

DRAMATIZATION IN CHASSIDIC DANCES

By Zvi Friedhaber

The mention of Chassidic dance tends to conjure up a stereotypical picture of many people moving in a never-ending circle, executing several variations of dance steps and ways of holding each other, progressing in different directions. This is, indeed, the common form of general dance seen at Chassidic festivities and convocations. But is this the only form of Chassidic dancing? As we shall see immediately, it is not.

Chassidic dance is, in fact, rich in topics, themes and choreographic patterns, and full of improvisation. Only prolonged observation will reveal all these elements – and the longer one observes, the more astonished one is at the wealth of phenomena discovered.

Observation is sometimes made difficult by the fact that Chassidic communities are closely-knit societies, difficult for a stranger to penetrate. It is even harder to interview, photograph or tape the dancers.¹

But one can obtain an adequate picture of the diversity, the dramatic and improvisatory elements of Chassidic dance from the sayings and stories on the subject in the literature of the rabbis (האדמו"רים) and their faithful flock about dancing.² Such information may be gleaned from the texts without getting involved in the deeper “meanings” of the dances as interpreted by the rabbis. Thus the dances of “The Old Man of Shpola”, especially those in which he donned a bearskin and danced for the purpose of “saving a Jewish soul”, and the dances executed on stilts (“Shtolzen”) by Reb Moishe Leib of Sasnov were recorded in great detail and with loving care, as were the dances of the twin rabbis, Reb Elimelech and Reb Zoshe, and other rabbis and simple men who became dancers of renown among the Chassidim.

Let us now list and describe the various forms and names of dances prevalent in Chassidic groups. They can be classified by the forms they take and by the different executants.

The most common basic form is the circle. The dancers move on the circumference of an arena in which exhibition or performance dancing takes place. Among these are solo

dances, dances for two participants and acrobatic dances.

The titles of the dances, as they appear in literature and common parlance, are self-explanatory and they show the diversity of distinct kinds of dance, each one with its special content and meaning. Thus we find a “To the Contrary Dance” (“בשתיקה” – “נהפוך-הוא-טאנץ”), a “Silent Dance” (“טאנץ”), the “Raising of the Dead Dance” (“תחיית-המתים” – “טאנץ”), the “Bottle Dance” (“פלעשל טאנץ”), the “Stick Dance” (“שטוק-טאנץ”), the “Peace Dance” (“שלום-טאנץ”), the “Angry Dance” (“ברויגע-טאנץ”) and other titles, all of which tell the story.

Where, one may ask, are the “Sher” and the “Sherele”, both well-known, and commonly labelled as “Chassidic Dances”? These are clearly not real Chassidic dances. On the contrary, they are frowned upon by the whole orthodox community, as they have become mixed dances, danced by men and women together.³ But there do exist “Sher” dances danced by Yeshiva students in the form of row-dances.

Hints of the specific nature and dramatic element of several dances are to be found not only in their names, but also in the circumstances and places of their execution; for example, at gatherings at the rabbi’s court; at send-offs and welcomings of rabbis embarking on or returning from journeys; at holidays and feasts (weddings, Births, etc.); at celebrations in memory of holy men or important events.

The dramatic aspects of such an occasion were described by Alexander Scheiber in his article “Traces of Dramatisation in Pesah Ceremonies in Hungary”,⁴ where he portrays a “crossing of the Red Sea” on the last day of Pesah in several Hungarian Jewish communities. Of course, the central motif of the dance is the crossing of the waters and the longing for redemption, which are expressed by pouring water on the floor of the Beth Hamidrash and dancing over it or in it until all the water dries up.

Before we turn our attention to the dances themselves, let us consider the different categories of dancers, who may be divided into three groups: professional dancers – in the

full meaning of the term; amateurs, who on occasion show off their prowess and talent in improvisation; and, finally, amateurs who specialise in a certain dance, becoming so proficient in its execution that this dance is demanded of them by the spectators.

Let us now consider the dances themselves, first of all the most dramatic one, the "Raising of the Dead Dance". This dance is seen at weddings, on the last day of Succot (שמחת בית השואבה), and especially at the Lag b'Omer festivities on Mt. Meron at the grave of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. It is danced by a pair of (male) dancers and is clearly divided into three scenes:

Scene One: At first the two friends dance together, taking swigs from a bottle of brandy which is passed from one to the other. Suddenly one refuses to pass the bottle and while he continues dancing, he cavorts in order to avoid his colleague. He is pursued, at first with gestures of cajoling and entreaty, and finally he is threatened by his partner. A struggle ensues. They come to blows as one of the two tries to recapture the bottle, the other strikes him and he falls to the ground "dead", laying on his back.

Second Scene: The aggressor realises what he has done, and does all he can to try to revive the victim. He hovers over him as if giving him artificial respiration, feels for his pulse, shakes his limbs, turns him over, passes the bottle beneath his mouth to resuscitate him, entreats him to take the bottle. All this is done while the dance goes on all the time, the gestures expressing fear, contrition and desolation.

Third Scene: Finally the "dead" man gives in to his partner's entreaties, shows signs of revival, his body trembles and slowly he gets up. There is no end to the joy of his friend, who offers him the bottle, and the dance ends in a wild dance of joy in which both take part.

The dance is accompanied by a different tune for each part, the first being the "Angry Dance" ("ברוגד טאנץ" ⁵) and the other two by Rumanian "Doyna"-melodies.⁶

The "Bottle Dance" ("פלעש-טאנץ") is danced either as a solo dance or as a duet, the latter form concerning us here. The "Bottle Dance" for two starts with very fast

running in a circle, each partner balancing a brandy-bottle on his head. The dancers follow each other, turning and twisting as if to escape being caught by the other. Suddenly they stop, and, facing each other, slowly lower themselves until both are sitting on the floor, without upsetting the bottles perched on their heads. They begin a contest of bal-

ancing, as they lift, stretch and cross their legs in the air and then also lift their arms, which have been supporting them behind their backs. From this position they lower themselves till they are prone, meanwhile moving nearer to each other and retreating again.

