

Sampling the Shtetl
Reinventing American Jewish Identity through Hip Hop

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A NOTE ON NON-ENGLISH WORDS

The communities whose music I analyze here speak or have spoken a variety of languages and dialects thereof, primarily English, Hebrew and Yiddish. To give a sense of the multilingual milieu and frequent code-switching of these communities, I generally do not translate or italicize words that are not standard English (i.e., comprehensible to most American English speakers) within the text. However, the first time they appear, I provide a translation or explanation in a footnote, and there will be a glossary at the back. Hebrew and Yiddish words are transliterated in order to be more easily comprehensible. I have not used any particular system of transliteration, instead choosing the most commonly-used romanization or one that I think will make the most phonetic sense to English speakers. I have occasionally used less-common romanizations of particular words in order to preserve a sense of their idiomatic pronunciation in Hebrew or Yiddish (most notably “Chasid” instead of “Hasid”).

INTRODUCTION

In late March 2010, the hipster-Jewish online magazine *Jewcy* posted a YouTube video on its website that quickly went viral in the Jewish blogosphere. In it, a Chasidic wedding band welcomes the newlyweds to their reception to the tune of a Lady Gaga medley: the bandleader says, “Ladies and gentlemen, here they are, our favorite chosson and kallah!”, the brass section plays an excerpt from the beginning of the song “Bad Romance” out of a spiral-bound volume labeled, simply, “DANCE BOOK,” and the vocalists start singing “Everybody let’s get ready for Shaya and Perry, Shaya, Shaya and Perry...Shaya and Perry Weinberger!” to the tune of the chorus from “Paparazzi.” As the Weinbergers’ entrance is announced, the band seamlessly transitions into a traditional freylekhs while the camera pans across a sea of Chasidic men wearing black coats, fedoras and shtreimels, the traditional round fur hats worn on festive occasions. No one

appears fazed in the slightest by the music. *Jewcy* and other blogs that linked to it, however, were incredulous and amused. *Jewcy* wrote, “This is one of those ‘see it to believe it’ situations”; *Heeb* compared it to the “success of YouTube vid ‘Kosher Face’” (Goldsher, *Heeb*).

Perhaps the Chasidim recognized that members of their communities have been reinterpreting the popular music of the countries in which they live for many years. Gaga may be the latest craze, but the process itself is not new. *Jewcy* should know this: it is affiliated with the record label JDub, which actively encourages creatively Jewish takes on popular music and launched the career of Chasidic star Matisyahu. Since mass Ashkenazi Jewish arrival in the United States between 1880 and 1920, Jews have been interacting with American popular music, creating a variety of styles generally derived in equal parts from African-American music and Jewish liturgical or folk music that address issues of Jewish identity and culture. The latest in this string of hybridizations has been Jewish hip-hop, which, for the past 25 years, has negotiated contemporary issues of race, ethnic identity, gender and diaspora, negotiating how to be both Jewish and American, what constitutes each of these identities, and the place of Jewish heritage and Jewish masculinity within the American binaries of race and gender.

For these artists, hip-hop and related genres have been canvases against which to play out their own stories about America, religion and heritage, a microcosm of the past 50 years of demographic, institutional and ideological changes in the American Ashkenazi Jewish community. The compositional techniques of hip-hop have served as a way to organize, juxtapose and negotiate everything from the revival of klezmer to the

uptick in stringent religious observance and from the aftermath of the Holocaust to the ever-evolving American Jewish relationship with the young state of Israel.

Jewish musicians making overtly-Jewish hip-hop, are, notably, not generally part of the mainstream American hip-hop community. Several have collaborated upon occasion with mainstream hip-hop artists (such as the Wu-Tang Clan's Killah Priest's appearance on *The SoCalled Seder*), but in general these artists form a community unto themselves, sampling and headlining for other Jewish acts and being nurtured by Jewish-oriented or specialty labels. Even Matisyahu, who has achieved worldwide fame, is often pigeonholed as a Chasidic novelty act despite his apparent desire not to be considered as such.

While this work investigates some reasons why self-consciously Jewish artists may make use of hip-hop, and the theoretical and musical consequences of these stylistic choices, I do not generally address the history of musical interactions between American Jews and African-Americans, nor do I attempt to address whether this is "right" or "wrong" or constitutes appropriation. First, most Jewish artists who use musical styles derived from African-American cultural forms do so once those forms have penetrated American popular culture and thus learn them from the radio, music television and recordings instead of from engagement with African-American musical communities. Second, while the fact of these genres' African-American origins is important for some aspects of the work Jewish hip-hop does, and Jewish jazz did, with respect to race, most artists working in these styles perceive them as "American" rather than "African-American." This is a sign of the lasting influence of African-American music on American popular culture more than anything, a phenomenon with its own complex

history. Nonetheless, the questions of cultural interaction that this work does not address are fertile ground for future research.

Chapters two and three of this work summarize the history of Jewish popular music in the United States and make an attempt at explaining the two major types of Jewish hip-hop—that derived from the klezmer revival and that derived from contemporary Orthodox musical practice. “Klezmering Up” traces the negotiation of Jewish and African-American styles through the 20th century to provide an explanation of why hip-hop is the most popular contemporary genre of choice for self-consciously Jewish music and to provide a counter-narrative to the dominant stories told about the postwar reclamation of Jewish heritage music. “Textuality, Tradition and Modernity” addresses the postwar shift toward greater ideological stringency in American Orthodox Judaism, which inspired new genres of Jewish popular music that conform to the stricter religious ideals of the Orthodox community.

“The New Portable Homelands” is an exploration of the theoretical issues raised by both types of Jewish hip-hop. New formulations of Jewish identity since the 1960s or so have relied on a narrative of rupture and reconstruction, to borrow Soloveitchik’s phrase; I theorize the attempts at reconstruction and their effects on contemporary Jewish diasporic identity. Much of this rupture is due to changes in ways of teaching and transmitting tradition; the overall move from mimetic to text-based pedagogy and cultural memory has had far-reaching implications for American Jewish ethnic and religious identity, masculinity, and nationalism that I discuss in the fourth chapter.

The last two chapters are case studies. I chose SoCalled as the example of klezmer-derived hip-hop and Matisyahu as the example of contemporary Orthodox

popular music. They take up similar questions in very different ways and are both well-known within their subgenres of Jewish hip-hop (although Matisyahu is considerably more famous in an objective sense). The similarities and differences in their approaches to such issues as Jewish nationalism, Jewish sacred text, masculinity and cultural transmission are a microcosm of the many perspectives found in today's American Jewish community, and point toward new ways forward for conceptualizing Jewish ethnicity, utopianism and collective identity in diaspora.

The conclusion explores these themes in the context of the deep structure of Jewish history and culture, driven by a constant dialectic of experiences of rupture with the past and attempts at the reconstruction or revitalization of tradition. The constant flux of these cultural movements, and the tensions and paradoxes they often contain, makes any attempt to summarize or explicate them necessarily imperfect. Nonetheless, I have tried to provide the beginnings of a theoretical framework that contextualizes Jewish hip-hop (and perhaps even new developments in Jewish popular music, such as Chasidic interpretations of Lady Gaga's dance music!) within broader conceptions of contemporary American whiteness, religiosity and diasporic multiculturalism.

Ultimately, I hope that the narrative continuities show through as much as the discontinuities between these artists and previous generations of Jewish musicians. It seems that every generation of American Jews has worried that they will be the last. However, if a desire for musical continuity is any indicator of a desire for ethnic, religious and cultural continuity—and in this case, it absolutely is—then American Jewish baby boomers need not worry that their twenty-something children will abandon Judaism and/or Yiddishkeit. They are, however, in the process of transforming

Jewishness, the better to make it relevant to the present day and the better to pass it on, as almost all generations of Jews have done before them. One of the signs of a vital, living tradition is its ability to sustain change. While Jewish hip-hop may seem like a radical departure from the past, the fact that Matisyahu can sing Passover songs over a reggae beat, SoCalled can rap Yiddish theater tunes and a Chasidic wedding band can start off the most traditional of Jewish parties with a Lady Gaga remix shows that the Jewish tradition of transforming tradition, and by extension Jewish identity itself, is alive and well in the United States.

But this was no mere concert. With a mix of *yeshive bokhers*, bridge-and-tunnel types, and a hefty dose of black-clad bohemians packed in tightly together, swaying, jumping, pogoing, and line-dancing to the Klezmatics' eclectic, ecstatic fusion of klezmer, jazz, rock, and reggae, it was a slivovitz 'n' rhythm-fueled affirmation of cultural pride, a middle finger raised to the demon of assimilation, a shout-out to the world that said,

'Jewish is hip!'

--Seth Rogovoy on his first klezmer concert in 1997, *The Essential Klezmer*

...while the diasporic nature of klezmer seems clear, its presumed homeland is felt more as an absence than as a presence. In fact, the 'diaspora' (the United States) has become the music's homeland in many ways. So while klezmer 'should' be understood as European—and in some ways it is—it is mainly an American development and is perceived that way in Europe and even in Israel.

--Mark Slobin, *Fiddler on the Move*

KLEZMERING UP AN ALTERNATIVE HISTORY OF ASHKENAZI JEWISH MUSIC IN THE UNITED STATES

The popular story of Jewish dance music in the United States follows a familiar, mythic trajectory: Eastern European Jewish immigrants to the northeastern United States in the early 20th century brought their music, a lively blend of fiddles, percussion, brass and folksy, bawdy Yiddish lyrics, with them, one of the few things they could smuggle out of the Russian Pale as they fled the Czar. It was extremely popular in the Jewish community from the 1910s through World War II, especially in the shtetlekh of Brooklyn, New York's Lower East Side, and a few far-flung enclaves like South Philadelphia—but when Jews began to assimilate to soulless, inauthentic American culture and lose their vaunted, God-given traditions, it fell out of practice and died away, strangled by the winding circles of Israeli horas danced at suburban Reform synagogues.

A few heroic Jewish baby boomer musicians, spurred by their involvement in the folk music scene, rediscovered their grandparents' favorite dance tunes—almost by accident, on the advice of an old Appalachian hillbilly fiddler—and resurrected them with blood, sweat, tears and phonographs, the needle in the groove of the old 78s like the prince's kiss on Sleeping Beauty's lips. Suddenly, klezmer roared back to life, this time LGBT-friendly, urban and hip: the soundtrack to an entire generation of American Jews' rediscovery of their (secular and cultural) roots, and, strangely, popular in areas of Europe where few Jews lived anymore.

This story, while inspiring to some, is exaggerated and inaccurate. “Klezmer,” as we now call this music, never quite died—though it is quite accurate to say that a younger generation of musicians did breathe new life into it in the 1970s and 1980s. Its revitalization was not serendipitous, but rather wholly consistent with long-standing processes of Ashkenazi Jewish music-making, processes that have only been thrown into sharper relief in the American context of the 20th and 21st centuries. Even klezmer's hybridizations with other styles of music—its encounter with hip-hop being most relevant here—are but the next logical step in the long evolution of Jewish music with roots in Eastern Europe. This evolution is a result of two complementary proclivities: first, the drive to preserve tradition by transforming it; and second, the tendency for Jewish arts and material culture to reflect the tensions of each diasporic situation in which Jews find themselves. Both proclivities have tended to result in music that retains elements perceived as distinctly Jewish while having characteristics particular to each unique spatiotemporal situation.

Jewish collective identity and imagination has been inherently diasporic since the Roman destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, when the Israelites lost sovereignty in the region and were sent into exile, eventually settling across Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, with outposts in China and India. Despite having little hope for return to Biblical lands or for self-governance there or anywhere else throughout much of pre-20th century history, traditional Judaism encourages the maintenance of a distinctive Jewish community, both for its own sake and in preparation for an eventual return to Israel in messianic times. Thus, although Jews have participated to varying extents in the mainstream of the lands in which they have lived, a consciousness of separation, distinctiveness, and dislocation has persisted.¹ “Diaspora implies multiple affiliations and multiple communities and so corresponds more accurately to the situation of many modern peoples, not only Jews,” writes Carol Zemel. “At its core, diaspora culture constitutes a double relationship: an outward relation between its minority voice or vision and that of the majority or ‘host,’ and an inner relation among dispersed communities of its own” (in Karp and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 176). These multiple visions, relationships and dialogues are at the core of all Jewish music, and are especially crucial to understanding and tracing the multiple paths of Ashkenazi Jewish music over the last 150 years.

¹ This consciousness is visible in everything from Freud’s neuroses about Jewish masculinity in fin-de-siècle Europe (see Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct*), to A.Z. Idelsohn’s extensive collections of and writings about Jewish music that portray it as related to, but separate from, host-culture music (see Idelsohn, “Parallels between the Old-French and the Jewish Song (Fines),” *Acta Musicologica*, Vol. 6, Fasc. 1 (Jan.-Mar. 1934), pp. 15-22 for a good example of this), to the halakhic tensions inherent in Rav Joseph Soloveitchik’s Modern Orthodox formulation of “Torah u’ madda,” to Philip Roth’s literary portrayals of Jewish-American anxieties about assimilation and Jewish identity, to the trajectory of 20th-century American Jewish music discussed in this chapter.

“Klezmer” before World War II

Eastern European Jewish music, as a whole, is exceptionally poorly documented before the late 19th century. Though the Bible is replete with descriptions of instruments, songs and aspects of ancient musical practice, rabbinic tradition after the destruction of the Temple forbids instrumental music—with the important exception of weddings and certain holidays—on the grounds that rejoicing in exile is improper. This decree was openly and regularly flouted, as evidenced by the many decrees against instrumental musicians made by medieval European Jewish town councils and religious leaders (Sapoznik 17). Nonetheless, weddings and holidays such as Simchat Torah remained the primary sites of instrumental music-making.

Certain localities ruled that Jewish musicians could only play “quiet” instruments—strings, flutes, *tsimbls*²—and thus we can be relatively certain that instruments like the fiddle were the mainstay of Ashkenazi Jewish secular music for several centuries (Sapoznik 7). Records show that “Jewish folk musicians from the Middle Ages through the seventeenth century in Germany, Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia played a variety of instruments, including the cittern, lute, zither, shawm, harp, flageolet, harpsichord, *dudlezack*, *Judenleier*, *postiv*, *Judenharfe*, *zink*, and *hackbrett*” (Strom 12). All of these instruments were used by contemporaneous Christian musicians, or were minor variants on similar instruments used by Christians. Wind and brass instruments were notoriously unreliable and primitive until the 18th century or so; Jews did not play them until they entered Czarist armies in the late 1800s both because the

² Yiddish, transliterated: cimbaloms, or hammered dulcimers.

instruments were not technically capable of handling the demands of the music and because of the ban on anything that was not a “quiet” instrument.

By the end of the 19th century, the majority of Ashkenazim lived in the Russian empire’s Pale of Settlement, which included much of what is now Poland, Ukraine, and the Baltic states. Many Jewish men were drafted into the Czarist army, which was regularly fighting wars at the time, and those who already had a degree of musical talent or experience were typically conscripted into military bands. “Military bands taught musical precision and a more worldly repertoire,” writes Henry Sapoznik. “The bands also gave rural players a chance to learn on the latest in modern manufactured instruments. Much as southern African-Americans created jazz using the castoff brass and woodwind instruments made for Civil War bands, Jewish musicians returned home with discarded instruments and, applying lessons learned in uniform, changed forever the older string-oriented band sound” (25). In this period, rural Jewish musicians gained increasing exposure to urban and non-Jewish sounds, and the prevailing performance practices and aesthetics changed: brass and percussion were incorporated, and having learned how to read Western musical notation in the military, Jewish musicians were able to learn contemporary popular tunes and art music pieces circulating on broadsheets. Concurrent loosening of Czarist policies around this time allowed Jews to enter the prestigious conservatories of Odessa and St. Petersburg. This gave musicians (primarily violinists) new economic opportunities and changed both Western art music and klezmer performance practice (Strom 123).

Jewish emigration from Eastern Europe to the United States picked up considerably in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, through the closing of Ellis Island

and until the passage of the Johnson-Reed Act in 1924; immigrants congregated primarily in east coast cities, with New York as the center of cultural gravity and the focal point of Jewish-American imagination. This is in contrast to the earlier Sephardic and German Jewish immigrants, who were generally wealthier:

[they] achieved great success and, until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, found great acceptance in American society. These Jews became part of the economic and social elite that was shaping the American nation. But in 1877 Jewish Americans began to experience systematic anti-Semitism for the first time on American soil—exclusion from posh resorts and elite social clubs and quotas limiting their numbers in institutions of higher education. (Katz-Fishman and Scott in Franklin, et al. 330)

Mass Ashkenazi Jewish immigration roughly coincided with the onset of this anti-Semitism as well as the Great Migration, which brought African-Americans from the rural South to the urban/industrial North—and thereby into contact with Jews, themselves considered not quite white at the time. This contact facilitated musical exchange and a complex process of Ashkenazi Jewish negotiation of race in the United States.

“Playing with the racial domination and desire hidden beneath claims to formal equality, blackface was a rite of passage from the Old World to the New. Blacking up as members of particular, often stigmatized ethnic and regional groups, performers (and through them their audiences) wiped off the burnt cork as White Americans,” writes Michael Rogin. “A ritual of conversion in which Black bodies saved White souls, blackface gave access to states of experience imagined as Black without imprisoning Whites in a fixed Black identity” (in Franklin, et al. 88). The turn of the 20th century marked the beginning of a sustained Jewish-American engagement with African-American cultural production that took many forms and served many purposes, chiefly

among them the mid-century Jewish entrée into whiteness in the American racial imagination and the exploration of anxieties and questions about minority masculinity and sexual identity.

“If ‘Black-Jewish relations’ has told a story about class in American culture, it has also articulated major concerns about masculinity and sexuality,” writes Jeffrey Melnick. “Women have been relatively absent from the standard chronicles, most likely because their presence would demand that some attention be paid to the potentially deal-breaking areas of miscegenation and domestic labor relations” (11). The story of women’s exclusion from the Black-Jewish arts scene has much deeper roots than the few areas to which Melnick calls attention, from Jewish religious notions of the indecency of women’s musical performance and structural factors confining women to particular economic sectors (generally in domestic service and, for Jews, the needle trades). Nonetheless, Melnick’s assertion rings true into the present day. SoCalled and Matisyahu, whose careers I explore later, have used musical forms with roots in African-American practice to explore ideas about contemporary Jewish masculinity, both potentially transgressive and quite traditional. Melnick continues, “The Jewish men involved in popular culture productions of Blackness”—which is, importantly, different from Jewish men involved in making music that is a hybrid between African-American and Ashkenazi styles—“projected racial imagery which seems concerned not only with their ‘ethnic’ suitability but also with the confirmation of their gender and sexual legitimacy” (97).

Like other European ethnic groups of questionable racial status in the early-20th-century United States, especially Irish-Americans, Jews experimented with vaudeville

and blackface performance as a means of fitting into (white) American society.

“Sometimes these minority groups would be combined to create a weird pastiche of ethnicities,” writes Sapoznik, “as in a 1905 program from Harlem’s Keith and Proctor’s 125th St. Theater that featured ‘Matthew and Ashley in their Hebrew Comedy: A Smash-Up in Chinatown’” (32). This pastiche fits neatly into common contemporaneous discourses about Jewishness and cultural production—that Jews were nothing but bricoleurs, incapable of producing original material—and discourses about Americanness, i.e. the “melting pot” ideal.

The apotheosis of Jewish blackface performance is the 1927 film *The Jazz Singer*, the first “talkie”: the main character, played by Al Jolson, begins life as cantor’s son Jakie Rabinowitz, becomes a blackface performer and secular singer, and at the film’s climax returns to his family’s synagogue to sing the Kol Nidre service³ in place of his deathly-ill father.

Jolson’s metamorphosis from Jakie Rabinowitz to the Americanized Jack Robin is predicated upon a literal racial redefinition, which is effected in its turn by the racial masquerade of the singer’s blackface routine. . . . At bottom, however, it is not just that the immigrant becomes American by appropriating jazz and ‘singing nigger songs’ in a German beergarden, as various residents of the Jewish ghetto put it in the original screenplay. Rather, it is that, paradoxically, by donning blackface the Hebrew becomes Caucasian. Jolson’s blackface routine becomes the vehicle for a complex racial triangulation among Hebrews (Jakie’s family and their congregation), African-Americans (literally absent but ubiquitously suggested by the blackface itself) and white Americans

³ The evening service on Yom Kippur (“Day of Atonement”), the holiest day of the Jewish religious year.

(embodied by [Jakie's love interest] Mary). The burnt cork at once masks Jewishness and accentuates whiteness: in playing black, the Jew becomes white. (Jacobson 119-120)

The Jazz Singer, like the Yiddish theater and the "Jewish jazz" 78s that were being released by Columbia and Victor at the time, represents an important outcome of the Jewish engagement with African-American music and with the idea of performing blackness itself: through performance of African-American music or a caricatured blackness, Jews were able to transition *as Jews* into the American conception of whiteness. At the end of *The Jazz Singer*, Jakie/Jack returns home to sing the Kol Nidre; while he may not observe all of the precepts of Jewish law, he is portrayed as being able to retain his Jewish identity through musical performance, in a way consistent with the demands of American upwardly-mobile whiteness.

This concept was (literally) played out in the realm of Jewish popular music. Ashkenazi Jews formed landsmanshaftn in many urban areas, mutual aid organizations of people from the same town or region who hosted social events, helped those who were sick or out of work, and—most importantly for entertainers—gave people planning celebrations referrals for caterers, tailors, and musicians and often hosted those celebrations at their halls (Slobin 1982, 76; Netsky 2004, 62-63). Many Old World musicians got their start in the United States by playing Jewish weddings, gigs they obtained through their landsmanshaftn. At the very beginning, they predominantly played in European styles—the old brass- and string-band sound cultivated in Czarist Europe. In fact, this was a primary reason people hired musicians through landsmanshaftn: they wanted to hear the sounds and melodies of their hometowns.

By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century this had, for the most part, changed: major labels recognized the commercial potential of Jewish music and began to

release it, relieving Jewish music of the need to be performed in particular social, ritualized settings such as weddings and holidays. In 1908, Columbia Records introduced its double-disc series, a technical innovation that brought the company out of dire financial straits. These discs were labeled by letter according to the geographic origin of their repertoire, ranging from “A” for generic “American” to “P” for Peruvian to “S” for “Spanish concertos and opera.” “E” was the designation for “General Foreign Language (U.S.)”—that is, music of American immigrant groups (Brooks 12-14). Columbia aggressively pursued the “ethnic market” and these recordings, encompassing everything from Italian street songs to Ukrainian wedding repertoire and German volkslieder, sold relatively well despite not being marketed to a general audience. The E series was the home of Jewish theatrical, cantorial and dance-music recordings, which sold reasonably well to the intended market but produced no breakout stars. By 1923, “ethnic artists” had moved to the new F (“foreign”) series (Brooks 32-34).⁴

Five years later, Jewish popular music had become much more commercially important. Stars like clarinetists Naftule Brandwein and Dave Tarras, performing with eponymous orchestras and other fairly large ensembles (after the fashion in jazz), produced albums of more-traditional dance tunes like bulgars, doinas, freylekhs and chosidls that were nonetheless influenced by jazz and vaudeville performance practices. In fact, they and other prominent “klezmer” musicians often performed in the Yiddish theater’s pit orchestras—a perfect example of a genre perched at the intersection of apple-pie Americanness and distinctive Yiddishkeit.

⁴ See Brooks 2002 for a comprehensive summary of Columbia’s early history. Columbia stopped pursuing the “ethnic market” in the early 1930s owing to the precipitous Depression-era drop in record sales.

In the 1910s, the “oriental fox trot” genre was the first to combine (albeit under the banner of a questionable racialized classification of Jews) Old-World styles with American pop trends—and both Jews and prominent African-American jazz musicians such as Duke Ellington and Fats Waller played it. “The first known recording of this type was ‘Yiddish[e] Blues,’ by Lieutenant Joseph Frankel (1885-1953), a Kiev Conservatory-trained bandmaster who led theater orchestras in New York in the early 1910s. In this 1918 composition, Frankel combines the *Mi Shebeyrekh* cantorial mode with typical ragtime rhythms,” writes Hankus Netsky (in Slobin 2002, 17). The trend continued with songs like the “Yiddische Charleston” and a few of Frankel’s other Columbia releases, “Aheym, Kinderlakh, Aheym (One Step)” and “Yiddelakh (A Shimmy)” (Sapoznik 94). The titles alone are telling.

By the 1920s, widely regarded as the heyday of “klezmer” recordings from the New York scene, immigrant musicians were performing parallel to the still-popular Yiddish theater and played mostly uptempo dance music. Dave Tarras exerted a particular influence on the repertory:

As the primary exponent of American klezmer from the twenties through the fifties, Tarras is widely credited with the growth of the bulgar as a popular style of Jewish dance tune. A minor genre of Old World klezmer rooted in Bessarabia, the bulgar came to be synonymous with American klezmer by the 1940s, to the point that the music as a whole was often merely referred to as the bulgars. Tarras composed and recorded dozens of these tunes, which he favored over the Old World core repertoire, most of which he viewed as too “simple” and audiences viewed as too “religious.” (Rogovoy 67)

Though Rogovoy’s use of the term “klezmer” is imprecise and can be confusing—what we now think of as the “klezmer” of the early 20th century was not labeled as such until

the 1980s—the narrative he presents proves an important point. While the more-overt hybridizations like the “Yiddishe Charleston” show a balance being struck between traditional and American sounds within the same piece, the drift of the traditional repertoire *also* shows a powerful contemporary influence, even though each piece in itself may sound distinctly Old World. The bulgar, a fast, happy-sounding, danceable genre, fits well with the prevailing jazz aesthetic of the day.

Not surprisingly, by the 1930s, “Jewish jazz” dominated the Jewish-music scene. (The most recognizable piece in this repertory is the clarinet solo that opens Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*.) Jewish instrumentalists moved back and forth between “American” jazz bands and “Jewish” dance bands, playing related repertoire on the same instruments. By this point in time, Jewish audiences were assimilated enough to want to hear jazz at their life-cycle celebrations and at the Catskills resorts that were becoming increasingly popular, and expected Jewish bands to be able to play the latest hits.

Sapoznik describes one clarinetist’s experience: “At thirteen, [Howie] Leess began working with older musicians, playing hotels in the Catskill mountains, north of New York City. American-born Jews going to these hotels demanded American music with a little bit of Jewish flavor. Leess was hired by musicians like Dave Tarras and Naftule Brandwein when American music was needed on their bandstands. ‘We young guys could play their music and they couldn’t play our music, period,’ he said. ‘By the American bands I was the Jewish guy, and by the Jewish bands I was the American guy, same thing’” (123). Leess’s description of himself perfectly encapsulates the tensions Jewish music has had to negotiate in the modern American end of the diaspora: how to be

American within the context of Jewishness and Jewish within the context of Americanness.

The story of the song “Bei Mir Bistu Sheyn” illuminates the complexity and diversity of the “Jewish jazz” scene. A hit on burgeoning Yiddish radio, on programs like *Yiddish Melodies in Swing* (whose specialty was “Yiddish songs played both *heymish* and hot”), it was written in 1934 as a Yiddish-theatre song for the musical *Men Ken Lebn Nor Men Lost Nisht*⁵ (quote from Sapoznik 143; Netsky in Slobin 2002, 14-17). African-American artists Johnnie and George performed it at the Apollo Theater in Harlem in 1937, where Sammy Cahn heard it. Subsequently both Bennie Goodman and the Andrews Sisters covered it, in more-Americanized English-language versions that still retained the Yiddish title (spelled according to Germanized orthography). The Andrews Sisters version went to the top of the charts at the end of 1937.

When Jewish jazz’s greatest hit became American jazz, the transition was nearly seamless, its Jewish background a selling point instead of something that needed to be masked—in direct contrast to Al Jolson’s need to blacken up, Sapoznik notes “how much of the press of the day insisted on referring to the original as an ‘old’ Jewish song, displaying a common ‘Jewish equals old’ bias that increased the song’s exoticism even more” (137). The easy transition makes aesthetic sense: Jewish jazz stuck closely to the big-band sound, generally including a few “Yiddish” ornamentations or Yiddish words. Finally, Ziggy Elman was a major force in this style, exemplified by his recording of “And the Angels Sing,” recorded in 1939 by the Benny Goodman Orchestra:

Here swing musicians were giving a traditional klezmer tune the same treatment they would any other melody, with the minor modification of Elman’s ‘klezmer’ portion in the

⁵ *I Would If I Could*, literally “You could live, but they won’t let you”

middle. The hybrid nature of Elman and Goodman's concept is transparent: the band first plays a 'jazzy' version of the melody with the song lyrics, Elman breaks out into a 'klezmer' version of the same tune, which he then transforms into a trumpet solo over the band, finally continuing the trumpet solo over a repeat of the earlier, jazzy version of the melody in an A-B-A form. Elman's performance in "And the Angels Sing" should really be read as a *representation* of klezmer style, rather than a klezmer performance itself.

(Rubin 87)

The aesthetics of Elman's Jewish-American combination—a little bit of Jewish style enveloped by, yet distinct from, American style—is a nice metaphor for Jewish-American life at the time. The Jewish community was generally still distinctive, but Jews embraced the notion of living with a foot in each of two worlds, the Jewish world an accent to the American way of life.

The last major innovation of this period was the bar-mitzvah set. It was not until the late 1930s that the bar mitzvah became the major spectacle that we know today. When the bar mitzvah became "an event," as opposed to a simple religious ceremony, musicians were hired for the party, and had to put together music that was appropriately Jewish without being too reminiscent of the less-desirable aspects of the old country.

Though the repertoires for bar mitzvahs remained basically the same as for weddings, musicians scurried to add songs like Ilya Trilling's 'Semele's Bar Mitzvah' (1938), Dave Tarras's similarly named 'Simole's Bar Mitzvo' (Seymour at Confirmation) (1941), Chaim Towbera and Sholem Secunda's 'Mayn Yingele' (1935), and other bar mitzvah-themed songs by Herman Yablokoff and Boris Thomashefsky. (Sapoznik 124-25)

As with the transition to a bulgar-heavy repertoire, American Jewish preferences vis-à-vis even the most traditional songs and styles shaped their receptions, performances and interpretations.

In its first four decades in the United States, Ashkenazi Jewish music experienced profound transformations while retaining a core of aesthetic and stylistic values and performance practices that marked it as within Jewish tradition while having distinctly American characteristics. Furthermore, it primarily underwent these transformations in conversation with African-American-derived musical forms, and with American notions of blackness and its performance. These developments set the scene for what was to come for Ashkenazi music in the United States after the profound dislocations of mid-century: a continued engagement with Afrodiasporic sound in the context of working through notions about Jewish masculinity and racial identity that changed as a result of these dislocations, and a nostalgia-driven attempt to heal the wounds to Yiddish culture dealt by the triple blow of the mid-20th century.

Ruptures and reinventions

Between the late 1930s and the early 1960s, Eastern European Jewish culture experienced profound and traumatic change. These multiple shocks altered American Jewish priorities, lifestyles, and, of course, had an effect on music and other forms of cultural production. In Europe, Hitler's Nazi Germany murdered millions—with a special emphasis on, but not limited to, Jews—and destroyed much of European Jewish civilization in the process, as there were few survivors and they largely emigrated. In the aftermath of the Holocaust and of World War II, the modern state of Israel was founded,

with its myriad implications for diaspora culture. And American Ashkenazi Jews overwhelmingly left cities for suburbs both because they had become more affluent and desired the benefits of whiteness, and because they were forced out by the nationwide highway-building and other urban “renewal” projects of mid-century.

These three trends combined had the effect of pushing overtly-“ethnic” Jewish music underground. Wedding and bar mitzvah bands still “played the bulgars,” but the set was a throwaway for the older people, a nod to nostalgia as opposed to an integral part of the show. Immigration from Eastern Europe had slowed to a trickle by this time due to the 1924 passage of the Reed-Johnson Immigration Act, which imposed very small quotas. There were very few “greenhorns” who wanted to hear roots music from the old country, and so its appeal as popular music was limited (Rogovoy 70). “It was the age of rock ‘n’ roll, and very few of the older musicians were prepared for the new aesthetic. Conversely, hardly any of the young musicians knew anything about klezmer music,” writes Hankus Netsky of the 1950s and early 1960s. “In cities all over North America, the reigning generation of Jewish instrumentalists edged toward retirement, performing at fewer and fewer exclusively Jewish engagements for an ever-aging clientele” (in Slobin 2002, 20).

Nonetheless, the present-day reports of “klezmer’s” mid-century death have been greatly exaggerated. Many of the old stars were still alive and still playing after World War II, sustained by the business provided by Chasidic communities in New York. Reinvigorated by high birthrates and small but important groups of immigrants fleeing postwar Europe, and more determined to hold onto their traditions than ever, Chasidim continued holding shtetl-style simkhes. They generally did not produce musicians of

their own, and so kept the celebrated performers of the 1920s and 1930s busy, if unnoticed by non-Chasidic Jews (Netsky in Slobin 2002). And there was no shortage of jobs for Jewish bands at the still-thriving Catskills resorts, whose clientele expected bands to be conversant in both the bulgars and contemporary American pop styles. The ever-changing tradition continued, if somewhat less visibly.

More dangerous for the bulgars—soon to become “klezmer”—was the rapid ascendance of Israeli Hebrew culture. Yale Strom writes that “American Jewry looked to Zionism, the *halutzim* (Heb.: pioneers), and the fledgling Israeli culture to create a new Jewish consciousness, one that emphasized hope, physical strength, and the future. *Klezmer* music was thus no longer the attractive, inspiring music it had once been” (171). Zionist ideology had always been explicitly anti-diasporic: spoken Hebrew was resurrected from an exclusively religious and liturgical language, and Yiddish simultaneously forbidden in Israel (along with Ladino, Judeo-Arabic and other Jewish-diasporic vernaculars). New literature was written; Israeli “folk songs” and dances were created. Mediterranean-style food became more popular. New ideas about Jewish physicality and masculinity emerged: the ideal Jew, archetypally embodied by the kibbutz pioneer, was healthy, strong, outdoorsy, nationalist, and macho. And white: “the establishment of a Jewish state ultimately had the...effect of whitening the Jews in cultural representations of all sorts: America’s client state in the Middle East became, of ideological necessity and by the imperatives of American nationalism, a *white* client state” (Jacobson 188). Israel was posited as a new imaginary homeland for American Jews, more desirable and tangible than the Russian Pale. By their connection to a whitewashed “homeland,” Jews were able to enter the same section of the American

racial imagination that groups like the Irish occupied: as white people who retained particular ethnic practices. Israeli tunes and dances, catchy and easy to learn, swept organized American Jewish life, from youth groups to summer camps and synagogue parties—to the deliberate exclusion of the older Ashkenazi repertoire.

After World War II, American Jews were finally considered definitively “white.” In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the United States Census “carved out a special niche for racialized Europeans—they were not part of ‘Negroes and other races,’ but neither were they the same as ‘native’ whites. It created a set of off-white categories by distinguishing not only immigrant from ‘native’ whites by country, but also native whites of native white parentage and native whites of immigrant (or mixed) parentage” (Brodin 60). By the 1940s, the Census ceased to make some of these distinctions. Certain forms of racism and bigotry were no longer considered acceptable after the horrors of World War II, and all “native-born whites” were lumped into the same category, giving Jews of Eastern European descent an entrée into the category of unequivocal whiteness (Brodin 36).

Jews’ suburbanization and the increasing momentum of the civil rights movement sped up this process:

...the steady but certain ascendance of Jim Crow as *the* pressing political issue of the day brought the ineluctable logic of the South’s white-black binary into play with new force in national life. Postwar prosperity and postindustrial shifts in the economy, too, tended to disperse Jews geographically, either to outlying suburbs or toward sunbelt cities like Los Angeles and Miami—in either case, to places where whiteness itself eclipsed Jewishness in racial salience. (Jacobson 188)

The very real privileges of whiteness, however, came at the price of a rupture with traditional ways of living, for better or for worse. Suburbia was ethnically—if not racially—mixed, and the infrastructure of the traditional observant Jewish lifestyle was not as readily available. The mimesis that forms the basis for traditional methods of cultural transmission, from prayer to kosher cooking to music-making, was harder to facilitate without structural and institutional forces to encourage it, especially when the new infrastructure of Jewish life, synagogues and community centers, served as religious and recreational rather than ethnic-cultural centers.

Musically, this meant that the Jews who were not either Chasidic, or still traditional enough to want bands they hired to play the bulgars, listened to Jewish music—when they listened to Jewish music—that bore little resemblance to the bulgars that came before it or the klezmer revival that would come soon after. The most popular Jewish music was primarily what Sapoznik calls “killer schlock—the 1960s ‘surf-guitar-meets-klezmer’ LP *Twistin’ the Freilachs* and the Latin-infused dance record *Raisins and Almonds Cha Cha Cha and Merengues*. Among the records that exemplify such music are the cocktail piano offerings of Irving Fields. Fields’s *Bagels and Bongos* LPs were a vivisection of Yiddish and easy-listening music that created the monster of ‘Jew-zak’” (168). While Sapoznik’s feelings on the matter are clearly quite strong, it is fair to say that this music has not stood the test of time within much of the Jewish community.

Revitalization and “revival”

By the late 1960s, traditional Jewish dance music as such was largely invisible in much of the American Jewish community, and largely dormant in much of the world it

had formerly inhabited. With its most vital locus of contemporary performance in deeply-insular Chasidic communities, a few bulgars tacked onto the end of a bar mitzvah or wedding set was the primary (if not the only) way most Jews heard tunes that were not “killer schlock.” Yet for all its invisibility, Jewish dance music with roots in Eastern European practice was not dead—it just lacked energy.

