

JEWISH DANCE TRADITION

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Dance in the Jewish Communities in Italy During and After the Renaissance

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The renaissance in the 14th and 15th centuries exerted a marked influence on the social, cultural and economic life of the Jewish communities in Italy. The close mutual ties between the Italian Jewish communities and those situated in other Mediterranean countries spread this influence throughout the whole region.

The new ideas of the renaissance however, did not displace the traditional Jewish values. Talmudic studies were not neglected,

but new subjects were added to the curriculum of pupils and jeshiva-students. These included secular subjects such as the Latin and Italian languages and their grammar as well as calligraphy and the instruction of the arts, especially in theatre, music and dance.

Dance among the Jews of renaissance Italy developed in two directions: social recreational dance and artistic stage dance - a relatively new phenomenon among Jews. Jewish artistic dance played a central role, not only inside the Jewish community but also in the gentile society. Some became dancing masters at the courts of many ducal rulers of Italy, and developed rich artistic lives at these palaces.

For example, in the 15th century, the Jewish dancing master Guglielmo Ebreo da Pesaro was the best known choreographer of his times and was invited to create pageants all over Italy. He and his colleagues may well be regarded as the forefathers of ballet. (1).

He wrote a treatise on the art of dancing in which he exhorts his students to be aware of the moral dangers and pitfalls lurking among the practitioners of the art of dance:

"This [art of dancing] most favours and befits those whose hearts are loving and generous and those whose spirits are ennobled by a heavenly bent rather than by a fortuitous inclination. But it is completely alien to, and a moral enemy of vile and rude mechanicals [base] who often, with corrupt souls and treacherous minds, turn it from a liberal art and virtuous science into something adulterous and ignoble." ("On the Practice or Art of Dancing", Barbara Sparti's recent translation of Guglielmo's book.) (2)

This warning by the foremost Jewish dancing master of his time was based on practical experience, as may be observed in the frequently re-occurring moral strictures against immorality at social gatherings where dancing took place found in the rabbinical literature of the period. Such exhortations are common in 16th century texts and even more frequent in the 17th and 18th centuries. They are the results of increasing frequency of social dancing among the Jewish communities. The mixing of young men and women at social dance events brought with them promiscuity, against which the rabbinical establishment published diatribes.

To what extent dance was proliferating among Jews attests the fact, that at the wedding of Ferdinand of Aragon with Isabella of Castilla in 1469 at Palermo,

Sicily, no less than 400 Jewish youths took part in the dances. Dancing was so popular amongst the Jews of the island, that in an unprecedented step the Jews of the town of Sciacca asked and obtained a special royal dispensation which allowed them to hold dance festivities at which men and women danced together, which was strictly forbidden by the rabbinical authorities of the kehillot. [Jewish town councils]. (3)

The intensive dance activities of the Jewish communities both in art form and social dancing made the systematic teaching of dance techniques mandatory. This created the need for establishing dancing schools. But dance was also taught in the private houses of wealthy Jewish merchants who hired dancing masters for their offspring.

The dancing master as a social phenomenon requires special attention. We are here solely concerned with the dancing master as the teacher of social dance, not as a choreographer of stage performances or as a tutor to princelings at the aristocratic houses of gentiles. There was, of course, mutual influence between both these categories of dance activities.

A few examples of the proliferation of dance in the lives of the Jewish communities in Italy will suffice to prove the important position of the dancing master as a profession. As already cited, the participation of the 400 Jewish dancers at the royal wedding at Palermo, necessitated the existence of widespread Jewish dance tuition in the community.

As also prove the two dance scenes presented by the Jewish community of Pesaro at the wedding of the ruler of the region, Costanzo Sforza with Camilla d'Aragona in 1475.

David Hareuveni (an adventurer who claimed to be the emissary of Joseph, King of the Lost Tribes, a 'false messiah') arrived in 1524 at Pisa, Italy, and was the guest of Rabbi Shemuel Nissim, a very important rabbinical personality. His house was apparently open to contemporary influences of the arts, including dance and music which were practiced by family members, as Hareuveni writes: "During the day of the great fast there came to visit Rabbi Yechiel and his virtuous wife Diamant, the daughter of Rabbi Meshulam of Venice; and she came before lady Sara [the spouse of Rabbi Yechiel] and her daughter Laura and other wenches and they danced in the room in which I was lodging. They told me: We are dancing before your honour and so you shall not grieve but rejoice at the day of fasting. They asked me:

Is there a greater joy than the sound of the violin and the [sight] of dancing?" (4)

Rabbi Yehuda Arie of Modena (1571-1648), one of the important rabbis of Venice, writes in his autobiography, that in his youth he "studied both music and dancing, and even a little Latin." (5) And he boasts of some of his family's offspring who were dancing masters. He writes about his wife's brother: "He is regarded by all, knows how to play [musical instruments], to sing and to dance..." And about another close relative: "He built his house and is diligent at his profession, teaching dance and the playing of music." (6)

In Venice, not only the daughters of Jewish families studied dancing with Jewish dancing masters, gentile youngsters also enrolled in their schools. The rabbinical authorities as well as the Christian establishment did not see this mingling favourably. Accordingly, in 1643, the dance schools run by the Jews were closed by municipal decree.

