

DANCE AMONG THE JEWS IN THE MIDDLE AGES AND THE RENAISSANCE

By Zvi Friedhaber

The development of dancing among the Jews in the Middle Ages is a phenomenon encompassing all Jewish communities throughout that historical period. Undoubtedly, one of the main reasons for this development was the growing stabilisation and organisation of the "kehillot" and the establishment of an intensive social life in the new centers. The traditional values as well as the new surroundings influenced this development.

One of the main sources of information about the social structure of the Jewish communities and their dance customs is the rabbinical literature in all its manifestations. In this literature we find evidence about the struggle — not as many erroneously believe — against dance itself, but rather against the accompanying social customs, which were sometimes opposed to religious principles. Typical of this attitude is Rabbi Yehuda Hachassid's (1150-1216) stricture: "Then the virgin will rejoice alone",¹. His objection is not to dancing as such, but to mixed dancing of men and women together, which, as we shall see, became more and more popular.

Already Rav Hai Ga'on, the last of the great Ge'onim of Babylonia, (939-1038), was asked about his opinion concerning dancing-customs in two far communities, questions from which we are able to glean information about developing dance-habits. He was asked to opine about the habit introduced to a community in Spain, according to which the congregation would dance with the Tora-scrolls at the Simchat-Tora festival in the synagogue and in his answer he states that in Mesopotamia there are elders of the community, who dance with the holy scrolls "as if in their honour" and he therefore has no objection to the habit.²

This is a good example of how customs travelled from one community to another. he received another query concerning dance, this time from what today is Tunisia, about a recently growing custom of girls entertaining the guests at weddings by dancing before them, accompanied by gentile musicians and about the women dancing while

the bride is adorned and perfumed. In his response Rav Hai forbids any form of women dancing in front of male spectators.

Rambam (1135-1205) mentions in his writings the adoption of alien dance-customs by the Jews in Egypt, when he describes a bride taking a sword or rapier in hand and executing a sword-dance before her wedding-guests. He of course prohibits this sort of dance as opposed to Jewish morals and altogether alien to the spirit of Jewish traditions.⁴

A fascinating phenomenon underlining the growing share dance took in the lives of Ashkenazi Jewish communities, especially those in the German-speaking areas, is the renting of buying of special houses by the "kehilla" for the purpose of holding feasts and celebrations, such as weddings, called *Tanzhaus* (dance-house), *Spielhaus* (play-house) or *Brauthaus* (bride's-house) and in the documents simply wedding-house.

According to historians such as A. Berliner or M. Guedemann⁵ this innovation was a simple necessity, as the private homes of the members of the community were not spacious enough to contain the festivities which included dancing.⁶ Both scholars maintain that the term *Tanzhaus* was taken from similar institutions found among the Christians.⁷ There was also a similarity in the location of the *Tanzhaus* which was usually near the offices or in the house of the "kehilla" while the Christian *Tanzhaus* was near or in the *Rathaus*, (the town-council or municipality). One of the earliest documents about the buying of a *Tanzhaus* by a Jewish local community comes from the town of Augsburg in 1290.⁸ But there is information about dance-houses from the 12th century and till the end of the 17th.⁹

About what went on in the *Tanzhaus* we may learn from a story told by Rabbi Yehuda Hachassid: "One of the Hassidim was sitting in the wedding-house ("Beith Chuppa") and listening to one of the singers ("Meshorerim") to the

dance, who mentioned God in his song. . ."¹⁰ From this first glimpse into the Tanzhaus we see that there were singers who accompanied the dancers. Among the customs of the dance-house was, for instance, the donning a special girdle while dancing, without which one wasn't supposed to take part in the dance. In a court-case brought before Rabbi Israel Isserlin (1390-1460) concerning the validity of a marriage it says: "Reuven rented a girdle from Shim'on for two dinars for wearing it at the dance as an ornament. As he danced with the girdle on his loins, a virgin asked him to lend the girdle to her, so she would be able to dance two or three rounds too. The man answered, that if she would be betrothed to him by this girdle, he would lend it to her, and she could dance with it. She answered in the affirmative and before witnesses he gave her the girdle for that purpose. . ."¹¹ Let us not pursue the legal argument as to the validity of that marriage (which, by the way, was invalidated by the learned rabbi), but note the importance attached to that special girdle worn during dancing.

