

Changes in Israeli Folk Dance

Dina Roginsky



Israeli circle dance in the past

The year 2004 marks a number of important events in the history of Israel: first, a hundred years to the second wave of immigration ("Second Alyia"), considered to be the beginning of Socialist pioneering Zionism, and a hundred years to the death of Theodor Herzl. Another important historical landmark in Israeli culture, albeit not as well known, is sixty years to the first Hebrew dance conference held at Kibbutz Dalia on 14-15 July 1944 (see the conference program in appendix). The Ph.D. thesis on which this essay is based (Roginsky, 2004) examines the social history of a hundred years of folk dance in Israel. In the present article, I would like to examine the changes that have taken place in Israeli folk dance over the past sixty years, since 1944 – the beginning of its institutionalization process. Some other writers,

such as Zvi Friedhaber (1997) and Dan Ronen (1994), have also studied the phenomena of folk dance in Israel; the present work differs from theirs in emphasizing new research aspects - sociological, historical and political - in the phenomena of Israel folk dance. I will hereby present several key changes in the socio-historic development of the Israeli folk dance movement.

1. The institutional formalization of Israeli folk dances

In the program to the first Hebrew dance conference at Kibbutz Dalia, one may distinguish several types of folk dances presented on the main stage: a) Folk dances from other countries, popular among the Eretz Israeli Jewish population, such as Krakoviak, Polka and Cherkessia, as well as folk

dances not customarily danced in Eretz Israel, such as Scandinavian or British dances; b) Less than ten dances described as "Israeli folk dances" - namely, new dances created by Jewish creators in Eretz Israel. Among them, one may note Rivka Sturman's "Hagoren" ("The Granary"), Gertrud Kraus's "Davka" (classified as a performance-dance), new dances by Sara Levi-Tanai and Yardena Cohen, and the dance "Maim-Maim" ("Water-Water"), attributed to Else Dublon but appearing in the program as directed by Miriam Belchman (see discussion of this issue in Friedhaber, 1997). c) Traditional dances typical of the Yemenite Jewish community and the Eastern European Jewish community. Yemenite dancers, separated by gender, performed Yemenite dances under the instruction of Rachel Nadav and Saadia Damari, and the Eastern-European dance "Scherele" was performed as a performance-dance by students of the Kibbutzim Seminar, instructed by Gurit Kadman (Gert Kauffmann). Kadman, considered the founding mother of the Israeli folk dance movement, for which she received the 1981 Israel Prize, describes the classification of the dances in the first Dalia conference: "On the closing night, the program was divided, very typically, into three: the first part comprised twenty two dances that I found around the country, the second part, very modest, included maybe five or six dances that had been created here, and a third, most magnificent, concluding part – folk dances with music and costumes that had passed the test of time and been in existence for hundreds of years, actual traditional dances".¹ The Dalia conferences became a festive tradition in

Eretz Israel and later in the state of Israel, and took place until 1968 (Ashkenazi, 1992) Later, dance conferences moved to Zemach, and since 1988 the tradition has been kept in the annual dance conference in Karmiel – held in the summertime, approximately on the same date as the first Dalia conference.

The first Dalia conference marked, symbolically and in practice, the beginning of the Israeli folk dance movement as an established movement managed

ההסתדרות הכללית של העובדים העברים בארץ-ישראל
הרעיה הנין-קבוצית לפעולה מרסיקלית

כ נ ו ט א ר צ י ר א ש ו ן ל מ ח ר ל ו ת ע ם
נדליה (הרי אפרים) 14-16 ביולי, 1944.

