



# Eurovisionland

By Robbie Gringras, Makom Artist-in-Residence

In Eurovisionland, things like this aren't supposed to happen. In Eurovisionland everybody is smiling, all songs are catchy, and *boom boom bingabang* is a challenging lyric. This year, it's all going to be different. And it's all Israel's fault.

The Eurovision Song Contest is Europe's leading annual song contest, drawing huge numbers of viewers, and the continent's greatest musical talent. Every country selects their own favorite original song, and sends off their hero to compete for the crown of the best song in Europe that year. Unlike *American Idol*, the emphasis here is on the song-writing itself, and not necessarily on the performer.

Though most winners are catchy to the point of banal - songs that you hate yourself for unconsciously humming - some stars have emerged from Eurovisionland. For example, Abba made their international debut at Eurovision 1974. *Waterloo* won top marks (or what Eurovision junkies call *douze points*), and the rest is Broadway history. Remember that jaunty crooners' classic, *Volare*? Covered by everyone from Frank Sinatra to David Bowie, this infuriating Italian song was Eurovision runner-up in 1958.

## Israel and a Vision of Europe

Nobody fully understands why, but for the last thirty years or so, Israel has competed in the Eurovision Song contest. It is, in a way, the realization of the ultimate Zionist dream: Once a year Israel becomes European. This was, after all, the original idea. Theodore Herzl, visionary of the Jewish State and creator of 'political Zionism', had always imagined the national language of Zion would be German, not some strange obsolete desert tongue. The State of Israel was a European creation, Jerusalem town planning owes more to the British than King David, and even Tel Aviv's boulevards feel French. Why else would Tel Aviv's street planners have decided that all roads do not lead to the sea? Because a self-respecting European city does not have beaches. While even England declares hose-pipe bans after a shortage of rain, Israelis water their grassy Swiss-like lawns throughout the parched summer. No Israeli Environment Minister could ever countenance actually admitting that sand, rocks, and cactus might be a better form of garden for Israelis. Too many European taboos are caught up in this patch of green.

Apart from Europhilia, the other even more surprising reason that Israel loves the Eurovision Song contest, is that it has a habit of winning. We have three winners to our name, and are the only

country to win the event twice in a row. That Israeli classic that is now an official mitzvah to sing on Yom Ha'Atzmaut with hands clasped high - *Halleluyah* - was a winning creation for Eurovision 1979. (Complete with the most notorious key-change in modern history).

## European Arabs

And so when the Teapacks band was chosen to represent Israel this year, it was clear that trouble was afoot. A leading member of Israel's own Eurovision panel, Anastasia Michaeli, had warned that we should not choose as our representative a performer who 'looks Arab'. The logic would seem to be, when in Europe do as the Europeans do. But Michaeli's advice was shunned. The panel chose Teapacks, whose style is Middle Eastern, and whose lead singer-songwriter is Kobi Oz, a North African immigrant from Tunisia.

Kobi Oz (no relative of the writer, Amos) hails from that Jewish ethnic grouping that was once called *Sephardi*, and that in Israel we call *Mizrachi*. Literally this means Eastern, or oriental (which is kind of funny since Poland and Russia are both further East than Tunisia). In the end, *Mizrachi Jew* is just a European euphemism for *Arab Jew*. The majority of Israel's Jews come from Arab lands - Iraq, Morocco, and Yemen. Apparently, as an 'Arab', Kobi Oz should not have been representing Israel in such a European competition.

It is one of the delightful ironies of this constantly surprising country, that Oz sings Teapacks' Eurovision entry in a mixture of English, Hebrew, and - you guessed it - French. As an immigrant from a former French colony, Oz' French is fluent and accentless. No doubt far

more European-sounding than the French of Michaeli, who condemned his unsuitability.

## Push the Button

But this is not the problem. This is not what upset Eurovisionland. The difficulty is that the song that Israel has chosen to represent her this year is a particularly non-Eurovision-sounding song. A cross between hard rock, hip hop, and circus accordion, it is musically eclectic but not beyond the bounds of acceptability. But the words. The lyrics. Now this won't do.

The song is called *Push The Button*, and it refers to nuclear war. It makes mention of the fact that terrorism is a factor in our lives, and that crazy fanatics have gotten hold of the bomb. In short, it relates to real life.

