



Via *Doloroza* (1983), choreographed by Amir Kolben. Left to right: Meir Gramanovich, Zvi Gotheiner, Ofra Dudai, Galia Fabin. Photo: Boaz Lanir

An Israeli Reflects on the Series of Articles on the Subject of Diaspora Jews and Jewishness in Dance

Ruth Eshel

I was conscious of intense excitement as I read the articles collected for this issue on Diaspora Jews and Jewishness in dance. On the one hand, these demonstrated in content, ideas, history, values and considerations that we are one people, and on the other I saw the differences in relationships to different aspects of dance between a person living in Israel and one who lives in the Diaspora. I want to share with the reader a few of the thoughts that occurred to me and that might serve as starting points for future articles.

Jewish Dance? Israeli Dance?

The Arizona State University conference's title, "Jews and Jewishness in the Dance World", did not contain the words "Jewish dance". This

suggests that its organizers understood that the question of what is Jewish dance is hard to define and how open it is to a variety of interpretations. To this day, we do not speak of Israeli dance in Israel (save for those speaking of folk dance), but of dance in Israel. In both cases similar questions arise: Is Jewish or Israeli dance a dance whose subject is concerned with Jewishness or Israelishness (such as religion, history, legends), or is it dance whose creators are Jews/Israelis, or is it dance that contains within itself values that we identify as Jewish/Israeli?

The centennial of concert dance in Israel will be in 2020¹, during these 100 years, the question of "Israeli dance" has arisen, as have

the changes in relationship to it. During the *Yishuv* era, 1882-1948, (or the Jewish Community) in *Eretz* Israel (the Land of Israel or before independence), there was a passion to create Hebrew or *Eretz* Israeli dance as part of the fashioning of a new culture in all fields. In the 1920s dance pioneers² were invested in the Zionist project and choreographed dances on Biblical era heroes and reinvigorated Biblical harvest festivals that bridged the time between ancient and modern *Eretz* Israel. They did not confine themselves to this, but also sought to create an original movement language that would express these concerns. Following the Nazis rise to power in 1933, a group of dancers who were practitioners of the *Ausdruckstanz* movement style (Expressionist Dance or expressive dance), some of whom had performed in Europe's leading companies, arrived in *Eretz* Israel. In contrast to their predecessors of the *Yishuv*, they considered that one could express *Eretz* Israelishness within the framework of the avant-garde *Ausdruckstanz* at the time, and that there was no need for a new dance language. Like their forerunners, they expressed *Eretz* Israelishness through themes taken from the Bible, plus adding the *hora* adapted-for-the-stage folk dance to their local *Ausdruckstanz* themes. During World War II and up to 1948, the *Yishuv* was culturally isolated from what was going on in the rest of the world, and so provided for itself – this was the era highlighted by Israeli folk dance festivals at Kibbutz Dalia (1944, 1947) organized by Gurit Kadman.

With the establishment of the State in 1948, there was a huge hunger to connect with current cultural activity in the rest of the world, and the local variety was revealed in all its paucity, especially in comparison with the United States. Subsequent to the 1956 Israeli tour of the Martha Graham Dance Company (at the initiative of the Baroness Bathsheba de Rothschild), which was received with huge enthusiasm, Europe's *Ausdruckstanz* style was totally rejected with the contention that it was outdated, and with it, the attempts to create *Eretz* Israeli dance that were regarded as naïve. Bathsheba de Rothschild founded the Batsheva Dance Company in 1964 with Martha Graham as artistic advisor during its first years. Of note is, that while the company dancers sought to dance universal themes, there was also Graham who encouraged them to choreograph Biblical subjects. In those same years, during the second half of the '60s and into the 1970s, there was a lack of faith in the abilities of



The Dreamer (1979), choreographed by Mirali Sharon. Bat-Dor Dance Company. Photo: Ya'akov Agor. Courtesy of The Israel Dance Archive at Beit Ariela, Tel Aviv.

local choreographers. The repertory was based mainly on choreographers from abroad, and the question of making "Israeli dance" was seldom raised and then only as a marginal comment when a critic identified what he thought of as an Israeli element in this or that dance.³

It was official State events and Jewish commemoration that provided the impetus to create dance on a Jewish or Israeli theme. For instance, in anticipation of the 1979 Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty, a number of dances were created for the Bat Dor Dance Company; outstanding among which was Mirali Sharon's *The Dreamer* that dealt with Joseph's interpretation of the dreams of the ancient Egyptian Pharaoh. In 1992 in commemoration of the quincentennial expulsion of Spanish Jewry in 1492, Moshe Efrati made *Camina a-Torna* (Going Around and Round) for his *Kol veDmama* Dance Company (Voice and Silence Dance Co)⁴ and Rami Be'er choreographed *Black Angels* for the Kibbutz Dance Company (KDC).

The story of KDC is interesting. Although the company was founded in 1970, it did not aim to make Israeli dance but sought rather to express the values of the kibbutz movement. One of the questions bothering the kibbutz dance community in general, and KDC founder Yehudit Arnon in particular, was whether, if indeed it was at all necessary, that KDC would have an artistic statement differing from the rest of the dance companies. Arnon and Ruth Hazan addressed this question in an article for *Al HaMishmar* (the Kibbutz newspaper *On Guard*).

