

THE STORY OF ISRAELI FOLK DANCE IN ISRAEL AND AMERICA

by *Fred Berk*

"Israeli folk dance is more popular in America than in Israel." Whenever I make this statement at folk dance workshops in various cities of the United States, dancers cannot believe it. So, in order to explain this strange phenomenon, I will have to go back to the beginnings of Israeli folk dance in America— and Israel.

ISRAEL

At the turn of the century "Chalutzim" (Pioneers) came to Palestine and brought with them the songs and dances from their respective countries, mainly European. One dance, from Rumania—the Hora—became transposed into the national dance of Israel.

In 1944, a group of teachers decided to organize a meeting at Kibbutz Dalia both to show and learn folk dances. It resulted in 300 dancers performing to an audience of 3000 spectators. This became known as the first folk dance festival at Kibbutz Dalia. Although the dances presented were mostly European (such as the Polish *krakoviak*, and Russian *cherkassia*) the gathering was most impressive. The organizational committee decided to continue their work and to stimulate the creation of new folk dances specifically Jewish and connected to Israel.

One of the most dynamic organizers of the group was Gurit Kadman. Because with her foresight and drive she continually shaped, inspired and developed new ideas and new Israeli folk dance projects she is considered today "the mother of Israeli folk dance." Kadman spearheaded the creation of new dances in our own lifetime with conscious effort which was contrary to the time honored way other cultures slowly evolved their arts and dances over the centuries.

Jewish dance as we know it from descriptions in the Bible was lost as the Jews wandered the face of the earth during the last 2000 years. The newly created dances were in-

spired by the Bible, the new life in Israel and also from folk motifs and dance steps of the different ethnic groups in the country. These included Arabs, Drúz, Yemenite Jews, Chassidim and others.

Amongst the first creators of Israeli folk dance was **Rivka Sturman**. Her first dances succeeded in capturing the real flavor of the new country and the spirit of the people. Some of her dances are known all over the world and seen wherever folk dancing takes place. To name a few: "Hine Ma Tov," "Harmonica," "Zemer Atik," "Kuma Echa" and many more. Other creators of Israeli folk dances during this time were **Yardena Cohen**, **Leah Bergstein**, and **Sara Levi-Tanai**. (For details the reader can turn to "Dance Perspectives" Quarterly No. 59, "Shorashim" by Judith Brin Ingber).

In 1945 another impetus was given to the development of Israeli folk dance, the forming of a folk dance department sponsored by the Cultural Department of the Histadrut (Labor Union). In 1952, **Tirza Hodes** became the director of this organization which has many functions including training folk dance leaders and teachers, organizing performance groups, stimulating the creation of new dances and publishing folk dance material.

In 1947 at the second Dalia Festival only newly created Israeli folk dances were performed. This was an enormous accomplishment achieved in three short years.

More folk dance choreographers emerged, among them **Shalom Hermon** and **Jonathan Karmon**. Hermon did not intend to create folk dances, but mainly choreography for pageants. Some of these dances were so well liked by the dancers and the audiences that they were danced again and again, becoming true folk dances. He also started the first Independence Day folk dance parade in Haifa which became a very popular annual event. Hermon is still an active member of the Histadrut folk dance committee.

Karmon created popular folk dances, too, but mainly concentrated on the performing and staging of folk dances with his own group. At many international folk dance festivals his groups represented Israel. Later, with his "Music Hall of Israel," he traveled all over the world.

Over the years additional festivals were held at Kibbutz Dalia. The biggest and final festival was in 1968. Sponsored by the Histadrut and the Ministry of Education, 3000 dancers performed for some 60,000 spectators.

The younger folk dance teachers and creators developed Israeli dance activities in many cities rather than in Kibbutzim. In Tel-Aviv, **Yoav Ashriel** and his wife **Mira** practically teach every night of the week. In Haifa, **Yonathan Gabai** and **Yaacov Levi** teach and lead performing groups. In Jerusalem the most active dance leader is **Ayalah Goren**. Folk dancing also takes place in some kibbutzim, in the army, in the public schools and universities. In fact, Israeli folk dance is established all over the country.

All the time new Israeli dances are being created and introduced to the public. These new dances are "hits" for a year or two and later discarded to make room for yet newer creations. A completely new element was introduced - the discotheque dances. The choreographers use popular hit songs and fit to them jazz movements, discotheque steps and folk dance motifs as well. The accepted folk dance formations of circles, lines, couples and squares were often changed, so that the participants all face the same direction, performing the steps separately but in unison. The discotheque flavor is very popular because of its pseudo American-dance accent.

Today, an evening of folk dancing in Israel usually includes a lot of discotheque dancing, with a few international dances thrown in for good measure. Some teachers create "folk" dances just to satisfy the demands of their students, to each continually something new. This reflects the low quality of dances presented today.

