connect them to the global Jewish community. Organizations like Kulanu have focused on embracing “Lost Jews” in foreign lands, and some activists have turned the cause into a thriving business. For example, the musician, educator, and activist Jay Sand writes and sings about isolated Jewish communities and has founded a world music and culture program for children, called All Around This World (www.allaroundthisworld.com). Other organizations, like B’chol Lashon, are structured to help black Jews help themselves.

Meanwhile, an increasing number of American Jews are nonobservant. The scholar of American religion Barry Kosmin sees this lack of ritual observance as part of a larger trend towards the Protestantization of American religion (Kosmin and Lachman 1993). Although 47 percent of affiliated Jews were members of the Conservative movement, many of them did not define themselves as observant. In addition, most American Jews (38 percent) considered themselves Reform, although far fewer were affiliated with any particular congregation (Kosmin and Lachman 1993). According to the 2013 Pew Research Center survey of US Jews, one in five American Jews identify as having no religion (Pew Research Center 2013). Unlike Jews in other countries, non-Orthodox Jews in the United States account for the majority of both self-identified and practicing Jews (Aviv and Shneer 2005). Thus, the continued reliance
on traditional Orthodox rules of membership to judge the legitimacy of blacks who make claims to Judaism not only presumes neat and clean group boundaries but also defies the post-World War II trend towards individualization, secularization, and recognition of patrilineal descent among American Jewry.

In February 2002, the Israeli Supreme Court entered a significant ruling that will influence future debates regarding who is a Jew. It held that individuals converted by the Conservative and Reform movements should be listed as Jews on the official population registry. Still, many Orthodox, Conservative, and even secular Jews continue to cling to biological notions of group membership and consider even unaffiliated and nonreligious matrilineal Jews more “Jewish” than converts (Tenenbaum and Davidman 2007). Given this entrenched bias among American Jews, the barrier facing ritually observant African American Jews with no matrilineal ties seems almost insurmountable.

Past scholars have largely treated Black Hebrews and Israelites as exotic, militant, and nationalistic sects outside the boundaries of mainstream Jewish thought and community life. Anthropologists and sociologists have tended to lump all Black Jewish groups—along with Black Muslims—into a single category, labeling them as messianic nationalist sects (Baer and Singer 1992; Kosmin and Lachman 1993). Yet black separatist groups like the Nation of Yahweh, which have been likened to cults and condemned as hate groups, have been widely dismissed by Hebrew Israelites and black Jews alike. In short, because some forms of Black Judaism and, more generally, African American religious practice evolved a cosmology of the “chosen people,” scholars highlight the politically racial component of their theologies and conflate vastly different groups as belonging to the same general belief systems (Dorman 2013).

the Commission on Synagogue Relations of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York, ignores the rise in black converts to Judaism, children of Jewish and African American parents, and adoptions of African American and Ethiopian children by Jews of European descent. It concludes that few bona fide black Jews exist in the United States and that “most have invented and accepted a mythology about their origins, which makes it difficult for them to achieve acceptance and integration within the Jewish community, whether in America, Ethiopia, or Israel” (Berger 1978). While much scholarship has characterized new Afro-American religious movements as “messianic nationalist” (Baer and Singer 1992), many black Americans who self-identify as Jews, Hebrews, or Israelites are not nationalist, nor do they believe that their spiritual leaders are messiahs. Even Christian Israelite groups, such as the Church of God and Saints of Christ, view Jesus as only a prophet.

Rather than explore centuries of African-Jewish contact in the New World and the influence of Judaism and Jewish culture on transatlantic black populations, Berger and others situate African American collective identity within the confines of the Protestant revival of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They claim that through a syncretic reinterpretation and allegorical identification with the ancient Israelites of the Christian Bible, blacks constructed new identities as Israelites and “literally became Jews” (Chireau 2000).

According to the sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel, the multiple ancestries of African Americans are hidden behind varied attempts of people in the Americas to “cut off entire branches of their essentially multiracial family trees in an effort to fabricate ‘pure’ genealogies that are virtually devoid of any ‘embarrassing African ancestors’” (Zerubavel 2004). Pedigrees provide both status and identity, and consanguinity (blood) is the most prevalent claim to having Jewish roots, especially when it is carried through the maternal line.

