

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Nineteenth-Century Missions and the Making of Race

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Abstract

This paper traces discourse and practices among Jewish communal leaders in Western Europe and the United States regarding the need for Jewish missions to China and Ethiopia. Though thousands of miles apart, China and Ethiopia became closely entwined in their racial imagination. Beginning in the 1840s, the Jewish international press depicted both as biblical lost tribes, languishing in isolation and ignorance, and in need of a guiding hand with the mounting threat of Christian missionizing. Jewish communal leaders began to call for Jewish missions in the 1850s, and they looked to contemporary scientific, evangelical, and civilizing missions as models, merging elements from all three. Throughout the 1860s, in debates over who should lead a Jewish mission, three different types surfaced: an explorer, rabbinic emissary, and Orientalist. Each of these reframed prophetic calls for the return of the lost tribes within a modern scientific and imperial project. Drawing on the work of Sylvia Wynter, I argue that these communities in China and Ethiopia came to serve as boundary markers, demarcating the outer limits of the Jewish world, of Jewishness, and Judaism as it became increasingly circumscribed through theological, behavioral, and racial norms. Not only does this upend assumptions about Jewish solidarity and internationalism, but it also points to how missionizing was deployed by minoritized communities in the nineteenth century.

Keywords: Jews; lost tribes; mission; missionary; race; China; Ethiopia; Beta Israel; Jewish internationalism; Jewish solidarity

The nineteenth century was a missionary age as cartographers and anthropologists set off on scientific missions to map the earth and its peoples, Christian missionaries evangelized the world over, and imperial armies embarked on colonial civilizing missions. These imperial agents—explorers and scholars, missionaries and colonial officials—worked in their own ways to create and maintain a global racial hierarchy in service of empire. Living inextricably within imperial contexts, Jews in Western Europe and the United States experienced this same impulse to find, assess, and

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civilize their co-religionists around the world. Calls for missions to scattered Jewish communities, often claimed as remnants of the ten lost tribes, proliferated in Jewish newspapers from Berlin and London, to Paris and Jerusalem, Philadelphia and San Francisco.¹ From the 1840s through the 1860s, Jewish newspapers depicted communities in places like Ethiopia and China as remote from other centers of Jewish life, languishing in isolation and ignorance, and in need of a guiding hand, particularly with the mounting threat of Christian missionizing.

Though thousands of miles apart, in the mid-nineteenth century, China and Ethiopia became closely entwined in the racial imagination of Jews in the United States and Western Europe.² Beginning in the 1840s, they depicted both as biblical remnants dating back to antiquity, lost to the Jewish world and shrouded in mystery. They had remained steadfast in their Jewish practice for centuries, attesting to their identity as lost tribes, but Jewish communal leaders feared that, surrounded by heathens and cut off by the tyranny of oppressive rulers, they would fall prey to the threats of Christian missionaries and assimilation. The urgency to find them was rekindled in the age of high imperialism and the possibility of accessing them on the coattails of the British Empire. By the 1850s, as the British made incursions into China and Ethiopia, Jewish communal leaders began to circulate proposals in the press. Some advocated bringing members of these communities to London or Paris to study, while others proposed sending a Jewish mission to them—both of which would happen with the Beta Israel in Ethiopia. Throughout the 1860s, in debates over who should lead a Jewish mission, three different types surfaced: an explorer, rabbinic emissary, and Orientalist. Each of these reframed prophetic calls for the return of the lost tribes within a modern scientific and imperial project. The discourse of tribes, then, merged the biblical idea of tribes with the colonial notion of tribes, depicting them at the margins of space and time, of humanity and Jewishness, of fact and lore.

Following Sylvia Wynter, I ask: what are the rules of perception that shaped the symbolic representation of groups in China and Ethiopia?³ Wynter traces how symbolic representations work to enshrine a sense of shared collectivity, what she calls the *propter nos*, of the habitable world over and against the Others of the uninhabitable world, a division, she asserts, that became racially inscribed as the color line in the modern era.⁴ I argue that these communities in China and Ethiopia served as boundary markers of the Jewish collectivity, representing the outer limits of the Jewish world geographically, but marking also the theological, behavioral, and racial norms of Judaism and Jewishness as understood by Jews in Western Europe and the United States. This applied for groups in China and Ethiopia, yet was also true more broadly in relation to the ten lost tribes. Scattered worldwide, they were perceived as being lost both geographically and temporally, removed from modern space and time until their prophetic, apocalyptic return that would bring salvation.⁵ The nineteenth-century search for communities marking the far reaches of the Jewish

¹Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, *The Ten Lost Tribes: A World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²On how missionary race-making has homogenized diverse populations worldwide, see Kathryn Gin Lum, *Heathen: Religion and Race in American History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022).

³Sylvia Wynter, "1492: A New World View," in Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex M. Nettleford, eds., *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas: A New World View* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 12.

⁴*Ibid.*, 39.

⁵Ben-Dor Benite, *Ten Lost Tribes*, 14–20.

world was carried out within frameworks simultaneously imperial and messianic, mapping the ends of the world and the end of time.

This helps to reorient the literature on nineteenth-century Jewish internationalism and solidarity. Scholars tend to pinpoint various nineteenth-century historical events as precipitating “Jewish solidarity,” including the Damascus Affair (1840), the Crimean War (1853–1856), and famine relief in Eastern Europe (1869–1872).⁶ But the discourse of Jewish internationalism peaked not only in relation to specific points in time; it was part of the general orientation in an age of empire. This scholarship on Jewish internationalism tends to take for granted a shared sense of Jewish peoplehood bound by a shared fate and fails to examine how a sense of Jewish collectivity has been continuously redefined through processes of circumscription.⁷ Wynter explains how a sense of shared collectivity, the *propter nos*, is defined and governed by moral-ethical criteria “to display altruistic behaviors toward those who constitute the *nos* on whose behalf we collectively act.”⁸ This circumscription, the drawing of the *propter nos*, in the nineteenth century entailed imperial and racial logics that determined which communities those in the United States and Europe would act on behalf of in a new age of Jewish internationalism.

It has long been a commonplace that Jews are not a missionary people. Yet Jewish communal leaders looked to contemporary scientific, evangelical, and civilizing missions as models, merging elements from all three in their Jewish missionary fantasies. They envisioned them as fact-finding missions to ascertain the origins of communities in China and Ethiopia and thereby prove their Jewish kinship. They were proclaimed by “civilized” Jewish communities on behalf of their “less civilized” brethren. And although they sought not to convert them to a different religion, they endeavored to revive their lost and ancient connection to Judaism as they defined it, a “kind of intra-Jewish missionary endeavor.”⁹ In drawing on these three types of missions, they ascribed to the imperial and racial logics, notions of civilization and whiteness, and saviorism they fostered. It was in part through missions that Jewish communal leaders worked to shape the racial boundaries of Jewishness. As endeavors of the powerful, missions provided an opportunity for Jews in Western Europe and the United States who had risen socioeconomically and integrated into their surrounding societies to try and stake a claim to the white side of the color line and align themselves with those imperial agents carrying out scientific, religious, and civilizing missions. Moreover, by portraying those in China and Ethiopia as ethically and intellectually superior to their neighbors, they debated and drew the racial boundaries of a Jewish *propter nos*, part of larger efforts to fix the bounds of

⁶Aron Rodrigue, *French Jews, Turkish Jews: The Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Politics of Jewish Schooling in Turkey, 1860–1925* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Jonathan Dekel-Chen, “Philanthropy, Diplomacy, and Jewish Internationalism,” in Mitchell Bryan Hart and Tony Michels, eds., *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, vol. 8 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 505–28; Lisa Moses Leff, *Sacred Bonds of Solidarity: The Rise of Jewish Internationalism in Nineteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

⁷An important exception is Matthias B. Lehmann, “Rethinking Sephardi Identity: Jews and Other Jews in Ottoman Palestine,” *Jewish Social Studies* 15, 1 (2008): 81–109.

⁸Wynter, “Race, Discourse,” 31.

⁹Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 293. He applies this term and concept in describing attempts to bring Eastern European Jews to Reform Judaism.

Judaism and Jewishness as it increasingly fragmented into new denominations. Taking a comparative and relational approach to missionizing opens up new ways of understanding how Jews in Western Europe and the United States applied the notion of the mission to meet their own circumstances and needs. Not only does this upend assumptions within Jewish Studies, but it also points to how missionizing was deployed by minoritized communities in the nineteenth century.

Locating “Our Most Distant Brethren”

In the mid-nineteenth century, China and Ethiopia, long closed to imperial powers, were forcibly pushed open by the British. Within China, the Qing Dynasty faced mounting pressure to lift its heavy restrictions on trade. When it refused to yield, and as the Chinese government clamped down on illegal British opium trafficking, the British declared war. China’s surrender in the First Opium War resulted in the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing, which opened China’s ports to British traders and merchants and ceded Hong Kong to the British. Soon after, the United States and the French negotiated similar treaties for extraterritorial rights and the 1844 Treaty of Wangxia enabled U.S. citizens, including Protestant missionaries, to purchase land, build hospitals, and establish schools in treaty ports. Following further armed incursions and more imposed treaties, the British and French had forced open eleven ports along the coast of China to free trade, enabled missionaries to enter the interior and buy buildings, and allowed for the establishment of foreign ambassadors in Beijing with the treaty of Tianjin in 1858. European and American explorers, scholars, and missionaries streamed into China, circulating accounts of their travels.

The mid-nineteenth century also saw a turning point in relations between Britain and Ethiopia. There, in 1855, a new emperor, Téwodros II, rose to power following the Era of Princes (1769–1855), marked by decades of local governors and military leaders locked in civil war. European missionaries saw his iron rule—predicated on the violent oppression of the Oromo people—as providing the political stability necessary for missionary activities.¹⁰ Téwodros admitted European Protestant missionaries while carrying out his own imperial project to unite and centralize the various regions of Ethiopia under his own leadership and that of the Ethiopian Orthodox church. These British imperial incursions into China and Ethiopia opened up new possibilities for Christian missionaries to locate lost Jewish tribes in Asia and Africa.

The prospect of discovering and evangelizing lost Jewish communities excited Christians in England, who saw them as a key to salvation. A new wave of British millenarian expectations galvanized churches and evangelizing organizations to escalate their missionizing activities. To bring the Second Coming, they poured funding into finding and converting Jewish populations worldwide, including in places like Ethiopia and China.¹¹ The ranks of missionaries swelled under the auspices of one prominent organization focused in particular on Jews, the London Society for Promoting

¹⁰Brian J. Yates, *The Other Abyssinians: The Northern Oromo and the Creation of Modern Ethiopia, 1855–1913* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2020).

