

‘IT’S ABOUT SOMETHING MUCH BIGGER THAN YOU!’

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW BY BORUCH MERKUR
WRITTEN BY CHANA KATZ

Friday afternoon. Music superstar Matisyahu is being trailed by a reporter from one of America’s most prominent newspapers, *The Washington Post*. Erev Shabbos and the reporter is barely keeping pace with the Chassid as he navigates the streets of New York City.

The article is published with the headline, “Funny, He Doesn’t Look Jamaican!” referring to the reggae roots of his music. Still, the essence of the story is G-dliness. “Matisyahu does this (gives up Shabbos performances, etc.) because, as he sees it, he has what he had because he put G-d first,” she writes and then continues with a quote from Matisyahu, “That’s what real passion is, and that passion comes through a divorce of self. And the way to do that is to give your self over to something greater.”

AIN’T GONNA WORK ON SATURDAY

ABC television network host Jimmy Kimmel asks the audience to give a warm welcome to the “most popular Jewish rapper” whom they flew “all the way” from Brooklyn to the West Coast. The six-foot-four, 27-year-old singer, Chassidically-clothed from his blacks to his white tzitzis,

enters and immediately starts to sing a melody, “Dum, dum, dum, dum, dah, dah...” and then vocalizes a series of sounds that sizzle and explode into song.

The cameras occasionally flash on the crowd in the audience and no one is sitting still. Everyone is literally

moving in their seats, if you can imagine. The audience is ignited.

Matisyahu finishes, gives a shy but appreciative smile and is ushered into the interview seat. Taking in his Chasidic composure, the host asks with great interest, “How did you become this rapper?!”

Matisyahu smiles and says, “Basically, I wasn’t always religious. I was raised in a non-Orthodox Jewish family and listened to reggae like any high school kid.”

Host: “You get criticism from the Orthodox?”

Matisyahu: “Not so much. The Lubavitcher Rebbe said, ‘Go out and turn the world over,’ and you should try to help people connect to G-dliness.”

The host: “What sort of things can’t you do? Are there any restrictions?”

Matisyahu: “I can’t perform on Fridays,” he begins to answer, as the host interrupts and prods: “Even if it’s a really BIG gig?!”

Matisyahu: “No.”

All this is getting very interesting to one of the other stars on the show and he interjects: “One million? Two million?”

A SIGN THAT GEULA IS NEAR!

“The success of Matisyahu is nothing short of pure G-dliness and certainly the work of the Rebbe MH”M. He’s good. In fact, he’s really good, excellent. But that millions of non-Jews are crazy over him is a miracle and it seems clear that he knows it, which is a big chiddush. Another sign that Moshiach is here and Geula is near!”

—Rabbi Tuvia Bolton
mashpia Ohr T’mimim,
Kfar Chabad

A WHIRLWIND

“It’s been chaotic. Like a whirlwind. One minute you’re a bachur and the next you’re selling a half a million records.”

—Matisyahu Miller

“No,” Matisyahu says.

“Let me bump it up to four million,” he persists.

“Four million?!” Matisyahu responds, his eyes lighting up, playing along, and then says, quite clearly, “No!”

* * *

A few short years ago, it may have been difficult to distinguish Matisyahu from other baalei t’shuva whose thirsting, restless souls struggled through the pits and passions of life in search of meaning. He learned at Hadar HaTorah after his soul was ignited by N.Y. University shliach R. Dov Yona Korn. Music had always held a prominent place in his life, but for this period, the immersion into Chassidus took precedence.

But his music wasn’t put on hold completely. He performed at little clubs which turned into bigger clubs and seemed to attract a growing number of admirers. From his early days at the YAM Jams (Youth Action Movement gatherings) people began to take notice of his immense G-d-given talent. You could tell that this young man was different as a performer. He was an utter natural, a star. By the time he was at the Hadar HaTorah summer program in the Catskills, other students learning with him noticed that a film crew was following him around!

* * *

In cyberspace, the name Matisyahu is readily found – but nothing, at least initially, on the Kohen Gadol of Chasmonian fame. There are websites for his fans, websites for his critics, websites for his music, and endless ranting in blogs.

