

## Title: “Let’s get it started in here”

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G78.2820: Forms of Jewish Culture

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**Abstract:** For four days in April, 2006, The Idan Raichel Project, one of Israel’s most acclaimed contemporary musical groups, toured New York City under the auspices of a not-for-profit organization, Israel at Heart, partnering with the Office of Black Ministry, Archdiocese of New York and Teev Events. The tour included concert performances and also tours of the band, including its Ethiopian members to public schools. The total experience brought various communities together including members of the black and Jewish communities, as well as American Jews meeting black-Jews. The tour also brought a picture of Israel to Americans, other than the images of violence most commonly portrayed by media outlets. Although not deemed completely successful by some, the overall experience was by most accounts extremely positive and showed the potential for culture to create bonds between various communities especially when encountering “the other.”

## **Introduction**

Over the last century relations between Jews and blacks in America have had many high and many lows. While images of Jewish leaders at the forefront of the civil right's movement are often held up as icons of a strong bond between the two minority groups, they are countered by a plethora of antagonistic episodes between the two peoples. (Rose, 1981) Images of the 1991 Crown Heights riots, Louis Farrakhan speeches, and division over Middle East policy highlight the divide which has existed and continues to exist between the parts of the black and Jewish communities in America. Yet despite these divides, there are several examples of individuals, communal institutions and independent organizations that continue to bridge this gap, especially in urban areas where the two populations either co-exist or in the case of cities like New York at least live in the same geographic region.

As minority groups both Jews and blacks have often been portrayed by the dominant Christian culture of America in a negative light often facing racism and anti-Semitism which was couched in similar themes, terminology and manifestations. As described by Hurvitz, American folklore, sacred Christian writings, secular literature and language were all instrumental in teaching, "negative attitudes towards blacks and Jews before they (Christian Americans) see or meet an individual or group of blacks or Jews." (Hurvitz, 1974, p. 301)

Given this common bond of facing discrimination, as well as the economic connection of both groups trying to advance in the white Christian system, it is no wonder that the two people formed alliances in various domains. Sundquist recalls the words of L.D Reddick, who in 1942 postulated that a man from Mars would expect

Jews and blacks to be allies because they shared so much in common within their day-to-day communal experiences. (Sundquist, 2005, p. 525)

The strongest of these alliances was in the area of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. In particular the well documented relationships between black and Jewish leaders, most notably between Martin Luther King Jr. and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, were of major significance to the civil rights movement. (Schneir, 1999) The connection of the two people led Martin Luther King Jr. to state that, "it would be impossible to record the contribution that the Jewish people have made toward the Negro's struggle for freedom, it has been so great." (Rose, 1981, p. 55)

However, even with these strong bonds, relations between blacks and Jews were unable to sustain their strength beyond the civil rights era. As Jews succeeded economically, symbolized by their flight to the suburbs, the black population was often constrained in urban life and poverty despite the achievements of legal and civil equality. At times the often vitriolic comments by members of both the black and Jewish communities pointed at the potential harm of racial integration, at times even suggesting that segregation was preferred and necessary. (Tevet & Shahak, 1977)

According to Sundquist, the man from Mars, described by Reddick, would be somewhat surprised to observe that despite their earlier successes and the promise of equality for both peoples, that, "for Jews the promise was generally fulfilled long ago. Unlike blacks, Jews have "made it" in America." (Sundquist, 2005, p. 525)

Despite the historical connections the asymmetrical relationship between Jews and blacks has also led to black anti-Semitism and Jewish racism being apparent in pockets within both communities. (Rose, 1981, p. 55)

In understanding both the Jewish and black communities as diasporic communities we are able to uncover a connection between the two peoples beyond their day-to-day existences. Jews have long been considered a dispersed people, and it is to them that the term 'diaspora' was initially applied. No longer the case, many minority groups now use the term diaspora to describe their condition of being a minority population away from their homeland. (Turino, 2004) For blacks in America, connecting to their homeland, intrinsically connected to the slavery movement, has become a key component in establishing African-American identity. For both communities the term "diaspora" can be seen as not just one of dispersion from a specific geographic entity, but a term which connotes, "political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement." (Clifford, 1997, p. 252) In Clifford's view it is the dual forces of loss and survival which are the dominant themes of diaspora discourse and both of which are evident in the black and Jewish communities.

