

From the South Bronx to Israel:  
Rap Music and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

by

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## **Abstract**

Despite its origins with underprivileged youth in America's urban ghettos, popular rap music in Israel is not necessarily connected with underprivileged minorities in Israel. On the contrary, generally speaking, commercially recorded rap music in Israel is either distanced from politics and adheres to a color-blind ideology, or includes expressions of right-wing Jewish nationalism. As a whole, rap music in Israel reproduces and perpetuates the social order as is, and rarely challenge it, notwithstanding moments of subversion. This anomaly – of pro-government, hegemonic rap – is possible in Israel because both rap music and Zionism, the hegemonic ideology, are perceived as an act of resistance, as "revolutionary", and as a claim for justice.

This study also discuss rappers who are Palestinian citizens of Israel, examining how they see rap music as a place to assert claims for a common global experience of marginalization, voicelessness, and oppression that echoes their own struggle. The presence of Palestinian rappers who are citizens of Israel within the hip hop scene highlights that popular rap music in Israel is a tool of Zionist nation-building.

This study shows that popular rap music, like other forms of popular music in Israel, serves as a tool of nation-building. Hence, official institutions find rap useful and co-opt rappers of different political persuasions for purposes of propaganda outside of Israel. Finally, it sheds light on the role of the rapper in society, and of the scholar's value judgments rendered on rap music.

Dedicated to the memory of my mother, Yafa Ben-Ari (Pozniak-Aharonovitz)

מוקדש לזכרה של אימי, יפה בן ארי לבית פוזניאק-אהרונוביץ

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## **Introduction**

### **Rap Music and Zionism**

*"Hadag Nachash / make / Zionist hip hop  
Hadag Nachash / make / Zionist hip hop!"*  
(Hadag Nachash, "Gaby and Debbie")

*"What will you do, huh? Kill me?  
I don't give a fuck about Hamas, Iran, Barghouti  
I only want to be free in Zion  
Signed: The Last Zionist"*  
(“The Last Zionist,” The Shadow)

*"A good rapper is a rapper that has something to say. It works only if you are authentic. The Shadow and me have this thing, because we were both brought up and educated in a patriotic-Zionist way. It drives us crazy, for example, that on Israel's Independence Day people hang American flags on their cars. What's up with that? There is something really cool in what used to be before, of real Zionist pride, how people came here on boats and kissed the ground. Before we had morale. Today everybody says 'fuck, let's go to Lapland,' there is no motivation anymore, nothing. On Hanukah there are no menorahs on the windows, even. I want to bring back to fashion that my parents were brought up on. Not a yarmulke, but fashion. Zionism-chic"*  
(Subliminal, quoted in Arad 2001)

It is an open-air concert outside of Ashdod, Israel's fifth largest city and home to the country's largest port. The municipality has sponsored a two-night music festival to celebrate Ashdod's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in the dunes outside the city center. The highlight of the evening is a concert by Subliminal and The Shadow, two of Israel's most popular rappers. Families, children, and teenagers come in an open space, eating, chatting, and meeting neighbors and friends. When the concert begins, young girls scream and run to the foot of the stage, followed by the rest of the teenagers and young adults. Older people and small children stay far back from the excitement, sitting on blankets on the slope facing the stage, humming and joining in the refrains.

Subliminal and The Shadow are leading the show, which includes other rappers, a DJ, and a female singer. Registering their excitement, audience members light up their cell-phones and wave them as though they were candles. We are close to the sea, and the breeze on this hot August night brings relief. The voice of Subliminal soars above the crowd, which yells along with enthusiasm as Subliminal chants the climatic line in the song: "No muthafucker was born yet who can stop Israel!" (*Od lo nolad haben zona she'yaatsor et Israel!*)

Rap music, together with DJ-ing, graffiti, and break dancing, is an element of hip hop culture, which started as a youth subculture in New York in the 1970s. Hip hop culture and rap music are most commonly identified with African American culture and music, and are commonly understood as embodying African American musical, oral, and dance traditions in the Americas. Because rap music reflects the experience of African American youth in America's inner city ghettos—experience of neglect, violence, police brutality, and poverty—it became associated with protest and resistance, first in the United States and later globally.

Before I started my study, I expected rap music in Israel to be analogous to American rap music and its politics. I expected it to be associated with minorities that face discrimination in Israel—Mizrahim, Palestinian citizens of Israel, Russian-speaking immigrants, Jews of Ethiopian descent, labor migrants, asylum seekers, poor people, and others who identify as oppressed minorities—and to be oppositional to dominant discourses in politics and society. Instead, I found that popular, commercial rap music in Israel is not oppositional or subversive. On the contrary, it is hegemonic, pro-government, mainstream, and often includes expressions of right-wing Jewish nationalism. Some commercial, popular rap music is distanced from politics and adheres to a color-blind ideology, but as such is not apolitical, indeed it

naturalizes hegemonic political discourses. As a whole, I found that commercial, popular rap music in Israel reproduces and perpetuates the social order as is, and rarely challenge it, notwithstanding moments of subversion.

While rap as resistance is identified with the African American community in the United States, this narrative can also be found in studies about rap elsewhere. I find that hip hop became a signifier of resistance to oppression that is used in all struggles against oppression. For example, in her study on Basque rap, Jacqueline Urla explains that rap is a "strategic deployment of signifiers that afford youth a window into their own situation and what it shares with that of racialized minorities" (2002:181). It seems counterintuitive that rap music in Israel rap music is hegemonic. Why is it the case? Solving this puzzle is the heart of this dissertation.

In light of this seeming anomaly, I ask: why is commercial, popular rap music in Israel pro-government and pro-establishment, and why does it not challenge, critique, or propose an alternative to hegemonic culture? I argue that this anomaly is possible in Israel because both rap music and Zionism, the hegemonic ideology, are perceived as "revolutionary" acts of resistance. Zionism, a secular nationalist movement that started in Europe in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, embodies the self-determination for the Jewish people. Zionism defines itself against an external enemy – anti-Semitism – and portrays the Jewish people as victims (Zertal 2002). Hence, being a Zionist, like being a rapper, is perceived as an act of resistance and a claim for justice.

### **Rap as Resistance**

Expressing resistance against dominant culture through explicit and hidden texts, rap music first emerged as an authentic and organic counter-culture in the United States

in the 1970s. Although this genre has been commercialized and commodified in the decades since, it retains its association with cultural resistance, and remains a musical icon of resistance because of its relation to African American youth in inner cities. Dick Hedbidge (1979) argues in his study of subculture that protest and resistance are expressed in capitalist societies through a system of representations from the realm of everyday life: language, fashion, music, speech, and body movement. Thus, the individual can -- even in a society in which the bourgeoisie maintains control by ownership over the means of production, punishment, and enforcement--challenge oppression by deploying a “style” culture. “Style” is a version of refusal and the most prominent characteristic of subcultures. Rap music and hip hop culture exported "style resistance" far and wide; a distinctive style of music, dress, speech, dance, and body language now conveys rap’s resistance in virtually every city and town in the world.

Most of the literature on hip hop culture and rap music celebrates rap music as giving a forum to African American and Hispanic youth, who were previously invisible in the public sphere, suffered from unemployment, and endured Nixon's "Benign Neglect" programs in the early 1970s, which had left them even more disadvantaged than they had been before (Martinez 1997; Rose 1994; Perry 2004). Rap embodied their neglected histories. Tricia Rose (1994:21) contends that "life on the margins of postindustrial urban American is inscribed in hip hop style, sound, lyrics, and thematics," and Lipsitz (1990:26) asserts that the founding fathers of hip hop culture in the Bronx in the early 1970s were "hemmed in by urban renewal, crime, and police surveillance, and silenced by neglect from the culture industry, the school system, and city government....[they] found a way to declare themselves part of a wider world through music." Other scholars have described the period of hip hop

culture's emergence as highly precarious and characterized by anxiety, alienation, and anguish among impoverished inner-city black communities (Rose 1994; Perry 2004; Forman 2002; Kelly 1997, 1996).

There is no question that black history and experiences are embedded in the sound and style of rap music and hip hop culture in North America. Dance scholar Yvonne Daniel calls it "embodied knowledge" (Daniel 2001), a concept that posits movement and music as containing histories and maintaining physical lineages. Movement and music traditions incorporate an epistemology through which "hip hop heads" (slang for hip hop devotees) could store music, dance, and art scores related to politics, economics, and histories. Tricia Rose (1994), Imani Perry (2004), Murray Forman (2002), Mark Anthony Neal (2004), Nelson George (2002), Robin Kelly (1997), Houston A. Baker, Jr. (1993), Errol Henderson (1996), Theresa A. Martinez (1997), Craig S. Watkins (2005), and Jeffrey L. Decker (1994), write about rap as politics and the politics of rap, and assert that the development of rap music is intertwined with the black urban scene in the United States, particularly New York City, in the 1970s.

Michael Ralph (2009), however, takes an oppositional stance and argues that "hip hop...did not arise organically in the late 1970s. Hip hop is instead an artifact of the late 1980s/early 1990" (Ralph 2009:141). Notwithstanding this provocative statement, Ralph agrees with the conceptualization of rap as a product of black labor. Hip hop culture and rap music, as an expression of black history and experience, has been instrumental in giving voice to an entire black generation. Understanding hip hop culture was key to understanding black people.

Scholars and journalists invoked the construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway and the post-industrial shift to decipher the landscape in which hip hop

culture was born and took form (Chang 2005, Rose 1994, Toop 1985, 1991). Behind the construction of the Cross-Bronx expressway and Co-Op City was Robert Moses, an unelected New York official (Caro 1974). Following in the footsteps of the modern French urban designer La Corbusier, Moses wanted to transform Manhattan into a business center, connected directly to the suburbs through a network of highways carved through the heart of existing neighborhoods in the outer boroughs. This encapsulated the idea of modernity and progress, as mid-twentieth century city planners saw it.

The construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway is held to be responsible for the transformation of the South Bronx from a flourishing, vibrant middle class neighborhood into a crime-afflicted, environmentally degraded, and impoverished neighborhood. The Expressway destroyed vibrant Jewish, Irish, and Italian middle class neighborhoods along the Grand Concourse, and hastened the decay of already-impoverished neighborhoods in the South Bronx (Chang 2005; Berman 1982; Caro 1974). In the years after the Expressway's completion, businesses and factories relocated, property was devalued, poverty and neglect deepened, and the construction of Co-Op City on the northern edge of the Bronx accelerated the middle class, largely white exodus from the destroyed neighborhoods (Caro 1974). Those who stayed were mainly poor black and Hispanic families who in subsequent years, were the victims of environmental degradation, arson, crime, drugs, unemployment, and gang violence. Where once family homes had stood was now rubble and burned-out buildings. By the end of the 1960s, most middle class families had fled the South Bronx for good. When African-American, Afro-Caribbean, and Latino families moved into formerly Jewish, Irish, and Italian neighborhoods, white youth gangs preyed upon the new arrivals, and the area became a war zone (Chang 2005).

This is the place where hip hop culture and rap music was born. As Berman (1982:15) writes, "destruction is an integral part of development: it always comes with a price, always something is lost." The destruction of the Bronx led to the birth of hip hop. The Bronx, Berman writes, became a symbol of "modern ruin and devastation" (1982:290). He compares the rappers to the great modernist writers such as Zola, Dickens, Wright, and Roth (Berman 1993: paragraph 9). Songs like "The Message" by Grandmaster Flash, graffiti on the walls of abandoned buildings, and break dance circles in the streets connect us, he writes, each one in its own way, to the experience and pain of living in a modern city. One of the early hip hop crews, Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five, were from the Bronx. In "The Message," Flash raps lucidly: "Don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge / I'm trying not to lose my head / It's like a jungle sometimes / It makes me wonder / How I keep from going under." Then the rappers take the listeners on a tour of the 'hood, show the destruction, the environmental and human degradation, and the horror. Berman takes special note of the album cover art of the song "The Message," which portrays the group against the background of an abandoned block of New York tenements and shops. The message, Berman asserts, was: "We come from ruins, but we are not ruined."

The new subculture was not always explicitly political. Until "The Message", hip hop did not say in words what it said in sound, graffiti, and dance: that the public space and basic rights were taken from these youth and that they were reclaiming them, even if unconsciously. There are no art classes in school? We will paint on the subway wall. No money for dance class? We will dance on the sidewalk and in the basketball court. No one teaches us our history? Afrika Bambaataa and the Zulu Nation will teach us about Africa. The musical establishment steals our songs? We

will take them back and make them into a new song. You don't like the way we look, dress, talk? We will make it so cool, your children will want to be like us. Without saying the words "racism," "discrimination," or "oppression," the founding fathers of hip hop created a way of life which was all about resistance. They reclaimed public space without asking for permission. Thus, hip hop's basic principles are collage, dissonance, and transgression, as well as staking claims to public space, which meshed with the Civil Rights movement's goal of racial integration and equality.

The Bronx was the meeting place of neglected African-American and Hispanic communities and a mass of immigrants from the Caribbean fleeing the restructuring of the economy following decolonization. Most scholars (Byone 2003, Rose 1994, Perry 2004, Keyes 1996, Gladney 1995) emphasize rap's roots in African cultural and musical traditions, such as "call-and-response, African rhythms, and oral storytelling, as well as African-American folklore, such as the stock characters of the outlaw, the trickster, the hero, and the braggadocio, a key ingredient of rap music which is also an element of African-American folktales" (Byone 2003:80). Also, the African American church is the source of the preacher-style delivery rappers adopted for their sermon-like performances, and the rhetorical style of Black Nationalist leaders such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. is entrenched in hip hop culture (Decker 1994; Henderson 1996).

Furthermore, rap is created within the African American tradition of signifying and toasting. Signifying conceals a criticism of power and oppression (Gates 1988). By signifying, Gates explains, Africans have disguised subversion and resistance and have questioned political and social conditions through parody and humor. Toasting is the practice of tale-telling of the adventures of "bad guys" who confront and overcome adversaries easily and without remorse. When toasting,

historical accuracy is not important; the toaster is celebrated and admired for his verbal skills. Shusterman (1991:615) writes that "asserting superior social status through verbal prowess is a deeply entrenched black tradition which goes back to the *griots* in West Africa," and Rose (1994:86) asserts that "rappers' rhymes are clearly influenced by, if not a direct outgrowth of, the African American toast tradition." Perry (2004:30) further determines that "the exhortation of oneself and one's greatness present in many hip hop lyrics derive from the toasts of early eras."

The hero of toasting is a trickster, who, in the African American tradition, is an urban bad-man who disobeys law and conventional behavior. In West African folklore, the trickster is represented by the "Signifyin(g) Monkey." According to Gates (1988), the Signifyin(g) Monkey is the New World equivalent of trickster figures of African Yoruba mythology, such as Esu and Elagba. His figurative oppressor is The Lion, who commands the Signifyin(g) Monkey's actions. Yet the Monkey is able to outwit the Lion repeatedly through his use of figurative language. As Gates (1988:289) notes, "[T]he Signifying Monkey is able to signify upon the Lion because the Lion does not understand the Monkey's discourse....The Monkey speaks figuratively, in a symbolic code; the lion interprets or reads literally and suffers the consequences of his folly." Consequently, because the Monkey uses language on a level that the Lion cannot comprehend, he can always triumph over his oppressor. In this way, the "master's house" is dismantled by the master's tools—i.e., his language.

The trope of the Signifyin(g) Monkey is key to understanding rap as resistance. Applying Gates' analysis of African American folk heroes combating subjugation from within an oppressive system, to contemporary rap, suggests that rap maintains a "sub-textual critique of society, and particularly of white supremacy" (Perry

2004:31). As such, rap music should not be understood literally: the competition on the mic represents the high regard that is given to verbal skills in black culture (Rose 1994), and the lyrics that attempt social realism should be understood as a "street ethnography of racist institutions" (Kelley 1996:121). Rappers often draw a causal link between the conditions in which they live and the decisions they make, such as to steal, to join a gang, to deal drugs, etc.; between the inmates and joblessness, police repression, and inferior and racist educational system. In other words, rappers serve as social commentators, and do not simply glorify violence (for examples, see Kelley 1996).

The experience and the knowledge from which rap sprang is embedded and encoded within it: the black urban ghetto in which rap developed, which is the geographical location of the aftermath of a history of enslavement, impoverishment, and colonialism. Black musical expressions articulate community reactions to specific social and political contexts; there is a clear continuity between jazz, blues, rhythm and blues, and rap (Cradock-Willis in Rose 1994, Perry 2004), between the Black Arts Movement and rap (Gladney 1995:299), between African music and culture and rap (Keyes 1996, Toop 1984), and between African dance and break-dance (Gottschild 1996).

Thus, since the first two decades of rap music were characterized by revolutionary artistic elements and explicit and implicit political elements, the dominant discourse about rap music tends to theorize it from the basic assumption that resistance is embedded in the music. Around the vulgar and angry lyrics and the portrayal of harsh life and struggles, the "monstrous" sound, and the disregard of artistic categories existed a discourse that takes very seriously the possibility that the music is interconnected with social change or simply to express protest of injustice.

Whether it is hip hop "headz," hip hop scholars, or political pundits, most will agree that rap music exists in a certain opposition to the establishment, to cultural hegemony, to bourgeoisie values and life style, to societal norms, to sexual Puritanism, or to any category of power that oppress people.

I focus on rap's birth not only because it exposes the formative period of hip hop culture, but because it allows for a historically-grounded discussion of the presentation of hip hop culture today. The early period reveals to us that resistance, protest, and black history are embedded in rap music. This history is sometimes whitewashed and emptied in the process of hip hop's transformation into world culture and a commodity. Next, I will discuss what happens to rap music and the histories it carries when it is commodified.

### **Rap as Commodity**

The release of "Rapper's Delight" on a commercial single-record by the Sugar Hill Gang in October 1979 is considered the moment in which rap music and hip hop culture turned into a commodity. As Jeff Chang writes, "Rapper's Delight turned hip hop into popular music" (2005:132). Hip hop, before the release of Rappers' Delight, comprised a T. A. Z. (Temporary Autonomy Zone) (Bey 1991): a series of spontaneous and unconstrained events. The spontaneity of the "event" was central to the culture, not the recording of music. These early events, Dimitriadis (2001:2) explains, "were unique events, available only to participants, accessed only through participation." There was no documentation or proof for the existence of these events, other than the experience of the participants. Although rap had been recorded informally and distributed on cassettes among certain circles, people in these circles had attended the events. For them, these nonprofessional recordings were extensions

of these events, not music existing separate from their embodied and shared experiences (Shusterman 1991; Chang 2005). Hence, most of what we know today as hip hop—recordings and clips that are consumed passively—are not hip hop in its original sense.

In other words, although rap music emerged as an authentic and organic counter-culture that expressed resistance against dominant culture through explicit and hidden texts, once it was commodified, it started a journey from the margins to the center of hegemonic culture, introducing a new language, aesthetics, and sounds into popular culture, and painting it black. With this journey, rap has turned from an "event" into a consumer product—a spectacle. As a quintessential example of cultural change, rap illustrates the way in which demonstrations of resistance and subversion are commodified, spectacularized, and incorporated into hegemonic culture. The following is an apt illustration: in 1981, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five rapped about New York that "It's like a jungle sometimes / it make me wonder / how I keep from going under," and in 2009 the rapper and businessman Jay Z raps that in New York he feels in an "Empire State of Mind."

When I write "incorporated into hegemonic culture," I use the term hegemony as Gramsci (1971) defined it, i.e., as a hidden ideological mechanism that contains the dominant definitions of reality in open societies, without any use of coercion or force, but rather, through internalization of the existing order as natural, obvious, inevitable, and serving the entire society, including those who suffer from it the most. In other words, a certain cultural practice becomes hegemonic when it becomes the "horizon of the taken for granted, when it shapes our ordinary, practical, everyday calculation and appears as natural as the air we breathe" (Fernandes 2004:24).

Filc (2006) argues, following Gramsci and Laclau and Mouffe, that hegemony is both a struggle and a state of affairs, in which a way of life and a way of thinking become dominant in society. Hence, hegemony is a process, not a situation, a locus of a constant struggle that demands renewal and change in the face of different social processes, and not an expression of social stagnation. "A project," Filc explains, "becomes hegemonic when its positions, its way of organizing reality and understanding it, penetrate all levels of society: its institutions, the lives of individuals, morals, customs, religion, and all aspects of culture" (2006:15). In order to endure, a project of hegemony must be based on a wide "historical bloc" that contains and encompasses—albeit partially—the interests, beliefs, views, and practices of subaltern groups (Filc 2006). The historical bloc is made and remade by constant struggles between dominant and subaltern groups. Filc points out (2005:17) that hegemony is strengthened by its ability to absorb non-hegemonic discourses, even when they are antagonistic to it.

Similarly, Fernandes (2004:24-26) theorizes that the hegemonic system can adapt itself to change through "partial reincorporation" of attempts that threaten to undermine it, and through "naturalizing" these attempts in order to verify that they will not lead to more substantial and fundamental changes. Hegemony as a process comprises "the efforts of actors at various levels to assimilate counter-hegemonic expressions and practices into official discourses and institutions" (2004:26). Rap music was "partially reincorporated" into hegemonic culture in the United States; counter-hegemonic expressions were "assimilated into official discourses and institutions," as certain rap acts were watered down to be pleasing and non-threatening for white consumers. As rap made its journey from the margins to the center, its sound and message became partially reincorporated by hegemonic culture.

Rapping about money and power that they already actually have, many rappers are no longer starving artists from the inner city, but successful businessmen who realized the American dream. And as the most popular musical culture in America and in the world, rap music is no longer a counter-hegemonic culture, but rather, one that adopts and adapts itself to multiple and intersecting hegemonies.

The journey of rap music in the United States from a counter-culture to dominant culture is an example to the transformation that hegemony can undergo in cultural terms. Hip hop culture has turned into a worldwide industry, and the sound of rap is echoing around the world as a reminder of the power of American culture to go global. However, as Rose (1994:19) suggests, rap is "at once part of the dominant text and, yet, always on the margins of this text; relying and commenting on the text's center and always aware of its proximity to the border." This duality, this contradiction, is what characterizes rap as a cultural product that is both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic. Furthermore, although rap has been commodified, its history and knowledge are embedded in it, and can be quickly discerned if we conduct an archeology of rap. As Murray (2004:10) explains: "The music's transgressive and revolutionary underpinnings have not been abandoned, but rather, recoded within the matrix of capitalist consumption. Hip hop's fictive decadence is asserted as humorous representation of redistributed wealth and radical social resistance. Put more succinctly, hip hop uses economic achievement and materialistic braggadocio as a form of resistance to white racism and its economic stronghold on the black community, as opposed to a politically infused transgression."

In sum, hegemonic institutions and agents have an interest in incorporating artistic counter-hegemonic expressions and practices, such as rap music, in order to be legitimized by the mass of people. The process by which rap was commodified

and spectacularized turned it into a global signifier of protest and resistance, but without "real" protest and resistance. As such, it is now non-threatening to hegemony. Like those who purchase a tee shirt emblazoned with the face of the revolutionary Ernesto "Che" Guevara and imagine themselves to be revolutionaries as well, consumers of rap music around the world can listen to rap music and make rap music, and imagine it to be protest and resistance.

The journey of rap music to the center of hegemonic culture was accompanied by simultaneous globalization. Next, I will discuss what happens to rap music when it is globalized.

### **Global Rap**

Rose (1994:19) asks what makes rap so attractive worldwide, and answers:

"Rap also draws international audiences ... mainly because it is a powerful conglomeration of voices from the margins of American society speaking about the terms of that position. Rap music, like many powerful black cultural forms before it, resonated for people from vast and diverse backgrounds. The cries of pain, anger, sexual desire, and pleasure that rappers articulate speak to hip hop's vast fan base for different reasons. For some, rappers offer symbolic prowess, a sense of black energy and creativity in the face of omnipresent oppressive forces; others listen to rap with an ear toward the hidden voices of the oppressed, hoping to understand America's large, angry, and "unintelligible" population. Some listen to the music's powerful and life-affirming rhythms, its phat beats and growling bass lines, reveling in its energy, seeking strength from its cathartic and electric presence. Rap's global industry-orchestrated (but not industry-created) presence illustrates the power of the language

of rap and the salience of the stories of oppression and creative resistance its music and lyrics tell."

Also Halifu Osumare (2005:266) suggests that hip hop culture appeal to many societies around the world because it has the ability to speak to people for a variety of reasons which she dubs "connective marginalities" that bind the global hip-hop generation. These "connective marginalities" are: "culture, class, historical oppression, or simply the discursive construction of 'youth' as a peripheral social status" (Osumare 2005:266). These "connectivities" explain the global appeal of rap music, she argues: in almost every corner of the world, people can feel connected to hip hop, for different reasons.

These arguments are illustrated in the studies of hip hop in Japan (Condry 2006; Cornyetz 1994), in Australia (Maxwell 2003), in Cuba (Fernandes 2004), in England and Germany (Bennet 2004), in Spain (Urla 2002), and in other places (more cases of global rap are studied in the compilation *Global Noise* (Mitchell, 2002). These studies point to the various ways in which hip hop culture is incorporated in different parts of the world, and the manner in which rap's embodied knowledge relates to and reflects upon the histories and experiences of the people that practice it. Local histories and experiences are attached to these art forms by artists, audiences, critics, and academics, while integrating African American knowledge, epistemology, and meaning into practices by people of varied backgrounds.

Already in *The Communist Manifesto* (1998 [1884]), Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels noted the process of globalizing culture, which they argued was a form of cosmopolitanism that superseded the nation, and thus had the potential to weaken the link between citizenship and nationality: "The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness

become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature" (Marx 1998:6-7). Hip hop, as a form of "world literature," affirms the supra-political cultural bonds of individuals by weakening the link between citizenship and nationality. But, by celebrating a "poetics of place" and "talking about where one is from," rap, DJing, graffiti, and break dancing signify "one's place in a subculture which is global and local at the same time. The hip hop nation is international as well as national" (Mitchell 1995). Mitchell highlights Robertson's (1995) theory of "glocalization," which posits that the global is also local and that they frequently intersect rather than being polarized opposites.

Rap comes into Israeli culture from abroad, and hence it is inevitably "glocal," both national/local and global. As I argue, rap intersects with Zionist ideology in their common discourses of resistance. However, even as a glocal cultural product, rap embeds black cultural and historical memory. When rap music leaves the United States and reaches places and people who might have little knowledge of African American history, questions about authenticity and cultural appropriation come to the fore: can hip hop be made by anyone, anywhere? Who has the "right" to make rap music? Black people? Poor people? Ghetto people? Oppressed people? Everyone? Is rap music outside the United States an instance of cultural appropriation? Or is it an innocuous multicultural hybrid?

Yvonne Byone eschews the concept of the globalization of hip hop because "hip hop culture deserves to be seen in its fullest light, encompassing its historical and social precepts" (Byone 2002:83). She argues that "unless one has at least a working knowledge of Black Americans and their collective history, one cannot understand hip hop culture" (Byone 2002:77). She goes on to ask, "If international artists are

selectively taking parts of hip hop culture and reconfiguring them to fit their own histories and experiences, without understanding the framework in which the components developed, how can these new cultural expressions still be called ‘hip hop’?” (Byone 2002:78). Moreover, Byone (2002:79) criticizes the concept of "world culture," arguing that it is redolent of cultural imperialism, particularly American cultural imperialism, and argues that "rather than allowing youth around the world to create their own cultural identities, the United States has exported its own for their use....Although the chief tenets of hip hop culture are unity and inclusion, in light of real differences among youth around the world, it seems irrational that a cultural expression that was born and bred in the United States and heavily emphasizes Black American vernacular and American references can speak to everyone, regardless of the amount of cajoling and stretching that is done to it.”

Rose (1994:19) draws attention to the interplay between the globalization of hip hop and U.S. imperialism: "Rap's ability to draw the attention of people, to attract crowds around the world in places where English is rarely spoken, is a fascinating element of rap's social power. Unfortunately, some of this power is linked to U.S.-based cultural imperialism, in that rappers benefit from the disproportionate exposure of U.S. artists around the world facilitated by music industry marketing muscle."

I ask similar questions. What, in Israeli rap music, is in dialogue with the histories and experiences embedded in rap music? Is some of it connected to African American history? Some to American imperialism? Is it more global or more local, more international or more national? Indeed, the sharing of rap music as a global artistic language is both removed from and connected to the African American cultural practices from which it came. Cultural outsiders can misconstrue or completely miss the meanings hidden in it. Indeed, global hip hop must be

understood in the context of the history and experience of cultural appropriation and theft that continues through today as "Black culture" becomes a way to transmit ideas about black people and their cultural expressions by non-black people, while the sounds, movements, aesthetics, and images of hip hop culture are removed from their historical and cultural contexts. Zionist rappers' appropriation of rap's history and experience is an illustrative case.

### **Zionism as Resistance**

In Israel, the messages of popular, commercial rap music can be found on a wide spectrum, ranging from Zionist right wing to Zionist left-wing, from advancing a project of nation-building, to depoliticized musical expression. Either way, popular, commercial rap music in Israel in Hebrew reflects the dominant Zionist ideology. I use the term ideology as Althusser (1971) conceptualized it: the sum of an individual's values, desires, tastes, preferences, choices, and other actions that are inculcated by ideological practice, thereby turning the individual into a subject. Ideological practice is the sum of the practices of all institutions that Althusser dubs "the ideological state apparatus," which includes the education system, the media, organized religion, and the family. All ideologies produce a subject, although each subject differs according to the practices of each ideology. Why does rap music not counter Zionist ideology, which is the hegemonic ideology in Israel?

Zionism is an ideological political movement that emerged in the late nineteenth century to counter European anti-Semitism by envisaging and then building a national home for Jews in Palestine. The premise of Zionism is that it is oppositional to the world because it is a movement of a victimized nation, and hence, the national institutions – government and military in particular – are in opposition to

the hegemonic structures of the larger world, particularly Europe. Zionism is defined by an external enemy; it eliminates internal cleavages by positing an external foe in order to produce the Zionist subject as homogenous and cohesive. The external enemy enables Zionist subjects to imagine themselves as a unified and victimized whole. Since Zionist ideology produces the Jewish existence in Israel as a David against Goliath, a victim of global anti-Semitism and Arab aggression, it can appropriate and rechannel rap's resistance discourse into Zionism's discourse of resistance and victimhood.

Zionism was born and fashioned within European traditions of modernity and the Enlightenment (Rodinson 1967; Rotenstreich 2007; Sternhall 1998). The Zionist movement popularized such values and ideas as collectivism, labor, the Judeo-colonization of Palestine, and the character of the “New Jew”—armed, independent, and connected to the land—as opposed to the compliant, humiliated, even pathetic Diaspora Jew denigrated by Zionist spokespersons from the beginning of the movement (Almog, 2000). The Zionist movement was born in the wake of modernization theory, hence rendering the *Yishuv* and the state of Israel as "at once Jewish, Western, democratic, and ‘revolutionary’" (Shafir and Peled 2002:24). The Zionist consciousness has been shaped by death and trauma, and continues to conceptualize the community in a “hall of martyrs” (Zertal 2002). These themes—victimhood, death, trauma, never-ending struggle, and survival—have been a recurring motif in Israeli culture and politics.

However, it should be remembered that as an ideological national movement, Zionism was always divided by internal debates (Rose 2005:11). The founding fathers, Theodor Herzl and Max Nordau, heralded the coming of political Zionism and its manifestation in a Jewish sovereign state in mandatory Palestine, while Zionist

thinkers such as Martin Buber and Ahad Ha'am did not see the establishment of a Jewish state in mandatory Palestine as the only solution, but rather, encouraged Jewish self-help in Europe. As Rose (2005) explains, Zionism is a messianic movement, and Zionist discourses partake of the narrative of the Jew as a person who has been abandoned and is looking for a Messianic savior and solution. Also, Orthodox sects of Judaism rejected Zionism as a blasphemy: it is not for men to bring forward salvation, but for God alone. For secular Jews, Zionism represented the "normalization" of the Jews as a nation. Rose quotes Ben Gurion and Weitzman, who heralded Zionism as the movement that could normalize the Jewish people (Rose 2005:93-94). Today, Israelis struggle to come to terms with and make sense of Zionism in a post-colonial world.

Zionism was the project of European Jews (known as Ashkenazim in Hebrew) influenced by romantic nationalist movements in late nineteenth century. The early Jewish settlement in Palestine was in large part their response to searing experiences of anti-Semitism in Europe (Rodinson 1967; Rotenstreich 2007; Sternhall 1998). The Labor Settlement Movement (LSM) was the hegemonic power in the pre-1948 Yishuv, and sought to establish a modern nation-state molded according to the ideologies of nationalism and modernization that flourished in Europe before the First World War. According to the ideology of the LSM, "to be virtuous meant ... being a secular nationalist Jewish *chalutz* (pioneer)" (2002:17). The pioneer was the "new Jew," molded according to the character of the pioneer European Jew.

Following the establishment of an independent Jewish state in Palestine in 1948, the Jewish European/Ashkenazi party, Mapai, attained power and sought to undertake an ambitious "Ingathering of the Diasporas" to the new state, and actively orchestrated the relocation of entire Jewish communities from Iraq, Iran, Morocco,

Yemen, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Turkey, known first as Sephardic (literally, “Spanish”) and later as Mizrahim (literary Eastern) Jews. Once they arrived in the new state, non-Ashkenazi Jewish communities met with a Eurocentrism that denigrated their culture (Shohat 1999; Shenhav 2003; Saada-Ophir 2006; Perelson 2006; Massad 1996), embodied in discriminatory and paternalist attitudes and policies. Later arrivals of Jews of Ethiopian descent, and those from the former Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s, brought new conflicts and cleavages (see Ben-Eliezer 2004; Ojanuga 1993; Gomel 2006; Horowitz and Leshem 1998; Ben-Rafael, Olshtain, and Geijst 1997; Shabtai 2001). Despite these fault lines, the main conflict in Israeli society continued to be the Israeli-Arab-Palestinian conflict.

One of Zionism's key principles is the rejection of the culture and consciousness of the *galut* (exile) and the belief that only in Eretz Israel (Land of Israel) can the Jewish people begin to be a "normal" nation and a "normal" people (Raz-Krakotzkin 1993). Rose (2005) writes that 120 years after the inception of the Zionist movement, tension have arisen over the clash of desires for normalization on one hand, and the way in which Zionist nationalist ideology continues to make choices that fail to bring forward an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (and help to perpetuate it) on the other hand. In this sense, conflict *is* the "normal" state of Zionist existence, and this is certainly reflected in Israeli popular music.

Scholars of Israeli music have depicted Israeli popular music as conforming to the Zionist ethos and as central to the cultural work of nation-building (Regev and Seroussi 2004; Perelson 1998; Yiftachel and Roded 2004). Furthermore, the scholarly literature has presented Israeli pop music as a space in which dissenting voices are marginalized. The last two decades of Israeli popular music have

witnessed a noticeable shift, and the emergence of a wider range of voices. Dramatic political events such as the 1993 signing of the Oslo Accords, the 1995 Rabin assassination, the 2000 eruption of the al-Aqsa Intifada, and the continuing military occupation of the West Bank, as well as the way in which the Holocaust is remembered in Israel and in the world, and the way in which anti-Semitism is constructed and imagined, have all reverberated in the production and consumption of Israeli popular music.

By choosing rap music as the focus of my study, rather than rock, pop, or the Israeli folk tradition known as Songs of the Land of Israel (SLI), I am able to capture not only trends in Israeli society and culture, but also the way in which African American art forms are experienced, appropriated, and produced outside the United States. This dissertation offers a view of Israeli society and culture during a historical period of change throughout the entire Middle East and beyond, a period that is often distorted and misunderstood outside of Israel because of cultural gaps, the propaganda efforts of the Israeli government, the bias of the international media, and social scientists' fears of accusations of anti-Semitism in light of the memory of the Holocaust. I have observed rap music and its public re/presentation in Israel during a highly polarized time in the society, recorded the struggles to create coherence, and the attempt of Israelis to think of themselves, and to represent themselves and Israel, as right and just.

In sum, rappers in Israel are rechanneling rap music's resistance discourse into the Israeli-Zionist victimhood discourse. As I will show in the next section, rap music, which started as a counter-culture of marginalized African-American youth, has become a global commodity signifying protest, dissent, and resistance. Hence, to consume rap music is to identify with protest and resistance. When rap music arrived

to Israel as a commodity, it was perceived as an ideal genre to express the resistance discourse of hegemonic Zionist ideology and a signifier of protest and resistance into which Israeli rappers could pour their own ideology.

### **Methodology**

I study rap music in Israel in two scenes of circulation and reproduction—the live performance and the recorded album—locating them in their claims to contain a genealogy of rap music. The hip hop community in Israel is a network centered on attendance at live performances, purchase and downloading of music albums, participation in online groups, forums, and social networks; and a love of music and dance. I chose to focus only on Israeli rap music that is recorded, not hip hop activities that remain undocumented in sound or image, because I wanted to investigate the impact that this music has on society and not only on the individual. I developed my argument through my analysis of rap music's presence in mass media formats such as radio, television, and newspapers. The discursive component of my research includes the analysis of lyrics, personal interviews, and interviews with rappers in the media.

The methodology of this study is a combination of participant-observation in rap music concerts (Atkinson and Hammersly 1994; Jorgensen 1989), and semiotic analyses of lyrics, sounds, and images (Geertz 1973; Barthes 1972; Manning and Cullum-Swan 1994) reinforced and supplemented by informal and open-ended interviews (Fontana and Frey 1994). The study was carried from the point of view of an outsider-insider (McAlister 2002): as a native born Israeli I am an insider in Israeli culture, but as someone who lived outside of the country for eleven years as an academic, I am an outsider in the hip hop scene. My experience as a musical editor in

Galey Zahal gave me access to many of the key figures in the hip hop scene, and granted me access to the artists. In fact, I know one of the key developers of the scene – the rapper Quami – personally from the time we served together as soldiers in Galey Zahal. I am also from the same socio-economic background as most of the rappers I interviewed. For example, when I met the rapper Ortega, I discovered that my father knows his parents, who, like my father, are insurance brokers in Herzelia. However, since I was at least a decade older than the majority of the rappers I interviewed, and because I lived outside Israel for eleven years, I was also an outsider to the scene I was researching, which afforded me a dual perspective

I conducted participant-observation research at more than 40 hip-hop concerts over a two-year period between January 2008 and December 2009. Many events took place in Barzilay Club in the industrial section of Tel Aviv, in the Sublime club in the Florentine neighborhood in South Tel Aviv, in Bodega Bar in Herzelia Pituach (about 20 kilometers north of Tel Aviv), and in Lima Lima on Lillenblum Street in Tel Aviv. I also went to many outdoor, free hip hop festivals and break-dance sessions. Most of the clubs were small, general admission venues (holding less than five-hundred people) that book a wide variety of musical acts. I also attended rap performances at political demonstrations, and I attended a performance by American singer Akon in Tel Aviv's concert hall, Hanger, where I saw Subliminal and the T. A. C. T. as artists in the opening act.

When I went to concerts in clubs I was recognizable as a member of the scene, as I usually came to watch the concert with a friend and behaved naturally and normally as a member of the audience. Some rappers knew I was doing research. My activities as a participant-observer ranged from simply “hanging out” to being a central member of the audience, dancing and rapping along with the MC. Sometimes

I recorded field notes on my notepad during shows and wrote up more comprehensive field notes when I got home. I never conducted interviews with rappers during shows. I always scheduled interviews at a special time during the day in a place of their choice, most often in their homes or in a café. I would start with the same question: “How long have you been involved with the hip hop scene?” I asked this question to make them feel comfortable by giving them the chance to expand upon their role and history within the scene, while I played the role of a naïve researcher. The majority of rappers I interviewed felt that they made a crucial and historic contribution to the development of the scene and told me about it in detail. The rest of these interviews were more formal and semi-structured, lasting between thirty minutes to two hours each. I recorded all the conversations with the rappers and DJs.