תכנית ההופעות כמוצאי שבת	
18.00	רקודי ילורי בית הספר המשותף (עין חורד-תל יוסף)
	א) ריקדה
	ב) ס' ל הכת
	ג) רקוד הבאר
	ד) מחולות כינים
	ה) מחול הגורן (דבקה)
18.30	"מגילת רוח" - הגנת חברי דליה
19.30	עליית הקבוצות הרקודות על הבמה. - דברי פתיחה. -
רקודים מהגולה ורקודים נהוגים בארץ	
	א) טוילה - רקוד טמורח אירופה
	ב) יאל יבנה הגלילי
	ג) טרסקיה ירושלמית
	ד) גוררוניה
	ה) פולקה בית הטסה
	ו) פולקה ליסאת
	ז) טוטה מרקודי הארץ:
	טרסקיה גלילה וכפולה-טולקה
	לייאת קרקוביאק-קוטסט-הורה
20.30	יצירות והצגות לרקודים חדשים:
	א) רקוד הכנס { מנגינות בן-חיים קריה ענבים
	ב) ס' טים
	ג) סויהס כנוסה תימני
	ד) שני רקודים
	ה) רקוד "דוקא"
	ו) סויהס בית ארבעה רקודים
	ז) דבקה ורקוד עלהמים
21.20	קבוצת חופים תל-אביב וראשון לציון
	בהדרכת סעדיה דאטרי ורחל נדכי - רקודנית ואשית בלהקה של רנה ניקובה.
רקודים של עמים שונים	
	א) "על הכרן כלם כורעים" - סקנדינבי בית הטסה
	ב) טולבניה
	ג) רקוד הארגים - סקנדינבי קן הטומר הצעיר, תל-אביב
	ד) רקוד עתיק אנגלי
	ה) בסדה - צ'כית
	ו) קרקוביאק
	ז) רקוד רוסי
	בהשתתפות כוכבת זידי ואלכסנדר (אפיקים)
22.30	קסעים מתוך ההצגה; "סיר הטיירים" רשת הכובט
	יצירה והדרכה: סרה לוי

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מחר כרטיסי הכניסה 250 מא"י. הכיתה הכרטיסיב בסטדר "נעמן", חיפה, רח' המלכים

The First Dalia Conference program, courtesy the Israeli Dance Library

by national authorities, first and foremost by the Histadrut Labor Federation – the Labor Movement's central organizational organ. In this conference, the

¹ Ayala Dan-Caspi, interview with Gurit Kadman on the occasion of receiving the Israel Prize, in the "Gurit Kadman Biography" file (no. 123.5), Israeli Dance Library archive. [Hebrew]

foundations were laid for establishing a central committee for managing folk dances, "The inter-Kibbutzim Committee for Folk Dances", established within the Education and Culture Center of the Histadrut Labor Federation in 1945. During that year, the first course for folk dance instructors was held, and a year later the first Hebrew communal folk dance event (*harkada*), led by Shalom Hermon, took place in Tel Aviv. After the establishment of the state of Israel, the committee was upgraded and in 1952 it became The Folk Dance Section – which continued to function within the Histadrut, assisted in special dance projects by the Ministry of Education and Culture as well as by the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Tourism. The Folk Dance Section operated and fostered the Israeli folk dance movement, and its activities included running programs for training folk dance instructors; cultivating folk dance creators; organizing seminars for instructors; selecting the dances that were to be publicized; establishing a central dance company for performances in Israel and abroad; establishing the "Dancing School" and "Dancing Kindergarten" projects; disseminating folk dances in the army, immigrant towns, development towns and disadvantaged neighborhoods, youth movements, etc. (Kadman, 1969).