Many groups today have taken on the term “diaspora” to characterize their exile or simply their immigration to a new home country and have become preoccupied with obtaining proof of their ancient origins. The story of the biblical exodus of the Jews from Egypt (Exodus 12:38) serves as an archetype of nationhood in the Western imagination. Over the centuries, such varied groups as the Celts, Sami, Finns, Inuit, Maya, Ber-
bers, Igbo, Zulu, and Native Americans have traced their origins to one of the lost tribes (Benite 2009; Parfitt 2013; Lis 2014). Sociologist Stanford Lyman has conducted a sociological interpretation of what he calls the “mytho-historical legend” of the Lost Tribes and concludes that since 721 BCE, when Assyria overtook the Northern Kingdom of Israel, “every aspect of the history—and the very existence—of the ten tribes of Israel is fraught with existential controversy and epistemological conundrums” (Lyman 2001). While much attention has been given to the Beta Israel of Ethiopia, who have been officially recognized as the lost tribe of Dan, there is greater biological merit to the claim of the Lemba, a southern African group that has been found to carry—with the same frequency as European Jews—the signature haplotype, or combination of genetic markers, identified with the ancient Hebrew population. Beginning in the late 1990s, some Lemba formally converted to Conservative rabbinic Judaism as a way to establish legitimacy within the global Jewish community (Thomas, Parfitt, et al. 2000). Other groups, such as the Abayudaya of Uganda, who do not claim to be descended from the ancient Israelites, have undergone formal conversion (Twaddle 1993). The precedent of the Beta Israel emboldened some sub-Saharan African groups who self-identify as Jewish to seek official recognition. An estimated thirty thousand Igbo in southern Nigeria now trace their lineage to ancient Israel, citing such practices as male circumcision on the eighth day, separation of women during their menstrual cycles, the blowing of a ram’s horn, and a mourning period that bears some resemblance to the Jewish shiva. Some have formally converted, while others resist, believing that to do so would undermine their claim that they are already Jewish (Bruder 2008; Bruder 2012; Lis 2014; Parfitt and Fisher 2016).

Claims to an unbroken ancestral history bolster the notion that the Jewish people constitute a biological group. The search for the genetic history of the Jewish people or an identifiable set of Jewish genetic markers is testament to how we continue to reproduce these notions (D. B. Goldstein 2008; Osterer 2012). Scholars are only now beginning to reevaluate common understandings of Jewish identity and to recognize that, like the ancient Israelites, modern-day Jews are a “mixed multitude”—that is, descended from multiple tribal and ethnic origins rather than a common ethnic or racial stock (Biale 2006).
The Author’s Quest

My own interest in the world of black Jews was sparked in 1995, when I joined the faculty of Yale University as an assistant professor in the Sociology and African American Studies Departments. My Jewish wife and I had moved from Manhattan to the Connecticut suburbs, where she began searching out Jewish communities, or “shul shopping,” as the expression goes. We joined an egalitarian Conservative synagogue in New Haven, where a number of interfaith couples were also members.25 There I noticed a scattering of people who looked black and who regularly attended Shabbat services. At Yale as well, I came across blacks who identified themselves as Jewish or Hebrew. I became fascinated by, what seemed to me, a new phenomenon and wondered how these Jews fit in with the popular narrative of a broken alliance between blacks and Jews. This was also a period of heightened Jewish angst over scapegoating by black provocateurs, such as Minister Louis Farrakhan and Khalid Abdul Muhammad of the Nation of Islam and Professor Leonard Jeffries of the City University of New York.

I began to tap into my own personal network of mostly European-descent (Ashkenazi) Jews from the New York metropolitan area in order to locate people of African descent within mainstream Jewish communities and to learn more about rabbinic Judaism and Jewish life. I used the Internet to contact people who had organized websites for or about black Jews. Some of these individuals proved critical in helping me to develop a seminational snowball sample. I took a few missteps in my early forays in the field and was upbraided by potential participants for presuming that they had not always been Jewish. I quickly learned to strip my questions of presumptive language.

By December 1998, I was well entrenched in a number of semiautonomous but overlapping networks of people who self-identified as black and Jewish (or Hebrew/Israelite), and I was a member of two web-based Listservs. Some individuals were connected to loose networks of black Jews in cities like Chicago or San Francisco, while others were isolated in cities like Allentown, Pennsylvania. I came into contact with individuals who had monoracial and biracial ancestries, with converts to Judaism, and with normative Jews by birth. They represented the full spectrum of mainstream Judaism—Orthodox, Conservative, and
Reform movements—but some traversed the boundaries, engaging in nonrabbinic forms of Judaic religious practice.

