

Yahweh and Jah: Religious and Stylistic Convergence in the Music of Matisyahu

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Consider, if you will, the following likely scenario: A young man walks down a street in Brooklyn. He casts his gaze downward, his face hidden in the hood of his sweatshirt as he traverses the familiar graffiti-covered streets of his neighborhood. Though he knows this area well, he is lost; he searches for something he can't even identify. As he turns a corner, this teenager encounters another familiar yet strange sight. He looks up to see another man, about a decade or so older than himself. This older man is dressed well in a black suit with a hairstyle that distinguishes him as a Hasidic Jew. For each person, the sight of the other is not entirely alien. One, in turn, affects the other.

In his music, New York-based musician Matisyahu combines stylistic elements of both reggae and rap to communicate a message of hope to the youth of today. In addition to syncretizing styles, he also brings together spiritual elements of the Rastafarianism of reggae and Judaism which he practices. He transcends religious and stylistic boundaries and facilitates interaction and communication thus imbuing greater meaning to his purpose as a performing artist. I will note that it is not my intention, in this paper, to provide an in-depth account or analysis of the ways in which these two religions intersect and interact. Monica Haim's documentary *Awake Zion* discusses these elements in a more vibrant and accessible manner than is feasible within the scope of this brief study. Instead, I will focus on the concept of Messianism: the coming (or return) of a great leader – indeed, a Redeemer, for a group of people and how Matisyahu realizes this idea in his music.

As a blend of Christianity and African religious traditions, Rastafarianism found an important voice in Jamaican political activist Marcus Garvey who, in the early twentieth century, touted a pan-African identity. Believed by many to be a prophet, Garvey told his followers to “Look to Africa for the crowning of a black King for He shall be the Redeemer”; these words found fulfillment in the 1930 coronation of Haile Selassie as Emperor of Ethiopia. Selassie gained the status of a cultural and political hero to the point where he was dubbed the earthly embodiment of God and received, as one of his many titles, the name of Prince Ras Tafari. His death in 1978 did not diminish his stature in the eyes of adherents to Rastafarianism; he abides in them spiritually. The idea of the imminent arrival of a great leader is also integral to Judaism wherein this leader is known as “Mashiach” – Hebrew for “messiah.” He is not a savior as Christians hold Jesus of Nazareth to be; rather, he is a charismatic leader, a military commander, and a mighty judge in the manner and line of King David. Indeed, he will be known as “mashiach ben David” – “Mashiach, son of David. As I will discuss, a syncretic concept of Messianism is integral to understanding Matisyahu's hybrid music.

The cultural, spiritual, and musical identities of Judaism and Rastafarianism merge in the person and music of Matisyahu. Through music, Yahweh and Jah (the Jewish and Rasta names

for God, respectively) combine to form the basis for a message of hope and encouragement. But these ideas did not generate *ex nihilo*; rather, they developed over the course of Matisyahu's own search for identity. Born Matthew Miller in 1979 in West Chester, Pennsylvania, the artist eventually known as Matisyahu was raised as a Reconstructionist Jew by parents who eventually moved to White Plains, New York. He eventually forsook the nominal religious instruction he had received in favor of drugs and dropped out of high school to follow the band Phish. After returning to his parents' home in White Plains, New York, he attended a wilderness school in Oregon, where he fell in love with reggae and hip hop cutting his teeth by rapping at open-mic battles. It was during this time that he recognized his identity as the "token Jew." At age nineteen, Miller enrolled at the New School for Social Research in Manhattan and joined the Carlebach Shul. At the latter institution, he found a calling to both music and the Orthodox Lubavitch Hasidic sect of Judaism. Taking the stage name of Matisyahu (based on the Hebrew origin of his English first name), Miller embarked on a new career and a new identity.

Since Matisyahu's identity is wrapped up in his music, I will discuss elements of some of his songs that depict his syncretism of reggae and rap to promote a Messianic message of hope and encouragement. An in-depth analysis of this artist's entire discography is beyond the scope of this paper; thus, I will focus my analysis on his first single "King Without a Crown" from his 2004 debut album *Shake Off the Dust... Arise*. Before delving into analysis, we will watch the music video listening for the blending of rap and reggae styles and the encouraging message Matisyahu delivers.

In "King Without a Crown," Matisyahu makes direct scriptural references and religious exhortations by stating his desire for Mashiach's (messiah) arrival and calling upon Hashem – one of many names for G-d – for help. The line "See I lift up mine eyes where my help come from/And I seen it circling around from the mountain" is a reference both to the first verse of Psalm 121 and to the presence of G-d on Mount Sinai when Moses received the Ten Commandments.

Another line refers to Psalm 23; I give the entire stanza here to provide context: "If you're trying to stay high, bound to stay low/You want G-d but you can't deflate your ego/If you're already there then there's nowhere to go/*If your cup's already full then it's bound to overflow.*" Perhaps the most significant religious reference in this song comes in the line, "Said thank you to my G-d, now I finally got it right/And I'll fight with all of my heart, and all of my soul, and all of my might." This is a paraphrase of the *Sh'ma* – the summation of the Jewish faith found in Deuteronomy 6:5. Matisyahu employs various techniques to syncretize diverse musical styles. His rapid-fire delivery of lyrics is derived from rap while his vocal inflection and accent suggests not a white guy from New York but a Jamaican reggae artist. By integrating the style for which Bob Marley is known, Matisyahu also calls to mind the spiritual implications of Rastafarianism with its Messianic anticipation.

