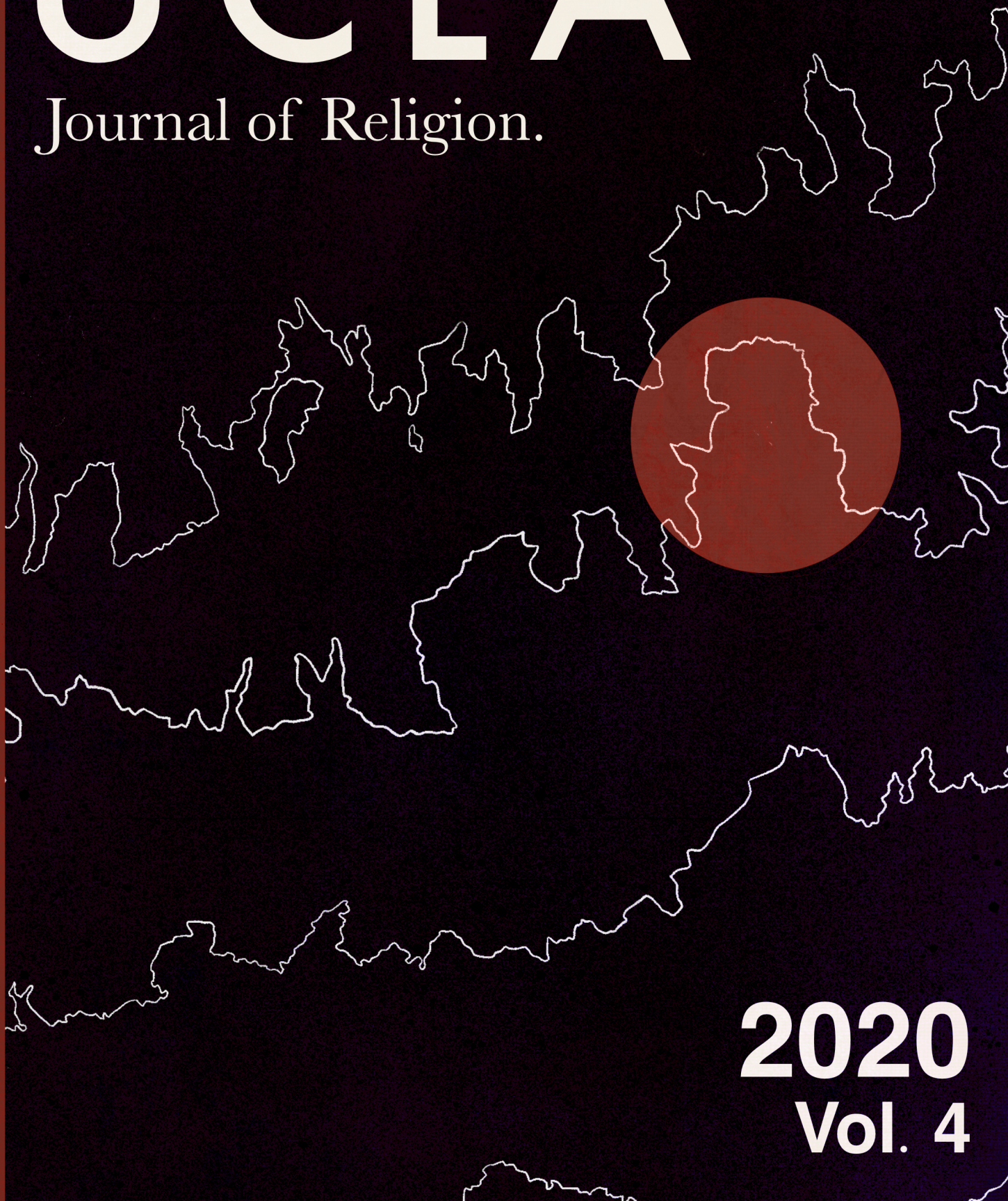


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*Mission:* The UCLA Journal of Religion is a student-run undergraduate journal dedicated to publishing papers on diverse topics in religious studies. We aim to engage and familiarize students with the process of journal publication--a cornerstone of academic life--and provide an opportunity for them to display their research in this fascinating field. **We welcome submissions incorporating all methodological and theoretical approaches, and highly encourage interdisciplinary papers.** Our goal is to publish superior work regarding the academic study of religion.

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## Editors' Note

Welcome to the UCLA Journal of Religion, Volume 4!

This student-run journal has seen tremendous growth in the four years since its reboot and rebranding. Under the leadership of Dr. Ryan Gillespie -- and with the support and encouragement of the Center for the Study of Religion and chair, Dr. Carol Bakhos -- this journal has flourished.

This year, we are pleased to present papers of various topics in interdisciplinary fields, showcasing the diversity of thought and perspective that make the study of religion so engaging. In the following pages, you will explore ancient Greece and Israel through their war rituals; ponder the economic strategies presented in Judaism and Islam; discover nuances in the nascent Black Hebrew Israelite movement; tackle the health implications of fasting on Ramadan for Muslims with diabetes; and see how relationality can elucidate commonalities between a Hindu guru and a Hasidic rebbe.

These topics, though broad in their scope, merely scratch the surface of the vast realm of religious studies. If you, or someone you know, is interested in submitting a paper to be considered for next year's publication, please see the last page of this journal to see how your work could be featured. We are grateful to all of the budding scholars who submitted works for this year's journal; each piece we read showed us a unique and informative perspective on the academic study of religion.

As we release this journal in the midst of the novel coronavirus pandemic, in a time of unprecedented physical separation, we are proud to continue to join together in the advancement of knowledge for our scholars and all our readers.

Please enjoy,

The Editors





## **God(s) in Control: Rituals of War in Ancient Greece and Israel**

Joseph Abeles  
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### **ABSTRACT**

Ancient Greek and Israelite societies each placed heavy emphasis on the divine, notably during wartime. Analyzing their practices around war shines light on the ways in which the divine are honored. The Greek structure of *isonomia*, equality in social standing, is visible through their wartime practices, as are the Israelite emphases on God's oneness and observing God's commandments. Specific rituals explored in this paper include sacrifice, divination, and war tactics. Social structures are further examined in the context of how warfare tactics and rituals demonstrate the priorities of each society.

Keywords: Ancient Greece, Ancient Israel, Warfare, War Rituals, Isonomia, Mitzvot, Sacrifice, Divination

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# God(s) in Control: Rituals of War in Ancient Greece and Israel

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When the mythical soldier Achilles prepared to face the enemy Trojans, he dared not enter the battlefield without first addressing his gods.<sup>2</sup> Across the Mediterranean, Israelite priests sought council with their god Yahweh to sanction battle strategies. Within ancient Greek and Israelite societies, there existed an inextricable link between battle and the divine. Examining their rituals and practices surrounding battle provides much insight into each society's respective priorities. For the Greeks, battle strategies reflected their emphasis on pleasing the divine and having a social structure based on equality; for the Israelites, the focus was on the oneness of God and following God's will. Through an analysis of established war practices and principles, including divination, sacrifice, and various battle strategies, this paper will illustrate a number of means through which military rituals in ancient Greece and Israel modeled social and political structures and priorities.

In the ancient Greek world, humans were subservient to the gods, and offered pleasing sacrifices in order to gain favor in their eyes. As Euthyphro explained to Socrates, "if a man

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<sup>1</sup>Joseph Abeles, UCLA Honors College Class of 2021, is double-majoring in Psychology and Religion. In addition to the historical precedents to modern religious expressions, he is interested in the vast intersection between religion and psychology. This paper was inspired by a Classics course with department chair Dr. Kathryn Morgan.

<sup>2</sup> Richmond Lattimore, trans., *The Iliad of Homer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).



knows how to say and do what is pleasing to the gods at prayer and sacrifice, those are pious actions such as preserve both private houses and public affairs of state.”<sup>3</sup> The preservation of public affairs required pious actions even in times of war, as historian and soldier Xenophon noted when his failure to offer a *sphagia* offering to Zeus Meilichios before battle ultimately resulted in Xenophon’s financial misfortune.<sup>4</sup> *Ta sphagia*, sacrifices intended to invoke or continue the gods’ favor surrounding battle, were only one type of sacrifice performed before war; the other type was *ta hiera*, sacrifices used for divination purposes to determine the outcome of a particular battle.<sup>5</sup> Diviners examined the entrails of the sacrificial animal, specifically the liver, and decided whether the fighting would result in a victory for them. Famously, Pausanias refused to advance into battle with the Persians in 479 until the *sphagia* were promising.<sup>6</sup> Xenophon describes another instance in *Hellenica* in which adverse *hiera* stalled a Spartan advance for four days.<sup>7</sup> These instances of delayed battle, during which troops may have been attacked without being able to retaliate, demonstrate the commitment of ancient Greek warriors to their religious structure. Soldiers would not dare disrupt the social order and partake in warfare without the affirmative message of their gods, for they knew that the gods were more powerful contenders than the Persians or any other state with whom they would engage in battle. The message was quite clear: the gods reign supreme.

With sacrifice came the need to divide meat, another pre-battle ritual that reflected the political structure of the Greek polis. After an animal sacrifice, the flesh not allotted to the gods

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<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Euthyphro*, 14b.

<sup>4</sup> Xenophon, *Anabasis*, 7.8.1-6.

<sup>5</sup> William Kendrick Pritchett, *The Greek State at War: Part I* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), 111.

<sup>6</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, 9.61.

<sup>7</sup> Xenophon, *Hellenica*, 3.1.17.

or those directly involved in the sacrifice was cut into strips of equal weight for consumption. The meat was distributed politically, corresponding to “the ideological model of *isonomia*, meaning both 'equality of distribution' and 'equality of political status.’”<sup>8</sup> The distribution of meat allowed many participants to be involved, and the equality of portions suggests a mirroring of the Greek social order: an expression of the will of the community to have equivalent shares. The religious nature of this social practice carries the implication that the manner in which this ritual was enacted might have been divinely sanctioned, and that having equal shares in meat and in politics was the proper way for the polis to function. All Greeks could consume equal shares of meat and serve the gods in equal respects.

In the Hebrew world, in contrast to the Greek, Leviticus 22:10 explains that non-priestly “lay-person” may not eat the food offered in a sacrifice to the Israelite god.<sup>9</sup> The Israelite god Yahweh set out a clear hierarchical system for his nation, with priests holding one of the highest statuses because of their roles as intermediaries between the people and God. Unlike the Greek socio-religious structure, in ancient Israel there was a clear correlation between someone’s relationship with God and his/her social standing—a relationship which was well calculated to place an emphasis on the power drawn from God in society. The highest-ranked officials of the Hebrew Bible, above even kings because of their direct channel with God, were the prophets. To determine the will of God before battle, prophets divined by means of cleromancy—casting lots. The Deuteronomistic History places great emphasis on the importance of following God’s will, specifically including the method by which it was appropriate to engage in divination. Bill Arnold explores this topic by observing the presentation of the first kings of the United

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<sup>8</sup> Louise Bruit Zaidman and Pauline Schmitt Pantel, *Religion in the Ancient Greek City*, trans. Paul Cartledge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 36.

<sup>9</sup> New Revised Standard Version is used for all Hebrew Bible references.



Monarchy, Saul and David, and their modes of divination before war. Arnold argues that the text legitimizes and idealizes the rule of David (whose prophets used cleromancy) by contrasting it with a portrait of Saul as a rejected king who used a forbidden form of divination.<sup>10</sup> The Book of Samuel depicts Saul as using the impermissible means of necromancy in a dramatic scene before battle, in which he consults a “spiritus” in order to converse with his favored prophet from beyond the grave.<sup>11</sup> However, the accepted modes described in the text by which the Israelite god can communicate with the king are “by dreams, or by Urim [lots], or by prophets,” and for failing to follow the conventions of divination, Saul was cursed.<sup>12</sup>

Why is necromancy portrayed negatively in the Hebrew Bible, as opposed to other means of divination? Arnold points to the Book of Isaiah to show that the Israelites were often tempted to use necromancy, but God forbade it because drawing upon ancestral *elohim* (god, gods, or divinities) through necromancy impinged upon the oneness of Yahweh.<sup>13</sup> Disobeying the word of God therefore risks violating a harshly punishable commandment of Deuteronomy 6:14-15: “Do not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who are all around you, because the Lord your God. . . is a jealous God.” In the example of Saul’s disobedience, as in Greece, even the desperation of being on the battlefield does not excuse violations of the divine law; God reigns supreme and controls the outcome of war and bypassing the sacred standard will prove more harmful than beneficial.

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<sup>10</sup> Bill Arnold, “Necromancy and Cleromancy in 1 and 2 Samuel,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association, April 2004), 198-214, Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43725201>.

<sup>11</sup> 1 Sam. 28:3-19

<sup>12</sup> 1 Sam. 28:6

<sup>13</sup> Arnold, “Cleromancy and Necromancy” 204. Referencing Isa. 8 and 28.

Following the instructions of the Israelite god came with many restrictions on acceptable actions. God established hundreds of *mitzvot*—commandments—for his people to observe; the Israelites were obligated to perform these commandments in order to maintain the covenant God made with their ancestors. Several *mitzvot* regard actions which may not be taken during war, such as gratuitously destroying fruit-bearing trees when besieging a city.<sup>14</sup> Scholars have proposed that this particular boundary was established in response to the ecological destruction Israel itself had suffered under siege, based on an account of the siege of Megiddo by Thutmose III, in which fruit trees were used to build siege works.<sup>15</sup> The Deuteronomistic account aligns the will of God with a priority of the people, separating the Israelites in practice from the surrounding nations while allowing them to become closer to Yahweh through observance of wartime laws. Here we have a convergence of political and religious obligations, as a practice which previously devastated the agriculture of Israel becomes religiously restricted to more effectively prevent the Israelites from doing the displeasing action. Serving God has become the outcome of separation from other nations, which also helps lessen the proximity behaviorally between Israel and its polytheistic neighbors.

In addition to performing *mitzvot* to honor Yahweh, Israelites followed commandments to recognize his oneness. One such *mitzvah* consisted of destroying idols upon entering new parts

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<sup>14</sup> Deut. 20:19-20

<sup>15</sup> Michael G. Hasel, *Military Practice and Polemic: Israel's Laws of Warfare in Near Eastern Perspective* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2005), in Jacob L. Wright, "Warfare and Wanton Destruction: A Reexamination of Deuteronomy 20: 19-20 in Relation to Ancient Siegecraft" in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 127, No. 3 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, Fall 2008): 427, Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25610132>.



of Israel, a major motif of the Deuteronomistic History,<sup>16</sup> the precedent of which is set with the laws of *herem*, utter destruction, in Deuteronomy 7:

When the Lord your God gives [idolatrous nations] over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy [*herem*] them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them. . . for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods. Then. . . [the Lord] would destroy you quickly. . . . [B]urn their idols with fire. For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people.<sup>17</sup>

Several important messages arise from the *mitzvah* of *herem*. God explicitly instructs this utter destruction ostensibly because any interaction with other gods may tempt Israelites to “serve” them, which would kindle Yahweh’s anger because he selected Israelites specifically as his devotees. This gives reason for the observance of divine law and the exclusivity of worship: Yahweh is a jealous God<sup>18</sup> and therefore requires complete recognition and compliance. Through following commandments and recognizing the singularity of Yahweh, the Israelites could remain in God’s good graces and continue to prosper in the land.

The Greeks, too, secured the favor of their gods by following specific, religiously based laws. For instance, military operations could not take place during festivals because of the festivals’ special significance as times to honor the gods, as seen in Sparta’s practices.<sup>19</sup> As Pritchett notes, “Part of the etiquette of ancient warfare [was] that religious obligations of the times often prevailed over purely military considerations.”<sup>20</sup> However, perhaps due to the large

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<sup>16</sup> Robert H. Pfeiffer, “The Polemic against Idolatry in the Old Testament,” In *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 43, No. 3/4 (Atlanta, GA: The Society of Biblical Literature, 1924): 235, Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3259257>.

<sup>17</sup> Deut. 7:2-6

<sup>18</sup> As noted above in Deut. 6:15.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel P. Tompkins, “Greek Rituals of War” in *The Oxford Handbook of Warfare in the Classical World*, ed. Brian Campbell and Lawrence A. Tritle (Jan 2013): 529, DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195304657.013.0027.

<sup>20</sup> Pritchett, *Greek State at War*, 1:126.

number of festivals celebrated in Athens each year—between 120 and 144 festival days a year<sup>21</sup>—festivals never prevented Athens from partaking in aggressive military operations.<sup>22</sup> This raises questions of Athen’s priorities in contrast with Sparta’s: Sparta’s emphasis on withholding from battle during festivals suggests higher regard for the religious in Sparta than in Athens. In both cases, that festivals ever played a role in the decision of whether or not to go to battle showcases the importance of divine favor in the military operations of ancient Greece. A Greek soldier would never want to offend any god by participating in an unsanctioned battle; honoring the gods is the preeminent priority in his eyes.

Methods of warfare can also shed light on Greek priorities. For example, Greek soldiers sang the marching *paian* when proceeding into war, the purpose of which is somewhat unclear. Daniel Tompkins provides two possible explanations based on ancient texts: “to avert evils” or “to enable marching in step.”<sup>23</sup> Either explanation corresponds with the already-discussed priorities seen in the Greek world. If the *paian*’s function was apotropaic, serving to avert evils, this would relate to the theme of divine control of fate. There would be no reason to avert evils if evil were a purely human function, for then only the fighting itself would be relevant in determining the victor of the battle. Calling upon a higher method of apotropaism implies that the deities control the Greeks’ fates, with success on the battlefield hinging on pleasing the gods and warding off evil. If, however, the true purpose of the *paian* was to enable marching in step, this relates to the general principle of equality seen in Greek rituals, such that all soldiers are unified within the social structure of the polis. The equality of citizenry is not without religious

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<sup>21</sup> Kathryn Morgan, “Festivals and Civic Religion” (lecture, Greek Religion, University of California, Los Angeles, November 4, 2019).

<sup>22</sup> Tompkins, “Greek Rituals of War.”

<sup>23</sup> Tompkins, “Greek Rituals of War” 530. Tompkins respectively references Authenaeus, *The Deipnosophists* 14.701; and Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 5.69-70.

implications: as in Attica, where citizens' roots were drawn to the soil itself, it is possible that the equal nature of citizens during the war march might have related to the equal level of (certain, war-eligible) people based on their standings as humans, lower than the gods.

In Israelite warfare, trickery and deceit were often portrayed more positively than Greek united-front battle strategies. Simple sociological explanations include a narrow focus on how to gain advantages over fortifications, since, as a small people, the Israelites were unable to win head-on battles with most other nations. A more religiously-driven argument, however, suggests that because the land of Canaan was promised to the descendents of Abraham in Genesis 12:7, the Israelites had a divine right to fight using whatever means necessary to fulfill this promise.<sup>24</sup> The story of Ehud and King Eglon is a fascinating case study in which the Hebrew Bible positively presents an example of trickery, prompting many interpretations. Ehud, one of the few Israelites described in the Bible as left-handed, is sent to kill the Moabite king. Ehud tells King Eglon that he has a message from God, draws him in close, and stabs him in the belly with his left hand.<sup>25</sup>

Sociological interpretations suggest two practical benefits to Ehud's left-handedness: The right side of the body would less likely be searched for a weapon when entering the court than the more commonly used left side, and it is harder for righties to defend against left-handed attacks.<sup>26</sup> In a religious frame, however, we see two other possible reasons for the left-handed attack. Ehud gets close to Eglon in private by telling him that he has a "secret message from

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<sup>24</sup> This includes lulling a foreign king to sleep in order to kill him, as Jael does to protect the land (Judg. 4-5), and, similarly, the eponymous character in the deuterocanonical book of Judith beheading an enemy king while he is drunk and defenseless.

<sup>25</sup> Judg. 3:12-30

<sup>26</sup> Suzie Park, "Left-Handed Benjaminites and the Shadow of Saul" in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 134, No. 4 (Atlanta, GA: The Society of Biblical Literature, Winter 2015): 708, Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.15699/jbl.1344.2015.2877>.

God,” a *davar seter*.<sup>27</sup> The text puns the Hebrew word *davar*, which means both ‘message’ and ‘thing.’ The ‘thing’ in question is a sword, delivered by God via Ehud, as promised. Another interpretation of the use of Ehud’s left hand is based on the symbolic interpretations of the left hand in the contemporary Near East as the hand of cursing.<sup>28</sup> With that hand, Ehud “conveys to Eglon the curse of God,” poetically bringing divine justice down on the cursed with his cursed side.<sup>29</sup>

Divine justice plays a further role in the story, as God’s control permeates the entire tale of Ehud: it was because “the Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord” that “the Lord strengthened King Eglon of Moab against Israel.”<sup>30</sup> Ehud was only able to complete his mission after God, hearing the Israelites’ cries, “raised up for them a deliverer.”<sup>31</sup> This is a classic plot device of the Hebrew Bible which exhibits the control of Yahweh and the importance of doing his *mitzvot*. From the perspective of the text, God’s power and control are more crucial to Israel’s deliverance than the subtle advantages of Ehud’s left-handedness. Without God’s permission, Ehud would not have been able to save the Israelites from the rule of the oppressive monarch, and, without God’s covenant with the Israelites, they would have no right to the land of Israel in the first place. Hence, God’s will is the dominant force controlling their lives, and it is through obedience that they receive reward.

