



David Ben-Asher

Photographs:  
David Ben-Asher  
and family album

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# Shuki Hoffman's Choreography of Life

## Winner of the Rabinovich Foundation Lifetime Achievement Award 2020

- Myriad of dance students across the country and even around the world
- Dozens of choreographies that have become classics
- Representation of Israel in State ceremonies and around the world
- Recipient of a Badge of Honor from Teddy Kollek, the legendary Mayor of Jerusalem
- Founder and leader of "Mehola" – one of the largest dance establishments in Israel
- Named as Yakir Yerushalaim (an Honorary Citizen of Jerusalem)
- Production of the choreography eight times for the torch lighting ceremony held on Mount Herzl
- And now – the Rabinovich Foundation Award for Lifetime Achievement
- Shuki Hoffman, one of the greatest Israeli dance Jerusalemites in our country.



Shuki Hoffman

Photo: Tomer Halperin

Sixty-eight years ago, **Shoshi**, possibly **Shoshana**, was born in Jerusalem. In eighth grade, she was nicknamed, "**Shuki**", the name which over the years became a brand in the field of Israeli dance; a nickname that stuck with a woman who woke up the Holy City and swept it with movement and dance that has reached new and fascinating heights.

Already in the ninth grade she knew who would accompany her with the sounds of his accordion, as well as in her private life. **Shlomi** has been her ultimate partner to this day.

Since then, for decades they have been the legendary couple that has brought the gospel of Israeli dance to the entire country and throughout the world, at numerous events and forums by presenting this culture to thousands of dance and song enthusiasts. There was a wonderful symbiosis between the movement and music skills of the couple, Shuki and Shlomi, and their followers even gave them the nickname "**Shluki**" (Shlomi and Shuki for fans of the genre).

In the early 1970s, while in the IDF at the army base BAHAD 8, Shuki, a graduate of Madassim (a course for sports instructors) served as a physical training instructor and an instructor of the HIBA, women soldiers serving in the police force. (Full disclosure:

the author of this article was the commander of this base.) Shlomi, in addition to being a tank crew member in the army, played the accordion as a cultural addition that was enjoyed by the members of his units.

Following the completion of a folk dance instructors course, Shuki began to instruct the children of the city of Jerusalem in both in within the schools and in the Tzofim (Scouts). Her choreographic skills were emerging and her first steps as a



Shuki and Shlomi Hoffman - "Shluki"



Shuki Hoffman. On the wall – her painting



Mehola at the Armon HaNatziv Promenade.  
Photo: Mehola Archive

choreographer were enthusiastically received by the city's school system. It was not long after that legendary Mayor **Teddy Kollek** rerouted her to the position of head of the municipality's dance section. This is where the Hoffman couple's life became tumultuous. They defined themselves as restless "workaholics". At the time, they had a hand in all the wide-ranging cultural activities in our capital city. There were graduation ceremonies of school classes, many performances, organization of local singing groups, work with **Lilith Nagar** on the black-and-white TV channel, management of the municipal orchestra by Shlomi and the overall management of "Hora Yerushalayim" which developed into a well-known and valued national troupe. In an exceptional manner, they received a special permit from Teddy to work as a married couple in the municipality; Teddy just wasn't willing to give up on both as contributors who had been giving above and beyond to the city's culture.

"Hora Yerushalayim" – the dance and song troupe was at the center of their work for the city. Both Shlomi, the manager, and Shuki, the choreographer, were in constant motion. This continued for about 16 years, with hundreds of performances around the country and at international festivals in many countries. **Teddy Kollek** crowned Shuki as an "outstanding employee in the municipality".

### The legendary Khan – another tier of the country's heritage

Concurrent with their work in the Jerusalem Municipality with "Hora Yerushalayim" and other activities in the

city, the "Shluki" couple made their unique folkloristic contributions. Every evening, literally every evening, an Israeli folklore performance took place in the Jerusalem Khan Theater, with its legendary **Hofni, Yaffa Yarkoni** and others, under the management of the entrepreneurial owner, **Eli Siton**.

