

OPA-LOCKA TO DIMONA

By William Rabinowitz



Opa Locka, Florida City Hall

“Sheila”, I said, walking into the family room. “Sheila?” I said again, but now more loudly.

Sheila was intently staring at the T.V. set.

“Wait a minute William! I am watching the Maury Povich show. He’s a nice Jewish boy doing good.

Look, Maury is about to open the results of the DNA test” she said pointing to the screen. “That girl there says that one of the five guys sitting on the stage with her is the father of her six month old daughter Kaneesha?”

“She doesn’t know who the father is?” I asked. “She had to have had sex with all five of them within a week! Why do you watch such slimy T.V.?”

“William, really... get a grip on things. Get into today’s world. No wonder our grandson Chandler says you live in a different century. They are going to identify the baby’s father and build a happy future marriage.” Sheila emphasized this waving the remote at me and putting it where I could not reach it, under her tush.

“Sheila, this is nothing but slimy voyeurism of people who made terrible moral choices.” She ignored my last comment.

A large manila envelope was handed to Maury on stage. The camera pulls in for a close up of Maury. Maury scans the single sheet of paper and turns to the first young man.

“Jamal,” Maury begins dramatically. “In the case of six month old Kaneesha... Jamal you are **not** the father!”

Jamal jumps up and high fives the air.

I watch with Sheila, transfixed by this.

Maury turns to the second young man. “William in the case of six month old Kaneesha, you are **not** the father”. The young man and I both let out woops of “Thank God – I told you so”, at the same moment.

Sheila looked at me annoyed. If I am not careful I might be spending the night on the couch again.

Maury walks up to the third young man sitting on the stage. His head is hanging down. He seems to sense that trouble is going to be announced for him. He knows that he and Tabatha had had an unprotected liaison. The last thing in the world he wants is to be tied to Tabatha.

Maury picks the paper up to his face and reads:

“Haysus, in the case of six month old Keneesha, you are **not** the father.”

Haysus, incredulous, rolls out of his chair onto the floor. In a single bound, he jumps up flailing his arms wildly in fisted power salutes – “I told you so” he bellowed.

Maury advances to number four. Again, he is **not** the father.

The tension on the stage is growing. A picture of baby Keneesha flashes on the jumbo-tron in back of the set. A pretty little girl in a pink dress with a bow in her hair and a broad grinning baby smile lingers on the screen. The audience groans loudly, “OH”.

Maury walks up to Ali. Ali just looks despondent. He stares at the floor.

“Ali”, Maury asks, “if you are the father of Keneesha what are you going to do”.

Ali wrings his hands. After an eternity, he finally looks up. “If that baby is mine, I am going to step up to the plate. I am going to do the right thing. If that baby is mine, I am going to be its Daddy” he declares to cheers from the audience.

Maury asks, “What does not mean?”

Ali said, "If that baby is mine, I am going to be there for it. I am going to be its Daddy and buy it things. But I ain't gonna marry Tabatha. She was only a ½ hour part of my day. Maury, man, think about it. She was with five guys that week. I ain't gonna be married to her."

The audience was silent.

Dejected, Ali stands up and faces Tabatha. She glares back at him. "I know you is the baby's father. I just knew it all along in spite of those other guys. Those other guys did not know what they were doing," she shouted at him.

Ali figured he was done for. The audience grew more hushed. No one even snapped their chewing gum. Sheila held her breath. I too stared intently with a pained heart at the drama.

Maury looks to his paper and walks between Tabatha and Ali.

"Ali, in the case of six month old Kaneesha, Ali" ...Maury let the words hang in the air for dramatic effect; it was good for the show's ratings. "Ali, in the case of six month old Kaneesha, Ali, you are **NOT** the father!" Maury reads out loudly.

Ali's head dropped. An incredulous smirky smile emerged on his face as his head bobbed back up. Tabatha runs off the stage, a camera following her. She is crying.

"I was sure he must have been the father", she wails. Maury runs after her, trying to be the consoling figure, offering her empathy. She collapses on the floor. Maury leans down with a hand on her sobbing shoulder.

