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Review: Invisible Races

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INVISIBLE RACES

The variable genetic blends, to which the man in the street refers in speaking of races, all involve highly visible characteristics. . . . [But] invisible features are no less real than the visible ones; and it is conceivable that the former are geographically distributed in one or more ways that are totally different from the latter ones, and also differ among themselves; so that, depending on the repressed qualities, "invisible races" could be revealed.

—Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The View from Afar*

Seth Sanders

Plenty of people think the Jews are a race. Plenty of Jews think the Jews are . . . well, not a race, exactly, but a people: a superficially incoherent blur of French, Moroccan, Yemenite, and Polish, with an underlying mystical unity, a kind of motley family history, and maybe a legal contract with God.

That the Jews are not a race becomes painfully clear whenever I go to Israel. The guys with olive skin and shiny black hair—the most stereotypically “Israeli” men you can find—are Sephardim: Jews from Arab lands like Iraq, Morocco, and Egypt. And they don’t know me from Adam; with my pink forehead and bright red sideburns, I might as well be a German tourist. Some Jewish historians have entertained the fantasy that the Sephardim are the original Jews (although this didn’t prevent the Jewish state from treating them as second-class citizens for much of Israel’s existence). And it’s true that the Israeli Sephardim speak Hebrew in a theoretically purer, more archaic form than their light-

skinned Ashkenazic counterparts—they rasp their laryngeals and gulp their glottal stops, emphasizing sounds that have been lost in modern, Europeanized Hebrew. But it’s not because the Sephardim just stepped out of a time machine: it’s because their parents grew up speaking Arabic, where everybody uses laryngeals and glottal stops. Indeed, the right-wing, ultratraditionalist Sephardi Jews of the Shas Party resemble Arabs more closely than they resemble the right-wing, ultratraditionalist Jews of Agudat Yisrael, who generally come from Western or Central Europe.

Israel is a classic example of the old anthropological notion that race exists more in thoughts and deeds than in biology or even history. What I have in common with Sephardic Jews stems from the fact that we pray and observe Shabbat mornings in so similar a way that the differences are a source of fascination and delight, not frustration. I can walk into any synagogue in the world and fall into prayer with the Jews there.

Discussed in this essay

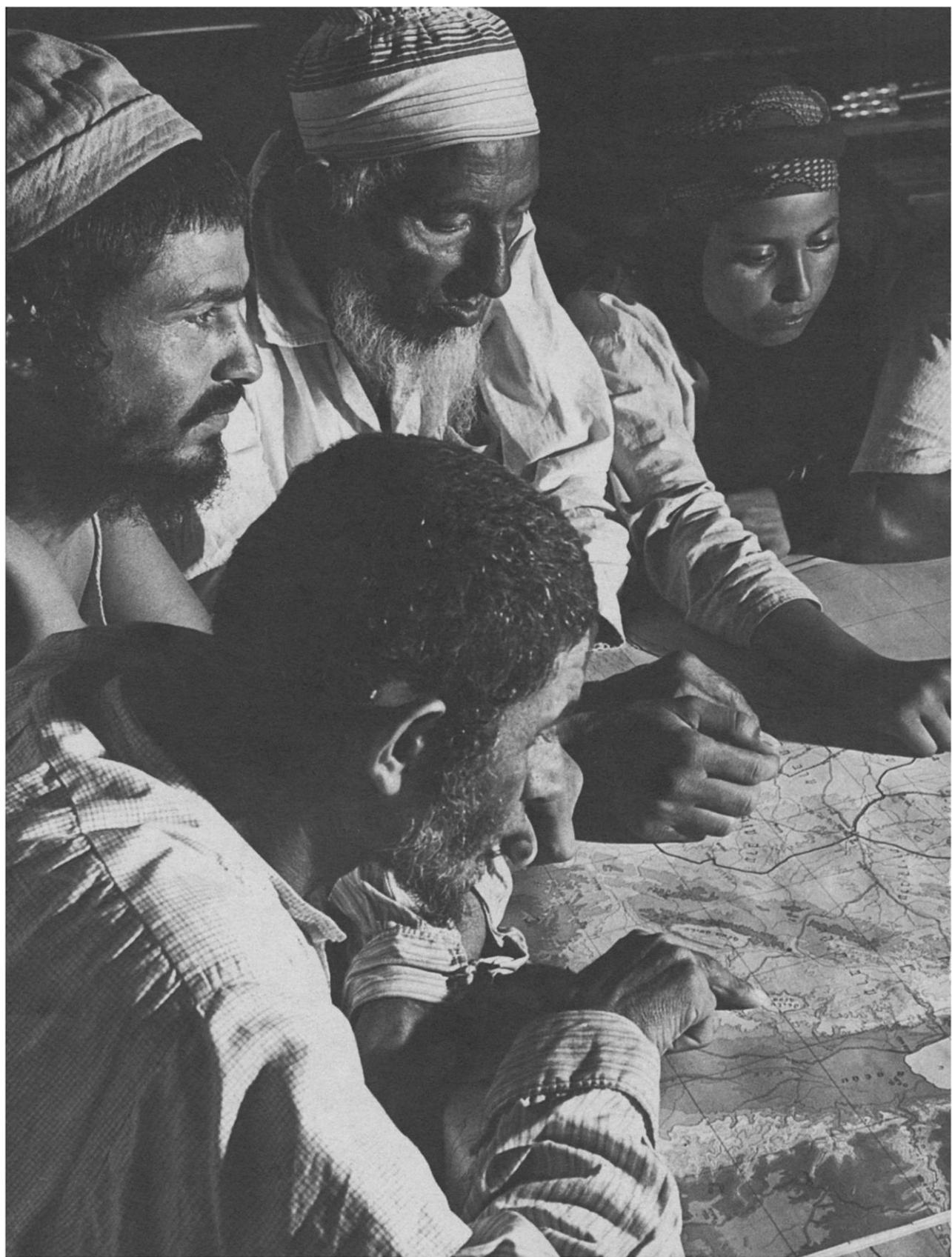
Journey to the Vanished City: The Search for a Lost Tribe of Israel, *Tudor Parfitt*. New York: Vintage

