

Stayed on Freedom's Call: Cooperation Between Jewish And African-American Communities In Washington, DC

Shira Destinie Jones Landrac

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Dedicated to Antoinette L. Bourke and Dr. Edgar Cahn

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Interviews:

Hayden Wetzel, Archivist, The Sumner School and Museum, Washington, DC, December 2010

Antoinette L. Bourke, Native Washingtonian of Color, November-January 2012-2013

Rabbi Eli Aronoff, Rabbi, TBE -7 November 2012

Gilbert Burgess Native Washingtonian of Color -12.12.12

Steve Ross Native Washingtonian of Color And Head of Facilities, TI) – 22.12.2012

Dr. Edgar Cahn, Founder Antioch School of Law, Time Banks USA, RJI – 25.12.2012

John (Johnny) Brown, Native Washingtonian of Color, 2 January 2013

*“Stayed on
Freedom”* lyrics

Woke up this
morning with my
mind
Stayed on
freedom

2x

Hallelu, Hallelu,
Hallelujah.

I'm walking and
talking with my
mind stayed on
freedom

2x

Hallelu, Hallelu,
Hallelujah.

“Dror Yikra”
lyrics

Dror Yikra l'ven
im bat
V'yintsorchem
k'mo vavat.

Na'im shimchem
velo yushbat.
Sh'vu venuchu
b'yom Shabbat.

D'rosh navi
v'ulami
Va'ot yesha ase
imi
Neta sorek b'toch
karmi
She'e shav'at
b'nei ami.

“Freedom Will Call”
lyrics

(title is author's
translation)

He will proclaim
freedom for all his
children

And will keep you as
the apple of his eye
Pleasant is your name
and will not be
destroyed

Repose and rest on the
Sabbath day.

Seek my sanctuary and
my home.

Give me a sign of
deliverance.

Plant a vine in my
vineyard.

Look to my people,
hear their laments.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/soundtrack-lyrics/#morning>

<http://www.hebrewsongs.com/song-droryikra.htm>

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Preface

“A bridge between economics and spirituality...” That is how Dr. Edgar Cahn, co-author of *“The War on Poverty: A Civilian Perspective”* and inventor of Time Banking, characterizes his new social structure dedicated to System Change. That is also what this book hopes to inspire: the building of more bridges between social economics and lived spirituality, starting with my community of origin and my spiritual community of choice. My family, Black DC residents for five generations on each side, is an intimate part of DC’s African-American community, singing and worshipping at Mt. Zion UMC, St. Augustine’s, and St. Luke’s. We also form part of the history of Black-Jewish community cooperation in the city, back to my adoptive great grandfather Adolphus Johnson, who worked as head tailor at Kann’s Department store for many years (“Can’s” as they used to pronounce it). My mother, Antoinette Bourke, shares recollections of Jewish shop owners Rose and Herman Gerber, who ran a small store on the corner near her home at 1905 Lincoln Rd, NE. The Gerber’s and other Jewish-owned shops, like that on the corner of 10th and O St., NW, frequently extended credit to their colored* customers. In starting at Calvin Coolidge Senior High School in 1964 with classmates from the Hebrew Academy, my mother also recalls learning about Jewish culture and sharing

diverse heritages in that tense decade after desegregation. At about the same time, in the same city yet another world away, Drs Jean and Edgar Cahn were pioneering Black-Jewish cooperation, on the social and legal fronts. Both DC families, old and new, drew on the faith which had kept them going, and used that faith to inspire hope in a new generation, which took up the torch to carry on the struggle to light the lamp of cooperation across yet more communities.

*Notes:

This book will use the terms *Colored*, *Negro*, *Black*, and *African-American* interchangeably, depending on the time frame under discussion. This refers to the terms which were in use during the periods in question. Also, the term *Community Cooperation* will be defined here as institutional groups, such as religious and community-based organizations, which bring people in the aggregate together to cooperate or act together collectively, rather than simply on the individual level.

Chapter 1: Shared Oppression, Shared Cultures, Shared Resistance

Shared History Of Oppression:

“You accepted 400 years of oppression, I have just accepted three *thousand* years of oppression!”