"Arnon: Will we have something to say that's about us, and does the company's right to exist depend on that? And what is that one particular thing that characterizes kibbutz dancers and choreographers? And if it exists, how are we to demonstrate it, or does the very fact that the dancers and creators are kibbutzniks necessarily create that same particularity?

Hazan: The company's right to exist resides in the activities among us of a group of people for whom dance is their very being... and does not require any additional or other proof. Its ability to exist is another question. It is dependent, and let's be blunt about this, simply on Ability. The right to exist is not a given, nor is it in any way a charity. Ability is what you fight for, something that translates into the prosaic problem of time."⁵

Hazan's remarks above regarding the company did not satisfy Arnon who believed that the uniqueness of kibbutz life and values had to find a mode of expression in the company's work, and if not by subject, then in another way. She said, "I had a kind of fantasy about what I wanted the company to be. It's about humanity and content, even when the work is abstract. Values can also deliver a message. The 'what' is important, but the 'how' is even more so. I've always worked in a team. Every dancer who had something to say artistically got a chance. All in all, that's the company's line."⁶ That is to say she spoke of a team relationship expressed on stage by means of a certain breezy self-confidence that would relate to paying attention to one another, nourished by the perceptions of the kibbutz world.

The solution arrived with the appointment of Be'er as KDC's in-house choreographer: the Israeli saying that a man is the landscape of his native land suited Be'er's way. He grew up with the values of the kib-

butz movement, with its components of social and political obligations that were higher than those prevailing in the cities at the time. He was born at Kibbutz Ga'aton in 1957, in the kibbutz that had been established in 1948 by Holocaust survivors, mostly from Hungary. Be'er grew up at home in the European tradition, and every Friday family members would gather in the living room of his home and play classical music. There were art books on the shelves and he studied cello. He was groomed to be a leader and he served in the army in an elite unit. All this would resonate in his works that were based on socio-philosophical ideas which were in keeping with life on the kibbutz, to Jewish memory and to Israeli/political realities.⁷

The fringe of Israeli dance exploded onto the scene in 1977, the aim being to make the desert that was local independent choreography bloom via influences emanating from American post-modernism and *tanztheater* in Germany. The choreographers' task was very great, yet the subject of Israeli dance was not a specific goal. Nonetheless, there were a number of works that could be called Israeli, such as those by Liat Dror and Nir Ben-Gal, a young Israeli couple who, with true integrity, danced what concerned them against the background of where we live: *Two Room Apartment* choreographed in 1987; *Donkeys* choreographed in 1988; *Inta Omri* in 1994; as well as the start of Israeli politically-themed dance such as the Arab-Israeli conflict with *Via Dolorosa* by Amir Kolben with the Tamar Ramle Company in 1982 and *Reservist Diary* by Rami Be'er for KDC in 1989.

The seeds planted at the end of the 1970s flowered in the 2000s. The combination of creativity, daring, talent, and knowledge enabled generations of Israeli choreographers to realize themselves and the place they lived in with all of its political complexities. Yair Vardi, the general director of the Suzanne Dellal Center said: "It's an open society. Everything's legitimate. It sometimes goes to extremes that mirror the dynamics in the character of Israeli society. The matter of choice is linked to responsibility and obligation."⁸

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My reflections return to the collection of articles in which I sometimes encountered an aspiration toward *Tikkun Olam* (the repair of the world) as an engine to activate Jews in the American Diaspora. In relation to this, I remember in elementary school in Bible studies we learned that the Jews and Israel are *Am Segula* (the uniqueness and holiness of the Jewish people as God's nation *Numbers, Ch. 19, v.5*), *Am Mofet* (Model people, *Ezekiel, Ch. 12 v.13*), or *Legoyim* (Light Unto the Nations). As children we believed in that motto and we wanted to embody it. With the years, however, this concept was shattered by our complicated reality. In the 1950s people did not lock the doors of their houses and we were surprised to read in the newspapers about thieves and rapists in Israel. However, I think that the turning point was after 1967 and the Six Day War, with the issue and reality of Israel either "liberating" or "occupying" Judea and Samaria (the words chosen depended on one's political outlook of Israel's gaining the West Bank from defeated Jordan). This began to tear apart Israeli society and *Am Mofet* was put to the test.

I confess that I first came upon the aspect of Judaism entitled even in English as *Tikkun Olam* in connection with dance in 2013; Daniel Banks

and Adam McKinney came to Israel and made *What One Voice Says* for the Beta Ethiopian Dance Ensemble I founded. Their intense desire to come here and expressly choreograph for an Ethiopian dance group of limited means surprised me, and when I asked them the reason for this passion, they explained it was *Tikkun Olam*. I was surprised.



