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**“FOOD FOR PEACE”:
THE VEGAN RELIGION OF THE HEBREWS
OF JERUSALEM**

Food, eschatology and sacred chronology

Abraham Elqayam, a great scholar of Jewish mysticism and Jewish Philosophy, presented food as key in designing sacred chronology¹ (2006:239). Ruth Tsoffar Mizrahi, who studies Israeli society and culture, argues that in Jewish culture ‘*eating*’ is ‘*believing*’ (2006:35), just as in American culture ‘seeing is believing’. (Dundes 1977). Such usage of ‘eating’ as ‘believing’ appears commonly within today’s Hebrew slang. Eating has a religious context of accepting, such as in the Passover ceremony where ‘eating’ becomes ‘believing’ through the symbolic food set on Passover table – from *haroset* (a blend of fruits and nuts) to *maror* (bitter herbs) to *matza* (unleavened bread). These Hebrew words point to specific foods of Passover that serve as instrumental symbols in a ‘tactile’ conservation and in the memorizing of religious collective experience. In this paper I will elucidate three major messianic ‘tactile’ terms in the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem (AHIJ) religion: Food and Bio-Evolution.

The African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem

The African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem (AHIJ) re-emerged during the civil rights movement, in a time when black pride was salient amongst political

¹ Sacred chronology is the system of holidays and Shabbat. For example, for Sabbatians in Shabbat there are three meals: Friday evening, Saturday breakfast and Saturday lunch. See Elqayam’s discussion on the Freedom Redemption via food, where the redemption of the individual and the community go through eating the “sacred meat” (Elqayam 2006:243–248).

and cultural organizations. They are led by a charismatic prophet, Ben Ammi Ben Israel (Ben Ammi) who is considered a Messiah by them. He became enlightened in 1960 through study with the African Hebrews elders. The elders knew themselves as the descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel and Judea who escaped to southern and western Africa from Roman Legions 2 millennia ago. They were subsequently sold as slaves to America. In 1966 Ben Ammi received a vision in a dream that instructed him to lead a remnant of the Hebrew Israelites in America to the Promised Land via Liberia where they eventually stayed for two and a half years spiritually purging, and dedicating themselves before entering Israel in 1969. In Liberia, the day before the traditional Hebrew Passover Ben Ammi reveled the AHIJ vegan lifestyle. This is symbolically celebrated annually as New World Passover”² where they witness Yah’s (God’s) redemption, as “He fulfilled His promise” to them, they, “in return with gratitude”, keep their covenant with Him.

The term ‘African Hebrews’ refers to several African American groups within the African Hebrew Israelites movement who all believe themselves to be the descendents of the lost tribes of Israel³: Church of God and Saints of Christ,⁴ Israeli School of Universal Practical Knowledge,⁵ Church of the Living God⁶ and Israelite Church of God and Jesus Christ⁷. One group, the African Israelites, moved from the United States to Liberia in the 1960s.⁸ Another group from this

² Simoni, L., Royal Passover, <http://www.rikushet.co.il/page/PageArticle.asp?fid=1&pid=4&aid=122>.

³ In this study I am not questioning this claim but rather I try from an emic perspective to do justice with their perspective by bringing up new angles and views.

⁴ A congregation organized in 1896 by Prophet William Saunders Crowdy, who passed his mantle of leadership to three successors (1906): Chief Joseph W. Crowdy, Bishop William H. Plummer, and Counselor Calvin S. Skinner. Counselor Skinner consecrated for leadership Rabbi Howard Z. Plummer, who prior to his demise ordained Rabbi Levi S. Plummer. Currently, the congregation is led by Rabbi Jehu A. Crowdy, Jr. The Church of God and Saints of Christ has headquarters in Belleville (Suffolk), VA with tabernacles across the United States, Jamaica, and Africa.

⁵ This group started in Harlem by Abba Binebs in the 1960s and has undergone some evolution and changed its name. They refer to the creator of Heaven and Earth as “God” YAHAWAH and to the messiah as YAHWASHI (Joshua).

⁶ This group was founded by F. S. Cherry as the Church of God in Philadelphia (1915). Theologically, it mixed Judaism and Christianity, although the Hebrew Bible and Talmud were considered essential scriptures. Several Jewish practices and prohibitions were observed by Cherry’s flock. The movement has been reported to survive under the leadership of Cherry’s son, but little information about it has been disseminated.

⁷ The Black Israelites seen preaching on the streets of American cities belong to this cohort. Unlike most BHI sects, they are open to Hispanics and Native Americans, who are believed by them to be among the 12 tribes of Israel. They produce a television program called “The Hidden Truth of the Bible”, which airs on many public access stations across the USA.

⁸ African Hebrew groups started to spring up in America after the years of the Great Migration (1926–1929) when there was a great influx of blacks into northern urban centers. These African Americans felt deprived of the familial structures, which they were used to in the South.

Liberian movement, named African Hebrew Israelite Community of Jerusalem broke away, is the AHIJ of Dimona. This group stands alone when measured by its location, nutrition and eschatology. Its redemptive solution is connecting land (Judea), language (Hebrew), culture (Israeli) and purpose.