For about thirty years, from the 1950s to the 80s, the Folk Dance Section's activity was bureaucratically centralized and managed by a number of strong women of German origin: Gurit Kadman as the originator and the driving power of the movement, and the Section's Director Tirza Hodas as the practical, governing force in the field.² Since the 1980s, the power, authority and budget of the Section gradually

decreased, in close correspondence to the decline in the political and cultural hegemony of the Labor party in general, and of the Histadrut in particular. This dwindling has led to the Folk Dance Section's shutting down in the beginning of 2000, after fifty years of continuous activity. Despite the decline of the state-run Section, the fruits of its activities are apparent to this day, and Israeli folk dancing is a live, dynamic, constantly evolving popular movement. This is reflected in the following data: approximately 200,000 dancers participate on a regular basis in Israeli folk dances; the annual Karmiel dance festival draws a crowd of approximately 250,000 viewers (Ronen, 1994 p. 50); while in 1944 only six Israeli folk dances were listed, there are now over 4,000; some 3,000 people graduated from the "folk dance instructors training programs" run by the Folk Dance Section; 50 prominent creators of folk dances are active in Israel, and 15 others live and work abroad; about 250 communal folk dance events take place every week throughout Israel,³ and a similar number around the world.⁴

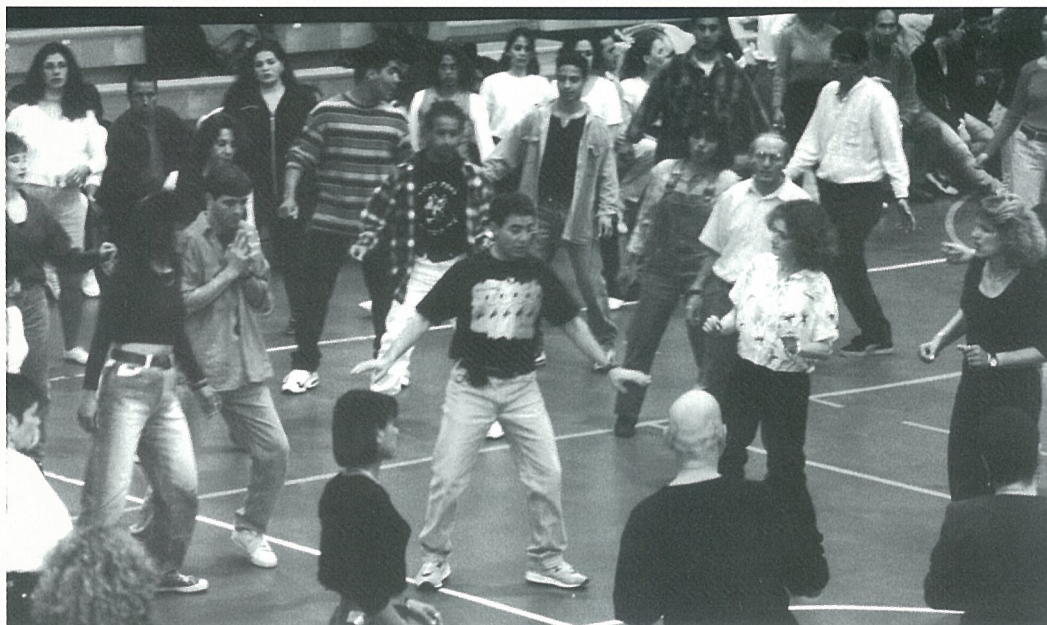
2. Major changes in the development of folk dance in Israel

Israeli society and Israeli folk dancing have undergone many changes in the past sixty years, and at an increasing pace over the past 25 years – a period of extensive cultural, political and economic changes. This has been the case especially since the political upheaval of the late 1970s, which gradually led to pushing aside and partially replacing the Ashkenazi hegemony in Israeli politics and culture; the establishment of a new economic orientation that shifted focus from a socialist welfare state to

² Alongside these women, who managed the institutional aspect of the movement, other women of German origin contributed to the establishment of the Hebrew dance movement by creating dances. Among the most important of these were Rivka Sturman, Gertrud Kraus, Lea Bergstein, Shulamit Bat Dori, as well as Yardena Cohen, who was born in Israel but studied modern Expressionist dance in Germany.

