

THE STATUS OF THE DANCER IN THE JEWISH-YEMENITE TRADITION

The Dynamics of Contradiction
by Naomi Bahat

The attitude towards the dancer in traditional societies varies to such an extent, that it is impossible to draw conclusions. We are not going to discuss here the reasons for this extreme diversity of attitude, and concern ourselves only with the principles governing the phenomenon. Indeed, the only common denominator in human societies' attitude towards the dancer is a lack of indifference. Movement, being a primary mode of human expression, precludes "neutrality". Hence the wealth of private and public expression of peoples' attitudes toward the dancer and dance itself; opinions reflecting the individual viewpoint as well as that of the class or social stratum the person happens to belong to. One encounters extreme reverence and enthusiasm on one hand; total negation and abhorrence on the other and the whole gamut between these extremes.

In traditional society dance is an integral part of everyday life. Therefore it is a tool the establishment is able to use in steering the society in the desired direction and influencing the members behavior according to the leadership's interests. Laws and regulations are promulgated to enable the leaders to control the masses. For the members of the society, dance is a ritual and an entertainment form, as well as a valve to let off the steam of accumulating pressures. It also serves as a means of identification with society, expressing the feeling of belonging to it.

We are not going to discuss the professional dancer. The dancers in our example are skilled in their special art, without being professionals. It goes without saying, that a professional dancer who wasn't born into this particular society could not possibly attain the proficiency reached by the anonymous or famous performers in the towns and villages, accomplished artists, who, nevertheless, have no professional status as such.

The dancer's status – as seen by himself and in the eyes of the traditional society he belongs to – has always been an important subject for research, because it provides an opportunity to study the place of art in the life of the given society as well as the collective and individual self-image

of members of the community. The indivisibility of the life-style and its artistic and cultural expression brings us to our topic, which is full of contradictions. The number of attitudes and opinions equals the number of people holding them.

It may be astonishing, but in modern urban contemporary society the so-called "general public" tends to hold opinions about dance and dancers basically similar to those found in traditional communities: contempt and disrepute as well as hero-worship, infatuation and a belief in the "supernatural" powers of the dancer. The continuing need to define the dancer as belonging to a certain group or school, never viewing him as an individual, whose language of expression happens to be movement, isolates him – for better or for worse – and does not allow him to enjoy his group affiliation. Modern society also denies him the possibility of belonging to the everyday stratum of socio-cultural and artistic life, a prerogative he undoubtedly enjoyed in traditional communities.

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Even in Yemen the status of the dancer and the attitude towards him were ambiguous, full of contradictions.

First of all, one has to take into account the regional differences. In the capital, San'a, there was little or no dancing. As we progress towards the rural areas, we find increasing dance activity. In the northern and southern regions (the Haban and Heissan areas respectively), the influence of the local, indigenous traditions on the local Jewish culture increases. We will concern ourselves only with the central region, disregarding the extreme north and south.

One of the reliable sources about the conditions prevailing in Yemen is Rabbi Joseph Kapach's book *Halichot Teiman* (Ben-Zvi Institute, Jerusalem, 1968.) Describing a wedding in San'a, he writes (p. 118):

The dancer stands in the middle of the room and dances. Not everybody dances, as it is not all that honourable to be a dancer. There is a saying, "One who dances, belittles (tradition)."

And he adds in a footnote:

Not such was the attitude of the village Jews. They were fond of the dance and honoured the dancer and so you will find among them old people who would not miss an opportunity to dance a round or two at a wedding.

Thus the author succeeds to describe existing conditions, which stem undoubtedly from traditional Jewish beliefs, expressed in the ancient scriptures.

In both Jewish and gentile society, dance is a part of family life, and as such, the children participate in it. In Central Yemen, dance was an integral part of family festivities. Menachem Arusi, who came to Israel soon after the War of Independence, said in an interview in 1977:

I remember myself dancing from the age of seven. My father, of blessed memory, used to make us, my sister and me, dance and sing every Sabbath, it was a kind of duty. He himself was a dancer and singer. . . In San'a they didn't dance, but where we lived, in Menache we used to do both. . . Not everybody can dance. You have to be able to watch carefully and learn. You watch how it's done and if you have talent, you catch on. . . You can't just get up and dance without knowing how. . . that's no honour. . .

