

DANCE IN ISRAEL: Performing Israeli As Opposed to Jewish Identity

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ABSTRACT

Creating and performing dance in Israel illustrates many ways in which the *yishuv* [the Jewish community in pre-state Israel] created its new Israeli identity. Through interviews with leading dance creators we see how their dance was in opposition to Jewish identity and the very physicality of Jews in the Diaspora. Emphasizing pageants and festivals particularly at Passover with the *Omer* and Shavuot with the *Hag Habikkurim* plus folk dance festivals at Kibbutz Daliyyah, all gave the Israeli public multiple ways of dancing that helped form the new Israeli identity. Rare film footage and photos mainly from the 1920s–1948 show the powerful effect dance had on the new endeavor of forming Israeli identity.

With dance and other related strategies, Zionists purposefully created a new identity by changing their very relationship to Judaism, to the land and even to what had been considered the Jewish body. This happened from 1920–1948 for the 500,000 people in pre-state Israel or the *yishuv*. Through photos, film and peeks at conversations I've had with passionate dancers, I'll show you how, in little more than one generation, they changed history.

I met these unique people when I was teaching dance in Israel in the 1970s. I was commissioned by the New York dance journal, *Dance Perspectives*, to study and write about the new dance and its creators. Some were born in the *yishuv*, but many were professional European dancer/immigrants. These unique pioneers re-established their art to express a new kind of Jewish life. (like Graham known as Martha, they went by their first names: Gurit, Yardena, Sara, simply "Haver" or friend like in the kibbutz... Tomorrow don't miss the other dance session at 10:30 when Gaby Aldor will speak further about the German dance immigration and imagination in Israel.

When I began my interviews I was struck how the dancers spoke about Jewish holidays and how much of the holidays took place outside. Look at the Simhat Torah slide with people dancing into the streets dancing with the Torah scrolls. Or Pesach celebrated outside in parks with Moroccan Jewish dance on the last day of the holiday, called the Mimuna (just last Thursday).

My idea of celebrating Jewishly in America was to dance Israeli folk dancing—and it was the highlight for Jewish youth in my conservative synagogue. Much of what we did came from NY via Fred Berk. I didn't know about dancing at Jewish weddings and I didn't know that it says in the Talmud all Jews are obligated to dance to make sure the bride will be happy. That's why we have wedding dancing in all the Jewish community wherever Jews have lived. Here's an Ashkenazic bride in her obligatory *mitzvah tanz* and here is a Yemenite bride.

In the *yishuv*, you could have seen this and many other dancing at other holidays too: at spring during Lag b'Omer in the Galilee you could see three year old Hasidic boys dancing in concentric circles on the shoulders of their fathers on the occasion of their first hair cut. (The obshernitz) Or at Sukkot there have always been *hakaphot* or the special kind of dance processions. All these styles and times of dance influenced the *yishuv*.

Whereas in religious dance, the movement and the desire to express one's gratitude to God could result in an ecstatic experience, ecstatic connections could be a component of the newly created Israeli folk dance, too. However, the reason for the dancing was never to thank God but to join with the power of the group itself. Whereas there were distinct differences between

doing and watching, especially in theatre dance with a separation between highly accomplished technical performers and their audiences, in the *yishuv*, one could see remarkable technical dancers in religious, ethnic, and folk dance. Old distinctions between audience and dancers also changed—and often audiences were often transported and transformed into dancers.

You know in the 19th c. those seeking to return to Zion were labeled Zionists and mainly they were Ashkenazic Europeans wanting to abandon the old ways of being religious. Instead they wanted a New Jew and the dance became a vehicle for the changes. According to Yaacov Shavit & Shoshana Sitton, in their recent book *The Creation of Festive Lore in a New Culture, 1882–1948*: the *yishuv* sought a new Hebrew culture without distinction between festival, ceremony and holiday. What was important was that these were social events based on ideology for a national and secular unity. (1) For example, the Teachers' Council for the Jewish National Fund sponsored choreographed celebrations for school children to express the symbolic system of Zionist ideology. (2).

The founding dancers of the folk dance movement I interviewed spoke about Jewish holidays in striking ways—how they were tied to the land. I thought back to my Jewish childhood in Minnesota and often when I had opened the door for Elijah, there would be snow outside at Passover. But in the *yishuv* at Passover there was a grain harvest marked by the Omer festival. At Shavuot in the summer there was the *Hag Ha-Bikkurim* or celebration of the first fruits and at Sukkot there was also the autumn harvest. In ancient times, all those in the country made pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem with their offerings at harvest time. In the *yishuv* the land was the star of the new dance productions.

