

YEMENITE JEWISH CULTURE AND DANCE: POPULAR MYTHS AND INDIGENOUS ACTIVITIES IN THE ISRAEL CONTEXT

by Shalom Staub

Of all the dance traditions among the world's Jewish communities, few can claim the popular attention and status associated with Yemenite dance. Movements similar to or based on those once done in the hundreds of small towns and villages scattered throughout the southern Arabian mountains have found their way to many new contexts. The "Yemenite step", the "da'aseh", is part of the basic vocabulary among dancers at Israeli folk dance sessions on several continents, as well as on stage. Yemenite dance is performed by dozens of ensembles, professional and amateur, Yemenite and non-Yemenite, Israeli and American.

Yemenite Jewish history cannot provide a full explanation for why this small aspect of Yemenite folklife has assumed such tremendous importance for so many people. Rather, as I shall explore in this paper, the roots of this reputation can be found in the quest for an authentic Jewish culture among European *halutzim*, the pioneers and settlers of Israel. And while certain images of Yemenite culture and dance became widely disseminated, and even adopted by some Yemenites, indigenous attitudes and practices have continued within the Yemenite community generally unobserved by outsiders. These indigenous aspects of Israeli Yemenite culture can be identified through ethnographic research, in which the fieldworker seeks to understand Israeli Yemenite culture in its own terms and within appropriate social contexts. Such an approach reveals that the meanings and significance attributed to Yemenite culture and dance by outsiders may have little in common with attitudes and experiences shared by insiders. Both continue to run their independent courses as if on parallel planes, though occasionally bumping against each other.

Yemenite dance began its remarkable rise to prominence not in Yemen itself, but upon its arrival in Israel, coinciding with the emergence of modern Hebrew culture from the beginning of Jewish immigration to Palestine in the late 1800's to the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. The

European Jewish immigrants to Palestine during that period sought neither to preserve their old country ways nor adopt the cultural forms of the host majority (cf. Even-Zohar 1981:5). Instead, they sought to break the stereotypes of the European diaspora experience and create a new Jewish identity. As Itamar Even-Zohar notes,

Among the numerous ways manifested for contraposing "new Hebrew" to "old Diaspora Jew" were the transition to physical labor...; self-defense and the concomitant use of arms; the supplanting of the old, "contemptible" Diaspora language, Yiddish, with a new tongue, colloquial Hebrew...-adopting the Sephardic rather than the Ashkenazic pronunciation; discarding traditional Jewish dress and adopting other fashions (such as the Bedouin-Circassian); dropping East-European family names and assuming Hebrew names instead. (1981:9)

In addition to these areas, we may also consider the efforts of composers, choreographers, and craftworkers who sought to create new forms built on ancient foundations. Most artists shared an implicit rejection of European Jewish folk traditions, since these were all too readily identified with the Diaspora experience, unbecoming the return to *ha'aretz*, the Land. As choreographer Yardena Cohen recalls from the 1940's,

There [at the 1944 dance festival at Kibbutz Daliah] I attended a symposium about what are the roots of Israeli dance. I remember saying that it is impossible to dance the *krakowiak* and other Eastern European imports which came with the immigrants. "We're learning Hebrew," I said, "and we must have a Hebrew dance." (Ingber 1974:36)

Just as the language and nation were seen as revival from the Biblical experience, Biblical images dominated the work of the early folk music and dance revivalists. Composer Mattityahu Shelem and dancer Leah Bergstein, among others, turned their creative attention to agricultural practices, drawing on Biblical precedents to create Kibbutz-

based harvest pageants and festivals (Inger 1985/86). The local Arab population recalled other Biblical images. The Arab men's *Debka* line dances accompanied by shepherd flute and clay drum offered the image of Biblical shepherds tending their flocks. Shalom Hermon recalls the influence of Yardena Cohen in this area:

It was due to Yardena, that I began to see alternatives. She has a special way of looking at dance — examining the steps and dances of those who live on the land much as the Patriarchs did. The Bedouin, Arab, and Druze still live in little villages or in tents and are still shepherd and plow with oxen much the same as in olden times. Yardena showed me these peoples' styles might give us the idea of how the Biblical people danced. (Ingber 1974:41)

