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Creating Jewish Rap: From Parody to Syncretism¹

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In this article I want to look at what happens when Jews in the USA and UK, predominantly 'white' Ashkenazi Jews, attempt to create explicitly Jewish versions of rap². My interest in this topic dates back to 1992 when I happened to enter the nearly empty comedy tent at the UK's Glastonbury festival. There I witnessed a performance by someone calling himself 'MC Rebbe - the rapping Rabbi'. He dressed as an ultra-orthodox Jew, with a fake beard, excessively long sidelocks and a prayer shawl. He also wore Addidas trainers, dark glasses and a seder plate around his neck, in an apparent parody of the brief mid-80s craze for wearing VW badges started by the Beastie Boys (themselves Jewish). To a sparse and unenthusiastic crowd, MC Rebbe stomped around the stage rapping to a version of 'Hava Nagila' and shouting slogans such as 'eat some food' and 'have some gefilte fish'.

MC Rebbe was not the first or the last Jewish comedy rapper. In 1990, the American act 2 Live Jews released As Kosher as They Wanna Be (Hot Productions 1990) – a reference to 2 Live Crews's As Nasty as they Wanna Be. The 2-piece performed under the pseudonyms 'Moisha MC' and 'Easy Irving' - two retired Jews from Miami, performing songs such as 'Oy! It's So Humid'. They released 3 more albums in the 1990s before fading into obscurity. More recently, the comedy 'mockumentaries' Chutzpah This Is? (2001) and Jew Jube Lives (2004) also featured parody Jewish rappers. A number of Jewish musicians and comedians have produced parody Jewish raps for release on the internet including MC Eric B's 'Hip Hop Hanukah', Joel Moss and DR Dour's 'A Bissel Rap', 'Crank That Kosha Boy' and other comedy raps by Eric Schwartz and the LA comedians Deena and Kara's spoof of two ultra-orthodox Jewish girl rapping as 'Miriam and Shoshanah'³.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was published in Russian, see Kahn-Harris (2008). As this paper was going to press I became aware of a recently published article by Judah Cohen (2009) that covers some of the same material as this paper. Lack of time has meant that Cohen's arguments and insights – which appear to be different in emphasis rather than content to my own – could not be discussed in this paper.

² This article does not look at Jewish rap outside the USA and UK. The Israeli rap scenes deserves an article of its own. In addition, Russian-speaking Jewish rappers such as DJ Gurdzhy and Our Man From Odessa work in a very different kind of environment to Jewish rappers in the UK and US.

³ <http://www.nerdcoresongs.com/hiphophanukah.htm> (accessed 11 November 2008); www.supermasterpiece.com/features/joel/bisselrap.html (accessed 22 March 05); <http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendID=4506528> (accessed 11 November 2008); <http://www.jewlicious.com/2007/12/miriam-and-shoshana-rockin-out-%D7%97%D7%A0%D7%95%D7%9B%D7%94-west-coast-style/> (accessed 11 November 2008)

There is of course, nothing new about comedy rap. In the UK in the 1980s for example, Kenny Everett's 'Snot Rap', Mel Brooks's 'Hitler Rap', Roland Rat's 'Rat Rappin'' and Morris Minor and the Majors' 'Stutter Rap' were significant chart hits. Some rappers have put humor at the centre of their work, a recent example in the UK being the Welsh rappers Goldie Lookin' Chain. Even 'serious' rappers have recorded comedy songs such as Biz Markie's 'Pickin' Boogers'. More generally, much of rap consists of artful and humorous versions of everyday banter. Rap's use of samples gives endless possibilities for ironic quotation and play.

It is hardly surprising to find that some Jews have produced comedy rap. Outside rap, there is a rich tradition of Jewish comedy, with key Jewish figures in American comedy such as Jerry Seinfeld, Mel Brooks and dozens of others. Comedy has provided an important forum where Jews have worked through the complexities and tensions of diaspora Jewish life (Stratton 2000). Parodies, spoofs and 'shtick' are part of the process through which Jews – like many other groups - bond with each other. In Ashkenazi culture, pastiche and parody are enshrined in the carnivalesque tradition of the 'Purim shpiel' in which various aspects of Jewish and non-Jewish life are lampooned on the festival of Purim. For Jews, parody, including musical parody, has long provided a way of coping with the Jewish tension with modernity (Kligman, 2001). Indeed, parody played a crucial role in navigating the complexities of assimilation in America and elsewhere. As David Kaufman (2008) has argued:

Assimilation is mimicry that dares not speak its name. Parody is mimicry that not only admits what it is but also makes a virtue of doing it badly. In its fractured reflections on what it takes to be mainstream culture, classic Jewish-American parody patrolled the boundaries of identity and tested the rights and the rites of entry.