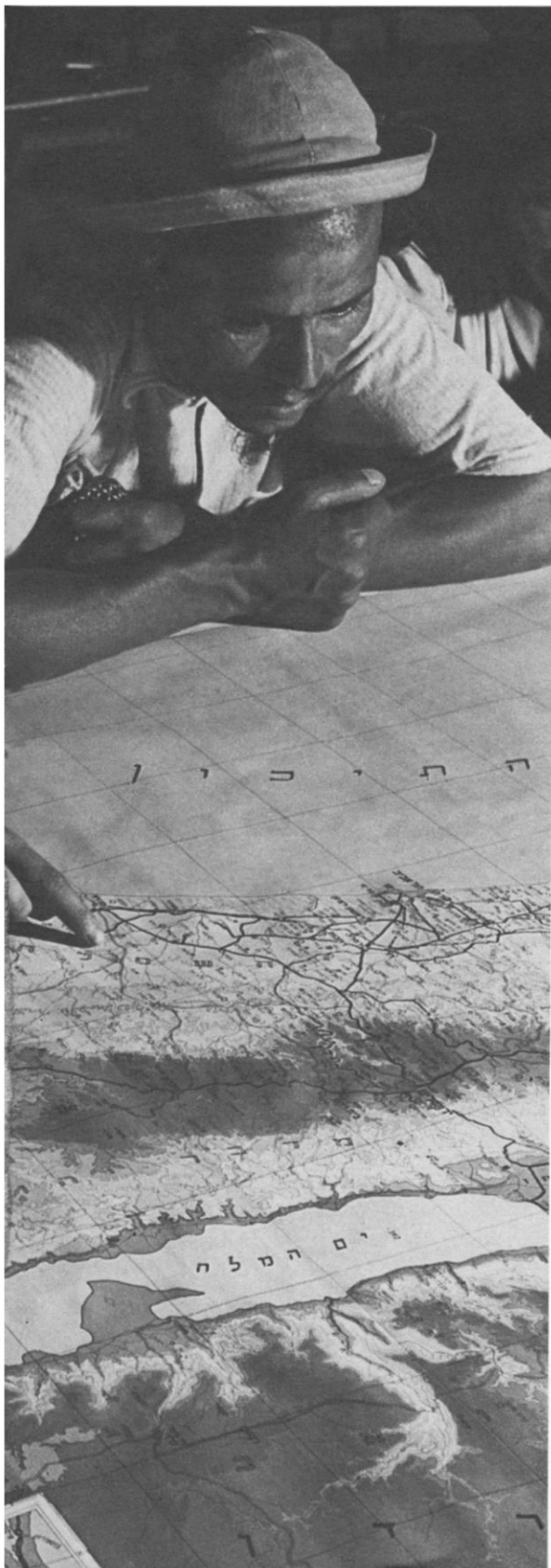
To the Ends of the Earth, *BBC Television*

Two Jewish girls in Israel

Paul A. Souders/CORBIS







But if you learned Hebrew and Aramaic and behaved yourself, you'd be able to do it, too. I've always believed that what Jews have in common is a set of texts and a shared way of putting them into action. But, as it turns out, I've been wrong.

• • •

Tudor Parfitt, an anthropologist at University College, London, may be the world's leading authority on "lost tribes of Israel." In books like *The Thirteenth Gate* and *The Jews of Africa and Asia*, Parfitt has made a career of scrutinizing long-held myths of Judeophiles and Judeophobes alike.

In 1991, he delivered a lecture at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg on the Falashas, the so-called black Jews of Ethiopia. (Parfitt had profiled them in his 1985 book, *Operation Moses*.) As he looked out at his mainly white audience, he saw "a small, discrete group of shabbily dressed black men wearing skullcaps." In a remarkable conversation after the lecture, they told him

Judaism—especially the soft-serve variety that most American Jews go in for—exists mostly in the comforting realm of the symbolic.

that they, too, were Jews, a tribe of Israel lost in southern Africa. They called themselves the Lemba, and they invited him to come and see their way of life.

Parfitt's astonishing trip was documented in *Journey to the Vanished City: The Search for a Lost Tribe of Israel* (1992), a rich but curiously incomplete book. Parfitt discovered that the Bantu-speaking Lemba had a culture and a history

**Yemeni Jews
studying a map of
Israel**

*Hulton-Deutsch
Collection/CORBIS*

that seemed out of place in southern Africa, but he couldn't figure out how they got that way. The Lemba themselves had an answer: they maintained that they had migrated to Africa from Judea and brought their customs with them. Other southern Africans agreed that the Lemba were relatively recent arrivals, but they

The pillow upon which English monarchs are crowned is said to be the pillow Joseph slept on at Beth-El. It was carried by the exiled Children of Israel to Antrim, from whence it passed to Scotland, before being brought to London in 1291 by Edward I.

could not, of course, confirm the Lemba's Judaic origins. And yet somehow the Lemba had become known as a kind of sacerdotal class in Africa, performing circumcision and other rituals for neighboring groups. In keeping with their priestly status, the Lemba were culturally exclusive: women could marry into the Lemba after undergoing a ritual preparation, but foreign men were strictly prohibited. More puzzling still, the Lemba were very picky about their meat, eschewing pork altogether and eating beef only if it had been ritually slaughtered by a member of the tribe. Finally, the Lemba's clan names—Salamani, Hamisi, Mahdi, Sadiki—didn't sound Bantu at all, but Semitic.

Selinah Munuonde, a young Lemba woman from Soweto, gave Parfitt a brief synopsis of the Lemba's oral history:

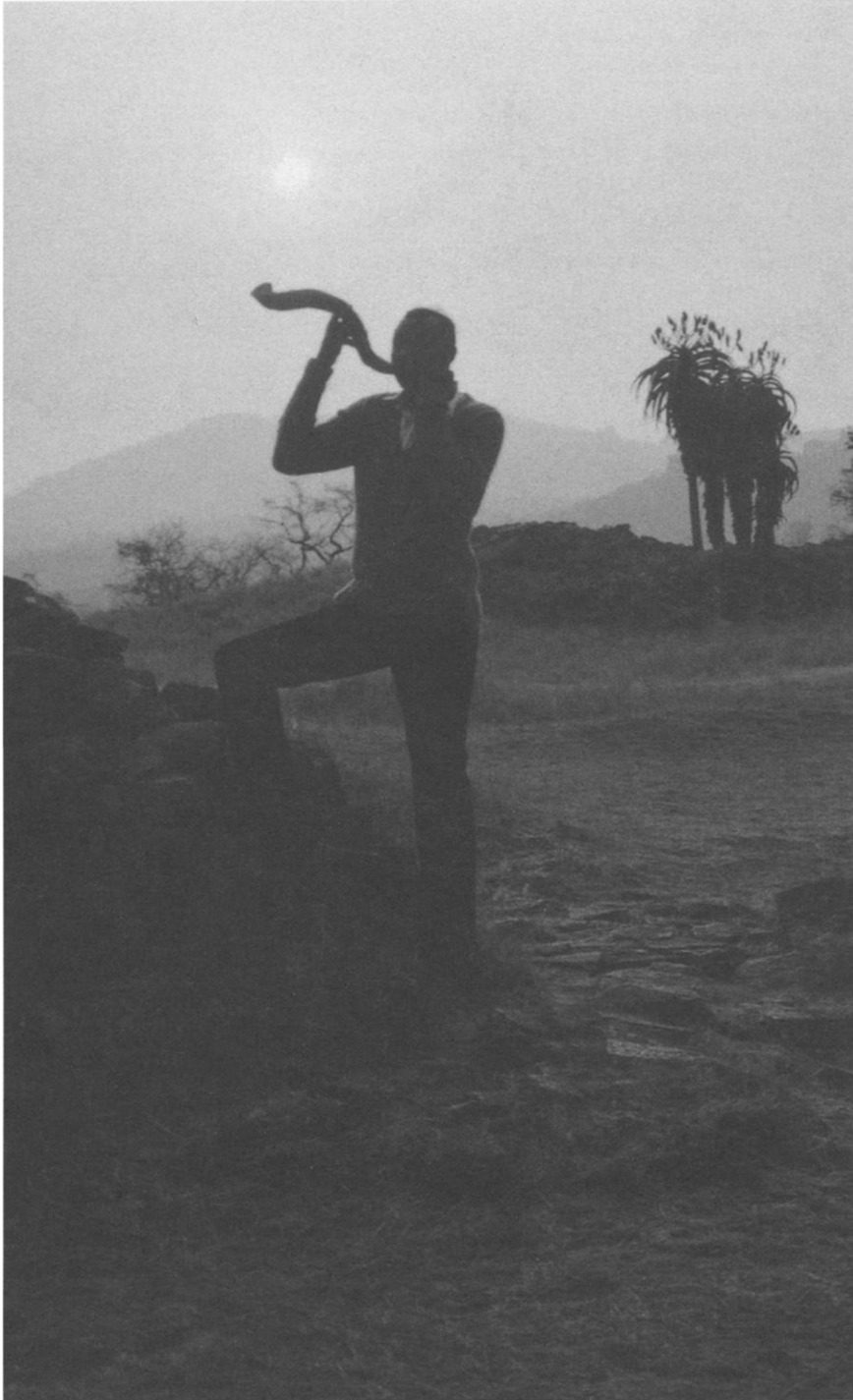
"I love my people," she shouted out from her bedroom, "we came from the Israelites, we came from Sena, we crossed the sea, we made

