



Nehara Dance Company, *Draft* by Rachel Erdos, dancer: Dalia Peretz, photo: Tami Weiss

להקת נהרה, טיוטא מאת רייצ'ל ארדוס, רקדנית: דליה פרץ, צילום: תמי וייס

Body, Judaism, Now: Interfaces Between the Jewish World and the Contemporary Dance World

In July 2015 I arrived for a 5-week research visit to Israel, supported by a faculty research grant from the Israel Institute and with additional support from the Stanford Initiative for Religious and Ethnic Understanding and Coexistence, supported by the President's Fund, CCSRE, Religious Studies, and the Taube Center for Jewish Studies.

It was a remarkable immersion into the exciting emerging dance practice of Modern Orthodox dance. Through his *Between Heaven and Earth* Dance Center, choreographer Ronen Itzhaki brought together more than two dozen dancers, choreographer and directors of ten different religious dance groups whom I had the pleasure of observing in rehearsals as well as interviewing

Janice Ross

over several days. While my research is still in its early stage what follows are some of my reflections on this fascinating interface between the Jewish World and the Contemporary Dance World.

I first wrote about this intersection between Jewish religious life and contemporary dance in Israel five years ago when I was living in Jerusalem for several months. One evening a friend took me to a concert at The Lab featuring work by several choreographers – it was a long night and few of the works stood out, but at the end of the evening this surprising and unusual dance began to unfold – and within seconds I was captivated. I did not know then that I was witnessing the debut of *Ka'et* and their signature

work, *Highway No. 1*. Suddenly in the midst of the predictably secular was this remarkably pure, simple statement about faith, the body and Judaism – but told through the sophisticated and spare vocabulary of postmodern dance.

What I saw then was the brokering of a complex relationship between the Jewish body, the physical vocabulary of prayer and a secular aesthetic of postmodern simplicity. The ordinary body as an extra-ordinary and holy art medium. The messages these bodies told were complex and layered. Each dancer's private history as a modern Orthodox Jewish man nested inside his developing one as a dancer. And when the dance "worked" there was a rare translucence as the dance allowed one to see more deeply into the modern Orthodox man/dancer inside.

Secular dance traditionally works in the opposite way – the individual is masked to become a neutral medium for the choreographer's vision, which may rarely, or never, intersect with the dancer's true life. But in *Ka'et*, and other religious dance group's work – Nehara, Noga, Haliu, Yael Rowe and Tzipi Nir, Carmia dance groups, the content is the starting place and the medium of the body is already a carefully shaped signifier of religious identity. The dance that follows celebrates what happens when those two come together.

Israel codes identities on the body with a unique intensity it seems to me – allegiances/beliefs/values are "performed," demonstrated, constantly in one's daily life. I am by inclination and training a cultural historian. I believe deeply in the connection between the social and political moment and the art that emerges at the same time. I believe that dance shows this on the body with unique power.

Years of watching, writing and lecturing about dance have also only intensified my belief in its unique capacity to hold multiple meanings in view simultaneously. It is a way to comment from the margins on issues at the core of individuals' lives. It allows people from very different places to each find and take away meanings they are ready to receive. This brings us to the first of the three categories – "the Body, Judaism, and Now" that initially emerge as possible ways to frame links between the Jewish world and contemporary dance.

The Body

Our bodies are unique repositories of coded meanings. They are shaped culturally and socially by subtle and obvious forces and when you add to this bodies that are religiously observant then the complexity increases. But the question arises, how does a dancing body speak to us?

The answer begins with the understanding that dance is a uniquely rich medium for conveying messages from one body to another. Historically, at the beginning of the 21st Century, neurophysiologists are an intrinsic connectivity between dancer and viewer based on the discovery of mirror neurons. These are synaptic connections in the cortex that fire both when one sees

an action and when one does that action. This means that in dance what is often experienced as spontaneously affecting is, in fact, carefully constructed. Choreography contains, embodied within it, a way of experiencing physicality and movement that, in turn summons other bodies into a specific way of feeling towards it. Then there is the fact that when we watch dance then we are responding to "choreographed empathy." This is the construction of specific movements and physicality that guides our perception of and connection to what another is feeling.