"Tabatha there must have been somebody else. You made a mistake. None of the men on the show today was Kaneesha's father. If you want to identify someone else we will work with you to test them for another show, if you want," Maury says.

Shock and gasps of "Oh My God" filled the air from Ali to the audience to Sheila to me.

Sheila was transfixed. I was disgusted with the show and my own reaction to it.

A commercial came on.

"Sheila, why don't we go out for a ride today? You don't need to watch this 'drek, this crap'. I found an incredible place to visit, Opa Locka.

"Opa what?" she responded, still half distracted from the shock and daze that none of the five guys were the father.

"Opa-tisha-worka-locka", it's an area near Miami named by the Native Americans who lived here a long time ago. Long before when Miami was nothing but a mosquito infested swamp. It

means 'a big island covered with many trees and swamps'. No one can say that. The locals shortened it to Opa-locka.

Its a city built in the 1920's to look like something from the Arab world" I finished saying.

"Why would I want to go see a city built for Arabs? We saw plenty of them when we went to Israel. And remember, we couldn't even tell some of the Arabs from Jews unless they were wearing those *schmattahs* on their heads. Even then we were not sure who was a Jew and who was an Arab.

As to going with you to Opa pisha woka...whatever, forget it. Maury is having a special, best of the Maury show series for the next week. I don't want to miss an episode" she said. "He is doing a Mitzvah helping those girls find their children's fathers."

"Sheila, those are not episodes, that stuff is real". I felt a bit exasperated.

"Whatever William, why don't you call your Hassid friend Mendel? He likes that kind of stuff. He would be better company than me anyway for Opa woka'ing."

She was right of course. Sheila never did like touring to the out of the way, exotic or unusual. In all fairness, she knew I loved exploring and she knew Mendel did too.

That evening I called Mendel. He just finished his double shift at his Florida Turnpike Toll Booth. Mendel pulls doubles the whole of Christmas week. It was his way of letting his non-Jewish friends have a little extra holiday time with their families. He was due a day or two off of his choosing.

"Mendel, it's your friend from the non-religious side of the tribe. How's things going?" I spoke quickly before he could say anything. "How would you like to go see Opa Locka?"

"Opa what?" he said.

"Opa-tisha-worka-locka," it's an area named by the Native Americans who lived here a long time ago. It means "a big island covered with many trees and swamps". No one can say that so the locals shortened it to Opa-locka.

It's a city built in the 1920's to look like a Moorish City. Very historic and should be very interesting," I tacked on.

Of course Mendel always was a hard sell. I could hear his blue eyes lighting up as the word popped out of his mouth equally fast – "Sure" he said with enthusiasm.

"I love learning and discovery and adventure.

But I need to ask the manager at the Toll Booth Plaza if I can get off – say next Thursday. I also need a little time to read up on what is an Opa Locka?” Mendel concluded.

I knew what that meant. He was going to the library and search for little known facts about Opa Locka. We would have a fun afternoon sharing and bantering about Opa Locka.

My imagination played ahead. There, I would be me in my shorts, pot belly and blue AFLAC t-shirt my son gave me from his job with the large yellow duck on the back.

Mendel always dressed the same, black tennis shoes, black pants, white shirt, black keppah and his graying payyahs wrapped behind his ears. To be unconventional, he liked white shoe laces. I did not even notice his long beard anymore. I had started a small imitation of his beard a-ways back. It irritated Sheila.

“Thursday it will be, unless you tell me different Mendel.” A few more pleasantries and we hung up. Mendel was a scholarly type, I had better read up on Opa Locka.

Between Mendel and me, we would find a Jewish connection to Opa Locka.

Mendel got off on Thursday. I picked him up but Sheila made me wear a shirt with a collar and no shorts.

“William, you are not a teenager and should not dress like one.”

“Sheila, teenagers don’t wear shorts,” I retorted.

“William, you look silly in shorts and that Aflac shirt. Go change.”

O.k. it was a small compromise. Friday was only one day away. I did not want to sleep on the couch, not on Friday night of all nights.

“Oy William, Mendel smiled at me, “I see no shorts today.”

