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## The Israel Debate, to a Beat

By BEN SISARIO

It was a standard enough hip-hop salute: "Peace!" But then came the response: "Justice!"

For the handful of Israeli M.C.'s who performed at the Prospect Park Band Shell last Thursday in a concert called the Unity Sessions, the two concepts go together: no peace in the Holy Land without justice. "You can never say let's live together and then have this thing called occupation," shouted T. N., a Palestinian from the town of Lod, near Tel Aviv. "They call it democracy," he added to growing jeers from the crowd. "It's democracy for Jews and Zionism for Arabs."

T. N. — a.k.a. Tamer Nafar, a wiry 25-year-old who raps in quick torrents of Arabic — is part of the growing Israeli hip-hop scene, which barely existed a decade ago but has become one of the most potent forms of pop culture in the Middle East.

With beats borrowed from Gang Starr and a Tribe Called Quest and lyrics inspired by the Beastie Boys and Tupac Shakur, Israeli rappers express a political urgency not often heard in hip-hop, whether in New York or any of the other corners of the world to which the music has spread.

The Israeli rappers, plus a couple from New York, were brought to Prospect Park as part of the Celebrate Brooklyn series by JDub Records, a nonprofit, New York-based Jewish record label that has produced events in New York and Israel. Some 3,000 people attended, according to Celebrate Brooklyn, and more than a few knew the Hebrew and Arab raps by heart.

For T. N. frustration over occupation and the plight of Palestinians is a central theme, and in his raps he often lashes out against Israeli military tactics:

You buried the parents under the stones of their own homes

And now you call me a terrorist?

Who is a terrorist?

You are a terrorist.

"My lyrics are with peace," he said in an interview. "The question is which peace. Before you reach peace, you've got to have equality. I'm with peace, but I'm against the Zionism."

Not all are as blunt as T. N. Another performer at the Unity Sessions, Khen Rotem, a stocky 35-year-old from Jerusalem who uses the stage name Segol 59 — meaning Purple 59, a name taken from his laundry identification tag from his kibbutz days — is inspired by the same violence and injustice he sees in his neighborhood.

"I live not far away from the territories, from Ramallah," he said. "I'm deep in this thing. I see it every day, and I see that it's not a good situation."

But his raps are less combative than T. N.'s. "Summit Meeting," from 2001, is a typically pointed satire that mixes frustration with absurdist humor and enthusiastically jumbles Western culture with Middle East politics:

The president of hip-hop calls for a draft of all units

'Cause the situation's critical and everybody's drawing their weapons

I feel like a desperado just like that song by the Eagles

While the peace process is taken apart just like Yoko did the Beatles

"I'm against our occupation of Palestinian land, and I think Israel should withdraw from the territories," Mr. Rotem said. "Of course I condemn the Palestinian terrorism because it's against my people, but if you look at the whole picture, we've got to reach some kind of settlement and give them back some land."

But as hip-hop in Israel has grown, it has divided along political lines, and not every rapper there would agree that Israel has to withdraw from anything.

One of the biggest Israeli rap stars, Subliminal (né Kobi Shimoni), was not invited to the concert. Striking a gangsta pose with heavy jewelry, including his signature bejeweled Star of David, Subliminal represents the right wing of Israeli rap. His latest album has gone platinum in Israel (more than 40,000 copies) on the strength of catchy anthems and incendiary nationalist imagery, as in "Divide and Conquer," where he says: "The country is shaking like a cigarette in the mouth of Yasir Arafat."

Subliminal has already created a divide in the hip-hop community. Aaron Bisman, the founder of JDub Records and one of the promoters of the Prospect Park concert, said he did not invite Subliminal because he did not think the concert's message of openness and peace would be of interest to him.

Mr. Nafar is a former protégé of Subliminal but has fallen out with him and now refers to him simply as "an idiot." Their relationship is the subject of a documentary, "Channels of

Rage," that has played at colleges and Jewish film festivals.

Liron Te'eni, a journalist and radio D.J. in Tel Aviv who has been one of the closest followers of the Israeli hip-hop scene, said the range of views simply reflects reality. "Rappers are taking sides on the issue," he said. "Hip-hop is about being brave, telling the truth like it is and not looking for excuses. Just talking about the real stuff."

At the Unity Sessions not all the rappers were explicitly political, though the theme of connection through music ran through the night. Fans rushed the stage and sang along as Mooke, a 29-year-old star formerly of the pioneering hip-hop group Shabak Samech, began one of his Hebrew raps. And all eyes were on the stage as Matisyahu, a 25-year-old Lubavitcher from Crown Heights, represented Brooklyn with dense raps (in English) to a loose reggae groove.

Born Matthew Miller and raised in a nonreligious Jewish household in White Plains, N.Y., he was a teenage Phish fan who had two epiphanies: around age 18 he found hip-hop, then a few years later he found Orthodox Judaism.

Rangy, soft-spoken and dressed in a black suit, white shirt and black hat, Matisyahu would seem the last person to be a rapper. But he has built a loyal local following, and JDub is preparing to release his debut album, "Shake Off the Dust, Arise," later this year.

In his lyrics he prefers spirituality to politics, with lines drawn from Hasidic texts. "Chop 'em Down" employs imagery from the 18th-century Alter Rebbe to describe a mission of using music as a tool for religious awakening.

"The whole point is to go into a place where there isn't a message of spirituality and to put the message there," he said. "To use music itself to chop down some of the negative aspects that go along with it," like drug use and promiscuity.

"Music is neutral," he said. "It can be used for religious purposes or for negativity. It can bring people together. It can bring Jews and Arabs together."