Lastly, but arguably the most important point in establishing how to look at the dancing body as an art medium is the fact that dance is the only art form that uses the body – something we all have – as its exclusive material for art expression. Witnessing another person and being fully being present to them is a profound act of respect and honor and it is also an essential component of what transpires when one watches live dancing. Here I want to bring in the voice of Rabbi Shlomo Vilk whom I met at the Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Machanaim in Efrat when I visited as the guest of Hananya Schwartz, who teaches dance in the Yeshiva and who is also a core member of *Ka'et*, the company of Modern Orthodox men Itzhaki founded. Rabbi Vilk's perspective on the physical dimension of dance and movement as not being a wasteful action is an important aspect of how dance is interpreted as in consort with rather than in contrast to Orthodox Judaism.

"Within Judaism much about modesty and hiding yourself," Rabbi Vilk explains. "Dance is a cure for the physical world. It is using the body for spiritual way not just a physical way. : The only movement that is not wasting energy is dancing. At the gym I go to waste energy. The only place redemption of the body happens is by dancing."

There is a definite difference between how gender is coded in the men's and women's religious dance and it clearly reflects how these gender codes operate in the public space. It is well established that in our daily lives gender is coded and reinforced through how we comport ourselves physically. Watching modern Orthodox dancers allows one to enter a private understanding of soulful work, and sense the physicality of prayer with the dancers. Rabbi Vilk addressed this issue of how gender is deliberately established through physical actions in military training for the Yeshiva students when he observed; "With movement in the army, the man within us is being built. It's very rigid and instrumental movement. But here we let our body talk and we come with wonder. Magic. We don't have any expectations so the man disappears."

In contrast Daniella Bloch, founder & director of Nehara offers trenchant reflections on how these identities are negotiated for women in performance: "It is important for us to perform for a mixed audience b/c opens it up to non Orthodox world. Even the fact that orthodox and non-orthodox sit side by side in the theatre is meaningful. But when a woman comes up with tears in her eyes after a performance I think Thank you G-d for a moment when you say dance is bringing divinity to people. To make work

that is clean of statement and ego – that is the goal of my dance what tops it off is that it comes from this way of life.”

Noga, is the other established all-women Modern Orthodox dance troupe. It was founded in 2009 at Orot Teacher’s College, which established Israel’s first academic dance program for religiously observant women in 2007. Noga dancers adhere to the strictures of religious observance keeping their hair and bodies covered with long-sleeved and conservative costumes and movements that honor a culture of modesty. Speaking at the end of a rehearsal in early July in the Efron Center in Jerusalem one of the dancers explained, “Noga for us is some kind of miracle because of the opportunity to dance in our lives. It creates holistic world where we can bring ourselves in the most honest and profound way. We bring to life some kind of language that did not exist. We have here mothers and dancing women. There is something very honest here there is something pure/spiritual experience. We believe we don’t have to find G-d in the synagogue G-d is here in the floor.”

Judaism: The Religious and Secular Body

The Jewish body and physicality have a deeply intertwined history in Israel. Historians tell us that the Jewish community in Palestine “invented tradition” through folk dance as they were seeking to develop a culture that stood rooted in the Jewish past and would be viewed as authentic yet also one that would produce new customs. This poster literally speaks of a new culture built on old land and the new Jewish body to go with it as heroic, masculine and athletic.

An important dimension of this for the secular majority was the development of a Jewish and physical way of life as important for establishing a modern nation. Historians tell us the reshaping of a new Jewish body, one that would be ready to build a state, was an important facet of this. An aesthetic of toughness, strength, masculinity and heroism – a tough exterior and kind interior – the Sabra – was seen as fitting the Israeli character. Since the earliest decades of the 20th century there have been attempts to join dance and a Jewish identity outside of Israel - both secular and religious - but these have always been theatrical imaginings.

Two prime examples are the significantly different ways these have been addressed in the United States and the USSR in the last century. In American in the 1930s one of the first attempts to depict dance and Judaism took the form of what is called “Hasidic Drag.” Female modern dancers saw the male Hasid as an ideal representative of Jewish culture and



להקת נהרה, הוט מיט א פעדער מאת תמי יצחקי, רקדניות: דליה פרץ וליה וייל, צילום: תמי וייס
Nehara Dance Company, *Hat with a Feather* by Tammy Izhaki, dancers: Dalia Peretz, Leia Weil, photo: Tami Weiss

so they performed as young Hasidic boys. But usually deliberately without really trying to “pass” so that her femininity was clearly visible making her seem androgynous and ethnically ambiguous.