While local Arab and Bedouin folk cultural materials were borrowed or used for inspiration as examples of Biblical activity, the European Jewish settlers also viewed Sephardic and Middle Eastern Jews as bearers of Biblical traditions, since their diaspora had not taken them as far from the homeland. Of all the Middle Eastern Jewish communities, the Yemenites seemed to emerge above all others as embodying this sense of "Biblical-ness." Even before "Operation Magic Carpet", the Yemenite mass immigration of 1948–1951, the Yemenites provided the folkloric sources for craftsmen, musicians, and dancers. Early in the 20th Century, Yemenite Jewish craftsmen worked in the Bezalel School of Arts and Crafts in Jerusalem, adapting their traditional skills and designs to contemporary forms. In the 1920s and '30s, a Jerusalem-born Yemenite Jewish woman named Brachah Zefira came to be known as the first "national folk singer", drawing her performance repertoire from Yemenite, Palestinian-Sephardic, and Arabic elements (Bahat 1972:968). In the 1930s a Russian ballet dancer named Rina Nikova turned to Yemenite women to dance in her ballets of Biblical scenes. Lead dancer Rachel Nadav recalls that Nikova "felt Yemenite dancers were the only ones who could truly express the Bible" (Ingber 1975:19). "Others thought she was crazy," Nadav commented to me in an interview. "Why Yemenite girls? With their large unshapely feet, and no education? Why Yemenites?" But [Nikova] said, 'Only Yemenites!' " (Interview, November 24, 1975.*)

Although Nadav continued to keep the Yemenite dance in the public eye even after the end of Nikova's Yemenite Ballet, it was not until several years later that the Yemenite dance had its major impact on the nascent Hebrew culture in its adaption into Israeli folk dances and onto the stage. Following the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 there occurred the "Ingathering of the Exiles," the mass immigration of Jews from Eastern and Western Europe, the

Middle East and North Africa. The ingathering offered new sources to those who felt the mounting pressure to create distinctly Israeli expressions to unite the myriad Jewish ethnic groups. When the Yemenite Jews arrived *en masse* in the late 1940s, they were viewed by some as primitives with odd customs and by others as custodians of an authentic, ancient Jewish culture. A community which lived isolated for centuries in the mountainous terrain of the southern Arabian Peninsula, they themselves viewed their airlift from Yemen to Israel as a fulfillment of the Biblical prophecy, "I will bring you to Me on eagles' wings."

*) Baruch Agadati, perhaps the first modern dancer in Eretz-Israel, also turned to Yemenite dance as to a source of inspiration. (Editor's note).

While yet living in makeshift transit camps of tents and metal huts, Yemenites were visited by veteran European-born Israelis interested in their cultural expressions. Some, like Gurit Kadman and Edith Gerson-Kiwi, recognized the value and need for documentation, and undertook to record visually the music, dance, and costumes of Yemenites and other immigrant groups. Others, like folk dance choreographer Rivka Sturman, sought artistic and cultural inspiration. After one visit to a Yemenite immigrant camp, Sturman was enthralled by their dance. She described her visit in this way:

We took with us recommendations from the Federation of Labor and we were consequently received with official honor. This meant that the Yemenites had prepared a gathering of all the families — babies, young children, parents, and grandparents — and the entire assemblage danced. I was bewitched by their grace and lightness and by their natural demeanor. One man beat on the side of a square biscuit tin as if it was a drum, and they sang songs from the prayer book. I was especially entranced with one step that I noted had a basic form, with many variations repeated in almost every dance. At the time I consciously realized that here I had come to the source, the fountain of one of our basic steps. (Ingber 1974:18)

Rivka Sturman began to integrate this "one step" into some of her dances, and as these dances caught on, the "Yemenite step" entered the Israeli folk dance. Folk dance choreographers were not alone in their fascination with Yemenite Jews. Israeli researchers seeking ancient Jewish survivals in the exotic Jewish groups found much in the Yemenite community, and research was conducted in the areas of language and pronunciation, educational practices and music, among others. Legitimated by such research, Yemenites were held in high regard as a source for ancient