³ Data collected from the noticeboard published in the magazine *Rokdim (Dancing)*, no. 64, July 2004. The two largest communal folk dance events take place at the Tel Aviv University and at the Beit Danny community center in Tel Aviv, each with over 1,000 participants per event (according to G. Bitton, *Rokdim (Dancing)*, no. 60, December 2002, pp. 18-19 [Hebrew]).

⁴ Communal folk dance events, according to the magazine *Rokdim* noticeboard, take place in the following countries: Argentina, Australia, Austria, Brazil, Belgium, Canada, China, Croatia, Denmark, El Salvador, England, Finland, France, Germany, Holland, Italy, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Poland, Singapore, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, Uruguay, USA. Half of the entire international activity takes place in the USA.



Contemporary Israeli circle dance, courtesy Yaron Meishar

neo-liberal economics; and accelerated globalization processes that affect the Israeli way of life. These changes are expressed in Israeli folk dance as a micro-cosmos of Israeli society. The main change in Israeli folk dance is the fact that forces from the "field" have broken through the monopolistic framework whereby the Histadrut cultivated folklore from "above". Young people who were educated by the Folk Dance Section established studios and breached the dam, changing the nature and character of folk dance. Following the establishment of studios for training folk dance instructors within the Histadrut, many new instructors and creators had been nurtured and educated by the Section to teach existing folk dances and create new ones. A second generation of adults and a third generation of young creators raised by the "founding mothers" began to run the field, leading to a surge of changes. These changes may be viewed in terms of generations and periods, manifested in a vital change in the field's management. While the founding generation included mainly women, most of them European and predominantly of German origins, nowadays the field is run mostly by men, generally of middle-eastern origins. This change was titled in my thesis (Roginsky, 2004) "From German women to middle-eastern men", and it

embodies other changes that have taken place in folk dance: accelerated commercialization of the field, turning Israeli folk dance instruction and creation into a profession, and a globalization of dances which led to the dissemination and creation of Israeli folk dances abroad. The principal values of the field have also changed, emphasizing a search for intimacy, courtship and personal expression, in contrast to the past, when collectivism was stressed and extrovert expression of individualism and sexuality were denied. Each of these processes warrants a full analysis and an entire essay; here, however, we can only present some of the structural changes in the dances themselves, in a historic perspective.

A. An increase in the number of dances and its consequences

In 1944, in the first Dalia conference, approximately six original Israeli dances were listed. In the first instructors course organized by Kadman in 1945, about fifteen such dances were presented (Admon, Binstock and B.S., 1953). Nowadays, there are over 4,000 Israeli folk dances. These include both dances created in Israel and abroad – created by Israelis for both Israeli audiences and audiences abroad. This is the number of dances counted by the most

comprehensive Web-site documenting Israeli folk dances: www.israelidances.com. At the same point in time, however, only 2,200 dances were counted by the Israeli Web-site managed by Yaron Meishar, www.rokdim.co.il. In an interview I conducted with him (23 September 2003), Meishar's explanation for the difference was that he documents only the dances that are actually being danced, which he also backs up by instructional video tapes. The international site, however, contains data from every new dance program in Israel and abroad, disregarding the dances' actual acceptance.⁵

An analysis of the raw data in the international Web-site shows that from the 1940s to the 80s, about 1,600 dances were created. In the 1990s, approximately 1,800 dances were created – more dances than in the preceding five decades. That is to say, in one decade the number of dances was more than doubled.⁶ For people who dance in the field, the actual significance of the existence of thousands of dances is manifold. The accelerated rate at which new dances are created is a double-edged sword. On one hand, the field is perceived as modern, up-to-date and constantly renewing, and thus appeals to new, energetic people who invigorate it. On the other hand, veteran dancers cannot keep up with the rate of renewal and with the need to constantly study new dances, and in their frustration even retire from dancing. Many dancers feel that they need to devote many hours to studying new dances in order to remain up-to-date, as the changes in the "hot" new dances are swift. As to those who are unable to keep up – some retire from the field altogether, and some remain frustrated or try to "mimic" the more up-to-date dancers while dancing.