There were hundreds of shows, even on Seder night and sometimes two shows in one evening. Thousands of tourists and masses of Israelis witnessed these folkloric performances with compact choreographies of Chassidic dance, Hora, Adama (the land), Oriental style, in which they made sure to present, first and foremost, the beautiful Israel.

For 10 years at the Khan there were productions to the glory of the capital of Israel. And from there came the "Yerushalayim Shel Zahav – Jerusalem of Gold" Club followed by the "Sabras" Project in [the Jerusalem] "YMCA", all for deepening the roots of the Israeli experience and the heritage of the land. In between, their eldest son, Yaniv emerged into the world.

### *So y-you can rest a little, Shuki? Relax on your laurels, enjoy the fruits of years of labor, a little quiet for the soul?*

You made me laugh. Me rest? Me sit quietly?! Anyone who knows me – I'm pepper. Doing and action is in my DNA. If I do not dance I paint, and if I do not paint then I sculpt, and if I do not sculpt then I design. Really, I look around and see beautiful sculptures made by her hands adorning her apartment overlooking the sea in the exclusive residential neighborhood in north Tel Aviv.

"You made me laugh. Me rest? Me sit quietly?! Anyone who knows me - I'm pepper. Doing and action is in my DNA. If I do not dance I paint, and if I do not paint then I sculpt, and if I do not sculpt then I design. After all, the essence of our artistic role is to excite and lead people with a spirit of doing and to reach new heights."

We were bombarded with students. From the very beginning in 1988, more than 1,000 children and adolescents of all ages were enrolled. The studio could not keep pace with the demand so we opened 5 branches, one after another, at community centers in the city of Jerusalem.

**Then Shuki adds:** After all, the essence of our artistic role is to excite and lead people with a spirit of doing and to reach new heights. So in my youth, I founded the "Bamot Chofshiot – Free Stages" project in the city, and projects to help struggling youth. Alongside these, I founded a folklore troupe whose motto is Israeli heritage alongside modernism and a high level of technology.

At the same time, in the citywide framework, the Shluki couple formed the municipal singing group with conductor **Yossi Debra**, along with an orchestra, choreographic staging by Shuki, special costumes and programs for the shows. Together, a large-scale artistic body was created. It is in fact a combination of the dance troupe "Hora Yerushalayim" together with a singing group as a basis for expansion along the way. In collaboration with **Bracha Dudai**, the late choreographer and instructor, the children's troupe "Hora Efrochim" was formed and with **Micha Ness**, "Hora Neurim" was formed. All were under one roof.

**An era was over.  
A new day was upon us.**

The very intense years of activity in the municipality led the Hoffman couple to rethink. After a long period of achievement, they decided to change direction towards an independent enterprise. They left working for the municipality, on good terms, and turned to their new life endeavor, i.e., opening



*From rehearsals at the "Mehola Merkaz" studio*

their own private studio. They found a special place in the German Colony in Jerusalem where they opened a studio featuring a variety of dance styles, which was then new in the capital. Classical ballet, modern, tap, flamenco, belly dance, ballroom, jazz and of course, folk dance and dances from the 60's were taught there. In biblical sources they found inspiration for the name "Mehola", a derivative of the word "Machol" and went with that.

**Shuki and Shlomi relate:** We were bombarded with students. From the very beginning, more than 1,000 children and adolescents of all ages were enrolled. The studio could not keep pace with the demand and so we opened 5 branches, one after another, at community centers in the city. We employed many teachers and I as the head teacher, directed the general operations and I was the artistic director of the school and of the adult troupe. At the same time, I made sure to keep in direct touch with all the young students along with their parents and families and that is what guides me in my work until today.



*Noa Hoffman, the youngest daughter. Photo: Or Danon*



Yael Hoffman

Later, we also expanded the field of operations to Mevaseret Zion and other locations in the country.