Films also played with images of Judaism and dance to present a modern American identity by contrasting it with the gender codes of Hasidism. In one scene of the Yiddish actress Molly Picon in the 1923 film, *Ost und West*, she invades a yeshiva and watching the men daven she makes fun of their movement teaching them to shimmy instead – an American vernacular dance. Here the modern Jewish woman is shown as immature, aggressive and disrespectful of religion and tradition as she forces the assimilation of Eastern European Jews from the shtetl.

In Soviet Russia in the 1940s the choreographer Leonid Yakobson was trying to make a space for the Jewish body in ballet in a more respectful way. His daring 1948 duet, *Jewish Couple*, made for his wife Irina Jacobson and a fellow Kirov dancer Alexi Miranov, mixed religious and secular images so that the dance feels like a compendium of every ritual Jewish action Yakobson could imagine, all tumbled together. The result was daring for its time and its compressed delivery makes the dance seem almost doll-like in the swift swings the dancers do from hand waving gestures of blessing the Shabbat candles to shrugging their shoulders and gazing mournfully upward as if to ask “why me?” for their suffering as second class citizens.

Now

Although my impressions at this point are very preliminary I have the sense that what is happening in Israel today is very different. A dramatically new model of what a negotiation between contemporary dance and Modern Orthodox Judaism might look like is unfolding. Dance has long been an important medium where the secular and religious are negotiated through culture.

These are identities we read on the body with rare clarity through dance. In conversation with Rabbi Vilk and several of the students in his Yeshiva he commented on this point observing: “We are looking for a meaning in the body. We think that our body was meant for meaning.”

This search for meaning in the body also animates the religious women’s dance groups like Noga and Nehara, but it takes a different choreographic form in their work. For the religious women’s groups like Noga and Nehara but also in ultra orthodox improvisation classes in Haliu’s school in Jerusalem, these women dancers spoke about dance for them as a way to find a new relationship



Noga Dance Company, *Geometry of Transcendence* by Sharona Floresheim, photo: Adi Ovadia
להקת נוגה, גיאומטריה של התעלות מאת שרונה פלורסהיים, צילום: עדי עובדיה

with their bodies. They reveal a physicality that is powerful, self-determining, and yet still modest and within the framework of their faith and its rules of how women’s bodies should appear in public. Tzipi Nir and Yael Rowe, two religious women who perform as a duo and also dance with other choreographers, agreed. “We were raised to act protected within modesty requirements. Our search is to look for our connection with God and without the strings attached. We feel we can when we do this in dance. Everything is allowed here, in this dance studio.”

At the same time that the religious women’s dance honors these requirements of modesty it also serves as a form of declaring one’s independence and autonomy through the pure physicality of dance. A quality that was particularly strong for me was the sense that all of these dancers are reclaiming their body for self-authored expression through religious dance practice.

It is not surprising that dance and the body is where these issues are being explored so effectively. Israel has had a strong use of the dancing body and nationalism. From what I am seeing this project of holding the dancing body and modern orthodoxy and more conservative religious, together is complicated - politically and spiritually, But it also promises to be immensely rewarding aesthetically and perhaps even transformative socially.

I think what Ka’et inaugurated on that Autumn evening five years ago just may be the next major dance movement in Israel – in

place of the heroic secular dancing body as an icon of the state a new Modern Orthodox one is being born through dance. Dance is a cure for the physical world, Rabbi Vilk observed. Indeed.

Janice Ross, is Professor, Theatre and Performance Studies Department, and Faculty Director, ITALIC, the new freshmen residential arts immersion program at Stanford University. She is the author of four books the most recent of which is *Like A Bomb Going Off: Leonid Yakobson and Ballet as Resistance in Soviet Russia*, (Yale University Press 2015). Her previous books include; *San Francisco Ballet at 75* (Chronicle Books 2007), *Anna Halprin: Experience as Dance*, (UC Press 2007), and *Moving Lessons: Margaret H'Doubler and The Beginning of Dance in American Education*, (University of Wisconsin 2001). Her Dance Studies essays have been published in numerous anthologies. Her awards include a Guggenheim Fellowship, Fulbright Scholar Fellowship to Israel, two Stanford Humanities Center Fellowships, Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture Fellowship, Jacobs’ Pillow Research Fellowship, and a 2015 Israel Institute grant. For 10 years she was the staff dance critic for *The Oakland Tribune* and for 20 years the SF contributing editor to *Dance Magazine*. Her articles on dance have appeared in *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times* among other publications. She is past president of both the international Society of Dance History Scholars and the Dance Critics Association.