In spite of their stay in Israel since 1969, the Interior Minister granted the AHIJ permanent resident visa status⁹ by a 2003, and citizenship in February 2009, two weeks after President Barack Obama entered the White House in Washington DC. These two last decisions reversed the Israeli government’s long-standing rejection and ended AHIJ struggle in Israel.¹⁰

The question of the size of the community is a religious issue. It has an extensive midwifery system, and gauging its exact population is difficult even though births are registered without hospitals or conventional medicines, because taking a census of the entire community is against their religious principles.¹¹

Their center, Village of Peace, was an empty governmental absorption center in a development town when they arrived. It is now a green village despite the scarcity of water in the midst of the rocky desert of southern Israel – the

The formation of African American Hebrew groups helped foster a communal environment and further the development of black society and culture by using the Old Testament. The Black Hebrew community took shape during the late 1950’s and early 1960s, coinciding with the Civil Rights movement of that time period. This assisted in their quest for an authentic identity not imposed upon them by the dominant culture in America at the time. They showed pride in their African past as well as a future of being true Israelis in Israel. This community synthesized the Civil Rights element of shedding the dominant structures of society with the idealistic and utopian views of leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. Many African Americans felt alienated and disappointed by Christianity. The Christian society sought to exclude them as a minority and illegitimate Christians and they therefore sought a new identity to be coupled with a spiritual experience. In their efforts to separate and build their religion they worked within the Judeo-Christian tradition.

⁹ Permanent residency refers to a person’s visa status: the person is allowed to reside indefinitely within a country despite not having citizenship.

¹⁰ The first comers in 29 December 1969 got a full citizenship as African Jews new immigrants according to the Law of Return (Shvut). Then they attracted more African Americans Black Hebrews who had left the USA to come to Israel for Dimona’s spiritual center. The Israeli bureaucracy, with the help of Chief Rabbinate, set a policy then that the Law of Return did not include the BHIJ. In spite of having no status, they stayed in Israel, and established their own school for their children in 1972. In May 1990 the government granted them BHIJ B/1 visas that allows work and a year later a temporary residency was issued. Naomi Grossman quotes a member of the congregation, Eliyahu, as saying: We still want citizenship under the law of return. We’re no different from the Iraqi Jews or the Russian Jews. Everyone says about them they were persecuted so they couldn’t maintain their traditions. Well, we were slaves for four hundred years. It shouldn’t be difficult to accept our Jewishness with all these factors. (Grossman 1994:15) Eliyahu Ben Yisrael, member of Black Hebrews in Dimona, 40, 19 March 1994 in Grossman, 7 September, 2007.

¹¹ The estimates range from 2000 to 4000 in Israel (The Jerusalem post, Breaking News from Israel, the Middle East and the Jewish World, page 2, 8 December 2005). Common estimates of between “2000–4000” of the BHIJ number are unofficial. My estimation is about 5000 men, women and children, residing in three development towns in Israel: Dimona, Arad, Mitzpe Ramon in southern Israel and in the area of the See of Galilee, not yet citizens of Israel.

Negev.¹² Why would they come here with no work, nor status? Like many other Israelis, they came to Israel infused with a messianic motif – to build and to be built:

Our conception of God and how you worship Him is knowable and visible via the culture and lifestyle we live. Verily what exist upon the earth today demands a New Beginning or New Genesis. This New Beginning has started in Dimona, Israel and the community of the Hebrew Israelites has received the mandate from God to be fruitful and multiply, and seize the authority to establish The Dominion of God and Truth upon the earth. (Elyakeem, 2007:3)¹³

Blessed Food and the Image of God

Blessed food is in the similitude to the blessings given to man in Genesis: signifying order, life and prosperity. Without the concept of blessing and order, one cannot understand the Jewish religion (Douglas 1996). Joseph Gikatilla (1248 AD – 1325 AD), of Castile in Spain¹⁴ and later Rabbi Israel Najara¹⁵ (circa 1550–1630), of Safed and Gaza set the principle that an evolved person (*Tsadiq*) can re-create and put everything in its rightful place. Gershom Scholem, the founder of the scholarly study of Kabala, found this ideal of putting things in the right order a kabalistic innovation that carries messianic significance with utopian

¹² The origin of the word *Negev* comes from the Hebrew root denoting ‘dry’ and the term for this area illustrates the ecological environment where BHIJ culture flourishes. The area’s extreme temperatures in summer and winter are due to its location 31 degrees north of the equator. The average rainfall from June through October is zero millimeters. The area gets 100 mm of rain in an entire year. The surrounding land has inferior and partially salty soils in which little can grow without irrigation and special soil additives.

¹³ Sar Elyakeem Ben Yehuda (Elyakeem) is the BHIJ Minister of the People.

¹⁴ Gikatilla, Shaarei Tzedek, 16:1.

¹⁵ By Job 22:28, Rabbi Israel Najara, Mikve Israel (16th century) (Regev 2004:238:46). Rabbi Israel Najara, the Mystic Poet of Safed in the 16th century wrote a book about the laws of *Shehita* (Najara, 1718). Surprisingly though, he restricted meat eating and refined the urge of eating meat, commenting on psalm (81:17) for a messianic time that God “is about to feed us in the future honey from the rock”, he referred to the messianic theme of Exodus when the people were fed the heavenly Manna and all the best of the Land of Israel (Mikve Israel A: 8b) (Regev 2004). Najara’s views were that the “key of the deliverance and the key to food are in the hand of the Angel. This meant that this key was not, right then, neither in the hand of humans nor in the hand of God” Which is a fascinating subject to study, yet in another study. The great poet transformed the ‘ritual of meat sacrifice’ into a ‘ritual of Word offering’, a daily, weekly and monthly practice of ‘poetic offering’ that the whole community offers to God. Subsequently, he was followed by the Rabbi Kook, who believed too that vegetarianism is the ideal sate for humanity.

explosives (Huss 1996).¹⁶ According to Mary Douglas, rules defining acceptable and unacceptable food set apart an identity and may be explained by the laws that attack that which is “not located in its rightful place” (Douglas 2004:11). Dietary taboos that prescribe what is and is not edible construct cultural identity (Kilgour 1998:239).

