

by Zvi Friedhaber

Dance and its role in Jewish life in different periods is the topic dealt with in a series of articles to be published in coming issues of I.D.Q.

The first part of this discourse with regard to Jewish dance traditions deals with the post-Mishnaic-Talmudic period (the 2nd to the 5th centuries C.E.) Most of the sources are to be found in the rabbinical literature of the period, such as the books written by the Geonim; the many collections of questions and answers by famous learned rabbis, who were approached by those seeking their guidance in queries concerning religious as well as practical topics; various books of moral teaching as well as the rules and laws decided upon by the committees governing the Jewish communities.

In the Mishna and the Babylonian as well as the Jerusalem Talmuds themselves, there are descriptions of dancing and rhythmical movement in ceremonies performed at festivals and holidays in the Temple, such as the Omer ceremony (connected to the celebration of Pesach), Hava'at Ha Bikkurim (Feast of the First Fruits), Simchat Beit Ha Shoeva (water ceremony during the Sukkot festival), Tu-Beav (15th of the months Av, the feast of love, when lads would seek their beloved ones at night in the vineyards) as well as family celebrations, such as weddings and circumcisions. (1) [For all bibliographical sources see the Hebrew version of this article on p.53]

All these descriptions, composed after the Temple in Jerusalem had already been destroyed and the Jews dispersed to many countries, were written in hope of renewing these ceremonies in a reconstructed homeland, a hope which was not to be implemented for many centuries. Most of these Temple ceremonies lost their meaning in the diaspora, their descriptions becoming just memories. On the other hand, the family ceremonies, especially weddings and their accompanying dances, became increasingly important in Jewish life in the diaspora, being in fact the sole source of merriment and happiness in the life of the Jewish communities.

It is not surprising, that in the framework of the family ceremonies one may observe dance modes borrowed from their gentile neighbors.

As early as the Babylonian exile new feasts were added to the traditional ones stemming from Biblical times, such as Simchat Tora (the ending and the new beginning of reading the Tora in the synagogue at Sukkot) and the Purim festival. Both these feasts brought about the creation of specific dances, that developed in different directions (to be discussed later).

Rabbinical sources dealing with the subject, were mostly addressed to dance aspects unconnected to religious life, but to questions arising from social occasions in everyday Jewish life. Dance is discussed in rabbinical literature mainly as a result of questions put to them as to the 'correctness', the 'kashrut' of dance

and its accompanying features. Without these sources, that came mainly from opponents to the newly established social dance habits, we would hardly be able to reconstruct Jewish dance forms at all.

What irked both the rabbinical as well as the secular leadership of the kehilot (Jewish local communities) was the emergence of a secular social life-style. They objected strongly to mixed dancing, e.g. of men and women dancing together, a phenomenon which spread increasingly.

Thus in the book "Ma'asim lebnei Eretz Israel", one of the earliest sources at our disposal, we find the following strictures: "And what with the dancing of men and women mixed together, it is forbidden to dance thus; only men alone and women alone." (2) As this book was written in Eretz Israel in the period after the Talmud was finalized, circa 500 C.E., we learn from this strict rule about separation of the sexes, that mixed dancing already took root at that early time. In the literature of the Geonim (Mesopotamia, around 700 C.E.) this prohibition - often in nearly the same words - is repeated again and again. This proves that mixing of the sexes during dancing was proliferating and impossible to stop.

WEDDING DANCES

Wedding ceremonies became increasingly important in the social life of the Jewish communities, as did the accompanying dances and dance traditions. We learn about the variegated dance customs that had developed from an early account from the 10th century C.E., when Rabbi Hai Gaon (939-1038) was approached by the Jewish community of the Tunisian town of Kabas, asking the learned man to instruct them as to what to do about habits that had spread in the community.

"It has become customary in the homes of brides and bridegrooms for the women to play drums and dance, and to bring in gentile [musicians] to entertain using string and wind instruments; is that allowed or prohibited? And is there any difference as to the type of instrument used?" (3)

The learned rabbi's answer is as follows: "As to the question of women playing drums and dancing, even if they use their mouths only, it is abominable. Even more so, if there are people playing instruments [there], this is to be avoided, as it is an 'opening for sin' and other iniquities, most of all, in the case of playing violins and flutes. But the playing of drums and dancing to singing while the bride is being dressed and adorned, though not during the festive meal, is disregarded by some, and if kept in [proper] bounds, is acceptable." (4)

From this source we learn for the first time, of women dancing in front of male guests, accompanying themselves by song and drumming, as well as the habit of hiring gentile musicians to play while the male and female wedding guests dance. Likewise, we hear about the custom of dancing and making of music while the bride is being dressed and made-up, in the presence of gentile

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entertainers. This is clear evidence of the collaboration and mutual influence among the Tunisian Jews and their Berber neighbors.