Viewing the Jewish and black communities as similar is complicated in a society which traditionally views the world in terms of black-white relations. (Tessman & Bar On, 2001) These complexities are highlighted in a variety of different forms including the differences between racism and anti-Semitism as forms of prejudice against the two peoples. Perhaps in the bygone area where scientific, racially based anti-Semitism was more prevalent, the connections between negative attitudes towards Jews and blacks may have been more obvious. However, given the understanding that Jews are not a race, have left some to wonder about the ability to both peoples to truly be able to relate to one another.

The statement that Jews are not a racial entity is not one that goes unchallenged. A common justification for such a comment has been that Jews come in all types of skin colors and therefore defy the general definition of what it means to constitute a single race. A new discourse around concepts of Jewish ethnicity and race has emerged recently with the mass immigration of Ethiopian Jews to Israel..

“The arrival in Israel of over 60,000 Ethiopian immigrants poses an unprecedented challenge to this notion. On all three accounts – phenotype, descent and genetics – Ethiopian Jews revealed the ultimate futility of a racial model of Jewishness. However, the continuing attempts to incorporate Ethiopians into such a racial model is, as we have shown above, one of the most vivid testimonies to its continued relevance and persistence.” (Kaplan, 2003, p. 90)

The treatment of black Ethiopian Jews in Israel by a predominantly white Jewish population has not always been one of respect and compassion, and has sometimes been blatantly racist. (Salamon, 2001) The way in which white Jews relate to black Jews, is also part of the broader picture that helps us to better understand black-Jewish relations in the United States.

This paper will explore the way in which a particular genre of contemporary music can serve as a way to describe the current relationship between Jews and blacks in America. In doing so, the music will also explore the ways white Jews in America understand and conceive of black-Jewish culture. Israeli music, paralleling Israeli society, has long been dominated by white Ashkenazi culture and only gradually begun to accept *musiqā mizrahit* (lit. eastern or Oriental music) as mainstream. (Regev & Seroussi, 2004) Even though Ethiopian Jews are regarded as neither Ashkenazi nor Sephardi (mizrahi) the role of Ethiopian culture mirrors the acceptance of a different type of Jew into Israeli society.

In four days The Idan Raichel Project in Harlem brought all of these issues together. While this tour does not offer an epilogue it certainly highlights a different chapter, and one seldom told, in the ongoing story of the relationship between blacks and Jews in America. In doing so, it also offers an extra chapter about the ways in which different Jews relate to one another, both in the United States and in Israel

### **Ethiopian Jewry**

It was a Saturday morning, May 24 1994, and the world awoke to the astounding news that the Israeli government had undertaken a dramatic rescue operation of 14,324 Jews from war torn Ethiopia. On this particular Sabbath, Jews all around the world were in awe at the miracle which in 36 hours saw the Jewish State fulfill its divine mission of providing a place of refuge for Jews from all around the world. As the full details of Operation Solomon became apparent, it has been recorded as one of the greatest accomplishments of a country less than 50 years old, and the embodiment of the Zionist enterprise.

Currently the Ethiopian population of Israel is approximately 80,000 representing less than 0.1% of the total population<sup>1</sup>. Despite its extended history dealing with various waves of immigration, the absorption of Ethiopian Jewry has provided Israeli society with a new set of challenges. This is not necessarily new for a country who despite continually fulfilling its mission of ingathering Jewish exiles from the broad corners of the Diaspora, has at various times been accused of being a nation which, “loves immigration but hates immigrants.”

The adjustment of many Jews to the knowledge that there existed such a

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<sup>1</sup> Some, including Joey Low from Israel at Heart estimate the population of the Ethiopian community in Israel to be as large as 100,000.

prominent black-Jewish community was also not simple. While there have undoubtedly been many Jewish people and organizations that have taken up the cause of Ethiopian Jewry, there are many segments of the Jewish population that for various reasons have struggled to come to terms with a black-Jewish population. The most vocal of these groups have been orthodox Jews who have doubted the authenticity of Ethiopian Jews and required them to undergo conversion in order to be accepted as members of the Jewish people. (Mihaileanu & Blanc, 2005) As well as these issues of status, many Jews have also failed to come to terms with Jews of another color being a part of their nation. This can be attributed to a number of reasons including Ethiopian Jewry's many different customs and traditions (they had been unaffected by 1,000's of years of the development of Jewish Law), as well as the uncovering a latent racism amongst many Jews.