“All government, indeed every human benefit and enjoyment, every virtue, and every prudent act, is founded on compromise and barter.” Edmund Burke,” he said with a smile.

“True Mendel, true but...’*Compromise is the best and cheapest lawyer*’. Robert Louis Stevenson”, I countered.

Opa Locka is about an hour drive south from Boynton Beach. It is also to the North West of Miami.

“So Mendel, tell me” I said as we drove along. “Where did the name Opa Locka come from? It came from nothing right?”

Mendel curled his payah with his left hand and began talking with his right. It's a sort of Jewish-Italian thing to talk with your hands.

"William, why do you think so conventionally? Must something always come from something? Cannot good come from the simple act of doing good for no reason and from nothing except the desire to do good? Did not God create the world from out of nothing?" Mendel began.

Mendel had a way of making me look at things through the words of my own mouth.

"The Miccosukee Indians," Mendel continued, "lived here a long time before the first Jews came to Miami and ate their first bagel at Wolfe's Delicatessen in Miami Beach. The first Jew came to Miami in 1896, a man named Samuel Singer. Miami was a swamp with a total of maybe... 12 people. Today, millions of people live in the Miami area. Only Israel has more Jews than South Florida. The Miccosukee Indians have been living here since the early 18th century.

There are not many nouns in the Miccosukee language. When they want to name something they describe it. The Indians called the place Opa-tisha-worka-locka, a big island covered with many trees and swamps. Makes sense no?" Why use a single word that is vague when you can describe something that everyone understands? Nu?"

Opa-tisha-worka-locka became Opa Locka because it was too hard for the white people to say Opa-tisha-worka-locka.

"Love is expansion; Self is contraction" – Sri Sathya Sai Baba. He was an Indian Guru. He just died." Mendel added.

The Indians loved the land. It belonged to all of creation. The White Man sold the land. The 1920's were the years of the great Florida Land buying bubble mania. It did not end well. Mendel had a point.

"Now it's your turn William" Mendel said. "Who built Opa Locka and why?"

Mendel knew I would have studied up on this. Just the same...

"The 1920's was a great bubble of land speculation. Land, underwater or not, swamp or dry, seen and unseen was being snatched up mostly by Northern speculators and future geriatrics wanting a place in the sun along with a quick dollar," I began.

"A guy named Henry Flagler built a railroad from St. Augustine in the North all the way to Key West. It was finished in 1912. Flagler made a fortune with John D. Rockefeller in oil. When his first wife Mary was ill, he saw that the Florida weather was good for her. But there was no way to get to the South of Florida where it was never cold in the winter except by boat. He built the Florida East Coast line.

He bought land all the way down. Wherever the railroad went so did development and a Flagler hotel.

“There was a dark side though. Flagler hated Jews and refused to sell any land that he owned to Jews. They could ride his railroad for a fee but that was it. The Jews moved to Florida just the same. Jews had been part of Florida life since the 1780’s. And boy did they come now.”

The railroad made Florida boom. Miami was nothing but swamp and waste. It became almost overnight, a major economic center. Jews are not stupid. Who wants to wear a fur coat and freeze in the winter when you can spend the Holy Season, from Thanksgiving to Pesach, in the sun?

For the first time people in New York, gentile or yid, could winter in Florida by hopping on a train. A day or two later, you could *platz* in *Mechaya* land.” I grinned at Mendel.

“*I was trying to daydream, but my mind kept wandering*’, Steven Wright”. I quoted.

“*So why not stop your wandering and daydream in Florida?*”, somebody Jewish said that. I look at Mendel. It was his turn to continue the game as we drove.

“William, “To be a friend of the Everglades is not necessarily to spend time wandering around out there. Marjory Stoneman Douglas’

You still did not tell me the who and why of Opa Locka,” Mendel said.

Mendel was good. He brought it back to where we were going.

“When the South Florida land boom was going on, everyone wanted to get in on the action. Developers showed up from all over to get a piece of the easy Florida money. Everyone was building the same type of house. To be smart you need a gimmick. You need something that makes your place and your development unique and special to buyers. That is basic business.