wonderful iron and gold and pottery and, as we came down through Africa, we sold our handicrafts. To start with," she was almost singing as she spoke, "we had cattle. We had towns. We were free. But the cattle died and we turned poor. But we were so beautiful with beautiful, long, Jewish noses and so proud of our facial structure! We no way wanted to spoil our structure by carelessness, eating pig or marrying non-Lemba gentiles."

Much of what Munuonde said is confirmed in a Lemba oral history compiled and published by Professor M.V. Mathiva, a Lemba scholar. Mathiva provides a detailed narrative of exile: the Lemba were punished for eating "unclean food" and forced out of Judea to a city called Sena. From there, they traveled down a river called Pusela to the coast, where they sailed across the ocean to Mozambique and founded a second Sena. From Sena II, they made their way across Africa, reaching Zimbabwe and participating in the medieval African empire that built the monumental city of Great Zimbabwe.

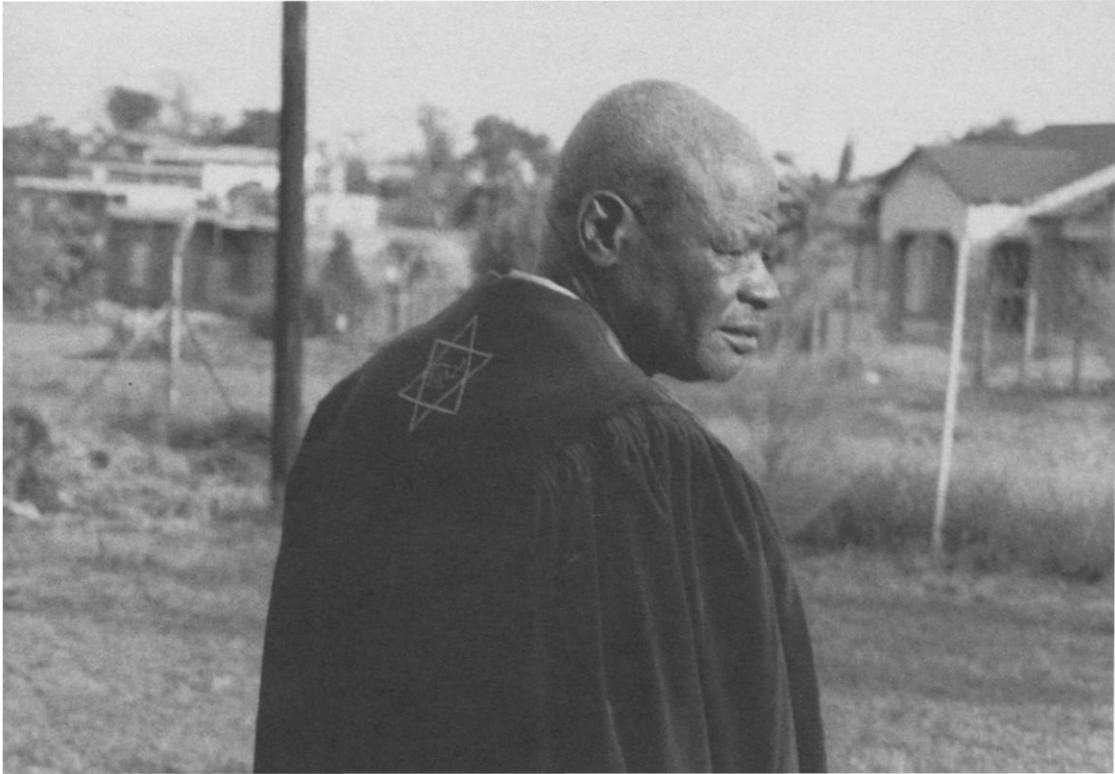
. . .

Parfitt was transfixed by the Lemba's story, but he had a problem. The Lemba had no written history; none of what they told him was supported by texts. His skepticism may seem uncharitable, but you have to remember that the story of the Lemba isn't quite as unique as it sounds. Indeed, many ethnic groups say their history began with exile from a distant home, many groups complain of racial persecution from neighbors, and many groups describe themselves as "chosen"; faced with these parallels, some of these groups describe them-



**Lemba blowing
horn at Great
Zimbabwe**

Tudor Parfitt



**Lemba leader
M. V. Mathiva,
wearing his
ceremonial robe**

Tudor Parfitt

selves as Jews. In March 1995 the Itim news agency carried a story about a Nigerian immigrant who was asking the Israeli High Court to recognize him as a Jew:

James Edward Oniolo, an Igbo who arrived in Israel six years ago, claimed that the tribe's dietary laws, monotheism and practice of male circumcision were evidence that the two million Igbo are descendants of the ancient Jewish tribe. The court ruled in favor of the Ministry of the Interior, which denied Oniolo status as a Jew.

Apparently, Oniolo did not mention one other parallel between these two peoples: in 1967, the Nigerian government systematically starved over 1 million Igbo in the breakaway republic of Biafra. But

Oniolo was not the first Igbo to find compelling parallels between his people's history and the history of the Jews. Almost two hundred years earlier, Olaudah Equiano, the Igbo-American slave turned writer and antislavery activist, claimed the same ancestry in his memoirs, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*. In the "imperfect sketch my memory has furnished me with of the manner and customs of a people among whom I first drew my Breath," he found a "strong analogy which . . . appears to prevail in the manners and customs of my countrymen, and those of the Jews, before they reached the Land of Promise."

