

# 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 Frieddike 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.