Glenn Curtiss

Glenn Curtiss was an American entrepreneur and an aeronautical pioneer. Eventually he joined with his primary rivals in flight development the Wright brothers to form the Curtiss-Wright Corporation. By the late 1920's they were the largest manufacturer of airplanes in the world."

Mendel interrupted. "William, did you know the first test pilot for the Wright Brothers was a Jew from Washington, D.C. , Arthur Welsh. During World War II, General Hap Arnold, the great American Air Force commander said of Welsh, "He taught me all he knew or rather all that I could teach. He knew much more."

"Curtiss moved to Florida in the 20's. He bought land to develop. Curtiss could think outside of the box. Instead of building the cookie cutter style homes going up all over the place after the canal system drained the swamps, he tried something different. He built Southwestern American styled Adobe houses and buildings. Unusual huh, and right here in South Florida."

So many things were happening in America in the 1920's. The mass culture promoted by the movie business transported imagination and place. An entire genre of movies, songs and books came out glorifying the mystique of the Middle East and the Moor.

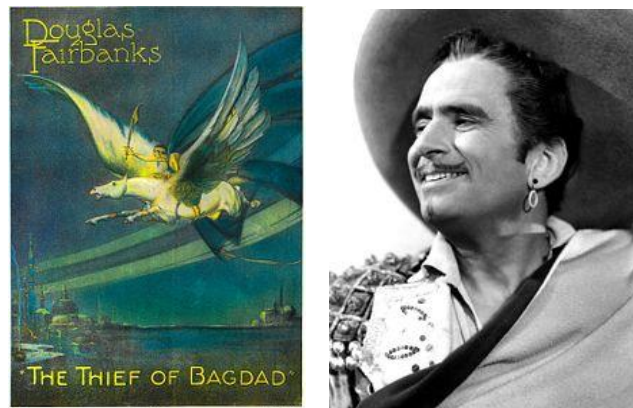


"Mendel did you know that in 1921, Rudolph Valentino starred in the blockbuster silent movie the "Sheik"? If you think women were crazy over the Beatles, Valentino and the story of the desert Sheik, romance, mystery and adventure was 20x times the Beatles. Things Arab, Muslim, Middle Eastern became the rage. The film was produced by a nice bunch of Jewish boys. Adolph Zukor and Jesse Lasky formed the Famous Players-Lasky Corporation in 1916.



Five years later Valentino starred again in a sequel the “*Son of the Sheik.*” Same story line. Like father like son.

But the really big thing was the “*Thief of Bagdad*” starring the swashbuckling screen mega-star, Douglas Fairbanks.



Douglas Elton Thomas Ullman (Fairbanks), or Doug as he was popularly and singularly known was the son of Charles Ullman from Berrysburg, Pennsylvania. His father was the fourth child of relatively well to do Jewish family.”

“So William, what are you saying? Douglas Fairbanks was Jewish, right?” Mendel asked.

“Well sort of,” I answered.

“It seems that his father married his mother, Ella Adelaide Marsh Fairbanks Wilcox, a nice Catholic girl. She became Ella Adelaide Marsh Fairbanks Wilcox Ullman.”

“Why so many names?” Mendel was puzzled.

“It’s a long story. But Ella Marsh married John Fairbanks. Fairbanks died of tuberculosis. She then married a guy named Wilcox who was an abusive alcoholic. He swindled her out of what was left of her fortune that Fairbanks did not ruin. She then married the family attorney, Charles Ullman and they had Doug.”

“Oy!” Mendel said.

“But it keeps on Mendel,” I said.

Ullman, the nice Jewish lawyer husband... he invested everything they had in mining interests in Denver and lost it all. Ullman abandoned his family, moved to New York. He was never heard from again. Ella had had enough. She changed her name back to Fairbanks. Their son, Douglas Ullman, became Douglas Fairbanks, with the family name of her first husband. I suppose you could say he was Jewish – sort of, ” I concluded.

Mendel sat quietly twisting the payah on the left side of his head and then switching to the right.

“Have to keep the curls even?” I asked him.