They Told Us to Go (2012) by Renana Raz. Photo: Eyal Landsman

Is there such a thing as *Tikkun Olam* in dance in Israel? For two decades now we are witness to a rich and varied output from Israeli choreographers that address themes that might be considered part of *Tikkun Olam*. This includes such areas as the Israel-Arab conflict and the radicalization in Israeli society of perceptions between left and right regarding settlement in Judea and Samaria and the occupation of these areas with the younger generation wanting to have its say and asking tough, irksome questions including choreographers such as Arkady Zaides, Noa Dar, Renana Raz, Yasmeen Godder, Hillel Kogan and Palestinian-Israeli Adi Boutrous. Varied subjects touch on the "other", whether in the political or gender-politics context, and there are green concerns – the Vertigo Company at the time it transferred to an ecological village in the Eyla Valley saw the move as part of taking responsibility toward the world and the link between man and the soil (Shaal, 2005). Also, there are concerns with the body and issues of health such as dance with the disabled; with Yasmeen Godder working with patients with Parkinson's (Bergmann and Teicher, 2018) or the development of bringing dance benefits to the general public. One may see in Ohad Naharin's "Gaga People" classes – not Gaga, created for dancers – a kind of giving to the community of people of all ages with no dance background for the pleasure of experiencing movement in their own bodies. There is also an abundance of dance activity within and for the community (Hershkowitz and Duek, 2018).

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In the first decades after the establishment of the state there was a gulf between the Jewish citizens from different Jewish communities known by the areas where Jews had settled before coming to Israel: *Ashkenazi* (descendants of Middle and Eastern European Jews), *Mizrahi* (Jews from Arab countries); and *Sephardi* Jews (descendants of Jews who had lived in Spain for 35 generations before their expulsion in 1492). For example, the *Ashkenazi* community denigrated the

dance of the *Sephardi* and *Mizrahi*. Those who performed belly dances in the *Sephardi* and *Mizrahi* communities either at parties or on-stage were regarded as cheap and “tarty” (Mero, 2011). In contrast, the policy of cultural pluralism that influenced social and cultural discourse in the 1970s increased the Israelis’ readiness to bridge the cultural gulf among the Jewish communities and among the Jewish and non-Jewish communities.

The first visible change in dance was in the mid-1990s when there were programs of “another shade” within the framework of *Gvanim beMahol* (Shades of Dance) Festival.⁹ The turning point occurred when Liat Dror (*Ashkenazi*) included a belly dance segment in *Inta Omri*. Choreographer Orly Portal, whose parents had immigrated from Morocco, returned to her roots and choreographs contemporary Moroccan/Israeli dance (Portal, 2011); Shira Eviatar makes a work on discrimination linked to the Yemenite community (Eviatar, 2018), and Dege Feder choreographs contemporary Ethiopian dance. She immigrated from Ethiopia and is the artistic director of the Beta Dance Ensemble (The company’s name is the Amharic word, *Beta*, for house).

Choreographer Barak Marshall’s work is an interesting amalgamation of styles and differing Jewish community roots. Marshall’s personal story – he is both American *Ashkenazi*, and Israeli Yemenite – is well aware of the tensions between the different Jewish communities. Born to an American Jewish father, Mel Marshall, and to Margalit Oved, from Aden, (near Yemen) who was the star of the Inbal Dance Theatre in its heyday, he grew up in Los Angeles and graduated Harvard in philosophy and social theory. He is a singer, a musician, and a choreographer with personal taste in varied rhythmic beats, movements and texts using such diverse elements as Romanian *klezmer* with texts sung in Yiddish or Biblical Hebrew, *Mizrahi* Yemenite tradition, rock music, and poetry. Everything comes together in a burst of explosive energy as a dance rich in detail which might include theatrical scenes telling short “stories” such as in his dance *Rooster*.

All of these choreographic activities in Israel are not labeled *Tikkun Olam*, but, in fact, they do tune into many of its central ideas of a call to action for changing or fixing the world.

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Since 1995 the Suzanne Dellal Center has presented the *International Exposure* dance festival that attracts international presenters who might select Israeli dance for their audiences back home. On the 24th festival in 2018 Judith Brin Ingber wrote:

“International presenters from 189 different countries, including China and Brazil, came to see an impressive compendium of Israeli dance performances last Hanukkah, guests of the Israeli government and the Suzanne Dellal Center for Dance. They watched over 35 dances ranging from solo to large - scale company productions, showing enormous imaginations at work, some with dystopian views of the world, others evolving from Israel’s differing ethnic backgrounds and others with unexpected views of aging or sensuality. Most were danced by fabulous performers often unfortunately unacknowledged by name in the programs, all to impart something of Israel for the guests’ various home country audienc-

es. [...] The dances at the Festival brought something familiar even to the foreigners: identification with components of ourselves that could be lovable, and sometimes unflattering and regrettable. Not all the dances had clear resolutions, but they were convincing for their bravery, honesty, thoroughly strong, and complex expressive of what’s true and valid for Israel” (Brin Ingber, 2009).

And my thoughts wander back to the *Yishuv*, to Margalit Ornstein, a dance pioneer who came out against the decision to make a distinctive *Eretz* Israeli dance. She said “Do not raise your voices to demand Hebrew art before we are Hebrews. Do not demand national expression in art before we will arrive at the specific expression in our daily lives. Do not make the end come sooner!”¹⁰ A century has elapsed since then. Dance is in flower. Is it Israeli dance? One may only say with certainty that this is dance, all elements of which – choreographers, dancers, music (usually), set, costume and lighting design – are made in Israel. Does this reflect Israelishness? One may say that more than in the past, dance in Israel reflects life here for good or for bad.

