

# DANCE IMAGES AND THE ZOHAR

by Judith Brin Ingber

I turned 40 this year, which is the approved age to begin investigations into the Jewish mystical literature, so I began to read the *Zohar*, perplexed as I am about God, health, destiny and life.

In the *Zohar*, many images and metaphors of the Divine are described. But in talking with Rabbi Arthur Green, president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, I was drawn to develop a metaphor that stands out for me beyond all else: that Jewish dance is a metaphor for God. Jews are not trapped with only one description of our God. We know of course that it is One — bear with me if I sound too theological, but in the *Zohar*, God is never one single image — it's constantly in flux, changing from image to image, as in dance.

What is the classical image in dance? It seems to me that if you are a classicist you like to think of dance in terms of pose to pose, movement developing from position to position, carrying forth the viewer from one intrinsically beautifully arranged thought to the next. Modernists deal with the emotions inherent in the drives, shaping and space of the body, but so that the images constantly change before the viewer too. Folk dancers use movements to bind themselves together in an identifiable group that enhances their own reasons for being, extending their joy together, their camaraderie and their mutual intent — but to watch them in action also brings formations of images that evolve and mutate into marvelous pictures as the dancers occupy their space in different ways.

It is important to define things, and it is possible to describe dance in many ways, the conventional one being about its style and its historical framework: ethnic dance; religious dance; pre-historic, Classical periods; Medieval; Court dances of the Renaissance and the development of theatrical dance that came later, such as ballet, modern, contemporary, post-modern and others. I've found Jack Anderson's definition of possible ways to clarify dance in his book *Ballet and Modern Dance* very useful: Dances performed principally to please the dancers themselves are called folk dance. Dances performed to please the Gods are

religious or ceremonial dance. Lastly, dances to please other people are theatrical dance forms.

Rather than break everything up into categories in an attempt to look at it and examine it, like dissecting a butterfly to understand its details and structure, I prefer to bring up the idea of its oneness, the oneness that is God itself. In all its constant flux of image and meaning, intention and invention, for me is like the idea of God that the mystical writer Moses de Leon described for us in his incredibly poetic work, the *Zohar*, the Book of Enlightenment. It may seem odd that a Medieval Spanish Jewish writer from Guadalajara, Spain, working from 1280–1286 gave me the idea for my paper, but the more I read of this poet/mystic's work, this is what I thought: Why divide things up and try to describe what other experts would explain in detail? What I want to do is to present a *non-devisive* look at dance itself.

In our beginnings we danced. And we danced in each succeeding epoch. Our leaders were dancers as were our prophets and kings, men and women named and unnamed. Jewish dance writers note that Biblical society moved away from the pagan, ancient near Eastern cultures surrounding them and gave new meanings to old forms of expression. In Egypt and in the Philistine culture one danced for the gods, so dancing around the Golden Calf was hardly a surprise for a people barely a step away from Egypt. In their loneliness and fright and insecurity in the desert with Moses absent, creating a religion out of fear, dancing out their abandonment. Just a few days before, Miriam had understood at the crossing of the Red Sea that Moses' words alone were not enough to express what she wanted. So she took the women and danced, saying more in her image than all the words of her brother. Later, Judith too danced a victory dance after doing in Holofernes; she danced for all the people at the head of all the women. Military victories, like those of King Saul or David returning from war, celebrated the joy of victory in dance. Another form of exultation was David's ecstatic dance before the Ark, even if we don't understand exactly what it looked like. Of all the dancers, I take David most to heart because he did not just dance, he



wrote about it too: In his Psalms we have the most beautiful allusions to dance. On the Sabbath we read one of his Psalms where he wrote: "The voice of the Lord shatters the cedars of Lebanon making the hills skip like rams, the mountains leap like lambs." (The Hebrew term is derived from the root *rekod*, which means to dance, though in the English translation it says the hills skipped and the mountains leapt.) In Ecclesiastes of course there is the simple explanation, that to every thing there is a season, including dance.