The difficulty in relating to the Jews of Ethiopia is reflected by the various names which over time have been attributed to them including Falasha (stranger) and Beta Israel (House of Israel). These names are accompanied by the crude terms to which Ethiopian Jews were sometimes referred to, mainly on the streets of Israel, including the terms "cushim" and "schorim" used in a derogatory fashion.<sup>2</sup>

It would seem natural that for Jews in the United States, that the highlighting of Ethiopian Jewry would have raised the consciousness of Jewish-black relations within America. A history that is clouded by tension and sometimes violence,

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<sup>2</sup> An originally acceptable Hebrew term for members of the community, *kushim*—"Cushites," from a Biblical name for Ethiopia—is today considered to be a slur and the term "schorim" (lit. blacks) in particular has descended to the same pejorative status.

sprinkled with moments of reconciliation and admiration, has largely been unaffected by the rise in prominence of the Jews from Ethiopia.

In one weekend in April, 2006, there existed a pocket in time when the arrival of an Israeli musical group to Harlem not only raised the level of understanding about Ethiopian Jews for North American Jews but also managed to bring Jews and African-Americans somewhat closer together. While the results may not have been as grand as the organizers of this event may have hoped for, the enduring results of this encounter are not known. This experience undoubtedly provided a moment where music was able to transcend division and for that brief moment bring different peoples together.

### **The Idan Raichel Project**

Five years ago Idan Raichel, straight out of the Israeli army's entertainment troupe, purchased his computer's music-recording program and began recording songs in Hebrew and Amharic with friends in his parent's basement. Before then, Raichel had worked at a boarding school north of Tel Aviv for 5th-12th graders, many of them new immigrants from Russia and Ethiopia. It was there that Raichel taught and learned about music, especially the music that the students were into. As Raichel comments, "what really grabbed me was that in spite of the poor quality of the tapes they listened to, the singers' rich voices sparkled through the static. You see, I hardly sing on my album because my voice is really not special. These musicians use their voices like instruments. In their society, somebody like Bob Dylan would never have made it." (Ginsberg, 2003)

Idan Raichel himself is not Ethiopian. He is third generation Israeli, born in Kfar Saba, although with his long dreadlocks and baggy pants he doesn't look out of place amongst his Ethiopian vocalists.

Many Israeli artists have fused ethnic music with contemporary sounds. (Regev & Seroussi, 2004) In 1991 Shlomo Gronich recorded Ethiopian adolescents singing with him in Hebrew. The Raichel Project is the first time that the traditional languages of Ethiopian Jews have been recorded with a mainstream Israeli musician.

Idan Raichel's first album *The Idan Raichel Project*, released in December, 2002, featured songs he had written most of the words and melodies to. Many of the vocals were by other artists from Ethiopia, Curacao and Israel singing in their original languages. The album was number one on the Israeli album sales chart and went on to sell more than 120,000 copies in Israel, and also received numerous music awards.

In January 2005, Idan Raichel released his second album, *Mimaamakim* ("From the Depth") which also mixed Hebrew and ethnic verses, but was not limited to one musical tradition. Most songs were love songs, as "love is the one language that crosses all boundaries."

Since 2005 Idan Raichel and his band also began touring the world, sometimes sponsored by the Israeli Foreign Ministry. He has traveled extensively in the United States, as well as featuring in international music festivals in Singapore, South America and the United Kingdom. While traveling he has become particularly popular with Jewish communities in the Diaspora, particularly youth who have been exposed to his music on various Israel travel programs.

## **Research**

This study focused on a period of four days, April 6-9, 2006 when The Idan Raichel Project visited Harlem in New York City. The trip was coordinated by a not-for-profit organization, Israel at Heart, and the performances were co-sponsored by with the New York Black Archdioceses and Teev Events

Idan Raichel and two of his lead singers, both Ethiopians, visited three schools in Harlem, on the Thursday and Friday prior to the performances at the Apollo Theater. By establishing a relationship with Joey Low, the founder and Director of Israel at Heart I was able to accompany the group on these school visits and attend the V.I.P cocktail reception prior to the Saturday night performance. At my own expense I was able to attend the two performances at the Apollo Theater on Saturday night, April 8<sup>th</sup>, and Sunday afternoon, April 9<sup>th</sup>.

Through discussions with various people associated with The Idan Raichel Project, and observing the group interact on a formal and informal level throughout these four days I was able to gain insights about the group and their trip to America.

There were also people associated with the Israel at Heart organization that I was able to interview, including Joey Low who was very generous with his time and sharing of information. I was also able to interview Brother Tyrone A. Davis, the Executive Director of the Office of Black Ministry of the Archdiocese of New York and many members of the audience at both performances.

## Context

Before discussing the findings of this research there are a few necessary explanations about some of the organizations involved and the physical context of the tour of The Idan Raichel Project to Harlem.

