

About Israeli Folk Dance

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Congregation B'nai B'rith Israeli Folk Dance Special Interest Group

0. Scope and Outline

I'd like to discuss how Israeli folk dance came into being, how it developed, and what makes it special. And, I really do mean “discuss”, in the sense that I'd like this to be interactive as long as we don't get too far afield.

I have a total of four topics:

1. What is Folk Dance?
2. The Origins and Development of Israeli Folk Dance
3. What Makes Jewish Folk Dance Special
4. What Are Israeli Folk Dances About?

1. What is Folk Dance?

Before we can discuss the title topic in a meaningful way, we need to settle at least one question—What is a folk dance? I keeping with Jewish tradition, I will try to answer this question by asking more questions, and you will have to help answer these.

Firstly, what does it mean to choreograph a dance? (Wait for answers). A. To choreograph a dance means to create or work out the movements of the dance; choreography can be communicated via written instructions, by pictures, by verbal instructions, or simply by showing someone the dance. Despite the etymology, choreography does not have to be written.

Is any dance done to folk music accompaniment a folk dance? How many people say yes? Suppose that I choreographed a dance for the song “This land is my land, this land is your land”. Would my dance be an American folk dance? Not right away, although it might conceivably become one over time.

As of the last time that I checked, the Wikipedia article on folk dance said that a choreographed dance can't be an authentic folk dance. Why is that a foolish statement? (A. Even if no one remembers who created a dance, every dance must have been choreographed by someone).

There is no universally-accepted answer to the question “What is a folk dance?”

One of the criteria that folklorists use for deciding what qualifies as folklore is “three or more generations of oral transmission”. But, in the age of the Facebook and YouTube, this is a definition that no longer works. I believe that it is more practical to define folk dance in terms of style, and more specifically, by contrasting folk dance with ballet, ballroom dance, disco, hip hop, and other popular forms of dance, and with ceremonial dance.

I believe that there are four things that tend to make a dance a folk dance:

1. The form and style of a folk dance should conform to tradition, at least in part.
2. Folk dances are usually done to music of traditional style, but they can also be done to more modern, popular music.
3. Folk dances are done primarily by non-professionals (as opposed to ballet).
4. While a ballroom dance form such as the waltz can be done to many different pieces of music, most folk dances are done to only a single piece of music. This is not a hard-and-fast rule. Greek folk dance is a major exception, because the Greeks have only about 30 folk dances, but each of these dances can be done to many different pieces of music having the same basic rhythm and similar tempo. Also, Polka is usually classified as a folk dance form, while tango is generally classified as a ballroom dance form, but both of these are cases where the boundary between folk dance and ballroom dance is unclear.

What about ceremonial dance? Conventionally, ceremonial dance occurs within the context of worship. Historically, mainstream Jews—from ancient times through the present—have tended to separate worship and dance. On the other hand, some Hassidim say that any dancing that is done in a spiritual frame of mind becomes a form of worship. It might be difficult to untie that knot, so I won't try. The very narrowest definition of ceremonial dance is dance that is done for the purpose of invoking supernatural forces. Traditionally, some American Indian dances were done to bring rain, to ward off evil, to cure a sick person, or to increase the chances of victory in battle. Whatever the benefits of Israeli folk dancing, I want to be absolutely emphatic that it does not have any supernatural efficacy. At least, not as far as I know.

2. The Origins and Early Development of Israeli Folk Dance

2.1 *Beginnings*

Who were the Halutzim? Answer: The Halutzim were Jewish pioneers who came to what was then Ottoman Palestine, beginning in the late 1800's. The dances of the Halutzim were adaptations of such Eastern European folk dances as the Hora, Krakoviak, Polka, and Korobushka. Where did each of those dances come from? Answers: Hora—Romania, Krakoviak—Poland, Polka—Poland, Korobushka—Russian. Some of these were introduced by the Socialist Zionists during the Second Aliyah period (approximately 1905-1914), when the first Kibbutzim (communal farms) were established (Ref. 1).