Kaufman further argues that as Jews in America became more comfortably assimilated, Jewish parody song became less culturally vital.

Rap is by no means the only form of music that Jews parody, for example the groups Schlock Rock and What I Like About Jew produces Jewish parodies in a range of musical styles. However, what is particularly interesting about Jewish parody rap is that it is highly revealing of the complicated relationship that English-speaking Jews have to rap and to African-Americans. For much of rap's 30 year plus history, parody rap has been the only kind of explicitly Jewish rap. That is not to say that Jews have not been 'seriously' involved in rap music and culture. For most of rap's history there have been key Jewish players in the business of rap such as producer and entrepreneur Rick Rubin. There have also been prominent Jewish performers such as the Beastie Boys and MC Serch of Third Bass (Cowan, 2003). But there has been little Jewish attempt to *signify* Jewishly in rap; little attempt to articulate Jewish themes in Jewish ways. Whilst Jews in rap have rarely hidden their Jewishness, their Jewishness has rarely been a central musical or lyrical resource. Rather, Jewishness is a vaguely recognized point of origin to which occasional namechecks may be given but whose influence and content are never spelt out. Tracing the Jewish presence in rap requires one to be something of a detective,

looking for the complex ways in which a performers Jewishness affects their work. For example, Jon Stratton reads the early work of the Beastie Boys as an ironic commentary on 'whiteness', a position that their Jewishness allowed them to adopt (Stratton 2008). MC Serch of Third Bass's negativity towards his Jewishness provided him with the motivation to seek closer relationships with radical black rappers (Mansbach 2007). Yet neither of these artists directly mentioned Jewishness in their work.

In short, Jews in rap have generally referred to their Jewishness coyly, humorously or not at all. The quasi-hidden presence of Jews in rap is similar to the situation of Jews in English-speaking popular music as a whole, in which Jewishness has rarely been spoken of openly. Jews have long been fascinated in and identified with black culture (Alexander 2001) and this has led many Jews towards a particular attachment to black music. Jews were crucial to the process through which African-American music provided the foundation for the global popular music industry in the post-war period. Initially Jews tended to be present in the industry as impresarios and writers rather than as performers (Billig 2000; Melnick 2001), but in the latter decades of the twentieth century Jewish artists became more prominent and played a crucial role in the development of punk for example (Beeber 2006). Whilst Jews have become more visible, explicit articulations of Jewish themes remain rare. Instead, the Jewish experience tends to have a ghostly, if often crucial, subterranean presence⁴.

The historical reluctance of Jews to speak openly in popular music stems in part from a fundamental discomfort. The deep legacy of anti-Semitism has marked the nature of masculinity amongst diaspora Jews. Jewish masculinity has often been associated with a kind of denuded, feminised masculinity and certainly not with 'cool' (Boyarin 1997; Gilman 1991). Further, Jews who immigrated to English-speaking countries at the turn of the twentieth century were encouraged by Jewish communal leaders and institutions to work hard, not be too visible and to fit into their host societies. Although the legacy of Jewish leftism shows that many Jews did not - initially at least - heed this advice, as the twentieth century wore on Jews became valued, comfortable and largely middle class members of society. Further, at least in America, the racial dynamics of society lead Jews to become classed as 'white' (Brodkin 1998).

By the late twentieth century, Jewish and black stereotypes had become essentialized in very different ways. Whereas Jews are associated with middle class values, whiteness, safeness, comfort, conformity and the suburbs; blacks are associated with poverty, deviance, the city, edginess and cool. Notwithstanding the fact that such stereotypes hide the diversity in both communities, there are real sociological and demographic differences between blacks and Jews. The idea of a natural affinity between blacks and Jews, once a mainstay of early-to-mid twentieth century cultural discourse, is no longer popular, although there have been attempts to resurrect it (Lerner and West 1995). There have also been tensions between the two communities over flashpoints such as community relations in Williamsburg, New York. Indeed, rap itself has been implicated in such tensions, as in the 1989 controversy over alleged anti-Semitic comments made by Professor Griff of Public Enemy.

