

**MIQDASH BETHEL COVENANT ASSEMBLY**

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**WITNESSES TO THE WOUND**

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*A Covenant Investigation into the Exploitation of the Zamar Carriers*

*100 Years of the Music Business on Trial*

**Report No. 14 of an Ongoing Series**

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# CURTIS MAYFIELD

1942 – 1999

***The Gentle Genius — He Broke His Back But Not His Spirit***

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*Owned his publishing and masters — struck by a falling lighting rig at 48, paralyzed from the neck down — recorded his final album lying on his back, one line at a time, gravity assisting his breathing — too ill to attend his Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction — died the day after Christmas 1999*

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March 2026 · Kepha Arcemont, Elder and Founder

## SECTION ONE — THE GIFT: WHO YAHWEH MADE HIM

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### Biography: The Gentle Genius of Chicago Soul

**Curtis Lee Mayfield was born June 3, 1942, in Chicago, Illinois** — to Marion Washington and Kenneth Mayfield. His father left when Curtis was five. His mother and grandmother raised him in the Chicago public housing projects. He found music at his grandmother's Travelling Soul Spiritualists' Church, where the Pentecostal tradition of gospel shaped his ear and his sense of what music was for. He discovered a guitar in a closet at age seven. By fourteen he had met Jerry Butler and joined the Impressions. What followed was one of the most morally serious and musically complete careers in American popular music. The Impressions recorded ***It's All Right, Keep On Pushing, People Get Ready*** — songs that became anthems of the Civil Rights Movement. Martin Luther King marched to them. Students sang them entering jail. ***People Get Ready*** was ranked 24th on Rolling Stone's 500 Greatest Songs of All Time. Mayfield was already the voice of a movement before he went solo.

His 1972 soundtrack to ***Super Fly*** remains one of the greatest soundtrack albums ever recorded — a work that simultaneously portrayed and critiqued the drug culture it depicted. He owned his publishing. He owned his masters. He had watched what happened to the artists before him and had structured his career to avoid it. His son Todd documented: *"Those royalties, as well as the security he afforded himself by insisting on owning much of his own publishing and master recordings, helped secure Mayfield's financial well-being."*

He was, by any measure, one of the most complete artists in this series: **a covenant musician who had learned to protect the instrument of the covenant.** He understood ownership. He understood publishing. He was not poor. He was not exploited by a label. He owned the catalog. What happened to Curtis Mayfield was not what happened to the other artists in this series. And that distinction is precisely why this report is necessary. The series documents 100 years of the music industry's covenant violations against the zamar carriers. Curtis Mayfield was not underpaid by a label. He was struck down on a stage. **The covenant does not only indict the industry. It also holds the account of what catastrophic negligence costs the one who carries the gift.**

◆ *People Get Ready. He wrote that in 1964, for the Civil Rights Movement, when the movement needed exactly what he gave it: a song that carried the covenant promise that a change was coming, that the train was coming, that the work of justice would be completed. Mavis Staples said he transformed from a love song writer into someone who wrote the best message songs available. She was right. He was the prophetic voice of an era. And on August 13, 1990, a lighting rig blown down by a wind gust crushed three vertebrae in his neck and ended the life he had been living.*

## SECTION TWO — THE WOUND: AUGUST 13, 1990

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## The Lighting Rig, the Rain, and the Traction Ward

**Curtis Mayfield arrived at Wingate Field in Flatbush, Brooklyn, on August 13, 1990.** He was 48 years old. He was in the middle of a career resurgence — two new albums released that year, a collaboration with Ice-T that signaled his relevance to the emerging hip-hop generation, a full concert schedule. Ten thousand people had come to the outdoor concert organized by New York State Senator Martin Markowitz.

