

CELEBRATING IN THE VALLEY AND ON THE HILLTOPS

**Yardena Cohen and the creation of cultural patterns
in nature-connected festivities in kibbutzim in the
40's**

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The Hebrew (Israeli) culture took shape under very special conditions, as a meeting between the Jewish culture of the Yishuv in Eretz Israel and contents, forms, values and aspirations brought by the new immigrants from their countries of origin. This fascinating process of the growing of a new culture and its crystallisation has many aspects and therefore researching it requires recourse to various methods and tools.

Our main object shall be to follow the dance component of this emerging cultural pattern, as formed by Yardena Cohen, when designing and choreographing the nature connected festivities at several kibbutzim in the Jezreel Valley in the 40's, namely at Ein Hashofet (1944), Sha'ar Ha'amakim (1945) and Ganigar (1947).

Research in anthropology and sociology has shown that in immigrant societies there is always a tug of war between tendencies of preserving the traditional cultural values brought from the country of origin and the wish to embrace the cultural values and patterns of the new homeland. This is evident, for example, in developments in the U.S.A., where "the old" was rapidly replaced by "the new". This transition was made possible by the existence of an alternative cultural base, which replaced the imported one. But the immigrants who came to Eretz Israel prior to the creation of the State of Israel did not encounter any such inherent local cultural base and had in fact to invent one more or less from scratch.

Yardena Cohen was one of those who contributed towards the creation of such new cultural patterns through her work on communal festivities. What were the contents she used, what sort of ideology was guiding her, which cultural elements were at her disposal and how were they absorbed in the emerging patterns and formal designs?

Zionist ideology, the "Cana'anite" movement and the nature festivities of the agricultural settlements

Zionist ideology sought to create a new Jewish nation and a Jew different from the stereotype of the Jew in the diaspora. While the Jew in the diaspora was regarded as "rootless", "weak", "devious" and lacking self respect, having a negative attitude toward physical labor and nature, his ideal Zionist counterpart was to be a person living on

the land, who is able to defend himself with arms if necessary, and whose language is Hebrew. "He replaces the traditional Jewish garb with the Beduin abbaya or the Circassian cartridge-belt." (Even-Zohar, 1980). "He is a new person, who replaces 'Jewishness' with 'Hebrewness'" (B. Tamuz, 1984). "During the 40's, the tendency was to create a local culture, which should reflect the social ideals. This tendency required the negation of yesterday while embracing the day-before-yesterday: disregarding the diaspora and emphasising the distant past, that of Biblical figures" (ibid). "The Cana'anite political ideology found its expression first of all in literature" (Y. Shavit, 1984). The Cana'anite criticised Jewish religion, life in the diaspora, its institutions and values. They wished to dissociate themselves from Zionism, which maintains a cardinal link to the diaspora, and they spoke in favour of integrating the Yishuv into the surrounding, Middle Eastern "semitic zone" (an expression of much later vintage), hence a connection to Biblical figures and myths.

Yardena Cohen's attitude toward the Bible stories was anchored in Zionist views. ("We are looking for something different, something new," were the words used by members of Kibbutz Ein Hashofet when they approached Yardena in 1943, inviting her to stage a vineyard festival for them.) She also inclined towards the integration of indigent

semitic art components of oriental origin in her dances. With Yardena's help the experiment of taking Biblical stories and investing them with new meaning took place.

She wished "to find forms . . . suitable to the implementation of this idea; such as plays or mime-plays . . . that will revive ancient elements imprinted in every nation since its early days: the sources of dance, music, poetry and dress" (Y. Cohen, 1963).

The form created by Yardena was then called "pageant". "The form created was connected to agricultural holidays, seasonal festivities as well as family events and anniversaries" (Z. Friehaber, 1983).

Yardena's vineyard festival at Ein Hashofet was based on the ancient Feast of the 15th of the month Av (Tu B'Av), as depicted in the book of Judges, 19-21. "And see and behold, if the daughters of Shiloh come out to dance in dances, then come ye out of the vineyards, and catch you every man his wife of the daughters of Shiloh and go to the land of Benjamin" (Judges 21:21). The daughters of Ein Hashofet were to dance in the vineyards, thus creating a popular vine harvest festival rooted in the ancient Hebrew epos.

At Sha'ar Ha'amakim the pageant was based on the happenings at Haroshet Hagoyim (where the Kibbutz is situated), as related in Judges 5-7. It is the story of Deborah the prophetess, Barak the leader of the Israelite army, the enemy general Sissera and Yael who killed him in her tent. The pageant was in three sections: Harvest in the Kishon River valley; War of Independence; Victory and Settling the land. The titles of the scenes carry a double message, connecting the pageant to the Old Testament events as well as referring to modern occurrences of the 40's. In fact the pageant was an expression of the feelings and ideals of the participating kibbutzniks as well as of the numerous spectators who attended the festivities.