Deities dominated and controlled Greek warfare as well; as such, they were given generous offerings by the Greek state after a victory. At the point of *tropai*, the physical location where the enemy had turned away, the victors erected a *tropaion* in honor of the gods, most often

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<sup>27</sup> Judg. 3:19

<sup>28</sup> Park, “Left-Handed Benjaminites” 709.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Judg. 3:12

<sup>31</sup> Judg. 3:15

to Zeus Tropaios and Nike. On it, spoils from the enemy, such as armor, were dedicated to thank the helpful gods who were clearly on the victors' side. Spoils could be promised to the gods before the battle in the form of vows, which could influence the outcome of the battle. Justinus tells us that at the Battle of the Sagra River, the Crotonians vowed to dedicate one-tenth of their spoils to Apollo should they win, which would have bode well for them, had not the Locrians vowed *one-ninth* of their potential spoils. The outbidding tactic worked, and the vastly outnumbered Locrian army defeated the Crotonians, with the aid of "two young men fighting in armour different from that of the rest, of an extraordinary stature" on the wings of a great eagle, certainly delivered by the gods.<sup>32</sup> This story demonstrates not only how beneficial vows could be in battle, but also how the deities indisputably influenced battle in the Greek imagination. This explains why vows and votives were taken so seriously in ancient Greece; to offer too little to the gods could mean the difference between life and death.

By examining ancient Greek and Israelite warfare, we have determined certain underlying themes which connect to models of political and social structures while demonstrating the respective priorities of the people. The Greeks performed sacrifices and read oracles to influence and determine the will of the gods. Good Israelite fortune came from following God's *mitzvot*, and tactics of warfare for both the Greeks and the Israelites emphasized the dominant nature of the divine. The consistent presence of religious belief interwoven with structural practice elucidates that within each culture, the sociopolitical system functioned according to its unique goals, reverent to its conception of the divine.

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<sup>32</sup> Justinus, "Epitome of Pompeius Trogus' *Philippic Histories*," Book 20, trans. Rev. J.S. Watson (1853. <http://www.attalus.org/translate/justin2.html>).



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## **Religion and Finance: Usury in Judaism and Islam**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Debt-driven financing has become the norm of ethical finance throughout the world. As countries in the developing world continue to struggle, policymakers and economists must attempt to seek alternative mechanisms to mitigate the risk of default. In this paper, I will explore the role of interest-free financing found in Jewish and Islamic traditions. I will argue that the restrictions on usury found in these traditions holds emancipatory potential for the developing world.

Keywords: usury, *heter iska*, interest, *riba*, *mudaraba*

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# Religion and Finance: Usury in Judaism and Islam

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1985, Nigeria borrowed approximately \$14 billion to build hospitals, schools, and provide basic restructuring of their already weak economy. By 2004, Nigeria's debt had grown to more than \$36 billion.<sup>2</sup> These statistics, provided by the Brookings Institution, already take into account the \$35 billion that Nigeria has attempted to pay.<sup>3</sup> As Nigeria continues to struggle in crippling debt, creditors remain unconfident that they will ever be able to secure their money back.

Nigeria's debt is not a unique one – in fact, it is ubiquitous around the globe. The Arab Spring, for example, can be traced to issues of compound interest on countries in North Africa. On December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi set his body on fire to protest Tunisia's harsh policies regarding his food business. Much of the population was under staggering debt, and

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<sup>1</sup>Abdus Najmi graduated from UCLA in June 2020 with a B.A. in Political Science and a B.A. in the Study of Religion. Additionally, he holds his Islamic finance certification from the Ethica Institute based in Dubai. He is primarily interested in studying the intersections of religion, political violence, and economics. He intends to continue his education in law school in the fall of 2021. This paper was originally adapted from a course with Professor Bakhos (UCLA, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures)."

<sup>2</sup> Lex Rieffel, "Nigeria's Paris Club Debt Problem." Brookings. Brookings Institution, July 28, 2016. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/nigerias-paris-club-debt-problem/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Tunisia itself was due from compound interest about “40 billion USD.”<sup>4</sup> Even Egypt, one of the main driving forces behind the Arab Spring, paid about “80 billion USD in foreign debt and interests since 1981.”<sup>5</sup> Interest-driven debt clearly has international ramifications, which is why President Obama “on May 19th 2011[,] suggested debt cancellation for Egypt.”<sup>6</sup> The extension of interest-backed loans to developing countries has proven to be a harbinger of wars, revolutions, and stagnating economies. One does not even need to look to the developing world to argue that compound interest has severe ramifications. This crisis affects students at home here in the United States, as witnessed by the student debt loan crisis. Soaring tuition costs and slow repayments have caused student debt to total \$1.6 trillion, further exacerbating new borrowing and leading to life-long repayment plans.<sup>7</sup> Clearly, the practice of compound interest is far from a perfect one – it is simply disastrous. However, the question then arises: Where did it begin? Are there any economic alternatives found in Judaism and Islam that can be incorporated to alleviate poverty for developing countries?

My argument will examine the history behind usury and its role in religious texts, specifically those of Judaism and Islam. Both these texts are clear on their prohibitions against usury, and this paper will attempt to thoroughly examine the interest-free, financial tools that have developed in these traditions to help alleviate global debt and poverty writ large. My research essay will argue the following: economists should adopt interest-free based mechanisms

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<sup>4</sup> Ingrid Stolpestad, “The Arab Spring and International Debt: Tunisia, Egypt and Bahrain’s Debt to Norway.” Norwegian Coalition for Debt Cancellation, 4. <https://eurodad.org/files/pdf/784725-the-arab-spring-and-international-debt-tunisia-egypt-and-bahrain-s-debt-to-norway.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>7</sup> Harmeet Kaur, “The Student Loan Debt Is \$1.6 Trillion and People Are Struggling to Pay It Down.” CNN. Cable News Network, January 19, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/19/us/student-loan-slow-repayment-moodys-trnd/index.html>.



found in Jewish and Islamic traditions. As Jewish and Muslim societies became much more reliant on state law as political practice, the prominence of interest-based prohibitions began to fade away, eventually being associated as a matter of “individual” preference, such as issues of divorce, inheritance, etc. Examining the intersection between religion and finance may hold promising answers for future economic and fiscal policy. Economists and policymakers should seek to incorporate religion as an alternative mode of ethical governance in monetary policy. My research does not include a discussion of Christianity. I believe that research in this field may hold useful economic alternatives to policymakers as well. I seek to examine Christian historical thought on usury and interest-free mechanisms in another essay.

### **JEWISH THOUGHT AND PRACTICE**

Judaism has an extensive history with the practice of usury throughout its various religious texts. The Book of Deuteronomy is very straightforward on its position on usury: “Thou shalt not lend upon usury to thy brother... unto a stranger thou mayest lend upon usury; but unto thy brother thou shalt not lend upon usury.”<sup>8</sup> According to the developmental hypothesis, this verse came as a response to Jewish anger over previous usurious practices. Before, “commercial lending was in fact widespread in ancient Israelite society ... As Israel and Judah suffered ... tribute payments to Assyria and Babylon, ... inequality increased ... Deuteronomy’s ban on usury between Jews may have been written around this time.”<sup>9</sup> The developmental hypothesis holds that this ban arose out of opposition to practices of surrounding societies. Naturally, banning usury became a method to foster social solidarity and mark the Israelites as distinct from other neighboring groups. Though the Deuteronomy ban forbade Jews

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<sup>8</sup> Ryan Calder, “God’s Technicians: Religious Jurists and the Usury Ban in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.” *European Journal of Sociology* 57, no. 2 (2016): 207–57. doi:10.1017/S0003975616000096.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

from “charging interest to another Jew,” it “did allow them to charge interest to a non-Jew.”<sup>10</sup>

This marked the beginning of Judaism’s tumultuous and complex relationship to usury. There are many other verses regarding the regulation of interest, but, for this essay, I will only focus on the Deuteronomy verse.

It is crucial to acknowledge that blaming Jews as “starting” usury is unwarranted and borderline anti-Semitic. Jews were placed in oppressive conditions after the emergence of Christian empires that left them no choice but to participate in banking. Specifically, after the Church banned usury as a financial practice, the Jews were forced to become “either merchants or money lenders.”<sup>11</sup> Jews were constantly “blamed for the crucifixion of Christ” and were “often not allowed to own land in societies where farming was the way of life,”<sup>12</sup> de facto forcing them into the financial industry as usurers, bankers, or traders. As Calder puts, “allowing or disallowing certain forms of moneylending could mean the difference between sustenance and impoverishment.”<sup>13</sup>

In *halacha*, which is based on the Talmud, Jewish practice has varied greatly. One method to avoid charging interest was the *heter iska* – the idea that risk should be shared among the business partners. This principle structured the financial ventures so that “the borrower and lender [agree] to be partners... whereby one partner invests money and the other uses his entrepreneurial skills to manage the venture.”<sup>14</sup> This type of relationship elicited a partnership where risk could be equally distributed among both partners, and both could technically share

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<sup>10</sup> Jafri, S.H. and Margolis, L. “The Treatment of Usury in the Holy Scriptures.” *Thunderbird International Business Review* 41 (1999): 371–379.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 372.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Calder, 224.

<sup>14</sup> Kenneth Ryesky, “Secular Law Enforcement of the Heter 'Iska.” Jewish Law Articles. <https://www.jlaw.com/Articles/heter1.html>.

profits. Profits were awarded in accordance to one's portion of the business relationship.

Halachic business law also demands that there be "two witnesses," either to prove the veracity of the contract or to make sure that if money was lost in the *heter iska*, it was not due to negligence.

<sup>15</sup> Some Jewish authorities still attempt to use this practice today. In modern-day Israel, banks attempt to operate with "a rabbinically authorized general *heter iska*... Israeli banks also offer standardized *heter iska* documentation for different types of transactions, including credit purchases, prepayment discounts, commodity trading, and the sale of debt."<sup>16</sup> However, much of Israel remains secularized, as evidenced by the growing discontent among the strictly observant Jews.

The separation of Jewish law from state law has produced financial alternatives in the face of Israel's acceptance of usury. For one, there has been no Jewish state for the majority of history till the foundation of Israel in 1948. This means that usury was practiced at the individual level, in small Jewish communities in diaspora, or simply was not practiced at all. In fact, the "Cairo Geniza papers, dating from the 9th century onward, show that in medieval Egypt, both Muslims and Jews lent at interest."<sup>17</sup> However, where usury bans were practiced, they were actualized at local levels. Post destruction of the Second Temple, "there was no centralized bureaucratic religious authority in Judaism,"<sup>18</sup> making empire/government enforcement extremely difficult. In diaspora, many rabbis sought to "to accommodate the economic needs of their communities,"<sup>19</sup> essentially allowing a diversity of Jewish financial practice. Rabbis

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<sup>15</sup> Daniel Klein, "The Islamic and Jewish Laws of Usury: A Bridge to Commercial Growth and Peace in the Middle East," *Denver Journal of International Law and Policy* 23, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 535-554, 543.

<sup>16</sup> Calder, 226.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

practiced and theorized about halachic financial law in their educational circles, such as at the “great Talmudic academies of Pumbedita, Sura, Tiberias, and Caesarea.”<sup>20</sup> Later on, rabbinical scholars would argue that interest bans in a world of money-based economies did not make much sense. With growing globalization, intertwined economies, and population booms, “later halachic institutions ... suggest that these laws in their original form were based largely on an agrarian society.”<sup>21</sup> Interest bans became almost impossible to work with due to the sheer amount of technological and fiscal innovations. Interest-free finance had thus become decentralized, much like the field of family law or inheritance law.

In current day Israel, halachic-compliant finance is clearly a decentralized issue, left to the discretion of the citizen. A quick survey of Israeli bank practices proves the prevalence of interest rates in state financial practice. Just two years ago in 2018, the Bank of Israel announced a shift in interest rate policy.<sup>22</sup> An examination of financial law in Israeli government tells the same story – the new amendment to the Regulation of Nonbank Loans Law, called the Fair Lending Law, “prescribes a maximum “civil interest”” at around “15%.”<sup>23</sup> The Fair Lending Law also establishes that exceeding the Bank of Israel interest rate of +30% “constitutes a criminal offense [...] Any lender found guilty of charging interest at a rate higher [...] will face up to three years of incarceration.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>21</sup> Chaya B. Rivka Rapaport, *Israeli Financial Gemachs: Interest-Free Loan Associations*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Union Institute & University, 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Waksman, Avi. “Suddenly, Israeli Interest Rates Are Becoming Interesting Again.” *haaretz.com*. Haaretz, July 9, 2018.

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/business/suddenly-israeli-interest-rates-are-becoming-interesting-again-1.6249065>.

<sup>23</sup> Anat Even-Chen, “Fair Lending Law Finally Approved.” *Barnea*.

<https://www.barlaw.co.il/client-updates/fair-lending-law-finally-approved/>.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

Additionally, Israel's financial history regarding interest rates of its currency, the Israeli new shekel, provides insurmountable evidence of disregard for usury laws found in the Torah. When the rate of inflation hit "above 100% in 1979 and rose from there to roughly 450% in 1984,"<sup>25</sup> politicians and economists were uncertain about navigating the fine line of manipulating interest rates to a halachically compliant level. Government officials thought of linking the currency "either to the United States dollar or to the governmental cost-of-living index... [but] the halachic question raised was whether such devaluation and linkage of loans could be legitimated halachically."<sup>26</sup> The ultra-Orthodox community has been outraged at this, in fact, many "have alienated themselves from the State of Israel due to what they perceive to be a widespread charging of interest."<sup>27</sup> This has led to an emergence of halacha-compliant finance, where Orthodox Jews innovate new financial tools like "equity investment" and "interest-free banking services in Israel, modelled on the equity investment paradigm of Islamic banks."<sup>28</sup> However, most "interest-free" institutions to this day still have to follow some sort of benchmark to avoid matters of inflation or currency devaluation.

Instead, individuals may choose whether or not they want to participate in "interest-free" finance in Israel, which I argue, is an effective mechanism for the alleviation of poverty. For example, a new Israeli bank named Ogen has emerged on the scene, offering interest-free loans to the disadvantaged in Israeli society. Surprisingly, the bank has done exceptionally well, showcasing about "\$300 million in interest-free loans to over 60,000... with a default rate of less

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<sup>25</sup> Rapaport, 25.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>27</sup> Klein, 544.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.



than 1%.”<sup>29</sup> When the founder of this interest-free bank was asked who his non-profit catered to, he stated that the groups he felt most concerned about were the “Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) Jews and Arabs and... people that are marginalized.”<sup>30</sup> The bank has not even been in full operation yet, since it is still waiting on its approval for a license from the Bank of Israel.<sup>31</sup> Despite not being at full working capacity, this social bank, steeped originally in Jewish thought regarding interest, has “raised some \$18 million in commitments... together with its NIS 68 million (\$19 million) core equity, Ogen has at its disposal \$37 million it can start giving out in loans.”<sup>32</sup> Mass poverty alleviation and debt reduction in developing nations can be achieved through pioneering financial alternatives like these. These thought practices originate in Jewish law originally, and innovating within the law may prove extremely useful as well.

Another place that many ultra-Orthodox Jews use to avoid interest are called *gemachim*, or in singular form, a *gemach*. *Gemachs* are “money-lending fund[s], interest free, for members of the Jewish community who [need] some advance funds.”<sup>33</sup> These functioned as social agencies that essentially distributed loans to people who needed fast money for weddings, rent, or even food. *Gemachs* were more than safety-nets for the poor and marginalized; they acted as ways to help jumpstart businesses that lacked initial capital. Usually, *gemachs* “tend to exist only within ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities” because of the “the Talmudic prohibition against charging interest.”<sup>34</sup> Statistically, poverty-reduction mechanisms such as these have boasted

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<sup>29</sup> Shoshanna Solomon, “Israel’s 1st social bank set to offer credit to those who find it out of reach.” *The Times of Israel*. August 20, 2019.

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/israels-1st-social-bank-set-to-offer-credit-to-those-who-find-it-out-of-reach/>.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>33</sup> Beth Pollak, “The Gemach.” *My Jewish Learning*. <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-gemach/>.

<sup>34</sup> Rapaport, 46.

really low defaults. For example, the International Association of Hebrew Free Loans, a *gemach* that operates within the US, has published evidence of their borrower default rates as “very low to zero.”<sup>35</sup> When compared to the overall default rate of 10.02% in the US during 2010, this number is an economic rarity. Economists should adopt interest-free mechanisms found in Jewish thought as alternatives to status-quo lending policies. Though banks may have to reject a higher proportion of borrowers, it is well worth the risk considering the massive amounts of inequality rampant today. Clearly, banking, as it is, is not working. Jewish alternatives may hold the answers.

### ISLAMIC THOUGHT AND PRACTICE

Islamic thought regarding usury in the Quran is quite easy to find. In Chapter 2 of the Quran, Surah Al-Baqarah, it states, “Allah hath permitted trade and forbidden usury.”<sup>36</sup> This surah goes on to state that “whoever returns to [dealing in interest or usury] - those are the companions of the Fire; they will abide eternally therein.”<sup>37</sup> It takes a step further, saying that if so-called believers keep charging interest, then they will be “informed of a war from Allah and His Messenger.”<sup>38</sup> There are many more verses, such as the verses in Surah al-Rum, Surah al-Nisa, and Surah al-Imran. However, for the sake of this essay, I have chosen to focus on the verses in Surah al-Baqarah.

Though the Quran prohibits usury, there is no definition of what it means in the Quran.<sup>39</sup> The word used in the Quran is *riba*, much like the Hebrew word *ribbit*. Analysis into the hadith

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>36</sup> “Al-Qur'an Al-Kareem - القرآن الكريم.” Surah Al-Baqarah [2:275-285]. <https://quran.com/2/275-285?translations=20>.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Mohammad Omar Farooq, “Riba, Interest and Six Hadiths: Do We Have a Definition or a Conundrum?”, *Review of Islamic Economics* (2009), Vol. 13, No. 1, pp. 105-141, 2009, 107. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1528770>.

literature is necessary for further understanding. When the verse was revealed, Muhammad's companions only knew about *riba al-jahiliyyah*. However, there were two types of interest: *riba al-fadl* and *riba al-jahiliyyah*. *Riba al-fadl* pertained to "sales transactions," while *riba al-nasi'ah* dealt with issues regarding "sales or debt involving deferment."<sup>40</sup> In the lifetime of the Prophet, only *riba al-jahiliyyah* was classified as unlawful.<sup>41</sup> In the modern era, most conservative, Orthodox Muslims tend to classify interest "in all its forms to be prohibited."<sup>42</sup> It is from the hadith literature that most of the legal complexities in Islamic financial law are debated. For example, one hadith in Sahih al-Bukhari, Vol. 3, #579 holds that:

Narrated Jabir bin [Abdullah:]  
I went to the Prophet while he was in the Mosque. (Mis'ar thinks that Jabir went in the forenoon.) After the Prophet told me to pray two rak'ah, he repaid me the debt he owed me and gave me an extra amount.<sup>43</sup>

Many scholars would argue that this hadith allows additional payments to be made out of generosity, kindness, or thankfulness to the lender. Mohammed Omar Farooq, an Associate Professor of Finance in Bahrain, poses the brilliant question: "How can 'all' loans which accrue a benefit to the lender be *riba*, but not gratuitous loans?"<sup>44</sup> The task of drawing a bright-line between usurious practices becomes very burdensome, to the point of examining someone's intention, which is an impossible task in and of itself.

Furthermore, Muslim innovations closely resemble Jewish practices when dealing with the circumvention of interest. Particularly, Muslim thought has created two tools: *bai al inah* and *mudaraba*. In the first example, scholars seek to address the issue of the lender needing to make

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 113.

money off the loan by creating a mechanism where the lender *buys* the asset for the borrower, and then resells the asset to the borrower at a marked-up price.<sup>45</sup> The reason this avoids interest is because money does not multiply over time; it is a simple, one-time mark-up payment that would be a flat fee. Additionally, much like the *heter iska* in Jewish thought, the *mudaraba* is a financial contract where two business partners “share risk” by having one party supply capital while the other functions as the entrepreneur, using the capital “for a business concern.”<sup>46</sup> This functionally is the same thing as an *heter iska*, and big banks in the Muslim world have found it extremely useful. These mechanisms work – as silly as they may sound, they shift the risk from the borrower solely to that of equal proportion with the lender. The focus on equity is what makes Islamic finance so unique – and it has proven useful. The industry is now worth “over \$1.89 trillion, and the annual growth rate of those assets averaged 10 percent per year.”<sup>47</sup>

In regards to state practice and compliance to Islamic law, the results are predictable – no modern, Muslim nation-state strictly adheres to shariah in matters of state law. Just like in Israel, where researchers have found a plethora of examples of Jewish policymakers and banks participating in interest, so too has the Muslim world, maybe even to a greater extent. Much like the modern nation state of Israel, Saudi Arabia does not strictly follow Islamic law when it comes to financial matters. In fact, Saudi Arabia emerged as an economic powerhouse due to these practices. The Kingdom’s “economy was thus heavily dependent, directly and indirectly, on interest... creating (‘noninterest’) banks would make existing banks un-Islamic, in a country where the rulers repeatedly have had to fend off accusations of impiety.”<sup>48</sup> This is why Saudi

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<sup>45</sup> Daromir Rudnycky, *Beyond Debt*. University of Chicago Press. Kindle Edition. Kindle Locations 143-144.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, Kindle Locations 155-159.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, Kindle Locations 238-240.

