

Israel Yakovee

The Universal Yemenite Step of a Dancer and Cultural Advocate

On Israel Yakovee's Yemenite heritage

Early Life and Background

Israel Yakovee was born 77 years ago in the Yemenite neighborhood of Sha'arayim in Rehovot, Israel. He was one of eight children in the family of **Awami Nissim** and **Bracha Cohen**, who had immigrated from Yemen in the 1920s. Growing up in a religiously observant environment, Israel was deeply immersed in the traditions and customs of Yemenite Jewish heritage. This rich cultural background laid the foundation for his future endeavors.

As a child, Israel's life was marked by a profound connection to his Yemenite roots. His experiences, from traditional foods and customs to the deep-seated memories of family and community life, shaped his identity. The Yemenite dance, a fundamental element of his heritage, captured his imagination and passion from an early age.

Youth and Education

After completing his elementary education at Sha'arayim, Israel was sent to Nahal Oz, a kibbutz near the Gaza Strip. This was a significant transition from his religious upbringing at home to a more secular life on the kibbutz. At Nahal Oz, Israel found a new environment that nurtured his personal growth, exposing him to the beauty of nature and the values of community living.

It was during this time that Israel was first introduced to folk dancing by Yossi Abuhav z"l, a dance instructor from Be'er Sheva. His natural talent for dance was evident, and Yossi encouraged him to enroll in a dance instructors course. Israel successfully completed the two-year program, earning a certificate as a certified folk dance instructor.

Military Service and Initial Career

Following his time at the kibbutz, Israel joined the Nahal Brigade, where he served



Israel Yakovee and his father

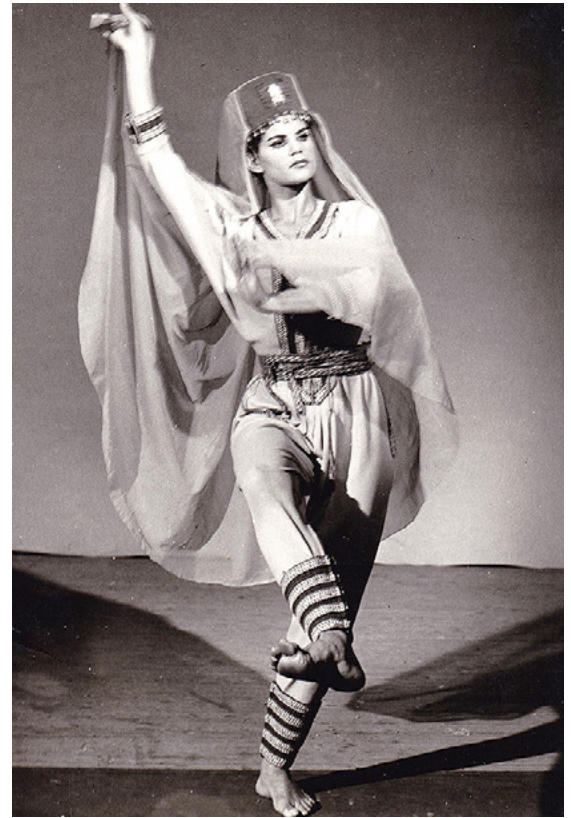


Israel Yakovee demonstrating Yemenite dance in a traditional costume

Israel devoted himself to exploring and preserving the rich heritage of Yemenite Jewish culture. He meticulously studied Yemenite traditions, including wedding customs and social practices, and documented them through various media.

as a platoon sergeant during the Six-Day War. His military service involved various duties, including a significant role in the security operations between Gaza and El Arish (on the Sinai Peninsula). After completing his service, he returned to Nahal Oz, was accepted as a kibbutz member, and sought to further his academic and professional dreams.

When the kibbutz did not support his desire to pursue higher education, Israel left and returned to his roots in Rehovot, determined to follow his dream of becoming a professional dancer. With the support of his sister Yoni, who was a well-known performer, he succeeded in passing the auditions for the musical, "Hello, Dolly!", and performed alongside her at the Alhambra Theater in Jaffa.



Yoni, Israel's sister, principal dancer in Lehakat Inbal



Israel and Michelle Yakovee on their wedding day

The American Dream and Professional Growth

Having achieved his dream of becoming a professional dancer, Israel set his sights on academic advancement. He moved to Los Angeles, California, where his older brother, **Rahavia**, had already established himself. Rahavia was instrumental in getting Israel a student visa and a flight to the United States.