Israel at Heart is a not-for-profit organization that is concerned with the well being of the State of Israel. Deliberately not identifying with any mainstream communal institutions, Israel at Heart, founded in 2002, is spearheaded and funded primarily through the work of its director, Joey Low. In the short time they have been in existence, Israel at Heart has brought several young Israeli ambassadors to speak at campuses throughout the country, Israeli sporting teams to play with and against American counterparts, and musical groups to perform throughout Jewish communities in the US. Israel at Heart also sponsored the Israeli reality television series, *The Ambassador*, based on the American show, *The Apprentice*. In the Israeli version the winner would work for Israel at Heart, becoming a traveling spokesperson for Israel throughout the world. Israel at Heart was born largely due to Mr. Low's frustration with the way in which the media was portraying Israel in recent times and the desire to get the real story out to the Jewish and general world.

For this particular project, Israel at Heart partnered with the Office of Black Ministry, Archdiocese of New York. Over several years Mr. Low had developed a relationship with this organization whose primary mission is to, "address some of the unique spiritual, cultural and social needs of African American, African, and Caribbean American Catholics, as well as the larger Black Community." (Office of Black Ministry, 2006) As described in their website the Office of the Black Ministry

is primarily concerned with the Black Catholic population but also sees as part of its work the, “the eradication of racism and all forms of oppression within the Church and Society.”(Office of Black Ministry, 2006)

The third partner for the performances was Teev Events, a company that has been responsible for bringing various Israeli musicians to America in recent years, but whose role was mainly restricted to publicity and logistics for the concerts.

For the organizers it was important for the concerts to be performed at the Apollo Theater in Harlem. Harlem both physically and symbolizes the home of a large concentration of African Americans. To emphasize this point it was essential for Mr. Low to include visits to local schools in Harlem in order to promote genuine dialogue between the two groups. The Apollo Theater, with all of its legendary status stands as a landmark of African American culture in New York. This was the first time that an Israeli artist had performed on the stage of the Apollo Theater. As Idan Raichel recounted, “performing at the Apollo was not even a dream, I had never dreamed it possible to perform here.”

## **Observations**

There were three core components to the observation of The Idan Raichel Project in Harlem – visits to schools in Harlem; a pre-performance cocktail reception; and two performances at the Apollo Theater.

### **1) Visits to Schools in Harlem**

On Thursday and Friday the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> of April 2006, Idan Raichel, his two Ethiopian vocalists, two tour managers and Mr. Low from Israel at Heart visited three

schools in Harlem. Two of the schools were elementary schools, Saint Joseph's and Saint Charles Borromeo and one was a high school, the Rice High School. All of these schools were affiliated with the Catholic Ministry of New York, and the vast majority of students in all schools were African-American or Hispanic. In each of school Raichel and his entourage were greeted by students and given tours of the school, often stopping into classrooms to answer a few questions from the students.

Throughout the school the group was greeted enthusiastically by students, staff and teachers. The students, in school uniforms, were extremely polite and on the whole extremely engaged with their visitors. In some classes it was clear that students had been briefed about the band prior to their visit.

Following the tours of the schools, which lasted anywhere from ten to thirty minutes, (in one case time did not allow for a tour to occur), the band moved to a central location, an auditorium or a cafeteria, to talk to the students and to sing a few songs. Student audiences ranged from fifty to 200 students. Idan Raichel was introduced by staff members of the school to the students and in one case Mr. Low was also introduced and said a few words.

Idan Raichel answered most of the student questions and he accompanied Cabra and Avi on the piano as they sang music in their native languages. Raichel has a good command of the English language although at times he did turn to his managers to ask for translations for certain words. His singers also spoke English well but were reluctant to answer questions. It was clear that Raichel enjoyed being in front of the student audience, constantly smiling, more than his fellow singers who

were not as enthusiastic about the school visits. The singing was greeted with enthusiastic applause and was followed by more questions from the students.

Questions from the students included:

- Where is Israel? What language do you speak in Israel?
- What is Ethiopia like? Is it all desert? Is there a McDonalds in Ethiopia?
- When did you learn to play music? How long has the band been together
- How do you contribute to your country?
- What are your songs about?

In one school, the student choir sang a song in honor of their guests – a gospel tune entitled “The Precious Lamb of God.”

Upon announcing that the band had run out of time and had to leave the school there were audible signs of disappointment from the students who wanted to ask more questions and hear the group perform more songs.