<sup>48</sup> Ibrahim Warde, *Islamic Finance in the Global Economy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000, 23.

Arabia has only four banks out of twelve that actually follow shariah-compliant financial practice.<sup>49</sup> Saudi Arabia has certain aspects of the law that are regarded only as state law, while leaving other issues like marriage or divorce as individual, “Islamic” matters.

As mentioned in the introduction, countries like Nigeria and Egypt have received the short end of the stick in regards to international loaning policies. However, Malaysia has *actively* sought to counter this by using Islamic finance. Post the Asian financial crisis of 1997 and 1998, Malaysia sought to say “never again” and “accelerated their efforts to forge an... Islamic alternative to the conventional financial system.”<sup>50</sup> Malaysia has actively imposed government reforms and measures to ensure compliance to Islamic finance laws. For one, in terms of sheer investment, Malaysia has “invested heavily to create the infrastructure.”<sup>51</sup> Secondly, they have attempted to push Islamic banking as government policy – something many countries in the Middle East have still yet to do. The “SPTF program offered tax breaks for conventional banks to open Islamic ‘windows,’ which could offer Islamic financial products through a separate division.”<sup>52</sup> This rapidly streamlined Islamic services to Malaysian citizens.

The other issue raised in the introduction was that of the student debt crisis. In a typical setting, an undergraduate student would pull out loans from a bank, where they would then pay the “principle plus interest in periodic installments.”<sup>53</sup> Islamic finance tells a different story. There would be no notion of a loan; rather, the undergraduate and the bank would form a business partnership of sorts, where the bank would “provide the student with funds to support

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<sup>49</sup> Samar Saud S. Bintawim, “Performance Analysis Of Islamic Banking: Some Evidence From Saudi Arabian Banking Sector.” Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (2011), 25-28.

<sup>50</sup> Rudnyckyj, Kindle Locations 406-407.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., Kindle Locations 224-226.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., Kindle Locations 582-583.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., Kindle Locations 173-174.



his or her education, with the financier obtaining a share of the student's future income, agreed in advance, as the return on his or her investment.”<sup>54</sup> The exact details of the contract are beyond the scope of this essay; however, this basic introduction to Islamic college financing sheds light on the switch from interest-bearing partnerships to equity-based partnerships, where risk is more equally shared.

## CONCLUSION

Economists must look at alternative modes of finance when it comes to international development for developing countries. It would prove useful to examine Jewish and Islamic thought in these matters, and the confidence is already there. Innovative social banks such as Ogen have millions of dollars for interest-free loans at hand. The ideology of a *gemach* could be incorporated into commercial banking policy as well. With regards to Islamic finance, the market already exists and is a quite massive one. Western public opinion is changing rapidly as well. During the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011, a “protestor at an Amsterdam march [carried] a... sign that read “Let’s bank the Muslim way,”<sup>55</sup> hinting at a growing social discontent with massive income inequality. In order to avoid another economic meltdown or recession, policymakers must incorporate religious ethics found in Judaism and Islam as part of their risk calculus and lending policies. Then, and only then, can developing countries look towards brighter futures.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., Kindle Locations 176-180.

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# **Ambassadors of Christ and Israel United in Christ: Comparing the Preaching Strategies of Black Hebrew Israelite Camps**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Black Hebrew Israelites (BHI) is an often-misrepresented religious movement within the United States, designated as hate groups or extremists by organizations such as the Southern Poverty Law Center and the Anti-Defamation League. Despite the movement's fairly frequent presence in the news cycle, it remains largely unknown to the public. The most common misperception is the treatment of the movement as a monolithic entity. In order to understand the BHI movement, distinctions must be made between its different chapters or camps. This paper will highlight two camps, Israel United in Christ and Ambassadors of Christ, and analyze the difference in how they choose to preach. In doing so the diversity of the movement will be highlighted, allowing for a more nuanced conversation regarding Black Hebrew Israelites. It is important to underscore that religious scholars, particularly Black religious scholars in the United States, have reiterated and continued to argue for a more nuanced understanding of the movement.

# Ambassadors of Christ and Israel United in Christ: Comparing the Preaching Strategies of Black Hebrew Israelite Camps

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## INTRODUCTION

Black Hebrew Israelites (BHI) is a religious movement within the United States, often described as extremist in mainstream discourse. The Southern Poverty Law Center, for instance, designates many of the movement's chapters as hate groups.<sup>2</sup> BHI makes frequent resurges in the mainstream consciousness, often in a negative light. One of the chapters, for instance, was involved in the viral standoff at the Lincoln Memorial between high school students from a Catholic School and a Native American elder.<sup>3</sup> Most recently, the movement was under the

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<sup>2</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center "Black Nationalist"  
<https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/black-nationalist>

<sup>3</sup> Sam Kestenbaum, "Who are the Black Israelites at the center of the viral standoff at the Lincoln Memorial" Washington Post. January 22, 2019.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/01/22/who-are-black-israelites-center-viral-standoff-lincoln-memorial/?utm\\_term=.41f8ba621cc7](https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/01/22/who-are-black-israelites-center-viral-standoff-lincoln-memorial/?utm_term=.41f8ba621cc7) The Washington Post explains the standoff "It began with a now-viral video clip, filmed Friday at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, in which high school students from a Catholic school in Kentucky appeared to be in a faceoff with a Native American elder, who was beating on a drum. The boys, some wearing red hats with President Trump's 2016 campaign slogan, appeared in the clip to be mocking a man, named Nathan Phillips. The clip was widely understood as being centrally about the dangers of Trumpism, and the teens were condemned."

spotlight due to reports that the alleged perpetrators of the Kasher market attack in Jersey City were affiliated with the Black Hebrew Israelite movement.<sup>4</sup> Despite the movement's presence in the news cycle, it remains largely unknown to the public. The most common misperception is that the movement is monolithic, that there is in fact *one* Black Hebrew Israelite movement. While many members of the movement share similar beliefs and attitudes, by some estimates, the movement comprises from 40,000-200,000 people,<sup>5</sup> ensuring diversity within the movement.

In order to further understand the BHI movement, distinctions must be made between its different chapters, or camps as they are often called. This paper will highlight two camps, Israel United in Christ and Ambassadors of Christ, and analyze the differences in how they choose to preach. The two camps were selected for their many constants: they share almost identical ideologies, they engage in street preaching as well as some form of digital preaching, and they were both founded in New York. The camps were also selected for one key difference – that is, their vastly different sizes. Israel United in Christ is a growing camp, with over 40 communities in the United States and at least eight communities worldwide. Ambassadors of Christ on the other hand, is almost solely contained within New York.

This difference in size is a result of the individual preaching strategies that the two camps choose to take. The Ambassadors of Christ heavily push a narrative of religious conflict, focusing not only on spreading the word of God but also on attacking those who stand against him. As a result, the camp is less focused on rapidly growing than it is on spreading its ideas. When attracting new members, it focuses on those already prepared to be part of the cause, rather than individuals who are simply interested.

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<sup>4</sup> Anti-Defamation League “Black Hebrew Israelites” <https://www.adl.org/blog/jersey-city-shooting-what-we-know>

<sup>5</sup> Ryan Turner, “Black Hebrew Israelites” Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry. <https://carm.org/black-hebrew-israelitesr>

In contrast, Israel United in Christ is largely focused on expanding, seeing that as a more effective method of spreading the message of BHI. While it does share the narrative of a religious conflict, its focus is to establish as many BHI communities as it can. This means taking a more nuanced approach to preaching, focusing on different forms of online targeted efforts to attract adherents. Rather than attacking those against God, Israel United in Christ focuses on including people in their community

### **BACKGROUND ON BLACK HEBREW ISRAELITES**

Black Hebrew Israelite beliefs are heavily based upon the movement's perceived relationship to Israelites, that is, the descendants of Israel from the Hebrew patriarch Jacob.<sup>6</sup> BHI members argue that the Jews of today, those who claim descentance from Jacob, are not the true chosen people of God. Rather, BHI members claim that the true descendants of Jacob, the 12 Tribes of Israel, are those people oppressed today: American Blacks, West Indian Blacks, Haitians, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Dominicans, Mayans (people from Guatemala to Panama), Native American Indians, Seminole Indians, Incans (people from Colombia to Uruguay), Mexicans and Argentinians.<sup>7</sup> Each named group comprises a different Tribe of Israel. The groups are broadly comprised of African Americans, Native Americans and Hispanics. BHI members believe that because these groups sinned, "God threw them out of the Land of Israel and they ended up in America as slaves, after sojourning in Africa."<sup>8</sup> The scriptural text that BHI members point to as evidence of this is Deuteronomy 28 which states:

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<sup>6</sup> Remy Chukwukaodinaka Ilona, "Of Israel's Seed: The Ethnohistory of Church of God and Saints of Christ and African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem" (2017). FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 14.

<sup>7</sup> IUIC "Breif Israelite History." <https://israelunite.org/brief-israelite-history/>.

<sup>8</sup> Remy Chukwukaodinaka Ilona, "Of Israel's Seed: The Ethnohistory of Church of God and Saints of Christ and African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem" (2017). FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertationn, 15.



And the LORD shall bring thee into Egypt again with ships, by the way whereof I spoke unto thee, Thou shalt see it no more again: and there ye shall be sold unto your enemies for bondmen and bondwomen, and no man shall buy you.<sup>9</sup>

For the BHI members, the reference to ships is alluding to slavery and oppression in America.

The enemies who they are sold unto are the white slave owners, and the phrase “bondmen and bondwomen” constitutes the oppression they face. While Native Americans and Hispanics were not sold as slaves from Africa, their treatment under the “enemies”—white oppressors in America—constitutes enough of a punishment to be considered one of the Tribes of Israel. BHI members elaborate that because Jewish people today were not sold or shipped away, they cannot be the descendants of Jacob. As final definitive proof, BHI members point to Lamentations 5:10, which “describes the Israelites who had skin as black as an oven.”<sup>10</sup> This, members argue, is concrete evidence that the Jewish people of today are not Israelites.

Because the Jewish people of today are “imposters,” BHI members do not follow all mainstream Jewish customs and traditions. While they do keep the Jewish Sabbath and other customs such as circumcision, dietary laws and the observance of festivals such as Yom Kippur, they utilize different scriptures. BHI members often use “the Old and New Testament to support their teachings, especially the five books of Moses,”<sup>11</sup> primarily the King James Version. Members also argue that both Jesus and Moses were black and that white people (including the mainstream Jewish members) have attempted to continue persecuting the 12 Tribes by hiding their true identity as Israelites.

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<sup>9</sup> Ljthriplan “Does Deuteronomy 28-68 prove that the Original Israelites were Black?” Followintruth. February 26, 2018 <http://www.followintruth.com/does-deuteronomy-28-68-prove-that-the-original-israelites-were-black>.

<sup>10</sup> Illona, “Of Israel’s Seed,” 15.

<sup>11</sup> Ryan Turner, “Black Hebrew Israelites” Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry. <https://carm.org/black-hebrew-israelites>.

It is important moving forward to distinguish BHI from adherents of the Jewish faith who happen to be black, that is, Black Jews. In *Of Israel's Seed*, Remy Illona explains that Black Jews “are members of the religion addressed as Rabbinic Judaism.”<sup>12</sup> They are recognized as “co-religionists by adherents of Rabbinic Judaism,”<sup>13</sup> and knowingly accept both the identity of “Jew” and “Black.” Black Hebrew Israelites, however, actively differentiate themselves from not only Black Jews but also Rabbinic Judaism. The BHI members claim that they are “authentic descendants of the biblical Israelites”<sup>14</sup> and generally do not “see themselves as Jews,”<sup>15</sup> who they consider as simply practicing the Jewish faith without having the lineage of the ancient Israelites. Because of this, they reject the title of Jew and instead choose to call themselves Black Hebrew Israelites.

This aversion to Rabbinic Judaism aside, the history of BHI is deeply connected to the influence of Rabbinic Judaism on black people, particularly in the United States. As scholars Edith Bruder and Tudor Parfitt explain, “the bonds with Judaism of black Jews were often forged in the harshest circumstances and grew out of slavery, exile, colonial subjugation, political ethnic conflicts and apartheid.”<sup>16</sup> Judaism became a response to discrimination in the United States, which gave African Americans “back a history and allowed them to overthrow American racism’s hierarchy of values.”<sup>17</sup> This take on Judaism was formed, in part, because of the way Christianity had been utilized against slaves in the United States. Churches would preach “that

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<sup>12</sup> Remy Chukwukaodinaka Ilona, "Of Israel's Seed: The Ethnohistory of Church of God and Saints of Christ and African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem" (2017). FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 17.

<sup>13</sup> Illona, “Of Israel’s Seed,” 18.

<sup>14</sup> Illona, “Of Israel’s Seed,” 18.

<sup>15</sup> Illona, “Of Israel’s Seed,” 18.

<sup>16</sup> Edith Bruder and Tudor Parfit, “African Zion: Studies In Black Judaism”(2012). Cambridge Scholars' Press, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Bruder, 18.

the Christianization of the slave would make him dutiful.”<sup>18</sup> An emphasis was placed “on the Scripture: ‘slaves be obedient to your masters,’ from Paul’s letter to Ephesians,”<sup>19</sup> in an attempt to quell slave rebellions and discontent. Many slaves were repelled by this brand of Christianity and, as John Blassingame explains, “formulated new ideas and practices in the[ir] quarters.”<sup>20</sup> These new religious ideals, which focused on liberation, were influenced by the slaves’ “longings for freedom and based on half-understood sermons in white churches or passages from the Old Testament [and] struggles of the Jews.”<sup>21</sup> In this post-slavery period, there was “a sense of identity with the oppressed children of Israel,”<sup>22</sup> ensuring that Old Testament themes continued to inform the religious consciousness of former slaves.

It comes as no surprise, then, that one of the earliest figures to teach that Black Americans were descended from the biblical Israelites was a former slave. William Saunders Crowdy was born a slave in Maryland in 1847. In 1863, after Maryland adopted a new Constitution abolishing slavery, a sixteen-year-old Crowdy went to Union forces, serving as a cook for the cause. Dedication to black sovereignty became a driving force for Crowdy, whose life in the post-civil war era involved actively being a part of a black community.<sup>23</sup> When a Republican Party politician, Edward P. McCabe, began promoting Black settlements in the Oklahoma territory during the late 1880’s and early 1890’s, using scriptural references to sell a promised land free of white interference and ripe with cheap land, Crowdy joined him. One of

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<sup>18</sup> Noel Leo Erskine, “Plantation Church: How African American Religion Was Born In Caribbean Slavery” (2014). Oxford University Press, 114.

<sup>19</sup> Erskine, 115.

<sup>20</sup> John W. Blassingame, “The Slave Community” (1972). New York: Oxford Press, 62.

<sup>21</sup> Blassingame, 63.

<sup>22</sup> Elly M Wynia, “The Church of God and Saints of Christ : The Rise of Black Jews” (1994). Garland Publishing Inc., 8.

<sup>23</sup> Ira Srole, “Inner city sanctuary: the history and theology of Rochester's Black Jews” (1978). Thesis. Rochester Institute of Technology.

the settlements, known as Langston, seemed to live up to this scriptural promise. Unlike most localities in the United States, Blacks in Langston “owned land, ran governments, farmed, steered businesses and taught in the schools.”<sup>24</sup> Crowdy was part of a community where Black influence was clear in all aspects of the community, and, in this environment, he thrived.

The Civil War veteran born into slavery became a respected elder of the community, “a husband, father, farmer[and] Mason”<sup>25</sup> who also served as a deacon in the local Baptist Church. But, as Anthony Pinn explains, beginning in 1893 Crowdy was said to have been acting strangely. He began having strange visions and hearing strange voices, which he would later attribute to the voice of God. The visions culminated into him running into the woods and allegedly falling into a deep sleep, where he was said to receive the foundation of a new church based on both Old and New Testaments. Initially, this new church, called the Church of God and Saints of Christ, did not reject the language of Christianity. Its new prophet, Crowdy, began preaching salvation and the gospel of Jesus Christ in Langston.<sup>26</sup> Eventually, Dorman explains, Crowdy felt the urge to spread the news of the faith elsewhere.<sup>27</sup> He left Langston, with his son Isaac, never to return. As he spread the new faith, he was taunted and punished, in particular, because of his anti-racism teachings and the controversial idea that Jesus Christ was black. In one town, he was even said to have been beaten and bound, wrapped up in the fresh hide of a recently killed buffalo and left for buzzards to finish off. Yet to his followers, those violent experiences provided him with more religious authority: to them, he was a prophet

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<sup>24</sup> Jacob Dorman, “Chosen People: The Rise of American Black Israelite Religions”(2013). New York: Oxford University Press, 35.

<sup>25</sup> Dorman, “Of Israel’s Seed,” 36.

<sup>26</sup> Anthony Pinn, Stephen Finley, and Torin Alexander, “African American Religious Cultures”(2009). ABC-CLIO, 153-156.

<sup>27</sup> Jacob Dorman, “Chosen People: The Rise of American Black Israelite Religions”(2013). New York: Oxford University Press, 39.

misunderstood by society. This religious credibility, combined with his enthusiastic preaching style on the streets of towns, gained him popularity. Many of his followers were white, making his Church unique in its racial tolerance during the time of Jim Crow. As his Church grew, Crowdy became more focused on the Old Testament, incorporating Hebrew elements into his new Church. He preached that African Americans were descended from the lost tribes of Israel and subsequently, by 1906, his Church was observing the Jewish Calendar. While it is unclear under what basis Crowdy made his descentance claim, the reasoning is fairly sound. By declaring that African Americans were descendants of the Israelites, he was able to reclaim an identity for the unique suffering that African Americans had gone through. Ilona elaborates, “the Suffering no longer seemed meaningless. They [African Americans] suffered because they disobeyed God. They were His chastened children,”<sup>28</sup> and in that, came a dignified strength. Unlike the Black Hebrew Israelites of future decades, those led by Crowdy “did not have to leave Christianity, abandon faith in Jesus, or give up familiar rituals like baptism and foot washing to become a follower.”<sup>29</sup> By the time he passed away in 1908, he had thousands of followers who believed that Jesus, Moses and the ancient Israelites were black. His Church trained hundreds of ministers, rapidly spreading his belief throughout churches, even to those not directly affiliated with the Church of God and Saints of Christ. Some of these churches would more deeply engage with Jewish practices, opening the door for the Black Hebrew Israelite movement as it is known today.

To be clear, William Crowdy was not the first person to promote the idea that Black Americans were descended from the Israelites. Religious scholar Paul Easterling traces

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<sup>28</sup> Remy Chukwukaodinaka Ilona, "Of Israel's Seed: The Ethnohistory of Church of God and Saints of Christ and African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem" (2017). FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 51-52.

<sup>29</sup> Ilona, "Of Israel's Seed," 46.

identification with the early Israelites to the beginning of the nineteenth century, with the slave revolts of both Denmark Vesey and Gabriel Prosser. More explicitly, F.S Cherry, who founded the Church of the Living God in Chattanooga Tennessee, in 1886, argued that Black people were the true descendants of the Israelites,<sup>30</sup> again on the basis of the unique suffering that his people had undergone. William Crowdy is significant, however, because of his effectiveness in spreading his message, largely attributed to the enthusiasm of his preaching. He was able to reach thousands of followers, from Kansas to Texas and expose them to his descendance theory.

While Crowdy's beliefs were centered around racial equality, some proponents of BHI moved away from that conciliatory message. F.S Cherry's views, for instance, aligned more closely with the racial superiority professed in some BHI camps today. In his book, *Black Zion*, Nathaniel Deutsch explains that the "Prophet Cherry cited his interpretation of disparate verses from the Old Testament [to attest] to the primacy of Blacks in Judaism."<sup>31</sup> Part of this primacy included the creation of a new racialized religious heritage that separated from previously held notions of identity. This included "the rejection of the terms 'Negro' and 'Black' in favor of 'Hebrew,'"<sup>32</sup> signifying Black Hebrew Israelites as a distinct identity. Cherry would expand on this principal by calling everyday black Christian clergy damn fools and vultures.<sup>33</sup> Particularly important was the distinction not only between white Jews and F.S Cherry's movement, but between the movement and white people *in general*. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the self-professed prophet preached "that white people were inherently evil and hated by

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<sup>30</sup> Anthony Pinn, Stephen Finley, and Torin Alexander, "African American Religious Cultures"(2009). ABC-CLIO, 111-115.

<sup>31</sup> Yvonne Chireau and Nathaniel Deutsch, "Black Zion: African American Religious Encounters with Judaism." (2000). Oxford University Press, 24.

<sup>32</sup> Chireau, 21.

<sup>33</sup> Chireau, 21.

God,”<sup>34</sup> and instructed his followers that “Jesus would return in the year 2000 to install blacks over whites through a race war.”<sup>35</sup> This claim regarding Jesus highlights the difference between Cherry’s movement and the BHI movement today, that is, Cherry still included Christian elements. Kwaku Bofo explains that he “observed Baptism and substituted Communion for Passover.”<sup>36</sup> And, while the Christian elements allowed Cherry to further separate his movement from Judaism, as he “castigated white Jews for rejecting Jesus,”<sup>37</sup> its acceptance of Christianity would wane as the Black Hebrew Israelite movement shifted away from the Christian-Judaism hybrid of the early twentieth century.

