

THE SOURCE OF THE MOVEMENT LANGUAGE OF INBAL

BY
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This lecture-demonstration takes place nearly exactly on the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of the Inbal Dance Theatre. The subject is the Bible in dance. I will begin by speaking about the dance of Inbal, for without this aspect, we as honest dancers, who talk with our feet, cannot approach the Bible.

I have to admit that I do not feel like summing up my creative activity. With the passing years the sources of our art seem so rich that it will take generations of choreographers, dancers and dance teachers to build the rich edifice which the ancient and new Jewish tradition and the richly varied folk materials warrant.

By the way, only two Jewish communities have produced dance which shows distinct characteristics: the Hassidim in Eastern Europe and the Jews of Southern Arabia, the Yemenites. But this topic will not be discussed today.

The Israeli artist of oriental extraction finds himself in a situation which requires a delicate balance: he works in a modern, western framework, but the landscapes, traditions and the ambience of his forefathers in the Orient are still alive in his body and mind, in his feelings and his memory. Movement, gestures, music and ornamentation are often represented on stage as the cultural values of ethnic groups. That may be so, but for quite a long time now Israeli artists have been searching for ways and means to bring out the spiritual beauty contained in the traditional cultural values of Israel's ethnic communities, and express it in terms of a national and universal, contemporary stage language.

This complicated background was the matrix from which Inbal was born. It began simply: a folk-art group. But when development and continuation were required and the need for personal expression became evident, difficulties appeared. What are the structural elements to be used? What about technique? What is this terrible word "choreography" and what does "composition" mean? Just between us, to this very day I am not quite sure what all these important terms really mean.

The most aggressive were those "elements". They emerged from all directions: from the movement, the melos, the rhythm, from the garments, the embroidery, the jewellery, from the pots and jars and accessories.

Later we discovered Shabazi who came to us from his 17th century and all my slim Yemenites seemed suddenly much fatter, big with pride: we possess a great poet! I bowed deeply before him, a truly great poet. The excitement generated by Shabazi's poetry was such, that forgetting all my modesty, I created a choreographic poem "Ode to Shabazi".

My meeting with the *diwan* was no less exciting. The *diwan* is the poetry book of Yemenite Jews. These poems are not read but sung during the Sabbath and holiday meals. Therefore the *diwan* is traditionally a narrow, elongated book in order that one may hold it in one hand and continue eating with the other. From much joyous use our *diwans* get torn and food-stained, God forbid!

In the *diwan* there are poems by many poets, but mainly they are by Salem or Shalem Shabazi, and his are the best. And the best part is that these poems are not only read and sung, but danced. Yemenite dance is danced to poetry.

Such variegated, stormy, embracing poetry! It stemmed from the Sephardic, Spanish-Jewish poetry of the 12th and 13th centuries but developed in its own direction, wrapped in the gossamer veils of mysticism and kabbala, prayer and Jewish martyrology.

This poetry came to our lives in the middle of the 20th century, with Israel fighting for its existence. How can one escape from all this? One can't of course. It was imperative to gather together all these elements, small and large, stormy and delicate, the elements of poetry, song and movement, to hold them gingerly but firmly and to begin courting those two important ladies, technique and composition. Both these intellectual dames know only a slow pace. But we had no time to spare. Our elements were im-

patient. As we are talking about Inbal, the accent was on the Yemenite elements. But we regard the traditions of the other ethnic communities as a legitimate and important source of elements for our dance. On purpose I am not saying Israeli dance. This will be developed by all the Israelis. And I hope Inbal will play an important role in this development. But it is quite clear that the cornerstone and basis for Inbal, was, first of all, the Yemenite dance.

I first encountered this sort of dance when I was fourteen years old. Immediately I felt – this is it! It's mine. My father used to dance this way. Till then, all I had seen was Hora, Polka, Cracowiak, dances brought at the beginning of the century by the pioneers from Eastern Europe. I did see some Arab Debka. Even then, at that momentous meeting with Yemenite dance, I did not realise that dance was to be my life. Inbal was founded many years later, after the Jewish population in Eretz Israel had become much bigger, cultural life in the country had developed, and probably I too had developed.

During the first years of Inbal, we were not concerned with technique. We had no idea what it was, we simply danced. We did all kinds of quite demanding and difficult steps, but our backs never ached. We did not study anatomy. The only anatomy I knew was the skeleton we were shown in elementary school. The bones of this skeleton would rattle from time to time, but there seemed to be no dance in their scary movement.