Generations after the pitiful dance around the Golden Calf and David's dancing ecstasy before the Ark, kingdoms became established, institutions built and systems of government created. There were the Levites in the Temple and the wise in the courts of the Sanhedrin, but dance was still fervent and all-pervasive. At the change of the seasons there were three important holidays: in the spring, Passover, in summer Shavuot and in autumn, Succot. Each were pilgrimage festivals and the entire Jewish populations hiked up to Jerusalem and the Temple there. Recently I sat with Shalom Hermon, who read me the Hebrew text describing these pilgrimages in David's Psalm (68:26): "The singers go before; the minstrels [musicians] after, in the midst damsels playing upon timbrels." He said to me that it was his feeling there surely would have been dancing in the midst of all that music and movement.

What about the description of the night of Succot itself, as it is described in the Talmud? The Sanhedrin judges and the Levites themselves juggled flaming torches and conducted a dance contest for the people all night long to keep the nation excited, while the children banged on drums and the shofar was blown and there was light from burning candelabra illuminating the festivities, "so much light there was, it was almost like day..." The pageants and festivals were multi-media events where celebration and dance was shared by everyone. No longer was dance spontaneous and ecstatic, it was assigned a specific role, in and outside the Temple service and there were traditions of choreography. We know of wooing-dances and wedding-dances, and the debates in the Talmud about how each Jew was to carry out the commandment to dance before the bride, which everyone in the community was obliged to perform. Dance was clearly set in its place.

After the Romans destroyed the 2nd Temple in the year 70 of the common era, we Jews had to think very hard about Joseph's blessings to his children. In exile in Egypt Joseph said over the head of his boys:

"May God make you as Ephraim and Menashe", and to the girls: "May you be like Sara, Rebecca, Rachel and Lea." In

that first exile, the children no doubt wore Egyptian clothing, spoke a foreign tongue, yet, still they remembered their roots and their Jewish ways.

After this new exile by the Romans, Jews remembered their past, but they carried on merging with new environments and building new things. In dance, new wedding dance traditions developed. In Europe by the middle Ages communal houses were built especially for these dances. These dance halls were called the *Tanzhaus* of the Jewish communities. We also may think of the traditions of masked players at the holiday of Purim, the *Purimspieler*, going from household to household enacting the story in verse, music and dance. Accompanying them would be the *badhan*, a masters of ceremonies who entertained his hosts with extemporaneous verse. At weddings, too, he was indispensable, setting up the festivities and calling on the different community members to dance seeing that everyone fulfilled their obligations or *Mitzvot*. He was a dance caller and teacher, an arranger of dances, and I should like to call him a Jewish dancing master, directing the *Tanzhaus* dancing. In the synagogue, too, at the holiday of Simhat Torah, Jews danced in their special ways.

But what are these Jewish ways? What are we to remember: the stories about our leaders dancing? The steps they danced? No, I think it is far more profound than that. Permit me now to tell you how our dancers have merged together, crossing all the categories of dance to be joined in one marvelous metaphor, image on image, simultaneously blending to illuminate God.

Daniel Matt, the editor of the *Zohar* edition I am reading, explains many mystical concepts which I found helpful. He writes that in Genesis we discover the human being created in the image of God. Recently, I was driving down a city street in Minneapolis and saw a huge army truck, camouflaged in greens and browns, merging with the traffic. In Israel that's not unusual, but in Minneapolis it is. It caused me to think that we certainly are odd... Animals, birds, butterflies blend into the landscape so naturally in their earth colors, but not us, humans, sticking out, away from the earth in our flesh colors. Maybe we blend upwards in a divine camouflage for we are created in the image of God.

The *Zohar* has a schematic diagram of spheres depicting the divine origins of man. It shows intersecting triangles in a mystical paradigm of the human being, our archetypal nature. These images or *sefirot*, are the step of a ladder of ascent back to the One. These images are experienced as colored lights, a vision which takes the place of sound or words, and so, one who has seen, is *seeing* a real experience.



One who *sees* in this way is transformed and his believing is transformed. This is no longer an intellectual proposition but a kind of mythic thinking and it is also true of dance thinking.

