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Hip-Hop To Create Peace In the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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When one thinks of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, from its long history through the present, hip-hop is not usually the first thing to come to mind. However, if one studies hip-hop in the state of Israel, one will find that it is inextricably linked to the conflict there. Although its history is brief, hip-hop in Israel is often political, including music by both Jewish and Arab artists. These artists use their music to express their opinion about the conflict, to define group identity, and to help the opposing side understand their point of view. Because hip-hop has always been linked to the conflict, it is reasonable to ask if hip-hop could thus also be part of a solution to the conflict. Is it possible for Jewish and Arab artists to come together through hip-hop to find common ground in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

History

Although today Israeli hip-hop is its own distinct genre, when it emerged in the mid-1990s it was much more closely aligned with American hip-hop. In 1995, the Beastie Boys toured Israel, and were interviewed on Galgalatz (Israel Army Radio) by Quami de la Fox and DJ Leron Teeni. After the interview, Quami de la Fox created a 30-second Hebrew parody of the Beastie Boys' song "What You Want" to help promote their tour

of Israel. The Beastie Boys loved it, and asked for the rights to it so that they might include it on their next album. After this initial small success, Quami de la Fox and DJ Leron Teeni collaborated to produce the first all hip-hop radio show in Israel, Esek Shahor, which means Black Business. The program featured a mix of Hebrew, Arabic, and English hip-hop, both classic and contemporary, and by 2000 was the most popular show on Galgalatz.²²

Today, DJ Leron Teeni is credited with being the founding father of Israeli hip-hop. His most notable contribution was changing the standard language of lyrics to Hebrew – not English. Esek Shahor used to feature local youth showcasing their rapping skills, and “the kids rapped in English. They came on our show and wanted to grab the mic. But we said: ‘No, no way, rap in Hebrew.’ There are about 100,000 American groups that can do it better in English. We want to listen to rap in our own language.”²³ To promote this new genre, rock band Shabak Samech began rapping in Hebrew when they released their first album in 1995. While Israeli listeners initially rejected their music, today Shabak Samech is credited both with being the first Israeli hip-hop group and with being the artist most responsible for the development of the genre.²⁴

Also responsible for the growth of hip-hop in Israel was the second Palestinian Intifada, from 2000—2005. The violent clashes were sparked by the failure of the Camp David summit in

²² Loolwa Khazzoom, “Hip-Hop Conquers Israel,” *Hadassah Magazine*, April 2005, http://www.hadassahmagazine.org/site/c.twI6LmN7IzF/b.5768435/k.1DF2/April_2005_Vol_86_No_8.htm

²³ Hartwig Vens, “Hip-Hop Speaks to the Reality of Israel,” *World Press Review*, February 2004, <http://www.worldpress.org/Europe/1751.cfm#down>.

²⁴ Khazzoom.

the summer of 2000, and by Ariel Sharon's controversial visit to the Temple Mount in September of the same year. The events gave young Israelis—both Jews and Arabs—a strong desire for self expression, which was manifested in hip-hop. Some hip-hop stars called for an end to the conflict, such as the left-wing artist Sagol 59, who invited popular artists Tamer Nafar and Hadag Nahash to collaborate on a song called “Summit Meeting” (2001). Other hip-hop artists went in the opposite direction, such as right-winger Subliminal, who recorded the popular “Divide and Conquer,” which featured anti-Palestinian lyrics. The violence of the second Palestinian Intifada provided Israeli and Palestinian hip-hop artists with subject matter for their music, and its relevance to youth's lives increased the popularity of hip-hop music in Israel.

Today, the hip-hop movement in Israel is comprised mainly of young people who are looking to make their voices heard. Jewish-Israeli and Arab-Israeli hip-hop artists have started using their music to condemn violence instead of condone it, and young Israelis from all backgrounds are listening. Popular artist Subliminal speaks of the shared experience of living in a nation of constant violence and terror, and of the frustration with political leaders and the ineffectual peacemaking process. He said, “through our lyrics, you can understand what the Israeli youth feels, believes, wants. Just listen, and you'll understand exactly what is going on.”²⁵ Clearly, the hip-hop industry in Israel today about making the voice of the younger generation heard.