To make a long story short, for now, a lot has happened in Matisyahu’s life in a relatively short time. On the one hand, he found his other half in a NYU graduate student, Tali, and settled down to married life in Crown Heights and to being a loving, hands-on father to their infant son, Levi Yitzchok. On the other hand, his career – and perhaps unique shlichus – began to spiral in an upwards soar that still sees no bounds. He has signed with the world’s leading recording company, Sony, and his latest release, *Youth*, has sold half-a-million copies, peaking at number 4 in the Billboard charts and so far staying on the charts for 9 weeks at the time of this



article. He has been written about by leading newspapers and entertainment magazines across America and is currently touring the globe.

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Beis

Moshiach: Given your incredible success and the fact that you’ve become a household name virtually overnight, you’ve come to represent various things to all kinds of people – Jewish and l’havdil, non-Jews alike. How do you see yourself? Do you see yourself foremost as a

shliach or an entertainer?

Matisyahu: No, I definitely don’t see myself at all as an entertainer. I always thought of entertainment as something like wrestling or a circus. I always thought of music as being something spiritual. So I guess I see myself as like a modern-day Chassid.

CHABAD TIME!

Anyone who has waited in line for hours to get a L’chayim or dollar from the Rebbe, knows the preciousness of each millisecond with the nasi of our

generation, the Rebbe, MH" M. Within the seconds that it took to be shuffled along in line, literally, an entire life could be changed and permanently elevated. Minutes in a yechidus were even more precious.

A Chassidic farbrengen, on the other hand, was an occasion to elaborate, to expand, to replenish the l'chaim cup, break for a niggun, and go higher and higher until late hours turned to morning light.

It was more of a farbrengen-style interview we had hoped to have with Matisyahu. This wasn't how it turned out. After being put in contact with his lawyer and then several publicists, we reached a New York City-based public relations firm, which initially explained that Matisyahu's schedule was full and could not include any new interviews for what could be months. And besides that, he was about to leave on his first international tour.

It's good that the media are interested in hearing about G-dliness. We persisted to publicist Aliza Rabinoff, who called the two years she's worked with Matisyahu "a wonderful experience" – but this is a little like the shoemaker's family that doesn't have shoes. "I'll do what I can," she said with understanding and honesty.

In honor of Yud-Aleph Nissan, the Rebbe's 104th birthday, we received a strictly-monitored 15-minutes.

* * *

Beis Moshiach: Do you have time to be a person, to do the things you want to do, or do you feel like you're being swept away in someone else's game?

Matisyahu: That's part of an avoda: to surround yourself with people that sort of understand that you need to have that time. That's been sort of a process for me, figuring out who are the people I want to be around.

Beis Moshiach: What kind of people do you take influence and advice from?

Matisyahu: Halachically, I count on my wife [to seek advice on my behalf] because she's amazing and sharp in terms of picking up on something that doesn't seem right. She goes to Rav Osdoba. Spiritually, I receive most of my guidance from a guy named Efraim Rosenstein. He



Matisyahu with Jimmy Kimmel



An early concert

lives in Chevron. He's a therapist. You might have heard of him before. He works with a lot of young teens. He's really a good guy and someone who I feel like I can trust. I feel that he really understands; he doesn't get caught up in definitions but searches for the meaning.

BODY AND SOUL, BRAIN AND HEART

Music critics and reviewers and lots of people with vocal opinions have certainly attempted to categorize, peg, label, understand, analyze and meditate upon Matisyahu, his music, and everything else related under the sun.

Beis Moshiach: Given the title of your latest album, "Youth," are they the group that you most want to reach out to?

Matisyahu: Not necessarily, but I feel that's definitely the group of people I'd like to be there for.

Beis Moshiach: What message do you most want to impart to people?

Matisyahu: I don't see that I'm trying to impart a message as much as I'm trying to just provide support, support for people that are searching and for people that are looking for G-d and need to have hope, that have pain and problems. I just hope that the music I had growing up that was there for me, providing strength and providing guidance – I hope that my music fills that role for Jews and non-Jews, for young kids...

Beis Moshiach: Do you see the music or the lyrics as the main emphasis that will accomplish that, or a combination of the two?

