

Dr. Rudolph Windsor: Griot of His People

By
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Dr. Rudolph Windsor has been a scholar, prolific writer, and captivating speaker for over forty years. He is best known for his many books that document the connection that people of African descent have with Judaism which include *From Babylon to Timbuktu*, *Valley of the Dry Bones*, and *Judea Trembles Under Rome?* The thread that runs through his published works is an earnest desire to educate his people about their glorious history, their Israelite identity, and the redeeming power of Torah. This article emerged from an interview that I had with him and his lovely wife, Mary L. Windsor, in August 2012 about his life and his new book *Barak and Deborah United*.¹

In biblical days those who recorded the history of ancient Israel were called scribes. Today we call them historians. Dr. Windsor is certainly those things; however, the term that probably best describes what he does is the African term “griot”. In many West African societies the griot is a person who has the sacred responsibility of remembering, preserving, and transmitting the collective knowledge of his people to the next generation. The griot’s role in these societies is far more than academic. They are the “keepers of the flame.” Without them people would be devoid of knowledge of their past and left to wonder through life as individuals afflicted with cultural and spiritual amnesia. Indeed, this was the very predicament that Windsor found himself in as a young black man coming of age in Asbury Park, New Jersey, in the 1950s. It was at that time that he had the good fortune of listening to a local radio program and heard a black rabbi by the name of Abel Respes explain the fact that many of the biblical figures who are always depicted as being European, were, in fact, people of color. This news was a revelation for Windsor as it was for most black people hearing this information for the first time. Moreover, Rabbi Respes was not merely speaking of ancient history, as many black nationalists from the time of Marcus Garvey had done in the 1920s. Rabbi Respes went further to announce that this Israelite legacy continues in many black communities around the world.

Windsor was so thirsty for knowledge that he began a quest to learn more about this heritage. He visited the synagogue that Rabbi Respes founded in New Jersey called Adat Beyt Mosheh and discovered that there were indeed black Jews living and practicing Judaism in twentieth century America. In the years that followed he learned more about our beliefs and customs. He studied, prayed, and devoured every book he could find on the subject. In particular,

¹ This article is based on an interview conducted by Rabbi Sholomo Levy with Dr. Rudolph Windsor on August 29, 2012

he was influenced by the works of Josephus Flavius, the Jewish historian who so passionately recorded the destruction of Israel during the first century. During this period Windsor's mind was ablaze. What he was learning from these old, dusty books was as current and as relevant as today's newspaper. The Romans were never actually as white as their marble busts. They were a Mediterranean people, closely related to their Greek cousins who preceded them as conquerors of the somewhat darker people of the east from Israel to Cleopatra's Egypt. This reality stood in stark contrast to the popular depictions of Charlton Heston and Elizabeth Taylor, ubiquitous images that so bleached the actual diversity out of history that what remained was a story that could have taken place in Switzerland instead of Africa.

In 1955 Windsor moved to Philadelphia. By this time, he had become close friends with another black rabbi and scholar, Datan Nasi. In addition, Rabbi Nasi was a member of Rabbi Respes' congregation and an officer of ADath Ha-Emet Israel in which Rudolph Windsor was the spiritual leader in the 1970s and 1980s. During this time, Windsor and Rabbi Jeremiah Israel of New York received an orah scroll from Rabbi Wolpe of Har Zion Synagogue in Philadelphia. Rabbi Nasi was also affiliated with a sect of black Jews founded by William Saunders Crowdy in 1896. Today Rabbi Nasi is the senior Rabbi at Congregation Temple Beth-El under the leadership of Rabbi Debra Bowen. Windsor also deepened his understanding of the various ways that black people were returning to Judaism by worshiping with a black congregation founded by Prophet Cherry in Philadelphia. For several years he worshipped with a Sephardi synagogue in Philadelphia called Mikveh Israel. Windsor and his brother Cole had become so proficient in Hebrew by this point that Cole Windsor often leads the prayer service with his rich melodious voice.

