

IS THE HORA AN ISRAELI DANCE?

by Neomi Bahat

Since the creation of the State of Israel the Hora, both as dance and as song, has been a symbol for all things Israeli, and indeed, a symbol of Israel itself, both at home and abroad.

It is a symbol whose roots are certainly not homegrown, a transplant which took extremely well to Israeli soil and quickly became acclimatized. In order for a dance or a song to become "national property", it has to be sung and danced by that ethnic group on its soil, regardless of whether it is a local creation or a cultural import.

Without offering exact definitions we may assume that a dance adopted by an ethnic group fulfils certain needs: traditional-ethnic, social, religious, and entertainment needs.

Let us now examine what made the Hora the "most Israeli" dance and what needs it fulfilled during the formative years of Jewish settlement in Eretz Israel. This seems to be the crucial question from which all the others stem. Accordingly, we have, first of all, to examine the origins of the term Hora itself.

The Hebrew Encyclopedia says- "Hora (from Greek **choros**; ; a circle-dance), a fast, vivacious dance, originating from Wallachia, found also among other regions' folk dances in the Balkans and in Abatikua (in Turkey)."

Indeed, one finds chain or circle dances called Hora all over the Balkans. For example, in Bulgaria there are several kinds of Horo, a dance of importance in that country's folklore. These are a group of dances, rather different from each other from the musical and movement aspect, some having a symmetrical, others an asymmetrical rythmical structure. For example, many are in 2/4 time, but the "Četvorno Horo" is a chain-dance in 7/16 time and the "Dojčovo Horo" in 9/16, and there are several others.

In Rumania we find the Hora in many variants (more than 1,600, according to M. and C. Grindes, the authors of **Dance of Rumania**), such as the Hora Mare (Big Hora), Hora Taranneasca, Hora Moldavaneasca, etc., again in different meters.

The Hora became popular in Eretz Israel during the first Aliyot (a term applied to waves of immigration to the country), prior to the First World War. This brings us to the fascinating question who brought the Hora to this country in the first place and to the even more intriguing query: what purpose did it fulfill in the social life and everyday ambience of the pioneers?

But before tackling this central theme of our enquiry, it is necessary to state that the Hora was probably brought to Eretz Israel by the Hassidim, who came to live and to die in the Holy Land. In the Diaspora, the Hassidim would adopt songs and airs originally belonging to the folklore of the non-Jewish communities in whose midst they were living. They also took the folk dances of these regions and made them their own.

Jews in the Diaspora used to dance **ריקודי מצווה** "rikkudei mitzva" (ceremonial dances, the execution thereof being regarded as a religious duty), connected with family and community festive occasions, such as marriage, circumcision or Bar Mitzva ceremonies. With the advent of Hassidism in the 18th century, dance became an important part of life at the Rabbi's court. The founder of the Hassidic movement, the Baal Shem-Tov, instilled in his disciples the belief that dancing and singing are "more than prayer". They would seize any opportunity to turn dancing into a central feature of a feast. The circle is an important symbol in Hassidism. Zvi Friedhaber in his book **The Jewish Dance** says, "The typical Hassidic dance is a circle dance, called **Karahad**, circle," and he cites the Baal Shem-Tov, who, answering a question about why dancing should be in a circle, said, "Because a circle has no front and no rear,

no beginning and no end, everyone is a link in a chain, all are equal."

This egalitarianism, so important in Hassidism, was no less important to the pioneers, and that could be another reason why the Hora was so popular with them. In order to substantiate this claim, following are several examples from works dealing with that period.

Avigdor Hameiri begins his novel **Tnuva**, which is based on his diary from the "Gdud Ha'avoda" period, with a chapter called "Silent Hora". He describes how a mute Hora is danced around the corpse of a member of a group of Halutzim:

...Suddenly he got up... approached her, put her arm upon his shoulder and his arm around her shoulder... and started to dance with her the Hora. A mute Hora. Silent and stifled. Other members of the group came in. They joined the dance in silence. Someone started singing, but he motioned to him to stop. And they danced in silence, without music and without song.

Though a mute Hora at a wake was, perhaps, not a common occurrence, the fact that Hameiri chose to depict it proves that it would suit the atmosphere then prevalent.

In another chapter he writes:

The only thing that would dispel his melancholy was a Hora danced by the Halutzim in the street. The whole place was alive and noisy. Two broad circles of dancers, one inside the other. The outer one moving from right to left, the inner progressing from left to right. In the middle a man stands and plays on a small mouth-organ, himself dancing to his music, while everybody joins him singing:

Let us rejoice,
Let us, let us rejoice.

And so on till one can't go on any more, till exhaustion, till one faints.