### **HISTORY OF HEBREW ISRAELITES IN NEW YORK**

The BHI movement today can trace its origin to Eber ben Yomin, also known as Abba Bivens who, “in the 1960’s broke away from the ‘Commandment Keepers,’ then the dominant mainstream black Jewish Organization,”<sup>38</sup> in order to establish his own sect. The sect, originally based in a Harlem apartment, eventually moved to a building on New York City’s 125 Street. Based on the location, the sect colloquially became known as One West. Sam Kestenbaum explains:

The One Westers saw themselves as radical reformers of earlier generations of Hebrew Israelites who had gone astray. They would troop out to street corners dressed in colorful and ornate capes and leather — vivid imaginings of what ancient Israelites might look like transported into the urban culture of New York City. They were also early and eager adopters of new media, hosting local television slots and filming their often-confrontational street ministry.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center “History of Hebrew Israelism”  
<https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2015/history-hebrew-israelism>

<sup>35</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center.

<sup>36</sup> Kwaku Bofo, “The Star in the Banner: Studies on North American Black-Jewish Communities”(2009). *Ottawa Journal of Religion*, 136.

<sup>37</sup> Bofo, 136.

<sup>38</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center “History of Hebrew Israelism”  
<https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2015/history-hebrew-israelism>.

<sup>39</sup> Sam Kestenbaum, “Who are the Black Israelites at the center of the viral standoff at the Lincoln Memorial” *Washington Post*. January 22, 2019.

The colorful outfits became a prominent part of the sect's preaching, drawing attention to the sermons that they held on the streets. The usage of new media would ensure that the message of One West would reach as many potential adherents as possible. Radically, one of those messages was that Native Americans and Hispanics, along with African Americans, were descendants of Israel's tribes. According to some Israelite camps, this shift began when Bivens witnessed, on his way to New York, "many Indian reservations and came to the scriptural conclusion that the so-called Indians were Israelites as well."<sup>40</sup> In the eyes of Bivens, the difficulty of Native Americans was unique enough to equate it with life for African Americans in the United States, allowing them to be included in the Tribes. The hardships of African Americans, Native Americans and Hispanics were thus all similarly attributable to straying away from the commandment of God. Only "by acknowledging their history as Israelites"<sup>41</sup> would issues like poverty and police violence be overcome. This also meant that those who rejected the history of the Israelites would themselves be rejected by One West. As a result, One West began rejecting groups like the Nation of Islam and the "pork-eating secularists of groups like the Black Panthers."<sup>42</sup>

In the 1990's, the sect began expanding on F.S Cherry's prophecy that Jesus Christ would "return to earth in 2000 to enslave and destroy the white race."<sup>43</sup> At that time, they believed, "the

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[https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/01/22/who-are-black-israelites-center-viral-standoff-lincoln-memorial/?utm\\_term=.41f8ba621cc7](https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/01/22/who-are-black-israelites-center-viral-standoff-lincoln-memorial/?utm_term=.41f8ba621cc7).

<sup>40</sup> IUIIC "Brief Israelite History." <https://israelunite.org/brief-israelite-history/>.

<sup>41</sup> P.R. Lockhart "The Black Hebrew Israelites and their connection to the Covington controversy, explained." Vox. Jan 22, 2019

<https://www.vox.com/identities/2019/1/22/18193352/black-hebrew-israelites-covington-catholic-phillips-maga>.

<sup>42</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center "History of Hebrew Israelism"

<https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2015/history-hebrew-israelism>.

<sup>43</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center.



Israelites would assume their rightful places as rulers and the white man's time would come to a close."<sup>44</sup> However, as a result of doctrinal differences during this time, the sect began to splinter, with members breaking away to form their own BHI camps. This splintering became especially prominent when the year 2000 came and went, and Jesus did not arrive as One West had prophesized. The leaders of One West eventually rebranded the organization as the Israelite Church of God in Jesus Christ, and again, began pushing the prophecy that Jesus would return to kill or enslave all whites. The modern day leaders, however, have not set a specific date.

Today, many BHI camps have their roots directly from the One West school, particularly those camps within New York. While some of these camps may believe slightly varying doctrines, they share "some common beliefs, including a strong sense of black nationalism and an ardent belief in the end of the world being imminent."<sup>45</sup> The current camps share many of the same preaching strategies that began with the One Westers, from the colorful and ornate capes to the utilization of media to film and spread their street preaching. They preach the same narrative about the 12 Tribes of Israel, that the members are African American, Native American and Hispanic peoples. Today, the splintered camps of One West have spread internationally, transforming this New York City based movement into one shared by, conservatively, 40,000<sup>46</sup> people in the world.

## **INTRODUCTION TO THE ISRAEL UNITED IN CHRIST**

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<sup>44</sup> Sam Kestenbaum, "Who are the Black Israelites at the center of the viral standoff at the Lincoln Memorial" Washington Post. January 22, 2019.  
[https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/01/22/who-are-black-israelites-center-viral-standoff-lincoln-memorial/?utm\\_term=.41f8ba621cc7](https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/01/22/who-are-black-israelites-center-viral-standoff-lincoln-memorial/?utm_term=.41f8ba621cc7).

<sup>45</sup> P.R. Lockhart "The Black Hebrew Israelites and their connection to the Covington controversy, explained." Vox. Jan 22, 2019  
<https://www.vox.com/identities/2019/1/22/18193352/black-hebrew-israelites-covington-catholic-phillips-maga>.

<sup>46</sup> Ryan Turner, "Black Hebrew Israelites" Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry.  
<https://carm.org/black-hebrew-israelitesr>.

Nathaniel Ray, born in the 1960's and raised in Harlem<sup>47</sup>, was drawn to alternative religions and spirituality at a young age.<sup>48</sup> He attended services in Baptist, Seventh-Day Adventist and the Jehovah's Witnesses Churches<sup>49</sup>, thereby covering a wide breadth of Christian beliefs.<sup>50</sup> But, it was his frustrations with what he felt like Christianity was *not* telling him that prompted his moving away from the faith. In particular, he felt that Christianity was hiding the fact that he, as a black man, was represented in the Bible. "I was destroyed mentally,"<sup>51</sup> said Nathaniel of the perceived deception. In 1990, he joined "an influential Israelite school in Harlem" known as One West,<sup>52</sup> which emphasized the identity of black people in the Bible. The sect would use their own version of Hebrew, a version that leaders said was an ancient version of the language, and gather in a small store-front church. There, members would read the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. More importantly for Nathaniel, the sect would emphasize the place of black people within the Bible. As part of this belonging to the Black Hebrew Israelite movement, Nathaniel adopted the surname Israel<sup>53</sup>, becoming Nathanyel Ben Israel. Of the

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<sup>47</sup> Paul Williams, "Israel United in Christ Offers A Different Perspective-Part II" *The Gleaner* Jamaica-gleaner.com May 13, 2017

<http://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/news/20170513/israel-united-christ-offers-different-perspective-part-ii>.

<sup>48</sup> Sam Kestenbaum, "Hebrew Israelite Leader Warns Kendrick Lamar Against Public Embrace." *Forward* Forward.com October 2nd, 2017

<https://forward.com/news/383237/spiritual-leader-says-kendrick-lamar-shouldnt-be-tied-to-hebrew-israelites/>.

<sup>49</sup> The Baptist Church is a denomination of Protestant Christianity, named after its main belief in a person publicly choosing to proclaim their faith in Christ via baptism. The Seventh Day Adventist Church is a denomination of Protestant Christianity, distinguished by its observance of the Sabbath on Saturday, as well as following a doctrine called the 28 fundamental beliefs. Jehovah's Witnesses is an offshoot of Orthodox Christianity, known for its nontrinitarian views.

<sup>50</sup> Paul Williams, "Israel United in Christ Offers A Different Perspective-Part II." *The Gleaner* Jamaica-gleaner.com May 13, 2017

<http://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/news/20170513/israel-united-christ-offers-different-perspective-part-ii>.

<sup>51</sup> Paul.

<sup>52</sup> Sam Kestenbaum, "Hebrew Israelite Leader Warns Kendrick Lamar Against Public Embrace." *Forward* Forward.com October 2nd, 2017

<https://forward.com/news/383237/spiritual-leader-says-kendrick-lamar-shouldnt-be-tied-to-hebrew-israelites/>

<sup>53</sup> Paul Williams, "Israel United in Christ Offers A Different Perspective-Part II." *The Gleaner* Jamaica-gleaner.com May 13, 2017

<http://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/news/20170513/israel-united-christ-offers-different-perspective-part-ii>.

experience, Nathanyel said he felt transformed, “learning the Bible, that we [Black people] are the people of the book, that we do have a history.”<sup>54</sup> Eventually, disputes with leadership would have Nathanyel belong to a series of Israelite schools until in 2003, when he eventually started his own camp, Israel United in Christ (IUIIC). The earliest meetings were held in his New York living room, with family and a small group of supporters as adherents.

Today, the IUIIC has thousands of members, with at least 40 different communities in the United States.<sup>55</sup> From Dallas, Texas to Honolulu, Hawaii, IUIIC members defer to Nathanyel, who they refer to as Elder Nathanyel or Bishop Nathanyel. The camp is ambitious in its growth, with Nathanyel attempting to expand the IUIIC internationally. In the spring of 2018, members from the camp traveled to Liberia, in an attempt to convert Liberian citizens into Black Hebrew Israelites. The members preached at a Liberian church, the streets and appeared on a local radio. Nathanyel even spearheaded a meeting between the camp and a former warlord, General Butt Naked, seeing a relationship with Naked “as an opportunity to push their outreach farther into Africa using a man with a very public persona.”<sup>56</sup> Outside of Liberia, the camp has at least 7 other smaller established communities internationally, from Ghana to Amsterdam<sup>57</sup>.

Part of the success spreading both domestically and internationally can be attributed to the focus that IUIIC gives its digital persona. The camp is active on multiple forms of social media, including Instagram and YouTube. YouTube especially seems to be an active source of

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<sup>54</sup> Sam Kestenbaum, “Hebrew Israelite Leader Warns Kendrick Lamar Against Public Embrace.” Forward Forward.com October 2nd, 2017  
<https://forward.com/news/383237/spiritual-leader-says-kendrick-lamar-shouldnt-be-tied-to-hebrew-israelites/>.

<sup>55</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center “Black Nationalist”  
<https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/black-nationalist>.

<sup>56</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center “Courting Butt Naked: Israel United in Christ attempts to recruit former cannibal and leader of a Liberian child army” April 11, 2018  
<https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/04/11/courting-butt-naked-israel-united-christ-attempts-recruit-former-cannibal-and-leader>.

<sup>57</sup> IUIIC “YouTube Channels Listing” <https://israelunite.org/youtube-channels-listing/>.

recruitment for the camp, with a separate page on the IUIIC website listing the YouTube channels for the different communities. Likewise, many of the communities have their own individual Facebook pages<sup>58</sup>, with events tailored for that city, state or region. The different accounts however, do reiterate the unity of the IUIIC. The accounts often include the main IUIIC website on their contact info, as well as information on national IUIIC Classrooms.

The ability to maintain a cohesive structure across the different communities has allowed IUIIC to rise over other Black Hebrew Israelite camps. This cohesiveness can be attributed to Nathanyel, who “prides himself on the strict discipline maintained by his members.”<sup>59</sup> In an interview, he expanded on the unity and discipline of his camp, stating “There’s no other camp—I’m not knocking them—but...we understand about organization better than all the other camps.”<sup>60</sup> In particular, it is the hierarchical structure that Nathanyel established in IUIIC that ensures a level of organization. There are the lay members, those who consider themselves part of the community and attend classrooms, and then there are the religious leaders. From lowest rank to highest rank, the religious hierarchy is Soldier, Officer, Captain, Deacons and Bishop/Elder.<sup>61</sup> The military-like titles are based both on scripture and the occupation of Nathanyel and many of his members, who “work in either law enforcement or security,”<sup>62</sup> to support the camp’s activities. The scripture in question is 2 Timothy 2:4 “No man that warreth

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<sup>58</sup> Here are two different IUIIC chapter Facebook accounts, as evidence of the various IUIIC communities and how they interact online. IUIIC Hawaii, Facebook.com <https://www.facebook.com/IUICHawaii/> IUIIC Atlanta, Facebook.com <https://www.facebook.com/iuicat/>.

<sup>59</sup> Sam Kestenbaum, “Hebrew Israelite Leader Warns Kendrick Lamar Against Public Embrace.” Forward Forward.com October 2nd, 2017 <https://forward.com/news/383237/spiritual-leader-says-kendrick-lamar-shouldnt-be-tied-to-hebrew-israelites/>.

<sup>60</sup> Kestenbaum.

<sup>61</sup> Paul Williams, “Israel United in Christ Offers A Different Perspective-Part I.” *The Gleaner* Jamaica-gleaner.com May 6, 2017

<http://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/news/20170506/israel-united-christ-offers-different-perspective-part-i>

<sup>62</sup> Peter Rugh, “The Black Israelites Think Whites Are Possessed by the Devil” Vice May 1, 2014 [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/dpwyqz/white-people-black-jesus-will-enslave-you](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/dpwyqz/white-people-black-jesus-will-enslave-you).

entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier,”<sup>63</sup> reiterating the idea that IUIC needs soldiers not simply worshipers. The camp’s belief that they are engaging in religious conflict thus ensures an obligation to structure. While there is not much public information as to what the roles explicitly mean, the IUIC website indicates that there are seven Deacons and two elders, one of which is Nathanyel.<sup>64</sup>

Domestically, the United States is divided into three regions, the Western Region, the Midwest Region and the Eastern Region. Each region has at least three leaders, comprised of either Deacons, Captains or both.<sup>65</sup> All of the religious leadership is male.

### **ISRAEL UNITED IN CHRIST STREET PREACHING IN NEW YORK**

As a camp that began in a New York living room, the IUIC holds deep ties to the state. The national headquarters are in Mt. Vernon, New York, which hosts online classes for the thousands of IUIC members internationally. Like many of the Black Hebrew Israelite camps, IUIC is well known for its street preaching. While the headquarters are in Mt. Vernon, there are smaller communities preaching all over New York, from Queens to Harlem to Rochester.

Many of the IUIC street preachers follow the same pattern camp-wide for their preaching. A group of men gather around a section of the street, wearing the traditional purple robe-like clothing of the movement. They place down a series of posters and signs, sometimes a picture of Black Jesus, other times a poster explaining what the kingdom of Israel looks like and at times simply a provocative sign. One member, often a member of the religious hierarchy, holds a

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<sup>63</sup> Paul Williams, “Israel United in Christ Offers A Different Perspective-Part I.” *The Gleaner* Jamaica-gleaner.com May 6, 2017

<http://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/news/20170506/israel-united-christ-offers-different-perspective-part-i>.

<sup>64</sup> IUIC “Bios” Israeliteunite.org

[https://israelunite.org/category/bios/?doing\\_wp\\_cron=1556229657.5220980644226074218750](https://israelunite.org/category/bios/?doing_wp_cron=1556229657.5220980644226074218750).

<sup>65</sup> IUIC “Contact Israel United in Christ” <https://israelunite.org/contact-us/>.

microphone and begins preaching, eventually targeting certain pedestrians. In a video dated October 12, 2018, a Captain named Zephaniah of the IUIC camp in Harlem, begins targeting a black woman. He explains to her, with a microphone in his hand, that his people (the ethnicities of the 12 Tribes of Israel), do not understand that they are the greatest people on Earth. Zephaniah elaborates that his camp has the patience to teach his people this fact, which is why IUIC Harlem comes to the same spot every Sabbath “to teach our people with patience.”<sup>66</sup> The exchange continues with Zephaniah occasionally pointing at the IUIC member next to him, periodically giving him the microphone so that the member may read from the scripture. To the woman, Zephaniah begins asking questions about her lifestyle, such as whether her hair is naturally that color. When the woman mentions that it is dyed, he begins telling her that her natural hair is that of Jesus and God. The color that she has chosen however, a yellow like color, is that of the “oppressor,”<sup>67</sup> effectively pushing her away from God and closer to the oppressors, the Caucasians.

The interaction demonstrates one of the functions of street preaching by the IUIC. That is, to directly interact with members of the 12 Tribes of Israel who they believe, have not yet understood the word of God. The coordinated uniforms, provocative posters and microphones ensures that they are difficult to ignore. Having one person preach, while another sits to the side ready to read out a verse from the scripture provides them with an air of legitimacy. It creates a persona of religious knowledge, painting them as individuals merely reading out the word of God rather than providing their own interpretation of it. Being on the streets rather than in an

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<sup>66</sup> IUIC Harlem “The Israelites: Preaching To The Church of Harlem.” Youtube.com October 12,2018 22:00 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wOiH0gMFJrg>.

<sup>67</sup> IUIC Harlem ““The Israelites: Preaching To The Church of Harlem.” 23:00.

enclosed space, such as a temple or a mosque, ensures that the IUIIC members are speaking to as many people as possible. They do not run the risk of preaching to the choir, but rather are guaranteed a new crop of listeners and potential adherents every day. Once an audience is attracted, targeting certain individuals not only draws that targeted person closer, but allows for the scripture to be directly applied to everyday life. As with the case of the woman in Harlem, she—and her bystanders—were able to hear how something as simple as hair is evidence of ties with God, learning that the choice to dye her hair was an act defying God.

Not all preaching sessions, however, go as smoothly as Zephaniah's. In a video dated November 23, 2013, an Officer named Levi is discussing why interracial relationships cannot occur under the scripture. Primarily he argues, it is because "these nations, they hate us as a people. Why? Because you so called Blacks and Hispanics are the children of God."<sup>68</sup> This line of argument angers one of the audience members, who objects to the divisions that the IUIIC members seem to be establishing. The objector begins to argue when a Deacon by the name of Yawasap steps in. Yawasap begins antagonizing the objector, asking him "are you going to say something and run like a Christian or are you going to stand here and listen?"<sup>69</sup> The two begin to argue and Yawasap criticizes the objector's faith once again, "these dumb Christians don't know anything, reading the Bible and don't know what the hell he's reading, he don't even know who he is."<sup>70</sup> By this point, Yawasap is no longer addressing the objector, but rather the other audience members. The remainder of the video shows the objector and the IUIIC members attempting to yell over one another as they speak to different pedestrians.

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<sup>68</sup> IUIICQueensCamp "The Foolish Unlearned Christians of Queens New York." Youtube.com November 23rd, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HLb2zyvV194> 0:13.

<sup>69</sup> IUIICQueensCamp, "The Foolish Unlearned Christians of Queens New York." 3:30.

<sup>70</sup> IUIICQueensCamp, "The Foolish Unlearned Christians of Queens New York." 5:00.

While this showcases a different preaching strategy than the one utilized by Zephaniah, it still serves an important function for the IUIIC. Establishing an antagonist, in this case the Christian man, brings to life the religious conflict that the members allude to in the scripture. They become soldiers for their faith, combatting the heresy that is propagated by the others. Their strength in numbers lessens the chance that they lose that conflict and presents to the audience a unified front of the religious war. Even publishing the conflict online serves to further this sense of religious conflict. The title of the video “The Foolish Unlearned Christian of Queens New York,” has already established to the viewer that the objector has lost. The IUIIC have seemingly come out victorious, their faith carrying them to victory. Only by street preaching does the IUIIC gain access to a consistent set of antagonists. Street preaching also provides them with a higher chance of winning the religious conflicts, as their enemies are less likely to come prepared. This form of preaching becomes more than just about gaining supporters but rather, delegitimizing the opposition in a way that traditional preaching methods cannot achieve. It becomes a reinforcing mechanism for IUIIC members themselves, providing them with the satisfaction that they are on the right side.

### **ISRAEL UNITED IN CHRIST ONLINE PREACHING**

IUIIC is particularly known for its “slick social media campaigns and professional quality videos.”<sup>71</sup> The main IUIIC YouTube page, IUIICintheClassRooms, is filled with high production value footage, helping to explain the page’s 70,000 subscribers and over 10 million views.<sup>72</sup> One of the more recent videos, published April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2019, showcases the camp’s level of media

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<sup>71</sup> Sam Kestenbaum, “Hebrew Israelite Leader Warns Kendrick Lamar Against Public Embrace.” Forward Forward.com October 2nd, 2017 <https://forward.com/news/383237/spiritual-leader-says-kendrick-lamar-shouldnt-be-tied-to-hebrew-israelites/>.

<sup>72</sup> IUIICintheClassRoom <https://www.youtube.com/user/IUIICintheClassRoom/about>.



professionalism. The video begins with a soundtrack and a transparent line at the bottom letting viewers know that the soundtrack is “Fair Use and is allowed for purposes of criticism, news reporting, teaching and parody.”<sup>73</sup> Above the fair use announcement is the IUIC logo and the different platforms that the IUIC is active on. Immediately after this introduction flashes a warning, letting viewers know that the video is for educational purposes only, as well as the legal code that provides limitations on exclusive rights.<sup>74</sup> This beginning alone indicates an organization that is familiar with legal stature, as well as their rights under the law as it relates to copyright. It places the camp as more than just a rag-tag group of preachers but, rather, as professionals spreading a message.

