



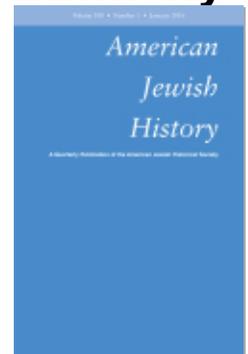
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“These Are a Swinging Bunch of People”:

Sammy Davis, Jr., Religious Conversion, and the Color of Jewish Ethnicity

REBECCA L. DAVIS

In November 1954, the entertainer Sammy Davis, Jr. awoke in a Los Angeles hospital bed uncertain of the events that had landed him there. Nurses explained that he had been in a car accident on his way back from a performance in Las Vegas. During the collision, a raised emblem on the steering wheel had punctured his left eye. Still groggy from anesthesia, Davis noticed that one of his hands was bandaged and asked a nurse why that was, when the surgery had been for his eye. She opened his side table drawer and took out “a gold medal the size of a silver dollar. It had St. Christopher on one side and the Star of David on the other.”¹ Days later, after surgeons had removed the damaged eye and treated his other injuries, Davis would have memories of his friends Tony Curtis and Janet Leigh walking alongside his gurney as orderlies wheeled him through hospital corridors, “and of Janet pressing something into my hand and telling me, ‘Hold tight and pray and everything will be all right.’”² Gripped so tightly that the Star of David left a scar on the palm of his hand, this religious object became one of several in Davis’s spiritual autobiography that he interpreted as a sign that he was destined to become a Jew.³

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1. Sammy Davis, Jr., *Yes I Can: The Story of Sammy Davis, Jr.* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965), 204.

2. Ibid. Davis repeated this story in an interview with Alex Haley, published in *Playboy* in 1966. Referring then to the mark on his hand after surgery, he said, “It was kind of like a stigmata.” Alex Haley, “The Playboy Interview: Sammy Davis, Jr.,” December 1966, reprinted in Gerald Lyn Early, ed., *The Sammy Davis, Jr. Reader* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 492.

3. Davis, Jr., *Yes I Can*, 205.

Over the next several years, as Davis recovered from his ordeal and his career took flight, he became one of the twentieth century's most famous religious converts. He was one of several Hollywood celebrities to convert to Judaism during the 1950s, but his conversion was especially controversial, both because of his racial background and because of the shifting dynamics of Jewish ethnicity. Marilyn Monroe converted in 1956, prior to her marriage to Arthur Miller, and Elizabeth Taylor converted in 1959 as she prepared to marry Eddie Fisher (having already been married to another Jewish man, film producer Mike Todd). Yet, unlike those of Monroe and Taylor, Davis's conversion was not related to a decision to marry a Jew, and, unlike them, he was "colored." And while Monroe was relatively reticent about her Judaism for the brief remainder of her life, Davis adapted to the attention that his choice drew by insisting that his highly unusual combination of racial, ethnic, and religious identities was inherently harmonious.⁴ Blacks and Jews had similar histories of oppression and marginalization, he explained, and he admired the Jewish people's history of overcoming adversity. As he would tell his composer Morty Stevens in the mid-1950s, the Jews were "a swinging bunch of people."⁵ Where others saw impossibility, Davis claimed logical compatibility. This logic included the Jewish masculinity that Davis admired among the Reform rabbis he met and the male role models he found among Jewish comedians and entertainers. Jewish masculinity offered a heterosexual style that worked for a short, lithe man who could out-dance, outtalk, and out-sing anyone with whom he shared the stage. He quite literally "performed" the uncanny dynamics of his self-presentation as an African American Jewish man.

Yet observers then and since have misunderstood Davis's attempts to navigate these religious, ethnic, and racial claims as efforts to distance himself from his blackness or to ingratiate himself with influential entertainers. Biographer Wil Haygood reduces Davis's conversion to yet another example of what Haygood considers the entertainer's pathetic aspiration to become white; scholar/essayist Gerald Early more sympathetically suggests that the conversion emerged from Davis's drive for acceptance. If Davis converted in order to win friends and influence people in entertainment, however, it was a failed tactic. Conversion to

4. See Lila Corwin Berman, *Speaking of Jews: Rabbis, Intellectuals, and the Creation of an American Public Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 145–151, 161–162.

5. Davis, Jr., *Yes I Can*, 246–247. Stevens worked for Davis until 1958; see "Sammy Davis Gets New Conductor-Arranger," *Jet*, March 13, 1958, p. 60.

Judaism subjected him to mockery from Jewish and non-Jewish friends in the entertainment industry and to derision from some African Americans who interpreted it as an abandonment of his racial heritage.

Davis claimed that he became the truest version of himself when he became a Jew, but trends among American Jews and African Americans were moving the politics of ethnicity in countervailing directions. His conversion juxtaposed religious, ethnic, and racial identities at a time when all were in flux. The prevailing Judeo-Christian ethos celebrated the idea that Protestants, Catholics, and Jews shared a common set of values and that these religions equally sustained American democracy.⁶ Post-Holocaust American Jews, however, began to invest in ethnicity and political Zionism as ways to define themselves as non-racial yet unassimilated.⁷ Many American Jewish leaders adopted "sociological" language to describe Jewishness as an ethnic heritage as much as a set of religious beliefs.⁸ These trends spoke to a desire to reassert historically based group distinctiveness and to claim ethnic difference as core to Jewish peoplehood. Conversion to Judaism thus tapped into American Jewish ambivalence about the basis for Jewish identity and community: how could anyone, let alone a nonwhite person, "convert" to ethnic Judaism? African Americans, meanwhile, were deepening their investment in racial identity and politics through the Civil Rights Movement, the nascent Black Power movement, and such related alliances as the Black Arts Movement. And while conversion to Islam would signal a more authentically black religious heritage for some African Americans, the complicated history between American Jews and African Americans bred suspicion of African American conversion to Judaism. The parallels between Jewish and African American history that Davis so often invoked, meanwhile, became a point of conflict during the ethnic revival of the 1970s. The resurgence of "white" ethnic pride denigrated the contemporary status of African Americans: If all ethnic peoples had experienced oppression, the new narrative asserted, then why had Jews, the Irish, and other whites achieved socioeconomic and political power, while blacks remained largely disenfranchised?⁹ These narratives seemingly left no place for a black Jew like Sammy Davis, Jr.

6. Kevin Michael Schultz, *Tri-Faith America: How Catholics and Jews Held Postwar America to Its Protestant Promise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

7. Michael E. Staub, *Torn at the Roots: The Crisis of Jewish Liberalism in Postwar America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Deborah Dash Moore, *To the Golden Cities: Pursuing the American Dream in Miami and L.A.* (New York: Free Press, 1994), Chapter 8.

8. Berman, *Speaking of Jews*, 2–3.

9. Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).

Audacious and independent-minded, Davis transformed that narrative of ethnic impossibility into a hybrid identity that became, in a word, his shtick. During one performance from the mid-1960s, he shared a well-practiced joke about his status as a racial, ethnic, and religious outsider:

It is true that I am an American Negro, and I have adopted Judaism as my faith. Everybody knows that, and all the comics make jokes about it. And I do it in self-defense. But I would also like you to know something that you're probably not aware of: My mother is a Puerto Rican. My mother's maiden name was Elvera Sánchez. This is true — *emes*. So that means I'm colored, Jewish, and Puerto Rican. When I move into a neighborhood, I wipe it out!¹⁰

Elegantly easing the discomfort any members of his audience might have had with his constellation of racial, ethnic, and religious affiliations, Davis framed his multiple identity markers in the context of white flight and ongoing battles over residential integration. He used a Yiddish word — *emes*, which means “truth” or “really” — to signify his connection to Jews (and to Jewish members of the audience) while noting that others mocked him for becoming a Jew. Yet the joke also points to something at the core of Davis's conversion to Judaism: a need not so much for acceptance (let alone “whiteness”) but for a shared understanding of being on the outside. Claiming his right to self-invention, Davis constructed a narrative of selfhood that defied the politics of ethnic inheritance. The response he received reveals how invested American Jews and African Americans were in their respective claims to ethnic-racial solidarity and their discomfort with suggestions that these identities were anything other than natural.