In what town in the whole world can this be done? Only after all in a Hebrew town. A town recently born, welcoming Israel's exiles with a smiling face.

Hameiri describes in great details the importance of the Hora in the lives of the pioneers.

The Hora slowly became an institution in the **kvutza**, (a group of pioneers working and living a communal life together). Youths who wish to be rid of the discrimination, the hatred, the inferiority, the prejudices and lies (of the Diaspora) seek, perhaps without being aware of it, new forms, new ways of expressing the feelings in their hearts. That mental energy which made them react of generations in different forms, sometimes cursing or getting mad, now found its expression in the dancing of the Hora, a dance which is nothing but the heritage of Hassidism. It is a shelter from all evil in the bosom of the burning soul.

The soul stirs - Hora!
A curse rises in us - Hora!
We hope but are not sure - Hora!
A girl cold-shoulders me - Hora.
I feel she is giving me hints - Hora.

The Hora: An expression of our vibrating life-force.

The Hora: Our answer to fate, be it good or bad.

The Hora: Our prayers.

In Hameiri's novel there are other descriptions of the Hora as part of everyday life of the halutzim and as their way of celebrating. The author uses his own experience and those of others who were witnesses and he sees in the Hora a symbol for pioneer life in the Eretz Israel of that period.

Indeed, the Hora was much more than just a dance one does when in a joyous spirit, simply for entertainment. It was a means to achieve freedom, to strengthen social bonds, to solve social problems among the members of the kvutza, the group. The Hora became a sort of "group dynamics"

device for that period. It was a framework in which tensions could be eased and the individual, the young person who had left the warm family ties behind, could find a sense of belonging. The joy of togetherness was the most positive component of the pioneer way of life, which was, on the whole, a harsh life, full of hardship and strife.

Apparently the Hora as danced in its original form in Rumania also has similar social and spiritual connotations, as the following quotation from Gridea's book **Dances of Rumania** shows:

...its stimulating effect upon the community's life is perhaps without parallel in the whole of Central and South-Eastern Europe. To 'enter the Hora' means, for boys, approaching manhood, and for girls it signifies their readiness for marriage... A period of mourning is brought to an end by joining once more the Hora; and it is used as a standard for village morals. As soon as a person of doubtful morality - an unfaithful wife, a man who has been in prison, even a youth or a girl who has broken his or her engagement - dare to enter the circle all the dancers stop at once.

(Editor's Note : The Hora-circle being so much an expression of belonging to a group and a society, I often heard from the founding members of Kibbutz Mishmar Haemek that at times, when a stranger or just a new member would join the Hora-circle, this would disintegrate, and form again behind him, leaving the newcomer alone and deserted, an outsider.)

Following are excerpts from contemporary records substantiating the above.

In the book **Annals of the Second Aliyas (1904-1914)**, Nathan Hofshi writes about a period of disillusionment following the leaving of the country by many halutzim in 1909:

...My surprise was even greater when after we all finished our meal the boys got up, pushed the tables and chairs aside and began dancing. The dance was general and they made us join

them. How come, dancing at noon on a ordinary work day, without rhyme or reason?

To quote a parallel example from Rumania (from Grindes's book):

The simplest form of the Hora is the circle, which can start from four or five people and expand to several hundreds. Immediately after midday dinner (but preferably at dusk) young men and girls, married couples and elderly people from one or several villages will gather at the crossroads, in the barn of an inn or the countryard of a well-to-do 'gospoder' or in the vicinity of a church. A few youths whose courage and enthusiasm have been carefully stimulated by a couple of glasses of wine or plum brandy are charged with the task of linking up and starting the dance.

Drinking not being a Jewish trait, and alcoholic beverages not a staple to the rather meager diet of the halutzim, the stimulus was a certain spiritual elation not induced by spirits, just by sheer excitement.

In the book mentioned above Z. Chomsky reminisces about his first workday at the settlement Migdal:

The true joy of life as expressed in communal singing and the dancing of the Galillean Hora filled me with a new sense of being alive. For the first time I felt this was Eretz Israel.

Zalman Lipshitz also writes about life at Migdal:

The members of the group would remain seated for a long time after the meal, talking and singing, till finally they would get up to dance a spirited hora, with so much Hassidic enthusiasm and ardent belief as only the 'old-timers' of the Second Aliya had known. They continued dancing till they were exhausted, especially on Sabbath-evening.

And Zwi Lieberman recalls the workers' canteen at Hedera:

The 'dessert' arrived: the Hora. Fiery, enthusiastic dancing inspired as if by divine inspiration, which seemingly frees the dancer of all suffering, all calamities, dancing with arms on shoulders, bringing soul close to soul, purifying the heart...

