

**Rabbi Arnold Josiah Ford: A Moses to His People**  
**By**  
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**Ford, Arnold Josiah** (23 Apr. 1877-16 Sept. 1935), rabbi, black nationalist, and emigrationist, was born in Bridgetown, Barbados, the son of Edward Ford and Elizabeth Augusta Braithwaite. Rabbi Ford asserted that his father’s ancestry could be traced to the Yoruba tribe of Nigeria and his mother’s to the Mendi tribe of Sierra Leone. According to his family’s oral history, their heritage extended back to one of the priestly families of the ancient Israelites, and in Barbados his family maintained customs and traditions that identified them with Judaism (Kobre, 27). His father was a policeman who also had a reputation as a “fiery preacher” at the Wesleyan Methodist Church where Arnold was baptized; yet, it is not known whether Edward’s teaching espoused traditional Methodist beliefs or embodied the radical reconsiderations of Christianity and the embrace of Judaism that his son would later advocate.

Ford’s parents intended for him to become a musician. They provided him with private tutors who instructed him in several instruments—particularly the harp, violin, and bass. As a young adult, he studied music theory with the Edmestone Barnes of London and in 1899 joined the musical corps of the British Royal Navy, where he served on the HMS *Alert*. According to some reports, Ford was stationed on the island of Bermuda, where he secured a position as a clerk at the Court of Federal Assize, and he claimed that before coming to America he was a minister of Public Works in the

Republic of Liberia, where many ex-slaves and then early black nationalists attempted to settle.

When Ford arrived in Harlem around 1910, he gravitated to its musical centers rather than to political or religious institutions—although within black culture, all three are interrelated. He was a member of the Clef Club Orchestra, under the direction of JAMES REESE EUROPE, which first brought jazz to Carnegie Hall in 1912. Other musicians who were black and Jewish, such as Willie “the Lion” Smith, an innovator of stride piano, also congregated at the Clef Club. Shortly after the orchestra’s Carnegie Hall engagement, Ford became the director of the New Amsterdam Musical Association. His interest in mystics, esoteric knowledge, and secrete societies is evidenced by his membership in the Scottish Rite Masons, where he served as Master of the Memmon Lodge. It was during this period of activities in Harlem that he married Olive Nurse, with whom he had two children before they divorced in 1924.

In 1917 MARCUS GARVEY founded the New York chapter of the Universal Negro Improvement Association [UNIA]. Within a few years it had become the largest mass movement in African American history. Arnold Ford became the musical director of the UNIA choir, Samuel Valentine was the president, and Nancy Paris its lead singer. These three became the core of an active group of black Jews within the UNIA who studied Hebrew, religion, and history, and held services at Liberty Hall, the headquarters of the UNIA. As a paid officer, Rabbi Ford, as he was then called, was responsible for orchestrating much of the pageantry of Garvey’s highly attractive ceremonies. Ford and Benjamin E. Burrell composed a song called “Ethiopia,” the lyrics of which spoke of a halcyon past before slavery and stressed pride in their African heritage—two themes that were becoming immensely popular. Ford’s efforts in the movement place him in the category of GEORGE ALEXANDER MCGUIRE, Chaplain-General of the UNIA, and various Islamic and Christian clergy who were each trying to influence the religious direction of the organization.

Ford’s contributions to the UNIA, however, were not limited to musical matters. He and E.L. Gaines wrote the handbook of rules and regulation for the African Legion (which was modeled after the Zionist Jewish Legion) and developed guidelines for the Black

Cross Nurses. He served on committees, spoke at rallies, and was elected one of the delegates representing the 35,000 members of the New York chapter to the “First International Convention of Negro Peoples of the World,” held in 1920 at Madison Square Garden. There the governing body adopted the red, black, and green flag as its national ensign and Ford’s song “Ethiopia” became the “Universal Ethiopian Anthem,” which the UNIA constitution required be sung at every gathering. During that same year, Ford published the *Universal Ethiopian Hymnal*. Ford was a proponent of replacing the disparaging term “Negro” with the term “Ethiopian,” as a general reference to people of African descent. This gave the line in Psalm 68 that “Ethiopia shall son stretch out her hand to God,” a new significance and it became popular slogan of the organization. At the 1922 convention, Ford opened the proceedings for the session devoted to “The Politics and Future of the West Indian Negro,” and he represented the advocates of Judaism on a five-person ad hoc committee formed to investigate “the Future Religion of the Negro.” Following Garvey’s arrest in 1923, the UNIA loss much of its internal cohesion. Since Ford and his small band of followers were motivated by principals that were independent of Garvey’s charismatic appeal, they were repeatedly approached by government agents and asked to testify against Garvey at trial, which they all refused to do. However, in 1925, Ford brought separate law suits against Garvey and the UNIA for failing to pay him royalties from the sale of recordings and sheet music, and in 1926 the judge ruled in Ford’s favor. Yet, despite his personal and business differences with the organization, Ford remained active in the UNIA as a rabbi, giving invocations and benedictions.