The April 19<sup>th</sup> video is titled “The Time, Death & Resurrection of Christ | Part 1 of 3,” and has a run time of one hour and nineteen minutes. It presents a panel of three Deacons discussing the scripture as it relates to Christ. This form of preaching is fairly common amongst religious communities – that is, simply presenting information to the congregation. In the case of IUIC, this video replaces a traditional religious gathering. Rather than having members physically present, different communities worldwide become part of a digital congregation. The online format allows for some key advantages. Logistically, adherents are able to follow along with the sermons more effectively. They are able to pause and rewind the video for clarification and the video itself is designed to be user-friendly. Each verse mentioned in the video is given a tagline with where to find the verse, including the bible version utilized.<sup>75</sup> This allows adherents to follow along with the Deacons, providing them with a deeper insight into the verse in

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<sup>73</sup> IUICintheClassRoom “#IUIC| The TIME, DEATH & RESSURECTION OF CHRIST| PART 1 OF 3” April 19, 2019 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d319vSo53xQ&t=454s> 0:00.

<sup>74</sup> IUICintheClassRoom “#IUIC| The TIME, DEATH & RESSURECTION OF CHRIST| PART 1 OF 3 0:37.

<sup>75</sup> IUICintheClassRoom “#IUIC| The TIME, DEATH & RESSURECTION OF CHRIST| PART 1 OF 3 42:56. This is just one example of the tagline.

question. The second advantage is the consistency of the message that IUIC is relaying to its adherents. Rather than rely on the existence of dozens of congregations worldwide, with each preacher relaying a different message to their members, the IUIC centralizes the mass. Each member, whether they be in Amsterdam or Atlanta, receives the same teaching and understanding of scripture. Finally, this centralization of the congregation ensures that members feel part of the IUIC community. Members are listening to the same teachings by the same individual and to that, there is a sense of unity. It allows for the camp to not only grow but to maintain a sense of connection with the headquarters in New York.

Some of the IUIC preaching, however, is not entirely traditional. A popular form of preaching for this camp is music videos, in particular, rap songs. One song, titled “IUIC: Purple Reign Official Music Video,” serves as an introduction to what the camp touches upon. The song mentions that classes are seven days a week, creates distinctions between IUIC and other Black Hebrew Israelite camps, and even includes various footage of the camp’s street preaching. The video was fairly popular, with over 500,000 views<sup>76</sup>, a testament to its high-quality. While a bit unorthodox, this form of preaching is not entirely uncommon within different religious communities. Evangelical Christians, for instance, commonly infuse popular culture with their preaching. What is unique about IUIC however, is how prominently entertainment features in preaching efforts for the camp. In one prominent case, Kendrick Lamar, an extremely successful hip hop artist, posted lyrics pushing forth IUIC ideology. In his album “Damn,” Lamar includes a voicemail reciting Black Hebrew Israelite doctrine, as well as the line “I’m an Israelite, don’t call

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<sup>76</sup> Original Royalty “IUIC: Purple Reign Official Music Video” May 25, 2016  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zgeTbEWX\\_wI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zgeTbEWX_wI).

me black no more.”<sup>77</sup> He was influenced to include those lines by his cousin Karni Ben Israel, a member of IUIIC who had been teaching Lamar personal Bible sessions. Together, they came up with the idea of including Israelite references.<sup>78</sup>

Utilizing entertainment is a critical strategy for the IUIIC. It allows the camp access to a large number of people, regardless of their interest in the message. Whether it be the music of Kendrick Lamar or “IUIIC: Purple Reign Official Music Video,” the camp has been able to access millions of people. Of course, these two albums and songs are not the only media that the camp has created. Outside of national headquarters, many of the smaller communities create their own music videos, with varying levels of professionalism. Each of these videos, regardless of popularity, serves similar purposes. They allow the camp to reach young individuals and begin preaching to their sense of belonging. The image of the IUIIC becomes that of a young person’s camp, one in which adherents make music videos and have fun doing so. It humanizes the camp, letting viewers know that while they may be devout, that is but one aspect of their identity. Viewers can easily forget they are listening to a form of preaching and instead, dance along to the music. This impact establishes the videos as a universal form of preaching, appealing to a wide range of backgrounds. The videos therefore can become a gateway for those interested in the camp as evident by the “IUIIC” video which, like many of the IUIIC music videos, includes in its description links to the main IUIIC website, other videos, podcasts and even a link to buy the T-shirts in the video.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Sam Kestenbaum, “Kendrick Lamar ‘Not Committed’ To Cousin’s Hebrew Israelite Group” 21 May 2017. Forward. <https://forward.com/news/372531/kendrick-lamar-not-committed-to-cousins-hebrew-israelite-group/>.

<sup>78</sup> Sam Kestenbaum, “How Kendrick Lamar Was ‘Blown Away’ by Hebrew Israelite Beliefs” 9 May 2017 <https://forward.com/news/371315/how-kendrick-lamar-was-blown-away-by-hebrew-israelite-beliefs/>.

<sup>79</sup> Original Royalty “IUIIC: Purple Reign Official Music Video” May 25, 2016 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zgeTbEWX\\_wI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zgeTbEWX_wI).

The emphasis on youth outreach is one example of why the IUIC is so effective in its online preaching efforts. That is, the camp actively attempts to target different populations using media outlets. For women, that outreach is through an online magazine called *The Daughters of Sarah*. *The Daughters of Sarah* hosts a number of different topics, from family to fashion to beauty. Each of the categories in some way reiterates the beliefs of IUIC members, ensuring that members follow the scripture. The family section, for instance, highlights the “natural order” of the family. The verse posted is 1 Corinthians 11:3: “But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God.”<sup>80</sup> As a result of the natural order, the message from the Bishop’s Wife at the bottom of the homepage makes it clear that the “website is under the leadership, structure, and discipline of the men of Israel United in Christ.”<sup>81</sup> That being said, the magazine is intended to be appealing to traditional gender roles of women. There are interviews with different women from the camp, cooking recipes and even quizzes about the scripture. The purpose of the magazine is clear, both to establish a sense of community within the women of IUIC and to also ensure that they too understand the scripture. Unlike the other forms of preaching, which can be more external and focused on bringing people in, the magazine is a more internal attitude towards preaching. It attempts to teach the women of the IUIC their place within the camp, while also creating a community within that place. The three different forms of preaching, digital congregation, music videos and magazines, are not the only online forms that IUIC utilizes. However, they provide an understanding of how nuanced the IUIC preaching strategy is. As nuanced as the preaching strategy is, however, the center of IUIC’s message becomes a sense of community.

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<sup>80</sup> The Daughters of Sarah “Titus 1:6-7” <https://thedaughtersofSarah.com/Family.html>.

<sup>81</sup> The Daughters of Sarah “Shalom and Welcome Daughters of Sarah” <https://thedaughtersofSarah.com/index.html>.

## INTRODUCTION TO AMBASSADORS OF CHRIST

Not much is known about Alpha Omega Clan, more commonly known as Ambassadors of Christ (AOC), a fairly small BHI camp based in Brooklyn, New York<sup>82</sup>. The camp is run by the charismatic General HaShar, who pushes his members into adopting a battle-like attitude towards preaching. In an interview, he explains that “the war-like dress and titles they [AOC] use are based on a biblical call to arms, including the omnipresent star, or ‘shield,’ of David on their garments.”<sup>83</sup> The secrecy surrounding the camp is intentional, as HaShar believes that “anything they say about themselves personally will detract from their mission.”<sup>84</sup>

What is known about HaShar is that he grew up in Brooklyn, coming from “what sounded like [an] extremely religious Christian household.”<sup>85</sup> Before the first Gulf War<sup>86</sup>, he served in the military, which gave him “insight into the military and the ways of the United States that only ‘a veteran’ could ever possess.”<sup>87</sup> His military background could explain the titles that AOC members often hold, such as Lieutenant<sup>88</sup> and Captain<sup>89</sup>. Other titles are more traditionally religious, including Chief Priest Star<sup>90</sup> and Priest Officer<sup>91</sup>. While it is unclear what the hierarchy of the all-male leadership is, it is evident that HaShar is the leader of the camp.

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<sup>82</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center “Black Nationalist”

<https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/black-nationalist>.

<sup>83</sup> Thrasher, Steven “Black Hebrew Israelites: New York’s Most Obnoxious Prophets” March 30, 2011 The Village Voice <https://www.villagevoice.com/2011/03/30/black-hebrew-israelites-new-yorks-most-obnoxious-prophets/>.

<sup>84</sup> Thrasher.

<sup>85</sup> Thrasher.

<sup>86</sup> The first Gulf War, also known as the Persian Gulf War, began on January 16, 1991.

<sup>87</sup> Thrasher.

<sup>88</sup> Daniel Timothe. Facebook.com The post showcases one of the titles that a member can hold is Lieutenant. <https://bit.ly/2ILw61b>.

<sup>89</sup> Ambassadors of Christ, Facebook.com May 22, 2018. The post showcases that one of the titles a member can hold is Captain. <https://bit.ly/2GOLaj>.

<sup>90</sup> Ambassadors of Christ, Facebook.com. May 27, 2018. The post showcases that one of the titles a member can hold is Chief Priest Star. <https://bit.ly/2vq8eYy>.

<sup>91</sup> Ambassadors of Christ, Facebook.com. May 22nd, 2018. The post showcases that one of the titles a member can hold is Priest Officer. <https://bit.ly/2GFDdF9>.

It is noteworthy that descriptions of HaShar refer to him as the leader, rather than the founder of AOC. And while it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when the camp first came into being, a Facebook post from February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2019 captioned “A.O.C MEGA Classic 464 1998 HaShar x Chaazaq Rawchaa” offers some insight. The video shows a young HaShar sitting down in front of a Star of David, preaching the scripture of BHI. While there is no evidence in the video that AOC was around during that period, as the logo in the back differs from the AOC logo today, the video highlights the years that HaShar has been part of the BHI movement.

Reports definitively show that AOC has been around since at least 2011, as evidenced by news reports.<sup>92</sup> For most of their history, the camp has remained largely focused on street preaching in New York, particularly in Time Square. HaShar, however, has recently become more active domestically, traveling with his camp to D.C and Atlanta<sup>93, 94</sup>, among other cities. While the purpose of the travels is unclear, one function seems to be expanding the AOC camp domestically. Most recently, the Ambassadors of Christ Facebook page showcased the members of A.O.C Houston, encouraging individuals in Houston and the greater Texas Area to be a part of the community.<sup>95</sup>

Digitally, AOC has not had the same sort of expansions that it seems to be doing in person. While the camp is active on Facebook, the page only has 1,117 likes, with post engagement typically less than a hundred Facebook reactions (often a mixture of likes, loves and

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<sup>92</sup> Steven Thrasher, “Black Hebrew Israelites: New York’s Most Obnoxious Prophets” March 30, 2011 The Village Voice <https://www.villagevoice.com/2011/03/30/black-hebrew-israelites-new-yorks-most-obnoxious-prophets/>.

<sup>93</sup> Ambassadors of Christ, August 11, 2018. Facebook post showing that AOC would be in D.C for the “White Civil Rights” Rally <https://bit.ly/2Gvn5Ws>.

<sup>94</sup> Ambassadors of Christ, January 29, Facebook post showing General HaShar in Atlanta. He is the individual hunched over. <https://bit.ly/2IILGL7>.

<sup>95</sup> Ambassadors of Christ. March 2nd, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2L60HJ4>.

sad reacts).<sup>96</sup> The Instagram page seems to be now defunct, with the only other form of online media being YouTube. The YouTube channel is the most effective, with over 1.7 million views and over 13,000 subscribers.<sup>97</sup> Most of the YouTube channel is simply clips of the AOC street preaching, though there are some lectures posted.

### **AMBASSADORS OF CHRIST STREET PREACHING IN NEW YORK**

AOC is infamous for the provocative methods utilized during their street preaching. During the Obama administration, the camp would carry a cardboard sign of the former president with “the phrases ‘AfriaCON Monkey Devil’ and ‘Illuminati Puppet’ accompany[ing] Obama’s smiling Senate portrait, along with horns they’ve drawn coming out of his head.”<sup>98</sup> Another sign, “Charla Nash, the woman whose face was ripped off by Travis the Chimp, [was] juxtaposed with Emmett Till’s mutilated body.”<sup>99</sup> The signs were chosen because of their provocative nature, succeeding in drawing a crowd of horrified on-lookers. These signs, however, were not the most provocative tool in the AOC toolbox.

In a video titled “A.O.C. Israelites General HaShar Real Jew vs Fake Jew,” HaShar is describing to a group of onlookers why the “Jew” of today is not a “real Jew.” He points to one of his members, who is standing with a copy of the scripture, and has the member read from Deuteronomy 28:6. HaShar focuses on the line “and there you shall be sold,”<sup>100</sup> arguing that “the so-called white man who call themselves a Jew, he was never been sold to anybody. In fact, they

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<sup>96</sup> Ambassadors of Christ, Facebook page. The like count is as of the time of writing, April 26, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2DBRGB9>.

<sup>97</sup> Alpha Omega Clan YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC0vUBuYsGf0qqkeXtdpuKPg/featured>.

<sup>98</sup> Steven Thrasher, “Black Hebrew Israelites: New York’s Most Obnoxious Prophets” March 30, 2011 The Village Voice <https://www.villagevoice.com/2011/03/30/black-hebrew-israelites-new-yorks-most-obnoxious-prophets/>.

<sup>99</sup> Thrasher.

<sup>100</sup> Alpha Omega Clan. “A.O.C Israelites General HaShar Real Jew vs Fake Jew.” August 22, 2018. 1:56 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xRyvmRZDwms>.

were slave merchants who owned slave ships and slave ports.”<sup>101</sup> He goes on to explain that the “so-called Jews” own “every sector of media, every sector of the jewels and the gold.”<sup>102</sup> The video continues with HaShar explaining why his camp is out on the streets, in order to “to do what the most high says... to call my people.”<sup>103</sup> The clip culminates with HaShar pointing at a white man and yelling “Every Black and Hispanic man standing here with this bastard in front of you, you all been punked. You all been punked man, so now do as you will and as you wish when he goes down the block. Beat his ass, beat his ass.”<sup>104</sup>

This video is not unique in terms of the intense language utilized by AOC members. The footage however, is particularly useful, as HaShar provides insight into why his camp is so adamant in their preaching. His preaching is more than just for the sake of God, he believes that it was *ordered* by God. In his eyes, he has a religious obligation to reach the greatest number of people, a goal easily attainable by being provocative. To “call my people”<sup>105</sup> requires a different skillset than converting people, which does not seem to be HaShar’s goal in many of these videos. Converting people would require engaging in discussion with the non-converted, attempting to persuade and draw them in. Instead, HaShar and his camp utilize provocative language to force others to hear them, a tactic more effective than any megaphone. Instead of utilizing the language of forgiveness and reconciliation used by many religious communities, language easily dismissed by those engaged with their everyday lives, he introduces decisiveness to bring forth a crowd. As to the comments regarding Jewish people, it serves to both inform as well as challenge. In terms of informing, it elaborates to the crowds how AOC is distinct from

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<sup>101</sup> Alpha Omega Clan. “A.O.C Israelites General HaShar Real Jew vs Fake Jew.” 2:05.

<sup>102</sup> Alpha Omega Clan. “A.O.C Israelites General HaShar Real Jew vs Fake Jew.” 3:30.

<sup>103</sup> Alpha Omega Clan. “A.O.C Israelites General HaShar Real Jew vs Fake Jew.” 7:50.

<sup>104</sup> Alpha Omega Clan. “A.O.C Israelites General HaShar Real Jew vs Fake Jew.” 9:04.

<sup>105</sup> Alpha Omega Clan. “A.O.C Israelites General HaShar Real Jew vs Fake Jew.” 7:50.



contemporary Jewish communities. That is, those Jewish groups are “not real Jews” and delegitimate in the eyes of AOC. At the same time, the anti-Semitic comments serve to establish the framework for the religious conflict that AOC members find themselves in. They are David, fighting the Goliath that is the “every sector of media, every sector of the jewels and the gold.”<sup>106</sup> This conflict is crystalized when HaShar points to the white man and tells the crowd to “beat his ass.” He sees himself as the commander of a religious army, and his preaching mirrors that. It is not so much a sermon but a war cry, rallying the troops that he hopes come to his side.

That being said, it would be disingenuous to paint the AOC preaching strategy as only combative. There are times when members, even HaShar, engage in a back and forth conversation with audience members, seemingly with the intention to enlighten. In a video titled “A.O.C Israelites Ahban Ahrayah & HaShar vs The 44<sup>th</sup> Street Clowns Joker & Harley Quinn,” a protestor is visibly angry at the arguments made by AOC. He walks back and forth through the audience that has circled the AOC preachers, screaming profanities at the preachers. Another man, a teacher, speaks to the HaShar and explains that while much of what he says is truth, “there can be no decisiveness between our kids,”<sup>107</sup> referencing the decisive language that HaShar utilizes. To this point, HaShar goes and shakes the man’s hand, telling him that it is a beautiful point. He counters, however, that “we [black people] are the only people that have the capacity, always ha[ve] ... to accept all.”<sup>108</sup> He elaborates on his point, mentioning that it is the melanin that allows people to have that capacity for love, but that white people do not have that melanin and thus, do not have that capacity. The teacher periodically goes to shake HaShar’s

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<sup>106</sup> Alpha Omega Clan. “A.O.C Israelites General HaShar Real Jew vs Fake Jew.” 3:30.

<sup>107</sup> Alpha Omega Clan, “A.O.C Israelites Ahban Ahrayah & HaShar vs The 44<sup>th</sup> Street Clowns Joker & Harley Quinn” December 8th, 2017. 17:05 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILwUfWgEvy0&t=1086s>.

<sup>108</sup> Alpha Omega Clan. “A.O.C Israelites General HaShar Real Jew vs Fake Jew.” 17:15.

hand and hug him, with HaShar praising “the Most High.”<sup>109</sup> While the interaction is somewhat positive, the protestor is all but ignored by the camp for the time being. The footage highlights that, yes, there are positive interactions with the AOC members, but those interactions are limited to individuals who are receptive to the camp’s ideals. Those who disagree are either ignored or shouted down.

In a way, the AOC strategy seems to be preaching to a choir. They are not attempting to convince others to join their camp but rather, telling them of God’s words to his people as well as his wrath. Those who will listen and abide are welcome, whereas those who will not are to be damned. The AOC preaching strategy is not necessarily an attempt to expand their number but instead, to expand the influence of their ideas onto society. This distinction explains why the camp is so focused on being combative towards individuals outside the 12 Tribes, as AOC members see no obligation to treat them with any form of respect. Their preaching strategy is solely centered on spreading the word of God as they understand it, including spreading the anger of God to any not of the 12 Tribes.

### **COMPARING THE PREACHING STRATEGIES OF AMBASSASORS OF CHRIST AND ISRAEL UNITED IN CHRIST**

While both AOC and IUIC are members of the Black Hebrew Israelite movement, their preaching strategies differ vastly. The differences do not arise from scripture, but instead from their respective goals as BHI camps. The AOC is primarily focused on maintaining unity amongst its members, emphasizing the idea that adherents are engaged in a religious conflict. In contrast, IUIC is currently emphasizing international growth and is attempting to target its

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<sup>109</sup> Alpha Omega Clan. “A.O.C Israelites General HaShar Real Jew vs Fake Jew.” 18:50.

message to a wide range of audiences. That is not to say that AOC is not aiming to expand, as is evident by the new Houston community, nor does it mean that IUIC does believe it is engaging in a religious conflict, evident by the camp's belief that it needs soldiers. However, it is clear that the two camps have different overarching priorities.

There are, however, some key similarities between the two camps that influence their preaching. Firstly, both camps seem to have been derived from the One West sect. In the case of IUIC leader, Nathanyel, he is explicit about the fact that he was at one time a member. In many ways, he maintains the traditions taught to him in the school, as his preachers often wear colorful robes and command an understanding of the Hebrew language. Like One West, IUIC is prolific in its usage of media to spread its message and similarly adamant about preaching on the streets. As to HaShar, while it is unclear whether he was officially part of the sect, his timeline in the BHI movement would indicate so. He was a member of the movement in 1998, when One West was still propagating its theory of the reemergence of Jesus, and his residency in New York City would make the connection probable. Regardless of his personal connection, it is clear that AOC has drawn on many of the traditions of One West. AOC members are seen actively preaching in the streets, with HaShar often wearing a black robe-like outfit. This said, the biggest indicator that both AOC and IUIC are off-shoots of the One West sect is that both camps include Native Americans and Hispanics as part of the 12 Tribes of Israel.

Another similarity is the cult of personality created within the camps. For AOC, the driving force is HaShar, whose outbursts provide the camp with its outsized infamous reputation. HaShar's persona is crucial to AOC preaching, evident by the number of AOC members who mimic his preaching strategy. The smaller size of AOC ensures that HaShar remains critical to

the camp's identity, for he is the one who goes around the country, bringing others into his camp and under his wing. His bombastic personality serves to shape the culture of AOC, driving the camp further and further into a combative spirit. Likewise, Nathanyel's personality is a big part of the IUIC preaching culture, particularly as the founder of the camp. It is his understanding of BHI that gets communicated worldwide, whether it be through videos of his preaching or who he chooses to be part of leadership. Nathanyel's presence looms prominently in the website and, as was the case in Liberia, has him serve as the camp's ambassador. The way he chooses to preach becomes an important factor for the different IUIC communities. The difference between HaShar and Nathanyel, however, is that HaShar's camp is still too small to really come up with a preaching culture independent of the general. To a large degree, the AOC *is* HaShar. Though this much is subject to change with the establishment of AOC Houston, at present his preaching strategy is AOC's strategy. By contrast, regardless of how central of a figure Nathanyel is to IUIC, he is only one individual. The different communities of the IUIC domestically and internationally will naturally begin to develop their own preaching strategies, adapted to the region and people. This development is not an indictment of Nathanyel's preaching strategy, which is largely focused on expanding, but rather evidence of his success.

