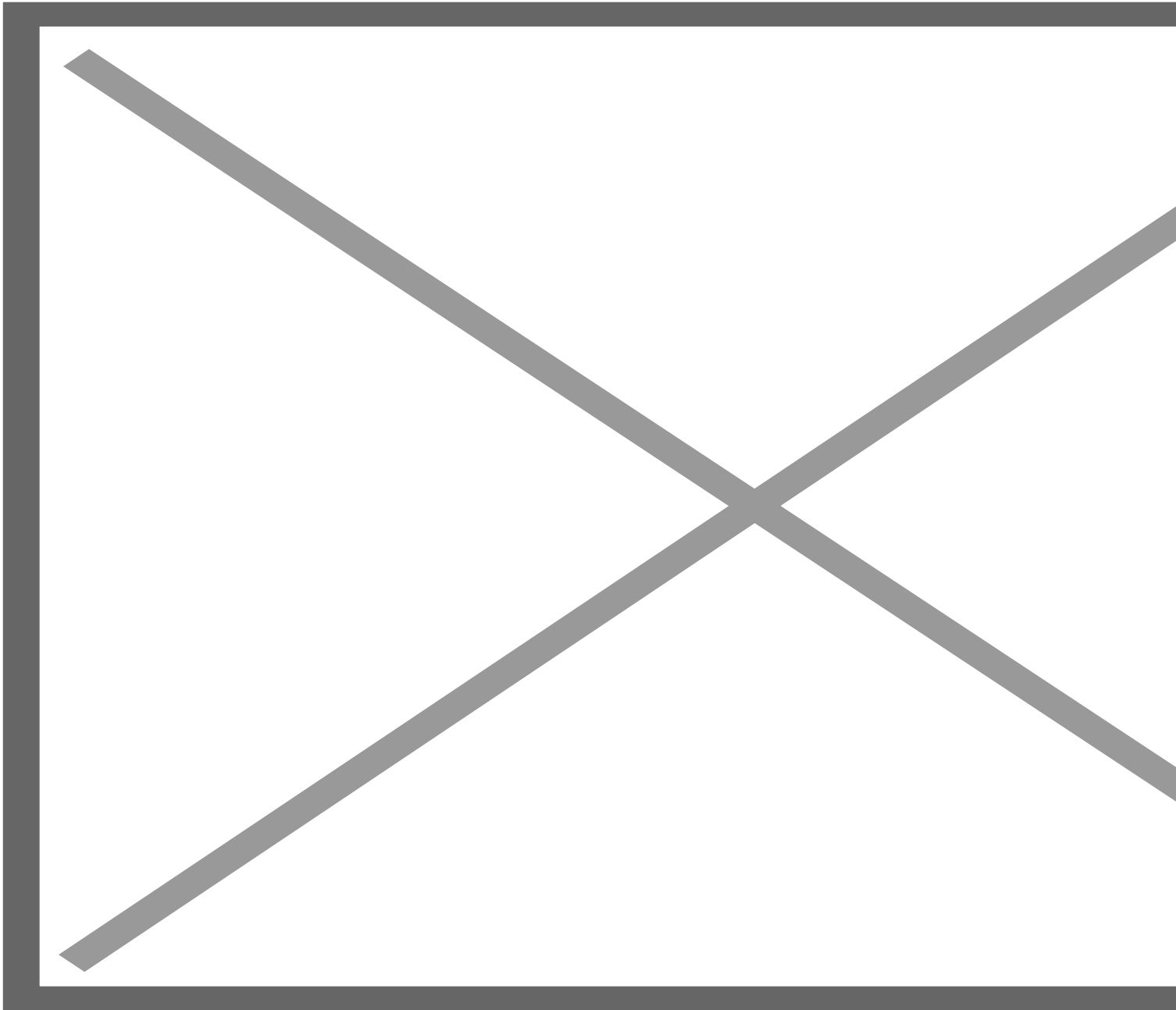


New PBS docuseries examines the 'interwoven history' of Black and Jewish Americans

by [Andrew Esenten](#)

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Host Henry Louis Gates Jr., center, attends a Seder while filming *Black and Jewish America: An Interwoven History*. (Image courtesy of PBS)

A new four-part PBS documentary series traces the history between Black and Jewish Americans, examining their connection through shared experiences of persecution and how they've navigated political tests to the relationship.

[*Black and Jewish America: An Interwoven History*](#), which premiered Tuesday and is hosted by Henry Louis Gates Jr., explores the two communities from the era of slavery to present day. The series spotlights religious leaders who have promoted intercommunal cooperation as well as those who have sown discord.

The documentary opens with a Passover Seder that gathered prominent Black Americans and Jews in Manhattan, including [Angela Buchdahl](#), the first Asian American to be ordained as a rabbi and cantor; Gates; and writer Jamaica Kincaid, and chef Michael Twitty—both of whom are Black converts to Judaism. The group met last spring to reflect on the Exodus story, share their personal histories and, of course, eat.