Matisyahu: I don't see it as a separation. When you have a song you have the music and the lyrics and the two are bound together like the body and the soul...or maybe more like the brain and the heart. The lyrics are the brain and the music is the heart.

WEEP WITH JOY

Every time I listen to "King Without a Crown" it makes me weep with joy. He sings with such intensity and gut-feeling that it makes my soul fly.

—Kazsimir

FAMOUS CHASSID

Matisyahu has become the most famous Chassid this side of the Baal Shem Tov.

—"G-d's Reggae Star"
by Jody Rosen

Beis Moshiach: Is there something intrinsic to the music? Do you feel that reggae is the ideal expression for the message you have, for your lyrics?

Matsiyahu: No. I don't consider my music reggae either. When it comes to the music, I don't see it in terms of categories or styles; I think more in terms like if you would think of a niggun. If you have an outpouring from the soul, you wouldn't classify it in sort of a category, right? When it comes to music I think more organic – that you pick up different things and as a musician it effects you in your outlook and how the music comes out.

Beis Moshiach: Do you think that your musical style could change completely then, to be a different style entirely?

Matsiyahu: G-d willing, the music will change. Change is a sign of life.

* * *

As you would expect, Matsiyahu has his own website, complete with an autobiography, scheduled concert performances, and a variety of other information and contacts. According to one count, his site has received more than a million hits.

Beis Moshiach: How do you view your success?

Matsiyahu: I don't know. It's kind of a whirlwind. Everything's been happening and going on in the last couple of two or three years. It's been a little chaotic and there hasn't been so much time to— Not even time, because it's not even about time; it's about the kind of person you are. I feel it's very hard to reflect and



meditate on my life so it just kind of like happens. One minute you're a bachur in yeshiva and the next minute you're selling 500,000 records or whatever and you don't feel like you're a different person. You feel like the same person.

CRITICISM AND COMPLEMENTS

Matsiyahu tries not to read too much of what his varied critics have to say, lest, as he says, "you get a little negative." On the other hand, he says with an acknowledging laugh, it seems to be something he's getting

more of: "If you're unheard of, it's cool to bring you up, but once you're heard of, the cool thing is to bring you down!"

Beis Moshiach: How do you handle praise?

Matsiyahu: Certain things sink in and certain things don't. When people are just running up to me and stopping me on the street and saying things like 'you're great' – that kind of just shakes off. But once in awhile you learn that the music affected someone in a really meaningful way. Or you hear about something you've done that affected someone in a way

that it becomes not about you but about something much bigger than you.

Beis Moshiach: Do you have any stories about individuals you've helped to inspire?

Matisyahu: I don't necessarily hear

about it in great detail. I was in Florida and someone was speaking at an NA (Narcotics Anonymous) meeting about being nine years clean. We were at a radio station that morning and a kid later told me he heard the lyrics and that week went to a rehabilitation center and cleaned

himself up. That kind of story makes you feel it's about something bigger than you. Instead of thinking, 'I did a show today and I'm not sounding so great' or 'I'm just repeating songs,' you realize that you're affecting people and that's the most important thing.

* * *

Although more and more Jews are finding their way back to their Torah roots in the Chabad houses in the mountains of India and other exotic spots, there are unfortunately, still many more who drop into the likes of the inappropriate shadows of MTV (music TV). It is in that venue where Matisyahu's song, "King Without a Crown" became most well known across the public who listens. In this song, Matisyahu sings about wanting Moshiach now.

Beis Moshiach: How do you think your references about Moshiach are received by your fans? The controversy has always been that if you are too up-front, people may get turned off. Have you had that experience or the contrary?

Matisyahu: Well, my experience has been in a way that I'm not sort of forcing it down people's throats, like as if someone just took the words and went into the street and rammed it down people's throats. So the context makes them more open to hearing and that, G-d-willing, they will want to hear 'Moshiach' (and think) what does that word mean? And it was mentioned before about reggae music and redemption – I try to put it out there in a way people can relate to. So I think you can speak about



Photo by Danny Clinch

Photo by Dan Mandell



those things, about Moshiach and Redemption, if you know how to speak in the right context. If you come from a true place in yourself, then people will respond to it.

