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African Hebrew Israelites mark their modern day exodus from U.S.

WATCH: The Hebrew Israelites, often referred to as Black Hebrews, celebrate their 'exodus' with a festival in the desert town of Dimona.

By Andrew Esensten | May 25, 2012 | 4:24 AM | 5

For two days each May, the dusty desert town of Dimona receives an infusion of color and excitement, courtesy of the African Hebrew Israelite community, which celebrates its "exodus" from the United States with musical and dance performances, a parade through the city and a watermelon feast.

The Hebrew Israelites, often referred to as Black Hebrews, represent the largest community of African-American expatriates in the world (at approximately 2,500). They began leaving the United States, which they refer to as Babylon, in 1967 during the height of the Civil Rights Movement.

"Our people were in captivity in the Americas and we had never been able to wear our own face," said Prince Immanuel Ben Yehuda, the community's director of international affairs. "Now we're back in Israel. We're able to reclaim our culture and begin to define a new direction for our community and hopefully inspire others in that direction."

Members identify themselves as descendants of the Biblical Israelites and commemorate both the original exodus from Egypt on Passover as well as their modern exodus from America during the two-day festival known as New World Passover.

This year's celebration was particularly special, as the community celebrated 45 years living outside of the United States and the 45-second vision that Ben Ammi Ben-Israel, the spiritual leader of the community, received in 1966 that led to the exodus. In his vision, Ben Ammi, 72, has said he received instructions from the angel Gabriel to deliver his people to their ancestral homeland of Israel. The original group of followers, mostly from Chicago, spent two and a half years in the Liberian jungle before immigrating to Israel beginning in 1969.

Although the community has clashed with the state over the years, especially over the question of whether they are Jews, relations have improved significantly since 2003. The Hebrews were granted permanent residency status that year, and 50 members have received citizenship to date, according

to community spokesperson Yafah Baht Gavriel. During the opening ceremony on Wednesday, the New Jerusalem Fire Choir performed both the community's national anthem, "Song of My People," as well as the Israeli national anthem, "Hatikvah." The sky was dotted with Israeli flags, a further apparent sign that the community and the state have warmed to each other.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu highlighted the community's participation in the Israel Defense Forces in a letter that was read aloud during the ceremony. "On this opportunity, I want to send my blessing to the members of the cooperative society that is working towards the inclusion of the Hebrew Israelite community in Israeli society at large," the letter stated. "Your integration in recent years into the Israel Defense Forces reflects your status as an integral part of the Israeli experience and of its institutions."

Shamiyah Baht Shaleak, who moved to Israel from Detroit in 1974, noted the importance of celebrating both Israel's Independence Day as well as the independence of the Hebrew Israelites. "We are a part of the collective people of Israel, and of course we celebrate [Independence Day in Israel], but we had to have an independence day" as well, she said.

However, there are no barbecues on New World Passover; the Hebrews maintain a strict vegan diet. Instead, they set up tents in the park across the street from their village, a former absorption center for Russian immigrants, and eat watermelon. Tons of it. This year, the community consumed 12 tons of watermelon fresh from the Galilee, according to Baht Gabriel.

There is no irony in the Hebrews' decision to celebrate their freedom by eating a fruit associated with slavery in the United States, said Prince Immanuel.

"We're seizing the 'power to define' in so many new areas," he said, including in what constitutes a healthy diet. Watermelon, he said, is an excellent source of water and vitamin C.

On a day devoted to celebrating the idea of self-determination, Ben Ammi shared his vision for the peace process in the Middle East.

"We must understand that peace will never come, and true freedom will never come, by way of politicians," he said in an interview in his tent. "There's a major difference between the peace that was promised by the Creator and the peace that is being sought after by politicians." The former is achieved only by those who practice a righteous lifestyle, he said.

Ben Ammi also reiterated his desire to receive Israeli citizenship, which he said the Interior Ministry denied him for unspecified reasons in 2009.

Does Ben Ammi enjoy eating watermelon? He "absolutely" loves it.

"I want to grow the watermelons for the house of Israel," he said. "I'm going to grow the sweetest, tastiest watermelons. That's what I really want to do whenever we find peace for ourselves and for all of the families on this earth."