In Los Angeles, Israel enrolled at California State University, Northridge, where he pursued a degree in Physical Education and Physiotherapy. In addition to his studies, to support himself, he started teaching Israeli folk dance classes and worked as a



Camp Finjan, 1994



Finjan Camp logo on the button

"My greatest achievement and satisfaction is the love and recognition that I now receive in Israel for [the fact] that I am considered an authority on Yemenite dance. That is, after all, what I value the most."



Israel and Bentzi Tiram wearing Yemenite costumes at Camp Finjan

lifeguard. His passion for dance and commitment to cultural education allowed him to expand his dance programs and teach Israeli folk dance on both the East and West Coasts of the United States.

Cultural Ambassador and Dance Innovator

By 1975, Israel had completed his studies and married **Rachael**, his first wife. Together, they had three children – **Oren**, **Ronit**, and **Ilan**. Israel's dedication to folk dance continued to grow, and he began to explore ways to promote and preserve Yemenite Jewish culture through his work.

He played a pivotal role in the development of the Israeli folk dance scene in the U.S., organizing Israeli folk dance camps, workshops and seminars that introduced and popularized Israeli folk dances. His innovative approach included incorporating traditional Yemenite elements into his dance choreographies. This earned him recognition and respect in the global folk dance community.

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Despite personal changes in his life, including a divorce and a subsequent marriage to **Michelle**, with whom he had a son, **Lior**, and a daughter, **Maya**, Israel's commitment to his cultural mission remained steadfast.

The Yemenite Dance Revival

In the late 20th century, Israel devoted himself to exploring and preserving the rich heritage of Yemenite Jewish culture. He meticulously studied Yemenite traditions, including wedding customs



Camp Finjan – the teachers, from right: Israel Yakovee, Moshe Eskayo, Moshiko Halevy, and Israel Shiker



Historical photo from Camp Finjan

and social practices, and documented them through various media. His efforts led him to create in the neighborhood of 100 folk dances, with approximately 80% of them inspired by Yemenite music and traditions.

Israel's work transcended borders as he shared his expertise through workshops, festivals, and cultural events across the globe. His outreach extended to Japan, Singapore, Taiwan, South America, Europe, Australia, and the United States, all areas where he found a keen interest in Yemenite and Israeli folk traditions.

Legacy and Continued Influence

Today, Israel Yakovee resides in Boston, where he continues to teach, create, and promote Yemenite folk dance. He recently collaborated with Israeli choreographer **Eyal Eliahu** on a new line folk dance, *Eid Al Yaman*, to Yemenite music.

Israel co-created the circle dance, *Blues Teimani*, with **Marco Ben Shimon** to music by the band, **Yemen Blues**.

Israel's life's work embodies the fusion of personal passion with a deep-seated cultural mission. He has dedicated his life to not only preserving the Yemenite Jewish heritage but also to sharing it with the world. His contributions to folk dance and cultural education have established him as a leading figure in the preservation and dissemination of Yemenite Jewish culture.

Israel Yakovee's journey is a testament to the power of cultural preservation and the impact one individual can have on a global stage. His legacy lives on through his teachings, dances, and the vibrant cultural exchanges he has fostered across the world.



Israel and Ronit, his daughter, performing at Camp Finjan

Through his tireless efforts, Israel Yakovee has become a universal ambassador for Israeli folk dance, ensuring that the rich tapestry of Yemenite traditions continues to inspire and resonate with audiences around the globe. His life's work reflects a profound commitment to cultural heritage and a dedication to future generations of folk dance enthusiasts.

Notable Achievements

- **Dance Instructor Certification:** Graduated from a two-year dance instructor course in Be'er Sheva.
- **Professional Performance:** Performed in the musical "Hello, Dolly!" at the Alhambra Theater in Jaffa.
- **Academic Achievements:** Earned a degree in Physical Education and Physiotherapy from Northridge University.
- **Cultural Contributions:** Created approximately 100 folk dances, with a focus on Yemenite Jewish traditions.
- **Global Outreach:** Taught and promoted Israeli folk dance in countries including Japan, Singapore, Taiwan, South America, Europe, Australia, and the United States.
- **Cultural Documentation:** Conducted extensive research on Yemenite Jewish customs and traditions, documenting them through various media.

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Camp Finjan, group photo