Jewish culture. As Yehuda Ratzhabi, a leading Yemenite Jewish scholar wrote,

The culture of the Yemenite community was more outstanding for its Jewish originality than that of any other Jewish community. As a result of their confinement and isolation in the Arabian Peninsula and exclusion from non-Jewish culture they had preserved the Jewish way of life of ancient times. This applied to their speech and pronunciation, dress, art, melodies, and dances. It is no wonder that in the State of Israel many sought the elements of an original culture in the areas of song, dance and art from among this group. (Ratzhabi 1972:755)

Interestingly, Ratzhabi's statement specifically identifies *dance* as one of the ancient cultural forms, but at the time he wrote this in 1972, no one had actually undertaken scholarly research on the antiquity of the dance forms comparable to research in other areas. Ratzhabi's inclusion of dance therefore rested on an assumption based on prevalent popular views, which had their roots in the aspirations of Israeli folk dance choreographers and other. Gurit Kadman, expressing a widely held and popular view, places Yemenite dance as one of two authentically "Jewish" dance traditions:

There exist two specific Jewish dance-creations, both outstanding in richness and originality: Hasidic and Yemenite. They developed in totally different surroundings, thousands of miles apart, and are very different. And yet, surprisingly, there are some striking similarities in movement and character, as seen in the ecstasy and the religious longing and devotion directed heavenwards, accompanied by an excited lifting of arms and snapping of fingers. *Are we indeed faced with the remnants of ancient traditions which originated in biblical Israel? Are these dances, in fact, directly descended from the most ancient prayer movements?* (Kadman, 1976:6, emphasis added)¹

Nowhere is this identification of Yemenite traditions with Biblical forms more vividly expressed than in the work of Sara Levi-Tanai and the Inbal Dance Theater. Like Rivka Sturman and others, Sara Levi-Tanai first adapted Yemenite steps into Israeli folk dances, but beyond this, she departed from the prevailing model of discarding Old Country cultural forms in the effort to create a uniquely Israeli culture. As early as 1949, Levi-Tanai established a structure for presenting staged choreographies of Yemenite dance by Yemenite dancers. Though born to Yemenite parents in Palestine, Sara Levi-Tanai was raised among European derived Jews in an orphanage. As an adult, while teaching in Tel Aviv, she rediscovered her own cultural heritage and found her true artistic medium. Her students were the dancers who later were the founding members of Inbal.²

As she later recounted, Sara Levi-Tanai learned the dances and songs from these "students," and got her first exposure to Yemenite customs and folkways among their families. She relates,

Many times I would watch how the women just talked and sat — I would watch how their hands and heads moved. I learned from life, and I began to see in the studio that we could develop a rich vocabulary from all of this. (Ingber 1974:27)

Through Inbal Dance Theater, Levi-Tanai sought to create a dance expression drawn from Yemenite culture and images of the Bible. In her artistic vision, the two were not always distinct. Levi-Tanai's creativity was acclaimed by many, and Inbal's reputation grew internationally, but ironically Sara Levi-Tanai's creative interpretations and artistic representation of Yemenite traditions contributed to some of the popular myths of Yemenite dance prevalent today among an enthusiastic public without any direct contacts to the source materials. For instance, Inbal's close identification of the Yemenite material to the Biblical reinforced the already prevalent view that there was a direct link between the two. One of Inbal's early dancers was quoted in 1958 interview as saying, "Israel is a Biblical land, so that its dance company should be Yemenite. The Yemenites are a Biblical people. We even dressed Biblically in Yemen". (Palatsky, 1958:23). Or to give a more specific movement example, the stylization of hand and foot gestures which were a natural part of adapting traditional movement and dance patterns to the stage now are commonly assumed to have their origins in the folk dance sources. Inbal's performance piece representing the daily life of Yemenite women in gesture and mine is perhaps the source of a widespread, though mistaken impression that Yemenite Jewish women have a formal hand gesture dance language akin to the classical Indian dances, like Bharata Natyam.

Further examples of the popular presentation of Yemenite dance are readily available, and each adds a particular rationale for how things used to be. In the spring of 1975, a group of Yemenite Jewish singers and dancers "performed" a Yemenite Sabbath evening service in place of regular Sabbath evening services at a Reform synagogue in Los Angeles. At the point where the congregants customarily expected a sermon, this evening the Yemenite danced. One of the men offered the following introduction to the sermon in dance:

The Yemenite dance is an expression of yearning and longing for Israel. It is a prayer in the form of movement. By looking at the dancer's feet, you'll be able to see that they would rather stay in the air than on the ground. In truth, this is the

purpose of the dance. Being on the ground for the Yemenite means being on your own soil. Since they were not at home in Arabia, they tried in their dances to be light on their feet until they'll be in their homeland, Israel.