Another ramification of the increased number of dances is that past dances are being forgotten, since they are no longer danced in most communal dancing events. In reaction to this accelerated process, a group of veteran dancers and activists in the field began to hold events of "old dances" (defined as dances created until the 1980s),

entitles by names such as: "Old-fashioned Dancing", "Nostalgia", "An Evening of Roses", "The Old Dance Returns", etc. These people have even become organized in an association named REIM (Hebrew acronym for Israeli Folk Dances), which runs non-profit "old-fashioned" dancing events. The phenomena of "returning to the past" is dramatically described by Ayala Goren, Gurit Kadman's daughter, as a "return to the fold".⁷ This is a relatively new phenomena (since the 1990s), but it reflects a spreading sense of discontent among some dancers vis-à-vis the field's progress over the past twenty years, and even a longing to return to past state-run centralization. The classification of dances as "old" or "new" clearly reflects the generational divide in the field: veteran versus new dancers, the old institutional hegemony versus the new generation that runs the field nowadays.

B. Changes in the nature of dances

In comparison to the "old dances", the "new dances" are distinguished by several salient characteristics in addition to the increase in numbers.

The dances' structure: There has been a dramatic decrease in the dominance of the circular, hand-holding dances that were dominant in the past. In circle dances today the change is remarkable, and as dancers do not hold hands the dances appear to be "singles" dances moving together in a circle. The decline of traditional hand-holding is a powerful metaphor of the essential changes in the entire field. Processes of individuation and alienation are conspicuous in the huge communal dancing events in the big cities. These changes reflect the decline of the socialist Labor party ideology as manifested in the field of folk dance: a transition from emphasis on the collective to emphasis on individualism, and from a sense of collaboration between many to limited contact between few. Today, close physical contact only takes place in couples dancing, or among a few dancers who are familiar with each other and enjoy creating

⁵ Ashkenazi (1992) presents a record of dances that had survived from the various Dalia conferences to 1992, accompanied by tables including the year of creation, the creator and the composer.

⁶ Since the year 2000 to date, approximately 700 additional dances were created.

⁷ A. Goren, "An Evening of Roses", *Rokdim (Dancing)*, no. 57, Nov. 2001, pp. 12-14. [Hebrew]



While in the past the songs were about love of the land, the country, Sabbath songs and the Bible, now contemporary, popular songs are chosen, whose lyrics reflect the current state of affairs in Israel. Musically, over the past twenty years more and more dances are created to music classified as Oriental or Mediterranean. Although one may question how authentically Oriental this music is, since it is actually popular, electronically performed Pop music, it is clear that the field of contemporary folk dancing is becoming yet another tool for expressing widespread Israeli popular cultural tastes.