And Eurovisionland doesn't like relating to real life.

Hence the talk throughout the internet world, of a possible disqualification of this 'political' song. Whether or not Eurovision ever really contemplated banning the song is moot. Reading carefully between the statements from the official Eurovision committee, one gets the impression that public debate over a potential 'ban' and 'censorship' may well have been the creation of a clever Teapacks public relations campaign. What is more interesting to me is not the response of the Eurovision, but more what this choice of song tells us about the cultural and emotional state of Israel.

## A Candle in the Darkness

Israel has been happy to play the Eurovision game. In 2002 the 'queen' of

popular music in Israel, Sarit Hadad, set off to Estonia to sing her anthem *Light a Candle*. Written and presented at the height of (and perhaps in response to) the second Intifada, the song schmaltzily called for hope and togetherness. Sarit Hadad was there, flanked by two violinists, clad all in angelic white, and sang Western-style about lighting a million candles in the dark.

Our stereotypes of Israelis might make us wonder how this macho nation could permit such a song to represent the nation's aspirations. But *Light a Candle* revealed the hidden side to Israeli cultural taste. Don't tell anyone, but Israelis are big on sentimentality. Pathos, tragedy, and bravely smiling through the tears is a resonant mode in this inherently melodramatic place. We will shout rudely, and we will push in line, but we will also shed a tear and raise a lighter with the best of them. In particular if the sadness is related to Israeli suffering. We are good at self-pity, and as we all know, receive more than enough reasons to wallow in it.

We would seem to be a very binary nation. Maybe it's in the water. I'm convinced that it's no coincidence that the black-and-white, dichotomous aspects of the Talmud - the Mishnah - was compiled in Israel, while the more folksy, nuanced and meandering *Gemara* grew mostly in exile. There's something about this place that needs, or demands, one thing or the other. And so it is in our taste for art. We consume *either* sentimentality or satire. It is either white, or it is black. After the experience of Sarit Hadad and other schmaltzers after her, this time we have decided to go black.

*Push the Button* does not only rage about the threat of nuclear war. It also rants about corruption in Israel, about rockets falling from Gaza, about crime, and even about the weather. Everything is, according to the song, very nearly unbearable. At points the song yearns for peace and quiet, wishing to have "lots of fun just sitting in the sun", but even these breaks in the song are performed ironically, almost parodically. As if these kinds of aspirations, of watching "flowers bloom", are already a silly laughable fantasy. Instead, an ever-accelerating rap of rage interrupts the reverie, almost overtaking its own rhythms, so fast and furious come the images of despair.

## Making Nice

So what is going on? Why such an aggressive challenge to all things Eurovisional? Well, for one, Israel has had enough of 'making nice' to Europe. The full story of Sarit Hadad's reception still resonates here. There she was, all white and sweet, and at least two broadcasters scoffed at her intentions. "She may be wearing white, but don't be fooled into thinking that Israel wants peace," snarled the Belgian announcer to his viewers. Sarit Singing a Sappy Song had suddenly become a symbol for Israel's genocidal tendencies. While any objective observer might have concluded that the song lost because it was rubbish, every Jew in Eurovisionland was convinced that Yasser Arafat had rigged the voting that year.

So Israel is getting real this year. Kobi Oz, the writer and singer of the song, has never been one to shy away from controversial topics, and proudly maintains that his role as an artist is to raise difficult subjects and to provoke

debate. For Oz and his band Teapacks, this is no passing phase. Their work has always pushed buttons, and challenged Israeli audiences - lyrically and musically. Teapacks is seen as the key pioneer of fusions between Middle Eastern (read - Arab) music with more Western styles, and is famed for its nuanced and intelligent outcry at ethnic and economic discrimination in Israel.

But Kobi Oz is capable of writing the sappy stuff, too. He is the one who originally brought Sarit Hadad to fame, writing two of her greatest hits, none of which were great brain-teasers. My favorite features the immortal chorus: "Yalla, go home Motti/Thank you and goodbye /Don't try to call me/ I'll not answer.../So get yourself a life/Cos you ain't got no choice!"

So given Kobi Oz' ability to do 'cheesy', why go black and satirical now? More to the point, out of the four songs that Teapacks offered for selection, it was the Israeli public that chose *Push the Button*. Gentler messages were available, but this year Israel chose despair. Nuclear despair.