### A new era, a great challenge – the establishment of "Mehola"

In 1989 we felt ripe, the duo Shluki said. We set another new and challenging goal for ourselves – to establish a dance troupe at the highest level. It would in fact be a milestone and an aspiration for all students to follow suit. And the troupe really made a name for themselves. In honor of the millennium celebrations, in the year 2000, Shuki's troupe was invited to represent Israel at an international event held at Disneyland in Orlando. The many performances at this event revealed "Mehola" to be the ultimate ambassador of Israeli art and culture to the thousands of spectators who visited the place. As cultural ambassadors, we also represented Israel in Brazil, Denmark, Sweden, England, France and the United States.

The success of the troupe and the school was great; a few years later, we broke through the boundaries of Jerusalem and opened branches in other places in the country. We now have activities in various cities, with "Mehola" branches in Tel Aviv, Ramat Hasharon, Savyon, Givat Shmuel and Jerusalem. Over the years, thousands of female and male dance students from the age of 4 to upper teens have



Yaniv and Dorit Hoffman. Photo: Shlomi Perry

passed through these settings. During the 33 years of "Mehola"'s existence, tens of thousands of youth have passed through our doors, some of whom have reached extremely high levels of dance. Our trainees continued their journey in the best dance companies in the country – Batsheva, Mayumana, The Kibbutz Dance Company, Vertigo, Tararam, the Israeli Ballet, Inbal Pinto and in prestigious schools abroad.

At the same time, we have trained hundreds of instructors, some of whom are well-known in their field. Our son, **Yaniv**, met his wife, **Dorit**, in "Mehola", and as expected, they became instructors and later major artistic directors and choreographers in the network. They were later joined by their middle daughter, **Yael**, and then also **Noa**, their youngest daughter. And so it came to be that the entire family was dancing, teaching and choreographing. Yaniv and Dorit manage two of the successful branches of "Mehola" – the locations in Ramat Hasharon and Tel Aviv, after many years in which they artistically managed the "Mehola" troupes in Jerusalem. For many years we did the Torch Lighting ceremonies together, the "Taglit" and "Masa" ceremonies, the Maccabiah and others. Later, Yaeli also got involved and took over the management of the Kiryat Hayovel branch in Jerusalem and helped open the branch in Ramat Hasharon, where she still teaches. Noa, the youngest daughter, became a solo dancer in "Mehola". Like an icon on stage, today she is the professional director of all activities at the Givat Shmuel branch and



Hoffman family. Photo: Tomer Halperin

of the troupes in Ramat Hasharon and Tel Aviv. Over the years, we have established competitive tracks, winning many awards in both folklore and modern dance. But more importantly, we have developed teaching methods to build a school according to levels of knowledge, so that everyone, at every level, can find themselves and their place in the world of dance. We've invested the same resources for all ages and levels - shows, costumes, senior staff and more. This is the secret of the method.

Recently, Yaniv took over my role in managing the adult troupe which he has raised to new heights. Lehakat "Mehola" is known in Israel for its level and performances, and Yaniv's choreographies are a hallmark, along with the reconstructions of the material I constructed in those years. Old and new, side by side. We regularly perform at the Karmiel and Ashdodance Festivals.

Last year, I got to direct the opening show of Ashdodance and, alongside Dorit and Yaniv, we did a show called, "Mazal Tov – Our Joys". It was a celebration of Israeliness on the stage by troupes from all over the country.

Today, it is safe to say that "Mehola" is an extensive system in the field of Israeli dance and other styles. It is one of the largest in Israel, both in terms of the number of trainees and the professional level of our dance centers. We have dance groups for every age

