

Israeli Ambassador Visits Black Synagogue

By
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On July 23, 2011, Dr. Michael Oren, Israel's ambassador to the United States, took the unprecedented step of visiting Congregation Temple Beth El in Philadelphia, one of the largest Black synagogues in the United States. The occasion was the tenth anniversary of Rabbi Debra Bowen, whose mother, Elizabeth Dailey, founded the congregation over sixty years ago and led them on a spiritual journey that brought them out of Christianity and to an embrace of Judaism .



Speaking to a packed congregation of over 300 Black Jews representing congregations from all over the northeast and a large delegation from Chicago, Ambassador Oren explained that in Jerusalem he is accustomed to meeting Jews of African descent who have immigrated to Israel from Ethiopia. He described how these Black Jews have integrated into all segments of Israeli society. And, should anyone doubt the veracity of his claim that Judaism in Israel is far more racially diverse than it often appears to be in the United States, the ambassador presented an enlarged picture of his daughter's military unit. All of their uniforms were green, but the varied complexions of their smiling faces represented many places of origin.

In a sense the photograph that Ambassador Oren presented to the congregation was a visual representation of the prophecy of Hashem speaking through Isaiah: "For My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations. The Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, says, "Yet I will gather to him others besides those who are gathered to him." (Isaiah 56:7)

For members of the Israelite community this divine act of return (שׁוּבָה) has been one of the corner stones of our faith. The ironic thing is that Ambassador Oren was born in New Jersey and educated at Columbia University in New York City, yet he had to go to Israel to meet Black Jews. Perhaps more astonishing is the fact that his entourage that Sabbath day consisted of many Jewish leaders from the Philadelphia area who were being introduced to the Black Jews in their midst for the first time by someone who lives thousands of miles away in Israel. It would appear then that part of the Ambassador's mission on this trip was not only to strengthen ties between Israel and the United States, but also to build bridges between isolated Jewish communities in the United States.

How did this coming together take place? Rabbi Capers Funnye, who has been such an excellent Ambassador of the Israelite community to Jews all over the world [at the time of this writing he is in South Africa reaching out to our Lemba brothers], was instrumental in making this coming together possible. He met several times with Ambassador Oren and also with Prime Minister Benyamin

Netanyahu. As he travels, Rabbi Funnye proudly informs his hosts that he is not the only Black Jew and that he is not an individual anomaly. He is part of an old and established community of Black Jews who prefer our Biblical God-given name of Israel. European Jews are often surprised to learn of our existence and to know that we have our own congregations, an Israelite Academy for the training of our rabbis, and the Israelite Board of Rabbis that establishes our minhagim and halachah. Rabbi Funnye and Rabbi Bowen invited Ambassador Oren to visit our community and he gladly accepted.

The service was conducted in our traditional manner. The morning prayers were recited from a siddur. The Torah scroll (which was commissioned by Cuban Rabbi Manny Vilnas from a Safardi scribe in Israel) were removed from the ark and read aloud in Hebrew. Songs that are universally recognized throughout the Jewish world were sung, but also those that come out of the rich African American spiritual lexicon. The soulful voices of the singers, the reverent passion of the worshippers, and the melodic offerings of the musicians in the band combined to create a unique beauty and a very distinct mixture that is not found in white synagogues nor black churches. All of this is part of what makes us a distinct Jewish community.

Ambassador Oren, his wife, and those in his delegation seem to appreciate the beauty of the service immensely. Despite the pressure of his schedule, he insisted on staying well into the afternoon and then warmly accepted the hospitality of the congregation that had prepared a special kiddush in his honor. During this reception he greeted many of the leaders of our community including Rabbi Hailu Paris, Rabbi Debra Bowen, Rabbi Sholomo Levy, Rabbi Capers Funnye, Rabbi Baruch Yehudah, Rabbi Benyamin Levy, Rabbi Yeshurun Levy, Rabbi Joshua Salters, Rabbi Yehushua Lewi, and Elder Moses Farrar.

All who were present saw this visit as a beginning. Once the doors separating our communities were shut. In past years there have been cracks through which some rays of hope have emerged. Now we are once again optimistic about the potential for greater understanding and unity.