## **2) Pre-performance Cocktail Reception**

The pre-performance Cocktail reception at the Apollo Theater at 8pm on Saturday April 8<sup>th</sup> was attended by approximately fifty people that were invited personally by Mr. Low and Brother Tyrone Davis. There were approximately 35 white people (presumably Jewish) and approximately 15 black people (presumably from the black Catholic church, although at least two of whom were Ethiopian Jews). The room was a large dark space on the third floor of the Theater. Upon entry a montage of images of Ethiopian Jews was being screened on the rear wall. People were talking informally amongst themselves, and sipping wine, before a series of 3 brief speeches.

The first comments were from Mr. Low officially welcoming everyone to the world famous Apollo Theater. “This is a dream come true,” began Mr. Low, “I’m a New Yorker, and when you grow up here you always hear, “Live from the Apollo,” and when Idan’s manager first suggested the Lincoln Center, I said what about the Apollo Theater, because part of our agenda at Israel at Heart is to let the world know about 100,000 Ethiopian Jews living in Israel, to know about them, to learn about the struggle that they went through, and to bring their culture to Harlem.” Mr. Low went on to talk about some of the other work Israel at Heart has done in bringing various Israeli groups (musical, sporting, and speaking ambassadors) to the United States and that this summer he will be sponsoring a basketball team from High School in Harlem on a trip to Israel.

The second speaker, Brother Tyrone A. Davis was warmly introduced by his “good friend” Mr. Low. In his clerical dress, Brother Tyrone expressed excitement and anticipation not just about what would appear on stage but what we are all doing here right now together. He concluded his talk by saying that, “together we celebrate the culture of anyone of us and the humanity of all of us.”

Following Brother Tyrone, Mr. Low briefly introduced Danielle. Danielle, a young attractive black woman began speaking, and although shy, she had a good command of the English language. She made the following remarks:

*“My name is Danielle and I am a twenty-three year old student at the Interdisciplinary Center in Israel<sup>3</sup>. I would like to briefly share my personal story with you as it symbolizes my connection to the land of Israel. The upcoming festival of Passover is one about a nation that left all behind to follow a dream that God gave to Abraham. This symbolizes my community’s story. I had to come the same way through the desert and to feel close to the dream of being in Israel....The way I see Israel it is not something that you should take for granted because my community went through much suffering. And when I was watching television and I saw Israel, as a holy thing being portrayed in such a horrible way, it made me feel so bad and feel so mad. And when I heard about Joey’s program that sends students to speak in front of students on campuses and give a chance to see what Israel is all about and not what it is on television, that is why I knew that this was the right program for me. I wanted to make a change and make them see the country that I know. I feel this is my contribution and my way of thanking Israel. I hope I’ll be an ambassador one day.”*

Danielle left no one in the audience unmoved and no one doubting that some day she would in all likelihood become an ambassador for the State of Israel.

From there we were ushered into the theater.

### **3) Performances at the Apollo Theater**

The two performances at the Apollo Theater were similar to one another. Rather than focusing in detail on both performances, I will concentrate on the Saturday evening performance which began at 9:15pm instead of the scheduled time of 9pm. In fact, The Idan Raichel Project did not get on stage until after 10pm, much to the surprise of the audience most of whom found out, only after arriving that there would be a speaker and a performance from a gospel choir preceding The Raichel Project.

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<sup>3</sup> The Interdisciplinary Center in Israel (IDC) is Israel's first private institution of higher education to which Israel at Heart has awarded fellowships to seven outstanding Ethiopian students who are committed to earning their bachelor degrees.

The audience on Saturday night was approximately 95% white, the vast majority of which were Jewish, and a substantial portion of which were Israeli. The audience ranged in age from teenagers through to those approximately sixty years old, with the majority being in their mid-twenties and thirties. There were also a substantial number of families with teenage children in the audience.

After a few brief welcoming remarks, Mr. Low introduced the key note speaker for the evening, Mr Virgil Hodges, as a “good friend” and the retired executive director of the NY State Martin Luther King Jr. Institute for non violence and retired NY State Deputy Labor Commissioner. Mr Hodges spoke for approximately 10 minutes including the following remarks:

*“We are here tonight at the world famous Apollo Theater. Let’s think about why we’re here. It’s a nice venue. It’s in Harlem (loud applause). That is the main reason that w are here. People have worked together for this special occasion, and felt strongly that it should be here in Harlem.”*

*“As a spokesperson this evening I am honored because I have experienced Israel. My wife and I were there last summer and it was quite different from what I had expected it to be. Tonight we are here to celebrate its diversity and in a way we’re here to experience, see, feel and experience Israel in a way that most of my people, African Americans, have not seen it before.”*

In somewhat detail Mr. Hodges then went on to describe the journey of Ethiopian Jews to Israel, asking the audience to imagine the context which he was describing.