I interviewed twenty-two men and two women about their personal interest in and thoughts about rap music, their views about race and culture, and their perceived associations (or lack thereof) between politics, race, and the production of rap music. The reason for the large disparity between men and women is simply that there are very few women involved in the production of rap music and hip hop culture in Israel. I was interested in talking to rappers and DJs who are central to the scene, because they are the ones who incorporate hip-hop into their lifestyle. All of my interviewees were involved in producing hip-hop as MCs, DJs, b-boys, journalists, and radio hosts. They were quite knowledgeable about hip-hop lore, and during interviews frequently quoted American rappers in order to underscore their own points, as in “As Chuck D said, rap is 'black people's CNN'.” At the shows I attended, audiences were almost exclusively Jewish Israelis (not Palestinian, black Ethiopian, or Russian-speaking), young (between the ages of eighteen and twenty-

four), and male. Most of the rappers and DJs know each other personally and have performed or worked with each other.

One question arose again and again: What meanings of "hip hop culture" were being communicated in these spaces? In this dissertation, I highlight how rap music was created in a historically continuous, highly complex, cultural setting, and then trace the repercussions this history has had on this culture's passage and dissemination around the world.

### **A Note on the Study of Music**

This study is not ethnography. Although I have conducted interviews and participated in numerous events as a participant-observer, the insights that I have gained from the research add to my knowledge and analysis, but do not constitute the entire study. As a political scientist, I am interested in what rap music means in *political* terms, and how it contributes to the construction of political meanings and subjects. I do not see a separation between the production of cultural products and the political world in which it occurs: political institutions, the military, international relations and diplomacy, movement between nations, national self-determination and sovereignty, the legal system, and the politics of identity. On the contrary, rap music is a form of mass political communication that reflects and shapes the hopes and desires of millions of individuals.

Musical production has social meaning for its makers and consumers (Lewis 1982). My study has been an "interpretative [study] in search of meaning" (Geertz 1973) in the social and political world of contemporary Israel. I sought to interpret two levels of meaning. First, there is a "framework of beliefs, expressive symbols, and values in terms of which individuals define their world, express their feelings,

and make their judgments,” and second, there is the “ongoing process of interactive behavior, called social structure” (Geertz 1973) which also gives meaning to musical expression. In other words, I pursued the connections between the discursive representations and that which is represented, or between the signifier and the signified.

There are several paradigms that allow us to understand the relation between music and politics. However, I do not attempt to think about music in its own terms and inside its own discourse, i.e., as disconnected from the political world in which its makers live. I see matters of ethnicity, race, class, geographical location, and gender as being intertwined with musical production. Hence, I employ *extra-musical* contexts and interpretative theories, and I use musical discourses to reify the extra-musical discourse, not *vice versa*. This might compromise the value of music as art, but it allows me to understand the meanings that music encodes and conveys in society, and in particular its political meanings, because besides being an artistic expression, music is also the outcome of production and social relations.

In *Performing Rites* (1996), Simon Frith explains popular music within three discursive fields: the art music discourse, the folk music discourse, and the commercialized music discourse. Frith argues that the evaluation of music is always located within one or more of these discourses. The art music discourse locates a transcendental experience in the music that is available only to a few people who hold the right knowledge and the right interpretative capabilities. The folk music discourse resists the separation between the performer and the audience, between life and art. This discourse wants to preserve a certain authenticity that arises from tradition. The commercial music discourse focuses on the music industry and the transformation of music into a consumer product.

In my study, I attempt to analyze and explain rap music within all three of these fields, which, only as a whole, can explain the meaning of rap music in Israel today. Meaning is created inside the music itself, from the meaning that its makers give it, and from its consumption. The meaning in rap music is derived from these three fields. In bringing all of these discourses together, I cannot base my argument on an analysis of isolated songs as phenomena that stand on their own, but rather, only upon a multifaceted discursive field, in which all the cultural products have complex relations with each other, and hence are relevant to my study: the songs themselves—genre, lyrics, sound, musical production, style of singings or rapping—as well as extra-musical products such as album covers, clips, images, performances, behavior in public, and oral histories of the performers. All of these constitute statements generating a discourse that functions as a system of meaning construction, or even a "naturalization" of meaning—a process by which meaning becomes the "horizon of the taken for granted" (Fernandes 2006:24). This study attempts to deconstruct the meaning of these cultural products in order to draw a clearer picture of the place of rap music in Israel, in the world, and within the web of global relations between individuals and nations.

In sum, I am concerned about the relation between music and society, and between music and the political, including political institutions. In this thesis, I am less concerned about whether music is an authentic experience or not, or about its artistic value. I am only concerned about these when they play a political role and when they contribute to the construction of political meaning.

## **Organization of the dissertation**

In order to demonstrate how rap music and the hegemonic Zionist ideology are both perceived in Israel as acts of resistance, and hence enable the anomaly of hegemonic rap, I have divided the dissertation into five chapters. In Chapter 1, I discuss the field of popular music in Israel, and the way in which popular music has been employed as a tool of nation-building. I review the introduction of rap music in Hebrew, which is also employed as a tool for nation-building.

In Chapter 2, I discuss Jewish rappers of both Zionist right-wing and Zionist left-wing political affiliation who view rap music as an appropriate avenue for "protest" and "resistance," and argue that although they are seemingly from different political affiliations, they all assent to and advance a Zionist ideology. I also examine the ways that official institutions co-opt rappers of different political persuasions for purposes of propaganda outside of Israel.

In Chapter 3 I discuss Jewish Israeli rappers who refrain from explicit political commentary. Rap music allows these rappers to present themselves as cosmopolitan, liberal, and progressive while they adhere to hegemonic Zionist ideology. They consider rap music as an act of cultural resistance, but they perpetuate and reproduce oppressive mechanisms, while simultaneously contributing to the production of rap music for purposes of nation-building.

In Chapter 4, I discuss the moments in which rap music challenges hegemonic ideology through subversive subtexts. I explore these performances of subversion as moments of "blackface" (i.e., blackface minstrels in the turn-of-the-20<sup>th</sup>-century United States). Reading Israeli rap within the history of Jews in blackface in the United States, I suggest that, like blackface Americanized Jewish immigrants, rap music globalizes Israelis. I argue, however, that these moments of blackface are

comparable to the rituals and practices of *Purim*, the Jewish holiday of inversion, and only *temporarily* displace hegemonic ideology through performance of alternative masculinity and profane speech. This momentary subversion highlights the tenaciousness of the dominant Zionist ideology.

Finally, in Chapter 5 I turn my attention to rappers who are Palestinian citizens of Israel, examining how they see rap music as a place to assert claims to a common global experience of marginalization, voicelessness, and oppression that echoes their own struggle. Being Israel's largest national minority, they assert their right to narrate their experience and perspective in a society that de-legitimizes and even criminalizes their historical narrative. The presence of Palestinian rappers who are citizens of Israel within the hip hop scene highlights the fact that, in comparison to Palestinian rap music, popular Zionist rap music is more commercialized.

In the Conclusion I conclude that commercial, popular rap music in Israel is not counter-hegemonic: it is part and parcel of the dominant hegemonic ideology. Made by either the members of the "Old Elites" (Zionist Left) or of the "New Elites" (Zionist Right), popular, commercial rap music sustains Zionism's hegemonic ideology. Nonetheless, there are moments of subversion, and there is rap music that exists outside the hegemony, which I discuss in this chapter. Finally, I discuss the role of the rapper in society, and question my own value judgments about Israeli rap music.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Popular Music and the Nation**

*We'll build our land, our homeland*  
*Because this land, this land is for us*  
*We'll build our land, our homeland*  
*It is our blood command; it is the generations' command*  
*We'll build our land despite our destroyers*  
*We'll build our land with our will power*  
*End of cancerous slavery*  
*Fire of burning liberty*  
*Glory of shining hope*  
*Will stir our blood*  
*Freedom thirsty*  
*Independent*  
*We'll march with might toward the liberation of the nation*  
*(Moshe Bick, 1928)*

In May 2008, the state of Israel celebrated its 60<sup>th</sup> Independence Day Anniversary. The song that was selected by the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Administration to be the official song for the event was *Bat 60*, a hip hop remake of a song by kibbutz Geva's singing choir, *The Givatron*, by Israeli rapper Kobi "Subliminal" Shimoni. Subliminal raps: "When the wind blows / my love intensifies / I want to grow older in a state that overcomes / all the difficulties, in all aspects / a state that takes care of her children and also of the old ones." Almost two decades after rap music debuted in Israel, I cannot help but wonder: is rap music Israeli music?

The famous lyrics by Moshe Bick from 1928 quoted above, and Subliminal's 2008 song, demonstrate the intimate relationship between music and nation-building in Israel. From the invented folk tradition known as the Songs of the Land of Israel (SLI), to contemporary rap, reggae, and alternative rock; from institutionalized efforts

to define national culture through the rebirth of a language, to contemporary Israeli musicians singing in English and the flourishing of slang and spoken Hebrew in Israeli rap; it is apparent that music has characterized Israeliness and national identity in unique ways.

In order to understand the place of rap music within Israeli popular music, and my argument that Israeli rap is hegemonic, I begin by noting that Israeli popular music has been instrumental in producing a national sentiment and shaping the character of the nation, and that it has also been shaped along the lines of national consensus. It has been a marker of belonging as well as of exclusion, and it has reflected power relations and struggles. The incorporation or exclusion of different types of music reflects the incorporation and exclusion of different groups, and the identification with certain musical genres, also marks the borders of group membership and identification. Galei Zahal, the military radio station, has been responsible for introducing foreign music to Israeli audiences for generations: rock in the 1970s, punk in the 1980s, and rap in the 1990s. Its unique role as a radio station managed by youth between the ages of 18 and 21, and its positioning the command of the military, has fostered the incorporation of new musical genres into Israeli popular music.

In the first part of this chapter, I discuss the reflection of Zionist values and practices in popular music, the Zionist revolutionary project's aim of creating a "new Jew," and the role that popular music has played in the nation-building campaign. In the second part, I describe the introduction and development of rap music and hip hop culture in Israel, and the role that the radio program *Esek Shachor* (Black Business) in Galei Zahal played in the incorporation of rap music into hegemonic culture.

## **1.1 The Field of Popular Music in Israel**

Between the years 1993-1995, I performed my mandatory military service in the Israeli military radio station, Galey Zahal, as a music editor. My job was to decide the musical playlist for the programs. One event in particular stands out in my memory. It was Purim in early 1994, and we prepared a special day of programs for the festive holiday. The night before, I slept in the station because I was on guard duty, and I was woken up early by loud knocking on the doors of the record library. The people at the doors were soldiers from the news department who had some hard-breaking news: an armed settler from Kiryat Arba, a Jewish settlement near Hebron in the West Bank, arrived during the Morning Prayer in the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron, shooting and killing 29 Muslim worshippers and wounding another 125 worshippers before he was killed by the armed guard. The unexpected tragic event introduced a dilemma—what kind of music were we going to play on such a day? The program for the day was planned to be happy and festive because of the holiday, but 29 people had just been killed. Normally, when large-scale tragic events took place, the station's policy was to cancel the regular playlists and to play only sad, melancholy Israeli music. But this event was different—the dead were not soldiers, they were not Israelis, they were not even citizens. They were Palestinians living in the West Bank under Israeli military occupation. The murderer was Jewish. What kind of music were we going to play?

The dilemma was solved eventually when we were told that the planned holiday program was cancelled and the rest of the broadcast was dedicated to coverage of the events. However, this event highlighted the dilemma that music editors faced then and now: what music should be played when tragedies occur on a national scale and in volatile political contexts? During Memorial Day and Holocaust

Day, and after terror attacks and other events in which soldiers or citizens are killed as a result of hostilities on national grounds, radio stations in Israel—even private ones, but not Arab stations—play sad, dramatic, and melancholic songs from the Israeli canonical repertoire. The broadcasting of these songs is supposed to bring all together around an Israeli sound that symbolizes the nation and its ethos. Does it?

The use of music as means of nation-building, in Israel as well as in other nations, has been documented and studied thoroughly, for example, *Music Makes the Nation: Nationalist Composers and Nation Building in Nineteenth-Century Europe* by Benjamin Curtis; *Russian Music and Nationalism: from Glinka to Stalin* by Marina Frolova-Walker; *Struggling to Define a Nation: American Music and the Twentieth Century*, by Charles Hiroshi Garrett; *Popular Culture and Nationalism in Lebanon: The Fairouz and Rahbani Nation*, by Christopher Reed Stone; *Vodou Nation: Haitian Art Music and Cultural Nationalism*, by Michael D. Largey; and many others. Popular music in Israel is a "leading area in the symbolic representation of Israeliness" (Regev 2004:2), and has been intimately connected to nation-building; it was created as an intrinsic part of the nationhood, and it has been embroiled in ideology since its inception (Regev 2004). Hence, popular music is a central sign and a source of distinctive national identity. The meaning of hegemonic Israeliness is defined and shaped through the lyrics, live performances, and public personas of popular music artists.

Popular music in Israel developed out of a period when the nation was being conceptualized in the wake of nationalism in Europe in late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Jewish popular musicians have sung about the beloved land and expressed their sentiments and pride about the new society they were establishing. The Israeli music scene was dominated by ideological dogma and political centralism, which characterized Israeli

society at large, emphasizing values of collectivism and sacrifice for the nation. Songs were commissioned by state leaders for special occasions, and to boost the nation during trying times (Regev and Serrousi 2004).

There are four main periods in popular Israeli music that materialize against the backdrop of the Zionist project: "the first is the period of early settlement until 1948 that is accompanied with "visionary" songs of redeeming and building the land; the second is from the 1948 war until the 1967 war, the period of state-building and conquest of the frontier, and the dominant songs are love songs for the land, describing the landscape and the sites; a third period starts in 1967 until the early 1980s, in which the expanding motherland turns into a renewing "Land of the Forefathers" and new frontiers open in the geographical space and in the consciousness; the fourth period that starts in the 1980s reflect a slow deterioration in the popularity of the idea of Judaizing the land, and the appearance of buds of protest against the problematic expressions of Judaization" (Yiftachel and Roded 2004:11).

Until the 1960s, the *lehaqot tsvaiyot* (army ensembles) with their nationalistic themes were the trend makers in the musical scene (Regev 2004). The *lehaqot tsvaiyot* were the most dominant element in the field of Israeli popular culture and were an important source of musicians and performers in civil life. Almost all major singers and musicians since the 1950s till the 1990s started their musical career in the army ensembles. Not only they received superb musical training and performing experience, they also met the most important and well-connected musicians and producers, and so when they finished their military service they usually went directly into a career in music.

The *lehaqot's* repertoire, which was the popular genre until the 1970s, was the so-called Songs of the Land of Israel (SLI). The canon of SLI was formed in the pre-

state *yishuv* and the first two decades of the state. SLI were "designed to celebrate the renewed Jewish national experience and the ideals of the Zionist settlement in Eretz Israel," and the emphasized "the descriptions of the Land of Israel (especially such locations valued by the Zionist ethos as the Jezreel Valley or the Jordan River), cultivating the land, and the defense of the territory" (Regev and Serrousi 2004:57). Another major aspect is the use of the pronoun "we" (ibid). Similarly, in their study of SLI, Yiftachel and Roded (2004) observed that the dominant motifs and metaphors in SLI were: "painful erotic love for a cruel land and desired land, while searching for consolation and reason that imbibe from the dreams of many generations." They further noticed that SLI are characterized with (1) "images of expanding/withdrawing borders determined by the location of the Jewish soldier or settler"; (2) "a disappearance of the Arab-Palestinian from the texts sang by Jewish-Israelis"; and (3) "a normalizing dimension that turn the abnormal flexible, borderless geography of the Jewish state into a normal, given, desired, and beautiful situation" (2004:11-12).

Hence, SLI played an important role in the process of Zionist nation-building, in supporting the construction of Zionist consciousness and the Zionist subject through music. Rotted in the early period, and now idealized and considered inalienable assets of Israeli culture, they have grown to be a signifier of Israeli national identity and a musical representation of Israeliness.

The construction of SLI as Zionist culture was part of the nation-building effort. Promoting national folkloric music deriving from Palestinian folkloric dance as "Israeli" and "Zionist" aided the nation in boosting its "connection" to the land and its right to return to the land. While Israel developed materially from establishing rigid boundaries between non-Jews and Jews—in particular between native Palestinians and Jews—Israeli music developed from transgressing those same

boundaries. Racism and segregation operated alongside cultural appropriation of dress, food, language, music, and dance from Palestinian culture. The early pioneers and the first generation of *Sabras* (Palestine-born Jews) that were responsible for laying the foundation for Israeli culture, who were dominantly European-Jewish men and women, consigned native Palestinians to political and economic inferiority but were willing and interested to take from Palestinian music and culture. They dressed, ate, spoke, danced, and worked the land like they saw Palestinians do. Behind this cultural "borrowing" was not only attraction and desire but also ideology: The Zionist project has made a departure with Jewish past in order to reconstruct a new Jewish future (Kimmerling 2001; Almog 2000; Segev 2001).

The Zionist nation-builders were European, and they envisioned a society that broke away from old Diaspora Jewish life in East Europe. Nationalism was sponsored by educated, middle-upper class nation-builders, therefore Israeli national culture does not have popular, mass origins. These early nation-builders popularized values and ideas of collectivism, work, the Judeo-colonization of Palestine, and the character of the "New Jew"—armed, independent, connected to the land—as opposed to what was perceived by Zionists as a compliant, humiliated, even pathetic Diaspora Jew (Almog 2000). The culture of Zionism was chiefly characterized by Hebrew as a mother-tongue, direct and rough way of expression (*dugri*), knowledge of the geography of Israel, and "rejection of exile" (*shlilat hagalut*) in cultural terms. Zionism revolutionized Jewish existence in Europe, by breaking from its past. As Regev (2004:15-16) writes: "As opposed to the "abnormal" mode of national existence in Diaspora, a "normal" mode was sought in Israel." To be "normal" was constructed in opposition to the way in which anti-Semites constructed Jews as

abnormal in Europe. Hence, Zionist excluded not only the Palestinian, but also Diaspora Jewish culture (Regev 2004:16).

Regev (2004) argues that the new culture developed along the lines of five cultural variants: Hebrewism, Globalized Israeliness, *Mizrahiyut*, Religious Israeliness and Palestinian Israeliness. These variants are hybrids, and they can be used as categories for analysis of both high and popular culture. In rap music, the dominant variants are Hebrewism, Globalized Israeliness, and *Mizrahiyut*.

In short, Hebrewism was formed during the formative years of Israeli society, in the pre-state *yishuv*. Central to Hebrewism was the use of the Hebrew language, which for the first time after many generations was used as the everyday spoken language of Jews in Israel, and of literature and popular song. The cultural practices of Hebrewism, Regev and Serrousi (2004:17-18) argues, "were ideologically mobilized, and had a collectivist mode of cultural performance and artistic practice." The collectivist ethos is exclusive: it is Jewish and Zionist, and hence Palestinian citizens of Israel, ultra-orthodox Jews, non-Jews, and non-Zionist left are excluded.

The variant of *Mizrahiyut* is related to the culture of Jews who hailed to Israel from Muslim countries, and who shared many elements of their culture with Arab-Muslim culture. As Regev and Serrousi (2004:21) explain, *mizrahiyut* "implies a position of ethnicity vis-à-vis Hebrewism and globalized Israeliness, which are generally regarded as Western or Ashkenazi variants." The materials that make up *mizrahiyut* are "traditional Jewish culture from Arab and Muslim countries, various Arab national cultures, Hebrewism, and contemporary global culture" (ibid 2004:22). I further discuss *mizrahiyut* in chapter 2.

"Globalized Israeliness," Regev and Serrousi (2004:19-20) explains, is "the set of cultural materials associated with the local adaptation of the effects of the

globalization of culture, in particular the emergence of Israeli consumerism, a strong sense of critique in the arts, and a pervasive cultural industry. ... Globalized Israeliness doesn't stand in contrast to Hebrewism, but rather it constructs Israeliness as a local extension of contemporary world culture. ... The shift from Hebrewism to Globalized Israeliness is often viewed as part of the move from a collectivist mode of conduct to an individualist mode. Globalized Israeliness emphasizes openness to and participation in global trends. Globalized Israeliness artwork was produced mainly within market-oriented culture industry. Eventually, the critic of Hebrewism was replaced with a respect for Hebrewism as the formative phase of Israeliness—a strategy of ‘honoring the elders’”

The variant of Globalized Israeliness is not new for Israeli culture. Popular and folk music has always been in dialogue with foreign musical styles, which Israeli musicians have employed in the service of nation-building, creating a culture which is a hybrid of the diverse backgrounds that make up Israeli society. SLI are based on adaptations of Russian, German, French, and Polish songs, and the early revue theaters *Hakumkum* (The Kettle) and *Hamatate* (The Broom) in Tel Aviv adapted songs in the tango, swing, and Broadway styles into the reborn language, Hebrew. The themes of the productions in the revue theaters were humoristic and not necessarily political or related to the Zionist enterprise. However, they were considered a part of the Zionist project because the use of the Hebrew language "Zionized" these musical styles and as Regev (2004:76) explains, "reflected the commitment of the social network that supported this music to the new Hebrew culture." Also, in the 1930s and 1940s, certain musical elements were appropriated from Oriental popular music, because they were "considered suited to national purposes" (Perelson 1998:114). Moreover, "[t]his appropriation entailed the

emergence of a new tonal system which, it was hoped, would replace the tonal system of Jewish Diaspora music, and thereby help consolidate the emerging Zionist image of the contemporary Jew in the realm of the lyrics, which broadly speaking pertained to matters of Work and the Homeland, and was in accord with the inclination towards a form of national socialism" (Perelson 1998:114, see also Regev 1995). Later, other styles were "Zionized" through the use of Hebrew, such as rock, blues, and rap. As Regev (2004:89) explains, cosmopolitan-oriented styles were always a part of Israeli popular music, and the foundation for a globalized variant of Israeliness was laid in the pre-state *yishuv*. During the Cold War, the United States was worried that Israel would join the Soviet Bloc, and promoted American power through "soft power" means: books, journals, film, and music (Segev 2001:47).

American culture has become the most powerful foreign influence on Israeli culture in areas such as music, film, architecture, and fashion, and with it the collectivist sentiment of early Israeli culture was replaced with individualism, and the ideology of the SLI was threatened. Songs that appeared after the 1970s, Yiftachel and Roded (2004:46) found, demonstrated that "cracks in the ethnic hegemonic conception of the state and its people" appeared, and "expressed ... the abandonment of songs praising the motherland, a partial move to protest songs, and the practical demand to end the occupation and decide on the borders of the state and its sovereign territories." During this period, popular music has broken the rigid boundaries of the SLI and opened up for expressions of dissent and protest. As Perelson (1998:114) argues, "Since 1982, the system of Israeli popular music has embodied the heterogeneity and inner contradictions of Israeli society, and reflected all its social and cultural problems." But, despite the spate of protest and dissent, and although "the system of Israeli popular music is not rigid or homogenous and manifests a host

of ideological tensions,” it has also "consistently and definitively been molded along the lines of national consensus" (Perelson 1998:114). Rarely, if ever, popular songs were challenging Zionist ideology, i.e., the conquest and Judaization of the land, the establishment of a Jewish state, the character of the New Jew, etc.

The impact of global trends on Israeli, however, is two-layered. The years following the Oslo Accords saw Israel becoming more split than before. The secular part of society became more outward looking, connected to global trends, and less committed to the project of nation-building, and the religious part became more religious and more national. As Uri Ram (2005:1-2) argues, "under the impact of globalization, Israel is being bifurcated into two polar opposites—capitalism versus tribalism, or "McWorld" versus "Jihad"—that contradicts and abet each other dialectically. It argues, furthermore, that this bifurcation overlaps to significant extent with socioeconomic divisions on one hand and with political-cultural divisions on the other hand. [...] During the 1990s, the Israeli society underwent deep class polarization, Israeli popular culture underwent "McDonaldization" and Americanization, and Israel's national ideology became a bone of contention between die-hard Zionists and radical critics.” McWorld is the "world of universal consumer brands,” and “Jihad” is the "world of communitarian holy wars (not just the Muslim variety or a religious variety)" and they are thus but "two different expressions of the same process of globalization” (2005:2). In Israel, Ram argues, "McWorld versus Jihad tension is rendered into a tension between the Jewish facet of its identity and the Israeli facet of its identity. The official Zionist ideology of Israel depicts it in terms of a "Jewish and democratic" Israeli nation-state. . . . Globalization bifurcates the "Jewish-democratic" unison and metes out the "Jewish" and the "democratic"

along different directions: a Jewish–Jihad trend—which we term "neo-Zionism"—and an Israeli-McWorld trend—which we term "post-Zionism.”" (2005:4).

This conflict is created because the history of Israel is the history of the pursuit of contradictory goals: colonialism of Palestine, Jewish ethno-nationalism, and democracy (Shafir and Peled 2002:2). However, they argue that "the inclusionary principle of democracy and the exclusionary principle of Jewish nationalism could co-exist only because, and only insofar as, they were mediated by republicanism as part of the colonial project of building the nation-state and attaining national citizenship" (2002:33). The republican view of citizenship, they explain, "display a clear aristocratic bias" since it assumes that "only a minority is capable of the moral transformation that places devotion to the common good ahead of the pursuit of individual interests" (2002:5).

Israeli culture and the meaning of Israeliness developed in such conflicted political landscape. The first comers were Zionist European Jews, and they attempted to create a Zionist, secular, Jewish state in Israel molded after their character and their ideals. The Labor Settlement Movement (LSM) was their political party, and it was the hegemonic power until the elections of 1977. With new comers, a power struggle ensued over resources, funds, and control over government, as well as over ideology. LSM Zionist ideology viewed Zionism as essentially a modernization ideology, consisting on colonization of Palestine, and "diffusion of universalist values and modern institutions from Europe to the rest of the world" (Shafir and Peled 2002:24). Thinking about Zionism as an ideology of modernization theory helps to explain the "Zionists' behavior towards both the Palestinians and non-European Jews in a way that did not seem to violate the LSM's commitment to universalists, even socialist, values" (Shafir and Peled 2002:24). As Shafir and Peled (2002:27) point out, "the

LSM's universalists rhetoric and partially universalist state-building practices masked highly exclusionist policies," in particular with respect to Palestinians and Mizrahi Jews.

Shafir and Peled challenge the functionalist perspective of the LSM as service elite because, they argue, Israel's citizenship regime stratifies rather than assimilate, and it construes as purely a nationalist project, in "ignorance of its attachment to coattails of nineteenth-century European colonialism" (2002:28). Thus, they argue, the Jewish-Arab conflict is the "key to understanding the LSM as a hegemonic movement ridden with contradictions" (2002:28). They follow Yonatan Shapiro (1976) in their search to "refute the image of the Labor Zionist leadership as a "service elite," dedicated to the creation of a universalist society and egalitarian polity" (2002:29). The LSM, as the hegemonic power in Israel until the 1977 elections, did not seek to incorporate but to maintain power, and although they adhered to democracy, it was democracy in the "procedural sense only" (ibid).

Since 1967, the main conflict between the Zionist left wing and the Zionist right wing has been the opinion over what should be the fate of the territories that were conquered in the June 1967 war. In their attempt to be loyal for the dual commitments – Jewish and democratic – the universalist, secular LSM left has been demanding that "at least the most populous areas of the occupied territories be relinquished, so as to maintain the demographic balance between Arabs and Jews in Israel" (Peled and Shafir, 2002:26). The right-wing opposition "have demanded that the newly occupied territories, particularly the biblically significant West Bank, be formally incorporated into Israel, and their Palestinian inhabitants either expelled or retained as non- or second-class citizens" (ibid). The line between these two camps is the line between right and left. However, both camps are Zionists, and the line

between the Zionists and the non-Zionist is mainly a religious and ethnic line: between Jews and non-Jews. There have been, however, Jewish political parties and individuals that belong to the non-Zionist camp such as Israel's Communist Party (Maki), and the Jewish-Arab party Hadash.

Zionist national identity has been transformed, and a new, neo-national identity have arisen, which represents the local, tribal, entrenched particularism, which Ram dubs "neo-Zionism," alongside a deconstructed, critical Zionist national identity – "post-Zionism." The reasons for these changes are political, economic, and cultural. Almog (2000) thoroughly reviews the moral changes that the secular, intellectual, mid- to upper-class had undergone in Israel since the establishment of the state, the ebbing of Zionist patriotism after the defeat of 1973, and why and how the character of the Yuppie inherited the *Sabra*. Almog (2004:22) writes that "Zionist national religion" that was created in the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a spontaneous, pioneering, charming 'cult', aspired to become institutionalized as a state. But once that happened, it lost its charisma and magnetism that fueled it in the beginning of the way. The establishment of the state in 1948, the victory in the 1949 war, and the massive immigration of North Africa and Middle Eastern Jews in the 1950s brought the Zionist 'religion' to a mythological and emotional catharsis, but the wheels of routine eroded the Zionist attraction."

The 1990s and 2000s saw the further compartmentalizing of Israeli society. The process that started with the revolt of the *mizrahi* Black Panthers in the early 1970s, and the election of the Likud Party to power in 1977, continued to intensify, and reached a high point of division and conflict with the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995, of the Labor Party, by a right-wing religious man. The years that followed the assassination, up until the contemporary moment, saw the

deepening of the divide between the different groups in Israel and were characterized with growing cleavages between groups in Israeli society that are deep and often erupt in violence.

Israeli society is made of many subcultures and disparate communities, and lacks a cultural core that encompasses all these groups (Kimmerling 2001; Mautner, Sagi and Shamir 1998). As Kimmerling dubs it, it is "multi-cultural without multiculturalism." Not all groups in Israeli society are equally committed to Israeliness as national culture, as Serrousi and Regev (2004:25) point out: "Israeliness as national culture is being eroded and is even disappearing. ... [T]he vocabulary of the ensuing debate on Israeli society and culture centers on the phrase "post-Zionism" as a descriptive concept for the current situation of Israel. It also includes a reexamination of the so-called major narrative of Zionism by a group of critical academics who came to be known as the "new historians"." The new historians – Ilan Peppé, Avi Shlaim, Teddy Katz, and more – opened the history of the 1948 war, and posed critical questions on the conduct and results of the war. They challenged the view of Zionism as a liberation movement and conceptualized it as a colonial movement. Their entrance into the academic arena heralded the reconstruction of the political field around Zionism. The divide between what is Zionist, and hence legitimate, and what is non-Zionist, or post-Zionist, and hence non-legitimate, came to dominant the political scale in Israel.

The changes that I described above are reflected in the field of popular music, and the field continues to be a field of power relations in which struggles, tensions, and conflicts regarding the meaning of Israeliness take place (Perelson 1998; Regev 2000). The power struggles can be tracked in the lyrics, musical styles, reception, dissemination, and support by the media and the public. In recent decades musicians

have turned to increasingly personal subjects: emotions and feelings, the body, love and intimate relations, and the family. Most prominently, the shift of *musiqā mizrahit* (Mizrahi music) from the margins of the Israeli popular music field to the center is a prime example. Up until the 1990s, *musiqā mizrahit* was played only in separate programs on the radio, it was sold on pirated cassettes in the streets in the Tel Aviv central bus station, and the most successful singers performed in clubs and family events but not in prestigious venues. This have completely changes and many singers of the *musiqā mizrahit* genre are today Israel's mainstream singers, which are played on national radio, performing in prestigious venues, and enjoy financial success.

The journey of *musiqā mizrahit* from the margins to the center of dominant culture represents more than a change in taste. As Horowitz (1999:452) explains, Mizrahi musicians "created not only the music but also the conditions in which their emerging hybrid music could flourish," and consequently, this music "subverted the carefully designed Euro-Israeli soundtrack." Mizrahi music, both popular and classical, did not receive the same public exposure in the small, government-controlled media up until the early 1990s when the media was opened up for commercial interests. Government-controlled media was played in special programs dedicated to "oriental" music and not as part of the larger "Israeli" music programs on radio and television. Also, until the 1990s, the army ensembles opened their doors mainly to singers and musicians who sang in European musical style and without Mizrahi characteristics (guttural vowels and the *mawwal*, a way of singing which is characterized by spelling vowel syllables longer than normal), hence they were mostly Ashkenazi. Mizrahi musicians who were trained in Eastern or Oriental musical traditions were not common in the army ensembles. The status of Mizrahi music, however, had changed considerably in the last two decades, and Mizrahi

musicians and singers have penetrated all Israeli music institutions (for the narrative of classical Mizrahi music see Perelson 2006, and for the narrative of popular Mizrahi music see Horowitz 1999, Saada-Ophir 2006, and Regev and Seroussi 2004).

In sum, popular music, as a tool of nation-building, was molded along national lines and has been shaped by Zionist ideology. The borders of popular music have expanded, and now include other genres besides SLI: rock, pop, punk, and now also rap. I turn now to review the incorporation of rap into the Israeli music field, and the radio program *Esek Shachor* that facilitated it.

### **1.2.1 Rap Music Comes to Israel**

Rap music was incorporated into the field of popular music in Israel in the early 1990s, and gained substantial popularity and followers in the late 1990s. I identify three tiers to the development of hip hop in Israel:

*Early years, 1993-2000:* Although hip hop culture existed in Israel before 1993—notably, during the 1980s there was a break dance street scene in Jerusalem that developed following the release of the movies *Breakin'* and *Breakin' II*—the culture was not fully expressed until the first attempts to rap in Hebrew. In the early 1990s, the hip hop scene in Israel began to grow as artists started recording rap in Hebrew and producing their own beats. In 1996 the first album of Shabak Samech was released, which was the first rap album in Hebrew to receive wide public exposure through electronic and printed media as well as through live performances.

Shabak Samech was a rock band from the city Yavne, composed of six teenagers influenced by the Beastie Boys and Run-DMC. In 1993 the band won twice in two different national "Battle of the Bands" competitions in the Roxanne club in Ramat Hachayal. Following their success, they were invited to record their

first album with the record label NMC. Their first three albums—Shabak (1995), *Beatifa shel mamtak* (Candy Wrap) (1997), and *Canaan* (2000), won critical and commercial acclaim, and Shabak became one of the leading live performances in Israel, with flocks of youth repeating lines such as "Shabak S is an Empire / Look at all the females getting hysterical," and "I came from Iraq to spread the knack / wallak / a sex machine from the Shabak." The songs in the albums were a combination of rap and rock, and their allusions to the Beastie Boys were not missed (for example, the stage name Mookie D is a tribute to Mike D. of the Beastie Boys).

The emergence of hip hop culture during these years was connected to the introduction of cable TV to the Israeli telecommunication market, which exposed Israelis to MTV in their homes. The program *Yo! MTV Rap*, an American television music video program which ran from 1988 to 1999 and was the first hip hop music show on the music network hosted by Ed Lover and Fab 5 Freddy, brought hip hop culture into Israeli homes.

Another location where the early scene developed was in the recording studio of Aryeh "Chulu" Avitan, located behind his shop of hip hop fashion on Dizengoff Street in Tel Aviv. Young aspiring rappers came to the store, and Chulu encouraged them to rhyme in Hebrew and recorded them. The result was a compilation entitled "*Israelim Atzbanim* (Furious Israelis)" that was released in 1996, but not distributed commercially. It was only sold in Chulu's stores and passed down from one hip hop head to another. MCs and DJs continued to record and produce beats but the culture was still underground. In 2000, after seeing a live hip hop show in New York, DJ Ori Shohat and DJ Magic came back to Israel determined to put together a live hip hop show with all the MCs and DJs that were active at the time, an evening they called *Leyl HaChishguzim* (Night of Fun/Parting/Mayhem). The first *Leyl HaChishguzim*

marked the beginning of a hip hop scene in Israel as rappers became increasingly aware of their connection to and involvement in a nation-wide and global culture. Hip hop artists were proud that finally they were able to bring hip hop culture to Israel. Despite the culture's growth, two elements that played a major role in hip hop's birth in the United States—break dance and graffiti—were still only sporadically practiced in the early years.

*Explosion years, 2000-2006:* In the years that followed the first *Leyl HaChishguzim*, the hip hop scene in Israel was exploding. Record labels signed hip hop artists, live hip hop shows and parties were taking place and larger numbers of people attended them, and mainstream radio, television, and newspapers gave more exposure to coverage of the genre. Graffiti artists in the underground scene such as Know Hope, Idiot the Wise, Broken Fingaz, and Serial Colors made graffiti a more common sight in urban centers, and studios in every city and suburb started to offer hip hop and break dance classes. The Israeli Break dance Organization, founded in 2003, organized the first Battle of the Year in 2004, sending the winning team, Lions of Zion, to the International Battle of the Year in Germany. Unlike in the United States, where hip hop dance and break dance developed in the streets, break dance in Israel invaded the streets through television and the big screen. During this period, hip hop increasingly became an integral part of life for hip hop artists in Israel and began to redefine "Israeliness" in everyday, mundane and localized acts such as speech, style of dress, and clubbing activities.

In 2000, Kobi "Subliminal" Shimoni released his first album, *Ha'or M'tzion* ("The Light from Zion"). A huge commercial success, Subliminal's album helped popularize hip hop in Hebrew and made him the most well-known and commercially successful rapper in Israel. *Ha'or M'tzion* was the first hip hop album in Hebrew that

had the sound of commercial American hip hop, reminiscent of artists such as Puff Daddy or Fifty Cent, setting Subliminal apart from the previously successful rap albums by Shabak Samech and Hadag Nachash, which created instrumental rap more akin to Israeli rock. *Ha'or M'tzion* became a sensation in Israel, and Subliminal became one of the most popular musicians among teenagers and soldiers.

The year 2000 also marked the emergence of a hip hop scene among Palestinian rappers who are citizens of Israel, and their departure from the Hebrew speaking hip hop scene. Palestinian rappers started to rap in Arabic instead of Hebrew and to address Palestinian and other Arabic-speaking audience in the Arab world.

During the *Explosion Years* many hip hop albums in Hebrew were released, including albums by Quami de la Fox, Paravarin Refugeeez, PR Trooperz, Kele 6, MC Shiri, MC Shorty, Sagol 59, and Hadag Nachash. Also during this period the underground scene also exploded, and Russian speaking rappers, Palestinian rappers, and Jewish rappers of Ethiopian descent also performed and recorded in Israel.

*Renovation years, 2006-present:* By 2006, so many people were rapping that the popular media started to regard hip hop music in Israel as a trend that was no longer original, and projected that it would soon start to phase out, a sentiment that was captured in Subliminal's album "*Bediuk Kshe'Chashavtem she'Hakol Nigmar*" ("Just When You Thought It Was All Over"). But despite these pessimistic predictions, the coming years saw new names, young blood, diversity, and a lively underground scene.

The underground scene is more diversified both musically and politically, and includes voices from the entire gamut of Israeli society. In the commercial scene also new rappers emerged and started to dominate it. New groups emerged, such as

Cohen@Mushon that released an album with an "old school" sound (1980s East Coast rap), Peled and Ortega that released an album with a "hardcore" sound (alluding to such rap acts like Wu Tang Clan and Cypress Hill) before they went to separate ways in a rap music career, Lukatch who does nonsense rap, Axum from Netanya who do dancehall-rap, and System Ali from Jaffa who rap in Arabic, Hebrew, and Russian on political and social issues.

In sum, rap music in Israel celebrated party going, sex, and marijuana smoking, reflecting the abandonment of the collectivist ideal and offering an alternative to the militarist ethos. But, rappers also use rap music as a platform to advance a nationalist, Zionist, right-wing political agenda. In the next section, I will explain how this seeming contradiction enabled the incorporation of rap music into the popular music field.

### **1.2.2 *Esek Shachor* and the Incorporation of Rap**

Two factors led to the development of rap music in Israel in the early 1990s: (1) The peace process that culminated in the Oslo Accords in 1993 opened Israel to the world and allowed an accelerated cultural exchange between Israel and the Western world that rewarded Israel for the ostensible willingness to end the historical conflict; (2) The years following the Oslo Accords were marked by unprecedented economic prosperity which enlarged the Jewish-Israeli middle-class and enabled more Israelis to travel and to purchase consumer communication products such as television and computers, which brought foreign cultures such as hip hop into Israeli homes. Hence, the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 brought a new direction on popular music, toward non-political themes. Shabak Samech's first album, which was the first rap album in Hebrew that was released in 1995, represented this trend.