In the context of this musical blend, one line in particular stands out for its political meaning. When Matisyahu sings, "Out of darkness comes light, twilight unto the heights/Crown Heights burnin' up all through till twilight," I believe he is referring to the 1991 riots in Brooklyn's Crown Heights neighborhood home to the Lubavitch sect of Judaism of which he was a part. A series of deaths both accidental and deliberate led to strained relationships and violent reactions between the African American and Orthodox Jewish communities that call the neighborhood their home. Since that time, political and religious leaders on both sides of the conflict have sought to make amends with each other as a result of these riots and due to the gentrification of their communities. Even during the violence in Crown Heights, rap music

appealed to young Jewish men as well as African Americans; in this light, combining this music with the reggae often heard in this part of Brooklyn would be very effective in the hands of a young rapper seeking to cross boundaries and deliver a message of hope.

In his third single, “Jerusalem (Out of Darkness Comes Light),” released in 2006, Matisyahu clearly focuses his attention to young people singing, “Babylon burning in the place, can’t see through the haze/Chop down all of them dirty ways/That’s the price that you pay for selling lies to the youth.” Matisyahu uses the imagery of the destruction of Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem by the Babylonians and the subsequent exile of the Hebrew both as a symbol of Jewish unity and identity and as a rallying point from (and to) which to call the youth of the world back to a sense of greater integrity.

For his 2012 album “Spark Seeker,” Matisyahu cut off his beard the long side curls of hair known as *peyot* that Hassidic Jewish men grow as believed to be mandated in the Torah. Though some critics saw this as a betrayal of his previously and publicly expressed faith, he asserted that, while his outward appearance had changed, what is inside – that which truly matters – had not. Matisyahu avers this unity and continuity on this quasi-concept album saying, “My musical tastes are all over the board. And, besides, my music has never been about the outer garment. It’s about searching out inspiration wherever it lies. This album is about seeking that spark within. We live in a world where people tend to think in extremes and categorize with ultimate statements. While it’s true that at one point it would’ve been pretty accurate to describe me as Hasidic reggae, for most of my career my music has been a blend, a mixture.”

In an interview with the Associated Press, Matisyahu returns to the focus on youth, this time citing the topic of the child within and his own children as the inspiration for the album. It is not just young African Americans that he seeks to reach with his music but all young people who are struggling to discover who they are and what their place is in the world. Regarding adopting his new look, he realized that he was viewing his outward appearance almost as an idol; shaving it off freed him to be truer to himself. In an interview with Tim Morrison from Time.com, Matisyahu states that he has no intention of returning to his birth name Matthew Miller; his Hebrew name and Jewish religion still holds much significance for him even though his understanding of the latter has evolved over time.

Henry Bial asserts that this sort of evolution is, in fact, part of Jewish culture. He notes that Jews are “continually embodying and reenacting [their] own narrative.” They are “people of the Book” that is, the Torah. Hank Lazer cites a proverb connecting this holy book with Jewish resilience: “As Israel has kept the Torah, so has the Torah kept Israel.” Rastas also embrace a similar sense of identity in referring to themselves as “I and I.” Regarding the continual spiritual presence of Haile Selassie, it is said, “He lives on in I and I.” In this context, “I” can also mean “we” indicating a confluence of individual and corporate Rasta identity. With this in mind, let’s reconsider our introductory scenario from the opposite perspective: A young Hasidic Jew walks down a street in Brooklyn. As he turns a corner, he encounters a teenager – it could be any young person anywhere, really – who, despite having lived in this neighborhood his whole life, seems lost. The Jewish man extends his hand in friendship to his new acquaintance – a boy who might otherwise have gone unnoticed in his travels. In this almost banal gesture, the younger man is encouraged and enlivened with a new sense of purpose.

In Matisyahu’s music, the Messianic messages of hope, perseverance, and ultimate triumph are grounded in faith but presented in a manner accessible to those not indoctrinated into or even familiar with the intricacies of Judaism or Rastafarianism. Tracy Rich offers several possibilities as to the time in which *mashiach* will appear; among them are “in a generation that

loses hope” and “in a generation where children are totally disrespectful towards their parents and elders.” *Mashiach* can be anyone in a given generation with the potential to lead his people. I will not presume to claim that Matisyahu fulfills the criteria of this tenet of his faith; however, this idea seems to be stated in his lyrics, notably in the line from *King Without a Crown*: “I sing to my G-d, songs of love and healing/I want Mashiach now, time it starts revealing.” He is pleading for someone to restore hope in humanity. Though Hailie Selassie has already come and gone and the Jewish messiah has not yet come, the spirit of hope both offer is alive and well. In fusing Judaism and Rastafarianism, reggae and rap, Matisyahu brings together Messianic images of hope to the youth – of every race and religion – whom he seeks to reach.