

A New Album Tries to Change Chanukah's Reputation

By Hadara Graubart

For any self-respecting cynic, it's de rigeur to despise Christmas music—primarily for its relentlessness, and the forced irony it creates in many, many otherwise joy-free environments (malls, car repair shops, pharmacies). Chanukah music has been saved from this fate by its obscurity, and as a result, the general public probably doesn't realize just how limited and infantile the catalog really is. Then again, why shouldn't it be? Winter holidays are under no obligation to have larger or more adult musical repertoires than other festivals—and Chanukah is most definitely a children's holiday. Still, there is certainly no reason why its songs cannot be transformed into more pleasurable fare, or some new ones added to the mix. Along with a cadre of talented collaborators, Erran Baron Cohen (that would be neither Borat, nor the neuroscientist, but a third talented brother), has taken on the task, producing



Idan Raichel and Erran Baron Cohen

the new album "Songs in the Key of Hanukkah."

Baron Cohen seems to be banking on the possibility that at the root of some Jews' distaste for Christmas music is the fact that, by definition, it's not ours. We may even envy the celebratory mood that the endless seasonal loop of Christmas music seems to engender in some people. But we don't have a soundtrack to amplify those emotions in ourselves. Chanukah music can never com-

pete when it comes to sheer volume, but if it were done well enough, we might actually listen to it. Don't we deserve the opportunity to bask in our own nostalgia (not to mention a tiny dash of elitist superiority over impeccable production values and the multiculti cachet of Sephardic music)?

"Songs in the Key of Hanukkah" starts off with the Jewish answer to "'Twas the Night Before Christmas," the play-by-play rundown of the festivities known as "Chanukah Oh Chanukah." While I never thought I would hear the word "sufganiya" in a rap song, I'm not totally surprised—there's been a bit of a trend toward Jewish novelty rap. But things start to get interesting when, in his klezmer-inflected take on "I Have a Little Dreidel" (the classic ode to DIY toy-making that has confounded generations of children whose dreidels are clearly mass-produced out of plastic), Jules Brookes growls the words "dreidel I shall

play" as if he is singing about starting a rumble, not spinning a top. Later in the song, Brookes' wailing might convince listeners that "Dreidel" is actually the name of his tragically lost love. This drama provides a welcome makeover for a song about a soul-crushingly un-fun game.

"Spin It Up" is, essentially, an instrumental remix of the same song's Hebrew version, "Sevivon, Sov, Sov, Sov" (the main lyrics translate to "Chanukah is a good holiday"; they aren't missed here). The pulsing electronic reggae imbues the ditty with a previously un-mined sonic dignity that's only slightly compromised by the chanting of the title phrase (possibly excusable as an allusion to DJ-ing).

The sultry Ladino tune "Ocho Kandalikas" has the benefit of not being in English, so its lyrics don't sound as silly as they might otherwise. In this case, it also benefits from the sensational voice of Yasmin Levy. The New Agey "Relics of Love and Light" includes just enough of Avivit



Caspi's Middle Eastern trilling to exalt it beyond yoga class background noise. It has that certain quality often found in Israeli music (and actually, in a lot of things Israeli): it sounds a little cheesy, but is somehow still tough and sexy enough to be compelling.

Another original, "Look to the Light," sounds so much like the 1970s hit "Dancing in the Moonlight" that I kept expecting someone to rhyme "light a candle tonight" with "supernatural delight." With a folkie groove and painfully earnest lyrics—"We struggle for freedom, and tyranny tries to exert itself/But tyranny weakens, and in the end justice will prevail"—the song attempts to infuse Chanukah with a spirit typical of other modern Jewish festivities: the call to use our own history of oppression to inspire a fight for the greater good of all mankind. This sentiment is generally reserved for Passover, but there's room for it here. (Ironists beware: In this song, when they say the word "echoes," voices echo.)

"Rock of Ages" continues in this vein. Although it has a Top 40-ish intro that could suggest R&B or retro hip-hop, it is, in fact, another soaring ballad that wouldn't sound out of place on a telethon; I could practically see the camera panning to each member of the chorus as they croon "All men free/Tyrants disappearing." And though there are hints of gospel (especially in the repetition of "sheltering tower"), unexpectedly fresh backbeats keep this from sounding like one of those Christian rock songs that's ostensibly about God, but sounds suspiciously like it's about a hot lover.

The final track, "Ma'oz Tzur," is the Chanukah song that most reminds me of Christmas carols, whether because of its ubiquity or some legitimate melodic symmetry. This rendition is no exception. If listeners have paid attention up to this point, they might already be feeling a bit uncomfortable after the previous track, a rap called "My Hanukkah (Keep the Fire Alive)"—which, via lines like "A nation awakened against assimilation," "Down with Antiochus, up with all the priestly zealots," and "How you gonna make a child of God become what he isn't?" underscores some of the religious fundamentals of a holiday seen by many primarily as an occasion for latkes and candles. But either way, the sentimental finale can't help but send a message—Joy to the World!—that leaves us carol-haters a bit uneasy. ☆

Hadara Graubart is the music editor at Nextbook.org.