¹¹Agnieszka Jagodzińska, “‘For Zion’s Sake I Will Not Rest’: The London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews and Its Nineteenth-Century Missionary Periodicals,” *Church History* 82, 2 (2013): 381–87; Mel Scult, “English Missions to the Jews: Conversion in the Age of Emancipation,” *Jewish Social Studies* 35, 1 (1973): 3–17.

Christianity Amongst the Jews (“The London Society”).¹² It was Christian missionaries seeking out Jewish populations for conversion who first consistently labeled and reported on communities in China and Ethiopia as Jewish. Christian missionary reports and travelogues of lost Jewish colonies began to appear in the Jewish press, prompting a sense of concern and responsibility among Jewish readers across the United States and Europe as to their fate, and they soon began to propose their own missions.

The nascent Jewish press of the 1840s reported on the status of Jewish communities worldwide as racialized depictions of Jews from across North Africa and Southwest Asia circulated in newspapers in Europe and the United States.¹³ Many lamented the “distressed” state of these faraway Jews, mired in ignorance and superstition after centuries living under oppressive regimes, and called on Jewish leadership to aid these communities. But those in China and Ethiopia were set apart by the wonderment and exoticism evoked by their supposed cultural and racial hybridity and their isolation that led to the reliance on reports of Christian missionaries and explorers.¹⁴ In discussions of Ethiopia, reports used the term “Abyssinia,” which emerged as a European colonial conception of the northern Ethiopian highlands and the Habasha, who they associated with a purer form of Christianity, Semitic civilization, and light-skinned inhabitants, in contrast to those people colonial ethnographers deemed African, uncivilized, and dark-skinned.¹⁵ Jewish discussions picked up this terminology, demonstrating how Christian racial cartography helped shape the imagined geographies of Jews in Western Europe and the United States.¹⁶

Rumors of Jews in China and Ethiopia were hardly new; stories had circulated since at least the early modern period.¹⁷ But with the expansion of empires and the surge in missionizing, the ability and imperative to investigate these rumors grew.¹⁸

¹²W. T. Gidney, *The History of the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews: From 1809 to 1908* (London: London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews, 1908).

¹³Rodrigue, *French Jews, Turkish Jews*.

¹⁴Tudor Parfitt, *Hybrid Hate: Conflations of Anti-Semitism and Anti-Black Racism from the Renaissance to the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), ch. 4. This, however, counters Parfitt’s claim that nineteenth-century Jews in Europe and the United States had little interest in Jews in Africa (*ibid.*, 71).

¹⁵As a result, the present discussion uses the term *Ethiopia*, which was preferred by local rulers and reflects a more multiethnic picture of the region. Additionally, the term *Beta Israel* appears throughout, rather than *Falashas*. Although the latter was not intended to be derogatory, it originated as a pejorative label, and Ethiopian Jews today prefer the term *Beta Israel*. See “Where or What Is ‘Abyssinia’?—An Investigation,” *Ethiopianorama*, http://ethiopianorama.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Where-or-What-is-Abyssinia-an-investigation.pdf2_.pdf (accessed 4 Aug. 2021); Yates, *Other Abyssinians*; James Arthur Quirin, *The Evolution of the Ethiopian Jews: A History of the Beta Israel (Falasha) to 1920* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 11–15.

¹⁶My thanks to Phil Keisman for this incisive observation.

¹⁷Rumors of the lost tribes in China appeared as early as the eighth century but grew with the 1615 publication of the journals of a Jesuit missionary, Matteo Ricci, who reported meeting a Jew from Kaifeng. Ricci’s journals were excerpted in the *Occident*, 1 Mar. 1844: 594–96. See Zhou Xun, “The ‘Kaifeng Jew’ Hoax: Constructing the ‘Chinese Jew,’” in Ivan Davidson Kalmar and Derek Penslar, eds., *Orientalism and the Jews* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2005), 68–79. Regarding Ethiopia, a sixteenth-century rabbinic responsum from the Egyptian scholar Rabbi David ben Zimri (RaDBaZ) proclaimed the Beta Israel as the Jewish lost tribe of Dan; Michael Corinaldi, *Jewish Identity: The Case of Ethiopian Jewry* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1998), 103–7.

¹⁸Following failed eighteenth-century attempts to correspond with Jews in Kaifeng, in 1817, London newspapers printed a letter from Lord Amherst, a British ambassador in China, attesting to a Jewish sect in Kaifeng (*The Jewish Expositor and Friend of Israel*, published by the London Society, including “On the Chinese Jews,” Mar. 1816: 101–11; Apr. 1816: 135–48; Nov. 1816: 414–21). See also “The Israelites of China,” *Voice of Jacob*, 24 Nov. 1843: 38; *Jewish Chronicle*, 31 Dec. 1841: 42–43; and 4 Nov. 1853: 38.

Articles in the Jewish press introduced readers to these communities, whom they painted as ancient remnants of the ten lost tribes. An 1843 series printed in Paris and London, “Israelites in China,” traced a Jewish presence back to the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and Levi.¹⁹ It claimed that, although Jews had once flourished in towns across China, their numbers had diminished to a thousand people living primarily in the central Chinese city of Kaifeng. It described in elaborate detail their “handsome synagogue, the form of which resembleth more that of the temple of Jerusalem,” and their sacred texts that “are either very faulty or incomplete, or are altogether wanting.”²⁰ It recounted their observance of the sabbath, practices of male circumcision and endogamy, and their messianic beliefs. Concurrent reports portrayed the Beta Israel in Ethiopia as observing the sabbath and Jewish dietary restrictions and practicing circumcision. One description asserted, “They are strongly attached by fabulous traditions to the old system of Judaism” and “trace their lineage back to the Queen of Sheba.”²¹ Their synagogues were said to contain a “holy of holies, in the most secret part of the temple.” Such reports painted both communities as ancient relics that maintained biblical practices due to their isolation from the rest of the Jewish world with its more modern forms of Judaism.

Throughout the 1840s, reporting on Jews in China and Ethiopia mounted with the increasing popularity of missionary accounts. In 1843, James Finn, an English diplomat and Protestant missionary active with the London Society, published *The Jews in China*.²² Shortly after, Samuel Gobat, a Swiss Protestant missionary published his *Journal of a Three Years’ Residence in Abyssinia*.²³ Excerpts from both circulated widely in both the mainstream and Jewish press. In the latter, they were accompanied by statements of concern about the threat posed by missionizing to these ancient and isolated colonies. Journalists bemoaned that their only information derived from unverified missionary accounts—“those who delight in misrepresenting Israelites”—and that both China and Ethiopia remained difficult to reach and to travel through since people in both places were suspicious of foreigners.²⁴

Knowledge about Jewish communities worldwide, the London-based *Voice of Jacob* declared, was crucial “to rouse the Jewish public to a more lively sense of the duties and privileges of *our race*” by establishing “yet another link in the chain of intercommunication between the dispersed of Israel.”²⁵ Their sense of mission was motivated by the growing belief that Jews comprised a single race scattered across the

¹⁹Printed in *L’Israélite Français*, reproduced in *Voice of Jacob*, 24 Nov. 1843: 38; 8 Dec. 1843: 41–42; and 5 Jan. 1844: 58–59. For additional references to Jews in China as part of the lost tribes, see *Jewish Chronicle*, 4 May 1849: 238; 2 May 1851: 237; and 13 June 1851: 286.

²⁰“The Israelites of China,” *Voice of Jacob*, 8 Dec. 1843: 41; 5 Jan. 1844: 58. A similar account appears in *Jewish Chronicle*, 31 Dec. 1841: 42–43.

²¹*Voice of Jacob*, July 1846: 164.

²²James Finn, *The Jews in China: Their Synagogue, Their Scriptures, Their History, &c.* (London: B. Wertheim, Aldine Chambers, Paternoster Row, 1843). Excerpts appear in “The Jews in China,” *Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, 1 July 1843: 183–87; 1 Mar. 1844: 594–99; and 1 Apr. 1844: 19–22. They further appear in “The Synagogue at Kae-Fung-Foo (China),” *Jewish Chronicle*, 4 Aug. 1848: 629–30; *Asmonean*, 19 July 1850: 101–2; *Archives Israélites*, 1 Dec. 1848: 620–23; *North China Herald*, 1 Feb. 1851: 106–7; 8 Feb. 1851: 111. He later published a second account: *The Orphan Colony of Jews in China* (London: James Nisbet, 1872).

²³Samuel Gobat, *Journal of Three Years’ Residence in Abyssinia* (London: Hatchard & Son, 1834).

²⁴“Scattered Israelites,” *Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, 1 July 1862: 179.

²⁵“Our Transatlantic Contemporaries,” *Voice of Jacob*, 10 May 1844: 142 (my italics).

world, whose fates were tightly entwined. This reflected both the promise of emancipation and the responsibility emancipated communities felt toward those they saw as their less fortunate coreligionists. Yet it also points to the precarity of emancipation and their persistent anxiety that an attack on Jews elsewhere could compromise their recent socioeconomic ascent and integration.²⁶ And so, by the end of the 1840s, readers of the Jewish press in Western Europe and the United States had grown familiar with Jews in China and Ethiopia through the accounts of missionaries who had targeted them for conversion, emphasizing biblical and exotic practices. As dubious as those accounts may have seemed, they nevertheless held out for readers the possibility and promise of Jewish missions to “our most distant brethren,” not to convert them to another religion, but to bring them back into the Jewish fold.

Calls for a Jewish Mission

For Jews in Western Europe and the United States, however, it remained unclear whether these communities could really be Jewish. They asked themselves, unsure, if it was racially possible for Jews to be Black or Chinese. At the time, Jewish communal leaders on both sides of the Atlantic embraced racial language as a positive form of self-expression, a sense of feeling bound not only by cultural particularism but also by shared ancestry and blood.²⁷ This positive embrace of race reflected their perception and standing as a racial group that was often construed as a subset of the wider “Caucasian race.”²⁸ This was determined in part by contrasting Jews to those “less civilized races,” be they in European colonies or Black Americans, Native Americans, and other groups of color in the United States.²⁹ This race-making was further informed by racial debates on environmental determinism and mono/polygenesis, the paradigm of “Aryan” and “Semite” in Europe that had grown out of philology and into racial pseudoscience and anthropology, and, in the United States, native dispossession, plantation capitalism, and conquest and occupation of the territory that became the American West.³⁰ In the wake of their own emancipation, a promise that was limited and unstable in the face of lingering antisemitism, Jews in Western Europe and the United States worked to secure their place on the white side of

²⁶Rodrigue, *French Jews, Turkish Jews*, 18.