This was not without good reason, given that Ashkenazi Jewish music suffered perhaps the greatest traumas in its history in the 1940s. Mark Slobin writes that

The thoroughgoing Americanization that overtook Philip Roth’s Newark is the most benign version of a pattern of radical disjuncture that includes the extremes of Stalinism and Nazism. Though it may seem strange to lump suburbanization/assimilation with cultural repression and outright genocide, a whole set of historical factors converged to reshape the klezmer’s tie to his community in the 1940s....But it is perhaps an overstatement to say that ‘the decades immediately preceding the klezmer revival are generally viewed as a wasteland’ ([Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998b:65]). Some of the repertoire survived in the *simkhe* celebration context and the small-label LP recordings of the 1950s and the 1960s. The gap was relatively short and the scene was quick to recover, especially in comparison with the European context of assimilation and suppression. (2000, 71-72)

To state that the recovery of the Jewish music scene was fairly short does not mean that it was necessarily easy. Slobin writes elsewhere of the shadows cast by lack of documentation, genocide, immigration and assimilation over the record of Jewish music in the United States, making the revitalization and recovery of the repertoire heavily dependent on 78s from the 1920s and on a few performers and scores. Though the

connection can reasonably be called tenuous, there was nonetheless continuity between pre-war and post-1960s Jewish music.

American Jewish music's historical tendency to respond to, and incorporate, contemporary trends from the American musical superculture made the languishing simkhe-band scene fertile ground for the folk revival that swept urban youth culture from the late 1950s through the 1970s. Former folkie Dick Weissman writes that "Although the urban revivalists did not view themselves as beatniks, they shared the beatniks' contempt for American mass culture. Most of the revivalists were either living in cheap apartments in the Village, or in various low-rent sections of Manhattan" (97). In short, New York was the epicenter of the folk community, just as it was the epicenter of the Jewish traditional music community—and Jews were as involved in the folk sphere as they were in the realm of Jewish heritage music (if not more involved):

The music scene was awash with fiddlers, banjo players, and guitarists, who, with their long stringy beards and intense gazes, looked like nothing less than students playing hooky from a *beys medresh*, the Jewish house of study. Playing century-old square dance tunes like 'Soldier's Joy' or gospel chestnuts like 'Hallelujah to the Lamb' came a tad too easy for this group of Kaufmans, Fingerhuts, Markowitzes, and Statmans, who sang earnestly of 'corn likker stills in Georgia.' ...For me, the only Holocaust survivors' child in the bunch, the music advanced my Americanness more than my brief tour of duty as a Boy Scout. (Sapoznik 178-79)

Just as involvement with jazz, blackface and swing had served to incorporate Jews simultaneously into American musical life and into the American racial imagination, involvement in the folk revival served to incorporate Jews into the left-wing, postwar version of whiteness. Paradoxically, this engagement with the music of the imagined

source of American whiteness—a tradition descended from Anglo-Irish dance music—served as a springboard for young American-born Jews’ reenchantment with Ashkenazi traditional music.

By now legendary, Henry Sapoznik’s conversion to the cause of klezmer was directly linked to his involvement in the folk movement. From 1973 to 1977, Sapoznik paid a series of visits to the “endlessly authentic” (as Sapoznik says) Appalachian fiddler Tommy Jarrell in Mount Airy, North Carolina, in the course of his quest to learn old-time banjo. During one of the 1977 trips, Sapoznik stayed at Jarrell’s house and was served a breakfast one morning in which nearly all of the components had been fried in bacon grease. Sapoznik politely declined to eat the food, and he and Jarrell

...parried and thrust with Tommy acting more like a Jewish mother than a hillbilly fiddler until, getting more and more exasperated, he blurted: ‘What’s the matter with you Hank? What’re you, a damned Jew?’ Well *that* sure got my attention....I stammered out: ‘Why yes, Tommy. I am.’ (181)

They discussed the involvement of Jews in the folk revival movement for some time, as many had similarly come to visit Jarrell, and could not come up with a satisfactory answer as to why old-time music was so popular among American Jewish musicians.

From the framework of this experience, Tommy had a question: ‘Hank, don’t your people got none of your own music?’ Until this moment I hadn’t thought about it quite that way. Well, of course we had our own music: the *khazones* I sang with my father when I was a kid; the *zmires* we sang in yeshiva or at one of the Lubavitcher *rebbe’s tishn*; the numerous melodies sung with gusto during Passover. There was the popular Israeli music, which I deeply loathed, and of course the music I remembered from my many years at the Catskills hotels and from my bar mitzvah. But where were the Jewish

Tommys and Freds? Where was *my* traditional music? I didn't know, but I meant to find out. (181)

Upon returning to New York, Sapoznik embarked upon what would become decades of research into and promotion of Ashkenazi Jewish traditional music, working at the YIVO archives, interviewing family members, traveling to Eastern Europe, learning fiddle, and founding the band Kapelye.

The concerns and methodology of the folk movement were grafted nearly intact onto the fledgling “klezmer” movement: historically-informed performance, “authenticity,” and rapid canonization of the early-20th century aesthetic as “traditional.” For the folk movement, “authenticity consisted of learning the repertoire of such a performer as Mississippi John Hurt and performing it as closely as possible to Hurt’s original recordings” (Weissman 13). For klezmer, the body of 78s produced in the New York area from the late 1910s through the early 1930s became the equivalent repertoire.

Despite the painstaking research undertaken by these early figures of the mid 1970s-early 1980s klezmer revival, the historical record has many limitations. The communities in which the music was embedded have themselves dispersed or disappeared (whether by choice or by force) and tastes have realigned, making claims to the “traditional authenticity” of historically-informed performance dubious. Mark Slobin writes that

The canon available to the klezmer activists who started revitalizing the music in the mid 1970s included three parts: a set of master musicians from the immigrant era who could be interviewed, a small but authoritative body of recorded work, and a handful of tattered folios and manuscript versions of tunes. First regarded as the ‘authentic roots’ of klezmer, this canon increasingly looks like offshoots of a musical grafting process that

took place principally in New York, headquarters of the recording industry and the Jewish publishing houses. (2002, 3)

The music of the era widely canonized as “traditional” and “authentic,” with its implications of purity and minimal assimilation—New York in the early 20th century—was itself rife with musical cross-fertilization, tensions between European and American practices, and ambiguity over the ethnoracial status of American Ashkenazi Jews, as previously discussed. Much of this dialogue with contemporaneous American styles like vaudeville and jazz in fact helped the Jewish music scene attain the level of vibrancy and commercial importance it enjoyed at the time. It makes sense that people seeking to revitalize the genre would look to its period of greatest popularity and dynamism as a model; however, the notion that that era was somehow the most “authentic” and “pure,” the most representative of the style, is somewhat misplaced.

Klezmer and “the end of self-evident Jewishness”

Once Jews were officially “white,” their primary identity did not have to be as Jews. Because assuming whiteness means, in part, giving up some if not all markers of ethnic particularity, Jews were not necessarily read as “off-white” by the 1950s. After World War II, Richard Alba writes, “the expectation was widespread that ethnic Americans would assimilate, largely along the lines of an Anglo-American prototype, and hence that consciousness of ethnicity would gradually disappear. This was a time when the melting pot was the prevailing image of American society” (1-2). By the 1960s, most American Jews were thoroughly integrated into American middle-class suburban culture, and the ways in which Jews were learning how to be Jewish changed.

At this point, the prevailing Jewish relationship to what had been “traditional” shifted dramatically. Old-world practices were largely no longer habitual; many that were retained were preserved consciously, as a matter of ideology. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett quotes Haym Soloveitchik:

[Soloveitchik’s] distinction between tradition and orthodoxy is relevant to a consideration of the klezmer phenomenon. ‘A traditional society has been transformed into an orthodox one,’ when what was a matter of course (what was once absorbed and habitual) has become subject to rules, formal teaching, and scrupulous attention to textual authority. The result is not ‘heritage,’ but a tendency toward stringency (*humra*). As a result, ‘Performance is no longer, as in a traditional society, replication of what one has seen, but implementation of what one knows’ ...What had been rejected as tradition would eventually be embraced as heritage. An ideological relationship to tradition among *haredim*, ultra-Orthodox Jews, as well as among the new klezmers arises from a ruptured past that ‘gave them free rein to create a familiar past of which the present was simply an extension.’ (in Slobin 2002, 136-137; last quote from Burke and Thompson)

The klezmer revival, like Jewish religious orthodoxy, made recourse primarily to textual authority—the masses of 78s, the few scores—and only somewhat to the practice of the remaining older musicians in learning and revitalizing the style. Furthermore, while the early klezmer revivalists were scrupulous in their reconstruction of the style, tunes and technique of the New York musicians of the 1920s, most of them (with the notable exception of Andy Statman, who became a Chasid during his quest to learn klezmer) have not chosen to live a traditionally-religious Jewish lifestyle.

The creation of “klezmer” out of the return to Ashkenazi Jewish dance music, then, is emblematic of larger patterns in contemporary American conceptions of ethnic

identity. Since the late 1970s, more and more white Americans have been engaging in practices that may be termed components of “symbolic ethnicity”: practices considered ethnically specific and significant, such as particular holiday rituals or the consumption of certain foods, that nonetheless do not conflict with most aspects of a contemporary American lifestyle and are not necessarily linked to particular “ethnic” social structures, such as heritage-oriented associations (e.g. the Order of Hibernians, the Sons of Italy), places of worship associated with immigrants from a particular place, or ethnically-homogenous neighborhoods (Alba 77, 121, 289). Symbolic ethnicity is a matter of individual choice, and multiple symbolic ethnicities may be assumed; that is, a hypothetical person who is partly of Irish descent and partly of Greek descent may attend St. Patrick’s Day parades, concerts of Irish music, and regularly eat Greek food, but attend a heavily-German Lutheran church and live in a predominantly African-American neighborhood, and consider herself both Irish- and Greek-American without issue.

Similarly, “klezmer” as a revivalist genre can be understood as a way of constructing a symbolic Ashkenazi Jewish ethnicity. Musicians or enthusiasts can perform or listen to klezmer in certain situations, but unless the person desires to be perceived as overtly “Jewish,” this affinity does not have to be evident to others. Traditional Ashkenazi Jewish dance music requires a community that has dances and celebrations and people who know the dances. “Klezmer,” its contemporary incarnation, only requires musicians and listeners. It requires individual inclination, rather than communal affiliation.

As such, though klezmer is firmly rooted in Eastern European Jewish cultural practice, it is a distinctly *American* manifestation of this heritage. As Kirshenblatt-

Gimblett writes, *heritage music* “distinguish[es] between music that is part and parcel of a way of life and music that has been singled out for preservation, protection, enshrinement, and revival...[Heritage] is a mode of cultural production that gives the disappearing and gone a second life as an exhibit of itself” (in Slobin 2002, 133-34). Recourse to “heritage” modes of cultural production is a typical means of expressing symbolic ethnic identity: klezmer performances and recordings are like the exhibits of which Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes, sites that can be visited at will and put away afterwards. “There’s something ironic—and very American—about the Jewish renewal and the secular Yiddishist movements, since they both depend upon a notion of the separability of religion and culture that didn’t exist in traditional Jewish life,” reflects klezmer violinist Alicia Svigals (in Slobin 2002, 213).

Klezmer is part of the latter movement, embracing as its sphere what Svigals calls “culture.” Yet this culture is almost exclusively limited to music, a music that has rapidly become commodified as part of the world-music market and exists in an imagined world that collapses the shtetl, the American city and the contemporary suburb. Like other forms of heritage, it reclaims and recontextualizes past identities by selectively choosing certain aspects of historical practice and silencing other aspects, then integrating the revised set of beliefs, behaviors and orientations into contemporary practice. Specifically, the klezmer revival has silenced an overtly-religious way of being Jewish in favor of a Yiddish-cultural way of being Jewish, which represents a distinctly white American, contemporary approach—a way of being American within the Jewish diaspora across space and time, and a way of being Jewish within contemporary American whiteness.

Why klezmer hip-hop makes sense

After the heyday of the folk revival came to an end in the late 1970s, hip-hop became the next major American youth music, entering the supercultural⁶ consciousness in 1979 with the Sugar Hill Gang's "Rapper's Delight."⁷ At the same moment that hip-hop was developing across New York, in Harlem, the Bronx and Queens, the klezmer revival was emerging. By the mid-1980s, after several rap and hip-hop songs had become major hits, Jewish artists unaffiliated with the klezmer scene had begun to engage with the style in various ways. The Beastie Boys became household names; observant Jewish musicians interested in outreach created parodies of major hip-hop hits that focused on elements of Jewish ritual practice. Despite klezmer's significant forays by this point into jazz, reggae and experimental music, hip-hop was not yet part of its core stylistic repertoire. However, the decades-old pattern of Jewish artists engaging with Afro-American-derived music as a method of engaging with Americanness and notions of racial positionality had begun to repeat itself vis-à-vis hip-hop.

Like other white Americans who participated in the ethnic revivals of the 1960s and 1970s, Jews began to reconsider their racial and ethnic status in the latter half of the twentieth century. Secure in the privileges of whiteness and driven to remember and preserve Ashkenazi Jewish culture in the wake of the Holocaust, many Jews began to re-identify as "white, but," "off-white," or "not-quite-white." According to Yale Strom,

⁶ After Mark Slobin's distinctions among superculture, subculture and interculture in his *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1993).

⁷ I largely ignore rock as youth music here because its early moment as youth music predated this revival, and because, although it had an extraordinary impact on American culture (including folk music and hip-hop) it was not a "youth movement" in the same way as hippie-folk and hip-hop are often construed.

“The growing diversity of the country and the rise of the African American and Chicano movements [in the 1960s and 1970s] shattered assimilationist theories and encouraged other ethnic groups to slowly begin to research and extol their own unique cultures.” He believes that this encouraged

many young Ashkenazic Jews...to examine and rediscover their East European roots. Some felt disillusioned about the political situation in Israel, and turned to these roots as an alternative. Others were tired of the focus of East European Jewish history and culture on migration, pogroms, and the Holocaust, and sought more positive aspects....Although many of these same disillusioned Jews wandered off searching for some kind of spiritual fulfillment in other religions and cults instead, others returned to Judaism through *klezmer*. (220-221)

Klezmer/Radical Jewish Culture composer and performer John Zorn has said “I think we’re getting a new generation of younger Jews who are proud of their heritage, who don’t want to pass for white, who want people to know that they’re Jewish...Their Jewish heritage is becoming a stronger part of their identity, and it’s becoming part of their music” (Rogovoy 163). Being Jewish and being “white” are certainly not mutually exclusive, and likely very few Jews of Ashkenazi descent would argue that they are not “white” in the American way of thinking about race. However, for some time now being “Jewish” has been much more appealing to many people than being “just white,” and music—as a performative, commodified medium that does not necessarily require as much investment as other ways of feeling ethnic—has become a primary means of being or feeling “Jewish.”

The same constant, historical drive to contextualize Jewish identity via music within the contemporary American experience has applied in the hip-hop era as well. But

just as it took Ashkenazi dance music in New York City until the late 1920s-early 1930s to engage with jazz on a fluent, consistent and meaningful level, as opposed to the smattering of often-clumsy parodies and novelty records that appeared in the 1910s and early 1920s, the emergence of Jewish hip-hop that has been able to blend hip-hop and klezmer stylings in a convincing manner has taken some time. It has not been until the early 2000s, after the maturation of both the hip-hop and klezmer scenes, that artists—like SoCalled—have been able to hybridize the two styles in a convincing and serious (as opposed to an earlier parodic) manner. Vis-à-vis this aesthetic hybridization, these artists and their audiences have been able to explore what it means to be Jewish within American whiteness.

The combination makes sense in terms of the historical Jewish dialogue with Afro-American musical styles and in terms of the concerns of each genre and of their audiences. Both styles started as dance and party music; New York City was the location of the formative years of both styles and remains a critical part of the imaginary landscape of both hip-hop and klezmer to this day, fostering a level of spatiotemporal and imaginary intimacy between the two musics almost from their respective inceptions—if not at the time, certainly in retrospect. Both are highly concerned with authenticity, both in the sense of historically informed performance practice and in the sense of being part of a community of performers in the tradition with deep and credible roots. Notions of authenticity here are also tied up in notions of minority masculinity and heterosexuality.

Additionally, both styles and performance communities share a concern with place. Abigail Wood writes of SoCalled and Solomon's album *Hiphopkhasene* that it “relies on a strong sense of spatial and cultural groundedness, which places not ideology

but identity and a sense of place at the core of the klezmer revival's agenda. Here is a revival scene at a point of transition, where identity and belonging are interrogated, and issues of fluency and vernacularity, borrowing and fusion are brought to the fore" (246). Hip-hop's association with strong sensibilities around place only strengthens and lends particularity to this priority of the klezmer revival, which deals largely in imaginary places and due to its heritage orientation cannot help but be somewhat vague when it comes to contemporary, tangible spaces. Forman writes both that "rap artists draw inspiration from their regional affiliations as well as from a keen sense of what I call the *extreme local*, upon which they base their constructions of spatial imagery" (xvii) and "space and place figure prominently [in rap and hip-hop] as organizing concepts delineating a vast range of imaginary or actual social practices that are represented in narrative or lyric form and that display identifiable local, regional, and national aesthetic inflections" (3). Jewish hip-hop artists are using many of these same organizing concepts and their aural signifiers in new ways: to construct imagined, diasporic places rather than to refer to the extreme local of lived experience.⁸

After thirty-plus years, both klezmer and hip-hop have become vernaculars in which young (North) American Jews in their twenties and thirties can speak and in which they—we—are becoming increasingly fluent (to which Wood alludes in her above quote). The revival is indeed at a point of transition; the older masters from whom the revivalists learned are largely dead, and the revivalists of the 1970s and 1980s, though still active, are considered the old guard to an extent, the traditionalists. The transition is

⁸ Discussions of utopian or imaginary spaces are, however, not foreign to mainstream hip-hop, although they often rely on additional tropes of science-fiction or space exploration to make their case. See Kanye West, "Spaceship" and "I'll Fly Away"; Lil' Wayne, "Phone Home"; and Kid Cudi's album *Man on the Moon* for some of the best-known examples.

not, however, so much in the Jewish orientation to musical fusion, but with respect to the materials available to blend and fuse.

The klezmer revival, for all its traditionalist, purist appearance, is itself the product of a blend between “Jewish” and “American” materials: it took the prevailing approach of the folk revival of the time and applied it to a different heritage music. With the passage of time, though, this approach looks increasingly less desirable to the younger generation and becomes increasingly less feasible as musicians pass away and retire. However, recordings from the past 90-plus years of Ashkenazi Jewish musical history in the United States are as available now as they were to the original revivalists—and have been added to considerably.

Increasingly, the main, or only, way to learn klezmer is through once-yearly gatherings and festivals such as KlezKamp (the Christmastime Catskills educational retreat founded by Sapoznik in 1985) or via recordings. How a musician learns is intimately related to how a musician is able to situate him- or herself within a performing tradition. Younger musicians learning via recording are, therefore, more likely to situate themselves in a given tradition via referencing recordings (either generally or specifically) in their work. It is a logical fit that a soundworld now predominantly composed of recordings, i.e. klezmer, is now being interpreted within an aesthetic, i.e. hip-hop, that regards recordings as central to its compositional and performance practices.

SoCalled (a.k.a. Josh Dolgin), for example, continually uses hip-hop sampling and beatmaking techniques to chop up, juxtapose and reinterpret old recordings; Wood writes that “The push and pull of cultural forces also continues within this texture: while

the technique Dolgin uses to create his beats is contemporary, the beats themselves are made from sound samples recorded from modern and historical klezmer drummers; traditional klezmer melodies are reworked into the *HipHopKhasene* ceremony” (256). By so doing, SoCalled is able to selectively archive, pay homage to, parody, and bring new meaning to old texts, and establish his credibility as a contemporary musician despite the fact that his primary musical talents are as a rapper and beatmaker. Once again, we have an example of Jewish musicians engaging with heritage materials vis-à-vis African-American-derived music, serving to contextualize the American Jewish experience within the 21st-century American experience.

Conclusion

The klezmer revival was one of four major responses to the decline of self-evident Jewish identity and mimetic transmission of tradition: stringent orthodoxy, the Jewish Renewal movement (a new age- and progressive-influenced religious movement), passivity, and the last (in which klezmer is located vis-à-vis contemporary music trends), the secular Yiddishist movement. This decline of self-evident Jewishness represented a significant rupture with previous modes of being Jewish. Previously an identity somewhat forced upon the individual by official government classification (immigration status in the U.S.; racial status in interwar Europe) and/or the pressures of living in a small, relatively insular community, assimilation and suburbanization allowed many American Jews to choose not to be overtly Jewish. This rupture required, in order for the persistence of any sort of Jewish identity, significant reinvention of Jewish practice—manifested as the four major responses above. The ideology of the folk revival

movement, which birthed the klezmer revival, required special reinvention, and fetishized an authenticity that the community grounded in 1920s New York Jewish wedding and theater bands. This masked the fact that, despite its heritage orientation, the klezmer revival was just as much a response to American popular music as other types of American Jewish fusion musics.

Therefore, klezmer hip-hop is not a corruption of, or drastic departure, from the sound of “authentic klezmer,” but rather an example of the same musical process responding to a changed mainstream aesthetic and an inevitable generational-temporal shift in methods of transmission. Furthermore, because hip-hop perhaps more than any other currently-popular genre deals with notions of place, masculinity and heterosexuality, linked to notions of authenticity, it makes sense that aspects of its style would be adopted in dealing with the same issues in American Jewish music and cultural trends. The continuum of the klezmer revival—the original, traditionalist sound, as well as its 21st-century hip-hop iteration and everything in between—is the secular-culturalist outcome of the tension between tradition and ideology that was brought to a head in the mid-20th century vis-à-vis the American-diasporic necessity of grappling with assimilation, an assimilation historically represented aurally by African-American musical styles. That outcome, furthermore, has complicated the picture of Jewish whiteness that seemed so secure in the immediate aftermath of World War II. By reasserting Jewish identity in conversation with African-American musical idioms, the members of the klezmer scene have made a musical case for hearing contemporary Ashkenazi Jewish identity as a way of being white that does not neatly fit into the extant American racial binary.

TEXTUALITY, TRADITION AND MODERNITY ORTHODOX JEWISH MUSIC IN THE UNITED STATES FROM WORLD WAR II TO THE PRESENT

Just as klezmer-revival artists situate their work within a story of the traumatic rupture of Jewish identity during the mid-20th century and make the case for their subsequent valiant revival of Ashkenazi ethnicity through music, Orthodox Jewish pop music artists tell a similar story of rupture and revival, one that has animated Jewish narratives from the book of Genesis through the present day. While they locate the points of rupture and revival in similar historical moments, they mobilize this archetypal narrative for a different purpose and use it to frame a different version of the story of American Jewish life.

Both klezmer-revival and Orthodox musicians agree that Eastern European Jewish culture represented a locus of ideal Jewish life in terms of piety and cultural vitality. They also largely agree that a version of this ideal culture was brought to the

United States during mass Eastern European immigration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, while klezmer revivalists celebrate and make recourse to the early history of Jewish music in the United States, reveling in its hybridized and often-parodic and bawdy nature, this engagement with American popular music and by extension American popular culture is seen by contemporary Orthodox Jewish authority figures as emblematic of a problematic trend toward secularization, and is regarded as such by the musicians studied here as well.

A widespread decline in American Jewish religious observance from the 1920s through the 1940s is seen as the first point of rupture by many Orthodox Jews involved in later revivalist movements. The second and third points of rupture, the Holocaust and mass Jewish de-urbanization, have been previously discussed but will bear some further elaboration later in this chapter.

While the founding of Israel and subsequent American Zionist fervor is seen as a significant rupture with Ashkenazi identity by klezmer revivalists, it is not seen as problematic by Orthodox Jewish musicians (nor by most Orthodox Jews, save charedim and some Chasidic sects). Rather, it is seen as a highly positive development enabling a reinvigoration of religious Jewish identity, and thus I prefer to cast the foundation of the state of Israel as the beginning of the revival period.

Music has played a central role in the kiruv⁹ and teshuvah¹⁰ movements that have sprung up since the 1960s. It has been considered necessary for Orthodox musicians and those engaged in kiruv to engage with the American musical vernacular of the day as a way of getting non-observant Jews to make an emotional connection with the observant lifestyle and to consider it cool. Furthermore, the Orthodox community and its musicians have negotiated contemporary popular music as a way of domesticating modernity and making it kosher for the Orthodox lifestyle, a lifestyle increasingly dominated by a totalizing textuality that requires the ideological conformity of all texts, oral, aural or literary, in its orbit.

Early Orthodox Jewish music in the United States

Before 1930 or so, when Jewish jazz became more popular than the old-world dance-band styles, “Orthodox Jewish music” was what we now think of as “klezmer.” Religious observance and folk custom—including music—were intertwined for most Eastern European Jewish immigrants. Klezmer was the music that accompanied Orthodox weddings and provided the soundtrack for Orthodox Simchat Torah celebrations. Extralitururgical music was not without controversy, as rabbinic commentators have interpreted sections of the Hebrew Bible as prohibiting instrumental music until such time as the Temple is restored in Jerusalem. Henry Sapoznik writes, “In

⁹ Literally “closeness,” Hebrew (transliterated). This refers to organized outreach movements by various Orthodox/Chasidic sects with the intention of bringing non-observant Jews into fully observant practice.

¹⁰ “Return,” Hebrew (transliterated). This refers to the flip side of kiruv movements: previously non-observant (or at least non-Orthodox) Jews who have embraced an observant lifestyle. The term for a person who has “returned” is ba’al teshuvah (male) or ba’alah teshuvah (female), literally “master of return.” (The plurals are ba’alei teshuvah (male/mixed gender) or ba’alot teshuvah (female).)

keeping with Jewish law for times of loss, [after the destruction of the Temple] rabbis decreed that Jews refrain from making instrumental music. The ruling—*ika shira b'pe* (major music by mouth)—spelled the beginning of rabbinic antipathy to instrumental music” (5).¹¹ This psak halakhah has largely been honored in the breach by most observant Jews; haredim generally adhere to it. Despite official strictures against instrumental music in most circumstances, klezmer music was an integral part of Eastern European minhag¹² and has been part of the fabric of traditional ethnoreligious Ashkenazi life in the United States, though its prominence and popularity has waxed and waned.

Until the mid-20th century, when increasing numbers of Ashkenazi Jews became affiliated with the Reform and Conservative movements, the primary religious and musical divide was between Chasidim and all others (who varied internally in degrees of observance but tended not to be divided by official movement). The rise of Chasidism in Eastern Europe was the first important rupture in Ashkenazi civilization in the modern era. David Roskies writes:

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the message of Jewish memory—if not yet the medium—went up for grabs. At the meeting of East and West, the great Kulturkampf began between the religious pietists, the Chasidim, who were taking Jewish Eastern Europe by storm, and the Maskilim, the undercover agents of modernity, two in a city, ten in a province. The landscape was transformed, not so much by Napoleon as by the Ba'al Shem Tov (ca. 1700-1760), whose legendary biography appeared in 1815. (2)

¹¹ This does not apply in the context of doing a mitzvah, such as a wedding or particular holidays when Jews are commanded to be joyous.

¹² Traditional communal practice, both in terms of religious law (i.e., the specific foods prohibited on Passover vary between Ashkenazic and Sephardic communities) and non-legal variations in practice (i.e. the specific tunes used for different sections of the liturgy).

The Ba'al Shem Tov, the spiritual ancestor of all branches of Chasidism, espoused a mystical pietist philosophy that prioritized kavanah (intention), personal communication with or relationship to the divine, strict adherence to the mitzvot as a means of effecting large-scale healing of the universe and the Godhead, which is believed to be shattered (tikkun olam), and joy, and most importantly, located religious authority and experience not in text study but in ecstatic and intense emotional experience. While Chasidic rebbes were and are often very learned in traditional texts and halakhah, as are many average Chasidim (benonim) of their own volition, study is not considered the highest end in life as it is for black-hat Orthodox.

This rejection of the prestigious, Lithuania-based yeshiva system as the means to religious knowledge, authority and experience was, of course, strenuously opposed by those of the Lithuanian yeshiva system, known as mitnagdim.¹³ The maskilim,¹⁴ the intellectual vanguard of the Haskalah,¹⁵ represented a third perspective on Jewish tradition, arguing for the adoption or adaptation of Enlightenment ideology—rationalist approaches to ritual, halakhah and minhag—and for greater assimilation into non-Jewish society. The mitnagdim likely listened to something like “klezmer” on specifically permitted occasions and only nusach and other liturgical musics in everyday life; maskilim advocated greater musical conformity to the surrounding, non-Jewish culture (hence the German Reform innovation of organs and choirs in synagogues). Chasidim, on the other hand, embraced both traditional and new music more enthusiastically than either of the other factions, viewing it as a means of achieving a transcendent connection

¹³ Literally “opponents” (Hebrew, transliterated).

¹⁴ “Educated” or “enlightened ones” (Hebrew, transliterated).

¹⁵ “The enlightenment” or “the education” (Hebrew, transliterated; from the root shin-kaf-lamed, “intellect” or “mind”). The Reform movement is a direct result of Haskalah ideology.

with the divine presence—especially the singing of nigunim, wordless melodies which could come from any source and only needed to be performed certain ways in order to be considered acceptably holy. Novel Chasidic repertoires developed—the chosidl, a klezmer dance genre, is derived from Chasidic dance rhythms, and several Chasidic dynasties, notably the Bobover Chasidim, are known for their male choirs. Despite these differences, the three groups shared a core liturgy and to some extent, a body of folk songs and dance genres.

These disparate attitudes, as well as these key similarities, came to the United States along with the diverse Jewish population that emigrated before 1924. With the exception of the few new repertoires created by Chasidim during the 19th century (some of which, such as the chosidl, were picked up by non-Chasidic Jews), musical difference for Eastern European Jews¹⁶ did not encode ideology as much as it encoded place (i.e., geographic variations in dance forms). Once in the crowded urban neighborhoods of the United States, these regional variations collapsed into “Jewish music,” with the salient differences being among dance music (often commercialized), home songs such as Shabbat table songs, and liturgy, including the commercial cantorial genre (which achieved a degree of success and visibility when star cantor Yosele Rosenblatt appeared in *The Jazz Singer*). American Jewish immigrants in this period also looked to European art music as a means of upward mobility, especially as violinists and pianists (notably Mishka Ziganoff, David Oistrakh, Vladimir Horowitz, etc.).

An engagement with American popular music during the early 20th century was often seen as a movement away from both Orthodox practice and Ashkenazi ethnic

¹⁶ Here I am excluding German Ashkenazic Jews, many of whom were Reform (or at least not Orthodox), generally fairly assimilated, and far more engaged in the world of art music than in the world of “Jewish music.”

tradition, which were intertwined. The split was not, as it is today, between different kinds of Jewish ideological engagement with American popular music; rather, the divide was between old-world and new-world styles, a divide felt by Jews of all levels of observance.

Orthodox experiences of rupture

Orthodox movements of return and secular-Yiddishist movements of revival share an orientation toward healing what they perceive as deep wounds in the complex mesh of halakhah, Ashkenazic custom, Jewish continuity, cultural vitality and the authenticity and validity of their contemporary personal notions of self, community and identity. Each looks to three key experiences of rupture; two of these are held in common. Both movements agree that changing attitudes toward traditional practice in the 1920s and 1930s as well as the inception of the state of Israel in 1947 (and, as an extension of the latter, Israel's victory in the Six Day War of 1967) were key turning points, but value each differently.

The United States, with its relative religious freedom, paradoxically proved corrosive to Orthodox religious values in the early 20th century. Jeffrey Gurock writes (albeit from an obviously judgmental perspective) of this phenomenon:

Once largely on their own, answering to their consciences, by the nineteenth century in places such as Germany and France, the Jewish law breakers became the majority as only a few stalwarts persisted in opting voluntarily to follow ancestral ways. A decline in religious observance—with all sorts of bold and even spiteful breaking of halachic precepts—also obtained among elements within East European society where freedom, through most of modern Jewish history, was a goal rarely reached. (4)

Jewish observance is intensely communal; given the level of discipline necessary to fulfill all of the mitzvot, and the counterintuitiveness of many of the most stringent regulations (for example, it is forbidden to eat shrimp but salmon is acceptable; linen and wool blends are prohibited as clothing; turning on the lights on Shabbat is “work,” but washing dishes is acceptable), external pressure is often what keeps the less-pious in line. Without this external pressure in most Jewish communities in the United States, the details of observance tended to fall away with increasing distance from the time of immigration.

Knowing this, Eastern European Orthodox and Chasidic rabbis largely attempted to prevent their followers from emigrating to the United States until it became clear that the Holocaust would make Eastern European Jewish life untenable. The argument was that America was a *treyfe medine*, an unkosher land where people abandoned proper religious practice and lost their Jewish identities. This fear was not without foundation for those who prioritized Orthodox practice: though most Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants were considered “Orthodox,” most chose not to follow all the strictures of their religion once in the United States for a variety of reasons, often considering the observant lifestyle a throwback to old-world ways that were unnecessary and undesirable in the United States. By the 1920s and 1930s, writes Gurock,

the minority of pious immigrant Jews literally died out. With the virtual close of the gates of immigration in the immediate post-World War I period, no new large cadres of strictly observant Jews were permitted to come over here to bolster the ranks of faithful immigrants. While the yeshiva community that began on the Lower East Side in the 1880s and was now situated primarily in Brooklyn, New York, survived and advanced among a staunchly dedicated second generation, and while an incipient modern Orthodox

day school movement began during these years, in the end, the youngsters who were involved constituted only the smallest percentage of America's Orthodox Jews. More generally, Jews identifying as Orthodox in America were largely oblivious to the demands of the halacha. (147)

In short, by the eve of World War II, Orthodox Judaism was believed to be on its way out in the United States, an untenably archaic lifestyle in a modern industrial-capitalist society.

The Holocaust occupies a unique place as both a central rupture and a central impetus for revival. First, it obviously destroyed the milieu that was considered the locus of authentic practice. Its occurrence, furthermore, became an existential crisis to many observant Jews: the covenant that God continually makes with the Jewish people throughout the Torah states that if the Jewish people follow the mitzvot, God will bless them with prosperity, abundance and many offspring and protect them from all evil. Furthermore, God is merciful and promises not to perpetuate wholesale destruction against the Jewish people in any circumstance. For observant Jews, this covenant forms a central foundation for understanding world events and personal turns of fortune. Rationalizing the Holocaust provided a major impetus for the turn towards greater piety that came postwar. This impetus was strengthened by the wave of ultra-Orthodox and Chasidic immigrants who finally decided to leave Europe during and immediately after the Holocaust and were determined to preserve and strengthen their new lifestyle in America.

Suburbanization, which as we have seen occasioned a decrease in ethnic identification, led to an increase in religious affiliation for Jews (especially during the early Cold War period, for obvious reasons). This affiliation, however, was decidedly

not with Orthodoxy for most. Instead, the Reform and Conservative movements experienced an enormous boom (Gurock 202-03). They provided more opportunities for women; their outlooks were more modern and Americanized and for this reason were also extremely attractive to those looking to retain their Judaism while embracing their American identity as well. Suburbanization remade the traditional Orthodox-ethnic model of Jewishness in the image of white American Protestant religious practice, a change welcomed by many in the Jewish community and strenuously decried by a small minority. M. Herbert Danzger writes that

The guiding principles of integration [in mid-20th century America] were no longer science, rationalism, and Deism but rather the practical applications of Americanism: acceptance of the language, clothing, and life-style of Americans. To gain legal and social acceptance, immigrants had to abandon their ethnic identity and adopt the American way of life. For many Jews and other Eastern Europeans, this meant redefining themselves as part of a ‘religious’ group—as Italian Catholics or Polish Catholics or Jews (Herberg 1960)—rather than an ethnic community with its own language, customs, and life-style. (23)

In short, assimilation to suburban whiteness meant erasing many markers of difference, including an emphasis on ritual, religiously-grounded customs of food and dress, and most saliently, the integration of ethnic and religious identity.

While the founding of Israel and subsequent American Zionist fervor is seen as a significant rupture by klezmer revivalists, it is not seen as problematic by Orthodox Jewish musicians (nor by most Orthodox Jews, save charedim and some Chasidic sects). Rather, it is seen as a highly positive development enabling a reinvigoration of religious

Jewish identity.¹⁷ The Six Day War in 1967, which marked a turning point in the stability of the young Israeli state, also marked a turning point in American Jewish attitudes toward Israel and, as will be discussed later, precipitated or enabled many aspects of the Orthodox Jewish revival and return movements. While this can arguably be seen as a rupture with previous Orthodox attitudes toward Zionism and the preceding slide into secularism, I prefer to cast the founding of the state of Israel as the beginning of the revival period.

The middle of the 20th century also saw ideological splits within the Orthodox world. The cultural gulf between Chasidim and non-Chasidim widened, with the Chasidim becoming increasingly insular in Brooklyn, Monsey, and other urban enclaves as they tried to recreate the lost world of pious Eastern Europe in the aftermath of the Holocaust. “Indeed, Chasidic contact with modernity did not result in secularization but rather in a strengthening of ethnic and religious boundaries within the modern context,” writes Ellen Koskoff (18). And the splits between Chasidic groups widened, with an especially notorious and sometimes-violent rivalry between Satmar and Lubavitcher Chasidim in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Lubavitcher Chasidim became even more separated from the members of the extremely insular Satmar, Gerrer, and Bobover groups when they began their programs of outreach to less-observant Jews.

¹⁷ This is both for sociological and psychological reasons and religious reasons. Many Jews feel a stronger connection to the broader Jewish community and to Jewish practice because of Israel; furthermore, according to halakhah certain mitzvot can only be performed when eretz Yisrael is under Jewish control or when the religiously observant Jew in question is in eretz Yisrael. Therefore, for those for whom it is a priority to observe as many mitzvot as possible, this political development enables greater piety.