Sammy Davis, Jr. has a well-earned reputation as one of the greatest American entertainers of the twentieth century. He was a virtuoso tap dancer (a “hooper”), a capable singer (especially talented at doing impressions), an actor, a musician, and a comedian. Born in 1925 in Harlem to impoverished vaudeville performers, he entered “the business” as a young child. His (Catholic) mother relinquished custody of him when he was an infant. For the rest of his childhood, he was either at home in Harlem with his (Baptist) maternal grandmother or on the road with his father and “uncle” Will Mastin (his father's vaudeville partner). When Davis was 3 years old, he did an Al Jolson impersonation that so impressed his elders that they put him in the act. He had his first film

10. This performance appears to be from the mid-1960s. Davis did impressions of many of his idols and peers singing “One for My Baby.” Davis told a version of this joke to Alex Haley; see Haley, “The Playboy Interview,” 476. For a variation on this joke (“Because he didn't have trouble enough before?”), told by a Jewish writer, see Milton K. Susman, “As I See It,” *The Jewish Criterion*, May 10, 1957, p. 13.

role, in *Rufus Jones for President*, when he was 6 or 7. Davis writes in his autobiography that his father and Mastin sheltered him from racism, explaining the Jim Crow discrimination they encountered at hotels and restaurants as prejudice against entertainers. When Davis was drafted into the army in 1943, however, his racial innocence ended. Assigned to one of the army's first integrated units, he sustained several broken noses in fights with racist soldiers who taunted him. He also began to break away from the management of his father and Mastin by defying their objections to performing impressions of white men, which was then taboo for African American entertainers. In the army, performing impressions of white superiors, singers, and actors, Davis seized upon the genius of his childhood impersonation of Jolson — who, of course, performed in blackface — and began to experiment with a love of racial and ethnic mimicry. Davis wowed audiences with his seeming ability to do everything; during a single performance he would sing; dance; impersonate such celebrities as Frank Sinatra, Louis Armstrong, and Humphrey Bogart; and play drums, bass guitar, and trumpet.¹¹

He struggled financially until he had his big break performing at the nightclub *Ciro's Restaurant* in Los Angeles in 1951. Davis's star rose higher when the Jewish comedian Eddie Cantor invited him onto his popular television show in February of 1952, giving Davis his first national television audience.¹² The publicity he received after the car accident in 1954 further propelled his career. Film and theatrical roles followed — *Mr. Wonderful* on Broadway (1956), the role of Sportin' Life in a film adaption of *Porgy and Bess* (1959), and *Ocean's Eleven* (1960) with the "Rat Pack" — Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Peter Lawford, and Joey Bishop. By 1960, he had severed his partnership with his father and Mastin (they had split their earnings up to that point) and become a huge solo act, selling out clubs throughout the United States. As Davis's career accelerated, however, he wandered into spiritual doubt. He later described his interest in religion as part of a quest "to cure a spiritual emptiness."¹³ Like many people affiliated with the entertainment industry in Hollywood, he read some works of Scientology in the hopes of finding answers to his spiritual questions.¹⁴ (Davis's spiritual

11. "Sammy Davis Takes Over *Ciro's*: Plays Celebrity-Packed House," *Jet*, Aug. 18, 1955, p. 60.

12. Wil Haygood, *In Black and White: The Life of Sammy Davis, Jr.* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 130–131.

13. "Davis: 'I am a black Jew,'" *Bay State Banner* [Boston], Nov. 11, 1971, p. 9.

14. "Sammy Davis Jr. Has Bought the Bus," the *New York Times Magazine*, Oct. 15, 1972, p. 32. On the relationship between Scientology and Hollywood celebrities, see Lawrence Wright, *Going Clear: Scientology, Hollywood, and the Prison of Belief* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013).

curiosity, coupled with an escalating alcohol addiction, would lead him, briefly, into Satanism in 1968.¹⁵)

Like many converts before him, Davis constructed a conversion narrative that reflected ideas about his self and his relationship to the divine.¹⁶ He changed key details as he retold his story over the years. Davis credited Jewish entertainers, including the television and film star Eddie Cantor (who got his start performing in blackface), with encouraging his initial interest in Judaism.¹⁷ In 1960, Davis told *Ebony* that Cantor had given him a mezuzah, a small rectangular box that houses a scroll with the words of the Jewish prayer the *Shema*, after learning in the mid-1950s that Davis was interested in converting to Judaism.¹⁸ Five years later, in his first memoir, *Yes I Can: The Story of Sammy Davis, Jr.*, (1965), he credited Cantor with giving him the mezuzah earlier in the 1950s, before the car accident. This latter version credits Cantor with piquing Davis's interest in Judaism, a form of homage to a senior comedian who shaped Davis's career and gave him one of his big breaks. In both accounts, Davis thereafter wore the mezuzah on a chain around his neck.¹⁹ In hindsight, he also imbued the mezuzah with magical protective powers. In *Yes I Can*, he wrote that during that fateful drive to Los Angeles, he realized that he had left the mezuzah behind in his Las Vegas hotel room.²⁰ Just as he had with the Star of David that Tony Curtis and Janet Leigh gave him before surgery, Davis transformed the mezuzah into a talisman. Yet, even the origins of the Star of David shifted in later accounts. By 1971, Davis recalled that Tony Curtis and Jeff Chandler had given him the Star of David at the hospital.²¹ (This version of events removes the complicating detail that Janet Leigh, a Christian, had given him an object that had equal parts of Christian and Jewish iconography.) One biographer, Wil Haygood, conflates the gifts from Cantor and Curtis, writing that Cantor had given Davis a Star of David (rather than a mezuzah)

15. Sammy Davis, Jane Boyar, and Burt Boyar, *Why Me? The Sammy Davis, Jr. Story* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), 208–209.

16. For discussions of the conversion narrative as a genre, see Geoffrey Galt Harpham, "Conversion and the Language of Autobiography," in *Studies in Autobiography*, ed. James Olney (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 42–50; D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

17. Jeffrey Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues: African Americans, Jews, and American Popular Song* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 37.

18. Sammy Davis, Jr., as told to Trude Feldman, "Why I Became a Jew: Entertainer Says Judaism Was Answer to 'Life Filled with Confusion,'" *Ebony*, Feb. 1960, p. 68.

19. Davis, Jr., *Yes I Can*, 148–149.

20. *Ibid.*, 194.

21. "Davis: 'I am a black Jew,'" 9.

that Davis wore around his neck.²² Details aside, what is clear is that Davis interpreted his survival of the crash as a sign of God's protection and of the inevitability of his eventual conversion to Judaism. Talking to reporters at the hospital, Davis said, "Baby, all I can say is that God must have had his arms around me. He really did, or I would have been killed."²³ He used similar language to describe a suicide attempt (when he tried to drive his car off a cliff) in the year after he lost his eye, telling author Alex Haley in a 1966 interview that he had survived because, "God had his arms around me."²⁴ Newly confident about his relationship with God, Davis described his conversion as a discovery of his authentic self and of God's plans for him.

Whether or not Davis found himself protected in the arms of God, his friends, many of them Jewish, saw to it that he received competent medical care. Jeff Chandler was among those who rushed to the hospital in San Bernardino, concerned that the staff might not admit an African American patient or, if they did, that they might not treat him equitably.²⁵ When Chandler learned that Davis would lose one of his eyes, he reportedly offered to donate one of his corneas to him.²⁶ Eddie Cantor also visited Davis in the hospital, and, as Davis recalled these events, he noted that he had by this point been able to have someone retrieve the mezuzah from the Las Vegas hotel room; he once again wore it around his neck. Having already given Davis the mezuzah that served as a kind of shield against harm, Cantor again offered Davis protective guidance. Davis recalled that Cantor told him, "Never forget what an enormous gift God gave you when He gave you your talent."²⁷ By the time he left the hospital, in other words, Davis believed that God had bequeathed him the talents that had made him a star and, by communicating with him through Jewish symbols, had looked out for him on the road to Los Angeles.