-African-American Dr. Jean Cahn, upon converting to Judaism, by permission, E. Cahn

The rabbis say that it took one man plunging into the Sea and wading in up to his neck before the waters parted and the Children of Israel were finally able to be free. As Moses led the Hebrew slaves out of the land of Egypt, up and out of bondage, so the Negro slaves looked to their faith, even as the spiritual waters of oppression seemed to rise up to the necks of people of color, both free and enslaved. People of color formed communities in spite of the oppressive atmosphere, overcoming great prejudice to do so, as mistrusted and often denigrated Jewish citizens also had to do. From Benjamin Banneker in 1791, to Isaac Pollock in 1795, the first non-White residents of the city faced unique challenges, having to prove themselves to their White contemporaries. In 1850, abolitionists and free people of color advocated for the rights of slaves, while Captain Jonas P. Levy and the Sons of Israel fraternal members had to advocate for the rights of Jews, overlooked in our very own treaties. Just as free individuals and families of color formed connections in the Capital, as with

Georgetown businessman Moses Zachariah Booth in 1865, and the Nash and Mayo families from Virginia at the turn of the 20th century, so Jewish businessmen and families trickled into the city before and, poured in during the Civil War, as with Cantor Lansburgh from Baltimore in 1860, and the Small family at the turn of the 20th century. Thus there are multiple parallels in the ways that the Jewish and Black communities, both enslaved as well as free people of color, had to cope with life in a country where neither was recognized as fully equal by the White majority.

By the time the first Hebrew Congregation in Washington City is organizing in 1852, thus present at least as early as 1850, slave coffles are still passing at night down 7th Street. The groans of slaves from the nearby DC City Jail, long used as a federally subsidized slave pen, still echo from the corner of 4th and G, St., NW, where the first Jewish residents might have passed going about their day. Those sounds may have been particularly poignant in 1851, as the Fugitive Slave Act came in to effect. The Act stopped the slave coffles, but in exchange, required the active participation of all free citizens in the apprehension and return of runaway slaves. As they listened to the Torah being read in private homes, in store fronts along 7th street, or even in SouthWest, near the Wharf, the destination of those enchained human beings, did they recall those sounds of suffering? What conflicts might this have raised in the minds of

observant Jews? They were barely accepted themselves in this Southern city, where the community felt obliged to petition for permission to purchase a house of worship, despite the existence of St. John's and other prominent Christian houses of worship. What fear and guilt may have gone through the minds of those hearing the words of Parashat Ki Tetzei, Deuteronomy 23:16, commanding that a slave running away from a harsh master must be allowed to live wherever he wished, and not oppressed? Here in Washington, DC, the compensated emancipation, which conditionally freed slaves nine months before the Emancipation Proclamation, left many slaves waiting for freedom, continuing to hope for a Moses of their own, as Harriet Tubman was sometimes called. The well known comparison actually went both ways, as Negro slaves identified with the plight of the Hebrews enslaved in Egypt, and many Jewish families in Mississippi and other areas of the South controlled by General Grant's troops experienced a homelessness similar to their recently enslaved contemporaries. Runaway slaves crossing Union lines were known as contrabands, considered to be confiscated contraband property of war. While Jews were being expelled from their homes in areas occupied by General Grant's troops, people of color like Harriet and Louisa Jacobs in the Federal City and surrounding areas, worked to inspire hope and provide housing for the many contrabands pouring in to the Capital from the South, an ironic twist of fate in the history of these two oppressed peoples. History was not all they shared.

Shared Musical Styles: Call And Response

“I will sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously;
Horse and driver He has hurled into the sea.

² The Lord is my strength and might;
He is become my deliverance.
This is my God and I will enshrine Him;
The God of my father, and I will exalt Him.

³ The Lord, the Warrior —
Lord is His name!”

-from the JPS Tanakh Exodus 15:1-3

From the celebratory “Song of the Sea” quoted above, sung each morning at daily prayers to this day in the Orthodox and Conservative Jewish movements, to the hauntingly beautiful strains of Drok Yikra, Freedom will be Proclaimed, (Inside Cover) sung most famously on the Sabbath day by the Jews of Yemen, Jewish liturgical song has long expressed the human yearning for freedom. This yearning is shared in the well-known music of traditional Negro Spirituals, often adapted by the Civil Rights movement as Freedom Songs, replacing words to fit the situation. Both Jewish and African-American music show this need to free, and share other similarities.

