
Hip Hop B'ivrit? That's Amazing!¹

Teddy Dov Fischer

Critics of Eliezer Ben-Yehudah, who resurrected Hebrew in Israel, complained that he was turning the holy language of prayer and Bible into a common street language. In some ways, they were right. Chaim Nachman Bialik, a great Hebrew lyricist, claimed, “We will be a normal state only when we have the first Hebrew prostitute, the first Hebrew thief, and the first Hebrew policeman”. Bialik, however forgot to add one thing to the list: Hebrew hip-hop. Thanks to Israeli rap, Hebrew has become more “street” than Ben-Yehudah’s critics could ever have imagined.

It is common knowledge that the Beastie Boys are Jewish, but few know of the other significant Jewish contributions to the rap industry. Other than Matisyahu, one would be hard pressed to find any mainstream Jewish rappers. Diaspora Jewry’s main source of pride, in terms of modern rap, lies in the etymology of the word “ghetto”.

But in Israel, there is an altogether different story. Israeli rap has exploded in the last few years, and the rappers are not afraid to showcase their Judaism. They emphatically rap in Hebrew, quote Jewish texts, and comment on the political and social issues in Israel. It may surprise some that rap exists in the language of the Bible; many people in Israel said that it would never be done. Poking fun at one of these detractors, Israeli rap superstar Subliminal once joked, “Hebrew? You can’t write hip-hop in Hebrew. No matter what you write and how you sing it, it’s going to sound like a bubblegum commercial”.² And then, he himself proceeded to set the Israeli rap movement into motion.

Just as every American cultural fad has a lag-time before it reaches the

Holy Land, hip-hop took about ten years to make it to Israel. Shabak Samech was the first significant group to rap in Hebrew, releasing their first album in 1995. Like the The Roots, Shabak Samech played its own instruments and rapped over the beats. The band mostly rapped about parties, girls, and getting high. Occasionally they would mix in a love song or a quote from Jewish texts. Though Shabak Samech was successful, its music was merely a blip on the radar. In the 1990s, the climate in Israel was not ripe for rap music; these were the “Oslo years,” a time of relative calm and of relatively bad music.

With the outbreak of the Intifadah in 2000 came an outpouring of frustration, anger, and helplessness from the Israeli public; sentiments which rap thrives upon. The hip-hop genre in America only reached mainstream audiences after Grandmaster Flash introduced rap as a form of political dissent in 1982. As the first to rap about poverty, inner city living conditions, violence, desperation, racism, and the ineptitude of the government he gave rap a *modus operendi*.

Not long after the bombs of the Intifada began exploding, the rap scene also began to explode. Violence, politics, and disillusionment became subjects for vehement flows. One Israeli rapper confirmed this sentiment, “I’d prefer peace and welfare, over terror, even if it means I would have to sit at home and think about what to write about.”³ The first few years of Israeli rap were focused solely on the violence of the Intifadah. If it ended, there would have been nothing left to write about. Rap music in Israel only became successful when the conditions for hip-hop culture were met—a population angry about the world it lives in and sick of being powerless to change it.

Kobe Shimoni, better known by his stage name, Subliminal, was the first popular Israel rapper. Subliminal spent years performing, writing, and even releasing an underground mixtape, appropriately titled *Israelis Are Fed Up*, before he achieved this popularity. The recording has a distinctly raw and unfinished quality to it. The title and the contents prove that rap and disillusionment are interconnected. To vent is to rap and to rap is to vent.

But Subliminal did not have much to vent about until the release of his next album.

In the year 2000, right at the beginning of the Intifadah, Subliminal released the genre-breaking album, *The Light from Zion*. Frustrated by the lack of interest expressed by record companies to produce his music, Subliminal created his own. He called his new record company the Tel Aviv City Team, or TACT, which has become a proverbial family of Israeli and Jewish rap artists.