A storm was moving toward Brooklyn. Markowitz knew it. He made the decision to move Mayfield's set earlier, hoping to get through it before the weather hit. A set by Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes was cut short. Markowitz took the stage to introduce Mayfield. His son Todd, in his biography *Traveling Soul*, documents the moment: *"At that moment, just as Markowitz said 'I'm thrilled,' a huge gust of wind blew through the event space. Stacks of speakers on the front of the stage — big mothers, heavy and stout — fell off like they were committing suicide."*

A second gust — estimated at up to 54 mph — toppled the lighting truss. It came off the ground and tumbled, its weight amplified by the metal and equipment attached to it. One light struck Mayfield in the back of the neck. **The third, fourth, and fifth vertebrae in his neck were crushed. He was paralyzed from the neck down.** He lay on the stage in the rain, unable to move his arms or legs, as the crowd screamed around him. A drum kit caught the falling truss and saved his life. He was taken to Kings County Hospital, which stood next to the field. His son described the hospital scene:

*"I flew to New York as soon as I could, and when I arrived at the hospital, my father's body was wracked with pneumonia. His system couldn't fight the sickness after enduring such trauma. He was stretched out in traction and hooked to a ventilator. Tears welled in his eyes. I'd never seen him cry before. He couldn't speak, but he mouthed the words: 'Take care of the finances.'"*

His first words from traction: **Take care of the finances.** The catalog. The publishing. The masters he had spent his career building the ownership structures to protect. Even from a hospital bed, paralyzed and hooked to a ventilator, **Curtis Mayfield's first thought was for the covenant inheritance he had built.** His son attributed the accident to gross negligence on the concert organizer's behalf.

## The Recording He Made Lying Down

**Four years after the accident, Mayfield began to re-emerge.** An all-star tribute album in 1994 — with Eric Clapton, Aretha Franklin, Phil Collins, the Isley Brothers, and Elton John covering his songs — convinced him he could still work. He returned to the studio. He could not sit up. He could not play guitar. The reduced lung capacity from his quadriplegia made sustained singing impossible.

He recorded his final album, *New World Order*, in 1996 by **lying on his back in the studio, recording one line of lyric at a time, using gravity to assist his diaphragm and his breathing.** His widow Altheida said: *"He broke his back but not his spirit."* The album received three Grammy nominations, including Best R&B Album. ***New World Order*** was not a valediction or a diminished final effort. It was the full covenant musician

still at work, finding a way to carry the sound regardless of what the body could no longer do.

♦ **DOCUMENTED RECORD:** *Curtis Mayfield recorded his final album New World Order (1996) lying flat on his back, one vocal line at a time, because reduced lung capacity from quadriplegia made sustained singing impossible. Gravity assisted his diaphragm. The album received three Grammy nominations. He was too ill to attend his solo Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction ceremony in 1999. He died December 26, 1999. His right leg had been amputated in 1998 due to diabetes complications from the accident.*

He never performed live again after August 13, 1990. In 1998, his right leg was amputated due to diabetes complications caused by his quadriplegia. He was too ill to attend his solo induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1999. He died the day after Christmas, December 26, 1999. He was 57 years old. He had spent nine years as a quadriplegic. He had spent those nine years still working, still composing, still recording, **still carrying the gift with whatever the body had left.**

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### SECTION THREE — THE THREE WITNESSES (DEVARIM 19:15)

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## Corroboration of the Record

**WITNESS One:** *Todd Mayfield (Curtis's son), Traveling Soul: The Life of Curtis Mayfield (biography, with Travis Atria, published by Chicago Review Press): primary biographical account confirming the accident details, the hospital scene, Mayfield's first words 'Take care of the finances,' the attribution of the accident to 'gross negligence,' and the family's experience of the aftermath. Excerpted in Rolling Stone. This is the primary family testimony from the person present at the hospital.*

**WITNESS Two:** *Ultimate Classic Rock (30 Years Ago: Curtis Mayfield Paralyzed During an Outdoor Concert, 2020): documents the UPI report confirming wind speeds of up to 54 mph; confirms Markowitz's statement to UPI ('As Mayfield was ready to come onstage, an overwhelming wind hit us and blew the speakers off the stage and the lighting trusses down'); confirms the medical diagnosis (vertebrae 3, 4, and 5 crushed); confirms the decade of quadriplegia, the diabetes complications, the leg amputation, and the death on December 26, 1999. Corroborated by UPI wire service contemporaneous reporting.*