Beis Moshiach: What is the role of the Rebbe in your day-to-day life and in your mission, and as a singer? How does the Rebbe influence your work?

Matisyahu: I think that my becoming religious was very strongly influenced by the Rebbe and to the shliach that I met who moved me to a

much further place than I would have gotten to on my own. So I credit the Rebbe for that...and while I never knew the Rebbe, I learned to a certain degree the Rebbe's sichos and maamarim and they had a very big effect on me, and I went to Crown Heights and learned in yeshiva. But me personally, I'm in a situation where I'm just trying to be honest and I don't know the Rebbe...I write to the Rebbe and I look at pictures of the Rebbe and I feel comforted that the Rebbe might be with me or might

be influencing me, but I don't claim to know what the Rebbe's all about. Maybe from the Rebbe's point-of-view, he's very bound to me and I just don't know it. I'm open to it; I'm not closed to it.

Beis Moshiach: We see it!

I wish you much success, and hope you continue to get closer to the Rebbe all the time and play a major role in Moshiach's immediate revelation.

Matisyahu: Amen!

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REACHING OUT TO THE WORLD WHILE LOOKING OUT FOR OUR YOUTH

INTERVIEW BY BORUCH MERKUR

Interview with Rabbi Akiva Wagner of Yeshivas Lubavitch, Toronto regarding the success of Matisyahu, the proper place of music intended for outreach, and the effect on our Youth.

Beis Moshiach: How important is it for a rosh yeshiva to maintain a connection with the bachurim on a personal level?

Rabbi Akiva Wagner: It's extremely important. The main success of any yeshiva today is measured not by the quality or standard of the shiurim, but rather by the personal connection and personal interaction between the hanhala and the bachurim.

Beis Moshiach: Does this include monitoring and being involved with influencing what type of music they listen to?

Rabbi Akiva Wagner: The world has changed from the way it used to be. We're living in a time in which there has been r"l an explosion of destructive outside influences, in every single area of life. The only way to maintain standards for our youth is by being much more cautious and much

more vigilant in protecting them and insulating them against these outside influences.

Beis Moshiach: Do the bachurim appreciate that type of monitoring and protection? How do they respond to it?

Rabbi Akiva Wagner: Obviously the bachurim range a lot in this, just like they range in every other area. I find that the majority of bachurim appreciate the objective of the monitoring and the need for it. Therefore, even though they sometimes don't understand or agree with a specific rule or a specific standard, nonetheless, because they identify with the ultimate goal, they are cooperative and even appreciative. That's what I find in most cases.

Beis Moshiach: Since there is a range amongst the bachurim, is there a lot of peer pressure and a lot of influence from those who are holding

at a less frum standard?

Rabbi Akiva Wagner: There's always great impact that bachurim have on each other, in every area, and it applies in both directions [i.e., the better bachurim influence the weaker bachurim and vice versa].

Beis Moshiach: We are preparing an interview with Matisyahu, the extremely successful singer who lives in Crown Heights and became a baal t'shuva through Chabad. Have you heard his music?

Rabbi Akiva Wagner (smiling): I haven't yet had the z'chus to hear his music.

Beis Moshiach: The lyrics and themes of Matisyahu's music are derived from Jewish and even Chabad sources. Does this classify his music as Jewish music per se?

Rabbi Akiva Wagner: Obviously what I am going to say is only my opinion. I don't think that fact is enough to classify it as Jewish music. Although, considering his goals and the people he's aiming to reach, it is possible that for them it can be considered Jewish.

Beis Moshiach: So there's different standards of how we define Jewish music. For bachurim in Chabad there's a much higher standard—

Rabbi Akiva Wagner: I'll give you a simple example. When Rabbi Berel Levy a"h passed away, his son Rabbi Don Yoel Levy took over the whole OK enterprise. Being very idealistic, he wanted to raise the overall standards of OK, and one of the changes he wanted to implement was to not issue an OK hechsher on any food that's not chalav Yisroel. His reasoning was that since we don't recognize non-chalav Yisroel as meeting our standard of kashrus, the OK shouldn't certify it as kosher. When he informed the Rebbe of his plan, the Rebbe, to his surprise, strongly opposed it. The Rebbe then said to him [following is the gist of the Rebbe's reply, not the exact wording]: "Should people who are not yet keeping [away from eating or drinking] chalav akum not have the option of keeping kosher?!"