Davis also seems to have been drawn to the gendered styles of American Jewish men, especially the modern dress, masculine bearing, and intelligence of the Reform rabbis he encountered after the accident. The first Reform rabbi Davis met, who visited from a nearby congregation while Davis was in the hospital, upended Davis's stereotypes about the culturally backward, observant Jew. He was "a rugged, athletic looking man in a khaki suit and a button-down collar . . . The image of a rabbi

22. Haygood, *In Black and White*, 184.

23. Davis, Jr., *Yes I Can*, 216.

24. Haley, "The Playboy Interview," 492.

25. Haygood, *In Black and White*, 159.

26. Davis, Jr., *Yes I Can*, 216.

27. *Ibid.*, 210.

with a long beard and silk coat and the big hat which I'd retained from my days as a child around Harlem was in total conflict with this man."²⁸ The rabbi's physical bearing and sartorial style impressed Davis, as did the Reform rabbi's obvious departure from stereotypes of orthodoxy. More Paul Newman than *yeshiva bucher* (student), the rabbi embodied urbane confidence. Davis sought the rabbi's advice, asking him why God would give him such talent (echoing the words he credits to Cantor about his talent being a gift from God) yet punish him with a debilitating car accident. The rabbi reframed the question in light of Jewish teachings: God had given Davis a "warning" in order to "stimulate spiritual progress." The rabbi boiled down Judaism's teachings into simple principles: People are made in God's image and they possess unlimited potential. Davis may have fallen short of his goals; God issued warnings, but he did not punish.²⁹ This rabbi, whose name Davis does not recall, became the first of several rabbis who convinced Davis that Judaism was manly, quintessentially American, and designed to meet his spiritual needs.

Davis identified with these Reform rabbis and considered them models of sophisticated manhood. They were entertainers, just as he was. They were cool. Rabbis also possessed qualities that Davis coveted. Entirely self-educated, Davis longed for the intellectual *bona fides* that rabbis exuded. (He was an avid reader throughout his life.) As the consummate intellectual and skilled entertainer, the rabbi embodied the qualities Davis wished for but lacked and the attributes he most esteemed in himself. At a benefit in San Francisco in 1955, he was seated next to one of the evening's featured speakers, Rabbi Alvin Fine of that city's Temple Emanu-El. Davis's description of Fine's remarks captures his admiration for both rabbinical intellect and charisma: ". . . with just logic, sincerity, and dignity, he completely wrapped up the audience . . . [A]n Old World wisdom poured out of him in combination with the most modern terminology, almost hip."³⁰ A talented (hip!) performer, the rabbi combined the best of the qualities that Davis coveted. Davis struck up a conversation with Fine, who taught him parables about Rabbi Hillel (for example, the teaching that the whole of the Torah is contained in the statement, "What is hateful to you, do not do unto others"), suggested books about Judaism, and invited him to visit his temple.³¹ For Davis, Fine was the real deal: "Everything he said had meaning."³² When Davis visited Temple Emanu-El, he was struck by the "simplicity" of the

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid., 210-212.

30. Ibid., 238.

31. Ibid., 185.

32. "Why I Became a Jew," *Ebony*, Feb. 1960, p. 62.

building's architecture and décor, recalling images of the Mount Sinai tablets embroidered on the altar cloth (curtains covering the ark for the Torah), four satin-covered scrolls (Torah scrolls), and silver ornaments (the mantle, breastplate, and crown for the Torah scrolls). He reveled in the thought that men such as Fine devoted their lives to studying Torah. The modern, masculine aesthetic of Reform Judaism appealed to Davis. He associated it with urbane sophistication, a style he sought for himself as his affluence increased.³³

The rabbi who most profoundly affected Davis was Max Nussbaum, who presided at Temple Israel of Hollywood. A German refugee whose congregation had been attacked on Kristallnacht in 1938, Nussbaum arrived in the United States in 1940 after escaping through Switzerland, France, Spain, and Portugal. Admired for being less assimilationist than other Reform rabbis in Hollywood and for his survival of Nazi atrocities, Nussbaum quickly became one of the most prominent rabbis in Hollywood.³⁴ (In 1959, he officiated at the wedding of Elizabeth Taylor and Eddie Fisher.) Davis began meeting with Nussbaum some time in the mid-1950s, after he had already followed up on Fine's reading suggestions. Biographer Haygood writes that Davis and Nussbaum "were two entertainers, and they were both in the business of pleasing."³⁵ Davis's memoir, not surprisingly, gives a more nuanced account of what transpired. He recalls that Nussbaum encouraged him to consider the faiths of his parents and warned that a decision to convert should not derive from knowledge gleaned from books alone. Practicing a traditional Jewish reluctance to welcome the convert, Nussbaum reassured Davis that his hesitancy was not rooted in prejudice: "Race has absolutely nothing to do with our reluctance to rush you into conversion We *cherish* converts, but we neither seek nor rush them."³⁶ Nussbaum urged Davis to look beyond books for his knowledge of Judaism: "Identify yourself as a Jew. Study, attend services, associate [with Jewish organizations]."³⁷ It seems likely, then, that, at Nussbaum's urging, Davis began to identify

33. Ibid. This valorization of the "manly," implicitly heterosexual Jewish figure, contrasted with the image of an effete, religiously observant Jewish man, bears striking similarities to the heterosexual masculine tropes that Daniel Boyarin finds in turn-of-the-century Europe. See Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 184–185.

34. Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1988), 305–308.

35. Haygood, *In Black and White*, 185.

36. Davis, Jr., *Yes I Can*, 284.

37. Ibid., 285. Haygood has this as the same meeting at which Davis was "full of childlike questions." Haygood's descriptions of Davis are problematically condescending: He writes that as the rabbi spoke, Davis "opened his one eye wider." Haygood, *In Black and White*, 184. See also "Why I Became a Jew," *Ebony*, Feb. 1960, p. 68.

himself as a Jew, to observe some degree of Jewish practice within his home, and perhaps also to attend services prior to any formal ceremony of conversion.

Identifying with Judaism did not push Davis to rethink his values, but instead reaffirmed ethical principles he already knew. Speaking with Fine in 1955, Davis explained his appreciation for Jewish law: "It's more like basic rules for everyday living and it's odd, I'm not a Jew but so much of it is what I believe in — ideas I'd love to be able to live up to . . . confirming so much that I'd learned the hard way."³⁸ Indeed, as Davis often noted, becoming a Jew was for him not as much of a transformation as an affirmation of long-held beliefs. In an interview in the early 1970s, he noted, "I have always been a Jew in my thinking . . ." ³⁹ Davis often described the appeal of Judaism as the emphasis (which he found among the Reform rabbis he met) on social-justice activism: "It teaches justice for everyone."⁴⁰ Rather than finding a conflict between being black and being Jewish, Davis saw these identities as logically compatible: "As a Negro, I felt emotionally tied to Judaism," he told *Ebony* in 1960.⁴¹

Davis aspired to the authentic selfhood that he believed he would find in Judaism. In *Yes I Can*, Davis described the late 1950s as a period of self-doubt. He was dating the white actress Kim Novak (and was possibly threatened by studio bosses to cease the relationship) and felt that his performances were flat and fake.⁴² At a particularly low moment, he returned to the wisdom he found in Jewish teaching: "I unpacked some of my books on Judaism, books I hadn't looked at in almost a year."⁴³ Davis was seeking authenticity in his religious life and on the stage; calling himself a Jew when he was not yet Jewish left him feeling like an imposter: "I know it can't work until I know I really *am* a Jew."⁴⁴ Davis's spiritual crisis intensified in January 1958, after he married Lora White, an African American dancer, very soon after meeting her. Davis was drunk when they got married, and the relationship may have been a publicity stunt to divert attention from his affair with Novak. White and Davis divorced within a few months. He proposed to a white actress a short while later, although they did not marry. Drinking heavily most

38. Davis, Jr., *Yes I Can*, 280.

39. "Sammy Davis Jr. Has Bought the Bus," 32.

