

TWO SWORN ENEMIES AND A MICROPHONE

In Israeli hip-hop, it's all political

BY DORIAN LYNSKEY

Kobi Shimoni and Tamer Nafar are both twenty-six, both Israeli, and both MCs. Only a few years ago, they were allies, if not quite friends, and key figures in Tel Aviv's then-minuscule hip-hop scene. They met for the first time on a coach traveling to a rap festival in Eilat in the summer of 2000, and they performed together a few times over the next several months, but their lives since then could not have turned out more differently.

pro-Israeli, he just needs to be *real*." Only months later, however, Shimoni and Nafar fell out disastrously. Talking now, they refer to each other as "fuck" and "idiot."

With the appearance of Public Enemy, KRS-One, and NWA in the late 1980s, hip-hop emerged as the voice of the young urban underclass. In America, that radical message has been diluted by rap's evolution into a multimillion-dollar industry of "bling," but in Israel, political traumas and wounds make hip-hop violently relevant. Lyrics

Shimoni, who calls himself Subliminal, lives in an affluent part of Tel Aviv, where his business empire includes a studio, a record label, a publishing company, and a clothing line. He's a household name, often described as "Israel's Eminem," and he has worked with U.S. stars such as Wyclef Jean. His last album went double platinum, selling 80,000 copies. Nafar, who raps under the name TN as the front man of a trio called DAM, lives in the dilapidated town of Lod, ten miles to the south. Despite a substantial Internet fan base, he has yet to secure a record deal. Shimoni used to get calls from the office of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon; Nafar still gets stopped and searched in the street.

If this were anywhere else, that difference would simply reflect the vagaries of the music business, but this is Israel, and there is an added wrinkle: Shimoni is Jewish; Nafar is an Arab. There were always political differences between the two men, but their relationship was emblematic of the hope in Israeli society that the younger generation could do more than rehearse the same old grievances, that a shared passion for music could unite people from warring camps.

Shimoni says he mentored Nafar, persuading him to rap in Arabic rather than English and inviting Nafar to rap alongside him at the pioneering hip-hop club he owned in Tel Aviv. "He was a cool guy," Shimoni remembers. "Kind of smart. Not dumb. I thought, this guy don't need to be

about guns hit harder in a country in which every eighteen-year-old serves three years in the military; regional rivalries bite deeper in a land where people fight and die for territory; threats of violence ring louder when young people fear tanks and suicide bombers. Hip-hop is the megaphone through which young Israelis are broadcasting their discontent. "Through our lyrics, you can understand what the Israeli youth feels, believes, wants," claims Shimoni. "Just listen, and you'll understand exactly what is going on."

If he is right, Israeli youth are impatient, exasperated, and very, very angry. In his song "Hope," Shimoni calls for an end to violence on both sides: "Everybody talks about peace / But they shoot, oppress, pull, squeeze the trigger." In "Divide and Conquer," which dismisses the Oslo accords as "handshakes, fake smiles / Treaties signed in blood," his message is less conciliatory: "We're nurturing and arming those who hate us. Enough!"

Hip-hop didn't gain a cultural foothold in Israel until the mid-1990s, when MTV began broadcasting there. Even after the rock-rap group Shabak Sameh introduced Hebrew MC-ing in 1995, the airwaves remained devoted to rock, psychedelic trance, and terrible Euro-pop. It took the success of Subliminal for hip-hop to break through to the mainstream. Now Hebrew raps and beats that sample traditional Israeli music are everywhere. >>

“It’s ridiculous,” says thirty-six-year-old Jerusalem MC Khen Rotem, whose hip-hop moniker is Sagol 59. “Everything that happened in the States [over] twenty-five years happened here in three. Now there are TV shows with battling [MCs] and freestyles. Every kid in school’s got baggy pants — ‘Yeah, I’m a rapper.’”

It’s impossible to separate the rise of Israeli hip-hop and its internal ructions from the eruption of the second intifada. In September of 2000, Ariel Sharon, whose right-wing Likud party was then growing in popularity, made his controversial visit to Jerusalem’s Temple Mount, a hotly contested area holy to Jews as the Dome of the Rock, the place where God instructed Abraham to sacrifice his only son, and to Muslims as the site of the Al Aqsa mosque, the third most sacred spot in Islam. The visit ignited long-smoldering tensions, sparking massive Palestinian demonstrations and clashes with the police.