Hip-Hop Used to Define Group Identity

Hip-hop has been a key component in helping Jewish-Israelis to form an identity in the last fifteen years, and one of the

²⁵ Dorian Lynskey, “Two Sworn Enemies and a Microphone,” *Guilt and Pleasure Magazine*, Spring 2006, 16-23.

best examples of this is Ya'akov "Kobi" Shimoni. Better known as his stage name "Subliminal", he is the country's most well-known hip-hop artist and has been described as "Israel's Eminem."²⁶ The son of refugees, Subliminal's parents taught him Jewish patriotism in a time when Zionism was unfashionable and Israel was leaning toward the political left. He began to rap in 1995, and was seen as a right-wing outsider for his political views. This changed during the Second Intifada, when political tides in Israel turned to the right. It was then that Subliminal began writing patriotic songs, creating a genre that came to be known as "Zionist hip-hop," including the double-platinum 2002 album *The Light and The Shadow*. Today, his record company TACT (Tel Aviv City Team) includes a studio, record label, publishing company, and clothing line, and he is one of the best-recognized musicians in Israel.²⁷

Subliminal's music aims to inspire and encourage a generation of young Jewish-Israelis to stand as a unified nation. At his concerts, he dresses in American hip-hop clothing, albeit with his ever-present Star of David necklace. As he comes onstage, he yells to the crowd: "Whoever is proud to be a Zionist in the state of Israel, put your hands in the air! Hell yeah!" and asks soldiers to hold up their army dog tags.²⁸ His songs use lyrics that reflect life in Israel, in order to connect with the teenagers and young people that make up his audience. For example, the second verse of "My Land" (2002):

²⁶ "Israel's Eminem' Wins Fans, Angers Critics." *U-Magazine*, December 5, 2003, <http://www.universalmetropolis.com/city/threads.php?t=theadid=6792>

²⁷ Lynskey, 19-20.

²⁸ Joshua Mitnick, "Israeli Hip-Hop Takes on Mideast Politics." *USA Today*, November 6, 2003, http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2003-11-06-hiphop-usat_x.htm.

Mother!/Look at me today/I've put down my uzi
/Picked up the microphone/Dreaming of peace
(shalom)/Getting only goodbye/Fuck
miracles/Everything is an illusion/Living in a
storm/In the heart of the danger/Such big
troubles in such a small state.

Young Jewish-Israelis can relate to the feeling of frustration and hopelessness with the peacemaking process that Subliminal raps about. Other lyrics are full of pro-Israel sentiment, such as the chorus of "My Land": "Who am I, what did I know, and where did I come from?/I am here and I came from here/This is my land and this is my country." Such lyrics reflect Subliminal's Zionist politics, and are meant to inspire young Israelis to the same sense of nationalism.

Subliminal's effect on the younger generation of Jewish-Israelis has been quite profound. His combination of hip-hop persona and right-wing politics appeals to young Israelis who are searching for a stable Jewish identity after years of conflict with the Palestinians. As journalist Joshua Mitnick said:

For Subliminal, the music has generated tens of thousands of record sales. For Israeli teens, it has given voice to their outrage at the state of affairs in their country. Hip-hop, a quintessentially American art form, is helping bolster national morale in a country bruised by... years of fighting between Israelis and Palestinians.²⁹

Through their music, Subliminal and the other members of TACT attempt to instill a new sense of Zionism to young Jewish-Israelis in the twenty-first century.

²⁹ Ibid.

Hip-hop has also been an essential element in developing Arab-Israeli identity, with perhaps the most famous artist being the group DAM. Formed in 1999, DAM was the first Arab-Israeli hip-hop group. It is made up of brothers Tamer and Suhell Nafar, and their friend Mahmoud Jreri. The group's name has several meanings, depending on which language one speaks: in Arabic it means 'eternity,' in Hebrew it means 'blood,' and in English it is an acronym for "Da Arabic MC's." DAM raps most often in Arabic, although they have released tracks that use both English and Hebrew in order to broaden their fan base. DAM's message is of protest, survival, and peace within the conflict, and self-criticism of Arab-Israeli society. They released their first album, entitled "Dedication," in November 2006.³⁰

DAM's music most often centers on the feeling of frustration at being second-class citizens in Israel. As Arab-Israelis, they are in a unique position: Israeli record labels won't give them a contract because they are Arab, and Arab-made hip-hop is not a big money maker – yet neither will an Arab record label because they hold Israeli ID cards and passports and are hence considered traitors. Tamer Nafar, the leader of DAM, describes the feeling of being barely tolerated by one country, and rejected by another with which he identifies:

We're strangers here. When I go on a bus, I'm also scared. Bombs cannot separate between Jews and Muslims and Christians. I feel that fear with them, but I cannot feel happiness with them.³¹

One of DAM's most popular and controversial songs is entitled "Who's the Terrorist?" (2001), which captures sentiments held

³⁰ Madison Gray, "How Phat Conquered Palestine." *Time*, December 5, 2007, 62.