At Ganigar the main theme was water. (Genesis 21 – the story of Hagar; Gen. 26 – Isaac and the wells; Gen. 29 – Jacob and Rachel.) Water is, of course, the most elementary need of the farmer today as it was in ancient times. The well – be it the primitive one of old or the modern boring-machine – is a symbol of life itself. Without water there is no future for the Jewish settlers.

Sources of inspiration

'Each land has its own landscape, and each landscape its

hues and rhythm," wrote Yardena (1946) and "The landscape created my dances" (1950). "Movement is a language and our language is Hebrew. . . Just as the ancient Hebrew tongue is our language, it is self-evident that the old movement language is rooted here, in our land, in its landscape and specific sounds," she wrote (1946). Yardena always maintained a special relationship with the agricultural settlements and kibbutzim. She believed that these "tillers of the soil" would bring us closer to the ancient sounds of nature. The Arab drum – the tambour – played a central role in Yardena's dance. She says, "With all my might I struggled for the rhythms of the tambour, as I knew that its sounds are an echo of our past and heritage, that to its rhythms a reborn nation will dance while seeking expression, in times of joy and times of mourning" (1950).

Two additional aspects fired Yardena's imagination and creativity: her ties to the Biblical lore and its connection to the actuality of the 40's in Erez Israel. She found both aspects at the Cave of the Prophet Elijah in Haifa. "Women dancing, clad in colourful garments at the entrance to the cave were the initial impulse for a creation of festive celebrations," she attests (1963). The cave, a place of pilgrimage for members of several ancient Jewish communities, which she calls "the oriental communities", are for her the source of inspiration and their dances the fountainhead of her movement. Ethnomusicologists researching ancient dance forms reinforce Yardena's approach.

People belong to movement communities just as they belong to language groups. There exist movement languages as well as movement dialects, as R. Birdwhistell, A. Lomax and J. L. Hanna have demonstrated.

Each culture has its specific, exclusive means of organizing dance, its tempi and rhythms. Each individual is born into a movement dialect. (J. Kealiinohomoku, 1969). The history of the Jews created a situation in which the individual may lack this inherent movement dialect. Yardena was one of those who, by creating cultural patterns for the Jewish settlers in the 40's, were instrumental in cultivating a Hebrew movement dialect and culture.

The pageant as a form of folk festivity

Going over the material in the archives of the kibbutzim Ein Hashofet, Sha'ar Ha'amakim and Ganigar and interviewing Yardena, Gurit Kadman and the musician Izhar Yaron (who was a member of Ein Hashofet), a certain order of events leading to the creation of a pageant emerged,

similar in all three instances.

All three festivities were spread over a whole day, the central pageant took place outside the kibbutz proper, at an open space which could be reached in about a 20-30 minutes' walk and the audience was seated on a hillside.

At Ein Hashofet the performance took place in a natural amphitheatre. In the vineyard a tent was built for the dancers and two arbors were erected, one to house the choir and the other containing an exhibit of the development of the horticultural achievements of the kibbutz.

At Sha'ar Ha'amakim the stage was a field, covered with stubble after harvest, and the "wings" of the stage were some shrubs and trees which happened to grow there. At Ganigar the stage was located at the foot of the slope on which the audience sat. The decor was two tents and a tripod over a dug well. At Ein Hashofet and Sha'ar Ha'amakim a "Biblical" supper was served *al fresco* and at Ganigar a sort of open-air banquet was held.

At Ein Hashofet the audience continued dancing after the meal, the stage area serving as a dance floor. At the two other kibbutzim the general dancing took place in the dining hall.

The attitude toward space and time is the result of cultural tradition. Spatial orientation is different in different cultures as is the convention concerning time (E.T. Hall, 1983). Yarden Cohen wished to break out of the conventional framework of time and space. She writes, "I tried to make the members of the kibbutzim feel that the festivity isn't a stage-bound 'program' but can continue all night, till dawn, and everybody can have a good time among the vines. Therefore I insisted on the festive meal being served in the vineyard itself, which was lit. The ground became the banquet table and the members of the kibbutz sat around it, as peasants on their land" (1963).

