

Jewish Symbols in German Gangsta Rap: A Subtle Form of Protest

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Jewish German Gangsta Rap and Societal Expectation Norms

Linke Hand die Tora	Left hand Torah,
Rechte Hand die Neuner, yeah	Right hand nine millimeters, yeah
Rapper sind nur Träumer, yeah	Rappers are just dreamers, yeah
Will in' Himmel zu Eloah	I want into heaven to Eloah
Ein Yahudi, der haram vertickt	One Yahudi, that is ticking haram
Mit der Araber-Clique, Marihuana-Traffic	With an Arab-clique, marijuana-traffic

Part 1 of the song "Eloah" by Sun Diego (author's translation)

These lyrics from the German Jewish rapper Sun Diego's song "Eloah" seem unsettling. On the one hand, he raps about his criminal and violent lifestyle as a drug dealer and implies that he is connected to organized crime. On the other hand, he describes himself as a Jew (*Yahudi*), and mentions the Torah as well as his religious ambitions to meet Eloah in heaven. He invokes gangsta rap and criminal lifestyle here and Jewish identity and religion there, two motifs that seem to belong to two completely different worlds.

Combining typical gangsta-rap themes with Jewish symbols seems to be Sun Diego's signature style. In the music video for his song "Yellow Bar Mitzvah," Sun Diego, a.k.a. SpongeBozz, surrounds himself with scantily clad women, sports cars, drugs, and jewelry—in other words, common gangsta-rap motifs. In the same clip, he wears a yellow cloth star saying "Jude," poses in front of a giant menorah, and dances inside a large Star of David constructed out of neon tubes.

While the genre of German gangsta rap typically has strong affinities to sex, drugs, and crime, hardly anybody in the genre raps about Judaism or uses Jewish symbols.



Scenes from the music video "Yellow Bar Mitzvah" by SpongeBozz

This is not necessarily due to the fact that German rap is an antisemitic genre—although there is a lively discussion about thisⁱ—but primarily because there are few German Jewish rappers.ⁱⁱ Since rap is a mirror of society, this relative lack of Jewish rappers points to a deeper problem. It indicates the existence of an implicit norm about Jews in German society: the expectation that they only display their identity in ways that do not contradict German collective identity as well as the images they have of Jews. Specifically, Jews are expected to limit their expressions to selected topics (primarily the Shoah) and

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to only express certain perspectives (anything that may contribute to the German-Jewish reconciliation process) in designated formats (e.g., *Jewish* film, literature, etc.)ⁱⁱⁱ This norm assigns Jewish expression a distinct role in German culture—and excludes it from any other part of society.

Sun Diego's use of Jewish symbols in his rap clearly does not meet this expectation, which raises the questions: What is Sun Diego's motivation in deviating from it? Is it just marketing—or are there any political intentions?

Jewish Symbols as a Form of Marketing

When he was questioned in an interview on the meaning of the Jewish symbols in his songs, Sun Diego referred to rap as an "entertainment business." To be successful in this business one has to market one's own identity—where his identity is constituted by a combination of criminal lifestyle and Judaism. "We are in the entertainment business. Nowadays people use their religious symbolism, their roots, their identity. It's normal, other rappers do it the same way. Except they're not Jewish. ... It's kind of like a game."^{iv}

In Sun Diego's own interpretation, he uses Jewish symbols to market his own identity and to generate attention. By deviating from the norms of German society he generates more attention.^v If some listeners perceive this deviation as an antisocial act of provocation—as some comments under his videos, his social media posts, and in rap-forums suggest—this might generate even more attention. In the end, in Sun Diego's own words, it all comes down to generating sales.

Although Sun Diego denies any political intentions, his use of Jewish symbols in German rap cannot (and must not) be reduced to marketing: his raps exceed his own, nonpolitical intentions.

Beyond Marketing: Jewish Symbols as Emancipation and Subtle Form of Protest

It is the social norm itself, its moral illegitimacy, as well as the fact that it arbitrarily restricts the freedom of expression of a large population group, that makes Sun Diego's deviance from it more than a nonpolitical or even antisocial act of pure self-marketing. His use of Jewish symbols

and his expression of his Jewish identity in ways and formats not specifically reserved for it are instead to be understood as a political act of *self-emancipation*. It shows that there is nothing morally "wrong" with expressing one's Jewish identity—neither in rap nor in society—but that the norm itself is illegitimate. However, this in turn has political consequences for three different groups.

First, for his non-Jewish listeners, his rap raises awareness of the relative lack of Jewish artists both in gangsta rap and other "non-Jewish" formats and might lead them to the realization that Jewish expressions in German society are limited to very few topics, perspectives, and formats. He makes visible to them the societal norm that restricts Jewish expression and whose existence they were either unaware of or ignored until now.

