

International Israelite Board of Rabbis, Inc.

189-31 Linden Blvd. Saint Albans, NY 11412
(718) 712-4646 / (773) 476-2924

Rabbi Sholomo B. Levy
President

Rabbi Capers C. Funnye
Vice President

Rabbi Baruch A. Yehudah
Executive Secretary

Israelite Unity Charter

Draft #1

*All constructive suggestions on this draft are welcome

In 1963 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. and told the world, "I Have A Dream." The vision he articulated was one of unity between all races and religions. We, too, share that dream; but just as Dr. King founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957 to unify black churches across the South, we also recognized the need to unify black synagogues so that we may be more effective partners and leaders in the struggle to repair the world.

The dream of Israelite unity goes back at least to 1919 when Chief Rabbi W.A. Matthew founded the Commandment Keepers Congregation in Harlem, New York. Rabbi Matthew had the number "1" painted on the door. This was to signify that this congregation was to be the first in a long series. He dreamed of a day when there would be hundreds of black synagogues across the United States, Caribbean, and Africa. In 1925 he founded a school that eventually became the Israelite Rabbinical Academy. The purpose of this institution was to train the black rabbis who were needed to teach the scattered exiles about the God of Israel and create congregations in various locations. These black rabbis established synagogues in major population centers like New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia. Initially, the bond that held the community together was the strong loyalty these rabbis felt toward their teacher. Their relationships were formalized with the creation of the International Israelite Board of Rabbis. It took responsibility for maintaining the academy and provided an organizational structure in which the leaders could communicate, discuss theological matters, and occasionally host conventions that were open to the entire community.

The need for more formal association was always obvious and frequently called for in speeches and letters. The attempts by other groups and individuals to unite the congregations failed for many reasons. Most lacked the stamina to continue a process that will take many years. Other

initiatives failed to resolve theological and cultural differences that make each congregation unique. While such diversity can be a strength, in the absence of a governing structure it usually leads to fragmentation over time. Another impediment to broader unity is the fact that most synagogues are fiercely autonomous. We admire the organizational structure of other religious groups such as the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform denominations within Judaism and similar Christian denominations such as the Catholic Church, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME), the Church of God, etc. On the one hand we know that growth and even survival ultimately depend on adopting a similar structure for ourselves. Yet, the fear of losing power and personal animosities and rivalries have all combined to prevent the unity we all desire from becoming a reality.

In August of 2012 the International Israelite Board of Rabbis voted unanimously to strengthen the links between our congregations. We were all aware of the problems that have blocked these attempts in the past. Yet, we realized that the enormity of the task was not a sufficient reason from shrinking from the responsibility of trying. Moreover, we recognized that maintaining the status quo was not an acceptable option. Our current arrangement is vulnerable because it is based solely on personal relationships between rabbis and their relationships to the lay leaders of congregations. These fragile bonds are a serious weakness and major impediment to our ability to move forward. The loss of a respected leader could cause the connections between that person and several congregations to disintegrate. On the other hand, we hope that the record of dedicated and righteous leadership that has been provided by all the generations of rabbis that preceded us and continued by the honorable rabbis currently serving, will inspire the majority of committed individuals in our community to strongly support this last best effort for unity.

We live in an increasingly cynical world in which people are less trusting of religious, political, and civic leaders. Divorce is higher, fewer young people even enter into marriage because they are so pessimistic about maintaining lasting relationships, attendance at places of worship is declining nationally--expect at mega churches were people can be unattached and unknown among the masses of people. Even in the work place where people are motivated by economic gain, employers feel little loyalty to their employees and workers will quickly abandon one job for another if they can make a dollar more somewhere else. Notions like character, responsibility, community,

and heritage seem to be losing their value--even among our young people who are growing up having virtual online friends rather than real friends. They live in places like facebook rather than face to face. The joy of real spiritual ecstasy that comes through prayer and worship is being replaced by immediate and temporary forms of satisfaction. And the commitment of time required from youth to learn how to appreciate the sublime in the divine is missing as few people who know it are able to share this gift with those who need it. In short, people who live in a society of individuals find it increasing difficult to bond with others in any meaning and lasting way. These depressing trends make the need for unity now more urgent.

