

## **Urban Immortalities: Toward an Ethnography of Race and Spirituality among African-American Hebrews**

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In 1966, amidst race riots and related urban unrest in Chicago's poorest neighborhoods, one of that city's native sons, a 26-year-old African American named Ben Carter, received a vision from God. In a dream that he recounts today as vividly and excitedly as he did back then, God asked Ben Carter to lead His people out of the "wilderness" of 1960s America. Every Sunday morning, Carter delivered this "back-to-Africa" message atop a literal soapbox on Maxwell Street in one of the city's crowded shopping districts. Their first stop, Liberia, proved to be a temporary sojourn. That is because Ben Carter, who had been renamed Ben Ammi, claimed that African Americans were actually descendents of Ancient Hebrew Israelites from the Old Testament, which meant that Africa wasn't really their true home. So, in 1969, the African-American Hebrew Israelites moved their emigrationist experiment from West Africa to what the group calls "Northeastern Africa," the modern state of Israel. By the summer of 2004, when I first visited started conducting ethnographic research with them in the quaint and quiet desert town of Dimona, in Israel's Negev region, was surprised to learn that the initial 400 pilgrims had ballooned to several thousand, and that these African American immigrants who invoke the "Right of Return" to justify their presence in the area have established themselves as a recognizable, if quirky, segment of contemporary Israel's volatile and multicultural landscape. My talk will recount this group's little-known emigration story to make a case for how humanistic and social scientific scholarship around issues of racial identification, participatory democracy, Diaspora studies, and governmentality might be substantively reconceived in light of this group's vernacular theories about life, death, spirituality, biology, and the new global order. I will also chronicle my attempts at ethnographic research with African Americans living in southern Israel.