Here we find expression of two other widespread popular images of the Yemenite dance: first, that the movements themselves express religious aspirations, and second, that the light, bouncy style can be attributed to the Yemenites' diaspora existence. If taken seriously, this latter statement implies that if they danced in a light and bouncy manner because they didn't want to touch the foreign soil of Yemen, then upon arrival in Israel Yemenites should have started to dance more heavily, perhaps even stamping on the ground like the Arabic *debka*. Of course, this scenario is pure fantasy, and the ethnographic evidence suggests quite a different pattern. First, one must appreciate that Jewish dance in Yemen was characterized by significant regional differences in repertoire and style as one may see in documentary movies about the subject.

Dancers from some villages and regions had leaping movements in their local repertoire, but many others did not. And while a viewer may be struck by a certain lightness of some of the dancers, this quality is better characterized as a grace in movement rather than a motivated attempt to "stay in the air [rather] than on the ground." Secondly, research among Yemenite Jewish villagers from central Yemen now in Israel suggests that the men's dance in Yemen was sedate and poised, since they highly valued the quality of *adinut*, which roughly translates to modesty, refinement, elegance, and propriety.

In contrast, the male villagers who grew up in Israel are more likely to talk about their dancing in terms of *hishtolelut*, which means "boisterousness, fooling around", and in fact their dancing is bouncier and more animated than the style of their elders. This may also be seen in documentary movies, The dancers from Midrakh Oz dance "lightly" in the early film; they are leaping in the later film. As the Jewish dance from central Yemen has evolved in Israel, it has grown bouncier, more exuberant, emphasizing *hishtolelut* over *adinut*, with larger movements and more exaggerated leg gestures accompanying the difficult syncopated leaps which are the dance's conclusion.

The other point suggested by the performers in the Los Angeles synagogue was that the movements themselves express religious aspirations. I would like to explore this point by looking at another performance context before turning to the traditional dance in the context of village celebrations. As discussed in Ayalah Goren's overview of ethnic dance in Israel in the current *Jewish Folklore and*

Ethnology Newsletter, a new format and context for ethnic dance in the *lehaka*, a performing ensemble often organized within a single ethnic village.

Midrakh Oz, the village where I conducted ethnographic research,³⁾ had such a group which performed men's and women's dances at general dance festivals, at Yemenite events, and as entertainment for local kibbutz events and weddings. About a month after I arrived at Midrakh Oz, I had my first opportunity to see a live performance of the *lehaka*. During the performance, I took many photographs and jotted notes on the dance. Later, while sitting with group's leader, Sa'adya Gur-esh, in his home back in the village, I asked him to review the order of the steps in the performance. My intention was merely to clarify one obscure section of my hastily scrawled notation, but his response sent me in another direction entirely. "What? do you think that we dance in just any order?" He looked at me as if unbelieving my ignorance. He continued:

There is a reason for the order of our steps: our dance tells the story of the emigration from Yemen. At the beginning, we hold our arms up to show that we are like captives in a land not our own. In the next section, we dance in place as if shackles prevented us from leaving Yemen. Then we are very happy that there is a possibility of leaving our exile and returning to Israel. Each dancer wants to jump higher than the other, to show that he is ready to go. After this, we have a conference: each one is asking the others and telling his opinion on what to do. We are all ready to leave, everything is prepared, and we're just waiting for the right moment. At the end, we are still waiting, waiting for the Messiah to come to take us up to our homeland in joy. By now we have no strength of our own left, and we are squatting down on the floor. Just as it is difficult to walk like that, we dance that way to show how slowly and hard the road to arrive to Israel is.

At this early point in my residence and research in the village, I was absolutely taken with Sa'adya's story. Inquiring further about its source, I learned that he had learned it from his grandfather, who lived to the age of 115 and who, in Sa'adya's words, "traveled a lot in Yemen and knew many things that today no one knows anymore."