Same Subject- Different Viewpoint

Reading the articles, it also became clear to me how different the interpretation of the subject was between a creator living in the Diaspora and one who lived in Israel (or in the *Yishuv*). It was then that I thought of Gertrud Kraus who had been one of the most outstanding of Central Europe’s *Ausdruckstanz* dancers between World Wars I & II. In 1931 she toured the *Yishuv* giving recitals. On her return to Vienna, full of her experiences in the encounter with *Eretz* ‘Israelishness’, she choreographed *Oriental Sketches* (1932) in which she illustrated characters from the Bible such as Hagar, Judith and Miriam colored by Arab and Bedouin fantasy. Following the rise of the Nazis, she left Vienna in 1935 and became a central figure in *Yishuv* concert dance. Then, twelve years later, she was invited to appear in California and before leaving she gave an interview to a journalist for *Al HaMishmar*; she said that she wanted to show *Eretz* Israeli dance after she had absorbed ‘*Eretz* Israelishness’. “After all I had had a European education and absorbed *Eretz* Israel into myself.”¹¹ Replying to Ben-Ami’s question on the nature of *Eretz* Israeli art, Kraus replied: “*Eretz* ‘Israelishness’ in art - it’s a tone, or a color or a ray of light pouring through all. The artist senses the land and creates from it.” She also spoke of Orientalism, saying that European Orientalism was sweet and sentimental, whereas “our East is not sweet. It’s wild and stormy, naïve and gross. It’s not sentimental, but dynamic, having its own rhythmic language.”

Kraus exemplified and emphasized the difference between one who lives in the Diaspora to one who lives here; she was a good interpreter. All this puts me in mind of Jennifer Fisher’s article on *Masada* that David Allen choreographed for the National Ballet of Canada in 1987. Danya Levin had made a dance on the same subject in 1931. As everybody knows, *Masada* is a fortress on a lone rocky plateau that rears up in the Judean desert overlooking the Dead Sea and to which the last of the Jewish rebels fled after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE. It was ancient Israel’s last stand against the Romans. When their soldiers finally prevailed in 73 CE they discovered that all there had preferred to commit suicide rather than become prisoners.

Although the two versions of *Masada* were created in different styles and in different eras, I think that the choice of a different viewpoint reflects the different perception of the world between the Diaspora and Israel (or the then *Yishuv*). Allan focused on the tragedy of the mass suicide. In her article, Fisher chose to center on the Jewish dancers' feelings and reactions, and what this meant for their identity as Jews, and those of the non-Jewish dancers who encountered a subject from Jewish history for the first time. For Israelis living among their people, and unfamiliar with anti-Semitism, Fisher's article opens a window on a world that they have never personally experienced, and on the other hand, here in Israel, we sometimes regard the Jews of the Diaspora, living in Canada or the US or elsewhere with envy because they do not need to confront the tensions we live with on a daily basis (terrorists, security, political, or the religious schisms in Judaism and so on). I was surprised that even in 1987 in Canada, there are Jews who prefer to hide their identity or deny it because of anti-Semitism.



Masada by Dania Levin (1931). Speech and Voice Group. Ruth Eshel private collection

Levin's interpretation of *Masada* was totally different from that of Allan's. Her dance was in the *Ausdruckstanz* style – that includes movement, dance, speech and song. The performers were a group of women costumed in shirts with sleeves and long pants in a dark color, reminiscent of work clothes for *halutz* (pioneer) women who scorned the usual feminine fripperies. These are strong women who drain the swamps and wield a heavy hoe in the fields, like the men, and remind one of communist agit-prop posters. The women dance and declaim that “although, and despite everything – *Eretz Israel*”, which is to say that despite the various suggestions for a solution to the Jewish problem, and despite all the difficulties that the pioneers are obliged to undergo, the only solution is living in and building up *Eretz Israel*. They swear that there will not be a second Masada and end the dance with a tempestuous *hora* that almost explodes with its energy. For Levin, *Masada* is a Zionist symbol in that Zion or Israel, will not fall again. It remains a symbol to this day. Generations of youth routinely climb it and soldiers swear allegiance to the state atop it. This is the Masada that I, as an Israeli, know and grew up on.

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The subject of the Holocaust as a dance theme, I think, has a vastly different emphasis in Israel from that of the Diaspora. “Ghosts of

the Past: The Creation of Pola Nirenska's *Holocaust Tetralogy*” is an article by Rima Farber that describes the Holocaust dances Nirenska made from 1990. The *Ausdruckstanz* style dances describe the frightful suffering of a mother and her daughters and are a challenge to God for allowing such a thing to happen. Dance critic Alan Kriesmann wrote a review of the dances in the *Washington Post* on July 29, 1990: “They constitute a daring attempt, within the humanistic tradition of modern dance, to bear the unbearable and speak the unspeakable.” In these four works Nirenska achieved a human core and depth of vision that reaches into one's heart and leaves a scar.

It was moving to read how much Nirenska's dance background before the Holocaust recalls Jewish dancers who immigrated to the *Yishuv*, especially Paula Padani, Elsa Dublon and Katya Michaeli. Nirenska had studied at Mary Wigman's school and appeared with her company. In 1951 she arrived in the US and later married Jan Karski, a hero of the Polish resistance. They both swore never to mention the Holocaust. Also, in Israel, parents did not speak of the Holocaust, as if to prevent the memories from surging, and frightening the children who had been born here into a new life. There were also other reasons: as a child I remember that the victims and the survivors were considered to be the epitome of the “Diaspora Jew” who “went like a lamb to slaughter” – the very opposite of what was considered the esteemed image of the Zionist Hebrew individual, who fought for his/her life in our war of Independence.