My focus here will be how a religious concept of ‘divine food’ though differentiates AHJ from others, both African Hebrews and Jews it yet has unknown roots in Jewish history and praxis,¹⁷ and there might be a hidden connection, since dietary laws are extremely vital in Judaism. All AHJ members are religiously vegans, eating no meat, no dairy products nor food with chemical additives, avoiding salt three days a week, avoiding sugar four weeks a year followed by a week during which only fresh and uncooked fruit, nuts, seeds, and vegetables are consumed. They exercise three times a week and have at least one full-body massage each month for its health benefits. They do not smoke or drink alcohol, except for naturally fermented self-produced wine. When the children of the congregation come back from school they eat together in the community’s dining hall to liberate the mothers (Yirmeyahu 11 October 2007). Vegetarianism is connected in Judaism to a messianic concept (Rabbis: Elbo, I. Najara, Nachman of Breslow, Kook and Hanazir).¹⁸ By interpretation of *Genesis*, man’s nutrition was intended to be vegetarian and Adam (the original man) was a vegetarian:

¹⁶ Quoted in Huss 1996: 170; Also see, Elqayam 1990:5–40.

¹⁷ Many studies have dealt with the Black Hebrews (Du Bois 1970 [1920–1963 1970]), (Washington 1972), (Jones 1988) (Fauset 1980 [1944]) (Ben Ammi 1982, 1994, 2004, 2005, 1994), (Markowitz 1996), (Hoffman 2002), (Rucker 2002), (Israeli Foreign Ministry 29 September 2006), (Markowitz, Helman, Shir-Vertesh 2003), (Grossman 2007), (Rofeh 2007), yet no diachronic study was done with reference to the Jewish roots of their tradition.

¹⁸ Vegetarianism as an ideology is rare among Jewish communities. However, a few prominent rabbis proclaim on ethical vegetarianism: Rabbi Yoseph Elbo (c. 1380–1440) advocated against eating meat. Rabbi Israel Najara (c. 1550–1630) wrote that vegetarianism is a messianic diet. Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (1772–1810) observed ‘The fighting doesn’t begin until the food runs out!’ Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook (1865–1935) presents strong support for vegetarianism as a positive ideal in *Torah*. (HaCohen, 1963–1964:1:8). HaCohen contend that the Torah’s permission to eat meat was only temporary, but he was not vegetarian. His student, Rabbi David Cohen, (1887–1972) “*hanazir*,” (lit. the monk) was a devout vegetarian. Yet, the last recent vegetarian community in Judaism was the Essenes (‘*Kat Hayahad*’) 2,000 years ago. Their communal vegan lifestyle was widespread in the time of the Second Temple in the towns and villages of Judea. (Jewish War 2:152), (Zeitlin 1954). Philo called them *Essaioi*; he thought this name was “a variation, though the form of the Greek is inexact, of piety, is given to them, because they have shown themselves to be especially devout in the service of God.” The Essences lived not only in the Dead Sea area as is commonly thought (Stern 1969: 264). The abstention from meat and wine appeared to be a common phenomenon also after the destruction of the Second Temple when there were no longer sacrifices. According to Zeitlin (1954), [0]many Jews abstained from eating meat and drinking wine since both were related to performing animal sacrifices (**Baba batra 60:b*).[0]

And God said, Behold, I have given you ever herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for food. (Genesis 1:29)

According to the AHIJ it is to this original vegetarian diet that humans will return to in messianic times, where no blood will be shed in a universal peace.

However, after the great mythological catastrophic flood humans were permitted to eat meat. Jewish law allows animals' meat to be eaten except for the blood, which signifies the soul (*Genesis*, 9: 2). Eating meat has become an imperative obligation within Judaism, specifically on certain occasions. Meat seems an essential part of Passover, and seems to also be an imperative in the time of the Temple, as many of the sacrificial offerings were animals. According to the *Mishna* (Pesahim 109b), partaking in the meat of the Passover sacrifice was a major joy in addition to being a requirement. The Jewish people have followed and continue to adhere to tight dietary restrictions in observance of kosher laws.¹⁹ Anyway, according to the AHIJ tradition the y moved south about the time of the destruction of the Second Temple, circa 70 CE (Ben Ammi 2002) thus had no contact with the (other) Jewish centers of study when the laws of '*kashrut*' were codified later in history.²⁰ Therefore, their dietary laws developed separately from the conventional Jewish laws of '*kashrut*'.²¹

Food for Peace: Interaction between Religion and Science

The AHIJ community has a reputation as one of the healthiest communities in Israel. David Sade reports on his website [Hebrew], that according to a recent study the average health of the AHIJ is much higher than the rest of Israel (Sade 2007)²² with very few cases of heart attacks and obesity throughout their

¹⁹ The Hebrew term "kosher" means fit or proper and is an adjective of Jewish food according to the laws and customs pertaining to types of food that Jews can consume and the way foods should be prepared. It is believed that dietary laws were established to promote holiness (Hier 1980:2).

²⁰ Safed, Kushta, Adrianopol, Salonica, Venice.

²¹ The Jewish system "*kashrut*" though based on the *Torah*, was codified in the 16th century by Rabbi Yoseph Karo (Yore De'ah 1550) into the system used today, and also in poetry by Rabbi Israel Najara "*Shochatei Yeladim*", Amsterdam 1718. Manuscripts: Schoken 70067/1, Margalyot, Bar Ilan University 245/2, Lehman NY 124/1.