The most glorious Omer Festival of the *yishuv* was created by composer Matityahu Shelem and dancer Lea Bergstein at Kibbutz Ramat Yohanon. People traveled from all over the *yishuv* to see it. One of the most popular Omer dances was *Shibolet be'Sadeah*, a couple dance of Bergstein's representing the reapers cutting grain. The men lifted their partners from one side, in front of them, to the other in a swift strong jump as if slicing with their scythes. The dance eventually spread even abroad with no clue it had ever been a part of the Omer Festival. Kibbutzim re-wrote their own Hagadot for the Passover meal, emphasizing that the sheaves in the fields and the joy of harvest with scythe and tractor were the important elements, not the story of God's strength, saving the Jews from slavery. In the US, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan (4) was also reinterpreting basic Jewish concepts, especially the idea of chosenness which he thought did more harm than good to the Jews even if the concept supposedly brought a sense of self-respect....(3).

Self-respect and joy were some of the aims of kibbutz dance. Shelem and Bergstein also created a wedding ceremony at Kibbutz Ramat Yohanon with no mention of God either, but the joyful witnessing of the new couple becoming part of the community. Many in the kibbutz danced for the bride and groom. Here is a photo of Bergstein's dance for the friends of the bride.

The summertime Shavuot holiday and its festival of the first fruits or *Hag Habikkurim* had its creative variations. Here's a photo from Yardena Cohen's *Hag Habikkurim* in Haifa in the late '20s emphasizing children as the first fruits of the new society. On the kibbutzim, the harvest was the crux of the celebration. In many, they dedicated the fruits of their work to the Jewish National Fund. On the leftist kibbutz Gan Shmuel, there was a big pageant created by Tscheska with offerings from and to the kibbutz. Here we see fishermen of the kibbutz with fish from their ponds.

At Shavuot in some kibbutzim there was a re-enactment of the "Story of Ruth," also chanted in synagogues. Why would it happen in a kibbutz? In the story there is a harvest theme, but you'll

have to read the story yourself if you don't know what erotic thing happened on the threshing floor. An important production by an immensely energetic woman, Gurit Kadman, was held in the spring of 1944. She said, "I was invited to stage the Book of Ruth for three kibbutzim in the Ephraim Mountains and I picked a beautiful spot at Kibbutz Daliyyah. Shortly afterwards we dance people decided to have our first folk dance gathering at Daliyyah, to invite dancers to show what they were doing on their different kibbutzim. We began the gathering with the **Story of Ruth** as far as we understood it in biblical style and spirit."(4).

This was the first of many amazing Israeli Folk dance festivals staged by Kadman at Kibbutz Daliyyah (in '44, '47, '51, '55 and '68, on the occasion of Israel's 20th anniversary.) She invited many to come including Rivka Sturman who lived at Kibbutz Ein Harod with the Gilboa Mountain overshadowing the kibbutz. Struman said, "In our Shavuot festival I kept the inspiring setting of Mt. Gilboa and it added greatly to the atmosphere of the celebration. Now looking back, I realized we had crystallized our feelings and our experiences going from the fields, and our new set of traditions with songs and dances created for the occasion. We were inspired by our ardent search for alternative traditions. Our children were enriched through the ceremonies and dances we made and we've built a new heritage for the coming generations."

When her students left the kibbutz and joined the defense force in the pre-state Haganah army, they turned to the prolific dance maker because they didn't want ballroom couple dances which they deemed too bourgeois. So Sturman created "Mahol Hashnayim" or "Dance for Two" which also became such a favorite it, too was danced all over the *yishuv* and also spread abroad.

In many of her dances, Sturman's incorporated a syncopated series of steps she daubed The Yemenite Step influenced by Yemenite Jewish dance she'd seen. The Yemenites, too, were Zionists and a community had settled in Rishon LeTzion in the 1880s. A ballet dancer in the *yishuv* named Rina Nikova drew on women from that community to create a popular troupe she called the Yemenite Biblical Ballet Company which toured around the *yishuv* and also in Europe. Here is Rachel Nadav starring as Miriam in Nikova's ballet about Passover.

