

RNS Religion News Service

And then, they came for the rock star ...

It happened to Matisyahu. It could happen to any Jewish performer. And, any Jew.

February 22, 2024 By [Jeffrey Salkin](#)



Musician Matisyahu in a 2017 press photo. (Photo courtesy MatisyahuWorld.com)

(RNS) — I want you to get your minds around this, because this is huge.

This is about [Matisyahu](#), a rock/reggae/rap singer. Matisyahu was born Matthew Paul Miller in West Chester, Pennsylvania, and grew up in suburban White Plains, New York. He grew up with a strong Jewish identity; he attended the Alexander Muss High School program in Israel.

His music is heavily infused with Jewish and mystical Jewish themes. He was once affiliated with Chabad, complete with black clothing and beard. He has since left Chabad and has removed those outer manifestations of his previous affiliation. He is a wonderful performer, and I have seen him in concert many times.

Matisyahu was slated to give a [concert](#) in Tucson, Arizona, and it was canceled. He subsequently held a concert at a different venue. Something similar happened in [Santa Fe, New Mexico](#).

What happened? The venues cited security concerns and inadequate staff coverage for those concerts. But Matisyahu understands it differently.

Referring to the venues' message to fans about security concerns, he [alleged in a post on X](#) that "The only concern was a group of staff unwilling to work my show. Tonight in Tucson, we have offered to supplement their staff

shortages on our own dime, but to no avail.

“They do this because they are either anti-Semitic or have confused their empathy for the Palestinian people with hatred for someone like me who holds empathy for both Israelis and Palestinians.”

Why did these young workers allegedly refuse to work at the concert?

Pay attention — this is about so much more than a few canceled rock shows. It is about so much more than Matisyahu.

Had Matisyahu been Israeli, and the workers refused to help with the concert — OK, that would have been deplorable. But, at least, we might have understood their reluctance (as misguided as it might have been). But Matisyahu is not Israeli.

So that leaves several other possible reasons. To quote “Casablanca,” let’s “round up the usual suspects” — and there are not that many of them.

- He sings about Jewish themes.
- He has a Hebrew name.
- He is Jewish.

- He is pro-Israel.
- Any or all of the above.

There is no other possible way to understand this.

This is not about Israel.

This is not about Zionism.

This is not about Gaza.

This is not about the occupation.

This is not about a two-state solution.

This is not about Netanyahu.

This is about the Jews.

And, since this is about the Jews, please realize that any Jewish performer, rock star, film star, celebrity — no matter how close to Judaism, or how estranged from Judaism — could be next.

Which leads me to wonder aloud: Where is the outcry from Jewish rock musicians and others?

OK, maybe it isn't about the Jews per se.

Maybe it is only about certain kinds of Jews.

Which prompts me to ask: How did we allow anti-Israel activists to curate (that oh-so-popular word) which kinds of Jews are acceptable?

Those who are pro-Israel — which is to say, the vast majority of American Jews — ahem, need not apply.

I am having a historical flashback.

Once upon a time, in the not-so-distant past, social antisemitism was a “thing” in America.

- Certain elite universities, including Harvard, Yale and Princeton, severely limited the number of Jews who could enroll. They sought “geographical diversity,” which was a code phrase that meant we don’t want those New York Jewish types.
- Certain elite clubs did not admit Jews.
- Certain hotels did not admit Jews, including (you have to laugh, sort of) hotels on Miami Beach, which for the last 70 years has been an iconic Jewish community.
- Jews could not live in certain towns and neighborhoods. I live near Palm Beach, which was

once a veritable theme park of antisemitism. When I see visibly Orthodox Jews walking to the large Orthodox shul on the island, I can only imagine an earlier generation of Palm Beachers cringing, and Henry Flagler, the founder of Palm Beach, spinning in his grave. He deserves to do precisely that.

It turns out that things have not changed all that much. The only things that have changed are the metaphorical club, the hotel and the neighborhood.

You want to be join our oh-so-exclusive moral club and live in our politically restricted neighborhood? Don't be "too Jewish." Once upon a time, that might have meant: Don't speak with a Brooklynese or Yiddish inflection.

Now, it means something else. Don't be a Zionist, and please don't care too much or too overtly about the Jewish state.

Tragically, there are Jews who are willing to pay that price.

It gets worse.

According to a recent [Harvard/Harris poll](#), 67% of 18- to 24-year-olds believe Jews as a class are oppressors.

The same poll revealed that about half of young Americans (51%) surveyed on Israel's conflict with Hamas believe the long-term solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict is for the Jewish state to cease to exist, and instead be replaced by a Palestinian entity.

Six in 10 [think](#) the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks were justified by Palestinian grievances, indicating they believe that genocide of Israelis is justified (since in the question right before that, two-thirds agreed the attack was genocidal in nature).

Which only means that the next generation of voters, leaders, social influencers and educators hold hateful ideas about Jews.

It is fashionable to say the solution for this is education. "If only they understood ..." "If only they knew better ..." For many years, I held to this opinion.

I still believe it might be effective in the education of children and adolescents.

But I've also come to understand this is not a problem of inadequate education.

As Dara Horn recently [wrote](#) in The Atlantic:

“Hatred comes from ignorance” and “Education is the answer.” But if hatred comes from ignorance, why were America’s best universities full of this very specific ignorance? And why were so many people trying to justify it, explain it away, or even deny it? Our era’s 10-second news cycle is no match for these questions, because the answers are deep and ancient, buried beneath the oldest of assumptions about what we think we know.

Or, let’s put it this way.

In good old SAT analogy style.

Racism:America::Antisemitism:Western civilization.

It really is that simple. And the anti-Matisyahu workers have proved it.

And yet, I think of what some people believe to be Matisyahu’s most beloved song, “[One Day](#).” It is so beloved that it has found its way into synagogue liturgy.

Sometimes in my tears I drown

But I never let it get me down

So when negativity surrounds

I know someday, it'll all turn around because

All my life I've been waitin' for

I've been prayin' for, for the people to say

That we don't wanna fight no more

There'll be no more wars

And our children will play ...

One day ...

Yes.

One day.

Join me and my colleagues — Rabbi Michelle Dardashti, Jane Eisner and Yehuda Kurtzer — as we discuss these issues, and the entire range of post-Oct. 7 Judaism issues, in a special Religion News Service seminar on Feb. 29 at 2:30 pm. Register [here](#). Hope to see you there!