40. Pete Martin, "I Call on Sammy Davis, Jr.," *Saturday Evening Post*, May 21, 1960, reprinted in Early, *The Sammy Davis, Jr. Reader*, 417.

41. "Why I Became a Jew," *Ebony*, Feb. 1960, p. 69.

42. Davis, Jr., *Yes I Can*, 418–423, 427–428.

43. *Ibid.*, 431.

44. *Ibid.*

days, Davis got into another car accident. When he went to Nussbaum for help, the rabbi warned Davis not to look to Judaism for "a quick cure for your problems." Nussbaum wrote on a piece of paper, "Sammy Davis, Jr. is a Jew" and signed it. Nussbaum then described the document as a fake: "I cannot make you a different person merely by signing a piece of paper." Davis could read all the books he wanted, Nussbaum explained, but until he started to live his life as a Jew, he would not become one.⁴⁵ Nussbaum again deferred conversion and gave Davis the sole authority for his spiritual transformation: "I can't put religion into you . . . I cannot make you a Jew. Only *you* can do that. And you have not yet done it."⁴⁶ Although disappointed, Davis apparently appreciated Nussbaum's refusal to convert him on the spot and recognized that by spending more time studying and practicing as a Jew, he would attain the kind of "real" Jewish identity he coveted.

Two additional aspects of Jewish tradition — its heritage of intellectual engagement and its history of struggling against oppression — convinced Davis that Judaism would be his faith. Never having had any formal education, Davis reveled in the aura of intellectual gravitas that, he believed, surrounded membership in the Jewish people. In an interview with Mike Wallace (probably in late 1955 or early 1956), by which time he was identifying as Jewish, he boasted, "I keep the Talmud on my night table — I like to have it there. When friends come up, I don't slip it under the pillow." Haygood, whose biography portrays Davis as an insecure, eager-to-please man-child, writes: "He bragged about his newfound reading habits. He walked around proudly carrying a book — *Everyman's Talmud* — under the crook of his arm."⁴⁷ A photo of Davis in a 1960 issue of *Ebony* pictures him holding the book.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, Davis clearly relished the opportunity to talk about Judaism. He told Wallace, "From time to time, [my Judaism has] come up in an interview and I'm not about to say 'No comment.' . . ." ⁴⁹ With a zeal typical of the newly converted, Davis bragged about his new religion, marveling in the heritage of scholarship and wisdom that accompanied his adoption in the faith.

Even more than intellectual gravitas, Judaism gave Davis a powerful metaphor about overcoming oppression and succeeding against odds.

45. Ibid., 432–433.

46. Ibid.

47. Haygood, *In Black and White*, 186.

48. Davis, "Why I Became a Jew," 63.

49. Davis, Jr., *Yes I Can*, 380. Davis identifies the interview as occurring on "Night Beat." Wil Haygood identifies the program as "In the Spotlight." Haygood, *In Black and White*, 232–233. The interview may have been in 1955 or 1956.

The prophetic tradition, which Reform Judaism in particular emphasized, stressed the pursuit of justice as the core of Jewish teaching. Having experienced the indignities of Jim Crow firsthand throughout his life — invited to perform at hotels that refused him entry into their restaurants or rooms, and especially during his ordeal in the army — Davis identified with the underdog who fought for equal treatment.⁵⁰ Davis's enthusiasm for Jewish *chutzpah* is clear from a conversation he had during a train ride with Morty Stevens, his arranger and composer. Davis recalls that Stevens, who was Jewish, asked if he was becoming a Jew because of the books he had been reading. In his autobiography, Davis describes his attempt to persuade Stevens of the hipness of the Jewish trope of outliving one oppressor after another:

Baby, you'd better read it again. These are a swinging bunch of people. I mean I've heard of persecution, but what they went thorough is *ridiculous!* . . . They'd get kicked out of one place, so they'd just go on to the next one and keep swinging like they wanted to, believing in themselves and in their right to have rights, asking nothing but for people to leave 'em alone and get off their backs, and having the guts to fight to get themselves a little peace . . . [Morty] was looking past me, reaching back to his Sunday School days. "I don't remember any of that."⁵¹

The Jewish emphasis on "justice" stood out for Davis on one particularly bleak Christmas morning in 1955, when he discovered that someone had painted "Merry Christmas, Nigger!" on his garage door. Retreating to his bedroom, Davis picked up his copy of Abram Sachar's *A History of the Jews*, from which he drew the lesson that Jewish faith and pride in being "different" had sustained Jews through centuries of persecution.⁵² The idea that African Americans and Jews held much in common, an idea that Davis studied in Jewish texts ranging from Sachar's *History* to the *Everyman's Talmud*, enabled him to frame his conversion as logical rather than discordant.

Davis was hardly the first African American to compare the experiences of the ancient Israelites and African Americans, or to gravitate toward certain Jewish narratives, rituals, and texts. Enslaved African Americans highlighted Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) stories of the Exodus as an inspiring and parallel narrative of slavery and redemption, and they retold "prophecies of the destruction of Israel's enemies" as metaphors for the suffering they believed would eventually befall their

50. For an example of how Davis made this analogy, see Martin, "I Call on Sammy Davis, Jr.," 417.

51. Davis, Jr., *Yes I Can*, 246–247. (Emphasis in the original.)

52. *Ibid.*, 278–279.

owners.⁵³ By the early twentieth century, analogies between contemporary African American Christians and the ancient Israelites flourished in Black Hebrew Israelite congregations. Growing up in Harlem, Davis may have been exposed to any one of several Black Hebrew Israelite groups, which taught that the original Hebrews had been black and had often incorporated Jewish (or early Christian) rituals into their practice. As historian Jacob S. Dorman has shown, between the 1890s and 1970s, "Black Israelite beliefs became widely accepted among Black Muslims and many African American Christians."⁵⁴ During the interwar years, Black Hebrew Israelite religions began to include Judaic rituals, which they modeled on contemporary Jewish practice as they observed it in the densely populated neighborhoods of Harlem, where Jews and African Americans lived in close proximity to one another. Yet Davis appears not to have found the answers he sought to his spiritual quest from these Black Hebrew Israelite faith traditions. Davis might have encountered analogies between Israelite and African American histories of oppression within African American Christianity, but if he did, he found them unsatisfying, and he continued his search for a more direct relationship to Jewish history.⁵⁵

Early twentieth-century African American converts to Judaism met with skepticism from European-descended Jews, who were themselves navigating among changing American ideas about race and ethnicity. Roberta S. Gold describes the varying responses that black Jewish groups in Harlem received from the local press in the 1920s and 1930s, finding jocular incredulity in the white Jewish newspapers, but mainly "relatively straightforward" coverage in the African American press.⁵⁶ Gold explains this disparity as the result of white Jewish racial anxiety; eager to prove themselves "white," Jews nervously doubted the existence of "black" Jews. African Americans during the interwar years, by contrast, admired Jewish immigrant success. Most importantly, Gold notes, the interwar years defined a transitional period in American understandings of race: "During these decades, a nineteenth-century racial spectrum composed of blacks, Anglo-Saxon whites, and intermediate 'races' such as Jews, Slavs, and Italians gave way to a more rigid, bifurcated social system

53. Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 311–313.

54. Jacob S. Dorman, *Chosen People: The Rise of American Black Israelite Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4.

