

## Book Reviews

*Chai-Me.* Tamar Manasseh.

Chicago: Createspace

Publishing, 2012. 138 pp.

Reviewed by S.B. Levy

July 3, 2012

A new and promising writer has emerged on the literary scene. Her name is Tamar Manasseh and her first book is a very engaging memoir entitled *Chai-Me: My Exploration of Race, Religion, and Spirituality in America*. The book invites comparison to such classics as Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Richard Wright's *Black Boy* in that it casts a light on the joys and challenges of being a person of color in a world that views life primarily through the monochromatic lens of white Christian society. What distinguishes this book within the genre of African American literature and from the canon of Jewish autobiography in general—both of which draw frequently on themes of marginalization and estrangement—is that Manasseh tells her story from the perspective of a woman who is both black and Jewish.

Refreshingly, Manasseh's book avoids the sense of victimization or cultural confusion that characterizes the work of many authors who write about straddling the fence of multiple identities. Although she vividly describes incidents of racism, anti-Semitism, and sexism, Manasseh does not feel cursed by God for making her a black, Jewish, woman; on the contrary, she feels thrice blessed. She finds harmony and celebrates the beauty of each aspect of her being, rather than regarding them as inherently contradictory elements that can only be held together by denying or subordinating her race, religion, or gender. And while the focus of the book is the interplay of these characteristics, she does not sacrifice the art of telling a good story for bland truth-telling or dry sociological discourse. Here is an example of how wonderfully her prose and ideas flow together:

They would approach me with this question like we were running some kind of covert secret military operation. I'd be walking to my car in the parking lot and a parent would pop out from between the cars, or they might follow me to the neighborhood gas station or grocery store to question me. It was done this way because I was not the black parent that other black parents wanted the white parents and faculty to see them talking to. I was black, but I wasn't like them either. I didn't have a college degree at that time, I was young, much younger than the other parents, I had just made 25, although I looked five years younger than that. I didn't drive a minivan or an SUV; I had a two-door sports coupe. I didn't wear Dockers and penny loafers with a natural hairdo. I was hood and they weren't, or at least they tried their best not to show it, but I was something else they weren't: a Jew. They had trouble understanding. They, educated black people, would ask me question like: Is their father Jewish? Are they adopted? Or my favorite, when did you convert? I felt sorry for them. These were people who were by society's standards successful. They were doctors, lawyers, and some

even taught at colleges and universities, but they had no idea that there was such a thing as black Jews.

Manasseh writes from the point of view of an Israelite (a term many black Jews prefer because it does not connote a white European ethnic group) who grew up in a community of Black Jews in Chicago even while attending and then sending her children to white Jewish day schools. This is a heroic story of a women who is comfortable in her own skin. She is fiercely proud of the complexity of her identity and describes with great wit, humor, and profound insight the process of making a place for yourself in the world as opposed to merely fitting into one of the existing pigeonholes. This was the first book about black Jews that I, as a black Jew, could identify with. In contrast to other books by people whose journey to Judaism was the result of a bi-racial marriage, such as Rebecca Walker's<sup>1</sup> *Black, White, and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self* (2001), or the consequence of a long search for identity, as in the case of Julius Lester's<sup>2</sup> *Lovesong: Becoming a Jew* (1988) and more recently Marcus Hardie's<sup>3</sup> *Black and Bulletproof: An African American Warrior in the Israeli Army* (2010). In these narratives the authors were searching to find themselves; there was something incomplete or unsettled, a void that Judaism filled.

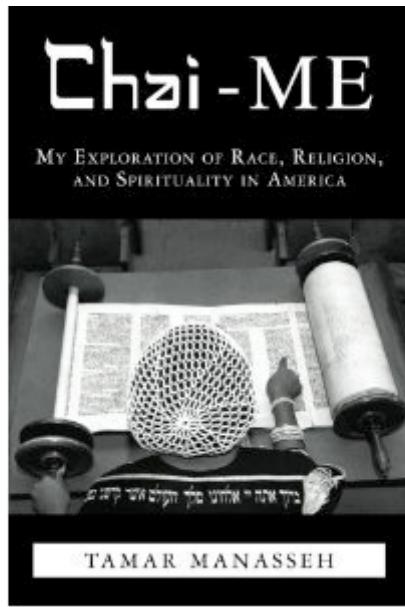
*Chai-Me*, a title that could mean in Hebrew “Whose Life?” or, with the double entendre that Manasseh probably intends, “My Life.” She calls this book the first volume of a much longer story she has to tell. It may be best to consider it the first edition of one book that would be enhanced by expanding on the topics covered and filling-in a few omissions that would bring her life and people into even greater focus. Yet, even in its current form, we have a book that sheds new light on what it means to be black and Jewish from a black perspective. She takes us into black synagogues with black rabbis and black schools. She also explains what it is like to navigate the white Jewish world as a black person. To use a biblical analogy, Manasseh did not sell her birthright like Esau, she struggled like Jacob to become Israel. In other words, her journey is not a transition from being black to becoming Jewish. It is not a transition at all. It is a statement of being. Thus, we have a very particular story that has such universal applicability that it can be enjoyed by anyone.

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<sup>11</sup> Rebecca Walker is the daughter of Alice Walker, the famous African American author of *The Color Purple*, and Mel Leventhal, a white Jewish lawyer. Her memoir covers a range of issues following her parent's divorce including bi-racial identity and bi-sexuality. Judaism is not the focus of her book.

<sup>2</sup> Julius Lester is a prolific author whose life covers a remarkable odyssey starting as the son of a Methodist minister who was lambasted for being a purveyor of anti-Semitism in New York City in the 1960s to converting to Judaism in the 1980s, joining the Judaic Studies program at Massachusetts Amherst, and becoming a vocal critic of black leaders.

<sup>3</sup> Marcus Hardie has traveled a long and circuitous journey to and in Judaism. In fact, he converted to Judaism three times, joining Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox denominations. He then immigrated to Israel, joined the Israeli army, and then returned to the United States.



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