³¹ Lynskey, 22.

by many Arab-Israelis about violence in the state of Israel. The second verse of the song expresses anger towards the Israelis for the violence committed against Arabs:

You hit me and wept, and beat me to complaining
about it/When I reminded you that you started it,
you sprung up and said/"You let the little kids
throw stones./Don't they have a family to keep
them under lock at home?"/As if you forgot that
your weapons put their family under the
stones/So now when my pain retaliates you call
me a terrorist?³²

These lyrics express the Arab-Israeli view on violence: that the Arab-Israelis are only violent in order to defend and protect themselves against the violence of Israelis, yet when they retaliate against wrongs done to them, they are punished with yet more violence. This perpetuates a vicious cycle of violence, in which neither party is any more right than the other. Giving voice to the frustrations, anger, and daily experiences of all Arab-Israelis, the members of DAM are able to connect with their audience over feelings of not belonging to either an Israeli or a Palestinian state, and these feelings are reflected in their music.

The effect that DAM has had on the younger generation of Arab-Israelis has been overwhelming. Inspired by African-American rappers and their contributions to the genre, DAM member Suhell Nafar has said, "we know about Afro Americans through hip hop, so all the world will know about Palestine through hip-hop."³³ Although it was at first difficult for them to

³² All translations of DAM lyrics courtesy of www.arabmusictranslation.com.

All translations of Subliminal lyrics courtesy of www.hebrewsongs.com.

³³ Gray, 62.

gain recognition, they persist because they know that they are having an effect. Nafar said “I have a lot of rage, but I express it with a microphone, not a weapon...I understand the language of both sides. That is why I am writing songs in Hebrew now, so I can explain the Palestinian side to the Israelis.”³⁴

Although Jewish and Arab Israelis view the conflict and each other very differently, they use music in a similar manner. Artists such as Subliminal and DAM use hip-hop to speak to a larger audience, including both Arabs and Israelis, and as a means of defining their experience living in Israel and in the conflict. When the audience can relate to what the artist is saying, a collective group identity is formed, and members feel strong and united to make their voice heard. When the audience cannot relate to what the artist is saying, and perhaps even disagrees, it is an opportunity for everyone involved to learn about how others see the situation. Consequently, hip-hop can be used in Israel as a means of both defining group identity, and of initiating dialogue and encouraging understanding between Arabs and Israelis on opposite sides of the conflict.

Hip-Hop to Bring People Together

Is it possible for Jewish and Arab artists to come together through hip-hop to find common ground in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? This may seem unlikely, given that nothing has been effective in creating lasting peace thus far, and that such dialogue would seem better suited to the floor of the Knesset rather than the recording studio or concert hall. However, one must remember that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is ultimately a conflict between the people. While policymakers are involved,

³⁴ Lisa Goldman, “Who’s the Terrorist? The Leading Palestinian Hip-Hop Groups Finds an Unlikely Fan Base,” *Tablet Magazine*, November 6, 2007, <http://www.tabletmag.com/arts-and-culture/music/1138/whos-the-terrorist/>.

the majority of those who are living it each and every day are ordinary working-class people, and hip-hop artists are well-suited to reaching out and connecting with these people. Artists such as Subliminal and DAM understand what it is like to live amidst the conflict, and can put those feelings into language that is easy to understand and relate to. If hip-hop artists are most able to connect with those most affected by the conflict, it is reasonable to ask whether they can find common ground in their music and inspire everyday people to do the same.

Subliminal and Tamer Nafar of DAM provide an example of how artistic collaboration in the conflict can end unfavorably. Subliminal and Nafar met in the summer of 2000, when they were both just starting out as hip-hop artists. They quickly became friends, and started touring and performing the country together, speaking about coexistence. However, just months later, the Second Intifada began in the fall of 2000. Subliminal's and Nafar's political opinions began to clash as the Intifada unfolded, and today Subliminal and Nafar are no longer friends or colleagues. When speaking about each other, they publicly refer to the other as "fuck" and "idiot," and insult the other's intelligence. They also battle on the microphone, with songs like Subliminal's "Divide and Conquer" and DAM's "Who's the Terrorist?"³⁵

On the opposite end of the spectrum are Arab-Israeli rapper SAZ and Jewish-Israeli rapper Sagol 59. Through hip-hop, the two have been able to collaborate and open a dialogue about their frustrations with society and hopes for a peaceful coexistence between Arab- and Jewish-Israelis. In 2007, they performed together at a popular Tel Aviv nightclub as part of a "Hip-Hop Sulha," a series of globe-spanning performances featuring Jewish and Arab artists, which aimed to create a musical

³⁵ Lynskey, 17-18.

