

Jewish Enough:

A Response to Sarah Imhoff's "The Man in Black: Matisyahu, Identity, and Authenticity"

Nora Rubel

In 2005 the Chicago Public Radio show *This American Life* featured a vignette entitled “That’s Funny, You Don’t Look Jewish”. The subject of this piece was a young hasidic man who went walking on the wild side and fell into the indie rock scene with Vic Thrill; the young hasid named Chaim took the stage name of Curly Oxide (“Curly” was a wink at his sidecurls or *payes*). For a year, this man who had been raised in Yiddish-speaking Williamsburg became a local sensation in hipster Williamsburg—part novelty act, part emerging pop star. Curly Oxide was looking for something other than the restricted yeshiva life that had been planned for him and the stage beckoned.

In another Brooklyn neighborhood not far away lives another hipster Hasid, one whose reputation has spread far beyond Williamsburg. By now Matthew Miller’s transformation from the Phish-following-deadhead to hasidic reggae superstar Matisyahu has been well documented in the popular press. Sarah Imhoff, in her essay “The Man in Black”, is quite correct in pointing out that this journey is not unique or even particularly noteworthy. The question of what attracts secular Jews to embrace this observant lifestyle has by now been well-tread by academics. This Jewish “tune in-drop out” story—also known as the ba’alei teshuvah movement—has been written about since it came to light in the midst of the 1960s counterculture. The draw of this story of course lies in the obvious question: what would cause someone who has endless choices in the outside world to consciously choose a lifestyle that—by design—limits one’s choices and movements?

But not all ba’alei teshuvah choose to continue to engage with the secular world in the way that Matisyahu has, and that is what makes his story different. Why he chooses to do so is not so important; the love of performance and the draw of fame and fortune are valid reasons enough. Imhoff asks a far better question: *why* do so many people find him appealing? She writes, “Why should a crowd of young, mostly secular pop-music listeners care about a Hasidic Jew? Was it just about the novelty?” In a word, probably. At least at first. I suspect that his appeal has far less to do with his reggae stylings than with his black-hatted identity. Imhoff is right to pinpoint the issue of authenticity as a central factor in examining the success of Matisyahu.

When asked to respond to this piece I did a superficial poll of a small undergraduate class (the majority of students are Jewish). Out of sixteen students, four had been to a Matisyahu concert, and about half of the class admitted to unabashedly liking him. None of them were particularly big reggae fans. I pushed them to explore *why* they like him. There were some awkward attempts to explain what they liked about his music; it’s catchy, it’s good to dance to. Finally I asked, “Do you like that he’s a Jew?” A wave of relief, as well as some nervous giggles, spread across the room. Yes, they declared. Yes, they like that he’s a Jew. They get to claim him. And sure, Amy Winehouse is Jewish too. But, just as Imhoff describes the history of other Jewish pop stars, it’s just

not the same. Winehouse isn't singing about the Temple in Jerusalem—and she just doesn't *look* Jewish in quite the same way.

In exploring this attraction, Imhoff notes an inconsistency: “Matisyahu wore the distinctive black fedora and *kapote*, the long, dark coat associated with Chabad-Lubavitch. Visually, then, he signified the traditional Hasid, which meant religious observance but also separate, exclusive, and even judgmental”. She raises a question, “With these objections, it is somewhat surprising how popular Matisyahu is among less observant Jews” (Imhoff 11). While his non-*frum* Jewish fans may equate Matisyahu with the hasidic world, it is important for us as scholars to avoid treating this world as a monolithic entity. The wide diversity within the hasidic community has inspired great religious creativity as well as the occasional violence between warring blocs. It is here then that I feel that Imhoff overstates resistance to Chabad from these “less observant Jews” by lumping this movement in with “hasidism” as a whole. It is true that Chabad receives harsh criticism from both the left and right, but these are usually from competing factions. Chabad's great success has been among the unaffiliated (which is actually the majority of American Jews). It is this successful marketing of the Jewish experience that its Jewish competitors view with bitterness and not just a bit of awe. Certainly if one examines Chabad's theological commitments it may actually be every bit as exclusivist as other hasidic groups, but it is Chabad's outreach efforts to secular Jews—if not secular Judaism—that makes the movement attractive to the unaffiliated. Possibly known best for their outreach on college campuses (a strong Matisyahu fan base), the movement has also made strong inroads among Jewish adults—offering an alternative to established synagogues in their communities.

Imhoff argues that Matisyahu's appeal hinges on an uneasy partnership of authenticity and inclusivity, and I agree. Matisyahu is attractive to a less religious Jewish audience because he is safe. Like Chabad, but with even less commitment. Listening to Matisyahu is a way of positively interacting with a perceived authentic Jewish authority figure who isn't going to point out that your breakfast bagel with egg and sausage isn't kosher.

The appeal of Matisyahu serves as a prism for examining not only Orthodoxy in the American imagination (and I'd be interested to know if he has a significant evangelical fan base) but also the great diversity in Orthodoxy. Matisyahu's 2007 departure from Chabad-Lubavitch and the attention this move garnered is also significant. The blogosphere was alive with speculation of his future religious plans. Would he become a Breslaver hasid? Would he drop his Orthodoxy entirely? He has stated that he likes to pray at Karliner hasidic shul. (The Karliners are also known as the Screaming Hasidim for their habit of yelling out their prayers; apparently this is how Matisyahu likes to start off his morning.) In some ways, I'd imagine that his departure from Chabad makes him more acceptable to some *frum* audiences as it is not just the woeful parents of *baalei teshuva* that think Chabad is a “cult”—it is Orthodox groups as well, even those that share a similar black hat.

Oh, and what became of the “novelty act” Curly Oxide? He's married with children and back in hasidic Williamsburg. But luckily for us, Tina Fey listens to NPR and has written a film called *Curly Oxide and Vic Thrill*. It stars Sacha Baron Cohen and is due out next year.