Second, for his fellow Jews in Germany, his self-emancipation as a *Jewish German gangsta rapper* proves that they do not have to limit themselves to certain expressions in order to meet norms expected of them. Sun Diego might become an example of *Jewish disintegration*^{vi} and encourage them to freely express and emancipate themselves.

Third, for German society as a whole, his rap turns out to be a confrontation with Jewish identity and Jewish symbols in unexpected ways. This forces society into a learning process in the course of which it will (hopefully) get to know and learn to accept Jewish Otherness—and contributes to overcoming this illegitimate social norm in the long term.

Its emancipative potential as well as its political consequences proves Sun Diego's Jewish German gangsta rap as a (possibly unconscious) subtle form of Jewish protest.

Developing a Sense for the Subtle Forms of Jewish Protest

This example shows that protest does not always appear in typical forms. It may be as unexpected as bringing Jewish symbols into German rap and performing as a *Judenrapper* (Jewish rapper).^{vii} And sometimes the protest is not even intended as a protest.

Such subtle acts of Jewish protest can be found wherever people/artists assert their Jewish identity or draw inspira-

tion from it in a foreign and possibly hostile context. Due to their subtlety (and possibly unintentionality), such acts are often not considered a protest. At this point, the task of the academic community is to sharpen their own senses in order to perceive such subtle forms of protest in various forms and in various unexpected places.

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- i An overview of antisemitism and German rap is provided by Marcus Staiger, “Antisemitismus im deutschen Rap,” *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 68, no. 9 (2018): 40–45. <https://www.bpb.de/apuz/265108/antisemitismus-im-deutschen-rap>.
- ii One might mention other German Jewish rappers, e.g., Ben Salomo, who explicitly raps about his Jewish identity and his struggles as a Jew in Germany. But like Sun Diego, Ben Salomo is an exception—and often discusses his experiences as an outsider. Cf. Ben Salomo, *Ben Salomo bedeutet Sohn des Friedens* (Munich: Europa Verlag GmbH, 2019).
- iii Cf. Max Czollek, *Desintegriert euch!* (Munich: Veltman Distributie Import Books, 2018).
- iv Dmitrij Kapitelman, “Ich Bin Halt ein Judenrapper, mein Gott,” *Spiegel*, November 3, 2018. <https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/musik/yellow-bar-mitzvah-von-spongebozz-ich-bin-halt-ein-judenrapper-mein-gott-a-1195862.html>. (author’s translation)
- v David Schraven, and Finn Schraven, “Yellow Bar Mitzvah: Sun Diego über Rap und Rapper,” *Correctiv!*, February 28, 2018. <https://correctiv.org/ruhr/debatte/2018/02/26/yellow-bar-mitzvah-sun-diego-ueber-rap-und-rapper>.
- vii Cf. Czollek, *Desintegriert euch!*
- viii A term used by Sun Diego to describe himself, cf. Kapitelman “Ich Bin Halt ein Judenrapper.”

The Ordeal of Scottsboro

Stephen J. Whitfield

To recover a past usable enough to inspire protest, Jews need to look no further back than Alabama during the 1930s. As millions of readers of the retrospective novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) know, the legal system of that time and place did not intend to achieve justice. As constitutional historians know, no set of trials generated more turbulent emotions or more legal consequences than when nine Black teenagers were charged with raping two white women during a brief train ride near Scottsboro. That a jury composed entirely of white men would acquit these Deep South defendants was inconceivable. Even if the virtually friendless and barely educated adolescents were innocent—which they were—some leading citizens warned that acquittal for this capital crime would endanger white womanhood throughout the region. A foregone conclusion that began in a Scottsboro courthouse in 1931 exposed such blatant injustice that it sparked international outrage. Opprobrium even included a popular Yiddish play that premiered in Warsaw in 1935. Written by Mikhl Vaykher

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(1890–1967), the mistitled *Mississippi* highlighted the plight of impoverished Southern Blacks and suggested a bond of suffering between two beleaguered minorities.

Although the defendants were quickly convicted, thanks in part to feckless local counsel, many whites were dissatisfied. A *New York Times* reporter heard them grumble that “the old way of the rope was better than the newer way of the law.” Yet two Northern Jews achieved the impossible; they intervened to save all of the Scottsboro Nine from the electric chair. One was Joseph Brodsky, the canny strategist who headed the Communist Party’s International Labor Defense. Brodsky hired the Romanian-born Samuel S. Leibowitz, a flamboyant attorney who took the case pro bono. Both of them needed to surmount a very high bar—not “beyond a reasonable doubt”—but beyond any doubt whatsoever of the innocence of their clients. The ILD’s tenacity, plus Leibowitz’s resourcefulness, managed to keep the defendants alive by demanding that procedural rights be enforced. In *Powell v. Alabama* (1932) and then in *Norris v. Alabama* (1935), the Supreme Court required of state courts that counsel in capital cases be adequate, and furthermore that jury rolls not exclude Black citizens. By