Gurit Kadman included Yemenite performers from Rishon LeTzion at the first Daliyyah Festival traditional Yemenite dance. Another invited dancer was Sara Levi-Tanai who was also Yemenite and born in Jerusalem. She came with her new song cycle and dance based on Song of Songs, *El ginat egoz* (going down to the walnut groves). Sara Levi-Tanai, the irrepressible artist, told me "It isn't by chance or by accident that the first Israeli folk dances were about harvest and the fruits of the earth. It was spring and freedom that we emphasized out of all the holiday festivals. Something embraced all of us and we were the first creators working in one spirit and maybe that is what gave us our style. No one can know how the Jews of biblical times danced but I could feel the mystery and try to turn to my roots and to our whole cultural foundation to draw out all that is contained in me in order to create the movement." (6)

Levi-Tanai's Yemenite background became the inspiration for a company she created called Inbal Yemenite Dance Theatre. New Yemenite immigrants with their amazing drumming, singing and dancing were her muses. For a time Inbal was a highlight of Israeli dance and it also moved audiences within the country and abroad.

Yardena Cohen, a 6th generation Israeli born dancer, won first prize in 1937 first (7) as the Most Israeli Dancer at a big Tel Aviv contest. After her prize, Yardena received invitations to perform and work in many kibbutzim. Yardena's most popular pageant was created for Kibbutz Sha'ar Ha'amakim; When I finish my remarks I want to show you a section of a film showing the kibbutz dancers re-enacting the story of Sisra the Philistine army general who met his doom at

the hands of Yael. It took place in the same valley where the kibbutz is situated. Yardena used this story to instill triumph and pride in the kibbutz. At Kibbutz Ein Ha-Shofet, Yardena created grape harvest dances and they were included in the 1944 Daliyyah Folk Dance Festival even though Yardena objected to Kadman dubbing her dances folk dance.

Yardena admired the Bedouin, Druze and Arab and loved their dance and whenever possible she included neighboring Arabs in her kibbutz pageants. Arab dance was another inspiration in the new dance, especially the Arab line dance called the debka. In this slide there is one of Viki's debka style dances. Arab women with their water jugs probably inspired Yardena in this line dance of kibbutz women from Kibbutz Hanita celebrating water. Yardena always taught children from all the different communities of Jews and Arabs, combining them together at her Haifa dance studio despite objections. (8) but that's a different story.

Kadman worked hard to popularize Israeli folk dances for she knew dancing could be a tool to help integrate new immigrants. She wrote detailed pamphlets in Hebrew and English explaining how to do the dances like the classic *Mayim Mayim*. More importantly, along with the new dances, Kadman and her colleagues saw the necessity of creating a new Jewish body. She called meetings of all the physical education teachers as well as dancers and at her home in 1937 she said "In front of us is the main Zionist task which is the healthy development of the Hebrew nation in its land. Our aim is to make the healthy body in this crucial moment. This task is totally different from every other nation, to be closer to the consciousness of the body. In our nation we had no relationship to the body in the course of many generations outside of Israel. Our body has to serve as the house of health to the soul of the Jewish person." At another meeting during World War II, Kadman said, "Our people [in Europe] are being physically tormented, and the need is great in altering the situation. SHOW photos of trio from Daliyyah: We face opposition by those convinced to this day that the culture of the body is something which is contrary to the spirit of Judaism...What is demanded today here is persistent, energetic work until we establish a popular physical movement unique to ourselves. All those who believe dearly in the notion of national revitalization will not hesitate a single moment." (5)

Kadman's greatest achievement were the Daliyyah Festivals. What had been the ancient thrice yearly call to the Temple in Jerusalem became a modern day pilgrimage for everyone to join together. Even though some objected in 1944 that the Holocaust was no time for dancing, 3,500 people streamed from all over *the yishuv* to come together. (9). Gertrud Kraus, another giant in Israeli dance, said all should dance, *Davka*, or in spite of the Holocaust and war, so that became the title for the Daliyyah Festival, the Davka festival.

Kraus like all the new comers was changed and so was her dance when she came to the *yishuv*. A Vienna newspaper reported when she toured to Palestine in 1933; here's a photo from two years later when she settled in Tel Aviv, directing and choreographing for her popular company until 1951. Kraus and the Ornsteins, also from Vienna, shared an evening of dance. Look at the advertisement, but I'm pointing out the Hebrew not the English. It says this will be an "evening of Hebrew dance." Like Yardena, the Ornsteins, Gertrud and many others were creating and performing for Hebrew expression.

The first man in Kraus's company was Yonaton Karmon, who created many energetic dances with tour de force leaps. Another creator who danced at Daliyyah during those years was Yoav Ashriel. He made many innovations including commandeering the city square of Tel Aviv for weekly Friday night folk dancing (not for greeting and keeping the Shabat with Kiddush and lighting candles).

By independence day in 1948 the whole nation celebrated by dancing the dances in the street. The new Israeli folk dance joined a confluence of ethnic, religious, and theatrical dance that

expressed excitement and pride and the vitality of the new country. Dance embodied its symbolic system, metaphors for everything a culture needs. The new dance was a national symbol—dance performed at new times truly expressed and contributed to the identity of the new Israeli.