Multiple high school-level Litvishe¹⁸ yeshivas opened in New York in the 1920s and 1930s and picked up steam in the following decades as an alternative to the perceived corrupting influence of the public schools. Some of these schools were seen as more pious or true to the Eastern European tradition than others; one, the progenitor of Yeshiva University, was widely castigated for becoming a university along the conventional American model that included humanities, social sciences, and physical and biological sciences along with the traditional rabbinic ordination program and full-time yeshiva studies. Many non-Chasidic Orthodox chose to live in relatively insular New York-area communities, sending their children to Jewish day schools and living, working and shopping in circumscribed areas, with many of the men spending significant amounts of time learning in yeshivot and assuming plain and modest styles of dress—the black-hat, traditionalistic or yeshivishe Orthodox.

Alternatively, some Orthodox (the “modern” or “modernistic”; occasionally “MoDox”) chose a fuller integration with mainstream American society, attending more-liberal Jewish day schools and then going on to secular colleges and universities and working in professional jobs while observing the mitzvot, adapting contemporary fashionable clothing to modesty regulations and often working to make the established halakhah as inclusive and progressive as possible (Gurock, Danzger, Soloveitchik).

This era marked the beginning of the major split among the various types of observant Jews in the United States, one that has not and likely will not be reconciled. By the 1940s, most observant Jews considered normative halakhic conformity to be far

¹⁸ “Lithuanian,” Yiddish (transliterated). Lithuanian-style, i.e. descended from the mitnagdic school of the Vilna Gaon and his successor, Rabbi Chaim Volozhin, who opened the Volozhin yeshiva, the best-known, most-prestigious and ancestor of many contemporary black-hat yeshivas in the United States and Israel.

into an irreversible decline, and believed that Judaism was therefore in crisis (Gurock, Danzger). Each of the diverse paths taken by Orthodox and Chasidic Jews represents an attempt to cope with the perceived crisis: at one end of the spectrum, Satmar Chasidim have pursued a policy of near-total isolation, forming their own incorporated, Yiddish-only village with little to no access to external media, and at the other end, Modern Orthodox regularly participate in nearly every aspect of mainstream American life, with only a few modifications. Other groups fall in the middle, tending toward a degree of insularity.

These ruptures, notably, are barely felt in musical terms, in stark comparison to the ruptures felt by the klezmer revivalists. Rather, these are seen as ruptures of religious observance that contemporary music can help to smooth over. Despite the fact that some degree of musical change did happen during the points of rupture, this is considered far secondary to the changing mores of the Jewish community (and, to an extent, wider American culture). The revival of Orthodoxy is, for the most part, not *about* music per se (as compared to the klezmer revival, which is nearly exclusively about music); rather, music is a byproduct and tool of the revival movement, albeit one of the most important tools and among the most visible byproducts.

Sounding revival and return

Beginning in the late 1940s and hitting its stride by the 1960s, the massive institutional efforts against secularization undertaken by American Orthodoxy—day schools, doctrinal stringency—were beginning to pay off. This coincided with a wave of interest in Ashkenazi Jewish ethnicity and Orthodox religious practice spurred by the

countercultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s, Israel's success in the Six Day War and changing American attitudes toward multiculturalism in the wake of the civil rights movement. A noticeable phenomenon of "teshuvah," or "return" to Orthodox and occasionally Chasidic practice by those who had not been raised strictly observant, began to take place in the 1960s.

Combined with greater halakhic stringency and explicit efforts at kiruv—essentially intra-Jewish proselytizing—by the already-observant (especially the more traditionalistic/black-hat Orthodox and Chabad-Lubavitch Chasidim), the zeitgeist shifted decisively toward a greater interest in "authentic" and distinctive ways of expressing Jewish identity. Observant Jewish engagement with popular culture was molded by this approach. Kiruv, especially, has relied on a deliberate use and/or modification of popular technology, trends and buzzwords to achieve its goals. Music, which lies at the intersection of observant Jewish practice, popular culture, and advances in technology (especially digital media) is especially ideologically and stylistically malleable and flexible. As such, it has been an especially potent tool of kiruv and a similarly potent expression of teshuvah, serving as a way to educate and emotionally engage those in transition in their Jewish practice.

The notion of teshuvah is a relatively recent phenomenon. Until the latter part of the 20th century, the overwhelming directional trend in Judaism was away from Orthodox practice. Most Jews have historically done what they have been raised to do, as have most people of any religious culture; the level of observance of the parents has been equal to or greater than that of the children. However, in postwar America (and Israel), those raised with little to no knowledge have regularly tended to seek out strict

observance—becoming Orthodox in greater numbers than those who become enthusiastically Reform or Conservative. Orthodox Judaism seems “to remain intransigently resistant to the demands of modernity,” which is perhaps part of the appeal (Danzger 2). But the return to this intransigent resistance is distinctly modern or perhaps even post-modern in form and impetus.

Most analyses cast the 1967 war as the crucial turning point in American Jews’ reenchantment with religious observance. “The awful terror of annihilation that preceded the war forged anew the unity between Israeli and Jewish identity. Israelis and Jews everywhere believed they were at the brink of another holocaust, but this time they were not merely miraculously saved, they were redeemed,” writes Danzger. “The religious symbolism of retaking the holy Western Wall after two thousand years was clear. Israel’s victory was interpreted in religious terms by secular and religious Jews alike....These events legitimated Judaism among secular and uncommitted Jews” (78-79). After the 1967 war, American Jewish support for, and identification with, Israel skyrocketed along, and interest in Jewish identity likewise increased. And the Six Day War, of course, came at a time when many Americans were exploring alternative lifestyles, especially those influenced by ritualistic and mystical spirituality. Concurrently, the civil rights movement caused many American whites to become interested in their ethnic backgrounds—a primary influence on the klezmer revival.

Jewish ethnoreligious identity, like other ethnic and religious identities, is of course intimately connected with musical repertoires and styles. Music’s semiotic slipperiness allows those interested in connecting with ethnic or religious roots to project their hopes, fears, history and needs onto it and furthermore has a unique power to inspire

emotional and communal connection. It makes sense that music would be both something to which newly-interested Jews and those engaged in kiruv would turn as a means of reaching out to each other and as an affirmation of the new identities that they are trying to build.

Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach's (1925-1994) career has become the model for subsequent Orthodox¹⁹ engagement with American popular music and, with some modifications,²⁰ for methods of outreach to non-observant Jews. Born in Berlin and educated in strict traditionalistic yeshivot in New York and New Jersey, Carlebach became a Chabad-Lubavitch shaliach²¹ and ministered to Boston-area campuses with his colleague Rabbi Zalman Schachter (later Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, a founder of the Jewish Renewal movement). Schachter describes an early outreach effort:

The [Lubavitcher] rebbe was talking about people in universities [in a speech he made at a holiday celebration]. I said to Shlomo who was standing next to me, "Next week is Chanukkah. Let's take the car and go to Boston; there's Harvard, there's B.U., there's Brandeis that just started. Let's see what we can do.' I got about a dozen old sets of tefillin fixed and polished up and some old siddurim that included English translations.

We had an accordion and an old tape recorder on which I had about an hour's worth of

¹⁹ I use this term here, and in general where not otherwise specified, to include those Jews who are shomer mitzvot, from Modern Orthodox on the left to haredim and Chasidim on the right.

²⁰ Carlebach's embrace of aspects of hippie counterculture is controversial among many stricter Orthodox Jews; he was also relatively lenient in allowing men and women to socialize together at his House of Love and Prayer, which has been frowned upon by haredim and Chasidim. Nonetheless, his philosophy of first presenting the most appealing, warm, communal facets of observance experientially (with a special emphasis on music and food) to potential recruits, and later introducing regulation and study, has become standard across almost all kiruv programs.

²¹ Literally "messenger" or "emissary" (Hebrew, transliterated). Shluchim are Chabad-Lubavitch Chasidim who are sent to communities around the world with the goal of providing Jewish resources and education to all interested Jews, and encouraging less-affiliated Jews to perform the mitzvot. They are most familiar to those outside the community as those who run Chabad Houses and those who staff "mitzvah mobiles" in New York and other major cities.

Chasidic music, and we made it up to Brandeis and started our thing...In those days I was the music man, having set the Lubavitcher niggunim [melodies] to some words like “For the fate of my soul, I search for a goal, and I find none other than You.” Shlomo hadn’t yet discovered his singing and music thing. So people would hear, for the first time, something like a spiritual with an Eastern European melody, and a feeling of davening. This created a fine spirit and people wanted to know “What do we do next?” (in Danzger 60-61)

Appealing music, as much as liturgy and ritual, was an integral part of the kiruv experience. It is no accident that this model of kiruv was developed by Chabad, which like other Chasidic dynasties puts great emphasis on the spiritual and communal power of music. It should be noted that whereas previous Lubavitch shluchim had primarily focused on maintaining the connection between the Rebbe and Lubavitchers in geographically-distant communities with little focus on non-Lubavitch Jews, Carlebach and Schachter were selected by the Rebbe to begin a new program of outreach to non-observant Jewish college students (which later became a larger program of outreach to all non-observant Jews) (Ariel 140).

Carlebach later founded a neo-Chasidic Jewish community and outreach center, the House of Love and Prayer (HLP), in San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury neighborhood at the height of the hippie era. His newly-composed liturgical music, a combination of traditional Chasidic melodies and then-current folk styles, became the backbone of the HLP’s services and musical practice. “In describing”—and, I would add, in experientially presenting—“the richness of the Jewish tradition, Carlebach and Schachter went beyond the particular Chasidic group that sent them on their mission. They incorporated stories, music, and folklore of other Chasidic groups as well. Carlebach,

who had musical inclinations, toured Chasidic courts, studying their musical heritage,” writes Yaakov Ariel (142). He began to compose his own music and to concertize widely, drawing enormous crowds of young Jews and non-Jews alike. On his concert tours, “Carlebach would invite young men and women he had met to his hotel for breakfast and would take telephone numbers from interested inquirers, spending his nights calling them. By the late 1960s, he and Schachter made dozens of converts, persons whom the outreach emissaries brought to take an interest in the Jewish tradition” (Ariel 143). Carlebach’s works have also made an indelible imprint on American Jewish liturgy, as worship communities from Renewal to Orthodox use many of his melodies today (some nearly exclusively). His overwhelming success at religious revitalization has become the model on which nearly all subsequent outreach efforts have been based.

As a result, most Orthodox musicians who are making explicitly-Jewish music share several key personal and stylistic characteristics with Carlebach. First, they are overwhelmingly male. This is based on halakhic proscription of public female performance of any kind (the law of kol isha b’ervah, the voice of a woman is akin to nakedness or immodesty), especially vocal performance (which is, of course, given higher standing according to the aforementioned law of ika shira b’pe, major music by mouth). Furthermore, from antiquity, the normative Jewish male ideal has been to study and then to teach Jewish law, custom and tradition.²² Because most of this music is

²² Daniel Boyarin fruitfully explores this ideal, and its intersection with Jewish nationalism and textual culture, in his *Unheroic Conduct* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1997). He writes, “The East European Jewish ideal of a gentle, timid, and studious male—*Edelkayt*—moreover, does have origins that are very deeply rooted in traditional Jewish culture, going back at least in part to the Babylonian Talmud. These characteristics, however, were not supposed to render the male even slightly unappealing, let alone ‘very unattractive.’ For Peskowitz’s American students, even American Jews, the gentleness of the rabbinic male can only be imagined as sexlessness, encoded as unattractiveness, because these

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aimed outward from the observant community, teaching young Jews who (in the words of the kiruv movement) “lack background” about Jewish practice, the performance of kosher pop is the performance of traditional masculinity in a very real sense.

Second, their music and behavior is occasionally controversial within the observant (frum) community. Koskoff, in her work with Lubavitcher Chasidim, writes of this type of hybridized kosher pop music that “Many of the older Lubavitchers and most of the lifetimers regard these types of borrowings as highly suspect, a little too close to the sexualized secular world outside the fence; but they will admit that these songs are effective in attracting otherwise unapproachable Jews to Chasidic life” (189). At the same time, in the Chabad community (from which many of these kosher-pop kiruv musicians come) the assimilation of music from outside sources and transforming it into Lubavitcher music is considered a mitzvah and an act that elevates the intrinsic holiness of the melody (Koskoff 77).

Additionally, several of these musicians have engaged in personal behavior that is considered suspect according to traditional mores. Carlebach was well-known for hugging both male and female fans at his concerts and for being lenient in the enforcement of traditional mores regarding sexual behavior in the House of Love and Prayer, which earned him a suspect reputation among the more-strictly observant (Ariel).²³ Aviad Cohen (formerly known as 50Shekel), a contemporary Jewish rapper,

students (like most of us) have been molded so thoroughly by the ‘dominant fiction’ of gender that our culture maintains. A gentle, studious, sweet man can only be imagined as old and nearsighted (i.e., castrated?) and could not possibly be attractive sexually. In the readings that follow this introduction, we will see that such a man is interpreted as anything but sexless within rabbinic texts; indeed, he is represented as the paramount desiring male subject and object of female desire” (2).

²³ There have also been persistent rumors that Carlebach molested and harassed women in his circles.

went from being a hipster-frum rapper to being a Messianic Jew in 2005, releasing several albums promoting Messianic ideology since then. He has largely been shunned in the Jewish musical community since that point for this obviously-controversial move (Cohen 12). The inherent ambivalence toward secular music in the American observant (especially Chasidic) community combined with several high-profile instances of taboo behavior among such musicians has led to the perception of kosher versions of popular secular music as a necessary evil in order to do successful kiruv; this music is generally not accepted or popular by those who have been observant since birth.

Finally, Carlebach's stylistic synthesis—using exclusively religious-Jewish lyrics and the occasional traditional melody within the broader context of contemporary American popular genres—has become the pattern followed by frum rappers, often to the point of parody of hit songs. Carlebach, in the mold of the folk singers of the 1960s and 1970s, set simple, singable liturgical melodies and Lubavitcher nigunim to folk-like guitar accompaniment. Likewise, in the late 1980s, the Radical Rappin' Rebbes transformed the well-known song “Wild Thing” into “Shabbos Thing,” an almost exact copy with lyrics about Shabbat practice. Matisyahu, for example, has created a rap-reggae version of the traditional havdalah²⁴ and Passover song “Eliyahu ha-Navi.”²⁵

The kiruv and teshuvah movements have spawned a Orthodox Jewish sound and approach to musical composition that is both novel in its contemporaneity and a continuation of a centuries-old Ashkenazi Jewish approach to making music in diaspora. The deliberate placement of Jewish textual content in American popular stylistic vessels

²⁴ Literally “separation” (Hebrew, transliterated). This ceremony marks the end of Shabbat on Saturday evening.

²⁵ The song title literally means “Elijah the Prophet,” who is considered in Jewish tradition to be the prophet who will foretell the coming of the Messiah. Therefore, singing this song at havdalah and Passover expresses the hope that good news will come in the coming week or year.

speaks to several important phenomena: first, the precise and savvy organization of those engaged in kiruv; second, the recognition by the frum community of the fact that, for most non-observant Jewish youth, American popular music *is* Jewish vernacular music; and third, by only “Judaizing” the lyrics and not the other stylistic parameters of the music, a prominent focus on text as the bearer of Jewish authority and practice.

Totalizing textuality

In the past sixty years or so, the American observant Jewish community has undergone a massive shift in what is considered authoritative, authentic and acceptable in religious practice as well as in attitudes toward, and participation in, the secular world. While traditional Jewish culture has always accepted various canonical texts as normative in structuring personal and communal behavior, this authority was often coequal to the authority carried by custom and community practice: “Custom,” writes Haym Soloveitchik, “was a correlative datum of the halakhic system. And, on frequent occasions, the written word was reread in light of traditional behavior” (3). However, since the mid-20th century, as a response to several communal experiences of pervasive and traumatic rupture, text has begun to carry significantly more weight than custom, often displacing custom and requiring far more stringency of behavior than was ever previously expected. Texts of all kinds, from the canonical works of Jewish law to auxiliary manuals, websites and new legal rulings, have come to structure observant Jewish life and practice in unprecedented ways.

This focus on text and the authority of the inscribed word has extended to Orthodox (including Chasidic) Jewish interaction with both traditional and contemporary

secular music. As described in the previous section's discussion of Carlebach's ascendance as a stylistic model for subsequent observant musicians working in popular styles, practitioners and listeners of kosher pop tend to locate the "Jewishness" of the music *exclusively* in the sung lyrics. Manipulation of the instrumental parts of each track is considered unimportant, to the point where wholesale appropriation and parody of everything but the lyrics popular secular hits is a frequent and acceptable practice.

This is in direct contrast to older techniques of kashering non-Jewish music. For example, Koskoff writes that pre-World War II Lubavitcher Chasidim in Europe frequently borrowed Romanian, Ukrainian and Russian folk songs from their neighbors and transformed them into nigunim (a distinctly Chasidic melody type considered to have the highest spiritual value within the community) through a process of altering their modes and adding ornamentation, opening motives and specific harmonization (95-97). In contrast, Judah Cohen describes contemporary Orthodox hip-hop's compositional practices:

Modern Orthodox musical parody artists Lenny Solomon and Shlock Rock, for example, issued a parody of one of rap's first chart hits—Newcleus's 1983 'Jam On It/Boogie in the Club'—on its first album in 1986, with the title 'Bless On It/Boogie in the Shul [Synagogue]'. In 1987, moreover, Shlock Rock parodied rap's first 'crossover' megahit—Aerosmith and Run-DMC's 1986 collaboration 'Walk This Way'—into a lesson about the Hebrew pre-meal hand-washing blessing entitled 'Wash This Way'. Both cuts, while incorporating the new lyrics, nonetheless retained much of the vocal inflection, instrumental accompaniment, attitude, and even stereo imaging of the original.

(5)

Occasionally, the rhythm departs from “La Marseillaise”: the anthem includes rests between phrases, and due to the overwhelming preference for melodic continuity in nigun singing, Lubavitcher Chasidim have lengthened certain pitches and removed rests to conform to this principle. Each section is repeated *ad libitum* to fit the performative need of the moment: the nigun section is used to keep the spiritual energy of the space at the desired level, and the text section is generally repeated twice per line of poetry in order to fit the meter. Finally, as the singing progresses, the (exclusively male) singers tend, unintentionally, to become flatter and flatter, as is the wont of untrained a cappella singers, often reaching quite distant keys within just a few minutes.

Shlock Rock’s “Wash This Way” is far more similar to the original it parodies, the 1986 Run-DMC/Aerosmith collaboration “Walk This Way,” than “Ha-Aderet v’ha-Emunah” is to “La Marseillaise.” The lyrics of the chorus are similar: “wash this way” is repeated over and over, just as “walk this way” is in the original, and the vocal delivery is a parodic rap. The instrumental part is also clearly intended to mimic the well-known drum and guitar solos of “Walk This Way.” However, it comes up short in replicating certain aspects: it is generally pitched higher, with a lack of fullness in the bass end of the spectrum; the track is almost two minutes shorter than the original; and the turntable scratches in the introduction are noticeably absent. Nonetheless, the explicitly-Jewish text is the musical change foregrounded in the shift from “Walk This Way” to “Wash This Way.”

This change in techniques of musical appropriation parallels other aspects of the broader movement toward textual authority in Orthodox Jewish life. A notable characteristic of the *ba’al teshuvah* movement has been its reliance on *yeshivot* as both

centers of recruitment and outreach and subsequent full-time centers of learning for those with little to no background in traditional Jewish study (Danzger). Yeshivot have, for hundreds of years, followed the same general pedagogical structure: small groups of men²⁶ study Mishna and Gemara together, comparing various commentators on the text and debating various approaches to deciding special cases under each point of halakhah. This is, and has been for centuries, a world created solely by its focus on text (and very particular texts at that), to the exclusion of all else. Before the Holocaust, full-time yeshiva study was an ideal achieved only by a select few, who had the financial resources and educational background to study in top-level European yeshivot for a period of time. Similar yeshivot were few and far between in the United States and Israel.

Some time after the Holocaust, ultra-observant immigrants from Eastern Europe (notably the centers of Jewish study in Lithuania) re-established these schools, especially in the greater New York area and in Jerusalem (Danzger, Gurock, Stadler). Especially in Israel and in the haredi communities of northern New Jersey (notably in the Bnei Brak, Jerusalem and Lakewood, New Jersey yeshivot), a multifaceted, newly-stringent attitude toward yeshiva study developed: first, that full-time yeshiva study was an ideal that could and should be achieved by all men, regardless of personal inclination, skill, or resources and often at the expense of helping to provide economically for one's family (in direct contrast to previous opinions, which held that only certain people could and should dedicate themselves to full-time study); second, that yeshiva study was the ideal way for the non-observant to become observant, as opposed to gradual mimetic learning; and

²⁶ Women are increasingly studying in yeshivot as well (albeit women-only yeshivot). In women's yeshivot, Mishna and Gemara are generally not studied, as this is considered improper; instead, they focus on Torah and learning the points of halakhah that are directly applicable to running a home (such as the laws of kashrut) and that are solely incumbent upon women (such as the laws of menstrual purity).

third, that the legal conclusions about traditional practice that were reached in yeshivot, often considered arcane and theoretically interesting yet without practical import due to their contradiction of custom, should be considered binding (Danzger, Soloveitchik, Stadler).

This recent fetishization of text has led to widespread stringency in the practice of the average Orthodox community where it had never previously existed. For example, strict interpretation of halakhah mandates that men and women be kept strictly separate during worship; women, so the logic goes, are an aural (i.e., kol isha) and visual sexual distraction that will prevent men from being able to complete their mandatory prayers with the proper intention.²⁷ Thus, in the most-strict synagogues, a mechitzah, or physical barrier, has always been constructed; the women sit behind it so as not to distract the men.²⁸ In the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, many Orthodox synagogues in the United States did not have a mechitzah, as it was considered an outdated stringency that was unnecessary for modern practice. However, Gurock writes that the “Orthodox Union [the national organization of Orthodox congregations and institutions] was proudest of the thirty affiliated synagogues that between 1955 and 1965 installed mechitzas; a move that one scholar then noted was ‘the first break in a trend that had been moving in the opposite direction since the nineteenth century’” (208).

This trend has continued until the present day. Danzger describes the experience of a Manhattan synagogue that has been a haven for both ba’alei and ba’alot teshuvah and newly-stringent younger Orthodox Jews:

²⁷ Orthodox interpretation does not consider daily or weekly prayer to be a binding obligation on women.

²⁸ In Modern Orthodox synagogues, generally the women are on one side and the men on the other, as opposed to having the men in front and the women in back. The bimah and the ark for the Torah are generally placed on the men’s side.

At Lincoln Square Synagogue Rabbi Buchwald reported that in the early 1970s, in response to persistent questions from women, he found it necessary to discuss the meaning and importance of the mechitzah in the synagogue about once a month. By 1980 the issue seemed to have faded—women seemed to be aware of the mechitzah and to take their seats on the women’s side without fuss or the need for directions—but the reason for the change was not apparent. (291)

By now, common practice has become so stringent that men and women are often separated by a mechitzah at social events (such as weddings and bar mitzvahs), lectures and other contexts outside religious services—a practice nowhere to be found in even the most strict older interpretations of halakhah but one which has gained such currency that mechitzahs are now regularly installed, for example, in concert venues (Gurock 242).

The evolution of notions about gender separation and, specifically, their expression via the shifting uses of the mechitzah are directly related to this text-based approach to Judaism. Whereas traditional practice had for hundreds of years not found it necessary to physically divide men and women except in the most perfunctory way in the synagogue, with the rise of this new textual consciousness, the Orthodox community has gone within the space of fifty years from having the occasional mechitzah in the synagogue to having imposing barriers as a matter of course at nearly every event. The text is here the source of the ultimate authority, as opposed to communal practice. This is perhaps partially due to the types of people who comprise today’s American Orthodox communities: first, those whose ancestors were the most committed to full observance and are thus still part of the Orthodox movement as it has “swung to the right” as opposed to having joined the Conservative, Reconstructionist, or Reform movements or

opted for complete secularism; and second, ba'alei and ba'alot teshuvah, who have learned their observance not, for the most part, through mimesis but through text.

Furthermore, this totalized textuality has existed to Orthodox interaction with contemporary American popular culture (with the notable exception of the Modern Orthodox, who tend to participate in mainstream culture with some limitations). There is a marked distrust of secular culture and its texts, which are considered polluting and a distraction from ideal religious texts. There has been a perceived need to produce the community's own auxiliary and vernacular texts—Soloveitchik's description of the “explosion of halakhic works on practical observance” that have been published in recent years is apt here, along with Chabad's savvy use of the internet to publish cartoons, short stories, Torah exegesis, and resources on Jewish daily life—as a way of protecting the purity of the central, canonical texts. Cultural productions like Chabad's Kabbala Toons both introduce people to the pantheon of important texts (here, the Kabbalah, the central text of Jewish mysticism and an ancestor of the major Chabad work the Tanya) in a way that is congruent with American popular culture, and provide an important buffer zone between the disparaged secular world and the exalted realm of divinely-inspired text.

Music, considered by Chabad and other Orthodox movements to be an emotional gateway to experiencing the divine presence, must be similarly guarded, with the liturgy, cantillation and (for Chasidim) key nigunim a parallel to Torah and Talmud. Kosher rap is here analogous to Kabbala Toons—a stripped-down version of older, canonical texts that is presented within the shell of contemporary and cospatial secular society, serving as a buffer between the kernel of authority found in the purest and oldest form of the musical text and the profanity considered to be located in hip-hop beats.

The net effect is that the locus of Jewish authenticity becomes timeless and placeless—a thread of text that, because it is anchored in a now-mythical Biblical-era Eretz Yisrael, can adapt to any time, place or, most crucially for music, medium. Furthermore, this authenticity is found almost exclusively in strict adherence to text (negating, for example, issues of stylistic appropriation from the perspective of kosher hip-hop musicians) as opposed to in more-nebulous conceptions of sincerity, heritage and a very specific notion of community practice in the shtetl and in New York City in the early 20th century for klezmer revivalists. Hip-hop and other American popular music styles provide a stylistic means for bringing this authenticity into a contemporary context without diluting its perceived purity and power.

Kosher-hop's mission and the new yeshiva bokhrim

Orthodox iterations of Jewish hip-hop exemplify the major themes and concerns of American Orthodoxy over the past 25 years. The primary goal of the movement, reinforced by recent revivalist and revitalist efforts, is to transmit (generally via text) what its members perceive as “unchanged traditions” in a way that comes to terms, however ambivalently, with the modern world. Furthermore, the ascendance of Orthodox K-12 day schools and the fact that kiruv began on college campuses shows the intense youth focus of this transmission. The text, obviously, must be transmitted to the younger generation intact under this ideology. Music that appeals to youth, i.e. hip-hop, is often considered a good way to make this text relevant; it is, however, only a first step, a vector pointing toward the larger canonical corpus.

The strong Lubavitcher presence in kosher versions of American popular music from the 1960s to the present shows the pervasive impact that diverse Chasidic movements have had on both the swing to the right and on late-20th-century outreach and return movements, especially in Israel (Danzger, Stadler). While the high percentage of prominent Lubavitcher Jewish hip-hop musicians is, as previously discussed, perhaps attributable to the strong formative influence that Shlomo Carlebach (originally a Lubavitcher) had on Orthodox popular styles, the Lubavitcher programs of kiruv that began in the 1960s and 1970s emphasized music both as an integral part of the Jewish way of life and as a way of connecting emotionally and joyfully to Jewish identity. Furthermore, musical practice is often an intrinsic part of traditional Jewish, and especially Chasidic, pedagogy and intra-gender bonding (the latter notably at *farbrengens*²⁹) and as such represents an important means of teaching those “without background” about Chasidut.

The musical processes that take place during kiruv and by and for ba’alei teshuvah have dealt with the sounds of the most popular youth movements of the past several decades: the folk/hippie movement and the hip-hop movement.³⁰ This is a slanted recognition of the fact that, as has been discussed, the popular music of American youth is, for the most part, the popular music of young American Jews and has been since roughly just before World War II.

²⁹ Explained extensively and evocatively in Koskoff.

³⁰ Incidentally, there has been a small Jewish punk scene in Brooklyn for quite some time that is following a similar stylistic model: similar aural parameters as conventional punk, with explicitly-religious lyrics. I would argue that it has not taken off in quite the same way as Jewish folk or Jewish hip-hop because punk is not typically associated with blackness and thus does not fit into the Afrodiasporic-music-as-introduction-to-American-culture paradigm to which American-Ashkenazi music has historically subscribed.

There is, however, a particular nexus of interest in pedagogy and outreach between Orthodoxy and hip-hop culture, which has perhaps been why this brand of kiruv music has proven so long-lived. While the earliest hip-hop was party music derived from Jamaican soundsystem practices, by the mid-1980s the subgenre of knowledge or message rap (exemplified by the work of Public Enemy and tracing its ancestry to the 1982 hit “The Message” by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five) had become important and widely popular. Often derived from Afrocentric Islamic ideology (notably that of the Nation of Islam and/or the Five Percent Nation), artists like Public Enemy, KRS-One, Rakim and the collectives the Native Tongues Posse and the Universal Zulu Nation had an explicit agenda of enlightening their listeners via politically-conscious lyrics about Afrodiasporic identity and issues facing the community.

Though since the early 1990s gangsta rap and pop-rap have become far more popular in relative terms, knowledge rap is still present in the contemporary rap scene and is often valorized as the “authentic roots” of hip-hop culture; this approach also informs an important sector of the dancehall scene from which Matisyahu draws, in which it is called “conscious” dancehall. Given that “The Message” went platinum around the same time as kiruv music turned to hip-hop, it makes sense that Orthodox musicians would have made recourse to this specific strand of hip-hop, with its explicit pedagogical message. In fact, the yeshivishe hip-hop group Black Hattitude used “its stylings to address issues of *Jewish* concern in a manner parallel to the ways their African-American neighbours addressed African-American concerns” (Cohen 7).

Again, this is not so much a transformation of tradition as its repackaging. Though Judah Cohen has written that “change in this context becomes a crucial part of

the religious and ethnic transmission and preservation process,” I argue that this change is only found in the outer wrappings of what is considered tradition; though the musical package has changed from Romanian fiddle tunes to hippie-folk to knowledge rap, the text, where authenticity is considered to reside, stays the same. Hip-hop, in this case, is an extension of a totalized, text-based culture via similarly text-based means of composition.

Via a lo-fi means of sampling—placing biblical and liturgical texts within a relatively new, hip-hop context—hip-hop represents a way of archiving knowledge and concepts deemed important in a contemporary context that is simultaneously oral and digital. Citation of canonical text both links new Jewish hip-hop to the timeless past *and* makes this element of authenticity the central point of focus in a musical style that would otherwise be suspect for its secularism. Yet, by situating an ancient, authenticated textual element in a novel context, the older text is similarly given a patina of hip that facilitates kiruv. In the more-recent past, observant Jewish hip-hop has reached a new level of artistic fluency and maturity.

While parodic and pedagogical elements continue to be consistently present, the mainstream popularity of artists like Matisyahu and the Israeli rapper Subliminal shows that Jewish hip-hop’s appropriation of the codes of cool has been somewhat successful. As such, this music can serve as a plausible Jewish alternative to mainstream hip-hop, both as a means of outreach and as a way to allow the “adherents [of Orthodox Judaism] a less threatening way to experience allowable elements of mainstream culture” (Cohen 5). The successful adaptation of ancient, valorized text to contemporary aesthetic norms

makes a case for its timelessness and its viability as a way of life in any cultural context.³¹

This assumption of cool (at least in the opinion of certain circles) also makes a powerful case for viewing Jewish hip-hop as a site of negotiation of new Jewish masculinity, moving away from Boyarin's conception of Edelkayt as the Jewish masculine ideal to a notion of masculinity closer to the exaggerated machismo found in hip-hop—albeit subverted with a good deal of parody. Hip-hop, as Judah Cohen has written,

opened a space for public, almost carnivalesque, negotiation of masculinity that fell in many ways along the same lines as previous discussions of Jewish masculinity: in one sense, artists aimed at emulating (and consequently embodying) societally sanctioned notions of being male; yet almost paradoxically, they also promoted an image of the Jewish male as a highly desirable 'other' that did *not* conform to society's images of masculinity. (8)

The performance spaces opened up by placing hyper-traditional texts as lyrics within the context of hip-hop allow for negotiation of the spirit, if not the letter, of the law as stated in these texts. The Jewish way of life as performed by observant rappers is fundamentally conservative, yet able to change its outer form in order to exist comfortably in a number of settings without changing its core tenets.

Conclusion

³¹ CCM (contemporary Christian music), of course, has a similar agenda to Orthodox Jewish hip-hop and often uses a similar approach of pairing Christian text with popular instrumentation and stylings. However, CCM tends to draw on rock much more than on hip-hop, likely for complex reasons of the racial, class and geographic demographics of its target audience (i.e., white, working- to middle-class, and nonurban).

Kosher hip-hop's lack of negotiation with the stylistic features of mainstream hip-hop, in combination with a near-exclusive use of canonical religious-Jewish texts and concepts drawn from them, is a neat microcosm of the lifestyle that many Orthodox Jews, especially Chasidim, have chosen to live in the contemporary United States. Just as a rap about Shabbat over a beat sampled from Tone Loc's greatest hit has created a space for Jewish distinctiveness within hip-hop's standard sound, the Orthodox philosophy of punctilious observance of halakhah (and often a totalized cultural system around the law) while selectively engaging with aspects of mainstream American culture has, in their perception, generally succeeded in maintaining Jewish distinctiveness within mainstream American culture. This maintenance does not require either Jewish or non-Jewish culture to change as a result of the interaction. In fact, it is generally preferable that minimal hybridization take place, in direct contrast to klezmer-hop's *mélange*, where both Jewish tradition and non-Jewish American culture are mutually constitutive, must change stylistically and can only preserve distinctiveness through a process of constant flux and hybridization.

This is a way for the observant to deal with the exigencies of modernity without compromising their perceptions of tradition and its demand, and even a way to make a case for the timeless relevance of their interpretation of tradition—if tradition can be rapped over a hip-hop beat, who's to say that it's not compatible with contemporary American life? Instead of, like less-observant Jewish artists, using contemporary Afrodiasporic popular music to learn about modern America and to negotiate a hyphenated Ashkenazi-American identity, observant musicians are using kosher hip-hop to teach America and assimilated Jews about *them*.

Kosher hip-hop stakes a claim to being Jewish *in* America, instead of sounding out a way to be simultaneously (Ashkenazi) Jewish *and* American. Thus, it represents a fundamentally different conception of diasporism than that of klezmer hip-hop. While for klezmer revivalists diaspora entails a constant process of negotiation with and assimilation and transformation of the host culture, for Orthodox musicians diaspora requires strict maintenance of the boundaries between self and other. Each perspective holds in common the notion that Jewish identity must be defined with and against the binary opposition of mainstream, in this case (secular) American, culture. I also suggest that these two versions of the poetics of diasporic existence are themselves a mutually-dependent binary. These two approaches to Jewish self-ness contain productive tensions that animate the rupture-revival-textuality cycle as much, if not more than, the exilic tension between Jewish self and non-Jewish other.

THE NEW PORTABLE HOMELANDS MATERIAL CULTURE, (POST)VERNACULARITY AND RETHINKING DIASPORIC NATIONALISM

The soundworld of Jewish hip-hop, which incorporates musical materials that span from the Caribbean to New York to Europe and the Middle East, united by old and new dance rhythms and a reliance on textual elements from the Jewish religious canon, expresses the social and communal realities, and desires, of its makers and audiences. It provides an aural answer to the question driving much of this community's contemporary cultural production: How can young (North) American Ashkenazi Jews express themselves aesthetically with reference to both their Jewish-diasporic heritage and their contemporary realities?

Importantly, though perhaps less obviously, the answer also lies in *recordings* proper, as material manifestations of this cultural production. From SoCalled's early musical formation as a DJ, to his serendipitous discovery of heritage music on vintage

vinyl, to his and Matisyahu's compositional practices, to the ways in which their music is produced, distributed and consumed, music as recorded, consumptible object is central to the diasporic and spatial projects of Jewish hip-hop and the identity that people derive from, and locate within, it. Music is central to, and frequently constitutive of, the secular-Yiddishist approach to contemporary Jewish identity; for the traditionalist-Orthodox, music is an outgrowth of a totalized, stringent ideological approach to being Jewish.

Furthermore, these new Jewish musical styles often self-consciously attempt to shift the discourse around Jewish identity and pop culture. Far from passively reflecting broader changes in Jewish culture, artists and the institutions that support them view music as an important tool for the creation of new identities. The label JDub, which launched Matisyahu's career and to which SoCalled is still signed, has been instrumental in the conscious formation of both new Jewish popular styles and in articulating the goals of this formation: "innovative Jewish music, community and cross-cultural dialogue," according to the company's tagline. A nonprofit record label that also does event planning and is affiliated with other cultural institutions, like the online magazine *Jewcy*, that cater to urban Jewish young adults, JDub and similar organizations conceive of "culture"—defined as the arts, media, and perhaps food—as the best way to transmit Jewish identity to the millennial generation. This is an identity primarily based on the purchase and display of semiotically-charged goods: records that are construed as "Jewish"; magazines that proudly, if ironically, cover Jewish youth culture from Sarah Silverman to the politics of hooking up with the Orthodox; and tongue-in-cheek t-shirts.

This is a perfect example of "symbolic ethnicity," a late-20th and early-21st-century phenomenon among many white Americans. That is, European ethnic identity

several generations after immigration is largely based on holiday foods and customs, festival attendance, and other sporadic and/or ritualized behaviors and purchases, as opposed to more-traditional ways of defining ethnic belonging, most notably the use of a heritage language as a vernacular.³² The performance and consumption of music in or based on European folk traditions, I argue, has evolved into a new type of ethnic vernacular for many white Americans and is located at the intersection of ethnicized symbolic consumption and conventional ways of conceptualizing ethnic groups as linguistic communities. As an inherently performative cultural formation, the centralization of music creation and consumption to American white ethnic identity in general, and more specifically for my purposes American Ashkenazi Jewish identity, decouples biological heritage from cultural memory and ethnic belonging in potentially destabilizing and productive ways.