More perplexing still is the strange history of Jewish identification in Britain, documented in the geneticist Steve Jones's *In the Blood* (1997). The

Metropolitan Anglo-Israel Association was founded in 1878; by the 1930s, it was attracting thousands to its annual meetings, including duchesses, knights, admirals, and generals. All were convinced that Britain was a lost tribe, ordained to rule the world. The figurehead of the British Israelite movement was William Blake, who wrote the words that became the hymn “Jerusalem”: “Did those feet in ancient time / Walk upon England’s mountain green . . . Was Jerusalem builded here / Among these dark satanic mills?” The myth of British Israelites is hardly the sole province of romantic poets: the pillow upon which English monarchs are crowned is said to be the pillow Joseph slept on at Beth-El. It was carried by the exiled Children of Israel to Antrim, whence it passed to Scotland, before being brought to London in 1291 by Edward I. In the 1950s it made a brief return to Scotland when it was abducted—or repatriated—by Scottish nationalists. Like Blake, they recognized the importance of a biblical founding myth.

In the United States, the situation seems to be more clear-cut. Of course, most American Jews seem positively tame: we don’t use much Hebrew or Yiddish at home, and many of us follow hardly any Jewish traditions at all. But still, we have in common the collective trauma of the Holocaust and a deep affinity for the homeland of Israel. Most of us see a clear difference between our Jewishness and that of the Africans, or the English: we’re actual Jews, direct descendants of the ancient Israelites. Family traditions and written accounts lead us back to our Jewish ancestors in Poland or Holland or Iran. And yet despite this

connection, it’s clear that Judaism—especially the soft-serve variety that most American Jews go in for—exists mostly in the comforting realm of the symbolic: we are Jews because of what we do or what we eat; occasionally because of what we won’t do or what we won’t eat. We’re rarely asked to prove it.

. . .

What does it mean to doubt someone else’s history? Do we have to concede that all histories, all identities, are nothing more than comforting myths? Or does written history—a falsifiable account based on immutable texts, open to vigorous debate—offer the only hope for accuracy? There’s something patronizing in the halfhearted way we accept other peoples’ oral history: polite credulity quickly gives way to an anxiety that we’re being dishonest by not challenging their cultural fantasies.

And yet this skepticism is hardly unfounded. A reliance on written sources unites Orthodox Jews and secular academics—they may disagree about Jewish history, but they do agree on a rough

Without texts, the Lemba’s Jewish past seems like just another Israelite myth, an invention in the tradition of Olaudah Equiano and William Blake.

standard of proof. In the textual cultures of Judaism, European Christianity, and Islam, knowledge of history is knowledge of texts. Without texts, the Lemba’s Jewish past seems like just another Israelite myth, an invention in the tradition of Olaudah Equiano and William Blake.

Faced with this dilemma, Tudor Parfitt

tried to dismiss the Lemba's claims as generously as he could. He wrote:

This is not to say that I thought [the Lemba's] assumed Jewishness, if such it was, was illegitimate. The idea of Jewishness is not specifically or exclusively Jewish, it has an existence and a meaning which can be used in contexts far removed from authentic Jewish tradition. Was this symbolic use of Judaism one that had been channelled through Christianity? Or had it rather been suggested by some awareness of the tragedies of Jewish history in which the suffering of the Jews at the hands of Christians seemed to offer a paradigm of African suffering at the hands of whites?

It's a compelling conclusion, a sympathetic contextualization of the Lemba's claims. But there's no escaping Parfitt's implicit message: I don't believe you.

. . .

One day last spring, I spent Shabbat evening at the house of some Lubavitcher Hassidim—former cattle ranchers from Colorado who had moved to Sefat, Israel. I had pedaled my bike up the mountain to this northern city, the resting place of many Jewish mystics. These days, Sefat is a tourist attraction for the ultraorthodox. A few nights before, I had slept outside on an empty hilltop, next to a French church emblazoned with a spray-painted slogan: "MAKE WAR. NOT LOVE." The warmth of a shared Shabbat dinner was just what I needed.

But the dinner table conversation soon took a nasty turn. My hosts began to make uncharitable assessments of "the Arab character," bolstering them with Torah-derived arguments about the manifest destiny of Israel. I began to

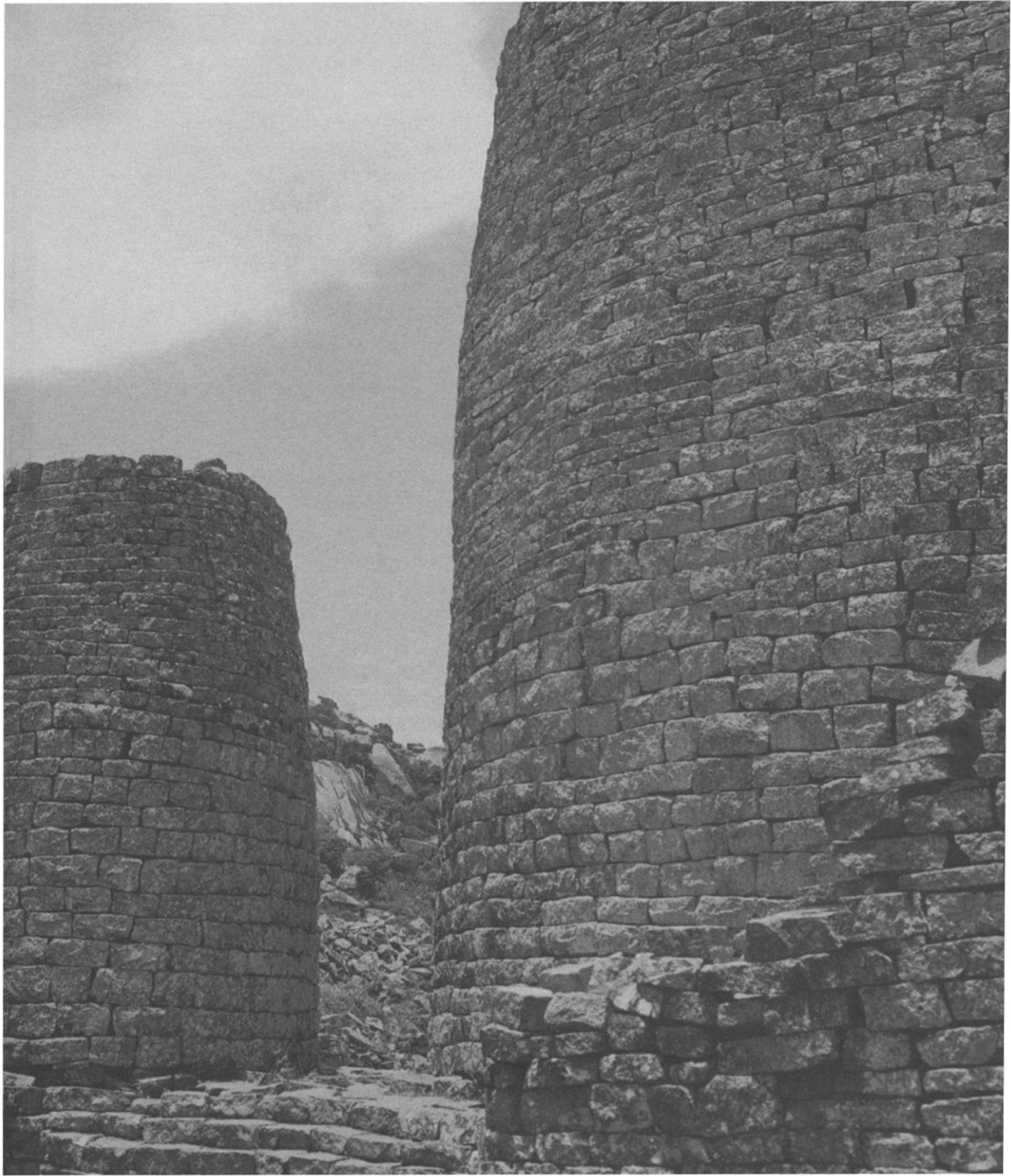
squirm. What the hell did they know about Arabs? I thought about Maimonides: he codified the rules we were following that night, using a dialect of Hebrew; but he wrote his brilliant philosophical treatises—and his private letters—in his native Arabic, using Hebrew script. I doubted that I could win any converts in a room full of energetic, articulate Jews enjoying a self-congratulatory revival, and I didn't want to offend my hosts, so I decided to keep quiet. But the combination of smugness and venom was beginning to ruin my meal. In response to a particularly enthusiastic outburst of Yiddische authenticity, I reached for the anthropologist's secret weapon. "Of course," I piped up, "from an anthropological point of view, all identity is a fiction."