“In each family a story is playing itself out, and each family’s story embodies its hopes and despair, Auguste Napier”, Mendel said.

It was my turn to sit quietly.

Abandoning the wonders of South Florida primary artery, U.S. Interstate 95, the silver gateway from New York to Miami, we headed inland to Opa Locka. Being smart yids, we were prepared. I had my Garmin, Mendel had his Windows Lumia Phone with Nokia Drive and printed directions from Mapquest to the Opa Locka city hall. Between my talking Garmin lady, Mendel’s talking guy voice and talking to each other, we still made a wrong turn into Opa Locka.

Wandering down Jann Ave. we hung a left on Sinbad Ave. We knew we were in the right area but the obvious poverty, the bars in the windows and on the doors told us that this was not an upscale neighborhood. Opa Locka was a very poor black and hispanic community.

We turned on Sherazad Blvd., a quarter mile up and there it was. It was something from out of the another world, far from America. A large yellow painted building, with minarets, pink cupolas, crenolated walls, Moorish surroundings, was just there! It stunned us. No where in the U.S. did a muzzén’s perch, to call the Muslim faithful to prayer, sit over a city hall.



We parked in the adjacent lot and got out to gawk. There was me, a upper middle aged pot bellied picture snapper and his Hasidic, kephah wearing, tzit-tzit hanging, side kick.

“A place for everything, everything in its place- Benjamin Franklin”, I said.

Mendel looked straight up at the minarets. *“You know how Opa Locka came about?”* he asked.

I knew he knew. He had been reading up.

Mendel began with a sly smirk.

“The future destiny of a child is always the work of the mother. Napoleon Bonaparte.”

“Curtis liked to bounce ideas off his mother. She listened with a feigned seriousness that only a mother could. Curtiss rambled from thought to thought.

‘Should I continue my Western American themes? Should I build more Pueblo projects on my Florida land?’ he murmured.

“William, his thoughts seemed to center on the popular Moorish movie genre. It was his mother. It was his mother who said it sounds like ‘A dream from the Arabian Nights.’

The next day Curtiss sent a copy of a handsomely illustrated volume of *‘The One Thousand and one Tales’*, we know it as the *Tales of the Arabian Nights*, to his architect, Bernahrd E. Muller.

There was a note enclosed with the book. It said *‘this is what I want Opa Locka to be like!’*

“If you dream it, it need not be a dream”, Theodor Herzl, I said.

Mendel did not comment. He continued.

“Muller was excited by the freeing architectural possibilities of what became known as Moorish Revival architecture for South Florida. He ran with the idea. Opa Locka is the largest “Moorish” looking city in the Western Hemisphere.

“The largest Muslim populated city in the U.S. is Dearborn, Michigan”, I said.

Again, Mendel did not comment.

“You know the childhood stories of Aladdin’s Wonderful Lamp, Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, and the Seven Voyages of Sinbad the Sailor?” Mendel asked.

“I remember sneaking a copy to read under my desk while Rabbi Fischel droned on week after week in Hebrew class why we should only marry Jewish girls. He never said why only that we must,” I said, wryly thinking of Sheila.

“Muller designed an entire city for Curtiss. It had everything from municipal buildings to swimming pools, an archery range, housing and businesses centers all in the Moorish style. Many of the building here are on the National Registry of Historic Places.” Mendel said.



Hurt office building



Railway Station

“But the dream ended in a natural disaster” I added. “The Hurricane of 1926 devastated South Florida. It violently ended the Florida Land bubble craze and many dreams.”

Mendel said nothing. He had stopped to look at a sign. I caught up to him and joined him to stare at the sign.

“No If, Ands or Butts...”



“It’s the City Law!”

“Oy!” We exasperated together. We had both seen Channel 7 news last night.

“Mendel, that was on the new last night,” I said.

“Yes”, Mendel said but he was pensive.

“Mendel,” I continued excitedly. “This was the story at 6:30. A Jewish woman, Sarah Blumengarten, came here protesting the city’s new law requiring young men to pull their pants up. It is some sort of dress statement for teenage boys to walk around with their pants half way down and show the world their underwear and butts.”