55. I am grateful to Judith Weisenfeld for clarifying this point.

56. Roberta S. Gold, "The Black Jews of Harlem: Representation, Identity, and Race, 1920–1939," *American Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (June 2003): 181.

of whites and nonwhites.”⁵⁷ This shift benefited racially “in-between” groups such as Jews, who more easily claimed whiteness by the 1940s. Historian Michael Alexander challenges this narrative of white-aspiring Jews. Focusing on the 1920s, he finds that instead of seeing themselves as new members of the mainstream, some American Jews identified with others who hovered at the socioeconomic and cultural margins. Alexander calls this habit “outsider identification”: “As Jews moved up, they identified down.”⁵⁸ What is clear from the response to Davis’s conversion is that many Jews — particularly the Jewish entertainers he admired, all of whom had changed their names early in their performing careers to less “ethnic” variations — joked about the existence of a black Jew in ways that expressed deep uneasiness about the racial possibilities of Jewishness.

Complicating this outsider identification, Jews proved reluctant to abandon racial or biological definitions of their peoplehood. Indeed, as cultural historian Eric Goldstein explains, debates in the 1920s over interfaith marriage highlighted how nervous many American Jews were about the prospect of radical assimilation. Religion alone seemed inadequate as a means of explaining what made the Jewish people unique and cohesive. Many Jewish leaders instead sustained the idea that the Jewish people constituted a race, one that bequeathed a unique ethnic heritage to successive generations: “Interpreting Jewish racial distinctiveness as a positive force in American society also gave Jews a means to defend their widespread preference for [marrying within the faith].”⁵⁹ After World War II, Goldstein explains, American Jews came to see themselves as white, but they retained a deep understanding of themselves as an ethnically distinct people.

By the mid-twentieth-century, conversion to Judaism provoked some confusion among American Jewish leaders about the boundaries between spiritual and ethnic Jewishness. Although postwar Jewish leaders adopted increasingly “sociological” definitions of Jewish peoplehood, historian Lila Corwin Berman has argued, sociological models did not fully supplant biological explanations of Jewish descent and inheritance.⁶⁰ Rabbis learned fairly straightforward guidelines about the instruction they should provide to potential converts and the rituals required for a conversion ceremony, but they doubted that a non-Jew could be transformed into the

57. *Ibid.*, 187–188.

58. Michael Alexander, *Jazz Age Jews* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 1.

59. Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), 174.

60. Berman, *Speaking of Jews*, 143–144.

inheritor of Judaism's ethnic heritage. As Berman notes, "[W]ell before the 1950s, sociologists and many rabbis had . . . explained that changing one's religious identity necessitated a complete, perhaps impossible, self-transformation. Few could articulate what exactly a non-Jew could do to become a full-fledged Jew."⁶¹ By the 1960s, as scholar Michael Staub has explained, liberal and conservative Jews increasingly described Judaism as more than a faith, attributing their deeply held political perspectives to a wellspring of ethnic inheritance.⁶² By the post-World War II era, American Jewish identity thus entailed complex and often internally contradictory ideas about Judaism as a faith, an ethnic culture, and an inherited trait.

Davis danced around these competing claims to Jewish identity by identifying publicly as a Jew for several years before he converted. In many regards, it was the cultural, emotional, and communal aspects of Judaism that Davis claimed at the outset; he converted under a rabbi's direction several years after he had first declared himself a Jew. The haziness of the timeline of his journey into Judaism has been compounded by an apparent confusion among his biographers about what conversion to Judaism entails. Journalist Matt Birkbeck asserts that following the 1954 car accident, "Sammy returned to the stage wearing a black eye patch and converted to Judaism."⁶³ Yet, as late as 1957, Davis spoke about his lack of ritual conversion. A Pittsburgh-based Jewish newspaper reported on an interview Davis gave to television journalist Mike Wallace, in which Davis explained "why he has decided against formal acceptance" into Judaism. Davis told Wallace that he had avoided conversion lest anyone accused him of seeking publicity (an ironic explanation to offer in a nationally televised interview), but he also noted that he attended Jewish religious services often. The author of the newspaper article urged Davis to make it official: "We can't help wondering . . . how many people, who may have never seen Negro Sammy Davis, don't already think that he is Jewish." Were it not for Davis's racial identity, the author appears to argue, no one would doubt Davis's religious identity.⁶⁴ Birkbeck and many others have confused Davis's blossoming interest in Judaism with conversion. A 1958 article in *Jet* magazine described Davis as "recently converted to the Jewish faith."⁶⁵

61. *Ibid.*, 151.

62. Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 8.

63. Matt Birkbeck, *Deconstructing Sammy: Music, Money, Madness, and the Mob* (New York: Amistad, 2008), 38.

64. Bea Paul, "On the Lookout," *The American Jewish Outlook*, May 3, 1957, p. 2.

65. "Sammy Davis Jr. In Chicago Catholic Benefit," *Jet*, Jan. 30, 1958, p. 61.

Davis and his fiancé, the Swedish actress May Britt, formally converted a few weeks before their wedding in the fall of 1960. As late as June 1960, when the couple announced their wedding plans, Britt, who was white, said that she did not plan to convert but would give any children the couple had a choice of religions.⁶⁶ Over the next several months, however, she changed her mind; on October 6, she converted at Temple Israel of Hollywood (Nussbaum's congregation). Davis converted five days later in Las Vegas, taking the Hebrew name Shmuel ben Avraham.⁶⁷ Rabbi William M. Kramer, the associate rabbi at Temple Israel, officiated at the wedding ceremony as the couple stood beneath the *chuppah* (wedding canopy) on November 13, 1960, at Davis's home in the Hollywood Hills.⁶⁸

Davis practiced his new faith in ways that reflected Reform Judaism's emphasis on a knowledge of Jewish history, observance of major Jewish holidays, and the support of Jewish organizations. A mélange of ritual practices, cultural heritage, and social-justice activism, Reform Judaism in the mid-twentieth century stressed the unique lessons of Jewish history and ignored the abstruse reasoning of Talmudic scholarship in favor of simpler messages, derived from biblical stories in the Torah, about the importance of social activism, ethical behavior, and community survival.⁶⁹ Glimpses into Davis's Jewish practice suggest that he observed the Jewish High Holidays (he enjoyed retelling the story of how he had stood up to the [Jewish] movie producer Samuel Goldwyn during the filming of *Porgy and Bess* in 1959 and refused to work on Yom Kippur); May Britt supervised their children's Jewish education, so that their son became a bar mitzvah when he was 13.⁷⁰ Just as the

66. "Sammy Davis Jr. to Wed: Plans to Marry May Britt After her Divorce in Fall," the *New York Times*, June 7, 1960, 27.

67. Rabbi William M. Kramer, "How I Got to Officiate at the Wedding of Sammy Davis Jr. & May Britt," *Western States Jewish History* 42, no. 2/3 (Winter/Spring 2010): 189; Certificate of Conversion for Sammy Davis, Jr., Oct. 11, 1960, Witnessed by Rabbi Harry Sherer, Small Collections 2489, The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio. I am grateful to Lila Corwin Berman for her generous research suggestions regarding Davis's conversion.

68. *Ibid.* The rabbi who officiated received a great deal of hate mail; see Berman, *Speaking of Jews*, 161.

69. Deborah Dash Moore traces changes in Reform Judaism in Miami and Los Angeles between 1945 and 1970, finding an increasing emphasis on support for Israel and ethnic identification, as well as an increasingly individualistic goal of personal fulfillment. See Moore, *To the Golden Cities*.

70. Davis, Jr., *Yes I Can*, 463. News about Davis and his family circulated widely; for an example of this coverage, see "Davis' Son Celebrates Bar Mitzvah," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, May 21, 1973, p. 2. Mark Davis's bar mitzvah ceremony was held at Temple Sinai in Reno, followed by a luncheon for 300 guests at Harrah's Reno Hotel & Casino.

post-World War II Jews that historian Deborah Dash Moore describes expressed their Jewish identity through commitments to Zionist and charitable organizations, Davis gave generously to Jewish charities and supported the State of Israel.⁷¹ Much less clear is whether Davis felt that his adoption of Judaism involved a reorientation of his relationship to God; in his autobiography, he does not discuss his religious views or faith in God prior to his conversion to Judaism.