So, although the Rebbe told him to give a hashgacha and to certify non-chalav Yisroel products as kosher, and this had the effect of increasing the numbers of people who would keep kosher, it's self-understood that in a Lubavitcher home non-chalav Yisroel foods would be considered below our standards of kashrus. Chassidim, who displayed mesirus nefesh for every aspect of halacha, would have surely had mesirus nefesh for chalav Yisroel also. In fact, there's many shluchim in far-flung destinations who have mesirus nefesh, relatively speaking, to bring up their families without compromising on chalav Yisroel. So while non-chalav Yisroel is kosher enough for us to certify it as kosher for the "world," to a Lubavitcher Chassid, something that's not chalav Yisroel is not kosher. And that's something that everyone understands.

I'll give you another example. The Rebbe used to call the *K'far Chabad Magazine* his "shofar," and the Rebbe obviously saw a very great benefit in what it does, as far as fighting the cause of *Mihu Yehudi* and the *shtachim*, etc. And yet it was always understood – and I believe Reb Mendel Futerfas

used to farbreng about this – that for bachurim, it's not the most appropriate pastime. It was understood that the pastime of a bachur should be a maamer Chassidus, a sicha, a *Likkutei Dibburim*, etc. While *K'far Chabad* or *Beis Moshiach* may be a vehicle for publicizing the Rebbe's views to the world, and for the world it is surely an object of holiness, for a bachur it can be the opposite: *bittul Torah*. Even for a Chassidische balebos it may be an admirable pursuit, but for a bachur, at certain times, it is inappropriate.

Another example: Would any Lubavitcher even think of wearing t'fillin that are not 4x4? Of course not. To provide such t'fillin to thousands of Jews over the world (as the "t'fillin bank" is doing) is the greatest thing in the world, yet for us ourselves to don them is unthinkable. (My father a"h never considered himself a Lubavitcher Chassid, yet he always put on t'fillin according to minhag Lubavitch. Once when I expressed my curiosity about this, he told me that when he learned in yeshiva in Bedford (around 1956), his mashpia was R' Dovid Raskin. Once R' Dovid Raskin made a deal with him that he would purchase for

him a pair of t'fillin that are 4x4, on the condition that my father commits to always wear his "keshet" according to the nusach of the Alter Rebbe. I found it especially interesting that – although, to my knowledge, even at that time he did not consider himself a Lubavitcher Chassid, yet – while learning in a Lubavitcher yeshiva, 4x4 t'fillin was important enough to him as to warrant his making a very long-term commitment for their sake.)

So too, there could be music that is Jewish for the world – it may be "kosher" for the general public and, in **some** cases, even for a Lubavitcher balebos – and yet for someone who's maintaining a higher standard (i.e., a bachur) they're not kosher, or perhaps, for him, not even "Jewish."

In the Rambam there's a concept regarding tuma and tahara – that there's different stages of tuma and tahara. And what's considered tahor for truma is considered tamei for kodesh, etc. And someone who toiveled for truma is still considered tamei for kodesh, etc.

Beis Moshiach: So for music that you deem not to be appropriate for



Rabbi Akiva Wagner farbrenging in 770

people of the standard of bachurim in a Chabad yeshiva would you then classify it as something that is forbidden? And are they aware of that, if that is the case? Is it something that is very cut-and-dried, very apparent that these things are not acceptable in the dorms or in a yeshiva environment?

Rabbi Akiva Wagner: In my opinion there are 2 points here. [1] Music that has a certain non-Jewish *taam* to it, a certain non-Jewish style, or that is totally derived from goyishe sources, I would say is forbidden, in most cases even for those who are not bachurim. [2] Even if there's nothing inherently non-Jewish about the music (and what that means is probably debatable; different people can have different definitions), something that's not purely "Chassidish" is still not appropriate for a bachur. I wouldn't use the word (in the 2nd case) "forbidden," because (while it may be forbidden by the rules of the yeshiva) it's not forbidden, it's not something that's inherently bad. But that's not what a bachur is supposed to be into.

