

Maya Angelou Knew Us
by
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Most of us have our favorite poem by Maya Angelou. “The Calling of Names” resonates most strongly for me because in it Dr. Angelou uses the poetry of names to trace the spiritual development of Black people over time. The poem progresses from the lowest, most degrading term “nigger” and evolves in stages from “colored” to “Negro.” In the third stanza she described the “next big step” was going from calling ourselves Negro to “*being a Jew.*”

The Calling of Names (excerpt)

He went to being called a colored man
after answering to ‘hey nigger.’
Now that’s a big jump,
anyway you figger.
 Hey, Baby, watch my smoke.
From colored man to Negro,
With the N in caps,
was like saying Japanese
instead of saying Japs.
 I mean, during the war,
The next big step
was a change for true,
From Negro in caps
to being a Jew.¹

This poem was published in Angelou’s first volume of poetry, *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water ‘fore I Diie* (1971). It was probably written during the 1960s when Angelou lived in Harlem and was an active member of the Harlem Writers Guild, which included James Baldwin and Langston Hughes—whose work also referenced Black Jews. Most significantly, Dr. Yosef ben-Jochannan, himself a Black Jew, and author of the book *We the Black Jews*, was a prominent historian in this tightknit cadre of intellectuals.²

Not only did Angelou interact with Black Jews in Harlem, during the 1950s she lived briefly in Israel where she taught modern dance at the Habima Theater (the national theater of

¹ Maya Angelou, *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*, 1 edition (New York: Random House, 1994), 46.

² “Angelou, Maya.” Henry Louis Gates and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *African American Lives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 26–27. In this article I described Angelou’s life and work in greater detail.

Israel).³ In 1961 she moved to Egypt with her second husband, Vusumzi Make. There she visited the pyramids and museums that accurately depicted the black faces of the pharaohs and the slaves that she read about in Exodus. In 1963, Angelou moved to Ghana where she became a close friend of Malcolm X soon after he separated from the Nation of Islam. During this period of her life Angelou was deeply immersed in a world of Black artists, teachers, and leaders who understood that the Jews of the Bible were Black people. They took great pride in the Black origins of Judaism as the basis for their own Christian or Islamic faith.

The theme of changing names, which is the title of this poem, was central to the search for identity that occupied the minds of Black people dating back at least to the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920 when leaders such as Marcus Garvey proposed “Ethiopian” as an alternative to Negro or Colored. It was during this period that Rabbi Arnold Josiah Ford and Rabbi W.A. Matthew embraced the term “Black Jews” and started the first black synagogues in Harlem.

They used the term “Jew” with a unique historical understanding—one which began with Black people and now includes people of all races. In the 1970s, many Black Jews believed that the term Hebrew or Israelite more precisely connected them to their Black Biblical past than the term “Jew,” which described a white ethnic group who share the same faith of their Black progenitors. Like Maya Angelou, Israelite leaders wrote poems and songs that expressed how discovering their true identity required a change of name. One of the most popular of these Israelite compositions was written by Cohen Lewi Yisrael and is called “What’s My Name?” The lyric takes the listener through the history of Black people from slavery to the present by creating powerful mental images of our physical and spirit journey. The question: “What’s my name?” is a refrain repeated throughout the song. The coda is the response or answer: “Israel. Israel is my name!” This song is sung at Black synagogues around the world. The attached link provides a video of Rabbi Baruch Yehudah performing his moving and soulful rendition of [“What’s My Name?”](#)

Angelou felt a closeness with the Jewish people throughout her life. In an interview with Oprah in 2000 Angelou described herself as being a “Jewish woman” among other identities.⁴ She condemned anti-Semitism consistently and without prompting along with all forms of racism and intolerance. She had a deep and genuine sympathy for the suffering of European Jews during World War II. Her commitment was so great that in 2001 President Bill Clinton appointed her to the board of the U.S. Holocaust Museum. She later used passages from her book *I know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), to narrate a documentary about the Holocaust called [“As Seen Through These Eyes”](#). Judaic themes speckle Angelou’s literary oeuvre. Sometimes these Jewish references were explicit as in the poem “The Calling of Names” or in “Bar Mitzvah Ben Lear,” an ode Angelou wrote for her nephew in which she described him studying the Torah and reading the words of the ancient prophets. Indeed, Maya Angelou knew us so well because she knew herself and her people.

³ Chelsea Brasted, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune, “Reflecting on Maya Angelou, Who Died on Wednesday at 86,” *NOLA.com*, May 28, 2014, http://www.nola.com/living/baton-rouge/index.ssf/2014/05/maya_angelou_dies_at_86_reflec.html. In Hebrew the word “Habima” means “the stage or platform.” In synagogues the pulpit is called the bima. It is likely that Angelou first arrived in Israel when she was part of the cast of *Porgy and Bess* by George Gershwin during its international tour.

⁴ “6 Jewish Memories of Maya Angelou – Forward Thinking,” *The Jewish Daily Forward*, accessed June 11, 2014, <http://blogs.forward.com/forward-thinking/199067/-jewish-memories-of-maya-angelou/>. The full quotation was “That’s right—all of my history as an African-American woman, as a Jewish woman, as a Muslim woman. I’m bringing everything I ever knew [and all the stories I’ve read]—everything good, strong, kind and powerful.” Elsewhere she described herself as “trying to be a Christian” in the sense of living up to the tenets of her faith.