Dancers understand what *seeing* in this sense means; they understand vision and image, and so do dance audiences. Dance is ever changing, the images at one of portent and absolute meanings to the choreographer, but of interpretation and abstraction for each different audience member. The images are different too, for the dancer doing the dance who may only sense what they are in the doing. The images are communicated through the strength, endurance and skills of the dancer, which are necessary to execute the choreographers' desires. Ever changing is the image of God and therefore, dance is the metaphor of God for me. The *Zohar* illuminates this.

Let me present my own, probably very vulnerable, version of the *sefirot*. When I tell something to my children, they follow each part of the story with an impatient "and then?" In this story, I'm afraid there is no "and then", with information following information. It doesn't seem to me to always work in talking about dance or the *Zohar* either. I'm reminded of the way Martha Graham employed this in "Appalachian Spring". Time is not portrayed chronologically in her telling of the story of a wedding in a pioneer community. A vision of what's to be is acted out before something happens, such as the bride's soliloquy in this classic modern piece.

The spirit comingles with the future and the past, and some presences from our history live on also until tomorrow, shaping our acts, inspiring our dances. So rather than to use the "and then, and then, he did or she did," approach I turn to some other altogether different framework in presenting my view. The narrative account makes one thing follow another, but I have discovered that in the *Zohar* that is not true.

The *sefirot*, Matt says, appear to have a multiple and independent existence. Ultimately though, all of them are one, time reality is the Infinite. It joins with the four levels of meaning in the Torah: the literal, the story-telling or the midrashic, the allegorical and the mystical. Matt also points out that this might be like all creativity, which links the conscious and the unconscious, the personal and the transpersonal.

At the top of the *sefirot* is the crown or *KETER*, from which everything else flows. Beneath the crown is *HOKHMAH* or wisdom, which for me is Lea Bergstein who

was wise to see the importance of reviving the ancient festivals in the renewed Israel. She was a professional dancer with Vera Skoronel in Germany and came to Eretz Israel in the '20s. In her work, she gave Biblical festivals new shape, such as the Omer Festival at Passover.

After the War of Independence in 1948 she incorporated a victory dance into the Omer festival. In her work she merged with the music and ideas of Mattityahu Shelem and their starting points were the landscape and their kibbutz, not in a religious way, but making new statements about Jewish life on the land.

*HOKHMA* or Wisdom corresponds to *BINAH* or understanding, also a palace or womb, a symbol of the world that is coming. For me, I place in this *sefirot* Guglielmo Ebreo or William the Jew of Pesaro, the Renaissance dance master who began all that was to become the tradition of theatrical dance, of classical dance thinking. There are many who grew out of this Palace, so to speak, many with this kind of understanding of what dance could become -- the dancers of the classical tradition who were Jews, such as Arthur St. Leon in the Romantic period in Paris, who created the all-important "Coppelia" ballet and others. One could claim many who followed in the theatrical dance tradition and I shouldn't forget to mention in later periods. Maybe even Anna Pavlova, whose father was Jewish, Ida Rubinstein and Marie Rambert; dancers of the Ballet Russes, including David Lichine and Alicia Markova; in Russia Assaf Messerer, Maya Plisetskaya; in America Melissa Hayden, Nora Kaye, Herbert Ross, Jerome Robbins, Anne Wilson-Wangh, Bruce Marks, Michael Kidd and the Panovs. I think of modernists such as Paula Nirenska from Wigman's company. I think of American modernists such as Lillian Shapero, Miriam Cole, Anna Sokolow, Doris Rudko, Sophie Maslow, Helen Tamiris, Linda Hodes, Anna Halprin and Laura Dean, Zeeva Cohen, David Gordon, Cora Cahan, Robert Cohan and Ohad Naharin.

Another dancer I choose to think of as belonging in the *BINAH* sphere, in understanding as a womb, is Yarden Cohen.

*BINAH* is considered a totality of all individualisation, and Yarden is just that. Born in Eretz Israel, she wanted to dance and left for Europe in the '30s to find proper training under Gret Palucca, but it wasn't what she wanted. So she went back to Haifa and began working with the sources around her, making solo programs and then bringing her volatile imagination to bear, pulling in droves of artists, young dancers and other performers, to think in new ways, to bring forth new forms and new ideas.