The turning point of Nirenska and Karski, not to mention the Holocaust, came when director Claude Lanzmann interviewed her husband for his epic *Shoah* after which Karski was invited to testify before Congress for the purpose of erecting a Holocaust Museum in the US. In Israel the turning point was the year 1961. After a protracted hunt, the Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann was captured in Argentina and brought to Israel for trial. At the trial, survivors mounted the witness box and told what they had concealed for 20 years; for 20 years the Holocaust had been taboo. The trial was broadcast in its entirety on the radio. People heard the survivors' harrowing testimonies about the death camps that served utterly to discredit the stereotypical Zionist view of “lamb to slaughter.” During and after the trial, the survivors began to publish their autobiographies, and these books also helped to change the veteran population's attitude toward the Holocaust.

A year after the Eichmann trial, Anna Sokolow mounted *Dreams* (1962) with her company, the Lyric Theater in Tel Aviv. With minimal pathos and with sensitivity, the dance evoked the nightmares of those in the death camps. There was no applause following the performance, the audience remaining mute.

In contrast to Kriesmann's enthusiastic review of Nirenska's work, the reviewers in Israel had difficulty agreeing even to deal with the subject: *Al HaMishmar's* Olya Zilberman wrote that Sokolow's work is “on a subject that is painful, tragic and very complicated to turn into a work of art. Grave doubts awaken in us whether we should even venture into this subject precisely because of our need for abstract esthetic symbols.”¹²

In 1971, a decade after the Eichmann trial, Stuttgart Ballet artistic director John Cranko premiered *My People the Sea, My People the Forest* that dealt with both the Holocaust and the resurrection of Israel. Cranko was amazed by the upheavals the Jews had undergone in so few years – from near extermination to national independence. A medley of poems underpinned the piece among which was Uri Zvi Greenberg's *A Mound of Bodies in the Snow* (on the Holocaust). This piece is engraved in my memory. Dancer Rahamim Ron came on stage wearing a suit, such as worn by Eastern European Jews. He stood and began to undress, garment after garment, and when he was naked, his white skin gleaming under the intense light, he fell to the floor as if shot. Then more and more dancers entered, stood, undressed, and fell one on top of the other so that the mound of white bodies grew, creating a cruel and horrifying beauty – a beauty that was close to a betrayal of what happened. As actress Hannah Meron read the terrible words, her voice was hypnotic, emotionless. I remember that scene to this day, and the audience did not breathe.

Compliments aside, there were critics who disagreed with the choice of subject. Miriam Bar wrote in *Davar*, "It's hard to grasp how an artist of the stature of John Cranko does not sense that Auschwitz is not yet history, that one is already at liberty to search for its metaphors, stage and visual enactments, and so forth."¹³ She contended that art in our time does not recognize limits, "and fulfills Nietzsche's principal 'there is no truth, anything goes' – and yet there still are some limits, spiritual and emotional ones." She also wrote that one cannot demonstrate the death camps and the Jews who undressed before entering the gas chamber at Nahmani Theatre where Batsheva performed most probably including audience members who had survived the camps. The critic continued "It's hard to accept the death camps of a generation ago in the stage images of dance."

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The 1973 Yom Kippur War, that so surprised Israel, added another layer to the changing attitude to the Holocaust. Pictures of Israeli prisoners of war, of weakness and humiliation were aired on TV for the first time. In the wake of the waves of shock these evoked, a door was opened to the legitimacy of portraying other kinds of Israelis, including those whose identity encompassed the Holocaust. At the start of the 1980s, the Education Ministry decided to give Junior High School students the task of writing a *Roots* work that also contributed to young Israeli's growing interest in the Holocaust to which so many of their grandparents were connected, either directly or indirectly.

Over the years Holocaust Memorial Day has become Holocaust and Heroism Memorial Day, and when the siren blares throughout the country, all Israel's Jewish inhabitants stand to honor the memory of the murdered, just as they do for Memorial Day to honor the fallen of Israel's wars.

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While the two Holocaust-related works mentioned above are by Sokolow – a Jew, and Cranko, a gentile, though according to Giora Manor his grandmother was Jewish. The next two are by Israelis and they highlight the differences in their viewpoint from that of Nirenska, even though neither were choreographed by survivors. The Batsheva Dance Company presented a program of works dealing with the Ho-

locoust on the 30th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, which occurred at Passover on April 19, 1943. Performed at the Israel Festival, it included *Eclipse of Lights* by Oshra Elkayam-Ronen.

The dance opened with a semi-transparent curtain through which the audience saw movement that looked like a frantic, pointless mass running about in an extermination camp encircled by an electrified fence. It looked like an event remembered in a dream of something beyond belief, that is and is not. In the journal *Musag* (Notion) Leah Dov wrote: "A ballet on a concentration camp, (and who in his right mind could even imagine such a pairing?), that can give one the shivers. The very fact that it has happened, that it is possible, perhaps atones for the awful banality inherent in any such experiment. [...]. Elkayam did it, with a team that worked as an anonymous group, and simple choreography."¹⁴

The most famous Holocaust-related work in Israel is Rami Be'er's 1995 *Aide Memoire* choreographed for KDC. This was not a work that illuminated awfulness, on the contrary, it went in the direction of a poetic visual beauty that recalled a requiem, its connection to the Holocaust floating up like an echo from the past, permitting a moment of respite to the viewer who finds it hard to confront the subject directly.