These mechanisms are also at work, albeit in a different way, in Orthodox Jewish hip-hop. While fidelity to origins (however defined) has always been a prominent value in religious orthodoxy, the way in which this fidelity is constructed by and for Jews has changed in the past half-century. Mimetic ways of transmitting Jewish religious observance are based on the premise that each generation is a link in a chain that extends to the point of origin. With the breakdown of this chain, those seeking to preserve practices that they believe were laid out at the point of origin have made recourse almost exclusively to what they consider the faithful record of these origins: canonical Jewish

³² Underlying Benedict Anderson's theory that shared consumption of print media allows people to conceptualize themselves as part of a unified political entity is the fact that this entire community of people reading together must be reading together in a mutually-intelligible language. And of course, the reading-together principle can be extended to speaking-together, listening to music together, etc. Thus, imagining national communities is completely dependent on a shared language (or, in the case of the Jewish community and others, several shared languages) in which the media can be produced and consumed.

texts such as the Torah, Talmud, Mishnah and associated commentaries and legal codes. For Chasidim, these include the writings of the founding rebbes of the various dynasties, and the Kabbalah and other medieval mystical texts.

Musical text, and its material production and consumption, has become an important auxiliary to this text-dependent way of life. The performative nature of both the observant way of life and, of course, of its musical manifestations likewise makes a compelling case for the reconceptualization of the conditions of communal belonging. JDub's mission, "to create community among young Jews, their friends, and significant others by promoting proud, authentic Jewish voices in popular culture; and to offer young adults opportunities to connect with their Judaism in the secular world in which they live," likewise views musical text and its circulation as the foundation for a new type of Jewish community, one that coalesces around manifestations of symbolic Jewish ethnic and religious identity in popular culture ("Mission").

The phenomenon of new Jewish popular music—from Yiddishist to Orthodox to kitsch to punk interpretations of the Torah and new klezmer fusions—can be seen as a nexus of several processes: of Jewish self-definition in diaspora; of the ways in which Western youth construct their identities through music; of the importance of music as recorded object and economic product; and of the changing ways in which white Americans of European descent think about their heritage. It is in many ways a response to the profound ruptures experienced by the American Ashkenazi Jewish community during the mid-20th century as well as a negotiation of the contemporary music business, American consumer culture and an acknowledgment of the fluidity and performativity of cultural identity.

Furthermore, the ways in which Jewish hip-hop, and other Ashkenazi heritage musics, are serving as a vernacular of sorts to the worldwide Anglophone Jewish community provide an opportunity for rethinking the ways in which communal identities have been mapped onto physical locations in the wake of 19th- and 20th-century European Romantic-nationalist movements (in which I include Zionism and the formation of the State of Israel). The emergence of an imaginary “Yiddishland” from the musics associated with the klezmer revival, and an imaginary “Zion” from Orthodox Jewish hip-hop, provide a compelling case study in decoupling national identity from the physical and political, if not economic, state, and recoupling it to a hip, urban Jewish youth culture that goes anywhere new Jewish music can go.

Rupture

Four major historical events occurred in the 20th century that had a profound impact on Jewish identity and thus on Jewish music: a major decline in levels of traditional religious observance in the United States, the Holocaust, the foundation of the State of Israel, and, paired with an ideology of Anglo-assimilation, widespread suburbanization in the course of American postwar white flight.³³ Most saliently here, these ruptures caused a breakdown in certain key, mimetically-learned ways of literally and figuratively performing Ashkenazi Jewish identity in the United States, from ethnic customs to religious observances (which, of course, cannot easily be separated).

³³ As discussed in the preceding chapters, different contemporary Jewish communities have interpreted these ruptures differently; the ethnic revivalists tend not to be very concerned with declines in religious observance, and contemporary Orthodox Jews tend to view the foundation of Israel as a primary catalyst for religious revival as opposed to a negative rupture with past ways of life.

First, these midcentury ruptures marked the end of the widespread use of Yiddish as a vernacular. Most native Yiddish speakers in the language's historical heartland, central and eastern Europe, were killed or forced to emigrate during the Holocaust. Obviously, the organic transmission of the Yiddish language ceased in these regions. Perhaps less obviously, central and eastern Europe were no longer a source of immigration of Yiddish-speakers to the United States, which had previously kept U.S. Yiddish-language newspapers, literature, radio, schools and the like afloat—and kept the teaching and learning of Yiddish a priority in a larger segment of the American Jewish community. Furthermore, Yiddish was strenuously suppressed in Israel, as Zionist ideology deemed Hebrew the only acceptable national language:

...Yiddish has become emblematic of a way of life rejected and superceded by Zionism. There is a considerable history of Zionist derision and even persecution of Yiddish in the pre-State era, which continued for years after the State of Israel was established. In Palestine under British mandate rule, Hebraists denounced Yiddish as a language lacking in linguistic, cultural, or social integrity (a discourse similar, and to an extent indebted, to the German assault on Yiddish) and indelibly marked with the stigma of exile. (Shandler 9)

Yiddish, as one of the most-recognizable Jewish-diasporic languages, was strenuously suppressed in Israel and no longer survives as a vernacular language there. Instead, Yiddish has survived in several highly-ideologically-charged ways: first, as the vernacular of Chasidic and ultra-Orthodox communities, including in their yeshivot;³⁴ in

³⁴ The word “yeshiva” derives from the Hebrew verb root “to settle or sit” and denotes a place of study of religious texts. They are somewhat like schools in the conventional Western sense but generally do not formally evaluate their students nor provide any mechanism for “graduation” (though occasionally attendees are ordained as rabbis). The ideal is for men to spend all their time in yeshivot studying religious text as an end in itself (with their wives supporting the family)

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academic and revivalist circles, by people who perceive Yiddish as a threatened language that requires their preservationist efforts; and third, as a “postvernacular,” which has been extensively theorized by Jeffrey Shandler and in which guise it will be discussed at greater length later in this chapter.

Second, the Ashkenazi Jewish community has experienced a polarization in religious observance not seen since, arguably, the emergence of the Reform movement in early-19th-century Germany. Over the same period in which most American Jews became markedly less traditionally observant in certain ways—most notably in intermarriage taboos and the observance of Shabbat and kashrut—the Orthodox segment of the American Jewish community became, on the whole, much more stringent in observance and energetic in outreach to other Jews. This phenomenon of outreach, known as *kiruv*, is linked with the *ba’al teshuvah* movement (in which Matisyahu is a participant).

The Orthodox community, as a whole, has experienced a fundamental shift in its relationship to Jewish law and tradition in the late 20th century and into the early 21st. “The classic Ashkenazic position for centuries,” writes Haym Soloveitchik, was “one which saw the practice of the people as an expression of halakhic truth. It is no exaggeration to say that the Ashkenazic community saw the law as manifesting itself in two forms: in the canonized written corpus (the Talmud and codes) and in the regnant practices of the people.” Until roughly the period of the ruptures discussed here, custom and text were both considered authoritative; when they conflicted, custom frequently won

economically). Yeshiva University, however, is a full-fledged modern university and not a “yeshiva” in the traditional sense.

out (Soloveitchik 3).³⁵ Soloveitchik argues that the changes of the late 20th century are a culmination of changing historical processes of legal interpretation that began much earlier: “This dual tradition of the intellectual and the mimetic, law as taught and law as practiced, which stretched back for centuries, begins to break down in the twilight years of the author of the *Arukh ha-Shulhan*, in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. The change is strikingly attested to in the famous code of the next generation, the *Mishnah Berurah*. This influential work reflects no such reflexive justification of established religious practice, which is not to say that it condemns received practice” (4).³⁶

By the 1950s, however, this established norm changed decisively, with much of the change carried by new perspectives on technical points of ritual observance. Soloveitchik continues: “And then a dramatic shift occurs. A theoretical position [on these particular technicalities, previously largely ignored due to its disjuncture with common practice] that had been around for close to two centuries suddenly begins in the 1950’s to assume practical significance and within a decade becomes authoritative. From

³⁵ Soloveitchik writes of the traditional Shabbat practice of eating fish and picking out the bones. Sorting of any kind is forbidden on the Sabbath (whether separating wheat from chaff, the example given in the Torah, sorting laundry, or any other kind of organization). Separating fish bones from the meat is a clear example of sorting. Nonetheless, this practice persisted for many years without question despite widespread acknowledgment that it was technically in violation of the rules; the practice of the community was considered more authoritative than the text. However, since the mid-century shift in observance, many Orthodox Jews will only eat gefilte fish (which has already been processed to remove bones) so as not to violate the injunction against sorting.

³⁶ In the 16th century, Rabbi Yosef Karo wrote a manual on halakhah called the *Shulchan Arukh* that was the most comprehensive since the *Mishnah*. It is widely considered among the most authoritative works on halakhah by observant Jews. The *Arukh ha-Shulchan*, compiled by Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein, is a 19th-century legal code, also considered highly authoritative, that explains and comments upon each section of the *Shulchan Arukh*. The *Mishnah Berurah* was written slightly later than the *Arukh ha-Shulchan* by the famed Polish rabbi the Chofetz Chaim and is a commentary and practical reference on the first section of the *Shulchan Arukh*. It is also considered a highly authoritative guide to daily halakhic practice and is widely used in haredi communities.

then on, traditional conduct, no matter how venerable, how elementary, or how closely remembered, yields to the demands of theoretical knowledge. Established practice can no longer hold its own against the demands of the written word” (5).³⁷ Mimetic learning is no longer considered authoritative and, for those returning to observance from more-secular families, is nonexistent: texts are both authoritative and normative, and are often the primary source of halakhic information for those newly embracing Orthodoxy. Ritual performance is based on textual authority—a recorded, rather than live, medium.

Third, the spatial ruptures caused by suburbanization (and the other traumas that American urban life experienced in the mid-20th century, from the building of interstate highways to “slum clearance”) contributed to these changes in language use and religious observance. Many Jews moved from spaces widely imagined as exclusively and intensively Jewish (perhaps contrary to historical fact), such as New York’s Lower East Side, to suburbia, widely imagined as homogenously “white” (also perhaps contrary to historical fact). Jonathan Freedman discusses the pervasive effect that these imaginings have had on American ways of thinking about white ethnicity:

Sometimes these overlapping and mutually reinforcing processes worked in such a way as to Jewify a mass of heterogeneous cultural material; at others they worked to do the

³⁷ The example given by Soloveitchik is that of the legal category of the shiur, or “minimal requisite quantity.” This is relevant for observances like the requirement to eat matzah on Passover: how much matzah must one eat in order to have fulfilled the commandment? The Talmud states that a quantity the size of an olive—i.e. an unspecified, relatively small amount—is sufficient. For many centuries, as long as people ate whatever they and their communities considered a reasonable amount of matzah, they were considered to have fulfilled the commandment. However, in the 19th century a minor legal opinion was published arguing that olives were bigger in Talmudic times and thus the shiur had been too small to be efficacious all along. This opinion was largely ignored until about the 1950s—it was considered irrelevant, because who would question the communal practice of centuries? Since the 1950s it has been considered of the utmost importance and the standard for shiurim has nearly doubled, with increasing numbers of observant Jews taking care to eat a piece of matzah at least the size of the imagined Talmudic olive.

reverse, to replace a Jewish-centered discursive context with something quite different. Consider, as an example of the first, the nature and properties of that place, at once real and symbolic, we call ‘the Lower East Side.’ Even though, as Hasia Diner has powerfully argued, Jews were just one of the many groups who lived in that now hallowed ground (an ill-defined entity at the time whose actual lineaments extended broadly throughout downtown New York) and were the first to abandon it for Brownsville, the Bronx, and Westchester, ‘the Jewish Lower East Side’ has served as a metonym not only for Jewish American experience but for that of turn-of-the-century immigrants at large, uniting the very different races, cultures, and experiences that jostled there in one associational mixture in which the Jewish ingredient came to define the entire concoction. (8)

Similarly, the images of the JAP, of the “Jewish” suburbia of Long Island, northern New Jersey, and Cherry Hill, New Jersey—anchored by several Jewish day schools and southern New Jersey’s biggest shopping mall—have shaped American notions of postwar Jewish life.

The Jewish exodus from urban-core neighborhoods required a reorganization of the spatial dynamics of Jewish life. The institutions that supported traditional ethnic life and religious observance—kosher butchers, small synagogues that could be reached by foot—translated differently to the suburbs. Religious education became institutionalized, a matter of intellectual and textual transmission rather than mimetic. This is, of course, a gross overgeneralization. Much of Jewish tradition, ethnic and religious, takes place in the home, and people who choose to have any sort of affiliation with other Jews (institutionally or otherwise) tend to incorporate Jewish tradition into the home as well.

The key change has been in what is normative and authoritative; after the 1950s or so, it has definitively not been homebound practice.

This change in mimetic transmission of traditional practice also extended to music. As previously discussed, the conventional narrative of the “death” of Ashkenazi traditional dance music between World War II and the klezmer revival is hyperbolized; many older musicians were still active at this time, albeit primarily in Chasidic circles and/or largely performing American pop sets with a few traditional tunes thrown in at the end. Hankus Netsky writes:

By the 1960s, attempts to create new hybrids had become increasingly unsuccessful. It was the age of rock ‘n’ roll, and very few of the older musicians were prepared for the new aesthetic. Conversely, hardly any of the young musicians knew anything about klezmer music. In cities all over North America, the reigning generation of Jewish instrumentalists edged toward retirement, performing at fewer and fewer exclusively Jewish engagements for an ever-aging clientele. A different scenario played itself out in New York, where the burgeoning post-World War II Chasidic population gave musicians there a new musical outlet within the Jewish realm. (in Slobin 2002, 20)

Recordings were still being made, again albeit at a much-reduced level: there are a fair number of Jewish-jazz records and even more kitsch recordings along the lines of the aforementioned “Bagels and Bongos” from this time period. However, performance did not necessarily beget mimetic ways of learning in most communities. Few people had sustained exposure to Ashkenazi traditional music in a live performance context. Even fewer learned it: Netsky, scion of a respected Philadelphia family of klezmerim, was actively discouraged from becoming a klezmer musician himself despite showing talent on the clarinet from an early age. It was considered lacking in prestige, and perhaps more

importantly, an unrealistic way to make a living due to decreasing demand for live performance (in Slobin 2002).

This key rupture facilitated the ascending importance of recorded musical objects in American Ashkenazi culture. Just as written texts assumed singular normative and authoritative status for Jewish religious observance, recordings and scores, rather than live performances and teaching, assumed this role in the klezmer revival. The two major branches of Jewish hip-hop that I analyze work with this textuality and objectification in related yet distinct ways. SoCalled's work, an outgrowth of the klezmer revival, uses hip-hop's compositional and performance techniques to directly manipulate and recontextualize recordings, while Matisyahu's work (an outgrowth of ideological Orthodoxy) tends to make lyrical reference to the canonical Jewish religious texts, newly-invested with authority, while relying on the formal structures and aesthetic sensibilities of hip-hop and reggae.

Responses and reinventions

The ideological relationships to tradition that formed in the American Ashkenazi Jewish community after the major midcentury ruptures are not a new development per se. While the forms that these relationships have taken are of course specific to this time and place, the Ashkenazi Jewish community as a whole has had strains of a highly ideologically-charged relationship to Jewish tradition, both folk and religious-legalistic, since at least the Enlightenment (if not slightly before, with the notorious ideological battles between the early Chasidim and their opponents, the Mitnagdim). Enlightenment ideology—rationalist, empirical—swept through European Jewish communities,

especially in urban Germany, launching the Haskalah, or Jewish Enlightenment. The emergence of the Reform movement was a direct consequence of the application of Haskalah thought to Jewish tradition; the emergence of modern Orthodoxy as such was a reaction to the Reform movement. A tripartite battle among Chasidim, Mitnagdim (scholarly Lithuanian legalist traditionalists) and the Maskilim (supporters of Enlightenment principles) polarized Jewish Eastern Europe and laid the groundwork for the plethora of contemporary Jewish movements today, all of which deal with law, mysticism, observance and secularism in highly-charged ways.

In the late 19th century, left-wing, folk-nationalist, secular Jewish movements created another ideological approach to tradition, supporting the elements of folkloric culture valued by other nationalist movements of the era and minimizing religious observance. Political Zionism is a prime example of this ideology: inspired by the nationalist trend in the Europe of that era, secularized urban German Jewish leaders like Theodore Herzl began to theorize, organize and agitate for Jewish control over a designated area of land just as various communities in Europe were doing. Zionism was to be the nullification of the problems Jews faced in diaspora: religious observance was so unimportant that Herzl at one point famously considered encouraging Jews to convert to Christianity en masse to ease their integration into European life. Where the Jewish masculine ideal was studious and gentle, the Zionist ideal was muscular and virile, working the land instead of working over the text (not unlike the contemporaneous philosophies behind British Muscular Christianity). And Zionism was proudly secularist, viewing Jews as a community of biological descent rather than as a community of religious practice (or something in between). This secularist ideology, still felt in aspects

of Israeli life today, is partially at the root of haredi and some Chasidic opposition to the state of Israel.

Each of these ideological responses to tradition are distinct in their historical specifics, but can be seen as related phenomena, bound up with the oft-repeated process of transforming aspects of the usable past in order to preserve them. And each of these strands had, by the early twentieth century in the United States, more or less settled into traditions of their own, prime for a new cycle of rupture and reinvention. Rather than seeing the various contemporary American movements that spawned Jewish hip-hop as novel, I prefer to think of them in the context of this larger process that is deeply rooted in the multiply-diasporic Ashkenazi Jewish community.

Nonetheless, these movements that engage tradition, religious observance and folklore on the ideological plane are distinct and, as previously mentioned, historically-specific and –contingent. Both the contemporary Yiddishist and Orthodox movements engage texts (loosely construed) as authoritative and generally normative, and these texts are often constitutive of their communal self-definition (along the lines of Benedict Anderson’s theories of the role of print media in nationalism). Both of these ideologies take a highly specific, value-laden approach to what constitutes “American” and “Ashkenazi Jewishness” or “Judaism,” and both engage with Ashkenazi dance and liturgical music and Afrodiasporic music as a way of mediating between the two cultural poles that their ideologies establish. Furthermore, both ideologies are highly ambivalent about the effect of American society on their perceptions of what constitutes proper, desirable and traditional Jewish ways of life—and have equally ambivalent approaches to

mainstream ways of thinking about the Holocaust and Zionism, two defining issues for the American Jewish community.

Furthermore, both Yiddishism and Orthodoxy posit themselves as alternatives for American Jews to contemporary mainstream American (Jewish) life. Because this mainstream is so entrenched in its often-uncritical support of the state of Israel and frames it as central to diasporic Jewish identity (and safety), it is no surprise that Jewish territoriality has been a prime concern in Jewish hip-hop. Because so much of the Jewish identity that has been taught to the younger generation has been based on both suburban life and Israeli sovereignty, issues of land and space have to be a paramount concern for any cultural production that wants to frame itself as an alternative to this received identity.

Both types of Jewish hip-hop and the movements that spawned them view themselves as fighting against the assimilation and/or erosion of Jewish tradition, epitomized for them by the Conservative movement-suburban-Zionist mainstream; in the case of Yiddish revivalists, this is often couched in an overt rhetoric of hip rebellion, while Orthodox revivalists posit themselves as the bearers of original truth. Most pervasive in both cases is a paradoxical rhetoric. Both maintain that their position is continuous with past tradition, while simultaneously promoting a rupture with present conditions.

Postvernacularity

Since the decline of Yiddish as a vernacular, American Ashkenazi Jews have developed a new relationship with the language. While Yiddish carries very little

communicative or denotative value for most Ashkenazim—that is, few people are able to transmit or understand specific information in Yiddish—a matrix of affective and connotative value has developed around the use of Yiddish itself. Jeffrey Shandler terms this “postvernacularity” in his insightful 2005 book *Adventures in Yiddishland*:

What most distinguishes postvernacular Yiddish is its semiotic hierarchy; unlike vernacular language use, in the postvernacular mode the language’s secondary, symbolic level of meaning is always privileged over its primary level. In other words, in postvernacular Yiddish the very fact that something is said (or written or sung) in Yiddish is at least as meaningful as the words being uttered—if not more so. (22)

Yiddish as a language—and as a host of attendant forms of cultural production—has become inherently performative. It connotes a welter of values and emotions, especially old-world authenticity, heymishness, nostalgia, left-wing counterculture, and a carnivalesque sensibility.

The performativity, and associated signifiers, inherent in postvernacular modes of Yiddish usage extends to other modes of Ashkenazi-diasporic cultural production.

Material culture, especially in its kitschier forms, is also implicated:

Vernacularity is replaced here by the putting on (and taking off) of a symbolic second skin—a behavior that invokes, and yet is quite different from, a polyglot’s code-switching. Rather, these T-shirts are an example of ethnic branding, transforming the Yiddish word into a logo for folkhood. Historian Marilyn Halter suggests that this has become a widespread practice in the “new ethnicity” of the late twentieth century, in which people “construct their [ethnic] identities through purchase.” In this sense, some of these Yiddish items are also totemic artifacts—that is, they situate Yiddish (or Jewishness more generally) within a parallel array of identities similarly materialized.

(Shandler 160)

Purchase of T-shirts with Yiddish slogans, buttons, posters, mugs that say “Oy vey!” and other ethnically-symbolic artifacts, then, participate in this Yiddish performativity. The person who purchases or uses them can be seen as performing Yiddish in its postvernacular mode, and by extension a particular version of Ashkenazi ethnicity, without knowing the language or using it to communicate specific information. Linguistic performance, and thus ethnic performance, is not limited to performing the language itself in postvernacular-postwar America.

The contemporary iterations of Ashkenazi traditional music partake of this performative, postvernacular mode of Yiddish. The folkloric, heritage-oriented ideology around the klezmer revival, and the ways in which the revival of Ashkenazi acoustic dance music has been coded (as pro-diasporic, left-wing, heymish, authentic) is a near-exact match with the semiotics of postvernacular Yiddish. Shandler recognizes that “[t]he atomization of Yiddish has also expanded the potential for reconceptualizing it as a semiotic system, in which its signifiers might be inflections, melodies, gestures, or objects more than (or even instead of) words. Or it can be conceived as a sensibility, engaged solely at the symbolic, ‘meta-’ level of meaning” (195).

Likewise, religious orthodoxy is here being engaged at the meta-level of meaning, as a performative sensibility rather than as a mimetically-learned vernacular practice. Its postvernacular status is less dependent on linguistic atomization—in the United States, Yiddish is a vernacular for charedim and Chasidim, and Hebrew and/or Aramaic retain their status as religious-literary languages—and more dependent on conceptual atomization and pedagogy. Just as Yiddish is being transmitted in particulate form through the texts of material culture, so too is religious orthodoxy being transmitted

through text, now far more authoritative than vernacular communal practice. Here, the affected sensibility of fidelity to origin is more important than organic transmission. A true return to the originary lifestyle is, of course, impossible, both because we do not know how things really were thousands of years ago, and because what we do know (such as the ancient Israelite reliance on herding and farming) is not being replicated in today's ultra-observant communities. The latter has been intentionally ruptured as well, in the service of totalized interpretations of canonical texts.

Klezmer as late-20th-century heritage genre and Orthodox pop as organ of textual reinterpretation and outreach are precisely these atomizations and reconceptualizations expressed in music. Their performance and consumption are often more important than the older denotations attached to the music itself. For example, while in 19th-century Ukraine certain tunes would have been understood to signify particular sections of the wedding ritual or to have an obviously "Greek" sound, in the contemporary United States all of it signifies "Jewishness"—specifically a pro-diasporic, folksy, quasi-secular *hey mish* Jewishness. And when Shlomo Carlebach, Mordecai ben David, or Matisyahu use fragments from the liturgy over contemporary pop instrumental arrangements, they are invoking a sensibility of strict observance rather than a worship context.

This is emphasized by the changed performance practices and financial structures around klezmer and *kiruv* music. Before the 1930s or so, most Ashkenazi traditional musicians made their money by live performances at lifecycle and holiday events, at which most tunes were understood to have specific dance or ritual accompaniment. Since the klezmer revival and rise of Orthodox stringency, the most visible economic and performance practices have been Jewish-identified bands performing at clubs, festivals

and concert halls—generally more akin to how most contemporary American bands perform and make money than to how their predecessors made money. While people may dance to particular songs, they are generally not performing the dances originally associated with each song; most Ashkenazi Jewish weddings are not accompanied by old-style songs for each section of the ritual. The klezmer revival brought the sounds back, but has re-presented them in a new matrix of signifiers, finances and performance practice. Likewise, in invoking religious text in their instrumental arrangements, kiruv musicians have taken the sounds of traditionally-observant worship and re-presented them in new contexts.

Furthermore, the sounds of Jewish eastern Europe have been re-presented as ethnographic objects. This and attendant notions of authenticity are more commonly associated with museum collections—which attempt to portray a world that the viewer has not experienced in manageable, yet eminently real, chunks. We experience the Ashkenazi old world, and the world of perfectly-observant Judaism, through their metonyms, contemporary klezmer and Jewish hip-hop albums. Hip-hop is the prism through which SoCalled and Matisyahu filter these echoes of the past and the substrate for what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls “heritage”:

While it looks old, heritage is actually something new. Heritage is a mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past. Heritage thus defined depends on display to give dying economies and dead sites a second life as exhibitions of themselves. (1998, 7)

The echoes of contemporary American musical life—music packaged and sold as albums, hip-hop—are what allow us to domesticate and understand the echoes of the alien, Ashkenazi-traditional musical and ideological life.

Jewish hip-hop albums, then, are miniature museums, in the sense that they are a forum for (re)presenting ethnographic musical objects, however fragmentary, in a new, contemporary context. SoCalled has re-interpreted and re-presented the Jewish wedding and the Passover seder, performative ethnographic sites par excellence. Matisyahu does the same with liturgical melodies and Chasidic theology, translating them into the American musical vernacular. Klezmer and Orthodox pop albums from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s are perhaps the earliest examples of this tendency, in their desire to recontextualize and revive a fragmentary selection of old-world—or earlier American Jewish—life.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett provocatively argues, in this vein, that “[p]erhaps we should speak not of the ethnographic object but of the ethnographic fragment. Like the ruin, the ethnographic fragment is informed by a poetics of detachment. Detachment refers not only to the physical act of producing fragments but also to the detached attitude that makes that fragmentation and its appreciation possible” (1998, 18). The detached attitude, in the case of Jewish hip-hop, is facilitated by spatiotemporal distance from the imagined sources of Ashkenazi folk culture and, furthermore, by the binary created, and problematized, by the intentional hybridizing of musical styles rooted in contemporary African-American practice and Ashkenazi folk and religious culture. These musical practices also represent a detachment from the contemporary American/Jewish world, which for ethnic revivalists represents a loss of custom and for religious revivalists represents a dangerous and contaminating secularism.

The object-ification and commodification of Ashkenazi heritage production, then, is almost a natural result of this process of ethnographic excision and (re)presentation

taking place in Jewish hip-hop. It fits nicely into the contemporary “world” sector of the music business, allowing a semantic, if not semiotic, shift away from Jewish music as part of a traditional culture to Jewish music as one more option on the American commercial music scene. The semiotic echoes of heritage, authenticity, religious truth, and distance or other-ness that remain attached to Jewish hip-hop (and, especially, to klezmer) can be seen as part of a trend in post-1960s American consumer culture toward the purchase of “authenticity” and “the exotic” (especially exploited by Matisyahu in his overtly-Chasidic dress and personal appearance). The purchase of approachably distant, authentic, slightly exotic Jewish hip-hop is, paradoxically, quite consistent with conventional American desires and behaviors, while self-defining against these same conventions.

Musical consumption and symbolic identity

Far from just being an inevitable result of young musicians caught between several cultural systems, Jewish hip-hop in all its varieties represents a careful curation of styles and musical materials, designed to advance a specific vision of contemporary Jewish identity and culture. These materials are not chosen simply because of received tradition or passive assimilation from mainstream American culture. Rather, they have specific cultural and symbolic connotations that are understood to communicate deeper meanings to audiences and other artists. Likewise, we often choose one product over another not because of appreciable differences in quality or functionality, but because of what we want to communicate about our identities, our personal style and the groups to which we belong. Thomas Frank writes that:

Conformity may have been a bulwark of the mass society, but in the 1960s it was usurped by difference, by an endless succession of appeals to *defy* conformity, to rebel, to stand out, to be one's self. Advertising in the 1960s taught that the advertising of the 1950s had been terribly mistaken, that people should not consume in order to maximize their efficiency or fit in or impress their neighbors. Instead, consuming was to derive its validity from the impulse to be oneself, to do one's own thing (136).

This rhetoric is especially prevalent in the music industry and is embedded in Jewish hip-hop, both as heritage music and as hip-hop.

The notion of hip rebellion against assimilation—of returning to roots, of keeping it real, of following the correct path of observance—is central to Jewish hip-hop and much of American advertising and consumer culture. Roskies writes of 19th-century developments with respect to Ashkenazi heritage that “The stage was now set for [famous Yiddish author, playwright and folklorist] S. Ansky to map out a brilliant strategy for Jewish renewal: if the young did not rebel against the past, it would be lost forever” (76). This paradigm, spawned decades ago, is the theoretical blueprint underlying Jewish hip-hop.

Symbolic consumption is an especially important part of how two groups in particular construct and display their identities: youth and white ethnics. Youth culture is often understood to be the point of origination for many fads and trends. This is especially relevant with respect to music, particularly hip-hop, which has consistently been understood as a youth music for the past 30 years. Phenomena such as “wiggerism” are completely predicated on this notion. Jason Tanz describes wiggers as

white kids embracing what they see as the exceptional qualities of blackness—machismo, authenticity, and the notion that every action can have life-or-death consequences—to fill

voids in their own lives, without considering or assuming the suffering that lies beneath it...In other words, wiggers interpret blackness as an easily mimicked series of verbal and physical cues. (131)

This often-derided identity is constructed by racialized, performative behavior and symbolic consumption of music. Its fabrication is perhaps more evident than other youth-music subcultures because of its uncomfortable racial overtones and often-comic absurdity. Nonetheless, other identities are equally constructed by the symbolic consumption of music: any American high school has recognizable groups of “punks,” “emos,” and other social groups who likely come from substantially similar class, racial and geographic backgrounds, but self-define against the local norms via their choices of music, which allow them to create an affinity with each other.

American white ethnics—people of European descent whose ancestors immigrated several generations ago, but who still have some affinity for the culture of their ancestors’ country (or countries) of origin—likewise construct their affinities and disaffinities symbolically. This construction often occurs through the consumption of music, kitsch and material culture, and attendance at festivals and other ritualized, performative occasions. Shandler’s concept of postvernacularity has here gone beyond a meta-relationship with a heritage language to the purchase of material products as signs and symbols that serve a similar function.

Music in particular works very well as this type of product. More so than a bumper sticker or a t-shirt with a similar symbolically-ethnic message, music has an affective and emotional impact that meshes very well with postvernacularity’s affective capabilities. Music can be thought of as an equally authentic, communicative expression of a heritage culture as a language or body of literature, but is more approachable by

those lacking background knowledge about the culture or who do not speak the language. While understanding all the particulars of a musical style or tradition takes as much work as learning a language, it is much easier to enjoy, or be moved by, music without background knowledge. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, music is easy to commodify, whether as an album, a performance, or attendant material culture like a concert t-shirt or poster. A heritage language requires a community of speakers and strict religious practice requires a community of the observant, but the consumption of music only requires individual desire—though it is conducive to communal affiliation as well, making it, and access to its semiotic connotations, more flexible than a heritage language.

American religious groups, especially in their ethnicized variations—Orthodox Ashkenazi Jews, Irish and Italian Catholics, etc.—participate in somewhat similar ways of constructing a shared identity through symbolic consumption, an individual practice that links the consumer to a larger entity. Catholic kitsch, religious necklaces and tattoos, etc. are understood to communicate religious belief and practice in much the same way as attending Dropkick Murphys concerts is understood to communicate one's pride in being a Boston Irish Catholic. Bohlman writes that

it could be one prevalent characteristic of American religious experience that music provides text and context for the articulation of change beginning with individuals at the local level, even when this undermines the collective nature of some religious practices. To some extent, we might think of individuality and community actually existing in a sort of dialectic, synthesized by music. (in Bohlman et al. 2006, 251)

This musical synthesis goes beyond liturgical participation and performance; public consumption of music with or without communal belonging is often sufficient to accomplish this synthesis, which increasingly depends more on an individual's self-

imagination as a member of an extended text-based community than on an individual's affiliation with a local, practice-based community.

The blog *Frum Satire: Jewish Comedy* has multiple posts describing the various types of kippot (yarmulkes) and satirizing how the Orthodox community judges people who wear each type—black velvet means the wearer probably went to a strict yeshiva, and those who place the kippah further forward on the head are either gay, or lax in observance (Fried). This demonstration of religious practice via symbolic consumption often intersects with ethnicized symbolic consumption: hamsas, Celtic crosses and Italian-American Virgin Mary statuary are understood to simultaneously communicate the owner's heritage and belief system. Religious music, from Christian rock to contemporary gospel and, of course, Orthodox Jewish hip-hop is a growing sector of the music business; it plays a role in the symbolic establishment of identity as much as a chai necklace given as a bat mitzvah gift or a St. Christopher on the dashboard. While religious groups make demands on their members' beliefs, habits and practices beyond simply purchasing the "right" things, this type of consumerism in the service of self-imagining as part of a religious community is a fact of American life.

The consumption of both Orthodox and Yiddish-revivalist Jewish hip-hop is a way of engaging with Ashkenazi Jewish culture in its postvernacular mode. It is a form of communal affiliation—and equally importantly, disaffiliation from what is posited as "mainstream" or normative culture—that does not require much linguistic knowledge, or particular religious or ethnic practices. It is a style and practice that both mirrors and partakes of ways that American youth and white ethnics have constructed and communicated their ideas and feelings about belonging, and a way of bringing an

imagined past to bear on the present. And Jewish hip-hop's ideology of differentiation, rebellion and uniqueness dovetails extremely well with prevailing notions of how and why we consume different musical styles—and especially well with the allure that hip-hop holds for white youth.

Conclusion: Postvernacular identity and imagining new nations

Jewish-American music of the late 20th/early 21st centuries is unique in its historical trajectory not because of how it sounds, but because of how it is packaged, distributed and imagined. While Ashkenazi popular music in the United States has almost always been in dialogue with African-American musical styles, it has never been quite so decoupled from ritual events and performative experiences. Its aesthetic has been modified and reattached to contemporary American performance and distribution practices, commodified and objectified to a greater extent than its predecessors.

Rather than representing a “selling-out” of traditional Ashkenazi ethnic and religious culture, however, this development has created new ways for young adults to negotiate their simultaneous identities as American Jews and as Jewish Americans. This is both an outgrowth of Shandler's late-20th-century phenomenon of Yiddish postvernacularity and a means of integrating new, contemporary ways of sounding into an Ashkenazi-diasporic vernacular musical identity. Musical vernacularity here is less about an individual's performance ability than about an individual's consumption patterns and therefore his or her familiarity with and affinity for a particular musical style, here Jewish hip-hop.

It is, therefore, just as viable to construct a vernacular musical identity via purchasing music, being a devoted fan and attending concerts as by participating in musical production and performance. JDub has created an institutional framework for this type of (post)vernacular musical identity as both a producer of new Jewish music and a facilitator of postvernacular communal affiliation through its concerts and parties—a framework very much derived from the contemporary American music business, but with Jewish content.

In the case of the Yiddish-revivalist branch of Jewish hip-hop, exemplified here by SoCalled, this is typical of the ways in which white Americans seeking to claim an ethnic identity have done so—i.e. by a performative, symbolic identity often based on consumption of material culture. For many American Euro-ethnic communities, notably Irish Americans and here Ashkenazi Jewish Americans, this symbolic consumption is largely of music. Ethnicity, once thought of as dependent on participation in a linguistic community, is now often dependent on participation in a musical community. For religious-Jewish hip-hop, exemplified here by Matisyahu, music can represent a religious subculture's negotiation of the secular music world, and/or a desire to signify some type of affiliation with religious identity via reinterpreted trappings of consumer culture.

Musical objects constitute, for Jewish hip-hop, texts that can be read together, ways of imagining communities after Benedict Anderson's notion that "the development of print-as-commodity is the key to the generation of wholly new ideas of simultaneity" and nationalism (37). Just as "Yiddishland" is, for Shandler, an imagined community created when two or more people speak Yiddish together, we can think of Yiddishland as likewise popping into existence whenever someone attends a concert, listens to an album

or watches a YouTube clip of Jewish hip-hop. Here, an ethnoreligious-diasporic community is being constituted by the co-consumption of musical texts and experiences.

The communities created by Orthodox Jewish hip-hop are less a community in and of themselves than an imagined community that serves as a vector pointing toward other Jewish imagined communities. Jews have long been aphorized as possessing a portable homeland in a book, i.e. in the Torah, the Talmud, the Mishnah and other religious-legal texts; religious Judaism has long been a text-based imagined community in and of itself, one to which the musical texts of Orthodox hip-hop refer. This disparity is evident in the imagined spaces posited by both SoCalled and Matisyahu in their lyrics and album notes. Although SoCalled refers to Yiddishland, the Lower East Side of Manhattan, and key Eastern European sites (in addition to other cities with non-Ashkenazi, Jewish populations such as Marrakech), Matisyahu consistently refers to a mythicized Jerusalem, the narrative center of much of religious Jewish practice. His postvernacular interpretation of Zionism relies on the symbols of Biblical Eretz Yisrael to evoke a sacred community that is rooted in performative observance and time, rather than in space; the mythos upon which he draws is accessible through text and practice rather than in a specific place.

This reliance on textuality to define a community makes the choice of hip-hop as a performance and compositional style much more clear. Hip-hop's compositional practices work very well for recontextualizing, reinterpreting and rereading prerecorded musical texts. Given the intense reliance in postwar Jewish America on texts, and the primacy of oral textuality (as opposed to bodily mimesis) for pedagogical purposes, hip-

hop is a logical way of organizing and presenting Jewish musical texts to contemporary American youth.