²² See in David Sade's website <http://www.tevalife.com/article.asp?id=56> [Hebrew]. There are abstracts following references to journals and to books supporting BHJ vegan food. See also, <http://www.doctors.co.il/xID-3072,xCT-81,m-Doctors,a-Article.html>, Bar-Or, R., Harel N. An island of sanity: The Black Hebrews Community in Dimina, Teva HaDvarim, 1994 April-May, 3. [Hebrew]

thirty-eight year history in Israel and only two documented cases of cancer, which is a statistical anomaly in the Western world. This excellent record of health is so renowned that Israel sends AHIJ as representatives to African countries, to aid local tribes in cultivating healthy practices and lifestyles. Indeed, recent scientific medical research supports the AHIJ’s type of vegan/vegetarian diet and lifestyle, the health benefits of fasting and the negative factors related to obesity. The importance of their diet cannot be stressed enough.²³

However, the AHIJ motivation for these customs derives from something more than longevity and health statistics. According to Ben Ammi right lifestyle and cognition correlate with immortality:

Good health is the result of a righteous lifestyle within a suitable environment. I’ve stressed in this work that intelligence is creative. Everything you now think and feel emotionally reflects who you are or who you will be. Wrong intelligence will/can create an evil being whose mind is obligated to create an evil environment. That force of intelligence understandably has the power to define life and death; wealth and poverty; youthfulness, as well as an old age. Because his spiritual intelligence is limited, his world is of limited existence. My heart is very heavy for those who believe sickness and death are unavoidable; over the hill at forty; old at fifty, senile and sedentary at sixty, and facing death at seventy. Unknowingly you have been programmed by an anti-life (anti-God) spirit to prevent your natural rebellion against prevarication. In the final analysis, you lose your youth simply because you don’t know how to preserve it. Once you are rendered helpless in the so-called accredited institutions, the confiscation of the values of life is relatively easy. (Ben Ammi 1994: 4)

²³ According to McCarty (2003), a ‘cure’ for hypertension may be feasible. Her research has found that the ability of therapeutic fasts to break vicious metabolic cycles may contribute to the efficacy of fasting in the treatment of type 2 diabetes and autoimmune disorders. McCarty asserts that as a general principle, if a metabolic disorder is susceptible to prevention – but not reversal – by a specific diet, and therapeutic fasting has a temporary favorable impact on this disorder. A more definitive therapy may consist of a therapeutic fast, followed up by the protective diet as a maintenance regimen (McCarty 2003). Kjeldsen-Kragh from the Department of General Practice at the University of Oslo also analyzed the effect of fasting followed by one year of a vegetarian diet. After four weeks at the health farm, the diet group showed a significant improvement in number of tender joints, Ritchie’s articular index, number of swollen joints, pain score, duration of morning stiffness, grip strength, erythrocyte sedimentation rate, C-reactive protein and, white blood cell count (1991). Divisi (2006) proposes that a diet low in fiber, the high in red meat and with an imbalance of Omega-3 and Omega-6 fats may contribute to increase the risk of cancer. On the other hand, the consumption of many fruits and vegetables may actually lower the risk of cancer. A diet made of these guidelines could decrease the incidence of breast, colon-rectal, prostate and bronchogenic cancer. According to Roman de Luis and his research on vegetarian diets, studies have shown beneficial results in obesity, cancer, Parkinson disease, hypertension, type 2 diabetes mellitus and urinary stones with this diet (Roman 2007). Obesity is associated with significant excess morbidity and mortality. Obesity is also associated with an excess risk of many disorders, including diabetes mellitus, insulin resistance, hypertension, dyslipidemia, heart disease, stroke, sleep apnea, cancer, and many others (Bray 2008).

The evident Truth is that our worship has to remain consistent to the idea revealed in the Genesis creative process. Deviation from this idea – an observable inconsistency in your manner of worship – will manifest a spiritual problem. (Ben Ammi 2004: 4)

For the AHIJ, the ways of the past are the perfect model for behaving today and guidance for the generations to come. Vegan nutrition in their culture is essential to the restorative process and is viewed as divine sustenance. “Yah” (God) mandated the vegan diet to maintain the physical manifestations of mankind. According to Ben Ammi,

[...] physiology is definitely influenced by the spirit of man. There is/was a living organism in man that is activated by righteous behavior as has been determined by God Almighty. Without the proper mannerisms and a Godly character, which yields the proper chemistry that causes certain cells, organs and tissues to function, death is inevitable. Just as there are proper nutritional requirements for man’s body, there are spiritual requirements for his soul.” (Ben Ammi 1991:34–35).

AHIJ’s messianic ‘kosher’ rules are based on the Hebrew Bible, for them a guidebook for today’s every-day living. By following a tradition where the actions and, more specifically the diet, reflect the divine dictates, the AHIJ feels worthy and able to bring the world back to its unblemished state. The religious core is that everything, everyday, and every moment, depends on God (*Yah*) and that man was created in the image of God (*Imitatio Dei*).²⁴ Not metaphorically or symbolically but rather as a program to fulfill, a plan to execute, a mission given to man by God in an effort to emulate him. Is the imitation of God an affirmation of a bond to be achieved by faith alone or is it stressing the role man has to play in redeeming the world from the forces of evil? I think the answer can be found in the principle of “Food for Peace”, a basic tenet of the AHIJ’s religious ideology. The vegetarian guidelines given in Genesis offer a guide for how to maintain the biophysical organism. “Peace” in Hebrew is one of the names of God (Judges 6:24) (Derech Eretz Zuta 11:12). “Peace” includes blessings and all the right conducts (Vaikra Rava 9:9). The prophetic eschatological vision of peace is a universal (Jesaia b: 4; Micha 4:3). To the AHIJ, ‘Peace’ also means harmonious life, righteousness, and morality. Peace in the African Hebrew religion is one of the ministries of the Messiah (*sar shalom*). Nevertheless they believe food must be cultivated in a peaceful manner and with peaceful intention. Rofeh Yehoshiyahu Ben Yehuda (Rofeh), from the AHIJ Ministry of Divine Health explains:

²⁴ For the philosophic background of the concept of *Imitatio Dei* in Jewish philosophy see Kreisel (1994: 169:1).