⁴ See for example Stratton's (2005) discussion of the importance as a theme in early punk music.

The chasm separating essentialist versions of blackness and Jewishness has had consequences for Jews' ability to speak through rap. For Jews at least, rap is tied to the experience of a particular kind of black urban marginality from which they are largely estranged. Further, discourses of masculinity are so different for Jews than for blacks and the lack of cool so profound, that the contrast between the Jewish rapper and the black rapper threatens absurdity. It is unsurprising then, that the (non-Israeli) Jews that have attempted to openly articulate their Jewishness in rap have had to do a considerable amount of cultural work.

In the last decade or so though, the presence of Jews and Jewishness within rap (and indeed within other popular musics) has begun to change. More Jewish artists have committed to the cultural work of doing rap Jewishly. Attempts to do so though, occur under the substantial shadow cast by the historical discomfort and coyness of Jews in rap. The choices made by a previous generation of Jewish rappers – between silence and parody – still effect how a new generation of Jewish rappers have come to renegotiate what Jewish rap means and could mean.

Pastiche and parody

Clearly, MC Rebbe and 2 Live Jews were parodies of rap intended to poke fun both at Jews and rappers. Yet parody can have serious intents beyond providing amusing material for Jewish consumption. Such is the case with the Ju Tang Clan, three American Jews whose work appears on their website jutangclan.com (accessed March 2007). The band give themselves the pseudonyms 'Method Moyle', 'Busta Chaymes' and 'Ol' Dirty Rabbi'. Most of their music involves Jewish-themed rapping over popular rap tunes with song titles such as 'Wild West Bank' (based on Fresh Prince's 'Wild Wild West') and 'The Real Israeli' (based on Eminem's 'The Real Slim Shady'). Superficially, the Ju Tang Clan appear to be little different from 2 Live Jews. However, as 'Ol' Dirty Rabbi' maintains (personal communication 18th September 2004), there is a serious purpose behind what they do:

Our purpose, if it's even this focused, is to be so incredibly extreme that people not only have to laugh/be offended/whatever, but also so that they can re-examine their thoughts on the stereotypes we put forth.

The irreverence that rap engenders can therefore be used to reach out to Jews who are disillusioned with the Jewish community:

The Jews who have no one else speaking to them, the Jews who value their Jewish roots and heritage and culture but don't use that to fully define their life, only to augment it - those are the Jews we reach, and they love it.

This playfully critical attitude can be heard on Ju Tang Clan's 'In Da Klan', based on 50 Cent's 'In Da Club'. The song parodies the Jewish accusation of 'self-hating Jew', often

leveled at those who are not comfortable with the culture of the organized Jewish community. As the chorus puts it:

You can find me in the Klan
Pocketful of ham, like Woody, self-hating Jew is exactly what I am
I'm not into Billy Crystal, but I'm into Billy Graham
The jury's still out, maybe the Holocaust's a sham

Whilst clearly humorous, 'In Da Klan' plays with contemporary Jewish fears and stereotypes. The use of rap only intensifies the effect. The presumption that rap is somehow foreign to the Jewish experience accentuates the ironic lyrics. For the Ju-Tang Clan, the resolution to the 'problem' of how to produce Jewish rap is to revel in its simultaneously comic and frightening resonances. In this respect, their music is both comic and serious.

Another Jewish rapper, 50 Sheckel, also recorded a version of 'In Da Club' called 'In Da Schul'. Something of a statement of intent, the song is much less comic than the Ju-Tang Clan version:

You can find me in da shul, praying after school
Honey I got the chewitz⁵ if you're jumping in my pool
I'm just into making peace, I ain't into causing trub
So come give me a hug, if you're into getting love

This chorus alludes to the original 50 Cent song much more closely than does Ju-Tang Clan's. Further, In Da Schul's preoccupation with women in both the chorus and elsewhere in the song means that there is a commonality with the 50 Cent song's preoccupations.