But even before Sharon’s walkabout, the peace process initiated by the 1993 Oslo accords was on life support: that summer, a summit at Camp David between embattled Labor Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian President Yasser Arafat had proved fruitless. By the Christmas of 2000, the increasingly bloody uprising known as the Al Aqsa intifada had claimed 330 lives on both sides, shattered the Oslo peace process, and brought down Barak.

It also gave young Israelis — Arabs and Jews alike — an appetite for fierce rhetoric. Sagol 59, a left-winger who grew up on a kibbutz, made a bid for unity by inviting Nafar and a popular funk-rap outfit, Hadag Nahash, to appear with him on

a song called “Summit Meeting.” “The peace process is being broken apart just like Yoko did the Beatles,” went one of the lyrics.

But most hip-hop fans were in no mood for compromise. Shimoni was performing songs such as “My Land” or “We Came to Expel the Darkness” which soon got him branded “the settlements singer” and an avatar of “the Zionist Underground” by the progressive media — a label he has also proudly claimed for himself. In the daily paper *Ma’ariv*, music writer Gal Ohovsky criticized “Divide and Conquer” as “the first patriotic anthem of the second intifada. Its name alone ... can make you shudder.” Meanwhile, Nafar became more outspoken about Palestine, recording “Who Is the Terrorist?” a furious anthem for Arab-Israelis: “Who’s the terrorist? You’re the terrorist! You’ve taken everything I own while I’m living in my homeland.”

Like many things in Israel, Shimoni and Nafar’s ensuing feud has two opposing narratives. The facts are roughly the same: in June 2001, a suicide bomber killed seventeen people in a beachfront disco called the Dolphinarium. Shortly afterward, Nafar told a TV interviewer that he could understand why the bomber did it, although he did not condone it. Shimoni saw the videotape. He had invited Nafar to perform with him again that same night.

“That was like a slap to the face,” says Shimoni. “This ... fuck got up on TV and said: ‘The guy that blew himself up? I can identify with him.’ I just got up onstage and dissed him hardcore. You wanna talk about the Zionist enemy, homie? Well, here I am.” Shimoni adds, “You should understand what you’re talking about if you say powerful things. When it comes down to the real shit, he don’t know nothing.”

Nafar remembers things differently. “Listen up. I was a good Arab to him when I was not rapping about politics. When you put hummus on the table and smile and tell jokes, that’s a good Arab. But you say you want your rights, and then it’s, ‘You little motherfucker, I’ll step on your head.’ That’s Israel. That’s Subliminal. But I can’t hate him, because I think he’s ignorant and an idiot. He’s saying Tamer has nothing to do with Palestine. That’s my cousins over there, my brothers

over there! But he doesn’t know that stuff. Subliminal is an average Israeli.”

Nafar sees himself as representative of the country’s persecuted underclass. In “Who Is the Terrorist?” he spat, “You’re a democracy? Actually you’re more like the Nazis!” He admits that the comparison wasn’t his smartest move. “I was young, and angry.” But it wasn’t this line that enraged Shimoni, he says. “He got angry when I said that Israel raped the Palestinian soul so it got pregnant and gave birth to suicide bombers.” He throws up his hands in exasperation. “They still don’t get it.”

The nerve centre of Shimoni’s empire is the bustling, well-appointed office of his record label, TACT (Tel Aviv City Team), located in a Tel Aviv business park. On the wall in his studio’s lavishly equipped control room hangs a poster of the eight-strong TACT crew, a knot of baseball caps and scowls. The first thing you notice is the diamond-studded Star of David hanging around Shimoni’s neck.