*“They didn’t get there the way that many arrived in Israel. They had to struggle to get there so they walked across the mean desert...Now imagine them finally arriving in Jerusalem and Israel in the Promised Land (applause). ...They came to a nice glistening wonderful country without preparation, unable to speak the language, not experienced with the culture without the resources for good living, without funds and money, with great needs yet they were there.”*

Mr Hodges then invited two Ethiopians in the audience to stand with him on stage – Danielle and Batya (an attorney now living Israel).

*“These are survivors. They may not have all taken the same route that I asked you to journey with me but most of them have achieved and most will contribute to the wonderful country of Israel.” (applause)*  
 Mr. Hodges then went on to describe the work of Martin Luther King Jr. and his connections to the Jewish community, mentioning that one of King’s final speeches a few days before going to Memphis in 1968, where he would be assassinated, was to the Rabbinical Council of New York. There he was introduced by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel as *“a man with a message, a method and a way. Israel at Heart replicates that vision.”*

*“This concert is a vehicle in helping us to do good and we will definitely succeed in what we want to do because the universe is on the side of right.” (applause)*

Mr. Hodges began to walk off stage and then quickly returned to the microphone.

*“In the vernacular of the Black Eyed Peas, Let’s get it started in here!”*

Mr. Hodges was then replaced on stage by a black gospel choir, The Tribe of Levi, who sang four songs all of which reflected words from the Old Testament. The group derived its name from the Biblical Jewish tribe of Levi, “whose primary responsibility it was to lead the singing, and play the musical instruments, both in worship and battle, as well as tend to the priestly duties of the temple. The Levites also carried the sacred Arc of the Covenant.” (Israel at Heart, 2006) At first it seemed that the audience didn’t quite know what to make of the experience, but by the final song, which espoused the virtues of Joshua, the audience was clapping and singing along to the unfamiliar tunes.

Following a twenty minute intermission, that left many in the audience restless and complaining about the wait, the lights went dim and The Idan Raichel Project finally appeared on stage.

For approximately one and a half hours, the band played and sung with little direct communication with the audience. Only twice did Raichel speak directly to the audience, the first time speaking of how gracious he was to be playing at the Apollo Theater and the second time to introduce the members of his band.

For many in the audience, presumably mainly the Israeli members of the crowd, many of the songs seemed familiar. Especially with the faster paced songs, and more towards the end of the evening, large sections of the audience were getting up and dancing in an almost infectious way. By the time of the final song, *Boi* (lit. Come), almost the entire audience was dancing and singing along. There was a feeling of genuine excitement and emotion in the audience which could be felt throughout and by the end of the evening there was a high level of palpable energy.

The concert on Sunday afternoon, April 9<sup>th</sup>, was similar to the Saturday evening performance in terms of content. There were less introductory comments at this second performance. At this performance there were probably more African-Americans in the audience, with some estimates being as high as 20%. On both evenings the Apollo Theater was not full, however the theater did not look empty. Audience estimates for the Saturday and Sunday performances were approximately 1000 and 800 respectively.

## **Discussion**

After the concerts a few people who were familiar with my research study approached me suggesting that although fun the performances were a failure because they failed to bring blacks and Jews together.

Instead of looking solely at the concerts I viewed the performances as part of a four day study, the context of which provided me with a different perspective about the role of The Idan Raichel Project in bringing together these communities.

It is with this in mind that I believe focusing on three areas where impact was made warrants analysis. The three areas are blacks and Jews coming together in Harlem; Israel coming to Harlem; and Ethiopian Jewry coming to American Jews. In all three areas the notion of a group of people being exposed to an unfamiliar “other” through the medium of culture was evident.

### **1) Blacks and Jews coming together in Harlem**

Over four days, Mr. Low addressed several audiences ranging from elementary school students to V.I.P guests. He always began his remarks by saying that he, “didn’t grow up far from here.” By emphasizing that close geographic bonds, Mr. Low was also suggesting tremendous unity between the two peoples.

These common bonds were emphasized throughout the four day experience. The most common resonating theme was that which connected Jews with the civil rights movement. At least three times during the visit, the friendship of Martin Luther King Jr. and Abraham Joshua Heschel was mentioned and held up in high value as the pinnacle of what could and should exist between the two communities. Raichel is

certainly not unfamiliar to these linkages as he has appeared previously in such contexts including Black History Month at UCLA in February, 2005.

For the African American students in Harlem and in Queens it was evidently one of their first meaningful encounters with Jews. The introduction of Idan Raichel at one school included the following remarks by a nun. “Today we are given a gift. We have visitors here today from Israel. As soon as I said that you had a perception in your head. But we also have another gift. And this gift also comes from Ethiopia. And as soon as I said that you had another perception in your mind. And that all comes together in such a beautiful way.”