As the son of Holocaust survivors and a kibbutz member, many of whose friends had come from a similar background, Be'er kept silent for many years. As the generation of survivors dwindled, the importance of preserving those memories increased. According to dance scholar Smadar Weiss, the name *Aide Memoire* signifies a document that is signed by both sides: both Be'er and the spectators, that was supposed to remind both sides to remember (Weiss, 2002).

The movement intersected with the impressive stage architecture of huge, horizontal copper oblong objects at the rear of the stage, equally separated, and that recalled cattle-cars, without windows, that one could climb, progress in single file to the "roofs", descend, wriggle between the cracks, disappear and reappear against them. The copper set also became a huge musical instrument that you could strike on and evoke sounds in tempo. Thus, the architecture was directly linked to the subject, yet at the same time offered compositional and movement solutions that were artistically sound even without relating to content.

The musical collage consisted of solo piano, song, the sound of moving trains, bells and drumming on the copper. But it was the orders bellowed by a man in German and Hungarian, the languages of the lands from which his parents came, and even in English (indicating their importance to the choreographer that they be understood) that caused the dread. The words were "Raus" or "Out! Get Out" in German to those alighting from the train cars or driven from their hiding place, or "Schnell" (quickly) to the skeletal creatures stumbling along. "These were the commands played over the loudspeakers in the extermination camps or at the train stations."¹⁵ Throughout the dance, the phrase "For every time and season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven..." that indicated man's helplessness before fate, heard twice in English, was taken from *Ecclesiastes* (Ch. 3, v. 2-8).

In time, the subject of the Holocaust has become more permissible, and can be seen in large productions. Oded Assaf wrote in the newspaper *Ha'aretz* that in music and literature "large-scale works on the Holocaust had been created, rich in scope – no less than for an oratorio, and if possible, opera – at sociably full-volume."¹⁶ In Natan Shaham's book *Hutzot Ashkelon* (The Streets of Ashkelon, 1986), he lays his thoughts before one of the characters, a task that he called "touching ghastliness at second hand". The book also delivers a message that there are artistic and moral limits to 'Holocaust creations'. "We must be sure to defend those limits, and not cross them. These kinds of works are not meant to 'present' or 'illustrate', supply easy thrills, or promise comfort or salvation."

Dance Torn Between the Anti- and the Longing for Holiness

In the passion to create *Eretz* Israeli dance in the *Yishuv* era, the choreographers sought to disengage from the Diaspora and from subjects that were linked to Jewish culture in the Jewish small towns/villages (*shtetl* in Yiddish) of Eastern Europe. After the establishment of the State, and thereby the accomplishment of an important phase of the revolution, opposition to Jewish culture weakened but the Israelis were not interested.

In 1962, during one of her many visits to Israel, Sokolow made *The Treasure* based on a Hassidic tale by Y. L. Peretz. For Sokolow, as it would be for other Jewish choreographers arriving in the years to come and founding Israeli ensembles, the choice of a Jewish subject was natural. Speaking with Michael Ohad she said: "I wanted to put over something of the legendary atmosphere of the source. As a Jew, choice of this Jewish legend was natural. ... several childhood memories served me as a background. My parents came to the US from Pinsk."¹⁷ In that same article dancer Dalia Harlap spoke of her opposition to portraying a Diaspora Hasidic girl. "But Anna quickly overruled me," she said, "and wasn't that wonderful that she'd come all the way to Tel Aviv from New York to awaken a Jewish spark in me?"

Sophie Maslow also thought it perfectly natural to mount her 1950 work, *The Village I Knew* with the Batsheva Dance Company, as well as *The Dybbuk* based on Yiddish folk songs and the stories of Sholem Aleichem. The works had garnered much praise in the US but did not speak to the hearts of the Batsheva dancers, nor to their audience.

Over the years Israeli society came to realize that not all of the Jewish peoples would come together and immigrate to Israel and that it was necessary to accept the Diaspora as part of reality, and that Israel and Diaspora Jewry had each other's backs, as it were. When, in 1977 Rina Yerushalmi made *The Dybbuk* on Batsheva, her choice of a Jewish subject was taken as natural. The seismic change in attitude toward Jewish culture found voice in the establishment of *Yiddishpiel* (Yiddish Theater) by Shmuel Atzmon in 1987, and its audience continues to increase.

The religious home she grew up in informs the choreographies by Noa Wertheim, artistic director of the Vertigo Company. Hers was a welcoming and pluralistic home that bequeathed her an insatiable search for the spiritual as well as a profound respect for the body. Jewish sources provide her with inspiration as seen not only in her themes but also in the titles and program notes for some of her

dances: *Manna* – "Vessel of Light What is repaired first, vessel or light? Is it the Sun's desire to fulfill the absence of the Moon's light, or rather is it her lack of light that gives rise to a vessel of innovation?" (the Zohar); *Yama* (2016) followed "And God...divided the waters under the firmament...and let the dry land appear and it was so, and God called the dry land Earth and the waters called He seas." There was also *One. One & One* (2018) (named after a tractate of the *Talmud*). Noa Wertheim revolves around the individual's inner wish to be whole whilst being challenged constantly by a fragmented reality within the personal, existential and spiritual realms of one's being. The above also connects to social and political self-examination in Israeli society vis a vis internal dissensions.