To which a girl from Ohio, with whom I had been commiserating about waiting tables, asked me if I had heard of the Cohen gene.

A familiar Jewish surname, "Cohen" is also the ancient Hebrew designation for the priests who conducted daily animal sacrifices in the temple at Jerusalem. The temple was the religious and political center of the Jewish universe, and the Cohanim ran it. The name Cohen is a cognate of *kāhin*—the pre-Islamic Arabic term for "seer"—and the role of the Cohanim predates the rabbi by perhaps a millennium. In ancient Israel, Cohen status was transmitted patrilineally, like Jewish identity in general at the time. During the Hellenistic period, Jewish identity became matrilineal, but Cohen status remains patrilineal to this day. After the Roman destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, which was both a national and a metaphysical catastrophe, Jews de-centered their universe, transforming

The walls of Great Zimbabwe

© Lynn Davis.
Courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York



**Lemba Cultural
Association
meeting in Venda**

Tudor Parfitt



priestly sacrifices into bloodless oral prayers that could be performed by any Jew, anywhere.

In spite of the long exile from their ritual workplace, though, a certain archaism still attaches to the Cohanim. The Priestly Blessing, a prayer that is intoned on the Sabbath, is the oldest known biblical text. It appears, badly damaged but unmistakable, on a pair of eighth-century-B.C. silver amulets from the Hin-

I decided to deploy the anthropologist's secret weapon. "Of course," I piped up, "from an anthropological point of view, all identity is a fiction."

nom Valley (also known as Gehenna) outside Jerusalem. And its phrases, alive in the mouths of today's Cohanim, figure divine favor as a shining, upraised face, an image already well known in the Old Babylonian period.

But at the same time, I assumed that Cohen status—which relies exclusively on folk culture, hearsay, surnames, and fa-

therly instruction—would be as tenuous as any other tradition. Historians and anthropologists have long argued that oral traditions continuously re-create cultural history—"organizing the present in terms of a past," in Marshall Sahlins's words. Studies have tracked how a people's genealogy can shift to reflect their current allegiances. It works in reverse, too: the allegiances we form, from citizenship to marriage, are influenced by the way we view our heritage, our identity, our origins. And these days, everybody seems to be suspicious of origins. But the history of the Cohanim is beginning to seem like something more than a self-reflexive narrative, because genetic testing has confirmed some of the stories that the Cohanim like to tell about themselves. And to understand how this works, you'll have to remember some high-school genetics.

A boy has an X chromosome and a Y chromosome, and a girl has two X chromosomes. The Y chromosome is passed from father to son, unaltered, while every X chromosome contains DNA from both father and mother. Within these chromosomes, the DNA is divided into genic material, which functions as the blueprint for most of a person's physical characteristics, and junk, which doesn't seem to affect anything at all. DNA is as much as 98 percent junk. If there's a mutation in a person's genic DNA, that mutation can produce a physical deformity, which might be fatal, or at least debilitating. Junk DNA, on the other hand, isn't subject to natural (or unnatural) selection: it just sits there, useless, in a kind of cellular attic, collecting mutations instead of dust.

This uselessness is the reason why junk DNA is so useful to historians, and

it's also the reason why Cohen "gene" is a misnomer: the Cohen mutation has survived intact precisely because it's not a gene. Changes in junk DNA on the Y chromosome are recorded for posterity; thus a rare mutation can be used to trace a lineage back to a single man. The accumulation of subsequent, less rare mutations—which occur at more or less regular intervals—can then be used to approximate the date of the original, rare mutation. A cluster of DNA changes is called a haplotype, and it is this cluster of more and less rare changes in the Y chromosome's junk DNA that can establish astonishingly precise genealogies.

In Jewish tradition, Cohen status began with the first high priest, Aaron, who was a member of the priestly tribe of Levi. It's an elite lineage, and a fragile one; many Jews have wondered how they can be sure that every person who calls himself a Cohen is really a Cohen. Indeed, according to rabbinic law, Cohanim are not entitled to the tithes that Jewish priests formerly received, since Cohen status is unverifiable. But in 1998 Karl Skorecki, Mark Thomas, and other researchers published the results of a test on a group of 306 Jews, including 106 Cohanim. Of the 106 Cohanim, 97 shared a haplotype present in only 109 of

**Black Israelites in
New York City**

*Bojan Breclj/
CORBIS*



**Colonial map of
Africa**

Tudor Parfitt



200 other Jews—a haplotype that was virtually absent from the population at large. Furthermore, the haplotype was equally present in Cohanim from European and Arab lands, which means it existed before these communities were sundered in late antiquity. Finally, assuming a relatively constant mutation rate, the accumulation of genetic changes in the Cohen haplotype suggests it is somewhere between two and three thousand years old.

These findings implied that the DNA of modern-day Cohens can be traced to a man who might have lived around the time that Aaron lived. But it is just as possible that the father of the Cohen gene lived at the time of Alexander the Great—and the DNA tells us nothing about what kind of man he was. Who's to say the core of the Cohen haplotype didn't come from a gentile? (I can't help but imagine a Moabite, hands covered in gore from sacrifice to his war-god Ke-

mosh, founding an unbroken three-thousand-year lineage of Jewish priests.) And yet the Cohen haplotype does tell us something about Jewish culture: whatever its origins, the mutation must have been associated with priestly status in order to have been preserved so well among the Cohanim.

There was also a second finding, less sensational but just as important: the researchers found no haplotypes associated exclusively with people who claimed descent from Levi, another priestly caste. This led to the conclusion that “contemporary Levites are not direct patrilineal descendants of a paternally related tribal group.” The difference between Cohen DNA and Levite DNA reflects the difference between Cohen status and Levite status. Levite status bears fewer restrictions and privileges than Cohen status; Levites are less sacred, and they guard their bloodlines less zealously.