[AHIJ] community was established upon the foundation of the spirituality and moral principles as handed to them by ‘divine revelation and inspiration through the Word of God’. We have returned unto the High, Holy and Sacred Genesis Diet of vegan whole mineral nutrition based upon the consumption of fresh, live foods-organic vegetables, fruits and whole grains, nuts and legumes which has propelled us into the cycle of cleansing and rebuilding our physical organisms into the Temple(s) and the Most Holy [...] A more natural spirituality is required by The God of Truth at this epoch of time where we all can enjoy the fruits of a moral life wherein there is perfect health, long life, peace (internal and external), eternal joy and genuine love for each other and the creations; where there is not even a semblance of internal conflict (biochemical) or external discord (sociological and ecological). This will be seen during season of the worldwide realization of the connection between spirituality, proper moral conduct and the appropriate dietary consumption. (Rofeh, 2007–1–9)

The ‘Fall’ of Food and Health and the Rise of the Kingdom of Yah

Zvi Werbowski’s arch-typologies contain two messianic models: ‘A New World’ and “A Return to Eden” (Werbloveski 1972:22). The AHIJ messianic concept is the latter, because they follow the way of the Hebrew Ancients as a divine given pattern that belongs to them ancestrally and connects them as an expanded family. Yet, does bio-evolution and immortality not signify “A New World?” AHIJ messianic concept includes, then, the two typologies. Yet, the typology of renewing the world or otherwise going back to the Eden origin is not the heart of the issue. AHIJ hold to the paradigm that the world and reality is given in the hands – and words – of God. Ever since the soul, the driving force of the body, transgressed the instructions of God the biblical ‘fall’ of Adam was commenced and consequently humanity began to consume sinful food. They believe God gave Adam dominion over Earth but Adam was not authorized to exploit it, but rather maintain and preserve it in a God-like manner. There are divine active principles which through their consideration and studying, humanity can maintain a messianic utopia, as war begins in the mind but so does peace. The Kingdom of Yah is a utopian messianic society where divine principles are considered and lived by. The spiritual AHIJ leader explained the nature of humanity – (signified by Adam) – as constantly developing and evolving:

Man in his ‘right mind’ possesses an instinctive understanding as to why he should not pollute the water he must drink, the air he must breathe, and the food he must eat. Thus thought the active principle of the God-mind, man was able to maintain

the ecological order and harmony of the creation and insure his existence in that order. He became the earth's caretaker, its watchman, fashioned and formed by Yah to procreate in His image. His dominion was the foremost Messianic Kingdom – he was the first Anointed (Messiah). Until his encounter with Satan, the Adamic sovereignty over the earth was in a constant state of ascension... It was only after the Fall and Famine of Truth that the nutritionally weakened messianic seed became an endangered species.” (Ben Ammi 1999:89)

One of the aspects of “Food for Peace” is not killing animals for food, and by this the community demonstrates the utopian ideal of avoiding “*Shfichut Dam'im*” (lit. ‘the spilling of blood’), which is part of the “Fall”.²⁵ Not spilling the blood of another soul is an element within a universal harmonious order and also a divine principle implied in the Ten Commandments. By being vegetarian the AHIJ then take a side, God's side, as opposed to the side of “Fall and Famine of Truth” and join the Kingdom of Yah, which I define as a utopian kingdom that exists in the movement and behavior of people. They keep their covenant with Yah and thus become Yah's people. This indeed is an emic perspective of ideas that motivate the vegetarian practices of the AHIJ.²⁶ Yet, the question is whether any school like this existed as a Jewish tradition and history. Let us therefore discuss the fasting on Shabbat. Since, from the age of seven a AHIJ dedicates the day of Shabbat for Torah studies and fasting as a part of a wider messianic period.

How Jewish is the African Hebrew Tradition of Fasting on Shabbat?

Most readers would think fasting on Shabbat has no basis in Judaism. Yet, the studies of the scholar of Talmud Yistachk Gilat, on the development of the Halakha, provide enough evidence that most Jews (not only individual sects) were fasting on Shabbat at the time of the Second Temple – which is relevant because that is the time period which the AHIJ allegedly left mainstream Judaism.

That such a tradition of fasting on Shabbat was the major tradition among Jews becomes evident in early historical accounts of the era. The Roman historian Gnaeus Pompeius Trogus in the first century BCE tells that after Moses and

²⁵ Talmud bavli, (Sanhedrien 59:2); See interpretation of *Rashi* (Rabbi Shlomo Yitshak) (1105–1040) on Genesis 1:29. However for the BHIJ avoiding meat began with Ben Ammi's revelation in Liberia at the Eve of Passover.

²⁶ While I was writing this paper, a new book, *Ramle Seven* was published about seven men from the BHIJ community who helped Ben Ammi shape the destiny of the congregation: The seven sat in jail in Ramle for staying in Israel without citizenship status, in the early history of the BHIJ.

the children of Israel went out of Egypt, ‘after seven days of wondering in the desert they arrived to the land of their fathers, and as a memory for ending their suffering on the seventh day they consecrated the seventh day’ as a day of fast for generations.’ (Gilat 1992:111), (Stern 1974:335,337). Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus (circa 71–135 AD) a prominent Roman historian quoted in his book on the *Lives of the Caesars – The Deified Augustus*, a segment of the letter of Augustus Cesar to Tiberius. The former was a light eater and ate plain food as a rule. He reported about his fasting which was as scrupulous as the fast of a Jew on Shabbat:

Not even a Jew, my dear Tiberius, fasts so scrupulously on his sabbaths as I have today; for it was not until after the first hour of the night that I ate two mouthfuls of bread [...] (Suetonius 121: LXXVI).