The disk opens with the sounds of rain. Subliminal starts speaking as the rain turns into a thunderstorm. He describes the battle that he has chosen to fight, “To pull Israel up out of the lyrical silence and the artistic desolation and to put the holy land, and Tel Aviv, on the map.” Subliminal also names his enemies, “The enemies from within, political groups, bureaucrats, and people in positions of power that are investing all of their might to maintain the walls that enclose us.” He admits that the battle will be tough, but that he and those around him are ready to fight and “return the light to Zion.”⁴

The idea of light shining from Zion is not a new one. There are Biblical sources that link Zion, another name for Jerusalem, with light. In the prophetic text Isaiah, the prophet says, “Because Torah radiates outward from Zion and the word of God from Jerusalem.”⁵ Modern Jewish thinkers have written about the importance of making Jerusalem, Zion, and Israel the cultural center of the world. Ahad Haam, a prominent Zionist thinker, introduced the idea of cultural Zionism at the end of the nineteenth century. He believed that by making the land of Israel the cultural center of the world the lot of the Jewish people would improve. Like Subliminal, Ahad Haam advocated creating a unique Israeli culture that would positively affect those outside of Israel, or, in other words, to put Israel on the map.

In the second song on the album Subliminal jumps right into his battle. Playing on the term “old school” and sampling a line from English rap (“From the old school to the school of hard knocks”), Subliminal goes into a four and a half minute attack on the Israeli school system. His diatribe covers everything

– lack of respect for teachers, overcrowded classrooms, and dearth of academic leadership. Like Grandmaster Flash before him, Subliminal uses rap to affect change by raising awareness and appealing to the public.

Subliminal does not address the Intifadah and politics until the fifth song on *The Light from Zion*. In the verses of the song “I Live From Day to Day,” Subliminal raps about the violence, the frustration, and the hopelessness in Israel. But in the chorus, he spits about timelessness,

I live from day to day
I don't get anywhere
One day ends and the next day comes
And nothing changes
The clock doesn't stop
Soon it will be tomorrow
And the same tune comes around again
I have no other country⁶

He feels that the violence in Israel is beyond anyone's control. Subliminal claims that even the government has relinquished its control over the situation (“The state wavers like a cigar in Arafat's mouth”).⁷ He feels that there is nothing to do, no difference from one day to the next, no calm and no peace. The passage of time usually brings change, but in the state that Israel is in, he feels that even time will not bring change. Subliminal sees concrete examples of this failure all around him. He raps about “every brother that comes back wrapped in ... the flag of the state.”⁸ Yet Subliminal ends the chorus with a sparkling gem of hope. The last line of the chorus is taken from an older Zionist song that proclaims love for Israel even when the political situation is desperate. By ending the chorus with “I have no other country,” Subliminal is proclaiming his hope for the future despite the violence of the Intifadah.

The rest of Subliminal's first album continues in this theme, with a liberal sprinkling of the party songs, self-promotion, and (Israeli) cultural

references that come along with the genre. On Subliminal's next disk, *The Light and the Shadow* was a huge hit; the album continues all the themes from his first, but the music sounds smoother, and more professional. The album was released two years into the Intifadah and reflects the atmosphere in Israel. It has the feel of a volcano about to erupt.

The album is full of the bleak imagery of the situation, *hamatsav*, but also is sprinkled with hope for the nation. Despite advocating the use of military strength in dealing with Israel's enemies, Subliminal also spits lyrics like "two nations, hand in hand with uplifted heads, *shalom salaam* peace to everyone in the world."⁹ At some points on the disk Subliminal sounds overly negative ("Peace was kidnapped, was murdered, doesn't live here anymore") but in the end he always maintains hope. One of the most poignant verses comes in the song "My Country." In a style similar to "I Live From Day to Day," the verses bemoan the situation in Israel but the chorus affirms hope. The chorus and title are in Arabic and are taken from a song enumerating the connection between a people and a land. The verses are feral:

Mother, look at me now
I have laid down my weapon
And taken up the microphone
I dream of peace
But get 'see-you-later'
Fuck miracles and wondrous events
Everything is just illusions
I live in pain
With a heart full of danger
So much trouble in such a small state!¹⁰

They deal with the anger, pain, and frustration of the Intifadah by creating Hebrew rap; they vent their anger, turning it into hope.