I figured that if Sa'adya knew the significance of the movements, then other dancers would too. So, I approached Mahfoud Kuresh, the man considered the best singer and dancer in the village, and I asked him if the movements of the dance have any particular meaning. "Yes," he said, and he explained:

In our dance, there is a religious meaning. We start with the *da'aseh*, like the movement of camels. This is to signify the

Exodus from Egypt. Then there is the middle section of the dance which is in the time of the desert, and when we reach the part after the crossing of the sea, it is a very fast rhythm and very happy. This is the story of our dance.

I was starting to get confused. Two men in the village, each respected for his knowledge of traditional dance, had offered different stories attributing religious significance to the actual movement sequences of their performance dance. I needed to get some further perspective, so I approached Sa'adya's uncle, the 73 year old son of the man to whom Sa'adya had attributed the story. The elder's reaction was quite direct. "I don't know where Sa'adya heard that story about captives," he said. "I've never heard it before, and my father certainly did not tell him that. The dance does not tell a story; it follows the rhythms of the drum and the words."

As I talked to more and more elders of the village, the consensus was clear. The movements of the men's dance have no inherent meaning, and they don't tell a story. The songs were filled with religious and mystical allusions, but the dance itself did no express religious longing. Traditionally, the words were the central focus of attention, not the movements. Only two men, three men at most, would get up to dance at a single time, dancing in a calm and refined manner, following the singer's rhythmic and tempo changes by avoiding any boisterousness that would disrupt the group's ability to follow the words.

Unlike the singer, the dancers were not accorded particular respect, since the dance itself had no value in a culture rooted on holy words and their interpretation. Dancing was an integral part of weddings and other communal celebrations, and indeed, those events required dancing. But the ambivalent attitudes towards dance are best summed up in the Yemeni proverb, "He who gets up to dance, goes down" or in the modern Hebrew version, "A man has brains until he gets up to dance."

It was the singer who commanded respect and attention, with his ability to bring to life the poetry of the *diwan*, largely composed by the 17th century Yemenite Jewish poet and saint Shalem Shabazi. Forming the lyrics for the dance songs, these poems may have lacked the divine authority of the Bible, but they were treated with utmost respect and considered as holy texts. Here is a sampling of several verses from *Im Nin'alu*, one of the most well-known of these poems:

If the gates of the generous ones are locked, the Heavenly gates are not locked
The Living God elevated above the cherubin, all of them

rising up in His spirit.

They come very close to His throne, they know his name and praise Him.

Animals that are advancing and retreating, they were completed from the first day of creation.

Galgal and *Ofan* [wheels] making noise,
Worshiping His name and praising Him,
Enrobed in the ray of His majesty.

Six pairs of wings surrounding, flying while they turn.

They answer each other loudly with sweet melodies, they are raised up together in signs.

[...] My soul yearns for the celebrations, the weddings and the gatherings.

In my memory is the Temple, and the desolate walls of Zion.
The light of my mind and my thoughts is extinguished, and my soul is assaulted by depression.

Arise, my beloved, approach the heavens to revive the spirit of fools.

Beautiful synagogues and houses of study,
They are my dwelling place.

Happy are they who are found in them.

The Ultimate, I will serve my Creator with a heart believing and desirous, He will fulfill His enduring promise.

He chose us and gave us understanding and Torah so that man should not remain foolish.

Whoever is caught by evils and difficulties, he will be a guest among the wise.

Seven verses in all, taking at least ten minutes in continuous performance. The elders of the village proudly recall the days in Yemen when upon the song's completion, they would discuss the hidden meanings and mystical references of the text. The *diwan* actually contains commentaries to the poetry to explain difficult verses. The first stanza of *Im Nin'alu* is one such difficult passage, with its references to the cherubim of the Tabernacle in the Wilderness and Ezekial's vision of winged animals flying to and fro. What has this to do with weddings, the appropriate context for the song's performance? The commentary of Yihye Korah provides an answer. "This song and its praise are founded in the [*mitzva* of] rejoicing with the groom and bride, therefore the song exalts the cherubim in their greatness and worthiness" (Shabazi 1966:201). The cherubim are thus an allegorical representation of the groom and bride, who are in turn an allegorical representation of the relationship between God and Israel. The cherubim were the vehicle for the Divine presence, and thus came to represent the Divine presence itself. The union of man and woman is also a vehicle for the Divine presence. If you take the Hebrew words for man and woman, *ish* [איש] and *isha* [אישה], and cancel out the two letters which duplicate each other [ש-א], the two letters which remain form the word Yah [יה], one of God's names. Thus there is an extended symmetry between the song's reference to cherubim and the song's suitability for the wedding celebration.

