Of Nation and Neighborhood: Rabbi Wentworth Arthur Matthew and the Commandment Keepers Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation

Alongside the musical and literary creativity that made Harlem famous in the 1920s and 1930s, a group of Black Jewish synagogues emerged in the New York City neighborhood. When Wentworth Arthur Matthew founded the Commandment Keepers Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation in 1919, he brought Jewish historical narratives and religious traditions together with the black nationalism of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association to create a synagogue for African Americans. However, unlike Garvey and other black nationalists, Matthew remained in Harlem instead of encouraging a return to the African continent. Archival sources, Yiddish press reports, and coverage in black newspapers contribute to this examination of the development of this community of Black Jews in the early twentieth century with connections to non-Jewish African American movements and Ashkenazi Jews.