There exists a last will of an old man, who bequeathed a substantial sum to his — yet unborn — granddaughter for the express purpose of her being able, when she grows up, to buy herself a dancing-girdle.¹² This evidence proves what an important part dancing played in the social life of the Jewish communities of that period. In a number of communities there existed privately owned dance-houses, which had to pay dues to the community chest, where on Saturday nights the young generation would gather to spend the time in dancing. From the list of the titles of the different dances danced at these gatherings we learn of the rich repertoire employed, but there exist but a few descriptions of the steps themselves.¹³

In a manuscript from the 15th century¹⁴ we find a vivid description of dancing in Jewish communities in Alsace: "Alas, the bad habit is extent in these regions by which men take the naked hands of women, even married women, in theirs and dance with them, while they sing and dance and make merry. . ." Apparently this habit was common not only in the Alsace region but in all Ashkenazi communities, as the author himself points out.

According to the opinion of the learned Rabbi Yochanan Luria, the writer of the document, to sing and dance is a proper activity for young virgins only, "who should cavort after the people" and in another place in his book he again states that "the women who perform before the brides at the ceremony should be reprimanded, as it only fits the young virgins to do so, in order to endear themselves to the young men, who will then spring after them for the purpose of matrimony."¹⁵

In the responsa and moral tractates from the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th there are reflections of life-forms of earlier times. In one of these works¹⁶ we find the following stern warning: "And it is forbidden to dance, what is called 'tanzen', for a wife with someone other than her husband, even with a male relative of hers, for fear of erring (sinning). And a man shall not even (dance) with an unmarried woman hand in hand, for he will not be forgiven." And in another chapter: "There is another prohibition proscribing dance in a public house (inn)."¹⁷

Besides the already familiar warning against mixed dancing there is a new element, namely the one concerning dance in public inns, as the habit of merry-making in public places became more and more common practise.¹⁸

In the "kehilla" of Niederheim (Alsace) the local Jews rented the inn for entertainment and dancing, as the rabbi of the congregation, Joseph Steinhart (1720-1776) describes in his book: "I was told by somebody, that the men and boys are accustomed to be merry by dancing with the virgins in debauchery and instantly on the eve of the 15th of the month (I) sent an order by the beadle of the rabbinical court prohibiting such, ordering them to pay a fine of 10 Reichstaler, half of the sum to the (secular) authorities and half for charity, as such things should not be done. They sent a message back, advising me that they had already secured a permit from the authorities and they can not abide by the prohibition, as that would reduce the amount of wine sold at the inn, and as the authorities are paid a tax on each measure of wine sold, they would lose money. . ."¹⁹

The above answer was the reply to a similar complaint by a rabbi from a town in the Palatinate region, where the local "kehilla" had likewise put an anathema on some of the local youths because of mixed dancing on holidays. The custom was, apparently, common.

As the habit of dancing at feasts spread and the repertoire of dances diversified the need for a dance-teacher became acute. Indeed, perusal of the moral tracts and by-laws of the "kehillot" of that period reveals the existence of dance-schools and of course dance-teachers. As early as the second half of the 16th century we hear of warnings to parents, who send their children to these schools to be instructed in the execution of dances.²⁰ In a decree against luxury proclaimed by the joint "kehillot" of Altona, Hamburg, and Wandsbeck in 1715 and again in 1726 in the statutes of the communities we read that the boys and girls as well as the servants of both genders were forbidden to

study any form of dancing in general and with a dance-master in particular.²¹ A similar rule is also to be found in the regulations of the "kehilla" at Metz from the year 1697.²²

Parallel to the development of dance-customs in the Ashkenazi communities dance in the Sephardi communities, mainly in places where emigrants from Spain and Portugal settled after their expulsion in lands under Ottoman rule, took on quite similar forms. Dancing at social meetings of festivals and on the Sabbath; the emergence of a "master of ceremonies" or dance-organizer who would act as dance-teacher but who would also, as a kind of broker, supply the dancer with a suitable partner of the opposite sex for a fee; mixed dancing at weddings and the hiring of non-Jewish musicians to entertain the wedding-guests, all these became widespread occurrences in Sephardic communities.

In Italy during the Renaissance Jewish dancing progressed in two separate channels: inside the community and as part of the general artistic creation among the gentiles. Let us consider, first of all, the dance as it developed inside the Jewish communities, but it is nearly impossible to draw a line between it and what went on outside the "kehilla", as the art of dance influenced the life of the communities in the spheres of education, celebration of festivals and holidays and social life. In the latter Jews and gentiles would mingle — disregarding the disapproval of such fraternisation by both religious establishments.