All the time the bottles are perched on their heads. They return to a sitting position, performing feats of balancing, slowly rising again, and the dance finishes as it began, with the twosome running quickly in the circle formed by the spectators. The accompanying music is, as in the "Raising of the Dead Dance", the tune of the "Angry Dance".

All the solo dances are improvisations. One of the most beautiful and interesting ones is the "Mime Dance", which is really a parody depicting a Chassid dancing with a partner, supposedly a female one. The dancer takes an overcoat and puts his arms into the sleeves from the outside, thus turning the coat into a sort of puppet, his "partner". A hat, the "shtreiml" made of fur, is then put on top of the coat-collar to make a head, and the dancer starts moving inside the circle of spectators and entertaining them by miming the "partner's" movements.

Another distinct category are solo dances featuring acrobatics. These require prowess and are full of dramatic moments. Such, for example, is the "Stick Dance", which has many variations.

The dancer takes a walking-cane, places it on his forehead and begins swaying to and fro, dancing in a circle and turning, never losing his balance, and never letting the cane fall. Without stopping his dance, he lowers himself till he is laying on his back and then proceeds to raise himself again, all the time balancing the stick on his brow. Sometimes a hat is put on the end of the cane. The dancer may also reach out and take the cane in both hands and then, with arms outstretched, go down on his knees and bend backwards until his arms touch the floor behind him. He may bend still further until his head touches the floor and all his body twitches and trembles. This type of dance is usually accompanied by "Angry Dance" and "Doyna" tunes.

The "Bottle Dance" is also danced by a single dancer, with a full bottle of brandy or a glass of water balanced on his forehead. Another most acrobatic variation is the "Bottle Pyramid" dance. The dancer places a tray, which is attached to a short wooden stick, on his head or holds it between his teeth, and three layers of beer or brandy bottles are arranged in a pyramid on the tray. The balancing feats described above follow.

A most unusual dance, only seldom seen at weddings, is the "Torch Dance". A young man enters the circle holding a burning torch, made from rolled newspaper, in his teeth. He goes on dancing until the flame reaches his lips and he has to discard it. Naturally, this is a very short dance. But it is highly dramatic, as the preparations are made "behind the scenes", so to speak, and the dancer bursts suddenly into the circle with the torch already blazing. An informant told me that, in order to prolong the brief dance, more torches were prepared and, as one would burn out, new ones were lighted and handed to the dancer, who would replace them in his mouth while continuing to dance.

The dances described are but a fraction of the many kinds of Chassidic dance which show dramatic elements, danced at the courts of the Rabbis. Most Chassidic dances, being improvisations, depend on the talent of the dancer to enhance and develop them to the best of his ability. Often they are brilliantly executed. This is true not only of the specific dances listed here, but of Chassidic dance in general, from the "Mitzve Dance" at weddings⁷, where one may observe the unbroken tradition of "how to dance before the bride", which began in talmudic times, to the mass meetings at Mt. Meron, commemorating the death of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai on the Lag b'Omer feast.⁸

¹ Most of the field research was done in the open air, as at Mt. Meron, described in the articles in "ריקודי החסידים בהילולת רשב"י"

"בל"ג בעומר במירון", *The Jewish Dance*, vol. 3, Haifa 1978, pp. 4-14, and on other occasions, when I received permission from the local Rabbi to observe and record. Sometimes I felt my activity was resented by one or another of the Chassidim, several times prompting me to curtail my work, so as not to upset their feelings.

צ. פרידבר, "ויש רוקדים כלפי מעלה" - אלי מרום, "המחול היהודי" - essays, Haifa 1968, pp. 35-36; in the Jewish Dance Archive there is a collection of more than 300 Chassidic sayings about dance.

א. לוינסון, "לריקוד העם בישראל", רשימות (סדרה חדשה), ג', ת"א, תש"ז, עמ' 159.

א. שייבר, "עקבות דראמטיזציה בטכסי הפסח בהונגריה", ידע עם, חוב' ז'-ח', "ריקודי החסידים בהילולת רשב"י בל"ג בעומר במירון", עמ' 14-4; also my article "עמ' ט'".

⁵ About these see my article: "ריקודי הברוגו והשלום", המחול היהודי, מאסף שני, חיפה 1972, עמ' 31-37.

⁶ See the notes to the record "ניגוני שמחה וריקוד של חסידים" הוצאת המרכז לחקר המוסיקה היהודית שליד האוניברסיטה העברית ירושלים (מאת אנדרי היידו ויעקב מזור).

⁷ About "Mitzve Dances" see: צ. פרידבר, "ריקודי מצווה, תולדותיהם וצורותיהם", המחול היהודי - מסות, חיפה 1968, עמ' 27-34; הנ"ל, "ריקודי מצווה בחתונות מצווה", מחקרי המרכז לחקר הפולקלור, ג', ירושלים 1972, עמ' קפ"ג-קפ"ז; הנ"ל, "ריקודי מצווה בחתונות יהודיות", שם, ד', 1974, עמ' ס"ט-ע"ג; הנ"ל, "ריקוד בהפסק של מטפחת", מחקרי ירושלים בפולקלור יהודי, ג', תשמ"ב, עמ' 35-45.

צ. פרידבר, "ריקודי החסידים בהילולת רשב"י.... כנ"ל, עמ' 13-4.





A Chassidic wedding at Kefar Chabad in Israel



Photo: Boaz Lanir