This means of negotiating and learning Jewish identity is firmly rooted in late 20th/early 21st century practices of youth-identity construction vis-à-vis music. Furthermore, the ways in which artists and fans produce, perform and experience the music take their cues from the hip-hop business, and the American music business more generally. The images of rebellion, differentiation and authenticity associated with Jewish hip-hop are consonant with the discourse around musical choice in general and hip-hop in particular.

This impulse is clearly rooted in contemporary notions about white-ethnic “heritage” vis-à-vis mainstream American white (i.e., bland and undifferentiated) culture.

JDub’s manifesto of sorts states:

So we don’t know how to be Jewish. We don’t remember the rituals and we don’t know the language, but we still connect to the values, the struggles and the stories. This is where culture comes in. It is an easy and interesting access point that transmits our values....Culture has always been a vital part of Jewish life and community. But in the Twentieth Century, with very few exceptions, the Jewish Community has downplayed the value of culture as a valid means of connection to our Judaism. When Jewish voices did pop up in the mainstream, they were most often self deprecating or trivialized. Rare was the authentically Jewish voice of pride in a medium that resonated with the young Jews who needed it most.

In an age where celebrity is king, the opportunity for Jewish role models to emerge in the arts is about more than just good PR for the Jews. It is a chance to relate our values and history to the next generation. (“Background”)

This is a clear statement of gentle rebellion against the downsides of buying into white privilege: JDub wants to offer Jews a way to, literally, buy their way out of the homogenizing tendencies of American mass culture. This statement makes explicit the lack of Jewish vernacularity among young-adult Jews in the late 20th and early 21st centuries; on the terms of contemporary American ways of thinking about music and pop culture, it presents postvernacular ways of affiliating with the potential richness of Jewish identity and repackaging it for successive generations.

At least two formulations about the potential expressions of white, or off-white, identity follow from the story of Jewish hip-hop. First, the ways in which ethnic identities are created here pose a very real possibility that heritage-music vernacularity and consumption are replacing, or have replaced, linguistic vernacularity as the definition of, and primary means of engagement or affiliation with, European ethnic identity in the United States. Second, this engagement with European ethnic identity is a way of renegotiating, or negating, some of the trappings of American whiteness (especially the problematic aspects of white privilege and cultural loss), and it is being accomplished through a mashup of European heritage musical styles with Afrodiasporic musical styles. Jewish hip-hop, then, is a means of performing *away from* “whiteness” without necessarily performing “blackness.” (This does not, however, resolve questions of appropriation in how these performances are received.)

The use of English as the linguistic vernacular of this Ashkenazi Jewish musical vernacular culture provides unique opportunities for communal self-definition. In Yiddish, “Yiddish” means both Jewishness as ethnicity and Judaism as religious belief and practice; they are inseparable. In English, the fact that “Yiddish” and “Jewish” are

semantically and semiotically different terms has allowed for a bifurcation of heritage and traditionalist movements along purely-religious and purely-ethnic lines in ways that other places, times and linguistic vernaculars did not. The musical community that SoCalled represents has laid claim to “Yiddish” identity, while that of Matisyahu has laid claim (with somewhat more difficulty) to authoritatively “Jewish” identity. The two major varieties of Jewish hip-hop represent different visions of contemporary American Jewishness or Judaism, making recourse to different strands of Jewish history to promote their version of Jewish-diasporic reality and possibility.

While Jewish hip-hop is ostensibly about Jewish identity, it speaks as much, if not more, to contemporary American white identity, especially if “America” is understood in the way Jonathan Freedman and others understand it, as a nexus of multiple diasporas. In its creation of an imagined, not-quite-white, distinctively diasporic community, Jewish hip-hop posits a new Jewish homeland, one not tied to speech or place, but one that is ontologically performative. Just as SoCalled wills Yiddishland into being to host the wedding of fiddle and microphone on his album *Hiphopkhasene*, or Matisyahu sings directly to an imagined Jerusalem on his aptly-titled *No Place to Be*, Jewish hip-hop creates new nations that are no less real for not having geographic locations.

I sing Jewish songs, um, well, actually I sing in twenty-one languages, I sing of many cultures but I sing Jewish songs not because they are better songs than the songs of my neighbor. I sing them because they're mine, and unless I sing them, that part of the culture will vanish, and that wonderful meadow with proliferating flowers, with a profusion of flowers, will have the Jewish flower missing.

That's why I sing Jewish songs.

(...)

Some of the songs are songs of nostalgia for a world that existed for a very long time, and no longer is inaccessible [*sic*] or no longer is even on the map anymore. Belz...is a little town or shtetl that they used to call, and, uh, the person recalls the days that he spent there as a boy and he remembers going to the pond with the other boys, and throwing stones into the pond. But now, the, the roof is leaky, there's no, no uh, panes in the window, and, uh, everything seems gone but he, uh, what is still there is the memory.

--excerpt of Theodore Bikel sample from "(Rock The) Belz," from SoCalled's 2007 album *Ghettoblaster*

CASE STUDY: SOCALLED

In Canadian-Jewish MC SoCalled's track "(Rock The) Belz," samples of actor and Jewish folk musician Theodore Bikel waxing nostalgic about Eastern European Jewish culture vis-à-vis his cover of the classic, early-20th century Yiddish theatre song "Belz, Mayn Shtetele Belz" take up all but 44 seconds of the five-minute, eleven-second song; a solid one minute and 48 seconds at the beginning are all Bikel, and the rest of the track juxtaposes his words with SoCalled's beats and aggressive-sounding French-language rap. Near the middle of the track, between long Bikel samples, is a brief interlude by SoCalled, reflecting on his own sheltered childhood:

Everyone's talking about the good old days

Every Friday night we're staying up too late

Can't get a ride from Mom so you make the whole crew wait

Bonfire, pool party, PDA's, spring breaks

Runnin' through the forest jumping in lakes
We were spoiled, upper middle class, livin' a life of ease
Worst case scenario, yo, we're skinnin' our knees
I think today if I could, I would run back
But it's never the same when you try to come back

Bikel and SoCalled share a bittersweet orientation toward the past of which they sing: a world to which they might like to return, but which is irrevocably changed.

The Bikel quote that opens the track (the first paragraph in the above excerpt) frames these motivations nicely. There is nothing inherently special or better in absolute terms about these Jewish songs and memories. But they are Bikel's own—if not personally, they are part of the collective memory of the Ashkenazi Jewish culture with which he identifies. In performing his heritage-oriented Jewish repertoire, he keeps alive a past that can only exist in imagination and memory. The windows may be broken in the houses of the present-day, real-life Belz, but in the world conjured by the traditional song they are unequivocally whole.

By choosing these particular samples, SoCalled frames his project quite explicitly, using Bikel's words to lay out his motivations: he performs Jewish music, a hip-hop-ified style of klezmer or perhaps a klezmer-ified style of hip-hop, not because it has any particular qualities that make it better than any other style, but because it is *his* music, or at least because he claims it as his music. By juxtaposing Bikel's perspective—a mid-20th century icon of prewar European Jewish and early Israeli culture—with his own relatively-privileged and less overtly “ethnic” late-20th century childhood experience, SoCalled situates his own, and his generation's, experience in a continuum of Jewish

cultural memory, and implies its inauthenticity relative to previous eras of Jewish experience.

But whereas Bikel claims a nostalgic Yiddish theatre song as his own music, and performs it very traditionally, SoCalled's reinterpretation of the same song, and by implication what he claims as his music, is distinctly different. Instead of "Belz, Mayn Shtetele Belz," he titles it "(Rock The) Belz," a clear nod to the popular annual hip-hop festival, Rock the Bells, that began in 2003 ("Event Overview"). By including Bikel and snippets of a more-classic interpretation of "Belz, Mayn Shtetele Belz," SoCalled is claiming continuity with that tradition, but also claiming belonging within contemporary hip-hop culture through the track's title, use of French-language rap samples, and his own rapping. Finally, by making his beats from samples of klezmer and 20th-century Jewish dance-band drummers, SoCalled establishes continuity with the late-20th-century klezmer revival.

In fact, much of SoCalled's oeuvre can be seen as a contemporary continuation of the klezmer revival. Like the revival, SoCalled's brand of klezmer-hop is an attempt to musically situate Ashkenazi-diasporic ethnic identity within mainstream North American culture, and to work through how to live with a foot in each world. His work takes a complex view of 21st-century Jewish ethnoreligious identity and deploys, sometimes ironically, a postmodernist pastiche of references to Jewish and mainstream culture past and present in order to imagine a specifically 21st-century metropolitan, North American Anglophone identity that is able to contextualize Jewish cultural memory and contemporary experience.

Several key themes can be teased out from—and at times are strategically used within—SoCalled’s work and are crucial to understanding how it operates: memory and forgetting; his performance of a gendered racial-ethnic identity; authenticity; and (ironic) imagination. As SoCalled works through these concepts, a new picture of 21st-century Jewishness emerges: a distinct, complex Yiddish identity within North American not-quite-whiteness, highly gendered and ambivalent, and creating its broader community through strategic deployment of print-capitalism and consumptible symbolic ethnicity within an urban youth culture.

Memory

Memory, both personal and collective, is a thread that binds together all of SoCalled’s recorded work. His 2005 album *The SoCalled Seder: A Hip-Hop Haggadah* explicitly focuses on the transmission of cultural memory. There is a vignette in Rodger Kamenetz’s 1994 bestseller *The Jew in the Lotus* about a conversation that Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, one of the founders of the Jewish Renewal movement and a major presence in the American Jewish community over the last 40-plus years, had with the Dalai Lama on a trip to India in the early 1990s. The Dalai Lama was concerned that in exile, Tibetan Buddhists would lose a sense of key events in their history—would lose important aspects of collective memory—unless a major intervention were staged. Schachter-Shalomi suggested that something along the lines of the haggadah, the ritualized retelling of the Biblical story of the Hebrews’ freedom from slavery in Egypt and subsequent journey into the “promised land” of Israel that takes place at the Passover table each year, be developed for the Dalai Lama’s community, saying that the haggadah

was among the best technologies ever developed for such preservation of memory in diaspora.

The haggadah has historically been revised and rewritten by different Jewish communities in order to emphasize particular themes or to address social concerns of the day. In its early years, the Reform movement created a haggadah to reflect its theological innovations; early kibbutzim wrote Zionist, agricultural haggadot³⁸; and since the 1960s-1970s there have been feminist haggadot, LGBT haggadot, haggadot that incorporate the story of the African-American civil rights movement, etc. Thus, while a hip-hop haggadah is a novelty, the notion of revising or adding to the ritual retelling of the Exodus is common practice within Judaism.³⁹

Furthermore, the observance of the Passover seder is considered one of the hallmarks of North American Jewish identification: a 2004 structural analysis of American Jewish identity and behavior found that synagogue attendance on Yom Kippur, regular discussion of Israel, and observance of the holidays of Chanukah and Passover are common denominators of Jewish identity—across movement, level of religious observance, area of the country, intermarriage, etc. (Rebhun 49). By drawing on a near-universal Jewish experience, often replete with ethnic and cultural traditions given that the seder is a major family meal, *SoCalled* conjures up powerful collective and individual Jewish memories.

On the album, *SoCalled* positions himself as the author of the haggadah and performs the role of the seder leader, the person whose responsibility it is to shepherd the

³⁸ Hebrew, transliterated: plural of *haggadah*.

³⁹ Certain hallmarks of the seder must remain constant: particular blessings must be said, particular foods must be eaten (matzah, bitter herbs, etc.) and particular aspects of the story must be told. However, the rest of the haggadah is open to interpretation.

group through each section of the haggadah. Performing the haggadah requires particular Jewish skills: reading Hebrew and understanding the Exodus story; knowing the proper nusach, or chant melodies, for each section and associated songs; and knowing how to perform the particular rituals required, such as the breaking of the matzah⁴⁰. This is a role that has historically been performed exclusively by men (and still is in Orthodox communities, though in all other Jewish communities both men and women can now lead the seder). Finally, given that the haggadah was developed in response to the Biblical commandments in Exodus 13:6-8:

Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a festival of the LORD. Throughout the seven days unleavened bread shall be eaten; no leavened bread shall be found within you, and no leaven shall be found in all your territory. And you shall explain to your son on that day, 'It is because of what the LORD did for me when I went free from Egypt.

the seder leader is assumed to be an adult embedded in an intergenerational community, if not a parent per se (*JPS Tanakh* 104). By assuming the role of the seder leader, SoCalled establishes himself as a knowledgeable adult Jewish male; as the author of a new version of the haggadah, he claims a place as someone whose memories and lived experience are an important contribution to Jewish history.

By creating a haggadah at all, SoCalled is making powerful and provocative claims to a gendered Jewish authority, experience and memory. By creating a hip-hop haggadah, he makes another powerful and provocative claim about the nature and validity of contemporary young North American Jewish experience, a claim that is

⁴⁰ Unleavened bread; Jews are traditionally commanded to eat this during Passover. Leavened grain products are forbidden at this time of year.

contested in a dialogue between SoCalled and an older male speaker with a heavy stereotypically-New York Jewish accent on the track “L.M.P.G.”:

Older man: An anthology of Passover music?

SoCalled: Uh, I make hip-hop music—don’t hold it—I’m sorry.

Older man: That’s ok.

SoCalled: And I’m doing a, uh, hip-hop seder.

Older man: (snorts) Where are you gonna present it?

SoCalled: Nowhere.

Older man laughs derisively.

SoCalled: I’ll release it.

Older man: Sell it up on 135th Street in Harlem, see how well it goes.

The man with whom SoCalled is speaking is clearly unconvinced that hip-hop is a sufficiently “authentically Jewish” type of music for inclusion in a haggadah; by suggesting that a neighborhood that has historically been at the center of the African-American cultural imagination would be the best place to market a hip-hop haggadah, he implies a strong claim about musical ownership: that hip-hop is unequivocally “owned” by, and only attractive to, African Americans, and that the Jewish community would reject a hip-hop variation on a traditionally-Jewish religious observance that has been remixed countless times.

But SoCalled identifies himself in this dialogue primarily as a hip-hop musician: “I make hip-hop music” before “I’m doing a hip-hop seder” as opposed to “I’m a Jewish musician who thought it might be interesting to make a hip-hop seder” or “I’m trying to make a modern-day haggadah and thought that hip-hop might be an interesting angle to take.” Right from the start, SoCalled seeks to establish himself as a serious hip-hop

musician as well as a credible Jewish authority figure. This association is further reinforced in the track “Who Knows One,” the title of which is a literal translation of the traditional Passover song “Echad Mi Yodea.”

“Who Knows One?” begins with traditional materials presented in distinctly contemporary ways. The choral sample (“Echad mi yodea?”) that loops throughout much of the track is a snippet of the traditional song and the direct Hebrew equivalent of the track’s English title. The entire album is structured by samples from a mid-20th century didactic recording, soberly explaining at the beginning of this track that this is “A different song now, this time from the Passover service, the Haggadah, but with a new twist,” and translating each of the phrases of the original Hebrew and Yiddish songs: “12 are the tribes of Israel,” and so forth.

It is eminently clear that this recording is aimed at people with little to no knowledge of Jewish religious practice. There would be no need to preface “the Haggadah” with the explanation “the Passover service” for an observant Jewish audience, and phrases that in the Hebrew song are clear to listeners in the know (i.e. “*arba imos*” means “four mothers,” and those familiar with Jewish liturgy and scripture would understand that this refers to the four matriarchs of the book of Genesis) are translated into explanatory English: “Four are the matriarchs,” “Seven are the days until the Sabbath” (instead of *Shabbat*, the more common Jewish usage), and so forth.

Who Knows One?

0:00 (chorus, sample, vamp) 0:05 (different man's voice, sample) 0:13

Vocal 1: Echad mi yodea? Ar - ba i-mo - s Sh-lo-sha a - vos Sh-nei lu-chos ha bri - s

Vocal 2: (man's voice, spoken, sample) A different song now, this time from the Passover service, the Haggadah, but with a new twist. (first man's voice, spoken, sample) Who knows one?

Instruments: (beat, vamp t/o most of song) turntable scratch

6 0:24 (Socalled) Check it (Mah) a - sap-re Mah a-dab-re Oys nu oys nu yam de de di dum (Man's voice, sample) Who knows one?

(piano) (these two measures vamp t/o section) (clarinet, vamp t/o section) (beat vamp) (paired with descending tuba line)

12 0:34 0:42 Echad mi yodea melody, sung (sample) Ver ken zog-n Ver ken red-n Vos di eyns ba-deyt

Tsu yam ba da di dum 12 are the tribes of Israel 11 are the stars in Joseph's dream 10 are the commandments delivered to Moses

bass vamp clarinet vamp

17 0:44 (Socalled, sung) 0:51 0:57 'chad mi 'dea (drunkenly) Gott iz ey - ner

9 are the months in the cycle of birth 8 are the days until eireumeision 7 are the days until the Sabbath 6 are the parts of the Mishnah 5 are the books of the Torah 4, the patriarchs

clarinet and piano melodies played on keyboard descending tuba line

24 0:58 (Socalled, rapped) 1:02 (Socalled, sung) 1:07 (Socalled, rapped) 1:10

Yeah, you flip flop and you don't stop 'chad mi 'dea (drunkenly) Yo, I know one DJ whose numtable's jewel-encrusted He rocks with two taggers who are always gettin' busted

3, the patriarchs 2 are the tablets of the covenant And one? 12 are the tribes of Israel 11 are the stars in Joseph's dream 10 are the commandments delivered by Moses

piano vamp

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31 1:13 They're part of a crew 1:16 of 3 MC's with lyrics They date 4 girl breakers with a crew that's unbeatable I met 5 producers sly with samples like foxes 1:18 And I know 6 1:21 with unbeatable boxes
unrepeatable unbeatable samples like foxes beatboxes

8 are the days until 6 are the parts of 5 are the books of 2 are the tablets of
circumcision the Mishnah the Torah the covenant (vamp played by beatbox)

37 1:23 I got 7 flyer boys who are fighting head to head 1:26 And I know 8 promoters who want each other dead 1:29 1:37 1:39 (sample) Who knows one? Yeah! Come on! (SoCalled)

(man's voice, sung; Pete Sokolow sample?)
E-chad E-lo- hey-nu she-ba-sha - may-im im ha-ar - etz E-chad mi yo-de - a

(same beat pattern and piano vamp w/o with minor variations) (synth keyboard) (strings)

44 1:42 Who knows one? 1:48 Who knows one? 1:53 (SoCalled raps) Who knows one? Who knows one?

E-chad mi yo de - a E-chad mi yo de - a E-chad mi yo de - a E-chad mi yo de - a E-chad mi yo de - a E-chad mi yo de - a
(clarinet) tuba gesture

SoCalled sings part of the traditional Yiddish version of the song beginning at 0:34 of the track, but introduces it with a standard hip-hop statement: “Check it!” Under this he layers loops of a sample of a keyboard playing the traditional “Echad Mi Yodea” melody and a sample of a clarinet playing newly-written material with a thoroughly klezmer sensibility. In essence, the song up until 1:08 consists of older, traditional materials compiled and juxtaposed in contemporary ways, using the basic compositional techniques of hip-hop: looping and sampling. SoCalled thus situates himself within a long tradition of variations on seder songs, but brings his own generation’s sensibility to his interpretation.

While the traditional song systematically counts off hallmarks of Jewish history and religious belief—incorporated into the first section of the track “Who Knows One?”

via English and Hebrew samples as well as Yiddish song—SoCalled’s update, presented as a rap, counts off hallmarks of hip-hop culture. And not only does he reference these archetypal members of the hip-hop community—he says that he knows them personally, establishing his place among them. After his rap is done, the rest of the track (not transcribed here for the sake of space) is more or less a variation on the first section, an intricate sampled and looped collage of new and old variations on the lyrics or melody of “Echad Mi Yodea.”

By expressing familiarity with the multiple facets of hip-hop culture, SoCalled establishes his knowledge of hip-hop history and perhaps even personal memory of this history: Tricia Rose summarizes its origins in the 1970s in the South Bronx as “an African-American and Afro-Caribbean youth culture composed of graffiti, breakdancing and rap music,” itself comprised of the two elements of DJ’ing and MC’ing (2). While elements of this culture such as graffiti (tagging) and breakdancing remained popular through the end of the 1980s, today hip-hop culture is dominated by music and fashion. That is to say, if SoCalled were not aware of hip-hop’s history, he would not necessarily have known to reference taggers and breakers, who are not nearly as prominent today as they were at hip-hop’s inception.

Thus having identified himself as a hip-hop artist and having placed himself firmly within Jewish tradition, SoCalled goes on to complicate his racial and ethnic self-presentation. Though throughout much of the album he goes to great lengths to self-identify as a masculine, Ashkenazi Jewish authority figure, he uses the term “nigga” in two tracks, “Pesach Zeit” and “L.M.P.G.” Derived from one of the most derogatory anti-black racial slurs in the English language, “nigga” has become a popular term among

African-American hip-hop artists and segments of the young African-American community over the past 15-20 years and is typically used in a positive manner, to identify one's trusted inner social circle. However, due to its loaded racial history, the term is considered highly taboo for non-black people, and especially for white people. Eminem, for example, has gone on record saying he will not use the word in any of his lyrics. Hispanic artists occasionally use the word with minimal controversy.

Nonetheless, SoCalled, born in Canada and of Ashkenazi Jewish descent, refers to his fellow Jews around the seder table as “niggas” several times in the first track on the *Hip-hop Haggadah*, “Pesach Zeit”: “Yo, spin toppin my niggas still rockin,” “Raise a cup to my niggas, don’t give a fuck,” and “I teach the art of livin’, my niggas rap to my soldiers in submission,” in the context of introducing the upcoming seder. Furthermore, in the aforementioned track “L.M.P.G.,” SoCalled once again refers to other Jews: “Passion niggas anthrax just judgin’ my climax/Continue to stack my bloody articulate syntax/Y’all niggas merely messengers/Cultivatin’ seeds release the scriptures/You rappers keep bringing pestilence against my wishes” in the context of several verses about the section of the Exodus story where Moses, the Jewish leader, speaks to Pharaoh, begging him to release the Hebrews from captivity, and Pharaoh refuses, so God decides to send ten plagues against the Egyptians to convince Pharaoh. SoCalled segues from this discussion into a roll-call of contemporary situations that he perceives as equally oppressive, ostensibly on the basis of the presence of racial or ethnic discrimination—listing Soweto, Israel, Rwanda, Palestine and America, among others—and chanting “Let my people go” throughout.

This ostensibly-universalist, politicized notion of “my people” that SoCalled puts forth relies upon a strategic incorporation of multiple communities’ historical memory into Jewish historical memory. By listing contemporary struggles in the context of a plea to “Let *my people* go” (emphasis mine), SoCalled claims these issues as a Jewish and personal concern; by using the word “nigga” to refer to other Jews and potentially to this larger community united by its struggle against particular types of oppression. However, by claiming fellow Jews as “niggas,” SoCalled claims a nonwhite identity for himself and for the other Jews in question.

While his implied claim that the remembered Jewish experience of slavery and hardship should draw contemporary Jews’ attention to similar present-day situations is hardly controversial within the context of haggadot in the liberal Jewish community—with the exception of his inclusion of both Israel and Palestine on the list—SoCalled’s deployment of nonwhite identity in the context of this argument is quite fraught. While Jewish remembrance of anti-Semitic discrimination has fueled many fruitful social-justice efforts within the North American Jewish community, most notably widespread Jewish support for and involvement in the African-American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, this cannot be confused with a free pass to use historically-racist terminology. Though much of SoCalled’s work recalls times and places—prewar North America, especially the eastern United States, and prewar Eastern Europe—when Jews were considered nonwhite, this does not erase the fact that most North American Ashkenazi Jews have enjoyed a great deal of white-skin privilege since the 1950s or 1960s.

SoCalled's use of a thoroughly contemporary racialized term to describe Jewish ethnoracial identity in the context of a ritualized performance of Jewish collective memory elides a time when Jews were unequivocally nonwhite with a time, i.e. the present day, when young urban Jews like SoCalled are attempting to rid themselves of the baggage and blandness of "whiteness" and to rediscover and reimagine a richer ethnic identity. Furthermore, "nigga" positions him within a context of masculine posturing within hip-hop: being one is as much about performing heterosexual machismo within the context of male-group bonding as about performing black identity.⁴¹

Using "nigga" and performing the identity of a credible, macho hip-hop musician at the same time as he performs the role of a masculine Jewish authority figure allows SoCalled to collapse the contemporary Jewish youth experience of mainstream North American hip-hop culture into Jewish historical memory. He thus adds a contemporary (North) American voice to a multivocal Jewish institution, one hallmark of which has been its constant reinterpretation in each Jewish-diasporic context. *The SoCalled Seder: A Hip-Hop Haggadah*, then, is a key example of Jewish hip-hop carving out a contemporary American place within Jewish civilization and a uniquely Jewish place within contemporary American pop-cultural life, and accomplishing this particularly by its claims to authority, to masculinity and to non-whiteness.

⁴¹ For further reading on this complex and contested issue, see Jason Tanz, *Other People's Property*; Mark Anthony Neal's "No Time for Fake Niggas," R.A.T. Judy's "On the Question of Nigga Authenticity" and Robin D.G. Kelley's "Looking for the 'Real' Nigga" in *That's the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal, eds.; and Patrick Johnson's *Appropriating Blackness*.

Forgetting

The evocation of memory is just as significant for what it does *not* evoke: that is, what it selectively forgets. SoCalled's entire body of recorded work skips over the two historical moments that have perhaps most shaped the global Jewish consciousness in the 20th and into the 21st centuries and concomitantly have dominated North American Jewish discourse: the Holocaust and the foundation and continued existence of the modern state of Israel.

The Holocaust, of course, nearly wiped out most of the world that SoCalled recalls—the shtetl, the locus of authenticity for “klezmer” music—and has provided a central organizing principle for many Jews' identity: be Jewish (and create more Jews with a Jewish spouse) so that Hitler doesn't win. In fact, Holocaust survivor, philosopher and Reform rabbi Emil Fackenheim formulated “the 614th commandment,”⁴² that the continuance of Jewish life, in a very biological sense, was a divinely-mandated necessity post-Holocaust. Furthermore, the foundation of the state of Israel is intimately linked to the aftermath of the Holocaust, when much of the international community saw the establishment of a Jewish political and territorial power as necessary to prevent such an atrocity from recurring.

Zionism, Israel, and Israeli culture, however, have a complicated relationship with diasporic Jewish identity. The Hebrew word historically used to describe the Jewish diaspora is *galut*⁴³; this is better translated as “exile,” giving a specific moral and

⁴² Traditionally, Judaism is thought to have 613 commandments, or mitzvot, that form the basis of the Jewish legal system and therefore all Jewish ritual and ethical observance. Adding a 614th, then, especially given the common view that all these commandments were given directly by God, is quite a serious claim.

⁴³ Transliterated; pronounced “goles” in Ashkenazi dialect and in Yiddish (as a loanword).

emotional weight to the diasporic condition. Traditional Jewish law specifies that certain commandments can only be performed within particular geographical areas in Eretz Yisrael, the land of Israel (conceived as the biblical lands of the Jewish people as opposed to the contemporary political state, though of course there is significant overlap between the two); each year Tisha B'Av is a day of mourning in the Jewish calendar for the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem (in 70 CE) and the subsequent exile of the Jews, and the Passover seder ends with the words "Next year in Jerusalem." Ritual observance contains many expressions of longing for a return to Eretz Yisrael and a subtle disparagement of the diasporic condition; however, few Jews returned to then-Palestine at any time between 70 CE and the early 20th century, preferring their lives in diaspora, though in many eras return was quite possible and perhaps even welcomed by local political authorities.

The establishment of the state of Israel rendered diaspora unnecessary in Zionist thought—or at least viewed it as second-best, non-authoritative, and a not-quite-valid Jewish identity. Attempts were made to create a homogenous "Hebrew" ethnic culture through the creation of "folk songs" out of more-or-less whole cloth; Hebrew was resurrected from a solely literary and religious language into a modern spoken language; and all the other standard trappings of "culture," from art to film to architecture, governance, business, etc. were reimagined through the lens of "Hebrew" identity. This necessarily involved the suppression of the cultural expressions of diasporic Jews who emigrated to the state of Israel: Yiddish, Ladino, Judeo-Arabic and other Jewish languages were discouraged, as were Jewish-ethnic cuisines, music and other manifestations of diasporic identity.

In the wake of the 1967 war, “Israeli culture” and the support of the state of Israel became highly popular among North American Jews. Israeli dances were taught in youth groups, hummus and falafel became ubiquitous fixtures at synagogue potlucks, and countless nonprofits and political pressure groups were formed to support Israel financially and politically. In fact, the aforementioned 2004 analysis of markers of identity found that “Israel constitutes a major anchor of social and cultural connection and an important basis for Jewish communal life” and that “feeling attached” to Israel is not far behind observance of Yom Kippur—the most important Jewish religious practice by far—in terms of the most prevalent markers of Jewish identity (Rebhun 46, 49).

Thus, the fact that SoCalled does not mention Israel more than a few times in passing in his *entire oeuvre* is of the utmost significance in how he constructs contemporary North American Jewish identity; when he does, it is almost in an imaginary way, echoing the ritualized references to biblical locations in Jewish religious practice. In short, SoCalled elides and collapses prewar ethnic Yiddish-American identity with contemporary American Jewish identity in his choice of subject matter, his use of hip-hop techniques such as sampling, his choice of instrumentation, the languages in which he performs, and the musical and geographical communities within which he has situated himself. He thus strategically *forgets* the Holocaust and Israel in order to shift the terms of his particular discourse about Jewish identity away from a negative identity predicated on remembering the Holocaust (and preventing another by defending Israel) toward an identity based on positive affinity for a perceived rich ethnic-cultural diasporic heritage.

One of his few references to the Holocaust is telling: in the context of listing the ten plagues that God is said to have visited upon the Egyptians in the Exodus story,

SoCalled raps, “Don’t want a sermon, but it’s interesting Jews were vermin for Germans.” His disparaging reference to sermonizing (ostensibly by the mainstream North American Jewish community) is clear evidence of his strategic silencing of this predominant Jewish discourse in favor of something else. How he accomplishes this in terms of his organization of sound will be discussed more specifically later, in the section on imagination.

Despite SoCalled’s reinterpretations, much of the world to which his work looks has itself been forgotten by most American Jews, strategically or involuntarily: the Holocaust destroyed the Yiddish-ethnic communities of Europe, and the establishment of and rhetoric surrounding the state of Israel and its implications for Jewish identity, combined with North American Jews’ entry into unquestioned whiteness in the same historical moment, greatly diminished the influence of this sort of diasporic identity. Mark Slobin’s notion of a penumbra surrounding pre-World War II Ashkenazi Jewish music is instructive here: “There is a sensibility around a notion of reflected cultural light coming to us from a shadowed world” (in Slobin 2002, 6). In the 1970s, the klezmer revival tried to reverse this trend. SoCalled firmly positions himself within the revival scene by his approach to what he chooses to include within “Jewish collective memory” and what he does not.

Performing Jewish masculinity and masculine Jewishness

SoCalled’s performance of Jewish identity is inseparable from his performance of (Jewish) masculinity; his use of hip-hop styles and techniques is intimately bound up with his negotiation of both his ethnoracial and his gender identities. Furthermore, his

use of hybridized musical style to situate himself as a North American Jewish man exemplifies the tension and the overlap that underpins the entire phenomenon of Jewish hip-hop: negotiating a Jewish identity within the United States (and by extension the Anglophone North Atlantic, including Canada and England) and negotiating a North American identity within the Jewish diaspora.

A key site of SoCalled's performance of masculinity is in his overt assumption of teaching roles. The traditional ideal of Jewish masculinity is the learned scholar; physical prowess, machismo and so forth are nowhere near as privileged as traditional Jewish learning in Talmud, Torah and halakhah.⁴⁴ The heroes of Jewish literature and folktales are learned rabbis who impart profound lessons to their students and followers. Judah Cohen describes how in the late twentieth century, this image was transmuted somewhat negatively in the American imagination:

Often portrayed as denizens of New York City or its suburbs, Jewish men took on a certain iconicity as particular, neurotic, unathletic, and overshadowed by strong if not overbearing women. Even Jewish 'tough' organisations such as the Jewish Defense

League seemed to situate themselves in *reaction* to the idea of the meek Jewish male (3).

As the author and leader of a Passover seder, the Jewish teachable moment par excellence, SoCalled definitively performs the role of a Jewish authority figure—and furthermore, a definitively masculine authority figure, who is revaluing Jewish masculinity as cool through his remix of traditional Jewish-masculine tropes with hip-hop-masculine tropes.

The aesthetic of this performance is entirely consistent with most hip-hop; Rose describes that in hip-hop's early years,

⁴⁴ Hebrew, transliterated: Jewish law.

The rappers who could fix the crowd's attention had impressive verbal dexterity and performance skills. They spoke with authority, conviction, confidence, and power, shouting playful ditties reminiscent of 1950s black radio disc jockeys. The most frequent style of rap was a variation on the toast, a boastful, bragging form of oral storytelling sometimes explicitly political and often aggressive, violent, and sexist in content. (55)

While this form of toasting is perhaps less frequent in contemporary rap and hip-hop, it still forms an integral component of the style.

SoCalled delivers his own variations on the toast in the seventh track on the *Hip-hop Haggadah*, "2nd Cup: Bless the Wine": "Flying aviation, cooler than ventilation/Hotter than perspiring, your flow evaporating/TDK's I'm blazing, shells stay laced and/ready to take it back to pop, lockin' and breakin'/The ill Hebrew's beats as medication/I dropped gems to maintain my reputation/With no indication/a style crisper than bacon/I've played to more folks than nationwide syndication". The first toast in the song is fairly standard, if more subdued than some: SoCalled is trying to get across the point that he considers himself a great rapper, and throws in some humor by juxtaposing a bacon reference with the fact that he's Jewish.

A few verses later, it's a different story: "I put the stud in student/put the man in semantics/Put the Jew in jukeboxes/put the pro in prophylactics/University educated/yo check the deep flow". SoCalled is bragging about how well-educated and how Jewish he is—and even his more-gendered and sexualized lines, "put the man in semantics" and "put the pro in prophylactics" emphasize his vocabulary and stress linguistic dexterity.

Put simply, if he wanted to brag about his masculinity and (hetero)sexual prowess, there are many rappers from whom he could have copied very straightforward ways to discuss his success with women. Furthermore, his boasting highlights precisely

what has traditionally been valued in a Jewish man—university education, strong Jewish identity—and gives it a contemporary pop-cultural twist—putting the *stud* in student and the Jew in *jukeboxes* as opposed, presumably, to simply being a Jew and a student.

By using the medium of hip-hop infused with Jewish content as a pedagogical tool, SoCalled harkens back to, as he puts it, “the days of pop lockin’ and breakin’,” i.e. the early days of hip-hop, for both the mainstream hip-hop and the observant Jewish communities. Jewish hip-hop began somewhat after hip-hop proper began; it was not until Run-DMC’s first album reached the top of the charts in 1984 that the Jewish community began to adopt rap and hip-hop (Cohen 4).

This tendency has continued, with such contemporary acts as Y-Love, Ta-Shma, Bible Raps and Matisyahu all performing in this vein. Though SoCalled generally deals with different subject matter and uses hip-hop styles in a less-literal, more-fluent way than these artists, in this instance his performance of being both a Jewish teacher and student resonates with his Orthodox Jewish forebears and contemporaries in hip-hop. A critical means of situating oneself within an identity is the transmission of this identity to others, which both confers authority and assures continuity. SoCalled takes on this aspect of identity performance with gusto in almost all of his work.

SoCalled imagines himself in archetypically Jewish roles, all of which are archetypically *masculine* roles. In *Hiphopkhasene*, he plays the role of the groom in a traditional Ashkenazi Jewish wedding—but not uncritically; he uses hip-hop stylings as a way of reimagining this role and its importance. Cohen writes,

the approach [i.e. using hip-hop aesthetics to address the Jewish experience] provided a musical ideology virtually untouched by expectations associated with Judaism; by

wrapping themselves in a hip-hop musical language, therefore, Jewish artists could find a

nearly undisturbed forum for actively exchanging and testing agendas of gender, ideology, exclusivity and knowledge, handed down to them by their elders. To those unfamiliar with hip-hop, the pairing was so unlikely as not to be taken seriously—and thus became rendered radical enough to provide a safe space for young people to make individual choices about their religious identities. (11)

In the fifth track on *Hiphopkhasene*, “(Alt. Shul) Kale Bazetsn”—i.e. “Old-School Kale Bazetsn,” the music that traditionally accompanied the ceremonial seating of the bride for the ceremony, SoCalled delivers a searing critique of traditional marriage and wedding ritual:

So buffet it up—yo, it’s all you can drink
 Say I do and do it all night (nudge nudge, wink wink)
 Sure it’s a fucked up institution, economic solution to socialized absolution
 Hype the hetero norms, it’s just ancient psychic residuals
 But folks are sentimental and they’ll always need their rituals
 Plus as a concept it’s dated, ketubah outmoded and faded
 Power-politicking nepotism, cheapest way to get related
 But, yo, your parents would have been so proud, so scream your damn vows out loud
 And from heaven they can look down and bless your dress
 Makes you look iconic, but yo what’s with the white, are you trying to be ironic?

While the badkhones⁴⁵ are chanted in Yiddish, pitched but in free rhythm as per traditional practice, SoCalled’s critique, in English, is rapped in his typical style, and when he is done, the badkhones continue. They are not the most traditional in content,

⁴⁵ Traditional Ashkenazi wedding chants delivered by the badkhn, a combination of an MC and a jester. Always intended to be humorous and often sarcastic and somewhat insulting, badkhones in the context of the kale bazetsn genre were used to introduce the bride, inform her of her new lifestyle as a married woman, and establish the occupations, lineage and other relevant factors about the groom, his family and the bride’s family.

but the listener, who likely does not know Yiddish, does not know that, and thus the overall traditional/contemporary dichotomous aesthetic is preserved. SoCalled's rap is distanced in style and content from the rest of the track, and thus the aesthetics work in service of the lyrical content, providing a separate sonic space for SoCalled's critical reflections on the enterprise in which he is engaged.