Much Jewish liturgical music takes the form of Call and Response, both in and outside of the sanctuary. From the Barchu, to Ldor va Dor, the Call to

Prayer and a traditional call and response section of prayer, all the way to the frolicking “Cherie Bim Baum Bim Baum Bim Baum”, Jewish music adapts this mode of song. Likewise, the familiar spiritual turned freedom song “Woke up this Morning” springs instantly to mind as a key example of Call and Response in African-American spiritual music, sung in a variety of settings. That same back and forth structure can also be felt in the slowly building tension of a Klezmer tune, often sharing the same beat pattern as much of the music of the traditional Negro Spiritual. Rag-time, Jazz, Blues, R & B, and even rock and roll arguably come out of these shared musical structures, interwoven into the fabric of our culture. These shared cultural structures, the challenge of a call used to inspire the ringing response, function both to keep communities together, and to bind them mutually, one to another, in hope and in marching forward.

Shared Strategies: Cooperating To Resist Oppression

“Said Property shall not be sold, conveyed, granted or leased, in whole or in part, to any Hebrew ... or any person or family not of the white race. ”

-<http://depts.washington.edu/civilr/covenants.htm>...

In many ways, shared oppression can be seen as a shared mandate. Imagine listening, in the summer of the year 1860, to Parashat Re’eh being read

to the congregation. You shall not oppress the runaway slave, let alone return him to his cruel master. So what, then, could you make of the growing tensions over the Fugitive Slave Act, now nearly ten years in effect across the country, including in slave-holding Washington City and County? The slave trade had been banished in the Capital, but replaced with something perhaps worse. That Biblical mandate for freedom must have led many in the Jewish community to wonder what they could do, particularly given the history of persecution of Jews even in the United States moving forward as late as 1884 with the lynching of Leo Max Frank. Thus, shared histories led to cooperation between the two communities in a variety of ways, at first private, and later more public. The Jewish community grew in Washington, DC, opening shops and businesses, mingling with working class families, colored and white, of pre-Urban Renewal SW. With the Navy Yard as one of the very few employers in the city willing to hire based on ability alone, both communities faced difficulty in finding jobs and housing. The new railroad and streetcar suburbs of the 1880s and turn of the 20th century, advertising to “the better classes,” frequently employed racially restrictive housing covenants barring both Jews and Negroes. These shared burdens, combined with the complementing religious and labor roles of the two communities, threw their lots together while preventing the rivalries seen between colored and Irish workers, whose competition for jobs certainly contributed to the Snow Riots of 1835, the city's first race riot. Having similar

burdens while being subject to rather different cultural and ethnic constraints, it seems only natural that alliances would form between the two communities to facilitate resistance to their mutual oppression. Such alliances would inspire communities to cooperate to make positive changes for the benefit of all citizens. And cooperate they did, both in private and in public.

Chapter 2: Before Jews Were White: Black-Jewish alliances in DC Before 1948

Carnegie Library and Central Market



-Carnegie Library

Much attention has been paid to the alliance between the Black and Jewish communities as a twentieth century phenomenon, but this alliance was born long before the Holocaust. Between the Civil War and the end of the Reconstruction, the Federal City was relatively desegregated and offered some freedom of movement for people of color, but as the 1880's progressed, those freedoms were eroded. By the turn of the century, the city was firmly segregated, negatively affecting both Jews and African-Americans. With small and informal exception, the only places where citizens of differing races might mingle freely on any regular basis were Central Market, now roughly located where Archives is, at 7th and Pennsylvania Ave, NW, and the never-segregated

Carnegie Public Library. Some working class neighborhoods, such as the SW neighborhood where Al Jolson learned the speaking style he would later play on stage, allowed limited mixing. The annual Easter Monday Egg Rolling contest was, however, the only officially non-segregated social event in the city for many years. Despite this, or because of it, Washington, DC was eventually declared the most segregated city in the Union. That artificial separation of groups and classes of people, with its attendant humiliation and ambiguity for both Negroes and Jews, was shown for the disruptive force it was meant to be, and broken down in two places: the lone institution of learning where all could meet and see past their differences, and the largest market in the city, where all could meet and see their common needs for food, and other goods, as human beings.

At the turn of the century, both communities developed similar ways of evading White discrimination. Both communities built their own institutions, and both sometimes had assimilation attempts. The Jewish community took refuge in its own institutions, from the synagogues to the YMHA near 11th and Pennsylvania Ave, NW. Comparable institutions in the African-American community included churches and the 12th Street YMCA, also known as the Anthony Bowen YMCA, after a prominent free man of color who was a

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