Now I'd like to show the film of Yardena's Kibbutz Sha'ar Ha'amakim pageant.

Endnotes

1. Shavit, Yaacov and Shoshana Sitton. *Staging and Stagers in Modern Jewish Palestine: The Creation of Festive Lore in a New Culture, 1882–1948*, 44–45.

2. *Ibid*, 53–54.

3. Mordechai Kaplan. *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American Jewish Life*, 43.

Here are examples from Kaplan's three traditional *brachot* with Hebrew word changes to eliminate the idea of the exclusiveness of God's preference for the Jews by choosing them above other nations:

Barchu ata adonai elocheni melech haolem asher bechar banoy me klal ha amim
[Blessed are You, Lord God of the world who has chosen us from all other nations]—

Instead, for the *aleyenu* blessing said three times daily:

1. *Barchu ata adonai elocheni melech haolem asher kervanu l'avodato*—from drawing us close to your service; based on a word in *Leviticus* discussing *korban*, which is sacrifice—Kaplan took the mechanism of being drawn close to God, but instead of the animal being sacrificed it is for us Jews to be drawn to good works and service of God, *gmilut hasadim*;

2. And also the *alenu*: Kaplan removed a section and substituted instead of *sh'natan lanu toraht emet v'hayei olam nata betohenu*. Instead of the particularities and making Jews different than other nations and choosing us instead of them, and Kaplan wrote instead that God "Who gave us teachings of truth and planted eternal life within us." Instead of talking about the other group, the prayer is emphasizing the Jews within the whole world.

3. Kaplan also changed the *Kiddush* blessing recited every Friday night taking the phrase *k'evanu vhartah v'otanu kidashta me kal ha' amim: to key aylenu karata v'otanu kidashta l'avodateyha* [You have called to us and made us holy by bring us to service you with good works].

4. Talk with Gurit Kadman at panel directed by Judith Brin Ingber, "Comments on Reviving Biblical Festivals in Israel," The Bible in Dance International Seminar, Jerusalem, Israel, August 8, 1979.

5. Judith Brin Ingber, "Vilified or Glorified? Views of the Body in 1947," *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review, Jewish Dance*, 2000, 45–46.

6. Sara Levi Tanai. Paper given at the International Seminar on the Bible in Dance, Jerusalem, Israel, August 8, 1979.

7. Interview with Yardena Cohen, "Shorashim: Roots of Israeli Folk Dance" *Dance Perspectives*, 32.

8. Not only was Yardena a creator but she has been a profound teacher, encouraging dancers and amateurs alike still teaching in her studio into her late 90s. Here is a story I love:

A father of an Ashkenazi girl in her class complained that his daughter was touching a Sephardic girl. She said to herself "okay, I can fix this." The next Friday in front of invited parents and friends, she had the girls dance together dressed in yellow dresses each with a baby sunflower in her hair -- they created a circle dancing palm to palm -- one Ashkenazi, one Sephardic and also Muslem girls alternating around the entire circle making a beautiful shape of a summer bouquet. After the performance the father came up to Yardena and said "and now I understand" and he apologized.

9. Judith Brin Ingber, "Shorashim: Roots of Israeli Folk Dance" *Dance Perspectives*, 56.

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With Lea Bergstein at Kibbutz Ramat Yohanon, 1972-1977.

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With Yardena Cohen at her home and in her studio in Haifa, 1972-1977, 2006.

With Gurit Kadman at 5 Shalag St., Tel Aviv from 1972-1977.

With Gertrud Kraus at her home on Frug St., Tel Aviv, at Café Ditzza and at her artist studio in En Hod, 1972-1977.

With Yonaton Karmon, Tel Aviv, 1972-77, 2006.

With Sara Levi-Tanai at her home in Tel Aviv and the Inbal studio, 1972-1977.

With Rivka Sturman in Tel Aviv and at her home in Kibbutz Ein Harod, 1972-1977.

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Dancer and writer Judith Brin Ingber worked for the Batsheva-Bat Dor Dance Society and Inbal Dance Theatre and co-founded Israel's first dance journal with Giora Manor. In the US she co-founded Voices of Sepharad with David Harris appearing in Europe, Canada and the US. Her articles appear in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*; *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*; *The*

International Encyclopedia of Dance, Dance Perspectives, Dance Research Journal, Dance Chronicle, Dignity in Motion and Sephardic Identity. Her book, *Victory Dances*, is Fred Berk's biography. Her forthcoming book is an anthology on Israeli and Jewish dance.

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