50 Sheckel's work involves the creation of Judaic analogues of every rap and hip-hop symbol. This produces a situation in which Jewish rap becomes simply a Jewish *version* of rap, one that depends on finding a Jewish equivalent to every lyrical and para-lyrical trace of blackness – for 'bitches' read 'J.A.P.s'⁶, for 'Crystal' read 'Manishewitz' etc. Significantly, the music remains unchanged, anchoring the lyrics and the performance to a blueprint that is ultimately defined elsewhere. 50 Sheckel intended to *use* rap as a way of making Jewish practice relevant to young people. However, in 2004 he converted to Messianic Judaism (i.e. Christianity) and he now records dance music with occasional tinges of rap under the name Aviad Cohen⁷. What has not changed is his desire to use music as a tool to express a message.

Ju-Tang Clan have been highly critical of 50 Sheckel and before his conversion recorded a 'diss track' against him, 'Schindler's Fist (50 Sheckels of Shame)', containing the lines:

5 An allusion to Manishewitz wine, a brand commonly used by American Jews for ritual purposes.

6 Jewish American Princesses.

7 There is also another Messianic Jewish rapper called HaZakim.

Now listen, the difference between Ju-Tang and you is that:
We could rock original beats if we wanted to
[...]
You're a bad Jewish parody of Jewish parody rap

Ju-Tang Clan objected to 50 Sheckel on the grounds that a) he isn't (in their eyes) a good rapper b) he has managed to get an enormous amount of publicity for it and c) that he takes himself seriously (personal communication 18th September 2004). There is a bizarre sense of authenticity underlying Ju-Tang Clan's critique. That is that Jewish parody rap should foreground play, humor and verbal dexterity rather than a message (although they themselves do admit that they also have serious aims). Ju-Tang Clan has pointed out the fundamental difficulty in producing pastiches to a serious purpose. Inevitably, as in 50 Sheckel's case, the use of rap music may seem little more than an educational vehicle. One might argue that there is more respect shown for rap as a genre in Ju-Tang Clan's wordplay and irony than there is in 50 Sheckel's rigid reworkings of rap stylistics for Jewish purposes.

Whatever the differences between them might be, both 50 Sheckel and Ju-Tang Clan reinforce the fundamentally non-Jewish image of rap. In targeting their music primarily for Jewish consumption, in not musically innovating and in concentrating on reworking rap lyrics and stylistics rather than developing alternatives to them, the novelty of Jewish rap is foregrounded. Ironically, the more that Jewishness is mentioned, the more jarring the Jewishness of rap can appear to be. While they may avoid the kinds of ridicule that 2 Live Jews and earlier Jewish parody rappers engaged in, there is still some discomfort in the idea of Jewish rap.

The same problem arises in the work of Jewish rappers who are less obviously involved in creating parodies and pastiches. In 2003, the London-based rapper Antithesis self-released an EP entitled The Israel Question, in order to raise funds for Zionist causes. The four songs on the EP deal exclusively with Antithesis's fervor for Israel and Zionism, together with his expressions of sadness at the current conflict. The lyrics adhere rigidly to Zionist orthodoxy:

An exiled people, looking for a home
For hundreds of years, nothing we could do but hope
[...]
Finally in '48 we got our redeeming
[...]
Believe that it's true, we just want peace
[From 'Just Peace']

The songs on the EP feature music that is little more than beats and some sample-based coloring. The songs are rapped slowly, with lyrics that are simple to follow and lack any wordplay or hip-hop argot – in fact there is little to distinguish them from any other kind of song lyric. The desire to communicate the message contained in the lyrics is the

central goal of Antithesis's work. The Israel Question and its follow-up United Kingdom of Racism (2007) use rap as an educative tool within Jewish communal contexts, but do not attempt to contribute to rap as an artistic medium. In retaining this distance to rap, Antithesis's work is little different from pastiche.

In a more subtle and complicated way, the same is true in the case of the American orthodox Jewish rapper Eitan G whose first self-released album South Side of the Synagogue appeared in 2000⁸. Eitan G's work is principally targeted towards Jewish youth. He tours extensively within a circuit of Jewish community centres, conferences and summer camps, often with the group Shlock Rock, who specialize in mildly humorous covers of famous rock songs with a Jewish educational message⁹. Although Eitan G does not himself do cover versions, the educational message is at the heart of what he does. In an interview with the Baltimore Jewish Times, reprinted on his website (jewishrapper.com accessed March 2007), he explains what inspired him to perform Jewish rap:

You would think it was wonderful that kids could listen to all kinds of music in many genres, but when our Jewish kids were listening to hip-hop, I saw that they were embracing the lifestyle of the 'characters' that those rappers were playing and I felt there was a void. I wanted to show another lifestyle, that of a Jew. I wanted to help open a door between the 2 worlds, something that the Jews can embrace as their own and relate to, which reflects their own values and views.