²⁷Efron, *Defenders of the Race*; Todd M. Endelman, “Anglo-Jewish Scientists and the Science of Race,” *Jewish Social Studies* 11, 1 (2004): 52–92; Lisa Moses Leff, “Self-Definition and Self-Defense: Jewish Racial Identity in Nineteenth-Century France,” *Jewish History* 19, 1 (2005): 7–28; Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006). References to the “Hebrew race” or “Israelite race” peppered the English-language press in the 1850s and 1860s.

²⁸Goldstein, *Price of Whiteness*, ch. 1. For the classification of Jews as a subset of Caucasian in U.S. immigration policy, see William Paul Dillingham, *Dictionary of Races or Peoples...*, United States Immigration Commission (1907–1910) (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1910).

²⁹Goldstein, *Price of Whiteness*, 16; John M. Efron, *Defenders of the Race: Jewish Doctors and Race Science in Fin-de-Siècle Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 43.

³⁰For the British context, see Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Maurice Olender, *The Languages of Paradise: Race, Religion, and Philology in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); Efron, *Defenders of the Race*, ch. 3; and the nineteenth-century works of James Cowles Prichard, William Lawrence, Robert Knox, Robert Latham, and John Beddoe. For the U.S. context, see Parfitt, *Hybrid Hate*, ch. 6; Goldstein, *Price of Whiteness*; and the nineteenth-century work of Josiah Nott and George Gliddon.

the color line. The possibility of Jews in China and Ethiopia thus raised certain difficulties.

As China and Ethiopia opened further to European incursions in the 1850s, Jewish communal leaders sought to assess their degree of kinship based on their origins, biblical and liturgical texts, language, calendar and holidays, life cycle practices, and their theological and messianic beliefs. By comparing these criteria with their own—which stood as benchmarks for defining Jewish religious, behavioral, and theological norms based on their own practices—they would ensure that these communities were lost Jews. But they also had to contend with race. “The Falashas are not black,” one scholar, Philoxene Luzatto, asserted in 1856, but “nor do they exhibit the characteristic type of the Jewish physiognomy which the other Hebrew have preserved in all the quarters of the globe and in all climates.”³¹ This, however, contradicted another account by Rabbi Selig Hausdorff in Jerusalem, who in 1855 had met there a Beta Israel man, Daniel ben Haninah, and his son, Moshe. Hausdorff reported that they “...often dined at my table and he told me that in his country there were also white Jews—nay, that the color of most of the Jews of Abyssinia was white. According to him, they all rigidly observe the Sabbaths and festivals, do not eat anything leavened on Passover, and blow the shofar on New Year. In general, they keep all our laws. For this reason, I must request all my brethren in faith to send a mission to them.”³² Hausdorff used hearsay to claim that the Beta Israel were white, the first criterion in adjudicating their Jewishness, referring only after to shared religious and legal practices. In doing so, he affirmed the assumption of a Jewish somatic norm rooted in whiteness.

By the 1850s, the activities of the London Society had “extended all over the globe, have penetrated into China, as well as Abyssinia—in fact, wherever a Jewish community was to be found.”³³ Isaac Leeser, a prominent American Jewish leader and editor of the *Occident* in Philadelphia, informed readers, “From the moment that China became more accessible to foreigners, missionaries rushed forward.... The sons of Israel were known to exist far away in the interior, though unvisited by any European for near two hundred years. The prize was too great to be lost in their estimation, and efforts were at once made to reach them.”³⁴ In 1850, the Anglican bishop in Hong Kong sent two Chinese Christian converts to Kaifeng. The *North China Herald* reported on “the discovery of an interesting race of Jews in the interior of the country” by the missionaries, who found there “the few wretched sons of Israel,” their community without a rabbi and their synagogue in disarray.³⁵ According to reports, the two missionaries later embarked on a second trip,

³¹*Jewish Chronicle*, 30 May 1856: 603.

³²*Der Israelit* repr. in *Jewish Chronicle*, 23 Sept. 1864: 5.

³³*Jewish Chronicle*, 30 Dec. 1864: 4.

³⁴“What Can Be Done?” *Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, Jan. 1853: 587. On Leeser, see Lance J. Sussman, *Isaac Leeser and the Making of American Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995).

³⁵*North China Herald*, 18 Jan. 1851. A journal kept by one of the missionaries during this expedition was published serially in the Jewish press. In the *Jewish Chronicle*, see 4 Apr. 1851: 202–3; 23 May 1851: 262; 5 June 1851: 277–78; 11 July 1851: 317; 2 Aug. 1852: 265; 27 Aug. 1852: 373; 3 Sept. 1852: 380–81; 17 Sept. 1852: 395. In the *Asmonean*, see 5 June 1851: 49; 13 June 1851: 57; 30 July 1852: 125; 6 Aug. 1852: 137; 13 Aug. 1852: 149. The *Occident* reproduced accounts from the *Sabbath Recorder*, published by the Seventh-Day Baptists of New York. See “What Can Be Done? Part 3,” *Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, Jan. 1853: 30, and 468–71.

returning with six torah scrolls, over fifty Hebrew manuscripts, and two “native Israelites,” the brothers Chao Wen-k’uei and Chao Chin-Ch’eng, to learn Hebrew from the missionaries. Their images appeared in the *Illustrated London News* alongside reports of these two missions in newspapers across Germany, France and England, New York, and Philadelphia.³⁶

Jewish communal leaders struggled to reconcile the notion of Jewishness with those in Asia and Africa. If they were indeed Jews, they reasoned, they were by definition profoundly out of place among their less civilized neighbors. The *Jewish Chronicle* in London expressed concern for the Beta Israel in Ethiopia, surrounded by “savage tribes” and preying missionaries.³⁷ Similarly, writing from Philadelphia, Leeser underscored “the absolute helplessness of the Chinese Jews, that handful of the faithful in the centre of half-civilized heathen, ready as are the missionaries of various denominations to rob them of the little remnant of their everlasting hopes.”³⁸ This was the case not only for China, but for Jewish communities worldwide. Leeser maintained that other parts of the world also “require the presence of enlightened Israelites besides China, to diffuse the pure knowledge of the law which is, alas! wanting in many portions of Asia and Africa, where long isolation or the tyrannical measures of the government have deprived the Jews of that mental elevation which ought to be theirs...”³⁹ These calls for missions hinged on the racialization of Asia and Africa with “half-civilized heathen” and “savage tribes” in contrast to Jews there, denied the “mental elevation” that was their biological right as Jews.

Historian David Weinfeld has recently noted Leeser’s belief that although skin color could change based on climate, Jews were “definitively, scientifically, white.”⁴⁰ Leeser contended that, “the true Jewish complexion ... is fair; which is proved by the variety of the people I have seen, from Persia, Russia, Palestine, and Africa, not to mention those of Europe and America...”⁴¹ Advocating on behalf of Jews in Ethiopia and China required separating them out racially from surrounding populations to include them in a white Jewish *propter nos*. Weinfeld argues that Leeser’s belief in the racial inferiority of Native Americans and African-Americans, extending so far as to support chattel slavery in the United States, served to shore up Jews’ claims to whiteness within the antebellum racial hierarchy alongside white Christians also of European descent.⁴² By reproducing the language of “savage tribes” and “half-civilized-heathen” common to nineteenth-century European anthropologists, colonial officials, and missionaries, Jewish communal leaders in the United States

³⁶“Colony of Jews in the Centre of China,” *Illustrated London News*, 13 Dec. 1851: 700; *Jewish Chronicle*, 12 Dec. 1851: 79; *Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, Jan. 1853: 38–39. Pollak notes that one of the brothers died in Shanghai while the other disappeared (*Mandarins, Jews, and Missionaries*, 158–62). *L’Univers Israélite*, 30 Sept. 1850: 307; Mar. 1853: 327–32; “The Israelites of China,” *Asmonean*, 2 May 1851: 13–14; “The Latest Communications about a Jewish Community in China,” *Monatsschrift für die Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judenthums*, 1853, 56–61.

³⁷*Jewish Chronicle*, 12 Feb. 1858: 67.

³⁸“What Can Be Done?” *Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, Jan. 1853: 468. On the long history of the term *heathen* and its use by missionaries as a form of race-making, see Gin Lum, *Heathen*.

³⁹“The Importance of Missions,” *Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, May 1853: 85.

⁴⁰David Weinfeld, “Isaac Leeser and Slavery: A Match Made in Richmond,” *American Jewish History* 106, 3 (2022): 244–45.

⁴¹Quoted in Weinfeld, 244.

⁴²Weinfeld, “Isaac Leeser and Slavery,” 243.

and Western Europe worked to demarcate a collectivity that fell firmly on the white side of the global color line.

In the 1850s, Leeser led the campaign to “rescue” these Jewish communities. He called on the paper’s readers, businessmen with connections abroad, “men of influence and women who fear God,” communal leaders and rabbis to rally public support for a Jewish mission.⁴³ This reflected the larger racial-religious context in the United States and the surge in Protestant missionizing to “heathens” worldwide, which Jewish communal leaders both condemned and admired.⁴⁴ The *Asmonean* regretted that Jews only *talked* of missions, while Christians were *acting*.⁴⁵ In the *Occident*, Leeser acknowledged: “Had any denomination of Christians heard that a number of Jewish missionaries were tampering with a colony of half-civilized Nazarene negroes within the confines of the Great Desert, we should have heard long since that hundreds had been sent to counteract so grievous an impending evil.”⁴⁶ They would have called meetings, united across denominational divides, taken up a collection, and immediately sent missionaries around the world. While not wanting to flatter Christians or Christianity, Leeser explained, he presented readers with “the superior power Christians have, in possessing a strength and union of which we have not even a semblance.” He advocated for a “native ministry” comprised of the brightest English-speaking rabbis, “missionaries of the truth” like the prophets of old, to be sent out to small, scattered communities. “It is a solemn duty incumbent on all,” he concluded, “to endeavor to promote *the establishment of a Jewish Missionary institution*.”⁴⁷

Leeser’s call for a Jewish missionary institution was part of his larger campaign against Christian proselytizing to Jews, which had increased in Philadelphia in the 1840s.⁴⁸ His campaign emulated the strategies and structures of Christian missions. He worked tirelessly on the publication of newspapers, books, Bibles, and sermons; the founding of Jewish Sunday “mission schools” and hospitals; and a missionary system modeled off of Protestant itinerant preaching to ensure that small, scattered communities would not become estranged or fall into Christian hands.⁴⁹ The dispersion of Jewish communities had resulted from the vast westward movement of imperial expansion in the United States, driven by manifest destiny; the need for Jewish missionaries, then, was not only a product of imperial expansion worldwide, but also within the United States.