When the Rambam (Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon, the most important Jewish sage, physician and philosopher of his time) arrived in Egypt in 1156, he encountered among the Jews there several modes they had copied from their gentile neighbors, found them objectionable and fought against them. The following is what Rambam had to say about these wedding customs: "Even as most Jewish women do not transgress the rule that 'a female shall not wear men's apparel', some, due to their naivety, are imitating the habits of the gentiles. [It happens] that a woman dons a head-dress or [a male's] hat, takes a sword or rapier in her hand and commences to dance with it before the men, which is an abomination. One cannot accept that being a bride, she is exempt from the rules [of behaviour] laid down by the Tora. Later they would excuse themselves, by saying they were just following the established tradition, excusing their behaviour by the deeds of others." (5)

Sword dancing was a widely spread habit, found among the Greek inhabitants of the Mediterranean isles, which spread as far as India. The sword dance was regarded as a magical act, believed to protect the bride and groom from the evil spirits endangering the newlyweds. Wedding dances developed in the European, Ashkenazi Jewish communities, were connected (especially in the German speaking countries) to the establishment of "dance houses" since the 12th century. Every self-respecting community regarded it as essential to hire or build its own dance-house, administered along with its other assets. The main reason for establishing dance-houses was, probably, the crowded conditions of their dwellings, that did not allow the gathering together of large numbers of guests, attending wedding ceremonies.

Often the dance-house would be situated at the offices of the kehila (Jewish local community), just as similar dance halls were located at the city-hall of the town, the "Ratshaus". The Jewish dance-house was called by different names, such as "Tanzhaus", "Spielhaus" [play-house] or "Brauthaus" [bride-house]. There is evidence of these dance-houses being active well into the 18th century.

The first author to mention such an institution, which he calls "Beit Chupa" (chupa - the canopy held over the couple to be married), is Rabbi Yehuda Chassid (1150-1217). He also describes wedding habits prevalent in his time: "It is being told, that a 'chassid' [righteous man], when he heard, while sitting in the 'Beit Chupa', a singer mentioning the name of the Lord in his song, would damn him every time he voiced the holy name." (6)

The traditions and dance habits that developed in the dance-houses were many. They are too numerous to

describe in the framework of the present article. (7)

Undoubtedly, dance became such an important component of the wedding ceremony, that Rabbi Yaakov, son of Rabbi Asher (1270-1342) states in his book of halacha-rules, "Sefer Haturim": "It is a 'mitzva' [religious duty] to entertain the bride and groom by dancing before them." (8)

Dancing before the couple as a religious 'mitzva' spread to most Jewish communities. The widely accepted expression "Mitzva-tanz", meaning a special type of dance found in Ashkenazi communities probably stems from the above quoted source. The first one to use the term to describe a dance danced during a certain part of the wedding ceremony itself was Rabbi Yaakov Halevi Molin ("Hamaharil", 1360-1427) in his book of traditions: "In some places the 'Mitzva-tanz' is danced after the 'Havdala' [the ceremony of extinguishing a special braided candle in a cup of wine] after the Sabbath is over." (9)

The development of Jewish social life brought with it class distinctions. There were customs marking who belonged to what socio-economical class at wedding dance occasions. As we may see in Rabbi Israel Isserlin's (1396-1460) book "Trumat Hadeshen", where the following story is told: "One Reuven hired a belt from Shimon for two dinars, to wear and show-off during a wedding dance. While he danced wearing the belt a virgin approached him, asking him to lend her the belt, so she too would be able to dance two or three dances. He told her, he would be willing to lend the belt, provided she would marry him, while wearing it. She danced with it, telling him she was agreeable, and he gave her the belt before witnesses." (10)

Without involving ourselves in the halachic question whether such a wedding pledge is binding at all, it is an illustration of social conditions prevalent at that time. Without sporting some distinctive signs of belonging to a certain socio-economic class, one could not participate. Donning an expensive belt, often made of silver, became such a status symbol. Perhaps that is the reason for the inclusion of a gilded belt in the traditional gifts of Ashkenazi grooms to their bride to be on the eve of their wedding, while the gifts of the bride to her future spouse often included a silver covered one.

The general concept of "dancing before the bride and the groom and entertaining them" brought about the creation of many dance customs, called collectively "Mitzva-tanz". Usually, these were danced at the end of the wedding feast.

Even today in the ultra-religious communities, this is the only point, at which the "charedi" couple is held aloft in a procession, while they are seated on chairs and celebrated together.

Since the 16th century, another phenomenon developed from this mixed dancing. Namely, dancing while being "separated by a kerchief". To avoid body contact between the sexes, a kerchief is

held by the man and his female partner. This did not become an accepted usage at once, as we may learn from Rabbi Avraham Chaim Shor's (1632) book "Torat Chaim": "It is forbidden to dance with the bride during the seven days of the wedding, even when he is not holding her hand but separated by a kerchief, as some students of the Tora are prone to do in our time; this too is abominable. ... And those sinners who dance just so with women, are, as the scriptures have it, "hand to hand is not to be expiated" [from sin]. (11)

There exist many forms of dance "separated by a kerchief", which are too numerous to be dealt with in this article. (12)

The list of bibliographical sources is to be found at the end of the article in Hebrew on p. 53.