Shabak's big break parallels the sea-change that followed the signing of the Oslo Accords. The Oslo Accords, although they were never implemented, initiated a period in Israeli culture that lasted until the breaking of the second intifada in 2000, in which popular culture was saturated with cultural and musical products whose sole intention was to celebrate and party, in a space clean of political conflicts. Israelis were led to believe that the Accords were to end the historical Palestinian-Israeli conflict (Grinberg 2007), and the "permission" was given to produce light-hearted, optimistic, non-political music (as Schorr (2008) documents, the euphoric sentiment in the post-Oslo years also generated a club culture in which club-goers could celebrate and dance in a "utopian space free of national and nationalistic characteristics" (Schorr 2008:8)). Shabak, besides a few somber songs such as "*Ein Kavod*" (No Respect) from the album *Canaan*, celebrated in their songs youth, parties, sex, and drugs. After the release of *Canaan*, Shabak announced that they were breaking up, and they did not record or perform together until 2008. In this lengthy hiatus, a few band members tried solo careers. Most successful was Dani "Mookie" Niv. Mookie released his first solo album with another member of Shabak Samech, Dani "Piloni" Krack, entitled "*Shma Israel*" (Hear O Israel). The album was a sharp turn from Shabak Samech, and included acoustic musical production and serious lyrics.

The program *Esek Shachor* (Black Business) in Galgalatz, the sub-station of Galatz, the military radio station, was key in the incorporation of rap music into hegemonic culture in Israel. The first program dedicated only to rap music on Galatz was *Esek Shachor* that was started by Eyal "Quami" Freedman and Liron "Don Jachnoon" Teeni in 1995 and was broadcasted live on Galgalatz on Thursday nights. Quami and Liron played both foreign and local rap and invited aspiring rappers to the

studio for "open mic" sessions in which they had the opportunity to display their rhyming skills. Almost all rappers that recorded albums later and became commercially successful started in the program, including Subliminal, The Shadow, members of Kele 6, Hadag Nachash, and Mookie, as well as rappers who were not able to launch commercial careers. The presentation style was in the tradition of rap shows in the United States—informal, spontaneous, and boasting nonsense, crazy humor. Quami and Liron rarely transgressed the mandate that was given to them to play rap music with critical political commentaries, although they both hold non-conformist opinions. One occasion stands out, however, when during a program in January 2002, Liron ridiculed Prime Minister's Ariel Sharon's "Peace and Security" elections slogan by declaring that he was so delighted by the peace and security that he wanted to "lick Sharon's nipples," and said that he wanted to "thank" Sharon for bringing the kind of peace in which "many people die, Jews and Arabs, together" (quoted in Barbiro 2002). The joke was not received well by the commander of the station and Liron was fired. Eventually he returned and continued to host the show until 2007 when he left for a position in the commercial radio station, Radio Tel Aviv.

Galatz has been, since its establishment in 1951 by the military chief of staff, the most popular radio station among youth in Israel. Since all its programming where done by soldiers ages 18-21 for other soldiers of the same age, it appealed mainly to young people. However, it was also a military radio station and its content and messages were under the supervision of the Education Unit of the military, and the building where the station is located in Jaffa is a military base.

How can we explain the fact that *Esek Shachor*, the first hip-hop show that introduced rap to the Israeli audience and opened a microphone for rappers in the

beginning of their way, was aired in a military radio station? As Mautner (2004) argues, the existence of Galatz softens the contradictory relation and the tension that exist between the cultural categories of "youth," in which hip hop culture is an important element, on one side, and of "the state" or "the establishment," on the other, as Galatz demonstrates that it is possible to them to co-habit. Hip hop culture in the United States was an important expression of the resistance of youth to dominant culture, to racism and to the attempts to stereotype them and delegitimize their cultural expressions. Hence in the United States there was a contradiction between the category of hip hop and the state. But in Israel hip hop music was introduced to the public through the military radio station. In other words, *Esek Shachor* delivered a message for youth in Israel—high school students as well as soldiers—that they can be part of hip hop culture; but when their day come and they are drafted into the army (or if they are already soldiers) they will be able, and even expected to, to serve with commitment and even sacrifice. *Esek Shachor* conveyed to their listeners the message that being a committed and excellent soldier can co-exist with deep commitment to hip hop culture. As a result, the subversive politics embedded in hip hop culture were integrated into the category of soldier-ness and of hegemonic culture.

Furthermore, in Israel, the political aspect of the military is hidden because the militaristic consciousness penetrates all contexts in life and fulfills an important role in shaping daily practices (Mautner 2004). As a result, the military is not conceived as political (Mautner 2004), and Galatz helped in turning Israeli militarism into what Kimmerling (2001) dubs "civilian militarism." Mautner (2004) explains that the evasion and hiding of the connection between politics and the life of youth turns young people in Israel to be non-critically complacent to the political decisions

of the parents' generation, and that the military station fulfilled a crucial role in neutralizing anti-militaristic messages in rock music that could have possibly developed among young men and women in Israel.

The incorporation of hip hop culture into the military legitimized and allowed the listeners of the show, as well as the rappers that came to freestyle in the studio, to feel as if they were engaged in resistance culture, while at the same time, as part of the military, the station sterilized hip hop and rap from its subversive edges. Just as Galataz was key in legitimizing and incorporating rock music in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Mautner 2004), *Esek Shachor* was instrumental in legitimizing rap and incorporating it into hegemonic culture. Hence, *Esek Shachor* is key in understanding the development of pro-military, pro-government, and non-political rap music. This incoherence that lies in the core of Israeli rap music is enabled because the radio station that popularized rap music in the program *Esek Shachor*, is the IDF radio station, Galatz. The existence of Galatz as a popular radio station that belongs to the military softens the contradictory relation and the tension that exist between the cultural categories of "youth," in which hip hop culture is an important element, on one side, and of "the state" or "the establishment," on the other. Rap could be angry and politically blatant (Public Enemy, Nas, NWA), and yet to be consumed and enjoyed as a fun and trendy soundtrack.

Galatz demonstrates that it is possible for them to co-habit in the same entity, and hence the two categories—"hip hop" and "state-ness"—who were contradictory where rap music came from, turned into categories that contain each other in Israel. In other words, *Esek Shachor* delivered a message for youth in Israel—high school students as well as soldiers—that they can be part of hip hop culture, but when their day come and they are drafted into the army (or if they are already soldiers) they will

be able, and even expected to, to serve with commitment and even sacrifice. *Esek Shachor* conveyed to their listeners the message that being a committed and excellent soldier can co-exist with deep commitment to hip hop culture. As a result, the subversive politics embedded in hip hop culture were integrated into the category of soldier-ness and lost their subversive edges.

In sum, as one of the most popular radio stations in Israel, which brought the most cutting edge musical genres from the world to Israeli audience and promoted Israeli music, Galatz was key in shaping development of rap within hegemonic culture and ideology. The introduction of rap music through the military station, and the place that new rappers were given in the station to start off their rap careers, sterilized rap from its subversive and counter-hegemonic potential.

## **1.1 Conclusion**

Popular and folk music in Israel have played an important role in the shaping of national culture and in nation-building in Israel. Popular music has been shaped along the lines of national consensus, and musicians and singers became culture heroes and markers of Israeli identity. The military radio station has played an important role in the shaping of the popular music field and in the neutralizing protest and music and its messages, including rap music. The introduction of rap music through the military radio station has legitimized it and enabled local hip hop fans to embrace black music, with its associated meanings, epistemology, and historical experience and to conceive themselves as engaging in a global protest culture, while preserving Zionist ideology and cultural hegemony. This contradiction has been replicated in every culture in the world, as modern culture is an inherently contradictory enterprise.

## Chapter 2

### Everybody Talks About Peace, No One Talks About Justice *Talking Politics in Israeli Rap Music*

*The solution hides in one word: salaam, peace, shalom!*

(Peace in the Middle East, Subliminal)

Because of its nature, rap music facilitates political commentary that was rarely possible before in popular music. The emphasis on lyrics and their importance in the song make rap music an ideal musical genre to express views of political matters. In this chapter I focus on Jewish rappers of both Zionist right-wing and Zionist left-wing political affiliation, who view rap music as an appropriate avenue for "protest" and "resistance" and I argue that although they are of different political affiliations they are all within Zionist ideology, and hence make hegemonic rap. Finally, I show that official institutions find rap useful to advance its *hasbara* (explanation, propaganda) efforts abroad.

The chapter is divided into three parts. The first part focuses on the rappers that define themselves as right-wing Zionists. I analyze the rap music of Kobi "Subliminal" Shimoni and Yoav "Hatsel" (The Shadow) Eliasi, who are commercially successful rappers in Israel. I argue that by employing rap music as their platform to advance a Zionist right wing agenda, they turn upside down the original place that rappers have in society, and destroy what I see as rap's true value. Instead of reflecting the defiance of a marginalized group struggling to find a voice, Subliminal and The Shadow issue an aggressive call for militarism and violence against conquered people. Furthermore, given Subliminal and The Shadow's *mizrahiyut*, their rap music reflects that *mizrahiyut* was incorporated into the hegemony, however only nationalist *mizrahiyut*.

The second part revolves around rappers that are widely considered left-wing Zionists. I observe the music of the funk-rap band Hadag Nachash and the rapper Mookie, who are critically acclaimed rappers. Like Subliminal and The Shadow, they consider rap music to be a suitable medium for expressing their protest politics, and they are perceived as protest artists by the media. However, these rappers do not object to hegemonic culture and ideology, but rather, they create musical products within it. I compare songs by these artists to a song by Subliminal, which revolves around the theme of the desire for peace, in order to demonstrate my argument.

In the third part I discuss the ways in which the Israeli government has used (and continue to use) these artists as its representatives abroad. I argue that for the rappers and the government, the act of making of rap music in Hebrew is *in itself* an act of *hasbara*. I argue that the government co-opts these rappers to serve as evidence of Israeli democracy, diversity, and pluralism.

### **2.1.1 Talking about Peace: Rap from the Right**

The most commercially successful rapper in Israel since 2000 has been Kobi "Subliminal" Shimoni. Subliminal was born in 1979 and raised in the affluent Tel Aviv neighborhood Ramat Hachayal. His father, who was born in Iran, is a successful businessman in the global diamond industry and his mother, who was born in Tunisia, is a housewife. In public interviews he tells about a happy and stable childhood, notwithstanding experience of estrangement due to his religiously traditional Mizrahi family in a neighborhood with a predominant liberal secular Ashkenazi population. He loved rap music from a young age and used to record himself rapping in an improvised studio he made in his room. He served in the army as a security guard in the Tel Aviv base *Hakiryá*, which allowed him to continue to

live in Tel Aviv with his parents and work on his rap career. Besides being a rapper, Subliminal is a successful business man. In 2002 he founded T.A.C.T. Records, a recording label that also represent singers, produce performances, and keep a clothing line and accessories.

From the beginning of his musical career, Subliminal cooperated with another rapper, Yoav "*Hatsel*" (The Shadow) Eliasi, who he met during high school thanks to their common interest in hip hop. The Shadow was born in 1977 and raised in the impoverished city of Jaffa. His father, who was born in Iran, had trouble with the law and sat in jail when Eliasi was an adolescent, and his mother, who was born in Romania, supported Yoav and his two brothers while the father was in jail. During his military service, he served as a Master Sergeant. Because he was still serving in the army when he started his rap career, he had to hide his real identity, which caused a rumor industry and a cloud of mystery around him. Upon his release from the army, The Shadow came to center stage with Subliminal and they released a album in 2002, *Haor VeHatsel* (The Light and The Shadow) (see appendix) that received a lot of media attention and market success. In 2008 The Shadow released his own successful solo album and in 2009 the two former good friends and business colleagues announced that they go separate ways.

Subliminal and The Shadow's meteoric success excited hundreds of thousands of young people, and was unique in the Israeli music scene. Although Shabak Samech and Hadag Nachash before them had been successful in making commercially successful rap in Hebrew, Subliminal and The Shadow were the first rappers to make *sample-based* commercially successful rap music in Hebrew. Shabak and Hadag Nachash's musical production, i.e., live instrumental hip hop, kept with the rock tradition that dominated the music market in Israel. Successfully

producing sample-based rap music in Israel, Subliminal and The Shadow introduced a new sound and a new look in the Israeli music scene. Although the content of their rhymes was diverse—parties, conquests with women, educational tales of life in the streets, and the trials and tribulations of making rap in Hebrew in Israel—it was their commentary on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that gave them the most public attention.

The song *Mitpalel* (Praying), that was released independently in 1999 on a mix-tape called *Israelim Atsbaniyim* (Mad Israelis), was Subliminal's first recorded song. It was a low-budget production that was done when Subliminal was still in high school. The song opens with a cantor singing a verse from the book of Psalms: *Mizmor ozi v'zimrat yah v'tihi li l'yshua*—The Song of my Courage and the Song of God will be my Salvation. This is a part of the *Hallel* (praise) prayer that is sung traditionally on Jewish holidays, including, since the establishment of the state of Israel, on Israel's Independence Day. The same verse appears also in the Book of Names, where Miriam, sister of Moses and Aaron, who in Jewish tradition represents the connection between the nation and its God, sang it after the crossing of the Red Sea in praise of God who protected the Children of Israel in the escape from Egypt and the crossing of the sea. After the opening prayer, we hear a dramatic guitar riff and a piano melody reminiscent of the sound of contemporary Israeli Holocaust songs. After this introduction, Subliminal enters, rapping in a machine-like, flat flow over a single-layered computerized beat.

Starting *Mitpalel* with the prayer, Subliminal anchors the song with both Jewish tradition and Jewish claims over the Land of Israel, and emphasizes the connection between Jewish people and their God. After the prayer, the rapper moves immediately to recount catastrophes from Jewish history—the biblical Jewish exile,

400 years of slavery in Egypt, biblical wars, and the Holocaust. Listing Jewish national catastrophes from biblical time to today, Subliminal draws a line from historical anti-Jewish events to current conflict in Israel and situate contemporary events as part of a continuous, unchanging state of Jewish suffering, disregarding the different historical and geographical contexts in which each of these events occurred. To emphasize the unchanging nature of the enemy, Subliminal evokes the biblical enemy *Amalek*, as a metaphor to the Palestinian enemy. *Amalek* is an ancient nation that fought against the nation of Israel when, according to the myth, they arrived at the Promised Land after fleeing slavery in Egypt. In Jewish tradition and mythology, *Amalek* is the eternal enemy of the nation of Israel that the nation of Israel is ordered to remove from the face of the earth, and according to the medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides the war against the *Amalek* is a *mitsva* war—a jihad (Stern 1998).

After situating the contemporary situation as another chain in the string of Jewish catastrophes, the rapper moves into a rendition against the current political leadership. He raps:

Every politician is messing up and running around

And everybody calms down when something blows up

So instead of believing what everybody promises Get up and take action instead of waiting for the messiah

...

I am fed up with seeing only blood in the news

Blood all the time and we do not react

We are terrorized because we are afraid

Like scared dogs with the tails between their legs

We run away, bribing the murderers  
The time of the Zionist underground is gone  
Now there is a spoiled generation and everything is different  
Now All of a sudden I come and give the medicine  
Revolution! Listen very well to me and learn the formula  
He, who comes to kill you, kill him first  
And if he doesn't want peace with you, fuck peace with him!

When Subliminal declares "blood all the time / and we do not react," and "we are terrorized because we are afraid," he is referring to the political leadership's claims that the military is using "restraint" in the Palestinian Territories, and hence situate Israelis as the victims. Moreover, he ignores the bigger cause behind the conflict: the long-term Israeli military occupation over the Palestinian population since 1967. Not only Subliminal is willingly ignorant of the military occupation, but he portrays a picture of the Israeli military as being on the defense, a picture rather twisted, since the military occupying power is the aggressor.

In *Mitpalel* Subliminal appoints himself as a prophet of rage, warning the people against the dangers of "restraint" and against "being afraid," as he calls the people to "listen very well" to him. In order to do that, he employs the framework of rap through which he channels his political agenda. In rap, the rapper often takes on the trope of the trickster, who is an underdog who celebrates his status as an outcast, boasts that he can kill and dominate his enemies, and tell tales of heroism and defiance against the law. The trickster consciousness—the possibility to overcome the Lion using the Lion's tools, simply by trickery—passed down from African American folk oral traditions that live on in hip hop (Perry 2004:30). Taking on a

trickster persona, Subliminal the rapper poses as an underdog who goes against what he deems as a weak leadership succumbing to left-wing and international demands.

Also in *Prahim Baqaneh* (Flowers in the Canon), a 2003 song that Subliminal performed with The Shadow, the rappers pose as underdogs when the rhyme "When we were out of bullets we fought with our hands," painting Israelis as a David against a Goliath. This is an ironic declaration considering Israel's military prowess as opposed to the Palestinian's lack of it, and considering the Palestinian's resort to slingshots when in confrontation with Israeli military which possesses the most advanced attack helicopters and airplanes. Unlike the trickster, Subliminal does not have to resort to trickery to overcome his enemies; he possesses real power but he chooses to pretend that he doesn't.

Subliminal and The Shadow portray themselves as outcasts on the margins of society, like rap's founding generation. They portray themselves as marginalized by declaring that they are the only members of society who understands that "[Israelis] are terrorized because we are afraid." However, unlike the rappers they mimic, Subliminal and The Shadow do not rap about state aggression such as police brutality, for example, but rather about state aggression, directed at others who are subordinated to military control.

Subliminal and The Shadow's consciousness is defined not by the trickster's desire to overcome oppression by trickery, but by the so-called Masada Syndrome (Zrubavel 1994). Masada, a fortress that was built on top of a mountain that overlooks the Dead Sea in the Judea Desert, was the last fortified outpost that survived against the Romans in the end of the Jewish revolt in the years 66-73 A.D. In the books "The Jewish Wars," Josephus Flavius described the Roman siege on the mountain, where about 1000 men, women, and children, refused to surround to the

Romans. According to Flavius, the rebel's leader, Elazar Ben-Yair, convinced them to kill their women and children and then to kill themselves, so they don't have to be subjugated to the Romans. Zrubavel (1994:49-50), explains that "Masada ... embodied in its essence the spirit of active heroism, the love of freedom and national honor that according to the collective Zionist memory disappeared in the long period of life in exile. ... The new Israeli society pushed ... the suicide for the collective subconscious and elevated Masada as a historical metaphor of national struggle for freedom and the willingness to fight to the end." Indeed, unlike the trickster, Subliminal and The Shadow have a preference for heroic death, not for irreverent life. The Masada Syndrome, which is driven by the siege mentality, informs their message.

Siege mentality is defined by Bar-Tal and Antebi (1992:634) as "a mental state in which members of a group hold a central belief that the rest of the world has highly negative behavioral intentions toward them. This belief is usually accompanied with additional thoughts by group members such as that they are 'alone' in the world, that there is a threat to their existence, that the group must be united in the face of danger, that they cannot expect help from anyone in time of need, and that all means are justified for group defense." Bar-Tal and Antebi (2006:636) further explain that "when Siege Mentality beliefs characterize a society, they are part of the national ethos and therefore are expressed through educational, cultural, and political channels. Individuals acquire them in schools, from parents, through literature and the media. Subsequently, these beliefs become part of their cognitive repertoire."

Bar-Tal and Anetbi (1992) examine a number of statements by which they assess the level of Siege Mentality among Israeli students, and found that there was a high level of identification with these statements. Tracing these statements in the

rhymes of Subliminal and The Shadow, I found that they display a high level of siege mentality as assessed by Bar-Tal and Antebi.

For example, Bar-Tal and Antebi (1992:637) indicated that the statement "There is no place for internal criticism in times of danger" is an indicator of the siege mentality. Subliminal, in an interview with Tahel Blumfeld, suggested that the rapper Mookie, with whom he has political disagreements, should leave Israel due to his political opinions: "The man [Mookie] raps "we murdered the land and we murdered the soul." The man is talented, but bro, go live in Gaza if that's what you have to say" (Subliminal, quoted in Blumfeld 2002).

Bar-Tal and Antebi (1992:637) found that the statement "The whole world is against us" also indicates siege mentality. For example, Subliminal rhymes: "Cry and laughter, birth and death, end and beginning, are a part of our daily life in Zion, and the entire world is against us" (Introduction, Subliminal and the Shadow). "God, I wish you came down to me / I am chased after in my life / my enemies are united, want to annihilate me" (*Hafred Umshol* (Divide and Conquer), Subliminal and The Shadow).

Bar-Tal and Antebi (1992:638) point out that the statement "Only unity will save us from external enemies" is also indicative of siege mentality. In comparison, The Shadow raps: "One against the other, like animals, it's a war between brothers / already we have enough enemies" (The Last Zionist, The Shadow); "In world of terror-attacks naïve people are talking / living under delusions of justice / they enlarge the crack in the nation" (*Hatikva* (The Hope), Subliminal and the Shadow); "Hey, together we survive, alone we fall" (*Hafred U'Mshol*, (Divide and Conquer), Subliminal and The Shadow); "As soon as we are united there will be peace on Israel" (The Last Zionist, The Shadow).

Finally, Bar-Tal and Antebi (1992:638) institutes that the statement "Only demonstration of force will defer our enemies from attacking us" is also an indicator of siege mentality. In comparison, Subliminal and The Shadow rhyme: "I am ready with the finger on the trigger / . . . / whoever mess with me finish in a coffin . . . / we are all soldiers, fighters, sweating / . . . / angry Israelis / and not even one of them is feminine" (*Bor bli tachtit*, Hall without a bottom); "Zionism will not leave a trace from you / TA, NY, Madrid / *salamat Shaheed!* (Goodbye, martyr) / You worthless / You thought we were all nerds over here / You monkey with a headband / Talking like Tony Montana / Come against Baba / You will get head against head! / Who will survive the suffering, the mourning, and who will quit? / . . . / That he will come in front of your face with a canon / Where are you going to run for, huh? / An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth / And if nothing changes, everything will disappear!" (*Viens Ici*).

In sum, I demonstrated that Subliminal and The Shadow demonstrate a point of view associated with the ethno-nationalist citizenship discourse and the Zionist right-wing political position, which I discussed in the previous chapter 1 (Shafir and Peled 2002:6). In the next section, I continue to demonstrate this argument by comparing and contrasting Subliminal's and The Shadow's popular rap music with that of the SLI genre.

### **2.1.2 Rap for the Land of Israel**

The patriotic rap of Subliminal and The Shadow demonstrates the "fortify[ing] Jewish society in a radical Zionist discourse" (Yiftachel and Roded 2000:55) that has developed since the break of the Al Aqsa intifada in 2000. After the themes in the SLI moved away from the collectivist ethos starting in the late 1970s, and after the

rise of Israeli pop and rock that focused less on nation-building and more on personal matters such as love, personal growth, and self-fulfillment, nationalism and the nation came back to popular music. Subliminal and The Shadow's remaking of canonical songs from the SLI repertoire such as *Prahim Ba-qaneh* (flowers in the canon) and *Bat 60* demonstrates their continuity with the SLI ethos and with nation-building.

In *Bat 60*, Subliminal collaborates with the *Givatron*, a *havurat zemer* (singing ensemble) from kibbutz Geva, for Israel's 60<sup>th</sup> Independence Day in the song *Bat 60* (60 years old), a remake of a *Givatron*'s song from 1982. The song was originally written for the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kibbutz Geva, and the original lyrics of the chorus, written by Didi Manusi, were kept. Kobi Oshrat, who composed the original song, also conducted the 2008 musical production of the remake. Describing Israel as a 60 years old woman, the *Givatron* sings her praises: "she is real and not a sign / not a flag or a letter / the past is behind her / but she is looking into the future /... / she is 60 years old by the calendar / but in all other aspects / she is only 6 years old."

Subliminal adds to the praises in rap: "when the wind blows / my love intensifies" and "60 years old by the calendar / but there is no reason to worry / 60 is only 6 in state-years / I love you with all my heart and write for you, lady / you are the only one for us / we don't have another one!" The lyrics express pride in the achievements of the state, albeit it is love mixed with the realization that the love object is not perfect and with a hope for a better future. The original chorus that is kept in the rap version is based on a Russian ballad, sung by a harmonious choir of 20 females and males. Its sound is dominated by a few simple riffs of a drum machine that loads it with a sense of rhythmic energy. It is a poppy, catchy tune and employs a lot of light-hearted puns regarding the love for country.

Subliminal's collaboration with the *Givatron* demonstrates that his rap is within the ethos of the SLI, as cooperation is key in the symbolic creation of meaning (Perelson 1998). In *Bat 60*, which became an instant hit and was formally declared the official song of the 60<sup>th</sup> celebration by the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Administration, Subliminal establishes that he carries the torch of the SLI tradition, however recreating it as an example of globalized Israeliness—represented by the rap—and *mizrahiyut*—represented by singing of Itsik Shamli in the refrain. By bringing these variants together—Hebrewism, globalized Israeliness, and *mizrahiyut* (which I explained in the previous chapter)—Subliminal demonstrates that "Israeliness" is a combination of all of these elements. Rather, it is a new SLI that contains these variants. The song *Prahim Baqaneh* is another example of the new SLI.

The song *Prahim Baqaneh* (Flowers in the canon) was performed originally by Yehudith Schwartz and the military ensemble *Lahaqat Hel Hashiryon* (Artillery Ensemble), an army pop band of soldiers during their obligatory military service: young men and women aged eighteen to twenty-one. It was a hit song in Israel in 1971 and was canonized from the moment it was released. Regev and Seroussi (2004:90-91) write about the song in their study of Israel's popular music:

*"Describing a time in the future when soldiers would return home to town and a young girl would hand them a flower, the lyrics expressed longing for the end of war, for a time when there will be "flowers in the barrel of the rifle (or cannon)" and "girls on the turret" (of the tank). ... The song is a mid-tempo ballad, sung with much emotional conviction and seriousness by a female vocalist. A few simple riffs of a Farsifa electric organ dominate its sound and drumming that loads it with a slight feeling of rhythmic energy. In other words, it is a simple and catchy pop song. It was recorded at the peak of Israel's "empire days," between 1967 (the Six-Day War) and*

1973 (the Yom Kippur War), when euphoria about the country's military might and its superiority dominated the public sphere. The gap between the nature of the song, Prahim baqaneh, as a cultural artifact on one hand, and the social and cultural context of its production and reception on the other, reflects the paradox that underlies one of most important phenomena in Israeli popular music: the lehaqot tzvayiot (military or army ensembles). This is a paradox because these were soldiers in full uniform, serving in ensembles that bore the names of and represented combat units, who often sang about peace and an end to war. It was music that fit the ideological requirements of a nation-state and its army, yet it enjoyed enormous success in the civilian pop market. The lehaqot tzvayiot exemplified, in this regard, the intense ideological mobilization that characterized much of Israeli cultural practice during this period."

I quote this in length because there is a straight line between *Prahim Baqaneh* 1971 to *Prahim Baqane* 2003. In 2003 Subliminal remade *Prahim Baqaneh* as a rap song, which was an instant hit. The song introduced Subliminal to older audiences, and established his reputation as one of Israel's most popular entertainers. The repeating chorus retained the same lyrics and melody as the 1971 version: "The sun will stop between Gaza and Rafah / The moon will whiten on top of Mount Hermon (in the Golan Heights) / Flowers in the cannon, and girls in the turret / Soldiers will return to town en mass.

As noted, in 1971 the song expressed the national euphoria following the Six Days War during which Israel captured large territories from Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, which included the cities Gaza, Rafah, and Mount Hermon to which the lyrics refer. Subliminal and The Shadow were born a decade after the war, and for them these territories were always part of Israel. Hence Subliminal rhymes in the last

stanza: "after 56 years of defending our home / we almost lost the hope for a dove with an olive leaf." Gaza, Rafah, and the Hermon are part of "our home," even though they were not part of Israel 56 years ago (in 1948), and despite the fact that besides the Golan Heights that were unilaterally annexed, these territories were never declared to be under Israel's sovereignty (and are not part of Israel's sovereignty by international law). The 1967 new borders marked the borders of the new Israeli empire, which was celebrated in the song. Tellingly, Israel's borders are marked as including the West Bank, Gaza, and the Golan Heights on the *Bat 60's* CD (see appendix).

In 1971, when the original *Prahim Baqaneh* came out, it represented heroic militarism. Besides the obvious militarism of a pop band made of mandatory drafted soldiers, the original video clip showed a group of uniformed male soldiers sitting between two tanks, looking at Yehudit Schwartz, the lead singer, singing atop a tank. The lyrics themselves are loaded with biblical mythology (the line "the sun will stop" alludes to the verse from the Book of Joshua, book 10 verse 12, "Sun in Giv'on—stand still" that allowed Joshua to win a battle because the sun stopped in midday) which again is a symbol of the right of the Jewish people of the colonized land. *Prahim Baqaneh* expresses the belief that long-lasting peace can be achieved only through military force, and that the military control over the West Bank, Gaza, and the Golan Heights is Israel's guarantee for a lasting peace. As Weiss (2001) asserts, in Israel "war and peace are ... constructed not as binarism but rather as a complementary reality." Rapping "Dreaming about this place / about the day that we will stop fighting and start breathing" and "flowers in the canon instead of shells / I dreamt about such day / I woke up in tears" Subliminal establishes that he is peace-loving person engaged in an inevitable, no-choice war against the Palestinians against

his will. Moreover, counting the number of times Subliminal evokes the word peace, we might be under the impression that he is a pacifist or rather, a peacenik. In a song titled "Peace in the Middle East," Subliminal says: "Enough, stop shooting, let's start listening, and give the youth the right message / understand, the solution hides in one word: **Salaam, Peace, Shalom!**" And The Shadow rhymes in *Prahim Baqane*: "We are fed up with waiting for **peace** / I will stop dreaming about [peace] when my heart stops beating." In *Prahim Baqane*, Subliminal describes a father who is a soldier going to war in order to bring peace: "So good you came back home / You bathed and put the boy to sleep / He waited for you, asked where is daddy? / He did not know you went to bring the **peace**." And in *Bat 60*, Subliminal rhymes: "A new generation is on the court / most are not experienced enough, and are very nervous in their hearts / yearning for **peace**, extending their hand / but without GPS they don't know where to go / ... / I was born for **peace**, yeah that's right for **peace** / and no, I do not mean an exit on the Ayalon highway." However, for Subliminal and The Shadow, the excessive use of the word "Peace" disguises a deep-rooted belief in military power and belligerent nationalism (as I will show in more detail below).

In sum, Subliminal and The Shadow use the platform of rap to portray themselves as "revolutionaries" and counter-hegemonic, but my study reveals that they are mouthpieces of hegemonic Zionist ideology. However, their Zionism is the new Zionism, that is to say, neo-Zionism. How does their *mizrahiyut*, which historically have been a mark of subaltern-ness, settle with my argument? To this I will turn in the next section.

### 2.1.3 *Mizrahiyut* and the Hegemony

Subliminal and The Shadow are both Mizrahi. Subliminal is Iranian-Tunisian and The Shadow is half Iranian. Their *mizrahiyut* is dominant in their public personas and lyrics. They use their *mizrahiyut* to justify their nationalism, and by doing so, their *mizrahiyut* is inevitably being accepted and incorporated, albeit partially (as I show in Chapter 4), into hegemonic culture. In this section, however, I will show the way in which their *mizrahiyut* is incorporated by hegemonic culture.

The Mizrahi poet Almog Behar (2008) wrote a poem about his family's struggle with their Arab heritage, as Jews who came to Israel from Muslim countries.

He writes:

My Arabic is mute  
Choked in my throat  
Cursing herself  
Without a word  
Sleeping in the suffocating air of the shelters of my soul  
Hiding  
From family members  
Behind the Hebrew shutters

As the song poetically demonstrates, the use of Arabic among Jews from Muslim countries has been—and still is—a matter of some ambivalence. As Regev and Serrousi (2004:20) observe, Mizrahi Jews were "expected to modernize and become 'Israelis': to adopt the image of the 'new Jew,' the *sabra*." Artists, writers, and poets have expressed the pain of being expected to diminish and downplay their Arab heritage. The European founding fathers of Israel oppressed and paternalized

Jews from Arab countries when they arrived in Israel, and did not tolerate their Arabness, since Arabs were (and still are) perceived as an enemy. Jews from Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa have been perceived as backward, primitive, and as having an inferior culture, even when they belonged to the urban elite in Arab countries, and have historically occupied, as a group, the lowest rungs of Israeli Jewish society (Shalom-Chetrit 2000). They often internalized oppression, and felt shame about their Arab heritage. The use of the Arabic language have been stigmatized, and led to exclusion (Shohat 1999; Shenhav 2003; Saada-Ophir 2006; Perelson 2006; Ram 2005:170). For literary narratives of the Mizrahi experience, see the anthology *Echoing Identities* (Shemoelof, Shem-Tov and Baram, eds. 2007).

However, despite the conflict between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim, which is characterized by cultural antagonism as well as economic disparities, "the relations between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim move on a continuum between ethnicism and racism because the borders between these groups are blurry and permeable and because the hegemonic discourse encourages the abolition of these borders ... in the name of common nationalism and Judaism" (Sason-Levi 2008:113). In other words, Mizrahi Jews in Israel have had to "choose" between their Arabness and their Jewishness. They had to choose Jewishness in order to be included in the hegemonic Zionist project, and to underplay their Arab heritage. Sometimes, this move was accompanied with Zionist right-wing nationalism, as a declaration of belonging to the "Jewish" part of their heritage over the "Arab" part (on Jewish-Arab identity and its conflicts and contradictions, see Shenhav 2003). In other words, Subliminal's and The Shadow's rap music reflects that *mizrahiyut* was incorporated into the hegemony- - but only nationalist *mizrahiyut*.

Subliminal and The Shadow's remake of "Prahim Baqaneh" in 2003 is a good illustration of my argument about *mizrahiyut*. While in the original video clip the lead singer Yehudith Schwartz's petite blond figure alludes to a uniformed Marilyn Monroe, in the 2003 version *mizrahiyut* is the dominant element; white and Ashkenazi versus black and Eastern. Subliminal performs the song with The Shadow, and the singers Sivan, Itzik Shamli, and Gabriel Butler. Instead of Yehudith Schwartz, a petite blond with an Ashkenazi last name whose voice is clear and soft, the lead singer for the chorus is Sivan Benham, a dark skinned female singer of Iranian background, who sings in the gospel/R&B tradition, in a strong and throaty voice, accompanied by Itzik Shamli, who sings in Arab musical style, and Gabriel Butler, an African-American from the community of Black Hebrews in Dimona. The ensemble is multicultural and Mizrahi; the song is nationalist.

In an interview with Yehuda Nurieli, Subliminal and The Shadow reject the comparison between American blacks and themselves, and disagree with the notion that there is a parallel between black Americans and Mizrahi Jews in Israel. The comparison is not unfounded: in the early 1970s, a group of young Mizrahi Jews in Jerusalem formed a movement which they named *HaPanterim Haschorim* (The Black Panthers) after the American Black Panthers, in order to protest the discrimination and maltreatment of Mizrahi Jews by the Ashkenazi elites since the founding of the *yishuv*. By naming themselves the Black Panthers, these Mizrahi Jews compared their socio-political-economic position in Israeli society with that of African Americans. Subliminal, however, rejects this comparison in an interview for Yehuda Nurieli in *Yedioth Ahronot*:

YN: Other than hip hop, what other music do you listen to?

Subliminal: *Musiqā Mizrahit* (Mizrahi music). Idan Reichel too. But things like Shlomo Artzi, I never listen to.

The Shadow: Only *Musiqā Mizrahit* works for me. And I love all of them. It is the same style like hip hop, and we connect to it better.

YN: OK, because you are black Israelis?

Subliminal: No, no.

YN: Why not? You are Tunisian-Persian and Yoav is Persian-Romanian. Black Israelis.

Subliminal: From the beginning it was not like this with us. [We are] not black Israelis.

Subliminal's ensemble in *Prahim Baqaneh*, in comparison to the Artillery Ensemble, and his rejection of the notion that he is a "black Jew," signify a new hegemonic Israeliness that has incorporated globalized Israeliness and *mizrahiyut*. However, the ideological message remains nationalism—the glorification of war and dependence upon military prowess as safeguards of the nation's existence. In short: new elites, old ideology.

But how is *mizrahiyut* incorporated into hegemonic culture? Indeed, Subliminal and The Shadow "choose" to emphasize their Jewishness over their Arabness. More importantly, they use their *mizrahiyut* in the sense of Arabness as a sign that legitimizes their Jewish nationalism, as the following example demonstrates.

In the song *Biladi, Biladi* ("Homeland, Homeland" in Arabic and also the title of the Palestinian national anthem), Subliminal hosts Lior Elmalich, a singer of traditional Jewish *piyutim* (liturgical poetry), in the Moroccan, Algerian, and Ladino traditions. In the repeating chorus, the first three lines are sung in Hebrew, and the last line is sung in Arabic. Elmalich sings in Arabic: "I know who I am and what I

am / I know my roots and from where I came / I am here and I came from here / that is my land and this is my state."

There is an unclear and even surprising strategy here, as the rapper and the singer declare their belongingness to the country through the Arabic language, which is the language of the enemy that claims ownership over the same territory. In *Biladi, Bildai*, Subliminal and Elmalich claim Jewish ownership over the disputed territory of Israel/Palestine in a song in the Arabic language. With Israeli Jewish performers singing (and rapping) Israeli rap songs in Arabic, *Biladi Biladi* could be seen as a claim to a common cultural and political legacy with Arabs given their own North African and Middle Eastern ethnicity and Arabic-speaking backgrounds. Moreover, it can even be seen as endeavoring to remedy the conflict between Jewish and Arab nationalist territorial claims and to create, at least in the musical realm, a space where Jewish and Arab nationalist claims can be united. However, while the language and the musical style bring Elmalich and Subliminal closer to Palestinian nationalism, their claims over the same territory place them in a conflictual position.

In *Biladi, Biladi*, Subliminal and Elmalich perform what Horowitz (2002) dubs "dueling nativities," which she proposes as a model to "trouble the prevailing concepts of indigeneity appropriation, and inheritance," and to suggest that "Israeli Jewish musicians with roots in Islamic countries are both insiders and outsiders to the regional sound-space" (Horowitz 2002:204). However, Subliminal and Elmalich's venture does not serve as a model to question "prevailing concepts" but as a chauvinistic attack on Palestinian national claims and a way to legitimize their own territorial claims. Instead of undermining political boundaries and emphasizing commonalities between Arabs and Jews from Arab countries through language, Subliminal and Elmalich take ownership over the language as well. Although Arab

music and language are part of their heritage, Subliminal and Elimaliach create borders in *Biladi, Biladi*, rather than breaking them down. They do not acknowledge the conflicting nationalisms.

As they appropriate *Biladi, Biladi* in order to make a claim to Jewish territorial nationalism in Palestine, they unsurprisingly ignited a conflict with Palestinian rappers. Tamer Nafar, a leading Palestinian rapper, angrily reacted to the way in which the song is understood in the Palestinian context. In the beginning of the documentary film *Channels of Rage*, Nafar tells Anat Halchmi, the filmmaker: "There's a fight here between two nations, yeah? Over who's gonna live here, and I talk to Kobi (Subliminal) and Kobi tells me, 'Listen, we gotta live together'. Suddenly this guy who is first generation here says to me, who is the 2000<sup>th</sup> generation here, *Biladi*, my land, and if you don't like it fuck off?" And Subliminal answers in Arabic and Hebrew: "*Hatha biladi* (this is my land), yeah, I was born here and I'm gonna die here. I am not ashamed of it." The competing claims over the Arabic words *biladi, biladi* reflect the competing claims over the real *biladi*—the land. Such confrontational dialogue demonstrates that the place in which Nafar and Subliminal meet is a site in which histories and identities clash, and in which the frequent crossing of musical borders not only fails to breach national boundaries but also serves to sustain them.