The vision of a Jewish missionary institution came to fruition in 1854 with the death of Judah Touro, a prominent merchant and philanthropist, who left \$5,000 in his will for the establishment of the Hebrew Foreign Mission Society of New Orleans

⁴³“Jews in China,” *Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, 1 Apr. 1852: 37–38; “What Can Be Done?” *Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, Jan. 1853: 474; Feb. 1853: 575; “What Can Be Done? No. 4,” Mar. 1853: 584.

⁴⁴Gin Lum, *Heathens*.

⁴⁵“Mission of Enquiry to the Jews in China,” *Asmonean*, 5 June 1851: 49.

⁴⁶“Proposed Mission to China,” *Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, Jan. 1854: 510.

⁴⁷“The Importance of Missions,” *Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, Aug. 1853: 245 (original italics).

⁴⁸Sussman, *Isaac Leeser*, 106.

⁴⁹Jonathan D. Sarna, “The American Jewish Response to Nineteenth-Century Christian Missions,” *Journal of American History* 68, 1 (1981): 35–51; “The Importance of Missions,” *Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, May 1853: 85. See Shari Rabin, *Jews on the Frontier: Religion and Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 110–11.

to serve “missionary purposes.”⁵⁰ Leeser also appealed to European Jewish leaders to support a mission to China, prompting replies from Nathan Adler, the Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, and David Sassoon, a prominent Jewish businessman whose trading firm was active throughout China, Japan, and India. Both Adler and Sassoon urged caution in sending a mission to China—wrecked by political upheaval—without knowledge of the land, people, and language.⁵¹ Instead, they proposed that Sassoon bring two young men from Kaifeng to study with Rabbi Adler in London and for them to return to educate their community in China. The plan was suspended with the outbreak of the Second Opium War (1856–1860), prompting Leeser to pivot. He advocated instead for a mission to China by “a man of vigorous mind and robust constitution, who is able to bear the hardships of a distant journey,” who would travel to Shanghai like Christian missionaries, establish communication with the Jews there, and begin teaching them Hebrew.⁵²

Yet by the mid-1850s, over a decade after initial reports began circulating in the press, a mission had been sent to neither China nor Ethiopia. The *Jewish Chronicle* explained this inaction by stating that, unlike Christian missionaries, “Ours is not the dauntless courage, impelled by a sense of what it conceives as duty, mocks at insults, defies torture, and braves death. The Jewish man that should propose a mission to his isolated brethren in China in order to preserve them for his faith, or to his co-religionists in the mountain fastnesses of Abyssinia in order to instruct them properly in the doctrines of their fathers, would, if he were not ridiculed, certainly not meet with sympathy.”⁵³ Like Leeser, it suggested that copying evangelicals would not corrupt Judaism, from their religious zeal to the publication and distribution of Bibles and prayerbooks, founding of Sunday Schools, and funding of synagogues, ministers, and missions.

Two years later, the 1858 Treaty of Tianjin concluded the war in China and led to the opening of the interior to foreigners and the establishment of a permanent British embassy in Beijing. The *Jewish Chronicle* noted that now a mission might be sent. “But there is no reason why these views should be confined to China,” it asserted. “Abyssinia too shelters a Jewish colony much more numerous and important than the Chinese, which is likewise in a decaying state. Why should not a similar effort be made for the benefit of our Abyssinian brethren, especially as they are so greatly exposed to the machinations of the Jesuits?”⁵⁴ As the 1850s unfolded and they slowly moved closer to dispatching missions to China and Ethiopia, the question still remained of who, exactly, might be sent.

The Great Debacle of I. J. Benjamin

In the Berlin-based newspaper *Vossische Zeitung*, one man announced himself as a candidate to lead a mission to China. He was a Moldovan Jew and lumberjack-turned-explorer who had made a name for himself as “one of the most judicious and intrepid travellers of the age”: Israel Joseph Benjamin, the self-styled Benjamin II in a

⁵⁰Max J. Kohler, “Judah Touro, Merchant and Philanthropist,” *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 13 (1905): 93–111.

⁵¹*Jewish Chronicle*, 4 Nov. 1853: 36, repr. in *Asmonean*, 25 Nov. 1853: 44; *Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, Jan. 1854: 513–14; the San Francisco-based *Hebrew Observer*, 4 Nov. 1853; “The Proposed Mission to China,” *Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, June 1853: 181; and *L’Univers Israélite*, Jan. 1854: 238–40.

⁵²“What Can Be Done? No. 4” *Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, Mar. 1853: 583.

⁵³*Jewish Chronicle*, 22 Aug. 1856: 700.

⁵⁴*Jewish Chronicle*, 1 Oct. 1858: 2.

nod to Benjamin of Tudela, the medieval Jewish traveler.⁵⁵ Setting off in search of the lost tribes in 1844, fearing “no trouble and no danger, boldly he penetrated the desolate dreary mountains of Kurdistan, explored Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia, passed through India, as far as the Chinese frontier. The whole Berberic coast, as far as the Sahara and Egypt were visited by him.”⁵⁶ The resulting work, *Eight Years Travel in Asia and Africa*, described the Jewish communities he encountered on his travels, “their habits, traditions and state of civilization,” and received ringing endorsements from famed scholar-explorers Alexander von Humboldt, Carl Ritter, and August Heinrich Petermann.⁵⁷ Having published his account, Benjamin began to make arrangements for a three-year journey to Arabia, Ethiopia, and China.

In 1860, Benjamin traveled to the United States to raise funds for this next journey.⁵⁸ There he collected donations from American Jewish communities and from the Hebrew Foreign Mission Society in New Orleans.⁵⁹ Benjamin thanked the Mission Society for its support, proclaiming, “I hope that the spirit which governs its members in contributing towards the propagation of Jewish light among our poor isolated brethren in those countries where the bright morn of civilization has not yet begun to dawn, may soon be emulated by other Jewish communities.”⁶⁰ But the case of China was just one of many. The *Occident* reminded readers that there were Jews scattered all over the world and that it was their responsibility “to aid our almost lost brothers, say of China and Abyssinia, to restore them again to the general family of Israel.”⁶¹ This mission, it further emphasized, was the joint duty of Jews in the United States and in Europe, who should both act together in support of Benjamin, charging European communities with failing to support his work.

The reason why soon became clear, however, as doubts about Benjamin began to surface. This was largely the work of Rabbi James K. Gutheim, a prominent rabbi in New Orleans, proponent of the Confederacy and slavery, and secretary of the Hebrew Foreign Mission Society. In the *Occident*, Gutheim publicly charged Benjamin with fraud.⁶² Gutheim joined critics in Paris and Berlin, contending that Benjamin’s book was injudiciously compiled from less reliable accounts, that he had never visited the regions and people he described, did not speak the many languages he claimed to, and was not “fully competent” for the task.⁶³ Moreover, they maintained that the famed

⁵⁵“An Intrepid Traveller,” *Jewish Chronicle*, 1 Oct. 1858: 3. For a biographical sketch, see Oscar Handlin, “Introduction,” in I. J. (Israel Joseph) Benjamin, *Three Years in America, 1859–1862* (New York: Arno Press, 1975), 1–8.

⁵⁶“An Intrepid Traveller,” *Jewish Chronicle*, 1 Oct. 1858: 3.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*; and *Jewish Chronicle*, 4 June 1858: 195. He originally published his account of his five-year journey throughout Egypt, the Levant, Armenia, Afghanistan, India, and Singapore as *Cinq années de voyage en Orient (1846–1851)* (Paris: Chez Michel Levy Freres, 1856). After returning to Europe, he embarked on a second journey, spending three years in Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. He added this account onto his original work in the expanded *Acht Jahre in Asien und Afrika von 1846 bis 1855*.

⁵⁸*Jewish Chronicle*, 27 Apr. 1860: 8; and 1 June 1860: 3.

⁵⁹*Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, 10 May 1860: 42; and 1 Aug. 1853: 275.

⁶⁰*Jewish Chronicle*, 1 June 1860: 5.

⁶¹*Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, 10 May 1860: 42.

⁶²Scott Langston, “James K. Gutheim as Southern Reform Rabbi, Community Leader and Symbol,” *Southern Jewish History* 5 (2002): 69–102.

⁶³*Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, 10 May 1860: 43; *Hamagid*, 30 June 1858: 99; and 7 July 1858: 102–3. Gutheim publicized charges initially levied against Benjamin by Dr. Bernhard Beer of Dresden in the *Wertheimer Jahrbuch* of 1857. Benjamin refuted these allegations in the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums* 22, 24 (1858): 324–25.

scientists backing him were liberal Christians endorsing his political aim to ameliorate the lives of Jews in Asia rather than his scientific content. It was not incidental, they asserted, that no rabbis or Jewish leaders in Germany had endorsed him or that he had to seek support in America.⁶⁴ As a result, Gutheim explained, the Mission Society had no choice but to rescind its financial support.

Benjamin refuted the accusations and charged that Gutheim was retaliating against him for obstructing his plan to erect a statue of Judah Touro, which Benjamin had deemed a violation of Jewish law.⁶⁵ Refusing to concede, Benjamin kept raising money along the west coast before returning to Europe, spreading his cause far and wide, including into the Ottoman Empire.⁶⁶ In London, he maintained “his readiness to repair to China or Abyssinia to visit the Jewish colonies there,” and solicited the Board of Deputies of British Jews for funding.⁶⁷ Since Benjamin of Tudela, his medieval namesake, there had been a deficiency in Jewish scientific travelers, he claimed. He carried the mantle not only from the medieval era, but further implied a biblical precursor in Isaiah: “The learned men of Israel say ‘*Whom shall we send, and who will go for us?*’ For who is there among the sons of Israel who will undertake the arduous task of traversing waste tracts and deserts, expose himself to severe hardships and sufferings, even endanger his life?”⁶⁸ Benjamin presented himself as the successor to the prophet Isaiah, an emissary on a divine mission to return those lost both from the Jewish people and in the wilderness of exile.⁶⁹ Dismayed by accounts of Jews in Ethiopia and China, Benjamin resolved to continue his journeys: “*Here I am (hineini); send me* to those places where our brethren, the children of Israel, are sighing and groaning under the iron yoke of oppression, and of whom we as yet know but little....”⁷⁰ It was his life’s task, he claimed, and particularly the duty of British Jews, he charged, because of the role of British missionaries, but the Board pledged only its moral support for the mission.