Eitan G's motivation is strikingly similar to that of performers in Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) (Howard and Streck 1996). As with CCM, the aim of Eitan G's Jewish rap is to turn a problematically alien and dangerous form to a better end.

The lyrics on The South Side of the Synagogue are largely odes to the joys of Jewish observance, ritual and identity as with the song 'Making the Motzee' which reflects on the joys of Shabbat:

... We start kickin' the kiddush on the grape wine
And I know pretty soon everything will be fine

The song concludes with an exhortation to be more observant:

This may be a custom that the grandpa's do
But this can be a mitzvah for all of you

The use of rap as an educational medium is not unique to Eitan G. The Bible Raps Project (<http://www.bibleraps.com/> accessed 11 November 2008) uses rap as a way of engaging young Jews with Jewish texts. Another educational rap group, Dr J\$ and the OJG's

⁸ His second self-released album Foundation appeared at the end of 2008.

⁹ In 2005 Shlock Rock and Eitan G self-released J Rap City, containing tracks and collaborations by both artists.

produced an album Hip-hop Shabbat (OJG Productions 2004) that consists of an educational Sabbath evening service using rap and hip-hop beats.

The rappers discussed in this section have all attempted to use rap as a way of exploring Jewish themes. Even if their vehicle is parody and pastiche, they are not simply content to point to the 'strangeness' of Jewish rap, but to use rap to Jewish ends. They do not contribute to the development of rap as a set of interrelated institutional, musical and discursive practices, but instead draw on it for their own purposes. They add Jewish lyrical concerns to what is assumed to be an untouchably African-American form. Either they do not challenge what are implicitly considered the African-American semiotics of rap or they treat it ironically. By pastiching rap, removing it from its cultural context and either 'cleaning' up its more problematic connotations or treating them ironically, the 'problem' of Jewish rap is 'solved'.

Parody and pastiche Jewish rap may solve the problem of rap for some Jewish performers, but that does not mean that it is not problematic in other respects. An issue that has hung over Jewish appropriations of black music since the early twentieth century is the problem of 'blackface'. In the early twentieth century, Jews featured prominently in minstrel performances, blacked up to look like African-Americans, Al Jolson being the most famous example. Michael Rogin (1996) has shown that blackface was be a more complicated phenomenon than may be apparent, one that expressed the complicated position Jews found themselves in early-twentieth century America. However, there was a fundamental disparity in the form as the Jewish ability to *use* blackness to articulate their concerns was not matched by a similar African-American ability to interrogate 'white' culture. There is also no doubting blackface's offensiveness to African-Americans themselves.

Even if African-American rap performers may have a place at the heart of the global entertainment industry, many African-Americans are still significantly materially disadvantaged. Rap remains a central part of the identities of many members of a frequently oppressed group. To use rap is still, at some level, to use African-Americans. Parody rap is not, therefore, innocent. However sophisticated parody may be, it cannot be separated from the material contexts and power relations within which the parody takes place. There is a very thin line between using rap to treat Jewishness in a light-hearted way and (intentionally or unintentionally) parodying black culture. This is not to say that Jews cannot or should not rap. Rather, Jewish rap that is founded on a self-conscious sense of Jewish rap's 'unnaturalness' may well essentialize blackness in problematic ways. Furthermore, Jewish parody rap also essentializes Jews and risks making Jewishness itself into a novelty. Jewish parody rap therefore has its critics even within the Jewish community (e.g. Juez and Roth 2003).

Syncretism

There are those who have attempted to forge a closer relationship between Jewishness and rap. These artists have shown that with some effort it is possible to forge forms of Jewish rap that are 'syncretic' (Taylor 1997) in that Jewish and other musical sources are

blended. Whereas Jewish parodies and pastiches of rap are predicated on a distance from it, Jewish syncretic rap is that which seeks to mix Jewish and rap traditions in a more complex fashion.