In conclusion, Subliminal and The Shadow's lyrics and performances make an inverted use of rap music. Their portrayal of Israel as a David who is a victim of aggression is an appropriation of rap music. Far from being the "Signifyin' Monkey" (see Introduction), Subliminal's and The Shadow's rap amplifies the voice of the Lion who oppresses the Monkey. Although they wear baggy pants, gold chains, and durags (see Appendix), Subliminal and The Shadow are not young blacks in the ghetto

who "refuse to apologize for their appearance, insisting that young working-class black men have the right to dress as they please without being treated with fear or contempt," and create a "collective identity that is distinct from, and even oppositional to, the dominant culture" (Kelley 1996:133). To the contrary, Subliminal and The Shadow use clothes and the rap persona in diametric opposition to their original use: to create a menacing, dangerous image against those subordinated to power in Israel.

### **2.2.1 Talking about Peace: Rap from the Left**

Rap music with "left-wing" sentiments is best exemplified by the popular band Hadag Nachash and the rapper Mookie (formerly of the group Shabak Samech). These rap musicians became famous for their "protest music" and were hailed (or criticized, depending on the speaker) as *smolanim*—those from a leftist political orientation. However, a semiotic analysis of their lyrics and their public statements reveal that although their music is conceived by the audience and the media as "protest music," they do not create an alternative for mainstream music, but rather an alternative *within* mainstream music.

The band Hadag Nachash was founded in 1996 and continues to be active. Shaanan Street and Dudush (David) Kalmas founded the band when they met in a record store in Jerusalem, after Street recorded his first song "Shalom Salaam Peace" under the stage name Hadag Nachash. When they met, Street had no musical education or musical experience, and Kalmas was a keyboard player who played with Jerusalemite musicians in bars around the city. In the first two years, the band practiced in the Yellow Submarine bar in Jerusalem, a meeting place for underground and alternative aspiring musicians in Jerusalem, and appeared in numerous bars in

Jerusalem and around the country. Playing a funky, jazzy live sound, they released four critically acclaimed studio albums and two live albums. In 1998, after hundreds of performances, the band added a DJ, Guy Mar, who later became a second lead rapper and released his own solo album in 2009.

Hadag Nachash's songs are in Hebrew, with words in Arabic and English inserted sporadically; most lyrics are written by Shaanan Street. The themes are diverse, and the sound is based on a fusion of funk, jazz, and rock. They use live instruments, not voice and musical samples. Hadag Nachash's spirit is captured in their name – literally meaning "The Fish-Snake," the words "Hadag Nachash" are also an anagram of the sign "Nahag Chadash," a yellow notice that new drivers have to lawfully display on the back window of a car for the first twelve months after receiving a drivers' license – the name, like the band, is light-hearted, local, and playful.

In 2000, Hadag Nachash released their first album, *Hamechona shel ha'groove* (The Groove Machine) in the small record label *Levantini*, and immediately received critical acclaim from the Israeli media. The album featured the hit song *Lo Mevater* ("Not Giving Up"), a song about rap music and the trials and tribulations of recording and releasing a hip hop album in Israel. Despite their critical success, the seven-member band did not enjoy financial success, about which they complained in a number of national media interviews. Their second album, *Lazuz* ("To Move"), featured the hit songs *Lazuz*, *Misparim* ("Numbers"), *Lo Frayerim* ("We are not Suckers"), "Gaby and Debbie," and "Bella Bellissima," all of which dealt with political realities in Israel and enjoyed both critical and commercial success.

The shaping of Hadag Nachash's political commentary took place during the first three years of the Al Aqsa intifada, during which Israeli public opinion shifted to

the right (Grinberg 2007; Yiftachel 2001). As Dor (2006) explains, when the Al Aqsa intifada erupted, the Israeli government's strong public relations machine (the *hasbara*) painted Israel in the world as the helpless, gullible victim of Palestinian terrorism. Because former Prime Minister Ehud Barak had supposedly offered Yasser Arafat a "generous offer" and Arafat supposedly turned it down and single-handedly orchestrated the popular uprising and a suicide bombing campaign, it was considered unpatriotic, even treason, to show the slightest sympathy to the Palestinian cause. Drawing on the rhetoric of the "peace process" and "democracy," the Israeli government attempted to paint the conflict as coming to an end and Palestinian "rejectionism" as hindering its complete conclusion. In addition, between the years 2000-2004, more than fifty suicide bombings were conducted in Israel, turning public opinion entirely hostile to the Palestinian cause.

In this environment, the lyricist Shaanan Street continued to be affiliated with left-wing positions that became less popular during this period, and yet, the songs from *Lazuz* became popular on all major radio stations, including Galatz, the military radio station. How was Hadag Nachash able to remain popular while being affiliated with unpopular political positions? An analysis of the songs *Shir Hasticker* ("The Bumper Sticker song") and "Gaby and Debbie" clarify why this was so.

*Shir Hasticker* is made of real popular bumper stickers, each representing diverse political positions in Israeli society. The slogans were put together as a song by David Grossman, a celebrated Israeli author. Among the slogans quoted in the song are right-wing bumper stickers such as "No Arabs no Terror attacks," "No peace with Arabs," "Let the IDF kill," and "(Rabbi Meir) Kahana was right," as well as stickers of leftist sentiment such as "*Sahtain* (Arabic for *Bon Appétit*) for peace, thanks for security" (which is a cynical allusion to Ariel

Sharon's 2002 election slogan, "Sharon: Peace and Security"), "a whole generation demands peace," and "we don't have children for unnecessary wars." While the song was meant as a mirror reflection of the diverse faces of society, it also offers light criticism in the refrain: "How much evil can we swallow? Father, have mercy on us." It is no surprise that the song was a mainstream hit, since it included slogans that appeal to people from almost the entire political spectrum. When *Arutz 24* (Channel 24, Israeli Music Television) asked politicians to choose their favorite songs before the February elections, *Shir Hasticker* was one of eleven mainstream songs chosen (Shechnik 2009).

The song "Gaby and Debby" is another example for Hadag Nachash's ability to be considered left-wing while also being embraced by the mainstream simultaneously. Gaby and Debby was an educational television show for English learning that was produced by Education Television in 1976 and its reruns were broadcasted until the late 1980s. In the show, two teenagers, a brother and a sister, had a magic stick with whom they could move in space and in time. Gaby and Debby became an icon of childhood collective memory around which children who were born in the 1970s—like the members of Hadag Nachash—could unite. It represented nostalgia for the "good old days" of childhood in the 1970s and early 1980s: a time when there was only one channel and hence more unity, and when television was not commercial and hence simple and innocent.

In "Gaby and Debbie," Hadag Nachash choose to attack two Zionist taboos: Theodor Herzl, the mythological Austrian visionary of Zionism, and Yosef Trumpeldor, the Caucasian settler whose death in 1920 in a battle in the northern settlement of Tel-Hay was mythologized and became a national symbol for military heroism. In Hadag Nachash's song, Herzl takes psychedelic drugs and is under the

influence during the first Zionist Congress in Basel, and doesn't care when the rapper, coming from the future, tries to tell him what happened to his vision of a Jewish state. Instead of his famous dictum, "If you will it, it is not a dream" about reference the future Jewish state, Hadag Nachash rap "If you take it (i.e., drugs) it is not a dream."

In the third verse, Yosef Trumpeldor is portrayed as uninterested in the state of the nation and behaves vulgarly. Instead of his famous last words—"it's good to die for our homeland"—he declares disrespectfully—"it's good to spit on our homeland."

Immediately after they debase Zionist heroes, Hadag Nachash rap in the refrain that they make "Zionist hip hop." The combination of "spitting" on the myth of Trumpeldor and declaring that they make Zionist hip hop (even if it is done with cynicism) suggest that for Hadag Nachash, "Zionism" stands not only for the nationalist pathos of the SLI, but that it can also be (and evens should be) a new kind of Zionism: self-aware of historical wrongs, able to exercise self-criticism, and willing to laugh at itself. Their blending of "Zionism" and "hip hop" says that they claim to be less Israel-centric and more universal.

In Gabby and Debbie Hadag Nachash debase the sacred founding myths of Zionism and Israel. However, they simultaneously mark themselves as being situated firmly in the center of the consensus by choosing the theme of the program "Gaby and Debbie" that only Israeli born Sabra can understand. By evoking Gaby and Debbie, the nostalgic figures of their generation's childhood, they evoke sentiments that the program Gaby and Debbie represents: nostalgia, unity, simplicity and innocence. Nostalgic sentiments tend to romanticize the past, which is what Hadag Nachash does. The song starts with a fake old-fashion sounding announcement that declares: "The rhythm orchestra Hadag Nachash expands the circles of dancers in the

square with a new style.” The use of archaic words such as *tizmoret hakestev* (the rhythm orchestra), the reference to the circles of dancers in the square alludes to the street celebrations after the declaration of independence in 1948, and the old sound of the announcement that alludes to a historical recording of the news on the dances in the square, all suggest that Hadag Nachash play with nostalgia in a way which is both critical and romantic.

Their evoking of the loveable characters of our childhood gains them wide appeal, but there is a hidden underlying criticism of the sacred myth of Zionism. The rapper, upon his finding of the magic stick, wants the magic stick to take him to Rue le Pot—the street of the vagina—in Paris, where, he knows, there is a bordello he wants to visit. Gaby explains that, regretfully, he should choose something "more Zionist.” "What Zionist?" He asks, "Like Herzl?" and they land in Basel, the Swiss city where the first Zionist congress took place. From there the rapper finds himself in the battle over Tel Hay, the mythological battle in which Yosef Trumpeldor lost his life (see Zertal 2002 for detailed account of the battle and the myth that is associated with it), with a Carrabin rifle in his hands. But instead of evoking Trumpeldor's famous last words "It is good to die for one's homeland," the rapper rejects the patriotism of the myth and choose to subvert it: "I couldn't understand what happens in my life / suddenly I found myself with a rifle in my hand / and I found myself at the battle over Tel Hay / whoa / I don't want a gun, I don't have the desire / I have a 21 profile (military slang for psychiatric discharge from the army)."

The refrain is made of only one line: "Hadag Nachash make Zionist hip hop," which repeats eight times. In the video clip, the line is accompanied by animated visuals of girls in khaki shorts and white shirts, which represent the austere pioneer fashion, dancing what looks like an Israeli folk "traditional" dance. Juxtaposed to

them in the back, an animated character representing the rapper—with dreadlocks and sunglasses—is jumping up and down.

In other words, the mythologized images of the nation, represented by the dance, are being contrasted with a new, globalized Israeli, represented by the dreadlocks, suggesting that the old can mix with the new. But who is more dominant in this image: the dancing pioneers or globalized Israeliness represented by the dreadlocked rapper? It seems that the rapper is indecisive and non-committal. He is unable to choose between the two worlds, and leaves the interpretation to his listeners.

The end of the song might attest to the rappers' intentions. In the last verse, the rapper addresses Herzl to tell him what has happen of his vision of a Jewish state, although he is unable to reach through since Herzl is under the influence of drugs. He raps: "But I couldn't control myself and continued harassing / the visionary of the state without embarrassment / with all the details of the cruel and tough reality of Israel / I told him about the traffic accidents / the handicapped on strike / the quarter million unemployed / and the corrupt politicians / ... / I tried to tell him that there is no peace, no security / and that I am sick of living in constant fear."

Tellingly, when the rapper turns for an accusation and elaborates his grievances explicitly, he turns to the least controversial subjects and the most general language that have a wide consensus, namely: traffic accidents, handicapped people, unemployment, corruption, and the yearning for "peace" and "security." By avoiding thorny subjects and words, the rapper appeals to a wide audience of all political opinions, and remain within mainstream culture.

"Gaby and Debbie" was a huge hit on radio, television, and in Hadag Nachash's live performances; it allowed people of all political opinions to poke fun at

Zionist myths while not completely disposing of them. This is an ambivalent move: on one hand Hadag Nachash debased the old Zionist myths but on the other hand they declare that they make "Zionist" hip hop, and employ images and themes that signify Sabra authenticity. They avoid taking a stance and hence are able to embrace and reject Zionism simultaneously.

Compare these songs with the song *Yamim Schorim* (Dark Days) by Eyal "Quami de la Fox" Friedman. Quami is self-conscious of his privileged position and his lyrical content counters hegemonic positions in Israeli political culture. Rapping in Hebrew, Quami employs parody and sarcasm to deliver his criticism of militarism and victimhood. For example, in *Yamim Schorim* (Dark Days), he raps:

I know what will happen if we don't watch the news  
Poof! They will disappear, and I have a message  
If we don't know what is going on here, it means everything is fine!  
...  
Dark days, dark days  
And this is why everybody is so happy  
Dark days, dark days  
It is the guide for the good life

And in *Ksh'elohim amar: Bekef!* (When God said: Cool!), Quami raps solemnly:

When God said the first time  
'Let there be light'  
He didn't mean darkness over the abyss  
He didn't mean that instead of peace  
There will be war in his name, war in his name  
They will use his name to spill the blood  
Of his creation

And one stage after the other  
The golem destroys himself  
And, no less, in the name of his master  
Now, in the name of arms and power  
Again everybody prays for the golden calf  
And there is no place to run to  
Didn't you know violence is an empty river  
They teach the Torah, they teach  
But on the way they forget that there were two twins  
Yaacov and Esau  
From their throne they send us to be heroes, they get fat  
But we don't return from the battle field  
Thus become leaders  
Leaders wave guns  
Subjects are shot in the name of the leaders  
People fall, thugs rise

Immediately after such solemn, fierce manifestation of rage, Quami returns to sarcasm, which is emphasized by his use of a ridiculous, squeaky voice, in the repeating chorus:

So enough with the *Tisha B'Av* (Ninth of Av, a day of mourning for the destruction of the first and second temples) face

God is happy now  
He doesn't see because we do nothing  
The entire world will sing together  
And God is proud now  
It's fun to make daddy proud  
Fun! Fun! Fun! Fun! Fun! Fun! Fun! Fun! Fun!

*Yamin Schorim* moves constantly between sarcasm, irony, and seriousness—common rap literary tools. The use of a squeaky voice emphasizes his sarcasm when he announces that "God is proud now" about what is done in his name, but he creates tension when he announces that it is "fun" to make "daddy" proud, and changes his voice back to serious. The tension between the word "fun" that repeats nine times, and the seriousness in which he utters the word, reveals he is critical of the war that is done in God's name.

Quami's lyrics are rare and pose a challenge to my thesis about the possibility of resistance within Israeli rap music. For a moment, they "crack" the consensus and bring forward an alternative view on the necessity of wars. This sets Quami apart from the rappers I analyze in this chapter, and forces me to think about the moments of subversion that are found within the field of rap music that I study, which I will do at length in Chapter 4.

In sum, despite their play with subversion of Zionist ideology, Hadag Nachash remain light and humorous hence non-subversive. As I show in the next section, their rapping on "peace" demonstrates that despite their public bickering with Subliminal and The Shadow over the political affiliations, all of these rappers are of the same ideological bedrock.

### **2.2.2 What's in a word?**

As Perelson (1998) writes, the longing for peace between Jews and Arabs is a common theme in Israeli popular music. Perelson (1998:123) analyses lyrics from mainstream popular music and demonstrates that the songs "conform to a common declaration of the need to peace, with no concrete suggestions of effective ways of achieving it." A sentiment, Perelson (1998:123) points out, that have been "vocalized

by every political party in Israel since its establishment.” Moreover, she points out that the partners for peace remain nameless, and that the solutions that are offered are metaphorical and have little relevance to the historical context. Perelson's conclusion is that the songs conform to what is normative, in "both aesthetic and ideological terms,” and hence easily "enter the canon.” She points at a "thematic and textual de-historicization" that occurs in "peace songs.”

Following Perelson's conclusions, I turn to analyze three hip hop songs that received wide popular success, and consequently entered the canon: the song *Shalom, Salaam, Peace*, by Hadag Nachash; the song *Kulam Medabrim Al Shalom* (Everybody talks about peace) by Mookie, formerly of the successful rock-rap group, Shabak Samech; and the song *Peace in the Middle East*, by Subliminal and T.A.C.T. artists.

All three songs express a desire for peace between Israelis and Palestinians, albeit a realistic, somewhat sober realization that the desired peace is long overdue. All songs adhere to the belief that peace is achievable and feasible, and consider the assertion that the mere act of desiring peace brings it closer. This belief is obvious in phrases like, “The solution hides in one word: Salaam, Peace, Shalom!” However, none of the songs explain the way in which this peace can be achieved.

The first song, “Shalom, Salaam, Peace,” speaks in general terms about peace. Explicit names of places or people are not mentioned, but it is obvious that the rapper refers to Israel since he raps in Hebrew and refers to "this place here.” It is an upbeat funky song, and the rapper's commentary is light-hearted, naïve, optimistic, and has a general "happy-go-lucky" sense: he says that peace is possible here, and when this peace comes, people will be smiling and dancing happily, relaxed, smoking weed, and worry-free. He concludes that peace should be very easy to achieve: "all you

have to do is act like human beings / not like animals / and show some good manners.”

The second song, titled *Kulam medabrim al shalom* (“Everybody's Talking about Peace”), by the former member of Shabak Samaech, Mookie, was released during the height of Al Aqsa intifada in 2001. The repeating, catchy refrain that was sung by Mookie himself, who asked passionately:

Everybody talks about peace, no one talks about justice

For one person it is heaven, for the other it is hell

How many fingers are on the trigger?

The lyrics were received positively by people of all political affiliations, but being devoid of political and historical context, it was rather unclear what the justice to which the rapper yearns was. As Eidleman (2001) points out, *Kulam* takes directly from a 1976 song by the legendary reggae singer Peter Tosh's "Equal Rights." In the 1976 song, Tosh sings:

Everyone is crying out for peace yes

None is crying out for justice

I don't want no peace

I need equal rights and justice

Everyone is fighting for (justice)

Palestine is fighting for (justice)

As Eidleman points out, Tosh says clearly "I don't want peace, I want justice, and justice means equal rights.” Mookie, on the contrary, does not give any indication what is the justice he sings about, and how it can be achieved. Furthermore, Tosh explicitly names the places where people do not have equal rights, and Palestine is one of them. Mookie, in comparison, avoids specifications of names,

places, or people, but rather turns it into a universal call for justice. The last verse contains a declaration, 'Everybody has the same dream . . . but there will be no peace without justice', which creates the illusion that Mookie comes with a concrete, new solution: i.e., that only 'justice' is missing to end the conflict. However, in the absence of particularity, the line "everybody talks about peace, no one talks about justice" becomes an empty statement. Subliminal and The Shadow referred to this song in an interview with Tahel Blumenfeld, when they were asked if it was not legitimate to criticize the military and the government, and they answered:

"The Shadow: The IDF? There is no criticism of the IDF. They IDF should be only praised. . . . Everybody is on the edge, confused, and then artists like... Mookie come and push us down. . . .

Subliminal: "Mookie, that sings "we murdered land and we murdered a soul." The man is talented, but bro, go live in Gaza if that's what you have to say" (Blumenfeld 2002).

The third song, "Peace in the Middle East," was released on Subliminal's third album, "T.A.C.T. All Starz" (see album cover in the Appendix). It was titled in English and rapped in three languages: Hebrew, English, and French. Of the three songs that I analyze here, this song has the most "rap" sound, as the rappers do not rap over instrumentals but over sampled beats. However, it is an unsophisticated musical production, and most of the beats are produced by a beat machine and not by a DJ.

The song laments the turning of the land into a war zone, and the pain and suffering that people suffer as a result. The song defines the bloody conflict in terms of religion—a "holy war"—and unlike *Kulam* and *Shalom, Salaam, Peace*, which refrain from pointing fingers, in this song the rappers specify the groups that are

responsible for the bloodshed: Muslims and Jews. The rapper asks, "Why did the war start at all? Over religion? Over the Wailing Wall?" Since he does not have an answer, he explains that the war is driven by what he calls "senseless rage"—senseless, as he does not know why the war is fought, so of course it seems senseless. The solution, again, is "peace": "let the past teach us all / to exist in peace / to hold hands / and stand tall in the Middle East Finally, although the song decreed religions as being the cause of the bloodshed, the song ends with a declaration, sung by Gabriel Butler, that "Only God can stop this war."

Confusing, inconsistent, and saturated with empty statements, the three songs all indicate that there is a problem, but the problem is always, as Perelson asserts, "conveyed vaguely as the lack of peace" (1998:122). None of the songs make it clear that it refers to an actual, historically grounded situation, although all songs were written in the aftermath of the Oslo Accords. To use Perleson's words, "we can see that the problem is rendered less threatening through its representation in abstract terms, that are certainly not those of domination and subjugation" (1998:122).

The first song presents peace as a fun, easy project. The second song speaks of the lack of justice as the reason for the lack of peace, but does not specify where justice lies. The third song, despite a moment of realistic description ("villages are tormented as the soldiers march / and it's hardly ever mentioned on the news"), also avoids all specifications and describes violence as a permanent situation without beginning or end that can end only when an abstract "peace" enters the stage. Explanations on how "peace" can appear are missing, besides the final call to God. All songs build a symmetry between the warring people—"war between people who don't see the future, fight in the name of God or Allah"—symmetry that is virtually non-existence in the Post-Oslo reality. In sum, all songs employ the strategy of 'de-

historization' that Perelson points at (1998:120), and the conflict is portrayed not in terms of power relations, but as symmetrical and even static, and contribute to underplaying historical and political aspects. The de-historization and false equation may "well serve to perpetuate the current state of oppression" (Perelson 1998:122).

*Kulam* and *Peace in the Middle East* have a very dark tone, and appear much less optimistic and cheerful than *Shalom, Salaam, Peace*. Although *Kulam* suggests that not "peace" is the answer, as *Shalom and Peace in the Middle East* suggests, but rather "justice," all songs call for either "peace" or "justice," while recognizing the terrible state of affairs, but none give "concrete suggestions of effective ways of achieving it" (Perelson 1998:122).

*Kulam* brings forward questions that effectively assign blame to Israel for the continuation of bloodshed. Compare "how did heaven become hell?" (*Peace in the Middle East*), with "for one it is heaven, for the other it is hell" (*Kulam*). How do we know to and for whom are the rappers speaking? While *Kulam* proceeds to say "we murdered the earth and we murdered the soul," the rappers in "Peace in the Middle East" refrain from any explicit use of the pronoun "we," and instead use the general present tense which can be either "we" or "they" equally. By avoiding the use of "we," the rappers in "Peace in the Middle East" establish that whoever is responsible to the lack of peace, is simply "those who want war," and hence the mere act of desiring peace is an act that should further the speedy arrival of peace. However, *Kulam*, despite the use the pronoun "we" to criticize, is also within the mainstream due to its avoidance of any specification and its adherence to "justice" in its unspecified form as the desired solution.

Despite these differences, "Shalom," "*Kulam*," and "Peace in the Middle East" are all rap songs that take advantage of the format of rap and posit themselves

as "protest" songs in the landscape of popular music in Israel. "*Kulam Medabrim Al Shalom*" and "Shalom, Saalam, Peace," were perceived as "protest songs" because they built on the rap format and Mookie's repertoire as a rapper, even though the song itself is more of a rock ballad than a rap song, since Mookie's flow is closer to singing than to rapping, and the refrain has a melody and harmony.

However, the use of rap serves a purpose, as I will show in the next section. Rather than breaking musical norms, the use of rap's rules serves as a signifier for a certain open-mindedness and political progressiveness that situate the rappers in a "protest" position. As Perelson (1998:123) points out, in the literary system, the effect of breaking norms is "achieved through poetics and writing techniques that divert from canonical norms." In these songs, the rap element plays a role in advancing these songs from being merely naïve peace songs to the status of "protest" songs and is responsible to portray the artists as liberal, critical, even open-minded, and of course peace-loving. As such, rap music also becomes useful for the state.

### **2.3 Rap Music in the Service of *Hasbara***

In 2004, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Prime Minister's Office sponsored Hadag Nachash's tour in the United States; they were invited to perform on campuses in the West Coast, in what the Israeli consulate dubbed "branding efforts" for Israel. Hadag Nachash performed in Franklin High School in downtown Los Angeles, in order to "make friends" for Israel among Hispanic and Asian youth. A year later, in 2005, based on the success of Hadag Nachash's tour, the governmental made the same offer to Subliminal, The Shadow, and the rest of the crew from the T.A.C.T. label. Why was the Office interested in sending these groups? And how can groups with

opposing political opinions both enjoy the support and sponsorship of the same government?

Upon their departure to the United States, the advisor for the Prime Minister, Raanan Gissin, explained that "I was very impressed by them. They are young people who are willing to recruit themselves for *hasbara* through performances and songs, so I briefed them about the messages we wanted them to deliver when they perform. Subliminal and The Shadow are able to talk at eye level to young people on campuses that we cannot reach. It is unconventional *hasbara*, but very effective. Rap culture is universal, and through the culture we can show the 'Beautiful Israel'" (Eichner 2005).

Subliminal and The Shadow explained their cooperation with the government as follows: "we see this tour as our mission. We have always represented and will always represent Israel with everything we do. We have the opportunity to talk to Jewish and non-Jewish youth at eye level because we speak the language of rap" (Eichner 2005). In another interview, given when the announcement on the tour was initially released, Subliminal remarked, "the language of hip hop is universal, and all young people understand it. In our message there is no politics and there is no left-wing or right-wing tone, but a Zionist tone that represents the nation" (Eichner 2004).

In these statements, the government official and the rappers demonstrate that rap culture itself becomes a signifier to something that the government can use: It is a "universal language," belongs to "youth," and is beyond politics. The rappers even argue that Zionism itself is not political. Subliminal and The Shadow and the government official imagine rap as a signifier of a non-political universalism and of youth spirit and coolness. But, because it is associated with black Americans, those who associate themselves with it imagine themselves as non-racist, pluralists, even

liberal; "rap music" becomes a signifier for these qualities. The government, Subliminal and The Shadow imagine the making of Israeli rap as representing all of these qualities, which they want to disseminate to the American audience. Rap is useful for this purpose.

While Subliminal and The Shadow are happy to incorporate lines taken from Sharon's speeches into their lyrics (Eichner 2005), and hence become obvious and easy candidates to represent the government abroad, Hadag Nachash are less of obvious candidates. Yet they were too invited by the government to travel abroad as official representatives for the government. As Israeli council in the United States said, "thousand spokespeople did not succeed to do what Hadag Nachash ... did in one show" (Eichner 2005). The Foreign Ministry explained the idea of sending Hadag Nachash for *hasbara* in the United States in the following words: "The idea to send an anti-establishment band was meant to expose the real face of Israel. It is clear to us that Hadag Nachash do not represent the official position of Israel, and that they sometimes criticize the government, but as soon as the American youngsters will see that also here we like the same music and talk about the same problems, maybe they will also feel empathy to Israel. One of the problems with the Israeli *hasbara* is the difficulty to penetrate the opinion of youngsters. Students and young audiences do not see resemblance between them and the Israelis, so the fact that a band like this will be exposed to the American audience and the local media is a type of *hasbara*" (Eichner and Oren 2004). In other words, Hadag Nachash have an advantage over Subliminal and The Shadow, as they do not only signify the spirit of rap that the government want to convey, but they also portray Israel as a democratic place, as the government supports artists that "sometimes criticize the government."

The idea that a certain critic is legitimized allows the de-legitimization of other criticism. Legitimization and de-legitimization are hence inseparable, and Hadag Nachash defines the line between them. They demonstrate the process by which consent is constructed: when dissent is tolerated by official institutions and publically embraced, the regime is able to construct a façade of liberalism and democracy. Shaanan Street's explanation demonstrates this argument. He says: "I met with the person in the Foreign Ministry that is responsible to sending artists to represent them abroad, and he explained to me that it is important that people will know that Israel is a pluralistic country, that it has freedom of expression, and so forth" (Eichner and Oren 2004).

Moreover, when I asked Street in person in September 2009 about Hadag Nachash's partnership with the Foreign Ministry, he replied to me that he felt that he was representing Israeli *culture*, not Israeli government. Again we see depoliticization: even the act of being sponsored by the government is seen as a non-political act. Again, rap music in Israel becomes a signifier which is independent from rap's real history and context.

The following satire demonstrates my argument vividly and with healthy dose of humor. During the Israeli attack on Gaza in January 2009, the popular satirical television show *Eretz Nehederet* (Wonderful Country) had broadcasted a parody on a rap duo that could possibly be Subliminal and The Shadow. The makers of *Eretz Nehederet* made up a fictional rap duo which they named X-Plane, a takeoff on "Explain," or "Explanation," alluding to the word *hasbara*. In a shrewd video clip, "X-Plane" performed a rap song "explaining" to the world why the world should support Israel's attack on Gaza. Wearing white baseball hats with blue Stars of David and white baggy pants, which is often what Subliminal and The Shadow wear in

performances, X-Plane (the comedian Eli Mariano and comedian/singer Maor Cohen) rhymed propaganda clichés such as "Our army is the most moral in the world," and immediately ridiculed it by adding "or at least one of the five most moral armies in the world / if you push us maybe we can agree / on the most moral army in the region." X-plane even evokes the often simplistic and hypocritical ways in which the Jewish Holocaust is evoked to justify Israel's war crimes and subjugation of the Palestinians, when they rap, "if you will not be on our side / we will have no other choice / we will remind you what / once happened in cold Europe / [the DJ sings a Holocaust song] / I think that makes my point clear."

*Eretz Nehederet's* clip displays awareness of the way in which rap music is appropriated by rappers like Subliminal and The Shadow – and to a certain extent, even Hadag Nachash – *without* awareness. When X-plane raps, they are wearing white-and-blue over-sized baggies, hoodies, gold chains, and turned-around white-and-blue baseball hats, and are surrounded by girls in white-and-blue bikinis. Their rhymes-- "Look at us / look at them / who looks more like you?" and "Yo yo yo! / X-Plane! / Support us! / Hate them!" --demonstrates profound awareness of the cynical appropriation of rap music (and with it black history and culture) for political ends. Rap in itself becomes a reason to "support us" and "hate them," simply because "we" look more like "you."

In the parody by *Eretz Nehederet*, the making of rap in Hebrew becomes Israel's *hasbara* "weapon" in itself, as the "proof" that "we" are closer than Arabs to Western culture. Hence the song ends with the line "Support us, hate them!" In other words, the writers of *Eretz Nehederet*, whether consciously or unconsciously, recognize that rap in Hebrew *itself* is used as a propaganda tool for the attack on Gaza

(although conversely, there is also Palestinian rap in Arabic, as I will show in the next chapter).

In conclusion, Israel's use of rap echoes Israel's efforts to brand itself in the world as a liberal place. In 2009, for example, after the attack on Gaza (Operation Cast Lead), the Israeli Foreign Ministry was given an emergency two million dollar grant to "improve Israel's image through cultural and information diplomacy" (Bronner 2009). The rationale was explained clearly by Arye Mekel, the ministry's deputy director general for cultural affairs: "We will send well-known novelists and writers overseas, theater companies, exhibits. This way you show Israel's prettier face, so we are not thought of purely in the context of war." Ido Aharoni, manager of a rebranding team at the Foreign Ministry, stated: "When we show Sderot (the Israeli city most hit by rockets from Gaza), others also see Gaza. Everything is twinned when seen through the conflict. The country needs to position itself as an attractive personality, to make outsiders see it in all its reality. Instead, we are focusing on crisis management. And that is never going to get us where we need to go over the long term" (in Bronner 2009). In other words, culture—and in particular, rap music—is used to erase the conflict from public consciousness around the world.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

The analysis of rap music that deals directly with political opinions demonstrates my argument that hegemonic rap music is possible because both rap and Zionism are perceived as resistance and hence it is possible to rechannel black nationalism into Jewish nationalism. However, the image of rap music as a signifier of protest and oppositionality, as well as its association with blackness, has enabled rap musicians to

be imagined as oppositional while they remain within the borders of the mainstream. As Uri Dorchin (2009) argues,

"[t]he tone of the creative work (in particular the early work) may be confusing, as the local rappers tended to adopt the oppositional expressive mould that they identified in the American model that they imitated. .... Israeli hip hop that saw itself as an alternative, like Shabak Samech, Hadag Nachash, or Subliminal, did not mark itself as a goal to find an alternative audience but to reach the wide audience, but rather to reach the 'wide' audience, the audience that until then was preoccupied with pop and rock."

Dorchin highlights the process in which rappers and their audiences continue to imagine themselves as oppositional, while the state employs them to build support for Israel abroad. The state institutions take advantage of these rappers as a way of claiming a façade of democracy and liberalism outside Israel in a period when Israel's image in the world is being tarnished. The government wished to use the rappers as a façade to portray Israel as liberal, democratic state, but they also attempt to justify Israel's definition as a Jewish state and the colonial project in the Occupied Territories, in an age in which colonization has been delegitimized by the liberal Western world. The government and the rappers may want to use rap music in order to send a certain message to the world, but it can only fly with those "oblivious to the meaning, oblivious to the irony" (Wimsatt 1994:24), whether they are in Franklin High School or in Tel Aviv. In the next chapter, I will continue to demonstrate the same argument by exploring the work of rappers who avoid "the political" and claim "the universal." They, too, I argue, are partaking in the project of nation-building and stop short from engaging in a subversive, anti-hegemonic artistic production.

## 2.5 Appendix

Cover of Subliminal's third album. The title reads: TACT—Architects of Israeli hip hop



The Shadow



Cover of Bat 60



Cover of best-selling Israeli rap album "The light and the shadow" of Subliminal and The Shadow

## Chapter 3

### **Rapping for the Nation, Rapping for Themselves: Not Talking Politics in Israeli Rap Music**

*"Like generations before them, white teenage rap fans are listening to Black culture, fascinated by its differences, drawn in by mainstream social constructions of Black culture as a forbidden narrative, as a symbol of rebellion"* (Rose 1994:5)

*"Black culture would have become an apt symbol for the way millions of nonblacks wanted to be in the world"* (Lhamon, quoted in Dreisinger, 95)

*"...even though I live in Montana, I still got the ghetto in my heart. I mean, this is just temporary. I'm just chillin' here for now. I don't really belong here. I'ma move soon though. I'ma move to like... just to some straight-up ghetto thug-ass projects type shit. Where the people just kick it every day and keep it real. And chill in their BMWs and rap, and all the girls got on bikinis, and everybody just ... parties ... and raps. You know, where the niggas just kick it, Jay. Don't get me wrong. When I say "nigger," I don't mean in any bad way. Like, "Oh you fuckin' nigger." But like, when you're just chillin' with your homeys and you just be like ... I don't know ... "What's goin' on, you bitch-ass nigga!" It's all good. It's all love, Jay. It's all love." (Hoch 1998:19-20)*

*"I mean, what the hell I wanna be white for? The shit is stupid... Look at you, you're corny, Jay! If I had a choice between bein' like you—Jay Leno—or Tupac Shakur, who you think I'ma choose? ...Tupac! I mean... he's dead. But at least he went out like a true thug nigga. He's cool. You? You're just a dick, Jay. At least Tupac kept it real. Are you even in reality, Jay? You just sit there." (Hoch 1998:21)*

*"Hip hop, they say, "is black music" / I am white, so how do I break my competitors?" (Subliminal, Kazablan of the '90s)*

Maccabim-Reut is a suburban town on the way between Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. It is a middle-class suburb that was founded by the state in 1985 to provide housing for high-ranking officers from the military and their families as two separate towns: Maccabim and Reut. In 1990 the two towns were united to form a single municipality, and in 2003 Macabim-Reut was united with the city Modi'in and received the status of an urban center with local administration. The military families received government subsidies to build a "suburban dream"--a house with a backyard, the Israeli version of white-picket fence suburbia. Today the municipality is home to about 12,000 residents, who are in the ninetieth percentile of Israel's socio-economic echelon (Central Bureau of Statistics 2003). It is clean and green, eighty-eight

percent of youth in town graduate from high school (Regev 2005), and it has the lowest mortality rates in the country (Central Bureau of Statistics 2003).

Maccabim-Reut is also the hometown of the members of the rap group Parvarim Refugeeez, a self-proclaimed "gangsta" rap group of eight members, who released one album, *Rappererrium*, after which they discontinued their work. The members of Parvaraim Refugeeez also participated in a project called Parvarim Refugeeez Trooperz (PR Trooperz), a super-group made of former members of the Paravarim Refugeeez and guests, which released one album together called *Mitoch Hazohama* ("Out of Dirt"). These two albums are considered by most music critics and members of the hip hop scene to be two of the best rap albums ever released in Israel. The musical production is flawless, and the rappers display an impressive flow in both Hebrew and English. The group, consisting of ten rappers, describes in black American accent in English their "street life." They rap about being chased by police, and their "tough life" in the "ghetto" in Maccabim-Reut. The content of their songs does not constitute their real-life experiences; their rap is a pure performance, and as such, it is art.

The rappers of Paravarim Refueegez are part of a close-knit "hip hop scene" consisting of young people who were teenagers in the 1990s and were exposed to hip hop music through Music Television (MTV) and the internet. They are well versed in the language of hip hop, and are extremely committed: they attend each other's performances and parties, and spend a large amount of time and money on recording and musical production. They make rap music which they consider as art, and they insist that it is detached from politics.

I have argued, that popular, commercial rap in Israel is hegemonic because both rap and Zionism are perceived as acts of resistance. In the previous chapter I

have shown that when rappers explicitly rap on political issues, they rap within Zionist ideology, even when they are of different political affiliations. In this chapter, I demonstrate that even when rappers distance themselves from explicit political commentary, they are not subversive; in fact they are part of the Zionist nation-building project. They consider hip hop their mission, describe themselves as hip hop pioneers, and are not interested in using rap as a platform to promote a political agenda. They stay away from political issues, and mostly rhyme about rapping and rhyming. In order to do so, they empty rap music of its racial and political history and imagine it as a universal musical language.

Following the study of Jason Rodriguez (2006) on white hip hop fans in the United States, I argue that Israeli rappers appropriate rap music by using discursive rhetoric of universalism and de-politicization, and by "removing racially coded and political meanings embedded in the music" (Rodriguez 2006:646). This discursive strategy enables them to justify their engagement in global hip hop culture, and more important, to appropriate hip-hop, however unintentionally, for their own purposes. I argue that the rhetoric of universalism and de-politicization reveals that Israeli rappers produce rap music precisely to demonstrate the irrelevance of race and politics in their own lives. To paraphrase Rodriguez (2006:646), the Israeli rappers use rhetoric that recognizes the importance of race and politics in hip hop for others, while denying the salience of race and politics in their own lives. By associating themselves with rap music's roots and with its enduring images of non-conformism, Israeli rappers position themselves "cool," cosmopolitan, progressive, and open-minded, but they remain within the limits of Zionist ideology which they do not consider as political, and walk down the paradoxical path of producing rap music for the purpose of nation-building.

The election of Barack Obama, the first black president of the United States, has generated public debate over the question of whether or not we live in a "post-racial" era (Chang 2008; Schorr 2008; Bai 2008; Merritt 2009). Indeed, the argument that race no longer matters is debatable, as evidenced by the growing gap between First and Third world countries, the continuation of racially- and ethnically-motivated conflicts around the world, and the poor human development index statistics for people of color in the global north and south. Despite the election of Barack Obama, racialized power structures remain intact, racial and ethnic divides have not disappeared, and the illusion of a color-blind society mainly appeals to those who benefit from existing power structures (Rodriguez 2009, Gallagher 2003; Lipsitz 1998; Bonilla-Silva, Lewis, and Embrick 2004). The case of rap music in Israel illustrates that globalization can enact and preserve racial and ethnic divides and power inequalities (Feld 2000; Erlmann 1993; Lipsitz 1994), even in the context of discourses that depict artistic spaces as trans-racial (Gallagher 2003).