If music is in any way goyish, while it could be perfect for reaching larger crowds, for a bachur in yeshiva (and in some cases for any Lubavitcher Chassid) it's forbidden. With any other music, if it's not "Chassidische" music, it is not appropriate. We have to remember that not everything that is OK to use for outreach, is OK to be found in a Lubavitcher home, in a Lubavitcher dorm room, or a gathering of Lubavitcher children.

Beis Moshiach: Independent of the hanhala's influence on the bachurim, are you aware of the way that they relate to Matisyahu and his music? How do they naturally respond to the whole inyan of what Matisyahu represents?

Rabbi Akiva Wagner: I don't know what he represents, but I'm sure that just like any fad that's popular in the world, it inevitably finds an appeal to certain bachurim, and especially when

they're able to convince themselves that it's something Jewish, maybe even Chassidish. So, I'm sure there are bachurim who find something attractive about it.

Beis Moshiach: Do you see that as a very significant problem?

Rabbi Akiva Wagner: The fact that they find something attractive about it per se – I don't see that as a significant problem. The fact that they look to such directions to find their enjoyment, the fact that they're not focused on where they should really be finding their enjoyment – that's a significant problem.

You know, a bachur once came over to me, very excited, and he told me he wants to show me a beautiful idea that inspired him. He showed me one of Rabbi Tzvi Freeman's books, a meditation or something in it. He said, "Isn't that beautiful?"

I read the line, and I said to him: This is a word-for-word translation of a *pisgam* of the Rebbe Maharash which is in *HaYom Yom* – nothing added at all, just translated into English, the words of the *HaYom Yom* word-for-word. He responded that he hadn't known.

On the one hand, I thought: That's great. Rabbi Tzvi Freeman is bringing the words of the *HaYom Yom* to this bachur who wouldn't hear them otherwise. But on the other hand, it's a symptom of a problem: the fact that the bachur doesn't get his inspiration directly from *HaYom Yom*. I think that the reason for this is because a bachur will learn *HaYom Yom*, hear it daily after davening, and not **expect** to find inspiration there; "that's just *HaYom Yom*" [he might say to himself], therefore, he doesn't **find** inspiration there. Whereas, in Rabbi Tzvi Freeman's book he expects to find inspiration, and therefore, he'll see a translation of the exact same thing, word-for-word, and he'll find it inspiring.

There's a story the Rebbe brings down in *Kuntres Inyano Shel Toras*

HaChassidus that there were people who were debating the relative merits of the different political parties, which one is right according to Torah. Every one of them brought a source to his position and they asked the Friederike Rebbe who is right. The Rebbe said, "The Torah is the ultimate truth, and any truthful aspect in any of the parties is what it derived from Torah." The point of the story is that whatever enjoyment – and in *s'farim* it says this specifically regarding *negina* – whatever beauty there is to any worldly thing is just the *shmarei ha'ofanim* of what's there in pure, authentic Yiddishkeit and Chassidus. If a bachur would seek inspiration in Chassidische niggunim, he would ultimately discover a much more meaningful source of inspiration there.

So the problem is the fact that some bachurim are looking in the wrong places, they're missing the pride in who they are, the appreciation of what Chabad Chassidus can provide them with.

And I have to emphasize again that I'm sure many bachurim in yeshivos have never heard Matisyahu. I'm speaking about that element that does have that attraction. That's how I would define the problem.

Beis Moshiach: What is the proper place for Matisyahu's music? Where is it appropriate for it to exist?

Rabbi Akiva Wagner: I already said that I don't know exactly what the music is, but I understand that it has an amazing impact in *hafatzas ha'maayanos* and in outreach. If so, that is its place. (I want to emphasize that most of the points I'm making are general, not primarily about one specific singer or another.)

Beis Moshiach: It sold half-a-million copies.