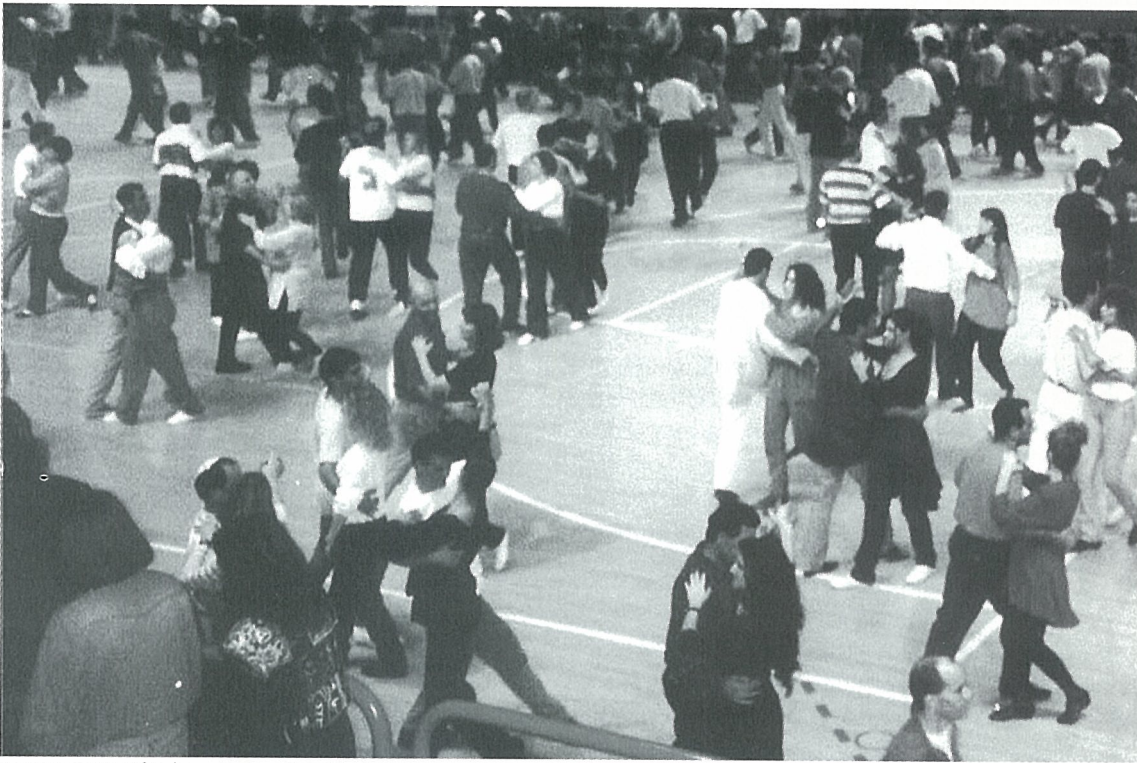
In conclusion, the dances themselves and the entire field of Israeli folk dancing have undergone changes in structure, values, leadership, technology and economics in its sixty years of existence. Despite the fact that these extreme changes outrage many in the field and give rise to disagreements and debates, both over principles and in relation to varied interests, one central element has not changed. This has to do with the fact that for all the participants – dancers, creators and dance leaders, old, young, and from various ethnic origins – the field of Israeli folk dance is related to a sense of

Israeli identity, and all of them consider themselves its representatives: those who repudiate the changes, claiming that the innovations distort the essence of Israeli folk dances and remove them from their origins, as well as those who embrace change, claiming that Israeli culture has many facets, diverse and self-renewing. Although there is no clear-cut answer to what exactly is the "Israeli nature" of Israeli folk dance, the participants in the field sense that the elusive element of national-cultural "Israeliness" in fact exists, and is still a key element in contemporary Israeli folk dances.

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Contemporary couples dance, courtesy Yaron Meishar

In contrast, in early dance events only a few dances were danced. The fact that songs are not repeated as often as they used to be is a contributing factor. In the past, each dance was repeated four to six times, while today three repetitions are deemed sufficient.⁹

C. Musical accompaniment, songs and music

At the beginning of the folk dance movement, an attempt was made to create music especially suited to folk dances, in order to create a harmonious artistic form comprising both dance and music. In this attempt, several professional creative couples are prominent, such as Lea Bergstein and Matityahu Shalem, and the couple Raaya and Yossi Spivak, as well as Sara Levi-Tanai, who searched for popular tunes to fit her dances and even composed dance music herself. In addition, for many years folk dance music was played live, usually by accordion. These aspects have changed drastically over the past

decades. Live music has all but disappeared. In the 1970s, live music was gradually replaced by tapes and cassettes, and later CDs. Today, dance leaders use computerized systems on which dance songs are scanned by special programs. In addition, there is no longer a wish to create special tunes for folk dances. Folk dance music is taken from up-to-date hits heard on the radio, to which dances are created. The dance creators' chase for new songs has led to the phenomena of the Folk Dance Instructors Organization "reserving rights" for songs in a particular creator's name, reserving his right to create a dance to it. This in order to prevent arguments between creators over two dances created to the same song, preventing confusion and anarchy.