The chapter is divided into two parts. In the first part, I argue that the first step that Israeli rappers do in order to legitimize themselves as rappers is to deny that rap music is political. They frame their artistic production as personal, and disclaim political meanings that might be associated with it. Although they recognize that rap music has originated with marginalized, oppressed black youth, they deny the relevance of these politics for themselves as rappers. They take hip hop's unique qualities, and the African American oral and cultural traditions embedded in them, and mimic them. In addition, I argue that this community maintains a specific touristic dimension in the ways in which they encounter—and are incorporated into—hip hop culture. This tourist experience can be compared to the experience of a Western tourist in non-Western cultures.

In the second part, I suggest that although they deny the politics of rap music, the rappers make political use of it. I suggest that they see themselves as carrying the Zionist torch: their musical and cultural project is in the use of nation-building. In this part, I demonstrate that even as rappers are not explicitly engaged with political commentary, and even though they consider themselves as part of a global artistic movement, they remain within Zionist hegemony and do not publically challenge dominant narrative.

### **3.1 Rapping for Themselves**

The ethnic affiliations of Israeli rap musicians cut across several categories. In the United States, Jews have historically occupied an ambiguous racial category – neither black nor white – and their relationship with the black community has been conflicted and complex (Brodkin 2000; Rogin 1998; Lott 1995). In Israel, "blackness" as a social category has been associated with Oriental Jews (Sephardim or Mizrahim) (Hever 2008), with Arabs (Ganem 2008), and in the past two decades also with Jews of Ethiopian descent (Ben-Eliezer 2008). Considering the diverse ethnic backgrounds of the rappers that I study in this chapter – some are Ashkenazi, some Sephardic, and some a mixture of both – and uniqueness of these categories to Israeli society, I consider these rappers as neither "white" nor "black." Being privileged Jewish males, they belong to the most privileged group in Israeli society.

Before I started to study the hip hop scene in Israel, I hypothesized that the music would have the effect of making rappers question dominant ideologies, in particular Zionism. The rappers' intense engagement with hip hop culture, I surmised, would affect their attitudes toward race, class, and politics. I thought that hip hop culture, which brings race, class, and politics to the fore, would become what

Rachel Sullivan (2006:617) calls an "interracial socializer," through which the artists would learn about the effects of racism and discrimination abroad and then apply it to Israeli society. In the American context, Sullivan found that "[W]hites...indicated that rap had affected their opinion about racism. . . . Many whites who listen to rap may be motivated by curiosity without ever having to face-to-face contact or interpersonal relationship with any African American, so rap can be a way for whites to vicariously learn about African Americans" (2006:619). In the same vein, I predicted that exposure to hip hop culture would make Israeli rappers more likely to be open minded, pluralistic, and empathetic to the experience of minorities.

I was wrong. As I proceeded with my research, I realized that the challenges to hegemonic culture brought by rappers in Israel were of sound and aesthetics, not of politics. However, since they were, for the most part, aware of the roots and legacy of their chosen musical genre, with its attendant expectations of a certain sensitivity to the politics of race, the artists stressed in their interviews with me that hip hop culture is "above" race, ethnicity, or socio-economic status, and instead they emphasized rap's artistic value and its universalism over its political, social, and racial meanings.

These rappers are passionate about their music, but they are keenly aware that the media and even their friends sometimes are inclined to regard them as inauthentic. What is at stake here for the rappers, however, is their authenticity within global hip hop – a culture in which authenticity is a badge of honor. To defend their right to rap, they de-emphasize rap's race and politics. If rap does not "belong" to black people or to the ghetto, anyone can rap. Since they are neither black nor from the ghetto, but are rather white, Jewish, and from affluent neighborhoods, they can only be considered "authentic" if they deny the race and geography of rap.

Michael Cohen is in his early twenties and is half of the successful Tel Aviv-based rap duo Cohen@Mushon. A native of the city, the son of a theater actor and a television director, Cohen has been listening to rap since he was in high school in the early 2000s. For Cohen, rap is above all an exciting and sophisticated musical form. As for those who insinuate that rap music should be made by disadvantaged, oppressed people, Cohen has a practiced and confident reply:

*People tell me 'you're not from New York', [or] 'you're not from Bat-Yam' [Tel-Aviv's shoddier neighbor to the south, NB], so what's your story, why do you do that? But it's music. Once they invented it and brought it to the world, it belongs to everyone, it is a language that everybody can [understand].... People all over the world identify with [rap], and just like someone represents his 'hood' in New York, I can represent King George [the name of the Tel Aviv street on which he lives, NB].*

This response reappeared with only slight variations in other interviews. Khen "Sagol 59" Rotem, who was raised on a kibbutz and spent most of his adult life in Jerusalem, is one of the earliest rappers in Israel and, at the ripe old age of thirty eight, is something of a tribal elder in the local scene. Of the relationship between creating rap and one's racial affiliation, he told me: "Hip hop is like math. Someone invented math, and everybody uses it. Now everyone can use hip hop. It doesn't belong to anyone."

The rapper Eyal "Quami" Friedman was born and raised in Ramat Hachayal, a well off neighborhood in northern Tel Aviv. He told me that it angers him when people insinuate that hip hop is "protest music" people, and even more, when people suggest that rap is the voice of the oppressed. He describes his anger best in his song "Yamim Shchorim (Dark Days)," in which he raps:

*They tell me, rap is only protest songs*

*In the United States they only sing about society's troubles*

*But for the Americans the only cool thing is to hear J-Lo in a duet with Ja Rule*

*Yalla, as if...*

*Tell me, is it only me (thinking this way)?*

*Or (is it true that) the biggest in rap there, next to Eminem, is Nelly?*

*Ha ha ha, somebody really think that he is better than a rapper who is, incidentally, Israeli?*

Here Quami suggests that one does not need to be American (or even black) to make good hip hop, and that he, Quami, can make better rap than a black American rapper (i.e., Nelly). He also dismisses the implication that rap music is protest music, and he points out that people expect rap music to be protest music, but he dismisses it, and claims that Americans do not care about "the troubles of society" but about whether or not J-Lo will cooperate with Nelly. He also brings up Eminem, the white rapper, to emphasize his point that color is not important in the making of rap music. When I brought up the subject with the rapper Sagol 59, he became visibly angered:

*Sagol: [Hip hop] started from parties... (sings) "When I say hey, you say ho..." you know things like that...*

*NB: Right, but it was the party of the oppressed.*

*Sagol: Maybe they were oppressed, but they didn't sing about it.*

*NB: They didn't sing about it, but the fact is that it was in a parking lot in the housing projects.*

*Sagol (now becoming visibly irritated): You see it as a white person, that it was a party of oppressed people. There is protest in everything... what's the point of giving definitions?*

This is the dilemma that also bothers Lukatch, a rapper from Tsahala, another of Tel Aviv's affluent neighborhoods in the north. Lukatch is a rapper in his early twenties who is also a hip hop party producer. When my students asked him about the issue of the "oppressed rapper," he answered in his characteristic humoristic, direct way:

*Look, no one tells you that you have to come from the ghetto to be a rapper. ... OK, so in the United States rap started form poverty, from blacks, from the poor communities of the kushim, fine, but in Israel it is not like this, most of the rappers are tsfonim (privileged, of the Northern neighborhood of Tel Aviv, NB), and the best rappers in Israel are tsfonim, like, so don't come to me with the attitude that "because I am from the ghetto I am more real."*

Lukatch claims that a rapper from the ghetto is not more "real" than a *tsfoni* rapper, and explains that in Israel it is simply "not like this." Similarly, Yehonatan "Ortega" Yehuday rejects the idea that he might not be "legitimate" as a rapper because of where he is from. Ortega was born in Hertzelia Pituach, one of Israel's richest suburbs on the shore of the Mediterranean. Hertzelia Pituach became an acronym for affluence and the life style of the rich, a sort of Israeli Beverly Hills. Ortega's father was born and raised in a kibbutz and served in an elite navy unit, and he manages an insurance office, one of the professions that typify the Israeli elite (Kimmerling 2001). Ortega served mandatory military service of three years, spending half of his service as a combat soldier in the West Bank. He told me that many rap songs from his album were written in his unit's outpost in Jenin, a large Palestinian city in the West Bank. After roughly a year and a half as combat soldier, he requested to no longer be on combat duty so that he could perform and record his album, and his request was granted by his commander. He lives with his parents in

Hertzelia Pituach and attends the school Minshar in Tel Aviv, where he studies creative writing. Ortega is sensitive to the accusation of being less than authentic, and he suggests race is meaningless in rap:

*We are here in Israel are doing black music. [But] There is no meaning to the fact that we are not black. . . . Hip hop is the gift that American blacks gave to the world. They are the founding fathers, the pioneers, the educators, the innovators. ... [but] anyone can do it. Music is music. No one ever said—white people invented Rock'n'Roll. It belongs to everybody. It is music, culture, and art."*

Ironically, Ortega is unaware that his example proves the dangers of his earlier argument, that "there is no meaning to the fact that we are not black." Rock'n'roll was created by black people, "discovered" by white people, and consequently appropriated, and shaped and molded for white audience. And now many people—like Ortega himself—do not know that it was actually the product of black artistic labor. Ortega, however, was not phased by the suggestion that rap music was "black," or that he is less than authentic. He added,

*True, I am making it from a little bit different place, here in Israel, in Hebrew. This is my truth; this is where I was born. [If someone tells me that hip hop is black music] it is not going to insult me. [Black Americans] are not doing what I do; they are the source.*

*NB: So what would you tell a black American person if he tells you that you are less than authentic?*

*Ortega: I will say, you are right, and thank you for helping me create what I do today.*

Yet, when I asked Ortega what is hip hop for him, he answered with confidence, "Me." In a similar fashion, the rapper Peled was unapologetic when

asked about his attraction to hip hop. Peled is also in his early 20s, and he was born and raised in the *moshava* (agricultural Jewish settlement based on private ownership of land) Menachemya in the Jordan Valley. In Zionist history, Menahcmya became is a mythological symbol for the defiance of Zionist settlement in Palestine. When I asked him why he likes hip hop culture, his immediate reaction was "because it is cool," and added humorously, "when I decided I wanted to be a rapper, it was because of the sunglasses."

I had a different conversation with Arye "Chulu" Avitan, who is considered by many the "Godfather" of the Israeli rap scene, in his studio above his hip hop clothing store on Ben Yehuda Street in Tel Aviv. Chulu, who is now in his late thirties, was born in Israel into a Moroccan-Jewish family of nine siblings. He grew up in Nes Tziona, one of the oldest towns in Israel, south of Tel Aviv. When talking about rap music, Chulu says that when he first encouraged Israeli rappers to rap in Hebrew, it was strange for people because "there [was] a contradiction here, it should be... it should be a *kushi* that sing about yo, it is difficult for me at home, and my mother this and this and this." But, Chulu adds, "in my opinion it doesn't have to be that it is difficult, you can be rich and it will be difficult for you, not necessarily if you are from the ghetto or not from the ghetto." When he talks about the contradiction, Chulu is indecisive and even incoherent, reflecting his struggle to reconcile the dilemma:

*Look, the first artist I took under my wing was Jeremy, an Ethiopian guy that I took and I started to work with him for two years and he was successful with the Ethiopians at that time, and I thought it really has to come from this kind of place. I always waited for the artist that would come from the 'hood, and will be real, and that I will be able to say, this is real. So Kobi (Subliminal) is real, and Shai (360) is*

*real, and there are few others, but the one hasn't arrived yet, the one that... you know what I mean? That Fishi tries to represent. Fishi raps, 'I am from the 'hood,' but he is not exactly from the 'hood. He is from here, from central Tel Aviv. And Kobi is from Shikun Dan (another name for Ramat Hachayal, NB). Yes, it's okay, it does not mean anything. I don't know why [journalists] do that, they don't do that to any other type of music. ... When there was punk here, Fortis and these guys, they didn't say, 'He's a rich kid;' they didn't expect him to be poor, from the ghetto. But in hip hop he is expected to be from the ghetto. There is no ghetto, it is not necessarily from there. Also the rappers in the United States, they are not coming from the ghetto, most of them. The majority of them are, like, doing pretty fine. . . . Look, I told you, until today I am waiting for the real one to arrive. The one whose father is in jail, and his mother is a whore, and I don't know what, and he, all of a sudden, sings from the heart. And he didn't arrive. And I am telling you from experience that it does not have to come from there.*

During our conversation, MC Manny, an aspiring rapper, was sitting in the room and listened to us. Manny is in his early twenties, was born and raised in a kibbutz, and he is recording and performing rap, but he hasn't released an album yet. At the moment when we were talking about the relation between the rapper's background and his music, he intervened in the conversation and asserted:

*There is a pretty good example, I think, both you and I are not coming from... I am a kibbutznik! You would say, what's with a kibbutznik, nerdy Ashkenazi, what's the connection with protest, and hip hop, and to feeling connected to this place and to the people and to the sound? The connection is something that comes from the inside, it is much stronger than simply music, it is hip hop."*

Manny and Chulu demonstrate that they know that there is color and class to hip hop, when they say that it is indeed odd that someone who is Ashkenazi, kibbutznik, not from the ghetto, who is doing hip hop; "what the connection with protest?" Manny asks. The connection that Israeli rappers have with rap, he answers, is "something that comes from inside," it is "universal, and belongs to everyone who feels it inside."

An interesting defense for their right to do hip hop appears in the album Rapperraium by the Parvarim Refugeeez. The Parvarim Refugeeez, similarly to Mushon's "Say Yes," employ ironic self-reflection in order to demonstrate that they know what is expected from them to be, and that the fact that they are *not* that. But, they must have been unsure whether their listeners understand that they do not claim to be what they are not, because they recorded a skit titled ShotGun#Shoes, in which the rapper El Parvaros says:

*Yo, some type of shoes ain't be down with me, stepping up to me sayin' like, yo dude, you guys can really spit, but wussup with all that nigga-talk man? That ain't cool, that ain't real. You gotta keep it real in this game, you gotta keep it real. Well what I like to answer back to those types of shoes is that, life is a fuckin' joke in the face, man, and playing games is all we fuckin' do these days. And all I tryin' to say is this: this is who we are, this is our good time, you know what I'm sayin'... and if you don't vibe with the music I can dig that, man, but I ain't gotta let no du-rag wearing muthafucka come up to me and say my shit ain't no thang, I ain't gonna do that. There ain't no racism where we come from, we don't give a fuck about no political issues, and if you don't dig that...*

In this skit, the Parvarim Refugeeez demonstrate that they know what kind of critique is directed at them, and that they are prone to being accused of not being

"real," or even worse, of being racist. They answer it back without apologies: "we are just having fun," "playing games," and "we don't give a fuck about political issues." Unlike Cohen@Mushon, they don't claim for their right to rap *as they are*—rapping in Hebrew about being *tsfonim*, privileged, etc.—because they rap in English and they take on black American personas, pretending that Maccabim-Reut is a dangerous ghetto and that they are the target of the police. This self-reflective parody achieves the goal of demonstrating that they are aware that they are not blacks and not from the ghetto, and in doing so they point at their privileged position. There is an ambiguity here: on one hand an awareness of their privilege, on the other hand a depoliticized, almost hollow, musical product. It is a spectacle of hip hop which is detached from the place and time in which it was made. Although they comment on their privilege, they do not take advantage of it to make a meaningful political commentary and Rapperraium remains an empty spectacle. Moreover, Shotgun#Shoes exposes that for them rap music is simply "good time," but of course it is not political—they don't give a damn about politics.

I met with Ortega in February 2009, shortly after the end of Operation Cast Lead, Israel's attack on Gaza, which had been under siege since Israel's withdrawal in 2006. Operation Cast Lead left over 1000 people dead. After talking for some time, I questioned him about the lack of politics in his music. He responded:

*Why am I not talking about politics (in my songs)? In all seriousness—I am not stupid or fucked up—it is not interesting, it is not my priority. It doesn't burn in me. I served in the army and I vote. But, maybe because we live where we live, in the Sharon area, Tel Aviv area, qassam missiles are not falling here, we hardly see any political propaganda, we are not under attack... so my art comes from a personal place. If there will be something political (in my life) so I might talk about politics.*

*Think about it... black people in the United States did not sing about protest. They didn't say "I am going to sing about politics." The priority was for the personal. I think everyone want to tell their own story, which is great.*

In the same week, Lukatch came to meet with my students in the Emek Israel College during the attack, and they also questioned him on why he refrains from politics, to which he responded:

*My political tendency is to the political right, and it never enters my music, under no circumstances... I just don't like it. When I started to be a rapper it bothered me that everyone there were political rappers, that was 1999.... Everybody was, like "The situation in the country is very difficult"... It was lame. And I decided that I will not make political rap, if I have political opinions I will save it for discussions. . . . The stage for me is not a political arena, it is an arena for my art. If I had a need in my art to talk about politics, I would do that. But I have a problem with politics in art because I think it harms the art, I don't think it contributes to art; I don't think that there is something artistic in politics. Yes sometimes I am on the stage, I performed for example voluntarily a little while ago to children in Sderot [the city most hit by qassam missiles in the South of Israel, close to the Gaza Strip], and I said Kol Hakavod (Hebrew: well done, good for you) to you and the nation is with you and Kol Hakavod to the army, and yes, this is something I can say.*

These statements demonstrate that the belief that hip hop transcend race, class, and politics, is strong among all these rappers. They conceive hip hop as a universal art form, and hence they see the expectations regarding their race and class as irrelevant. Universalism, or the belief that hip hop is a universal art form that is detached from race, politics, etc., is a strong and flexible framework that can accommodate an unambiguous and explicitly politicized event such as performing in

Sderot and saluting the military, while simultaneously conceiving the event as non-political.

By depoliticizing rap, the rappers decline from commenting meaningfully on politics in their local context. Their choice of names also demonstrates this point. For example, the rapper Eyal Friedman had given himself the stage name Quami, which is a misspelling of the name of the legendary freedom fighter and first president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah. The rapper Yehonatan Yehudae had given himself the stage name Ortega, a common Hispanic last name. In their choice of stage names whose connotations take them away from local conflicted reality to far-away conflicts, they replace the local conflict with a foreign one, and remove their gaze from real racial and ethnic conflicts in Israeli society. The choice of names that bear association to far-away conflicts serves as a way out of the stressful contents of the local conflict. Their engagement in rap music enables them to imagine the conflict away from their reality.

In other words, by imagining the conflict far away from their reality, and demonstrating that their performance is only a "simulacra" (in Baudrillard's sense) of rap-ness, not a real undergoing of a change of identity, they continue to hold on to their privileged position in Israeli society, as they are only role-playing. Since their engagement with rap music occurs without intimate cross-racial contact locally or globally, they are able to enact the desire to acquire African American expressive power and supposed emotional freedom without actually having to lose their privileged position or having to deal with real racial tension in Israeli society. In order to do that, they must pretend that conflict between white and black, Jew and non-Jew, Israeli and American does not exist. They imagine their own racial reality and racial conflicts that are evident in hip hop away as distant from them. Instead

they create an imaginary, fantasy world in which whites and blacks live in artistic harmony. Sometimes, they even ignore real racist manifestations, as the following examples show.

Many rappers use the word *kushim* freely (it was also used above in one of Lukatch's statements). *Kushim* is word for black people in Hebrew, which has negative connotations, and is used derogatorily (for the cultural meaning of the word *kushim* among Jews of Ethiopian descent see Shabtai 2001, and Ben-Eliezer 2008). One night in March 2008 I attended the release party to Lukatch's album *Lo Dubim V'lo Yaar* ("No Bears, No Forest") in Tmuna Theater in Tel Aviv. The audience consisted mainly of friends and friends of friends of Lukatch and his crew, most of them in their early twenties. There were one or two black people in the audience, Israelis of Ethiopian descent who were associating themselves with the hip hop scene. Before he started to sing the song Golden Chains, Lukatch prefaced by announcing, "Some people say I am racist. This is not a racist song." In this song, Lukatch uses the word *kushim* as the refrain:

*Ha ba ba ba ba ba ba... Kushim*

*Ha ba ba ba ba ba ba... Expensive cars*

*Ha ba ba ba ba ba ba... Golden chains*

*Expensive cars... Pussies!*

In the song, Lukatch ridicules rappers and rap lyrics; he presents rap music as preposterous, even laughable: the *kushim* are not saying anything of substance, just "ha ba ba ba," or rap about cars, golden chains, and "pussies." For him, those subjects are insignificant. He invited other rappers to the stage, and they rapped the lyrics of Golden Chains, including the repetition of the word *kushim*, and it was received very

well by the audience. The audience was dancing, clapping, and joining him to the chorus.

In the context of the performance at Tmuna, Golden Chains was an inside joke that fortified the identity of the group as non-racist, and as distinguished from the rest of society for their racial sensibility. Despite the fact that they use the word *kushim* in the song, both the rapper and the audience considered its usage to be non-offensive, since it was used within the context of a rap song. Their engagement with rap gave them "credentials" to use racially sensitive words, because as "hip hop" artists, they could not be racist. Interestingly, they felt comfortable using the word, but they were aware that what they considered as a joke might be lost on people outside their milieu, hence the public announcement.

Golden Chains continue with the rapper El Parvaros 100% Cotton who enters after the third refrains and raps:

*I am kushi, I came from the projects*

*I was pushing drugs, I turned toddlers into addicts*

*I was hanging out only with minorities*

*I was hoping in the end to study Islam and law*

*Let's continue... to tell you about all the ho's*

*Common, please, believe me, they really exist*

El Parvaros presents the African American rapper as a ridiculous, cartoonish character: he is a drug dealer from the projects who surround himself with "ho's." El Parvaros presents the ghetto as a theme park for black people: they push drugs, are surrounded by ho's, hanging out only with other minorities, and in the end go to study Islam and law. He signifies that he does not believe the rappers' tales, when he turns

to beg the listeners to believe him that the hookers exist, while in fact suggesting that they do not exist.

Lukatch and El Parvaros mock African American gangsta rap, caricaturing the rappers as pushing drugs to toddlers and lying about their associations with hookers. They also suggest that in the end, the African American rapper goes on to study Islam and law. Being part of the cartoon that they draw, this noble endeavor is also ridiculed. For Lukatch and El Parvaros, the African American experience in the urban ghetto is nothing more than an amusing tale. They mock the African American experience as it is portrayed in rap music, and reduce it to meaningless display of golden chains, women, and cars.

But, they paint this caricature of American rap while signaling that they are aware of themselves *not* being these imaginary rappers. The name, El Parvaros, for example, ridicules the suburbs from which the rapper hails: the word *parvar* means suburb in Hebrew, and the Spanishization of the word suggests that the rapper ridicules his own self for being from the suburbs and for *not* being a Hispanic person whose name is El Parvaros. In this song, as well as in songs called "'From the City to the Suburb" and "Stage Aleph Maccabim 2004" (referring to a neighborhood in Maccabim-Reut), and in the expression "muthafucking *medoragim* (terraced houses)" and "*kikar* party" (Square Party), the rappers signify that they are aware that they defeat the expectations and that they are not "supposed" to be rappers. By mixing the words that are coming from different world – the ghetto and the affluent suburb – they emphasize the difference between these worlds rather than their meeting points, and by doing so, signify on their privilege.

They also signify that they are aware of the roles they are forced to play: suburban Jewish Israeli youth masquerading as rappers. They are aware of the irony

of that. In other words, the mixing of the (imagined) ghetto and the (real) suburb in the expression "muthafuckin' *medoragim*" accentuates the difference and contradiction between them, and signifies that they conceive of the ghetto as the contradiction of the suburb, or at least as different. The adoption of rap music allows these rappers to "enact their coolness" and "validate [their] own cultural currency, and assert... individualistic agency" (Murray 2004:18).

Another example to how the Parvarim Refugeez construct themselves *vis-à-vis* the suburbs is in the name of the group itself. The word *parvarim* means "suburbs" in Hebrew, and it is also a tribute to Ha'Parvarim, a successful musical duo in Israel from the early 1960s to the late 1970s that played originals and covers in a Latin style. Hence, by choosing this name, the Parvarim Refugeez signify that they are not only refugees from the suburbs, but also from Israeli music, establishing their connection with a certain socio-economic class and a certain Israeli type of music: a nostalgic tribute to the Songs of the Land of Israel. At the same time, they reject the suburbs by declaring themselves to be refugees from the suburbs.

The rapper Lukatch also struggles with the accusation that he is not legitimate as a rapper because he is from a rich neighborhood. In his song "The Caveman," he raps that he comes from "*Tshala*, the poor neighborhood." *Tshala* is known for being a rich neighborhood. Hence, Lukatch shows that he is aware of his privilege by employing self-ridicule and irony.

Another example of self-aware privilege comes from Cohen's partner in Cohen@Mushon, Michael "Mushon" Mushonov, who is the son of two famous Israeli actors, Momy Mushonov and Sandra Sade, and a promising young actor in his own right. He, too, is in his early twenties and was raised in central Tel Aviv. He met Cohen at the high school for the arts that they both attended. In "Say Yes," one of

their hit songs, Mushon raps about being a "*tsfoni*" rapper. In doing so he demonstrates that he is well-aware of the expectation that a rapper be underprivileged. Indeed, the lyrics address this head on:

Tsfoni tsfonboni, the son of Momy

Born with a silver spoon in his mouth like a snobby...

He is not oppressed, fool, and he doesn't have a frustration

Self-reflection reveals Mushon's awareness of the presumption that a rapper should be oppressed and frustrated, and not a "*tsfoni*." Signifying on their self-awareness directly is a means of dispelling these presumptions and expectations and legitimizing themselves as rappers despite their "lack of credentials." They signify that they know that they are not expected to be rappers and that they are aware of their privileged place in Israeli society.

The rappers I discussed above—Jewish, privileged, suburban—are not attracted to hip hop culture because of its political or social attributes and they also do not draw connections between the history of hip hop and similar histories in Israel. Instead, they are attracted to hip hop culture because of its "coolness," trendy-ness, artistic significance. In addition, I find that they are attracted to rap because it allows them to be associated with blackness and what it represents in their imagination: toughness, coolness, their own progressiveness, etc.

Yet, I find that the rappers had neither the desire nor the ability to learn about African-American history and politics or to apply the political and racial meanings of hip hop music to Israeli society, and they often engaged in racist behavior, albeit unwittingly. However, self-awareness is prevalent, even if hidden and only hinted at. Overall, these popular rappers engage in a depoliticized hip hop scene, and within this depoliticized scene they stop short of posing any serious challenge to hegemonic

Israeli culture. They confine rebellion within their individual struggles against their parents, their peers, and a society that they perceive as oppressive. They do not see rebellion in political and national terms.

In sum, associating themselves with rap music, these rappers also associate themselves with its enduring images of non-conformism. However, as I will show in the next section, although they deny the politics of rap music, the rappers make political use of it. I suggest that they see themselves as carrying the Zionist torch: they walk down the paradoxical path of making rap music for the purpose of nation-building,

### **3.2 Rapping for the Nation**

In this section I suggest that the use of rap music as a tool of nation-building by these rappers is different than simply taking a form of music and employing it for nation-building purposes. Because the genre is political and is embedded with the history and political life of black people in America, the rappers in Israeli cannot appropriate it for nation-building without having first emptied it from its racial politics and historical context. However, it is not important *what* they rhyme about; what is important is simply *that* they rhyme in Hebrew. Rhyming in itself becomes a political action, because it takes place in Hebrew.

The use of Hebrew as the modern language of the modern nation of Israel represents the resurrection of the nation and is the main cultural anchor of the nation. Popular music in Israel was an important tool in the designing and shaping of the new Hebrew culture and hence it was a revolutionary tool and a role as a cultural melting pot in a society whose population was new immigrants from different diasporas (Almog 2004:660: Regev and Seroussi 2004). Some even argue that "There was a

call for the revival of the Hebrew language as a prerequisite for this Jewish national revival" (Izre'el 2001). As Helman (2002:359) writes, "Zionists viewed the replacement of the languages of the Diaspora with Hebrew as a means of creating 'the new Jew' in the Land of Israel and forestalling the importation of diasporic cultures." Speaking Hebrew was a national mission. Volunteer organizations such as the Battalion of the Defenders of the Hebrew Language, as well as public institutions, enforced the use of Hebrew as the single public language, and took action against those who "insisted" on preserving their own languages (Helman 2002). Despite the rivalry between Hebrew and other language during the early history of the Zionist movement, dominantly Yiddish as well as French, Hebrew succeeded as the national language (Safran 2005). Safran (2005:53-54) explains that "by stressing the importance of language (Hebrew) rather than religion (Judaism) as a unifying factor of the various sub-communities living in the land, Zionist nation-builders hoped to avoid the temptations toward theocracy and reduce the conflict between religious and secular Jews." Safran emphasizes that besides serving as a "vehicle for 'trans-ethnic' communication" between the cultures of the Ashkenazim and the Sephardim, it also served as "a means of restoring the cultural links to Palestine – and hence, to legitimize Zionism" (Safran 2005:50). As such, speaking Hebrew was a Zionist act itself, and creating literature and culture in Hebrew even more so.

Thus the young rappers see themselves as conducting the most eminent Zionist act of all. Rapping in Hebrew is conceived by those brought up in the Zionist education system as a national mission. Hence, although they rhyme mainly about personal subjects—their rhyming skills, their love for music and hip hop, their difficulties as young artists, and their relation with the media—I suggest that they carry the Zionist torch; their musical and cultural productions are in the use of nation-

building. Indeed, rapping in one's native language had become the most dominant aspect of the articulation of local identity in hip hop (Bennet 2004:182), however, besides articulating a local identity, the Israeli rappers also tell about a bigger mission than their own identity: bringing hip hop to Israel as a national mission.

The first (and last) album of Peled and Ortega as a rap duo, *Mamshichim Liv'ot* (Keep on Kickin'), was released in 2008 with the independent label "High Fiber." Although they look, move, and sound like American rappers, the fact that they make Israeli hip hop is first evident in the fact that they rap in Hebrew. They perceive their making of rap music as more than a personal choice, an individual hobby, or a way to shape their identity. They perceive their rap making as a national mission. For example, the rapper Ortega told me: "[Hip hop is] what I was meant to do. It is my mission in this place: to contribute to the development of rap in Israel, to bring awareness for hip hop and to the beauty that I see in it." In the song Shotgun, Peled describes their part in hip hop culture as a "mission," and in the song Keep on Kickin' he describes his mission as a "burden," implying prophet-like, pioneer role in Israeli society (almost a White's Man Burden). As prophets and pioneers, they are the contemporaries of the early Zionists, who saw themselves as the pioneers of Western culture in the backward Levant, or worse, in a cultureless wasteland. Many artists whom I interviewed called Israel a "shit-hall," indicating that for them Israel is backward in terms of culture. Peled told me that Israel is "cut off" and is in "delay" from the rest of the world. In this sense these artists consider themselves to be living in a cultural desert and hence they see themselves as spearheading a cultural revolution.

Quami, one of the first rappers in Israel and one of the first radio DJs to play rap on prime time programs, also perceives his role as a radio DJ as avant-garde. In the song *Let Them Talk*, he raps:

What have you done other than masturbate?  
When Liron Patrick Teeni, Momy Levy, and me—Quam  
Turn the world upside down for rap  
Bringing hip hop to this country  
Even before you knew how to pronounce it  
When there was only Dire Straights and 2 Unlimited here  
Tell me who discovered  
Biggie, Rawkus, Missy, who?  
Who was the first to play Fu-gee-la?  
Who plays Outkast, Mos Def, Tupac and Method Man  
Every week on the radio?  
We brought the rap to every corner  
Yes! And thanks to us they play "Stan" all the time  
You don't like it? Fuck you!

Quami employs Zionist—or rather, imperialist—terminology, such as "to discover" hip hop, and to bring quality culture to a deserted corner of the world. "Bringing hip hop" to Israel, hence, is a national mission: to bring the most cutting-edge, innovative western musical genre in the world today to Israel. Hence, he sees meaning in the act of playing rap music in Israel and rapping in Hebrew in and of itself.

Momy Levy has been one of the first radio hosts to devote an entire radio program for hip hop and R&B, in *Reshet Gimel* of Israel's public radio in 1989. Levy, of a Yemenite-Jewish background, is the nephew of a famous Israeli singer and

a popular radio host. Now in his mid thirties, he has been singing from an early age and served his military service in a *lehaqa tsvait* (military musical ensemble). During my interview with him, Momy mentioned numerous times his role in popularizing hip hop in Israel, and described bringing hip hop music to Israel as his goal in life. He emphasized that it was hard for people to digest hip hop because it is not harmonious like the rest of Israeli music, and hence he had to "open their ears." He told me that the music sounded "weird" when he first played it for Israeli audience, and that Amnon Shiloni (*Reshet Gimel's* manager at the time) wanted to take his program off the air before he realized that the show was popular. When Levy talks about his contribution to the development of hip hop culture in Israel, he describes Israel as a backward place in terms of music, and he emphasizes his contribution to changing it:

*I was in London for three years, I came back to Israel in 1995 and I was in shock when I opened the radio—there was nothing called rap in there. Not to mention R&B. ... Only things that were mainstream, like Whitney Houston, or Mariah Carrey. ... I felt as if there was no respect for the music I want to hear: hip hop, rap, R&B, and soul, so I told myself I have to do something serious about it and that I ought to host in the radio. I approached Ilan Asher, a producer in Reshet Gimel and he invited me to the program of Gil Komar, and I came with CDs I brought from London and Gil Komar said, "oh, here is Momy Levy bringing us new black music from London, I have to hear that, Momy, what did you bring us?," and I said, "I brought you the new hit of Black Street, No Digidy." No one knew it in Israel back then.*

### **3.3 Conclusion**

To summarize my findings, I found that rappers reject the political in the making of rap music, even as they see their mission as a national mission: bringing rap to Israel and rapping in Hebrew is hence a Zionist act. The rappers I reviewed in this study indicated the irrelevance of race and politics in their own lives, because they had to legitimate their presence in the scene. Universalist ideas on one hand and Zionist ideology on the other provide the discursive resources for them to justify their engagement in hip hop culture. Moreover, they also provide an opportunity to use their privilege, however unwittingly, to appropriate hip hop culture and rap music. In the process, they empty hip hop culture from meaning and appropriate for themselves elements of the culture that suits them, such as the Universalist element.

The rappers embody a contradiction: they perceive rapping in Hebrew as both national and universalistic (a contradiction that is nonetheless inherent to all Israeli music). On one hand, they conceive of their engagement with hip hop culture as transcending their individual life, and belonging to the greater national sphere; their role in society is to bring hip hop culture to Israel. On the other hand, they refrain from commenting about issues related to the political sphere, and they "rhyme about rhyming" as is the demand of hip hop culture. Instead of using rap music as a vehicle to transcend the nation, they reproduce national divisions by viewing their rap making as an act of nation-building. The creation of Israeli version of an African-American musical expression does not necessarily imply unity or resistance as might be expected, but often emphasize difference and even negative perception. In the next chapter, I discuss the moments in which rap music momentarily counter the hegemonic Zionist culture. I show, however, that this act is momentarily and have not yet managed break ideological walls.

## Chapter 4

### Moments of Subversion: *Language and Masculinity*

Perhaps more than everything else, rap music is associated with "street language": curses, profanities and obscenities. In this chapter I explore vulgar language, sexual commentary, humor, curses, and profanities used in rap music in general and in rap music in Hebrew in particular. Rap's mockery of sexual and behavioral norms momentarily subverts and challenges dominant norms of behavior and appropriateness. However, rap music in Israel is an act of *Purim*, the holiday of masquerading carnival and inversion, in which for the duration of the holiday, the taking on of a different persona is momentary and hence permissible. Like in *Purim*, also in rap music in Hebrew dominant ideologies and practices are momentarily inverted. In these moments of subversion, rappers challenge power by mocking it. But the rappers are not undertaking to subvert the social order. After the carnival is over, the rappers are back to their "real" self and hegemonic ideology remains in place. Furthermore, I identify these moments as overlapping with moments of blackface, in which Israeli rappers make rap within the American tradition of blackface.

This chapter is divided into two parts. In the first part, I argue that rap's essence is subversive of societal norms and of dominant ideologies, and that rap conceals a criticism of power. In order to think about the subversion in rap music, I think about rap music in Hebrew as (1) a literary text, and apply Bakhtinian literary theories to its interpretation, (2) an act of the Jewish holiday *Purim*, and (3) blackface. Applying these three points of view allows me to think about rap music in Hebrew as containing *moments* of subversion, but not being subversive of hegemonic

power as a whole. In the second part, I explore these moments of subversion in rap music in Hebrew, as they manifest in (1) sexual innuendo, and (2) *Ars* masculinity.

#### **4.1.1 Bakhtin and Rap Music**

The Bakhtinian concept of the carnivalesque (1968) refers to a literary mode that subverts and liberates the assumptions, norms, and standards of the dominant style through humor and chaos. Bakhtin likens the carnivalesque in literature to the type of activity that might take place in the carnival. In the carnival, social hierarchies of everyday life—their solemnities and pieties and etiquettes—are profaned and transgressed by voices and energies that are normally suppressed and made invisible. Through the carnival and carnivalesque literature the world is turned-upside-down. Ideas, values, and truths are tested and contested. The carnivalized text de-privileges the authoritative voice of the hegemony through the mixing of “high culture” with the profane. For Bakhtin it is within literary forms like the novel that one finds the site of resistance to authority and the place where cultural, and potentially political, change can take place (Bakhtin 1968).

Hip hop is filled with what Bakhtin would describe as "mighty aspiration to abundance and to a universal spirit" (1968:278). The role of parties in hip hop can be compared to the role of banquets that Bakhtin explores in the writings of the Russian writer Rabelais. In hip hop video clips, for example, images of scantily-dressed gyrating women, golden chains, expensive cars, barbecuing, dancing, and drinking alcohol echo the excessive consumption of food and drink in medievalist banquets; they signify procreation, fertility, and birth. For example, the parties staged in Dr. Dre and Tupac's “California Love” and Outkast's “Players Ball” exemplify the desire for life that Bakhtin describes. Another prominent image is that of the parade, which

is also prevalent in hip hop imagery, such as in Public Enemy's video clip to their song "Fight the Power." The parade represents the power of the people and it is a menacing spectacle. Hip hop images create an alternative, fantasy world in which those who are oppressed in the real world free themselves momentarily and symbolically from the powers that oppress them by mocking them.

Another example of rap's intertextuality is the representation of fashion: the baggy pants, oversized shirts, and turned-around baseball hats. These fashion expressions in the United States subliminally subvert dominant values related to what is proper attire and how one should look in public. Wearing baggy pants without a belt ("jailin'") is a tribute to jail culture; prisoners are forbidden to keep their belts while incarcerated. In other words, hip-hop culture provides a space, as Diawara (1998:267) suggests, for reclaiming and subverting stereotypes and for redeeming the individual.

A poetic way of understanding rap music is as an art form that "contaminates" everything (Nechosthai 2006): everything can be raw material for hip hop. She writes: "This contamination is the cancellation of a distinction and barrier between the clean and the dirty, the infected and the neutral. Nothing is remained neutral—the work of art is all-embracing and everything that touches it becomes a part of her. Everything in the universe becomes a raw material for the work of art. ... Rap wants to c o n s t r u c t. To construct existing materials into a new and more sophisticated thing, carnivalesque but having its own internal, alternative, meticulous grammar. Grammar that might be missed on those who conceive rap as chaotic, and its poetic motivation as destructive, without understanding the incredible passion for life. This is the essence, the core of the language of rap: a hybrid joining of elements that are usually foreign to each other, that belong to separate linguistic registers, different

authors, different times—and destroying all aspiration for homogeneity. This contamination is embedded in rap and it is the mud that connects the lingual bricks together. It is the essence of rap and is the basic characteristic that distinguishes between what is rap and what is not" (Nechosthai 2006:35).

As such, hip hop is subversive in its very essence—it negates norms, standards, and definitions of "music." Everything can be music and music can be everything—an established modernist idea. This "contamination" can be thought also in terms of Bakhtin's (1968:303) concept of the grotesque. Both carnivalesque and the grotesque can be used to describe and define rap: rap does not "have to respect hierarchical distinctions; it freely blends the profane and the sacred, the lower and the higher, the spiritual and the material" (Bakhtin 1968:285-286). The grotesque body is a celebration of the cycle of life; it is a comic figure which was used in the literary form not just mock power, but it was to unleash what Bakhtin saw as the people's power, to renew and regenerate the entire social system, to turn the official spectacle inside-out and upside down, even if only momentarily. Exaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness: these are the essences of the "grotesque"—and of rap—and they serve to undermine power by mocking and ridiculing it.