Take courage in the knowledge that we, as a people, have survived challenges greater than the ones we face. The prophet Isaiah lived during a similar period of societal decline. He advised the faithful to "Take counsel **together**, and it shall come to nought; speak the word, and it shall not stand: for God is with us." Isaiah 8:10 Only a fool would attempt to go through this storm alone as an isolated individual or as a separate congregation. The Torah tells us that after the death of Moses the Children of Israel entered the promised land and began to segregate themselves into tribes that did not protect, defend, or care for each other. Judah believed that because it was larger than the others it could survive alone. They did nothing as ten of the "lost tribes" were carried away into captivity. When the Babylonians came for Judah they had no one to call for help. We must not repeat the mistakes of the past.

How shall we deal with the problems caused by diversity? We must once again use Torah as a guide. After giving us the law Hashem told us "You shall no longer conduct yourselves as you do this day, every man whatsoever is right in his own eyes." Deut 12:8 Before the Torah each person decided for himself what was right and wrong. After the Torah Hashem said that you shall appoint judges to interpret the law and decide matters of communal importance. The Israelite Board of Rabbis is the only institution in our community that has maintained and operated a Bet Din. It is the only forum where trained rabbis meet regularly to discuss, debate, and rule on Torah matters. Yet, without a formal relationship between the rabbis and the congregations there is no mechanism by which such decisions are announced or enforced. History tells us that there were other times, after the giving the Torah, where Israelites refused to accept this judicial court. In fact, in the book of Judges it describes a wicked period in which our people reverted to the practice of "every man doing

what was right in his own eyes." Judges 17:6 This is the situation that we have today. It is the Wild West of Torah, custom, and traditions. Congregations do whatever they want. During the time of Jehoshaphat God said, "I did see all Israel scattered upon the mountains, as sheep that have no shepherd." 2 Chron 18:16 This describes our predicament today. Many of us are running around like "sheep without a shepherd."

What role will elders, learned women, and interested lay people have in running this unified community? This is a very important question. The first thing for the public to know is that the International Israelite Board of Rabbis is a democratically run organization. All officers are elected by their peers for fixed terms. Any duly ordained rabbi may apply for membership. In recent years the Board has debated accepting applications for female rabbis who meet all other requirements for rabbinic service. A majority of our Board is in favor of admitting qualified female rabbis. However, changing our by-laws in this manner would require a two-thirds majority which has not been reached. We believe that there should be overwhelming support on our Board before such a change occurred to ensure that there is a consensus that would not led to further divisions. Moreover, women have served as professors in our Academy for well over fifty years and continue to serve as trusted advisers and counselors on all important matters.

In an effort to bring about more inclusion, we have divided the jurisdiction of the Board into two parts: (A) Theological matters related to Torah, customs, and traditions and (B) Education, health, and the general wellbeing of our community. The rabbis will continue to decide theological matters with input from all interested persons. In addition, the Board will hold public forums to actively solicit the opinions of members of our community. All other matters pertaining to education, health, and the general wellbeing of our community will be decided by our **Vision Counsel**. This body is open to everyone. We expect the Vision Counsel to include the president of every congregation, the leaders of Israelite organizations (morehs, kohens, chiefs), as well as men and women of all ages who have something to contribute regardless of title. Such matters as when and where to open a new congregation, addressing the needs of our seniors, providing support for our youth, assisting families in need, and sponsoring community events will fall within the purview of the Vision Counsel. We see this as an expansion of the Board--not creating a separate or inferior organization. We will work together as one. Rabbis will serve on the Vision Counsel and some

members of the Vision Counsel will be rabbis. This constitutes a sensible division of labor where all interests are protected and everyone is included.

In the wilderness God asked the Children of Israel to build a Tabernacle. Hashem specified that the Levites shall be priests, but that did not mean that everyone else was excluded from building God's house. As it is written, "they came everyone whose heart stirred him up, and everyone whom his spirit made willing." Exodus 35:21. The Torah highlights the contributions of those who were not priests like a person from the tribe of Judah named Bezalel who was a skilled goldsmith and silversmith who made vessels for the Tabernacle or Aholiav, who was of the tribe of Dan. He was a man who was a skilled embroiderer and gifted to work with fabrics. God has given each of us skills and talents that we should willingly devote to His service. Let not the carpenter say "I want to sing" if he has no voice; nor should the blacksmith say "I want to cook" if he has no taste. Instead, if you care about this community say, "I have two hands, how can I help?"