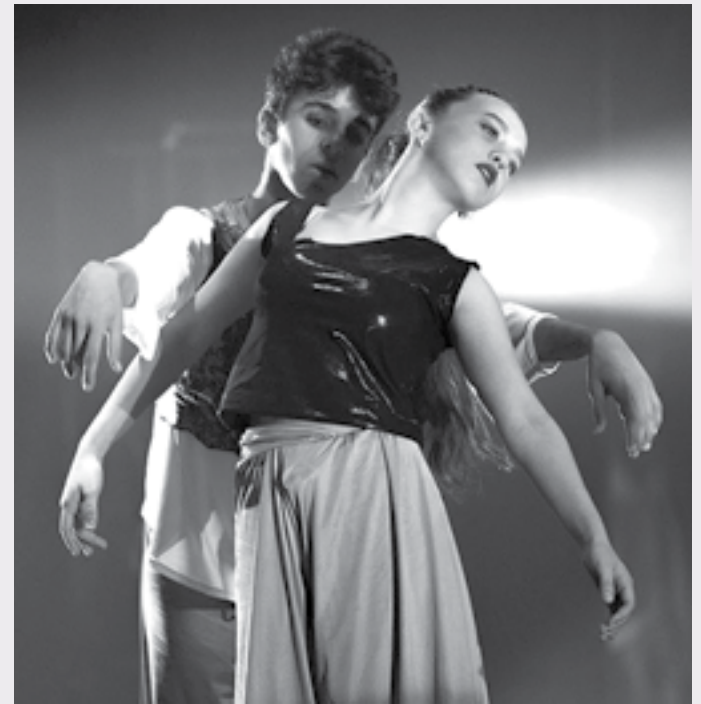


Photo: Dorit Hoffman

group, including 5 representative troupes of high schoolers and graduates who perform at a very high level on a nationally recognized scale.

***You performed at the torch lighting ceremonies on Mount Herzl eight times with your spectacular choreographies – Shuki, Yaniv and Dorit – the "Hoffmans". What can you say about this and when will it happen again?***

I was chosen eight times to serve as the choreographer of the dance performances at the torch lighting ceremonies on the eve of Israel's Independence



From the dance "Like a Lily", choreography: Shuki Hoffman. Photo: Tomer Halperin



*Mehola at the Karmiel Dance Festival. Photo: Eyal Yeynot*



*Photo: Tomer Halperin*

Day, **Shuki says**. We brought about 300 dancers with innovative choreographies that matched the grandeur of the event. Every single time, we dedicated special thought according to the theme that the Ministry of Education set for that year.

Participating in this honored ceremony, of course, required a lot of rehearsals and endless preparations. All participants were Mehola dancers. We perceived the choreographies as a complex, creative and deep work of art; we had many rehearsals before the event and endless preparations. I am proud to have been a significant part of a State event of this magnitude.

In recent years, event producers have made changes to the concept and moved to focus more on pyrotechnics, fireworks and glitter, lasers and drones. This suited us less. We are more into the field of art and Israeliness. We may return to this, depending on the viewpoint of those in charge of this ceremony

### **There are no limits to what can be done**

Shuki's track record is rich and varied. She has produced evenings for the Karmiel Festival, choreographed for the Maccabiah ceremony, at events in Caesarea, directed performances for the Ministry of Education and more. She has given guest lectures at both the Jerusalem Academy and Wingate College, served as a judge at the Israel Festival as well as for various dance institutions. She gained international recognition when she was invited to international folklore competitions where she also won medals of honor.

As a guest choreographer, she has created choreographies for acclaimed troupes, including "Anachnu Kan", "Misgav", "Tzivei Machol Hadera", "Hora Ashkelon" as well as Jewish troupes in Brazil and England.

Lehakat "Mehola" won a silver medal at a competition in Dijon, France, first place in Cyprus, a run of a month of performances in China and England and at the Dromobil Festival in Canada; this is only a partial list.

Shuki's works have become inalienable assets in folklore and have been performed by well-known troupes in the country. Among her best-known works are "Hora Secharchoret", "Lo Tifga Bi Ein Ha'Ra", "Leyerushalayim", "MaOhf", "Trio" and others. Her work, "Adayin Kan", together with Shoshana Damari which was performed at the Karmiel Dance Festival, received The Dance of the Year Award from Amanut La'am – Arts for the People in 2006.

In 2017, her son Yaniv initiated the show, "Dancing Shuki – 40 Years of Creation", which was a festive show on the occasion of her 65th birthday. The show featured about 250 dancers from all over the country, dancing a variety of Shuki's works starting from when she began creating. And there also starred the whole family including the daughters, the bride, the son and even the grandchildren.