My networks of self-identified black Jews, Hebrews, and Israelites spanned across the nation to include people from New York, Connecticut, California, South Carolina, Illinois, Massachusetts, and Wisconsin, and even beyond the United States to Australia (where one participant had recently moved). The core of the data that undergirds this book is drawn from in-depth interviews, conducted between 1998 and 2003, with twenty-five participants—thirteen men and twelve women. Interviews were structured chronologically around participants’ life histories. Most were conducted in participants’ homes and ranged in length from forty-five minutes to six hours, although the norm was approximately two hours in length. Interviews were supplemented by frequent phone conversations or e-mail correspondences. Additional field research—in New York and its suburbs, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco—was conducted through 2005.

Rather than following a classical ethnographic model, this book belongs more to the tradition of “retrospective ethnography” explored by sociologists Patricia and Peter Adler and Charles Tilly. Embedded in the temporal anchor of the late 1990s, a period in which a confluence of factors—the ascendance of the Internet, the Israeli airlifts of Ethiopian Jews, the multiracial movement, and the concomitant staking of new identities—brought a new visibility to individuals of both Jewish and African descent, this book combines macrolevel historical analysis with microlevel oral histories in order to “reconstruct actors’ dispositions from the historical record” (Tilly 2007). This period, marked by an all-time low in black-Jewish relations, also saw the beginnings of mobilization among black Jews themselves. The strategies they used to refine and assert their collective identities and interests—be it as black Jews, multiracial Jews, or Black Hebrews and Israelites—can be more fully appreciated with the triangulation of interview data, historical records, and retrospective ethnographic observation. These strategies also shed light on larger dynamics between race and faith and how historically situated subjects use race as a meaningful descriptor of both religious experience and meaning. While numerous scholars have recognized various “construction sites” for making racial and ethnic identities, including labor markets, residential spaces, and social institutions, this is the first
volume to detail racial projects emerging within the context of religion. Unlike the conventional use of the term, in which actors engage in racial projects to access tangible goods and resources, this book illumines how racial projects can also serve as a vehicle for claiming resources that are far less tangible, such as social recognition, religious legitimacy, or a new narrative framework.

This is also the first sociological study to explore the full complexity and diversity of black Jews, thus providing insight into their commonalities and differences, as well as the broad range of projects with which they counter white hegemony. Over the next pages, the reader will encounter biracial Jews of both matrilineal and patrilineal descent; black converts to Orthodox, Reform, and Conservative Judaism; and a former acolyte of the Black Jews of Dimona, Israel. We’ll meet an elder of the Israelite tabernacle of the Church of God and Saints of Christ, which infuses Christian and Jewish teachings; a self-ordained rabbi from a Philadelphia-based congregation; and a Hebrew Israelite rabbi in Brooklyn who holds to the belief that European Jews are “Edomites.” As readers engage with their voices, they will be poised to explore anew the dialogue between blacks and Jews that began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as the meaning of blackness and Jewishness underwent profound changes, and which continues to this day. In so doing, they will also glean insights into the ways in which racial projects operate on the ground.

While most of my interviews took place more than a decade ago, one key aspect of the story is still very much evolving. In the course of writing this book—in which years were spent delving into the complexities of Judaism, black religious movements, and identity construction—I have myself become drawn towards Judaism and, in a sense, become part of the story.

Critical to the success of this book has been my relationship with the Institute for Jewish and Community Research in San Francisco. I met Dr. Gary Tobin, the institute’s founder and president, in the late 1990s, just as I was completing initial interviews in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. He and his wife, Diane, were generous in providing me with access to their extensive network of black/Black Jews and included me in their annual think tanks held at the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco, which brought together black Jews and Hebrews from
the United States, African Jews, Latin Jews, Asian Jews, and gay and
lesbian Jews. Through these conferences, I met people like Baruch A.
Yehudah, a towering Israelite who then served as executive secretary of
the International Israelite Board of Rabbis. His colorful Israelite garb,
combined with his Fu Manchu mustache and gold loop earrings, made
him one of the more memorable characters I would encounter along
my journey. I also met Jack Zeller, an Ashkenazi Jew and the founder
of Kulanu.27 Zeller had been one of the key organizers in the conver-
sion of the Abayudaya people of Uganda. The Abayudaya had adopted
Jewish practices as early as 1917, but in 2002, under the stewardship of
Kulanu, four Conservative rabbis from the United States and one rabbi
from Israel oversaw the halakhic conversion of most of the remaining six
hundred practicing Jews. (Some, who already believed they were Jewish,
opted not to undergo conversion.) I made acquaintance with Gershom
Sizomu, the spiritual leader of the Abayudaya and a regular participant
in the forums. When I first met him, he had been attending the Zeigler
School of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University (formerly
the University of Judaism) in Los Angeles. In 2008, he was ordained and
returned to Uganda to establish a yeshiva. Sizomu is widely recognized
as the first black rabbi from sub-Saharan Africa to be ordained at an
American rabbinical school. Today he is a senior rabbinic associate at
Be‘ chol Lashon and receives support for projects like the Tobin Health
Center in eastern Uganda.