In 2003, the British Klezmer violinist Sophie Solomon and the Canadian DJ Socalled, released the album Hip-Hop Khasene (Piranha). Both musicians are well known in the international Klezmer scene. Socalled has released other solo albums mixing hip-hop beats and Jewish musical sources. Hip-Hop Khasene features significant contributions from other Klezmer luminaries such as David Krakauer. 'Khasene' means wedding in Yiddish and the wedding was traditionally an occasion in the old Jewish communities of Eastern Europe in which Klezmer music featured prominently. On Hip-hop Khasene, the featured wedding is between Jewish music and hip-hop: 'the wedding of the fiddle and the microphone' as the song 'Badd-khones' puts it.

In truth, only a minority of tracks on the album feature rapping or anything that resembles hip-hop. The majority consist of arrangements of traditional (often instrumental) wedding songs peppered with samples and breakbeats. However, two of the tracks feature the vocalist Michael Alpert as 'Badkhn'. The Badkhn acted as part master of ceremonies part jester at the Eastern European Jewish wedding. Hip-hop Khasene makes a parallel between the art of the Badkhn and that of the MC. Michael Alpert is expert enough at Yiddish to be able to freestyle in the language. On the track 'Kale Bazetsn', Alpert (billed on the lyric sheet as 'The Real Slim Litvak') gives a virtuoso display of Yiddish badkhones, introducing the band and managing to find fitting translations to such lines as:

...And on beats, Akai S20 and on the keys:
Mr Joshua so-called Socalled, the mike-mester

[Un bay di taktn, Khay-Akai-Es-Tsvantntsik, un kletkes:
Reb Yeshue Azey-Gerufn So-Called, der bal-mikrofon]

Alpert's badkhones is followed by Socalled delivering an ironic rap about the relevance or otherwise of weddings in contemporary society:

Sure it's a fucked-up institution, economic solution to socialized absolution
[...]
But folks are sentimental and they'll always need their ritual...

The vocals and lyrics on 'Kale Bazetsn' offer a form of syncretic Jewish rap in which *both* lyrical traditions are drawn on and played with. However, in the rest of the album it is quite clear that the primary musical tradition to be explored is Klezmer, in its many variants. Hip-Hop Khasene is more of a Jewish music recording that features rap and hip-hop, than it is a Jewish rap album. Abigail Wood (2007) has argued that the album developed out of a desire to extend the boundaries of 'Yiddishland', that space in which the Yiddish culture of the pre-war period is rediscovered at the end of the twentieth century and beyond¹⁰. Socalled's solo albums The So Called Seder: A Hip Hop Haggadah

¹⁰ There is also a German-Jewish rapper, Zionlight, who raps in Yiddish.

(2005) and Ghettoblaster (2007) are much more engaged in the creation of a syncretic Jewish version of hip-hop than they are klezmer albums. Their dense mix of beats and samples achieve a fusion that is more easily classed as hip-hop than Hip-hop Khasene.

A similar musical experiment occurs in a self-released eponymous EP by the British group Emunah (2003). Emunah's music is a mixture of dance music, rap, world and Jewish musics. The band could not be exclusively cast as a rap act, but rap does provide the principle vocal style. In this way, Emunah's music is syncretic in two senses – as an amalgam of musical styles, of which rap is but one and as location for various ethnic musics of which Jewish music is one. Jewish themes are less prominent lyrically (although there is a Hebrew verse on the track 'Sweetness') than they are musically. The track 'Lemaan Achai' features an arrangement of a track by the Neo-Hassidic Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, himself an important pioneer of a syncretic form of worship that mixed sixties acoustic folk music with hassidic melodic styles. For Emunah then, rap provides one of a panoply of sources – Jewish and non-Jewish – through which their own music is constructed. In not defining their music as rap, both Solomon and SoCalled and Emunah are able to avoid many of the issues inherent in the creation of Jewish rap. The use of rap is simply part of a more general musical experimentalism.

A crop of religious Jewish rappers including Kosha Dillz, Y-Love, Jew Da Maccabi, Ta Shma and Itzik Nissim have also begun to produce religious Jewish rap that is more complex than the work of Eitan G. Like the successful orthodox Jewish reggae performer Matisyahu, such artists see music as more than just a tool for outreach, but also a medium that can be a source of spiritual fulfillment in its own terms. They also have a syncretic element to their music, interspersing their lyrics with Hebrew verses and snatches of Jewish liturgical music.