The earliest true Israeli folk dances predate the state, dating back to the 1920's and 1930's. Hora Aggadati, choreographed in 1924, is probably the first authentically Israeli folk dance. Interestingly, the music in the second part was originally an anti-Semitic student song.

Mayim Mayim was created in 1938 to commemorate the discovery of water at Kibbutz Na'an after a 10-year search.

2.2 Heads Up! I'm going to Disagree with Cantor Belfer

How many of you attended [Cantor Shira Belfer's presentation](#), which was given at CBB about 15 months ago? At this point, I want to give you fair warning that I'm going to disagree with two of the central points from her presentation. If anyone is going to be deeply upset by this, I'll give you a chance to sneak out now.

#1: Cantor Belfer suggested that Israeli folk dance is not a real folk dance tradition, in part because it didn't go through the mandatory three generations of oral transmission required by ethnographers and folklorists. Firstly, I believe that three generations of oral transmission is an entirely arbitrary standard. In the modern world, the pace of social and cultural change is much more rapid than it was in the early 1900's. Secondly, media such as Facebook and YouTube have to some extent displaced oral transmission. It's time for ethnographers and folklorists to accept these facts and update their definitions.

#2: According to Cantor Belfer, Israeli dance was largely the product of Ashkenazik Jews, i.e., Jews who came from Eastern Europe. As I will explain, this was only true in the earliest stages of the development of Israeli folk dance.

2.3 Rivka Sturman

I tend to think of Rivka as the mother of Israeli folk dance. In discussing Ms. Sturman, I'm going to freely plagiarize the article from the Jewish Women's Archive (jwa.org). You can find this article by searching online using the phrase "Rivka Sturman".

One day in 1942, as Rivka Sturman was walking along the paths of her kibbutz, En-Harod in the Jezreel Valley, she heard second-grade pupils planning their class party and dancing to the tune of a well-known German song. Rivka asked herself: "How is it that we, the pioneers, who established this character of the 'new Jew' who works the land, lives in a collective and speaks Hebrew, nevertheless sing and dance in a foreign language?"

At the time, the immigrants to the country danced the folk dances of their countries of origin, primarily dances from the Slavic countries and the Balkans. With considerable misgivings, Sturman sought to create Israeli folk dance, to be based on the principles of simplicity and honesty: "A minimum of movement to express a maximum of feeling."

A pioneer of Israeli folk dance, Sturman devoted herself to creating Israeli folk dances "so that En-Harod's children will dance in Hebrew," at a time when many people believed that folk dances were not choreographed but rather developed as a result of a long process of group

activity spanning many generations. She choreographed the first dances that established the style and character of Israeli folk dance.

Rivka was born in Warsaw in 1903. Her family moved to Germany, where she studied agriculture and modern dance—an unusual combination—in Leipzig and Berlin. At the agricultural school, she met her husband-to-be, Menahem Sturman, and joined the He-Halutz pioneer movement.

After moving to Israel, Rivka studied dance in Tel Aviv with several prominent teachers. She choreographed dance movements for large-cast plays produced at Kibbutz Geva, including Saul Tchernichowsky's *Bar Kokhba*.

The major turning point came as a result of the aforementioned encounter with the children of En-Harod. Kibbutz En-Harod's approach was expressed thus: "To skip over the Diaspora, continue the old tradition, and distance ourselves from all religious expression. To renew, without neglecting the old; to revive what is most ancient and to feel the present experience—to find the right way among all these contradictions".

[There are indeed some thorny contradictions here! At the risk of pointing out the obvious, I'm going to point out the obvious: We Jews cannot and should not attempt to skip over the diaspora. Every place and period that the Jewish people has experienced has left its imprint on us.]

Sturman later recalled that the urge to create folk dance awoke within her out of that desire to negate the Diaspora; this was characteristic of the Zionism that led her to emigrate. At the time she was unimpressed by the dances of Yemenite Jews, which she encountered at the end of the 1940s, seeing them as intended only for their own community. The dances of her Arab neighbors, on the other hand, attracted her attention and inspired her, since she felt they were at one with the landscape and nature common to both peoples.