How can one learn such a dance? The erect and at the same time compressed posture. The thin movements and the fluttering hands. All the time there is a pull towards the earth and upsurging prayer towards heaven. And where are these cunning impulses hiding in the inner and outer parts of the body? To learn to dance like a Yemenite dancer takes at least 150 years.

The Yemenite is not concerned with theatre. He has all the time in the world. But we want theatre, modern theatre, here and now. So, from time to time we assemble the elements in a studio and press them into the mould of a "class".

All Yemenite dance is improvised. Like all other ethnic dancing, it belongs to ritual. The Yemenite Jews dance only at weddings, at the Simchat Tora festival or other festive occasions. Yemenite dance stems from the poetry. The holy poetry of the diwan is for singing, often accompanied by dance. Yemenite Jewish dance is mainly a man's

dance. The women sing a lot, and their dance is made up of much more restricted and repetitive movements than the men's. Only in Israel could one see Yemenite women dancing with the men present, an unheard of thing in Yemen.

But let us return to the men. You have probably noticed that there is no covering of wide space in Yemenite dance. There are no large leaps. The steps and jumps may be animated and spirited, but they always remain restricted to a small area. The dance takes place in the living-room, at a family gathering, always indoors, never outside. The movement is mostly vertical, the arms are held close to the body, and when they are extended, the dancer looks like one defending himself or attacking.

The Yemenite dancer dances spontaneously, does not know how to teach or learn a dance consciously. The dance is quite forceful, but songs, sacral in nature, sublimate the physical expression and lend it a spiritual incandescence. In such circumstances it is impossible to engage in analysing each step. Let's dance, and that's that. Very well, but we are professional dancers. We live in Israel which has changed a lot through the years. Even the landscape has changed, and with it forms dynamics and content too. Tradition, alas, is waning . . . In such a situation movement has no choice but to develop. This specific movement could not do without prayer, poetry and the spiritual splendor of its sources, but it happens here and now.

It endeavors to be earthy, simple and gay, but also to preserve that special flavour concentrated in centuries of diaspora, the aroma and power of suffering, rage and happiness.

It was clear that we had to make the acquaintance of that new territory called technique. This happened during the first visit of our friend Jerome Robbins, in the early 50's. He fell in love with Yemenite dancing. Like me he saw the tremendous potential inherent in the Yemenite tradition, but told us: "You don't possess the technique required by a professional dancer". And he called on our great friend, Anna Sokolow, who came and stayed three months to teach. Other teachers followed. The technique was based on suitable exercises from ballet and modern dance combined with daily rehearsals of the movement language which developed from our material. And we became familiar with the inevitable back-ache, knee trouble, muscle problems, all of which proved to us that we had become members of the international club of professional dancers . . .

To this very day no special Inbal technique has been developed. There exists a specific language based on steps and moves from the rich oriental tradition, but no expert has as yet moulded it into a systematic technique. Some of the most experienced Inbal dancers are engaged in developing such a system, but it is in an experimental stage. All of us are creating choreography and have learned to employ that inevitable ruler, technique, as best we may.

Perhaps you noticed that both the singing and the dancing always begin with rather long sentences, which have no pronounced rhythm patterns. The words are, mostly, prayers asking God's permission to start singing. In Arab culture one may find similar first stanzas. In Jewish tradition these prayers almost always include the theme of longing for a return to the Holy Land and for the rebuilding of the Temple.

For example:

Lord, let us be dispersed no more,
Have mercy and gather the scattered,
Who shall save us? Where shall we plead?
Who shall command our salvation?

The men's songs are mostly Hebrew, but also in Arabic. The slow opening is called *nasheed* and is in the form of verse and response; one singer answering another, two responding to two others, or a group and an individual. The singer himself does not dance. He provides the accompaniment. In Israel sometimes the dancer joins the singer in the song. Yemenites love singing. I have to admit I seldom choreograph without singing to my dancers. I really hate the tape-recorder.