No sooner had Davis begun to display his interest in Judaism in early 1955, however, than he drew ire from many African Americans and ridicule from colleagues in the entertainment industry. The most scathing responses came from African Americans who accused Davis of abandoning his blackness. Several readers of *Ebony* wrote caustic letters to the editor after the magazine printed an article in 1960 about Davis's conversion. One person wrote, "The reasons he gave all add up to nothing . . . I think what he is really trying to do is get away from being a Negro."⁷² Another reader interpreted Davis's descriptions of the commonalities among African American and Jewish histories of oppression as proof of Davis's ignorance of "his own black people": "My estimate of Sammy Davis has dropped to zero. To think that he knows so little about his own black people . . . He must realize that he is a Negro."⁷³ This writer and others maintained that race and religion amounted to an either-or proposition: One might *either* be African American *or* Jewish. Davis's friend, the Jewish comedian Joey Bishop, inverted this criticism with a joke: "I wanted to get Sammy Davis Jr. a Christmas present, but what do you get a guy who is everything?"⁷⁴ These critics considered African American racial identity and Jewish religious identity incompatible, their statements suggesting either that Davis must have abandoned one identity in order to embrace the other, or that Davis's claim to both identities was absurd. Although racial diversity among American Jews has grown substantially more common in the last few decades, these suspicions persisted during Davis's lifetime, despite his efforts to assert their compatibility, and despite the lack of any substantive explanation for their antagonism.

The Jewish press celebrated Davis's refusal to work on Yom Kippur; for one example, see New York (WUP), *The American Jewish Outlook*, Sept. 25, 1959, p. 19 (citing a story from the *New York Inquirer*).

71. Moore, *To the Golden Cities*.

72. Marvin Williams, Letter, *Ebony*, April 1960, p. 15.

73. Gayle McQuinn, Letter, *Ebony*, April 1960, pp. 15-16.

74. Samuel Schreig, "Inside Report," the *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh), Jan. 5, 1962, p. 14.

Davis's friends in the entertainment industry poked fun at his religious transformation, often reflecting astonishment that someone already on society's margins because of race would elect further alienation by claiming Judaism as a religion. Comic Jerry Lewis translated his reaction to Davis's conversion into a shtick: "I said, 'You don't have enough problems already?'"⁷⁵ Lewis and Davis were friends, and more than many other comics, Lewis permitted Davis a measure of acceptance, teasingly calling him "Samele."⁷⁶ The jokes were often crueler, especially as Jewish and non-Jewish comedians mocked Davis's ethnic heterogeneity. Davis bore the brunt of the Rat Pack's ethnic humor. In one bit from the mid-1960s, Dean Martin would pick Davis up (Davis was diminutive) and say, "I'd like to thank the NAACP for this trophy." According to Joey Bishop (born Joseph Abraham Gottlieb), who said he wrote the line, Martin was supposed to say, "I'd like to thank B'nai B'rith," but he could not pronounce the name of the Jewish organization.⁷⁷ At a stag party the night before Davis's wedding to May Britt, his friends feted him with songs and jokes, many of which mocked him for becoming a black Jew, something the jokes characterized as ethnically absurd. To the tune of "The Lady is a Tramp," Peter Lawford sang, "That's Why That Sammy is a Jew." ("Won't go to Harlem and eat hominy grits.")⁷⁸ Later in the evening, Milton Berle (born Milton Berlinger), dressed in drag as May Britt and sang a spoof of "My Yiddishe Mama" as "My Yiddish Mau-Mau," rhetorically linking Davis to an anti-British military uprising in Kenya and thus to black-African nationalism, a joke whose humor rested on the seeming illogic or incompatibility of Yiddish culture and African heritage.⁷⁹ Another set of jokes described Davis's conversion as a way of accumulating categories of oppression. At a "roast" of Davis at the Friars' Club in 1963, Pat Buttram, a comedian from Alabama, noted that back home, if Davis came to town, "[T]hey wouldn't know what to burn on the lawn."⁸⁰ The humor of these jokes rested on the idea that what Davis had done was ethnically uncanny — that Davis was violating unstated rules about the illogic of African American Jewishness. (Marilyn Monroe's fetishized white body became another target for

75. Haygood, *In Black and White*, 183.

76. Davis, Jr., *Yes I Can*, 130. Comedian Nipsey Russell, who was African American and not Jewish, also called him "Samele"; see "Sammy Davis Jr. Has Bought the Bus," 32.

77. J. Randy Taraborrelli, *Sinatra: Behind the Legend*, excerpted in Early, *The Sammy Davis, Jr. Reader*, 185.

78. Louie Robinson, "Behind the Scene as Sammy Weds: Jewish Rites Were Preceded by Rollicking Stag Party," *Jet*, Dec. 1, 1960, p. 58.

79. "Behind the Scene as Sammy Weds," 59.

80. "Friars 'Roast' Sammy Davis Jr.," *Jet*, Feb. 7, 1963, p. 60.

doubts about the authenticity of her conversion.)⁸¹ Stressing the ethnic humor that animated the white comedians' relationship to Jewishness, these jokes presented Davis's Jewishness as absurd.

Davis himself delivered variations — albeit, less extreme ones — on this theme, in which he cast his conversion as a doubling down on social alienation. Whereas other critics and comedians mocked his religious identity as being ethnically preposterous, Davis portrayed his conversion as an affirmation of his status as an outsider. At a sold-out engagement at the Copa nightclub, he quipped, “You know, when I get up in the morning I don't know whether to be shiftless and lazy or smart and stingy.”⁸² In an oft-repeated joke about his golf game, he told comedian Jack Benny that his handicap was being “a one-eyed Negro who's Jewish.”⁸³ Without mentioning his additional ethnic or racial ancestry as the child of a Puerto Rican mother, Davis claimed a socially marginal status based on disability, race, and faith. These remarks highlighted his identities as markers of his distance from the mainstream. Becoming Jewish, it seems, did not give Davis purchase on whiteness so much as it magnified his sense of being on the outside looking in.

Much of the evidence that journalists then and historians since have cited about the negative response to Davis's conversion is unattributed. A 1972 article about Davis in the *New York Times Magazine* claims that “some” saw the conversion as a step on the social ladder, while “many” thought he did it to boost his theatrical career, and “a considerable percentage” thought he did it because his night club audience was predominantly Jewish, as were a majority of night club owners.⁸⁴ An article in *Ebony* in the mid-1970s relied on the passive voice to describe the response to Davis's conversion: “There was talk that he chose the religion to gain acceptance among Jewish owners and promoters in the entertainment industry.”⁸⁵ Davis's obituary in the *New York Times* in 1990 mentions “widespread skepticism” about the conversion, but it does not name any individuals or cite any sources about who harbored such doubts.⁸⁶ Haygood's take is more critical. He quotes one of Davis's acquaintances, Amy Greene, describing the conversion as a “ploy,” done out of “boredom.”⁸⁷ Haygood found another Jewish woman who met

81. Berman, *Speaking of Jews*, 162.

82. “Why They Wait for Sammy Davis Jr.,” the *New York Times*, May 9, 1964, p. 16.

83. Sammy Davis, Jr., “Is My Mixed Marriage Mixing Up My Kids?” *Ebony*, Oct. 1966, p. 124.

84. “Sammy Davis Jr. Has Bought the Bus,” 32.

85. “Sammy Davis Jr.: None of This Has Been Easy,” *Ebony*, March 1974, p. 34.

86. “Sammy Davis Jr. Dies at 64; Top Showman Broke Barriers,” the *New York Times*, May 17, 1990, A1.

