

בס"ד



# נפלאות הבריא

**How A British Jew  
became a Zulu chieftain**

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## How a 19th-century British Jew became a Zulu chieftain and slaveholding warlord

In new book 'The Jew Who Would Be King,' historian Adam Rovner tells the story of Nathaniel Isaacs, who survived a shipwreck and went on to a life of wealth, adventure and corruption

By **RICH TENORIO**

Nathaniel Isaacs's life defied convention. A white Jewish Englishman who came of age during the early 19th century, he spent much of his career on the outer reaches of the British Empire in Africa. In South Africa, he won the trust of the famed indigenous leader Shaka Zulu, who made Isaacs a chieftain while pursuing bloody wars against other tribes. Later, as a British agent in West Africa, Isaacs negotiated treaties with local rulers to end the slave trade — yet he eventually became a slaveholding warlord himself.

Historian Adam Rovner documents Isaacs's eventful life in a new book, "The Jew Who Would Be King: A True Story of Shipwreck, Survival, and Scandal in Victorian Africa." The University of California Press published it on April 15. Early in his career, "Isaacs played the role of a Joseph — a kind of adviser to King Shaka," Rovner tells *The Times of Israel* in a phone conversation. "Later, in West Africa, he became a kind of Pharaoh, a hard-headed holder of those against their will." But "it's not exactly a Passover story," says Rovner, who directs a Judaic studies center at the University of Denver, where he is also an English professor. "He... did not undertake an exodus. It was a self-exile. The only way he can really make it as a working-class poor Jew in Georgian England is to get to the very fringes of empire and try to make a name for himself with whatever he had — his guts and the ability to outwit those out to get him."

When the author first came across the story, he didn't even know the subject's name. It happened while researching a previous book — "In the Shadow of Zion: Promised Lands Before Zion." One primary source proved unexpectedly intriguing: A speech by British playwright Israel Zangwill, active in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Zangwill — best-known for popularizing the term "melting pot" with his play of the same name — was discoursing on how the Jews had as much right to a homeland as anyone else. While making his argument, Zangwill included a reference to an unnamed Jewish Zulu king. Suffice it to say, it piqued Rovner's interest and sparked an online search.

"[Isaacs] had been written about in a couple of sketchy articles and one self-published genealogical book," Rovner says. "It was a good story and I started researching it." As the author learned, there was "much more to Isaacs than just the unlikely fact that he was a Zulu chieftain."

### **Far-flung research project**

Researching this story took Rovner far from his home base in Colorado. He kept customs officials busy, visiting a slew of international destinations connected to the narrative: England, South Africa, Sierra Leone... even the island of St. Helena, where Napoleon was living out his life in exile just as a certain teenage Brit came there to apprentice with an uncle in the import-export business. The author did extensive archival research, visiting locales including Cape Town, St. Helena and the Sierra Leonean capital of Freetown.

“To me, it’s important not only to have the... paper records from the archive,” Rovner says. “I also like to pursue ‘the archive of the feet’ — tread the same ground... the same sites, the same places, perhaps the same peoples as those that had lived in Isaacs’s time. To me, it makes it more real.” That included a melancholy visit to the remote island of Matakong, off the coast of Guinea. There, far from British eyes, Isaacs became a warlord, holding slaves — and, the author says, perhaps dealing in slaves, as well. A high-level British government attempt to prosecute Isaacs for slaveholding ultimately foundered.

As might be expected, narrating Isaacs’s life presented multiple challenges to the author.

“It’s a non-redemptive story,” Rovner explains. “He starts out an admirer of Zulu culture,” and expresses “opposition to the slave trade” in a multi-volume memoir. “Later on, he’s slowly, slowly sucked into it.”

There was the thorny issue of a white Jew holding Black slaves. The narrative of Jews in the slave trade has been a contentious one over the decades due to controversial and disputed claims about the extent of Jews’ role in it.

“Obviously, there were Jews involved in the slave trade,” Rovner says. “They were not the primary movers,” although they had “surplus visibility.”

And, he adds, Isaacs might have been a case unto himself — unlike previous slaveholding Jews in the British Empire, he held slaves after England had abolished the slave trade in 1833: “What we have is someone working on the frontiers of empire, subverting British interests... I don’t think it’s a reflection of his Judaism. Someone who thinks it is might need to think about themselves making antisemitic stereotypes.”