Describing a somewhat later period, Zwi Livni (Lieberman) writes about "Pesach at an Absorption Center for New Olim":

...While some were still complaining and venting their anger, beds were being dragged out to make place for the Hora which started immediately, the circle widening more and more, forming more circles, one inside the other. A great and close-knit community, a hectic, inspired Hassidic dance. Down with loneliness! Down with sadness! We are a nation, we have a country, there is hope, redemption will finally come.

And the description goes on, the dance continues and changes form.

As all this testimony shows — and of course we are able to reprint only a fraction of existing evidence — the Hora played a most important part in the lives of the Halutzim of the first Aliyot. This period contributed much to what today is known as "Israeli folk-song and folk-dance". Since the beginning of the century the elements comprising Israeli folk dance have undergone many transmutations, but the Hora, so important in pioneer life, remained one of the most characteristic components of Israeli folk-culture.

MUSICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE HORA

In his book **The Israeli Song** Dr. Herzl Shemueli emphasises the instance of the Hora.

The life-styles of the first Aliot had a decisive influence on the future of Israeli song; especially the dance-tunes and the importance of

communal singing among the workers. It is not just by chance that so many of the songs are dance-tunes. Neither is it arbitrary that we find so many recurring, fixed rhythm-forms and that the double measure is predominant. The connection with dance and the life-style of the working class is evident. This link was so strong that even after it was much weakened in later periods, its influence is still tangible in new tunes written much later.

Regarding dance: singing and dancing were interrelated, the dancers would sing and there was no distinction between active and a passive participation.

The rest of that chapter deals with the musical aspects of the Hora and we shall cite only those pertaining to the Hora as a dance.

Metre: The 4/4 or the 2/4 metre is typical, with a few exceptions.

Syncopation: many researchers state syncopation as one of the main characteristics of the Hora, but Shemueli emphasises that there exist Horas without syncopation, for example "Eize Pelle" ("איזה פלא"), one of the most popular and oldest Horas, which has no syncopation. Later examples: "Havu Lanu Yayin Yain" ("הבנו לנו יין") by M. Shalem. As a typical "syncopated Hora" he cites S. Pustolsky's "Kumma Echa" ("קמה אחא"); and there are, of course, many instances of mixed Horas. The conclusion is clear: syncopation in the Hora is possible but not obligatory.

Symmetrical Structure: Shemueli thinks the symmetrical structure is characteristic of the Hora, but there are exceptions to the rule.

One should remember that what made these tunes popular, and what made them folk dances, was their propensity to become absorbed in folklore and to fulfill its requirements, such as:

Repetitive, recurring rhythmic structures.

Symmetrical and easily discernible structure.

Tempi that suit dancing.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ISRAELI HORA

At first, each group of immigrants brought its songs and dances from its country of origin, and soon a process of elimination began, a process of selection being the usual one in which a folklore develops.

From Rumania came the Hora, from Russia the Kozatchok, the Krakowiak from Poland and the Polka from Bohemia. On the other hand, quite separately, there existed treasures of folk song and folk dance of different origin altogether, such as the Jewish-Yemenite, Kurdish or Bucharian tradition. And apart from these, the indigenous traditions of the Palestinian Arabs, the Druze and the Circassians. All these contributed to what today is Israeli folk dance. But as our subject is the Hora, it has to be stated that its development has as yet to be documented and scientifically analysed.

First of all, one has to take into account that most Hora tunes are in 4/4 time, while the basic steps are in 6/4, and this rythmical 'discrepancy' produces the discord, a seeming lack of synchronization which makes the Hora such a vigorous, lively dance.

The interrelation of tune and steps in folk dances is such that it is impossible to separate the two. Describing the basic steps of the Hora will produce a picture which is true, but will occassionally disapear behind several variants of steps, which may be all found in actual execution of the dance.

Any researcher who endeavors to describe these basic Hora steps will have to base his definition upon the following, most common forms extant.

Basic Form: circular, clock-wise; arms held on shoulders of neighbours left and right; steps in 6/4 time

1st step - L to left side

2nd - R crosses before L

3rd-4th - double step-hop on L

5th-6th - double step-hop on R

Most variants are on steps 5-6 or on 3-4-5-6. The way of holding arms also may vary, but still, the 'typical' Hora is always done holding arms on shoulders.

The variability of the Hora is immense. For example, Taylor & Hofstatter describe the basic form as:

1st - R to right side

2nd - L crosses behind R

3rd-4th - Step-hop on R to right side

5th-6th - Step-hop on L to left side.

This form is exactly the mirror image of the basic Hora most common in Israel.

