

The African Hebrew Israelites want to be part of Israel, but Israel still won't commit

They started leaving the U.S., 'Land of the Great Captivity', 50 years ago, and have weathered racism and poverty in Israel, establishing a vibrant community. But the legal status of the 'Black Hebrews' is still unresolved

Andrew Esensten | Oct. 31, 2017 | 6:55 AM

Kasadyah Baht Israel and her husband, Yehoshua, were riding a public bus in Beer Sheva recently when, out of the blue, a fellow passenger started hurling racist insults at them, while broadcasting the interaction live on Facebook with her cellphone.

The video went viral, and the passenger was vehemently criticized in the Israeli media and online. She later told Israel's Channel 10 television news that she had been "joking around."

For members of the African Hebrew Israelite community, to which Kasadyah and Yeshoshua belong, the incident was a painful reminder of the racism they tried to escape when they began leaving the United States - or the "Land of the Great Captivity," as they refer to it - in 1967.

"We all remember the history in America in the 1960s," Yair Ben Israel, a community member who himself was the victim of what he believes was a racially-motivated attack by a Border Police officer two years ago, wrote in a Facebook post. "But I never imagined that this could happen in Israel in 2017."

It has been nearly 50 years since the first African Hebrew Israelites (or Black Hebrews, as they are more commonly known) began settling in Israel, the land they believe to be their ancestral homeland.

Their presence was contested from the beginning. The founders of the community are non-Jewish African Americans who identify as descendants of the ancient Israelites, but not as Jews. Since they didn't qualify for automatic citizenship under the Law of Return, they entered Israel as tourists and stayed illegally.

Mostly left to fend for themselves, they established a vibrant community in Dimona and, over the years, have made significant contributions to Israeli society. They manufacture vegan products, perform in soul and jazz bands, and have represented Israel at international music and sports competitions.

In addition, they proudly serve in the Israel Defense Forces; in fact, they are the only non-Jewish minority group in Israel for whom service is compulsory for both men and women, per the 2003 agreement they reached with the government to become permanent residents. (Only male members of other non-Jewish groups like the Druze and Circassians are required to enlist.)

Yet as the Beer Sheva bus incident revealed, in appalling fashion, they are still viewed by some Israelis as outsiders to be scorned. They are regularly referred to as *kushim* - a racial slur for black people - on the street, in the Hebrew press, and even by government representatives who clearly should know better. They have been mistaken for African asylum seekers and manhandled by the police as a result.

In the IDF, my research has shown, they have been harassed by their commanders for requesting the accommodation they are entitled to receive as members of a minority population, such as time off to observe Shabbat and holy days. And they are passed over for spots in intelligence units, sending the message that they are not to be trusted with sensitive information.

Most infuriatingly, the Israeli government has quietly tried its best to prevent them from becoming citizens.

Only a small percentage of the 3,000 or so African Hebrew Israelites living in the country have received Israeli citizenship to date. Most are permanent residents who cannot vote in national elections or receive Israeli passports, and over 100 have no legal status in the country whatsoever, including dozens of children, according to community leaders.

How can this be? Yafit Weisbuch, a human rights lawyer who has represented community members in dozens of cases against the Interior Ministry, says that the Ministry's Beer Sheva branch which handles their cases is "very hostile" to the Hebrew community.

"They make their lives as difficult as possible and usually break the law by not giving status to those entitled to it," Weisbuch says. "Even simple matters are dragged on for years."

Like the matter of a 26-year-old community member who was born in Israel to parents without status, and who still has no status himself. And a young Hebrew Israelite woman who served in the IDF but was denied citizenship because she lived abroad for a period of time after her service, like so many Israelis do; after returning to Israel she had a baby who is currently status-less. And a 9-year-old Hebrew boy who has been waiting five years for permanent residency, which he is entitled to receive through his father.

This is the great irony of the African Hebrew Israelites' migration story: They left the U.S., where they were treated as second-class citizens because of the color of their skin, only to be treated as second-class citizens - and minus the citizenship - in Israel, because they are not recognized as Jews. (Given the option to convert to Judaism early on, they refused, asserting that they were the authentic descendants of the Tribe of Judah and that white Jews were imposters.)

The time has come for both the government and the people of Israel to fully embrace them.

In the late 1970s, a special Knesset committee investigated the "problem" of the Hebrew community, which at the time was considered to be a cult.

The committee determined that the government had totally mishandled the situation, first by allowing the Hebrews to enter Israel as would-be immigrants (even though they didn't qualify), and then by adopting an "ostrich-like policy" of ignoring them, which resulted in a humanitarian crisis marked by overcrowded living conditions, malnutrition and disease.

Much progress has been made to remedy the situation, including the courageous decision by then-Interior Minister Avraham Poraz to grant most community members permanent residency status in 2003. But many issues remain unresolved, including whether or not community members should have to give up their American citizenship in order to receive Israeli citizenship, as is sometimes required of non-Jewish immigrants.

"We have sat with government officials," said community liaison Rifael Ben Israel. "They all say they want to help, but nothing has been done."

MK Michael Oren, former ambassador to the U.S., is the most recent politician to publicly express support for the community and then seemingly move on to other issues.

After a visit to Dimona this June, he posted on Facebook that he met "with members of the Hebrew Israelite community, most of whom still are not Israeli citizens despite having served in the IDF and having been in Israel for decades. We must change this situation!" (When I called Oren's office to ask how he planned to help change the situation, a spokesperson said he was unable to comment.)

Like all sovereign states, Israel is entitled to enact and enforce laws about who can and cannot become a citizen. But it must do so fairly.

In a twist of history, the Interior Minister who began the process of normalizing relations with the Hebrew community in 1990 by allowing them to receive work permits and support themselves - Arye Dery of the ultra-Orthodox Shas party - holds the same portfolio today.

He should seize the opportunity to finish what he started and finally close the book on a saga that has confounded the Israeli government for half a century. (In a statement, the Interior Ministry said that each status case is examined "individually and in all of its circumstances." Multiple requests for comment from Dery that were submitted to his media aide were ignored.)

As for the people of Israel, they should get to know their African Hebrew Israelite neighbors. In the wake of the bus incident, the community extended an invitation to the abusive passenger, and to all Israelis, to visit them in Dimona and hear about their unique lifestyle and history.

Accept the invitation. You will learn, as I have learned during the decade I've spent researching this special community, that the African Hebrew Israelites are a "blossom in the desert," as the chorus of one of their songs goes. They may not be Jewish according to halakha, but they follow the Torah and see Israeli Jews as "members of our extended family," in the words of their late spiritual leader, Ben Ammi Ben Israel.

Moreover, they have disavowed earlier misguided anti-Israel propaganda campaigns, undertaken in hopes of pressuring authorities to recognize them, and proved their loyalty to the state through their military service.

They have truly thrown in their lot with the people of Israel and suffered the traumas that other Israelis have suffered, losing Aharon "Rony" Ellis in a terrorist attack during the second Intifada and a soldier, Toveet Radcliffe, whose 2015 death on her IDF base under suspicious circumstances is currently being reinvestigated. And they aren't going anywhere.

For all of these reasons, and because it's the right thing to do, the government should finally clear a path for the African Hebrew Israelites to become Israeli citizens.

Andrew Esensten, a former writer at Haaretz, is writing a book on the history of the African Hebrew Israelite community. His website collects information about the community, including answers to frequently asked questions, a historical timeline, and videos.