Haim Hazaz in his novel *Ya'ish*, which documents the life of the Yemenite Jews, deals with dance and the dancers' status in the eyes of his peers. His hero, *Ya'ish*, several times in his life is torn between his desire to get up and dance and his fear that he will be scorned.

"My son a dancer? He is still stupid, a child, with no understanding. You need a master dancer, an experienced one. What makes you suddenly choose my son?" He answered: "It's the bridegroom's wish, he wants a child to dance for him, only a child. An his wish must be honoured. . ."

And so that fear and that trouble came to him and he became a dancer in public. From then on there was no feast he did not dance at. And if he wasn't there, the feast was not a true festivity.

Dance as something that is a holy duty, that carries a blessing, and yet is always in danger of overstepping the boundary and breaking the law against secular dancing, can not be fathomed unless one takes into account the traditional attitude expressed in Jewish religious lore. The Yemenite Jews were learned people, well versed in scripture. Without taking into account the traditional scriptural attitudes, the picture of Jewish life in Yemen can not be complete.

Various verses in the Bible indicate that dancing was practised at times of festivity and of mourning. And even in the Bible we find expressed the ambivalent attitude to the dancer, in the episode of Michal watching her husband, David, dancing before the ark, making a fool of himself.

Apparently that was a danced procession, a phenomenon encountered in many parts of the world. As the Bible says:

So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the Lord with shouting and with the sound of trumpet. And as the ark of the Lord came into the city of David, Michal, Saul's daughter looked through the window and saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord; and she despised him in her heart. (Samuel II 6:15-16).

In Hazaz' book *Ya'ish*, p.29) one finds a similar point of view:

One day his grandfather heard about it. So he sent for him, stood in front of him and said. "You, child! I hear you've taken up dancing. Stand up and dance before me, so I can see how you do it.

The boy just lowered his eyes and stood there. The old man put his hand on him and said: "Don't be bashful! After all, I am your grandfather and I wish to see how you dance. Even David, King of Israel, leaped and danced before the ark of the Lord, and may it be His will, that you should gladden the heart of brides and grooms and dance when prayers and the poetry of Mari Salem (Shalem Shabazi, translator's note) are said, may his blessed memory defend us. I'll sing for you and you shall dance. God bless you. I with my throat and you with your feet! . . ." For some time the boy stood there, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. Finally, as if the floor had shifted beneath him, he began dancing slowly, moving his body, gradually shaking it faster and faster.

When he stopped, the old man kissed him on the head and said: "Heavens will bless you, my child, you add wisdom and talent to the rumors I heard. Be steadfast, so that you will have no fear of God in you while you dance, and will not dance idly, in fun, but with humbleness, joy and purity. Think, my child, before whom you dance - before the King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be his name. You dance not for your own honour, nor for the honour of your father's house, but for the honour of Heaven."

There is no paucity of descriptions of dancing in Jewish religious writings, such as the Talmud. They reflect the recurring question about how to treat dance.

In spite of the growing number of prohibitions and warnings against secular, entertaining dance, there exist records of a phenomenon well known among the Yemenite Jews, namely that of rabbis themselves participating in festive dancing. For example, the Talmud says: It was said about Rabbi Yehuda Bar-Ilai, that he would take a branch of myrtle in his hand and dance before the bride and praise her.

There are other examples as well. Those who wish to pursue this topic further, should consult Rabbi Mordecai Firon's article "Dance and Singing in Talmudic Times", in *Machaniim*, published by the I.D.F. in the Menachem-Av issue, 1960, and Zvi Friedhaber's articles in *Jewish Dance*, published by the Jewish Dance Archives in Israel.