Along with Abayudaya and Lemba Jews, I came to know Rwandan
Tutsi, like Yochanan (Jean) Bwejeri, who was living in exile in Belgium.
According to Bwejeri, the Tutsi are descendants of a pre-Talmudic He-
braic tribe and the remaining royal branches of the Solomonic House of
Ethiopia. He claimed to be a descendent of the Bene-(Za)gwe (Benen-
gwe) clan of Ethiopia and heir of the title of Prince of Nkoronko, and he
carried around a short, elaborately carved wooden staff that symbolized
his royal lineage. As a friendship developed between us, he engaged my
wife’s services to translate, from French to English, an article he wrote
on the Jewish roots of the Tutsi people.

Also participating in the annual think tank was Rabbi Rigoberto Em-
manuel Viñas, a thirty-three-year-old Sephardi rabbi of converso back-
ground. His family, Cuban exiles, rediscovered their Jewish roots when
they immigrated to Miami. Rabbi Manny, as he is known, founded El
Centro de Estudios Judíos Torat Emet, which serves not only as a center for Jewish learning and prayer but as a resource for those of converso background (former Jews who had been forced to convert to Christianity) who seek to return to their roots (Kagen and Morgan 2009). At the time of our acquaintance, he had 180 families in his congregation, about a quarter of whom had gone through formal conversion.

I also had the honor of meeting the late Rabbi Hailu Paris, a revered patriarch of the Ethiopian Hebrew community who mentored a generation of Hebrew Israelite rabbis through the Commandment Keepers in Harlem, the Mount Horeb Congregation in the Bronx, and the Israelite Rabbinical Academy in Queens. Although his claim that he was born in Ethiopia and adopted by Eudora Paris, a member of Arnold Josiah Ford’s delegation to Ethiopia, has been publically disputed, many Jews and Israelites have continued to see him as a crucial bridge between African American and European Jewry (Kestenbaum 2014). My greatest honor was to have met Ephraim Isaac, the preeminent Ethiopian-Yemenite scholar of ancient Semitic languages and civilizations and director of the Institute of Semitic Studies in Princeton, New Jersey.

During the conferences, we discussed everything from how to promote outreach, diversity, and growth among the Jewish people to anti-Israelism and anti-Semitism. Yet some of the greatest contention arose during Shabbat services. With groups ranging from self-identified Israelites, who veered towards traditional practices, to more secular but halakhic Jews (those born to a Jewish mother), fundamental differences emerged, especially when it came to the role of women. Should there be separate seating? Could women read from the Torah? Yet even these lively debates captured the passionate, argumentative spirit of Judaism. If there is any merit to the old adage “Two Jews, three opinions,” one can only imagine the layers and nuances that are added to the mix when race, continents, and varying ancestral traditions and claims are introduced.

As I conducted interviews and explored the historical record, it became clear that scholars of religion had not looked closely at the impact of Jews and Judaism on black American identities. Blacks and Jews, the prevailing narrative went, were two distinct groups that first encountered one another during the late nineteenth century. My investigation revealed that the notions scholars held about the historical relations
between Africans and Jews were simplistic, naive, and incomplete. The questions I have tackled throughout my journey, and which I address in this book, concern the intersection and negotiation of race, religion, ethnicity, and culture, and the ways in which these categories continue to serve as a basis for group difference in the modern world. This book explores how individuals assert their dual identities and find acceptance within their respective communities. How do they respond to the public conflicts waged between blacks and Jews? How do they view provocateurs like Minister Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam? To what extent do they feel connected to Israel or identify with Zionism? How do they negotiate both racism and anti-Semitism, while learning to synthesize two socially stigmatized group identities that have been shaped by discrimination, segregation, and biological notions of group difference? Do Hebrews and Israelites observe traditional Jewish holidays and the dietary laws of kashrut? To what extent do they incorporate the Talmud and Mishnah into their religious practice? And how do they identify with the broader Jewish community in the United States and overseas? In short, how do Hebrews and Israelites consider themselves to be a part of the Jewish people as it has come to be defined in the modern era?