By the 1950s Sturman was already drawing on Bedouin dances, on Yemenite dances performed by Rahel Nadav's group, on the Rina Nikova Biblical ballet and on Hassidic dances. Among the first dances she created were many children's dances for festivals such as the Omer Festival and Shavuot

In 1945 she choreographed *Kumah, Eha* (Arise, My Brother) and *Harmonica*, which are still popular. *Kumah, Eha* was an expression of what Sturman experienced when the tower-and-stockade settlement Kibbutz Sedeh Nahum was established on January 5, 1937 in the eastern Jezreel Valley.

In 1946 Sturman choreographed *Kol Dodi* (My Beloved's Voice) to music by Sarah Levi-Tanai, who founded the Inbal Yemenite Dance Company. She also choreographed *Ozi v-Zimrat Yah* (God is My Song and Strength) to a Yemenite folk melody she learned from young Yemenites who came to work in the settlements. The influence of Yemenite dance is evident in *Be-Mehol ha-Shnayim* (Dance for Two), a dance for couples which she choreographed; in *Dodi Li* (My Beloved Is Mine) of 1948; and in *Ve-Iti mi-Levanon* (With Me from Lebanon), created in 1949. These dances were choreographed following a conversation with an adolescent girl from En-Harod, who convinced Sturman that young people needed couple dances.

Rivka choreographed about one hundred and fifty dances in all. Many of these are still popular, while many dances choreographed today are based on the basic steps of Sturman's dances.

2.4 Influences on and in Israeli Folk Dance

Israeli folk dance has been influenced by many folk dance traditions, and especially since 1970, by such non-folk-dance styles as ballet and jazz dance.

Some Israeli dances—this is more common in the newer dances—have few if any folk elements. Prime examples Yo Ya and Zodiak, which are done in disco format (i.e., with all dancers facing in the same direction) and have movements almost entirely from jazz dance; purists might consider such dances stylistically outside the limits of folk dance.

Most of the early folk influences in Israeli dance came from relatively old Jewish and non-Jewish dance traditions. These fall into four groups which I will list in order of decreasing importance:

#1: Yemenite Jewish dance

#2: Eastern European dance

#3: Hassidic Jewish dance, and

#4: Dances of ethnic minority groups in Israel—in particular, the Bedouin Arabs and the Circassians.

Shortly after the state of Israel was established in 1948, Israel began an amazing operation called Magic Carpet. From June 1949 through August 1950, nearly 50,000 Yemenite Jews were airlifted to Israel by the Israeli government. Where is Yemen? (A. Yemen is at the southern end of the Arabian peninsula, and shares borders with Saudi Arabia and Oman). Jews were a persecuted and impoverished minority in Yemen, but after arriving in Israel, the Yemenite Jews soon began to have an important influence in all aspects of the arts, music, and dance. At least 400 years old, the Yemenite Jewish dance tradition is one of the oldest and certainly the most important of the various strands that have contributed to Israeli dance. (25 years ago, I learned several dances from Moshiko Halevy, one of the greatest choreographers and teachers of Yemenite dance. One of the dances that he taught me was a Yemenite belly dance; I'm not going to perform it today).

The most distinctively Yemenite element in Israeli folk dances is the so-called Yemenite step: To do a Yemenite right, step to the right, lean to the left, cross over with the right and hold for one count. The Yemenite left is the mirror image. If one combines these together, one gets a “double Yemenite”. As Moshiko explained it, the reason why the Yemenite Jews developed this step is because they lived in extremely cramped quarters, so dance steps that required a minimum of space were essential. Distinctive head and hand motions are also features of some Yemenite dances.

In the 1950s, Israeli choreographers began introducing elements of Hassidic dance into Israeli folk dance. Hassidism is a mystical Jewish movement that began in Eastern Europe about 1740.

For the Hassidim, dance is not only an expression of joy and celebration, but also a form of prayer. Like other Orthodox Jews, Hassidic men and women never dance together. Some elements of Hassidic dance are suggestive of prayer; these include rocking or swaying, heel touches, and raising one or both hands with the palm inwards, as though appealing to God. At times, the styling of a Hassidic dance suggests intoxication, whether the source of the intoxication is religious fervor, alcohol, or a combination of the two is unclear.