In the 4th century did an *Amoraic* (*Torah* interpretational, circa 200AD–500AD) source on the fast of Shabbat had an interpretation which, even then in the 4th century, was opposed by another interpreter repeating the previous opinion that “the one who sits in fast on Shabbat makes a *mitsva* that has much reward in it” (Mahzor Vitri,²⁷ in Gilat 1992:113:31–38).

While the Halakha today is to eat three meals on Shabbat, it is worth noting that in the time of the *Talmud* and the *Amoraim* (*Torah interpreters* circa 200 AD–500 AD) such a *Halakha* had not yet been established. Moreover, and more importantly, according to Gilat the fact that Rabbis from 4th century AD promised eschatological rewards to those who eat three meals on Shabbat testifies to the fact that the habits of eating three meals on Shabbat were not practiced at that time by the majority of the Israelites. *Tanaim* (1st century BC – 2nd century AD) and *Amoraim* tried hard create a tradition of eating in the Jewish culture in order to combat the high spirituality of the ancient Hasidic and Pharisees who did not eat on Shabbat dedicating it to prayers and studying of the Torah (Gilat 1992:115). This discussion brings up an aspect of over-feeding which intended to lower the spiritual intensity of Jews 2 millennia ago. Indeed, eating three meals on Shabbat by force became an issue of the one school of thought over another (Rambam, *Hilchot Shabbat*, 30:10). Abraham the son of Maimonides wrote on the “special way in walking in the way of the Torah” [*Special Halakha*]: which not every religious person can reach, and that has a very vast range. Not eating

²⁷ Mahzor Vitry (Munich manuscript) is an important early Ashkenazi compilation of the prayers, which was the basis of the Ashkenazi tradition introduced by the French rabbis in 1208; it was first published in Berlin (1893). Compare Najara, Safed, (1587) *Zmirot Israel*. (manuscripts: Venice JTS A1316, Budapest – Koifmann A438, London Gester, 12359; Firkobitz2, EVR II A 182, Zurich HEID 147, Compiled in print: Safed 1587, Venice 1599–1600, Bilogrado 1839. <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=497&letter=P>.

on Shabbat was enacted in order to not be stopped from studying the Torah²⁸ (Gilat 1992:116:46).

The phenomena of Shabbat as a day wholly dedicated to God was widespread in the period of the Second Temple, but it seems that after its destruction, when the tendencies to fasting as atonement intensified as a transmigration for the sacrifices that could not be any more practiced, the practice of fasting on Shabbat ended (Gilat 1992:116). There were two schools of thought on the essence of the Shabbat (Pesahim 68:2; Bitza 15:2). The AHLJ hold to the more spiritual one, of not eating and not drinking.

Indeed, throughout history, certain eating practices came to identify and define groups, delineating group boundaries along with the criteria of inclusion and exclusion (Tsofar-Mizrahi 2006:33; 50:22). Moreover, eating in Judaism is marked with moral and ontological meaning, and food is perceived as a divine gift and reward. Judaism institutes abundant distinctions between the edible and inedible. Different constructions of 'kosher' have developed among different Jewish communities. Although the basic laws are articulated in the Pentateuch, the Rabbinate developed it further to maintain a separation between meat and dairy (Gilat 1992). The same way Jews do everywhere and in all times also the AHLJ developed and studied the laws of their messianic 'Food for Peace' from the *Torah* particularly the book of Genesis. Connecting this to the previous discussion of fasting on Shabbat, also the similarity of the major role of food between the AHLJ and the Modern Jews is evident. In the Hebrew language, food is connected to its essential narratives, from Eve's eating of the apple from the tree of knowledge (Genesis 3:6) to the manna of the desert (Exodus 16:15), and from the priestly ritual of eating the sacrificial offering (*korban*) (Leviticus 18:5) to many other types of offering such as Pentecost offering (*bikkurim*) and Paschal meat (*zevah*).

According to Tsoffar-Mizrahi, the ritual of eating symbolic food is a way of internalizing history and memory. As such, food not only defines Jewish collectivity and its shared traditions, but also becomes that very tradition itself.

Moreover, one's identity is premised on taxonomies of food. A cultural site of discipline and order, these food taxonomies consist of a long list of permissions and prohibitions, from avoiding pork or shellfish to searching for the trademark symbols of rabbinic authorities who certify the products as kosher for consumption. Eating kosher involves more than the strict dietary separation between dairy and meat products. To be ritually permissible an animal should be slaughtered according to halakhic rules and salted and cooked halakhically. Eating is a conscious act,

²⁸ Avraham ben Mimonides, *Sefer Hamaspik – kafaya elabadin*, Jerusalem 1965:14–15.

marked by distinctions, with attention to aspects of both space and time, and to the careful separation of meat and dairy cooking utensils. These culinary practices are a crucial aspect of the production of the conscious mouth, which becomes the site of control over hunger and desire. (Tsoffar-Mizrahi 2006:34)

African Hebrews Food and the idea of Bio-evolution

The AHIJ teachings on immortality and whole mineral vegan tradition are based on a paradigm in the Hebrew Bible (*Torah*). They try ‘to traverse history, space and time until return to the critical point where the access to the right knowledge of reality was lost’ (Rofeh 2007:1). Their ideal of religion is, as in other religions, the development of the personality (Guttman 1981:73). Reading Maimonides one may understand the general concept that man is given to an endless development (ibid 1981:91), and the AHIJ are not different in this developmental Hebraic respect.

According to Kant, the human wisdom needs ideas in its desire to that which is endless and unconditioned (Kant 1954: 326).²⁹ Bio-evolution is such an idea. AHIJ bio-evolution is the process of human development from mortality to immortality, an interaction between morality, spirituality and vegan hole-mineral nutrition, an *Imitatio Dei* (“Immortality is the Ultimate Reality”).

