

# MEET ISRAEL'S DOPEST HEBREW ISRAELITE MC'S

BY ANDREW ESENSTEN



Credit: Andrew Esensten

**K**endrick Lamar and Kodak Black are popular rappers with millions of fans. They are also self-proclaimed Israelites.

Of course, Kendrick and Kodak aren't the first American rappers to embrace the Hebrew Israelite spiritual movement. Doug E. Fresh, Killah Priest, and Chingy have all incorporated Israelite doctrine or symbols into their songs and videos, as Sam Kestenbaum pointed out in a recent article on the rap lyrics and news website Genius. To Kestenbaum's list I would add KRS-One, who mentions "black Israelites" in "Why Is That." And who can forget E-40's references to a dreadlocked Jesus and Hebrews ghostriding their chariots in "Tell Me When to Go?"

It's unclear if any of these rappers are active in the movement or practice Hebraic customs. (Kodak reportedly worshipped with Thee Light of Zion congregation in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.) However, it should be noted that the community has produced its own rappers, like Crunk God Euro and Obadiah.

Meanwhile, in Israel, there are a number of phenomenal MCs who also identify as Israelites. Most of them are affiliated with the African Hebrew Israelite community based in Dimona, the largest group of Hebrew Israelites outside of the United States.

Music is a vital component of that community's quest to be a "light unto the nations." In his book "God the Black Man and Truth," Ben Ammi Ben Israel—the late spiritual leader of the African Hebrew Israelite community whose 1966 vision prompted the "exodus" of the community's founders from America the following year—wrote about a conspiracy against black people "perpetrated through a musical transformation."

According to Ben Ammi, musicians are supposed to act as priests, sharing messages of love and righteousness. But today's musicians "have forsaken God and the people," he wrote. "They no longer understand their responsibility is not only to entertain and uplift, but also to educate their audiences and our people. The music has to make demands on the people and give them vision."

Ben Ammi was no fan of rap music; he forbid his followers from listening to it because of its "ungodly" content. So the youth created their own positive, spiritually-oriented, and curse-free flavor of rap called "poetic prophecy." Community leadership was skeptical at first but eventually embraced the music.

Relatively unknown outside of Dimona, the following MCs celebrate their identity and community in verse while calling out injustices in Israel and abroad. They rap in an amazing amalgam of English and Hebrew (most are fluent in both languages) and collaborate with Israeli-Jewish artists. And while some of them are on the outs or have officially left the African Hebrew Israelite community, they all proudly identify as Hebrews. Allow me to (re)introduce them to you.

## **Ben Blackwell aka Ben Shakhar**

Blackwell is the best known rapper from the African Hebrew Israelite community. He has caught the attention of the Daily Beast and TimeOut Tel Aviv, and he was featured in an awesome Noisey series on hip hop in the Holy Land. A grandson of Nasik Heskiyahu (born Charles Blackwell), the first Hebrew Israelite to settle in Israel in 1968 and a co-founder of the renowned Soul Messengers band, Blackwell raps about his life as an outsider in the country and his desire for a more just, peaceful society. He often appears in his videos wearing traditional African Hebrew Israelite garments, and some of his videos have included Hebrew youth and priests dressed in ceremonial robes. Blackwell has collaborated with several Israeli artists and runs his own record label, Famo Entertainment. "The path that I have chosen isn't easy at all," he raps on "Ben Israel." "But what a blessing, the Creator is watching over me."



## **Prince Ofer**

Born and raised in Dimona, Ofer (pronounced oh-FEER) is best known in the community as a comedian and impressionist, but he's also a gifted rapper and producer (and my spiritual brother, from the time I lived in his father's house in Dimona). Although he's not an actual prince—his father, Ahk Ahmeshadye, was a member of the community's Holy Council of nesikeem, or princes—he definitely has the charisma of one. His lone album, "Black Light," dropped in 2011 and represents the best of poetic prophecy: positive, spiritually uplifting, celebratory of his heritage, and just really fun. "Proud of my culture so I'm never undercover," he raps on a track called "The Prince." Ofer currently lives outside of London with his family but travels to Israel often.



## **E.L.E**

E.L.E—short for Eleazer, and an acronym for Every Lyric Elevates—is a lyrical force of nature. He was born in Baltimore and moved to Israel at age 11 with his mother and siblings. Many of his songs deal with the joys and challenges of growing up in the African Hebrew Israelite community. "I was brought up to show all the world that I'm another man," he raps on "My People." He was the frontman of New Gene, and he has released a handful of mixtapes, including the excellent "No Ordinary Village Kid." E.L.E toes the line between poetic prophecy and harder stuff, but he always has

something interesting to say.

### **New Gene (sometimes spelled Nu Gene and New Genes)**

A decade ago, this was the hottest group in Dimona. Amis-hai, Ben Zohar, E.L.E, Nadeev, Malkeeyah, Ritseeni-yah, and Yoash Victorious (along with dancers Dah-leyah and Naomeyah) tore up the stage at New World Passover 2008, performing hit songs—in the community, if not on Israeli charts—like “Do the Yah Khai,” which inspired its own dance. The group’s album, “Spiritual Icons,” was never released due to some internal drama, and they haven’t performed together for years. But their music lives on various hard drives, including mine, where it gets heavy play.