This book argues that their assertions of Jewish identity illuminate the fluidity of the relationship between race and ethnicity. Both East/West and black/white binaries shaped the racial morphing of Ashkenazi Jews throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries until their newly imagined whiteness became inextricable from their Jewishness. Today, scholars agree that Jews have become white folks (Brodkin 1998; Jacobson 1999; Roediger 2007; E. L. Goldstein 2008; Glenn 2010). But blacks who identify as Jews have had to create counterhegemonic projects to challenge these essentialist notions, some choosing to claim that only they are the true descendants of the children of Israel and that white Jews are imposters. Meanwhile, mainstream black Jews (those recognized within rabbinic Judaism) carry the burden of continually asserting their legitimacy; without a counternarrative of their own, they struggle to fit within a Western narrative of Jewishness that precludes their very existence.

Chapter 1, “Jews, Blacks, and the Color Line,” moves across continents and decades to outline the evolving social scientific discourse on race regarding both blacks and Jews. It explores the shifting categories of the
US census and its role in solidifying race difference by deploying narrow conceptions rooted in color and phenotype—that is, the biological, inheritable aspects of race—while redefining ideas about culture, religion, language, nation, and history as malleable, changeable constructs that only “ethnic” immigrants possessed. Finally, it examines how the “whitening” of Jewish identity continues to limit the claims of black Jews and Black Hebrews.

Since the nineteenth century, Western scholars have selectively made use of racial taxonomies to draw boundaries between Africans and Europeans, as well as among Africans themselves. Chapter 2, “B(l)ack to Israel,” focuses on the Beta Israel, a small band of Ethiopians from the mountains of Gondar who claimed to be the descendants of the ancient Israelites. It traces how racial logic was used to argue, first, that these people could not possibly be Jews because they were black and, later, that they could not possibly be black because they were Jews.

If most Jews in the US trace their direct lineage to eastern Europe, many Black Hebrews and Israelites trace their lineage to Ethiopia or the Caribbean. For at least some individuals, there is likely historical merit to their claims. While chapter 2 focuses on the Ethiopian line, chapter 3, “Black-Jewish Encounters in the New World,” examines the brief intersection of the African and Jewish diasporas in the Caribbean and the earliest Black Hebrew and Israelite communities in the United States.

Chapter 4, “Back to Black,” explores the major dividing lines among Black Hebrews and Israelites today and how identity terms like “Jew,” “Hebrew,” and “Israelite” can serve as rhetorical constructs to map out territory and reify boundaries. It argues that the challenges of Black Hebrews to rabbinic hegemony—through biblical exegesis and the reinterpretation of key terms, verses, and passages—serve as competing racial projects to redefine the role of African peoples in world history and lay claim to a chosen status.

Chapter 5, “Your People Shall Be My People,” focuses on black converts to normative Judaism. This group includes those who identify with mainstream Judaism as well as members of Black Hebrew groups who seek a connection with the broader Jewish world. While few studies of religious conversion focus specifically on converts to Judaism, the scant research available suggests that, unlike the case of conversion to Christianity, in which a life-changing experience often sets individuals on a
new spiritual path, marriage and family play a significant role in conversion to Judaism. Yet the research suggests that in the case of blacks who convert to Judaism, other factors are at play. Many feel a spiritual connection to Judaism or believe that they had Jewish ancestors, and they long to formalize and strengthen these bonds to the larger Jewish world.

Scholars have explored identity formation among individuals with one black parent and one white parent, but the processes become ever more complex when the dimensions of ethnic culture and religion are inserted. Chapter 6, “Two Drops,” examines the identity options of biracial Jews and the various strategies they employ to publically signify membership in one or the other community. The chapter also sheds light on the larger dynamics of how individuals selectively articulate and assert identities and broaden the boundaries and meanings of groups.

Chapter 7, “When Worlds Collide,” examines the cleavages in black-Jewish relations in the United States and the degree to which insider/outsider status shapes the perceptions and responses of biracial Jews, black converts, and Hebrews/Israelites to black anti-Semitism and Jewish racism. The interviews, which were largely conducted during a period in which relations between blacks and Jews were at a historic low, shed light on the strategies these groups use to negotiate conflicting interests and to synthesize two socially stigmatized group identities.

The concluding chapter considers the significance of the growing population of self-identified black Jews and its implications for world Judaism in the twenty-first century. It also returns to the concept of racial projects, discussing how blacks have engaged in competing projects (both “racist” and “antiracist”) to assert their identities as Jews and their place within the global Jewish narrative. Finally, it considers an expanded notion of racial projects, suggesting that they need not translate into tangible goods and resources. Rather, they can serve the psychological and social needs for acceptance, legitimacy, and self-affirmation.