That is to say, while traditional ritual is preserved in a slightly-updated form elsewhere on the track (the changes are mainly event-specific, such as introducing SoCalled and Sophie Solomon but translating their distinctly contemporary professions into Yiddish—i.e. SoCalled is described as a “bal-mikrofon,” a master of the microphone), SoCalled's choice of rap styling allows him to deliver almost a meta-critique, in distinctly post-feminist, hipster-influenced, 21st-century terms, of the neo-traditional and patriarchal event he has created elsewhere on the album.

(Alt. Shul) Kale Bazetsn

0:25 (badkhones, chanted by Michael Alpert) 0:32

Vocal

Faran klezmerim gevaldike haynt bay undz derbay, Tsu ader khasene fun hip hop un klezmeray. Reb Dovidl Krokever, zol er blozn un gezunt zany,

Percussion

afterbeats in brass and strings

layered with this rhythm in various percussion inst. t/o with minor variations

11 0:39

18 0:51

25 1:02 1:12

Instruments

(brass) (brass) (violin, Sophie Solomon)

39 (afterbeats) 1:14 1:18

(Yiddish badkhones, chanted)

51 1:27 1:33

61 1:38 1:44

(clarinet, David Krakauer)

72 1:55 2:04

86 2:06 (rap, Socalled) 2:09 2:11 2:14

Ov, I got a party to crash, so let the cimbaloms bash We got glasses to smash, we can get trashed So buffet it up, yo, it's all you can drink Say I do and do it

(this rhythmic cell is prevalent throughout the rap, generally layered with rhythmic afterbeats in brass and strings which are sometimes more prominent)

Perc.

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2

94 2:16 2:20
~~all night (nudge nudge, wink wink) Sure it's a fucked-up institution, economic solution to socialized absolution Hype the hetero norms, yo, it's just ancient~~

110 2:25 2:27 2:30
~~psychic residuals But folks are sentimental and they'll always need their rituals Plus as a concept it's dated, ketubah outmoded and faded, power politicking~~

131 2:33 2:37
~~nepotism cheapest way to get related But yo, your parents woulda been so proud, so scream your damn vows out loud And from heaven they can look down~~

152 2:40 2:44
~~and bless your dress Makes you look iconic, but yo what's with the white, are you trying to be ironic? We're all so happy for you, it's just not my thing!~~

163 2:46 2:49
~~Ikh bin sheyn vider singl, punkt azoy vi a yingl! ("yingl" continues to echo; badkhones in Yiddish begin immediately)~~

This attitude returns on the first track of *Bubbemeises: Lies My Gramma Told Me*, SoCalled's 2004 album with noted clarinetist David Krakauer and his band, Klezmer Madness.⁴⁶ Much of the track, also called "Bubbemeises," has the sound that has come to be standard in post-revival klezmer: slightly jazz-inflected clarinet, accordion, drums, and somewhat atypically, an electric guitar, but over a hip-hop beat created by SoCalled. The track opens with a sample of a man's voice, speaking in a stereotypical New York-area Jewish accent: "But now we come to a period...that I call the battle for identity." This sample is interspersed throughout the track, getting more and more dramatic. Its next appearance states, "they entered me into mortal combat...but, you know, the identity was getting lost! Remember who you are—that, that makes it possible for me to say to you, 'Come back to me!'" The voice is later sampled saying "It's the implacable forces, they entered me into mortal combat," and continuing the rest of the sample as stated above.

The lost identity in question here is clearly Ashkenazi Jewish identity in North America, and SoCalled follows the sample with a rap:

⁴⁶ "Bubbemeises" literally means "grandmother-stories" in Yiddish (transliterated), but has the idiomatic meaning of "old wives' tales."

These are the lies my gramma told me, superstitious devices
Urban mythological rules and bubbemeises
Lies my gramma told me, superstitious devices
Urban mythological rules and bubbemeises
Yo, a bowl of chicken soup gets rid of colds in the head
But a bowl of mouse soup stops you from wettin' the bed
You get warts all over from handlin' a toad
Stay away from all the witches who live at forks in the roads
Schnapps is for pains, bakin' soda for stains

The rap continues with other grandmotherly admonitions clearly directed to a young boy, including “If you can kiss your elbows then you’re probably gay” and “And if you masturbate you’ll go blind,” which clearly express a degree of homophobia and conservative sexual mores inherent in the sexual and gender identity being passed down to the boy in question, ostensibly SoCalled or another Jewish male of his generation.

While SoCalled asserts that such admonitions are lies, “superstitious devices, urban mythological rules and bubbemeises,” he nonetheless admits through their inclusion in the rap that these attitudes are part of how young Jewish boys are or were taught to be Jewish men. SoCalled both states and reproduces these markers of identity, yet questions and undermines them through the lyrics of the chorus (“These are the lies my gramma told me...”). The fact that he is rapping as opposed to delivering the lines in a style more consistent with the instrumental music—i.e. something more akin to Yiddish song—is a clear example of Cohen’s assertion that rap and hip-hop aesthetics open a space for Jewish male artists to question traditional ideologies.

At other times, SoCalled imports hip-hop aesthetics and performances of masculinity almost verbatim. His track “Let’s Get Wet,” from his 2007 album *Ghettoblaster*, has no recognizably-Jewish lyrical content; the words are all variations on this verse: “All I really want is you/It’s your smile/No one’s quite as hot as you/It’s your style/Look at you and salivate/Make me sweat/It’s so hard to concentrate/Let’s get wet” interspersed with samples of a female voice implying that SoCalled’s desires will not be fulfilled. The instrumentation, especially the trumpet part, has a generically Balkan sound to it—but otherwise, this is a straightforward, albeit PG-rated, sex rap.

The pièce de résistance of SoCalled’s performance of Judaized masculinity—and, more intriguingly, how he uses rap stylings to reinvent it—is the track “Ich Bin A Border Bay Mayn Vayb,” also from *Ghettoblaster*, a reinterpretation of Aaron Lebedeff’s classic Yiddish theatre tune by the same name. The original song tells the story, in humorous and idiomatic Yiddish, of a man who divorced his wife but moved back in with her as a renter, enjoying all the benefits of marriage without any of the drawbacks. SoCalled raps most of the same lyrics in a rhythm derived by halving each of the original note values in Lebedeff’s version over a beat constructed, as usual, from samples of prewar Jewish dance-band drummers, and assigns the melody to a trumpet and strings.

The trumpet and violin phrases that are interspersed with rapped verses parallel the form of the chorus in the Lebedeff version; in fact, all of the melodic sections of SoCalled’s version, with the exception of the bass guitar solos (not notated here) are lifted verbatim from the earlier tune and simply transposed. Once again, SoCalled filters older material through hip-hop compositional and performance practices to construct a

particular commentary on, and fusion of, the intersection of contemporary Jewish and North American identities.

This reinterpretation exemplifies Cohen's summary of the activity around gender identity in the hipster Jewish hip-hop scene: that these stylistic practices "evidence deeper aspects of a cultural activity attributed specifically to the Jewish experience: most notably a publicly negotiated, bipolar sense of Jewish masculinity, as well as an often overt agenda aimed at transforming perceptions of Jewish tradition in order to preserve them" (2).

The words themselves present this "bipolar sense of Jewish masculinity": while the husband may have originally been henpecked along the lines of the old and unfortunate stereotype of weak Jewish men and overbearing Jewish women, he manages to turn the situation around and get the upper hand, enjoying his (former) wife's cooking, cleaning and goodness knows what else—all without being asked questions and hounded for money as he was before. Though the song sounds fairly similar in each setting, the way they are received by their audiences is presumably completely different: Lebedeff's audiences in 1920s New York would likely have understood the song in Yiddish and would perhaps have been familiar with the picture painted of marital gender roles and behaviors.

Ikh bin a border bay mayn vayb (Aaron Lebedeff version)

♩ = 90

0:00 (orchestral introduction--96 bpm) 0:09 Ikh bin shoyrn vi-der "sin-gl" punkt a-zoy vi a yin-gl mit mayn vay-bl

14 0:19 hob ikh zikh ge-get Ge-denkt hob ikh zu mu-fn A "rum" ge-zukht tsu shlu-fn Hot mayn vay-bl mikh i-ber-ge- redt Vos darf-tsu zu-khn

26 0:39 gli-kn In frem-de "rums" zikh shti-kn Un zayn a-leyn un re-dn tsu di vent Blayb du i-ber punktvi fri'r Zay a "bor- dr" yetst bay mir Vi a frem-der

38 0:49/1:08 8va 0:53/1:13 8va 0:58/1:18 tsol ikh ir dem rent Ikh bin a bor-der bay mayn vayb (orch.) Me-ner iz dos a tay-rer "dzhah" (orch.) Zi "a-ten-det"

50 1:03/1:22 1. 8va 1:27 2. 8va accel. mikh mit a-les Ven ikh kum fregt zi keyn sha-les Ikh bin a "bor- der" bay mayn vayb (orch.) (orch.)

61 (8) 1:35 a tempo 1:41 1:45 Ikh zog aykh yetst oys-drik-e-lekh Az ikh fil zikh glik-e-lekh Be-ser als a "bor- der" ey-der man Ikh

74 1:55 darf mayn vayb nit hit-n Un on-ku-men in mi-tn Ven der "but- sher" brengt dos fleysh a- rayn Ikh bin gants fray fun zor-gn Ikh darf nisht lay-en

85 2:05 2:10 bor-gn Nit ar-be-tn unbren- en ir dos gelt Nortsayt ikh bit in "bord" bay ir Iz mir gut gor on a shir Ik es un trink nor un ikh bren a velt

98 2:16 8va 2:21 8va 2:26 Ikh bin a "bor- der" bay mayn vayb (orch.) Me-mer dos a tay-rer "dzhah" (orch.) Ven ikh kum fregt zi keyn sha-les Zi "a-ten-det"

109 2:31/2:38 8va 2:41 8va mikh mit a-les Ikh bin a "bor- der" bay mayn vayb (orch.) Me-mer iz dos a tay-rer "dzhah" (orch.)

117 (8) 2:45 2:51 2:57 (orch.) Ven ikh kum fregt zi keyn sha-les Zi "a-ten-det" mikh mit a-les Ikh bin a "bor- der" bay mayn vayb!

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Ich bin a border by mayn vayb (Socalled version)

0:00-0:31 dialogue (see below) 0:32 (Socalled raps)

Vocal

Pitched instruments

Cymbals

Snare drum

Kick drum

(bass)

(bass continues)

Ikh bin shoy'n vi-der sin-gl punk a-zoy vi a yin-gl

(these two percussion measures vamp with minor variations throughout)

10 0:42 0:47

Mit mayn vay bl hob ich zikh ge - get Ge-denkt hob ich tsu "mu - fn" A "rum" ge-zukht tsu shlo-fn Hot mayn vay - bl mir i - ber - ge-redt Yo, (strings hit)

16

vos darf-tsu zikh-n gli-kn In frem-de "rums" zikh shtik-n Un zayn a-ley'n un red n tsu di vent Nor tsayt ich bit in "bord" bayir Iz mir gut gor on ashir

22 (Socalled sings)

Ikh es un trinkt nor un ich bren a velt (bren a velt) Ikh bin a "bor - der" bay mayn vayb

(violin) (trumpet) (trumpet) (pitched electric base)

31

(violin) Ikh bin a "bor - der" bay mayn vayb Es iz a far-ge-ni-gn (trumpet) (trumpet)

41

a-les ken ich kri-gn Vi a frem-der "bor - der" bay mayn vayb Ikh darf mayn vayb nit hi - tn In on-ku-men in mi-tn Ven der "but - sher" brengt dos fleysh a (bass) (bass, simile)

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47 ^{1:27}
 rayn Yo, ikh bin gants fray fun zor-gn Ikh darf nit lay en bor-gn Nit ar-be-tn un breng-en ir dos gelt Nor tsayt ikh bin in bord bay ir

53 (Woman's voice, spoken, sample) ^{1:43}
 Young man, sin-gle and free
 Iz mir gut gor on a shir Ikh es un trinkt nor Un ikh bren a velt (bren a velt) (Socalled sings) Ikh bin a "bor- der" bay mayn (violin) (bass solo)

61 Young man, sin-gle and free (Socalled speaks, sample) ^{1:56}
 Ein tsvei drei funf
 vayb Young man, sin-gle and free Ikh bin a "bor- der" bay mayn vayb (trumpet) (violin) (trumpet) (bass solo) (violin)

71 (Male voices, sample) ^{1:58}
 Hey drop your thing clap clap your hands bring that tsvei to the left Patsch know the tune Sing that Ay Gon-na ya ba ba ba ba ba Stop that
 Ya ba ba Ya ba ba

77 Feet to the right snap Care-ful gon-na drop that beat (beat) Clap clap your hands Bring that Tsvei To the left Patsch Know the tune Sing that Ay Gon-na ya ba ba ba
 ba ba Ya ba ba ba ba Ya ba

84 ^{2:24}
 ba ba ba ba Stop that Gon-na ya ba ba ba Young man, sin-gle and free
 ba ba ba Young man, sin-gle and free Ikh bin a "bor- der" bay mayn vayb (trumpet)

93 Young man, sin-gle and free (Socalled speaks) ^{2:24}
 Young man, sin-gle and free Gon-na
 (Socalled speaks) Yeah drop that beat! (Socalled sings) Ikh bin a "bor- der" bay mayn vayb (violin) (trumpet) (bass solo) (trumpet)

101 ya ba ba ba ba ba ba
 (SoCalled raps) Ikh bin shoy'n vi der sin-gl Punkt a-zoy vi a yin-gl mit mayn vay bl hob ikh zikh ge - get Ge denkt hob ikh zu "mu - fi" A

107
 "rum" ge-zukht tsu shlo-fn Hot mayn vay-bl mir i-ber ge-redt Yo, vos darft-tsu zu-khn gli-ken In frem-de "rums" zikh shtikh-n Un zayn a-leyn un red-n tsu

113
 di vent Nor tsayt ikh bit in "bord" bay ir Iz mir gut gor on a shir Ikh es un trink nor un ikh bren a velt(bren a velt)(bren a velt) Gon-na
 (drum solo)

121
 ya ba ba ba ba ba ba ba Uh huh Yo And I'm out (and I'm out) (violin) (tambourine only to end) (vamp)
 3:14-3:40 dialogue (see below)

0:00-0:31 dialogue:

SoCalled: How we doin', how we doin' for time there?

Recording engineer: 14-15 minutes.

SoCalled: Oh man! We got 15 minutes, my friend!

Irving Fields: Yeah, what I TOLD ya...

SoCalled: We're laughin'! It's awesome! No, we got plenty of time this is great.

Fields: Oh--oh, is he recording all this?

SoCalled: Yeah man!

Fields: Oh, I didn't know you were recording! I thought this is rehearsal!

(laughter)

Fields: I did that once with RCA Victor, I said what the hell we do with the session, he says it's over! That's good, all right.

3:14-3:40 dialogue:

Older man's voice (presumably Fields): Now the turnover...not YOU, you degenerates! Turn over the tape! That's right, turn over the fucking tape! But start from the beginning, okay?! Start from the beginning...on the BACK. SIDE. You understand, schmuck?!

SoCalled's listeners are unlikely to be native Yiddish speakers, and live in an era when such behavior as taking in an ex-spouse as a renter in order to make money is nearly unheard of. They hear Yiddish as a cultural signifier as opposed to an intelligible language. Abigail Wood borrows Jeffrey Shandler's designation of Yiddish as a post-vernacular language,

motivated by individual choice rather than necessity for communication. This individual choice is necessarily ideologically motivated: for some, it is based on a desire for cultural continuity or to connect to family roots; for others it is a conscious rejection of modern Israeli, Hebrew-language Jewish culture or of religiously oriented Judaism[,] and explains that “since post-vernacular Yiddish privileges cultural and symbolic affiliation over linguistic fluency, regardless of actual language use, musicians are immediately placed not only as participants but as important cultural actors in the post-vernacular Yiddish scene” (250).

In his version of “Ich Bin a Border Bay Mayn Vayb,” SoCalled marks himself as an Ashkenazi Jew with an explicit agenda of preserving cultural heritage—and transforming it in order to preserve it, like many of his colleagues in the contemporary hipster Jewish music scene—as opposed to someone whose primary goal is the usage of language to convey literal meaning. SoCalled further emphasizes this message by including clips of his discussions in the studio with an older Jewish musician playing on the track; the older man reminisces about his days playing for RCA Victor, now defunct, and his confusion about whether this take is a rehearsal or the “real thing,” then tells the studio engineers to “turn over the fucking tape, you degenerates!” at the end.

Yet this does not hide the very real gender work that is happening in both Lebedeff’s original and SoCalled’s reinterpretation. The novelty factor of rapping a Yiddish theatre song emphasizes the ironies and the humor in the original text; we understand, by the very fact that an already-ironic song is being presented in an ironic way, that we are not supposed to take the portrait of Jewish gender roles it paints seriously—but there is no alternative given.

“Particularly for a population constantly and publicly identified by its elders as a source of anxiety and ambivalence for the future of their ‘people,’” Cohen writes, “such spaces [i.e. Jewish hip-hop production and performance] served as culturally bounded laboratories for expression—places to play out these inherited anxieties both individually and as a group, while forging a new/old language of authenticity, heritage and identity” (15). The original text does much to renegotiate the stereotyped Jewish husband-wife dynamic, but ultimately *SoCalled*’s re-presentation of “Ich Bin a Border Bay Mayn Vayb” is ambivalent about the contemporary gender dynamic it suggests or describes. It is, however, unambiguously and overtly *Jewish* in whatever that gender dynamic may be—and distinctly North American-diasporic in nature. The three categories (masculinity, the preservation via transformation of Jewish identity and heritage, and the diasporic condition) are thus inseparable and mutually constructive.

The quest for authenticity

“...in my vinyl hunting, I started to find Jewish records, and I figured, hey, I can’t be sampling George Clinton and James Brown like everybody else, I’ve got to find my own voice, I’ve got to represent myself in this music—and myself isn’t a Black American funky self, it’s an alienated, rural Canadian Jewish self....Anyway, so these Jewish records...were simply exploding with perfect little bits to loop and chop up.”
--*SoCalled*, interview with Abigail Wood (251)

Before he became *SoCalled*, klezmer-hop artist, Josh Dolgin was a Canadian college student making beats, and like every other DJ, spent a lot of time digging in record bins to come up with something funkier and fresher than any of his competitors and colleagues. Already fluent in the techniques of the mainstream musical style of his generation, hip-hop, he stumbled across Yiddish theatre records and began to use sounds

with which his great-grandparents' generation would have been familiar in order to make his own mark as a hip-hop artist.

It seems like an unlikely musical biography for a klezmer-revival artist, but it encapsulates the tensions inherent in self-consciously Jewish hip-hop and its quest for authenticity. SoCalled desires to represent his "real self," and has determined that the best way for him to do that is to use hip-hop techniques to organize Jewish content: sampling Yiddish theatre music and dance-orchestra musicians, or rapping in Yiddish and about the Jewish experience. Hip-hop stylings allow SoCalled to respond to his feelings of alienation in a specifically Jewish way, creating an aural representation, and potential resolution of, anxiety about the disappearance of Yiddishkeit into North American whiteness.

SoCalled, like many Jews of his generation, is searching for narrative, historical specificity, and a sense of cultural memory, and cobbles these together by using tropes of authenticity from the discourse of the two musical styles that he fuses: hip-hop and Ashkenazi Jewish music from prewar New York City. This fusion creates a space for reclamation and renegotiation of the Ashkenazi-North American identity that was ruptured by immigration, Anglo-assimilation, the Holocaust and the foundation of Israel. And the fact that SoCalled has made a name for himself as a hip-hop artist through his beatmaking and sampling technique is no accident. Hip-hop scholar Andrew Bartlett writes that "Sampling in hip-hop is not collaboration in any familiar sense of that term. It is a high-tech and highly selective archiving, bringing into dialogue by virtue of even the most slight representation" (in Forman and Neal 401). Through sampling and

historically-informed performance, SoCalled selectively resurrects voices from the past, situating himself in a self-created, and redefined, Jewish aesthetic and cultural tradition.

Sampling works extremely well for the hipster-Jewish project of redefining tradition in order to preserve it: traditional materials can be fully quoted, juxtaposed with other materials both traditional and new, and placed in entirely new contexts to create many new layers of meaning. “Apart from constructing a bridge between musical antecedents and the present,” hip-hop and African-American studies scholar Murray Forman writes, “digital sampling can imbue an element of authenticity on newer tracks as the patina of the past seeps into the new mix....DJ’s or producers’ tastes and cultural capital are also on display with their selection of classic recordings from the past, especially as they seek more compelling or obscure material to distinguish their musical creations” (in Forman and Neal 390). In his above quote, SoCalled essentially states that he moved from the latter part of Forman’s analysis to the former: from seeking to distinguish himself as a DJ to using sampling to imbue his work with authenticity and a sense of history.

Versioning and reinterpretation in SoCalled’s work serves a similar purpose. His previously-discussed cover of “Ich Bin a Border Bay Mayn Vayb,” though it includes no audio samples from Aaron Lebedeff’s original recording, works conceptually in the same way: the older material is recognizably quoted, recontextualized and re-validated. Therefore, I will be discussing all of these technical and compositional practices together, focusing on the track “Who Knows One?” from *The SoCalled Seder: A Hip-hop Haggadah*.

“Who Knows One?” is a reinterpretation of the traditional Passover song “Echad Mi Yodea.” As previously discussed, the original song counts hallmarks of Jewish religious and cultural identity: one is our God, two are the tablets of the commandments, three are the patriarchs, and so forth. SoCalled updates this concept by counting off hallmarks of hip-hop culture: one DJ whose turntable’s jewel-encrusted, two taggers who are always getting busted, etc. The track opens with three samples from what sounds like a mid-twentieth-century didactic album: “A different song now, this time from the Passover service, the Haggadah, but with a new twist,” “Arba imahos, shlosa avos, shnei luchos habris,”⁴⁷ and “Who knows one?” The first clearly introduces and explains the song; the second is an excerpt from the Hebrew version of “Echad Mi Yodea,” sung in a strong Yiddish accent; and the third is a translation of the title of the song, which sounds like it is from the same didactic album.

SoCalled enters, saying “Check it”—a standard hip-hop entrance—sings a few lines in Yiddish, raps “Yeah, flip flop and you don’t stop,” which is almost reminiscent of the Beastie Boys’ party raps, and launches into his hip-hop countdown. Throughout, fuzzy, crackly samples chanting “echad mi yodea” and “who knows one” loop over a klezmer-style clarinet solo by noted performer David Krakauer, interspersed with a sample of a spoken, English translation of “Echad Mi Yodea.” While SoCalled’s flow is arguably the centerpiece of the song, the bulk of the time is taken up with traditional samples. At the end of the track, SoCalled samples a dialogue between himself and Pete Sokolow, an older Jewish pianist who performed the kind of music that SoCalled now samples at resorts in the Catskills in the 1950s:

⁴⁷ “Four are the matriarchs, three are the patriarchs, two are the tablets of the covenant,” phonetically transliterated from the Hebrew above.

SoCalled: Do you do any Passover songs?

Pete Sokolow: Why?

SoCalled: Um, it's a long story, but I just want to hear some if you know some.

Bouncily accompanying himself on the piano, Sokolow launches into a heavily-accented, uptempo rendition of “Echad Mi Yodea,” snippets of which are sampled earlier in the track.

Through sampling, *SoCalled* situates his updated roll-call of one area of Jewish knowledge in a matrix of cultural references: traditional singers, Jewish popular musicians from an earlier generation, religious imagery, ethnic imagery, and imagery that speaks to *SoCalled*'s personal experience—all touched with humor. The rap is so unlike the samples around it, yet clearly based on a shared tradition, that it allows *SoCalled* to significantly expand the bounds of Jewish identity and knowledge while still remaining unmistakably Jewish. *SoCalled* wants to have it both ways in this track. He claims hip-hop credibility, as previously discussed, as well as laying claim to powerful signifiers of Jewish cultural memory and tradition via the many voices he resurrects and juxtaposes. He situates his own voice as one that may speak for this tradition.

“This hip-hop aesthetic, broadly speaking, allows for sharp and abrupt discontinuities or ‘cuts’ as it encourages continuity by way of the all-important ‘mix.’...[It] engages the postmodern present in its stress on the discontinuous and the contingent while it nurtures a community building musical tradition rooted in the oral,” writes Greg Dimitriadis of sampling (in Forman and Neal 425). In “Who Knows One?”, as in his other songs, *SoCalled* creates a temporally-specific, polyvocal *mélange* of Jewish experiences while establishing his own continuities and discontinuities with those experiences.

While sampling is standard to the hip-hop aesthetic, and SoCalled learned it within that context, he makes a valid point in an interview with *The Walrus*, recognizing the hybridity of “klezmer” and drawing parallels between compositional practices in each style:

We had these new technologies of computers and keyboards. Well, people were going to try to make music with them, and the music that came out of it was this thing called hip-hop. That’s sort of what was happening in eastern Europe. They were taking the best parts of Ukrainian music and Romanian music and Russian music, and they were sampling it, basically, and looping it and making it their own. Hip-hop just lays it bare—you can see the cut and hear the cut. (in Coodin)

While this viewpoint is somewhat reductionist, it does establish important similarities between hip-hop and the historical Jewish tendency to assimilate and hybridize. Furthermore, it sets the stage very nicely for SoCalled’s claims to authenticity and credibility in both traditions.

Musical “authenticity” in Jewish hip-hop has many implications and can be understood in several ways: as historically-informed performance; as musical ownership by the “right” people; as a claim to narrative and aesthetic continuity; and as performance of a particular type of aggressive, heterosexual masculinity. In hip-hop, furthermore, the concept of “keeping it real” is important—both in terms of personal presentation and musical aesthetics. What “real,” then, is SoCalled keeping if his work is a pastiche of references to contemporary North American musical superculture, Ashkenazi kitsch, Jewish religious practice, personal workings-through of masculine identity, and claims to Ashkenazi Jewish authority and credibility, all shot through with attempts to recontextualize and redefine each of these?

SoCalled cannot possibly keep it real in the general meaning of the phrase. What he can do, however, is keep it sincere: in his attempts to sound his “alienated Canadian Jewish self,” he must play with, stretch, remix and perform notions of authenticity and multiple, and sometimes competing, claims to authority in order to get at what he really wants to get at: a workable, *heimish*⁴⁸ sense of Yiddish-diasporic identity that reclaims him and his peers from alienation and assimilation. The elements of SoCalled’s music contain tensions and paradoxes when analyzed because the condition in response to which it is being made is itself filled with tensions and paradoxes: how does one reclaim an identity that one never really knew in the first place, yet with which one feels a deep affinity? What happens when one is almost by definition an inauthentic performer in one’s musical vernacular (hip-hop) yet has only limited experience of the music in which one could be considered authentic?

SoCalled’s music is really, at heart, about contextualizing a particular Ashkenazi-diasporic cultural memory within contemporary experience, and trying do it with a degree of credibility. Paradoxically, it’s a memory that much of SoCalled’s generation does not have due to the perfect storm of immigration, acculturation, genocide and Jewish nationalism. If that memory is to be had at all—and many people desperately want it to be had in order to create a musical home for themselves—it must consist of bits and pieces of lived experience and received wisdom held together by a largely-imagined glue.

⁴⁸ Literally “homey,” Yiddish (transliterated) but with additional sensibilities of warmth, belonging, tradition and intra-ethnic relationship.

(Ironic) imagination

Like Theodore Bikel's Belz, the Yiddish cultural spaces that SoCalled recalls in his samples, and in his explicitly heritage-oriented works such as *Hiphopkhasene*, largely no longer exist. The shtetl exists only in folktales and family trees, and native Yiddish speakers are mainly found only in particular, very insular Chasidic communities (such as the Yiddish-only Satmar village of Kiryas Joel north of New York City). Furthermore, as a young, relatively-assimilated Canadian Jew who himself speaks about his feelings of alienation from Ashkenazi ethnicity due to having been raised in a relatively-assimilated family, SoCalled himself cannot possibly remember these spaces and times—but, given their metaphoric and rhetorical centrality in Ashkenazi Jewish collective memory, must reckon with their power. This task is complicated by the fact that the Ashkenazi community, like many Jewish communities throughout history, is inherently, even ontologically, diasporic.

SoCalled (and Sophie Solomon, his partner on *Hiphopkhasene*) use, and redefine, the imagined space of “Yiddishland” to locate their revitalized Yiddish(ist) culture.

Abigail Wood writes that they are not the first to use the concept or the term:

As Jeffrey Shandler notes in his recent study, *Adventures in Yiddishland*, this term, while appearing in no Yiddish dictionary, has been used for over a century to imagine ‘a virtual locus construed in terms of the use of the Yiddish language, especially, though not exclusively, in its spoken form’ (2006, 33). This label is, nevertheless, implicitly either utopian or ironic: even at the height of Old World Yiddish culture, Yiddishland never existed.

Despite its non-existence, Yiddishland has “a deep-rooted culture, yet none of the attributes that serve to legitimize a modern nation-state—government, embassies,

airports, a Lonely Planet guide and, of course, a *land* or even a distinctive shared language; while some Yiddish is spoken among those fluent in the language, the lingua franca of the klezmer scene is American English” (248-49). Nonetheless, “Yiddishland” is a useful organizing concept and convenient shorthand for the Yiddishist community’s activities and yearnings.

Yiddishland, furthermore, is a space that—because it is not real—can contain all of the tensions and paradoxes inherent in the contemporary Jewish hip-hop scene. Wood continues, “The sense of place encapsulated in Solomon’s writing”—the aforementioned liner notes to *Hiphopkhasene* that describe snacking on classic Jewish deli food while arranging the marriage of fiddle and microphone—“portrays a Yiddishland which embraces the complex cultural and linguistic ebb and flow underlying today’s Yiddish music scene. Solomon and Dolgin appropriate techniques of contemporary hip-hop, including bricolage and rap, using cultural materials to define the boundaries of their imagined Yiddishland” (250). For SoCalled (and Solomon), the borders of Yiddishland are contiguous with their own lived experience, which includes bits and pieces of religious observance; markers of Ashkenazi ethnicity like vodka, Yiddish, and grandmotherly superstition; an often-cynical attitude toward received tradition; and a good deal of exposure to, and fluency in, hip-hop and other dominant North American musical styles.

Diane L. Wolf discusses the relationship of Jews several generations removed from direct experience of the Holocaust to the event itself:

Postmemory, a concept developed by Marianne Hirsch in her discussion of children of Holocaust survivors, is experienced by those with a generational and historical distance from the Holocaust. Postmemory is a very ‘powerful and very particular form of

memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation...’ (Hirsch 1997:22)

While a kind of Jewish cultural memory might be shared by the majority of Jews, postmemory is experienced only by those with a particular generational and historical distance from the Holocaust. Here I am utilizing the notion of postmemory somewhat more broadly to refer to second- and third-generation Jews whose notions of the Holocaust are mediated through the memories of others and through the production of Jewish cultural memory. (in Wettstein 2008)

SoCalled’s work is almost resolutely anti-Holocaust remembrance; indeed, the Holocaust is a narrative he intentionally silences. But the concept of postmemory presented here works beautifully for our purposes in this context if “Holocaust” is replaced in each instance with “Yiddishkeit.” In the case of klezmer-hop, memory of Ashkenazi ethnic identity is mediated through the sounds of others and imaginatively reconstructed utilizing SoCalled’s direct experience of contemporary hip-hop culture and aesthetics.

Despite the immense and well-meaning efforts of klezmer revivalists to rebuild vital Yiddish cultural spaces, rebuilding the shtetl or the old-fashioned Lower East Side of Manhattan is neither possible nor, I would argue, desirable in many ways. What is possible, and what has been done rather well within particular subcultures—especially in the young, hipster, urban Jewish scene of which SoCalled, et al. are a part—is the rebuilding of *imagined* Yiddish communities, along the lines of Benedict Anderson’s classic proposition.

Conclusion

“Yiddishland,” and the overall conflicted, messy, hybridized, ironic and humorous portrait of North American Ashkenazi-diasporic identity that *SoCalled* paints with his sounds, are translocal, both in terms of space and of time, and almost wholly dependent on consumptible media to create a sense of community. Both of these characteristics are consistent both with the *longue durée* of diasporic Jewish culture—which has been aphorized as consisting of a portable homeland in a book—and with how much of white American ethnic identity operates in the early 21st century.

While *SoCalled*’s portrait is rich, nuanced and multivocal, and it can be interpreted in many ways from many different angles, it remains a consumptible item, and not a way of life. Wood writes:

The musical revival of klezmer music may have spawned a cultural scene which feels tangible enough to constitute a real, named place rather than a mere network of acquaintances and cultural knowledge, and to give an impression of cultural continuity; however, in revolving around music camps, festivals and concerts, Solomon and Dolgin’s *Yiddishland* has little infrastructure for everyday life. Here, Yiddish culture is largely performed rather than lived. (265)

For the musicians in the scene, it is performed; for their fans and their larger communities and peer groups, it is purchased; concerts and recordings are experienced at will without necessarily being dependent on any tangible or specific social interaction.

Rather than reading texts together, à la Anderson, this new Yiddish community is—has been—listening to “texts” together, prominently among them *SoCalled*’s, as its primary method of interaction and self-organization, enabled by sound-capitalism instead of print-capitalism. This creates another paradox: in trying to carve out a distinctly

Yiddish, heymish space within alienating and bland (North) American whiteness, SoCalled's work marks North American Jews as firmly within this whiteness by approaching ethnicity as a symbolic and consumptible identity to be experienced at will, as opposed to a holistic way of life. While much of SoCalled's sampling wizardry attempts to establish narrative community between a time period when (Ashkenazi) Jewishness was self-evident and significantly less negotiable, and the present day when it is ultimately negotiable, at least in North America, an excerpt of a sample from his track "Bubbemeises" sums it up best: "You know, the identity was getting lost! Remember who you are...that makes it possible for me to say to you, 'Come back!'" The fact that this identity must be *returned to*—even if the return is imperfect, to an imaginary land—implies, correctly, that it was nearly gone in the first place.

Yet one of the most beautiful aspects of SoCalled's stylistic fusion is that it allows for profound reimaginations and reinterpretations of the lost identity, and on what terms it should be resurrected. While the possible identities put forth do not always make logical sense, they are honestly felt. Attempting to transcend the paradoxes of authenticity, the sincerity of motivation driving SoCalled's work "allow[s] for the possibility of performative ad-libbing and inevitable acceptance of trust and uncertainty as the only solution to interpersonal ambiguity" (Jackson 18). This approach may raise more questions than it resolves, but the tensions are ultimately fruitful, keeping it as real as the messiness of lived experience.

Three thousand years with no place to be
 And they want me to give up my milk and honey
 Don't you see, it's not about the land or the sea
 Not the country but the dwelling of His majesty
 --Matisyahu, "Jerusalem"

Clearly, then, the ideal contemporary performance is one that is not only associated with past generations but also with past performance events and behaviors. Thus, today's Lubavitcher performers must create the past anew each time a performance takes place in the present. Both the music and its contemporary performance, in essence, act together as mediators negotiating between two worlds: the idealized past and the spiritually weakened present, both of which are constructed in the context of a contemporary musical performance.

--Ellen Koskoff, *Music in Lubavitcher Life*

CASE STUDY: MATISYAHU

Often framed as an anomaly, the reggae-rap-rock artist Matisyahu occupies a unique place at the intersection of historical Chasidic musical practice, recent demographic and halakhic trends in American Orthodox Judaism, Afrodiasporic musical flows between New York and the Caribbean, and the Jewish hip-hop community. As the most prominent ba'al teshuvah in the United States and likely the most famous Lubavitcher⁴⁹ outside of the Chasidic community, and as a musician who intentionally blends several different musical styles, Matisyahu's music is almost necessarily concerned with delineating, expanding and negotiating the aural and social boundaries of the Chasidic world and, less directly, those of American and Caribbean popular music.

⁴⁹ "Chabad" and "Lubavitch" are interchangeable designations for the same Chasidic community. The Lubavitch sect was founded in the town of Liadi, sometimes known as Liubov, in what is now Belarus. Therefore, "Lubavitch" refers to the sect's geographic origins. "Chabad" is an acronym for the terms "chochmah," "binah," and "da'at," which mean, respectively, wisdom, understanding and knowledge in Hebrew. This is the term that Lubavitchers most often use to describe themselves as an organization and represents the goals of the Chabad-Lubavitch spiritual path.

His biography encompasses both the ba'al teshuvah and kiruv phenomena—and the attendant increase in halakhic stringency in American Jewish practice—along with the by-now familiar narrative of secularized Jews from the east coast suburbs rediscovering their roots and constructing a new Jewish identity, however defined, in the wake of various revivalist and revitalist movements in the late 20th century.⁵⁰

For Matisyahu, this identity is performed on the international stage using the stylistic tropes of dancehall, roots reggae, Rastafarian ideology and (especially on his most recent album) American rock and hip-hop. He also uses typically-Chasidic styles of nigun singing, which in Matisyahu's hands share many aural characteristics with elements of dancehall vocals. Stylistically, his music reflects a primarily American-Caribbean Afrodiasporic sensibility.

However, all of his lyrics fall into one of several categories (often combined in the same song): direct quotation from Hebrew scriptures (in Hebrew and/or in English translation); inspirational or pedagogical exhortations to (presumably Jewish) young people to live according to observant Jewish values; riffs on Jewish history, generally from Biblical times; explanations of or reference to Chasidic theology and cosmology; militaristic allegories and Zionist exhortations that blur the line between metaphor and contemporary reality; and devotional texts (either composed by Matisyahu or based on traditional writings). Thus, though he is an atypically fluent practitioner of non-“Jewish”

⁵⁰ Since late 2007, Matisyahu has made public statements disaffiliating himself from the Chabad-Lubavitch movement. However, there are several compelling reasons to continue to place him within the Lubavitch-kiruv tradition: first, that the bulk of his career has unequivocally been as a Lubavitcher; second, that he still identifies as “Chasidic” if currently unaffiliated; third, that his musical idiom and public persona has been shaped under the auspices of being a practicing Lubavitcher CChasid.

genres, Matisyahu falls squarely within the paradigm of earlier kiruv musicians in his blending of Jewish text with non-Jewish instrumental styles.