Who are the Bedouin? (A. The Bedouin are Arabs who were originally nomadic. Unlike the Palestinian Arabs, many Bedouin Arabs serve in the Israeli army. Some of the Israeli Army's best trackers are Bedouin). The Bedouin dance form known as the *Debka* is a macho men's; it typically includes stamps and unusual leaps (e.g., sideways leaps or crossover leaps). Bear in mind that stamping and unusual leaps are also common in Russian and other Eastern European dances.

The Circassians, a tiny minority group in Israel, are Muslim, but not Arab. They originally lived in the area between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. After they were conquered by the Russians in 1864, many of the Circassians fled to various parts of the Turkish (Ottoman) Empire, including Palestine. The Circassian step almost certainly came to Israeli folk dance via Israel's Circassian minority. [The most distinctive element of Circassian dance is a kind of ballet-like dancing on the tips of the toes; for the most part, only professional dancers can do this.]

2.5 Israeli Folk Dance Choreographers Working in the United States

The first 19 years of Israel's existence were a difficult period for the country. Until Israel's lightning victory in the 1967 Six-Day War, many—both inside and outside Israel—predicted that Israel could not exist long-term amidst a sea of enemies. Economic conditions in Israel during this period were difficult, and many chose to leave for the U.S., Canada, and other countries.

Some of Israel's best choreographers came to the U.S., where they continued to create new Israeli folk dances. Although there was at one time a minor controversy as to whether dances created by “yordim”—Israelis who had emigrated—could be considered legitimate Israeli folk dances, these dances are have “crossed back” to Israel and are today danced by Jews around the world.

Two of the American/Israeli choreographers—Dani Dassa, who worked in the Los Angeles area, and Moshe Eskayo, who worked in New York—were particularly important. Along with Fred Berk, they helped to popularize Israeli folk dance among American Jews. Dassa and Eskayo gradually introduced greater complexity into Israeli folk dance, as well as elements from such non-folk dance forms as jazz dance.

Dani Dassa

Dani was born in Jerusalem to traditional Jewish parents in January of 1929. He grew up dancing in youth groups. Dani was involved in the folk dance movement of Israel since its inception. He was very active in the Zionist Youth movement and as a teenager, he became involved with the Haganah and helped defend Jerusalem.

Dani studied modern dance, first in Israel and later, in 1956, in New York, where he learned from Martha Graham and Louis Horst. He studied modern dance for the technique; the music and ideas of modern dance really never touched him. Although sought after as a modern dancer, he knew that his calling lay elsewhere. Shortly he was introduced to a young woman who worked at the Israeli Consulate and, within a month, Dani married Judy Shore. He became Dance Director at New York's Cejwin camps.

The couple, along with their infant daughter Dorit, arrived in Los Angeles in 1958 and Dani secured an interview with Shlomo Bardin, founder of the Brandeis-Bardin Institute. In 1966, Dani founded and launched Cafe Danssa folk dance coffee house in West Los Angeles.

Dassa choreographed dances covering a wide range of styles and themes, and some would say that he was even more influential as a teacher than as a choreographer.

3. What Makes Jewish Folk Dance Special

#1: Although Israeli folk dance is relatively new (roughly 70 years old), it is founded on much older Jewish and non-Jewish folk dance traditions.

#2: Unlike many folk dance traditions that have tried to remain “pure”, shunning outside influences or denying the existence of these influences, Israeli folk dance is continually absorbing influences from other folk and non-folk dance forms, and no one is the least bit ashamed of this.

#3: Unlike many folk dance traditions, Israeli folk dance is highly egalitarian. There are two aspects to this equality:

- The Bedouin Arabs have men’s dances and women’s dances. It would be unthinkable for a Bedouin man to dance a women’s dance and even worse for a Bedouin woman to dance a men’s dance. Romanians have men’s dances, women’s dances, couples dances, and mixed dances, but again there are certain dances that are only done by men and certain dances that are only done by women. In Israeli folk dance, there is no such thing as men's dances and women's dances. Anyone is free to do any dance.

