

Rabbi Speaks About African American Jewish History

LOCAL

ERIC SCHUCHT | JE STAFF

IN JUNE, several U.S. lawmakers formed the Black-Jewish Congressional Caucus with a goal of bringing African Americans and Jews together to combat white supremacist ideology.

It's that mission of unity and commonality that Rabbi Earl Bowen Jr. spoke about on July 22 at Adath Israel.

Bowen is familiar with the subject matter, having worked in 2018 at Gratz College as an instructor, where he taught a course titled "Historical Origins and Developmental Patterns of

African American Jewry."

In his lecture, part of the Golden Slipper Gems summer series, he touched upon the role African American Jews play in the larger Jewish community and the history of Philadelphia's black Jewish community.

Bowen traced the origins of black Jews in America, noting

that the first African American Jewish communities formed in the latter half of the 19th century.

The ancestors of those people had been slaves taken to the United States and converted to Christianity. At the time, they began to equate biblical stories about the plight of the Jewish people as slaves in Egypt to their

own experiences. Slowly, they began to adopt Jewish customs, starting their own congregations in the early 1900s.

"It's very hard to adopt a religion of people who have been oppressing you for all these years, and all of a sudden look to their God as a 'savior,'" Bowen said of Christianity and

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the search for alternative belief systems.

Previously, black Jews were mostly those who had adopted the customs and practices of Jewish slave owners.

Bowen said there is a bit of evidence to support the idea of some slaves were Hebrews before they were brought to the United States. That culture, however, was destroyed along with the rest of the cultural identities of the slaves. So, in a sense, Bowen said, blacks embracing Judaism is a revitalization of that point of view and a continuation of history that was once lost.

Philadelphia is home to Congregation Temple Beth'El, a predominantly African American synagogue in West Oak Lane. Bowen serves as its associate rabbi, in addition to his job as a behavioral therapist in Lincoln University's Office of Student Affairs.

The synagogue was founded by Louise Dailey, the daughter of a Baptist minister. In the 1940s, she worked as a housekeeper in a Jewish home in Philadelphia, where she learned about Judaism. Inspired, she started to practice the religion in her home and soon attracted others.

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RABBI EARL BOWEN JR.

Eventually, the group grew large enough to buy a building and start a synagogue. Today, her daughter (also Bowen's wife), Rabbi Debra Bowen, leads the congregation.

The congregation faced discrimination in the early days. Bowen said they struggled to find vendors who would sell them

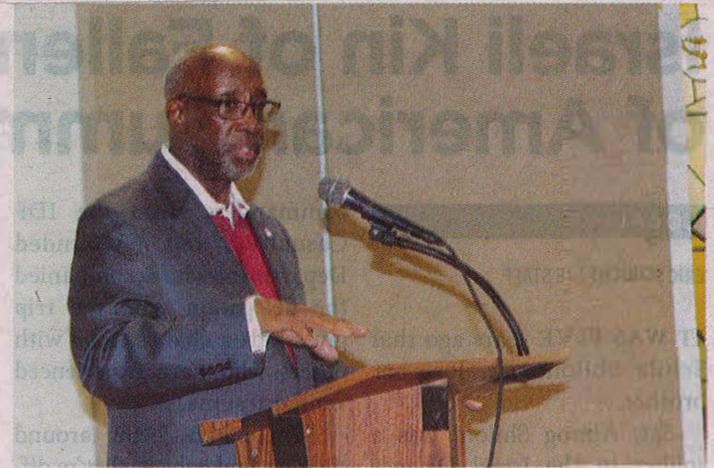
Judaica. And many of the Torahs obtained were old and worn and even illegible in portions. But over the years, the congregation has been accepted into the wider Jewish community.

The congregation has about 200 active members. A staple of the services is music, with guitars, drums and keyboards. Congregants

will even get up to dance.

"Maybe because it's part of our own culture in the African American community," said Bowen, "we believe that one way that you praise Hashem is through the music, and it resonates with people."

Bowen's main message at Adath Israel was a call for unity



▲ Rabbi Earl Bowen Jr.

Eric Schucht

among all sects of the Jewish community. Just like the ideals behind the new congressional caucus, he said, it's important to come together and offer support.

"We believe that our presence can have a very positive effect on the wider Jewish community," Bowen said. "We believe that our community, in coalition

with the larger Jewish community, can represent a united force to resist some of these things that are happening. But we have to see it as our commonality and how this can be a very good thing for us to do." •

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