

Michelle Obama Has a Rabbi in Her Family

Capers Funnye, Leading Black Israelite, Is Aspiring First Lady's Cousin

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While Barack Obama has struggled to capture the Jewish vote, it turns out that one of his wife's cousins is the country's most prominent black rabbi — a fact that has gone largely unnoticed.

Michelle Obama, wife of the Democratic presidential nominee, and Rabbi Capers Funnye, spiritual leader of a mostly black synagogue on Chicago's South Side, are first cousins once removed. Funnye's mother, Verdelle Robinson Funnye (born Verdelle Robinson) and Michelle Obama's paternal grandfather, Frasier Robinson Jr., were brother and sister.

Funnye (pronounced fuh-NAY) is chief rabbi at the Beth Shalom B'nai Zaken Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation in southwest Chicago. He is well-known in Jewish circles for acting as a bridge between mainstream Jewry and the much smaller, and largely separate, world of black Jewish congregations, sometimes known as black Hebrews or Israelites. He has often urged the larger Jewish community to be more accepting of Jews who are not white.

Funnye's famous relative gives an unexpected twist to the much-analyzed relationship between Barack Obama and Jews in this presidential campaign. On the one hand, Jewish political organizers, voters and donors played an essential role in Obama's rise to power in Chicago, including some of the city's wealthiest and most prominent families. But the Illinois senator has struggled to overcome suspicions in some parts of the Jewish community, including skepticism about his stance on Israel and discredited but persistent rumors that he is secretly a Muslim.

Funnye, who described himself as an independent, said he has not been involved with the Obama campaign but that he has donated money and was cheering it on.

"I know that her grandfather and her father and my mom and all of our relatives that are now deceased would be so very, very proud of both of them," Funnye told the Forward.

Michelle Obama and the Obama campaign did not respond to requests for comment.

Funnye told the Forward that he has known Michelle Obama (born Michelle Robinson) all her life. His mother and her father, Frasier Robinson III, enjoyed a close relationship, and Funnye said he saw Michelle several times a year when they were growing up, mostly at family functions and on occasional visits to her house.

"Her father was like the glue of our family," Funnye said. "He always wanted to keep the family very connected and to stay in touch with each other."

Funnye, 56, said he and Michelle, 44, were not especially close growing up, but he remembers her as "energetic and smart and very caring."

The two fell out of touch when they grew older and went their separate ways but then reconnected years later when Michelle Obama was working for the University of Chicago and Funnye was leading a local social service organization called Blue Gargoyle. Funnye also worked with Barack Obama, then a state senator, who came and spoke at events for the organization. When Barack and Michelle Obama married, Funnye and his family attended the wedding.

Although Funnye's congregation describes itself as Ethiopian Hebrew, it is not connected to the Ethiopian Jews, commonly called Beta Israel, who have immigrated to Israel en masse in recent decades. It is also separate from the Black Hebrews in Dimona, Israel, and the Hebrew Israelite black supremacist group whose incendiary street harangues have become familiar spectacles in a number of American cities.

Funnye converted to Judaism and was ordained as a rabbi under the supervision of black Israelite rabbis, then went through another conversion supervised by Orthodox and Conservative rabbis. He serves on the Chicago Board of Rabbis.

Funnye's relationship with the Obama family was reported in the Chicago Jewish News in an article dated August 22. A Wall Street Journal article in April reported that the aspiring first lady had a cousin (whom the paper mistakenly referred to as a second cousin) who is a prominent black rabbi but did not mention Funnye by name.

The rabbi's familial connection with the Democratic presidential nominee is also a matter of common knowledge in Funnye's synagogue.

"He really jumped on everyone's radar after the 2004 convention," Funnye said. "That's when some people said, 'Isn't he related to you or something?' I said, 'Yeah, he's married to my cousin, and she's making him everything that he is.'"