• • •

In light of Skorecki's research, Tudor Parfitt decided to revisit the vexing issue of Lemba identity. In *To the Ends of the Earth*, a BBC television special, Parfitt returns to South Africa and Zimbabwe, racing across the region in a white Land Rover. He's armed with a set of cheek swabs and test tubes prepared by his University College colleagues—the same scholars who conducted much of the

original research on Y-chromosome haplotypes, including the Cohen "gene." After a series of bureaucratic snafus and carefully mediated negotiations, Parfitt manages to obtain cell samples, filed by clan, from the mouths of Lemba villagers.

Having swabbed and cataloged the Lemba, Parfitt meets once again with Professor Mathiva. Clad in a blue robe embroidered with a Star of David, Math-



The Book of Abraham, published in Lisbon, 1489

Christel Gerstenberg/
CORBIS

iva recalls the exodus route described in Lemba oral tradition; together, he and Parfitt devise an itinerary to retrace the Lemba diaspora. From the run-down, unexotic town of Sena II (in Africa as in Israel, the loci of national myths are of-

After the Roman destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, Jews decentered their universe, transforming priestly sacrifices into bloodless oral prayers that could be performed by any Jew, anywhere.

ten underwhelming), Parfitt travels to Mozambique, on the coast of the Indian Ocean. Not only can one sail to Mozambique from Yemen, but at certain times of the year, it's hard to sail anywhere else from Yemen: monsoon winds often sweep boats south. As he makes his way up to the shores of western Asia, Parfitt follows a hunch: there is a town in the Hadramaut region of Yemen called Sayuna—which sounds vaguely like Sena. Could this be the long-lost Sena I?

Hadramaut was well-known to the ancient Israelites: the Hebrew name for the region, Hatsarmaweth, is included in the biblical genealogy of the human race (Gen. 10:26, 1 Chron. 1:20). A folk etymology glosses the name as “chambers of death,” and as they bake in the southern Arabian sun, the buildings look as if they were built half in the other world. Parfitt has traded his sporty Land Rover for a Toyota, and he's going in search of Sayuna's only librarian. When Parfitt finds him, he gets an abrupt response: “This isn't Sena.” But then, without skipping a beat, the librarian says, “Sena is three hours from here.” When Parfitt mentions the twelve Lemba clan names,

the librarian confirms that they are nearly identical to the surnames of local families from the Hadramaut. The Lemba's names are Semitic after all.

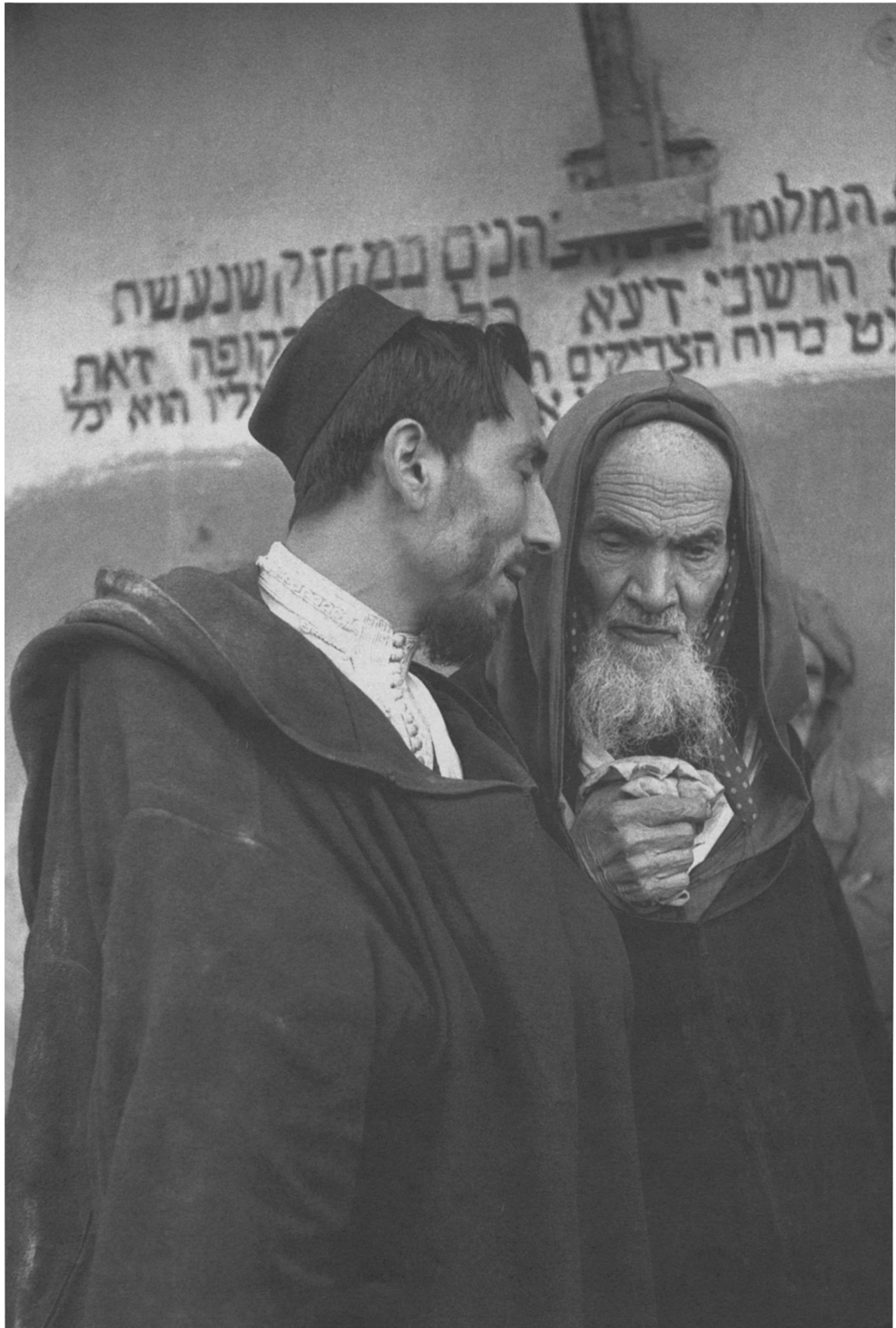
Back in London, Parfitt turns over his cheek swabs to the biologists. As you've probably guessed, his suspicions are confirmed: it turns out that the Lemba have haplotypes that are found only in the Hadramaut region of Yemen. Moreover, it turns out that the Lemba's priestly caste, the Buba—of which Professor Mathiva is a member—have the Cohen haplotype in a higher proportion than Ashkenazic or Sephardic Cohanim. This is the proof that Parfitt was waiting for: the Lemba come from Judea; their oral history is more than a myth.

Perhaps you've noticed that I didn't say the Lemba were Jewish. After all, we still have no way of knowing for sure that the Cohen haplotype comes from Aaron and not from the hypothetical bloody Moabite. And then there's the question of marriage: the reason the Lemba look like Africans is that the men who fled Yemen took African wives. If Jewish identity were patrilineal, like Cohen status, this would have no effect on the Lemba's status as Jews, but since Jewish identity today is matrilineal, their African wives may have severed the Lemba's ties with the rest of the world's Jews. The Lemba may have more priestly blood than the Ashkenazi, but without a matrilineal Jewish genealogy, they would be denied the right of repatriation in Israel. The Lemba may be priests without being Jews.

. . .

