

# CHASSIDIC DANCE AT THE RABBI SHIM'ON BAR YOCHAI FESTIVITIES AT MEIRON

by Zvi Friedhaber

Though it may seem strange, the tradition of Chassidic dance at Meiron on Lag Be'Omer, when the festivities commemorating Rabbi Shim'on bar Yochai take place at Meiron in northern Israel, where his tomb is located, are of quite recent origin. It is, in fact, not more than a hundred years old. Before that time the dominant groups congregating at Meiron in honour of Bar Yochai were those of Jews called "The Arabised ones" *מסתערבים*, the indigenous inhabitants of Eretz Israel and those from the neighbouring lands, of Sephardic extraction, whose everyday language was Arabic. I would like to point out right from the beginning, that the influence of Oriental Jews on Chassidic dance and song on this occasion was not inconsiderable, but did not change the dances themselves. It manifested itself by adding another facet to them, as we shall see presently

For the researcher dealing with Chassidic dance traditions the meeting at Meiron is of great importance, as it offers the observer a unique opportunity to get close to the dancers and record or film the proceedings, which is impossible at other times, when the dancing takes place in closed Chassidic communities. At Meiron all are welcome and the gathering also offers an opportunity to watch a whole range of Chassidic dances, executed by the most adroit dancers, each dance being danced in many variations, which one may compare. Likewise the strict separation of the sexes – apart from the occasion of the lighting ceremony – does not apply at Meiron, enabling the women to observe freely the dances of the men, which is impossible on other occasions in Chassidic circles.

Before describing the dances themselves, let us consider the structure of the event, as many of the dances are connected to certain phases of the ceremony. The festivities may be divided into two main events: The first being the lighting of the fire on top of the special pillar placed on the roof of the tomb at night; the second, on the following morning, when the festivity itself takes place in the courtyard of the tomb,

in which the *Chalaka* (חלקה), the first cutting of the hair of babies, is the central event.

There is a further sub-division evident, each part being connected to certain separate dances, which are:

- (1) The lighting of the fire.
- (2) The festivities in the courtyard at night after the lighting.
- (3) The festivities next morning.
- (4) The ceremony of the *Chalaka*.

The dancing around the pillar on top of which the fire burns is comprised mostly of songs taken over by the Chassidim from the Sephardic, indigenous tradition. These are mainly circle dances and they are directed by the "dance -and-song master", who usually dances in the circle of dancers, but occasionally makes a sortie into the space between the dancers and the pillar holding the fire, prodding the dancers to exert themselves by intoning the special songs of the Bar Yochai festivities, which are all antiphonal in their structure.

Sometimes one of the Chassidim would spontaneously jump into the breach, take on the role of the "master of ceremonies" and encourage the dancers by his own dancing and singing, the multitude answering his song in response. It is impossible to describe the ecstasy the Chassidim reach at this point, as they go on dancing hour after hour in a frenzy of exultation.

Let us now proceed to the dancing taking place in the courtyard after the lighting ceremony. It starts by each group of Chassidim forming its own circle, thus offering an opportunity to compare the variations of the circle dances danced simultaneously. There are different steps to be observed, the form of holding to each other isn't always the same and the progression of the circle itself had several



variants.<sup>(1)</sup> These dances are all accompanied by the singing of the dancers themselves, a mixture of the special songs of the Bar Yochai festivities with those of other occasions.

At a certain point the musicians, the *Kleizmerim*, enter the activities. They take their traditional place in the *Kleizmerim*-corner and as they begin playing, the "show-off dances" commence. These dances are request dances, the spectators requesting specific dances from the musicians. As the tune of a certain dance is heard those dancers excelling in that specific dance enter the circle and the spectators clear a space for them. The audience is familiar with the dances as well as with the dancers who specialise in each dance.

An old man with a long beard, dressed in a grey coat enters the circle. He holds a walking stick in his hand. This oldster is a specialist in one form of the "Walking Stick Dance" (*Stocktanz*)<sup>(2)</sup> Immediately many *yeshiva-bochers* (students) close in on him clearing only the ground necessary for the old man to swing his stick in. The old man commands the musicians to play a *Doina* tune for him, a tune of Gypsy-Rumanian origin, to which the Stick Dance is done.

Instantly the requested tune is heard, played in the tremulous Chassidic manner. The old man bends over, describing a circle on the ground with his stick, just wide enough to swing it without hitting the spectators. And the dance commences: he kneels, his body reclining forward, and swings the stick in a circling motion in front of him and in figures of eight to his sides and above his head. His movement becomes quicker and quicker, accelerating for a while, shaking his whole body. Slowly he gets up, without stopping the swinging of the stick until he stands up and the dance is over.

