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## From Birthright to Black Hebrews: A journey by three U.S. filmmakers

**New film backed by NBA star Amar'e Stoudemire offers an updated portrait of the African Hebrew Israelites, but is criticized for not asking its members – who originated in the U.S. – 'hard questions' about their lifestyle.**

By Andrew Esensten | Nov. 19, 2014 | 1:07 AM

LOS ANGELES – Fourteen years ago, a student film titled “Sister-Wife” was broadcast on Israeli television. It was a sensation, providing a rare glimpse inside the insular and polygamous community of Black Hebrews living in Dimona, and exposing Israelis to, as one reviewer put it, “a society that exists within us but that we hardly know.”

Much has changed since then. The African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem, as they prefer to be called, received permanent residency status in 2003 and are more visible than ever. These days, members of the community often appear on Israeli reality TV singing competitions and in news segments touting the benefits of veganism. Last spring, the Israel Defense Forces profiled a soldier from the community on its official blog. (As permanent residents, the Hebrews are obligated to serve in the IDF.) Yet they are still little known outside of Israel.

A group of young American filmmakers is hoping to change that with their new documentary: “The Village of Peace,” which was produced by NBA star Amar'e Stoudemire and has been screened at festivals and theaters across the United States, is an intimate portrait of daily life inside the community's compound in the Negev desert. The film will premier in Israel next month at the Jerusalem Jewish Film Festival.

“We are fans of art and cinema that is personal,” said Niko Philipides, who directed the documentary with Ben Schuder. “When we generated the concept of the doc, we wanted it to be about the people, about their stories, in their voices.”

The directors, both 26, and Sam Schuder, a producer and Ben's 28-year-old brother, described in a joint interview with Haaretz how the seed for the film was planted in 2010, when the three of them traveled to Israel together on a Taglit-Birthright trip. Sam had befriended a man in Oakland who was raised in the community, and the Schuder brothers opted to extend their trip to visit the man's family in Dimona. Their visit coincided with Unity Week, the

Hebrews' annual celebration of culture and physical fitness.

"We were mesmerized by the experience and by the community," Sam Schuder recalled. "We knew we wanted to do a film together, and this seemed like the perfect fit."

Philipides and the Schuder brothers had been making music videos together in California's Bay Area, and when they returned from their Birthright trip they recruited other friends in the industry to start a production company. Two of them, Jack Madigan and Aaron McCreary, put up the initial \$20,000 to shoot the film. The directors said they received permission via e-mail to film in the Village of Peace – an abandoned immigrant-absorption center which the Hebrews refurbished in the 1980s. (The founders of the community are African Americans who left the U.S. in 1967 and trace their lineage to the biblical Israelites.) But a week before production was to begin in the summer of 2011, and with the seven-man crew already in Israel, Ben Schuder received another e-mail from one of the community's leaders: Filming would have to be postponed due to unspecified scheduling conflicts. The directors rushed to Dimona to discuss the situation with some of the leaders.

"They didn't know us, and it's a huge thing to open your doors to somebody in this way," Philipides said, adding that after an extensive conversation, "we found we were very much in line with our visions," and the community leaders granted permission for the crew to begin shooting. (By contrast, the Israeli directors of "Sister-Wife," Hadar Kleinman-Zadok and Timna Goldstein-Hattab, told Haaretz that they spent a year meeting with the leaders and building trust before they were able to start filming.)

### **'I was amazed'**

During the 10-day shoot, the crew stayed in the community's guesthouse and filmed from sunrise to sunset. The leaders helped them choose the documentary's four protagonists: Nasik Hiskiyahu, a native of Georgia and the first Hebrew to migrate to Israel via Liberia; Aturah Tekiah, a so-called Crowned Sister from Mississippi, who has three sister-wives; and two IDF soldiers, Elamar Edwards and Matshelah Patterson.

Dressed in her olive-green IDF uniform, Patterson talks candidly in the film about feeling like an outsider during basic training. "Everybody in my unit never heard of me," she says. "They wanted to know where was this black girl from and why was she speaking English and Hebrew mixed."

In addition to formal interviews, "The Village of Peace" includes vignettes of life in the village: a dance rehearsal, a school assembly, a family dinner, a

wedding, a circumcision.

“It shows this is a true community,” explained Philipides. “There is always something going on, always someone being born and getting married, and that was awesome to show.”

The post-production stage of the project dragged on for two years, as the filmmakers tried and failed to raise money through the crowdfunding website Kickstarter. (The initial backers eventually put up more funds, and the team received a grant from the Berkeley Film Foundation.) They did, however, succeed in convincing Stoudemire to join the project as a creative consultant and executive producer. Sam Schuder sent the film trailer to the New York Knicks forward – who identifies as a Hebrew, though not as a member of the Dimona community – via Twitter and eventually met with him at his apartment in Manhattan.

“The reason why this film attracted me is because at the time that the world caught on that I was a Hebrew Israelite, no one really heard of any Black Jews or Israelites,” Stoudemire said during a Q & A session after the film’s Los Angeles premiere in May. “When I got the project and I saw it, I was amazed by the story. It was very close to me, and I understood what they were going through.”

The story of the Hebrews’ quest to uncover their roots in Israel may be easier for some viewers to digest than their ideology, especially on the topic of gender roles. The Los Angeles crowd let out a collective gasp when Nasik Hiskiyahu, using biblical language to describe the expectations of Hebrew women, said: “Nothing taking away from her, she can be as powerful as she wants to be, but she’s still a ‘helpmate’ to man.” (According to Ben Schuder, that line also rubbed his mother Nina the wrong way.)

The filmmakers reiterated that they wanted to let the community members explain who they are and what they believe in, in their own words, without commentary from outsiders. (For this reason, they decided to cut an interview with John Jackson, Jr., an anthropologist and the author of a recent ethnography of the community.)

“This place is not a liberal sanctuary where everyone is free to do whatever they want,” Ben Schuder said. “We didn’t purposely leave anything out, and we did our best to try to bring certain issues to light through their words.”

Added Philipides: “I felt it was important to not tailor the film to the controversy, because then that’s what people are going to walk away with.”

Jay Rosenblatt, the program director of the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, where the film was shown in August, said that some viewers faulted the filmmakers' uncritical approach to their subject.

"Some people felt it was a little bit of a puff piece and didn't ask enough hard questions," Rosenblatt said. "Maybe it wasn't as thoroughly researched as they would have liked. That said, I think there were other people who felt like I did, that it was just fascinating and worth seeing."

The leaders of the community, as was to be expected perhaps, were pleased with the movie.

"Having often been at the mercy of writers and editors who can easily twist our words or use a skewed camera angle to cast us in a completely contrary light, we are especially appreciative of the work of Ben and Sam Schuder, and their entire crew," Sar Ahmadiel Ben Yehuda, a spokesman who also appears in the documentary, wrote in an e-mail. "As we survey the widespread chaos on the planet today, we pray that the movie will assist in our goal of having the Village of Peace extend into the global village."