Mendel did not comment. Sort of unusual for him not to say anything, I thought. He seemed sad.

“You know Mendel, this woman, a rich middle aged Jewish woman in her late forties from the white condo and beach side world of Aventura, about five miles east from here, is protesting the city’s effort to keep the boy’s pants up. She says it is a right of free speech and artistic expression. She, with the American Civil Liberties Union in tow, is screaming this is racism. Can you imagine? She and the American Civil Liberties Union have teamed up.”

“I saw her and her three minutes on TV,” Mendel said quietly.

Jumping in I continued, “She showed up, with TV cameras and paraded around, right there down the street next to the second hand thrift shops across from the Public Assistance and Health office. She was wearing designer jeans and a pair of men’s boxer shorts pulled high and modestly above her belt line. Her pants certainly were not around her knees. She certainly was not showing any part where *God had split her*. She strutted in front of Opa Locka’s police, quite modestly attired with her designer sunglasses pulled back on her dark colored coiffed hair to cover her gray, hoping to be arrested. I actually remember the headline:

‘Jewish mother from Aventura is sagging her pants in protest of a racist law in Opa Locka, Florida making it illegal to sag your pants.’

She has got to be kidding... those low cut stylish pants that all the nice young white women wear with their “divides” showing when they sit or bend over like a plumber’s show it all, is much worse. If you said anything to them they would be embarrassed and angry that you saw, or looked, period. I can’t figure why showing off their butts is so important. But then I really can’t figure out why young girls, even little girls, wear those pink sweat pants with the word **PINK** or **Juicy** in bright, extra large letters printed on their derrieres deliberately drawing people’s eyes to their bottoms.

So why do they do it or let it show? I would never let my daughter out of the house with a public advertisement on her bottom," I concluded with a self-moral congratulatory high note and a shrug.

Mendel had been quiet as I ranted. But now he opened up.

"With all the problems here for this small, poor Black community...they struggle, daily, with drugs, moral decay, poverty, crime and economic distress, a Jewish woman finds the efforts of a Black city council to create standards of decency the only thing she can contribute to help make this place better to raise children...and then she runs back to Aventura.

You know, if a group of young Black men hung out in front of her condo with their baseball caps on sideways and their pants hanging down around their knees, making pseudo gang-land hand gestures, swaggering in front of her plastic potted plant security doors, would she still think it racist to protest their presence in her neighborhood? Or is it just o.k. to protest here in Opa Locka because she can leave at night? Is this the fight that a Jew should pick to make the world better?" Mendel said it with a quiet but powerful disgust.

"Respect for ourselves guides our morals; respect for others guides our manners," Laurence Sterne, he added sadly.

"Torah teaches us this. I guess she never learned much Torah."

It was my turn to be quiet.

"You know William, even President Obama commented on the great sagging pants national crisis" Mendel said with tinged sarcasm.

The President was being interviewed by a Black journalist. The interviewer wore a huge two foot high Afro Cap covering his dreadlocks. They did not speak about the unwed mother crisis in the Black community, they did not speak about Black unemployment, drugs, poverty and despair, but instead they spoke about sagging pants. The President said he does not think there should be a law but then he does not think that form of Black expression is proper either.

The journalist agreed and said he was not going to show his underpants. It would not have been respectful to the President he said.

"Choose your battles wisely. After all, life isn't measured by how many times you stood up to fight. It's not winning battles that makes you happy, but it's how many times you turned away and chose to look into a better direction. Life is too short to spend it on warring. Fight only the most, most, most important ones. Let the rest go." C. Joy Bell.

How Mendel remembers so many different quotes amazes me.

The best I could come back with was, *“don’t sweat the small stuff.”*

Somehow the Jewish lady from Aventura and the American Civil Liberties Union think pants hanging around somebody’s knees is the big stuff that will make or break America. This is the line in the sand they are willing to fight over.

The city is being taken to court. They must spend their precious, limited resources, pay lawyers to defend their right to make their own laws, for their own community and their own children.