In light of the scandal surrounding Benjamin, Isaac Leeser proposed that Benjamin be supervised by a scientific committee that would oversee his missions. He explained that if leading men and organizations in the United States and Europe were jointly to lay the foundation for a mission society, it would create “a bond of union between the Israelites living in enlightened countries and those of the various

⁶⁴The one exception the *Occident* noted was Meyer Kayserling (*Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, 10 May 1860: 43). In fact, Benjamin had become an object of amusement for European Jewish scholars, including Albert Cohn, Bernhard Beer, Moritz Steinschneider, and Isaac Marcus Jost (*Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums* 23, 11 (1859): 161, repr. in *Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, 14 June 1860: 73).

⁶⁵I. J. (Israel Joseph) Benjamin, *Three Years in America, 1859–1862* (New York: Arno Press, 1975), 318–33; Jonathan D. Sarna, “The Touro Monument Controversy,” in Michael A. Meyer and David N. Myers, eds., *Between Jewish Tradition and Modernity: Rethinking an Old Opposition* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014), 80–95.

⁶⁶For Benjamin’s response to Gutheim, see *Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, 5 July 1860, 90–91. For his American trip, see Benjamin, *Three Years in America, 1859–1862*. On the Ottoman Empire, see “The Travels of Rabbi Israel: The Jews in China,” *El Lunar* 1, 1 (1864): 33–36.

⁶⁷*Jewish Chronicle*, 18 Mar. 1864: 5.

⁶⁸“A Letter to the Board of Deputies by the Celebrated Jewish Traveller, Benjamin II,” *Jewish Chronicle*, 1 Apr. 1864: 2. Biblical quotes appear in italics: “*Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I. Send me!’*” (Isaiah 6:8).

⁶⁹Ben-Dor Benite, *Ten Lost Tribes*, 16.

⁷⁰“A Letter to the Board of Deputies by the Celebrated Jewish Traveller, Benjamin II,” *Jewish Chronicle*, 1 Apr. 1864: 2.

barbarous districts where civilization has not yet penetrated, or where cruel codes check all idea of advancement.”⁷¹ Their moral duty to bring them into civilization echoes the white man’s burden of nineteenth-century imperialisms and the global process that shaped white men’s sense of belonging to a collective based on shared racial kinship.⁷² Indeed, Leeser assured readers that this mission society working on behalf of the civilized world would receive political and diplomatic support from “several consuls of the various powers, and thus enjoy, so far as practicable, a degree of governmental protection.”⁷³

In 1864, following the Second Opium War, the interior of China became newly opened to foreigners. In an article entitled “Expedition to the Jews in China, Abyssinia, and the East,” the *Jewish Chronicle* acknowledged that given the position of the English in China, they should support the cause.⁷⁴ As such, they created the scientific committee envisioned by Leeser to spearhead efforts.⁷⁵ The committee deemed Benjamin acceptable under its guidance and proposed that if Benjamin succeeded in his mission to China, it would provide funding for a second mission to Ethiopia.⁷⁶

However, just four days later, Benjamin died.⁷⁷ Although many had doubted Benjamin during his lifetime, the newspapers admitted that, “It were nevertheless to be wished to see arise an Israelite traveller, for the solution of the not unimportant problems which China, Abyssinia, and other countries offer, considered from a Jewish point of view.”⁷⁸ Throughout the 1850s, Jewish communal leaders articulated the need for a distinctly Jewish mission, one that merged ancient biblical precursors with modern imperial and racial logics of contemporary scientific, civilizing, and evangelical missionizing. This reflected a Jewish racial cartography that distinguished those of the Jewish collectivity who were civilized and enlightened and would undertake the mission on behalf of those languishing in faraway places that marked the outer limits of the Jewish world.

The Divine Mission of Rabbi Haim Zvi Snersohn

During the mid-1860s, as ardent supporters of a Jewish mission sought to take advantage of China’s recent opening, newspapers in Philadelphia, London, and Jerusalem began to advocate for a different kind of traveler. The *Jewish Chronicle* proposed: “It is well known that the rabbis of the Holy Land are great travellers, and that they are known all over the globe, and not rarely in communication with the most distant Jewish settlements.”⁷⁹ Furthermore, the article argued, these rabbis were

⁷¹“Scattered Israelites,” *Occident and Jewish Advocate*, 1 July 1862: 179.

⁷²Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men’s Countries and the Question of Racial Equality* (Carlton: Melbourne University Publishing, 2008), 5.

⁷³“Scattered Israelites,” *Occident and Jewish Advocate*, 1 July 1862: 177.

⁷⁴“Expedition to the Jews in China, Abyssinia, and the East,” *Jewish Chronicle*, 29 Apr. 1864: 7.

⁷⁵The committee was headed by S. D. Sassoon, and included Chief Rabbi of the British Empire Marcus Adler, financier, politician, and communal worker Lionel Louis Cohen, Semiticist Marcus Kalisch, financier and philanthropist Frederick David Mocatta, and lawyer Maurice Moses.

⁷⁶“Expedition to the Jews in China, Abyssinia, and the East,” *Jewish Chronicle*, 29 Apr. 1864: 7.

⁷⁷*Jewish Chronicle*, 6 May 1864: 5.

⁷⁸*Archives Israélites*, quoted in “The Late Benjamin the Traveller,” *Jewish Chronicle*, 17 June 1864: 3.

⁷⁹*Jewish Chronicle*, 13 May 1864: 2.

“acclimatised in the east and seasoned, as it were, for these very regions which Benjamin was to visit.”⁸⁰ The centuries-old tradition of sending rabbinic emissaries from the Holy Land to collect funds in support of Jewish communities settled there had long made for prominent rabbinic travelers serving a Jewish mission.⁸¹ This was a different kind of mission, one in search not of science or souls to convert or civilize, but of financial support for communities in Palestine. Yet it clearly emerged as a particularly Jewish model—alongside scientific, civilizing, and evangelical missions—for conceptualizing a Jewish mission that would not convert individuals but restore lost communities to Judaism.

This was not the first time that rabbis were proposed as possible candidates. Earlier, Isaac Leeser suggested that young men from the rabbinical seminaries in Breslau and Paris might embark on such a mission “to carry the message of peace and brotherhood to those who live in comparative darkness.”⁸² The Jerusalem-based newspaper *Ha-Levanon* similarly saw rabbis as ideal emissaries for such missions. It asserted that there were many competent rabbis of Jerusalem willing to “perform this sacred duty of leading these straying sheep into the right fold.”⁸³ The turn to rabbis in the wake of Benjamin’s death offered a new image of the rabbinic emissary, one able to undertake a scientific enterprise on behalf of Jewry worldwide.

It was one such rabbinic emissary who soon presented himself as a candidate. In the summer of 1864, Rabbi Haim Zvi Sneersohn wrote from Jerusalem to the *Jewish Chronicle*, volunteering himself for the mission.⁸⁴ Rabbi Sneersohn (1834–1882) was the scion of a prominent rabbinic dynasty as the great-grandson of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, founder of the Chabad Hasidic movement.⁸⁵ Born in Lubavitch in the Russian Empire, he moved to Jerusalem with his family in 1840, where he demonstrated oratorical and linguistic adeptness as a young man, skills reflected in his letter to the editor. He began by noting how the political state of China had changed as a result of the Opium Wars, or divine intervention: “Now it seems that the Almighty has opened a path and that our brethren can be visited; we see with our eyes that our Christian friends are giving us notice that there are numbers of our faith in China, Abyssinia, and other places....”⁸⁶ Describing the passion he felt for the cause, he proclaimed, “I feel that it is in my heart to go ... I therefore, with all my heart, desire to appeal to the committee saying, ‘Here I am; send me where you will.’”⁸⁷ Here

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Matthias B Lehmann, “Rabbinic Emissaries from Palestine and the Making of a Modern Jewish Diaspora: A Philanthropic Network in the Eighteenth Century,” in Ra’anan S. Boustan et al., eds., *Envisioning Judaism*, vol. 2 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 1228–46; and *Emissaries from the Holy Land: The Sephardic Diaspora and the Practice of Pan-Judaism in the Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

⁸²“Scattered Israelites,” *Occident and Jewish Advocate*, 1 July 1862: 179–80.

⁸³Quoted in *Jewish Chronicle*, 18 Mar. 1864: 5.

⁸⁴Members of this family have used various spellings, including *Sneersohn*, *Schneersohn*, and *Schneerson*.

⁸⁵Most of the scholarship on Sneersohn focuses on his experience in the United States, where he traveled in 1868 and met with Ulysses S. Grant. See Yedidya Asaf, “The Emancipation of Slaves and the Auto-Emancipation of the Jews: The Impact of the American Civil War and the Abolition of Slavery on the Precursors of Zionism,” *Jewish History* 33, 3–4 (2020): 461–86; Jonathan D. Sarna, *When General Grant Expelled the Jews* (New York: Schocken, 2012).

⁸⁶“Jewish Missions to China and Abyssinia,” *Jewish Chronicle*, 8 July 1864: 8.

⁸⁷Ibid.

he echoed Benjamin in drawing on Isaiah's proclamation, casting himself as fulfilling a divinely ordained mission as a prophetic savior of Jewish communities in exile.