### **About your creative process**

***Well, as we have seen. Shuki multi-tasks. The "what" is indeed rich and varied. It's time to ask***



*Photo: Or Danon*



Shiri Rafael

*you something about the "how". How does the creative idea come about? What goes through your mind when building a dance sequence? How does group integration work? How do you choreograph?*

This is a question that is a bit difficult to answer as it is abstract and multifaceted, Shuki answers. There are those who create choreography. There are those who create on the spot when inspired by a muse, and unfortunately there are those who also those who copy from others. Of course, getting inspired is acceptable, also legitimate but there is a big difference between those who have innovated and introduced innovation and are original and those who just copy.

For me, it seems that things come from an inner vision. Something that is hard to explain. I think of a certain idea, go into a bubble, something internal comes to me, something spontaneous.

Sometimes it even comes to me in my dreams. It happens in an associative, flowing state, without prior preparation. This is a choreography creation with no formal limitations. I let my thoughts and feelings flow; in a sense, it might be something mystical. Sometimes, something comes into my mind at night, or in the car, or somewhere and then I ask my assistant to remember it so that it does not escape and be forgotten the next day. This is how other artists create while in a special mood and they do not even know how it comes to them.

Even with creating an entire show, I do not know exactly what the structure will be like; it comes about while creating with the large group that I work with.

My works may have become inalienable assets, an Israeli classic. I've created unique dances, such as to the song, Hava Nagila, with an innovative arrangement, where I created an oriental arrangement intertwined with jazz, a kind of modern oriental combination. Or, for example, in the original work "MaOhf" – Flight", I imagined the birds in white and so I created a language, a costume and music together with the talented **Menachem Koren-Menta**. (The costume design partners for "MaOhf" were **Leah Toren** and **Israel Shapira**.) On the other hand, when there is a work that is part of a set program, like the torch lighting ceremony, for example, I build the choreography with a lot of thought and early planning along with the design partners.

### "Mehola Merkaz" in Givat Shmuel as an innovative model in Israel

"Mehola" Givat Shmuel is one of the five centers of "Mehola" throughout the country. This is the newest studio in the network; it is a multidimensional center according to the method developed in "Mehola" by "the Hoffmans". This is reflected in the scope of styles, in the diversity of the population, in the inventories of the infrastructure and equipment, in



Photo: Tomer Halperin

At the Millennium Celebrations in 2000, Shuki's dance troupe was chosen from all the troupes in the country, by a special committee of dancers and the State Department, to represent Israel at an international event held at Disneyland in Orlando. The many performances at this event revealed "Mehola" to be the ultimate ambassador of Israeli art and culture ...



Photo: Tomer Halperin

the quality of the halls, in the professionalism of the instruction and the optimal organization.

**Shiri Rafael**, director of the Mehola Merkaz office in Givat Shmuel and a leading dancer in **Yaniv Hoffman's** adult "Mehola" troupe, says: We have a sophisticated and non-stop dance center at our disposal. Well-equipped dance halls, dance floors and other facilities required for a studio of this level. We focus on different dance styles – modern, jazz, classical ballet, contemporary Israeli, hip hop, and there are other areas as well.

After proving itself in "Mehola" Ramat Hasharon, we also established a competitive track here alongside an easier track that is also divided into knowledge levels – according to the general practice of the "Mehola" network. The students are from age 5 to twelfth grade, and this is how we operate on Sundays-Thursdays with unabated intensity.

The professional director and chief instructor at the branch is the youngest daughter, Noa who adds: The emphasis in today's dance is on a work style that combines modern technique with Israeli dance along with the classical style for holistic professional integrity.

The groups in Mehola are divided into the very young children (pitzkelach), young ones, middle schoolers and high schoolers. There are reserve troupes and representative troupes. In addition, there are various tracks such as – "Academic 1", "Track M", "Reserve", Track C, "Meholic", etc. Some train



Noa Hoffman. Photo: Or Danon

once a week and some are here up to 4-5 times per week, depending on the level and goal.

**Noa**, a former professional dancer at the Cameri Theater alongside well-known Israeli actors, served in the IDF as an outstanding dancer and will soon complete a bachelor's degree in dance at the Kibbutzim Seminary following in the footsteps of her older sister, Yael, who did so more than a decade ago.

