

# BIBLIOGRAPHIC SOURCES IN RESEARCH OF DANCE AMONG THE JEWS

by Zvi Friedhaber

The *Bible*, the *Mishnah* and the *Talmud* all include many instances where dance and dancers are mentioned. But I would rather dwell on post-Talmudic sources, as these are less known, but constitute important sources of information about the development of dance in Jewish communities in many lands since the Middle Ages. These literary sources have until now hardly been tapped by scholars of Jewish dance tradition.

The most ancient of these literatures are books written by the Gaonim, "the sages", the heads of the Yeshivot of Surah, Naharde'a and Pumbeditha in Mesopotamia in the 6th-11th centuries, who were the founders of the tradition of *Responsa* literature, a tradition going on to contemporary times.

Rabbinical literature comprised several literary genres: Halachic tractates, based mainly on codexes; Rabbi Yaakov Ben Asher's book *Hatur*, from the 13th century; the *Shulchan Aruch* by Rabbi Joseph Karo from the 16th century as well as the exegetic literature dealing with these works, and of course the books of morals, habits and legend which abound.

To all these one has to add the regulations and bye-laws collected in the protocols of the committees which governed the Jewish communities in the Diaspora, and the Chassidic literature. Not the literature describing the life of the Chassidim, but the books written by the *Admorim*, the heads of the Chassidic communities themselves, stating their ideas and beliefs.

Apart from all these sources one has to list the non-religious books, such as those written by explorers and travellers, Jews and Gentiles alike – who recorded their encounters with Jewish communities and their dance habits. Books of reminiscence, mainly about Jewish communities in Eastern Europe prior to the Holocaust and diaries such as that by Glickel von Hammeln.

In the many dozens of books published to commemorate the no longer existing communities, destroyed during the Holocaust, one may also find many descriptions of dancing habits as remembered by the survivors. Recently there appeared many works dealing with the research of specific Jewish communities, mainly Oriental ones, and there is hardly one in which dance traditions are not described.

I did not as yet mention all those books dealing with folklore and the Israeli folk dance, most of them in Hebrew, of course. Though most of these bring forth new material, they often lack vital information, due to the sporadic and faulty documentation of the folkloric material.

Let us now consider examples of the literary sources already mentioned and demonstrate what information they offer, concentrating on rabbinical literature, as this is less well known.

First of all, let us examine the most ancient of the *responsa* literature, namely that of Rav Hai Ga'on, the last of the famous sages of Babylonia, who lived in the 10th century C.E. Of the two queries sent to him for adjudication, one came from Spain, dealing with the dances during the *hakafot* on Simchat Torah in the synagogue and the other from the North African town of Gabes (in Tunisia), about dance habits at weddings.

The first one received a positive answer from the Ga'on, who states, that the dances, though they take place on the holiday itself, are danced to the greater glory of the Torah and are therefore, allowed. He also points out the fact, that dancing on Simchat Torah was already customary in Babylon, where the Simchat Torah feast originated.<sup>(1)</sup>

In his answer to the Gabes community he expresses his categorical opposition to any dancing of women before a male audience, regardless of whether done at the groom's or

bride's home, or when the bride is being made-up before the ceremony and especially if the accompanying musicians happen to be Gentiles.<sup>(2)</sup>

In the 12th century we find strict opposition by the Rambam to a common custom to be found in Jewish Communities in Egypt, where it was traditional for the bride to don a decorated headdress and execute a sword dance in front of the guests. He found it inappropriate for the bride to entertain in this manner, as it is strictly forbidden by the Torah itself for a woman to wear a man's garment. The Rambam also points out that the sword dance is in fact borrowed from non-Jewish wedding customs.<sup>(3)</sup>

At the same time in Germany, we find a book of homilies by R. Yehuda Chassid *Sefer Hachassidim*, in which the learned rabbi states his well-known paraphrase to the biblical verse (Jerm. 31:13): "Then shall the virgin(s) rejoice in dance by themselves..."<sup>(4)</sup> For the term "by themselves" should be construed as meaning "not before a mixed audience", which in itself isn't proof of mixed dancing of men and women together. R. Yehuda Chassid is also the primary source from which we are able to learn about the habits of dancing in the *Tanzhaus* <sup>(5)</sup> which became an important social institution in the European Jewish communities between the 12th and 17th centuries.<sup>(6)</sup> We encounter a very special dance-ambience in the *Tanzhaus* of the Jewish communities of Germany in the 14th-15th centuries in R. Israel Isserlin's book of responsa *Trumat Hadeshen*. Because of the importance of this source let us quote him verbatim:<sup>(7)</sup>

"...Reuven rented a belt from Simon for two dinarim so that he may gird it and adorn himself with it at the dances during the days of the wedding. While dancing with the belt on his loins a girl asked to borrow it from him so that she too might be able to join the dances, twice or three times, and he replied, if you will consent to wed me with it I shall give it to you and you will be able to join the dance and she answered yes, and he gave it to her in front of witnesses..."<sup>(7)</sup>

Without getting deep into the halachic problems raised by this occurrence, we may nevertheless note that a social attitude found its expression in dance traditions of the Jewish community.