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The inside courtyard of the Opa Locka city hall was a contrast of Moorish styles and Christmas themed decorations. It was Christmas after all.

Contrast upon Contrast...we both knew a very dark part of Opa Locka’s history. It was at the Opa Locka airport that the 9/11 Muslim Terrorists practiced flying on simulators before crashing real planes into New York and Washington to kill.



The Opa Locka Christmas Tree

We wandered down Opa Locka Boulevard. The subject of Jews and Opa Locka came up again. How could it not with that B’Nai Brith truck sitting right in front of us near the Ali Baba intersection.



B’Nai Brith-Opa Locka

“Mendel,” I said. “I have something for you. Have you heard of Yahweh?”

“Yahweh? ... you mean how the non-tribe tries to pronounce the Hebrew letters for God’s name, yud, hey, vav, hey? They only succeeded in mispronouncing the Holy One, whose name we do not pronounce out of respect. Why do you ask?” Mendel looked at me curiously.

“Well, I too was reading a little. I was reading that the Yahwehs were here in Opa Locka. Their leader was a Black Hebrew supremacist, a racist from Miami. His name was Yahweh ben Yahweh,” I said.

Mendel looked at me with an incredulous smile. “He was a Black Hebrew racist and his name means God the son of God?” Mendel asked?

“Yup,” I said, “sort of”

“Yahweh ben Yahweh was the name Hulon Mitchell Jr. took for himself. He was the founder and leader of the Nation of Yahweh, a Black supremacist religious movement. Yahweh started out in Liberty City, Florida in 1979. He taught that all the prophets of the Bible were Black. Blacks were the true chosen people not the Jews. He regularly preached to his followers, and there were followers, that Whites, and Jews in particular, were infidels and oppressors. Only through absolute loyalty to him, could true knowledge, true history, and the true redeeming path for Black people be realized. He demanded that his followers accept his as the living Messiah of the Nation of Yahweh.

There were a couple of problems though. He was repeatedly involved with the law. Yahweh was convicted of conspiring to murder White people as an initiation rite into his faith. He allegedly required something about cutting off the ear of a murdered White person for proof. The second big problem he had being the Messiah was that he died of prostate cancer in 2007.

Yahweh was not always considered bad by the media. Even the mayor of Miami, just a month before Yahweh’s *legal issues* came out, declared a Yahweh ben Yahweh day. He did a lot of charitable things for the Black community.”

Mendel just groaned.

“In Opa Locka, members of his Nation took over an apartment building and tried to evict the Black tenants. Two of the tenants objected. They were shot dead. I don’t think anyone was ever convicted.

Reading about Yahweh ben Yahweh, I learned there is a whole history of Blacks who believe they are the real Jews.” I said.

Mendel stopped in mid stride, grabbed a payyah to twist.

“William, if we are not the real Jews, then for the past 2,000 years of oppression and anti-Semitism, the Holocaust... you mean that the goyim have been going after the wrong *Jews* all this time?” He made little quotation marks in the air as he said the word, *Jews*.

“A man is his own easiest dupe, for what he wishes to be true he generally believes to be true,” Demosthenes, Mendel quoted.

I wasn’t sure if he was serious or not but I continued.

“It all began in Kansas,” I said.

“William Saunders Crowdy was a former slave, a Union Army veteran and a railroad cook when he arrived in Lawrence Kansas in 1896. He said he had had revelations from God. God guided him to the true religious path for Black people. Black people were the true Israelites. They were the true descendents of Abraham. They were the true Jews.

Crowdy founded the Church of God and Saints of Christ. They do not believe in Jesus as the Messiah but rather that he was a prophet. You might say that Crowdy was the father of Black Judaism. Crowdy’s movement grew to the tens of thousands, then splintered and declined. There are still quite a few small, Black Hebrew churches in the U.S. who believe it is they who are the true direct link to the Biblical times. They wear kippahs, practice kashrut, or vegetarianisms, go to “church” on Saturday, circumcise their sons, pray in Hebrew and English with the sounds of African drums guiding the ceremony and observe traditional Jewish Holy Days, such as Pesach, Rosh Hashanah and Chanukah. Some call their religious leaders, Rabbis,” I said.