* * *

My reflections return to the conference in Arizona and realize how I envied the ease in which presenters linked dance and religion, taking two exciting experiences as examples. The Embodied Torah Workshop opened with a Shabbat morning service, led by Rabbi Diane Elliot, focusing on dance as devotion. The embodied Torah exploration continued throughout the day with eight breakout sessions which included: *Sh'ma* based on the twice daily prayer of the Jewish credo; *Kaddish* based on the mourners' prayer; and *Shalsholet* or movement ideas based on chanting Hebrew Scripture or the different cantillations. Meanwhile, the Dance Lab, which began in the afternoon, pulled from the techniques of a variety of young dancers and choreographers, to physically investigate the intersection of movement and Jewish identity, and work towards defining how Judaism informs our broader physical identity.

I imagine that this skein of relationships does not exist within the ultra-Orthodox (*Haredi*) sector in the US, except that in Israel the religious parties, including the extreme *Haredi* sector, are part of the political coalition in the Knesset (Parliament). Following the results of the April 2019 election, president Reuven Rivlin tasked Benjamin Netanyahu with forming the new government. He did not attain a 61 vote majority because Avigdor Lieberman, head of the Israel *Beitenu* (Israel Is Our Home) party refused to join the coalition unless the Draft Law was passed.¹⁸ From his point of view and that of the secular population this was the opening salvo against the religious extremists suspected of trying to turn Israel into a theocracy.

A short explanation for those unversed in Israeli religious politics. Already at the very beginning of Zionism there was a contradiction between the Zionist and the *Haredi* sector's perception of the *Land*, the latter believing that redemption for the land and the people would arrive only with the coming of the Messiah. A near poisonous relationship has developed between the secular and *Haredi* community that extends to every aspect of life including dance. For instance: at the 1998 Israel Festival in honor of Israel's 50th anniversary to be televised internationally from Jerusalem, Batsheva was to perform a segment from Ohad Naharin's *Kyr* (Wall) that required the dancers undressing down to underwear. Certain of the *Haredi* objected, demanding the dancers wear longjohns rather than briefs. During the televised program the dancers refused to go on stage and went back to Tel Aviv without performing. There was an emergency meeting of the Batsheva Board of Governors to censure Batsheva's behavior. Then: "... a clear voice said: 'I request permission to speak'. There was

silence around the table. Veteran actress Hannah Meron took a deep breath and said 'All of us board members, every enlightened person in the country, as well as the pages of its history owe a huge debt to the dancers. They saved us from a major disgrace, from a fiasco. I wish to thank them for their courage and their determination to stand up against this evil idiocy that has spread among us and swept so many others in its wake, from the least of the politicians and up to our President [Ezer Weizmann] who dismissed a compromise. I wish to propose the motion that we, the members of the Board, fulfill our duty as though elected, get behind these wonderful dancers, and beg Naharin to resume his post as artistic director.'¹⁹

Naharin received complete backing, returned to his position which he had left in solidarity with the dancers and a short time after, Fortis became the company's general director and co-artistic director.

* * *

While the secular-*Haredi* divide deepened, we witnessed a growing attraction to dance in the religious Zionist sector.²⁰ Scholar and educator Talia Perlstein explained the strengthened attraction of religiously observant women to dance in terms of modern cultural influences that the community experienced in the second half of the 20th century, primarily from the view of the feminist movement that advocated gender-equality. These led to significant changes in the lives of religious women with the possibility of higher education and integration into the job market opening up to them (Perlshtein, 2014). Religious Studies Seminaries for women were established in the 1980s and pretty soon there were demands to open a dance track at the *Orot* Israel (lights of Israel) Religious College (1988), and that led to a supply of religious dance teachers who sought ways of expressing spiritual processes in dance.²¹ The college prepared special teaching programs on how to teach creativity and understanding in choreography through subjects allied to religion or Jewish tradition (Zichroni-Katz, 2010).

In the years from 2000 on, Ronen Izhaki established the *Atzmotai Tomarna* (And My Bones Shall Speak) movement and dance center for men in Jerusalem that also has *Ka'et* (now) Ensemble (Izhaki, 2010). Yaron Schwartz, at the Hartmann High School for boys, wrote: "The encounter between dance and an Israeli man who lives a religious life and worships is significant, possible and desirable according to the values of the individual who prays and according to his body's needs. [...] Religious protocol allows a man to clap when he's in a quiet space, to jump, close his eyes, move gently in various kinds of dynamic, unconventionally, move slowly, move from the pelvis in a movement that reveals something of his inner world. The religious Israeli man has all kinds of identities. He is bodily inhibited and reserved, but his religious identity is also found in the body, linked with and attentive to the body, talks to the body, dances" (cited in Izhaki, 2016).