Professor Yehuda Rasahbi, a noted scholar and expert on Yemenite literature, writes: "The *nasheed* has a parallel in the *Kasseida*, the ancient Arabic of the desert population. The melody is monotonous, drawn-out, tranquil, and not at all suitable as accompaniment for dancing." The Yemenite Jews accompany even the *nasheed* with movement. They simply can't sit quietly when they hear singing. But the *nasheed* movement is slow, freewheeling and low-energy: a sort of preparation for the rhythmic movement to follow. As you may have noticed, all the demonstrations began with a *nasheed*. In the *nasheed* (and in Prof. Razahbi's description) I found an echo of all my own feelings about the desert. I have never succeeded in creating a dance in a clear, down-to-earth marching rhythm. I always found myself rocking on a camel's back.

Though the women traditionally never dance in front of the men, I have asked Malka "to *nasheed*" for you. Her family comes from a rural area in Yemen. When she moves, I always see her riding camels, horses or donkeys. She will never be able to run along on a modern paved road. Even should you uproot this sort of dance from its archaic landscape and transplant it to a modern stage, it will, on the sly, instil in your dance some little piece of desert aroma. So be it.

The rhythmic component of Yemenite dance is called *Shirah*. Most of the poems in the *diwan* are *Shirot*, a term which includes the *tausheech*, a word meaning "girdle". In Prof. Razahbi's words: "The *shira* has its parallel in the Arabic *maushhaat*, a form reborn in Andalusia and the "girdle-songs" of the Jewish-Spanish period. These poems are varied in their form and rich in meter and versification. Their freshness made them suitable for singing, setting to music and dancing." Why are they called "girdle-songs"? In Arabic *tausheech* or *muvaashach* means belt or girdle.

All this is a matter for researchers, but we, after all, wish to dance. So let us now watch a girdle-song, which will show us clearly how a *nasheed* gets into a *shira* and how a *tausheech* displaces it gently and dominates the dance space.

Before we proceed any further let us consider the basic, typical Yemenite step, with which every dancer plays around as the spirit moves him. Let us analyse it. Analysis is far from a Yemenite dancer's mind. As soon as he arrived in Israel, the joy of being finally in his homeland expressed itself in a riot of variations on the basic original step, causing us a lot of trouble defining it. The little Yemenite step with astonishing speed assimilated the Israeli movement and invaded the territory of Israeli folk dance and even contributed to the relaxation of the professional dancer's body.

Because of the confined area in which the dance was executed in Yemen, there were no group dances, only a single dancer or a couple, as I stated in the beginning of my paper. In Israel, on the other hand, everybody dances simultaneously. There is even a sort of Yemenite-disco dance. In Yemen each dancer plays around with the movement and with the help of imagination he creates hundreds of variations even in the small space at his disposal and thereby also satisfies his acting talent. Undoubtedly there is also an influence of Arab street players in this theatrical form, including even acrobatics and subtle eroticism.

Now let us consider an actual street-play:

Ya-gammal

(An Arabic song incorporating Jewish elements)

Ya-gammal-how does the loving one walk? Ya-gammal . . .
Ya-gammal-how does the one chopping wood go? Ya-gammal . . .
Ya-gammal-how does the lilly (the bride) walk? Ya-gammal . . .
Ya-gammal-how does the bridegroom walk? Ya-gammal . . .
Ya-gammal-they have offspring (children) in the heavens.
Ya-gammal-how do the sufferers weep? Ya-gammal . . .
Ya-gammal-towards the land of Israel we travel. Ya-gammal . . .
Ya-gammal-how graceful you are in your dance (the camel).
Ya-gammal . . .

“Ya-gamal” is an Arabic song with Jewish elements in it. It is sung to the bride who marries someone from a distant town. The eponymous Gamal is the person who leads the bride’s caravan, as she travels to her new home. I saw this done for the first time at the wedding of our dancer Malka. The leader in this case was her cousin. On another occasion, when this man was unavailable, his wife played the role. She put a turban on her head and a small sword, the *shubrieh*, in her girdle, just as her husband had done. Even her dance and her movement were those of a man.

In the poetry, the song and the dance of the Yemenite Jews as we perceive them we find incorporated the oriental landscape, ornamentation and habits. And of course the Jewish mysticism and culture of different historical periods. The Jew in the diaspora took with him his homeland, which lived on in his literature. The Jews carried in their books the sun, the fruits even the sheep of their homeland. The sun became the “hidden light” of his belief, the spouse of the *Shechinah*, the godhead. The lamb was put by the East European Jews beneath the baby’s cradle. Instead of the lamb the Yemenite Jews sang about gazelles. At each wedding they fell in love again with the gentle creature. To be sure, the gazelle in this case is nothing else but the godhead itself.