What prepared him so well for the role, Sneersohn explained, was not only the depth of his religious knowledge, but also his breadth of experience traveling on missions as a rabbinic emissary for the Kollel Chabad and other organizations in Palestine. At the age of eighteen, he had left his home in Jerusalem, making his way through Damascus, Aleppo, and Egypt; to Persia and the coast of China, where he stayed with a branch of the Sassoon family; and to India and Australia. He traveled not only as a fundraiser, but also taught, preached, counseled, engaged in diplomacy, published newspaper editorials in support of settlement in Palestine, and advocated on behalf of Romanian Jewry.⁸⁸

His efforts were driven largely by a messianic ideology that human action would help bring about the eschatological dream of restoration of Jews to Zion and thence the coming of the messiah.⁸⁹ Redemption, he believed, was imminent—and Jewish communities scattered worldwide had a role to play. His travels had not been out of self-interest, he explained in the *Jewish Chronicle*: “My desire has been, and still is, and I pray God will continue to be, to do good for the dwellers in Zion, and I look upon this mission to China as likely, by the blessing of God, to be of benefit to Judaism at large.”⁹⁰ To avoid any charges of being unfit for the role, he concluded by noting that the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem could certify his ability to undertake such a mission.

And the Chief Rabbi soon did. In the Prussian newspaper *Ha-Magid*, he praised Sneersohn, who had recently returned from a mission to Australia: “I do testify to the honesty and prudent management of our beloved messenger, Rabbi Sneersohn, who jealously worked in his holy enterprise. With clean hands and a pure heart he discharged his duties.”⁹¹ Yet in recounting Sneersohn's work raising money in Australia, even the Chief Rabbi looked to Christianity as a gold standard: “Admire the benevolent hearts and good feelings of the Christian inhabitants of Australia! We would wish their example imitated by those of our co-religionists who neglect Zion.”⁹²

It was around this time that additional, often sensationalized reports began swirling in the Jewish press about communities in China, allegedly ranging from one hundred to two million people, in a single village or scattered across the country, in abject poverty or thriving fabulously, with shaved heads in the Chinese style or “with large beards and ringlets,” led astray by missionaries or steadfast in their faith.⁹³ Accounts were published, aroused suspicion, and promptly renounced, leading the *Jewish Chronicle* to make renewed attempts to sift through these many contradictions and to separate fiction from “fact”: “The fact of the existence of a colony of Jews in China is one of much importance, and gives rise to interesting conjectures. If the opinion be well founded, which is of late gaining ground in the churches, that the Jews are to be restored to their own land, then, undoubtedly, the Chinese Jews, as well as all

⁸⁸In 1872, he published an account of Jews in Romania: Hayyim Zvi Sneersohn, *Palestine and Roumania: A Description of the Holy Land and the Past and Present State of Roumania and the Roumanian Jews, America and the Holy Land* (New York: Arno Press, 1977[1872]).

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 72–84.

⁹⁰“Jewish Missions to China and Abyssinia,” *Jewish Chronicle*, 8 July 1864: 8.

⁹¹Repr. in Sneersohn, *Palestine and Roumania*, xi.

⁹²Repr. in *ibid.*, xi.

⁹³*Jewish Chronicle*, 13 June 1851: 286.

others, are to be brought back.”⁹⁴ Doing so would be to fulfill the vision of the prophet Isaiah, which the newspaper then painted for readers:

In vision he stood upon the walls of Jerusalem, lifting up his eyes round about, he saw the long lost children gathering themselves together and coming into her. From each point of the compass they came, flocking like clouds, and as doves to their windows. In amazement [*sic*] the desolated Jewish Church exclaims: ‘Behold I was left alone; these, where had they been? And the answer is ‘Behold, these come from afar’ and to these! from the North and from the west; and these! From the land of Sinim.’⁹⁵

Sneersohn was not the only one marshalling biblical imagery of redemption in relation to Jews in China and Ethiopia. This biblical excerpt recounts the ingathering of the exiles from around the world, including from the land of *Sinim*, a biblical term that had long been associated with China.⁹⁶ This imagery depicted a divine mission to restore scattered Jewish communities to Zion, one not so dissimilar from that of Christian missionaries. Yet, despite the support for rabbinic emissaries and the reframing of the mission as divinely ordained, Sneersohn never left for China. He seems to have been overshadowed by the establishment of the prominent Franco-Jewish organization the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, with whom Isaiah’s proclamation, “Here I am; Send me!” would soon ring out a third time.

Joseph Halévy and the Mission to Ethiopia

The *Alliance Israélite Universelle* (AIU), founded in 1860, worked to “regenerate” Jews worldwide through political advocacy and French-style schooling. The AIU wasted no time in joining these efforts on behalf of Jewish communities scattered across the globe. It announced its intentions in its *Bulletin*, “To visit them, to study them, to teach them that they are not alone in the world . . . to bring them, and perhaps through them, those among whom they live, into the great stream of civilization. That is the task that the Alliance has begun and that it proposes to follow.”⁹⁷ Aron Rodrigue has noted how the AIU’s founders were influenced by a Christian missionary group, the Universal Evangelical Alliance.⁹⁸ Yet a quasi-messianic vision of their civilizing mission also resonated among some of the AIU’s founding members, who believed that all Jewry, emancipated and “regenerated,” would fulfill a divine mission of spreading monotheism.

⁹⁴*Jewish Chronicle*, 28 Oct. 1864: 3. See also *Jewish Chronicle*, 12 Aug. 1864: 6; the series “Are There Jews in China?” published 14 Oct. 1864: 6; 21 Oct. 1864: 3; and /28 Oct. 1864: 3.

⁹⁵*Jewish Chronicle*, 28 Oct. 1864: 3. Here the *Jewish Chronicle* quotes Isaiah 49:21: “And you will say to yourself, ‘Who bore these for me when I was bereaved and barren, exiled and disdained—by whom, then, were these reared? I was left all alone—and where have these been?’” It then adds Isaiah 49:12: “Behold! These are coming from afar, these from the north and the west, and these from the land of Sinim.”

⁹⁶Michael Pollak posits that the Biblical Hebrew term *Sin* being used to mean China might have first appeared in the writing of Eldad ha-Dani ca. 880 CE; *Mandarins, Jews, and Missionaries: The Jewish Experience in the Chinese Empire* (New York: Weatherhill, 1998), 49.

⁹⁷Narcisse Leven, General Assembly meeting of 19 Dec. 1867, printed in *Bulletin de l’Alliance Israélite Universelle*, 1 July 1867: 40–41.

⁹⁸Rodrigue, *French Jews, Turkish Jews*, 21.

This echoed the mission theology of Reform Judaism. Informed by Enlightenment and emancipation politics, mission theology reinterpreted Judaism as a universal mission to spread a pure and ethical monotheism for the redemption of all humanity.⁹⁹ Unlike Sneersohn's vision of a divine ingathering of exiles to Palestine, mission theology provided a higher purpose to the scattering of Jews worldwide and their integration into the societies in which they lived. Although the nascent Reform Movement was more popular in Germany than in France and was less involved in Jewish missions to China and Ethiopia, mission theology likely still informed the mid-nineteenth century sense of a Jewish mission.¹⁰⁰

As calls to dispatch missions escalated in London and Paris, Berlin and Jerusalem, San Francisco and New York, editorials called on the Alliance to support such expeditions.¹⁰¹ "Could the Israelitish Alliance of Paris not try to open communication with the poor Falashas, isolated as they are and cut off from all fellowship with the rest of their brethren?" one asked.¹⁰² In response, the AIU explained that it would pursue such a mission when it had the resources. When possible, the AIU first established contact with communities directly or worked through French scholars already on government-sponsored missions. It reached out to G. Eugène Simon and Guillaume Lejean who had been dispatched to China and Ethiopia respectively, requesting that they inquire into the state, beliefs, and practices of Jews there.¹⁰³ Their accounts, however, while attesting to a Jewish presence, proved incomplete.¹⁰⁴

The *Jewish Chronicle* continued to deplore "this sad story of decay" in China, that "in the very heart of the densest paganism and barbarism, there has existed for more than two thousand years a small, and in point of numbers, an insignificant settlement of Israelites" who had maintained Hebrew language, liturgy, and laws and even "in their degenerate condition, seem to cherish some faint remembrance of the holy traditions."¹⁰⁵ In a published response, I. L. Levison admitted, "I cannot help making a comparison between the zeal of Christians, who spend large sums of money, and send learned and pious men across the seas to proselytise barbarous aboriginal peoples, in hot and frozen regions, and at the hazard of their health and lives."¹⁰⁶ This he contrasted with the apathy of Jews: "It is a moral anomaly in this 'missionary

⁹⁹Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, 138.

¹⁰⁰Rodrigue, *French Jews, Turkish Jews*, 20. On the Reform Movement and missionizing in the twentieth century, see Lila Corwin Berman, "Mission to America: The Reform Movement's Missionary Experiments, 1919–1960," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 13, 2 (2003): 205–39.

¹⁰¹*Jewish Chronicle*, 16 Mar. 1860: 4; *Occident*, 11 Nov. 1860: 18; and 1 Oct. 1861: 335, repr. in *Jewish Chronicle*, 15 Nov. 1861: 7; *Der Israelit*, 2 Nov. 1864: 575–78 and 7 Dec. 1864: 641–42; *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums*, repr. in *Jewish Chronicle*, 17 June 1864: 3; *Ha-Magid*, 4 Jan. 1865: 2–3; *Jornal Israelit*, quoted in *Jewish Chronicle*, 1 Dec. 1865.

¹⁰²*Jewish Chronicle*, 4 July 1862: 2.

¹⁰³*Bulletin de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle*, July 1863: 13, repr. in *Jewish Chronicle*, 28 Aug. 1863: 6. The AIU had also written in 1861 to the Count Stanislas d'Escayrac de Lauture, who was conducting research in China for the French government. Unfortunately, the Count was unable to visit Kaifeng and so his account proved "imperfect." The AIU's letter to Escayrac and his response are printed in *Bulletin de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle*, Jan. 1862: 7–11; *Archives Israélites*, 1 June 1861; *Jewish Chronicle*, 28 June 1861: 8; and 14 Mar. 1862: 7. A further reply from Simon is printed in *L'Univers Israélite*, Dec. 1863: 179–80; and *Jewish Chronicle*, 4 Dec. 1863: 7.

¹⁰⁴*Jewish Chronicle*, 4 May 1866: 7.

¹⁰⁵*Jewish Chronicle*, 23 Nov. 1866: 6.

¹⁰⁶*Jewish Chronicle*, 7 Dec. 1866: 2.

age,' when the members of our own creed are occasionally ensnared, and some ill-informed persons are induced to sell their souls 'for a bribe,' that we should not make an effort to save the few hundred Jews of China."¹⁰⁷ This was the express duty of the AIU, he charged.