A guy goes to a rabbi. He says, “Rabbi, make me a Cohen.”

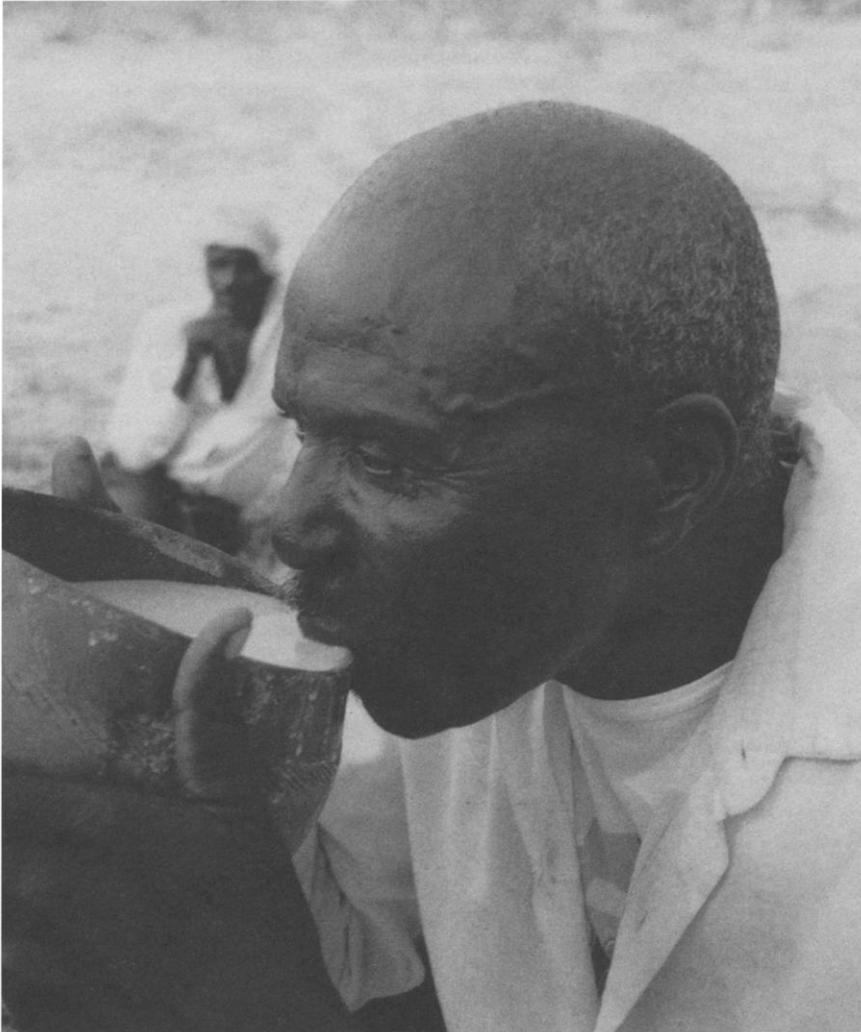
The rabbi is horrified. “What?!” he



**Jewish men in
Jerusalem,
gathered for the
blessing of the
Cohanim**

*Annie Griffiths Belt/
CORBIS*





**Lemba drinking
maize beer**

Tudor Parfitt

sputters. “I can’t make you a Cohen! It’s impossible, not to mention unethical.”

The same guy goes to a different rabbi. He says, “Rabbi, you’ve got to help me. Make me a Cohen.”

The rabbi scowls at him. “I can’t make you a Cohen, you idiot. You have to be *born* a Cohen.”

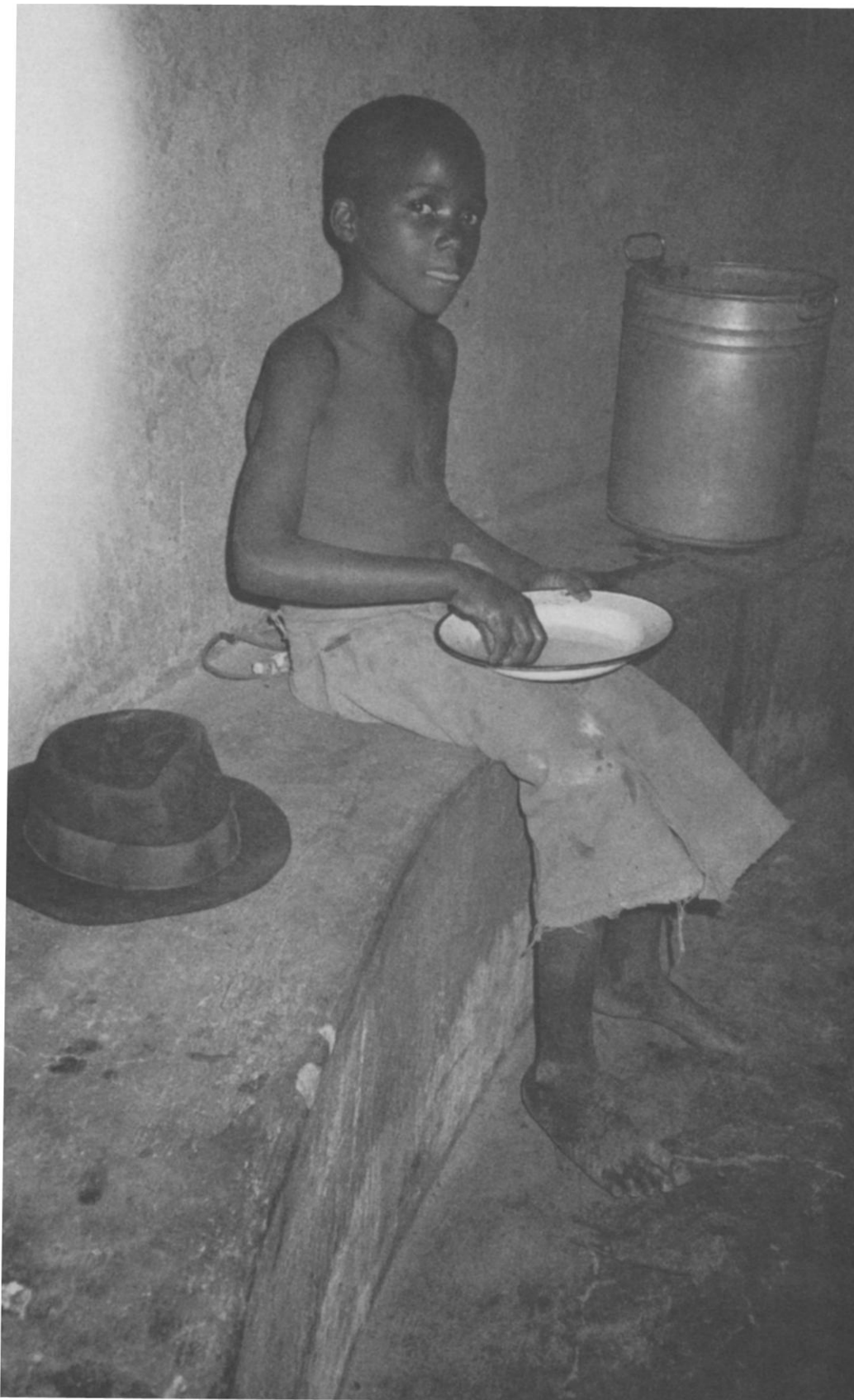
So the guy tries another rabbi, and another; he’s turned down by everyone. Finally, he finds a shifty rabbi who says he might be able to help. The guy makes a

sizable donation to this rabbi’s synagogue, and he finally gets his wish: the shifty rabbi scares up some hopelessly obscure documents. Strung together and forcibly misinterpreted, they allow him to declare the guy a Cohen. “There,” the shifty rabbi says, “You’re a Cohen—and I’m probably going to hell for this. But tell me just one thing: Why did you go to all this trouble? Why do you want to become a Cohen?”