To some in Israel, Subliminal is a national hero. When I mention his name to a security guard at Ben Gurion airport, she smiles, raises her thumbs, and says: “He is a great man.” His fan base is immense: factoring in Israel’s high ratio of bootlegs to legal sales, he estimates that a copy of his second album, *The Light and the Shadow*, is in 25 percent of Israeli homes. Official sales alone have made him by far the country’s biggest rap star. But he has no doubt where his core support lies: “Whenever you’re drafted into the army, you become a Subliminal fan,” he says with pride. At concerts, he asks soldiers to hold up their dog tags

KESSELMAN: EXPLOITER

The following e-mail exchange was found on a computer purchased “as is” in an “everything must go” apartment sale in Toronto. The seller said she was taking an “extended vacation.”

From: Sheera Aronovitch [mailto:jewessence@canu.ca]
Sent: Wednesday, November 10, 2004 7:33 PM
To: Jon Kesselman
Subject: YOUR GREAT FILM!

Dear Mr. Kesselman:

Hi! I don’t usually write letters like this, but I just saw your movie, “The Hebrew Hammer,” and I thought it was really, really good! Me and all of my friends went to go see it at the Jewish Film Festival here in Toronto. Finally! A Jewish film that’s cool and not full of clichés! The only thing I objected to is, well, you kind of SUBJUGATE women in the movie. Like the part where the Hammer and that girl have sex. She’s such a strong woman, and then she turns into Jell-O the second she’s in bed with him. What’s up with that???

Anyway, it would be so cool if you wrote me back (I am thinking of writing a midterm paper about your movie, and it would really help me!)

Sincerely, your biggest fan in Toronto,
Sheera Aronovitch

11/11/04 14:56, Jon Kesselman at jk@harbor.net wrote:

Sheera--

Thanks for the kind words and support of the film. The DVD is out now! Regarding the Jell-O-ification of Esther -- The Hammer is a throwback to the Blaxploitation heroes of the '70s. These characters were powerful “men’s men” types who made their women (or “bitches”) swoon. Hope that addresses your concern. Sincerely,
Jon

From: Sheera Aronovitch [mailto:jewessence@canu.ca]
Sent: Thursday, November 11, 2004 3:19 PM
To: Jon Kesselman
Subject: Re: YOUR GREAT FILM!

Dear Mr. Kesselman,

I actually did a paper on Blaxploitation and African American Sexual Utopianism last year. I look at the genre from an ontological perspective, and see it as a sign that black culture was beginning to lose depth and faith in the 1970s. Honestly? Blaxploitation as your raw material... um, I guess I didn’t realize that’s what you were trying to do... anyway, I don’t think it sends out the *best* message about contemporary Jewishness. Anyway, I may still buy your DVD, because Adam Goldberg is so cool! Why did he agree to do your movie? Sincerely, Sheera Aronovitch

13/11/04 15:27, Jon Kesselman at jk@harbor.net wrote:

Sheera--

Again, thanks for your support. Yes, Adam Goldberg is very cool. I’m glad that you took the time to consider

and delivers a unique spin on rap's usual call-and-response shtick: "Whoever is proud to be a Zionist in the state of Israel, put your hands in the air! Hell yeah!"

To many liberal Jews, though, he is the unacceptable face of radical Zionism. In the summer of 2004, Jewish record label Jdub organized the Unity Sessions, a concert in Brooklyn celebrating Israeli hip-hop. The organizers invited Nafar and Rotem but snubbed Shimoni because they didn't think he would appreciate the message of peace and cooperation.

In person, Shimoni is a slick character with subtly expensive clothes, a meticulously styled goatee, and a shrewd hustler's charm. He has the same matter-of-fact arrogance as P. Diddy, reeling off his litany of accomplishments — opened his first club at the age of fifteen, released Israel's first Hebrew rap album, sold this, won that — as if he were merely presenting facts rather than boasting.

"When I first came out, I was the voice of the people," he says. "When I signed my first distribution contract, they told me never to talk about politics, because no matter what your opinion, half the people in Israel are going to hate you for it. And I was like, this is hip-hop. If they don't like me for my political opinions, fuck them. I'll keep it real. And the people in the streets respect me for that."