The sacred sustenance of the immortals is “Food for Peace”, and it is based on the totality of all things as the ordered handiwork of God’s creation, and the universe in which we live in a moral innate interconnectedness. Morality, the differentiating between right and wrong following sacred pabulum, is central in the attainment of biological evolution (Proverbs 3:7–8). According to AHIJ religion, Genesis contains the sacred seeds of universal revelations. These seeds represent the ‘*Eternal Ideas*’ behind natural phenomena as ordained by God. In the Genesis

²⁹ In Kant’s writing the ideas of religion became postulates of morality, yet religious people experience religious ideas as a ‘reality’ not as a postulate. According to Yulius Guttman, in the ‘moral religion’ people do not stand in front of God as individuals but rather as groups. Though the relationship between man and his God is individual, yet there is a connection between people as in every morality there is a connection between people. In Judaism political and social moral is founded on religious moral. This gives a special form to the religious life (Guttman 1981:75). Moral activity is in the world, among people, defined as relating to, dealing with, or capable of making the distinction between right and wrong in conduct. A moral universe implies for the BHIJ the Divine Laws that govern humanity’s existence within a cosmic order. They believe divine standards are facilitating the process of ‘Edenic’ (human) development because it would keep mankind within the right frame of mind as proper stewards over God’s Creation and His creative processes (Rofeh 2007:2).

account of Creation they find the guidance regarding the proper biophysical maintenance, where *Yah's Holy Spirit* moved (Genesis 1:1). This interacts with the law of nature that 'everything that moves is energetically motivated' (Rofeh 2007:1) a scientific confirmation that the *Holy Spirit* is real and it involves energy. Apparently, words that 'move' are energetically motivated as well, and so bio-evolution is connected to their prophetic language. Ben Ammi teachings in bio-evolution are in accord with the prophetic Hebrew thought: the *Holy Spirit* is, in essence, a prophetic language, a divine communication in AHJ words: a truth-centered language and communication.

Indeed peace and eschatology equals life already in early Hebrew schools.³⁰ Ben Ammi's teachings resemble the prophetic, popular Jewish literature of the apocryphal books (Stern 1937:143) with the idea of *imotatio Dei*³¹:

If God is a spirit, we are spirit and must worship Him as spirit; we must be endowed with the understanding of the/*this* spirit. Undoubtedly, the spirit is representative of the idea, the thought, the language of the God that made you "a living soul" in the Genesis. The evident Truth is that our worship has to remain consistent to the idea revealed in the Genesis creative process. Deviation from this idea – an observable inconsistency in your manner of worship³² – will manifest a spiritual problem. The accompanying effects will lead to other aberrations in every facet of your lives, such as: direction, vision, male–female relationships, parent–children relationships, occurrence of disease, and all other biological processes... This is the Law and the words of the Prophets. (Ben Ammi 2004:25).

Yet, these teachings are also in concert with modern cognitive psychology's basic assumption that right thought ('ingesting the right information' as of in "Food for Peace") may manifest and lead to a right behavior. This in turn positively affects health and well-being (Elkayam 2001:4–5; *Ibid* 15–17). According to the AHJ religion '*truth*', right knowledge of reality, as formulated or received in the mind, begins to create or produce life and/or life-sustaining substances in the form of biochemical molecules. Therefore, the primary nutritional substance would be found within a morally sound delineated process of teaching where the sacred seeds (ideas) of *truth* can saturate the minds of the people. It begins within the immaterial and ends with the manifestation of substance. Ben Ammi elucidates:

³⁰ (Enoch 1: 51:1), (Maccabim 7:9; 36–37), (Baruch 1), (Adam and Eve 41:3–5) (Midrash Shoher tov T'hilim 18), (I Corinthians 3:16–17); Zohar 1:118a.

³¹ Note 19 above.

³² "Worship" here is interpreted by The BHJ Ministry of Divine Health as "moral behavior" (Rofeh 2007:3).

... physiology is definitely influenced by the spirit of man. There is/was a living organism in man that is activated by righteous behavior as has been determined by God Almighty. Without the proper mannerisms and a Godly character which yields the proper chemistry that causes certain cells, organs and tissues to function, death is inevitable. Just as there are proper nutritional requirements for man’s body, there are spiritual requirements for his soul. (Ben Ammi 1991:34–35) (Rofeh 2007:3)

according to the AHJ Hebraic fundamentalism, they have returned to the sacred Genesis diet of vegan, whole-mineral nutrition based on the consumption of fresh, live foods – organic vegetables, fruits and whole grains, nuts and legumes. Their diet has propelled them into the cycle of cleansing and rebuilding their ‘physical organisms into the “Temple(s) of the Most Holy” (Rofeh 2007:6) (I Corinthians 3:16–17). God mandated the vegan nutrition in the following two Genesis verses:

And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to everything that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for food: and it was so. (Genesis 1:29–30)

The Hebrew word used for green herb (*‘esev’*) in both verses refers to edible plant life, inclusive of some medicinal herbs that can be used for seasonings (*‘esev zorea zera’*) and green leafy vegetables (*‘yerek esev’*). This scriptural reference highlights for the AHJ the eternal idea of whole *mineral* nutrition.³³ So does the interconnection between the words “soil” and “Adam” in Hebrew:

in Hebrew, the word for the soil from which Adam (pronounced Ah-dah-m) was created is Ah-dah-mah. There is an obvious synergy found in the right relationship between Adam and the soil that equals the reciprocation of life energies (both spiritual and material) between the two. As Adam would till (take care of) the soil, the soil in turn would take care of (provide essential whole minerals for) him... The elements that are found in the soil are found within Adam. Calcium, iron, magnesium, potassium, iodine, zinc, copper, and manganese are elements so vital to the organism that if there is a lack of a single mineral in our food that it can cause cellular abnormalities which can influence the development of various physiologic