The Light and the Shadow established Subliminal as a major Israeli musical figure. After the album's success, the artist started to show up in

TV commercials in Israel, selling albums in the US, and began merchandising (Subliminal lunch boxes, Subliminal school supplies). On his next album, Subliminal successfully showcased other members of TACT to help them establish careers of their own. He jump-started the careers of a number of artists who then signed on to his label, TACT Records. Today, TACT Records is the biggest rap label in Israel.

Subliminal continues to be the king of Israeli rap, calling himself the “architect of Israeli hip-hop.” Many artists witnessed his rise to popularity and came up on his coattails. It is clear that Subliminal achieved his goals. He used rap, Hebrew, and his Israel background to bring Israel recognition, and to contribute to global culture.

Not surprisingly, these goals are similar to those laid out by Ahad Haam. Though he was not a strong advocate for a Jewish political state, Ahad Haam wanted to create a Jewish cultural center in Palestine. He dreamt of a rebirth of Jewish culture, based in history while integrating the traditions of the modern world. According to his view, Israel should be like the hub of a wheel with cultural spokes reaching out to Jews and non-Jews all around the world. Ahad Haam did not live to see his goals fulfilled, though certain Israeli institutions, like Betzlalel Art Institute and the University of Judaism, echo his philosophies.

In less than ten years, Subliminal has nearly realized all of Ahad Haam’s goals. His last two albums featured moderately well known American rappers such as Joe Budden, Wyclef Jean, and members of the Wu Tang clan. He regularly brings American rappers, like the Black Eyed Peas, to Israel to perform. Subliminal was the first to incorporate Zionist messages into his music, and the first to use the anger of the Intifadah in his music. He molded Israeli rap, in all of its uniqueness, by rapping in multiple languages, using Middle Eastern beats and instruments, sampling American music, referencing Jewish texts, and critiquing, but remaining loyal to, Israel. He even starred in his own line of Israeli pudding commercials. If being in a Milki commercial doesn’t mean

success, what does?

Soon after Subliminal's success, dozens of underground rappers attempted to recreate his formula. While some blindly imitated him, others picked up where he began and created something new and inspired. Keleh Shesh formed in 1998, but only released its first successful album in 2004 at the height of Subliminal's popularity and at the peak of the Intifadah. One of the members of Keleh Shesh is the brother of Subliminal's main performing partner, The Shadow, and this relationship was certainly helpful to Keleh Shesh's image initially. The group's first album is quintessential Intifadah Israeli rap. It too starts out with just the rappers' voices. "Everyone has something to say. If you have something to say, say it to the beat."¹¹

And when Keleh Shesh raps to the beat, its members criticize just about everything in Israel. For 80 minutes straight, they take turns spitting about the violence in the streets, how Israeli society has lost its morals, the ineptitude of politicians, and just about everything else. Their lyrics are sharp, witty and poignantly critical. The lyrics to "Time Bomb" show this frustration,

I am dying slowly in Israel
and the ministers are relaxing in Knesset
Everyone is a zombie, walking dead
I don't want to live among the dead, but rather die living.
Peace sells, but who exactly is buying?
One more day and it will be sold on burnt CDs in the stores
I made an appointment with peace because it moves me,
I've been waiting and waiting,
Apparently it stood me up
Good, so they say the sky is the limit
and that there is no limit to the imagination
but I live in a place that's enclosed by limits,
like a rope around the neck.
Symbols are falling like stars, Ilan Ramon
lives at the diagonal between disaster and disaster.

This culture has lost its substance,
fraud has become a word that you can rhyme with government.
The flowers in the fields have become concrete tombstones¹²

Much is lost in the translation, but it is clear how angry they are – at times it seems that they are frothing at the mouth. Even putting aside the violence of the Intifadah, Keleh Shesh has much to rap about. Ilan Ramon, who was the first Israeli astronaut and was a source of national pride during the long and hard Intifadah, died in the Columbia explosion. Keleh Shesh also raps about stolen music rights, the inactivity of politicians and even Diaspora Jewry (“Fuck donating money – you’d be donating more if you donated love”¹³). The name of the song and the chorus imply that time is running out. A solution must be found to these problems quickly, or else Israeli society will implode.