In sum, rap is people's power—or at least it used to be, once upon a time in the South Bronx. Rap as people's power is "embedded" in rap music, and surfaces if we look for the so-called "hidden transcripts" (Scott 1990) in rap music and hip hop culture. When I search for these "hidden transcripts" and carnivalesque elements in rap music in Hebrew, I find that they appear momentarily, in what I identify as an act of *Purim*.

#### 4.1.2 Rap music as *Purim*: A Masked Ball

The Jewish holiday of *Purim* is the holiday of inversion or suspense, in which Jews are commanded to tell jokes and laugh. The custom to masquerade in *Purim* is not mentioned in the Bible, but it started in thirteenth century in Europe as a popular carnival (Berlin, Brettler, and Fishbane 2004). According to the biblical story as it appears in the Book of Esther, the holiday of *Purim* is celebrated to mark the rescue of the Jews in the ancient Persian Empire from the hands of king Ahasuerus, who wanted their annihilation. Esther agreed to become the King's wife in order to save her Jewish people from his plan to kill them. She used her feminine power to influence the King and win political clout. The Book also tells of Queen Vashti, the King's wife, who was requested to dance naked for the King and his ministers, and refused. As a consequence of her refusal she was expelled from the palace. The story brings forward acts of resistance and challenges to power, and the holiday is celebrated in this spirit, as a time to mock order and authority.

The principle of *Purim* is the principle of temporary suspension of behavioral norms, of the chains of conventions and etiquette, and of status and class symbols. The principle of inversion is similar to the principle of the carnivalesque (Berlin, Brettler, and Fishbane 2004). By wearing a costume, real identity is hidden, and the person can be someone else for the day, fulfill a hidden fantasy, and say things that cannot be uttered otherwise. Humor, satire, parody, and farce are the tools of expression in the holiday of inversion, and nothing is too sacred or taboo to be presented in its grotesque and absurd side. The spirit of *Purim* sheds light on life's inverted side, and hence generates criticism of what is defined as "appropriate," "normal," or "right." The dominant classes view the music as vulgar and inappropriate, thereby distinguishing themselves from it and confirming their own

status as civilized. Hence, it is a momentary release from civilized self-restraint. The temporary suspension of norms provides an opportunity to examine them from an outsider's point of view, and to see them as ridiculous and limited.

As if it were *Purim*, rappers put on a "rapper" costume to display resistance to societal norms and to find ways to momentarily act in the world that are different from what is expected from them normally, and to question the social order through parody. The rapper, under the guise of being someone else, allows himself to break the norms while *mimicking* being a rapper, while continuing to maintain his or her expected role in society. Indeed, while part of the tense appeal of rap music is its imagined potential to elide racial boundaries, it is also fundamentally predicated on the idea of mimicry, rather than on the possibility that a Jewish Israeli person might really assume a black subject position. The rappers find rap music "worthy of overt admiration and emulation," but "marginality" itself would not become an "object of 'mainstream' cultural desire" (Levine 2003:63). They are, then, undertaking pallid imitations and do not aspire genuinely to inhabit a marginal position.

Mimesis, however, can be diversely interpreted. There is, on one hand, the mimetic relation of hip hop elements to contemporary African American culture, but on the other hand there is a possibility, or even likelihood, that the rappers mistake such representations for precisely what they were meant to disavow. Israeli rap is an example to what Homi Bhabha (1994:85) has called "colonial mimicry": "the discourse of mimicry is constructed around ambivalence: in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. . . . *[M]imicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal.*" Global hip hop as mimesis, thus, "occupies the tenuous position of conjuring both fear and fantasy in the white imagination" (Murray 2004:8). Thus,

those who experience hip hop culture can taste the unknown, the forbidden, even dishonorable or wild, black culture through the palatable performance of it as black culture.

It is useful to bear the concept of the mimetic from Taussig's work *Mimesis and Alterity* in mind when analyzing cases of global hip hop. Taussig writes: "once the mimetic sprung into being, a terrifically ambiguous power is established; there is born the power to represent the world, yet that same power is a power to falsify, mask and pose. The two powers are inseparable" (in Chapman, 2007:16). But representation—particularly representation of alterity—is charged, as Feld (in Chapman 2007:7) argues, pointing out that mimesis allows for creativity, but also opens up space for caricature. Indeed, there is tension between creativity and caricature in the performances of these rappers, which allows for simultaneous subversion and incorporation.

On one hand, rappers display attraction and curiosity that arise from attributing the status of cool and authenticity to black American hip hop artists; there is admiration and idealization of black American rappers and an attempt to imitate them. On the other hand, there is ignorance, disrespect, fear, and even recoil from them. This ambivalence produces a dual position toward black Americans. Israeli hip hop enthusiasts do not really want to *be* black. Rather, they want to "buy, consume, and appropriate to themselves characterizations of cultural capital that suits their ... preferred identity" (Maoz 2007:158). These rappers create a fantasy of the black ghetto as a space of adventure, glamour, and play. They produce what Diawara dubs "immanent blackness" or the "permanent grafting of often-stereotypical qualities onto a particular black archetype" (in Murray 2004:18). Their adopted black

vernacular and style transform them to the title of cool; blackness without history or meaning is their leverage for coolness, status, and fame.

Rappers inhabit a desire to "embody an alternative identity" (Murray 2004:15) of their choice. On one level, they express a desire to "consume or be consumed by 'otherness,'" but on the other hand, they "subvert, parody, and mock through imitation" (Murray 2004:15). They reveal a desire to escape the suburb, or what it might represent for them: lack of culture, dullness, conservatism, and bourgeois life style (the "muthafucking *medoragim*" from Chapter 3). The desire to play the role of hip hop artists as it traveled from the Bronx to Israel dramatizes a sympathy for African Americans, and a desire to acquire African American expressive power and supposed emotional freedom without actually having to lose their privileged position, scrutinize history, and without having to face real conflicts in Israeli society.

Thinking about rap music in Israel as between desire to repulsion echoes discussions of blackface in the United States, discussions that also brought together Jews, blacks, and expressive culture.

### **4.1.3 Moments of Blackface**

It is intriguing how much the analysis of rap music in Israel has in common with the analysis of blackface minstrels in the turn-of-the-20<sup>th</sup>-century United States, notwithstanding geographical and historical gaps. It is useful to read Israeli rap within the black cultural and literary traditions and within the history of Jews in blackface in the United States (such as Al Jolson) and the history of Jewish-black political and cultural relationship because whether consciously or subconsciously, Israeli rappers create within these histories and traditions. I suggest that like

blackface Americanized Jewish immigrants, rap music globalizes Israelis and turn them into global citizens.

In the United States black-Jewish relations have been crucial in the production of popular American culture. As Brodtkin (2006) points out, European Jewish immigrants to the United States were not seen as white until post-WWII policies "reconfigured the category of whiteness to include European immigrants" (p. 27). She further notes that Jews' upward social and economic mobility was enabled to a great extent by post-war public programs that, "even though they were advertised as open to all, functioned as a set of racial privileges" that were extended to white males – which included Jewish men – and not to blacks. One of the most important popular culture manifestations of black-Jewish relations has been blackface and the minstrel show.

Blackface was a performance tradition of American theater since approximately 1830 (according to other accounts it goes back to 1815), and was most commonly used in the minstrel performance tradition and in Vaudeville Theater. White blackface performers in the past used burnt cork (or greasepaint or shoe polish) to blacken their skin and exaggerate the shape of their lips, often wearing woolly wigs, gloves, tailcoats, or ragged clothes to complete the appearance of a black person. Later, black artists also performed in blackface. Blackface embodied images, attitudes and perceptions often regarded as racist, which were nonetheless cemented in the public's consciousness. The caricatures of the black person are the legacy of blackface and they persist in contemporary cultural forms. However the meaning and interpretations of these images are controversial, as I show below. By the mid-20th century, changing attitudes about race and racism ended the prominence of blackface practices in American theater and performance. However, it remains in limited use as

a theatrical device, mostly as social commentary or satire, among mostly avant-garde performance projects, but it remained controversial even when used in a critical fashion. For example, after the Wooster Group's 1981 production of *Route 1 & 9* in New York City in which four white actors performed in blackface, the New York State Council on the Arts cut Wooster's funding by almost half (Hill and Hatch 2003). There are several interpretations of blackface in the literature. Saxton (1990) sees blackface as a central to the cultural construction of the ideology of white supremacy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Similarly, Roediger (1991) explains blackface as a working class culture that expresses white supremacy. He argues that the roots of racist ideology are connected with the belief that white freedom is dependent on black slavery. Roediger emphasizes that working class people were simultaneously attracted and repulsed by the charisma of black culture, which they conceived as "natural," "pre-modern," and "authentic."

In his seminal work on the phenomenon of blackface in American life, Michael Rogin (1998:6) presents the thesis that "blackface as American national culture Americanized the son of the immigrant Jew." Studying motion picture blackface, he explains that "by joining structural domination to cultural desire, [blackface] turned Europeans into Americans," and that "Jews acquired American credentials, in this racially divided society, taking control of the black role" (Rogin 1998:12, 17). Like Roediger, Rogin argues that blackface expressed the attraction of whites for black powerful expressiveness, minus the need or desire to cancel slavery. Blackface represented this incoherency: simultaneous attraction and repulsion. However, by playing blackness under blackface, American entertainers brought black aspects into the fabric of American dominant culture. American identity was constructed from a racist desire to material destruction of the other (i.e., slavery), and

simultaneous adoption of the Other's culture. This way, the minstrel show transformed American of different ethnic background into American, on the expense of the minority on the bottom of social hierarchy. The minstrels were the glue that brought all American ethnic minorities together as The American Nation, as he writes: "The view through burnt cork places race relations at the center of mass politics and culture in the United States; it displays the peculiar feature of American nationalism, a popular expression that emerges ... not to free oppressed folk but to constitute national identity out of their subjugation" (Rogin 1998:18).

Eric Lott (1993) and Lhamon (1998), however, argue that blackface disguised real attraction to the expressiveness of black culture. They identify the way in which blackface was the beginning of a tradition in which young whites who rejected bourgeoisie values adopted blackface as way to display (even if unconsciously) their attraction to the black body, black voice, and black movement (as well as a phallic attraction and envy). These young people practiced black culture as their rebellion against Puritan values and denied sexuality.

While Rogin argues that Jews in blackface were agents of the melting pot, Irving Howe believes that "Jewish performers transformed it into something emotionally richer and more humane. Black became a mask for Jewish expressiveness, with one woe speaking through the voice of another." Alexander goes further by arguing that Jews found their story of slavery and exile in black American life, and that Jewish participation in minstrels was based on a "tradition of suffering" common to Jews and blacks. In sum, as Katorza points out (1998:39), whether blackface minstrels expressed white supremacy ideology or attraction and desire for black charisma and culture, blackface was crucial in making American

music into an expression of the relation between culture, society, and race, and Jews played central role in this process.

Nineteenth century blackface's appropriation and exploitation of African-American culture foreshadowed the late twentieth century—early twenty first century's trendy and attractive packaging, marketing, and dissemination of African-American cultural expressions in global popular culture, in particular global hip hop culture. However, the dissemination of African American culture globally created a more complicated problem as the performance of blackness is done in a decontextualized fashion and without awareness or knowledge of the sensitive history of blackface.

My analysis of rappers in Israel suggests that at certain moments, rap music in Israel can be read as a text of blackface. It is not to say, however, that hip hop culture in Israel is a case of blackface minstrels; it is not. I also do not claim to draw a straight line from turn-of-the-century blackface in America to contemporary hip hop culture in Israel, but I believe that pointing out and highlighting similarities and nuances of blackface can underscore certain meanings in hip hop culture in Israel.

Studies of blackface suggest (Lhamon 1998; Lott 1995; Dreisinger 2008; Rogin 1998) that blackface demonstrated an ambivalent desire for black people. As Rogin (1998:35) explains, blackface was "a manifestation of the particular desire to try on the accents of 'blackness' and demonstrate the permeability of the color line" while it simultaneously "coupled a nearly insupportable fascination with a self-protective derision with respect to black people." He goes on to list the contradictory elements of blackface performance (1998:35): "Admiration and ridicule, appropriation and homage, pathos and play, deception and self-deception, stereotyped and newly invented, passing up and passing down."

African Americans inhabit an expressive culture that whites all over the world are drawn to. When I observe Israeli rappers, I see that as Rogin (1998:20) noticed regarding the practice of blackface in the United States, the desire to play the role of a rapper "dramatizes a curious sympathy for African Americans" and an "effort to imagine oneself inside the skin of an exotic people" (Rogin 1998:20). Yet, while in the United States blackface performers and white "passers" had an affinity with black people and have desired to cross the color line and to subvert and transgress rigid social boundaries (Rogin 1998; Dreisinger 2008), the rappers I study in this dissertation project do not necessarily have a desire to transgress social boundaries, and in fact, although they are engaged in a sort of a blackface performance, they do not necessarily break down racial boundaries and do not necessarily have an affinity with black people. Like I emphasized above, it is an act of *Purim*. It should be said that there are acts and moments in which boundaries are broken down; there are also rappers, which I did not study in this project, who are willing and able to overcome racial, ethnic, and national boundaries through their engagement with hip hop. For reasons of scope, I do discuss them. However, their work does not cancel my conclusions regarding the rappers I study in this project. Rather, it is an exception to the rule that proves the rule.

I find a moment of blackface in the performance of the rapper Shachar "Shas" Swissa. Shachar Swissa takes on the pimp persona so prevalent in African American rap (see Appendix). In the video clip "Party," for example, he wears a white suit and holds a cane, homage to American "mack" rappers such as Snoop Doggy Dogg. Swissa's rap persona instantiates, in Lott's definition, both "love" and "theft." Swissa's caricature of an American rapper demeans his subject, but under the sign of ridicule, Swissa celebrates black American culture. His caricature masks a desire and

an attraction that "attempt [sic] to repress through ridicule the real interest in black cultural practices" (Lott 1998:6). The extravagant outfit and the intentionally funny voice and exaggerated accent that Swissa employs are a caricature of an American rapper.

By ridiculing rap music that he also admires, Swissa is able to un-claim his association with blackness—while claiming it simultaneously. He is "only a clown," an impersonator—not a real rapper who takes himself seriously. Still, Swissa is a serious rapper who recorded two albums and performs regularly. The ambivalence of his public persona—serious musician on one hand, a clown who masquerade as a rapper on the other—is a moment of blackface in Israeli rap. In other words, Like Roediger and Rogin argue that blackface expressed the attraction of whites for black powerful expressiveness minus the need or desire to cancel slavery, in Israeli rap I too find the same incoherency: simultaneous attraction and repulsion.

Another element of blackface in Israeli rap music, which is similar to blackface in American culture, is that the taking on of a rapper identity in fact accentuates their Israeli identity rather than the role that they attempt to play. When an Israeli plays the role of a rapper—no matter how professional he is—he enters into moment of blackface when he says, for example, "muthafucka" or "bitch," or in the way in which he holds the microphone and moves. In these moments his Israeli identity is emphasized because the fact that he is playing a role of a rapper underlines the fact that he is *not*. As a result, rap music in Israel reproduces Israeli identities rather than alleviates them. It lays emphasis on the blackface element and reminds the audience that under the "burnt cork" rappers remain Israelis, and hence calls attention to the boundary between Israeli and non-Israeli as well as the boundary between black and white. As Butler has explained (quoted in Lott 1995:33),

"performativity scripts identities. It defines group members by the roles they are forced to play. Far from simply escaping power, performance also operated under its sign." In other words, by performing the role of a rapper, Israeli rappers underscore their Israeliness, not their "rapper-ness," as it becomes clear that they are engaged in the performance of a role.

Furthermore, Lhamon (1998) suggests that blackness as a cultural practice in the United States was a liberating ritual for those who practiced it. My study reveals that the engagement with rap music is also liberating for rappers in Israel. Indeed, expressing oneself in a foreign language produces a feeling of distance from what is expressed and allows for certain expressions that might not be easily expressed in a native tongue, such as obscenities and discussions of sexual actions. In these moments, rap music serves as a mask underneath the Israeli rapper can hide his "real" self and be someone else for a limited period of time.

I sum, while rap music in Israel, like blackface, "loosen up white identities by taking over black ones, by underscoring the line between white and black" (Rogin 1998:34), it also exposes group members by the roles they are forced to play, and reproduces Israeli nationalism by emphasizing differences rather than similarities between Israeli rappers and those after whom they take. Although as such it has the potential to subvert, or at least to slightly crack hegemonic culture, it also emphasizes the blackface element in it and the boundary between Israeli/Jewish and non-Israeli/Jewish.

#### **4.2.1 Sexual Innuendo in Hebrew**

The use of vulgar and profane language is a deliberate act whose purpose is to shock and shake norms of "proper" behavior. Despite the fact that verbal sexual vulgarities

are used by all classes in Israel as curse words, sexual innuendo in Hebrew have never been taken seriously as a category to study. I want to move toward such an analysis by treating sexual innuendo in rap music as a popular form of speech that reveals certain truths related to political and cultural relations. I believe that profanities, vulgar language, and sexual allusion in rap music in Israel are also about order, protest, and power relations. In order to connect vulgarity with power, I take up the idea that the grotesque and the obscene are essential characteristics of resistance to domination, exploitation, and oppressive social order. My analysis of rap music links gender roles, sexuality, and machismo with ethnic cleavages, political conflict, and class divide. Looking closely at rap music in Israel convinced me that profanities and sexual vulgarities are a form of popular laughter that comprise a public form of speech available to the common person. For example, when the rappers in PR Troopers rap "what are you smiling for? / I am coming on your face in one moment" (in *Ktinot*), it can be seen as overly sexist, but also as a liberating laugh on appropriate talk. Hence, in the most immediate level, sexual innuendo in rap music in Hebrew serves as a site of liberation and as a challenge for oppressive sexual, language, and behavioral norms.

I find that there are moments in which Israeli rappers challenge the dictatorship of a "normal" body, "appropriate" language, and "proper" sexuality: a politics of slackness. According to Caroline Cooper (quoted in McAlister 2002:64), "slackness is potentially a politics of subversion. Slackness is not mere sexual looseness—though it certainly is that. Slackness is a metaphorical revolt against law and order, an undermining of consensual standards of decency." The use of obscenities, profanities, and references to genitalia situates rap music in what Bakhtin calls the "lower body stratum": the center of procreation and excretion. The fixation

with the lower bodily stratus testifies to the "insistence on the unofficial and counter-hegemonic truth of the lower stratum against middle-class decorum and norms of 'good conduct'" (Broyles-González 1994:32).

As Almog (2000) explores in detail, the Zionist pioneers and first generation *Sabras* had a restrained sexual public culture (what was done in the private realm was a different story). Sex was practiced only inside marriage, discussing sex was a taboo, and courting was perceived as a bourgeoisie custom that does not have a place in a revolutionary society. The physical desire between the sexes represented hedonism, a dedication to private pleasures in a time in which the individual was expected to commit oneself to the fulfillment of national and ideological goals. Almog adds (2000), that the main characteristic of the love and relationship culture of the *Sabra* was restraint, shyness, and embarrassment. This culture was shaped by the socialist ethos and the close supervision of society, and expectation to be committed to the cause of a Jewish State and not to private pleasures. Hence, sex was not the dominant ingredient of relationship, but rather it was friendship. The partner was not seen as a sexual object, and his or her physical quality was not an important consideration, hence not a lot of attention was given for body care and external appearance, neither for men nor for women. Moreover, the heterosexual family and women's reproductive duties were not only about gender rules, but also a national duty to reproduce the nation (Yuval-Davis 1999).

Furthermore, as Ben-Ari (2006) and Almog (2000) demonstrate, *Sabra* culture was characterized with sexual Puritanism. Hence, profane language had an important function, which is to "create solidarity amongst [the] players against authority." In particular in puritan *Sabra* culture, the use of profane language represented an association with marginal groups, while refraining from profane language included

the speaker in an elite group. She writes: "for the *Sabra*, the code of purity disassociated him from the non-*Sabra* "Other" and demanded ... commitment to the consensus discourse, distance from sexuality, rejection of forbidden thoughts, and contempt for profanity" (Ben-Ari 2006:87). Hence, the use of profanities in rap in Israel represents a local version of an act of subversion, whose roots are in the early Zionist puritan culture.

Many rap songs in Hebrew, however, use vulgar language and references to the lower bodily stratum. These songs are meant to be funny in their absurdity and rebellious in their vulgarity. For example, the rapper Quami raps in the song "What's My Name":

If I want to say that there is humiliating behavior toward women

And that there is no minimal respect, too many idiots

And everyone who is violent should have his dick cut off

Ouch! It hurts to hear that? Walla? On my dick!

I don't look for trouble

But if trouble looks for me

So let it come and scratch my balls between my pubic hairs

In *Nolad Lamut* ("Born to Die") in his second album, Quami, hosting the rapper Cottage, again uses vulgar language to subvert the dominant narrative, and subsequently empties his commentary of pathos, when he raps: "You enslaved us to history / the one that screws us from the back." In *Nolad Lamut*, Quami and Cottage mock the pathos of Israeli culture of death, producing an anti-war rap song in Hebrew, an antithesis to Subliminal's and The Shadow's war songs:

I have a strong rear, airplanes and shells

Americans that give me their support

I have a special permission to "get crazy"  
To plant destruction from within and without  
I send the sons—let's go to fight  
A true patriot does not argue  
Not for nothing I spent millions on the military and training  
There is no one like us and we will win  
I am a war hero, a tactician, a chess player  
No one can overcome me  
I don't move one centimeter without the approval from my advisors  
A puppet but I have no guarantee  
Common soldiers get on uniform  
Right, the flag is me, calling you to the front lines  
You will win decorations or you will be lucky to die like martyrs  
I arrange for you a reception with death  
I was born to die here...

Vulgar language evoking the lower bodily stratum and anal sex "flies in the face of official pretense and seriousness" (Broyles-González 1994:33) while commenting on a serious social issue – violence against women – thereby using profanity as a literary tool to employ his political protest. As MacAlister (2002:81) notes concerning the politics of profanity, "while this politics is not an engaged political movement, it is a politics of liberation nonetheless. This is because obscenities and vulgarities open a philosophical space for opposition and rejection of the suffering of the world through laughter." Accordingly, profane language in popular music constitutes a site in which the rapper comments on the social order. While some rap songs are explicit political manifestos (as I demonstrated in Chapter 2), and can occasion self-censorship or censorship from the state or from commercial

mass media, the politics of profane language are obscured and hence often go unmarked. Yet, profane language in rap songs can be read politically.

Another rapper who represents the politics of slackness is Lukatch (see Appendix), who, besides his excessive use of profanities and vulgar language, is obese. He uses his own body to transgress the borders of the normal. Many of his songs describe excessive eating. For example, in the song *Bet Ha-pancake* (The Pancake House), Lukatch raps a long list of his favorite dishes in his favorite diner, The Pancake House:

You feel like something exotic? Order coconut  
There is peach pancake and nuts pancake  
And if you come on *Tu Bshvat* (holiday of nature) there is raisin pancake  
Berries pancake and egg pancake  
Chocolate mousse and Bavarian crème  
So many types with maple and chocolate syrup  
But there is only one Pancake House  
So if you come and you are hungry  
There is toast with omelets and humus to wipe from the plate  
There is also chilly and lots of meats  
Because the Pancake House is good, and diversifies

Despite his obesity, Lukatch celebrates his excessive appetite. Bakhtin writes, that "eating and drinking are one of the most significant manifestations of the grotesque body. ... Man's encounter with the world in the act of eating is joyful, triumphant; he triumphs over the world, devours it without being devoured himself" (Bakhtin 1968:281). Lukatch's obese body and his display and flaunting of excessive eating represent his defiance of order, of his "triumph over the world." Like rap music itself, Lukatch shows no respect to borders and distinctions. He uses his body

as a challenge to the norm that excludes his body as abnormal. He displays it and it excessive appetite as an affront. As Boje (2004:4) explains, "During Rabelais's (1532/1873) novels, it was appropriate to ridicule the king and clergy, to use dung and urine to degrade; this was not to just mock, it was to unleash what Bakhtin saw as the people's power, to renew and regenerate the entire social system. It was the power of the people's restive-carnival, a way to turn the official spectacle inside-out and upside down, just for a while." Lukatch's performance is, to borrow Boje's phrase, a "restive-carnival," a momentary challenge to power. Lukatch's defiance, however, is a mask of a deep-rooted pain of his struggle to be accepted and to survive as an unhealthy person, a struggle and pain that he describes in *Zman Leshinuyim* ("Time for Change") from his album.

The transgression of boundaries, as I noted above, is in the nature of hip hop itself; it is the lack of distinction between what is appropriate and what is inappropriate. The transgression of boundaries between the profane and the sacred is both the nature of hip hop and of the carnival. Nechosthati compares it, poetically, to filth, or foulness. She quotes Georges Bataille, who describes filth as staining not only "my body and my thoughts, but everything that I imagine in her presence and especially the starry universe" (Bataille, quoted in Nechoshtai 2006). She writes that filth "does not only sully, but it cancels, in a global move, the very existence of a differentiation and division between the clean and the dirty, between the infected and the neutral. Nothing in the world is left neutral; the creation is all-embracing, and everything that comes in touch with her absorbs her and is washed away by her movement. The entire universe is infected; the entire universe is raw material." *Just like rap music.*

Another example the use of profane language are the songs *Tni Li* (Let me) by Subliminal, and *Mekofef Habananot* (The Banana Bender) by Shabak Samech. In *Tni Li*, Subliminal raps in the refrain:

Who, who, want to come with TACT  
Take your shirt up, take your mini skirt down  
I want you always with me because...  
I will explain to you in a second  
In the mean time, go down on me  
...  
Give me a second until you sit on me  
We will talk about the future but in the mean time  
Go down on me

Shabak Samech, in comparison, painted Israeli men in both vulgar and humoristic way in *Mekofef Habananot*. The bananas received an obvious sexual meaning, and the Banana Bender, who was an innocent fairytale character in the original song, turned into a Casanova, a womanizer who gets all the women he wants:

I came from Iraq to spread the knack  
Wallak, a sex machine from the Shabak  
Another bending there, another bending vagina  
Another little bending, I do *mitzvas* (Good deeds)  
She will be in shock  
When she sees my artichoke  
My sister, I am a cool farmer  
Slip on a banana, give me a complaint  
I am 20 centimeters after the *bris* (male circumcision)

How can I read *Tni Li* and *Mekofef Habananot* as both a feminist and a rap scholar that insist on rap as a form of a hidden transcript? On one hand, there are explicit advances that can be read a potential for violence against women (for example, the PR Trooperz's *Ktinot*), but it is also a moment of unrestrained carnivalesque. However, whether the lyrics are an expression of disrespect towards women or not is not relevant, because this is an act of *Purim*. The rappers are only disguising as rappers momentarily, but they really are Zionist subjects.

In sum, when rap music came to Israel, it brought with it a form of speech that conceals a "hidden transcript" of people under domination that it retained also in its commercialized form. The Israeli rappers might or might not see the transcripts of resistance hidden in it, but regardless, when they imitate it they also create a moment of subversion. Because of certain cultural politics where obscenities and vulgarities are dismissed and derided, they become a form of speech that allows the voiceless, marginalized, powerless poor to perform opposition, create community, and receive visibility. They are in the "lowest" end of culture, and they take advantage of the only speech available to them: obscenities and vulgarities that are their only expressive space in the public arena. It is a momentary release of "civilized self-restraint" (Rogin 1998:39), which encapsulates a possibility for liberation, both personal and political.

#### **4.2.2 Masculinity and Ethnicity**

In this section I explore masculinity in rap music in Hebrew. Reading the lyrics and performances of Israeli rappers, I find that they imitate black performers in their lyrical style, using their bodies and their personal style to assert their masculinity. In the United States, rap music serves as a field for the construction of black

masculinity, as Jeffrey Ogbar (2007:76) asserts: "black men have created a palpable celebration of their masculinity in the form of hip hop discourse and style." The contact of Israeli young rappers with American rap music reveals a complex web of signifiers that are connected to global hip hop culture, Israeli ethnic divisions and hierarchies, and Zionist ideology. Therefore, an African American symbolic presence is felt in the music through these signifiers.

A comprehensive study on the masculinity of the Israeli Jew has not yet been done, but all studies that touch upon the subject attest to the construction of the *Sabra* Jew as a masculine, tough, militarized man (Almog 2000; Ben-Ari 2006). Zionism was a national movement, and as such it was a masculine movement. Zionism aspired to free Jews from the feminine-neurotic-impotent image that was associated with Jews in Europe (Sander 1991), and "killed" this image by positioning masculinity as a goal for the healing of Jewish disease (Ben-Ari 2006). As Raz Yosef writes (2004:31), "Zionism aspired to construct a "proper" Jewish male sexuality, distinguished from the "deviant," so-to-speak homosexual, of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. The Zionist conception maintains that a normal male sexual existence is a pre-condition to a normal national condition. This way, the Zionist culture pushed away the *galuti'im* (of-exile), feminine Jewish elements that were conceived as threatening its wholeness, and prepared the ground for the construction of an Israeli militaristic, *Sabra*, masculinity model."

The merging of black masculinity with Israeli masculinity in Israeli rap music – or rather, the dialectics between them – appears as a rich field for explorations of sexual identities and national culture. In what comes next, I start with discussing black masculinity in American rap music.

#### 4.2.2.1 Fear of a Black Body

"Hip hop is masculine music," hip hop scholar Imani Perry (2004:118) declares. Indeed, hip hop is masculine music: the strong, forceful bodies, the oversized cloths, the aggressive hand and pelvis movements, the profane language, the sexual innuendo, and the blatant explicitness. Rap music and the black body have grown to become intertwined in the public imagination, making rap music a fertile terrain for the study of black masculinity.

In 1903 Du Bois formulated his famous account of black people's "double-consciousness." He wrote:

*"[T]he Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—An American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder"* (Du Bois [1903]1989:5, my emphasis)

Since Du Bois, studies of art and culture throughout American history reveal that the black body is subject to the white gaze and to objectification through the gaze, and is conceived as a site of desire and repulsion, jealousy and fear (Guerrero 1993; Rogin 1998; Lott 1993; Lhamon 1998). Cornyetz (1994), for example, discusses the fetishization of the black body in Japan. She explains that blackness is associated in Japan with phallic empowerment for both men and women. Also Perry argues that "contemporary pornographic obsessions with the size of black male

genitalia show us that an earlier era's paranoid fixation on black male sexuality and the fear of black humanity ... lie only a bit beneath the surface at the beginning of the twenty-first century" (Perry 2004:120). Lhamon (1998) points out that blackface revealed a desire to the black body, and Michael Dyson (in Cornyetz 1994:124) asserts that "few images have caused more anxiety in the American sexual psyche than the black male embodiment of phallic prowess. A sordid range of stereotypes, jealousies and fears have been developed around black men wielding their sexuality in ways that are perceived as untoward, unruly, or uncontrolled." In other words, the stereotype of the black man as hyper-sexualized had been prevalent both in American culture and globally.

Historically, in the United States, the black body was feminized due to a "ritualized humiliation" (Perry 2004) during the enslavement and Jim Crow eras. The black man had to live a "fragile existence, mediated by his own encounters with white male patriarchy" (Perry 2004:119). Black men's masculinity in the United States had developed in the shadow of white supremacy laws and the consequent experience of dehumanization and humiliation. Hip hop can be seen as a reaction to this historical humiliation of the black male. Perry argues (2004:118) that "masculinity in hip hop reflects the desire to assert black male subjectivity, and [it] ... sometimes does so at the expense of black female subjectivity and by subjugating women's bodies, while at other times it simply reveals the complexity of black male identity." She points out that the black feminist writer bell hooks also argues that "black men have fought back by embracing hyper-masculinity" (hooks, in Perry 2004:121). In other words, the black men's hyper-masculinity is a reaction to the feminizing gaze of the white man, a "way of challenging a sense of race and gender powerlessness" (Perry 2004:122). By way of fashion, musical, and cultural innovation, young black males challenged

dominant cultural norms and expectations. The performance of sexual aggression and aggrandizement represents defiance against depicting the black male less-than-a-man, and as reclamation of the right to be sexual.

However, with the development and growth of hip hop culture, young black males in the urban ghetto can no longer be solely conceived as underdogs. Perry (2004:121) suggests that there are two prominent images of the black male on American media: on one hand, the grand, successful, rich, and attractive celebrity star, and on the other hand the nameless criminal or victim of violent crime. She asserts that hip hop "marries the two images into one unified picture of the black superstar and the thug" (Perry 2004:121).

In short, hip hop style is interwoven with black skin in the United States as well as globally, and black masculinity is entrenched in it. Hip hop is interwoven with black masculinity and with the "phallus as a signifier of a subtext of masculine, heterosexual body power" (Cornyetz 1994:115). Furthermore, as Driesinger asserts, "playing the black man's tune" is "a predominantly masculine enterprise" (2008:116), and so, when Israeli MC Peled tells me "I am black," and the producer Tamir Kehaty publishes a sticker reading "I have a white ass and a black soul," I am told that "blackness" is not seen as skin color, genetics, and not even as certain group affiliation. Instead, it can be musical preference or taste. The rappers are driven, as Driesinger points out, by "fantasies of this transformation, which is imagined as providing white men with a new sense of potency" (Driesinger 2008:11).

What happens, then, when Israeli men attempt to express themselves through rap music? How do they use rap music to construct a masculine identity? The merging of rap music with Israeli masculinity—or rather, the dialectics between them—appears as a rich field for explorations of sexual identities and national

culture. Furthermore, the performance of Israeli male rappers provides an opportunity to inquire into questions of masculinity and ethnicity, in particular Mizrahi ethnicity.

#### 4.2.2.2 Trickster → *Ars*

Zionist ideology constructed the male body as central to the building of a new Jewish nation in Palestine. The Zionists envisaged the new Jewish body in Israel as strong, dark, hairy, and sexually potent, as opposed to a feminine, white and weak body of the Jew in the European Diaspora, which the Zionists wished to "remasculinize," to use Levine's (2003) phrase. In early Zionist culture, the *Sabras* were portrayed as the chosen sons and daughters of the Jewish people; the New Jews. Anti-thesis to East European Jews, the *Sabras* were positioned against the alleged "inferiority" of the Diaspora Jew. Regarding the beauty of the *Sabra*, Almog (2000) writes:

"In the description of the son of the Land we find in particular characters such as masculine strength and physical health, the alienation from Judaism according to the Christian-European standards. The body is slim, supple, strong, tanned and tall, the neck is long, the head is full of hair, high cheekbones, pug nose, and Slavic face clean of thick beard. ... The jealousy of the *goy* and the desire to resemble him and to start a new type of Jew were the reason for the vast attention that the pioneers gave to the physicality of the *Sabra*. ... contrary to the passivity and the introverted-ness that characterized the East European *yeshiva bucher* (young man who is a student of religious school)."

As Pellegrini (in Levine 2003:61) points out, "the feminization of the Jewish male body was so frequent a theme in this period that Jewishness—more precisely the Jewishness of the Jewish men—became as much a category of gender as of race." In

his study of images of Jews in American culture, Paul Breines maintains that "the body of ... a victim," with its "'narrow shoulders . . . shallow chest, and knobby elbows and knees,'" is the "body [that] crystallizes the history of hapless Jewish suffering." Breines points out poignantly, "the most potent Jewish bodily image of all [is] the Jewish corpse in the Nazi death camp." Thus, Breines explicitly links representations of Jews killed in the Holocaust with a long history of associations between the weak, defective, feminized body and the Jew" (in Levine 2003:61).

Cohen (2009) similarly argues that the Jewish body was feminized, and adds that "male Jews remained 'different' and frequently continued to hold a feminized status within the context of secular society; but ... their concerns for social advancement within that society made their feminized status a liability. Governing perceptions of male Jewish physical inferiority, such as the hooked nose, circumcised penis, and flat feet, further eroded Jewish masculinity, and led both medical and social scientists to classify them in less-than-virile terms" (Cohen 2009:3).

However, while in the United States, images of Jews in the popular media took on certain iconicity as "particular, neurotic, unathletic, and overshadowed by strong if not overbearing women" (Cohen 2009), in Israel the image of the Jewish male was constructed as an anti-thesis to the American Jew (and any Jew of the exile – *galut*), as strong and virile. As the Israeli military became a world military power and the figure of the Israeli man became synonymous with aggression and military prowess. While these two counter-images of the European Jewish male—the Zionist and the *galuti*—continued to exist throughout twentieth-century America, they faced another transformation in the Jewish State, as an influx of Mizrahi Jews arrived in the new state in the 1950s and 1960s from Muslim countries in North Africa and the Middle East.

Recent work by Raz Yosef has mapped out the field of Israeli masculinity in general, and of Mizrahi masculinity in particular. Yosef (2004:31) explains that "questions on race and ethnicities, especially regarding Mizrahi Jews, play only a secondary role, if at all, in intellectual debates on the founding of Zionist masculinity." Yosef's study intervenes in this absence. He argues:

"[t]he Zionist discourse applied on the Arab-Jewish body complementary practices of homogenization and differentiation that blurred and erased the experience of the Mizrahi body. ... The Mizrahi body was nationalized as part of, seemingly, the founding of the universal national subject, and melted into practices of homogenization (the melting pot) into a collective, neutral, modern framework, so to speak, that carried in fact quintessential Ashkenazi character. ... In order to found the Jewish national (Ashkenazi) body as the binary contradiction of the Arab Other, the Jewish Mizrahi body was nationalized and was engulfed by the Zionist, Ashkenazi, masculine order" (Yosef 2004:33).

Ben-Ari (2006:88) similarly asserts that "The New Jew was supposed to be secular, educated, and modern; i.e., Ashkenazi. The immigrants from the east were the opposite of this image, at least in the eyes of the European immigrants: religious or traditional and uneducated. ... the imagery of backwardness was strengthened by anthropologists who described the east as primitive and washed with sensual desire. The Mizrahim were conceived as potential threat to the norm of *Sabra* purity." She demonstrates how the new immigrants were associated with prostitution, excessive sexuality, and sex diseases.

In his study on Israeli cinema, Yosef (2004:33) argues that "Zionism marked the Mizrahi body as the gender and sexual Other of the Jewish-Ashkenazi body ideal." He argues that Israeli cinema reveals that Mizrahi males were constructed as

"primitive, savage, and violent." The derogatory name *Ars* (*Arsim* in plural) reveals the place of Mizrahi masculinity within Israeli masculinities.

A recent special edition by the journal *Hakivun Mizrah* (Direction East) has taken up for the first time the sensitive, controversial issue of the representation of Mizrahim in popular culture, in particular the figures of the *Ars* and the *Freha*, who have become derogatory words that indicate a Mizrahi ethnic background. The origin of the word *Ars* is from the Arabic, literary meaning a pimp. Originally, the *Ars* was meant as a derogatory word for criminal, overly-adorned, inarticulate men. The female version of the *Ars* is the *Freha*, a vulgar, uneducated woman who dresses without style or sense of refinement. The word *Freha* in Arabic literally means happiness, and it was a common name for Jewish women who came to Israel from Arabic-speaking countries, in particular Morocco. It changed its meaning when it was used as an insult toward Mizrahi women whose accent, dress, and behavior were different than the female *Sabra* figure, who was expected to behave with restraint and to dress simply. Throughout the years, the *Ars* and the *Freha* became signifiers for a certain socio-economic background, which can be identified through speech, behavior, culture, and profession.