Y-Love's work is particularly striking as he is an African-American convert to Hassidic Judaism. His blackness does not make him 'naturally' a rapper of course, but it does free his music from the shadow of constructions of Jewish rap as somehow unnatural. Y-Love began rapping in yeshiva as a way of learning Talmud. He includes Aramaic, Hebrew and Yiddish in his raps, although English is the primary language. Unusually for a Hassidic Jew, he is committed to progressive politics and his work is not simply concerned with Jewish religious issues. On the title track on his 2008 album This Is Babylon, he plays with the notion of America as Babylon, tying in a critique of American politics with a diasporic Talmudic identity:

The beast takes many forms
One long night with no signs of dawn
It's been years since Reconstruction and it's still built wrong
That's why I rhyme in Aramaic, this is Babylon!

The connotations of Babylon with enslavement and exile in Rastafari and African-American culture create a connection between Y-Love's black and Jewish identities. Y-Love's syncretic rap has extended to recording an acapella album called Count It (2007) together with the Jewish beatboxer Yuri Lane, for use during the Omer period when

instrumental music is traditionally forbidden. Y-Love's work is multi-layered, with rap provides the mechanism to connect a range of identities and practices.

The US artists Hip-Hop Hoodios have pioneered another kind of syncretic musical identity on their albums Raza Hoodia (2002) and Agua Pa' LA Gente (2005). The band members are bilingual Jews from Hispanic and American backgrounds and some have musical histories in the Latin American music industry. The added resource of Hispanic identity facilitates the development of Jewish rap, as Hispanic-American rap – whether Spanish-speaking or not – has a history that dates back to the very beginnings of rap. The ability to be part of this other history helps to alleviate some of the problematic connotations of Jewish rap. Furthermore, the band freely moves between English, Spanish and occasionally Yiddish and Hebrew. This is true musically as well as lyrically, where Latin American sources are drawn on as well as rock, rap and Jewish music.

Hip Hoodios's syncretic identity is evident on the song 'Ocho Candelikas', a version of a popular Balkan Ladino song celebrating the eight nights of Chanukah. The Hip-Hop Hoodios version dispenses with many of the lyrics and adds a few of their own and turns it into a raucous semi-sung, semi-rapped version, very different to the original. The same is true with their version of the popular Hebrew standard 'Hava Nagila', which dispenses entirely with the lyrics and gives the original tune a Latin flavor. The lyrics present a playful celebration of what it is to be Jewish, mixed with some humorously nonsensical wordplay:

I'm a Jew for thugs
A Jew for hugs
A Jew for lobster
A Jew for drugs

I'm a Jew for masturbation
Five weeks vacation
A Jew for NPR, Salon and the Nation

Pass on Reagan
Gimme Donald Fagen
Manish Tanah
Menachem Begin

Like the Ju-Tang Clan, Hip-Hop Hoodios play with transgressive and sometimes racist symbols of Jewishness as on the songs 'Kike on the Mike' and 'Dicks and Noses'. The latter song plays with an old-fashioned anti-Semitic stereotype of Jews' bodies and transforms them into an ironic form of the sexual bragging often found on rap songs:

You like our dicks
And you like our noses
Ya see a Jewish guy and you forget where your clothes is

The difference between Hip-Hop Hoodios and Ju-Tang Clan is the former band's willingness to experiment musically with both Jewish and non-Jewish sources. Whilst there is still a sense of novelty in the bands' lyrics, the use of Jewish musical sources and Jewish languages adds some genuinely new elements to rap music. The complicated ethnicity of the band also decentres their Jewishness enough so that the relationship between Jewishness and rap is more complexly drawn. This complexity also facilitates the band's interacting in non-Jewish music scenes. In 2007 the band released an EP Viva la Guantanamo (Nacional Records) protesting against the Guantanamo Bay prison with profits going to Amnesty International. The song featured a range of guest musicians, including members of the Latino rap group Delinquent Habits.

A few other Jewish artists have managed to articulate Jewish concerns at the heart of the hip-hop industry. One example is Blood of Abraham, a two-piece rap group that was active in Los Angeles in the early 1990s. Both members are Jewish, with one, Benyad originally from Israel. The band was originally mentored by Eazy-E of the well-known group NWA, who helped get them signed to Ruthless Records, who released their debut album Future Profits in 1993. The album featured the collaboration with Eazy-E 'Niggaz and Jewz (Some Say Kikes)' which attacked black-Jewish racism (in both directions), pleading for a closer Jewish-black relationship. In 2007 another American Jewish rapper E-Shy produced a similar track 'Blacks And Jews', a collaboration with Daddy-O of Stetsasonic.