87. Haygood, *In Black and White*, 185.

Davis while he was in Cleveland for performances who recalled, “He said he liked Jewish people because they helped him the most. He said he wouldn’t be where he was if it weren’t for Jewish people.”⁸⁸ Ignoring the fact that Davis likely spent several years studying Judaism before converting formally, Haygood derisively concludes, “The decision had been made like many other decisions made in the life of Sammy — spur of the moment, a bout of light introspection . . . He came to Judaism quickly and romantically.”⁸⁹ Primary source evidence does not support Haygood’s contention that Davis approached Judaism lightly or converted on a whim. The longevity of that misperception, however, speaks to the incongruity that many observers, then and since, have noted about Davis’s racial and religious identities.

The charge that Davis’s conversion was opportunistic — or, in the words of Tony Curtis (born Bernard Schwartz), “a bit gratuitous” — has also endured, sustained by the conflation of three forces: the disproportionate influence that some Jews had in the American entertainment business, the Jewish appropriation of African American musical styles, and Davis’s interest in Judaism.⁹⁰ As historians of American popular culture and the entertainment industry make clear, Jews had an outsized influence on the cultural marketplace in the early twentieth century, and they ascended the ranks in the theater, popular song, and film industries, in part, through the appropriation, distribution, and performance of musical forms and dramatic motifs that originated among African Americans. American studies scholar Jeffrey Melnick argues that American Jews were able to position Jewishness as fundamentally “American” through their appropriations and performances of “black” musical styles. Along the way, they controlled the marketplace for popular music, leaving African American performers with little negotiating power.⁹¹ Davis was intimately familiar with the importance of Jewish producers, theater managers, and agents from his earliest days in vaudeville. He may indeed have been grateful to many Jewish people for supporting his career. In a 1960 interview with *Ebony*, however, he insisted that gratitude had nothing to do with his conversion. Referring to Jewish entertainers Jack Benny (born Benjamin Kubelsky), Eddie Cantor (born Edward Israel Iskowitz), and Jerry Lewis (born Joseph Levitch), he denied that they had influenced his religious shift: “[D]on’t get the impression I wanted to become a Jew because these great guys who helped me were Jewish.

88. *Ibid.*, 250–251, quoted at 251.

89. *Ibid.*, 183.

90. *Ibid.*, 185. Haygood quotes another associate, Jess Rand, as saying of Davis’s conversion, “It came out of left field”; *Ibid.*, 183.

91. Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues*, 12.

It was just a coincidence."⁹² Reducing Davis's conversion to a bid to appropriate Jewish ethnic success denies the possibility that Davis found Judaism appealing; it reinforces stereotypes of both Jewish power and African American servility.

While others made his ethno-religious identity the butt of jokes, Davis liked to imagine himself as a special ambassador between Jews and African Americans; he gave generously to civil rights and Jewish organizations. By the late 1960s, however, he found that he was no longer receiving invitations to the homes of wealthy Jews on Long Island, as he had in the past, to raise money for civil rights causes.⁹³ Historians today debate whether there ever existed an "alliance" between blacks and Jews outside of select circles of radical politics, but certainly by the late 1960s, the relationship was at a low ebb.⁹⁴

Davis sustained the analogy between Jewish and African American oppression long after most others had abandoned it. As Michael Staub has emphasized, while American Jews supported the Civil Rights Movement in numbers disproportionate to their share of the American population, the anti-communist politics of the postwar United States stifled the earlier popularity of analogies between Jewish and African American oppression. After World War II, the Jewish press rarely compared German fascism with American racism because the analogy struck editors as too similar to the arguments that communists made about American racism.⁹⁵ Davis, however, continued to find the analogy between African American and Jewish oppression compelling. As late as 1979, he told a reporter that he was "proud to be a Black Jew The Jewish people have endured incredible suffering. They share that in common with Black people. My own great-great grandparents were slaves."⁹⁶ Davis's appropriation of the oppression analogy, key to the narrative of "black-Jewish relations," is both fascinating and problematic.

92. "Why I Became a Jew," *Ebony*, Feb. 1960, p. 68.

93. "Sammy Davis Jr. on Sammy Davis Jr., Sex, Suicide, Success, Richard Nixon, Frank Sinatra, Black and White Women, Blacks and Jews," *Ebony*, March 1980, 134.

94. For an example of how journalists portrayed black-Jewish relations in the late 1960s, see Alan von Adelson, "Allies No More? Decades-old Alliance Between Jews, Negroes, Is Beset by Animosity" the *Wall St. Journal*, Dec. 31, 1968, pp. 1 and 10. On the history of this "alliance," see Eric J. Sundquist, *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005); Clayborne Carson, "The Politics of Relations between African Americans and Jews," in *Blacks and Jews: Alliances and Arguments*, ed. Paul Berman (New York: Delacorte Press, 1994), 131-43.

95. Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 42-43.

96. *Chicago Metro News*, Feb. 3, 1979, p. 8.

A visit to Israel in 1969 highlighted Davis's sense of his special mission among the Jewish people and his feeling of being at home among other outcasts. During his stay, Davis met with Israeli troops and described the trip as a sojourn from the Diaspora: "This is my religious home." He observed the Jewish custom of placing a note with a prayer to God in one of the crevices of the Western Wall in Jerusalem, and he described his sense of being immersed in his Jewishness: "It's a kind of oneness I have with Israel and the Jewish people."⁹⁷ In the second volume of his autobiography, *Why Me?*, Davis described his emotional tour as a spiritual homecoming in language redolent of Hollywood romance:

I had come to the land of the unwanted as I had so often been, and they were reaching out to me. Years before, I'd converted to Judaism, attracted by the affinity between the Jew and the Negro. The Jews had been oppressed for three thousand years instead of three hundred, but the rest was very much the same and I admired how they'd hung on to their beliefs, enduring the intolerance, the abuses against them because they were "different," time and again losing everything, but never their belief in themselves and in their right to have rights, asking nothing but for people to leave them alone.⁹⁸

He performed at the Mann Auditorium in Tel Aviv for the family members of soldiers who had died in Six-Day War of 1967. Seizing the dramatic opportunities of his setting, he concluded his performance with the theme from *Exodus*, the 1960 Otto Preminger film that starred Paul Newman, a Jewish actor whose enormous talent and physical attractiveness made him a Hollywood legend. For Davis, performing the theme song from a blockbuster film about Zionism was a religious experience: "I sang like a cantor in a temple," he said.⁹⁹ Backstage, he gave several rhinestone-encrusted eye patches to Moshe Dayan, the one-eyed Israeli general and war hero.¹⁰⁰ In Israel, Davis found an audience for his literal and symbolic performances of the commonalities between the African American and Jewish experiences.

Davis's identification with a representative of the Israeli military, however, could only have intensified the distrust that was growing between him and black nationalists. In contrast to the African Americans who

97. "Sammy Davis Jr. Pays Homage to Israeli Wall," *Jet*, Aug. 7, 1969, p. 56. The *New York Times* similarly reported that Davis described his visit to Israel as "just like coming home"; "Sammy Davis in Tel Aviv; Rejoices in Homecoming," the *New York Times*, July 21, 1969, p. 39. A 1980 cover story about Davis in *Ebony* included a photograph of him praying at the Western Wall in Jerusalem; see "Sammy Davis Jr. on Sammy Davis Jr.," 130.

98. Davis, Boyar, and Boyar, *Why Me?*, 195.

99. *Ibid.*

100. *Ibid.*

had written letters to the editor of *Ebony* in 1960 that were critical of Davis's decision to convert to Judaism, expressing dismay that Davis had abandoned his racial heritage (and Christianity), black radicals by 1967 were criticizing Davis for allying with whites (including white Jews) rather than seeing other people of color as his natural allies. In 1967, the increasingly militant Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) had come out in support of the Palestinians, identifying them as part of a global revolt by people of color against white colonial oppressors.¹⁰¹ (Students for a Democratic Society, or SDS, also came out in support of the Palestinian political party Fatah after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.)¹⁰² Davis encountered hostility from increasingly radicalized African Americans such as Ron Karenga, who challenged Davis's blackness because of his close association with white people. Davis recounts Karenga's critique of racial inauthenticity in his autobiography: "In the vernacular, 'you *is* black, but you don't *be* black.' You married a white woman. You live in a white community. You're publicly associated only with white friends. And you work almost exclusively in white, even Jim Crow towns."¹⁰³ (Neither Karenga nor Davis, interestingly, discussed Davis's Puerto Rican ancestry as a source of ethnic or racial hybridity.) By the late 1960s, African American critics of Davis's devotion to African American causes focused on his associations with white people more than on his conversion to Judaism. Although Davis rejected Karenga's charge that he was a race traitor, he may have internalized such critiques in the years thereafter.