“It was such a rich discussion, and it’s a shame we could only, in the end, use bits and pieces in the first episode,” documentary co-director Sara Wolitzky said in a recent interview, adding that the goal of the Seder and the entire series is to “bring everyone to the table.”

The first episode, “Let My People Go,” covers the 1909 founding of the NAACP by Black and Jewish activists, and the partnership between Jewish businessman Julius Rosenwald and Black educational leader Booker T. Washington that led to the establishment of thousands of schools for Black children across the South [between the 1910s](#) and the 1960s. The second, “Strange Fruit,” highlights collaborations between Black jazz musicians and Jewish songwriters, managers and club owners who boosted their careers.

The third episode focuses on the so-called grand alliance during the 1960s and the Civil Rights Movement, considered a high point in Black-Jewish solidarity. Some of the stories, like one surrounding the Ku Klux Klan murders of Black and Jewish civil rights activists working together, are well known. Other stories, like that of the [Monson Motor Lodge protest](#), have largely been forgotten.

In June 1964, King invited White rabbis to join protests against segregation in St. Augustine, Florida, believing their presence would help generate press coverage, according to the documentary. Sixteen Reform rabbis gathered with local protesters outside of a segregated motel to pray and were arrested. It was the [largest mass arrest of rabbis](#) in US history at that time, and the press was all over it. President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act less than a month later.

Rabbi Israel Dresner, a close friend of King’s, was among those who were jailed. His son, [Avi Dresner](#), says in the episode that many rabbis felt compelled to participate in the civil rights movement because of the Holocaust.

“My dad said to Dr. King, ‘Jews were slaves 17 years ago in the death camps and concentration camps of Europe, so this is not ancient history for us,’” he says, adding that the comment “really made an impression on Dr. King.”

The fourth episode, “Crossroads,” covers the 1970s to the present, a period marked by strife between the communities over the [resignation of Andrew Young](#) as US ambassador to the United Nations under pressure from Jewish leaders; the 1991 Crown Heights riots; and the Israel-Hamas war.

The series shows that despite both communities having a history of persecution, their alliance has repeatedly been tested both by political differences and by dynamics that allowed White Jews to advance in society much faster than Black Americans.

Gates, a Harvard University professor and host of the popular *Finding Your Roots* genealogy show on PBS, conceived of the series in the wake of three tragic events—the 2015 Charleston, South Carolina, church shooting; the 2017 White nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia; and the 2018 Tree of Life synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh. During the Seder, Gates notes that antisemitism and anti-Black racism have been ever-present in Western culture.

“By tracing the long arc of Black and Jewish history in America, I hope we can see each other more clearly, more honestly, and find hope in our mutual stories of survival, resilience, and solidarity,” Gates said in a news release. “But this series is not only about the past. It is about us—and how, together, we can prevail over the forces of hatred that seek to divide us.”

Susannah Heschel, the chair of Jewish studies at Dartmouth College and daughter of the late Rabbi Heschel, said she believes both communities have lost power in recent years and must revive their alliance for their mutual benefit.

“I don’t feel they have a goal or much of a voice other than expressing tremendous fear and concern about what’s developing in this country,” Heschel, who appears in the series, said in an interview. “That’s not a strategy. We have to get together because this is a very crucial moment in our history.”

A diverse group of filmmakers worked on the project, said co-director Phil Bertelsen.

“We very intentionally designed our teams to be both Black and Jewish, modeled after Henry Hampton’s Blackside productions, which gave you *Eyes on the Prize* and other series,” he said, referring to the Emmy Award-winning filmmaker and his landmark PBS series about the civil rights movement. The goal was “to be sure that the history was told from a more balanced perspective.”

Among the dozens of scholars, activists and artists who provide commentary in the series are a handful of clergy members, including Al Sharpton; Capers Funnye, the spiritual leader of a predominantly Black synagogue in Chicago; and Tree of Life’s [rabbi, Hazzan Jeffrey Myers](#).

The documentary arrives on PBS during a challenging time for the broadcaster. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a major funder of local PBS stations, [voted](#) last month to dissolve after Congress cut more than \$1 billion in support. A PBS spokesperson said funding for *Black and Jewish America* was granted prior to CPB’s closure.

The host and directors will [discuss the series](#) with US Sen. Cory Booker on Thursday at 92NY in New York City. The event will also be livestreamed.

For the Seder meal shown at the beginning of the series, Twitty prepared West African brisket, collard greens, creole-spiced kugel, and other recipes from his book *Koshersoul: The Faith and Food Journey of an African American Jew*, which won the top 2022 National Jewish Book Award.

“I think this is a monumental moment in telling the story of Blacks and Jews in America,” said Twitty, who lives in Virginia. “There’s a diversity of voices represented, and people who think it’s the same old material will be surprised by the attempt at nuance.” —Religion News Service