There is no wedding without the following song:

Graceful gazelle, gentle gazelle,
In exile will comfort me.
And at night, and at night
In her bosom I dwell.

This symbolic way of thinking influenced the eroticism in our works and the man-woman relationship in them, but this is a subject in itself, which I will not now pursue any further.

The Jewish-Yemenite dancer in Yemen used his imagination inside a very limited space. But musicians and choreographers from Yemen living in Israel of course use the wider area put at their disposal by the modern theatre. These artists’ imagination links them to the ancient desert, to that wilderness that became a spiritual landscape, a wilderness which holds both wrath and tranquility, clear air and the unpenetrable sand-storm; the desert which has perilous precipices and rocks but also leads the eye towards the far, sharply defined horizon. Where Time, wise and ancient, patiently nurses doubts and meditation. Where the feet massage the sand, the steps disappearing in it quietly, and man’s voice is lost in the distance or returns as a rich echo of one’s simple, everyday voice.

In such deserts Abraham, Moses, Muhamad and Jesus wandered about pondering their soul and God’s ways. From there they brought back monotheism. As far as my simple thought allows me to understand, I come to the conclusion that monotheism is, finally, the reckoning of man with himself and his deeds. In the huge void of the wilderness the true leaders of mankind heard the voice of God whispering from the bush burning in their heart: You are bound to help me in carrying the burden of the world’s existence. I will not carry it unaided by man.

This is one aspect of the wilderness, but there are others as well. When, as an Israeli, modern, oriental choreographer, one respectfully approaches the Bible and wishes to offer, for example *Debora’s Song* as a straightforward dance, then the terrible dessert invades your heart with images of dunes, rocks, the animals that live in your mind – and only God himself who led us out of the wilderness can shield you from yourself.

Until now we have refrained from mentioning the Bible, the chief protagonist of this Seminar. We have left it for the very end. Perhaps we were apprehensive. Of course the Bible was and will always be one of the most powerful sources of inspiration for us, as a gigantic creation of the Jewish nation and of mankind and as the eternal companion of our nation throughout its long history.

The Bible is not only studied as ancient history. It became part of everyday Jewish life and its festive occasions through the religious law (based on Scripture), and the holy prayer-books – which have crystallized through the ages. Among European Jewish communities, mainly since the Enlightenment, there existed a rift between secular and religious sections. In the Oriental Jewish communities until their emigration to Israel the religious framework, the Bible, the Talmud and the prayer-book were the strongest bonds holding together the Jewish identity. The surrounding Moslem society also kept, and keeps, its religious structure intact. The religious element, in its ecstatic aspect, was an important component of the art of Inbal. The vocabulary we needed for widening the means of expression, especially in our Biblical works, we purloined mainly from the Yemenite dance tradition and from the influences it absorbed from the surrounding Arabian desert, even casting an eye towards East Africa and as far as India.

Apart from that we are Israeli-born and thus absorbed something from the Mediterranean region – or perhaps it is in our blood already.

Several critics writing about Inbal abroad have even found traces of ancient Egypt and Greece in our dances. Who knows? We did what we did simply because we did not know how they danced in biblical times and we had such a vigorous dance tradition as the Yemenite at our disposal.

Some of the biblical themes in the Inbal repertoire are: *The Queen of Sheba*, *Song of Debora*, *The Lad Samuel*, *The Story of Ruth*, *A Psalm of David*, *Jacob in Haran*; and tonight you are about to see Rina Sharet's *Nimrod and the Coat and Oshra Elkayam-Ronen's Song of Songs*. Let us now approach our last example, taken from *Debora's Song*, that archaic poetry of the desert. The excerpt we will see deals with the contempt heaped by the prophetess on those tribes which did not come to help in fighting Sissera, and Barak's dance.

Finally one asks oneself: where does the folkloristic material leave off and where does personal expression and comment start? Everything is so chaotically mixed. But you are all learned men and women, and will, undoubtedly, be able to distinguish between the diverse elements. We hope that what you will watch tonight on stage will round out this lecture-demonstration, and peace unto you all. □



Sara Levi-Tanai lectures at the international seminar on "The Bible in Dance"