What tangible benefits will charter member congregations receive?

1. **Recognition of the Israelite denomination.** At present when asked if we are Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform most of us reply "None of the above. We are Israelites." Until now the term "Israelite" has not been defined. We have not had one organization that we could say represents most of us. Now we can. We will be able to identify congregations throughout United States, South Africa, Uganda, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Ghana, the Caribbean, Israel, and South America, and whosoever we have been scattered and found. These are my people. My congregation is one of them.

2. **A Rabbinic Court or Bet Din.** The Torah requires us to appoint judges and officers within our gates to decide important matters. We cannot function as a self-governing people if we do not have a judicial body to decide religious matters. Every Jewish, Christian, and Muslim denomination has such a body. We must have our own.

3. **Israelite Rabbinical Academy.** This is the oldest educational institution in our community. Most black rabbis in America and most black synagogues were founded and are led by graduates of this

school. Its mission is to train and ordain the future rabbis and teachers who will lead our community. In order to send a student to the Academy for training or to have one of our rabbis conduct services, that congregation should be a charter member. This is both a responsibility and a privilege.

4. **Rabbinic Services.** At some point every congregation needs a rabbi to perform a wedding, bar mitzvah, or funeral. Most rabbis also conduct services for High Holidays and Shabbat. We issue certificates of Shuvah (Return or Conversion). We also provide counseling, visitation, and representation of us to the world. In the past we have provided these services and congregations have reciprocated. Now we seek to formalize this relationship so that we serve those who support us and those who support us are properly served.

5. **The Blessing of a Unified Minhag (Tradition).** Charter member congregations will, for the first time, define what constitutes Israelite customs, traditions, and beliefs. This will be based on **our** interpretation of Torah, Talmud, Halacha, History, and Traditions that have developed within our community. We do not expect that there will be absolute uniformity (no should there be), but there will be definite parameters that define the boundaries of accepted Israelite practice. These things will certainly include the monotheistic belief in the oneness and indivisibility of the Creator. They will exclude beliefs and practices such as the use of the "New Testament," Christology, Sundays as Sabbath and things deemed by us to be incompatible with who we are as a biblical people living in a modern age.

6. **Creation of an Israelite Siddur.** Once our minhagim is properly defined we can publish, for the first time, a siddur that contains the prayers and songs used by our community. This book will be beautifully printed in Hebrew and English. It will contain some universal elements and some prayers and songs that are unique to us. For instance, in addition to prayers to remember those killed in the Holocaust, there will be services to remember those lost in the Middle Passage and additional supplications for the speedy return of those still in exile.

7. **Group Burial Plans and Life Insurance.** We have done this successfully in the past, which is why you find Israelites for different periods and congregations buried together in several cemeteries. Charter congregations will be able to sell burial plots to their members at discount group rates.

8. Financial Assistance. Through congregational dues and a variety of fund raising efforts, together we can generate revenue and direct those resources to where they are most needed or best invested. For instance, creating a synagogue in a city where one does not already exist or helping to save a congregation that is in danger of extinction. Eventually, this is how we will build our own nursing homes or day schools. They will be collective rather than the work of any one congregation.

A number of public forums will be held around the country to discuss ways of improving and implementing the Israelite Unity Charter. The first will coincide with the annual commemoration of the life of Chief Rabbi Levi Ben Levy. It is very appropriate that the theme of that program be "Achieving Unity in the Israelite Community." We will use his life and activities in this area as an example to help guide us in our current endeavor.

**Sunday February 17
Beth Elohim Hebrew Congregation
189-31 Linden Blvd
1:00 Discussion 3:00 Presentation**

With Torah Blessings:

Rabbi Sholomo Ben Levy
International President

Rabbi Capers C. Funnye
International Vice President

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