³³ According to Melvyn Werbach, both physiological operations and cognitive processes are affected by certain vital macro – or micro-nutrients. Epidemiological studies have repeatedly found associations between overaggressive behaviors and deficiencies of several essential nutrients such as niacin, pantothenic acid, thiamin, Vitamin B6, Vitamin C, iron, magnesium, and tryptophan. Werbach also states his firm conviction that a nutritional approach should be seriously considered in the healing and rehabilitation process (Werbach 1995 in Rofeh 2007:4).

and mental dysfunctions. In fact, over 95% of your most basic biological functions are dependant upon the life-sustaining properties of complete minerals. “Whole” minerals refer to the minerals that are only found within living plants that have absorbed them from the living soil. (Rofeh 2007:4)

The AHIJ believe it is an impossibility to consume animal flesh in attempts to obtain the whole complete mineral. Their understanding of the dynamics of metabolism and digestion is, for example, that science now knows that as food passes through the intestinal wall during absorption and assimilation, DNA (genetic information) of the organism is attached to the food substance. It then travels through the bloodstream and settles in the areas relative to the needs of the organism. To consume animal flesh in search of minerals would mean the intake of transmuted chemical molecules synthesized into animal tissue with its corresponding genetic information. This type of diet is “grossly inferior”³⁴ and “inadequate in qualifying for the consideration of healthy food for human consumption” (Rofeh 2007:4).

Conclusion

In this paper I have defined AHIJ veganism as messianic food that reminds them of the redemption and freedom that the God of their ancients had promised to their fathers – and fulfilled. I examined the interaction between believing and eating in Judaism and in the AHIJ religion, and discussed the AHIJ fasting on Shabbat as indeed a tradition widespread in Judea at the period of the Second Temple two millennia ago. I suggested seeing their religious identity as the result of c. 400 years of slavery in America and almost c. 40 years of a non-status stay in Israel, and c. 4000 years of tribal history as children of the biblical father Judah, the fourth son of Jacob.

³⁴ For the BHIJ the account of the great transgression of Cain (Genesis 4:8–12) reveals the connection between human nature, behavior and diet. Due to the envious nature of Cain “*the earth.... shall not henceforth yield [...] its strength*” (Genesis 4:11). The BHIJ interprets this to mean that the earth would deny its ‘dietary and mineral’ strength. For them the proof of the biological benefits of living in their dietary way is apparent: after all, in spite of hardships in their course of 40 years, the BHIJ witnessed the relative eradication of the top ten diseases that affect the rest of the world such as hypertension, heart attacks, cancer, diabetes, kidney failure and obesity. The Black Hebrew Israelites have also found natural cures for various diseases. Their own coal-pressed flaxseed oils are used to help ADHD and prevent Type I Diabetes (Atur Irmiyahu: 2007).

I suggested seeing AHIJ idea of bio-evolution is an *imitatio Dei* and their vegan diet as resulting from a messianic utopia that supported the bio evolution of those who believe ‘peace’ to be equal to life. Yet, peace in Hebrew means also the behavior of people, the health, the good condition of something, and a completion.

This article implied that AHIJ Israeli community contributes today a tradition colonized and forgotten in for 2000 years. Their return to Zion has, in their eyes, begun the messianic era. Their diet and way of life correlate to their outlook on the world: messianic utopia. Linked to this idea in Judaism is vegetarianism, which AHIJ practice since Passover in Liberia 1969. This connection has created a religious-vegetarian community in Israel apparently for the first time, unless the Essene community 2000 years ago was vegetarian.

Summary

A debate over the morality of Kosher slaughter [*Shechita* (Hebrew: שחיטה)] has raged in Poland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and Denmark, where the Jewish ritual slaughter was outlawed. The more the debate goes on, the more awareness arises to *Shechita* as a basic Jewish religious practice. Yet veganism is a Hebrew religious operation too. This article discusses Hebrew vegan belief in terms meaningful to Jews, yet considering its utopian nature, in terms applicable to others as well. Both *Shechita* and veganism have universal Hebrew claims. Yet both claims are to be studied. Within this vast theme, I will analyze here veganism only, with respect to its utopian role and as a theological structure of one, yet global, community: the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem. They believe themselves to be the descendants of Judah, the fourth son of Jacob Israel. They are Jewish by their cultural nature: they observe Shabbat, Torah and a weekly fast. In 70 A.D. after the Romans destroyed the second temple they escaped and fled southward and westward to various nations in Africa two millennia ago where they were sold as slaves and were enslaved in America. They left America in 1967 led by their spiritual leader Ben Ammi, defined their departure as an exodus from America. Via Liberia – where they became vegans – they arrived in Israel in 1969, established an urban kibbutz, a collective communal living which is located in a desert region. Like most Jews, their diet has tremendous importance, but unlike most Jews they are vegan. The African Hebrews have very specific vegan dietary practices. Their tradition includes teaching and studying a special diet, which is vegetarian, organic and self-produced. They observe Shabbat strictly. On Shabbat, they fast and cleanse. This mirrors their spiritual outlook that eating is a hard labor of which they are obliged to rest from by the Ten Commandments. This article presents a breakthrough idea that fasting on Shabbat indeed reflects an ancient Israelite religious tradition. “Food for

Peace” s a metaphor for the theology of the Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem unfolding their messianic utopia through which they believe people may achieve inner peace and even world peace, encompassing decades of powerful hopes, realities and nutritious lifestyle.

Key words: veganism, Jewish rituals, Shabbat, theology, peace, utopia

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