Talia Perlstein established the Noga Company at the Orot Israel College directed by choreographer Sharona Floresheim with special dramaturgy dialogue (Hurvitz-Luz, 2017), and Daniella Bloch established Nehara, both companies are for women dancers only (Bloch, 2017) and the audience is composed of women only. Of the 71 dance tracks for matriculation in formal public high school education, 11 are for observant girls. To examine the situation, there has been a religious-secular theater and dance conference at the Western Galilee College (Rotman, 2017).

In 2016 Janice Ross of Stanford University identified the start of this new dance: "Secular dance traditionally works in the opposite way – the individual is masked to become a neutral medium for the choreographer's vision, which may rarely, or never, intersect with the dancer's true life. But in *Ka'et*, and other religious dance group's work – *Nehara*, *Noga*, *Haliu*, Yael Rowe and Tzipi Nir, Carmia dance groups, the content is the starting place and the medium of the body is already a carefully shaped signifier of religious identity. The dance that follows celebrates what happens when those two come together. [...]. What I saw then was the brokering of a complex relationship between the Jewish body, the physical vocabulary of prayer and a secular aesthetic of postmodern simplicity. The ordinary body as an extra-ordinary and holy art medium. The messages these bodies told were complex and layered. Each dancer's private history as a modern Orthodox Jewish man (sic) nested inside his developing one as a dancer. And when the dance "worked" there was a rare translucence as the dance allowed one to see more deeply into the modern Orthodox man/dancer inside. [...]. A dramatically new model of what a negotiation between contemporary dance and Modern Orthodox Judaism might look like is unfolding" (Ross, 2016).

After the conference, comparing dance and Jewishness in the Diaspora, to what's happening in Israel, I realize there is a surprising relatively new direction with those who are Jewishly observant adding dance study and performance as part of their observance. I look forward to its continuing. The dialogue set up at the "Jews and Jewishness in the Dance World" conference can be extended through connections internationally, and deepened, considering both the differences and commonalities between Israel and the Diaspora. I offer *Mahol Akhshav* as a forum for expanding the considerations and issues of trends, epochs and dancers we have brought forth in these pages.

Notes

¹ The beginning of concert dance in Israel is ascribed to the first recital that Baruch Agadati gave at Neve Zedek in 1920.

² For instance: Baruch Agadati, Yardena Cohen, Rina Nikova and Devorah Bertonov.

³ The exception was Israeli born Sara Levi-Tanai who established the Inbal Dance Theatre using Yemenite Jewish culture rather than any kind of inspiration that was European based.

⁴ Moshe Efrati, who besides his Jewish/Israeli themes in his choreography, was drawn to work with a unique minority: dancers who were deaf. His company *Kol veDmama* (Voice and Silence) included both hearing and non-hearing dancers.

⁵ Hazan, *Al HaMishmar*, 24 May 1972.

⁶ Arnon, interview with the author, 9 September 1996.

⁷ For example, Rami Be'er's works for KDC such as *Reserve Diary* (1989) and *Real Time* (1991).

⁸ Vardi, interview with the author, 2 September 2013.

⁹ The Shades of Dance venue was established in 1984 and continues to this day with the aim of fostering young Israeli choreographers.

¹⁰ Margalit Ornstein, "Development of the Art of Movement," *Ktuvim*, 1920.

¹¹ Nahman Ben-Ami, *Al HaMishmar*, 22 April 1948.

¹² Olya Zilberman, "Anna Sokolow's Lyric Theater," *Al HaMishmar*, 1963.

- ¹³ Miriam Bar, *Davar*, 18 October 1971.
- ¹⁴ Leah Dov, "Batsheva Dance at the '75 Israel Festival – The Ghostly Possibility Is Possible," *Musag*, April 1975.
- ¹⁵ Michael Feirburg, Petah Tikva, 12 December 2000.
- ¹⁶ Smadar Weiss, interview with Oded Assaf, *Ha'aretz*, 27 April 2012.
- ¹⁷ Michael Ohad, *Davar*, 6 July 1962.
- ¹⁸ The "draft law," is actually an attempt to amend the existing law to regulate the issue of enlistment to the Israel Defense Force (IDF) of ultra-Orthodox and yeshiva students, whose Torah study is their profession. Over the years, various coalition arrangements made sure that exemptions from the IDF were granted to yeshiva students. In 2014 the *Knesset* or Israeli Parliament passed an amendment to the law. To the movement's position, the new law was not even equal, did not put an end to the long injustice according to the secular Jews whose children are required to enlist, and established large parts of that discriminatory arrangement. But the story did not end there - in 2015, after the *Haredi* (ultra-Orthodox), parties re-entered the coalition, another amendment to the law was passed, and it became, in the movement's position, even more discriminatory than the law passed in 2014.
- ¹⁹ Eldad Manheim, "A Loud Thump was Heard," *Ha'aretz*, 20 June 2014.
- ²⁰ The religious Zionist sector strengthened and most of it is part of the settlement project in Judea and Samaria (a.k.a. the West Bank). How one calls the area depends on one's political point of view.
- ²¹ One of the religious dancers trained at Orot Academy College, Efrat Nehama with Itamar Nehama, presented a remarkable movement workshop on the Saturday of the ASU conference dealing with what is and is not forbidden in the body with Talmudic references.

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