The *Ars*'s coquetry and emphasize on outlandish fashion, with leather pointed shoes, outrageous hats, and silk shirt open down to the last button to expose hairy chests, became an anti-thesis to the *Sabra*'s simplicity—wearing sandals or walking barefoot, wearing khaki pants and simple white shirt—and hence perceived as being higher class and having "earthly" qualities (Almog 2000). Zionist culture regarded simple dress as a value and a virtue, as a sign of commitment and sacrifice for the collective and for the cause. Hence the elaborate fashion exhibited by the *Ars* and the *Freha* were ridiculed. At certain times, they were also policed, as girls who wore

panty hose and youth who was accused of attending "salon parties" where people danced and drank, were dismissed from the Zionist youth movements (Shor 2008).

But more than simply standing for the vulgar and the crass in Israeli culture, the *Ars* and *Freha* signify an act of defiance of the Zionist project and Israeli culture. The *Ars* and the *Freha*, hence, were not simply degraded and looked down at by hegemonic Ashkenazi culture; they were seen as a threat for the strength of the nation, as each subject in the new nation was expected to be fully committed to the project of nation-building. As Ivry (2008:29-30) suggests, the *Ars* and the *Freha* have become "the negative picture against which the "true," rooted Israeli identity is designed. Their character is portrayed as contaminating Israeli culture in improper language and shallow culture; they are identified with the process of Levantization of the Hebrew culture that erodes the Western-European character of formal culture." Ivry (2008:26-31) further argues, that the *Ars* "threatened the socialist ethos to whose light the society in Israel imagined itself. The [*Ars*] represented the salon (as opposed to the youth movement), adorned, erotic appearance against the Zionist ethos of modesty and uniformity ... an atmosphere of carnival, a masked ball without an end. They are represented in a pompous, exaggerated, ridiculous fashion. They ... portray a bizarre and carnivalesque world, lacking order, that deconstruct the coded of formal behavior."

Ella Shohat (1991) argues in her study of Israeli cinema that movies portraying the Mizrahim as an underclass are characterized by carnivalesque humor, in which the underclass in fact disrespectfully mocks the oppressive class. She points out that a certain protagonist in this type of movies is able to overcome his oppressor by the use of trickery. She writes: "In this momentary inversion of the alignment of power in society... the underclass (marginalized man), politically helpless, succeed, not

without self-irony, to win in bed, and in the carnivalesque "logic" of inversion, he wins power and symbolic potency. Watching these movies turn into, therefore, a therapy in which the underclass laugh not only at their own weakness, but also at the limits of power of the center—a collective, liberating laughter" (Shohat 1991:125).

I find this "liberating laughter" present in certain Israeli rap songs, in which there is a meeting of the trickster—the trope of the lawless urban African American legend—and the *Ars*. They both represent a challenge to hegemonic culture in a carnivalesque humor: the coquetry fashion, profane language, and tales of sexual conquests and defiance of the law. Both reject "proper" codes of behavior and what is right, and they occupy a space of both desire and repulsion by dominant culture. It is begged, then, that the Israeli rapper would exist in the place in which the trickster meets the *Ars*.

For example, as Subliminal and The Shadow rap, the *Ars* might be conceived as repulsive by "descent" women, but he is also an object of erotic desire. In the song Freestyle Subliminal raps: "You may be calling me *Ars* / but admit it that I am going to score it with you," and the Shadow raps in *Mechoeret* (Ugly Woman): "I may sound like *Ars* but today I fuck." In another song, Respect, The Shadow reclaims the title of *Ars*, and turns it into a title of respect: "I graduated from the University of Life with a Bachelor of *Ars*."

The song *Tenaanei Tatachat* (Shake Your Ass) by the duo *Ha'Israelim* (The Israelis) provides an evocative illustration for the rapper as *Ars*. In dialogue with hip hop classics such as Shake Ya Ass by Mystical, the track includes stereotyped depictions of Mizrahi males. Biggie and Shorty, the two rappers that make up the duo, are of Yemenite background, which they emphasize by the Yemenite pronunciation of the letters *Het* (ה) and *Ayin* (א), and street-smart cultural

knowledge. The rhyming styles and language play employ rap conventions such as "Shake ya ass / move everything / I'm a great player / I will score a goal," and "I am black / I am tough / I suffered from discrimination," as well as vulgarities such as "Tell me what's up with you / where are you / you grew so much / you look hot / do you want some in your ass," complete with a video clip that features a pool party, a limousine, and women dancing in swimming suits. Yet amid all the elements of play and rap stereotypes, the song's final message turned out to have its own twist: "I broke / I destroyed / I blew up faces / Three years like a maniac / I grinded in the Territories."

In the end, then, *HaIsraelim* transmit a clear articulation of what constitutes an Israeli male life: military service in the Territories, in which their masculinity is proved by aggression toward the Palestinians. The carnival-like chauvinist masculinity of the first part of the song is replaced with real-life, militaristic Israeli chauvinism, which reminds the listener that the subversion offered in the first part of the song, was rather momentary.

Finally, while Subliminal and The Shadow flaunt their *Ars*-ness in defiance of the norms of Zionist masculinity, other rappers parade a Jewish nebbish identity as *both* an anti-thesis to the *Ars*/trickster rapper persona that is expected of them as rappers—and to the macho masculinity that is expected from them as Israeli males. The rappers from the duo Cohen@Mushon, for example, rap: "When you played soccer I listen to "love, love me do, you know I love you," and, "If you tell me sex / I will say "a miracle." Also, they poke fun of their physical appearance: "We don't go over 5'2"," and dedicate a whole song, *Kosher Gufani* (Physical Shape), to praise being out of shape: they don't play soccer, don't get the girls, and are out of shape. They poke fun for a less-than-masculine body:

Cohen: don't play soccer

Mushon: don't play basketball

Cohen: all the energy is gone

Mushon: I prefer to be chillin'

Cohen: Don't pretend to have muscles

Cohen@Mushon: Cuz Cohen@Mushon say no for physical exercise, I don't have psychical ability, no...

By laughing at themselves, Cohen@Mushon use self-disparaging humor to rob their aggressors of the opportunity to do it, and their disadvantages become advantages. At the same time, they also employ humor to refuse and resist the societal norm that demand that as Israeli men they would have a strong muscular body and be good soldiers. By creating themselves as rappers rather than soldiers, they craft a place for alternative Israeli masculinity.

In sum, although the rappers challenge Israeli masculinity as either *Ars* or nebbish, the subversion is momentary. I now turn to think about this momentary subversion as also a moment of blackface. By doing so, I add another layer of meaning to my argument on Israeli rap as an act of *Purim*. Not only that rap music is an act of *Purim*, a moment of carnival, but these moments encapsulate the possibility to globalize the Israeli rappers, and hence are useful in legitimizing *Zionism* in the world. This reinforces my argument that rap music is not counter-hegemonic. Through rap music, Israeli rappers become a part of an imagined global community—even as they continue to promote nationalism and *Zionism*—which might hold the prospect of carving out a space for a positive statement about Israel and Israelis in the world. Sadly, translating black American masculine tropes into Israeli tropes, e.g., from trickster to *Ars*, create possibilities for solidarity across national borders and for

a bridging of differences that are apparent elsewhere, possibilities that are not fulfilled.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

In sum, the engagement in rap music enables Israeli rappers to "globalize" themselves and to consider themselves as both Israelis and global citizens. However, since the role of a rapper is only an act of *Purim* and not a real taking on of an identity, Israeli rappers do not have to give up their privileged position in Israeli society. They enact the desire to acquire African American expressive power and supposed emotional freedom without actually having to lose their privileged position and without having to face the real racial and ethnic conflicts in Israeli society, as their engagement with rap music occurs without intimate cross-racial contact locally or globally.

#### **Appendix:**



Lukatch



Shachar Swissa, aka Shas, aka Swissi, wearing a white suit and a white hat and holding a cane, surrounded by dancing young, good-looking girls, from the video-clip "*Mesiba*" ("Party").

## **Chapter 5**

### **Stranger in My Own Country**

#### ***Palestinian Rappers in Israel***

*The blue ID card worth nothing to us  
Let us believe we are a part of a nation  
That does nothing but makes us feel like strangers  
Stranger in my own country  
(Mahmoud Jreri, DAM)*

So far I have demonstrated that rap music in Israel is hegemonic and is made within Zionist hegemony, notwithstanding moments of subversion. In this chapter I turn to the main exception to my argument, exception that nonetheless proves the argument: the case of Palestinian rappers in Israel. The Palestinian citizens of Israel are native to the area and have lived in historical Palestine before the advent of the Zionist movement and the colonization of Palestine. They are not Jewish or Zionists, and are systematically discriminated by the state due to its

Thus, rap music made by Palestinian citizens of Israel is understood as a "natural" example of global rap.

Approximately 1.2 million Arabic-speaking Palestinians who are citizens of Israel live in Israel, making about twenty-three percent of the population. They are the largest minority group in Israel. The majority of them are Muslim, and they do not serve in the military even if they wanted to. There are also smaller numbers of Arab Christians and Druze who serve in the Israeli military. All—Muslim, Christian, Druze—can vote and be elected to the Knesset. However, as Bishara (2001:58) argues, although they are officially part of Israeli society, Palestinian citizens of Israel continue to be viewed as "the enemy within" and relegated to the status of second class citizens in the Jewish state.

In this chapter, I argue that young Palestinians who are citizens of Israel are turning to rap music as their preferred avenue to promote Palestinian nationalism, to

perform their resistance to Israeli occupation and oppression, and to insert themselves into global coalitions. The chapter is divided into four sections. In the first part, I discuss the presence of music in Arabic in the realm of Israeli music, and argue that despite minor forages into the field of popular Israeli music, music in Arabic is not conceived as Israeli music. Thus, although the Palestinian rappers are citizens of Israel, they are not making "Israeli rap" but rather "Palestinian rap," and they use rap music to advance the Palestinian national cause. Living with these contradictory identities – Palestinian and Israeli – Palestinian rappers are caught between the two worlds. In the third part, I discuss the ways in which rap music, as a performative action, is employed as a tool of resistance. And in the fourth part, I demonstrate how rap enables Palestinian rappers who are citizens of Israel to partake in a global transnational "community of the oppressed."

### **5.1.1 Yes, but is it *Israeli* rap?**

In December 2008 I taught a class on Israeli hip hop in Emek Izrael College. The day after the attack on Gaza began, I was scheduled to discuss Palestinian hip hop in class. Perhaps naively, I came to class and taught the class as planned. My presentation included excerpts from a documentary on Palestinian hip hop and a number of video clips. In the second half of the class, I met with students individually to discuss their assignments. One of my students was visibly angry, and told me that he "didn't feel like" doing the final assignment. I inquired what made him so upset, and he answered, that in a "day like this" he didn't feel comfortable to hear music in Arabic. I made him do his work anyway. But what does that tell us about the presence of Arabic music and the Arabic language in the Israeli public sphere?

Most Palestinians living inside Israel tell have families who during the 1947-49 war fled their homes in Jaffa, Haifa, Majdal, and many other towns and villages which do not exist today, believing that they will be back to their homes when the war was over, but were never allowed returning to their homes since then. Those who remained within the borders of Israel by the end of the war in 1949 lived under Israeli military regime until 1966, and in 1966 became citizens of Israel. They suffer from both institutionalized discrimination, such as the prohibition to buy "state lands," to serve in the army, to unit with spouses and families from the West Bank and Gaza or the larger Palestinian Diaspora, or to work in state companies such as Israeli Electric Corp., and from informal forms of discrimination and racism. The state had given formal equality and civil rights to Palestinians in Israel when it terminated the military regime in 1966, but in reality Palestinians citizens of Israeli continued to suffer from institutionalized and informal racism and discrimination (Herzog, Leikin, and Sharon 2008; Ganem 2008). While the state has given many benefits for Jews, Palestinians are separated but not equal (Bishara 2001; Peleg 2004). Palestinian towns, neighborhoods, and villages are discriminated against with public funding for education, health, and infrastructure, unemployment is higher in comparison to its percentage within the Jewish population, and geographical expansion is highly truncated by stringent limitation on building permits. Some even suggest a form of "apartheid" against Palestinians citizens of Israel (Tarazi 2009). While Palestinian citizens of Israel have formal equality in the Israeli democracy, inequality exists de facto.

It is not surprising, then, that in such atmosphere, music in Arabic has been absent in the public realm of music in Israel. In 1995, Regev wrote: "None of the Hebrew radio stations include Arab music in their programs or playlists. The only

place where Arab music can be heard on Israeli radio is on the Arabic station, which is not an all-music station. ... Arab music is rarely present on the local mass media, which means that its presence in Israeli culture is publically denied" (p. 442). Regev (1995:442) further explains, that "There is no official prohibition for playing Arab music on Israeli radio," but that rather "it is the autonomous decision of music editors who admit that playing Arab music on a Hebrew radio station is a cultural border which they cannot cross." Whether officially or not, Arab music is almost absent from the Israeli public culture; it has a "marginal presence." Although there have been several co-operations of Jewish and Arab musicians (Perleson 1998), and there are Jewish musicians who sing in Arabic (Horowitz 2004), these examples are rare. The Arabic language has been demonized and as a result has been excluded from the public sphere. The situation had become more severe after 2000.

The outbreak of the Al Aqsa intifada and the killing of 13 Palestinian protesters by the Israeli police inside Israel in October 2000 crystallized the national sentiment among Palestinian citizens of Israel. Bishara (2001:64-65) explains: "In the wake of the events, the unity of the Arab national minority reached levels not known before, including the emergence of a completely unaccustomed solidarity between village and town, as well as a strengthening of national and human bonds spanning the Green Line. In sum, the October events fostered a level of national awareness and a solidity of national identity that the national movement would have required years to develop in ordinary times. [...] The October events expressed both the Arab citizens' genuine solidarity as a national movement and their alienation from the institutions of the Hebrew state."

Palestinian rappers inside Israel who identified as Arab-Israelis and rapped in Hebrew and English before 2000 started to rap in Arabic and to express Palestinian

nationalism in their rap lyrics. DAM from Lyd and MWR from Akka<sup>1</sup> were the first to emerge.

Regev (2004:23) explains that the presence of Palestinian citizens of Israel in the field of popular music is marked by a certain dualism: "On one hand, there is insistence on autonomy and Arabness, on being an Israeli variant of a larger Palestinian identity. On the other hand, there is a demand for presence and legitimacy within Israeli culture, for being a Palestinian variant of Israeliness." In the scene of Palestinian rap, this dualism is marked, primarily, by language and name terminology: rapping in Arabic and referring to themselves as Palestinians and not as Israelis.

Rapping in Arabic instead of Hebrew represents nationalism and a rejection of Zionism. By rapping in Arabic, Palestinian musicians who are citizens of Israel attempt to assert their identity and to undermine the dominance of the Hebrew language in the public sphere. Since they speak both languages, Palestinian rappers who are citizens of Israel can choose in which language to rap, and their choice represents a political statement. While Regev (2004:24) suggests that "cultural practices that represent Palestinian Israeliness have one major consequence for the existence of Israeli culture: they add non-Jewish variant to the local field of national culture, and thus contest the Jewish exclusiveness of that culture," Palestinian rappers who rap in Arabic demonstrate that they are disinterested in "adding a non-Jewish variant to the local field of national culture," but rather in adding to the field of Palestinian culture. DAM's website, for example, is in Arabic and English, but not in Hebrew. The songs are translated from Arabic into English, and there is no Hebrew

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<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, I use the Arab names of towns, because this is the way in which the rappers call them. Hence I will use the name Lyd instead of Lod, Akka instead of Akko, and Yafa instead of Yafo.

translation available. In a screening of *Slingshot Hip Hop*, a documentary about Palestinian hip hop in which they star, in Tel Aviv University in summer 2008, the Q&A session was conducted in Arabic without translation. When I requested a translation, only one answer was translated. The conversation returned to Arabic immediately afterwards, although many of the people in the audience were students who did not speak Arabic.

In sum, by rapping in Arabic Palestinians who are citizens of Israel connect to the Arab world and to a global rap community, and distance themselves from Israeli society who by and large does not speak Arabic. As Perelson (1998:118) contends, "[a]ny minority wishing to validate its culture within a canon determined by the majority needs to do so by challenging some of the central norms of majority culture. In this case, one of these central norms is the strong linkage between language and territory, which seems natural and self-evident to the majority. Contesting the link is a way in which the minority can undermine not only accepted cultural definitions, but also the very validity of the canon determined by majority culture." Palestinian rappers in Israel contest the linkage between the Hebrew language and the territory, and assert an alternative linkage: the linkage between Arabic language and the territory.

A second dualism is marked by name terminology. Palestinian rappers demonstrate their disinterest in adding a "non-Jewish variant to the local field of national culture" by using the name Palestine instead of Israel and the Arabic names of their hometowns instead of their official Hebrew names. The members of DAM, for example, a rap trio made of three rappers from the mixed city Lyd in central Israel, introduce themselves as Palestinians from Lyd, Palestine, as opposed to Israelis from Lod, Israel. The use of Arabic names of towns that existed before the

Jewish colonization of Palestine illustrates DAM's rejection of Israeli citizenship. In performances the members of DAM are presented as "The first Palestinian rappers," and often starts their shows with a call and response session, calling the audience to chant in Arabic "DAM has arrived / from Palestine." Also, in a promotional clip posted on their website, DAM members present themselves as "DAM, the first Palestinian hip hop crew" or "the first hip hop crew from Palestine." The band members often don the Palestinian red-green-and-black flag on their shows, as a t-shirt or a fashion accessory.

Being a Palestinian, as opposed to Israeli, is present in many of DAM's songs. In *Mali Huriye* ("I Don't have Freedom"), Tamer raps: "If this barrier comes between me and my land / I'll still be connected to Palestine," and in *Ghareeb Fi Bladi* ("Stranger in my Country"), he raps "all of you can call us renegades or the inner Arabs or the Arabs of '48 / whatever / we'll keep the roots of Palestine till the end of time." In *Nghayer Bukra* ("Change Tomorrow"), Mahmoud raps: "In the white and the red / the green and the black / we will paint our culture" (white, red, green and black are the colors of the Palestinian flag), and he continues "My head is held high / in the name of Palestine."

Saz, a Palestinian rapper from the mixed city Ramle near Lyd, rejects the notion that he is Israeli because he holds a blue ID card. In a documentary film about him, he says: "I don't consider myself Israeli, I don't have a relationship with Israel. What's Israeli citizenship for me? My blue ID?" And he adds, "As time goes by, I realize I have nothing to do with this country. I have nothing here, but the land is mine. The police, the school, nothing is mine, nothing belongs to me" (in Maira 2008:179).

What can we call the rap that DAM and Saz make? Perelson (1998:116) suggests that when Israeli Palestinian singers are accepted "into the system of Israeli popular music" it represents a "broadening of the system's boundaries and a transformation from an exclusively Hebrew system into an Israeli one." Do the Palestinian rappers enlarge the definition of Israeli music as Regev predicted? As I will show below, Palestinian rappers do not indicate that they are interested in "enlarging" the system of Israeli popular music. They prefer to rap for Palestine.

Palestinian nationalist music has always played an important role in the Palestinian nationalist movement in "mobilizing the masses, crystallizing a nationalist movement, and stirring the emotions of the masses for the nationalist cause" (Massad 2002:175). However, rap music represents a new development in popular Palestinian nationalist music because it is led by Palestinians who are citizens of Israel. As Massad (2005:176) explains, "until the 1970, non-Palestinian Arab singers took the lead [in Palestinian nationalist music], with Palestinian singers moving to the forefront thereafter. More recently, and especially since 1998, a new spate of enthusiasm has expressed itself in songs for Palestine by both Palestinians and other Arabs."

Although Palestinian nationalist music continues to be dominated by traditional Arab sound, since the late 1990s rap music emerged as the dominate form to articulate the emotions and aspirations of Palestinians, especially young people, and has contributed to the development of a national consciousness among Palestinians who are citizens of Israel. It is the first time that Palestinians who are citizens of Israel take the lead to speak to the rest of Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and in the Diaspora, which represents a surge in nationalist sentiment among Palestinians who are citizens of Israel. The need to define their

identity, to gain pride in a state that denies them full citizenship and rejects their identity, to mobilize a national movement, to articulate their national aspirations, and to connect with youth globally, underlay the popularity and effectiveness of nationalist rap music among young Palestinians who are citizens of Israel. In addition, relative freedom of movement as Israeli citizens, and access to recording facilities, also explain why Palestinian citizens of Israel were the first among Palestinians in particular and in the Arab world at large to produce rap in Arabic.

Remarkably, as Palestinians who are citizens of Israel take the lead for the first time, they emphasize the place of Palestinian refugees in their collective memory and their right for a just solution of their historical injustice. Bringing the Palestinian refugees into the discourse of Palestinian nationhood and demanding historical justice for them is evidence to the rappers' desire to create a notion of solidarity independent of the Palestinian leadership and even in rejection of Palestinian leadership, who have marginalized the refugee question and even forsaken it (Suleiman 2001). For example, in *Nghayer Bukra*, Mahmoud Jreri of DAM raps: "My hand will never abandon my abandoned brothers / their hopes will cross my heart, near *Handala*." Handala is a cartoon of a refugee child created by Naji Al-Ali, a Palestinian cartoonist who was displaced from his village when he was ten years old and was assassinated in London in 1987 (see Appendix). Handala turns his back on the world and to the Arab leadership and hence Handala became a symbol of the Palestinian struggle. By evoking Handala, DAM demands historical justice for Palestinian refugees.

In sum, Palestinian citizens of Israel make Palestinian rap, not Israeli rap, and take the lead for the first time in the Arab world. But as citizens of Israel they occupy a complex place in the Palestinian world. Isolated from the rest of the Palestinian people and from the rest of the Arab world because of their Israeli passports,

Palestinian citizens of Israel find themselves de facto second class citizens in Israel, and traitors for the rest of the Arab world (see Peleg 2004 for an historical overview). In Israel they are seen as less than Israelis because they are Arabs, and for the rest of Palestinians and the Arab world, they are seen as "Israelis," living with the enemy. The Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories suffer from statelessness and Israeli violence, but the '48-ers suffer from loss of identity. This loss is highly present in rap music, as I will show next.

### **5.1.2 Stranger in My Own Country**

The development of rap music made by Palestinians who are citizens of Israel should be understood within the context of the Oslo Accords which resulted in the closure of Palestinian free movement between the West Bank, Israel, and Gaza Strip, and in the outbreak of the Al Aqsa intifada, and the shooting of 13 Palestinian citizens of Israel in protests in October 2000. The Oslo Accords and the outbreak of the Al Aqsa intifada brought the violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to a new height, while further depriving Palestinians of political voice in Israel (Orr Commission Report 2003). The sea-change that October 2000 represents is reflected in rap lyrics poignantly. As the rapper Mahmoud Jleri of DAM raps in *Ghareeb Fi Bladi* (Strangers in my own land):

We are unwanted guests in our home  
But our destiny is to stay  
Physically close to our lands  
While being spiritually far away from our nation  
Who cares about us? We are dying slowly  
Controlled by a Zionist democratic government

...

Brainwashing my children

So that they grow up in a reality

That doesn't represent them

The blue ID card worth nothing to us

Let us believe we are apart of a nation

That does nothing but makes us feel like strangers

Strangers in my own country

To this Suheil adds:

We encounter faces that don't want us

Looking at us full of disgust

...

The occupation has written our destiny

Which is, that the whole world till today treating us as Israelis

And Israel till tomorrow will treat us as Palestinians

I'm a stranger in my own country

Furthermore, the rapper rejects the assertion that Palestinians are equal citizens in the

Jewish state:

'48 Arabs, stuck since ever

Live in the shadow of fear from themselves and from the blue-and-white flag

Because after all, for the blue-and-white regime

The Arab has a cheap blood, and I ask (what happened?)

And you answer with another corpse that is buried in the sand

There is no value for the Arab soul (stand up)

And when she stands up, she is finished, and they load rubber bullets

Others protest, cops take up clubs

Arabs protest, cops take up the soul

...

You argue that we are equal

That I am knocking on your door (surprise surprise) you don't even answer

Where is the equality when I live in a shack and he lives in a ritzy neighborhood?

When I am not mentioned in the anthem?

A land for the Jewish soul, and the Arab was not even created (where is peace?)

There is no peace, and when there is no peace there is a checkpoint on every window

Deprived, but I will not runaway

The rappers repeat the line "innocent criminals" as a way of emphasizing that they are being criminalized as opposed to having been born criminals, and that Palestinian resistance is the result of historical dispossession that continues in the present and not the result of innate criminal behavior.

In sum, as Maira (2008:179) asserts, these rappers, who are "the grandchildren of the generation that experienced the Nakba and the children of those who mobilized the Palestinian minority in Israel in the 1970s and the 1980s," are "assertively challenging the fundamental definition of Israel as 'the state of the Jewish people'; they are demanding full citizenship and equality, building on the Palestinian national movement within Israel that has been developing since the 1990s, if not earlier." Rap songs by Palestinian citizens of Israel describe the experience of living in Israel as Palestinian citizens, the terror of the Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza, as well as divisions and conflicts inside Palestinian society. In other words, rap music turns into resistance.

## 5.2 Performing Resistance: "The Microphone is a Weapon"

A well known story about the emergence of rap in the Bronx and later in Los Angeles tells of gang members who choose to compete each other with rhyming, dancing, and graffiti painting skills instead of with guns, and as a consequence rap and hip hop replaced gang violence in these neighborhoods (Chang 2001:47-61). The Palestinian rappers adopt and adapt this narrative willingly and purposefully. In other words, rap music is considered by Palestinians as an act of non-violent resistance.

Palestinian rappers who are citizens of Israel use rap music to perform their resistance to the Jewish state and to demand social, political, and historical justice for Palestinians in Israel and in the Occupied Palestinian territories, as well as for Palestinian refugees everywhere. They also use rap music as means to challenge social norms inside Palestinian society and introducing alternatives for old cultural and social practices and hierarchies, for example on matters such as the status of women in the family and society. Through rap music, Palestinian rappers express national aspirations, defy the normalization of the Jewish state, and resist their subjugation in the Jewish state as a non-Jewish minority. Moreover, they point out that the self-definition of the Jewish state and the Zionist narrative excludes them from being full-fledge citizens in the Jewish, Zionist state, and they call on the hypocrisy of the discourse of "Jewish and democratic" as far as the Palestinian citizens of Israel are concern. They also call on the various faces of the violence of the state apparatus against them: police brutality, house demolitions, and the violence of the military occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. As Maira (2008:164) writes, Palestinian hip hop is a "site of resistance and solidarity."

For example, in "Da-Dam, It's DAM," Suheil Nafar of Dam raps: "Our album is the next intifada / the lyrics are the stones." Sameh Zakut, a rapper from the city of

Ramle, a mixed city next to Lyd, explains to *Haaretz* newspaper: "Arab hip hop is the beginning of a world-wide movement that opposes violence—and also in itself does not express violence. My lyrics might be harsh, but there is no hatred in them; and unlike other hip hop genres, they are not rude and aggressive and there is no evil or incitement in them—not against women and not against any ethnic group. It is the expression of a new generation that is fed up. It is a musical intifada. [...] Hip hop Palestine is the way to protest without weapon, and it is the way to give people hope. To prove that even somebody from nowhere has a place to go to, that despite the hunger we can reach satiation—mental and spiritual" (in Ben-Zeev 2008).

In his CD Saz raps in Arabic:

The microphone is the weapon—for life and death

The microphone is the weapon—the words flow from my heart

The microphone is the weapon

Always lighting my way

And my rhymes are the bullets

Rhymes are the bullets

Notably, the use of rap music as a "weapon" of resistance among Palestinians has a double purpose. Not only to perform resistance by non-violent means, but also to dispel the prevalent image of Palestinians as terrorists. In *Nghayer Bukra* (Change Tomorrow), Mahmoud Jreri raps: "Don't grab a gun, but grab a pen and write / I am an Arab like Mahmud Darwish did / I will never kill the others just to live." He adds to this in *Hibuna Ishtruna* ("Love us and Buy us"): "Our music is the war, our album is the shield / The tongue is the sword and the beat is our horse," and in "Innocent Criminals": "No stones in my hands / Hot rhymes in my mouth."

Another rap song that represents Palestinians' desire to resist their portrayal as terrorists is called *Meen Irhabi?* (Who's the terrorist?) In this song, DAM refers to the rhetoric that dubs all Palestinian resistance "terror" while rendering Israeli military activity as "self-defense." The song is an accusation of the double-standards and hypocritical language regarding the struggle of the Palestinian people for freedom. In a forceful flow underlined by Arabic singing, DAM brings to mind the "terrorism" rhetoric that is common in the discourse about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and then debunks it. The song opens with a-cappella rap of the question "*Meen Irhabi?*" which gives a strong sensation of anger, and the sounds of the *mawwal*, which situates the song in the Arab world. Then, the rapper begins to question the rhetoric of "terrorism":

Who's a terrorist?

I'm a terrorist?!

How am I a terrorist when you've taken my land?

Who's a terrorist?

You're the terrorist!

You've taken everything I own while I'm living in my homeland

...

You attack me and then you cry

And then you rush to complain about me [to the world]

When I remind you that you started the whole thing,

You jump to say

"You let small children throw stones!

Don't they have parents to keep them at home?"

What?!

You must have forgotten you buried our parents under the rubble of our homes

And now while my agony is so immense

You call me a terrorist?...Why terrorist?! Because my blood is not calm?

It's boiling!

Because I hold my head for my homeland

You've killed my loved ones

Now I'm all alone

My parents driven out

But I will remain to shout out

I'm not against peace

Peace is against me

It's going to destroy me

...

You don't listen to our voices

You silence us and degrade us

And who are you?!

And when did you become ruler?

Look how many you've killed

And how many orphans you've created

Our mothers are crying

Our fathers are in anguish

Our land is disappearing

...

We fight for our freedom

But you've made that a crime

And you, the terrorist call me the terrorist!

...

So when will I stop being a terrorist?!

When you hit me and I turn the other cheek

How do you expect me to thank

The one who harmed me?!

...

You oppress

You kill

We bury

We'll remain patient

We'll suppress our pain

Most importantly you feel secure

Just relax and leave us all the pain

You see our blood is like that of dogs—not even

When dogs die they receive sympathy

So our blood is not as valuable as dogs' blood

No - My blood is valuable

And I will continue defending myself

Even if you call me a terrorist

In *Meen Irhabi*, DAM raps on how Palestinians are being constantly under attack—homes demolished, ancestral homes and towns destroyed, land stolen, children orphaned, justice denied. DAM suggests that the Palestinians are terrorized by Israelis, and not the other way around as the Israeli government attempts to portray it. In *Meen Irhabi?*, the Israeli narrative from the war of 1948 to the Al Aqsa intifada, which considers all wars as self-defense, is contrasted with the Palestinian narrative that considers the establishment of Israel their *Nakba* (catastrophe in Arabic), and

sees Israel as a belligerent aggressor. DAM renders the state and the military "terrorists" in an attempt to destabilize their moral reputation and restore their own.

Palestinian rappers who are citizens of Israel use rap music as a channel to protest and challenge their stereotype as terrorists on one hand, and as happy citizens of Israel on the other. They employ a direct and unapologetic style to protest against the Israeli state and people. While the military targets Palestinian civilians for so-called terrorism, the rappers use their lyrical capabilities to render that the military itself is engaged in actions that can be rendered terrorism as well. They challenge the rhetoric of "peace," rapping: "I'm not against peace / Peace is against me / It is coming to destroy me."

DAM's take-off of a song written in 1991, "*Kan*" (Here), by the popular songwriter Uzi Chitman, illustrates the way in which the Palestinian rappers are able to turn the Zionist narrative on its head. The original song tells the listener about the Zionist "return after 2000 years of exile" narrative:

Here is my home; here is where I was born  
In the plateau near the sea  
Here are the friends with whom I grew up  
And I have no other place in the world  
Here is my home, here is where I played  
In the trail by the mountain  
Here from the well I drank water  
And I planted grass in the desert  
Here I was born, here my children were born  
Here I built my home in my two hands  
Here you too are with me and here are all thousands of my friends  
And after 2000 years, my wandering is over

The song was performed by the popular middle-of-the-road duo Moshe and Orna Datz, and it was chosen to represent Israel in the Eurovision competition in Rome in 1991. In a song titled "*Kan Noladeti*" (Hebrew for "I was born here"), released in 2006, DAM borrowed the theme from the Chitman song, commenting on the double-standard hidden in the Israeli Law of Return, the immigration law that grants automatic citizenship in Israel for all people who have at least one Jewish grandparent, but simultaneously denies the Palestinian Right of Return and restrict Palestinians from family unification in Israel and in the Occupied Territories. The song describes the situation of Palestinians in Lyd:

Here I built my home and here you demolished my home

And if it is not legal, what about yours, my cousin?

...

A demolished house and in the backyard railroad tracks

And every day at least 200 trains pass

And behind the ruin, a separation fence

That supposed to be between the house and the track

But this is between Snir and Beit Zvi

And the city argues that everything is illegal there

So wait a second...

What about the legal neighborhoods that have

Hospitals, surrounded with sewage

Kindergartens, surrounded with sewage

There is no excuse for that

The city doesn't care for the Arabs

And the government has one wish

Maximum Jews, on maximum land

Minimum Arabs, on minimum land

This house wasn't granted a permit

But you will never erase us

When the rappers say "Maximum Jews, on maximum land / minimum Arabs, on minimum land," they refer to the government's policy of refusing building permits in Arab towns and neighborhoods and demolishing illegal structures when they belong to Palestinians. The rapper mocks the government's claim that the Arabs are building illegally, because, the rapper says, even in the "legal" neighborhoods the city neglects the residents.

When Chitman sings "I was born here," he attempts to emphasize that Jews born in Israel have no other citizenship and homeland. When Nafar raps "Here I was born / here also my grandparents were born," he tries to assert that, contrary to the Zionist narrative, before the arrival of the Jews, Palestine was not a "desert" empty of people, but rather a productive land populated by native Palestinians.

These lyrics are the rappers' assertion of agency and voice against Zionist narratives. The members of DAM use rap to assert that they are a new generation of Palestinians who are no longer willing to accept discrimination and injustice, or as they call themselves in "*Mali Hurriye*" (I Don't Have Freedom): "a generation of giants" (Maira 2008). Thus, for example, in an interview with GritTV (TV program aired on Dish network and DirecTV on cable and public television stations in New York), Tamer told the host Laura Flanders: "If you want to succeed, you have to be a house Arab. That's the thinking. A House Arab, not a Field Arab." In the documentary *Channels of Rage*, he tells Israeli director Anat Halachmi, "Where's the peace? Am I supposed to say: OK, Kobi (referring to Subliminal), OK, I will bring

you some coffee, humus and fries, boss...? (He shows his middle finger). With all due respect..."

The waiter metaphor captures DAM's "generation of giants" sentiment. Eating in Arab restaurants has been translated as a symbol of coexistence in Jewish popular culture, but for Tamer the Arab restaurants represent the humiliation of the Arab (man). While Arabs meet Jews in all realms of life, the space of the Arab restaurant is often the only place for Jews to meet Arabs in a social setting. However, the space of the Arab restaurant continues to maintain the unequal relations that exist in other public spaces, and strengthen them, because the Arab serves the Jew. The Jew is under the illusion that his presence is welcomed in the space of the Arab restaurant because of the tradition of Arab hospitality, and hence can imagine himself or herself as liberal. The Arab food is orientalized in the Saidian sense, i.e., the food is revered, but Arab culture as a whole remains backward and primitive in Israeli eyes. Hence, refusing to wait for Jews represents resisting the fake façade of coexistence and non-cooperation. Moreover, Nafar clarifies that his rejection of "serving hummus" is in fact a rejection of "co-existence," as he told my students in Emek Izrael College: "I don't believe in coexistence now. First we need to exist, and then we can have coexistence" (Nafar 2009).

The theme of feeling humiliated and oppressed in their own country is central to Palestinian rappers who are citizens of Israel. In *Meen Irhabi*, Suhell raps about how the Israeli wants him to be:

I tell you what

You tell me how you want me to be

Down on my knees with my hands tied up

My eyes to the ground

Surrounding by bodies

Houses destroyed

Families driven out

Our children orphaned

Our freedom chained up

In sum, rap music is a performance of resistance as the aggressive sound of rap and the direct lyrics present a "new Arab"; a "generation of giants." The image of the parade, for example in the video clip for "Born Here," represents the power of the people and a menacing spectacle that overturns the image of the Arab citizens of Israel as weak. Palestinian rappers construct the message that they no longer agree to be portrayed as an exotic, Orientalized, submissive Arab, but rather, that they are angry young men with political consciousness. Moreover, Palestinian young people, having experienced discrimination, racism, and police brutality, and feeling voiceless and silenced in Israel, use rap music to portray themselves as the Israeli peers of African American urban youth, as I show in the next section.

### **5.3 From Compton to Palestine: Bridging the Struggles in a Global Community of the Oppressed**

Palestinian rappers first appeared in the mixed cities of Lyd, Ramle, and Akka in which the encounter between Jews and Palestinians inside Israel is more intense and conflicted, due to life in geographical proximity. Although Jewish and Palestinian neighborhoods adjoin each other, the contrasts between them are unmistakable. Palestinian residents are routinely denied building permits—which are relatively easy to obtain for Jewish residents—to build or expand their homes, resulting in impoverished and overcrowded neighborhoods. Mixed-cities Palestinians lag behind

their Jewish neighbors in education, income, and job opportunities. In mixed cities—Ramle, Lyd, Akka, Haifa, and Yafa—live approximately 90,000 Palestinian citizens of Israel, most of them in underdeveloped neighborhoods. These neighborhoods suffer from neglect of buildings and roads, lack of public services and parks, and inferior educational institutions and health and welfare services. Many of these neighborhoods are not recognized by the municipalities and do not appear in the municipal master plans, and hence there are routine house demolitions. As Suheil Nafar showed me on a tour of Lyd, in some neighborhoods there are walls between Palestinian and Jewish residents.

While people of all ethnicities and religions suffer from discrimination, racism, and lack of opportunity in Israel, Palestinian citizens of Israel constitute a high percentage of them in relation to their size in the overall population. The Arab sections of mixed-cities in Israel are inflicted with similar problems that large American urban ghettos are inflicted with: neglect, structural discrimination and institutional racism that result in crime, drugs, environmental degradation, and violence. As Chang documented (2005:41-65), similar realities in America's urban ghettos, where a harsh reality of urban decay, abandonment and police brutality generated a "cultural resistance in the form of rap" (Fernandes 2006:87).

Chang (2005), Rose (1994), and Martinez (1994) argue that rap music has emerged as a form of resistance among African American youth. Osumare (2005) asserts that rap attracted oppressed minorities and native communities worldwide because of the connectivity felt with African American youth, and Maira (2008:180) points out, "The songs of DAM, MWR, and Saz are in fact full of the same outrage about police brutality, inner city poverty, and the failure of the state to protect the rights of its minority citizens that infuses political rap in the United States."

Indeed, Palestinian rappers testify that their influences are Black Nationalist rappers, primarily Tupac Shakur. To demonstrate it, in the documentary film *Slingshot Hip Hop*, Tamer Nafar of DAM invites Jackie Salloum, the filmmaker, to take a tour of his hip hop influences. Here is what he tells her:

Of course it all starts with whom? Tupac's 'All Eyez on Me'. Fugees, DMX, Big Pun, Snoop, B.I.G., and all the Gangsta rap, all of Talib Kweli, Atmosphere, Nas, Mos Def, Common Sense, all of Wu Tang, Outkast, Busta Rhymes, Mobb Deep. People would say to us, 'You're like Public Enemy.' I didn't know who Public Enemy was, so I got a Public Enemy album, and realized I'd known them from a Spike Lee film, *Do the Right Thing*. Look how great this title is: "Fear of a Black Planet," it's about how the white man is trying to stop the growth of the black population. In this country, there's fear of an Arabic Nation. How could you expect us not to live hip hop? How? We have more, come see this too. Edward Said, Mahmoud Darwish, Tupac's book of poems, Malcolm X is here, Chuck D, Handala—Naji Al-Ali, Ahlam Mostaghanmi, Nawal Al-Sadawi, Nizar Qabbani, Hanan Al Sheikh (in Salloum 2008).