Church of God and Saints of Christ in Washington, D.C.

Mendel looked at me with a gleam in his eye. His payyah was almost a rounded knot.

“Ok, I have one better for you,” Mendel continued.

“Michele Obama, the First Lady, her first cousin, once removed, is Rabbi Capers C. Funnye Jr. of Chicago’s Beth Shalom B’nai Zaken Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation. The Chicago Board of Rabbis and the Liberal Jewish community accepts him as a Rabbi. Beth Shalom B’nai Zaken Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation worshipers purchased the former Lithuanian Ashkenazi synagogue on the South Side. ”

Now it was my turn to be amazed.

“Did he ever graduate from a Yeshivah or get smicha?” I asked.

“Well, sort of,” Mendel answered. “He has the title of Rabbi from the International Israelite Board of Rabbis.”

“Are they mainstream Jews?” I asked.

“No, they are not recognized by the Jewish mainstream or the Rabbis in Israel as being Jewish. They created their own seminary and leadership for the American Black Hebrew movement,” he answered.

“Then they are not Jews,” I asked.

“No they are not,” Mendel said.

“Didn’t David Ben Gurion say, when asked who is a Jew, *‘anyone crazy enough to say they are a Jew, must be a Jew.’*” I countered. “Wasn’t there a bitter struggle with the Israeli Rabbinate to get them to admit that the Ethiopian Jews brought to Israel under the right of return were in fact Jews?”

No one questioned the Russian Jewish immigration to Israel if they were in fact Jews. Everyone blinked. Is it because they were white?

There are separate chief Rabbis in Israel, one for the Sephardim and one for the Ashkenazim. They barely recognize each other as legitimate.”

Now it was Mendel who was a bit uncomfortable.

“As a matter of fact Mendel, there is a large community of American Black Hebrews who live in Dimona. They have been there for forty years. I saw a picture in the Jewish Journal of Shimon Peres, the President of Israel, celebrating his 85th birthday with their community and their religious leader Ben Ammi ben-Israel. Of course Ben Ammi ben Israel was not his real name. His given name was Ben Carter from Chicago. He too had a religious experience. The Angel Gabriel told him to bring the American Black people home to Israel. He came in 1969 on a temporary visa and stayed. There are thousands of American Black Hebrews in Israel. Some

are now Israeli citizens. Becoming citizens was a struggle for them. Their sons and daughters serve in the army. They speak Hebrew and are accepted by Israeli society as Israelis.

The mayor of Dimona is proud of their accomplishments and contributions to Dimona's life. They even established a vegetarian spa and resort in Dimona, "The Village of Peace."

"But not as Jews," Mendel said.

He was right. They were in every way Israelis. They had chosen to link their fate and the fate of their children to the Land and to the Jewish people. But the Rabbis, neither Sephardic nor Ashkenazi, recognize them as Jews.

Mendel and my relationship has always been easy, but this was getting a bit tense. We had to take a break.

"My father never lived to see his dream come true of an all Yiddish speaking Canada' – David Steinberg", I added with a smile.

Mendel picked up the tone shift.

"I once wanted to become an atheist but I gave up...they have no holidays,' Henny Youngman".

"Mendel, how would you like to go see the oldest building in the Western Hemisphere? It is right here in Florida."

"How old is old?" Mendel asked.

"Eight hundred years old," I answered.

"You're kidding right?" Mendel asked.

"No, seriously... It is about ten miles away in North Miami Beach. It is a monastery from Spain that William Randolph Hearst bought. He disassembled it and brought it to South Florida. It was a real monastery. It has Chapels, Christian art work, even a cloister and gardens for the monks. Today it is part of the Episcopal Church. They have weddings there.



The Spanish Mission

Wanna go see it?" I asked.

Mendel paused. "It's been a long day William, let's pass on that."

We climbed back into the car and headed north on 95 hanging a right past the Chabbad International Educational Center, a few miles outside of Opa Locka.

It was a long day. Though both of us were members of the Tribe and very close friends, there were distances between us that are not easily bridged.

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