The song, its text, and its interpretation occupied the attention of the men at these gatherings in Yemen, though this cannot be said for current practise in Israel. Mirroring the shift in value and emphasis from *adinut* to *hishtolelut*, the dance has emerged in Israel as more prominent than the song. Even in the most traditional events, like the private Saturday evening pre- and post-wedding parties held at home more than one set of dancers may rise at once and their exuberance dominates the attention of the guests. In other events, like the *henna* evening prior to the wedding, a Yemenite band may accompany hundreds of villagers, men and women dancing together in small and large circles and in couples. And on the evening of the wedding itself, with a catered affair in a rented hall, the band may play only a few selections of Yemenite music, mixed in with popular Israeli songs, Rock an' Roll and more.

The shifting of emphasis to the dance itself over its traditional place within a multi-faceted communal celebration is clearly seen in the emergence of the *lehaka*. In preparation for a performance, the village men change from their everyday shirts and trousers to a standardized costume of ankle-length, striped caftans. They remove their shoes for dancing, which few do in the village context, and they wear hats and turbans with false sidecurls sewn on. They undergo a symbolic transformation from their everyday identities as contemporary Israeli Yeminites to the stereotypical identity of exotic and religious Jews from Yemen.

The Midrakh Oz dance troupe gives its performance without any attempt to create or re-create an event or scene. They do not, for example, present a Yemenite wedding with its processions and appropriate props. They just dance. And unlike their dancing in the village, where the last dance lasts up to 10 minutes and varies in its steps and formations according to the repertoire and skill of the individuals, the performance dance is formalized, generally 2½ minutes long, following a set progression of steps, movements and formations. The dancers have adapted their spacing for frontal viewing, and have incorporated entrance and concluding sequences.

As the months of my fieldwork in Midrakh Oz passed, I began to recognize these differences between dancing in the *lehaka* for outsiders and dancing in the village among family and co-villagers. Had I not already suspected Sa'adya's story about the dance's meaning, the spontaneity and variability of the in-group dancing certainly demonstrated that traditionally there is no set sequence of movements and therefore no possibility of any literal storyline. In fact, as I spoke to more and more villagers, I pieced together an interesting picture of the development of the performance

dance sequence. When the villagers first came to Israel, they knew just one step pattern with variations. Sa'adya and others were talented dancers, and in the transit camps where Yemenites from many villages and regions were mixed together, these young men learned and adapted step patterns drawn from other villages and regions. Sa'adya's special talent in forming the performing dance troupe was his ability to string these varied steps sequentially. Sa'adya has been the main influence on the village dance troupe, but around 1960, the Midrakh Oz dance troupe was advised by an outsider, an Israeli folk dance leader named Musa Ashkenazi. Musa helped stage the opening and closing sequences of the performance dance, elements later adapted and kept by Sa'adya.

I learned all of these details by speaking to the villagers, and I confirmed the details with Sa'adya. There was no need to confront him with questions about the truthfulness of his story, since by then I was asking the kinds of questions about the dancing and his experiences which only a cultural insider could formulate. Truthfulness isn't even really at issue here; appropriateness is. 'Descriptions about the religious meaning of the Yemenite dance, whether told by Sa'adya Gur-Esh, by the professional performers at the Reform synagogue in Los Angeles, or by choreographers motivated by artistic vision are not told, and are not likely to be accepted within Yemenite communities like Midrakh Oz. These are images of the Yemenite dance first envisioned by cultural outsiders to evoke a living version of Biblical traditions. To validate their experience and to create new expressions consistent with their return to the Land, the dominant European-born secular Israelis were drawn to the suitably exotic Yemenites, to whom they accorded a status of cultural authenticity. Many Yemenites saw in this special status a strategy for their own social legitimacy and cultural pride, and they encouraged and fostered the reputation. Conditioned by researchers who were seeking for a meaning in his dance, Sa'adya developed his story. As he said to me after many months of research and residence in his village, "Here in Israel when I would dance, they used to ask me, "What is the meaning of this movement?", but I didn't know what to say." His story may not reflect the ethnographic reality of life in Yemen, but it is wholly appropriate to the Israeli cultural identity.

