

JEWISH DANCE TRADITION

TRADITION DANCE JEWISH

III

Dance in the Jewish Communities of the Ottoman Empire and in Eretz Israel

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The expulsion of the Jews from Spain and Portugal (1492-1497) and later from Italy brought about major changes in the life of Jewish communities in the Ottoman Empire. Each group of refugees tried to preserve its identity and its social and religious character in the framework of the community it settled in. Among these

characteristics were the dance traditions each community brought with it from its place of origin. If the newcomers had enough influence they even forced their tradition on the indigenous Jews. A typical example is the community at Arta in Greece, which caused great tumult in all the Jewish communities of Greece, Turkey and Italy in the first part of the 16th century.

The most detailed record of this event is to be found in a letter sent by the Jews of Arta to Rabbi David Hacoheh of Corfu (died 1530). From this letter -- which uses strong language not usual in such correspondence -- we may glean the whole picture of dance in those communities. The text goes as follows:

"May our rabbi and teacher inform us if the three synagogues [kehalim] in one town decided on regulations as to the dancing of married women, because the ugly happenings which go on daily at dance gatherings make them like whore-houses. A youngster tells the arranger of dances [messader hamachol]: Get me this wench, because if not, I am not going to dance. And she too would say as much. One Sabbath there occurred a mishap during the dance, when the husband told his wife: Don't dance with that one. Later he found her dancing with just this man and an altercation occurred which ended in a gentile court of law. When the community realized what terrible indignity resulted from this sort of dancing it was resolved that under threat of direct ex-communications only married couples may dance together or father and daughter, mother with son, or brother and sister. This rule was observed for three years". (1) [for sources see the bibliography of the Hebrew version of the article]

The dancing was supervised by the arranger of dances (master of ceremonies) whose task was not just to teach dancing and organize the event but also to bring together the dancer with the partner of his choice. For performing this service the arranger was paid by the youngster, hence the threat not to dance at all, recorded in the above quoted letter.

This letter also points to the fact that the dancing took place on the Sabbath, which raises the question as to the accompanying music, as it is forbidden to play musical instruments on the holy day. There is no clear answer to this query in this document, but in any case the happenings at Arta influenced dance traditions in the whole region. (2)

As in all Jewish communities weddings played a prominent role in the cultural and

social life of Ottoman kehillot. Often the Jewish authorities had to intervene in dance customs, especially in those with prominent groups of newcomers from Spain, Portugal and Italy.

One of the earliest sources we possess is from the town of Constantinople - an answer of Rabbi Benjamin Halevi (died 1540) to a query from the Jews of Arta on the subject. He praises the customs of his own community as opposed to those found at Arta.

These state that the bride shall not be accompanied when leaving her home by more than five women playing drums and "other musical instruments of the Ishmaelites". Even in her house she is allowed only the violin and the harp as these "do not possess the [power] of words". As far as dance itself is concerned, he emphasizes the ancient prohibition of mixed couples - male and female - dancing. "Even a boy of twelve years of age shall not dance in the presence of women". (3)

The important new aspect found in this document is that it applies to "newcomers" as well. This indicates the influx of emigrants from the West into the Jewish communities in the Eastern Mediterranean area.

The document we discussed deals with two important parts of traditional Jewish wedding ceremonies, namely the procession leading the bride to the groom's home and the music accompanying the actual wedding rite. About these topics there is an important passage in the writings of the Chief Rabbi of Constantinople, Rabbi Haim Benbenisth (1603-1675), where he describes the dancing "to make the bride's heart glad" (4) and the accompanying habits of his flock.

He deals with the problem of how to arrange the music during the year of mourning after a death in the young couples' families. (5) In his opinion the wedding feast takes precedence over the mourning.

Another source deals with the case of a widower marrying a virgin not long after his first wife's demise. The passage explains that though the widower may object to musicians accompanying the bride on her procession to his home with merry tunes, he has to accept that this is her traditional right. (6)

Another instance of making the widowed groom accept music at his wedding as tradition demands comes from Rabbi Benbenisth, quoted earlier. (7) The last Sabbath before the nuptials was

designated to special festivities including music and dance. These occasions created a demand for musicians, among them gentiles, and gave rise to Jewish musical ensembles who took it upon themselves to provide music, in spite of repeated warnings by the rabbis that it constitutes a breach of the sacred ancient prohibition to play instruments on the Sabbath.