- In a Greek line dance, the dance leader (almost always a man) has a special role; he may direct the rest of the line to follow whatever he is doing, or he may choose to do special steps that are different from what everyone else is doing. In Israeli folk dance, the leader of a line dance can choose where the line goes, but otherwise he or she has no special steps and no special prerogatives.

The egalitarian nature of Israeli folk dance is a reflection of the early Zionist-socialist ideals, which taught that men and women are equal, and that no one should have any special status.

#4: Israeli folk dance is growing and evolving more rapidly than any other folk dance tradition in the world.

Some folk dance traditions are small and relatively static. Q. Does anyone know how many Greek folk dances there are? A. There are only about 30 Greek folk dances. Someone cannot just choreograph a new Greek folk dance and have it accepted into the canon.

Some folk dance traditions are larger and more dynamic. For example, there are roughly 4,000 Romanian folk dances; some of these are believed to be more than 1,000 years old, but several Romanian folk dances were introduced in just the last decade (almost one new dance per year).

Q. How many Israeli folk dances are there? A. Over 4,000 as of about 2004. Q. How many new Israeli folk dances are introduced each year? A. 50-100. To be fair about this, there are at least 200-300 Israeli folk dances that are dead. A dead dance is one that no one dances. Some Israeli dances have had brief flashes of popularity and then faded from the scene. But, many Israeli dances have endured and remain popular half a century after their introduction.

4. More Recent Developments in Israeli Folk Dance

Note: This material is still in development.

Sapri Tama, which was choreographed by Yoav Ashriel in 1968, is one of the first—perhaps the first—Israeli folk dance that uses *disco format*, otherwise known as *lines* or *four walls*. (I discourage the use of the term *lines* because of the confusion with the more traditional line dance format). In disco format, dancers are scattered across the dance floor, all facing in the same direction, and there is no holding of hands. Changes of direction—by 90 degrees, as in *Sapri Tama* or *Yo Ya*—or by 180 degrees, as in *Zodiak*, are common.

In Israel's early history, folk dancing was associated with Israel's communal agricultural settlements—the kibbutzim and moshavim, and it did not become a mass phenomenon until later. By the 1960s, Israeli dancing was being taught in Israeli schools (I don't have a reference for this) and was starting to be done by young adults living in Israeli towns and cities. It is unclear whether disco format was introduced to satisfy the desire for a more modern feel, or by the pragmatic need to fit dancers in the limited dance spaces in Israeli homes and dance cafes. I suspect that the latter was the main factor, but this is hard to prove.

In early Israeli couple dances, men's and women's steps were either the same, as in Rivka Sturman's *Dodi Li*, or mirror image, as in the couples version of *Erev Ba*. Dassa and Eskayo introduced asymmetrical male and female movements. As far as I have been able to determine, Dassa's *Rachel*, which was choreographed in 1977¹, is the first Israeli couples dance with non-symmetrical steps. In this dance, it sometimes feels as though the man and woman are dancing for each other, and sometimes as though they are dancing for an audience.

In his 1985 dance *Anshei Hageshem*, Israel Shiker introduced syncopated movement. By the end of the 1980, several choreographers were experimenting with steps and rhythms inspired by jazz dance.

¹ e-mail from David Dassa (son of Dani Dassa) dated April 7, 2015.

5. What Are Israeli Folk Dances About?

I'm sometimes asked this impossible-to-answer question.

Virtually all Israeli folk dance music is what people in the classical music business would call “program music”, meaning that there is a story that goes with the music. Most of this story is in the lyrics, but part is also in the historical context in which the song and lyrics were written. I will say more about this shortly.

There's an English saying that I'm sure you've heard: “For G-d, King, and Country”. With a bit of tongue in the cheek, I will state that the most common themes in Israeli folk and pop songs are God, Country, and the opposite sex. Or, to put it another way, the major themes in Israeli folk and pop songs are love of G-d, love of country, and love of women (or men). Slightly more seriously, that last category should be expanded to include human relationships in general.