Probably the best-known example of black-Jewish collaboration in rap can be found in the work of the New York based Remedy, a close associate of the Wu-Tang Clan. Remedy has mentioned his Jewishness frequently in his two solo albums. His song 'Never Again', a commemoration of the Holocaust featuring samples of Jewish prayer, appeared on the 1998 Wu-Tang Clan album The Swarm Vol 1 (Priority)¹¹. In his 2003 solo album Code Red (Musicrama), Remedy recorded 'A Muslim and a Jew', a collaboration with RZA of the Wu-Tang Clan. The song is a condemnation of the violence in Israel/Palestine and contains samples from Jewish musicians. The song contains the line (spoken by RZA):

Combine the Torah, Qu'ran, with the Gospel
With your mind open and eyes shut

Such examples of Jewish rappers dealing with Jewish themes and working at the heart of the rap scene, together with others such as Jewish Gangsterz, provide tentative signs then that a deeper encounter between Jews and rap may be developing. The New York based company, JDub, has tried to deepen these encounters with their 'Slivovitz and Soul' evenings featuring Jewish and African-American rappers and musicians. New York has also been the location for a number of 'Hip-Hop Sulha' performances that bring together Israeli and Palestinian rappers. In the UK, a Jewish-Muslim rap group called Lines of Faith (which includes the rapper from Emunah) has performed at multicultural arts festivals. The UK organisation Psychosemitic has organised events featuring Jewish and

¹¹ Other Jewish rappers that have added a song about the Holocaust to their repertoires include Chad Love, with the song 'GhettoCaust' and the UK's The Brotherhood with 'Descendants of the Holocaust'.

Muslim rappers, poets and graffiti artists. Israeli rapper Subliminal and others from his Tact label have toured in America and collaborated with African-American rappers. Rap can therefore provide a potent means of interrogating and sometimes transcending complex cultural differences.

Conclusion: From Parody to Syncretism?

Over the past decade or so, the number of openly Jewish rap acts in the US and the UK has mushroomed. In 2004 the Jewish music company Craig n' Co released the compilation Celebrate Hip-Hop, featuring a number of artists mentioned in this paper. The Jewish and non-Jewish press has also started to talk about Jewish rap (e.g. Rakoff 2003; Khazzoom 2004) and artists such as Y-Love and Socalled have gained considerable critical acclaim. We cannot (yet) talk about Jewish rap as a coherent genre, but it is clear that the various artists discussed in this paper have demonstrated that it is possible to speak openly about Jewish issues in rap, that it is possible to do rap in explicitly Jewish ways, that Jewish rap need not be a joke and that the Jewish presence in rap need not be a covert one.

Developments in Jewish rap can be tied into developments in contemporary Jewish culture more generally. Since the early 1990s Jewish cultural production has developed in ways that are less covert than previously, that play with both Jewish and non-Jewish sources, that draw in a diverse range of (often young) 'hipster' Jews and that are 'cooler' than Jewishness has ever been before (Cohen and Kelman 2005; Kleeblatt 1996; Rakoff 2003; Schorsch 2000). These developments in Jewish culture appear to suggest that diaspora Jewish communities in the English-speaking world are less concerned with trying to assimilate and are instead embracing multicultural celebrations of hybrid minority identity.

Against this background it would be tempting to conclude that Jewish parody rap is an obsolete form reflecting the concerns and insecurities of an earlier era, but of course Jewish parody rap is still being produced today. Further, we cannot automatically conclude that the new forms of Jewish syncretic rap represent a move towards the embracing of new Jewish identities – as we have seen, syncretic Jewish rap can be insular in using of rap as a way of adding new sounds to rejuvenate Jewish music. Jewish rap has developed to the point where it articulates a diverse range of Jewish identities, some of which pioneer new ways of being and doing Jewishness and others of which reflect well-worn anxieties. What the developments in Jewish rap in the last few years demonstrate most strikingly is the desire to engage in rap in an openly Jewish way. The days have passed in which the only ways to create Jewish rap were to articulate Jewishness in covert ways or to be overt and treat it as a joke. The field of Jewish rap is now one that is full of possibilities.

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