Shimoni likes to portray his success as a triumph against the odds, although that is to downplay how much the odds themselves have changed. Israel was a different place when he started out as an MC eleven years ago. Shimoni's father, who fled persecution in Persia in 1948, taught his son to be a patriot at a time when it was unfashionable. Israel was leaning toward the left. Every Independence Day, Shimoni's childhood home looked like one giant Israeli flag; he claims his schoolmates would mock him for his love of Jewish tradition. "The role models [my generation] had as children were rock artists saying, 'Fuck your head up, fuck this country, fuck this army, fuck religion, fuck the culture, we don't come from that, we're the new generation.' They had the anarchy logo everywhere. That was the environment I grew up in."

In the 1990s, before the fall of Barak and the

Oslo accords, "Zionist" became a synonym for "right-wing." Shimoni's politics made him an outsider. The key line in 1999's "Living from Day to Day" — "The whole country's shaking like a cigarette in Arafat's mouth" — and its creator's fondness for the Star of David outraged many liberal journalists. "They called me Nazi," he protests.

But after the second intifada, the tenor of the times changed in Shimoni's favor. Using a two-hundred-strong street team to bombard radio request lines and generate buzz, Shimoni made his first major album, 2001's *The Light from Zion*, into an overnight sensation. Success emboldened him. The next year's more political follow-up — *The Light and the Shadow*, recorded with an old army buddy, Yoav Eliasi (a.k.a. the Shadow) — spawned nine hit singles. The first 20,000 pressings came with a Star of David pendant.

During his army service, he was bodyguard to Shaul Mofaz, then chief of the general staff, now defense minister. As a musician, he has enjoyed the endorsement of Ariel Sharon, fronting a government campaign in the nation's schools against drunk driving. He supports the police and doesn't take drugs. "Nobody expects that from a thug rapper. We're not thugs. We're the good guys."

This is a reversal in a musical genre that gave us "Fuck tha Police" and "Hits from the Bong." However, for all intents and purposes, mainstream Israeli hip-hop is whatever its first and biggest star says it is. "In Israel, I make the rules," he declares. "I built hip-hop. We [the TACT crew] tried to create our own, better version of the hip-hop world."

In the summer of 2004, Shimoni struck a cautiously conciliatory note on a version of a 1960s military song, "Flowers in the Barrel," envisaging "two nations' emancipation from slavery to freedom." Today, he describes himself as an optimist for peace.

But his position is still unapologetically radical. He views himself as a reasonable, tolerant man who is besieged by anti-Semites. The foreign media is "hateful to Israel," he says. His thoughts on Israeli occupation: "If the Israeli army wanted to occupy something, we would occupy the whole Middle East in 48 hours. So what occupation army are you talking about? It's the Israeli. Defense. Force." On Arafat: "I believe Arafat should have been dead ten years ago, because it would have saved us a lot of time." Dead, as in assassinated? "Yeah. Fuck, yeah! Everybody knows he paid the families that sent their sons to kill themselves inside a fucking club. Do you believe that Tony Blair or Bush would stand for something like that?" He's shouting now, losing his usual even-tempered charm. "No! But Israel is under a microscope, so Israel's gotta be all humanitarian."

Two days later, I visit Tamer Nafar inside his flaking apartment block in Lod. We sit on his bed, beneath huge posters of Tupac Shakur and Che Guevara. On the opposite bed, usually occupied by his brother and bandmate Suhel, sits DAM's third member, Mahmud Jrere. When I mention I met Subliminal at his offices, Nafar barks a mirthless laugh. "His offices? You are standing in my offices."

Nafar seems to be angry at everything: at Israel, at Arab governments, at the music industry, at me for not following his directions properly and getting lost. He barely smiles, but then he has little to smile about. Since forming in 1999, DAM (Da Arabic MCs) have played countless shows and posted several songs on the Internet to a strong fan base, but they have yet to release a CD. Although they rap in both Arabic and Hebrew, no Israeli label will sign them, because Arab-made rap isn't a money-spinner, and no Arab label will touch them, because they hold Israeli ID cards and so are considered traitors. Nafar supports his parents by selling insurance over the phone. Mid-

the ontological perspective of the Hammer. In all honesty, I had to go look up ontological because I am not as smart as you are. :) About the "best" message of contemporary Judaism -- I wasn't aware there was one. Can you send me the Web site so I can read up on it? Thanks,
JK

From: Sheera Aronovitch [mailto:jewessence@canu.ca]
Sent: Tuesday, November 16, 2004 3:44 PM
To: Jon Kesselman
Subject: Re: YOUR GREAT FILM!