Throughout the disk, the major theme that is repeated over and over again is timelessness. All time, past, present, and future, melding into one. “How can you live the same thing, when you live in a place where everything looks like yesterday and the past looks like tomorrow.”¹⁴ What they describe is similar to what Subliminal rapped about a few years earlier, a world where everything is stagnant, where the future looks bleak and where every day is the same. As a listener, this seeming hopelessness is disturbing. The modern state of Israel was built on hope (and hard labor, sweat, and blood). The national anthem itself is called “The Hope”. It is difficult to listen to Keleh Shesh rapping that there is “no light at the end of the tunnel”¹⁵ or that “I have no reason to believe in hope anymore.”¹⁶

Despite Keleh Shesh’s complaints, the members remain avid Zionists. The hopelessness in Keleh Shesh’s music is a reflection of what they see around them, but they themselves remain optimistic. Another repeated theme on the disk is that the future is in “our hands”. Keleh Shesh believes that humanity has an amazing capability to change the future. This ability to affect the future is “The Hope” that Zionism is based on. Keleh Shesh’s Zionist message is: if we act, we can affect change.

In the summer of 2005, Israel unilaterally disengaged from the Gaza Strip, evacuating all Israeli settlers and soldiers. That summer, one of Keleh Shesh's songs, "It was my Home," became the song of the anti-disengagement movement. The song, which is about leaving home behind, as the settlers did, had a large impact on the consciousness of Israeli society. Though Keleh Shesh's lyrics lean to the political right, not all Israeli hip-hop raps to the same political beat.

If Subliminal and Keleh Shesh are the kings of the right, Hadag Nachash is the king of the left. The seven Jerusalemite members of Hadag Nachash, like Shabak Samech before them, play their own instruments and create their own beats. It is a little misleading to call them a rap group, as their music is an eclectic mix of rock, punk, ska, and dance styles with the lead singer rapping over the beats. Though they released many albums earlier, their big successes came only after Subliminal's.

While the violence in Israel and the Intifadah is one of Hadag Nachash's concerns, its lyrics focus more on social issues in Israel, like poverty, the education system, the polarization of Israel society and minority rights. As the violence has slowed down in Israel, many rappers have followed suit and begun to focus on social issues, as Subliminal did from day one. In one Hadag Nachash song, "Numbers," the lead singer counts everything in Israel—how many times he has been too close to a bomb when it has gone off, the difference between a man and woman's salary, unemployment rates, etc. The song's concern is clearly the economy, "The CEO of Bank Hapoalim brings home 29,816 shekels a day. Jeez! Divide that up by two, by five, by ten, and its still a very nice monthly salary."¹⁷ Another well-known song, "The Sticker Song", is a rhyming list of all the bumper stickers that can be found in Israel. By contrasting bumper stickers, Hadag Nachash illustrates the polarization of Israeli society.

Where Subliminal seems to advocate violence and Jewish strength, Hadag Nachash's lyrics stress justice, equality, negotiation, and compromise. At times, Hadag Nachash's criticisms of Israel are so sharp that they feel anti-

Zionist. One song, “Gabbie and Debbie,” is especially harsh. Hadag Nachash goes on an imaginary journey, with the old Israeli educational TV characters Gabbie and Debbie, to important moments in Zionist history. They come upon Theodore Herzl standing, as he does in his famous portrait, looking out over his hotel banister in Basle, Switzerland. When they see him, they are amazed at how calm and composed he looks at a time when the state is “going up in flames.”¹⁸ “I looked him in the eyes from close up. What a hoot! His irises were dilated and the whites of his eyes were pretty red! Psst, I whispered, looks like he’s stoned”. The main character becomes so infuriated with the visionary of the state that he verbally attacks him, holding nothing back. He tells Herzl about

all the details of the awful state of the nation, I told him about the car accidents, I told him about the strike of the disabled, I told him about the quarter million unemployed, and I told him about the corrupt politicians.