An important factor in this development was the integration of newly arrived immigrants from Spain and Portugal and "Roman" Jews, whose ancestors lived in Italy since antiquity, in joint communities. There were also Ashkenazi members of the "kehilla" and each group possessed a distinct tradition of dance-customs, which were strictly observed and preserved. But, as we shall see, there was also much mutual influence between them.

The most intensive dance-activity developed in two communities in Italy, namely in Venice and Mantua, but a lively dance-scene was common in many other places. The dancing took place mainly on holidays, when people were not at work and especially around Purim and of course at weddings. Mixed dancing which took place in all these activities was condemned by the religious authorities but continued to flourish nevertheless.

For example, Rabbi Yeshayahu the Second, who was active in southern Italy in the 13-14th centuries came to the conclusion, that a total prohibition of dancing will do little good, as "in spite of being told one should not hop or dance, we see many who do, and about such matters the ancient sages said let Israel err, which is better than

transgress, as their habits are too ingrained to be abolished."²⁴

In the protocol-books of the community of Padua in the first half of the 16th century there is a description which gives us a vivid picture of dance-habits: "We decide and hereby decree that no person, either man or woman, adolescent or virgin shall arrange a ball with dancing except from the eighth day of the month of Adar till the 21st before Pesach. . . on the eve of a "Brith Milla" of male offspring or in the house of women to whom a child was born, on the Sabbath preceding the wedding and on the one after the "chuppa", in the house of the betrothed or any other place chosen by the bridegroom and bride. . . and on all other days no ball with dancing shall take place unless permission from the "parnassim" (officers) has been obtained. . ."²⁵

From the above document we learn that dance-festivities were allowed on certain days only, at all other times a special permission was mandatory. One should note the exception made for the fortnight in which the Purim festival takes place in the month of Adar. Apparently the Purim festive season and its special performances were much loved by the Jews as well as by their gentile neighbours and therefore those two weeks were set apart for rejoicing and dancing.²⁶

The regulations also speak of a "wedding-house" in which the newly-married couple may choose to hold a ball, which proves the existence of the Tanzhaus, which we already encountered in the Ashkenazi communities, which is not surprising as many of the Jews of Padua were people expelled from Germany.

The fourth paragraph of the rules concerning dancing layed down by the meeting of all the rabbis of Italy in 1507 (held in Padua) deals with the permissibility of men dancing with unmarried girls on the Purim-feast as an exception to the general rule.

During the Purim-feast it was even allowed to dance with married women, as an exception to the general rule against such behaviour.

"We forbid all (men) to dance with married women, no male with married female, except on the days of Purim. He may dance with the free (unmarried) on condition that the male attire will at least cover the risky region (the groin) and anybody failing to observe this decree is trespassing on the laws of the Jewish faith."²⁷

If we compare this rule with the strictures of the Alsace rabbis on mixed dancing, we must conclude that the habit of dancing of boys and girls together was apparently so widespread, that the rabbinical authorities thought it prudent to warn against this misconduct but to refrain from condemning it outright. But there were also those who expressed stronger opposition.

The intensive dance activity in many of the communities made dance-teaching necessary and indeed, dance teachers and dance tuition are mentioned often in documents of that period and even rabbis were involved in it. Rabbi Arie of Modena writes in his autobiography that he studied music, singing and dancing in his youth.²⁸ The status of the dance-teacher became more prominent and the regulations of the communities express this development. In the protocols of the "kehilla" of Mantua their is hardly a decree which does not mention dancing. In 1635 we find a paragraph making it obligatory to obtain permission for organising a ball from "the small committee" and the very same document permits the dancing of the "Mitzvetanz", as danced by the Ashkenazim at weddings, provided the men will dance by themselves and the women separately.²⁹ This shows the mutual influence of Sephardi and Ashkenazi communities living in the same town.

In several places in the protocols of the Mantuan community there is an explicit prohibition on dancing the "Fiesta-dance" apparently an Italian dance of mixed couples. This type of dance is prohibited even if the men and women dance separately. In order to dance it, a special dispensation was

required.³⁰

Due to the pressure of public opinion this strict rule was relaxed and the protocol of 1687 states that "during a wedding-ceremony the men are allowed to dance one dance, provided their hands are covered with gloves." There is in the same decree a special paragraph permitting dance-teachers to dance, also only if they are wearing gloves.³¹ Giving the dance-teacher permission to dance with women points out the special social position this profession had acquired.³² Dance is regulated in several decisions by the communities of Firenze, Ferrara,³³ Ancona³⁴ and others.