Several students asked Idan Raichel whether he celebrated Christmas, a question which made complete sense to the students, as after all he came from the land where Jesus was born.

For many Jews in the audience it was their first time at the Apollo Theater and it was one of their first encounters with gospel music. As the primarily Jewish audience began singing along to the gospel tunes, which strategically all recounted stories from the Old Testament it was clear that a link between the cultures had been developed which did not previously exist. Many audience members still felt the whole experience of listening to gospel music “strange” and “bizarre” but at least outwardly appeared to enjoy the new experience. Perhaps this was part of the link between Jews and blacks alluded to by Rose when he wrote, “the evidence of the linkage is abundant, but nowhere is it clearer than in the Negro spirituals and in Gospel music. The lyrics reveal a litany of over-Jordan imagery and of deliverance from bondage” (Rose, 1981, p. 57)

## 2) Israel coming to Harlem

The central mission of Israel at Heart is to bring a positive image of Israel around the world. The sight of dread-locked Idan Raichel, playing the piano, accompanied by two young, attractive black Jews from Ethiopia, is an image that triggered several discussions about what Israel was really like. This moved the dialogue beyond the images of violence from CNN that many students stated formed their opinions about what Israel was like. Idan Raichel mentioned several times, “I wouldn’t call it a war. I would call it a conflict, and there are many conflicts all around the world. This is what CNN chooses to show, but this isn’t the real Israel and it isn’t the Israel that I know.”

From there Raichel would usually offer his exaggerated version of the size of Israel, as if to emphasize that this tiny country in the Middle East attracts undue attention. “In six hours you could drive the whole country from north to south, and in half an hour you could cross from the river to the sea. It is a small country. Smaller than New York.”

Perhaps the most poignant question came from a third grade girl who I learned later had been discussing civil responsibility in school. She raised her hand and innocently asked the question of Raichel, “What do you do to serve your country?” Raichel was momentarily stunned by the question, perhaps in disbelief that such a young girl had asked such a profound question. In the moment of silence, Cabra, Raichel’s vocalist shouted out that, “we all served in the army.” Raichel was quick to add to this, “Yes we all served in the army. But now we serve our country in different

ways. Most importantly we are ambassadors of the culture. We travel all over and people get to know all about our country and our society. This is the main thing that we do. We sing songs and bring our hearts all over the world. I wish you would be able to come to visit and come to Israel.”

When asked by the students to say something in Hebrew, Idan Raichel would teach the students the word “Shalom. A word which not only means hello and good-bye, but also means peace.”

As opposed to Danielle, an official ambassador for Israel at Heart, Idan Raichel did not always have responded with the same political eloquence. A high school student told Raichel the story about an international camp that he attended last year where there was a boy from Israel and a boy from Palestine (pronounced Palesteen) became friends. The student asked Raichel whether this could happen in the Middle East. Raichel’s response was that basically there was no communication or connection between these two groups and that this was the main problem. He then quickly suggested that this was the problem with all peoples, for example he worked with children from Ethiopia and from Russia who know nothing about one another except that they were able to communicate through the language of music. Idan Raichel was clearly more comfortable on the piano than he was answering political questions.

In terms of this mission of bringing a more nuanced and peaceful image of Israel to Harlem, Israel at Heart through The Idan Raichel Project, was undoubtedly successful. When asked why more media had not been present at such events, Mr. Low’s responded that being a small organization meant that they were unable to

attract such media attention. According to Mr. Low, one of the strengths of Israel at Heart is that he is not constrained by Jewish communal politics and bureaucracy. A weakness might be that he may be unable to share the message as far as it could be spread.

### **3) Ethiopian Jewry coming to American Jews**

For many Jewish, including Israeli, members of the audience, this was the first time that they had come face to face with Ethiopian Culture. This concert for many signified the first point in time where they were able to identify the contributions that Ethiopian Jews were now beginning to make to Israeli society and Jewish consciousness world-wide. As in the past where it had taken a while for *musiqqa mizrahit* to make its launch into mainstream acceptance by Israelis and Jews, now was the first time for many that Ethiopian culture could be viewed in the same way. In the week prior to the performance, The Jewish Week reported the following:

“There was something about him, as one Israeli rock critic wrote, that most Israelis found irresistible: Despite all the talk of Israel as a multicultural society, Raichel was the first to orchestrate a true coming together of cultures, not only by recording an album sung mostly by Ethiopians, but also by combining prayers in Amharic with blessings in English, and biblical Hebrew love songs with a classical Arabic sensibility. It was thrilling to hear, and not only did the album serve for most Israelis as an introduction to the previously unknown culture of Ethiopian Jews, but, more importantly, it fulfilled the promise of Israel as a melting pot.” (Leibovitz, 2006)

While it is unclear whether Idan Raichel represents an image of Israel as a melting pot or a multi-cultural salad, he has certainly come to represent a new image of what a Jew could be for many American Jews. This is confirmed by the high acclaim which Raichel receives from Jewish audiences all around North America.