The Hora also provides a wide field for individual improvising, another feature which surely made it popular. One may join the dance at any point and leave at will, again leaving much to the individual's expression of mood or of belonging. Also there is no difference whatsoever between the step of the sexes, again an egalitarian feature consistent with the ideology of the pioneers.

Z. Friedhaber in his work about the "Israeli Folk Dance" writes:

The form of the Hora in Israel developed through several stages, still unfortunately not fully documented and investigated. One of these forms that developed anonymously and which became known as the "Israeli Hora" is now regarded as the national folk dance of Israel. There existed several variants of this Hora, one, for example, called the "Yekish Hora" (Yeke: an immigrant from Germany in Israeli slang) as named perhaps because newcomers from Germany used to dance the Hora in a special way, throwing the legs aside during steps 4 and 6. By the way, this swinging of the legs to the sides later became part of other Israeli folk dances.

The **Hebrew Encyclopedia** cites Baruch Agadati as one of those who introduced the Hora to Eretz Israel and made it popular. But that may only be a partial truth. Agadati tried to create his own dance, the "Hora Agadati", which many regard as the first original Israeli dance.

Z. Friedhaber writes:

The first among Israeli dancers who endeavored to make a foreign folk dance into an Israeli one was Baruch Agadati and his Hora is still danced to day.

...In a large hut on the dunes in Tel Aviv the actors of the "Ohel" theatre were dancing, when a tall young man taught them his new creation, a new Hora, and the actors joined him and began to study seriously the steps, the jumps, the bows and stamping of the feet, improving as they went along. Arm joins arm, shoulder to shoulder, a chain of bodies closes the circle. The common rythm welds the individuals into a dancing community. The teacher joins the group and makes the movement more beautiful, and generates enthusiasm. The teacher is Baruch Agadati, who was born in Rumania, had studied ballet in Russia and presents in Eretz Israel his solo dances, depicting Jewish and Arab types. His new dance is a group dance in which Rumanian influences mingle with ballet-based forms and the tune is of Moldavian origin.

This event took place in 1924 and following it the "Hora Agadati" became well known all over the country. The actors of the "Ohel" theatre brought this new Hora to the settlements in Galillee and the Emek and it soon became popular among the pioneers. [Editor's Note: Agadati called his Hora "Orra" ("ערה") from the Hebrew word meaning to awaken, to arise, as he saw in it a manifestation of the fighting spirit of the first settlers and their struggle with nature and enemies surrounding their isolated villages.]

Friedhaber quotes Gurit Kadman, one of the originators of Israeli folk-dance, who told him that the original Moldavian tune was later replaced by a tune composed by A.U.

Boskowitch, who had been rather shocked on hearing it for the first time and recognising it as the tune of well-known Rumanian anti-Semitic students' song. The Hora Agadati as it is now danced is an adaptation by G. Kadman.

In her book **A Nation Dances** Kadman lists 6 Israeli Horas:

<u>Name</u>	<u>Choreography</u>	<u>Music</u>
Hora	folk	
Hora Agadati	B. Agadati	A.U.Boskowitch
Hora Hefer	Y. Dekel	S. Safra
Hora Eilat	R. Sturman	S. Weissfisch
Hora Neurim	S. Hermon	A. Netzer
Hora Nirkoda	Y. Ashriel	M. Shalem

In **100 Israeli Folk Dances** (by B. Taylor & S.Hofstatter, New York, 1976) there are listed, in addition to the above, the following Horas:

Hora Bialik	Y. Ashriel	Hassidic
Hora Hassidit	R. Sturman	Hassidic
Hora Habik's	Y. Levy	A. Zigman
Hora Hadera	Y. Levy	Hassidic
Hora Medura	Y. Ashriel	Alterman
Hora Simchat He'amal	R. Sturman	A. Netzer

There are also other Israeli folk dances into which the Hora is incorporated, and still others that were based on Hora tunes. For example: "Havu Lanu Yayin Yayin", a folk dance to music by M. Shalem, or "Harmonika" by R.Sturman, music by Alkony, etc...

Thus we see in the development of Israeli folk dance the tendency of traditions to wander from one place to another, a phenomenon we encounter in many countries.

In 1971 I attended the lecture of a French ethno-musicologist who has lived for several years in the Congo, about how nowadays Brazilian folk music had penetrated the Congo, and how many Congolese play the guitar in the Brazilian fashion with South American rhythms. Of course

what he had heard was not the same music played in Brazil, but rather a new sort of folk music, created from Brazilian musical materials on African soil. Brazilian music itself is, in the first place, a mixture of African, Indian and Spanish musical traditions, but now we witness its return to the black continent, thus undergoing a new transmutation.

Similarly, our very own Hora, whose origins are foreign, has become Israeli by dint of the social task it fulfills.