platform for discourse and understanding.³⁶ However, as idealist as the performance was, the rappers revealed their hesitant realism about the problems Israel is facing. SAZ said, “My music is not just for Arabs, my music is for the world. I participate in the Hip Hop Sulha because besides being a Palestinian or a Muslim, I am human.”³⁷ Sagol 59 agreed, saying “We’re trying to have a simple dialogue. We’re not delusional. We’re not trying to solve all the problems in the world. Everyone should do something within their capacity to initiate progress.”³⁸

Both SAZ and Sagol 59 have been working to start a dialogue and help every-day Arab-Israelis and Jewish-Israelis come together through music. SAZ gives Arab-Israelis and Palestinians inspiration to turn from drugs and violence and pursue an education instead. He encourages Arab pride in Israel and the territories, while at the same time condemning violence as a path toward Palestinian statehood. Through his contact with Jewish-Israelis, SAZ has come to support a two-state solution, with equal treatment for Jewish-Israelis and Arab-Israelis. His music is critical of both Jews and Arabs. In his song “Since that Day” (2007), he disparages of both, saying “Instead of blaming ourselves, We blame everybody else” of the Arab-Israelis, and “The sound of a lifetime struggle of a nation struggling, Against the occupation, For corruption has eaten our bones” about the Jewish-Israelis and the government.³⁹

Sagol 59 also creates initiatives for dialogue through his organization Corner Prophets, which he co-founded. Corner

³⁶ “Sulha” is the Arabic word for a conciliatory agreement between two parties in a dispute.

³⁷ David Wainer, “Jewish, Arab Rappers in Israel Find Common Ground.” *Y-net News*, August 2, 2007 <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3432943,00.html>.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

Prophets' mission is to inspire Jewish-Israeli and Arab-Israeli children to use music as a means of finding common ground, and it hosts several hip-hop and arts events in Jerusalem to provide a way for the city's diverse youth to be engaged with the performing arts. To support such coexistence, SAZ and Sagol 59 have performed together numerous times. Both artists agree that their friendship is strong, despite their differences of opinions. "We have a lot more in common than what sets us apart," Sagol said, and SAZ agrees, "Our love for music brings us together," he said.⁴⁰

Musically speaking, the best example of a Jewish-Arab hip-hop collaboration is the 2001 song "Summit Meeting." Written during the Second Intifada, the controversial and popular song was composed by Sagol 59, DAM's Tamer Nafar, and Sha'anani Street, the front man for Israeli rappers Hadag Nahash. It was the first-ever Jewish-Arab hip-hop collaboration, and it received mixed reviews. Recorded during a time of great violence and chaos in Israel, "Summit Meeting" took a left-wing pro-peace stance, and called upon leaders from both nations to stop the fighting and resume peace talks. The song was performed in both Hebrew and Arabic, symbolizing the artists' commitments to partnership and equality between both parties. Although it was recorded nearly a decade ago, "Summit Meeting" remains an excellent example of Jewish-Arab hip-hop collaboration.

Is it possible for Jewish and Arab artists, through hip-hop, to come together to find common ground in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? In theory, yes, but in practice it is much more complicated than that. Artists like Sagol 59 and SAZ have shown that it is possible for rappers who come from different backgrounds and have different opinions to work together, while

⁴⁰ Ibid.

artists such as Subliminal and Tamer Nafar of DAM show that such collaboration can also end very badly. How can today's artists work together to end up like Sagol 59 and SAZ rather than Subliminal and Nafar?

Although peace in Israel is a multifaceted process that is much bigger than hip-hop, and artists and artistic friendships are unique, there are several common factors that can be used to promote dialogue and understanding among hip-hop artists. Artists must be willing to put their ethnic and political differences aside and remember that such work is about the music and about artistic collaboration and creation. They have to be willing to listen to and respect the other party's beliefs and opinions. Instead of turning their differences into a feud, they should instead see them as an opportunity for learning and peaceful dialogue. Artists need to recognize that they are not going to solve the problems that exist between Jewish-Israelis and Arab-Israelis, but rather that they can aspire to create understanding and dialogue with each other.

Most importantly, hip-hop artists must remember that their fans, especially young people, all over Israel and the world look up to them as role models. Artists must show respect for one another and have a peaceful discourse in order to set a positive example for their fans, especially the younger generation. If young Israelis, both Jews and Arabs, can grow up learning that peace and friendship is possible between people from different backgrounds, then it will inspire them to do the same with others in their own school and community, and to become vocal advocates for peace between Jews and Arabs. Jewish-Israeli and Arab-Israeli hip-hop artists can come together as colleagues and friends to find common ground in music by having respect for each other and their beliefs, by turning their differences into an opportunity for learning and dialogue, and by remembering that

they influence the next generation of Israelis and must set a good example in order to build a better Israel.

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