Ask the Expert: Chanukah Bush

Question: My kids (ages 5 and 8) really love Christmas trees. They know that I won't have one in our house because we're Jewish, but recently someone told them about a Chanukah bush, and they've been asking if we can get one of those. How can I explain to them my discomfort with the tradition without seeming like a Grinch?

—Henry, Nashville

Answer: Oy. I try to be impartial about these things, Henry, but I'm with you when it comes to Chanukah bushes. I just don't like them.

First of all, you might want to get your hands on the children's book by Susan Sussman called "There's No Such Thing as a Chanukah Bush" by Sandy Goldstein. The situation it deals with is not precisely the same as yours, but reading the book might be a good way to start the conversation with your kids.

The concern I think most people have with Chanukah bushes is that they are too close for comfort

to Christmas trees. There's not much difference between the two, as far as I can tell.

Slapping a Jewish star on something and then calling it a Jewish ritual item is like putting a lion mask on your dog, having him run around in your backyard and calling it a safari.

When you're talking with your kids about this, you can discuss how Jewish holidays aim to keep the traditions and history of the Jewish people alive. You can look at other ritual items you might have in your home—a seder plate, a siddur, a noisemaker, etc.—and talk about how all of them are connected to things in Jewish history. Then talk about a Chanukah bush and how it really doesn't have a Jewish history at all.

One thing that I think is helpful in this kind of situation is focusing on the ways that your kids can celebrate with others without necessarily taking on their ideology. Your kids can visit friends who

have Christmas trees, and can enjoy the trees that are out in public spaces. But they should do this to be happy for others, not to take on non-Jewish rituals as their own.

The best way to combat Christmas envy is to amp up your own Chanukah celebrations in ways that aren't purely derivative of Christian traditions. Consider making your own window decorations to help publicize the mitzvah of lighting Chanukah candles. Make Chanukah foods from scratch (latkes and sufganiyot are Ashkenazi options, or try Sephardi/Mizrahi bimuelos and atayef), and set up a dreidel tournament. You can even have a contest in your family to see who can make the most interesting chanukiyah from things around the house. The eight nights of Chanukah are also a great opportunity to invite friends to celebrate with you.

I think the key to really getting your children to enjoy all of these holiday activities is to steer the



conversation away from direct comparisons to Christmas. Celebrating Chanukah shouldn't be about providing an alternative to Christmas. If you bill it that way, you'll always lose out to Santa and Christmas trees.

Chanukah is about focusing on maintaining a Jewish identity even in the face of a strong cultural current that defies that sentiment.

Another way to focus the discussion is to remind your kids about all of the holidays on the Jewish calendar. After Chanukah we have Tu b'Shvat, then Purim and Passover. You can talk about the traditions that go with these holidays, and all the exciting and fun traditions that lead up to them, whether it's making small gifts for friends at Purim or searching the house for chametz at Passover.

If you own a children's book or game about the Jewish calendar, now is a great time to bring it out. If you have family pictures from Jewish holidays in years past, this is a great time to look at them. Kids love looking at how much they've changed and grown up, and enjoy reminiscing about how they celebrated holidays—buying new clothes for Rosh Hashanah, eating together in a sukkah, etc.

As the secular year comes to a close, you can take the time to look forward to the whole cycle of wonderful Jewish holidays that will begin again next year.

Good luck and chag urim sameach! ☆

(For more information about Judaism and Jewish life, visit MyJewishLearning.com.)

"The Magic Dreidel" Puts Your Child in the Story

Marketing Masters International, the people who offer personalized books for children, have a book for Chanukah, *The Magic Dreidel*. In it, Mac, the magic dreidel along with a specified child's name, recreates the miracle of Chanukah and teaches the children the meaning of the holiday.

Each 36 page story book is custom printed with your child's name throughout the story, along with home town, names of three other friends or family members as well as a message from the individual ordering the personalized book. All books are complete with color illustrations and are hard-bound with wipe-off covers.

"Books are more than just seasonal gifts, because they educate young minds both with the content

and with the reading practice needed to succeed," says Cherie Brown, publisher. "The desire to read is natural if children are read to even at a very early age. It's a memorable experience to watch a child's reaction when they first hear and see that they are integral part of the story."

And, with a little extra help, parents can introduce some books that have interesting features, like *The Magic Dreidel* which has the child's name in it. That will help raise the interest level in any child who likes to hear his or her own name.

Anyone looking for a unique Chanukah gift that entertains, educates and makes the child feel special can order personalized versions of *The Magic Dreidel* for



\$15.95 at www.rwrinnovations.com/productpages/514.htm.

The entire text of the story is available to be previewed along with the order form on the same web page. ☆