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Man of Joy

By [David Suissa](#)

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Craig Taubman is a very happy guy, but on Yom HaAtzmaut last spring, as Jewish communities around the world were celebrating Israel's 60th anniversary he wasn't a happy camper.

Which in itself was unusual, since on that day he was doing what he loves to do best -- playing music and producing events. As part of his popular Faith Jam series, which, as he says, "brings together music of all traditions to sing songs of praise, and not differences," he was rocking and rolling with Jewish bands, gospel choirs, Sufi chant masters and other musicians.

Taubman's problem, though, was that one thing was missing from his party: Any reference to Israel's birthday.

This was the third year of the Faith Jam festival, and Taubman had tried to include a celebration of Israel's 60th as part of the festivities. Unfortunately, his Muslim partners in Faith Jam disagreed with that idea.

If we celebrate Israel, they said, then we should also celebrate Palestine.

Taubman had a ready answer for that: When the Palestinians get their own state, I will gladly include them, he told the Muslim organization with whom he was working.

But they wouldn't budge, so Taubman accommodated. He wanted to keep peace, he said. But then, when the day arrived, and he saw that his was the only Jewish-connected event in town that wasn't celebrating Israel's anniversary, it made him sick. He said he lost sleep for many months.

As he was telling me all this the other day over lunch at Jeff's Gourmet on Pico Boulevard, you could see that the episode still weighed on him.

"I knew that I had compromised my joy, my values," he said. "I wasn't strong enough to say, 'I understand, but I can't compromise on this issue.' I was more interested in maintaining my good relationships."

This latter point shouldn't be too surprising, because if there's one thing that has defined this musical impresario for the past two decades in our community, it is the quality of his relationships.

I first met Taubman in the mid 1980s, when he was looking for help promoting a new musical venture called Yad B'Yad. Since then, every time I've seen him around town, his hair has gotten a little grayer, but absolutely nothing else has changed -- he's still always looking to promote another musical venture.

Catch him at any moment, and he's likely to be working on a major project -- events like the annual "Let My People Sing" festival, the "Hallelu" concert series or the "Jewels of Elul" booklet and online compilations. Although he continues to do non-Jewish work -- he's composed and directed music for companies like FOX television, HBO and Paramount Pictures -- it's clear that his heart and soul is with the Jewish community.

One of his proudest achievements is that many thousands of Jews have been turned on to Judaism thanks to "Friday Night Live," the musical Shabbat service at Sinai Temple he started with Rabbi David Wolpe more than 10 years ago. Held on the second Friday of every month, the service regularly attracts more than 1,000 Jewish young adults, many of whom had been estranged from Jewish life.

These days, his big thing is a Chanukah-themed PBS Pledge Drive Special, which will air nationwide over the next few weeks and in Los Angeles on Dec. 2. Of course, he produced the whole event and performed in it, too.

All of which makes me glad for any Jewish community in the world that has a Craig Taubman in its midst. What would we do without these musical warriors? They are portable joy machines. While most of us easily can get consumed with frustrating things like the state of the economy or Israeli politics or an annoying family member, the Taubmans of the world are consumed with giving us spiritual-joy breaks from the daily stresses of life.

I spoke to him on the phone last week after he had just returned from a concert tour in Turkey and Israel. In between all the excited talk of his musical projects, I couldn't resist asking him how a naturally happy person like him reacted to the horrible tragedy in Mumbai. He paused for a long time, and then he did the Jewish thing and asked for my reaction first. I didn't pause. I told him I was angry. Angry at the cowardly murderers who could so brazenly destroy precious and sweet human lives.

He told me he felt deep sadness. He has trouble feeling anger, he says, because it makes him feel helpless and despairing. So he mourns in sadness, and puts on a happy face when he has to perform.

Taubman is relentlessly enthusiastic about life and music, but he has no illusions. He doesn't pretend that music can fix the world's problems, and he's hardly naïve about the terrorist threats to Israel and to America and to the world. It's just that while being a musical and spiritual guy, Taubman is also a very practical guy. He worries about the things he can influence.

And his influence is in music, not politics.

Of course, when the two meet, it can cause a little stress, like it did at Faith Jam on Yom HaAtzmaut this year, when he chose "peace with the Muslims" over his desire to celebrate the birthday of his beloved Israel.

I'm not sure why Taubman volunteered to tell me about his Zionist faux pas. For a Jewish man of joy, this wouldn't seem like a good career move. Maybe he figured we'd give him some slack after all he's done over the years to elevate our community.

But here's another possible explanation for his candor: Right before we left Jeff's Gourmet, he insisted that I mention that at the next Faith Jam festival, he

will indeed celebrate Israel's 61st birthday.

"Whether my partners like it or not," he said, without a trace of anger.

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