'As a dancer, Yarden's attitude is one of exploration of space, of becoming part of it, of changing whatever she has discovered in it and creating in it. But her space is that of a landscape, not of a theatrical stage . . . her landscape is that of Israel, the stage isn't made of wooden boards she takes the people out to the hills and the valleys with her. She points to the earth as to a place to dance on, to play, to act on and be merry.'" (A. Tzuriel, 1976)

Yarden Cohen took the festivity out of the dining hall and transferred it to the open field. She built many bridges connecting the participants and the guests, the kibbutzniks

and those who came from the surrounding towns and villages, bridges which carry symbolic meanings. At Ein Hashofet it was vine leaves offered to the spectators; at Sha'ar Ha'amakim, special badges; at Ganigar, pine branches. Wine served by the dancers to the audience at Ein Hashofet and Ganigar, and milk at Sha'ar Ha'amakim, broke down the partitions between spectators and stage. By means of biblical activities a bridge was created between the past and the present. Another bridge was the procession from the kibbutz to the scene of the performance, a passage from everyday atmosphere to that of a festival. A bridge between Jews and Arabs was created by inviting the Arab neighbours to the festivities.

L.J. Hanna (1979) believes that dance or movement acquire meaning only in their social and cultural contexts. The same is true with regard to the above-mentioned bridges. The symbolic value of the bridge is connected to the social structure of the community, which also determines the mode of the artist's expression. His being a member of a given culture is reflected in the symbols belonging to it (Douglas, 1973).

Zionist ideology as well as the 'Cana'anite' attitude determined Yarden Cohen's choice of symbols and emphasised the connection to the local landscape, underlined the ancient Biblical epos and enhanced the integration of the immigrants in the geographical zone.

Yarden's pageants were integrative, uniting all their elements, such as dance, movement, music, song, mime and acting, decor and costumes into a complete production. This holistic approach also found expression in abolishing the gulf between participants and spectators, and in having three generations (children, parents and grandparents) take part in the dance tableau which was the climax of the event in all three festivities.

Yarden's holistic approach wove together all the artistic elements, extinguishing the boundaries between field and stage, past and present, Jews and Arabs.

The emergence of movement dialect

In Eretz Israel before the foundation of the State of Israel the ancient Hebrew language had to be re-created as a living tongue and likewise, a movement dialect had to be found. Yarden was one of those who, by creating dance elements, were instrumental in finding such a movement dialect. These elements, found in the kibbutz festivities and in her "Ovadia's Dance" and the "Wine-press Dance", show her

part in building the basis for the Israeli folk dance and its movement dialect. The basic formations and steps – in diverse combinations – form the folk dances, and the chain of steps executed by the dancers' feet trace a pattern on the floor. The basic forms evident in the pattern are several kinds of leaps, debka-hops, steps and cross-steps, the last being very characteristic of Israeli folk dance.

According to Kealiinohomoku, movement dialect manifests itself in posture, in the accentuating of a certain limb in mood and the relationships between the dancers.

Yardena Cohen addressed herself to the creation of a movement dialect. Aharon Ziv (who participated in the Ein Hashofet pageant) describes the circumstances thus: "In the period under discussion, there was a lot of intensive creative activity in the kibbutzim, each kibbutz trying to outdo the neighbouring one. Everybody was busy delving into the roots of the national cultural past. Those (members of the kibbutz) who thought that preparing a pageant with Yardena would be just 'hop and skip' were much mistaken. After our first meeting with her, she decided to devote the rehearsals to the loosening of the pelvis and the shoulders. After about two weeks, the shoulder blades actually started to move as if of their own accord and the pelvis began rotating 'perpetuum mobile'. . . I realised I was walking on the kibbutz sidewalks swaying my behind." (Y. Cohen, 1976).

This amusing description shows that Yardena was emphasising the shoulders and pelvis – these being the

dominant members in her movement dialect.

One may list a number of typical postures found in her work. In one scene one sees a line of girls, standing one behind the other, holding hands, the back curved backwards, the pelvis thrust forward, shoulders held back, the head inclined to the left, the weight supported by the slightly bent left foot with right leg thrust forward resting lightly on the heel. This posture appears in a number of Israeli folk dances, for example 'Hora Hadera' and "Eretz-Eretz".

In another photo one sees the cross step (חילוף=שיכול) which makes a stylised progression in circles or lines possible.

The mood is one of ecstasy, determination, with a strong connection to the soil, as well as a will to take off into the upward sphere. This posture expresses the equilibrium Yardena wished to express, between the material and the spiritual components of what she endeavoured to depict in the agricultural pageants she created for the kibbutzim in the 40's. ■

Bibliography

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J.L. Hanna, *To Dance is Human*, University of Texas, 1979
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For source material in Hebrew see bibliography at the end of the article in Hebrew.



Group of mourners at Sha'ar Ha'amakim pag