Through this combination, especially in his lyrics about past and future Jewish identity, Matisyahu creates a postvernacular vision of Zionist Jewish existence in diaspora. For Matisyahu and perhaps for the communities he represents, Zion is a symbol of a redeemed Jewish community that can serve as a catalyst for world redemption. Part of this two-tiered redemption includes sovereignty over the physical land of Israel, especially the key religious sites to which Matisyahu refers upon occasion; however, the ownership of physical space is not nearly as important to postvernacular Zionism as is the performance in the present, as Koskoff writes in this chapter's epigraph, of an idealized past located in a symbolic Eretz Yisrael that now survives only in canonical Jewish text. This conception of Jewish diaspora and return is simultaneously about boundaries—spatial, temporal and behavioral—and their transcendence through text and its performance.

Matisyahu's use of Rastafari, reggae, dancehall and hip-hop

Matisyahu is most commonly referred to as a Chasidic *reggae* artist, and the reasons why are immediately evident upon listening to his music: from his dancehall-inspired vocal delivery to his heavy use of a classic one-drop reggae backbeat, various elements of Jamaican popular music are prominent in Matisyahu's vocal and instrumental sound. He is also a skilled beatboxer (more evident in his live performances), a style clearly derived from American hip-hop. Equally important, however, are the ways in which Matisyahu (often very deliberately) departs from the conventions, lyrical and

stylistic, of American and Caribbean Afrodiasporic styles. Chasidic ideology and, often, vocal conventions are also a large component of Matisyahu’s music, and he often alters elements of the non-Chasidic traditions from which he draws in a process of musical *tikkun* which will be explained at greater length in the next section.

Reggae-influenced rhythms form the backbone of nearly all of Matisyahu’s work up until his 2009 album *Light* (which relies more on hip-hop and rock beats). Most of his early songs are in a moderate 4/4 and feature a prominent skank, generally on guitar; several others make use of the 3+3+2 pulse that is extremely common in dancehall. Manuel and Marshall write that “in the period of 1990-2003, most [dancehall] riddims have featured a basic 3-3-2 pulse, at a tempo of around 90-110 bpm (although several songs in recent years have been faster)” (456). None of Matisyahu’s songs strongly emphasize the front of the beat or place more stress on beats one and three than on beats two and four.

“King Without a Crown” is a good example of these general characteristics. During the chorus, the lead guitar plays a 3+3+2 rhythm drawn directly from dancehall, while Matisyahu sings devotional lyrics about his love for God:



The percussion likewise echoes the conventions of reggae and dancehall, with modifications—the third beat is not as heavily emphasized as it would be in Jamaican musical traditions. This is evident in the rhythms of the first verse (typical 4/4 measure transcribed below):

	1		2		3		4		~90 bpm					
guitar			x				x				x			
bass guitar	x						x		x				x	
hi-hat	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
snare					x		x					x		x
kick drum	x								x					

Similarly, the instrumental parts of the bridge emphasize the offbeat:

	1		2		3		4					
hi-hat			x	x			x	x			x	x
guitar			x	x			x	x			x	x

The accompaniment to the chorus of “Chop ‘Em Down,” from 2004’s *Shake Off the Dust...Arise*, uses the kick drum on the front of each beat, but the keyboard skank is the most prominent sound:

	1		2		3		4		~90 bpm				
keyboard			x				x				x		
bass guitar			x		x		x				x		
hi-hat					x					x			x
snare (rim shot)					x				x			x	
kick drum	x				x						x		

“Jerusalem,” another track from *Youth*, also exemplifies Matisyahu’s reggae style, with the kick drum emphasizing the backbeat and the hi-hat and keys emphasizing the offbeats:

	1		2		3		4		~80 bpm				
keyboard			x				x				x		
bass guitar	x		x		x								x
hi-hat			x	x			x	x				x	x
snare					x			x					x
kick drum	x		x										

Matisyahu’s latest album, August 2009’s *Light*, relies much more heavily on an

American rock and hip-hop sound (a stylistic transition which has been heavily covered

in music media). Crunchy guitars and crisp drums provide a much faster, driving 4/4 beat on most songs (generally ~120 bpm), often emphasizing 1 and 3 and rarely emphasizing the backbeat or offbeat. However, Matisyahu has not completely abandoned the reggae/dancehall aesthetic, as evidenced by the skank and affected patwah in “Struggla”:

	1		2				3			4			~90 bpm		
bass guitar	x			x	x						x	x	x	x	
drum machine			x				x				x				x

Matisyahu has consistently relied heavily on styles of vocal delivery borrowed from Jamaican music. First, although he does *not* use I-tal or other elements of Rastafari vocabulary that do not overlap with standard Jewish terms and concepts—which will be further discussed shortly—he *does* affect patwah in many of his songs. Excerpts from his song “Jerusalem,” rendered phonetically where necessary, are good examples of this: “Jerusalem, if I fah-get you/Fiyah nah gon come from mi tongue”; “Inna de ancient days, we will return wit no delay”; “Why is everybody always chasin we/Cut off da roots of yah family tree/Don cha know dat’s not da way to be.” Matisyahu, born near Philadelphia, raised in White Plains, New York, and currently steeped in American-based, primarily Yiddish-speaking Jewish mystical-fundamentalist movements, is obviously choosing to use patwah sounds and turns of phrase performatively, as part of his overall reggae/dancehall sensibility; the American English dialect he learned as a child does not include, for example, the use of “we” as an object of a verb, and pronounces the personal possessive as “my” instead of “mi.”

This use of patwah is more as an ornamentation than as a full, vernacular language. Most American audiences would have a very difficult time understanding

lyrics exclusively in patwah, which would have a negative effect on both Matisyahu's market share and his ability to get out his message to English-speaking American young people. Patwah here is a postvernacular aimed at those for whom, paradoxically, it was never a vernacular.

Matisyahu's patterns of emphasis and vocal stylings, even when he sings in standard American English, are recognizably derived from dancehall and reggae. Occasionally, these stylings come from roots reggae; the song "What I'm Fighting For," from the 2006 album *Youth*, is noticeably similar in timbre and vocal style to stripped-down Bob Marley tracks such as the well-known "Redemption Song." Most of the time, though, Matisyahu's voice sounds distinctly more contemporary. He often rapidly sings multiple syllables on the same note in an almost-stuttering way, at times nearly rapping and at other times definitively rapping (which, of course, lays bare the Caribbean and specifically Jamaican influences on American hip-hop). Choruses are generally "sung" in a more melodic, vocally full manner, while verses are faster, staccato, with little variation in pitch, and modest melismas sometimes occurring on syllables that begin and end lines.

"Reggae has...successfully brought Rastafari to the world and, in so doing, managed to link musical style with religious ideology," writes Rommen. "[R]eggae's travel abroad has also succeeded in clearing space for readings that find artists and fans incorporating Rastafari *symbols* into their lives and music without necessarily subscribing to the spiritual dimensions of Rastafari ideology" (240). This is exactly the case with Matisyahu: Rasta and reggae are used as style in his work rather than sung as ideology, and only where they do not contradict his Jewish beliefs. Accessed through the work of

global reggae stars like Bob Marley, Matisyahu has picked up on aural signatures of Jamaican styles (albeit somewhat unsystematically; his drummer does not always execute reggae rhythms quite properly) without incorporating Rastafarianism into his worldview.

Despite the fact that he has ample opportunity to do so, Matisyahu never uses a distinctively Rastafarian phrase—note the above example from “Jerusalem” where he chooses “we” (despite its potential awkwardness) instead of using “I&I.” He makes several references, in “Jerusalem” and in other songs, to Jewish struggles throughout history, but does not use “downpression” or other relevant Rastafarian terms.

Furthermore, he explicitly *distances* himself from key elements of Rastafari practice: in the song “King Without a Crown,” the lyrics of the bridge state, “Me no want no sinsemilla/That would only bring me down/Burn away my brain no way my brain is too compound/Torah food for my brain let it rain till I drown.” Here, he disavows the Rastafarian belief in the sacredness of marijuana, contrasting it with the spiritual and perhaps physical benefits of Jewish scripture.

Substance abuse is, in fact, a particular target in Matisyahu’s lyrics, with several other songs either saying that God and/or Jewish learning are better highs than drugs (especially marijuana), or admonishing young people against drug and alcohol use (“Substance dulls the mind/Treyf⁵¹ wine clouds the heart,” in “WP”). Although he of course frequently makes reference to God, Matisyahu uses the words “Adonai” (“my Lord”), “God,” “HaShem” (“the Name”), “king” or “majesty” as opposed to the Rastafari “Jah” (which is, interestingly, a perfectly acceptable and common Jewish term for God, though often spelled as “Yah” in the Jewish liturgy).

⁵¹ “Non-kosher.”

Matisyahu is a clear example of the “negotiation of proximity” Rommen describes in his work on Protestant reggae artists. According to Rommen, “the more removed an artist/band is from Jamaican cultural or geopolitical space, the greater is the proportion of the Rastafari elements within the music” (257). Because Matisyahu’s fundamentalist Jewish tradition and Rastafarianism both draw on Hebrew scripture (what Christians and Rastafarians call the Old Testament) as their foundational text, and Matisyahu is a member of a religious community that seeks to protect itself from unauthorized readings of this text from within and without, he must distance himself as much as possible from the Rastafarian content of the reggae style he uses. For Matisyahu, as for other Jewish artists, verbal text is of paramount importance. Therefore, as long as his lyrics are sufficiently “Jewish” (and, equally importantly, “not non-Jewish”), Matisyahu can use as many 3+3+2 rhythms and offbeats as he wants.

Thus, though many themes and terms in Matisyahu’s lyrics are also found in Rastafarian ways of thinking, he does not use them *because* of this; rather, they appear because they are common to both Jewish and Rastafari ideology due to their common derivation from Hebrew scripture. Matisyahu discusses Babylon, Zion, the Lion of Judah, the Messiah, and other concepts that would be entirely familiar to Rastafarians and fans of mainstream reggae.⁵² However, they would be equally familiar to practicing Jews and are common themes in Jewish religious history and liturgy. It is, in fact, not considered acceptable by Orthodox Jews even to *appear* to endorse another belief system; because reggae is associated with Rastafarianism, Matisyahu must make interventions that specifically and obviously dissociate reggae style from Rastafarian

⁵² He even pays homage to roots reggae where appropriate: “Bob Nesta said it best, everything will be all right” is part of Matisyahu’s song “Close My Eyes.”

belief. Matisyahu's concern with these ideas is due to his strong religious beliefs and his explicit desire to use his music to promote a Chasidic ideological agenda, as opposed to a desire to emulate Rastafarian themes in reggae—though, of course, the overlap lends more credibility to his use of reggae styles as well as evoking sensibilities of consciousness, alterity, authenticity and righteous pedagogy.

Performing Chassidus

While the trappings of observant Jewish, and specifically Chasidic, identity may seem natural to Matisyahu, he performs Chassidus—"Chasidic-ness"—as much as he performs reggae or negotiates Rastafari ideology.⁵³ As easily the most-visible individual Chasid in the United States, if not the world, Matisyahu represents Chasidism to those outside his community, both Jews and non-Jews. His performance of Chassidus affects public perceptions of Judaism and Chabad Chasidism, especially because he performs *as* a Chasid as well as performing Chasidism in a less-self-conscious way.

In addition to being the most visible Chasid in the United States, Matisyahu is the most famous ba'al teshuvah in American popular culture. He grew up in a relatively non-observant Reconstructionist Jewish household and chose to become observant during his college years; previously musical, he chose to use his musical skills in service of his newfound beliefs and embarked on his Chasidic reggae/rap career. Though any Chasidic musician (or indeed, any observant Jewish musician) would have to follow certain

⁵³ "Chassidus" literally means "piety" (just as "CChasid" means "pious person") and is the term used by CChasidim of all sects to describe what they consider ideal, and uniquely Chasidic, ways of being; it is also the word for "CChasidism." It can also be transliterated "cChasidut" or "Chasidut," but is generally transliterated "chassidus" by CChasidim themselves to more accurately reflect their traditional Ashkenazic pronunciation.

halakhot—all lyrics would have to be on “appropriate” topics, certain repertoires (such as Christian liturgical music) would not be suitable to perform or reinterpret, music (especially instrumental music) could only be performed in the proper contexts—observant musicians are not necessarily obligated to use their skills and/or careers in the service of a specifically religious agenda.

However, ba’alei teshuvah⁵⁴ are considered to have special potential for outreach and for representation of the community to the outside world. It is worth quoting Koskoff at length:

Those who have entered the community as adults, the ba’alei teshuvah, are generally regarded as being far more consciously aware and energetic than their lifetime counterparts, aware of the minute nuances of Jewish law and possessing unbounded energy to live them. They are often highly motivated to learn quickly, to catch up for a lifetime of being on the outside; thus, a certain heartiness of approach, as well as precariousness, characterizes their actions....The energy that characterizes ba’alei teshuvah is often channeled into music making, especially if the person entering the community has had musical training and experience in his or her former life. In fact, musical ba’alei teshuvah have special roles: they are seen as ideal musical emissaries, reaching outward toward the secular community in ways far more effective than lifetime Lubavitchers. They are familiar with the secular world, only recently having left it; yet they are far more aware of its seductive influences and often feel the need to be far more vigilant against its power to contaminate. (148-49)

Thus, Matisyahu’s pre-existing musical skills and special energy as a ba’al teshuvah were considered by the Lubavitch community to make him a uniquely potent force for kiruv.

⁵⁴ Chasidic ba’alot teshuvah, like other ultra-Orthodox women, are not allowed to perform in public.

This was considered good for the ba'al teshuvah, Matisyahu: by representing Chabad to the outside world, by reaching out, he does not have time or energy to second-guess his own commitment. It was also considered good for the community: the contaminating influence of the secular world that the recent ba'al teshuvah may carry can be redirected outward, thus protecting the sacred community and potentially expanding it. Matisyahu's public performance of Chassidus, then, is partially "organic," partially prophylactic, and partially for the purpose of kiruv.

In 2007, Matisyahu announced in several interviews that he was no longer a part of the Chabad movement: "I am no longer identified with Chabad. Today, it's more important to me to connect to a universal message" (Ettinger). His 2009 album, his first after his split from Chabad, likewise reflects a new stylistic approach. However, Matisyahu should still be heard as a Chasidic musician and perhaps even as a Chabad musician for several reasons. First, most of his musical output has been as a Lubavitcher and should be analyzed as such; second, he is widely viewed as a Chasidic and/or Lubavitcher artist due to the large amount of press coverage at the time of his debut, when he was still a member of the movement. Finally, he is still an ultra-Orthodox Jew who identifies with Chasidic thought and has, according to the above *Ha'aretz* article, been investigating other Chasidic movements. Matisyahu in 2010 is most easily identifiable as a generic Chasid, using symbols of Chasidism like distinctive dress, vocabulary and ideology and practices common to all Chasidic movements to project a sort of postvernacular frumkeit based on symbolic manipulation as opposed to communal affiliation. These symbols are most visibly manipulated in his music and in the way he presents himself in the public sphere.

First, Matisyahu’s lyrics, of course, reflect the religious ideologies in which he is steeped. There is not a single song in his repertory that does not deal, directly or indirectly, with issues of Jewish identity, history and text. He often performs, verbatim, Jewish liturgical and scriptural texts: his songs “Candle” and “Tzama L’Chol Nafshi” from *Shake Off the Dust...Arise*, for example, are his settings of verses from Psalms 18 and 63, respectively, along with their English translations. “Water,” from the same album, quotes the Sh’ma, the central Jewish creedal prayer—both the text and the standard Ashkenazic melody, albeit modified to fit the reggae beat. His songs are rife with Biblical references, from the Exodus and Garden of Eden stories to occasionally mentioning Babylon, the Lion of Judah, and important Biblical characters such as Abraham.

The song “3rd Cup: Yahu,” from the SoCalled album *The SoCalled Seder: A Hip-hop Haggadah*, is a reggae-inflected reinterpretation of the classic Passover and havdalah song “Eliyahu haNavi.” Matisyahu begins the track with the verbatim text and melody of the traditional tune (albeit decorated with a few characteristic ornamentations), later singing vocables and English lyrics inspired by Biblical historical and prophetic narratives.⁵⁵

♩ = 100

E-li - ya-hu ha na - vi E-li - ya-hu ha Tish - bi E-li-ya - hu E-li-ya - hu E-li - ya hu ha Gi-la - di

Bim-hc-rah bc-ya-mei - nu Ya_ vo ci- lci_ nu Im Ma-shi - ach ben Da - vid Im Ma-shi-ach ben Da - vid

⁵⁵ In the eleventh and twelfth measures of the traditional “Eliyahu haNavi” tune, Matisyahu pronounces “eileinu,” “to us,” as “aleynu,” “upon us” or “before us.” It is unclear whether this is intended to convey an altered meaning or is a result of Matisyahu’s particular vocal style.

The instrumental arrangement, however, draws on reggae styles. The hi-hat emphasizes the afterbeat of 2 and the third beat; strings constantly emphasize afterbeats, evoking the klezmer styles of SoCalled as well as the reggae skank.⁵⁶

	1		2		3		4		~100 bpm				
strings			x				x				x		
bass guitar			x		x		x				x		x
hi-hat	x		x		x		X	-	x		x		x
snare					x						x		
kick drum	x						x						x

In addition to reinterpreting traditional songs and texts, Matisyahu also frequently explains or refers to central elements of Chasidic theology and belief. Contemporary Jewish mystical cosmology is predicated on variants of the Lurianic myth, named after its author, the 16th-century rabbi and mystic Isaac Luria.⁵⁷ This myth, writes Scholem, “is concentrated in three great symbols, the *tsimtsum*, or self-limitation, of God, the *shevirah*, or breaking of the vessels, and the *tikkun*, or harmonious correction and mending of the flaw which came into the world through the *shevirah*” (52). According to this myth, God originally filled the entire cosmos when s/he decided to create the known universe. Upon realizing that there was no space into which the universe could be created, God willingly contracted, leaving a void. God decided that the created universe should be filled with divine energy and created vessels or membranes to hold this energy. However, when these vessels (ha-kelim) were filled with the energy, they were not strong enough, and

⁵⁶ Immediately following the traditional tune, Matisyahu begins chatting in a style borrowed directly from dub, then raps a few newly-composed verses dealing with Jewish symbols over an accompaniment that includes dub sound effects as well as klezmer-style fiddle.

⁵⁷ The Lurianic myth was created in the aftermath of the Jewish expulsion from Spain. It is not intended as a literal explanation of the creation of the universe but is rather an intentional myth that is supposed to make sense of and give meaning to historical and archetypal Jewish experiences of rupture and reconstruction.

shattered; both the material of the vessels and the divine energy contained inside were lost to the void (shvirat ha-kelim). God tried again, and created the universe as we know it today via a process of emanation from the divine source, such that there are four levels of existence, each containing different amounts of divinity. This universe contains trapped sparks or shards of divine light or energy from the first attempt at creation.

The Jewish people, according to this myth, have the unique role of reuniting each spark of light with its divine source; this can be done through the performance of mitzvot, and performing mitzvot with the proper kavanah, or intention, is even more effective. Once all of the light is reunited with its Source, time as we know it will end and the world will have been perfected. Many Chasidic sects cast the Messiah as the person who will be able to descend, metaphorically, into the depths of the Void and retrieve the last, most stubbornly lost sparks of divinity in order to finally and definitively mend the universe. This estrangement of the Godhead from its emanations is often compared with the Jewish people in exile from their homeland or a married couple that has been separated—the feminine aspect of the divine, the Shekhinah, is considered to be the immanent presence of God that is estranged from the transcendent aspect, and can only be re-unified through the performance of mitzvot. Therefore, according to this way of thinking, Jews who do not perform mitzvot are not only forgetting their heritage or breaking traditional law, but neglecting their duty of repairing the world and of mending the broken Godhead.

Though this myth is not well-known beyond the Chasidic world, Matisyahu makes constant use of its imagery in all of his work.⁵⁸ The song “Dispatch the Troops,” from the 2006 album *Youth*, begins with “Daughter of Zion/Once precious princess/Left

⁵⁸ Many progressive Jews have repurposed the concept of tikkun olam from the Lurianic myth, now using it to denote a world perfected by social justice work and activism.

her father's house/To walk the streets that never rest"—a classic image of exile; "Late Night In Zion," from the same album, begins with "We're the reflection of imperfection/We come from the infinite place of limitation/Rejoice in these days, make a correction/We're the completion" and later refers to "Falling pieces, lost sparks, hearts cut." He also makes tangential references to the often overtly-sexualized aspects of the metaphor of exile and estrangement: in "Water," he sings, "Hashem rules the world and Israel is his wife/Love you yes my G-d with all my heart my soul and my might," drawing on often-made connections between the erotic charge of personal devotion and the sexualized bond between God and the Jewish people.

Matisyahu's performance of Chassidus extends beyond his lyrics and choice of subject matter to elements of his vocal delivery and melodic structures. He frequently performs nigunim, or wordless melodies, which are considered by Chasidim (and especially Lubavitchers) to be the most spiritually-potent form of music. Koskoff writes that "Nigunim, because of their position as the closest of all musics to the divine source, are so powerful that even a performance by an evil person, or perhaps for an evil purpose, can transform both the performer and the event into something of good" (73). Both entire songs and segments of songs are sung as nigunim: the song "Short Nigun," for example, from the 2004 album *Shake Off the Dust...Arise*, is obviously a nigun; Matisyahu's settings of psalm texts, such as the aforementioned "Tzama L'Chol Nafshi," are also sung in the nigun style (they cannot be strictly sung as nigunim because Matisyahu sings the original words of the psalm instead of vocables).

Nigunim are generally slow to mid-tempo a cappella melodies, sung with repeating patterns of vocables. The melodies tend to be conjunct with larger leaps

interspersed for dramatic effect; the tessitura tends to be relatively compact for ease of singing. Nigunim are supposed to be singable by the average person. While there are more and less difficult nigunim and performers with different levels of skill, most nigunim are accessible to the lay performer and often have variations of different levels of difficulty that may be sung simultaneously. They are common to every American Jewish movement—service leaders from the Reform movement to the ultra-Orthodox will often sing a nigun on a liturgical melody to introduce a psalm or to build up to or wind down from an extremely long or spiritually-intense prayer—but are most associated with Chasidim. Non-Chasidim will generally pick their “favorite” vocable pattern, and each member of a congregation may sing something slightly different: “ya da dai da da dai” or “ya ba bum bum.” Chasidim tend to differentiate functions of nigunim: some, generally in free rhythm, are “devekus nigunim” intended to bring the singer closer to God, while others are for walking, dancing, singing at table, etc.⁵⁹ Each Chasidic dynasty also has a characteristic syllable pattern that its members tend to use for nigun singing. Vizhnizer Chasidim, for example, tend to use “ya, da da dum, da da di,” etc.; Lubavitchers use “yoy oy oy ya yi” or some variation thereof.

Matisyahu almost exclusively uses the “yoy oy” pattern when he evokes nigun style or sings nigunim, thus marking himself as a Lubavitcher Chasid. “Short Nigun,” for example, only uses these vocables. “Indestructible,” from *Youth*, provides a more nuanced case study. The song itself is not a nigun; it has lyrics and full instrumental accompaniment. However, Matisyahu intersperses nigun singing and beatboxing with the sung or rapped lyrics. The track opens with beatboxing, which continues in the

⁵⁹ “Devekus” is a Hebrew word meaning something like “to cling to” or “dedication,” used by Chasidim to denote an intense longing to be attached to God and/or the achievement of this state of unity.

background throughout; from 0:05 to 0:15, Matsiyahu sings variations on “Sing mama yam ba yo yo yo!”, which can be interpreted as evoking either Lubavitcher nigun style or the common reggae and dancehall device of singing vocables in order to fill time in an interesting and rhythmic way. The track continues, with rapped and sung lyrics dealing with *devekus*, *tikkun olam*, Matsiyahu’s feelings in the divine presence, issues facing humanity, and advice to the listener that “grab[bing] the rope of God’s heritage” will solve all the issues presented. After the third verse, Matsiyahu again evokes nigun singing, chanting “ya ma bum yo, yoy ohhh...” before continuing on to the last verse.

This is simultaneously reminiscent of a Lubavitch *devekus* nigun and of the way that reggae and dancehall singers intersperse vocable melodies between verses. Neither reading can be attributed to coincidence: due to the immense spiritual power ascribed to *nigunim*, a Lubavitcher would not sing something that even had nigun-like qualities carelessly; nor would a Lubavitcher trying to use non-Chasidic repertoires for religious purposes casually invoke stylistic hallmarks of those repertoires. Matsiyahu’s singing of vocables in songs that are not labeled as “*nigunim*” or as settings of liturgical texts is the result of a careful negotiation between self and other, between the sensibilities of the religious community he has joined and the musical community with which he chooses to affiliate.

The double meanings of Matsiyahu’s vocables complicate the boundaries between self and other that seem so rigorously drawn by Chasidic communities. Matsiyahu himself is a boundary-crosser; as a relatively recent *ba’al teshuvah*, he necessarily occupies a liminal space between the observant and secular communities. Before he became a Lubavitcher, Matsiyahu was a diehard reggae fan and Phish groupie; now, the

pan-Chasidic identity he assumes blurs boundaries within that segment of the Jewish community. His biography, then, presents both reggae and Chasidic music as naturalized sensibilities, and complicates his ability to perform either in a straightforward manner. Matisyahu cannot escape performing Chassidus—the observant lifestyle is an extended performance of religious duty—and has chosen to make a career of performing reggae-inflected styles, which at times can conflict with the ideological and stylistic priorities of his religious belief.

He negotiates this by exploiting the aural points of connection between these repertoires, such as vocable singing, as well as the ideological and symbolic points of connection, such as references to the central concepts of the Hebrew scriptures. Where elements of reggae style are not in conflict with Jewish teaching, such as the frequent use of a guitar skank, Matisyahu uses them unchanged. And where elements of reggae style are marked as “too Rastafarian” or conflict with Orthodox Jewish belief, Matisyahu replaces or excises them entirely: he never refers to God as “Jah” and frequently disparages marijuana.

Matisyahu is the most prominent practitioner, then, of the common Lubavitcher/Chasidic practice that Koskoff calls “musical tikkun,” after the process of tikkun olam outlined in the Lurianic myth. She writes,

It is not unusual for Lubavitchers to borrow, adapt, and incorporate musical (but not textual) materials from outside sources. This process, a natural one of musical acculturation, is a part of all social, ethnic, and religious group interaction, especially within Jewish culture. What is unusual, however, is that borrowing is the primary form of composition within Lubavitcher musical culture and, further,

that the act of borrowing and transforming a song is considered a mitzvah (blessing), one that is both spiritually motivated and rewarded. (77)

This process of transformation includes, as mentioned, a complete change of song texts, always to something relevant to Chasidic canonical texts and beliefs. It also includes a structural transformation of the melodic contours and harmonic structures of the songs: because the characteristics of nigunim are considered the most spiritually-powerful and exalted, songs that originate outside the community are generally modified to sound more like nigunim.

This is partly what Matisyahu is doing when he makes the time-filling vocables of reggae style sound like nigunim. But he is also running the process of tikkun in reverse: nigunim increasingly sound like reggae singing in his hands. Though Matisyahu's music is reggae that is kosher for the consumption of observant audiences, his music is also Chasidic ideology that has been repackaged for the consumption of non-observant audiences. The standard process of musical tikkun domesticates music from the secular world for Chasidic purposes. Here, Matisyahu is domesticating reggae for his ultra-observant community, but is first and foremost domesticating Chassidus for non-observant Jews. He is both a mediator and an innovator: as a practitioner of musical kiruv, he has engaged with non-Chasidic styles on a more-fluent and meaningful level than any of his predecessors since Shlomo Carlebach; as a practitioner of musical tikkun, he has made an unusually canny choice of music to "elevate" by choosing a repertory that already makes use of some of the most potent Jewish symbols. Matisyahu creates, through his hybridized style, a vision of the observant lifestyle that is selectively porous and can negotiate the myriad influences of the non-observant diasporic world.

To Zion

Matisyahu consistently makes lyrical reference to Middle Eastern locations from Jerusalem, Babylon and Mount Zion to the Temple and the Kotel. These references are to a mythologized, Biblical Eretz Yisrael and its environs rather than to the present-day physical space. Though several lyrical asides establish that Matisyahu cares about and supports the contemporary political state of Israel, it is just as evident that his primary focus is on the Israel that exists in sacred space and time. These references are both a way of drawing on the canonical texts that form the lyrical backbone of his work, and a way of evoking a shared Jewish conception of ethnoreligious heritage.

Furthermore, the vision of Israel that Matisyahu creates is distinctly postvernacular: the symbology associated with Zion is here a utopian vision of time outside diaspora, of an imagined Jewish community existing both before the fall of the Temple and after the coming of the Messiah. This community, presented as existing through the scrupulous and devoted performance of halakhah, can only exist in ritual time and is only loosely moored to physical landmarks. Here, the physical space of Israel and tangible landmarks such as the Kotel are only anchors for the performatively-created ritual space of Zion in much the same way that real-life former shtetlekh like Belz anchor SoCalled's performance of Yiddishland. This postvernacular Israel can, paradoxically, only exist in diaspora while seeking to negate it.

The first verse from Matisyahu's song "Jerusalem" illustrates this vision perfectly, in all its paradox and complexity:

In the ancient days, we will return with no delay

Picking up the bounty and the spoils on our way

We been traveling from state to state

And them don't understand what they say
3,000 years with no place to be
And they want me to give up my milk and honey
Don't you see, it's not about the land or the sea
Not the country but the dwelling of His majesty

The first line of this excerpt makes little denotative sense: “In the ancient days, we will return with no delay.” Obviously, situating an action described in the future tense in the past is impossible; furthermore, stating that the action of return will happen in the immediate future, “with no delay” in a nonexistent time frame, is likewise impossible.

In a connotative framework, however, it makes much more sense: “the ancient days” and the time of return are, for Matisyahu, one and the same time. Within the binary of diasporic exile vs. homeland, both “the ancient days” and the time of return are equivalent; they both negate exile. The future and the past merge into the same idealized conception of Jewish life, sovereignty, and practice, and thus returning at some future point into past time makes sense. Because both the distant past and distant future exist in ritual space/time—the negation of everyday diasporic space/time—they can be entered into equally through the rhetoric of return.

Matisyahu reinforces the point at the end of the verse: “Don’t you see, it’s not about the land or the sea/Not the country but the dwelling of His majesty.” The dwelling of His majesty is, obviously, only possible in ritual space/time—a state brought upon by the performance of mitzvot with the proper kavanah and by ecstatic worship (often including musical performance). While this ritual space/time is anchored in the symbols of Eretz Yisrael, it does not have to be anchored in actual physical locations in the Middle East—not the land or the sea of Israel and, ostensibly, not even the land or sea of

any particular country. “The dwelling of His majesty” could, in theory, be achieved in the United States, Eastern Europe, or any other diasporic location that contains the right Jewish community and ritual practices.

Other songs continue to develop this theme. “Chop ‘Em Down,” an uptempo song with a prominent reggae skank, relies upon an extended retelling of the Exodus story:

Yosef descended sold as a slave,
Thrown into a dungeon cause he wouldn't be swayed
Interpreted Pharaoh's dreams and Egypt was saved
Stockpiled food for seven years of rain
Then sold to all the nations when the drought came
Yosef rose to power and the yidn stayed
They started to build and success was made
Pharaoh's getting worried let's make them pay bound in chains
Firstborn was sent down to their graves
Moshe was saved and a prince he was raised
Hashem spoke to him: here's a message to relay
Take my nation from Mitzrayim, I see the suffering

So far, this is a fairly conventional summary of the Biblical tale of the Israelites' experience in Egypt: the sons of Jacob sold their brother Joseph as a slave, after which he met with great success as Pharaoh's steward, largely on the basis of important agricultural information revealed to him in prophetic dreams. However, after Joseph and Pharaoh died, later generations of Egyptians turned against the Israelites and enslaved them. Moses, the eventual bearer of divine revelation, was raised a prince in Egypt after

being found in the river rushes by Pharaoh's daughter and wound up using this position to lead the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt.⁶⁰

Matisyahu then connects this tale to what he perceives as the modern-day spiritual situation of many Jews:

Time flies by like clouds passing in the sky
 Lifetime's here and gone like the blink of an eye
 March through this desert one step at a time, march through the desert one step at a time
 From the forest itself comes the handle for the ax, drop the staff
 Moshe Rabbeinu split the ocean in half,
 March through the desert, this ain't where it's at
 Chop 'em down, chop 'em down
 Patterns engraved not so easily erased, still wandering trying to find your place
 Playing the game I see pain on your face nowadays the yidn like children sold as slaves
 Strange ways running through the maze, strange ways always
 Lost in the desert trying to find to find your way
 Lost in the desert trying to find your place

In this extension of the metaphor, everyday, unenlightened life is the desert that the Israelites must cross on their way to freedom; people are in spiritual slavery without

⁶⁰ Here, all the characters in the story are referred to by their Hebrew names (i.e. "Yosef" for "Joseph," "Moshe" for "Moses"). "Yidn" means "Jews" in Yiddish. "Mitzrayim" is the Hebrew term for "Egypt." Matisyahu's use of this term is especially important because "Mitzrayim" literally means "confining or narrow places." This is often used in a metaphorical sense in Jewish spiritual thought, representing an individual's status in confining circumstances and/or narrow ways of thinking, as well as the need to transcend these circumstances and move to a higher, more liberated spiritual plane (i.e. Yisrael, the promised land).

Jewish observance, and must use the metaphoric ax of Torah⁶¹ to hack through the brambles of materialism, substance abuse and the other ills of contemporary society.

In the Torah, the Israelites wander in the desert until they come upon Mount Sinai. Moses ascends the mountain and receives extensive revelation directly from God in an awe-inspiring display of thunder, lightning and fire. Traditional interpretation states that Moses received the foundation for the entire body of Jewish law at this juncture. Some time later, in exchange for their commitment to perfect observance, the Israelites are allowed entry into the Promised Land. The logical outcome of Matisyahu's allegory is that those Jews currently wandering in the desert—those in thrall to the contemporary secular way of life—need to enter the Sinaitic covenant of observance in order to progress on to any type of promised land.

Here again, the Promised Land of Zion is a symbol for observance and its spiritual (and perhaps material) rewards. Once again, the past and the future are conflated. Just as in the ancient past, the Jewish people entered into a halakhic covenant and received great spiritual and temporal rewards, so too, in both the proximate and distant future, the Jewish people must do the same in order to lead a rewarding and meaningful life in the world created by Matisyahu. Eretz Yisrael is not a physical place but rather a state of being, a state of textual performance. One can live there as an observant American Jew; one can be a secular Israeli and not live in Eretz Yisrael.

This metaphoric construction of Zion, of course, shares many important commonalities with Rastafarian notions of Africa found in reggae. “Many Rastas associate this new Jerusalem (Zion) with Africa, particularly with Ethiopia, and these

⁶¹ The comparison drawn here between the ax (previously described as coming from a forest) and Torah bears an interesting connection to the common practice of referring to the Torah as *Etz Chayim*, the “tree of life.”

Brethren think of repatriation as actually going back to Africa; others, however, locate Zion in Jamaica,” writes Dennis Forsythe, a professor, lawyer and Rasta.

Others do not associate Zion with any particular place but to the psychological and spiritual condition of being redeemed, to a condition of restored peace and wholesomeness, to finding the self as a result of following the will and the laws of Jah, the father of creation. The reward for this righteous and natural (“ital”) way of living, says the Rastaman, is “ever-living life.” Thus Zion represents the spiritual questing of Africans for spiritual fulfillment in their lives. (110-11)

For Rastafarians, the myriad references to Zion in reggae music denote Africa; for Matisyahu and other Jews, Zion of course denotes Israel. Forsythe’s multiplicity of options presented for how Rastafarians relate the concept of Zion to the physical space of Africa are analogous to the multiple levels on which the concept of Zion can be understood within the Jewish community. Obviously, Zionism as a political movement has produced the very real state of Israel. Though Matisyahu does not disavow this view of Zionism—in “Jerusalem,” he sings, “Rebuild the Temple and the crown of glory/Years gone by, about sixty/Burn in the oven in this century/And the gas tried to choke, but it couldn’t choke me,” explicitly linking the political state of Israel with the Holocaust and with metaphorical imagery of Jerusalem—he focuses more on the postvernacular, symbolic interpretation: “It’s not about the land or the sea/Not the country but the dwelling of His majesty.”

Just like SoCalled’s Yiddishland, Matisyahu’s Zion is only loosely related to an actual sovereign country. While Yiddishland is almost a necessary invention to make up for the lack of a Jewish community in contemporary Eastern Europe, Zion in the postvernacular sense has a different relationship to physical space. There is, obviously, a

thriving Jewish culture living in or controlling the spaces to which Matisyahu's Zion ostensibly makes reference: Jerusalem, the Kotel. The Temple has, of course, long been destroyed, but its remnants are within a Jewish state (albeit now serving as the substrate for one of the holiest sites in Islam, a point of great contention). Jewish life in "Zion" has become a reality within the last 65 years, but this is of very little consequence to postvernacular Zionism. The relevance of the physical locations mentioned has to do with their being embedded in archetypal Jewish myth—their existence in ritual, rather than physical, space. Jerusalem matters because it is the place to which the seder leader expresses hope of returning "next year" and in whose direction Jews turn to pray; the Temple matters because it was the home of God when Judaism was a sacrificial cult. Jerusalem's status as one of the major cities in the contemporary country of Israel most distinctly does *not* matter for its inclusion in Matisyahu's musical geography.