To preserve the authentic dance material still found in the different ethnic groups a new organization was formed by **Gurit Kadman** in 1974. The Israel Ethnic Dance Project has begun collecting exciting anthropological field experiences in their research on the dances of the Jewish Yemenites

and Kurds in Israel as well as the Druze. It is hoped that the organization (sponsored by the Histadrut and the Ministry of Education in connection with the Folklore Dept. of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem) will inject the necessary quality and direction into the development of Israeli folk dance which it so badly needs.

AMERICA

When I arrived in the United States in 1941 I found much Jewish dance activity amidst modern dance. Modern dancers would interpret Jewish themes and present these dances at concerts at Jewish community centers, at "Y's", at fund raising affairs mostly for Jewish audiences. After the establishment of Israel in 1948 the interest in these dance performances disappeared and were replaced by dance groups coming from Israel.

There was Jewish folk dancing going on as well. Most of the dances, to Chassidic melodies, were choreographed in America. The European dances which were so popular in Palestine at the time I found were also danced by Zionist youth movements in America. In these organizations, folk dance games were created to the tunes of Hebrew songs and very enthusiastically performed at every occasion.

Folk dance records did not exist, a good accordionist was rarely available, so the accompaniment was singing while dancing. The "American Jewish" dances, as they were referred to, incorporated the zest and "swing" of American square dancing. Among the dances which had their origin in America were the "Double Hora," "Dundai," and "Ari Ara".

In 1946, for the first time, I saw a dance which came from Palestine, the very popular "Mayim-Mayim" It was introduced by a cultural emissary (Shaliach) on a Hashomer Hatzair training farm. It was exciting to see a dance which had its origin in the new country ! Over the years, more and more dances were introduced in America, all new creations coming from Israel. These dances replaced the "American Jewish" dances which are totally forgotten today.

In 1951 I started a weekly Israeli folk dance session at the 92nd Street "Y" in New York City. It was the first time such sessions were attempted in an organized way. Of course in the beginning they were poorly attended, but eventually more and more came and sometimes there was not even enough room for all the dancers. Classes were later added for beginners, intermediate and advanced dancers and a teenage workshop performing group was announced from which members could enter the newly formed Hebraica Dancers. This group of 6 couples plus a narrator presented Israeli folk dances for children at Jewish holidays. It was not only an entertaining program but an educational one as well.

The children learned about Israel and the habits and costumes of the Jews. Those little audience members learned Hebrew songs and dance movements right in their seats at performances. To conduct all these activities-- of performance and folk dance classes -- the Jewish Dance Division was formed at the "Y" and is still very active under my chairmanship. In 1951 I was asked by the Zionist Youth Federation of America to organize an Israeli folk dance festival in New York City which has become an annual event. We just celebrated the 25th annual festival with 3 performances at the Philharmonic Hall.

Dvora Lapson, another folk dance pioneer in America, brought Israeli folk dance to Hebrew Day Schools. Today she still organizes an annual children's Israeli folk dance festival, supervises teachers and publishes dance writings. Her activities are sponsored by the Jewish Education Committee of America in New York. Visiting Israeli dance leaders have come to many cities to teach the newest dances throughout the years spreading enthusiasm as well as knowledge.

In 1968 the Zionist Youth Foundation established a department of Israeli folk dance under my direction. Its purpose is very similar to the Histadrut folk dance department in Israel. Leadership training sessions are offered; a summer program for Israeli folk dance enthusiasts in Israel is an annual project. "Hora", a publication appearing 3 times a year, reports on Israeli folk dance activities. Through this department a book and record service is also available.

In general, folk dance became very popular in America after World War II. In one way it gave the many soldiers returning from service abroad a cultural contact with the countries where they had been stationed. Perhaps the popularity of folk dance was also due to the "melting pot" nature of the United States with its many ethnic groups; Ties to the countries of origin could be maintained through folk dance.

International folk dance clubs and organizations were formed all over the country. Educators, too, realized the tremendous educational, physical, social, recreational and even therapeutic values of folk dance. Universities offered international folk dance classes as part of physical education program. Israeli folk dances were included in the repertory of international folk dance and so a large audience of non-Jews was reached. In this way Israeli folk dance became tremendously popular--today its popularity is exceeded only by Yugoslavian and Greek folk dances.

In most of the big cities one can participate in Israeli folk dance practically every evening. Hillel organizations on campuses offer Israeli folk dance and many even have performing groups. In most Jewish and Zionist summer camps Israeli folk dance constitutes a very important part of the programming. A concluding dance festival "Rikudia" often ends the season with every youngster participating. At many colleges there are courses of Israeli folk dance on an accredited level. Israeli folk dance festivals are annual events in many cities (Washington, D.C., Boston, Philadelphia, Miami, Oklahoma City). Also, on the west coast in San Francisco and Los Angeles there are the very charming "International Folk Dance Cafes." These are places where friends may meet, eat and dance. Each evening usually features a different national dance with Israeli dancing at least once a week.

Because there is such an interest all over the country, almost every Israeli folk dance is recorded on 12 inch records accompanied by an instruction booklet. Elektra was the first company to cut records, Tikva the most popular. By now, hundreds of dances have been recorded and new ones are constantly being added.