Let us now cross over to the Balkans and especially to the Greek town Arta, as we know a lot about its dance traditions from the perusal of questions sent by the local rabbi to R. David Hacoheh of Corfu. The importance of this source – apart from the detailed description of the dance scene itself – lies in the fact that the queries are printed along with answers, a very rare occurrence in response books.

To quote the document itself:

"Would it please our rabbi to enlighten us as to the [correctness] of the bye-laws decreed by three synagogues [communities] in the town about dancing with wedded wives, because of the ugly occurrences daily, as if the dance was a den of harlots; a man would turn to the dance arranger [*Mesader Hamachol*] and say: 'Get me that and that girl, and if not, I shan't dance at all. She too would say the same and one Sabbath a whole mishap [mix-up] occurred, one husband telling his wife 'don't dance with that one, and later she discovered her husband dancing with that man's wife and all the community witnessed the ensuing iniquity. Hence we placed a firm anathema on dancing, except the husband [dancing] with his wife father with his daughter, mother with her son, and sister and brother..."<sup>(8)</sup>

As we are dealing with community-regulations, allow me to bring other examples as well.

In the register of the Padova community of the first half of the 16th century there is the Agreement of the Congregation, from which we can learn much about the dancing manners in this community:

"We hereby ordain and institute that no person whoever it be, man or woman, boy or youngster or maiden shall not make *Pashiti* [parties] to dance except from the eighth day of the month of Adar proximate to Passover [excluding the first Adar in a leap year] till the twenty-first day of the month, and the nights of the *yillia* which are the nights before the days of the circumcision of a male child and this is in the house of the mother, and the Sabbath day before the week in which the marriage takes place, and the Sabbath after the marriage and this is in the house of the marriage or a place that the bridegroom and bride choose; and the Sabbath day after the announcement of an agreement between the bridegroom and bride. Besides these above mentioned days no *Pashiti* to dance shall be made without the will and permission of the community leaders, and whoever rebels not against the members of the holy community, may God protect and preserve them, cannot make a *Pashiti* to dance at any other time unless he will get the permission of the community leaders of the day..."<sup>(9)</sup>

In fact what we have here is a calendar of fixed events which did not require a special permission from the leaders of the community. Any other occasion including dancing had to get a specific permit.

A fascinating phenomenon of dance in the Jewish communities of Renaissance Italy is the emergence of the dancing master and his position in society. This topic is frequently dealt with in the bye-laws of the *Kehillot* for example in those from Mantua, dating from 1687:

"...At the wedding of a youth and a maiden men and women

might dance together one dance, provided they wear gloves; those learning to dance might dance mixed dances, wearing gloves.”<sup>(10)</sup>

From this we learn that there were no restrictions limiting the dancing master to any given number of mixed dances, apart from those requirements of priority such as the donning of gloves.

In this matter I would like to turn the reader’s attention to my paper *The Dance with the Separating Kerchief*, which deals with the halachic as well as the folkloristic development of this aspect.<sup>(11)</sup>

As dance developed and proliferated in the various Jewish communities, we come across more and more instances of it in written sources, almost always in connection with moral topics. Thus we find in the homily book *Tochacha Megulah* from Germany in the 17th-18th century:

“It is forbidden for a married woman to dance – what is called *tanzen* – with another man or with a boy even if he is her relative because of a sinful stumbling-blocks. And a man is forbidden [to dance] even with a single girl hand to hand; they will not remain untainted...”<sup>(12)</sup>

And further on we read the following prohibition:

“And yet there is an additional prohibition to dance in a public house...”<sup>(13)</sup>. The phenomenon of dancing in public places and even pubs leased for that purpose became more and more prevalent and it is mentioned in many responsa and tractates dealing with morals.<sup>(14)</sup>

As I already mentioned, there exist secular sources – apart from rabbinical literature – pertinent to our subject. Among these books are the descriptions of journeying to the Holy Land, who encountered Jewish communities on their way and described the dance habits of these *kehillot* in their journals.

Among these discoverers one has to include several Gentile travellers, especially pilgrims, who wrote descriptions of dance traditions as they found them in Jewish communities they met on their itineraries. Even in travel books documenting journeys to places other than Eretz Israel, there are descriptions of Jewish dancing. This category of books often contains evidence about remote Jewish communities, about which we otherwise know very little.

One also has to pay attention to collections of epistles, letters written by Jews who visited or settled in Eretz Israel during the centuries and corresponded with their families or friends in the places they came from. I had the opportunity

to encounter these during my recent research into the dance traditions of the Jewish communities in the Mediterranean area.<sup>(15)</sup>

Important information may be gleaned from books of reminiscence, especially those written by Jewish women, who often describe weddings, either their own or those of their offspring. Recently another type of remembrance book is proliferating, namely books compiled in memory of communities destroyed during the Holocaust, comprising today more than 600 tomes. There hardly exists a book of this sort, which does not include descriptions of dance traditions.

In order to explore and evaluate all this wealth of information, contained in the above-mentioned sources and others not described here, to create a comprehensive picture of Jewish dance tradition over the centuries as well as in the many places where the Jews lived and danced, much work requiring many researchers is going to be needed. ■

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## REFERENCES

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