### **The oldest hatred shapes and follows the Jewish Zulu**

The book explores the role of antisemitism in Isaacs’s life. He was born in 1808 in Canterbury. Its name, inextricably connected to an archbishop, also featured a sizeable Jewish population in the early 19th century.

While his father exited the historical record early on in Isaacs’s life, he was close to his mother and received something of a Jewish education in a country where there were few Jews yet multiple forms of antisemitism: a cruder form fueled by folkloric stereotypes, and a supposedly more genteel form that the landed class allegedly used to exclude Jews from legal rights enjoyed by other Britons.

Antisemitism followed the Isaacs family to St. Helena. Although Nathaniel’s uncles there attended church, they presumably did so because it was mandatory, and even this could not spare them from local antisemitic ire. Locals also resented him and his brother Lewis Solomon becoming confidants of the imprisoned Napoleon.

After three years on St. Helena, Isaacs befriended an ambitious Canadian sea captain, James Saunders King, who invited him to join a bid for

fortune in South Africa. King and Isaacs successfully journeyed to Cape Town, but a subsequent trip to Port Natal — in search of one of King's lost comrades who had been entrusted with creating a trading post — ended in a shipwreck. King, Isaacs and other crew members survived, thanks in part to a hospitable reception from the Zulus. They learned that members of the previous expedition to create a trading post were very much alive. Shaka requested to meet with the white newcomers. Those who obliged included Isaacs, who brought a massive stash of ivory to the Zulu leader.

“For the Zulus, the fact that Isaacs was Jewish, that he did not have the right pedigree... meant nothing,” Rovner says. “In that way, the Zulus were far more equal than the British society.”

### **A bloody existence**

The book describes Zulu atrocities committed against other tribes and among their own population.

Isaacs won renown among the Zulus by participating in a deadly attack on another tribe, during which he sustained a wound in the back. As a result, Shaka bestowed a “praise name” or honorific on Isaacs, who later received a chieftaincy, which came with a plot of land.

“He tries to get the British interested in the territory he had been granted,” Rovner says. “The British were not interested in a teenage Jewish guy with no social standing, not much education, developing the empire.”

By the time Isaacs left South Africa, he had fathered children with an African woman. He returned to England with a high opinion of Shaka, and the praiseful descriptions of the Zulu leader in Isaacs's autobiography allegedly spawned a more mythical depiction of Shaka's

military prowess, a myth subsequently propagated in the bestselling novels of H. Rider Haggard.

Act two of Isaacs's life began with another business venture in Africa. Here, he did so well in his dealings with local kings that the British government recruited him to make a different sort of deal: In exchange for British products, local rulers would end the slave trade. Rovner documented nine such treaties made by Isaacs.

Eventually, Isaacs became wealthy enough to purchase Matakong Island, where he modernized its port and trained a private army.

"Unfortunately, it seems the power went to his head," Rovner says. "He was corrupted. He wound up holding slaves, if not dealing in them."

"Domestic slavery was long practiced in Western Africa by various cultures, civilizations and groups," he adds. "It seems as if Isaacs kind of used [the local practice of] domestic slavery as an excuse for holding people in bondage."

In West Africa, Isaacs fathered two more children, a son and a daughter, with Mary Ann Lightbourn, a woman of mixed European and African heritage who had a family connection to slave trading. After their relationship ended, Isaacs entered a new relationship with another woman of European and African parentage, Hannah Hayes, whom Rovner suggests could have convinced him to become a slave trader himself.

"You could interpret it as a kind of Macbeth situation, with the woman as Lady Macbeth," Rovner says. "Above all, he was a very shrewd businessperson. He likely saw he could make money and wealth... dealing in human souls."

When one of Isaacs's daughters became a young adult, she traveled with him to Liverpool, where Isaacs's sister and brother-in-law were active in the local Jewish community. Isaacs's daughter married an Irish immigrant whom Rovner presumes was non-Jewish. Yet, Rovner notes, even up to Isaacs's death in 1872, he maintained ties to Judaism.

"His daughter and son-in-law transported his body... to the old Jewish cemetery in Canterbury," Rovner says. "He was buried next to his mother... He considered himself, at the base, Jewish. His Jewish identity clearly meant something to him — perhaps sentimentally."

**The Jew Who Would Be King: A True Story of Shipwreck, Survival, and Scandal in Victorian Africa** by Adam Laurence Rovner