

Matisyahu and the Spiral of Authenticity

Posted At : December 14, 2011 1:06 PM | Posted By : Seth Chalmer

Related Categories: artistic expression, music, discourse, identity, orthodox judaism, religion, affiliation, art, spirituality, culture

By now you've heard the (apparently earth-shattering) news that Matisyahu has **shaved his beard**.



The pundits of Jewry are abuzz with interpretive chatter -- and no surprise, since Matisyahu was already (in his hassidic incarnation) an icon and byword for all manner of Jewish discourse about culture, religion, and identity.

A very recent case in point: in the **most recent issue** of **Sh'ma**, Stuart Z. Charmé uses the hassidic Matisyahu as the denouement to **his article, "The Spiral of Jewish Authenticity"**. Responding with circumspect detachment to his teenage daughter's announcement that she doesn't consider herself Jewish (since slam poetry is her true identity), Charmé notes that, as his research has shown, teenagers and the adults they grow to become have ever-shifting relationships to Judaism:

Ultimately, what I wish for my daughter is a Jewish journey that is intellectually and psychologically honest, vibrant, and creative; one that values questions more than answers, while avoiding the pitfalls of premature closure and rigidity. I trust that she will discover authentic forms of Jewish expression for herself as she redefines her past and plans for the future. I can't predict whether slam poetry will be part of that process, **but if the singer Matisyahu could use reggae to find a sense of Jewish authenticity for himself, then why not?**

(Emphasis, of course, is added.) How *unlucky for Stuart Charmé*, one might think, *that merely two weeks after he publishes a piece which uses the hassid Matisyahu as an example, Matisyahu goes and shaves and de-hassidifies.*

But in this case, one would be wrong to think so. In fact, Charmé's point regarding Matisyahu not only still stands, but stands even stronger. Much of the article, read in hindsight following "ShaverGate," read as if they were written with the apparently-now-misnagdic Mat(the? isyahu?) in mind:

I have described the experience of Jewishness over the course of one's life as a loose spiral. We circle back to revisit a variety of issues related to

Judaism and Jewishness; each time, we approach the experience of Jewishness from new perspectives and with new investments and understandings that emerge in response to other changes in our lives.

For many Jews, the feeling of Jewish authenticity involves a sense of connection to a romanticized or idealized image of the past... Much has also been written... about the postmodern freedom to “construct” or “invent” Jewish identity in a myriad of ways ranging from contemporary ultra-Orthodoxy to Torah Yoga and Jewish “mindfulness.”...

It is obvious that claims about authenticity can never really offer a scientific test of purity, a “Good Housekeeping” seal of approval, or a warranty against change. Some of what is now accepted as authentically Jewish will eventually be abandoned and some of what is now rejected will later be reclaimed. In this sense, each individual’s search for Jewish authenticity is a microcosm of the collective process of redefining Judaism at different moments of history.

The desire for Jewish authenticity, therefore, has both retrospective and prospective dimensions. On the one hand, it situates one in relationship to one’s personal and group history; it provides a sense of existential orientation and protection; and it, thereby, offers a provisional home in the world. But the goal of authenticity is simultaneously a warning to be careful of claiming too much certainty at the present moment — recognizing the permanently destabilizing power of the future to shatter and rebuild the foundations of our world in ever-new ways... There is probably some Zen-like truth to the idea that those who claim most adamantly to have found or achieved Jewish authenticity are also those who lack it in a deeper sense.

For those who responded to Matisyahu's naked face with disappointment, then, as well as for those who responded with anti-Orthodox glee, we might all do well to borrow some of Stuart Charmé's detachment and attention to the long view. Life keeps going on, the spiral of authenticity keeps spiralling, and we might all turn out to be someone a little (or a lot) different tomorrow.