It is interesting to note that both HaShar and Nathanyel come from security-like backgrounds, HaShar from the military and Nathanyel a former NYPD detective.<sup>110</sup> The way in which they utilize those respective backgrounds highlights a key difference between the two camps. For Nathanyel, a law enforcement background is predominately used to ensure that his camp is structured. It encourages the hierarchy he established in IUIC and creates a sense of

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<sup>110</sup> Kendrick Lamar's 'Damn' References To Hebrew Israelites Have A Family Connection. April 24, 2017 <https://genius.com/a/kendrick-lamar-s-damn-references-to-hebrew-israelites-have-a-family-connection>.

unity within the different communities. Nathanyel's background, however, does not seem to significantly influence his preaching. While he and his camp *do* focus on the idea that the movement needs "soldiers," that seems to be more of a result of BHI teachings than Nathanyel's law enforcement background. The IUIC's nuanced approach to preaching makes it clear that the "soldier" angle is but one aspect of their preaching. Other more prominent aspects revolve around the establishment of a global IUIC community, which necessitates a softer form of preaching more accessible to a larger population. For HaShar, however, his military persona is critical to the way that he, and thus his camp, preaches. The first evidence of this is the title that HaShar chose for himself. Rather than be called an Elder or a Bishop, he chose General, situating himself as the commander of a religious army. His preaching strategy is largely combative, focused on not only bringing the word of God to his people but bringing the wrath of God to his enemies. His calls to attack the white man during his preaching highlight that, for him, attacking the enemy is one of the aims of preaching. The IUIC, however, is more diverse in the way it chooses to preach. While there is a sense of combativeness, it is used more sparingly than a camp like the AOC. Thus, it would be unlikely to see an IUIC member actively call for attacking a member of the audience.

What IUIC does rely on heavily, however, is an online presence to preach. The music videos, live classrooms and digital magazines all indicate that, for IUIC, the digital space is a priority. The music videos, for instance, ensure that as many people as possible become familiar with the camp and ideally, research more into their practices. In the case of AOC, however, the comparative lack of a social media presence indicates a different reality for the camp. AOC is more focused on unifying the camp together, purely for the sake of God rather than for the sake

of expanding. This can be seen in HaShar's reluctance to give his personal name, arguing that to do so would "detract from their mission."<sup>111</sup> His focus is not on reaching out to individuals and having them become part of the camp, but rather, on including those who are already willing to dedicate themselves to his cause. This could also explain why, rather than use social media to grow, it is HaShar himself who is travelling across the country. Traveling creates an almost vetting process for new members, setting a bar for who can and cannot become part of the AOC. This much can even be seen in the AOC YouTube channel, with provocative titles to their videos serving both to boost views and to make clear the kind of person AOC is looking for. Nathanyel, on the other hand, utilizes both his physical presence as well as the digital space to include others into the camp. Using entertainment videos for instance, serves to humanize the IUIIC camp and make it seem more welcoming for members. Even the language of his website, designating members as "family," reiterates that the camp is a community that one can belong to. The difference between the two camps boils down to this; while the IUIIC is looking for recruits, the AOC is looking for soldiers. As a result, the IUIIC preaching becomes seemingly more welcoming while AOC is more directly combative.

The preaching strategies of the two camps are thus intentionally different because of the camps' varying goals. For a camp like IUIIC, focused on expanding, it would be ineffective to prioritize a combative form of preaching. Such preaching serves to alienate those who could potentially be members. For a camp like AOC, focused on creating a family of adherents, it makes more sense to target various populations and draw them in, whether it be through music videos or magazines. And while IUIIC has stated the BHI movement needs soldier's, the IUIIC

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<sup>111</sup> Thrasher, Steven "Black Hebrew Israelites: New York's Most Obnoxious Prophets" March 30, 2011 The Village Voice <https://www.villagevoice.com/2011/03/30/black-hebrew-israelites-new-yorks-most-obnoxious-prophets/>.

website's emphasis on community shows that what IUIC needs is a community. A camp like AOC, on the other hand, cannot prioritize the "call of God" by putting its efforts on expanding. It needs to ensure that the personal does not detract from the mission and so will not prioritize concerns of alienation. Instead, camps like AOC need to be provocative both to spread their message to the 12 Tribes but also, to punish those who they perceive as working against the Tribes.

## **CONCLUSION**

While Israel United in Christ and Ambassadors of Christ are both within the Black Hebrew Israelites movement, their camp ambitions and understandings are vastly different. Israel United in Christ seems to be emphasizing a worldwide BHI community, explaining the intense efforts they take to maintain a social media presence. The Ambassadors of Christ, on the other hand, are more focused on spreading the word of God, including his wrath. As a result, they take to the streets, where they can encounter both their people and the enemies of God. The camps are both members of the BHI movement but are anything but monolithic in their attitudes.

The ambitions of both camps highlight key questions about the future of the BHI movement: As Israel United in Christ expands internationally, what effect will that have on their understanding of the scripture? Will the camp begin to adapt in order to attract more members, or will it maintain some of the decisive language it utilizes? And, if Israel United in Christ expands and becomes the face of the BHI movement globally, how will different audiences react?

As to the Ambassadors of Christ, will they be able to maintain the combative spirit that the members are known for as the camp grows? Will a camp that is as small as theirs maintain power in the broader BHI movement, or will they become the fringe sect of a fringe movement?

What these questions crystalize is that there is still much to learn about the Black Hebrew Israelite movement, especially as the movement begins to grow in size. The Ambassador of Christ and the Israel United in Christ are but two camps of a movement that includes anywhere from 40,000-200,000 people. It is critical that researchers take the time to distinguish between the different camps, while differentiating between the religious movement and the actions of certain members, such as those in the Lincoln Memorial controversy. It is my hope that in highlighting the different preaching strategies of Ambassadors of Christ and Israel United in Christ, I offer some insight into this still unknown movement.

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## Diabetic Fasting in the Month of Ramadan

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### ABSTRACT

Certain religious traditions and practices sometimes run counter-culture to modern day medicine practices. While it is important for religious individuals to practice their faith, it is equally important that they receive the proper medical care and treatment for their health. For Muslim individuals, fasting during Ramadan is considered an important practice within their faith, and many, regardless of medical circumstances wish to participate. However, the practice of fasting for diabetic Muslims can prove harmful towards their health. This paper previews the ways that Muslims and their physician can create personalized health programs including diet and medications such that diabetic Muslims can properly take care of their diabetes during the month of Ramadan. Physicians should take note of their Muslim patients and do their best to support both their religious practice and medical care in such a way that the two do not contradict.

Keywords: Muslim, diabetes, Ramadan, healthcare, fasting, medicine

## Diabetic Fasting in the Month of Ramadan

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There are 5 pillars of Islam that are central to the Islamic faith. These pillars are: the declaration of faith, the daily prayer, charity, fasting, and the pilgrimage to Mecca<sup>2</sup>. Muslims utilize these pillars to map out the larger, more important rituals and beliefs of their faith. One of these pillars, fasting, is completed during the ninth month of the lunar calendar known as Ramadan. It is a month, typically 29-30 days, where Muslims abstain from food, drink, oral medication, sexual activities and negative thoughts towards others from dawn to sunset<sup>3</sup>. Ramadan is typically perceived as a joyous and spiritual time for many Muslims as it is a period for great reflection with an emphasis on community. Muslims begin their day with a prayer and a morning meal called the *suhoor*, and they typically break their fast at night with an *iftar*, a meal taken after prayer in communion with others.<sup>4</sup> These fasts can range from 11-18 hours at a time depending on the geographical location of the fast<sup>5</sup>. The *iftars* provide time for social gatherings; multiple families might meet at each other's homes to pray and then break their fast with a large

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<sup>2</sup> Ahmed M. Abdel-Khalek (2011) Islam and mental health: A few speculations, *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 14:2, 87-92, DOI: 10.1080/13674676.2010.544867

<sup>3</sup> Kelly Grindrod and Waseam Alsabbagh. "Managing Medications during Ramadan Fasting." *Canadian Pharmacists Journal* 150, no. 3 (2017): 146

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Fereidoun Azizi, "Islamic Fasting and Health." *Annals of Nutrition and Metabolism* 56, no 4(2010): 273-282

meal or attend prayers at a mosque and eat a communal meal with the rest of their community.

Ramadan serves as a spirituality important time not only for Muslim individuals but also the Muslim community at large. As a result, there is a great desire to participate in the festivities and rituals.

The prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam, was known to fast and encouraged other to do so therefore the Muslim community takes the practice of fasting very seriously.<sup>6</sup> The practices of fasting are meant to assist Muslims in developing self-control, attain closeness to God, and encourage charity or generosity.<sup>7</sup> While a very personal endeavor, fasting has a communal aspect which builds strong ties of solidarity and kinship. Because the obligations of Ramadan are demanding, there are individuals who are exempt from the practice. Prepubescent children, the elderly, pregnant or nursing women, and the ill or traveling are not required to fast due to their delicate physical state.<sup>8</sup> As a result of this exemption, it might be assumed that Muslims who are chronically ill or have such physical conditions that require them to take daily medication might void themselves of the responsibility of fasting; however, this is often not the case. Ramadan is the largest, most important Muslim celebration of the year. Consequentially, even individuals with chronic illness are compelled to partake in the practice.<sup>9, 10</sup> For individuals with diabetes, the treatment plan consists of medications that decrease blood glucose in

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<sup>6</sup> Sunnah Sahih al-Bukhari 1893. Book 30, Hadith 3

<sup>7</sup> Fereidoun Azizi, "Islamic Fasting and Health." *Annals of Nutrition & Metabolism* 56, no. 4 (06, 2010): 273-82. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1159/000295848>. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/645071953?accountid=14512>.

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<sup>9</sup> Babineaux, SM, D. Toaima, KS Boye, A. Zagar, A. Tahbaz, A. Jabar, and M. Hassnein. "Multi-Country Retrospective Observational Study of the Management and Outcomes of Patients with Type 2 Diabetes during Ramadan in 2010 (CREED)." *Diabetic Medicine* 32, no. 6 (2015): 819-828.

<sup>10</sup> Zainudin, Sueziani B., Abu Bakar, Kjalishah Nadhirah B, Salmiah B. Abdullah, and Aslena B. Hussain. "Diabetes Education and Medication Adjustment in Ramadan (DEAR) Program Prepares for Self-Management during Fasting with Tele-Health Support from Pre-Ramadan to Post-Ramadan." *Therapeutic Advances in Endocrinology and Metabolism* 9, no. 8 (2018): 231-240.

anticipation of the individual eating three meals a day, thereby balancing the glucose levels in the bloodstream. A diabetic treatment plan becomes medically unsafe during Ramadan because fasting halts the intake of food but continues medications that cause hypoglycemia, leading to a loss of consciousness or, in some cases, death. Unfortunately, a lack of medical provider education about the importance and practice of Ramadan, coupled with a lack of patient communication leads to unhealthy fasting practices during the month of Ramadan. However, studies have shown that it is possible for many individuals to maintain a fast while suffering from many different chronic illnesses if specific guidance has been provided by a general practitioner.<sup>11</sup> These health guidelines would allow for safe fasting during the month of Ramadan. Due to the precarious nature of many chronic illnesses, it is critical that patients and health care providers discuss the patient's state of physical health and create a personalized care plan for the month of Ramadan such that the patient's physical health is not at risk as a result of their religious practices.

Diabetes is a severe chronic illness that according to the World Health Organization affects 8.5% of the world population, roughly 422 million adults.<sup>12</sup> Diabetes is categorized as a chronic disease which is "characterized by elevated levels of blood glucose."<sup>13</sup> There are two different types of diabetes that involve insulin, the hormone utilized to break down carbohydrates, to maintain safe glucose levels in the body. Type 1 diabetes, commonly known as juvenile diabetes, occurs when an individual's body fails to make enough insulin to properly regulate the glucose in their bloodstream.<sup>14</sup> Individuals with type 1 diabetes require daily

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> *Global Report on Diabetes*. Report. World Health Organization. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization Press, 2016. 1-88

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p.11

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p.11

injections or administrations of insulin such that the glucose in their blood can be regulated.

Type 2 diabetes occurs when the body cannot effectively use the insulin it produces to optimally regulate sugar in the bloodstream.<sup>15</sup> Type 2 diabetes encompasses the largest percentage of diabetics in the world with similar symptoms to type 1 diabetes. Treatment for type 2 diabetics ranges from a combination of diet, physical activity and medication. Individuals with type 1 and 2 diabetes are required to constantly monitor their blood sugar levels to ensure that they are not becoming hypoglycemic or hyperglycemic.<sup>16</sup> Prolonged levels of high or low or high blood sugar can result in seizures or a loss of consciousness. When experiencing hypoglycemia, individuals suffer from shakes, anxiousness, sweatiness or chills, weakness, headaches and overall feelings of nausea. If blood glucose levels stay low for prolonged periods of time such that the brain does not receive adequate glucose, it stops functioning properly. This can then “lead to blurred vision, difficulty concentrating, confused thinking, slurred speech, numbness, and drowsiness.”<sup>17</sup> Sustained periods of time without treatment can cause damage to the “heart, blood vessels, eyes, kidneys nerves and increase risk of heart disease and stroke.”<sup>18</sup> When left for too long of a period of time, hypoglycemia can lead to “seizures, a coma, and very rarely death.”<sup>19</sup> Due to the severe outcomes of diabetes, it is crucial that Muslims speak with their primary care physician if they plan on fasting throughout the day.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p.11

<sup>16</sup> Hypoglycemia occurs when an individual’s blood sugar is lower than normal.

<sup>17</sup> “Hypoglycemia (Low Blood Glucose).” American Diabetes Association. Accessed March 17, 2019. <http://www.diabetes.org/living-with-diabetes/treatment-and-care/blood-glucose-control/hypoglycemia-low-blood.html>.

<sup>18</sup> “Hypoglycemia (Low Blood Glucose).” American Diabetes Association. Accessed March 17, 2019. <http://www.diabetes.org/living-with-diabetes/treatment-and-care/blood-glucose-control/hypoglycemia-low-blood.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.



While many Muslims recognize the exemption from fasting, they do not always take the exemption, or they create reasons and explanations for why they fast anyway. “The Epidemiology of Diabetes and Ramadan (EPIDIAR) study performed in 2001 found that 42.8% and 78.7% of patients with Type 1 or Type 2 diabetes mellitus (T1DM/T2DM), respectively, fasted for at least 15 days during Ramadan. More recently, the CREED study reported that 94.2% of T2DM patients fasted for at least 15 days and 63.6% fasted every day.”<sup>20, 21</sup>. Their feelings of obligation towards fasting, even while chronically ill, stem from: a sense of religious duty that should be filled, the notion that fasting during Ramadan provides them with happiness and energy, and or feelings of strength and resilience from Allah during Ramadan.<sup>22</sup> Participants from a study done in Greater Manchester, England, stated that regardless of their health conditions, many of them would still choose to fast.<sup>23</sup> “For Muslim people, it is vital to fast. Yes I am ill but my faith keeps me strong and if I am going to get worse health-wise I am going to get worse no matter what.”<sup>24</sup> This response from a type 2 diabetic, 43-year-old female captures how some Muslims feel that fasting is part of their identity. While Islamic teachings convey that those who are ill are exempt from fasting, there is no consensus on what appropriately qualifies as an illness. The range of acceptable illnesses that would allow a Muslim to forgo fasting differs depending on the juristic body that a particular Muslim adheres to and who the Muslim receives

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

their fatwas from.<sup>25</sup> In addition to the religious benefit, many Muslims wish to fast because of the social and communal importance of Ramadan. “We meet each other, we support each other, and you find plates of food are being exchanged in the streets [laughs] from Muslim to non-Muslim...we all eat at the same time.... We all walk to the mosque and open fast there, my husband he likes that. We have lots of visitors I love Ramadan!”<sup>26</sup> Muslims, on top of the spiritual gain, participate in the social culture of Ramadan as well. Muslims gather together through daily prayers and *iftars*, resulting in a great sense of community. For these reasons, many Muslims choose to fast during the month of Ramadan regardless of their physical well-being. These Muslims stated confidence in their ability to control their diabetes while fasting without any advice from their general practitioner. They felt confident in their understanding of diabetes to properly manage and adjust their insulin while also planning what they should be eating at *suhoor* and *iftar*.<sup>27</sup> This confidence leads to many Muslims failing to disclose with their general practitioner that they are fasting due to a fear of being told not to fast.<sup>28</sup> Muslims thereby attempt to manage their health without expert advice from a medical professional.

While some Muslims quote that the strength of *Allah* will guide them through their fast, many still recognize the need for medical care. However, few Muslims choose to speak with their physician, instead choosing to meet with their imam who usually holds little to no knowledge regarding the health risks associated with fasting for the diabetic worshippers. When Muslims do meet with their physician, many Muslims fail to comply with their healthcare

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<sup>25</sup> Fatwas being a non-obligatory ruling on Muslim law provided by an educated Muslim scholar.

<sup>26</sup> Patel, NR, A. Kennedy, C. Blickem, A. Rogers, D. Reeves, and C. Chew-Graham. “Having Diabetes and having to Fast: A Qualitative Study of British Muslims with Diabetes.” *Health Expectations* 18, no. 5 (2015): 1698-1708.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

provider's advice, because they feel that their physician does not comprehend the religious significance of fasting during Ramadan. This sense of miscommunication between patient and physician can lead to ethical conflicts in the treatment of fasting Muslims during the month of Ramadan.<sup>29</sup> Many physicians, without adequate education on the practice of fasting during Ramadan, view the ritual as dangerous to their diabetic patients. Patients expecting their doctors to immediately advise against fasting neglect to tell their physician of their practice.<sup>30</sup> As a result of these ethical conflicts, many Muslims avoid their doctors during the month of Ramadan, as they suspect their doctor will not respect their religious practice and will forbid them from continuing their fast.

In a study performed by Gaborit et al., a group of 101 general practitioners were surveyed regarding their opinions towards Ramadan and the advice that they handed out to their patients. It was noted that of the 85% of these general practitioners who spoke with their Muslim diabetic patients about fasting: 54% advised their patients not to fast, 44% answered that fasting is harmful to patients' health, 25% replied that diabetes is an exemption from fasting according to the Koran, and 16% said that they had discussed the risk of fasting with their patients.<sup>31</sup> However, most general practitioners lack the medical knowledge needed to properly formulate a care plan for their diabetic Muslim patients during Ramadan. This problem was further exacerbated when physicians who were educated about the safe nature of fasting during Ramadan still worried that the patients could not be trusted to manage their diabetes without

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<sup>29</sup> Ilkilic I and Ertin H. Ethical conflicts in the treatment of fasting Muslim patients with diabetes during Ramadan. *Med Health Care Philos* 2017; 20: 561-570.

<sup>30</sup> Patel, NR, A. Kennedy, C. Blickem, A. Rogers, D. Reeves, and C. Chew-Graham. "Having Diabetes and having to Fast: A Qualitative Study of British Muslims with Diabetes." *Health Expectations* 18, no. 5 (2015): 1698-1708.

<sup>31</sup> Gaborit, B., O. Dutour, O. Ronsin, C. Atlan, P. Darmon, R. Gharsalli, V. Pradel, F. Dadoun, and A. Dutour. "Ramadan Fasting with Diabetes: An Interview Study of Inpatients' and General Practitioners' Attitudes in the South of France." *Diabetes & Metabolism* 37, no. 5 (2011): 395-402

strict round the clock care therefore leading them to prescribe against fasting.<sup>32</sup> Due to this apprehension towards and doubt of their physician, many Muslims do not speak with their health practitioner or any doctor about fasting during Ramadan, because they recognize that many doctors would consider fasting unsafe and prescribe against it. This calls for education and greater awareness of the treatment for diabetes during Ramadan on the behalf of physicians and a call for Muslims to work together with their physicians to create goal-oriented health care plans for themselves. These health care plans can then properly treat an individual's glucose levels before, during and after Ramadan. This will not only allow Muslims to feel in greater control of their spiritual practices in relation with their healthcare, but will further familiarize them with their diabetic needs in general. But, even after medical advice is given, many Muslims continue their search for religious guidance regarding their health.<sup>33</sup>

Within Islam, an imam takes on the role of a spiritual leader who guides congregations of Muslims through prayers; however, as with many religious factions, the spiritual leader's role goes beyond religious services.<sup>34</sup> Imams have been observed to approach healthcare through four different roles: "encouraging health behaviors through scripture-based messages in sermons; performing religious rituals around life events and illnesses; advocating for Muslim patients and delivering culturally sensitive training in hospitals; and assisting in healthcare decision for Muslims."<sup>35</sup> These actions showcase Muslims' utilization of their religious beliefs to guide their healthcare decisions. By "encouraging health behaviors through scripture-based messages in

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid. pg 399.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, pg 397

<sup>34</sup> Padela, Aasim I., Amal Killawi, Michele Heisler, Sonya Demonner, and Michael D. Fetters, "The Role of Imams in American Muslim Health: Perspectives of Muslim Community Leaders in Southeast Michigan." *Journal of Religion and Health* 50, no. 2 (2011): 359-373.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. pg 360.

sermons” imams are picking up on the important role that Muslims place upon integrating their religion within their daily life and are exhibiting their willingness to advise their congregation beyond the mosque.<sup>36</sup> Due to the integrative nature of Islamic values with cultural norms and practices, Islamic beliefs shape “patients’ notions of health and illness, influence...adherence to doctors’ recommendations, guide medical-decision making, and influence health outcomes.”<sup>37</sup> As a result of this integration, it is crucial that imams assist Muslims in their healthcare decisions. Many Muslims purposely seek out their imam regarding medical advice such that their decision will adhere to their religious obligations.