Dear Mr. Kesselman,
I thought everyone who went to university has used "ontological". My bad. Anyway, I doubt I am more "smart" than you--maybe just "better read." (Ha, ha) And as for this "best" message business. There ARE better messages. Have you ever been to B'nai Jeshurun in New York? It's a very cool synagogue. They have a bongo player. Their agenda is one of social justice. I'm not saying that your agenda is worthless -- hey, I enjoy pop culture as much as the next "Jewcy Jew" -- but I think, when you have a platform, use it! ESPECIALLY in today's America, where all the wrong people have soapboxes (we here in Canada are VERY dismayed at the outcome of your election. We feel bad for you guys). If you ever come to Toronto, I would love to meet you! ...is Adam Goldberg married? (just joking. Actually...not!) Sincerely, Sheera

20/11/04 12:17, Jon Kesselman at jk@harbor.net wrote:

Dear Sheera—
Typically, I don't have long e-mail conversations with fans, but you are obviously not typical. In fact, I have yet to encounter a fan quite as self-righteous as yourself. I'm so sorry that the Canadians are dismayed by the outcome of our recent elections. The opinion of a country whose only real contributions to the world are maple syrup and hockey mean so much to us Americans. To be honest with you, I'd rather live in a Bush Run Conservative Christian Right Pseudo-Democracy than in a country of bongo playing, inferiority complexed, maple-leaf-on-your-backpack whiners. PS: I don't usually speak on behalf of my actors either, but I'm fairly certain Adam Goldberg would hate you.

From: Sheera Aronovitch [mailto:jewessence@canu.ca]
Sent: Sunday, February 06, 2005 7:20 PM
To: Jon Kesselman
Subject: Re: YOUR GREAT FILM!

I was not going to write you back, given how RUDE your last message was, but I just wanted you to know that I belong to a women's book/knitting club here, and I posted your last e-mail on our list serve. Everyone was just appalled. We had a big talk about it at the vegan cafe we meet at -- run by lesbians, who, by the way, in THIS country can get MARRIED to each other. You say Canadians have an inferiority complex! You are the perfect example of the AMERICAN inferiority complex. You KNOW your country is going to hell, so you lash

way through explaining all this, he lowers his head and roars with frustration: "My situation is fucked!"

Half Jewish and half Arab, Lod is a mixed city, but not an integrated one. The Arab district is a run-down clump of ugly apartment blocks and unpaved streets; it is rife with unemployment, drug dealing and gang violence. "This environment of crime got me connected to Tupac," Nafar says. "It's the same behavior, the same attitude, the same systems."

For Arabs living in Israel, the issue is one of class as much as race or religion: it is poverty that does the most to stoke Nafar's rage. One in five Israelis is Arab, but to Nafar, who has cousins in the occupied territories of Gaza and Ramallah, the concept is oxymoronic. "We're strangers here. When I go on a bus, I'm also scared. Bombs cannot separate between Jews and Muslims and Christians. I feel that fear with them, but I cannot feel happiness with them. If you go to a mall and you speak Arabic on the phone, people look at you. You feel like a monster. It's a land for the Jewish, so I have no place here."

As an Arab-Israeli, Nafar has been orphaned by a turn of history — barely tolerated by one country, rejected by the other with which he identifies. "I have no ambitions. I don't know the word *ambitious*," he says. "The Jews have got the army" — he means the mandatory military service, which at least gives Israeli youth a sense of direction. "You're connected and feeling independence. And after the age of eighteen, I've got to go and sell hummus or fix cars or sell drugs."

When "Who Is the Terrorist?" first appeared, one newspaper columnist urged Mossad to arrest

DAM. "I think that they will come, but not yet," Nafar says with a sly grin.