There exist other variations of the *Stocktanz* such as the one in which the dancer balances the stick on his forehead, adding an acrobatic feat to his movement. Without holding the stick, he may attempt to descend until he lies prone on the floor and rise again without letting the stick tumble from his head. There are several other variations of this dance.<sup>(3)</sup>

The "Bottle Dance" (*Flesheltanz*) is danced in similar fashion. A bottle of brandy is placed on the forehead of one or two dancers, who endeavour to balance it throughout their gyrations. There exist several variations of the Bottle Dance, one of them consisting of balancing a whole pyramid of bottles placed on a special tray instead of one bottle only.<sup>(4)</sup>

One of the most beautiful dances to be seen at this occasion

is the "Resurrection Dance" (*Techias-hamesimtan*) This dance is executed by two dancers and contains a whole story told choreographically, in three scenes or parts:

First Scene: Two men dance together refreshing themselves while doing so by taking swigs from the brandy bottle. The bottle is passed from one to the other, accompanied by gestures of friendship and amity. Until suddenly one of the dancers refuses to pass the bottle to his partner. A quarrel ensues, while the slighted one of the pair tries to regain the bottle from his partner's grip, but the other does not let go and keeps the bottle out of his adversary's reach, teasing him by passing the bottle close before his face. At last the slighted one strikes the other and the attacked one falls down, "dead".

Second scene: To his growing consternation the aggressor realises what he has done. He tries to resuscitate his "dead" friend. He bends over his prostrate body as if administering artificial respiration. He shakes his limbs and tempts him by holding the bottle under his nose, entreating him to take it. All this is done while the dance goes on uninterrupted, the movement expressing anxiety, remorse and despair. At last the "dead one" shows signs of being alive. A tremor passes through his body and slowly he gets up.

Third scene: The Happy End. The aggressor offers the bottle to his resurrected pal and there is no end to the joyous dance which concludes the event.

Each part of this dance is accompanied by a different tune. The first one is danced to a *Doina* tune, which is also the one played for the *Beroigestanz* "The Anger Dance"<sup>(5)</sup> The second part is also accompanied by a *Doina* tune, but of a plaintive, sad character. For the final section another *Doina*, full of exuberance is being played.

The stage is open to anyone wishing to dance. From time to time a Chassid will jump into the arena and display his prowess. All the dances of this sort are improvised and the dancers performing them are mostly yeshiva student of tender age.

A short but impressive dance takes place at dawn next morning, on the roof of the tomb-building, after the *Tefillat Havatikim* ("Veteran's Prayer"), when the dancers still don their *talith* and *tefillin*. They dance in small circles, the dances being the same ones as those danced on the previous evening, during the fire-lighting ceremony.

After a short break, the Chassidim again congregate in the courtyard for the *Chalaka*. The dances are a nearly exact



repetition of those seen on the previous night. But there is one difference: now the children whose hair is to be shorn – leaving only the forelocks (*Peies*) – for the first time in their lives are the centre of interest and merriment. They ride high on the shoulders of their fathers in wide circles, while the show-off dances at the musicians' corner go on simultaneously.

To this whole repertory of Chassidic dance one has to add those dances which show the influence of recent times and the dance habits of modern contemporary Israel. Thus one may observe dances the Chassidim call "Hora" or "Debka", which bear the marks of oriental influences. In recent years there are also dances to tunes written by Israeli composers which the Chassidim have adopted.

In 1986 I again visited the festivities at Meiron and was surprised by the changes which had occurred since my previous visits. There was a complete change in the human landscape I had watched for nearly two decades. Together with those who shaped the events the old *Kleizmer* Reb Avramel Segal, disappeared. The old generation was replaced by a younger one, which is looking after the traditions described in my paper, but one may observe certain differences, if not in the form of the dances, then in their substance.

The new generation of dancers has by utilising the improvisatory character of all Chassidic dance, increased the frenzy and acrobatics and even introduced new dance forms. Prominent among these new dances are the group dances, such as the one danced to the tune of the Biblical verse, "Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity" (Psalms 133:1), a dance expressing simply the content of the text.

It is done as follows: the group of dancers sits on the ground, with feet stretched towards the centre of the circle; during the dance the participants exchange greetings by hand-shaking or other gestures of greeting. This is accompanied by the shaking and lifting of the feet. Then they get up and a regular circle dance commences, a procedure which is repeated several times.

I observed another variation, in which one of the dancers gets up and dances round the circle of his sitting comrades an improvised solo. Sometimes the solo dancer sits down again, and the one next to whom he sat down gets up and takes over in a round of his own. This is repeated several times, until all get up and a circle dance commences. Of course these innovations are caused by contemporary influences and one shall have to follow this interaction

between tradition and improvised change as it develops.

One never tires of watching the dances at Meiron, as they offer perennially new features, due to the improvisatory nature of all Chassidic dance, adding endless variations to the traditional ones. ■

#### REFERENCES

- (1) Zvi Friedhaber, *Chassidic Dances at the Festivities of Rabbi Shim'on Bar Yochai in Meiron*, in Fred Berk (ed.) "The Chassidic Dance"; New York 1975, pp. 25–28.
- (2) About R. Chaim Attik, the *Stocktanz* dancer and other famous dancers at Meiron – see Ch. Pekarzs, *Zava'ato shel R. Yanah*, "Hazofe"; Tel Aviv, 13.5.1971. Zvi Friedhaber, *Hamachol be'am Israel*, pp.124–128.
- (3) *Ibid.* (1), p.28.
- (4) *Ibid.* pp. 28–29; Zvi Friedhaber, *Dramatization in Chassidic Dances*, "Israel Dance", 1983, p.6.
- (5) About the *Sholem und Berogetzanz* see *Hamachol Hayehudi*, Vol. 3, Haifa 1972, pp. 31–37.