From these experiences Windsor learned that there are many ways of being Jewish and that each community defines its own *menhagim* (customs). Naturally, he was drawn to the various ways that people of African descent had practiced their faith, preserved it for generations, and are returning to it as prophecy foretold. Unlike most academic scholars who investigate these matters solely to satisfy their historic curiosity or intellectual interest, Windsor has been motivated by the Talmudic injunction that the purpose of knowledge is to better understand the will of the Creator. If your knowledge does not lead to living the Torah and teaching others to do so, then your study and degrees have been earned in vain. Windsor has put his knowledge into practice. He was one of the founders of the Hebrew Fraternal Order, a *kavurah* (religious community) that met in Philadelphia to pray as well as study.

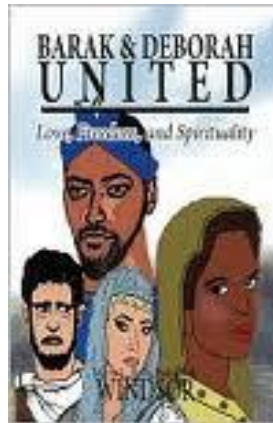
Windsor continued to expand his formal education by studying at Temple University and earning a B.A. degree in Hebrew Literature from Gratz College in 1975. Ultimately, Windsor would go on to earn a Doctoral Degree from the University of Metaphysics. Windsor explained that the problem with earlier books such as *Hebrewism in West Africa* by Joseph Williams and *The Lost Tribes a Myth* by Allen H. Godbey is that they were written for a very narrow audience of well-trained scholars. He wanted to write books that could be read and understood by the masses of his people. He succeeded in doing this with *From Babylon to Timbuktu* (1969). It traced a clear chronology of events and provided a wealth of factual information which proved that a migration of people and culture had taken place that connected the ancient Israelites with several populations in the African diaspora. Yet, his thesis and supporting evidence were easily understood by any reader. When this book came out Windsor became an instant celebrity. He

visited New York City at the invitation of Chief Rabbi Levi Ben Levy and gave lectures at Beth Shalom. He conducted interviews with newspapers, spoke on college campuses, and was a popular guest on various radio programs. Windsor recalls how hungry our people were for knowledge. After reading his books people would send him letters thanking him for “telling our story.”

Windsor’s newest book is called *Barak and Deborah United: Love, Freedom and Spirituality*. It was a collaboration with his wife Mary L. Windsor. They told me that the inspiration for this historically based novel came from several passages of Hebrew scripture that describe how Barak, a courageous prince of Israel, and Deborah, a wise prophetess who became a “mother of Israel,” ^{Judges 5:7} worked together to liberate the Israelites from their oppressors. However, rather than being a simple history, they weaved in elements of creative fiction that add drama, suspense, and deeper insight into the characters. These authors have a true gift for storytelling. There is an intricate plot that grabs your attention from the first chapter and keeps you turning pages until the very end. Along the way, the characters encounter situations that introduce the reader to real elements of Israelite culture and Torah law such as judicial proceedings and the complications of Levirate marriage.

One of the most masterful accomplishments of this book is the wonderful way in which its authors explore the virtues and challenges that their characters face. Barak and Deborah are presented as real people who have problems and desires. They rely on their faith and intelligence to find solutions to dilemmas in their personal lives and in the collective experience of their people. Although this drama is accurately set in the Biblical period, the difficulties that they faced then are almost identical to the troubles that we face today. This book teaches and also entertains. The lessons one learns about Torah, relationships between men and women, and the meaning of words like “duty,” “responsibility” and “honor” are so important that this book should be considered required reading.

When I ask Dr. Windsor to reflect on his long career he said that he dedicated most of his life to educating and inspiring his people. He seemed to regret that the increase in knowledge that has resulted from the wider availability of this information has not led to a significantly larger and stronger Israelite community. Remarkably he said “knowing history is not sufficient; living as members of a righteous community is our highest obligation.” With that goal in mind, he expressed his wish that the work of the Israelite Board of Rabbis will be successful in its mission to build synagogues, train rabbis, and unite our people all over the world. May the Creator of the universe answer our prayer.



Purchase his books from [Windsor Gold Series](#), [Barns and Nobles](#), [Amazon](#)