One of these decrees, with the aim of limiting the value of wedding gifts to avoid excessive luxuries, states that one of the presents the groom is permitted to give his bride is a "pair of dance slippers".³⁵ which again stresses the importance of dance in the life of the community.

In the invitations to weddings, among the other attributes of the bride her accomplished dancing is often listed. On such an invitation-card from Ancona in the 18th century is said: '...there is no end to her praiseworthiness. Mistress Judicea Cohen of Ancona, who knows French word by word and gladdens all those who watch her dance. . .'

The scope of this article permits but a glimpse at the manifold dance-activities of the Jews in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The information we have covers only a few aspects of the field and much research is yet incomplete. □

היינה הנשים בין נשואות בין משודכות רגילות חונה ביום בדרכים המפוזרות
ואפילו בלכתן לבית הכנסת בלא גידולו חרוד. ומשיחנה אותו באופן שכל ראון
יהיה מכוסה. ולכן לא תוכלנה לחשוב אותו דאחנע הראש ולכלכלו לאחוריהן, וזה יובן בדרכים
הכל אשר הונבלו בין הד' השערים הגדולים מחננו, אך בכל סוף המביאות והחזרות מוכלנה
ליך בלא גידולו, וכן הנשים המהרפות והיושבות בחנויות לא תהיינה מחויבות בעוד הולכות
לשרת או יושבות שמה. לכסית ראשן בגידולו, וכן לבנות הכפרים הותר לילך בלי גידולו.
כלל ועקר:

היוצאים
מן העיר או המעמד ללכת חץ מהמנט'ובאנו, הותר להם הכל ביום נאחם
וביום בואם, וכן הנשים ביום נאחם וביום בואן הותר להן הטי'רפה, ובמנאי
מהיה כלה מנבע כחוד ולא ברחמים מנבעים אחרים:

מוכלנה הנשים בלכת חונה ללוות היוולדות, או הכלה לבית הכנסת, או לבית החתן,
וכס' בכנופיה אחרת להיות כי אם ארבע, פלכד היוולדות או הכלה:

הנקרא פ'סטה: סבו מוקדים האנשים עם הנשים נאסר לעולם בכל מקום ובכל זמן.
אפי' אחריתם הדינמאטיקה הזאת, ואפילו האנשים עם האנשים או נשים עם נשים.
לא יוכלו לרקד יחד אם לא יקחו רשות מאת מע' הממונים אשר יהיו מדי שנה בשנה. כל ימי-
משך הסכמתנו זאת:



1. ספר החסידים סי' קס"ח.
2. שערי שמחה לר' יצחק בן יהודה ו' גיאת, סוף הלכות לולב, פירטא תרכ"א; מובא גם בשו"ת מהר"י קולון, שורש ט', לעמברג תקנ"ח; ובספר שערי תשובה סי' שי"ד בין התשובות המיוחסות לרב נוטראי גאון. ואם כך הדבר, יש להקדים מנהג זה למאה השביעית. רב נוטראי היה בקשר עם קהילת לוסינא שבספרד.
3. מ.ב. ליון, תשובות רב האי גאון לקאבס, גנזי קדם, ספר חמישי, י"ם תרצ"ד, עמ' 33-35.
4. קובץ תשובות הרמב"ם, לפסיא 1859, עמ' 51.
5. A. Berliner, Aus dem Leben der Juden Deutschlands im Mittelalter, Berlin 1900; M. Guedemann, Geschichte des Erziehungswesens und der cultur der Abendlandischer Juden, ² Amsterdam 1966.
6. Berliner pp. 121-122; Guedemann, III p. 138.
7. Op. sit p. 139; op. sit. III. pp. 138-139.
8. ב"צ אופיר, פנקס קהילות גרמניה, באוריה, י"ם תשל"ג, עמ' 584.
9. על קיומם והתפתחותם של חיי המחול סביב בתי-מחול אלה ראה מאמרי "לזמנו ומקומו של בית-המחולות" Tanzhaus בחיי יהדות אשכנז בימי-הביניים מחקרי ירושלים בפולקלור יהודי (בדפוס).
10. ספר החסידים, סי' ד'.
11. שו"ת תרומת הדשן, סי' ר"י, ווארשא תרמ"ב.
12. שם, סי' ש"ג.
13. י. שיפער, געשיכטע פון יידישער טעאטר קונסט און דראמע, ווארשע 1927, עמ' 69-70; A. Sendrey, The music of the Jews in the Diaspora, N.Y. 1970, pp. 317-328.
14. ר' יוחנן לוריא, משיבת נפש, כתב יד אוקספורד מס' 91 4°, Opp. Add. נויבאויר 257, מכ"י 16726, חיי שרה, עמ' נ"ב; ב'.
15. שם, בשלח, עמ' פ"א; ב'.
16. "תוכחה מגולה" בתוך "ראשית ביכורים" לר' חנוך העניך בר' יהודה ליב, פרנקפורט א/מ תס"ח.
17. שם, עמ' כ"ט; א'.
18. ראה "אגרת שלמה" לר' שלמה זלמן בר' יהודה ליב סגל מדעסויא, וואנזבעק תצ"ב, כ"ז; א'.
19. שו"ת זכרון יוסף לר' יוסף שטיינהרט, פוירדא תקל"ג, סי' י"ז.
20. שמחת הנפש לר' אלחנן הענלה, קירכהאן, זולצבאך תקנ"א, עמ' כ"ז; א'.
21. M. Grünwald, Luxusverbot der Dreigemeinde (Hamburg - Altona - Wandsbek) aus dem Jahre 1715 Jahrbuch für jüd. Volkskunde, 1923 p. 229 § 18; idem: Die Statuten der Hamburg - Altona Gemeinde von 1726, MZJV, 1899(2), p. 31 § 35.
22. J.R. Marcus, The Jew in the Medieval World, Cincinnati 1938, p. 196.
23. צ. פרידהבר, חיי המחול בקהילות היהודים הספרדיים באספקלריה של תקנות קהילות וספרות השו"ת, מורשת יהודי ספרד והמזרח, מחקרים, י"ם תשמ"ב עמ' 347-353.
24. ר' ישעיהו השני, פסקי הרי"ז, מסכת ביצה פרק ה', הלכה א' סי"ב, י', בתוך פסקי הרי"ד, י"ם תשל"א.
25. ד' קארפי, פנקס ועד פאדוואה, של"ג-שמ"ג, י"ם תשל"ד, עמ' 97.
26. J. Zoller, Theater und Tanz in dem italienischen Ghetto, Menora, Jüdisches Familienblatt für Wissenschaft u. Literatur IV, 1926, pp. 596-597.
27. ר. בונפיל, קווים לדמותם החברתית והרוחנית של יהודי איזור וויניציאה בראשית המאה הט"ז, ציון מ"א תשל"ט, עמ' 71.
28. ר' יהודה אריה ממדינא, חיי יהודה (מהדורת א. כהנא) קיוב תרע"ב, עמ' 17, 33, 48.
29. ש. סימונסון, תולדות היהודים בדוכסות מנטובה, ב', ת"א תשכ"ה, עמ' 399.
30. ראה בפרגמטיקה משנת 1650, פורסמה בספרו של ש. סימונסון, כנ"ל עמ' 392; כ"כ ראה הפרגמטיקה משנת 1706 שפורסמה בספרו של J.A. Abrahams, Jewish Life in the Middle Ages, London 1932, p. 329 ובפרגמטיקה משנת 1723 שתצלומה נשלח לי עלידי ד"ר י. ריבקין ו"ל מאוספו.
31. ראה תמונה מס' 1. על הריקוד עצמו לא הצלחתי עד היום להעלות דבר על מקורו, תוכנו וצורתו.
32. ש. סימונסון, שם, עמ' 393.
33. שו"ת זרע אמת לר' ישמעאל הכהן, ליוורנו תקנ"ו, סי' צ"ח; עחקרה הד"ט, לר' דניאל טירני, וילנא 1835 חלק יו"ד, סי' כ"ה, סי"ק ד'; שם, סי' כ"ה סי"ק י"א.
34. שו"ת שמש צדקה, לר' שמשון מורפוגו, ויניציאה 1743, חלק יו"ד סי' כ"ה.
35. H. Vogetstein u. P. Rieger, Geschichte der Juden in Rom, II Berlin 1895 p. 302.