At the end of the verse, Herzl takes out some acid, puts it on the character’s tongue, and says “If you take it, it is no dream”, a play on Herzl’s famous quote, “If you will it, it is no dream.” The song then segues into the chorus, “Hadag Nachash makes Zionist hip-hop.” The song seems to be a vicious assault on Zionism and its founding father, yet they claim that their music is Zionist. Either the song is incredibly ironic, or Hadag Nachash feels that by pointing out the problems in Israel, it is paving the way to improve the future of the state.

Despite Hadag Nachash’s attacks on Israel, it is clear that the members have a bond with the state and a will to improve it. In another song, “Just Here,” they list all of the attributes, both positive and negative, that make Israel unique. Like Subliminal and Keleh Shesh, Hadag Nacash’s lyrics are critical of the present but hopeful for the future.

Hip-hop music in Israel is alive and well. Many artists, with varying

styles and political opinions, have contributed to the active rap scene. Despite their distinct natures, these groups have much in common. Their music is based on and comes from the anger and helplessness that they feel living in Israel. Despite the negativity that they express towards the present situation in Israel, they remain in love with their homeland and optimistic about its future. For them, music is a means for making Israel a better place, just as rap music was an instrument of social change in Grandmaster Flash's days. In the words of American rapper KRS-One,

Hip means to know
It's a form of intelligence
To be hip is to be up-date and relevant
Hop is a form of movement
You can't just observe a hop
You got to hop up and do it
Hip and Hop is more than music
Hip is the knowledge
Hop is the movement
Hip and Hop is intelligent movement¹⁹

Rap in Israel is indeed more than just music. It is a way to affect change in society. It is an outlet for a generation of artists and kids. Just as Subliminal had hoped, it has "put Tel Aviv, and the holy land, on the map."²⁰ It has found a way to incorporate Jewish tradition, modernity, and world culture, as Eliezer ben-Yehudah and Ahad Haam prophesied one hundred years ago in their dreams of a Jewish state. And most importantly, hip-hop represents the essential tenet of Zionism: together, Jews can build a better place for the Jews, and even a better world.

Teddy Dov Fischer is a junior in mechanical engineering. He likes Israel, pancakes, and rap music. Unfortunately, he was unable to find any Israeli rap songs about pancakes, so he wrote the above article instead.

Notes

- 1 Kobe Shimoni, Yoav Eliasi, and Guy Basilika, Chuck Dorfman, “Moving with the Bass (Bounce),” The Light and the Shadow, CD, TACT records 2002.
- 2 Kobe Shimoni, “Introduction,” Israelis are Fed Up, CD, 1996.
- 3 Keleh Shesh (Paz, Amir; Eliasi, Itamar; Elek, Amit), “Time Bomb,” Keleh Shesh, CD, Phonokol records 2004.
- 4 Kobe Shimoni, “Introduction,” The Light from Zion, CD, TACT records 2000.
- 5 Isaiah 2:3.
- 6 Kobe Shimoni, “I Live Day to Day,” The Light from Zion, CD, TACT records 2000.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Kobe Shimoni and Yoav Eliasi, “We Have Come to Expel the Darkness,” The Light and the Shadow. CD. TACT records 2002.
- 10 Kobe Shimoni, Yoav Eliasi, “Biladi,” The Light and the Shadow, CD, TACT records 2002.
- 11 Keleh Shesh, “Introduction,” Keleh Shesh, CD, Phonokol records 2004.
- 12 Keleh Shesh, “Time Bomb,” Keleh Shesh, CD, Phonokol records 2004.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Keleh Shesh, “Israel,” Keleh Shesh, CD, Phonokol records 2004.
- 15 Keleh Shesh, “There’s No Light,” Keleh Shesh, CD, Phonokol records 2004.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Shanon Street and Hadag Nachash, “Numbers,” CD, Had Artsi Records 2003.
- 18 Shanon Street and Hadag Nachash, “Gabbie veDebbie,” CD, Had Artsi Records 2003.
- 19 Lawrence Parker, “Hip Hop Lives (I Come Back).”
- 20 Ibid.