Communal life in Yemen offered several solutions to the problem of conforming to the rabbinical prohibition of dancing, while satisfying the need for dance expression.

The elders tended to adopt a lenient attitude towards the young people's exuberance, as Rabbi Kapach describes in his book *Halichot Teiman*, (p. 123):

After the rabbis leave, the atmosphere becomes lighter, the young scholars gather round the groom, the young singers take the initiative and begin to show off their musical talents, perhaps with the aid of one of the more experienced poets. Several nargillas (water-pipes) are brought in and anyone who wishes to leap about and make merry, may do so.

THE ATTITUDE IN ISRAEL TO YEMENITE DANCE

The attitude of Israeli society towards Yemenite dance has determined to a certain degree the Yemenite's own attitude. As an example of an early observer's impression let us consider the evidence of the pioneer of ethnomusicology in Israel, A.Z. Idelson. His enthusiasm is typical of the Western observer's encounter with an exotic, unknown phenomenon which, nevertheless, is very close to his Jewish heart.

He tries to explain his feelings, but remains in the explorer gazing on strange and unfamiliar territory.

In 1909 he writes in *Ha'aretz Almanach*, (p.115):

Anyone who hasn't seen a Yemenite wedding, doesn't know what a wonderful real festivity is! The feast begins three days before the ceremony itself with the shaving of the groom's head. All his relatives gather together, light special large candles and begin to sing and dance. Two men step forward, moving their bodies, clapping their hands, and another one beats the drum. They chant special "shaving songs". The festivities go on for seven nights. . . In their ecstasy, their singing and dancing reminds one of the Hassidim, but since much of Hassidic dance and song is based on Russian tunes and steps, nobody knows how all this came to the Yemenite Jews.

This last remark says all. The researcher shrugs his shoulders and does not presume to try to solve the problem, remaining a spellbound spectator fascinated by what he observes.

Hazaz describes in *Ya'ish* (p. 23) how Ya'ish dances with an old fellow, who at first tries to assess his prowess and dexterity, then plays a few tricks on him, and only when Ya'ish has passed all these "tests" do they become partners in dance. It is clear that the author is moved and fascinated by the dance contest. Even an eminent scholar like Gerson-Kiwi, in her article "On the Musical Traditions of the Jews" (in *Ethnomusicological Studies of Israel's Communities*, Tel Aviv, 1972), uses the term "exotic". She writes (p. 27):

Yemenite singers, who remind one of the nomads of Southern Arabia with their lithe, gentle bodies, always accompany their

song with dance movements. Thus only the composite phenomenon of vocal sound and body movement give us the whole picture. . . The Yemenite Jewish dance with its exotic steps has become a prime example of the new folk dance, along with the musical values it possesses. Their garments, ornaments, jewelry and rugs paved the way for innovations in the practical arts.

Strange as it may seem, this romantic attitude has persisted for many years. Of course the Yemenite Jews themselves were troubled by quite different, much more concrete problems.

TRADITION, CONSCIOUSNESS AND SELF-EXPRESSION

The Jews of central Yemen (always excepting San'a, which constitutes a special case), were aware of being people who love to sing and dance and were aware that they were regarded as such by others.

The people of Menache, when talking about these from San'a, would regard them as people who miss out on something worthwhile, a pleasant experience.

Participation in dance serves in many societies as a token of belonging or not belonging. Those excluded from the society will not be allowed to join the dance, while those who are considered desirable socially will be encouraged to do so. For example, this was expressed in a conversation among people from Yemen who live nowadays in Kiriat Ono in Israel. All the participants in the discussion were, save one, members of a family from Menache. The exception was a man from San'a, who was married to a girl from Menache, and as they live in the neighbourhood of the girl's family, they participate in a family life in which singing and dancing play an important role. When mentioning him or other people who do not come from Menache, they would say, "We converted them," or, "Now they belong with us." The following excerpt is from a discussion about the attitude towards dancers, which took place in 1981:

. . . in Menache we danced, we sang, on 'Motza'ei Shabbat' – it was fantastic! Here in Israel, today, those who dance are highly regarded. Everybody envies the good dancers. (Pointing to the man who came from San'a), look at him, the San'aen, he used to be a clod, stiff as a telephone pole, till he married my sister. Now everybody admires his dancing. . . it's interesting, people accept him now. He was a clumsy clod, a man with no 'form'. Now all this has changed.