In fact, the AIU's policy of noninvolvement was about to change with the arrival on the scene of Joseph Halévy. Orientalist, philologist, and AIU educator, Halévy volunteered for the mission in an editorial in *Ha-Magid*, echoing Isaiah once again in announcing, "Here I am; send me!"¹⁰⁸ Halévy proclaimed, "I have been a traveler since my youth. I have roamed the northern glaciers, and, for many years endured the scorching heat of African summer, hunger and thirst awakened in me, and I counted many difficult nights and on an arduous day (in the year 1850) I made a vow to the God of my fathers to travel to the land of *Kush* when God wills it time to learn the state of my brothers and to improve their nation as much as I am able."¹⁰⁹ Halévy detailed his proficiency in several languages, extensive study of Jewish and secular subjects, and experience with Christian polemics. The emphasis on his credentials may have been attempts to underscore his scientific rigor, preparedness, and diligence in light of the scandal surrounding Benjamin.

Like those who came before him, Halévy lobbied Jewish organizations and individuals for support. In January 1867, he spoke at an AIU meeting to encourage "this mission [to Abyssinia], which he hopes for the best results for civilization of these coreligionists, which history and the present state have enveloped in great obscurity, and which appear ignorant of Jews in other parts of the world, as much as they are ignored."¹¹⁰ He then lobbied the Board of Deputies of British Jews, maintaining in the *Jewish Chronicle* that it was a duty incumbent especially on English Jews given the English missionaries promoting apostasy.¹¹¹ British Jewry collected 10,000 francs for missions to Ethiopia and China, and the AIU voted to match it, but prioritized Ethiopia, pledging 5,000 francs for a trip there and waiting to allocate the remaining 5,000 francs for China pending successful results from Ethiopia.¹¹² In their wake, the Board of Delegates of American Israelites also voted "to devote 100 dollars each in aid of missions to the Jews of China and Abyssinia."¹¹³ Under the guidance of the AIU and having acquired funding, in the summer of 1867, a Jewish representative of "enlightened and civilized nations" finally embarked on a mission to Ethiopia.¹¹⁴

"[M. Joseph] is intrepid, enthusiastic, he has a faith in the success of his journey that fears no obstacle. He has now set out on his journey," announced the *Alliance Bulletin*.¹¹⁵ Throughout his journey, Halévy dispatched letters to the Alliance that circulated in the press as readers followed him from Paris to Anatolia, Jerusalem,

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ *Ha-Magid*, 8 Feb. 1865: 6, biblical quote from Isaiah 6:8.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. Halévy's reference to *Kush* conflates biblical Kush with modern-day Ethiopia. Compare this with *Sin* in footnote 95.

¹¹⁰ *Bulletin de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle*, 1 Jan. 1867: 3.

¹¹¹ *Jewish Chronicle*, 3 May 1867.

¹¹² *AIU Bulletin*, 1 Jan. 1867: 14–15.

¹¹³ *Jewish Chronicle*, 28 June 1867: 7.

¹¹⁴ On Halévy's expedition to Ethiopia, see Rachel Baron-Bloch, "The Racial Politics of the Alliance Israélite Universelle," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 114, 1 (2024): 109–40.

¹¹⁵ *Bulletin de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle*, 1 July 1867: 18.

Massawa in present-day Eritrea, and throughout different regions of Ethiopia. It was only after traveling for several weeks that he first encountered a Beta Israel community. Halévy introduced himself: “‘Oh, my brethren,’ I replied, ‘I am not only a European; I am, like you, an Israelite. I come not to trade in Abyssinia, but to inquire into the state of my co-religionists, in conformity with the desire of a great Jewish Association existing in my country. You must know, my dear brethren, that I also am a Falasha!’”¹¹⁶ Halévy writes that in response, they scoffed: “‘What! You a Falasha! A white Falasha! You are laughing at us! Are there any white Falashas?’”¹¹⁷ This phrase, “white Falasha,” removes skin color from the concept of “Falasha,” reflecting the ambiguities that lie within these terms.¹¹⁸ Their disbelief was dispelled, however, when Halévy mentioned his recent trip to Jerusalem. “I must confess,” Halévy wrote, “I was deeply moved on seeing those black faces light up at the memory of our glorious history.”¹¹⁹ Although initially unsure, the Beta Israel soon welcomed him into their community.

Following this first encounter, Halévy proceeded to visit various Beta Israel communities, studying their religious and cultural practices, their language, the layout of their villages, their liturgy and beliefs. He concluded that the Beta Israel practiced a more biblical Judaism, complete with priests, altars for animal sacrifices, and a Holy of Holies, casting them as a biblical relic. Yet he emphasized their shared kinship even as “The very African color of their complexion seems to protest against such pretention [that they are Jewish]; but the wonderful finesse of their features and the lively intelligence that shines on these black faces silences all doubts and objections.”¹²⁰ What made the Beta Israel racially Jewish, according to Halévy, was not their skin, which worked against a presumed Jewish somatic norm rooted in whiteness, but their “lively intelligence” that distinguished them from their neighbors.

After eight months among the Beta Israel, Halévy decided to return to France. But before leaving, a young Beta Israel man, Daniel Adhanan, asked to accompany him to Paris to study at the Alliance teacher-training school there. Halévy wrote that Adhanan’s community implored him to bring him with, so Adhanan might return to Ethiopia to teach there.¹²¹ Halévy acquiesced, sending a telegram to the AIU on 21 July 1868: “Trip to Abyssinia successful. Satisfactory results. Documents collected. Relations established with our brethren. Accompanied by a young Falasha—Joseph Halévy.”¹²² Their return caused a flurry in the Jewish press. Newspapers reported that, “Halévy has returned accompanied by a very young Falasha susceptible to instruction. He has completely black skin like a negro, but his features are normal and he has traces of Jewish beauty. His nose is straight and his lips are shapely.”¹²³ Racialized depictions of Daniel Adhanan’s body circulated in

¹¹⁶Joseph Halévy, *Travels in Abyssinia*, James Picciotto, trans. (London: Society of Hebrew Literature, 1877), 215.

¹¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹¹⁸Notably, the claim of shared racial kinship preceded a historical moment in which Jews increasingly differentiated between Jewish racial types. See Maurice Fishberg, *The Jews: A Study of Race and Environment* (London: The Walter Scott Publishing Co., 1911).

¹¹⁹Halévy, *Travels in Abyssinia*, 215.

¹²⁰*Bulletin de l’Alliance Israélite Universelle*, 1 July 1868: 90.

¹²¹*Ibid.*, 102.

¹²²AIU FR XI A 79, 23, repr. in *Jewish Chronicle*, 4 July 1868: 5; *Occident*, 1 Sept. 1868: 285.

¹²³*Archives Israélites*, 1 Sept. 1868: 809, repr. in *Occident*, 1 Oct. 1868: 333.

newspapers from San Francisco to Berlin that reinforced the assumption of a white Jewish body.

Halévy soon attended an AIU Central Committee meeting on 30 July 1868 to report on the expedition and to introduce Adhanan. Halévy began by commending the AIU for undertaking such a mission: “The ancient land of Ethiopia at last reveals to you the secret of that population which remained unknown other than the name of the Falashas, who, faithful to the sublime truths of the Code of Sinai, have traversed the most diverse phases of social life, and, notwithstanding their disasters, have lost nothing of the vigor necessary to raise them to the height of the new spirit which animates our modern society.”¹²⁴ Halévy drew on racializing tropes of Ethiopia as an “ancient land” shrouded in mystery, and of the Beta Israel as occupying a lower level of civilization, yet with the capacity to become modern. In suggesting that their uncivilized state was a result of their environment, “where the difficulties of life tend to degrade all the faculties of man,” Halévy proposed that the AIU establish a school there. Here he echoes the earlier discourse that Jews are racially mentally superior to their neighbors and, with the support of European and American Jewry, able to attain their rightful, biological claim to modernity as Jews. The AIU concluded that the Beta Israel “belong to the great Israelite family, and we do not want them to remain faraway.”¹²⁵ While Adhanan soon enrolled in the Alliance’s teacher-training school, the *École Normale Israélite Orientale*, “to carry back European civilization to his people, and thus to become the connecting link between them and their brethren in other climes,” Halévy began to prepare for his next mission to the Jews of China.¹²⁶

But not everyone believed Halévy. Charles Netter, a prominent member of the AIU Central Committee, accused Halévy of never having been to Ethiopia and of purchasing Adhanan at a slave market in Sudan.¹²⁷ The AIU opened an investigation, and the veracity of Halévy’s report and Adhanan’s true identity spurred editorials in the Jewish press. *L’Univers Israélite* dismissed both Adhanan and Halévy’s work completely, arguing, “Despite the expensive mission sent by the Alliance to the country where the wild Theodoros rules, we still know almost nothing about the Abyssinian Jews. The sight of a young man of black color and frizzy hair that we possess is not enough to satisfy our curiosity.”¹²⁸ Such accusations cast a pall on the expedition, and the AIU took no action on behalf of the Beta Israel. Following the scandal, the Board of Delegates of American Israelites pulled its funding for a mission to China.¹²⁹ The *AIU Bulletin* would state that while planning the “mission to China, with the view of preserving for Judaism and civilisation the perishing Jewish colony isolated there from remote antiquity, a blight suddenly fell upon it like a thunderbolt from a serene sky. The Franco-German war broke out.”¹³⁰ Angry, dejected, and penniless, Halévy abandoned the mission to China, setting off instead to study

¹²⁴ *Bulletin de l’Alliance Israélite Universelle*, 1 July 1868: 85.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹²⁶ *Jewish Chronicle*, 17 Mar. 1871: 11; 2 Apr. 1869: 14.

¹²⁷ Joseph Halévy, “Une Lettre Amharique Des Falachas Ou Juifs d’Abyssinie,” *Revue Sémitique d’Épigraphie et d’histoire Ancienne* 14 (1906): 94–95.

¹²⁸ *L’Univers Israélite*, 15 Jan. 1870: 297.

¹²⁹ *Jewish Chronicle*, 24 June 1870: 6.