The right arm of the Lord is *HESED*, the *sefira* of Grace, all white and filled with free flowing love. Here I place Gertrud

Kraus, her shining light being for me *HESED* itself. She shone in Vienna, where she had her own troupe, performing dances of Jewish themes and dances of expression, a power for those around her, someone who could instill in her dancers her own greatness. Gertrud herself moved to Eretz Israel and created new companies there, starting in 1936. For 45 years she also taught, inspiring and carrying forth whatever was to be found in her students.

The twin of *HESED* is *GEVURAH* or the left arm of God. This *sefira* is red, the sphere of power and judgment, and I think of the powerful Miriam dancing her victory dance at the Red Sea.

Of course we have no photo of Miriam to look at but there exists one of Rahel Nadav, dancing the part of Miriam in the '30s. Miriam passed on to us the passion of the single performer, delivering a judgment of what must be done, certainly beginning yet new cycles for us. Nadav was a dancer in Rina Nikova's company who took her own talents and those of dancers like Rahel Nadav and went back to Biblical themes, showing us Miriam and Rebecca and setting us on new tracks, giving sustenance to her visions.

The trunk of the body is considered *TIFERET*, the son of understanding and wisdom, achieving an ideal balance and a compassionate beauty. For me I think of a personality like Fred Berk, who balanced the theatrical world and folk dance and pageantry with discipline, rehearsal and training with mysticism and inspiration. He came from Kraus' Viennese company and fled to Switzerland and then to Cuba, to escape the Nazis.

In Cuba he danced with Claudia Vall, who was also a Kraus dancer. He came to America in 1941, where he began much of what was to become the foundation for Jewish dance in America. He continued his performances with Katya Delakova and created the Jewish Dance Department at the 92nd St. Y., with companies such as Hebraica, which he directed. He was involved in many projects, such as Stage for Dancers that provided stages for many well-known artists, who were unknown youngsters then. He had the ideal balance for the Israeli folk dance work that was going on in Israel, reflecting the festivals there in his teaching in New York and throughout the US, as well as the yearly Israel Festivals in New York, which still continue under Ruth Goodman.

The right leg of the *sefirot* is *NETZAH* or endurance and

prophecy. I think of Baruch Agadati who had the perseverance to continue with his performance ideas at a time when no one else was thinking in his direction. He began his work using a *talit*, (prayer shawl) as a costume. He toured his one-man-show in Eretz Israel and in Europe. His contemporary, Yeshurun Keshet, wrote about him (translated into English by Giora Manor): "Agadati's artistic freedom allows him to introduce mime elements: the Jewish gesture, which he regards as the material from which he molds his renovated Jewish dance. He retrieved the gesticulation of the whole body from the garbage heap of anti-Semitic caricature in order to ennoble and refine it into an artistic and even national tool... Agadati took the exaggerated movement of the anti-Semitic cartoon and reshaped it into self-directed irony." In this *sefira* I would also put Rivka Sturman. She realised that the German nursery rhymes and folk steps that she and the other German-Jewish settlers had brought with them to kibbutz Ein Harod were wrong for Israel children. They were inappropriate in their new life. So she used her talents and what she had learned at the Studio of Jutta Klamt in Germany and created new dances for the kibbutz school children and later new dances for couples, when she was told by your people they didn't wish to do "bourgeoisie salon dances," like the fox trot.

For the kibbutz she created many dances and staged festivals like the Omer reaping ceremony and Hag Ha-bikkurim, helping to lead the way to what became the most classic creations of Israel folk dance, such as her "Zemer Atik".

*HOD* is majesty, the left leg, a source of prophecy and for me this *sefira* represents the Chassidim, who understood and still today know the passion of life and the expression of it is dance, dance as the very prayer to God.

All they expressed in dance in the 18th century, all that they brought to others, as inspiration and meaning, both as participants or as something to emulate, to turn for inspiration to, lives in *HOD*.

The majesty of *HOD* is also the *sefira* of the Yemenites, and all the other dancing Jewish communities or *eydot*. There is an inherent majesty in the Yemenite dance, because they too are the metaphor of God as they dance. That spirit permeates all who join in the dance, it permeates the drummers and the singers participants and the onlookers alike, inspiring other ideas of dance-ritual and celebration, they have kept vibrant for so long. I think also of Kurdish dancing Jews, of the Moroccans, especially at the festival they created following Passover called the *Mimouna* and



also of the Persian Jews dancing with the Torah in its special silver case on Simhat Torah.