**WITNESS Three:** *The Boombox (25 Years Ago: Curtis Mayfield Paralyzed in Stage Accident): confirms Mayfield's own direct quotation — 'I don't remember anything. I don't even remember falling. The next thing I knew I was lying on my back... And then I discovered that neither my hands nor my arms were where I thought they were, and I couldn't move... Then it began to rain. Big drops. I could hear people screaming and hollering.' Additionally confirms that his ownership of publishing and master recordings — secured before the accident — helped maintain his financial stability through the medical expenses. This detail distinguishes Mayfield from every other artist in this series.*

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### SECTION FOUR — THE COVENANT ANALYSIS

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## The Torah Charges — Applied to Curtis Mayfield

### Charge One: Gross Negligence and the Bodily Harm of the Covenant Worker — Shemot 21:18-19

***"And if men quarrel and one strikes another with a stone or with his fist and the man does not die but takes to his bed, then if the man rises again and walks outdoors with his staff, he who struck him shall be clear; only he shall pay for the loss of his time, and shall have him thoroughly healed."***

— Shemot (Exodus) 21:18-19

The Torah's civil law addresses the liability of one whose negligent or violent act disables another. Todd Mayfield attributed the accident specifically to **gross negligence** on the part of the concert organizer. A storm was building. The organizer knew it. He chose to proceed rather than cancel. He chose to move Mayfield's set earlier rather than stop the event. A lighting rig blown down by 54 mph winds in the presence of a known approaching storm is not an act of God. It is the predictable consequence of proceeding with an outdoor concert in dangerous weather conditions. **The Torah places the financial and physical responsibility for disability caused by negligent action on the one who caused it.** The concert organizer whose decision to proceed in a storm produced Mayfield's quadriplegia bears covenant liability under Shemot's framework for injury caused by human action. The victim does not *take to his bed* because he chose to. He takes to his bed because the one in authority chose to proceed when stopping was the only responsible option.

### Charge Two: The Disabled Body and the Uncompleted Gift — Vayikra 24:19-20

***"If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him, fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him."***

— Vayikra (Leviticus) 24:19-20

The **lex talionis** — the principle of equivalent accountability — in Vayikra's framework is not a call for literal retaliation. The rabbinical tradition and the covenant framework that underlies it understand it as **the principle that the consequence of causing injury must be proportional to the injury caused.** Curtis Mayfield was 48 years old. He had another 50 years of music in him. The accident that crushed his vertebrae did not merely disable his body. It ended his ability to play guitar. It reduced his ability to sing. It took from the world and from the covenant community everything he would have given it in the decades after 1990. **People Get Ready** was written in 1964. What would the man who wrote that in 1964 have written in 2004, in 2014, in 2024? We do not know. The lighting rig made sure we would never know. The covenant's principle of proportional accountability applies to every song he did not write.

## Charge Three: The Desolation After Faithfulness — Iyov 1:21 and the Covenant Response

***"Yahweh gave, and Yahweh has taken away; blessed be the name of Yahweh."***

**— Iyov (Job) 1:21**

Iyov's response to catastrophic loss is the covenant framework for what Mayfield faced after August 13, 1990. He had been given the gift. He had stewarded it faithfully. He had protected it legally and commercially better than almost anyone in this series. He had owned his masters. He had owned his publishing. He had insisted on control where others had surrendered it. And a lighting rig fell on him. **The covenant does not promise the faithful artist protection from catastrophe. It holds the record of what faithfulness produced before the catastrophe and what faithfulness produced afterward.** Mayfield's response to the catastrophe was the same as his response to everything else: *Take care of the finances. He broke his back but not his spirit.* He lay on his back in the studio and recorded one line at a time and made an album that received three Grammy nominations. **Iyov blessed the name of Yahweh from the ash heap. Mayfield recorded his benediction one line at a time, lying flat, gravity feeding air to his lungs.**

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### SECTION FIVE — THE LIVING WITNESS: KEPHA ARCEMONT, 2026

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## A Blues Guitarist Reads the Record

**Take care of the finances.** From the traction ward. Paralyzed. On a ventilator. Looking up at his son. First words. **Take care of the finances.** I have thought about those words since I first encountered them. They are the words of a man who built the structures. Who owned the publishing. Who owned the masters. Who had done everything this series documents as necessary to protect the covenant inheritance. And from a hospital bed where he could not move his hands or his arms or his legs, paralyzed by a lighting rig that should never have fallen, his first thought was: ***the catalog is the gift, and the gift must be protected.***