Ethiopian Jewry has until recently only played a role of the “needy Jewish brother” in Jewish consciousness being the focus of many drives by Jewish philanthropic and welfare organizations. With a display of vibrant and authentic Jewish culture the relationship between black and white Jews begins to transform and the power dynamic begins to adjust. While one could not claim that the relationship has achieved an equilibrium it might no longer be one only symbolized by sympathy and donations.

### **Conclusion**

Israel, like New York is a center of immigration. The peoples of both locations feel this in many different aspects of their daily lives. While Idan Raichel suggested that Israel was unique because every ten years a new immigrant population arrived, the New Yorkers could relate to this as part of their daily life experiences.

The points of convergence between the blacks and Jews, were evident throughout the tour. Whether it was on issues of cultural exchange, or a shared nostalgia for the civil rights era there was a constant feeling of warmth between two communities that were continually referred to as “good friends.”

The somewhat disappointing component of the experience was the lack of black members in the audience during the band’s performance. Ticket prices for the performances ranged from \$30-\$150. This price may have simply been out of the price range for the average African-American who it was anticipated would attend such an event. While this could be evidence of the socio-economic gap which still exists in New York, it could also be evidence of Jews being willing to pay money to

attend a concert by a known Israeli performer as opposed to African-Americans who could not be expected to know about The Idan Raichel Project. Despite working closely with the Office of Black Ministry, there were clear signals that the black community did not have the infrastructure to publicize the performances in the same way that the Jewish community did. Although some may claim that this disparity is further evidence of the Jewish community having “made it” there are other variables which also influenced the attendance rates from both communities.

What the four day tour of The Idan Raichel Project to New York did show, was that on a leadership level there was good will and undoubtedly potential to build stronger connections between the two communities.

The Idan Raichel Project coming to Harlem was definitely part of the broader aims and objectives of the sponsoring organizations. Fulfilling the mission of Israel at Heart and the Black Archdioceses was a core objective of this tour. This clearly raises the question of how the providers of culture actually form the narrative which the performances project. While it is also true that Raichel’s message was framed within these broader contexts, there appeared to be something genuine and authentic about Raichel throughout the tour. Perhaps it was his youthfulness, and even in his naiveté, that he was unable to disguise his enthusiasm as he performed, answered questions from children, or spoke of his dream to play at the Apollo.

The tour of The Idan Raichel Project illustrated the power of culture to bring together different peoples. For those who witnessed it, the experience was illuminating. Although not as successful as some would have liked, the potential for culture to bridge gaps around the world is supported by this four day experience.

After the tour I was forced to take a step back and evaluate my own objectivity about this project. As a Jewish educator, a self-admitted Zionist, and with an admiration for The Raichel Project I knew that I had biases coming into this study. Although I have previously listened to a lot of Raichel's music, I had never previously met him or seen the group perform. I also acknowledge that as an Australian, observing black-Jewish relations had some sort of exotic appeal to me, but I have tried as best as possible to put these feelings aside in order to examine the event within the historical context of an ongoing dialogue between the two peoples.

Perhaps it is in the words of The Idan Raichel Project's most acclaimed song, *Boi* that I am best able to describe the reactions of so many people that I spoke to during and after the four days. So many of them explained being taken on a journey or that something special had occurred. I have no doubt that for every person I spoke to that this special journey was unique and intensely personal.

*Come, give me your hand and let's go,  
Don't ask me where.  
Don't ask me about happiness,  
Maybe it'll come too.  
When it comes – it will fall on us like rain...  
Come, let's hug and let's go,  
Don't ask me when.  
Don't ask me about a home,  
Don't look for time from me,  
Time doesn't wait, doesn't stop, doesn't stay...*

Over four days there was much evidence of people taking each other's hands and moving forward together with a similar vision. While only a beginning of many dialogues, Mr. Hodges words have echoed with me since he declared, "Let's get it started in here!" For many of those who experienced The Idan Raichel Project there was undoubtedly the feeling that something really did get started.

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