Noa (who recently got married – Mazel Tov! congratulations!) explains: We admit to Mehol, in all its branches, those who are interested and suitable to pursue dance and are highly motivated. Our training requires a serious attitude and a strong will. It's not just a physical technique. In fact we have here an incubator for life, self and social discipline; one needs physical ability alongside emotional strength. They must learn to manage on their own. It is an education for maturity and it is seriousness, i.e., dealing with stressful situations and a willingness to accept criticism

Of course, not everyone is gifted with professional potential, but each of our students should exhaust their abilities and derive pleasure and benefit for life. They actually receive a cultural and personal asset that will accompany them for the rest of their lives. This is actually part of the method that we have developed at "Mehola" over the years by Shuki and Shlomi, the founding parents, and Yaniv and Dorit, who have continued on their path



in project development and management along with an innovative credo, "Ani Ma'amin – This is My Credo".

In the end, about 10% of the students will reach really professional levels and our studies provide them with the necessary tools to be involved with professional troupes, musicals, cinema and for participation in productions in Israel and abroad.

All branches of Mehola have a strict adherence to professional behavior alongside a value-based and social experience. We employ professional teachers, all of whom are certified and have dance degrees and are graduates of teacher training courses; additionally, many of them are outstanding dancers and Mehola graduates who have absorbed the language from an early age. Most of the instructors are professional-level dancers and are in fact the backbone of Lehakat "Mehola" – the most well-known adult troupe in the country.

*Well, how did you really build a dance project on such a scale? I asked Shlomi Hoffman, founder of Mehola and acting director of the new "Mehola Merkaz" branch in Givat Shmuel.*

It's a labor of years. Of course experience is an important component. It is a process of on the job

training and through the years we correct, improve and implement. After years in Jerusalem, we started to spread our wings and along with our children we have branched out, as mentioned, in five different centers. Such a concentration of dance students under one organizational roof is unparalleled in Israel and perhaps also in the world.

We, Shuki and I, consider "Mehola" a lifetime enterprise and our modest contribution to Israeli culture. The thousands of trainees during our decades of activity, and their success in life, are the awesome return for our great endeavor.

Our work is very, very diverse, not only in dance but as a school for life. Here you learn the meaning of discipline, coping with stress, competitiveness, ambition, sociability, self-confidence and achievement in all areas of life. Dance in itself is an asset for life.


### And for dessert – another prestigious award

Shuki was recently informed of her receiving the **Rabinovich Foundation Award** on behalf of the Tel Aviv Municipality. This is an important and prestigious award in the field of culture in Israel which also includes a financial grant. And so they wrote:

"Shuki has been involved in dance and choreography for over 40 years. The "Mehola" troupes under her artistic direction have won many awards and certificates from the founding of the school to the present day. The field of Israeli folklore was of great importance to the spread of Zionism, love of the country, settlement and the heritage of Israeli culture in Israel and in the Jewish communities around the world. Shuki has taught thousands of dancers in Israel and abroad about the unique Israeli folklore; she created and composed original and special works, with a folk orientation, along artistic lines combined with a story illustrated in every movement and staging.

"Folkloric dance is full of sweeping and erupting energy, with the use of space and composition that infects the audience. Thanks to her works and creations – she has spread the Israeli dance culture and the roots of the immigrations and the ethnic groups in Israel, the holidays as a source of authentic Israeli expression. From the very first moment her talent could be discerned as that of a unique creator and personality, combining art, accesibility, intelligence and energies – and all of these are intertwined with the nature of the Israeli dance of yore - which is still expressed in an exciting manner.

"Shuki has created her own unique Israeli style, which has left its mark on Israeli culture and dance, and she has blazed her path from folk art to professional and all encompassing art".

And so, even at the "young" age of Shuki and her husband Shlomi, it seems that their creative horizon continues to be the enterprise of their lives and for future generations to come. 

"Shuki has created her own unique Israeli style, which has left its mark on Israeli culture and dance, and she has blazed her path from folk art to professional and all encompassing art".