This geography is one that becomes mapped out as texts are performed—whether musical or scriptural. It creates a utopian Judaism that is disconnected from physical space; this state can be achieved in Brooklyn, Jerusalem, or just about anywhere else that a Jew takes on observant practice and devotion within a community dedicated to the same aims. In this geography of ritual space/time, Jerusalem represents messianic perfection and Yisrael the sacred community in constant contact with the divine presence. It is as much a mapping of contemporary religious desire, of the yearning of *devekus* in the here and now, as it is a description of utopian space.

“Uniting the past”: Kiruv, teshuvah, tikkun

Matisyahu’s constant references to “returning to Zion” are part of a larger concern with themes of kiruv, teshuvah and tikkun: healing the primary and foundational wound of exile is part of a larger process of world-repair outlined by the Lurianic myth. He wants to heal a perceived rupture between a text-based, observant way of life—which he associates with Jewish heritage, Zion and the distant and not-so-distant past—and the way that many Jewish youth conduct themselves, which he associates with spiritual emptiness, substance abuse, and larger notions of the debauchery and confusion of Babylon. Matisyahu’s take on musical kiruv postulates the end goal as tikkun olam, brought about by perfect Jewish observance; at that point, the future will enter into the same sacred or ritual space/time as the ancient past, precipitating the messianic era and the end of profane time.⁶²

This view is likewise expressed in a grammatically-nonsensical lyric, here from the song “What I’m Fighting For”:

Sons and daughters of Abraham
 Lay down to a higher command
 Don't be tricked by the acts of man
 God’s wisdom revealed in a holy plan
 A chance to unite the past
 With the brothers coming home at last
 Fighting together for light
 To Zion we roam and we're not all alone
 Unite and purify

⁶² See Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004) for more on modernity, sacred time and profane time.

“Uniting the past” is, in itself, nonsensical; again, Matisyahu speaks of making future interventions in the past. It makes sense, however, when situated within the framework of ritual time: uniting the idealized past *with* the idealized future is, of course, at the core of Matisyahu’s project. The utopian Judaism that he promotes through his music and that his theology posits is based on modern impressions of the distant past, and seeks to return Jewish life and practice to what it is believed took place in Biblical and rabbinic times.

Thus, Matisyahu falls squarely under the umbrella of kiruv music, along the model established by Shlomo Carlebach in the 1960s. Combining Jewish texts with non-Jewish contemporary popular instrumental sounds, Matisyahu uses his position as the coolest Chasid in the United States to speak directly to (primarily-Jewish) young people and encourage them to follow what he considers a better way of life than the one they currently lead. This is quite explicit in his work. His 2006 album is titled *Youth*, and its title song exhorts young people to make the right choices:

Young man, control’s in your hand

Slam your fist on the table

And make your demand

Take a stand

Fan a fire for the flame of the youth

Got the freedom to choose

You better make the right move

He then describes some of the challenges that have led to the problems facing young people: “beer and cigarettes,” vanity, teachers “squash[ing] the flame,” and the general ills of modern society. In “Jerusalem,” he accuses people of “selling lies to the youth”; describes “whipper snappers” as having “lost the way, they never had the right map” in

“WP,” and makes extensive reference to his personal life story and high school experiences. Furthermore, he states that youth have lost touch with their heritage, having “cut off the roots of your family tree.”

To complement his diagnosis of the problems facing American youth, Matisyahu offers a solution: observance, God and Torah. He says that one should “thank God for all that life brings” in “Fire of Heaven”; “fear nobody but His majesty” in “Indestructible”; “return to fundamentals” and let go of the ego in “WP”; and be a warrior fighting for one’s soul in “Warrior.” He frequently ends retellings of his personal story with descriptions of the intense joy and fulfillment he has found in the observant lifestyle.

Matisyahu goes beyond simple rearrangements of Jewish text, though he does occasionally sing psalms and prayers. He cannot present the observant lifestyle in as experiential a way as did Carlebach—Matisyahu operates no equivalent House of Love and Prayer, nor is he the rabbi of a Chabad House—so instead, he presents his story, a variation on “I was lost and now I’m found.” Before he was observant, he was spiritually empty, taking drugs and moving through life with no sense of meaning or purpose; now, he feels close to God and has a defined mission. This is all extremely well-laid-out in nearly every song.

This metaphor of rupture and return—whether actualized or hoped-for—is always framed in either spatial and physical terms, temporal terms, or organic terms. In the first category, returning to Zion, rebuilding the Temple, and the Jewish people coming home are frequently invoked. In the second category, the ancient past and messianic future are held up as models, as opposed to the fallen and problematic present; “uniting the past” and remembering heritage and mythic truth are often referenced. Finally, metaphors of

nature are often used. The spiritual struggle is often compared to a confusing and arduous trek through a forest or desert; heritage is based on the model of a family tree with roots; fire and light represent the spiritual potential within each person and, often, the divine presence itself. God and Torah are represented as water for a thirsty soul. And the city can be as arduous and confusing as the desert: Matisyahu frequently portrays himself as walking in New York City, riding the subway, or standing on a roof, confused and struggling spiritually, when he breaks through to the divine presence through music or prayer and feels better.

These metaphors have a long history in both mainstream Jewish and Chasidic philosophy—from Biblical poetry comparing an eroticized love of God to pomegranate orchards, doves and hills (in *Shir haShirim*) to the representation of divinity as lost sparks of light in the Lurianic myth. And, of course, similar spatial and natural imagery is strong in Rastafarian-influenced reggae, from Bob Marley's confusing and spiritually-draining concrete jungle to the sacred restorative powers of marijuana. The extreme power of words is a notion common to Rastafarianism and mystical Judaism. The former's belief in the trinity of word, sound and power and the latter's belief that the world was created, and continues to be sustained, through the speech of God, and that the deepest secrets of the universe can be accessed through manipulation of sound and text, makes the focus on text here especially crucial and telling. To believers, Matisyahu's metaphors and textual choices are not idle poetry: like *nigunim*, they are spiritually and perhaps even powerful in and of themselves.

These metaphors illustrate, dramatize and mythicize what Matisyahu perceives as the contemporary Jewish problem of secularism, of forgetting roots and obligations. By

so doing, they become situated in sacred space/time: a Jew who does not pray and keep kosher is not simply making individual decisions about religion or reflecting prevailing American attitudes about religious practice, but represents the estrangement of exile and the confusion of the Israelites wandering and quarreling in the deserts of Egypt before the revelation of the Torah. The unmythicized description of contemporary American Jewish life has any number of possible endings or attached value judgments. But mythicization imposes a narrative on these facts, one with a known ending: exile implies eventual return, and wandering in the desert implies a proximate entrance into the archetypal covenant. Under this hermeneutic, non-observant Jews must, and will, become observant in order to put an end to the confusion and meaninglessness caused by life in secular modern society. Musical kiruv can only imply teshuvah, and indeed Matisyahu holds up his own story of confusion and emptiness and subsequent “return” to observance as an example of this inevitable process.

The logical consequence of teshuvah, for Matisyahu in his music as for all Chasidim, is tikkun olam, the full repair of the rending of the universe caused by the shattering of the vessels at the time of creation. The Hebrew word “olam” carries connotations of both infinite space and infinite time. Thus, tikkun olam not only refers to a mending of the spatial universe through an end of the dispersion of Jewish people and divine sparks throughout space, but it connotes a healing of time itself, a reunion of the sacred past with the sacred future. Here, Matisyahu’s wish to “unite the past” makes perfect sense—the state of the universe would, ideally, be exactly the same at its end as it would be at its beginning.

This view of Jewish history and of contemporary Jewish life fits neatly into the rupture-reconstruction dynamic that has animated all the manifestations of the phenomenon of Jewish hip-hop. Matisyahu believes that there are significant ruptures in Jewish life, from everyday observance to the exilic diaspora of the Jewish people to the deep structures of space, time and divinity themselves. Music is what can, first, heal rupture in itself: through his music, Matisyahu is performing an alternative world into being, constructing both “the idealized past and the spiritually weakened present” in his albums and live performances (Koskoff 107). Music is also intended to inspire people to teshuvah in the world outside the explicitly-defined performance, to keep the performance going through their observance of mitzvot and perhaps their newfound emotional connection to God. Music will, then, serve as an impetus for a reconstructed Jewish identity, one that will have been so well-mended that it can negate the traumas of the broadly-defined present and elide the future with the past.

Conclusion

Matisyahu stands at the nexus of the major trends in Orthodox music and life over the past four-plus decades: kiruv, including a robust auxiliary musical scene; the still-vital phenomenon of the ba'al teshuvah movement; the Lubavitch outreach campaign, originally begun to facilitate the process of tikkun and potentially trigger the coming of the Messiah⁶³; and, of course, the ongoing Jewish negotiation with American popular music, especially those styles derived from the sounds of the African diaspora. He presents a vision of Jewish life in diaspora that allows for an endless, timeless, placeless

⁶³ A segment of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement, of course, believes that the late Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994) was or is the Messiah.

recontextualization of a text-dependent observant life. While profane conceptions of time and space require specificity, the ritual space/time of Zion and the idealized past and future are defined, and can be accessed, through textual performance.

Just as Chassidus-inspired lyrics can create, for however short a time, a new musical world in an almost exclusively non-Chasidic instrumental environment, one that draws on diverse influences of reggae, hip-hop and rock, so too can American Jews be observant islands that coexist harmoniously with the surrounding mainstream culture without having to change whatever constitutes the “essence” of their Jewish identity. The reggae or Rastafarian feel of Matisyahu’s lyrics is only due to his exploitation of the natural commonalities between Rastafarian and Jewish symbology, and they primarily rely on idiomatically Jewish terms and concepts. However, the sensibility of his instrumental arrangements is exclusively based on non-“Jewish” styles. This strategy allows for the acceptable elements of the surrounding culture to be utilized and/or assimilated—the capitalization on the shared rhetoric of Zionism, the way he morphs nigun-singing into beatboxing—while still strenuously maintaining self-other boundaries.

Matisyahu’s music presents a view of Jewish, and indeed world, history that is directional. Here, the Jewish community has undergone significant rupture, but hope for reconstruction is underway. Furthermore, there is great value—and potentially great beauty—in this reconstruction, which runs in opposite directions that nonetheless end at the same destination. The vectors point away from the present, which includes materialism, spiritual emptiness, blandness, confusion, and exile, to a substantially-similar distant past and distant future in which Jews have a distinctive, holy identity and are actively working to bring about the perfection of the universe. By organizing a

mélange of sounds derived from mythologized texts in time, Matisyahu is actively trying to bring about the *end* of time; in performing an alternative to the present, he makes the ancient future possible if only for a moment.

CONCLUSION

The multifaceted phenomenon of Jewish hip-hop—Jewish musicians making hip-hop, loosely construed, about aspects of the contemporary Jewish experience—addresses nearly all of the key issues of Ashkenazi Jewish life in the United States in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. This location and period represents one of the few times in Jewish history—the only other comparable places and eras being medieval Spain and perhaps late-Biblical Eretz Yisrael and Hellenistic Greece—when Jews have truly been able to flourish, to practice their religion and culture without fear of persecution, and to participate in the state as full citizens both legally and culturally.

The great irony, of course, is that aspects of Jewish difference that many in previous generations fought to preserve are no longer desirable as a way of life to many American Jews now that so many other options are available. A sense of difference is in itself desired; traditional observance, however, is no longer the preferred means of realizing this difference. Instead, contemporary Jews are working through other possible

options, from ethnic revivalism to hyper-legalistic religious practice, from New Age and progressive Judaisms to political activism informed by a sense of Jewish prophetic ethics. These manifestations of Jewish identity are incredibly diverse, possible only in a time and place of great permissiveness and informed by an ethos of innovation.

They are, however diverse, united by their reliance on a central narrative: that of rupture and subsequent revival, renewal, reconstruction or revitalization. The movements that led to both strands of Jewish hip-hop examined here use this framework, as I've discussed; other iterations of Jewish identity also tell their stories in terms of an experience of rupture and their subsequent attempts at re-creation and renewal, from feminist and LGBT Jewish movements to Modern Orthodoxy and all the types of Zionism. Some of these ruptures are experienced passively: as outside traumas visited on the community, like the Holocaust. Others are experienced actively: feminist movements within Judaism, for example, are viewed as an intentional attempt to break with the problematic aspects of the past and then create something more just in its place.⁶⁴

Haym Soloveitchik's 1994 essay "Rupture and Reconstruction" well-theorizes how the noticeable increase in stringency of halakhic observance within the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox communities since the 1950's fits into this dialectic. This community tends not to view itself as having undergone rupture with the past (except, of course, for the Holocaust); instead, it considers itself a bulwark against encroaching secularism and permissiveness in the rest of the Jewish community. Nonetheless, its methods of cultural transmission and pedagogy, its approach to text and its performative realization, and its

⁶⁴ See Tikva Frymer-Kensky's extensive writings on feminist interpretations of halakhah for an example of this re-visioning. This explicit narrative is, of course, what has made feminist movements so controversial in certain sectors of the Jewish community that value adherence to what is perceived as continuity with tradition.

maintenance of its communal boundaries clearly show the rupture-reconstruction narrative at work.

Though many affiliates of the klezmer/Yiddishist revival would strenuously disavow any similarity to the ultra-observant Jewish community, their Jewish movement is likewise, and even more explicitly, dependent on a similar narrative. Writings from central figures of the klezmer revival, such as Henry Sapoznik's book *Klezmer!*, clearly show this experience of loss and attempt at revitalization. The general overview of the history the klezmer revival tells about itself is that once klezmer existed as a vital and popular part of the Ashkenazi community, both in Eastern Europe and in the urban United States; it was left behind due to highly-problematic assimilationist tendencies in the United States; and a small and valiant band of cultural activists resurrected the genre when it was nearly on its deathbed to make it into a simultaneously intensely conservative and intensely radical (because of its queer friendliness) manifestation of unapologetically-anti-mainstream Jewish identity.

This overall narrative is endemic to, and prized in, a Western modernity that has sought to throw off the assumptions of the past and subject them to intensive scrutiny and reconstruction. Charles Taylor writes:

This recurrent experience of breakdown is real enough. But it shouldn't mask from us the fact that modernity is also the rise of new principles of sociality. Breakdown occurs, as we can see with the case of the French Revolution, because people are expelled from their old forms—through war, revolution, or rapid economic change—before they can find their feet in the new structures, that is, connect some transformed practices to the new principles to form a viable social imaginary. But this doesn't show that modern individualism is by its very essence a solvent of community. (18)

What we are seeing vis-à-vis the stories the American Jewish community tells about itself, then, is both part of the “recurrent experience of breakdown” and an attempt at “finding feet in new structures.” Taylor speaks of three primary “modes of narrativity” that come to the fore in modernity: progress, revolution, and nation (177). These are all present in the Jewish self-imaginings of the recent past; the reinterpretation of the nation, especially, is central to the project of Jewish hip-hop.

However, these social imaginaries are not unique to Jewish modernity. David Roskies has posited that the dynamics of revolution, destruction and loss are at the heart of the “deep structure” of Jewishness itself, writing that “within Judaism, destruction is always fraught with covenantal meaning” and that “in modern times, the dynamic of inner-Jewish renewal is always predicated on the awareness of loss. The moment the past is finally laid to rest is the very moment that it reasserts its claim upon the living” (15, 59). The foundational stories of the Torah—which Roskies aptly describes as “a postexilic document about the drama of homecoming”—are all based on this narrative, from the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden; to Abraham’s call to leave his home and follow God, later finding himself on the brink of murdering his son before he can be entrusted with his mission; from the Israelites’ receipt of revelation after a traumatic and disorienting freedom from enslavement; to the final exodus from Israel described in later prophetic and rabbinic writings and the subsequent imperative of religious reconstruction occasioned by the loss of key ritual spaces such as the Temple. Central performative sites of Jewish memory, from the seder to the wedding liturgy, recall these themes of expulsion and destruction alongside the transmission and recreation of tradition.

As implied by the words “recreation,” “revival,” “revitalization,” and “reconstruction,” this transmission of tradition often, if not always, entails an explicit transformation of a usable past in order to ensure that it is workable for the present and will be transmitted indefinitely into the future. Judah Cohen has described this (specifically with respect to Jewish hip-hop, but equally workable as a general premise) as an “overt agenda aimed at transforming perceptions of Jewish tradition in order to preserve them” (2). Music is a convenient way of both transforming perceptions of and preserving tradition; because it is so mutable and potentially-eclectic, “traditional” elements can coexist alongside “new” or “transformed” elements. SoCalled’s “Who Knows One?” or Matisyahu’s “3rd Cup: Yahu” are especially good examples of this coexistence and transformation. In both songs, the artists use a traditional melody as their starting point and rework it in different ways, embedding it in instrumental arrangements based on hip-hop and reggae.

The disparate transformations of musical, textual and performance tradition within the soundworld of Jewish hip-hop, and the transformation of tradition that Jewish hip-hop as a concept embodies, negotiate contemporary diasporic existence in several ways that are variations on the same theme. First, both the Orthodox and klezmer varieties of hip-hop have created postvernacular homelands, presenting imagined spaces in which the discontents of diasporism can be resolved and various approaches to diasporism can be worked out, commented upon and played with. Second, the way that the musical materials coded as “Jewish” interact with the musical materials that are coded as “non-Jewish” is in itself a commentary on Jewish existence in diaspora.

Klezmer hip-hop revels in the messiness of diaspora and of postmodernity. Its seams are visible; SoCalled's song "Ich bin a border by mayn vayb," for example, is the clear product of layers of years and years of Jewish American sound, from the ironic Yiddish lyrics to the rap to the sampled klezmer drums and the trumpet solos derived from the song's original orchestration as a Yiddish theatre tune. On "Who Knows One?", different versions of the song are played against each other, and the song is then rewritten in English, for a different audience; the elements of the blend jostle together, complementing and commenting on each other.

The use of Yiddish and other signifiers of Jewish popular culture in the postvernacular mode re-vision American whiteness. It's well-established that white Americans have for several decades become more and more interested in their ethnic ancestry. "Heritage," broadly defined, is a passion for many people as well as the impetus for huge amounts of cultural and economic production, from festivals and ethnic music to food, tourism and much more. It is also well-established that this heritage is largely engaged in the "symbolic" mode by most of these people: people express Irish identity by going to a St. Patrick's Day parade or Czech identity by eating kolaches every so often. They do *not* express their identity, for the most part, by speaking a vernacular language other than English, living in neighborhoods primarily comprised of people of similar descent, or other, older forms of ethnic identity.

This symbolic identity has been termed "postvernacular" with respect to the Yiddish language by Jeffrey Shandler. The same phenomenon is now occurring with respect to klezmer music and its derivations, such as klezmer hip-hop. Vernacular music, like vernacular language, has been subject to the same phenomenon and is engaged with

as an ethnic marker on the symbolic level. “Yiddishland” is a postvernacular homeland created through this approach to music and language—an entirely symbolic, but no less meaningful, emergent property of diaspora that serves as the creative and psychogeographic source of novel approaches to Ashkenazi Jewish ethnic culture. The unifying power of Yiddishland and its central founding narrative—as a revivalist and revitalist response to the devastating loss of the Eastern European Jewish physical homeland in the Holocaust—and its soundtrack-as-language, klezmer, makes a strong case for viewing ethnic musics as the new vernaculars, replacing heritage languages as the marker of communal cohesion and means of communication.

Many ethnic communities across the world can still be defined in the conventional sense, as speakers of the same language who share a common culture and tend to live in the same area (or at least claim a particular geographic region as a homeland). These characteristics often tend to anchor diasporic communities: Mexicans in the United States, for example, may visit relatives in Mexico, consume Mexican media, observe Mexican cultural traditions and speak Spanish on a regular basis. In contrast, most European immigration to the United States took place in a time when Anglo-assimilation was the ideal and before technology enabled continued strong ties to the homeland. Therefore, although a sense of white ethnic identity is felt very acutely by many contemporary Americans, it does not for the most part conform to the above definition.

In the heritage mode—that is, to paraphrase Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, in a mode of cultural production in the present that makes recourse to the past—ethnic communities are more properly defined as groups of people who share common musical and aesthetic symbols and who form communities of performance and consumption

around these symbols. This conception of ethnicity is only tangentially related to biological ancestry or territorial sovereignty (in the sense that people with a certain ancestry may be more likely to form part of the postvernacular ethnic community). Here, the sole criterion for ethnic identity is the performance of texts that work with symbols of ethnicity, or participation in a performance as a buyer or audience member.

Such a postvernacular performance takes on a different, but related, form in the world of Orthodox hip-hop. Performance of the musical text, or participation in a community of such performance, cannot be the only criterion for religious identity due to the strictures of Orthodox Jewish belief. Instead, Orthodox Jewish hip-hop has two primary implications for formation of a new kind of Jewish community. First, it serves as a vector pointing back to a particular type of performance of canonical religious texts: it is message music encouraging people to lead a holistic, tangible, ritually-observant way of life, one that is very specifically delineated by rabbinic authorities.

Second, in the case of Matisyahu, a postvernacular Zionism has come into play. The end of exile and diaspora in the religious sense requires Jewish sovereignty over Eretz Yisrael as well as the fulfillment of various prophecies and ritual obligations; the only true end of covenantal exile, in this worldview, will be when the Messiah comes. Despite the 20th-century success of political Zionism, the contemporary state of Israel has not and cannot possibly meet the requirements of the religious dimension of Zion and its role in ending Jewish exile and dispersion. The message-music component of Orthodox hip-hop plays into this: according to this ideology, the Messiah will only come when the Jewish people as a whole is ritually observant.

But the actual coming of the Messiah or political sovereignty over all the physical space given to the Jews in the Torah is somewhat irrelevant to the visions of postvernacular Zionism. This is a Zionism—Zion in the sense of a Jewish-identified religious utopia—that can be attained in the here and now through the performance of mitzvot, the performative realization of religious text in the same way that a postvernacular Yiddishland relies on the performative realization of “ethnic text.” The holy community can be realized in diaspora by performance in sacred time, as opposed to the profane time of everyday life unmarked by performance of either text or music; spatial homecoming is not important.

These imagined, postvernacular homelands radically redefine nationalism (ethnic, religious or otherwise) and the role of media in the creation and cohesion of dispersed national communities. Nationalism has previously been considered to be tightly coupled to a homogenous group of people (generally with respect to descent, language and culture; occasionally with respect to belief as well) who desire to have, or have, autonomous political control over a particular piece of land. As we have seen, the Jewish national communities imagined by Jewish hip-hop come into being through a performative realization of text rather than through political sovereignty and/or a common vernacular language.

Whereas Benedict Anderson’s imagined national communities are held together by print media for common ends related to statehood and tangible elements of culture, print media (loosely defined) here both creates the community and an imagined space in which it can locate itself. These national communities can, unlike other nationalist movements, exist cospatially with other, more traditionally-defined national communities

and political states. They do not have to share a linguistic vernacular, nor does any shared vernacular have to be their exclusive property (for example, English is now the vernacular language of the klezmer community, which does not pose much of an issue practically or theoretically for its members).

These communities have, in the case of Jewish ethnoreligious identity, their own symbols and myths as a necessary prerequisite for their existence, but can also exploit those they share with other groups, such as Matisyahu's use of Rastafarian symbols and myths that are themselves drawn from Hebrew scripture. Finally, biological descent is not the determinant of an individual's ontological status as a member of the community. While biological descent may be a shortcut to communal belonging, textual performance is the primary criterion for inclusion.

Each type of Jewish hip-hop negotiates the boundaries of its imagined homeland differently, both with respect to the non-Jewish cultures within which they are embedded in diaspora, and with respect to other forms of Judaism and Jewishness. Klezmer hip-hop views diasporic mainstream culture and ethnic-Jewish culture as mutually hybridized; as previously stated, klezmer hip-hop concerns itself with how to be both Ashkenazi Jewish *and* American in the present moment. Its choice of music rooted in African-American popular culture as the "non-Jewish" music by which to define itself is both a matter of accident—because hip-hop is currently the most popular American youth music style—and absolutely intentional, in klezmer hip-hop's attempt to articulate Euro-ethnic difference from mainstream whiteness. Performing hip-hop here does not mean performing "blackness," but rather performing *against* assimilated whiteness.

Orthodox hip-hop views Jewish culture and diasporic culture as mutually constitutive by opposition: secular culture is not Jewish culture, mainstream culture is predominantly Christian and therefore cannot possibly be Jewish, and so on. Musically, Orthodox hip-hop defines its Jewish materials by their opposites. In Matisyahu's update of "Eliyahu haNavi," for example, the self-other boundaries are clearly defined: the vocal melody and words are "authentically Jewish" and the instrumental arrangement is definitively "not." This style makes use of African-American-influenced music because of its interest in kiruv; hip-hop is incredibly popular, especially with young people, and those seeking to do outreach to Jewish young people want to jump on the bandwagon.

These conceptions of Jewish identity and nationhood are simultaneously novel, and an extension of traditional Jewish self-conceptions. There has always been a diasporic tension between assimilation and stark assertion of difference; Jewish hip-hop is the latest, American-pop-culture oriented version of working out this dilemma, and each of its iterations has fallen in a slightly different location on the spectrum between the polar opposites of complete assimilation and complete isolation. Though the public face of Jewish nationalism has in the recent past been political Zionism, a look at the deeper past reveals that for most of Jewish history, national identity has indeed been realized through textual performance. Jewish hip-hop is simultaneously a reaction against, or a brushing aside of, the political Zionism that is an overwhelming focus of mainstream American Jewish institutional life and an affirmation of long-term Jewish ways of being and relating to text, history and homeland.

Heine's aphorism is apt here: the historically and distinctively Jewish process of carrying a portable homeland in a book has been updated for the 21st century. This is a

homeland that exists in time and in ritual community rather than in space. Despite its novel trappings, the traditionalism of the underlying values—that Jewish identity is something to be proud of, to be made one’s own and passed on—is as old as Jewish communal myth itself. The community’s power is in these myths and values; its beauty is in the diversity of the ways myth is performed into reality.

GLOSSARY OF NON-ENGLISH WORDS

- **Adonai:** Hebrew, transliterated: “my Lord”
- **Ashkenazi Jews:** Jews from Central and Eastern Europe
- **ba’al** (m. singular)/**ba’alah**(f. singular)/**ba’alei**(m. plural)/**ba’alot** (f. plural)
teshuvah: Hebrew, transliterated: literally “master(s) of return,” connotes Jews who were not born observant but who have become observant as adults
- **badkhn:** Yiddish, transliterated: the traditional master of ceremonies/jester at an Ashkenazi wedding, who composed risqué rhymes and songs about the bride, groom and guests
- **badkhones:** Yiddish, transliterated: the rhymes and songs sung by the badkhn
- **benoni/benonim** (plural): Hebrew/Yiddish, transliterated: the average Jew, in Chasidic writings
- **bimah:** Hebrew, transliterated: the lectern from which the Torah is read in a synagogue
- **bubbemeises:** Yiddish, transliterated: literally “grandmother-stories”; connotes “old wives’ tales”
- **bulgar:** Yiddish, transliterated: a fast Ashkenazi Jewish traditional dance in syncopated 4/4 time
- **chai:** Hebrew, transliterated: life
- **charedi(m):** Hebrew, transliterated: literally “fear,” “anxiety” or “those who tremble before God”; connotes the strictest ultra-Orthodox Jews
- **Chasidim:** Hebrew/Yiddish, transliterated: literally “pious ones”; connotes members of any of multiple populist/mystical religious movements begun in 18th-century Eastern Europe by the Ba’al Shem Tov
- **Chasidut/Chassidus:** Hebrew/Yiddish, transliterated: literally “piety”; connotes “Chasidic-ness”
- **chosidl:** Yiddish, transliterated: a moderate-tempo dance in 2/4 time begun by Chasidim
- **chosson:** Yiddish, transliterated (derived from Hebrew “chatan”): bridegroom
- **daven/davening:** Yiddish/Yinglish, transliterated: prayer or praying
- **devekut:** Hebrew/Yiddish, transliterated: literally “dedication” or “clinging on” to God
- **doina:** Yiddish, transliterated: a slow, improvisatory, often virtuosic southern Ashkenazi genre
- **Edelkayt:** Yiddish, transliterated: literally “nobility” or “delicateness”; connotes the “nice Jewish boy” stereotype of gentleness, studiousness, politeness
- **Eretz Yisrael:** Hebrew, transliterated: literally “Land of Israel”; connotes religious/utopian aspects of that area
- **farbrengen:** Yiddish, transliterated: literally “joyous gathering,” used by Lubavitcher Chasidim to denote a festive gathering on holidays characterized by drinking, speech-giving and ecstatic singing and dancing

- **freylekhs:** Yiddish, transliterated: literally “joyous dance”; connotes fast Ashkenazi Jewish dance
- **frum:** Yiddish, transliterated: religious observance or piety (adjective)
- **frumkeit:** Yiddish, transliterated: religious observance or piety (noun)
- **galut:** Hebrew, transliterated: exile
- **Gemara:** Aramaic, transliterated: connotes the section of the Talmud containing rabbinic commentaries on the Mishnah
- **haggadah:** Hebrew, transliterated: literally “the telling”; connotes the written text that outlines the Passover seder
- **halakhah:** Hebrew, transliterated: literally “the path”; the entire body of Jewish law
- **hamsa:** a hand-shaped amulet traditional to Arab culture and to the cultures of Sephardic Jews in Arab lands; increasingly popular as an artistic motif in the American Jewish community
- **HaShem:** Hebrew, transliterated: literally “the Name”; connotes the name of God
- **Haskalah:** Hebrew, transliterated: literally “enlightenment,” “education”; connotes the Jewish Enlightenment
- **havdalah:** Hebrew, transliterated: literally “separation”; connotes the ceremony marking the end of Shabbat and holidays
- **heymish:** Yiddish, transliterated: literally “homey”; connotes warmth and folksy atmosphere
- **ika shira b’pe:** Hebrew, transliterated: literally “major music by mouth”; connotes the rabbinic ban on instrumental music except for on occasions upon which rejoicing is mandated
- **I-tal:** the Rastafarian “natural” diet; can also refer to Rastafarian ways of speaking that replace aspects of words that are considered problematic with the syllable “T” or syllables that are considered more fitting to the meaning (i.e. “oppression” becomes “downpression”)
- **Kabbalah:** Hebrew, transliterated: literally “receiving”; connotes one of the primary esoteric schools of Jewish mystical thought; adherents today are primarily Chasidim
- **kallah:** Hebrew/Yiddish, transliterated: bride
- **kavanah:** Hebrew, transliterated: literally “intention”; connotes the focused mindset necessary for prayer infused with feeling and meaning
- **k’lei/kelim:** Hebrew, transliterated: vessels
- **khasene:** Yiddish, transliterated: wedding
- **khazones:** Yiddish, transliterated: cantorial singing
- **kippah:** Hebrew, transliterated: thin skullcap worn by observant Jewish men at all times and occasionally by Jewish women
- **kiruv:** Hebrew, transliterated: literally “closeness”; connotes outreach by Orthodox Jews to non-Orthodox Jews to encourage greater observance
- **klezmer/klezmorim** (plural): Yiddish, transliterated: instrumental musicians; today denotes the genre of Ashkenazi Jewish heritage music and/or those who perform it

- **kol isha b'ervah:** Hebrew, transliterated: literally, “the voice of a woman is like nakedness”; this is the text of the halakhic prohibition against women singing in the presence of men
- **kosher:** anglicized Ashkenazi Hebrew: literally “fit”; generally used to describe food that conforms to Jewish dietary laws but can also connote music, books, etc. that conform to Jewish law. **Kashrut** refers to the dietary laws as a whole and **to kasher** is to make kosher (i.e. a kitchen, the text of a poem, etc.).
- **Kotel:** the Western Wall in Jerusalem, the only remaining portion of the Temple
- **Litvishe:** Yiddish, transliterated: Lithuanian
- **matzah/matzo:** Hebrew, transliterated: the unleavened bread eaten during Passover
- **maskilim:** Hebrew, transliterated: literally “educated” or “enlightened ones”; proponents of the **Haskalah**
- **mechitzah:** Hebrew, transliterated: the barrier between the men’s and women’s sections in an Orthodox synagogue
- **minhag:** Hebrew, transliterated: community custom
- **Mishnah:** Hebrew, transliterated: the first aggregation and redaction of the Oral Law, compiled around 200 CE
- **mitnagdim:** Hebrew, transliterated: literally “opponents,” i.e. of early Chasidim
- **Mitzrayim:** Hebrew, transliterated: literally “narrow places,” connotes Egypt
- **mitzvah:** Hebrew, transliterated: commandment
- **nigun/nigunim** (plural): Hebrew, transliterated: literally “melody”; connotes Chasidic melody sung with vocables
- **nusach:** Hebrew, transliterated: both the regional style of a prayer service (i.e. Ashkenaz vs. Sephardi vs. Italian vs. French, etc.) and the actual liturgical melodies used within a prayer service
- **olam:** Hebrew, transliterated: world, universe (connoting infinite space and infinite time)
- **oy vey:** Yiddish, transliterated: literally “oh, woe!”
- **patwah:** the creole language of Jamaica, combining English, African, Indian and other influences
- **psak halakhah:** Hebrew, transliterated: literally “verse of law”; refers to a legal decision by a respected rabbi
- **rebbe:** Yiddish, transliterated: Chasidic pronunciation of “rabbi”; refers to the ruling rabbi of a Chasidic movement
- **rebbe’s tish/tishn** (plural): the equivalent of a **farbrengen** for non-Lubavitcher Chasidim
- **seder:** Hebrew, transliterated: literally “order” or “arrangement”; generally refers to the ritualized meal on Passover but can also refer to a similar ritualized meal on Tu B’Shevat, the books of the Mishnah, etc.
- **Sephardic Jews:** Jews of Mediterranean and Arab lands who descend from the Jewish population expelled from Spain in the 1400s
- **Shabbat:** Hebrew, transliterated: the Jewish Sabbath, falling from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday

- **shaliach/shluchim** (plural): Hebrew, transliterated: literally “messenger”; refers to Chabad-Lubavitch emissaries
- **Shekhinah**: Hebrew, transliterated: the feminine, immanent presence of the Holy Spirit
- **Sh'ma/Shema**: Hebrew, transliterated: literally “hear,” from the first word of the Jewish creedal prayer “Hear o Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one”
- **shevirah**: Hebrew, transliterated: literally “breaking,” connoting the breaking of the vessels in the Lurianic myth
- **shiur**: Hebrew, transliterated: refers to any Torah lesson and/or the **halakhic** category of minimal requisite quantities; both connote the sense of a small quantity
- **Shir haShirim**: Hebrew, transliterated: Song of Songs, i.e. the Biblical book
- **shomer mitzvot**: Hebrew, transliterated: literally “keeper of the commandments”; refers to Jews who feel bound by traditional **halakhah** and generally observe at least the traditional laws of **kashrut** and **Shabbat**
- **shtetl/shtetlekh** (plural): Yiddish, transliterated: small Jewish village
- **shtreimel**: Yiddish, transliterated: large, round fur hats worn by **Chasidic** men on festive occasions
- **shvirat ha-kelim**: Hebrew, transliterated: literally “breaking of the vessels,” i.e. in the Lurianic myth
- **siddur/siddurim** (plural): Hebrew, transliterated: comes from the root for “order”; refers to prayer books, which set out the order of the liturgy
- **simchah/simkhe**: Hebrew/Yiddish, transliterated: literally “joy”; refers to joyous event such as a wedding, bar/bat mitzvah, or other celebration
- **Simchat Torah**: Hebrew, transliterated: literally “joy in the Torah”; a fall holiday celebrating the end and new beginning of the annual cycle of Torah reading
- **slivovitz**: plum brandy (traditional to Eastern European/Slavic countries)
- **Talmud**: Hebrew, transliterated: literally “learning”; the Mishnah and the Gemara
- **Tanya**: the central work of Chabad philosophy, written by Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the founding Lubavitcher **rebbe**; also known as *Likkutei amarim*
- **tefillin**: Hebrew, transliterated: black leather boxes containing the **Sh'ma** attached to black leather straps; used by observant Jewish men and some women during prayer
- **teshuvah**: Hebrew, transliterated: return or repentance
- **tikkun (olam)**: Hebrew, transliterated: literally “repair”; in the context of Jewish mysticism, implies utopian mending of spacetime (**olam**)
- **Torah**: Hebrew, transliterated: literally “teaching”; refers to the first five books of Hebrew scriptures, which contain the basis for all of Jewish law
- **treyf**: Yiddish, transliterated: not **kosher**
- **treyfe medine**: Yiddish, transliterated: an unkosher country or land
- **tsimbl**: Yiddish, transliterated: cimbalom or hammered dulcimer
- **tsimtsum**: Hebrew, transliterated: the self-contraction of God (after Lurianic Kabbalah)
- **Volklieder**: German: folk songs
- **yarmulke**: Yiddish, transliterated: see **kippah**

- **yeshiva:** Hebrew, transliterated: from the root “to sit” or “settle”; a single-gender school for study of Jewish legal texts
- **yeshiva bokher (yeshive bokher):** Hebrew/Yiddish, transliterated: a boy (bokher) studying at a **yeshiva**; colloquially, a studious, gentle Jewish man (see **Edelkayt**)
- **yeshivishe:** Yiddish, transliterated: after the custom of **yeshivot**; **yeshiva**-like; after the custom of black-hat/**haredi** Orthodox Jews as opposed to after the custom of **Chasidim**
- **Yiddish:** Yiddish, transliterated: the language traditionally spoken by Ashkenazi Jews, derived from a combination of Middle High German, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Slavic languages
- **Yiddishkeit:** Yiddish, transliterated: the traditional culture of Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazi Jews
- **Yiddishist/ism:** those who subscribe to the **Yiddishkeit** revival movement of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, which includes renewed interest in **Yiddish**, **klezmer** music, and other elements of **Yiddishkeit** from food to literature to history
- **zmires/z’mirot:** Yiddish/Hebrew, transliterated: Jewish hymns, often sung on **Shabbat**

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