¹³⁰ *Jewish Chronicle*, 17 Mar. 1871: 11.

inscriptions in Yemen on behalf of the Parisian *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*.¹³¹

It would be years until the AIU once again took an interest in the Beta Israel. In 1904, Baron Edmond de Rothschild sponsored a mission to the Beta Israel led by Halévy's student, Jacques Faitlovitch, prompting the AIU to undertake its own counter-mission. The AIU hired Rabbi Haim Nahum, who would become Chief Rabbi of the Ottoman Empire in 1909, yet following his mission, decided to maintain its position of noninvolvement.¹³² In his concluding report, Nahum declared that the Beta Israel had primitive mental and moral capacities and would not benefit from the sophisticated schooling of the Alliance.¹³³ "We should not for a moment think of creating any educational programme in Abyssinia or Eritrea," he wrote. "We should not create dangerous illusions: we are dealing with a people whose intellectual capacity is not generally very highly developed.... Any different behavior would mean destroying the mental equilibrium of the Falasha race."¹³⁴ Once again, the AIU decided against working with the Beta Israel.¹³⁵ Despite the AIU's moral imperative of global Jewish solidarity, the expedition to Ethiopia highlights how the Alliance determined which Jewish populations it considered worth investing in and which it deemed undeserving of its attention, aid, and schooling. In this way, it was through such missions to Ethiopia and the racialized knowledge they produced about the Beta Israel that Jewish communal leaders in Western Europe and the United States worked to demarcate the boundaries of the Jewish *propter nos*.

Conclusion

This story of Jewish internationalism begins and ends in different places than the usual narratives spun in scholarship. Although Jews are often thought of as being at odds or antagonistic to missionizing, debates around missions to China and Ethiopia demonstrate the ambivalence Jewish communal leaders in the United States and Western Europe felt toward missionary activities. While they fiercely condemned Christian missionaries targeting Jewish communities for conversion, they also envied them. They decried Jewish disorganization in light of a well-established missionary organizational apparatus; the lack of donations in light of extensive Christian collections; and perhaps most significantly, Jewish apathy in light of Christian missionary zeal. The very concept of a Jewish mission consciously mirrored Christian missions and framed Judaism in terms that Christians could

¹³¹ Alan Verskin, *A Vision of Yemen: The Travels of a European Orientalist and His Native Guide* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

¹³² For more on Faitlovitch and his expedition, see Baron-Bloch, "Racial Politics"; Emanuela Trevisan Semi, *Jacques Faitlovitch and the Jews of Ethiopia* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2007); Esther Benbassa, *Haim Nahum: A Sephardic Chief Rabbi in Politics, 1892–1923* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995); Tudor Parfitt, "Rabbi Nahoum's Anthropological Mission to Ethiopia," in Tudor Parfitt and Emanuela Trevisan Semi, eds., *The Beta Israel in Ethiopia and Israel: Studies on Ethiopian Jews* (Surrey: Curzon, 1999): 1–14.

¹³³ *Bulletin de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle* 37 (1909): 5–35.

¹³⁴ Quoted in Trevisan Semi, *Jacques Faitlovitch*, 34–35.

¹³⁵ Benbassa, *Haim Nahum*; Parfitt, "Rabbi Nahoum's Anthropological Mission," 1–14; Semi, *Jacques Faitlovitch*; Verskin, *Vision of Yemen*, 19.

understand.¹³⁶ But although calls for Jewish missions resulted in various models of Jewish missionaries, from explorers to rabbis and Orientalists, and culminated in the founding of the Hebrew Foreign Mission Society, they yielded a mission to China that failed before it had begun and Halévy's mission to Ethiopia that produced no action.

Following Sylvia Wynter, Jewish missions demonstrate how theological, behavioral, and racial norms provided the moral-ethical criteria that shaped the symbolic representations of groups in China and Ethiopia in defining the outer limits of the Jewish world, Jewishness, and Judaism. One of the reasons that communities in China and Ethiopia garnered such attention was their racial difference. The continuous reference to "Chinese Jews," for instance, points to how the term *Jews*, without the modifier *Chinese*, excludes Chinese racial identity. The same, as Noah Tamarkin points out, is true for the term "Black Jews."¹³⁷ Jewish communal leaders' concern for these communities, languishing among "savages" and "half-civilized heathens," as well as the highly racialized depictions of Daniel Adhanan, further echoed contemporary imperial, anthropological, and missionary race-making, all in the name of Jewish solidarity. In drawing their *propter nos*, Jewish communal leaders incorporated communities in China and Ethiopia as members of the Jewish race by elevating them above those they lived among, while subsuming and rendering them marginal within the larger Jewish collective.¹³⁸ This indicates how diasporas are created within and across global racial hierarchies.¹³⁹

Such communities were not incidental to, but constitutive of, the creation of a Jewish collective identity.¹⁴⁰ Missions served as a means by which Jewish communal leaders in Western Europe and the United States sought to define a Jewish collectivity that fell on the white side of the color line. Despite their socioeconomic ascent and integration, they felt an underlying sense of precarity, that the promise of western emancipation was unstable and limited. They sought to shore up their belonging in part through imperial and racial logics that determined the terms of inclusivity that circumscribed Jewish belonging. While Jewish missions may seem fundamentally different from their Christian counterparts—seeking not to convert to another religion, but to revive an ancient connection to Judaism—these missions represented intra-Jewish missionary fantasies that drew on contemporary scientific, evangelical, and civilizing missions. This included the homogenizing of vastly different communities in China and Ethiopia into a single realm that separated those who considered themselves enlightened and civilized from their benighted brethren, a key form of race-making among Protestant missionaries.¹⁴¹

The search for "lost Jews" has continued into the present-day, transformed by genetic testing and politicized with the establishment of the State of Israel, though with direct throughlines to nineteenth-century predecessors. In 1973, the Beta Israel were declared descendants of the Tribe of Dan before being airlifted to Israel in the

¹³⁶Berman, "Mission to America," 215.

¹³⁷Noah Tamarkin, *Genetic Afterlives: Black Jewish Indigeneity in South Africa* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 19.

¹³⁸*Ibid.*

¹³⁹Scholarship on the Black diaspora has long explored this, particularly the seminal work of Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

¹⁴⁰Here I am building on Gin Lum, *Heathens*, who is in turn building on Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

¹⁴¹Gin Lum, *Heathens*.

1980s and 1990s. Arguing for their resettlement in Israel, the President of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews followed in the footsteps of Halévy, invoking the same racial trope that the Beta Israel “are less African and more Mediterranean than the other(s) [Ethiopians] ... they have less frequency of African associated chromosomes.”¹⁴² The campaign on behalf of the Beta Israel spurred the founding in 1994 of the American Jewish organization, Kulanu (All of Us), which works to identify “lost” Jewish populations worldwide.¹⁴³ Echoing Leiser, the former president of Kulanu, Jack Zeller asked, “What Jewish civilization would abandon thousands of Jewish descent from the Iberian Peninsula, India and Africa?”¹⁴⁴ Kulanu members seek to find and aid Jews scattered worldwide, who they depict both as more authentic and devout, while decrying their lapsed Jewish practice that has led to assimilation and conversion. However, while genetic testing has provided scientific evidence to dubious claims of shared descent, Zeller directly called on Halévy in explaining how Jewishness transcends DNA: “You wouldn’t need DNA for proof if you met a Lemba (or a Bnei Menashe from India, for that matter). Meeting a Lemba ‘one on one’ conveys the palpable Jewishness in his or her soul. Joseph Halevy didn’t need DNA 150 years ago when he went to meet the Beta Israel of Ethiopia. It was obvious to him from discussion alone.”¹⁴⁵

Anthropologist Nadia Abu El-Haj has traced how Kulanu has partnered with organizations in Israel, *Amishav* (My People Returns) and its successor *Shavei Israel* (Israel Returns), to bring “lost Jews” not only back to the Jewish people, but to the State of Israel, fulfilling the mandate of the “ingathering of exiles” (*kibbutz galuyot*) taken up by Rabbi Sneersohn in the 1860s.¹⁴⁶ *Amishav* and *Shavei Israel*, run by Orthodox settlers and with funding from Christian evangelicals, have sent missions to communities worldwide and have partnered with the Israeli government in settling communities in Gaza and the West Bank. Since the 1990s, over three thousand people from northeastern India have been dubbed the Bnei Menashe by the founder of Amishav and in 2005 they were legally determined to be descendants of the tribe of Menashe. Having undergone Orthodox conversion, they were first settled in Gush Katif in the Gaza Strip, where Jewish residents sought to replace Palestinian workers, who they felt posed a security risk, and later in West Bank settlements.¹⁴⁷ In 2003, settlers and rabbis converted hundreds living in the Peruvian Andes and settled them in the West Bank settlement of *Shavei Shomron* (Return to Samaria).¹⁴⁸ As the founder of *Shavei Israel*, Michael Freund, stated before a governmental committee in 2010, “Despite being cut off for more than 2,700 years, the Bnei Menashe never forgot who they are or where they come from, and never gave up on the dream of returning to Israel.”¹⁴⁹

¹⁴²Quoted in Steven Kaplan, “If There Are No Races, How Can Jews Be a ‘Race’?” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 2, 1 (2003): 79–96, 86.

¹⁴³Nadia Abu El-Haj, *The Genealogical Science: The Search for Jewish Origins and the Politics of Epistemology*, vol. 54 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 181.

¹⁴⁴Jack Zeller, “Overly Ambitious?” *Kulanu* (Summer 2001): 6.

¹⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁴⁶Itzhak Ben-Zvi, *The Exiled and the Redeemed* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1957); Ben-Dor Benite, *Ten Lost Tribes*; Tamarkin, *Genetic Afterlives*.

¹⁴⁷Abu El-Haj, *Genealogical Science*, 206.

¹⁴⁸Graciela Mochkofsky, *The Prophet of the Andes: An Unlikely Journey to the Promised Land* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2022).

¹⁴⁹Quoted in Abu El-Haj, *Genealogical Science*, 212.

This points to how these missions to lost Jews and discourses of Jewish solidarity predicated on imperial and racial logics have carried into the present day. Yet Abu El-Haj cautions against discussions of lost Jews focusing only on internal Jewish racism and neglecting the larger context of global racial and territorial politics of Jewishness in which these dynamics continue to unfold. Freund has explicitly stated that his organization facilitates Jewish settlement in the Occupied Territories for demographic purposes. As a state structured around the distinction between Jew and non-Jew, citizen and subject, these efforts reflect action on behalf of a shared Jewish collective, or Wynter's *propter nos*, at the expense of Palestinians excluded and increasingly dispossessed. This history reveals the many debates, discourses, and events through which the lines defining Jewishness were drawn in the nineteenth-century according to racial logics, a history rendered all the more potent as it is harnessed for modern politics of territorialism.

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