Several black religious leaders experimented with various degrees of Judaism between the two world wars. Rabbi Ford formed intermittent partnerships with some of these leaders. He and Valentine started a short lived congregation called Beth B’nai Israel. Ford then worked with Mordecai Herman and the Moorish Zionist Temple, until they had an altercation over theological and financial issues. Finally, he established Beth B’nai Abraham in 1924. A Jewish scholar who visited the congregation described their services as “a mixture of Reform and Orthodox Judaism, but when they practice the old customs they are seriously orthodox” (Kobre, 25). Harlem chronicler JAMES VANDERZEE photographed the congregation with the Star of David and bold Hebrew lettering

identifying their presence on 135<sup>th</sup> Street and showing Rabbi Ford standing in front of the synagogue with his arms around his string bass, and with members of his choir arrayed at his side, the women wearing the black dresses and long white head coverings that became their distinctive habit and the men donned in white turbans.

In 1928, Rabbi Ford created a business adjunct to the congregation called the B'nai Abraham Progressive Corporation. Reminiscent of many of Garvey's ventures, this corporation issued 100 shares of stock and purchased two buildings from which it operated a religious and vocational school in one and an apartment house in the other. However, the resources to sustain this enterprise dwindled as the Depression became more pronounced, and the corporation went bankrupt in 1930. Once again it seemed that Ford's dream of building a black community with cultural integrity, economic viability, and political virility was dashed, but out of the ashes of this disappointment he mustered the resolve to make a final attempt in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian government had been encouraging black people with skills and education to immigrate to Ethiopia for almost a decade, and Ford knew that there were over 40,000 indigenous black Jews already in Ethiopia who called themselves Beta Israel, but who were commonly referred to as Falasha. The announced coronation of Haile Selassie in 1930 as the first black ruler of an African nation in modern times raised the hopes of black people all over the world and led Ford to believe that the timing of his Ethiopian colony was providential.

Ford arrived in Ethiopia with a small musical contingent in time to perform during the coronation festivities. They then sustained themselves in Addis Abba by performing at local hotels and relying on assistance from supporters in the United States who were members of the Aurieth Club, a civic group of black Jews and black nationalists, and members of the Commandment Keepers Congregation, led by RABBI W. A. MATTHEW, Ford's most loyal protégé. Mignon Innis arrived with a second delegation in 1931 to work as Ford's private secretary. She soon became Ford's wife, and they had two children in Ethiopia. Mrs. Ford established a school for boys and girls that specialized in English and music. Ford managed to secure 800 acres of land on which to begin his colony and approximately 100 individuals came to help him develop it. Unbeknownst to Ford, the U.S. State Department was monitoring their efforts with irrational alarm, dispatching reports with such headings as "American Negroes in Ethiopia—Inspiration

Back of Their Coming Here—‘Rabbi’ Josiah A. Ford,” and instituting discriminatory policies to curtail the travel of black citizens to Ethiopia. [Explain why briefly]

Ford had no intention of ever leaving Ethiopia, so he drew up a certificate of ordination (shmecha) for Rabbi Matthew that was sanctioned by the Ethiopian government with the hope that this document would give Matthew the necessary credentials to continue the work that Ford had begun in the United States. By 1935 the black Jewish experiment with Ethiopian Zionism was on the verge of collapse. Those who did not leave because of the hard agricultural work, joined the stampede of foreign nationals who sensed that war with Italy was imminent and defeat for Ethiopia certain. Ford, it was said, died of exhaustion and heartbreak in September, a few weeks before the Italian invasion.

### **Further Reading**

The papers of Rabbi Ford are held largely in private collections; however, correspondence between Ford and Matthew is contained in the Rabbi Matthew Collection at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, along with other collections relating to Harlem’s black Jews. Detailed records of Ford’s efforts in Ethiopia are available at the National Archives, State Department Records for Ethiopia.

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and Richard Newman (1978) and William R. Scott. “Rabbi Arnold Ford’s Back-to-Ethiopia Movement: A Study of Black Emigration, 1930-1935,” *Pan-African Journal* 8, no. 2 (1975):191-201.

\* This article was published by Rabbi Sholomo Levy in *African American Lives* (2004) and the *African American National Biography* (2008). Both volumes were edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham and printed by Oxford University Press.