The songs to whose sounds the new dances are danced are considered Hebrew or Israeli songs because the lyrics are in Hebrew. However, their contents have undergone an apparent change.

⁹ Y. Meishar, "Then and Today", no. 15, Sept. 1992, pp. 4-5. [Hebrew]

a separate sub-group by holding hands among themselves. Alongside round dances, two other structures of dances were created: the couple structure and the line structure. Both undermine the sense of communal togetherness enabled by the unified circle, since they separate the participants into smaller structural fragments. Couples dances enable the creation of intimacy between genders – an exclusive connection between two dancers only – and diminish the importance of the collective circle (although the couples move along an imaginary circle). In line dances, the dancing person is entirely isolated, since participants stand in lines and rows behind each other, without making any contact at all, so that each dancer dances on his own while watching the back of the dancer before him.

The two new dance forms that were added to circle dances strongly emphasize the difference in values in the field and the difference in the dancers' feelings as they shift from a sense of belonging to a collective (expressed in the circle), to inter-gender connection (couples dancing), to sheer isolation. This morphology strongly attests to the field's central ideological norms. I would like to claim that the field of Israeli folk dancing emphasizes "Israeli collectivism" as a supreme value, while other forms have developed within it, expressing attempts to separate from the stressful collective in order to become a couple or an individual. Quantitative data reveals that, other than a few dances, the line structure was practically nonexistent until the 1970s. The first dances of this type in the 70s (1971) were created to foreign music (Hundred Miles, Madam Rober). The foreign music and lyrics, which characterize line dances to this day, bluntly breach the "Israeliness" of the field, and are thus few in number, allowed only a small portion of time (or none at all) in communal dancing events.

The dances' characteristic movement: The typical movements of folk dances have not changed as drastically as other aspects of the field. The assortment of basic movements which were the basis of Israeli dance from its beginning (such as the Yemenite step, Debka stamping and bending, hand and leg raising, crosswise reverse step, rotation,

weight switch, pauses, etc.) are still the basic dance moves. The movement notations established by the Folk Dance Section since its beginning – aiming to document dances in order to study and teach them – do not show any deep change in dances since the 1950s to our time.

The delineation of the typical Israeli folk dance artistic movement style was formalized in the 1950s, upon the establishment of the Histadrut Company - the national Israeli dance company. It was managed by the choreographer Yonatan Carmon, who coined what is still dubbed the "Carmon style" in folk dancing. This style is displayed by practically every representative Israeli company, which exist in almost every city in Israel and in many educational institutions, mostly enjoying municipal support (there are a few commercial folk dance companies, such as Gavry Levi's Shalom companies, and the independent companies managed by Carmon). This performance style has become the identifying mark of Israeli folk dancing, "reflecting back" on the creation of communal folk dances. Gadi Bitton, one of the field's principal players today, comments on the relation between dances in communal dancing events and the semi-professional folk dance companies, whose dancers and managers have grown in the field of Israeli folk dance. These relations involve reciprocal influences, making the participatory communal folk dances more complex and more demanding in terms of technical abilities.⁸

The complexity of the dances: In contrast to the relative stability in basic steps, the connections between these basic steps and their variations and changes have gradually led to more complicated dances. This is true in terms of increased complexity, higher tempo and decrease of repetitive patterns in the dances. Such dances require more focus and attention, both in learning and dancing them, as they include a wide variety of changes and steps. Technical ability has also become more elaborate, as many new dances require it for their many rotations, fast paces and rapid changes. In communal dancing events today dozens of dances are danced, and as many as hundreds are danced in dance marathons.

⁸ G. Bitton, "Touching the Stage", *Rokdim (Dancing)*, no. 45, April 1998, p. 11. [Hebrew]