Imams are therefore placed in a position of medical power because many Muslims, even after receiving medical advice from their doctor, wish to also receive religious advice. This situates the imam in a tough position where they are forced to “try and close the gap between physician and family.”<sup>38</sup> These decisions become difficult for imams because, while they can “serve as religious consults, helping both patients and healthcare workers to make decision in-line with Islamic law and ethics,” they will not always understand the medical situation that the patient is undergoing.<sup>39</sup> As a result, their advice, while accurate within religious doctrine, might lead imams to guide Muslims to medical decisions that are not in the best interest of their physical health. Imams, noting this gap in their knowledge base, might therefore feel uncertain when stepping into the healthcare world out of fear for risking the patient’s health. This leaves Muslims in a strange place of limbo where their religious leader cannot make educated

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<sup>36</sup> Padela, Aasim I., Amal Killawi, Michele Heisler, Sonya Demonner, and Michael D. Fetters, “The Role of Imams in American Muslim Health: Perspectives of Muslim Community Leaders in Southeast Michigan.” *Journal of Religion and Health* 50, no. 2 (2011): 360.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. Pg 367.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

recommendations for their physical well-being but their doctor might not respect or understand their religious obligations. This calls for an integrative approach for Muslims to work together with an imam and physician, such that their healthcare plan properly caters to both their religious and physical well-being.

When Muslims fail to receive any medical advice, many Muslims will self-adjust their medications and try to change their eating habits to accommodate for Ramadan.<sup>40</sup> However, without adequate medical surveillance and a constant measurement of their blood sugar levels, many Muslims fall into a state of hypoglycemia or hyperglycemia. This state of hypoglycemia or hyperglycemia can have both short and long term effects on their health. In what is referred to as the EPIDIAR study, 12,243 participants were recruited to participate in a study that was meant to observe the diabetic Muslims fasting habits and health levels before and during Ramadan without any medical advice.<sup>41</sup> “Physical activity, sleep duration, food intake, fluid intake, and sugar intake were unchanged in approximately one-half of the study population” from before to during Ramadan.<sup>42</sup> “Among the overall population, the number of severe hypoglycemic episodes per month and per patient was significantly higher during Ramadan than during the preceding year for patients with type 1 diabetes as well as for patients with type 2 diabetes. In addition, the number of severe hyperglycemia episodes with/without ketoacidosis per month showed a significant difference between Ramadan and the preceding year only for patients with type 2

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<sup>40</sup> Salti, I., E. Benard, B. Detourmay, M. Bianchi-Biscay, C. Le Brigand, C. Voinet, A. Jabbar, EPIDAR study group. “A Population- Based Study of Diabetes and its Characteristics during the Fasting Month of Ramadan 13 Countries-Results of the Epidemiology of Diabetes and Ramadan 1422/2001 (EPIDIAR) Study.” *Diabetes Care* 27, no. 10 (2004): 2306-2311.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Salti, I., E. Benard, B. Detourmay, M. Bianchi-Biscay, C. Le Brigand, C. Voinet, A. Jabbar, EPIDAR study group. “A Population- Based Study of Diabetes and its Characteristics during the Fasting Month of Ramadan 13 Countries-Results of the Epidemiology of Diabetes and Ramadan 1422/2001 (EPIDIAR) Study.” *Diabetes Care* 27, no. 10 (2004): 2306-2311.

diabetes.”<sup>43</sup> This study illustrates how, without medical advice or a treatment plan during the month of Ramadan, Muslims are at greater risk for hypoglycemic/hyperglycemic episodes during Ramadan in contrast to other months. Patients who did change their lifestyle in efforts to combat the nature of hypoglycemia or weight gain typically decreased their levels of physical activity, sleep duration, and or food, sugar and fluid intake.<sup>44</sup> While doctors may prescribe changes such as these, without sufficient familiarity of their healthcare needs, Muslims might be making changes without adequate foresight of which factors they need to change and how. Due to the dangerous nature of hypoglycemia, it is important that Muslims acknowledge this tendency and take action to work together with their physician to create a healthcare plan to diminish the probability that they experience any health problems.

Due to possible health risks, Muslims should be encouraged to speak with their general health practitioner about their decision to fast, so that the patient and primary care physician together might come up with a specialized treatment plan for the patient. This would allow for a safe and controlled fast during Ramadan such that the patient would not experience any negative, physical harm as a result of their fast. Together, physicians and patients can adjust medications, create a special diet, adjust sleeping patterns, or set new physical activity guidelines that will serve to lower the chances for hypoglycemia or hyperglycemia. A pre-planned care regime could allow for the avoidance of the potential hazards of fasting. If a patient were to attempt to fast without the guidance of a physician in regards to their physical health, the diabetic Muslim could experience swings in glucose control and weight gain. For individuals with type 2 diabetes, weight gain can prove serious health problems because weight gain makes blood sugar levels

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

even harder to control. Some forms of type 2 diabetes are best controlled by a combination of weight loss and exercise, so weight gain during Ramadan might put some Muslims at a health disadvantage.<sup>45</sup> Due to the severe outcomes that can stem from hypoglycemia and weight gain, two health risks that arise from fasting during Ramadan, it is critical that Muslims take care of their physical health and consult a physician before fasting during Ramadan.

While it first appears daunting to create a goal-oriented healthcare plan for the care of diabetic Muslims during the course of Ramadan, studies have been completed, showing the success that arises when physicians and patients work together to create a healthcare plan for Ramadan. The DEAR study enrolled 29 participants to work with a physician who personally created a healthcare plan for the period before and during Ramadan so the patient could practice adjusting their medication or lifestyle according to their health needs.<sup>46</sup> It should be noted that 93.1% of the participants had type 2 diabetes, which is an easier type of diabetes to control, but this should not serve to negate the positive results found from the study.<sup>47</sup> Participants performed a pre-Ramadan visit 2-6 weeks before Ramadan to create a wellness profile that consisted of an assessment of their metabolic profile, risk category for hypoglycemia and a health plan for optimization of glycemic control and medication adjustments. They also completed a workshop with religious personnel who presented discussions on glucose monitoring during fasting. During these 2-6 weeks before Ramadan and during the month of fasting, participants recorded their glucose levels 4-5 times a day and kept a log of their food intake, activity levels and other

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<sup>45</sup> “Weight and Diabetes (for Parents).” KidsHealth. February 2018. Accessed March 17, 2019. <https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/weight-diabetes.html>.

<sup>46</sup> Remaining Paragraph referencing the DEAR study until noted: Zainudin, Sueziani B., Abu Bakar, Kjalishah Nadhirah B, Salmiah B. Abdullah, and Aslena B. Hussain. “Diabetes Education and Medication Adjustment in Ramadan (DEAR) Program Prepares for Self-Management during Fasting with Tele-Health Support from Pre-Ramadan to Post-Ramadan.” *Therapeutic Advances in Endocrinology and Metabolism* 9, no. 8 (2018): 231-240.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.



diabetic complications. The patients relayed information on their health status via tele-monitoring, which is a way for physicians to track a patient's health from afar, therefore providing a method for 24/7 updates on a patient's glucose levels. If any medical problems occurred, quick action was taken to resolve all complications. Once the month of Ramadan was over, the participants were again enrolled in another clinic, were given feedback based upon the data collected regarding their glucose levels during the month of Ramadan, and were provided further instructions on how to improve their practice of fasting during Ramadan. This method of learning supported safe fasting during Ramadan and encouraged dialogue between physicians and their patients regarding the practice of fasting while diabetic. Overall, the patients noticed improved glycemic control and reduced diabetic complications after enrollment in the study, suggesting that, with monitored and assisted medical aid, safe fasting can be practiced by diabetics.

The importance of diabetic education during Ramadan is emphasized by the findings of the EPIDIAR study who, rather than educating Muslims about safe fasting, chose to merely observe their practices during the month of Ramadan.<sup>48</sup> The EPIDIAR study failed to provide any education to their participants and found that "severe hypoglycemia was more frequent during Ramadan than during the preceding year and [was] associated with changes in treatment regimens and physical activity during Ramadan."<sup>49</sup> Their study showed that there are more Muslim diabetics who experience hyperglycemia during Ramadan than any other month, probably due to unsafe health practices that were made up by the patient rather than were

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<sup>48</sup> Salti, I., E. Benard, B. Detournay, M. Bianchi-Biscay, C. Le Brigand, C. Voinet, A. Jabbar, EPIDAR study group. "A Population- Based Study of Diabetes and its Characteristics during the Fasting Month of Ramadan 13 Countries-Results of the Epidemiology of Diabetes and Ramadan 1422/2001 (EPIDIAR) Study." *Diabetes Care* 27, no. 10 (2004): 2306-2311.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

prescribed by the doctor. Many of the individuals in the EPIDIAR study refrained from discussing their fasting practices with a physician, and this might have resulted in many of them making uneducated changes to their healthcare regime. The DEAR study, in comparison to the EPIDIAR study, exhibits how, with adequate education, Muslims can successfully and safely fast during Ramadan. Healthy fasting can be practiced by an adjustment of medication dosages or the type of medication, a change in activity levels, and/or changes in diet.<sup>50</sup> With close physician monitoring and regular glucose checks, Muslims can properly adhere to their religious beliefs while taking care of their health needs as well.

In order for physicians to adequately assist their diabetic Muslim patients during the month of Ramadan, they must adequately prepare themselves to discuss fasting and religious beliefs with their patients. One of the most commonly cited reasons for not discussing religious fasting with their physician was the fear that the physician would either not understand the importance of fasting to the believer and or completely eliminate the concept of a safe fast.<sup>51</sup> However, it is critical that physicians educate themselves on the practice of Ramadan and its importance to Muslims as a sacred tenant of their faith so they might properly treat their Muslim patients with an open mind. Once physicians are accustomed to the practice of fasting, it is crucial that they familiarize themselves with the different medications that only require dosages of 1-2 times a day such that they fit within a daily fasting schedule. This knowledge allows physicians to work with their patient to create a care plan for treatment before and during Ramadan, thereby optimizing health outcomes of the patient. For the safety of their patient,

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<sup>50</sup> Grindrod, Kelly and Waseam Alsabbagh. "Managing Medications during Ramadan Fasting." *Canadian Pharmacists Journal* 150, no. 3 (2017): 146

<sup>51</sup> Patel, NR, A. Kennedy, C. Blickem, A. Rogers, D. Reeves, and C. Chew-Graham. "Having Diabetes and having to Fast: A Qualitative Study of British Muslims with Diabetes." *Health Expectations* 18, no. 5 (2015): 1698-1708.

physicians should encourage close monitoring of glucose levels throughout the day, and, if patients are unsure if this will break their fast, should encourage dialogue with an imam regarding the practice.<sup>52</sup> Many imams dictate that glucose monitoring does not break one's fast, and this reassurance from a patient's religious leader working with their physician will strengthen the patient's bond with both their physician and religious leader.<sup>53</sup> Together, Muslims and their physician can create concrete plans for a safe fast.

While all this planning appears beneficial, some might say that it is not the doctor's job to consider their patient's religious orientation when prescribing medication or treating them for their health. However, this argument lacks consideration of the concept of holistic healthcare. When physicians gain their medical license, they take either the Hippocratic or Osteopathic oath. These two oaths swear in physicians as guardians of health. The Hippocratic oath appropriately states that the physician "will apply, for the benefit of the sick, all measures [that] are required" therefore promising that they will protect their patient's health to the best of their ability.<sup>54</sup> Likewise, the Osteopathic oath promises to "be mindful always of my [the physician's] great responsibility to preserve the health and the life of my patients" as the core premise of their vocation.<sup>55</sup> Essentially, when doctors take their oath to become a physician, they are assuming the responsibility of taking care of the whole person. Depending on how someone interprets the whole person, it might be understood that someone's religion is a part of their holistic

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<sup>52</sup> Gaborit, B., O. Dutour, O. Ronsin, C. Atlan, P. Darmon, R. Gharsalli, V. Pradel, F. Dadoun, and A. Dutour. "Ramadan Fasting with Diabetes: An Interview Study of Inpatients' and General Practitioners' Attitudes in the South of France." *Diabetes & Metabolism* 37, no. 5 (2011): 395-402

<sup>53</sup> Ibrahim, Mahmoud, Megahed Abu Al Magd, Firas A. Annabi, Samir Assaad- Khalil, Ebtesam M. Ba-Essa, Ibtihal Fahdil, Sehnaz Karadeniz, et al. "Recommendations for Management of Diabetes during Ramadan: Update 2015." *BMJ Open Diabetes Research & Care* 3, no. 1(2015): e000108.

<sup>54</sup> Various Physicians Oaths. Accessed March 17, 2019. <http://www.aapsonline.org/ethics/oaths.htm#bears>. A Modern Hippocratic Oath by Dr. Louis Lasagna

<sup>55</sup> "Osteopathic Oath." American Osteopathic Association. Accessed March 17, 2019. <https://osteopathic.org/about/leadership/aoa-governance-documents/osteopathic-oath/>.

well-being. As we have seen, the Muslim population derives their understanding of illness through their faith such that their health care requires familiarity of their religious beliefs. The physician must assume the responsibility of not just the biomedical health of the person but of total well-being. This includes their religious well-being as well as their physical well-being. Currently, hospitals are working to greater lengths to put proper consideration into their patient's religious health by providing inter-faith chaplains who can visit patients in the hospital along with interfaith prayer spaces. The University of Pennsylvania has especially taken a lead on this by writing up a religious diversity guide for practical points in health care.<sup>56</sup> In order for physicians to fulfill their oath and take proper care of the well-being and health of their patients, they must also cater to their patient's religious beliefs. Just as physicians respect a Jehovah Witness's refusal of blood, they must cater to a Muslim's desire to fast. This sentiment is echoed by the many Muslims surveyed in the DEAR, EPIDIAR and CREED studies where Muslims stated that they wished their physicians would respect and cater to their religious beliefs. It is not that Muslims wish to refuse medical aid during their fast but, rather, that they do not believe their physicians would approve or facilitate this sort of care. Educated physicians might alleviate this hesitation, allowing for greater dialogue between physicians and their patients.

Fasting during the month of Ramadan is an important tenant of Islam that many believers hold very seriously. This proves difficult for Muslims with diabetes, who are constantly monitoring their glucose levels and controlling it with either medication or food intake. While fasting with diabetes is typically discouraged by physicians due to the risks of weight gain and hypoglycemia, studies have proven that it can be a safe practice for many Muslims suffering

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<sup>56</sup> Ehman, John. *Religious Diversity: Practical Points for Health Care Providers*. Philadelphia, PA: Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania and Penn Presbyterian Medical Center, 2012.

from diabetes. In order to provide this safe fasting practice, teamwork between the physician and patient must be implemented such that, together, they can create a health care plan that allows for religious adherence while still protecting patient health.

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## **The Guru and the Rebbe: Relationality in the Devotional Practices of Neem Karoli Baba Maharaj-ji and Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson**

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### **ABSTRACT**

When reading through the stories of Hindu gurus and Hasidic rebbes, the similarities are immediately apparent. This paper will argue that these similarities are due to a parallel need among devotees for ‘relationality,’ which can be seen in case studies of the devotional practices of *darshan* of the Hindu guru Neem Karoli Baba Maharaj-ji and *yechidut* with the Seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe of Chabad, Menachem Mendel Schneerson. Additionally, it will be argued that the primary function of saints is to provide their devotees with an accessible form of divinity thereby fulfilling the underlying human desire to be in a relationship with the divine.

Relationality’s central role will be proven by exploring a composite definition of the term that draws on four building blocks; the theory of intersubjectivity, Buberian Dialogism, and the practices of *darshan* in Hinduism, and *yechidut* in Hasidism.

Keywords: darshan, yechidut, Chabad-Lubavitch, Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson, Neem Karoli Baba Maharaj-ji, intersubjectivity, Buberian Dialogism

## The Guru and the Rebbe: Relationality in the Devotional Practices of Neem Karoli Baba Maharaj-ji and Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson

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Maharajji's company was very special... his presence was more than inspiring; it was enlightening. While mediating in or near his presence, even though he'd be talking and joking loudly, one quickly reached the place of clear light, a place difficult to achieve without his grace and power.<sup>2</sup>

I know of no one who left the Rebbe without being deeply affected, if not changed by the encounter... In his presence, you come closer in touch with your inner center of gravity. Whenever I would see the Rebbe, he touched the depths in me... [and I] felt [I] had lived deeper and ... on a higher level.<sup>3</sup>

When reading through the stories of Hindu gurus and Hasidic rebbes, the similarities are immediately apparent. The same types of miracles are attributed to each; the same connection to the divine; and, most amazingly, the same reverence by their devotees. Unfortunately, for many secularized American Jews, Hasidic tales are not readily available. Perhaps this is a reason why so many travelled to Asia in the 1960s and 70s to find the mysticism they perceived absent in their native Judaism. This narrative can be ascribed to a Boston-born Jew named Richard Alpert,

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<sup>2</sup>Ram Dass, *Miracle of Love: Stories About Neem Karoli Baba*, (NY, Hanuman Foundation, 1979), 22.

<sup>3</sup>Joseph Telushkin, "Connecting to Individuals: The Experience of Yechidus (One-on-One Meetings)" in *Rebbe: The Life and Teachings of Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, the Most Influential Rabbi in Modern History*, 43-73, (New York, Harperwave, 2014), 45.



who reluctantly followed a friend into a Himalayan *ashram* in 1969 and was introduced to Neem Karoli Baba Maharaj-ji (~1900-1974). After this fateful meeting, he took on the name Ram Dass (servant of God) and began studying and teaching bhakti Hinduism in the West. Eventually, a few hundred Americans (mostly Jews) followed Ram Dass back to India to find Maharaj-ji in an attempt to fulfill mystical desires they believed could not be satiated by their assimilated and secularized Judaism.<sup>4</sup> Leaving behind no personal writings, the numerous volumes of devotee-compiled stories of Neem Karoli Baba Maharaj-ji perpetuate his legacy. Reading through these narratives, a mystical-leaning Jew like Ram Dass is drawn to the experiences that Maharaj-ji could provide for his devotees: experiences that offered a mystical validation perceived to be missing in Judaism. That is, until the stories of Hasidic rebbes are discovered.

Reading through Martin Buber's *Tales of the Hasidim* sheds light on the first few generations of Hasidic leaders,<sup>5</sup> and a reader familiar with Hindu Traditions is immediately struck by the similarities to influential Hindu gurus, such as Ramakrishna and Caitanya. What was alluring to Ram Dass in the Hindu tradition-- spiritually elevated saints that provided their devotees with an accessible form of divinity-- is clearly evident. Unfortunately for the India-bound Jews of the '60s and '70s, these stories speak of figures that lived centuries ago; what of modern Hasidic saints? Searching for a contemporary of Maharaj-ji, research inevitably lands on the Seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe of Chabad, Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994). The stories of Schneerson overflow with similarities to Maharaj-ji, even if their personal histories and cultural traditions are not analogous.

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<sup>4</sup> It was only later in life that Ram Dass started to explore Jewish mysticism. See Ira Rifkin, "RAM DASS EXPLORING JUDAISM," Sun, October 5, 2018, <https://www.sun-sentinel.com/news/fl-xpm-1992-03-27-9201300673-story.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, (New York, Schocken Books Inc., 1991).

These glaring similarities led to the current project of comparing the devotional practices around Neem Karoli Baba Maharaj-ji and Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson. While there is much comparative scholarship on Buddhism and Judaism, and on the Jewish *halakha* and Hindu *dharma*, there is a lack of scholarship on contemporary Hindu-Jewish relations. In his book *The Jewish Encounter with Hinduism: History, Spirituality, Identity*, scholar Alon Goshen-Gottstein lays out the history of this encounter and calls for more scholarship comparing the two rich traditions. This project aims to help fill this void by expanding on Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi's comparison of the practice of *darshan* in Bhakti Hinduism to *yechidut* in Lubavitch Hasidism.<sup>6</sup> These encounters are defined by 'relationality' and point towards an underlying desire for humans to be in relationship with a higher power. The place of the saint is to plug into this desire by providing their devotees with an accessible form of divinity.

In the remainder of this essay, 'relationality' will be defined and the two figures and practices in question will be explored. This analysis will illuminate the ways in which relationality is integral to the devotion around Neem Karoli Baba Maharaj-ji (hereafter, Maharaj-ji) and Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson (hereafter, the Rebbe), and show the underlying similarities between these two disparate traditions.<sup>7</sup> To get to this understanding, it is imperative to understand the ways in which the practices of *darshan* in Bhakti Hinduism and *yechidut* in Lubavitch Hasidism manifest the quality of 'relationality.'

## WHAT IS RELATIONALITY?

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<sup>6</sup> Zalman Meshullam Schachter-Shalomi, *Spiritual Intimacy: A Study of Counseling in Hasidism*, (United States, Jason Aronson Inc, 1991), xv.