There were great differences in Yemen. There was hardly any connection between the different communities.

The people of San'a are slow, slow, asleep. . .

We are different, we sing and dance.

This brings us to the crisis in self-image brought about by immigration to Israel. This crisis was not only evident in the large waves of newcomers who arrived with the "Magic Carpet" operation, but felt by every new oleh. Each one experienced an identity crisis — as an individual and as a member of a community — bringing with him the tradition of the Diaspora. Questions and doubts about "how do I

look in the eyes of my new surroundings, while behaving according to the tradition I brought with me" caused a continuous crisis and feeling of insecurity. The wish to be integrated as quickly as possible in the new surroundings created a vacuum. There are many recorded testimonies about the loneliness of new immigrants in their first years in Israel. (See Dr. A. Bahat's article in *Tazlil*, 1979, vol. 10.)

One example will suffice. The spraying with D.D.T. and the cutting-off of earlocks was the traumatic experience symbolising for many immigrants (in the 50's) the brisk, rather unfeeling attitude of the absorption authorities, triggering insecurity and identity crisis. Equally symbolic was the return to traditional cultural habits by the immigrants as "Israelis of Yemenite extraction", which enabled them to feel like modern individuals proud of their heritage.

Menachem Arussi (who came from Menache) again and again describes an event which for him symbolises the fundamental change in his life, in which he returned to his tradition of dance and singing as he knew them in his father's house. The following conversation took place in 1977:

When I came to Israel, I didn't wish to dance anymore. I thought that here it was no good, that nobody wanted to see the dances we brought with us from Yemen. I thought I forgot them. One day a strange lady came to the building I was working in. Later she told me her name was Gurit Kadman. I would work and she would sit near by. I didn't have much time for her. She said she heard we had dances and that I knew how to dance them. I told her I was through with all that. There is now no need for that here. She told me she wouldn't get up and go away unless I promised I would dance for her the way I used to in Yemen. At first I didn't quite understand what she meant. It took me time to understand that it was important for all the community and for me, that I, Menachem Arussi, should be what I like and

that I have nothing to be ashamed of. On the contrary. She is a wise woman and I am grateful till this very day, that she helped me to understand how important all that is. I will never forget that.

The process of rebuilding a positive self-image is a gradual process that is still taking place.

Surely the ability to integrate traditional cultural and artistic forms and contents in every-day life contributes to the cohesion of family and community ties. External reinforcement also helps in strengthening the community's regard for their cultural traditions. The positive feedback to Yemenite dance and song from the mass media and the incorporation of their motifs in Israeli art have also contributed to the feeling that their art belongs to the body of Jewish tradition and has a place in Israeli culture.

In Israel the simultaneous existence of communal cultures poses a problem which each individual must face. The official attitude which found its expression in the term "melting-pot" in the 50's carried a clear message of negation of the traditional values brought by the immigrants from the Diaspora. No one attached any importance to the preservation of traditions which could serve as a basis on which a new culture could grow.

In spite of the revolutionary changes in lifestyle which caused a temporary setback for dance (as for other manifestations of traditional culture), it regained its role in Yemenite family and community life.

Paradoxically, dance itself played an important role in improving the self-image of the Yemenite immigrants and helping them regain their self-esteem. Undoubtedly the fear that the treasures of traditional poetry, song and dance would disappear also contributed to a change in attitude. Only those who shut their senses to the beauty of these living cultural documents could fail to realize the loss this would mean.

Clearly the attitude of society to the dancer reflects what dance signifies for it. But one must remember that regardless of the official attitude of a given cultural establishment, there always were and will be people who dance, because of an inner need they feel, because they are dancing people.