Rabbi Akiva Wagner: Fine. It probably is transmitting very important messages to a lot of people. And wherever those messages have to be brought out, that's where it has an

important place. In Chabad houses, in shlichus programs. In those places where you're not going to be able to go and *chazer* a maamer Chassidus, nor are they necessarily ready to hear a *Nicho'ach* tape, there it can do a job that otherwise couldn't be done.

But within the Daled amos of Lubavitch, whether in a Lubavitcher yeshiva, a Chassidisher home, or at an event geared to Lubavitcher children, there we should expect higher standards, purer standards. Even the enjoyment and the entertainment of a Lubavitcher Chasid should be from Lubavitcher niggunim. It should be from a Chassidishe singer who sings Chassidishe niggunim.

You know, Avrohom Fried had a tremendous impact through his recent tapes. Much of the Jewish world walks around singing Chassidish niggunim, you know, the real old, authentic Chassidishe niggunim that they never would have known, if not for Avrohom Fried. It's a tremendous accomplishment. All the same, a Lubavitcher bachur shouldn't be getting these things from Avrohom Fried. The "Misnagdishe" world may need Avrohom Fried to provide them with this aspect of Chabad Chassidus, but whatever subtle *taam* that Avrohom Fried has to add into [the songs] for his tapes to have an appeal to the outside world – that's not for us.

And true, it's something that has to be worked on, but bachurim have to have this focus and realization. All those bachurim who did get this focus, this realization, found their lives infinitely richer because of it.

Beis Moshiach: How should our community at large view Matisyahu or singers like him?

Rabbi Akiva Wagner: I think the way we should see him is as a Lubavitcher Chassid who's using his G-d-given talents to do good things, as long as he's following the directives of his mashpia or Chassidishe rav. The Gemara says, "*kabed es Hashem m'honcha' – al tikra m'honcha ella*

m'garoncha." In addition to the general idea that everyone has to use their abilities to serve Hashem, it's specifically said about serving Hashem with the voice, the vocal chords. So a Chassid who uses these talents to serve Hashem and spread the Torah ideals – that's beautiful.

What we have to focus on is that there's many Chassidim who do many things for outreach and we have to remember the distinction between what we're giving other people, and what's good for ourselves. Just like with *chalav Yisroel*, just like with all these examples. This line between what's appropriate for "*hafatza*" and

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what's fitting for "p'nim" is something that we can't lose sight of.

Beis Moshiach: I have a quote from Rabbi Tuvia Bolton, the mashpia in Kfar Chabad, that links the success of Matisyahu to the imminence of Redemption, of Geula. Do you see any similarity?

Rabbi Akiva Wagner: Well, again, I'm not a student of Matisyahu songs. I never gave much time to the study of Matisyahu—

Beis Moshiach: Assuming that his songs have a Chabad, Chassidishe tochen and given his popularity—

Rabbi Akiva Wagner: Yes, given from what I hear about it, it makes sense to say that the fact that there's someone who's using tools that are worldly tools and using them to spread Chassidus, pure Chassidus, to so many hundreds of thousands of people, this is really what the Rebbe defined as a *dira ba'tachtonim*. This was the concept that the Rebbe spoke about regarding radio and television and satellite, using all the world's forces for *k'dusha*. So it's very easy to view what's happening as another stage of that, another manifestation of that.

Beis Moshiach: Could you confirm what I heard that the Rebbe gave *brachos* even to bands who played blatantly non-Jewish styles of music, to do *hafatza*, because they introduced Yiddishe tochen into their music? Have you heard such a thing?

Rabbi Akiva Wagner: I haven't. But you have to be able to see that in the right context. The Rebbe gave a *bracha* to everyone who came to him, and not just a *bracha* but encouragement. There's so many letters that are printed that spell this out clearly – that no matter who the person is, and no matter what kind of views he may have, there is some contribution that he has to make. You see this with writers, for example, who thought the Rebbe would completely shun them because of their philosophies and/or lifestyles. Yet the Rebbe's approach was always: You have a talent. Whatever differences of opinion you may have are unimportant, but whatever talents you have and whatever *ko'ach* you have, use them in your way and in your field to do good and to spread good in whatever way it is.

We have to remember, though, that just because someone is using his skills in a positive way and accomplishing good things with them, doesn't necessarily sanction it for our homes, our children, and ourselves.