“Pressure,” the man responds.

Lemba boy

Tudor Parfitt



The rabbi is puzzled. "Pressure?"

"Sure!" comes the reply. "You see, my father was a Cohen, his father before him was a Cohen, his father before him was a Cohen . . ."

. . .

The first Europeans to encounter the Lemba were the missionaries, fortune hunters, and archaeologists who spread across southern Africa in the nineteenth century. They were immediately impressed by these "Israelitish types" who worshipped one god, practiced male circumcision, and refused to eat pork. "How *absolutely* Jewish is the type of this people!" exclaimed Carl Peters in *The Eldorado of the Ancients*. "They have faces cut exactly like those of ancient Jews."

But the Europeans hadn't come looking for Jews. They'd come looking for treasure: centuries-old Portuguese travelogues had posited the existence of an ancient city surrounded by mines rich with gold, sometimes linking it to the biblical story of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. In 1871, the German adventurer Karl Mauch discovered an enormous complex of stone ruins with walls as high as thirty feet: Great Zimbabwe, the largest monument in sub-Saharan Africa. To the Europeans, the ruins proved that this land had been colonized before: black Africans didn't build in stone. Mauch was convinced that Zimbabwe's main building was indeed a ruined copy of the Temple of Solomon. He was also convinced that, among the native population, there were descendants of the ancient Jews who'd built the place. Hence the European fascination with the Lemba.

Of course, for the Lemba, this was the

kiss of death. Colonial interest in the Lemba as a dark-skinned "white race," Parfitt notes, "helped to relegate them to complete obscurity as far as the history of Southern Africa is concerned. . . . Any attempt to see links between Central Africa and the Semitic world would be viewed as an effort to denigrate African culture and to bring respectability to old racial prejudices." Subsequent archaeological investigation (and radiocarbon dating) proved that Great Zimbabwe flourished between 1240 and 1450 A.D.—two thousand years after King Solomon. Indeed, one of the turning points in the struggle against white rule in Cecil Rhodes's country—Rhodesia—was when the partisans of the liberation struggle stopped calling themselves Rhodesians and named themselves after the monumental city. Zimbabwe became an emblem of indigenous black power.

Two decades later, the history of Great Zimbabwe is as mysterious as ever. It has been accepted as a uniquely African creation, and yet no one has offered a convincing theory of how or why it was built. But in light of Parfitt's research into the Lemba, it might be time to ask whether the colonialists were right. That is, if the Lemba helped build Great Zimbabwe, and the Lemba are Jews, then perhaps Great Zimbabwe is a kind of Afro-Judaic relic, after all.

Of course, even if the Lemba had nothing to do with Great Zimbabwe, they are back in the spotlight: in the afterword to the most recent edition of *Journey to the Vanished City*, Tudor Parfitt explains how his work has made the Lemba famous. Their story has been told and retold around the world—you

might have seen them on *60 Minutes*. They've even become African celebrities: last year, inspired by Parfitt's BBC documentary, South African president Thabo Mbeki invited a group of Lemba elders to Pretoria.

It's not hard to see why the story generates such interest: a tribe of long-lost black Jews, alive in southern Africa! And then there is its sudden, spectacular resolution. It often seems that African oral histories are a universe of their own, an infinitely expanding realm of myth and politics. But the riddle of the Lemba was solved with a few cheek swabs. At once, thousands of years fell into place.

And it's not just the Lemba. Genetics is encroaching on the terrain of the humanities: using haplotypes as fossils, biologists are picking up where anthropologists and archaeologists have left off, uncovering invisible histories, invisible connections, invisible races. In *The Language of the Genes*, Steve Jones argues that the questions of human origins will soon be answered. Armed with haplotypes, we can learn that the residents of a sleepy village on the Irish coast are descended from Basques—and that the Basques themselves are the aboriginal Europeans.

This combination of history and genetics may sound suspiciously like the return of race science, that discredited amalgam of linguistics, anthropology, and craniology that attempted to discern substantive physical and mental differences between human populations. But race science pioneers like Gobineau have little in common with today's genetic research: Gobineau posited the existence of discrete racial groups, identifiable by differences in language and lifestyle and cultural heritage, then made these groups

the basis of a new theory of human biology. Contemporary historical geneticists, on the other hand, turn the old race science around: they start with biological data, then use that information to reach hypotheses about human history. In the work of Tudor Parfitt and others, biology gives us clues about culture. Lemba DNA doesn't make Lemba culture what it is, it merely records their cultural history.

The problem is, it's never quite so simple as that. The discovery of the Cohen "gene" among the Lemba has already started to effect profound changes in their culture. As Parfitt notes, the Lemba today are already radically different from the people he met ten years ago. "You have given us our history back," one Lemba tells Parfitt. But he has also given them a new Jewish future; the lost tribe has been found. American Jewish organizations are sending books and money; Professor Mathiva wants to build a synagogue. Even among the Lemba, the new race science has something in common with the old: biology and culture seem to be entangled, and old ideas of biological determinism have not died easily.

But the more you think about the old dichotomy of biology and culture, the less sense it seems to make. After all, the Cohen halotype may have been discovered using the tools of genetic science, but its real significance is cultural, not physiological; it doesn't tell us anything about the human body, only about human history. In other words, insofar as the dichotomy of culture and biology is relevant to the Lemba, it's not clear on which side the "Cohen gene" belongs. Indeed, part of what makes Parfitt's work

so exciting is that it opens up the possibility of interpreting haplotypes the way scholars have traditionally interpreted fossils or ruins or ancient texts. DNA becomes a cultural artifact, and we can use it to learn about where—and, perhaps, how—a people's ancestors lived.

And so, in the end, we may find that the new race science looks a lot like the old anthropology. On the surface, the Lemba are a colorful paradox: they are a lost tribe of Israelites, comfortably settled in Africa; they are Jewish by tradition, but not by traditional Jewish law. Yet on a deeper level, what is most important about the Lemba is precisely what is so ordinary about them: like the Polish Jews who look like Poles, or the Yemenite Jews who look like Arabs, their physiology tells a story that seems at odds with their heritage. The secret that all these people share isn't really biological, but historical: it is history that allows Poles and Yemenites to think of themselves as Jews, and history that will allow the Lemba to reestablish their links to a broader Jewish community. If the lives of the Lemba are now changing because of what can be divined from their DNA, then perhaps we can see, at last, that the Lemba's Jewish fate was never in their blood, but in themselves.