The *sefira YESOD* is the foundation, what Moses de Leon called the 'male part,' the phallus. It is also the covenant and the righteous ones, and for me this foundation is seen in the work of Gurit Kadman.

Gurit conceived of a vehicle for the new people's dance. She organised festivals of dance, the Dalia Festivals which became modern day pilgrimages. Thousands of people from kibbutzim, towns and villages came from all over Israel in 1944, 1947, 1951, 1955, 1963 and 1968 to Dalia, to see and to participate, thereby stimulating more dance and more creativity.

Within this *sefira* understanding mixes with wisdom to create the balance of *TIFERET* or the trunk. Here I would add two more individuals: Rene Blum, born in Paris in 1878 and killed in Aushwitz in 1942. After Diaghilev's death Blum inspired the foundation of the Ballet Russes de Monte Carlo and was its artistic director until 1940. He was a man of exceptional culture and partly due to him so much of the Diaghilev heritage was conserved. Also in *YESOD* I would place the Baroness Batsheva de Rothschild, who sponsored the Martha Graham company for many years and then moved to Israel where she established the Batsheva Dance Co. and then a school and the Bat Dor Dance Co.

The bride of *TIFERET* is *SHEHINA*, the divine presence, the queen who is blue, and also dark, and like an apple orchard. She is the communion of Israel and together they give birth to us. The *SHEHINA* is a mirror through which we see all, though it is dark. In this *sefira* I place Sara Levi-Tanai, who knows about woman and communion and speaks to our heritage.

She began her dance work at kibbutz Ramat Hakovesh, where she made songs and dances for the children from the "Song of Songs". Then, she moved to Tel Aviv, where she created Inbal. She speaks to our heritage and our lives, through her special root in the Yemenite lore. Others join in this mirror of *SHEHINA* and I think especially of Jerome Robbins, with so many facets to his career on Broadway, directing, inventing, choreographing, also in the classical tradition, for the New York City Ballet. Meredith Monk, too, I would place in this *sefira*.

I did not place any names in the top *sefira* the *KETER*, because I am so awed by the contribution of our dancers over the times. In the Bible I read over and over the

inexplicable story of Jeptah's daughter, who greeted him dancing in victory after war, only to be sacrificed. Thereafter, every year her friends went to the hills to remember her in dance.

I think of the work of the Lewisohn sisters on the Lower East Side of New York, who ran the Neighborhood Playhouse and the effect it had on giving dancers a place to go to learn and to perform; I think of the effect of Anna Sokolow, of Bella Lewitzky, of Corinne Cochem, of Dvora Lapson and Hadassah, of Pauline Koner and Pearl Lang, of Benjamin Zemah, Felix and Judith Fibich, and the performers and choreographers in Israel, to name but a few, Moshe Efrati, Ehud Ben-David, Rina Shaham, Rina Schenfeld, Rena Gluck, Domi Reiter-Soffer, Berta Yampolski, of Oshra Elkayam and Rina Sharet, Yehudit Arnon and Rami Be'er, and all the dancers I might regretfully have forgotten or did not know about. In the Dance Collection at Lincoln Center there are pictures of two dancers from the World's Fair held in 1884. Rahlo Jammele was a native of Jerusalem. The caption concludes with the comment, that all unlike the Egyptian, Persian or Turkish dancers, these Jewish girls moved with a willowy grace which to Western eyes, trained in the habit of admiring steps in which the feet and ankles play the prominent part, was most pleasing.

Another shows Nazha Kassik who was, according to her publicist, from Syria. The writer tells us: "Her dancing, while it resembled somewhat the steps of the Syrians, had in it something which was peculiarly Jewish in its rhythmic grace and sinuous swayings..."

All these dancers crown the *sefirot*.

In a cascade of time and movement all the facets of our Jewish being seem as dances to me.

We are, after all, wrapped together in one grand choreographic plan and in fact it says in the Talmud "that the dance of the righteous the Holy One will make, and he will sit among them in the garden of Eden." ■