Openly or secretly, fears of an Iranian nuclear holocaust have seeped into the Israeli psyche. Last summer's failed war in Lebanon shamed us, and the continued missile attacks from evacuated Gaza have frustrated and confused us, but the Iranian threat is something else.

## Iranian Holocaust

Israel is a country whose true European roots are not in song contests, but in the Holocaust. The Holocaust, not Herzl, offers us the real founding narrative of Israel. Children here are weaned on

Holocaust. Entirely ignoring all developmental educational wisdom (perhaps deliberately), there are Holocaust Remembrance events in Israeli nursery schools. Israel's Holocaust narrative insists that from the ashes of the gas chambers was born Israel, and that the question posed by the Holocaust is answered by the existence of Israel's Defense Force. The national Holocaust Memorial service is a military event. Uniforms are worn. In Israel 'Never Again' is not a rally slogan, but military policy.

Israel's military might has always been the pacifier of our Holocaust nightmares. (Indeed, some suggest our Holocaust obsession has distorted our relationship to the IDF. As novelist Sara Shilo commented: "No matter how powerful the IDF is, it will never be able to prevent the Holocaust.") But here we are, faced with possible annihilation from Iran, yet all our military strength - even nuclear - can not save us from destruction. It is not just Bibi Netanyahu who makes comparisons between the current situation and pre-war Germany. Even Benny Morris, pioneer of the New Historians, who would be the first with his back against the wall were Bibi to get his way, even Benny Morris wrote last week that the Iranian Holocaust of the Jews is only a matter of time.

So is it no wonder that Teapacks is screaming. The fascinating aspect is that Teapacks have been sent to scream outside of Israel. In Eurovisionland, of all places. It seems there is an element of defiance in it all. 'So don't vote for us,' the choice of song seems to say, 'See if we care.'

It is difficult to think of a song less likely to win over Eurovisionland. Quite apart from its harsh view of the future, it does

not go out of its way to communicate. While the chorus "They're going to Push the Button!" rings out loud and clear, much of the lyrics are almost opaque, filled to bursting with private in-jokes. The song begins with Kobi Oz singing in heavily-accented English. His own English is far better than this: he is parodying Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*. But who would know? Only those who would then laugh at his If-I-Were-A-Rich-Man fear that the world will be "blown to biddy biddy kingdom come." It's difficult to imagine that many Europeans are so familiar with Israeli life as to pick up the references to kidnapped soldiers, corruption in high places, and the discomfort of our hot dry *sharav*. And for sure they won't pick up the repeated allusion to Israel's 1974 Eurovision entry - *Natati La Chayay* - I gave her my life.

More and more I begin to look at the creation and choice of this song as a true representation of the Israel I know and admire. Not only because it is a musical overview of all this country's styles, from folk-dance style accordion, to Oriental rhythms, to Western hip hop. But also for the way in which it is true to its

cultural context. *Push The Button* is daring, disturbing, fascinating, and thick with meaning. Like Israel. It seems to say - "I am Israel. I am conflicted, I am scared, I will not lie, and even at the cost of losing your friendship and support I refuse to give up my own authenticity. I will not 'make nice', and I will explain myself only on my own terms. If you want to know me better, you're just going to have to make more of an effort."

Eurovisionland has, for the moment, made its choice. The song will be allowed in the competition. But what about in North America? In our Jewish communities? I wonder whether we have allowed ourselves to resemble Eurovisionland, stubbornly insisting on singing *Halleluyah* with our eyes closed? Beyond protesting European 'discrimination' against the song, do we have the will and the courage to engage directly with *Push the Button* itself, in all its uncompromising honesty? For if we do, it will be inside the nuance and echoes of the song that we will find a deeper Israel that is worth getting to know.

Robbie Gringras Nisan 5767/March 2007

*Makom is the Hebrew word for place. It is also a name for God. Resonating with both the earth and the heavens, it symbolizes our efforts to renew the place of Israel in Jewish life. Makom addresses the critical lack of sophisticated connection to Israel and the Jewish People amongst Jews through a range of educational and cultural experiments. Through a network of labs, local leaders - in education, the arts and travel - are mentored to create the compelling content needed to build the field of Israel engagement for our times. Makom is a collaborative initiative of the Jewish Agency, community leadership and philanthropic partners.*

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