During the 19th century there was an artistic group in Izmir, Turkey, called "Dansa", which performed on the Sabbath a week before the wedding, singing, dancing and playing in front of the bride. The rabbinical authorities were of divided opinion regarding the propriety of the custom. Some thought it constituted a desecration of the Sabbath while others, such as Rabbi Avraham Ashkenazy (1789-1860), opined: "they are righteous men", doing what they deem a "mitzva", without charging fee for their performance. And he concludes that though there should never be a "mitzva through sin", the good deed of dancing before the bride overrides this prohibition. (8)

A colleague of his, Rabbi Haim Plagi (1788-1869), who objected to the playing of instruments and dancing on the "Wedding Sabbath", described the happenings that took place: "Special people arrive from another town, put a large copper vessel in front of them and strike it with wooden ladles, to make music ..." (9)

The origin of the musical group's "Dansa" I have discussed in a separate article. (10)

The Dance Activities of Jewish Communities in Eretz-Israel

When researching the dance activities in Eretz-Israel two kinds of records are at our disposal in addition to the rabbinical "Responsa". Namely, books of stories and reminiscences. Another rich source is the Cabbalists' life style and customs, including as they did ritualistic gestures and dances.

There existed dance traditions among the Jewish inhabitants of Eretz-Israel since ancient times. In the more recent past an important part was played by those Jews

who adopted many of the habits, including attire, of their Arab neighbours. Their central annual occasion for dancing was the Feast of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai at Meiron in the Upper Galilee, at Lag B'Omer.

Dancing, lighting of torches and other ceremonies performed by the side of holy tombs of late divines, which these "Arabized" Jews practised were at first objected to by the cabbalist mystics but later adopted by them. The repertoire of Lag B'Omer dancing included indigenous Oriental dances, such as the Debka or the Sword Dance but also Chassidic dancing from Eastern Europe. (11)

Dance acquired increasingly greater



CHASSIDIC DANCES AT MEIRON ON LAG BE'OMER

importance among the Cabbalists, and in their letters to their colleagues abroad they exhorted them to adopt dancing likewise.

The custom of dancing with the Tora scrolls on Simchat Tora became widespread. Rabbi Haim Vital (1543-1620) wrote in his book "Sha'ar Hakavanot" about his teacher, Rabbi Isaac ben Solomon Luria (ha-Ari): "I saw him being very observant about this, to dance and sing around the Tora scrolls, with all his might on the night of Simchat Tora, after the evening service ... I also saw him go to other synagogues to do this by joining the congregation there". (12)

In Izmir Rabbi Haim Abulaffia (1660-1744) decreed that during the "Chol Hamoed" (half-holiday) of Succot, there should be festivities with dancing when the Temple is commemorated on the Joy of the water-pumping Day ("Simchat beit hashoeva"). In his book he writes, "I [ordered them] to light many candles in the synagogue and play for about two hours, sing and dance,

old and young ["men of affairs"], as was done in the Temple". (13)

When Abulaffia arrived with his family to settle in Tiberias in 1740, this custom spread to many other communities across the land.

Just two years later we read about this custom as practised by the Cabbalists of Jerusalem at "Beit El" synagogue: "... they get up and dance in couples with torches in their hands, going on for several hours reciting Psalms ["Shir Ham'alot"] and the Kaddish ...". (14)

In the 19th century, at the "Kehal Zion" synagogue in Jerusalem, an artificial fountain was built to sprinkle water on the dancers, to commemorate the shedding of water ritual at the Temple.

Even some kibbutzim in the 1920s attempted to restore this water ritual. In 1925 the members of Ein Harod went to a fountain near the kibbutz with torches and water jugs. The children entered the cave where the fountain is, filled the jugs and then poured the water on a fire lit outside the cave, while the people danced around it. In other kibbutzim some sort of fire and water ceremony was incorporated into the "Gathering of the Harvest" festival held at Succot.

But the central dance event in all Jewish communities always was the wedding ceremony. Many books of reminiscences from such diverse sources as the Chassidic and other ultra-religious communities, through the first immigrants in the 19th century and the founders of the kibbutzim and moshavim describe wedding dances. Alas, this is outside the scope of the present paper. However, anyone wishing to learn more about Jewish dance traditions should turn to my other publications. (15)



The bibliography is to be found at the end of the Hebrew version of this article p. 62.