Out of step with the identity politics of the 1970s, Davis fit the mold neither of black nationalism nor of European-descended ethnic Jewishness. Singing "The Candy Man" while funk hit the airwaves, Davis confounded the black-nationalist masculine ideal. His political choices further alienated him from African Americans committed to civil rights. In the early 1970s, he accepted President Richard Nixon's invitation to join the National Advisory Council on Economic Opportunity. Writing *Why Me?* in the late 1980s, Davis tried to explain this seeming abandonment of his liberal politics by stating that he had checked with civil rights leader Jesse Jackson first, who had assured him that Nixon was "carrying on the civil rights programs." The response from other civil rights allies was less sanguine; actor Sidney Poitier and singer Harry

101. Sundquist, *Strangers in the Land*, 280, 330–336. See also *Ibid.*, Chapter 2; Marc Dollinger, *Quest for Inclusion: Jews and Liberalism in Modern America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 201–202.

102. Jacobson, *Roots Too*, 223.

103. Davis, Boyar, and Boyar, *Why Me?*, 193–194.

Belafonte no longer returned Davis's phone calls.¹⁰⁴ Any modicum of good will Davis had managed to maintain with his allies in the African American civil rights movement vanished, however, after he performed at the Republican National Convention in Miami Beach in 1972. Headlining the entertainment for a Young Republicans event, Davis was still on stage when Nixon came to the microphone and awkwardly praised Davis: "'You aren't going to buy Sammy Davis, Jr. by inviting him to the White House. You buy him by doing something for America.'"¹⁰⁵ Untroubled by Nixon's suggestion that he was a purchasable commodity, Davis instead felt overcome with gratitude: "I walked up from behind him and put my arms around him, hugged him, and stepped back."¹⁰⁶ The next morning, newspapers from across the country printed the image of that hug, and by the evening it was on the television news.¹⁰⁷ Yet Davis did not waver in his loyalty to Nixon. A decade later, he still felt the sting of rejection from 1961, when John F. Kennedy's advisers had disinvited him from the inauguration after news that Davis would perform at an inaugural ball had already gone public.¹⁰⁸ Davis reveled in Nixon's invitations to perform and stay at the White House, writing in his memoir about his sense of having fully arrived as a person of worth and prestige.¹⁰⁹

By 1980, Davis had started trying to distance himself from an ethnic definition of Jewishness: "My people are my people, and my religion is my religion. They are not interconnected. My people are first. I happen to be a *Black* Jew. I am first Black and the religion I have chosen is Judaism. That doesn't mean that as a Black I agree with every other Black or that as a Jew I agree with every other Jew."¹¹⁰ This explanation likely satisfied few people, least of all American Jews who understood their faith as tied to a sociological, ethnic heritage with complex political legacies. An entertainer who sprinkled Yiddishisms into his routines, Davis nonetheless struggled to distinguish his racial or ethnic identity as an African American from his religious conversion, denying that his religious choice had abrogated his racial identification. When he met with Karenga in the late 1960s, Davis defended himself against

104. *Ibid.*, 249–251.

105. *Ibid.*, 263.

106. *Ibid.*

107. *Ibid.*, 264.

108. *Ibid.*, 127–129. For an article announcing Davis as one of the performers at the inaugural gala, alongside Harry Belafonte, Ella Fitzgerald, Nat King Cole, and Mahalia Jackson, see "Hate Groups Can't Keep Sammy from D.C. Date," *Jet*, Dec. 15, 1960, p. 59.

109. Davis, Boyar, and Boyar, *Why Me?*, 269–273.

110. "Sammy Davis Jr. on Sammy Davis Jr.," 134.

Karenga's charges that he was not truly black: "I rubbed my face with my hand. 'This don't exactly come off, y'know. I'm not Al Jolson.'"¹¹¹ Yet, in the 1950s and 1960s, Davis had embraced not simply the religious aspects of Judaism (its teachings and observances), but also its ethnic identifications — the humor, Yiddishisms ("emes"), and heritage that surrounded the Ashkenazi Jewish cultural identity. His 1980 interview suggests that he recognized this attempt at ethnic conversion to have been a failure; he wanted to rewrite his spiritual autobiography as a more limited religious conversion, one that sustained his commitments to Judaism and Jewish ideals while attempting to rehabilitate his affiliations with African American social, cultural, and political identities. Davis never expressed any regrets about his conversion. He supported Jewish organizations and Israel until his death in 1990.

Davis's reference to Jolson, the great Jewish American entertainer of the first half of the twentieth century, whose blackface performances made him famous and endlessly fascinating to scholars since then, and who clearly served as an entertainment business role model for Davis, conjures up layers of meaning, metaphor, and contradiction. For both men, their racial and religious identities were intrinsic to their mystique and on display in their performances. Ultimately, Davis agreed with Jolson's theatrical and musical interpretations of the links between Jews and African Americans: Jolson's famous number in *The Jazz Singer*, "My Mammy," has him applying blackface as he bemoans the ways he has disappointed his Jewish mother, all the while performing a parody, in the style of blackface minstrelsy, of the nineteenth-century black man longing for his "mammy." Jolson performed blackface as a problematic metaphor about the parallel Jewish and black experiences of exile and return. Yet, whereas Jolson's character sang about how he had abandoned his birthright as a cantor in order to become a popular blackface entertainer, Davis was a black entertainer who claimed his birthright as a Jew when he sang the theme from a Hollywood film about the Exodus to the families of Israeli soldiers.

The ironies deepen and expand in a 1991 episode of *The Simpsons*, "Like Father, Like Clown," in which the main character, Bart, an ill-behaved 10-year-old, tries to mend fences between his TV hero Krusty the Clown and Krusty's father, who is an Orthodox rabbi. A parody of *The Jazz Singer*, the episode portrays Krusty regretting his abandonment of his heritage in exchange for a life as a sadistic TV host, applying clown paint the way Jolson put on blackface. But toward the episode's conclusion, Bart succeeds in convincing Krusty's father to give his son

111. Davis, Boyar, and Boyar, *Why Me?*, 193.

a second chance by quoting from *Yes I Can*: “The Jews are a swinging bunch of people,” Bart tells him over a game of chess. Awestruck, the rabbi asks, “Who said that? Rabbi Hillel?” No, Bart, explains, it was the great entertainer himself.¹¹² Aired slightly more than a year after Davis’s death, the episode brilliantly pays homage to Davis as an authority on Jewish pride in overcoming oppression, ties Davis to his idol Al Jolson, and expresses the racial and religious inventions that both of their lives entailed.

Davis lived the metaphor, insisting on the similar histories of Jewish and African American oppression and describing the Jewish American example as one that African Americans should follow. In doing so, he appears not to have been trying to become someone else — let alone someone who was white — or to broker social acceptance, but rather to find himself, to anchor his personal story of alienation and redemption to an epic narrative of overcoming oppression, and succeeding against daunting odds. In the Jewish story, he saw echoes of his own life, and Judaism offered him a path toward self-understanding. That many people, Jews and non-Jews alike, measured his religious sincerity against the color of his skin says more about the racial and religious politics of the times than it does about Davis and his quest for a spiritual home.

112. “Like Father, Like Clown,” *The Simpsons*, Season 3, Episode 41, Fox, Oct. 24, 1991. I extend my special gratitude to Judith Weisenfeld for this citation.