### **MeshMoney**

Michel Chism is a singer, rapper and sought-after producer who goes by MeshMoney—one of his favorite themes is money and how to get more of it. He grew up in Arad and Dimona and has collaborated with nearly all of the Hebrew Israelite MCs mentioned in this post. As a performer, his main claim to fame is having appeared on the first season of the Israeli version of “X Factor” in 2013 as a member of an all-Hebrew boy band called Mirage. (The group was eliminated early in the season.) While his explicit lyrics and tattoos attest to the fact that Chism is no longer officially part of the African Hebrew Israelite community, he told me that he’ll always be a Hebrew. He has put out a few mixtapes, including “Free” and the questionably titled “Grinding Like Jews.” (When I asked him about that, he said he respects Jews for “working hard and hustling to be wealthy.”) Think what you will, but you definitely can’t knock MeshMoney’s hustle.

### **Forever Young**

This short-lived group—comprised of Avishamah, Ben Ezrah, Prince Ofer, and MeshMoney—recorded an album but never released it, supposedly because it was not approved by African Hebrew Israelite leaders, who must screen all music that is officially released through the community’s Ministry of Divine Performing Arts. The group earned a spot on this list, though, for putting out one of my favorite poetic prophecy songs of all time, “Rep Yah Khai.” Fingers crossed that someone will release that album one day.

### **Messianic Sons (also spelled Messianic Sunz)**

In 1992, the spirit revealed to Chicago native Nevrockiyah that he should share details of “our prophetic destiny as a people” with the world, so he began performing in the local rap scene and formed the Messianic Sons with another brother. After that brother went to jail and Nevrockiyah moved to Israel, the Sons went through a few different permutations until Ammikhi and Gamliel—both of whom grew up with Nevrockiyah on the South Side of Chicago—joined the group. They hooked up with Dahveed soon afterward. Nevrockiyah coined the term “poetic prophecy” to describe the positive, spiritually-minded hip hop that he and the Sons pioneered and continue to produce to this day.



### **Ammikhi**

The most prolific of the Messianic Sons as a solo artist, Ammikhi is known for his intricate wordplay and rapid-fire delivery, à la fellow Chicago native Twista. He splits his time between Dimona and Chicago (aka Chiraq), where he drives a cab. Explaining his artistic mission in a bio video, he says: “To what is known to many now as Chiraq and the four ends of the globe, I want to share what has been shared with me—intellect, hope, love, peace, and blessings—through

song and phrase, sounds and psalms.”

### **Spontain aka Yahkoom**

An O.G. of the poetic prophecy game, Spontain (whose real name is Yahkoom) was part of the first wave of Israeli-born Hebrew Israelite rappers who called themselves D.K.P., for Divine Kingdom Product. (African Hebrew Israelites refer to their community as the Kingdom of Yah/God.) He recalled that he and his peers faced resistance when they started out in the early 2000s. “Our community did not want to have nothing to do with that particular form of expression because rapping was related to the streets,” he explained. “We created our own lyrics and put our lifestyle into the music. Now it’s become more acceptable, but we had to break that door down.” Spontain moved to Tel Aviv at age 18 to pursue his music and has served as a mentor to younger Hebrew artists. He has lived in South Carolina for the past few years but told me he still calls Israel home.



### **Freelancer aka Freelancer Dixon**

This fashionable rapper and producer grew up in the African Hebrew Israelite community but left at age 20. He was a member of Unknown, a group of Hebrew rappers and singers that included El Keys and Avishachar “AJ” Jackson (who appeared on the first season of the TV show “X Factor Israel”). His current crew is called Trackillaz. Freelancer specializes in trap music, so his lyrics are raw and direct. “I do have positive sounds,” he told me, “but mainly I speak my mind about the harsh reality.”

### **Ben Amiel**

Ben Amiel is kind of like the DJ Khaled of the African Hebrew Israelite community—he’s a capable rapper and producer, but his greatest talent might just be in bringing artists together (including, to his credit, several female ones). His collaborative album, “Breath of Life,” features all of the best Hebrew MCs rapping over his hot beats. Ben Amiel was born in Washington, D.C., spent several years in Bermuda and Los Angeles, and currently lives in Ashkelon. His father, Sar Amiel, is also a musician.



### **Godel**

Another young Hebrew MC making waves in Israel, Godel is part of a Tel-Aviv based, neo-soul band called Modern Phase. He’s also done some guest appearances on other Hebrew musicians’ records. A talent for rapping apparently runs in his family, as he is a younger brother of Spontain. Godel told me that he’s releasing some solo material next month, so be sure to look out for that.

There are a number of talented African Hebrew Israelite rappers outside of Israel, too. They include NYC-based MC Elyahreev Immortal (Facebook, YouTube), self-described “New World Griot” Ben-Real of Indiana (YouTube, ReverbNation), and South African duo Sonz of Law (Facebook, ReverbNation, BandCamp), who rap in English, Hebrew, and IsiXhosa.

For a selection of “bangers” and “deep cuts” from all of the artists listed in this article, please visit <http://www.andrewesensten.net/hebrewmcs>.