◆ *I am the Elder and founder of Miqdash Bethel Covenant Assembly. I served as a New Orleans firefighter. I know what it means to protect something with your body. Curtis Mayfield spent his career protecting his catalog with his legal acumen and his business structures. Then he walked onto a stage in Brooklyn and a wind gust took everything his body could do. He still had the voice. He found a way to use it. Lying down. One line at a time. He made New World Order. Three Grammy nominations. I do not have language sufficient for that level of faithfulness to the gift.*

**People Get Ready.** Martin Luther King marched to that song. Students sang it entering jail cells. It was written in 1964 by a 22-year-old man who lived in Chicago public housing and understood that his gift was for something larger than himself. He wrote

covenant music. Music that told the community that the change was coming, that the train was arriving, that the work of justice was not finished but would be. **He carried that covenant purpose from 1964 through August 12, 1990.** And on August 13, the wind came, and the rig came down, and he lay in the rain on a stage in Brooklyn, unable to move, listening to the crowd scream.

He recorded ***New World Order*** six years later. He died three years after that. His widow called it: ***He broke his back but not his spirit.*** The covenant record holds both. The breaking of the back. The unbroken spirit. The one line at a time in the studio. The Grammy nominations. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction he was too ill to attend. The day after Christmas in 1999. The full account.

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## SECTION SIX — THE COVENANT VERDICT

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### Yahweh's Record on Curtis Mayfield

**The covenant verdict in this report is different from every previous verdict in this series.** Every previous report documents exploitation by the industry: underpayment, contract theft, copyright fraud, racial exclusion, coercive settlements, posthumous catalog capture. Curtis Mayfield is not primarily an exploitation case. He owned his publishing. He owned his masters. He had done what the previous thirteen artists in this series were denied the opportunity to do. **His wound was not a contract. It was a catastrophe.** And the covenant holds the record of catastrophe with the same precision it holds the record of exploitation.

**COVENANT CHARGE ONE: Curtis Mayfield was struck by a lighting rig at a concert organized by a public official who chose to proceed with an outdoor event in the face of a known approaching storm. His son attributed the accident to gross negligence. The decision to proceed when cancellation was the only responsible option produced quadriplegia, nine years of disability, diabetes complications, a leg amputation, and a death at 57. Shemot 21:18-19 — the one whose negligent act disables another bears liability for the loss of that person's time and the cost of their healing. The covenant judgment is entered against the negligent decision to proceed. It is entered against every concert promoter and organizer who proceeds in dangerous conditions because cancellation is commercially inconvenient.**

**COVENANT ACKNOWLEDGMENT: Curtis Mayfield, paralyzed from the neck down at 48, mouthed from a traction ward: 'Take care of the finances.' He recorded his final album lying on his back, one line at a time, using gravity to assist his breathing. The album received three Grammy nominations. He died the day after Christmas, 1999. He broke his back. He did not break his spirit. The covenant honors the faithfulness that continues when the body**

**can no longer comply. Iyov blessed the name of Yahweh from the ash heap. Mayfield recorded his blessing one line at a time. The record is complete.**

***"Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning."***  
**— Tehillim (Psalms) 30:5**

***He broke his back but not his spirit.*** The night was nine years long. The joy was ***New World Order***, three Grammy nominations, the covenant community's recognition that what he had carried had not been extinguished. ***Yahweh gave the gift. A lighting rig took the body. The gift was carried anyway.*** The morning came. The record is complete. ***Selah.***

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#### SERIES NOTES

**Next in series:** Report No. 15 — Sam Moore (Sam & Dave) (1935–). One half of one of the greatest soul duos in American music history — who received \$67 per month in pension from Stax Records after his duo's recordings generated estimated \$100 million in revenue.

**Series roster:** Reports 1–14 complete. Reports 15–16 pending: Sam Moore, and the hip-hop era to 2026.

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***Selah.***

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*Miqdash Bethel Covenant Assembly · Pearl River, Louisiana · March 2026*  
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