Making sense of the two MCs' claims and counterclaims feels impossible. Just ask Anat Halachmi, who spent three years filming Shimoni and Nafar for an award-winning documentary called *Channels of Rage*. "I chose these two young boys, because they reflected the older people here," says Halachmi, the film's Jewish-Israeli director. "How people behave is not mature. If I [had taken] Arafat and Sharon, it would [have been] the same dynamic." Often she sounds like a schoolteacher discussing two troublesome pupils. "Tamer was looking for his roots. Sometimes you become too extreme, but he was searching for his identity, and Subliminal couldn't understand it. Subliminal's like everybody here — all the time criticizing and blaming. And Tamer's the same."

Halachmi wants to get Shimoni and Nafar to record a song together as a DVD feature for

Channels of Rage. After a year of trying, she is still optimistic, but exasperated. "I have a great relationship with both of them, but I can't get them together. I told them, 'Let's be friends; let's come together.' If they're just fighting all the time, it becomes boring."

These days, when the two men meet by chance at a club, at best they exchange insincere niceties; at worst, their crews come to blows. Each thinks the other is naive, ignorant, extremist, and unreasonable. Both claim to best represent hip-hop. Both want peace in Israel. They just can't agree on the details.

Early on in Halachmi's film, the two MCs are seen onstage together in Shimoni's tiny Tel Aviv club, trading verses on Shimoni's song "Living from Day to Day." It is before the bust-up, before the intifada. When the song ends, the twenty-year-old Nafar shouts to the mixed crowd: "People! Only hip-hop will bring peace!" You'd love to believe him. &

**ACCESS THIS ARTICLE ONLINE!
WWW.GUILTANDPLEASURE.COM/HIPHOP**

out at us, because you KNOW that we are doing things better, and AMERIKKKANS can't handle that TRUTH. ...I had no idea you were a neo-con.
Sheera

From: Sheera Aronovitch [mailto:jewessence@canu.ca]
Sent: Sunday, February 27, 2005 8:11 PM
To: Jon Kesselman
Subject: Re: YOUR GREAT FILM!

Just so you know, I have mounted a boycott campaign of your film here. Please find a letter below that I have stapled to every campus and Jewish community centre wall I could find in this beautiful, free Canadian city of mine.

DOWN WITH THE HEBREW HAMMER!

The Hebrew Hammer is a film by Jon Kesselman which has appeared in several festivals in Toronto in the past year. This is a plea for those of you who have not yet seen this pathetic film, but who have been planning to do so, to boycott The Hebrew Hammer, and any future endeavours by the SO-CALLED filmmaker Jonathan Kesselman. Jonathan Kesselman is an American fascist with a hatred of women -- especially Canadian women -- and of Jewishness. He is masquerading under the mask of "irony" -- and it's ENOUGH! Please log on to www.downwiththehebrewhammer.com, to see what this "filmmaker" thinks of Canadians and women and the importance of having a good Jewish message. This Web site contains a full transcript of an exchange of letters between the Canadian graduate student (cultural studies) Sheera Aronovitch and Jonathan Kesselman.

NOTE: To the knowledge of those involved in the DOWN WITH HAMMER campaign, the star of the film, Adam Goldberg, is not anti-Canadian or anti-women or anti-Jewish. The views of Jonathan Kesselman should not be seen as representative of those of (the totally hot!) Adam Goldberg.

From: Josh Levy [mailto:jlevy@boingboing.com]
Sent: Monday, March 07, 2005 11:09 AM
To: Jon Kesselman; Sheera Aronovitch
Subject: APOLOGIES FROM JSA at U of T

Dear Jon Kesselman,
I am writing as a representative of the Jewish students' association of the University of Toronto. It may have come to your attention that a student of ours has organized a campaign against you and your film THE HEBREW HAMMER. We would like you to know that we do not endorse this campaign and this past Saturday, sent several (non-shomer shabbos) students around campus to take down the many anti-Hammer notices. We even got the ones inside the ladies' bathroom stalls.
I would like to extend an invitation to you to show your film at our lag ba'omer festival this spring. It's a very cool event — we call it the Lagfest. Would you be interested in discussing this further? Please get back to me as soon as you can.

Josh Levy
Jewish Students Association
University of Toronto

Cc: S. Aronovitch &