<sup>7</sup> This is not a claim that these two traditions are analogous --in fact there are huge distinctions between their cultures and theologies-- but just that *these specific practices* are performed for analogous reasons. The large divergences between these two traditions are beyond the scope of this essay, with the most important of these distinctions being the conceptualization of Maharaj-ji as an *incarnation of divinity* while the Rebbe is seen as an *incarnation of Torah*.

Stories of *darshan* and *yechidut* abound with words such as ‘merging,’ ‘exchange,’ ‘sharing,’ ‘communing,’ etc., which alludes to a transactional encounter between the saint and devotee. This points towards a certain ‘quality’ that is mystical in nature and is facilitated by the saint’s high spiritual status. It is this very ‘quality’ that the label ‘relationality’ seeks to explain. A relationality-centered reading of these practices utilizes two methodological impulses, namely the theory of religious intersubjectivity and the philosophy of Buberian Dialogism, and then an exploration of the devotional practices shows how these theories function in practice. With these as inspiration, a basic definition is formulated as “the power-endowing relationship between saints and their disciples in which the ability of the saint to fully see their devotees’ ‘whole being’ transfers a spark of their higher spiritual state to them.” Each of the two methodologies and practices provide a different piece of the puzzle, starting with intersubjectivity’s explanation of the desire for relationality.

## INTERSUBJECTIVITY

Religion scholars such as Robert Orsi have posited that religion is a matrix of intersubjective relationships.<sup>8</sup> Intersubjectivity has a variety of definitions for different fields, but, for this project, it is understood to refer to shared agreements about the functioning of the world and “the process of psychological energy moving between two or more subjects.” This is to say that the psychological state of one subject can affect and alter the state of another.<sup>9</sup> Matthew Ryan Robinson has built on Orsi to argue that humans desire “intersubjective relationships of interdependence” which “fill-up certain individual incompleteness but only by

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<sup>8</sup> Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005), 2.

<sup>9</sup> The Audiopedia, "What is INTERSUBJECTIVITY? what does INTERSUBJECTIVITY Mean? INTERSUBJECTIVITY Meaning." Feb 2, 2017. video, 2:06, 2:33, 2:48, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XXG3J8Tu684>.

expanding persons' awareness of the vastness of reality, and thereby intensifying and deepening the overall sense of incompleteness [sic]."<sup>10</sup> Robinson supplements Orsi's intersubjective assertion by adding that the foundational human social need is 'lacking' until a relationship 'fills it up.'

This 'filling up' *is* relationality and, furthermore, the fundamental need to be in relation does not stop on the human level but extends to the divine realm. That this need extends to the divine realm is the very reason why people go to saints; the underlying human desire to be in relationship with God is mediated and fulfilled through the relationship with the saint who provides an accessible form of the divine. Additionally, it is through their encounter with the saint that the devotee is shown the essential claim of Hasidic Judaism (and, one could easily argue, Bhakti Hinduism); that "there is more to existence than our physical and material concerns."<sup>11</sup> The saint exposes the devotee to the spiritual truths that undergird the world and it is through this exposure that the devotee's "overall sense of incompleteness" is exacerbated. Their devotion to the saint then grows out a need for this lacking to be remedied. This model of transformative and intersubjective relationship is the basis for the assertion of 'relationality,' as the defining feature of the saint-disciple relationships in the devotional practices around Maharaj-ji and the Rebbe.

### **BUBERIAN DIALOGISM**

Intersubjectivity explains the *desire* for the relationship, but it fails to explain *how* the saint is able to "fill up" their devotees. Martin Buber, a Jewish academic and theologian from the 20th century, offers a compelling account of the 'how' of relationality in his philosophy of

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew Ryan Robinson, *Redeeming Relationship, Relationships that Redeem: Free Sociability and the Completion of Humanity in the Thought of Friedrich Schleiermacher*, (Germany, Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 7.

<sup>11</sup> Adin Even-Israel Stiensaltz, *My Rebbe*, (New Milford and Jerusalem, Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd, 2014), 1.

‘Dialogism.’ Drawing on Hasidic stories and philosophies, his philosophy of Dialogism argues that “the world is twofold for man in accordance with his twofold attitude.”<sup>12</sup> This is Buber’s poetic way of declaring that there are two fundamental ways of seeing the world-- the “I-It” relationship and the “I-You” relationship. The former is an objectifying of the world into ‘experiences’ and the way in which virtually everyone sees the world, while the latter is labeled by Buber as ‘relation’ and can only be experienced with one’s “whole being.”<sup>13</sup> To ‘experience’ the world is to see everything in terms of what it can do *for you*. For example, looking at a tree, one might see shade, kindling, or wood, while looking at a person, one might see a source of labor, someone to laugh at your jokes, or even a spouse. If one were ‘relating’ in the I-You mode, on the other hand, they would see the tree and person for what they are a tree and a person in their full being. This is the state of consciousness that the saint is always embodying.

In the third section of his famous book on this philosophy, titled *I and Thou*, Buber furthers this notion by espousing the idea that the “lines of relationship intersect in the eternal You.” When he refers to this ‘eternal You,’ he is introducing his dialogic version of divinity. Not theistic in the traditional sense, Buber’s ‘divinity’ is addressed in part each time one addresses any You.<sup>14</sup> The eternal You is always available, but is usually untapped. In a more theistic vernacular, one might say that understanding the place of the eternal You is to see the world as a manifestation of godliness (a belief that is commonplace in both Hasidic and Hindu circles). It is the saint’s ability to live this-- that is, not only function in the I-You mode, but also maintain an awareness of the eternal You-- that elevates them. This ability to ‘relate’ to everything as a manifestation of godliness is what makes them compelling to their followers. By addressing their

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<sup>12</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufman, (New York, Touchstone/ Simon and Schuster, 1970), 53.

<sup>13</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 54, 56.

<sup>14</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 123.

devotees as ‘You’s, these saints are able to ‘fill up’ (to use Robinson’s language) their devotees to a larger extent than all their other mundane relationships. As Buber puts it; “For those who enter into the absolute relationship [with God/saint]... everything is included in the relationship.”

<sup>15</sup> This is to say that all dualities and inconsistencies of mundane life are subsumed within the relationship and the devotee obtains a degree of the saint’s higher consciousness, as will be discussed in the exploration of *darshan* below. This reorienting of the devotee is Robinson’s ‘filling up’ and representative of the fulfilling of the devotee’s need for relationality. With the theoretical framing provided by intersubjectivity and Dialogism in place, the definition of relationality can be completed by exploring their practical application in the two devotional practices.

## **DARSHAN**

*Darshan*, the central devotional practice around Maharaj-ji, exemplifies the ‘filling up’ of a devotee through the transmission of a spark of the saint’s higher consciousness. This practice is the principal way in which devotees engage with the divine in Hinduism. When a Hindu goes to the temple or to see a saint, they are not necessarily going to attend worship or hear a lecture, but to quite literally ‘see’ the icon/saint. This seeing *is* the practice of *darshan*, and scholar Diana L. Eck claims that this “exchange of vision lies at the heart of Hindu worship.”<sup>16</sup> According to Ram Dass, devotees would travel immense distances to have this pleasurable experience with their guru:

The intense desire of the devotees to be with Maharajji, combined with his elusive and unpredictable behavior, gave rise to the most intricate dramas of hide and seek, labeled by one waggish devotee as the “great grace race.” Being a devotee of Maharaj-ji was like participating in a continuous and unending treasure hunt... the pot of gold, of course, was darshan with Maharajji. And gold it was! One Indian

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<sup>15</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 127.

<sup>16</sup> Diana L. Eck, *Seeing the Sacred* In “Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India”, (NY, Columbia University Press, 1998), 7.

devotee put it succinctly when he said, “Even sexual intercourse with my wife cannot equal darshan with Maharajji.”<sup>17</sup>

As the quote makes evident, this experience was deeply impactful for devotees. Although *darshan* is commonly used to refer to an audience with the saint, a scholarly definition proposes that *darshan* is to “see and be seen by the deity [guru].”<sup>18</sup> This is not to say that *darshan* is a silent exchange of eye contact-- there could be everything from humorous quips to silent meditation to hysterical crying during these audiences-- but this notion of ‘exchange’ is central to understanding the practice.<sup>19</sup> *Darshan* is spoken of as being ‘given’ by the guru and ‘received’ by the worshipper, which is to say that the transaction is initiated by the guru. This notion of the saint initiating an interaction in which the devotee is ‘seen by the guru’ is representative of the saint’s Buberian ‘I-You’ consciousness validating the devotee’s “whole being.” In the stories around Maharaj-ji, it becomes clear quickly that the scholarly understanding of *darshan* is much narrower than *darshan* in practice. One Western devotee named Parvati Markus explains:

For those of us who were with Maharajji while he was in the body, darshan meant being in his physical presence. We called the time we spent with him darshan, but as Maharajji said “You don’t have to meet the guru in a physical body.” You can also have darshan through a dream, vision or deep meditation. You have darshan whenever you connect with the presence of the divine. Darshan is a gift, the moment when you are allowed to ‘see,’ like when the clouds blow away so you suddenly get a clear view of the awe-inspiring Himalayan peaks.<sup>20</sup>

This mystical moment of being “allowed to ‘see’” does not happen for every person who sat in front of Maharaj-ji. Scholars explain this by positing that an understanding of the practice and culture of *darshan* precludes one's ability to engage in the practice. Like all modes of seeing, the ‘seeing’ that occurs in *darshan* is not a “passive awareness but an active focusing... [T]he

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<sup>17</sup> Dass, *Miracle of Love*, 19.

<sup>18</sup> Lawrence A. Babb, “Glancing: Visual Interaction in Hinduism,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 37, no. 4 (Dec 1, 1981), 396; Kama Mclean, “SEEING, BEING SEEN, AND NOT BEING SEEN: Pilgrimage, Tourism, and Layers of Looking at the Kumbh Mela,” *CrossCurrents*, Volume 59, Issue 3, 2009; Eck, *Seeing the Sacred*, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Eck, *Seeing the Sacred*, 7.

<sup>20</sup> Parvati Markus, *Love Everyone: The Transcendent Wisdom of Neem Karoli Baba Told Through the Stories of the Westerners Whose Lives He Transformed*, (New York, HarperOne imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2015), 44.

object we see... is dependent on who we are and what we recognize from past experience.”<sup>21</sup>

Scholars such as Eck and Lawrence A. Babb assert that the viewer’s past experiences and belief in the deity/guru inform their ability to receive the benefits of the *darshan*.<sup>22</sup> This project hopes to complicate this notion by positing that what is needed is not necessarily past experiences, but rather an ‘openness’ to a mystical experience. This can be seen in the self-selecting nature of those coming to Maharaj-ji; it is those who are ‘open’ to mysticism that travel to a saint. As seen in Markus’ quote above, stories of culturally ignorant Western devotees coming to Maharaj-ji for *darshan* and experiencing life-altering exchanges-- while others left unaffected-- is evidence that past experiences cannot be a requirement. Beliefs and past experiences can facilitate such ‘openness,’ but cannot be necessary.

It is also important to understand how these scholars understand the phenomenon of ‘seeing.’ The seer is not passive but an active participant in meaning-making.<sup>23</sup> Babb understands this to be “an extrusive flow-of-seeing that brings seer and seen into *actual contact*.”<sup>24</sup> He asserts that there is quite literally something to be *gained* from the exchange of *darshan*:

this visual interaction between deity and worshipper establishes a special sort of intimacy between them, which confers benefits by allowing worshippers to ‘drink’ divine power with their eyes, a power that carries with it- at least potentially- an extraordinary and revelatory ‘point of view.’<sup>25</sup>

It is precisely this quality of relationality that enables the *guru* to grant the benefits of *darshan* to the devotee, and similarly, the openness of relationality that allows the devotee to receive it. To put this into the theoretical language, Babb’s claim of a ‘gaining’ is Robinson’s ‘filling up,’ and the devotee’s impassioned descriptions of the ‘gift of *darshan*’ is representative of the Buberian

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<sup>21</sup> Eck, *Seeing the Sacred*, 15.

<sup>22</sup> Babb, “Glancing,” 400; Eck, *Seeing the Sacred*, 15.

<sup>23</sup> Eck, *Seeing the Sacred*, 14.

<sup>24</sup> Babb, “Glancing,” 387.

<sup>25</sup> Babb, “Glancing,” 388.



‘I-You’ relationship through which Maharaj-ji relates to his devotees. This mystically beneficial relationship will be mirrored below in the exploration of *yechidut*.

## YECHIDUT

*Yechidut*, the main practice around the Rebbe, exemplifies the necessary surrender in an intersubjective relationship. Broadly, it is a formulaic interview in which the Hasid is able to meet one-on-one with the Rebbe and ask for advice, which the Rebbe then prophetically answers. This interview is fundamentally an act of devotion in which the Hasid ‘giv[es] oneself over to the Rebbe.’<sup>26</sup> A famous Hasid named Zalman Jaffe accounts his first *yechidut* as follows;

We remained closeted with the Rebbe for two hours. Until this meeting we had only seen the Rebbe at the services and at the *farbrengen*; it was amazing for us to behold such a transformation in a human being. Instead of the serious expression and far away look which the Rebbe habitually seemed to wear, we found ourselves now conversing with a very cheerful, happy and friendly- albeit holy- person. He had a gorgeous smile, and the dazzling twinkle in his eyes lightened the seriousness of the occasional criticism or rebuke. (Soon enough we learned that the Rebbe saw and knew everyone and everything. That far-away look was really far-sighted and far-seeing.)<sup>27</sup>

Initiated by the first Chabad rebbe, this deeply impactful experience was an attempt to be able to provide not only material, but also psycho-spiritual support to his Hasidim:

during *yehidut*, the Hasid would open his heart ... and lay bare his spiritual difficulties and failings and [the Rebbe] would offer him ways to restore his faith. He would give the Hasid individual guidance based on his Hasidic teachings according to the individual's personality and intellectual abilities.<sup>28</sup>

Although this might appear one-sided at first glance, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi posits that an understanding of “mutuality is essential” in this transaction.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Stiensaltz, *My Rebbe*, 117.

<sup>27</sup> Zalmon Jaffe, *My Encounter with the Rebbe: Volume 1*, (Brooklyn, PCL Publishing, 2002), 23. A *farbrengen* is “an assemblage addressed by a Rebbe and/or an informal gathering of chassidim characterized by singing and inspiring talk.” See Chabad.org for a further discussion: [https://www.chabad.org/search/keyword\\_cdo/kid/2225/jewish/Farbrengen-The.htm](https://www.chabad.org/search/keyword_cdo/kid/2225/jewish/Farbrengen-The.htm).

<sup>28</sup> David Biale, David ‘Asaf, Binyamin Bra’un, Uri’el Gelman, Samuel C Heilman and Marcin Wodzinski, *Hasidism: A New History*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2017), 127.

<sup>29</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, *Spiritual Intimacy*, 167.

The *yechidut* ritual is where the Hasid's theological understanding of the Rebbe becomes manifest, as it would be one of the only times they would be able to spend close to their Rebbe.<sup>30</sup> Their reverence can be seen in the protocol Hasidim are told to follow during the ritual, such as "real Chassidim don't shake hands with the Rebbe," nor do they sit.<sup>31</sup> The Rebbe did not always follow these protocols-- as seen in the story of Zalmon Jaffe's first meeting with the Rebbe when the Rebbe reached out his hand for a handshake and then asked him to sit down!<sup>32</sup> -- and he seemed to be uncomfortable with the devotion paid to him, but understood that it was necessary for the Rebbe-Hasid relationship to be fruitful.<sup>33</sup>

During *yechidut*, the Rebbe is understood to be in contact with the Divine and the words spoken by the Rebbe are taken as prophetic, even if no explicit prophecy was given.<sup>34</sup> As a divine intermediary, the Hasid entering his quarters assumes that the Rebbe knows *everything*.<sup>35</sup> Their devotional surrender is what allows the Rebbe to make God real for the Hasid and become an "attuned mouthpiece of the group's God-presence" during *yechidut*.<sup>36</sup> This is to say that it is through the submission of the devotees that the Rebbe is elevated; it is in the Rebbe-Hasid relationship that "temporal and spiritual power[s] [are] given [to] the Rebbes *by* their followers" (emphasis mine).<sup>37</sup> There are many stories of the advice received during *yechidut* predicting the future, displaying unshared knowledge of someone's past, or changing the direction of someone's life forever.

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<sup>30</sup> As Chabad grew, the practice of individual *yechidut* was replaced by group *yechidut* in 1981, and eventually by the practice of Sunday 'dollars.' (Stiensaltz, *My Rebbe*, 121-2).

<sup>31</sup> Jaffe, *My Encounter*, 22.

<sup>32</sup> Jaffe, *My Encounter*, 23.

<sup>33</sup> Stiensaltz, *My Rebbe*, 92.

<sup>34</sup> Stiensaltz, *My Rebbe*, 119.

<sup>35</sup> Stiensaltz, *My Rebbe*, 126, 117.

<sup>36</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, *Spiritual Intimacy*, 171, xvii.

<sup>37</sup> Mark Avrum Ehrlich, *The Messiah of Brooklyn*, (Jersey City, KTAV Publishing House, 2004), 12.

Schachter-Shalomi posits that *yechidut* is a “moment when two persons, Rebbe and Hasid, merge into the Infinite One.”<sup>38</sup> This can be seen by exploring the etymology of the word *yechidut*. Coming from *yechidoo*, which has the same stem as the words *yachid* (single) and *echad* (one), this term literally means ‘aloneness.’<sup>39</sup> To use a term denoting singularity to refer to an interview might seem contradictory at first, but upon exploration of the mystical nature of the encounter, it becomes clear. The ‘one’ in *echad* designates not singularity, but Oneness between many- the Oneness of God that encapsulates all things. This Oneness is reminiscent of Buber’s all-encompassing eternal You. Similarly, the ‘aloneness’ denoted by *yechidut* does not refer to the Hasid’s solitude but to a oneness experienced *between* the Hasid and his Rebbe-- Buber might call it a ‘dialogic aloneness.’ Entering the Rebbe’s chamber for *yechidut* brought the two distinct people together in singularity.

Despite the mystical nature of the encounter, the actual practice of *yechidut* is very formulaic. After preparing themselves in the form of a ritual bath and dressing in nice (perhaps brand new) clothing, the Hasid dons a prayer sash and waits outside the Rebbe’s office for many hours.<sup>40</sup> Most often, this was a family unit or a married couple going in to see the Rebbe-- rarely would people have *yechidut* alone. Upon finally entering, the Hasid hands the Rebbe their *kvittel* (written question) and waits to be addressed to speak. Next is the *pidyan nefesh* (cash donation, or “soul’s ransom”), which is conceptualized similarly to a sacrifice at the Jerusalem temple in ancient times.<sup>41</sup> Then comes the main attraction; the *etzen* (council), during which the Rebbe gives his advice that is expected to be followed unquestioningly. Lastly is the departing *brakhah*

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<sup>38</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, *Spiritual Intimacy*, 120.

<sup>39</sup> Thank you to Oberlin Chabad Rebbetzin Devorah Elkan for bringing this to my attention.

<sup>40</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, *Spiritual Intimacy*, 123.

<sup>41</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, *Spiritual Intimacy*, 118.

(blessing).<sup>42</sup> This formula is roughly followed in every *yechidut* and clearly lays out not only the formality of this encounter, but also the transactional nature in which the Rebbe acts as support for the Hasid.

### COMPOSITE DEFINITION OF RELATIONALITY

Having now explored the four ‘building blocks’ of relationality (the two methodological frameworks and the two practices), a composite definition can be crafted to explain the nature of relationships between saints and devotees. First, the theory of intersubjectivity laid out the underlying human desire to be in an intersubjective relationship not only with other humans, but with the divine, and how saints plugged into this desire for mystically-leaning people by providing an accessible form of divinity. Second, Buber’s Dialogic philosophy shed light on two disparate ways of living in the world-- namely, I-It’s ‘experiencing’ and I-You’s ‘relating’-- and on how saints are constantly in the I-You mode and conscious of the eternal You. Furthermore, it is through this ‘You’-ing that the saints are able to ‘fill up’ their devotees’ shortcomings that fed their desire for intersubjective relationships. And finally, third and fourth, an exploration of the practices of *darshan* and *yechidut* displays the ways in which the saint is able to transfer their wisdom and higher way of seeing through an exchange with their devotees.

By pulling from these four streams of relational theories and practices, a synthesized definition of ‘relationality’ is formulated as the power-endowing relationship between saints and their disciples in which the ability of the saint to fully see their devotees ‘whole being’ transfers a spark of their higher spiritual state to them. This revelatory experience fosters stronger faith in the devotee that thereby endows the saint with further powers. The powers that the saints receive

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<sup>42</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, *Spiritual Intimacy*, 117.

from devotion then function to reinforce the devotee's faith, creating a cyclical and reciprocal relationship. This is not to say that the saints are not already understood to be highly developed spiritual beings, but that it is precisely by being in relation to their devotees that they are endowed with their spiritual gifts. Additionally, it is important to note that the devotee is not a higher spiritual individual from then on but is elevated *during* the experience with the saint.

There are countless stories from both traditions of devotees having a life altering experience with their saint and vowing to live a certain 'holy' lifestyle, only to realize later on that they continuously fall short. That moment of realization might also be the moment that the devotee decides to go for another *darshan/yechidut!*

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