In 1697, when luxury became rampant among the rich Jews of the city, the rabbinical authorities of Venice prohibited the hiring of dancing masters in the homes of brides to be, before and even after the wedding ceremony.

The important place held by the dancing master in the Jewish communities is reflected in the rules proclaimed from time to time by the committees governing them. For example, in Mantova, one may observe the change in attitude of the "parnassim" towards the teaching of dance as well as mixed dance (i.e. male and female dancers). Usually the members of the community failed to observe the stricter rules of conduct. In 1687, Rabbi Moshe Zacut (1620-1697) had to defer to public opinion and relax the strict prohibition of mixed dancing at weddings.

The petition he received stated: "...we decided to approach our learned rabbi Moshe Zacut, so that he may allow the dance of men and women at the weddings of maidens and grooms just once, on condition they are going to wear gloves. Likewise, to allow the dancing master to teach (both sexes) at any time, provided he wears gloves."

Another aspect the by-laws of the communities concerning dance often dealt with was the question, to which degree of kinship (father and daughter, brother and sister, etc) were to be allowed to dance together - holding hands? The heads of the communities also dealt with the role of the musicians hired to play at dances. As a

general example of these rules, the following will suffice:

"A troupe of players, what is called 'academia' in other languages, may perform at weddings, even if the musicians are gentiles. Likewise, even on the night the bride goes to the bridegrooms house... At all times, mixed dancing between men and women is forbidden. Except for the dancing master and amongst the members of a family." (8)

From these two quotations from the rules of the Mantua Jewish community one may observe the special place of the dancing master in society. He alone had the privilege of dancing with women, and not only during lessons but also at social gatherings involving dance. To this evidence may be added the rule proclaimed in 1751 at Ferrara, stating that "only husband and his wife, father with his daughter, sister and brother, and the dancing master may dance together." (9)

Among the Jewish communities of Italy the tradition of holding feasts, especially at the Purim holiday, developed. These balls began already in the 13th century, becoming widespread in later times, influenced, no doubt by the carnival celebrated by their gentile neighbours. Therefore it is obvious, that mixed dancing

as well as the donning of masks became popular amongst the Jews. This caused discussions as to what is appropriate and what is to be proscribed.

But in most recorded cases, in the end the permission of a rabbinical scholar was obtained. For instance, Rabbi Yehuda Mintz. (1408-1508) the rabbi of Padua cites in his answer to a query, the permission some of his illustrious predecessors have given to the organizing of masked balls. He adds, that he himself observed the offspring of his own teachers wearing apparel of the opposite sex at masked balls. [As opposed to the biblical stricture that a man should not wear women's clothes and vice versa]. To emphasise his ruling, he adds, that if anything was improper, his learned teachers would not have accepted the new habits and endorsed them. (9)

Another phenomenon increasingly in evidence at Purim feasts is the "literary mask", i.e. a satirical parsiflage or imitation of a well know text, recited for the amusement of the revellers. These dealt critically with up-to-date topics in the life of the Jewish community. The first parody of this kind is by Rabbi Klonimus ben Klonimus (1286-1324), entitled "Massechet Sofrim", a play on words, as 'massechet' means both mask as well as treatise. From this text we may learn about

the role played by dancing at the masked balls, which, as the author states, takes place from the beginning of the month of Adar to the 15th, the date of the Purim Festival. (10)

The grudgingly granted permission for Jews to participate in masked balls was an apparent attempt to prevent Jewish youngsters from going dancing at gentile carnival balls.

To enhance the artistic presentations at the Purim balls, the parodies, cantatas and comedies performed were becoming more and more elaborate and often included dance scenes. For this purpose, especially composed music and choreography was necessary. This could not be achieved without professionally trained dancing masters and dancers. (For bibliography see end of the article in Hebrew on page 46)



THE JEWS OF PESARO PERFORMING AT THE DUCAL WEDDING IN 1475