Religious Themes

Religious themes can be found in many of Israeli songs, and continue to be a major element, even in the newer songs. In contrast, it is rather hard to find recent American pop songs that have religious themes. Many songs have words that come directly from Biblical sources. I'd like to give two examples of Israeli songs with religious themes:

(1) *Ma Navu*: The words are taken from Isaiah Chapter 50, line 7. The entire verse is: Ma navu al heharim raglei mevaser, mashmia shalom, mashmia tov, mashmia yeshua, omer letziyon malach Elohayich. The translation is as follows: "How pleasant on the mountains are the feet of the messenger of good tidings, proclaiming peace, proclaiming good, proclaiming salvation; saying to Zion, your God reigns". Needless to say, Jews and Christians interpret these words differently.

(2) *Tsadik Katamar*: The words are from Psalm 92: “The righteous man shall flourish like the palm (tree) He shall thrive (grow tall) like a cedar in Lebanon. Rooted in the house of the Lord. In the courtyards of our G-d. They shall bring forth fruit in our old age. They'll be ever fresh and green, proclaiming that the Lord is just, my Rock, in whom there is no wrong”.

Nationalistic Songs

There are a huge number of Israeli songs whose themes center on love of the land of Israel or love of the Jewish people. Virtually every song that contains “Eretz” in the title falls into this category, including “Eretz, Eretz”, “Eretz Israel Yaffa”, “Eretz Hatzabar”, and “Eretz Ahat”. Some of the songs in the nationalistic category deal with Biblical events. “Joshua” is a prime example. The song “Lu Yehi” was written in 1973 by Naomi Shemer in honor of the IDF soldiers killed in action during the Yom Kippur War. That song captured the mood country at that time. People were sad—almost everyone knew someone who had died—but Israel was still resilient and filled with hope for a better future.

Romantic Songs

There are simply too many songs in this category, so I will simply tell one amusing anecdote. The lyrics of the song "Rachel" tell us about a mysterious and alluring young woman with golden hair. "Rachel, Rachel, your wine is heavy, and in your eyes the grapes kiss each other". In the original recording, which is quite lovely, a woman sings. At some point in the 1980's, someone decided that it was inappropriate for one woman to be singing about the desirability of another. Political correctness won out, and a new recording with a male singer was made. I still prefer the old recording.

Your Guess is as Good as Mine

It is sometimes hard or even impossible to say what a song is about. Although rare, there are some Israeli pop songs that have no lyrics.

Oumatok Ha'Or, which sounds like "Sweetness and Light" but probably means something different in Hebrew, is pure action music. It would have worked well as the theme music for something like Hawaii Five-O. Such music leaves one free to imagine almost anything, except perhaps a quiet walk in the garden.

Shir Al Etz

This Hebrew song is a poem written by Naomi Shemer, based on an older Yiddish song. The Hebrew poem has both meter and rhyme. Here's the English translation:

By the wayside stands a bent tree;
All the birds have flown away,
And the tree stands deserted, ... abandoned to the storm.

I say to momma--"Listen,
If you don't stand in my way,
Then, one--two,
I'll quickly become a bird. I'll sit in the tree

And lull it during the winter and comfort it
With a lovely tune."

And momma says, "No, child,"
And weeps bitter tears.
"G-d forbid, you might freeze in the tree."

So I say, "Momma,
it's a waste of your lovely eyes,
Because before you know it,
I'll be a bird."

And momma cries, and says "Itzik, my Crown,
As G-d would want, take a scarf with you,
Lest you catch cold.

"Put on your galoshes,
It will be a severe winter.
And take your fur hat, too.
Woe is me!

"And wear you warm underwear, foolish child,
Lest you become a guest of the dead."

I lift my wing, but it's hard...
Too many things, too many things
Has momma put on her weak little fledgling.

I look sadly into my momma's eyes;
Her love did not allow me to become a bird.

By the wayside stands a bent tree.
All the birds have flown away,
And the tree stands deserted.

What do you think that this dance is about?