What then is the "meaning" of the Yemenite dance? Literally, the movements mean nothing, not religious longing, not stories of emigration from Yemen nor Exodus from Egypt. But socially and symbolically, the dance is rich in meaning on many levels.⁴⁾ The many variations in the movements of older men and women, for instance, demonstrate that dance was an expression of regional and village

identity in Yemen. Where you lived translated to how you danced, but no matter what the particular step, dancing was a *mitzva*, a commanded responsibility to gladden the hearts of bride and groom. In Yemen, dancing was also one of the few public activities in which the individual was permitted and encouraged towards individual expression and personal creativity in a tight community which was generally oriented to uniformity and group expression.

The Yemenite Jewish dance was in fact a very "Jewish" dance, but not in the ways envisioned in the popular conceptions as an ancient, authentic dance, perhaps reminiscent of Biblical forms. My research among Yemeni Muslims suggests that many of the traditional dance patterns of Yemenite Jews were shared with their gentile neighbors, so the "Jewishness" of the dance was not in the dance itself. Considered in relation to the similar dances of their Muslim neighbors, the Jewishness of the dance was not to be found in the movements, but in the context of their performances: indoors as opposed to outdoors, quiet and sedate as opposed to loud and boisterous, within the communal framework of weddings and circumcision gatherings as opposed to a framework of tribal identity, accompanied by songs of religious longing for redemption as opposed to songs of tribal rivalries and victories.

Ironically, the associations to Jewishness of the dance in Yemen have evolved to expressions of Yemenite-ness in Israel. The Yemenite Jewish dance in Israel is no longer framed in village or regional terms. Regardless of the familial villages and regions of origin, any young Israeli of Yemenite descent shares a common repertoire. Today's standardized repertoire, "dancing Yemenite" as the young people say, offers an easy expression of ethnic unity. Drawing on traditional movement patterns, a modern Israeli Yemenite dance has emerged. Yemenite dance traditions continue. Old patterns and values are maintained by some; others adopt new forms and styles which grow out of the traditional structures. For the general public, Yemenite meanings and values remain hidden; only the created popular meanings are available. The Yemenite community itself, transformed from a Jewish minority in Yemen to a Yemenite minority in Israel, has sought ways to shape its cultural identity in a new context by selectivity reinforcing certain popular images for outsiders while reserving other elements of cultural identity for insiders only. ■

NOTES

1. The link between Yemenite and Hasidic dances was postulated as early as 1909 by the musicologist, A.Z. Idelsohn, who wrote, "In their [the Yemenite Jews']

ecstasy, their singing and dancing reminds one of the Hasidim, but since much of Hasidic dance and song is based on Russian tunes and steps, nobody knows how all this came to the Yemenite Jews" (cited in Manor 1985/1986:71). Sara Levi-Tanai expressed a similar view, extending the proposed similarities to the verticality of the gestures "which reflected the limited space both groups had — cramped in their ghetto life with only up as a direction to look" (Ingber 1974:27–28). This topic deserves its own article, but briefly stated, I would argue that any such link between Hasidic and Yemenite dance rests on projections and false assumptions. The Hasidim were radical in their times precisely because they elevated simple acts, such as dance and wordless melodies, to a higher plane, encouraging these as appropriate vehicles for spiritual expression. "Dance," if only in the form of shuffling steps in lines and circles, was even incorporated into the synagogue context by Hasidim, where some, like the Bratzlavers, conclude their Sabbath evening services with singing and dancing around the *bimah*. As indicated in the body of this paper and in my earlier work (Staub 1976), Yemenite Jewish dance is linked to religious expression only through the context of its performance and not in its movements *per se*. Furthermore, dancing was an activity looked upon with, at best, ambivalence.

2. Among them were Margalit Oved and Moshiko, two well-known dancers now in the United States who independently continue to choreograph, teach, and perform theatrical dance and folk dance respectively in the Yemenite idiom.
3. This research took place during 1975 – 1976.
4. This aspect of social and symbolic meaning is explored in greater detail in my 1985/86 publication.

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