Tamer also tells Salloum, after a workshop he gave to Palestinians kids in Akka: "I asked them if they knew why rap started and they said, "Yes, it started from black people's pain and suffering. So they get it." To this, Suheil adds:

There was something we always loved about hip hop, but the music videos we saw, only focused on the bling (meaning in rap slang, shiny jewelry). But then, we saw a video by Tupac Shakur, "Holla If You Hear Me". It looked like he filmed it in our hometown, Lyd. Even though we didn't know English and we didn't get the lyrics, we made the connection. Tamer got all of Tupac's tracks he could find, and he

learned English by sitting at the back of the class, translating lyrics into Arabic, and sharing it with me (in Salloum 2008).

In an interview with Laura Flanders with NY-based GritTV, Suheil says:

"We loved [Tupac] even before we understood him just because of the images (from his video clips). You see him running away from cops, and this is our reality, this is what we felt, so we couldn't get attached to any pop music that was flowers and love and all that, but we got attached to our brother, we felt him. And when he used the word African American, we felt... we saw it as an Arab, in our neighborhood. So we totally felt that. And all the thug mentality, the political mentality, and the Black Panthers mentality that he has, and the charisma, it really got attached to us" (in Flanders 2009).

WE7 (short in Arabic for Boys from the hood), is made of Adi Krayem, Anan Qasem, and Alaa Bishara, two rappers from Nazareth and a rapper from neighboring village Kfar Qana. Adi Krayem told me in an interview about his musical influences and why he likes hip hop:

"Eminem, Tupac, Coolio, American rappers... the music that talks to us, that talk about us, is mainly hip hop. When you hear Tupac you can identify with Tupac in every poor neighborhood in Nazareth, Kfar Kana, Sachnin... we suffer from the same problems that Tupac suffered from, and Tupac is only one big metaphor for Western rap. Every minority everywhere in the world can identify with hip hop. I think that if you would go to everywhere in the world, to all poor neighborhoods in the world, you will find a graffiti of Tupac on the wall, and that is not surprising. Tupac expressed the emotion of every person that lived in such circumstances, and I think that because of the American rule over the world, these feelings of the deprived in the United States [became] the feelings of the deprived all over the world, and they

all find something in common among them. And this is why we liked hip hop in the beginning, although we never sat down and thought about it, we liked hip hop because we liked hip hop, in this age you don't think about it. In this age I was a huge fan of Tupac ... I know that he touches me emotionally, but I don't know how to explain it. If there is hip hop in the United States among African American, it is the result of the same reason that there is hip hop with the Arabs in Israel.”

Clearly, these rappers see themselves as the peers of African American rappers, drawing a parallel line from the African American experience to their experience. Indeed, Massad (2002:194) sees the choice of rap as a way to express Palestinian nationalist aspirations and political analysis to testify to "the parallel they see between the racially oppressive society from which African American rappers emerge and their own conditions under Israeli racial oppression."

For DAM, Saz, and WE7, expressing themselves politically and artistically through hip hop is connected to parallels they see between them and African American rappers. They construct rap music as "belonging" only to those who fulfill a certain extra-musical social and political conditions of invisibility, oppression, and experience of police brutality. Hence, rap music "belongs" to Palestinian rappers, and it had helped them to be part of the "global community of the oppressed," with the support of activists and artists from the United States, primarily from New York, where I was based between 1997—2007.

Jacqueline Salloum, an Arab-American filmmaker of Syrian and Palestinian descent based in New York City, played an important role in crystallizing the Palestinian hip hop movement by making a documentary film about it. She has been involved with Palestinian hip hop since 2002 and has helped to bring Palestinian rappers to the United States and to give them a voice and a stage through film and

performances in the United States. Like other U.S.-born activists of Palestinian origin, Salloum identifies with the Palestinian struggle, and along with other pro-Palestinian Jewish and non-Jewish activists she plays an important role in shaping the message of the Palestine Solidarity Movement in the United States.

Indeed, U.S. activists play a vital role in advancing the political message of the Palestinian rappers. An important support for Palestinian rap come from individuals and political organizations in the United States, many of them Jewish, such as the Palestine Education Project (PEP) and Adala-NY. These global solidarity activists play a vital role in organizing performances for the rappers and act as promoters and public relations conduits for Palestinian rappers in the United States and Europe. They see the value of Palestinian rappers who are young, hip, secular, English-speaking, and eager for international audiences as representatives of the Palestinian cause abroad.

For example, Ora Wise, a Jewish-American Palestine solidarity organizer and educator and the founder of PEP, and Jacqueline Salloum, an American of Palestinian heritage, have organized numerous performances for Palestinian rappers (mainly DAM) in New York and elsewhere in the United States. The documentary “Slingshot Hip Hop,” which Wise produced, premiered at the Sundance festival in 2008, and is used by Palestine solidarity activists as an education tool. Salloum and Wise attempt to highlight the hipness of the Palestinian rappers as the face of the Palestinian cause in the United States. Since 2004, Salloum and Wise helped to organize tours in the United States for DAM. Salloum and other activists organize interviews for the rappers in leftist New York media outlets like Pacifica Radio and GritTV, appearances in conferences and political events, as well as music concerts that are often fundraisers for political causes.

In April 2009, for example, DAM participated in a fundraiser for a delegation of Native-American youth to the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) in the Brooklyn music venue, South Paw, which I attended. The event was co-organized by a group called Palestine Education Program (PEP), the producers of Slingshot Hip Hop, and by *Snag Magazine*, which are all made up from roughly the same group of activists. The event also featured hip hop artists Rebel Diaz, a Chicago rap trio made of rappers G1 and Rodstarz, whose parents were Chilean political exiles; Lah Tere, who is of Puerto Rican descent; and Invincible, a Detroit-based queer activist and hip hop artist of Israeli descent. The convergence of radical politics and issues—Latin America, Palestine, indigenous people, queer activism—was emphasized throughout the evening. The emcees of the evening, Ora Wise of PEP and Slingshot Hip Hop, and Willow Jack, a Native American activist, announced repeatedly that the role of the delegation was to "bridge the struggles" of Native American and Palestinian youth, and Suheil was wearing a tee-shirt with a Native-American portrait on it.

Indeed, the spirit of resistance inherited from politically conscious black American hip hop can be found everywhere in Palestinian rap, from Afrika Bambaata, to Public Enemy, through Tupac Shakur, to Mos Def and Dead Prez. Palestinian rappers find that they are, whether they choose or not, "national allegories" (Jameson 1986), and they accept the role of speaking for an entire generation, albeit with certain regret. There is a tension between the desire to be artists and the desire to represent a certain political cause. While they care for rap music for the artistic-musical quality of their music, they also want to accomplish political goals (Maira 2008:183). Here, similar to Israeli rap, Palestinian rap music serves an *extra-musical purpose* as global public relations for the Palestinian cause: DAM are invited regularly to shows and conferences in Europe and the United States,

many of them organized and sponsored by pro-Palestinian groups, and they take international guests for tours of Lyd. When the American soul singer Erykah Badu performed in Israel in February 2002, she met with DAM in Lyd and was invited to their homes.

When I asked Suheil Nafar to interview him for this project, he took it for granted that I wanted a tour of the city. When I arrived in Lyd in March 2008, he immediately took me to see the *rakavet* (railway in Hebrew) neighborhood, where railway tracks are in dangerous proximity to a school, and which is also the main drug dealing neighborhood in Lyd. Suheil acted as my tour guide in Lyd despite the fact I told him I wanted to interview him about his music. It was a moment in which "politics" merged with "art." And the border between them, if it existed at all, was blurred.

In sum, as Osumare (2001) points out, global hip hop culture brings youth around the world together in a connectivity based on oppression. The Palestinian rappers become a part of these communities, hence strengthening connections with global communities, but simultaneously use rap to promote Palestinian nationalism. Although rap music is their chosen artistic expression, they do not attempt to be any less Palestinian. On the contrary, as Saz raps in the song *Warda* (Arabic slang for brother): "I'm not Eastside, not Westside, not even "wassup" / I'm an Arab MC, one word – *Salam*."

#### **5.4 Conclusion**

Rap by Palestinians who are citizens of Israel constitutes a site of resistance, identity construction, nation-building, and global coalition-making through popular culture. Although rap music is a transnational cultural trend, it is used to advance nationalist

causes, as the Israeli and Palestinian cases both demonstrate. Paradoxically, thanks to its transnational status, Palestinian rappers have an avenue to express national aspirations that are otherwise silenced in the global arena (Maira 2008). Rap gives Palestinian citizens of Israel a ticket to a "global community of the oppressed," in which they can be part of a transnational community, but continue to maintain a strong Arab identity. Similar to Israeli rap, it is "glocal'."

However, the Palestinian rap scene and the Israeli rap scene are connected to different global scenes, with only few converging points. Hip hop culture in Israel did not become, a "cultural bridge" between Israeli and Palestinian rapper. Despite the use of the same musical mode of expression, rap music in Israel does not bridge the differences between rappers who are Palestinian citizens of Israel and Jewish-Israeli rappers. Although in the early years of its evolution, until 2000, Palestinian rappers wrote and performed in either English or Hebrew and were part of the Israeli hip hop community, but since 2000 Palestinian rap has developed separately from Israeli rap and has become distinctly more nationalist and political. Out of the escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict emerged a Palestinian national movement empowered by a global solidarity network, in which young people found a place to articulate political demands, national desires, and social criticism. At the same time, a metaphorical wall was erected between the two communities—as well as a real wall—that even common love to rap could not bring down.

## 5.5 Appendix



Handala by Naji Al-Ali

## **Conclusion**

### **Israeli Rap Music: *An Incoherent Project***

If this study on rap music in Israel is to teach us anything is that protest, resistance, and dissent are hardly part of Israel's political culture. Commercial, popular rap music in Israel is not counter-hegemonic: it is part and parcel of the dominant hegemonic ideology. Made by people of different political affiliations, commercial, popular rap music reflects the hegemonic ideology of Zionism. Nonetheless, there are moments of subversion, and rap music is made outside the hegemony. I also did not study the field of non-commercial hip hop which can be found in the periphery and among marginalized youth such as youth of Ethiopian descent and Russian-speaking youth. In her study on Ethiopian youth and rap music, Malka Shabtai (2001) found that the Ethiopian youth create a subculture that emphasizes blackness over Israeliness. The attraction of Ethiopian youth to black music represents this youth's need for a culture that accepts them as blacks, and not only as Jews and Israelis. The identification with rap and reggae highlights their need for belonging and identity in Israeli society, and presents an alternative to the crisis of belonging that they experience. Furthermore, the identification with rap is more than a preference for a particular musical genre and a universal form of youth culture; it is also a means of survival and a haven for those whom Israeli society fails to include. Studies of Ethiopian rap and Russian rap will lead to different conclusions than those I arrived at in this study, and they will reveal, I believe, aspects of Israeli society that challenge or give an alternative for the findings of this dissertation.

While I hardly found what I was looking for in commercially recorded rap music, I found it elsewhere. There are moments in which rap music become an out of

the ordinary, almost utopian place in which art and politics meet and create an alternative. I have found it with System Ali.

### **Rebuilding the Home**



System Ali in the bomb-shelter in Jaffa where the group formed. From right to left: Neta Weiner, Enchi, Mohammad Aguani, Amna Jarussi.

System Ali is more than a rap group; they embody a way of life. The group consists of ten members who are all based in the mixed city of Jaffa, south of Tel Aviv. They rap in four languages: Hebrew, Arabic, Russian, and English. The group was founded in 2006 in a bomb-shelter in Ajami neighborhood in Jaffa that served as a youth center, until it was closed by the Tel Aviv municipality. The ten MCs and musicians created charged encounters and clashes between languages, musical styles, personal stories and inspirations, drawn from everyday realities and experiences, as well as from their political and social interpretations. Despite their relatively young age—all members are between the ages of 19 and 22—they create a space within the Israeli music field in which none of the rules of the scene apply. They disregard any given boundaries: ethnic, religious, or political, and of course musical. Their existence is in

itself an exception to the rule: they have Jewish Israeli, Palestinian Israeli, and Russian-speaking Jews from the former Soviet Union Israeli members. They do not serve in the army (besides one member), and they rap in four languages: Arabic, English, Hebrew, and Russian. They are explicitly political, and often perform in political events.

If rap music is an artistic space which is shaped by the experience of marginalization, racism, and subjugation, and a space in which boundaries are being transgressed, subverted, and disrespected, as I have argued in this dissertation, than System Ali have captured rap's spirit. It is most striking when they take songs from the Israeli canon, and turn them upside down to expose the underlying ideology that defines it, i.e., Zionist ideology. The song *Bayit Natush* (“Deserted House”), for example, takes on the canonical song *Khalon La'Yam Ha'Tikhon* (“A Window to the Mediterranean”), by Yehuda Poliker, which was released in 1988. *Khalon La'Yam Ha'Tikhon* was part of Poliker's *Efer V'avak* (“Ashes and Dust”) album, which was entirely based on the experiences of Poliker and the song-writer Yaakov Gilad as second-generation Holocaust survivors. *Khalon La'Yam Ha'Tikhon* narrates the story of a Holocaust survivor upon his arrival in Jaffa after the Second World War. Poliker sings:

I promised to write when I left  
And I haven't written for a long time  
Now I miss you so much  
I wish you were here  
After I arrived in Jaffa  
Hopes were born out of desperation  
I found a room and a half

On the roof of a deserted house

...

Year '50, end of December

Outside a storm war

The snow came suddenly

White, reminds me of times that have been forgotten.

Here, if you want, you have a home

And you have me, lots of me

Children laughing at dusk

And a window overlooking the Mediterranean

The song was immediately incorporated into the canon of Israeli popular music. The experience of the second-generation for the Holocaust was little known until then, and the album made it the subject of attention. The song creates in few refined lines the horrible experience of Holocaust survivors in the young state in the early 1950s. Thousands of Holocaust survivors arrived after having experienced terror, horror, and suffering in the concentration camps, Jewish ghettos, or as partisans in the forests, and they all lost entire families and communities. They arrived with this trauma and attempted to start a new life in an unknown new country. Gilad describes this experience of his mother most poignantly: "I wrote the last sentence of the song [based the parents' experience]: And maybe, from far away, there is one of a million chance / and maybe, from far away / happiness sneaks through the window." On this meager chance for happiness they came here, rebuilt their lives from nothing, and gave birth to us. This is the whole story."

The arrival of the traumatized Holocaust survivors and the establishment of the new state were mixed with tragedy and horror for the Palestinians, who were

displaced from their homes and towns during the 1947-1949 war, never to return. Perhaps the overpowering, horrible shadow of the Holocaust prevented the young nation from seeing the tragedy of the Palestinian people. The "deserted house," that Poliker sings about, reflects the way in which this and other "deserted houses" were kept outside public scrutiny, moral or otherwise. The pain of the survivors was so big, that the pain of those displaced from their houses never to return, and the destruction of Palestinian lives, communities, and culture in Jaffa, were either ignored or rationalized. The houses that were "deserted" due to war and mass displacement were given to the traumatized survivors, and the stories of those living there before were denied from the collective memory of the new state.

System Ali takes the "deserted house" from Poliker's song, and put a question mark on its definition as deserted. This is a quintessential "rap" thing to do. They take the deserted house from *Khalon La'Yam Ha'Tikhon* and put it in the title of the new song, and the deserted house becomes the story in the front now. The song starts with the singing of the original song, and continues up to the mentioning of the "deserted house" after which the lead rapper, Neta Weiner, pauses and asks: "Deserted house?" in a mocking voice, and the drums roar in. Immediately after, Neta continues rhyming:

Like then, also now, there is somebody sitting on the roof of a deserted house  
Gaunt, hacked to pieces, exhausted *achu sharmuta* (brother of a whore), but  
Exactly like Mohammad here that can flee or die  
Not on a carpet, Arabic translation missing  
I am going back now, 2000 years of exile  
I write to my darling, Meydaleh, I wish you come to the land  
That is all milk and honey

All milk and honey, rocky ground and straws

...

The widower is overwhelmed under the knee of memory

Because also with a machete over the throat the humiliation rolls

The foundation of all luxury towers are buried deep down in disaster

This story has to be written with ashes, plaster—blindness

It is the end of December and a spark is buried under the slope

The new song challenges the original canonical song in three different ways.

First, the sound: Instead of Poliker's dramatic oud and deep singing voice, the rapper wounds the song with his fast-paced rapping, showing disregard to harmony and melody. Also, the instrumentals in System Ali play harshly and with a strong dominating drum, which is different from Poliker's full-of-pathos, wailing sound. Second, the lyrics: the rapper questions whether the house was indeed "deserted" (and not, rather, confiscated as loot after war), and condemns the new Jaffa that is built on the ruins of the old Jaffa, and the refusal to see the ongoing destruction and theft. Third, the incorporation of the Arabic and Russian languages challenges the domination of Hebrew, and moreover, set a precedent for a multilingual, and by extension, multicultural society. It destabilizes the place of Hebrew language as the only language of the Jewish state, by legitimizing not only Arabic, which was forced on the Jewish state from outside as an official language, but also Russian, as an alternative for Hebrew even among Jewish citizens of Israel, in an attempt to conserve a *galut* culture and refusing to confirm to the dictatorship of Zionism and the Hebrew language. Finally, the curses in Arabic (*achu sharmuta*) have a double-role: they serve the purpose of mocking the pathos of the original song, and even

more so, being done in Arabic, representing an affront to the Zionist ethos embodied in the original song.

Insomuch as the Zionist ethos is based on the Holocaust as the moral justification for the establishment of a Jewish state in Israel, System Ali take the Holocaust as an object to rap about. They do not treat it as a "scared cow" which cannot be made into popular culture. Instead, they take the memory of the Holocaust as a legitimate subject for scrutiny, and not as a scared cow that cannot be rethought and even criticized. They draw a line between the Jewish survivor on the roof of a deserted house from Jaffa of the early 1950s, to "Mohammad," the Palestinian person, who is again, under the forces of contemporary gentrification and development, forced to choose between leaving the city and dying, and the land, once desired as the Land of Milk and Honey, that has turned into "rocky ground and straws." If in *Khalon La'Yam Ha'Tikhon* the Jewish survivor rose from the ashes, created a new world out of his ruins, in what was conceived as the ultimate triumph of good over evil, in *Bayit Natush* his grandchildren question what they were told, question the founding myths of Zionism (in particular the 1948 war and the Palestinian *Nakba*), and question the binary division of good and evil.

The song ends with the rapper addressing the narrator of *Khalon La'Yam Ha'Tikhon* directly, by calling him to remember: the narrator being the grandparents' that established the state. Remembrance, as rap music itself, is a subversive act, as the Palestinian memory is muted and denied. He raps:

Only remember, *ya zalame* (man in Arabic)

That the words for your darling

Were not written on a blank page

Under the soles of Tel Aviv

Words still burn

On the corpse of a city enough songs cannot be written

On a great, gleaming, blinding light that someone turns into crumbs

This is not the only place where System Ali takes on canonical classics and recreates them. In *Yalda Migadot* (A girl from Kibbutz Gadot), System Ali takes on the song *Biti At Bocha o Tzokheket* (“My daughter, are you laughing or crying?”), which tells about Kibbutz Gadot in the Golan Heights during the 1967, when it was under Syrian attack. In the original song, the poet tells about a girl in the kibbutz who leaves the shelter after the end of the attack, and sees her kibbutz destroyed. The song goes:

Last shell exploded and went silent

Silence covered the valley

A girl from Gadot left the shelter

And there are no houses in the kibbutz

Mother we had a green house

And a father, a doll, and loquat

The house is gone and father is far

Mother, are you laughing or crying?

Look above, my child, to the mountain

The mountain that turned into a monster

There are still cannons on the mountain

But now they threaten Damascus

Take your eyes above to the summits of the Golan

There are soldiers there, but from now on

There flag is in blue and white colors

Father is crying and laughing there

We will have a green home, my child  
With father, and a doll, and a loquat  
And no more horror, my child, my child  
My daughter, are you laughing or crying?  
The Jordan flows, curves like a drunkard  
Bloom covers the valley  
And no one will turn the water back  
Mother, are you laughing or crying?

The song, which was released in 1967, was performed by Chava Alberstein, a singer who performed some of the most important Songs of the Land of Israel. Although it lacks hyperbolic expressions of nationalism and is pained with a certain melancholy, the song preserves the heroism that is attached to the insistence to stay on the grounds in the face of attacks. The singer expresses pride and even elation to the sight of the cannons on the mountain that carry the white and blue flag. Like in other songs that followed the 1967 war (such as *Flowers in the Cannon* that I discussed in Chapter 3), the songwriter expresses the belief that through the victory in the war, "peace" will arise that will end all wars. "No more horror, my child," the mother consoles her child, because the cannons now "threaten Damascus."

The rap remake by System Ali goes back to this utopian moment. Rapped by young people who were born more than twenty years after that war, *Yalda Migadot* revolts against the militaristic sentiment entrenched in the original song, and on the binary between enemy and friend. Yonatan Kunda, System Ali's guitar player, raps:

Last shell exploded and went silent  
And the blood that hit us is the blood that is still here  
They teach us that he who exists is only he who fights  
So paradise given and paradise lost

At the end you will proven this or that  
It is only a matter of time until the cannon is directed at you  
My daughter is not laughing and is not crying  
Only silently she conquers her fury  
In the black, blue, white  
Ink  
Not Damascus and not Teheran  
The war over our house  
Will start here

Again, the new song challenges the original song in the same three ways. First, the sound: as opposed to Alberstein's dramatic, wailing voice, the rapper raps monotonously. In fact, Kunda cannot even be considered a rapper, as he lacks the certain musicality that rappers have. He is more of a "spoken word" artist, and he merely spit the words as recitation. Second, the lyrics: Kunda refuses to accept the militaristic narrative that dictates that peace can only be achieved through the barrel of a canon, and he cynically question the taught indoctrination that "he who exists is only he who fights." He points out that even if we think that we are strong, "It is only a matter of time until the canon is directed at you" and hence he rejects those who try to scare him with stories about the threat from Damascus or Teheran, and suggest that we fight with "ink," i.e., with words and ideas, not with bombs. Third, also in *Yalda Migadot* the Arabic and Russian speaking rappers join in. *Yalda Migadot* refuses to dwell on the militarism that was captured in the original song, and are determined to "fight for the home" with words, as the words promise.

Insomuch as militarism is entrenched in the Zionist ethos, System Ali refuses to accept it, in lyrics as well as practice, as all the Jewish members of the group did

not serve in the military. They see the blood that was spilled in Israel's past wars as still present, and they reject the command to continue to spill blood in order to exist. If in the original song the "bomb" and the "canon" were put on a pedestal as mythic, and the girl in the shelter was a heroic figure simply for surviving the attack, in what was conceived as the continuing ultimate victimhood of the Jewish people, in *Yalda Migadot* the children of the little girl from Gadot question the constant need to live by the sword and to accept militarism as the only reality in Israel.

It was a cold night in Jerusalem in January 2010 when I came to watch System Ali perform with DAM in the East Jerusalem's neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah. Sheikh Jarrah became a hotspot for protests in the summer of 2009 after an Israeli court ruled that certain property in the neighborhood belonged to the Sephardic Community Committee during the Ottoman rule and ordered the evacuation of Palestinian families from this property. This court case was harshly criticized by human rights organizations in Israel and abroad, as it stood in blatant contradiction to the refusal of Israel to consider any Palestinian claims for property lost during the war of 1948. After the families were evicted from their homes in Sheikh Jarrah, Jews affiliated with the organization that sponsored the legal proceedings moved into the houses almost immediately. In the following months, the neighborhood became a hotspot for clashes between the new Jewish settlers and the Palestinian residents and their supporters. Almost every Friday during this time a few hundred people gathered to demonstrate the eviction of the Palestinian families, which almost always ended with mass arrests of protestors.

The concert was taking place in a public playground in the entrance to the neighborhood. The organizers asked for a permit in advance, but the playground was

surrounded with police and border police forces, but they were not there to squash the event or to conduct arrests. The organizers set up an amplifying system on the grass, but there was no stage so the performances were going to take place on the same level as the audience. About 300 people gathered, consisting of the neighborhood youth, a few older representatives of the evicted families, and many Israeli, Palestinian, and international supporters.

System Ali were second to perform after DAM. The multilingual group started the performance with announcing in Arabic that Sheik Jarrah and Jaffa have a common present—evictions and the presence of Jewish provocative settlers—and with a declaration of solidarity: "when someone enters into your house, it is as if he enters my house." When System Ali started to rap, their lyrics on historical memory, dispossession, and resistance to militarism, echoed dramatically in the neighborhood. When the Russian-speaking rapper, Enchie, rapped that the first words he remembered on his first day in an Israeli school were "filthy Russian," it was a rare moment in which the voice of different oppressed communities in Israel—Russian speaking youth from the former Soviet Union, Palestinian citizens of Israel, and Palestinians of East Jerusalem—were joining together in resistance. It was also a rare moment of solidarity between the Palestinian members of System Ali, DAM, and the residents of the Sheik Jarrah neighborhood, as many of the residents are refugees from Jaffa, who arrived at Sheik Jarrah before the establishment of Israel in 1948, and lived under Jordanian rule, separated from their families, under 1967.

As I stood in the Sheik Jarrah playground that night in the concert, I felt that the event was dramatically echoing the ideas, theories, and scenarios that I described in my dissertation. As I argued in this dissertation, rap has grown out of the ruins of the great modern city. That night in Sheik Jarrah, System Ali made rap out of the

ruins of the great modern ideology—Zionism. If Zionism has failed in creating a Jewish state based on the liberal, modern principles of democracy, equality, and universal morality, as the case of Sheik Jarrah demonstrates, System Ali embodies the chance that the next stage will be to rebuild the place that we call home. These rappers and musicians that were born at least 20 years after the 1967 war, take the world that they were born into, a world made of borders that they were prohibited of crossing, truisms that they were told not to challenge, and hierarchies that they were told were a way of nature, and break it into pieces, and rebuild it into the new home they want it to be. Just like rap music, they build a beautiful new thing out of the ruins of the old. It is a genuine "rap" thing to do. "Rebuilding The Home" is also the name of one of System Ali's songs, *Bonim et ha'bayit mechadash*, which I quote here in its entirety:

A revolution will come because of my love to my community

Not because of hatred to people who continue to walk on me, on my friends

To castrate criticism

To shut me down

To shut me down?

Yo, Ashkenazi redhead, what are you so angry about? Shut up, go to be a soldier, to be a pilot

When you will be a grown up, every month you will get a check in the size of the dick of Dan Halutz will be deposited in your back account [Dan Halutz is a former Israeli Air Force Commander and former Chief of Staff in the IDF, who infamously said that when dropping a bomb from an airplane he only feels a light blow to the airplane, but no emotions]

Do just whatever you feel like, you are trainer, no need to be polite

The people here are in cages, and culture is a circus

And even if you raped a 13-year-old in an Air Force base there will be no report, no trial, not even a fine

It is a disease

And System Ali is the antibiotics; until a different generation arises I will not be placated

Only me and God will decide who are my enemies and to whose army I will be drafted

The violence, the impotence, the ignorance I will hang on a high tree in the main square to be mocked and ridiculed

The happiness on the microphone of System Ali is from choice

Because everyone on this stage have a good reason to feel like a victim

My friend Enchik came from Uzbekistan in the age of 11

And without half a word in Hebrew he has to break a lot of teeth

To spit litters of blood

Until the door will open from the inside

That someone will look at you and will let you cross the threshold

So I don't want, I disagree, I am not ready

To be another brick in this Babylon Tower, the degenerated system

All of System Ali is with you, Enchik

Now you are the engineer, now you are the contractor

So build with us the new home on the shards of Babylon

On the ruins of the building

In *Bonim et ha'bayit mechadash* System Ali bring together rap's lyrical and performative power, and paint a picture that tells vividly about the world that *can* be. Their declaration that they reject victimhood, reject the roles that society has given to them, and choose to build their new home with happiness is their most powerful

message. Declaring to "mock" and to "ridicule" the social order of "Babylon," a key black and Jewish metaphor for an oppressive social order, "the size of the dick of Dan Halutz" is an example of ridiculing power through vulgar language. Dan Halutz was Israel's eighteenth chief of staff, and became notorious in 2002 after the assassination of a Hamas leader in Gaza, in which 14 civilians were killed. When he was asked by the interviewer what he feels when he drops a bomb from an airplane, he replied that all he feels is a "small blow to the airplane." The rapper's awareness that as a "redhead Ashkenazi" (Weiner really is a redhead) he is expected to be a soldier, perhaps a pilot, is a strong challenge to social norms and expectations that Weiner sees as oppressive to him, to his community, and to the people he loves.

System Ali's most powerful rap moment lies in the tension between the very harsh reality in which they live and which they describe in their lyrics, and their insistence on creating a joyful, happy sound and performance. In the song *Yaffowia* (meaning to be from Jaffa and also to speak Jaffa Arabic dialect), a love song to the city that used to be the capital of Palestinian culture before it was degraded by a century of war, conflict, and domination, the rappers tell the story of Jaffa in one of their most powerful, vibrant, groovy, funky songs. Yonatan Kunda, the guitar player and occasionally a rapper, close the song with the following words:

Yaffowia is existence, Yaffowia is a savior

No need to wait until we get there because everything is already here

We are what sweats in the fist that condemns

All the evil that salutes the old order

We vetoed everything there is

From Sea and Sun to street number 6 (Sea and Sun is a controversial luxury apartments range in North Tel Aviv and street number six is a nickname for a street in the Ajami neighborhood in Jaffa notorious for its gun violence and drug dealing).

Every word is a landmine in the ghetto of the brain, in the burning of power

System Ali in sum: fire without smoke

Because we found ourselves in a shelter where there is nothing but the possibility

To rewrite the story in rage, pen, and minority

Open a crack for justice, a door for opportunity

One more line I have to translate

With the promise to "veto everything there is," to wave a fist in the face of the "old order," to "rewrite the story," and to "open a crack for justice," I would like to end this dissertation. It is System Ali, and their audience, supporters, and friends that "crack" the order of nationalism, racism, and erasure of memory and history, by putting their hands together, waving them in the air, and rebuilding a home in which we can all live together.

### **Final Note on the Study of Rap**

*"As [hip hop] gains audiences around the world, there is always the danger that it will be appropriated in such a way that its histories are obscured and its message replaced with others" (Potter 1995:146)*

In the beginning of my research I, perhaps naïvely thought that rap music carries its history and meaning within it everywhere it goes and must be obvious to everyone. It was not until I met rappers, listened carefully to their lyrics, and attended hip hop events in Israel that I began to figure out that rap music may mean different things to different people. Studying rap music in Israel, I could not help but wonder whether rap music can be "legitimately divorced from general black American culture and

history" (Byone 2003:78)? As this dissertation demonstrates, the answer is complex and is not a simple "yes" or a "no."

The dilemma of rap music and its relation to black history and experience that I brought up in my dissertation is not new to black music and art. In 1927, Baz Driesinger reminds us, Jazz musician Mezz Mezzrow wrote the following on Jazz music: "We were the keepers of the faith, the purists, the cats who stayed with it. The others were out to make money, not music." Then he adds "Only black people can play jazz" (in Driesinger 2008:107). Today, the same arguments might be directed toward about rap music: "Rappers are only out to make money, they are not interested in it as art," or "only black people can make rap." These arguments echoed in my head when I was writing this dissertation, and struggling with deciding whether I should accept or reject them, and under what conditions.

Israel is not the United States, and Israeli rappers work within very different racial and political realities. Globalization created these dilemmas in the Israeli reality, and with it came new conflicts, new tensions, and new misunderstandings. Unlike Mezz Mezzrow, who was a Russian Jew but considered himself black thanks to his proximity to black people, and unlike the rappers Eminem and Third Base, who solve the dilemma of being white rappers through "assertions of proximity to blackness" (Driesinger 2008:115), Israeli rappers' fantasy is not one of "passing" or of getting "near black." Even when they immerse themselves in hip hop culture, they do not want to become black, but rather, to remain Israelis. In fact, they celebrate and emphasize their "Israeli-ness," and they do not see a conflict or a dilemma with being rappers but not being black. Although often they conceive rap music and Israeli-ness as having a lot in common (as I demonstrated in Chapter 2), they do not believe that blackness is needed at all to legitimize them as rappers. They do not surround

themselves with an entourage of black rappers because there aren't many black rappers in Israel. One black rapper—Rebel Son—indeed appears in many Israeli hip hop acts. But other less successful rappers, such as Nachmiel and other Israeli-born Black Hebrews, as well as Ethiopian rappers, are not often found outside their own communities.

However, while there are not many commercial black rappers in Israel, there are many black people, and they suffer from different forms of institutionalized and non-institutionalized racism. Although the Palestinian-Israeli conflict looms larger than any other conflict in Israeli society, racial conflicts are abundant. During the writing of this dissertation, an ongoing crisis rocked the Israeli public: the refusal of several religious public schools to accept Jewish students of Ethiopian descent, and the separation between these students and white students in other public schools (a refusal that was not resolved as yet). Another debate that dominated the public talk was the status of ten thousands of asylum-seekers from South Sudan and Eritrea that crossed the border into Israel. Prime Minister Netanyahu told the press that these asylum seekers "cause economic, social, and cultural damage and threaten to take Israel back to the level of a Third World country" (to this date majority of asylum seekers were not interviewed and remain without status). Such attitudes did not meet with protest by the majority of the hip hop community in Israel, and majority of rappers did not attempt to take any active part in the cultural reaction to these attitudes. With some notable exceptions, the community at large did not respond to such racially divisive attitudes.

These obvious moralistic judgments that I make cannot be done without asking why do I render value judgments on Israeli rappers? Should I hold them accountable to racial politics in Israel? To ethnic politics? To politics in general?

Shall I expect a certain progressiveness of them? Does it follow that being influenced by black music one has to adopt a black worldview? To be empathetic to the plight of black people? Or of any people? Is it fair, necessary, or appropriate that I did a political analysis of rap? Should it even be the subject of study in political science?

My critics would say that rap music is a site of pleasure and artistic self-expression, and as such it should be above the mundane world of politics. Furthermore, some might argue that my view of rap as necessarily an "allegory" when it is produced by "Third World people" is in itself a racist expectation. No one expects one to be French or Russian if one is a ballet dancer; why do I expect rappers to be of a certain ethnicity or to have certain political views? Some could argue that the insistence that rap music is a form of "national allegory" is racist because it implies that black artists are not judged under the same artistic standards as white artists. Even now, after having written the entire dissertation, I am still unsure what to answer.

George Lipsitz (1994) writes that "cross-racial explorations have to be carried out with a self-conscious understanding of unequal power relations." This dictum has loomed large in the writing of this dissertation. I came to Israel with the expectation that Israeli rappers and hip hop lovers would make hip hop with a "self-conscious understanding of unequal power relations," in the field of hip hop as well as in our society and culture. I have been disappointed to find out that rappers in Israel are uninterested in either the political world, or the African American experience that shaped the culture, or in the power relations that are in the basis of what allows them the privilege to make rap music in Israel. Even many committed rappers did not have a "self-conscious understanding of unequal power-relations," and did not seek to make parallels between American and Israeli race relations and politics.

As I have argued throughout this dissertation, black worldview and values are embedded in the music (in Driesinger 2008:119), and "music is the "key" to the African-American aesthetics, and the fulcrum of African culture and the expression that sustained African aesthetics in the Americas" (Driesinger 2008:144). As Caponi (1999:8) explains about black cultural practices: "Within the very body of expression—the form of the music, the shape of the dance, the worship practices of the religion—are embedded cultural values. The structure of cultural expression—the cultural aesthetics—reflects and supports the ethics of the society, reinforces its values and philosophy. ... Their structure evolved over time in relation to their social function." So how could Israeli rappers make rap music and yet untangle themselves from blackness simultaneously? I could not settle what I saw as a contradiction.

Was I wrong to expect political awareness and race sensitivity from the Israeli rappers? Are they oblivious thieves or simply happy hybrids? These questions expose my own biases, which are both personal and political: I have a personal love for the aesthetics of black and African music and culture, and I identify with what seems to me the "black" in rap, despite the fact that I am not black but Jewish, Ashkenazi, and Israeli.

My criticism of these rappers—notwithstanding my appreciation of their creative musical skills and their sense of humor—is underlined by my desire that they explore their engagement with hip hop with a "self-conscious understanding of unequal power relations." I cannot accept their "unwillingness to examine their own relationship to power or to allow for reciprocal subjectivities between and among cultures," and I criticize them for "obscure[ing] power relations in the present as well as the enduring consequences of past acts of subordination and suppression. Most important, they define delight in difference as a process organized around exotic

images from overseas, with *no corollary inspection of their own identities*" (Lipsitz (1994) quoted in Driesinger 2008, my emphasis).

Furthermore, as I showed in this dissertation, rappers in Israel divert their gaze from their own conflicted identity and their often violent racial and ethnic reality into what they imagine as harmonious racial coexistence in which no one really dies and no one really suffers (though a utopian impulse worth having). By choosing to look away from the local conflict, they avoid scrutinizing their own identity as Jewish and Israeli men (and less often, women), with the power privileges that entails, and the real and ongoing oppression that is inflicted directly by them, with their support, or in their name. Instead, they realize the desire to acquire African American expressive power and supposed emotional freedom without having to lose their privileges (in employment, education, culture, government, etc.) and without having to face real racial conflicts in Israeli society, as their engagement with rap music occurs without intimate cross-racial contact locally or globally.

In sum, what is missing in Israeli rap music is what Driesinger calls "cultural footnoting": "giving literal and metaphorical homage where homage is due" by "giv[ing] thought to issues of influence and power, privilege and positionality" (Driesinger 2008:149). Only "cultural footnoting," "self-conscious scrutiny" of the "raced place in the cultural sphere," self-reflexivity, and an exploration of identities and of privilege, can make hip hop culture in Israel a progressive act. Such scrutiny "cultivates a certain . . . precious, profound double-consciousness that means refusing to take race for granted; it means being aware of both how one sees the work and how the world sees one" (Driesinger 2008:149).

But I sometimes doubt my own observations, when I read that Israeli rapper Subliminal says: "The problem is that people try to see in us our counterparts from

abroad. They look after us crazily and they already turned us into murderers and criminals..." (quoted in Mushayof 2004). This statement reveals a certain expectation placed on rappers from Israeli journalists that Subliminal adheres to as well. Hence, when I pose questions like, "what types of value are added and lost in the commercialization and globalization of rap music as African American cultural expression?" and then read such statements, I have to re-assess the role of the scholar. Perhaps I take for granted goals of cross-cultural dialogue because I want to find the hidden structural meanings that are embedded in rap music—"the epistemology"—and the implications of such epistemology. While these investigations are helpful, it is also just as helpful not to lose sight of the basic foundations of rap communities all over the world. Rap music makes so many people feel empowered and help so many people to define themselves in this world. Certain elements of rap increase global affinity and solidarity, and perhaps others function to perpetuate difference and polarization. What is pertinent to address is the way this cultural form foster new senses of belonging and identity for blacks and non-blacks alike.

Since I have been introduced to rap music during my military service as a music editor in the Israeli military radio station Galey Zahal, I have found exuberance, vitality, and humor that I did not find in other types of music. I have also encountered elements of spectacle, commodification, and authenticity, as well as disturbing presence of gendered, sexualized and racial politics at play. There are elements of the hip hop global community and the Israeli hip hop community that are empowering, but at the same time there are also factors that are limiting and uninspiring. What I was present in my study was the importance of the music to self-identity and to one's own formation of selfhood, which I did not explore sufficiently, and hope to find it as time goes by.

I have been intrigued, puzzled, frustrated and inspired by rap music. It continues to shake up my intellectual curiosity and my own preconceptions. The opportunity to examine some of its nuances closely and to speak with the actors opened up my perspective and understanding of it. There is a specific energy present in the music and in the social dynamics that live beyond the academic analysis that I offer. It is this energy that attracts people from all over the world—keeping them learning how to rap, to make a beat, or to break-dancer, and always craving more.

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