



David Ben Asher

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Photos:
David Ben Asher,
family album

The Lyricist, the Musician and the Choreographer

Moshiko Halevy tells about and shares his personal perspective

This is **Moshiko Halevy**, a unique, extraordinary phenomenon, unique in Israel and throughout the world, in the holistic complexity of works of movement as far as the field of dance is concerned. This special combination of composing the melody, writing the lyrics, performing the song and choreographing the dance – all done by the same person – is very rare. As far as I know, this multidimensional talent does not exist among songwriters and dance choreographers.

Moshiko, 89-years-old, holds a record of more than 300 folk dances (“Israeli dances” by his definition, and more on that follows), of which about 180 are to his musical compositions. He also wrote the lyrics for 70 of them. He is the performing singer, accompanying vocalist, drummer or a flute player for many of these. His professional record, spanning over 70 years, includes countless choreographies and performances as a dancer, choreographer, director and instructor, in Israel and around the world.

[Israeli folk dance choreographers are often referred to as “creators of a dance.” Based on that, the following question: BL] What is the difference between a creator and a choreographer?

“We do not create,” says Moshiko, “we compose and assemble the movements of the dance.” As a person who wears a kippah (yarmulke), Moshiko gives credit to the Creator of the world: “He is The Creator and He is the only one who can create out of nothing; and since we do not have the skills that The Creator of the world has, we should not be referred to as creators, but rather, as choreographers. Choreographing a dance is like putting a puzzle together – if it is assembled (i.e., put together) correctly, is good and appropriate, a complete picture emerges. We did not create the parts, nor did we invent. We simply found and only assembled the parts to the desired perfection.”



Moshiko Halevy in 2021

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"For this reason and the degree of modesty required, we should call ourselves 'choreographers' and not 'creators'."



Instructing with Nourit Grinfeld

Moshiko explains his doctrine of "creation" formation and "choreography" and the basic concepts that are accepted among those who are engaged in the field of dance in particular, and in the arts field in general: "With all due respect, dance choreographers have no ground to carry the title "creators" since none of them has ever invented a step. All they do is simply reproduce steps and movements and enjoy what exists.

For this reason and the degree of modesty required, we should call ourselves "choreographers" and not "creators," Moshiko said.

And I repeat again, since all the choreographers are nourished by what exists, there is no place here to define a dance composer as a "creator." Dance composers are accustomed to the title of "creator" and enjoy using it because the title of creator elevates them to the divine rank.

In light of your vast experience both in choreographing dances and in teaching and training at countless hishtalmuyot (workshops) worldwide, what exactly is it to choreograph a dance?

It is important for an individual to have at least a natural sense of rhythm and music, and the talent to incorporate the steps into the musical structure. No scientific or philosophical knowledge is required to compose a dance that is built on a stanza and a chorus or two stanzas and a chorus.

Each choreographer imprints his/her own mark on the dance they compose. I do not seek to generalize, however, many of the new generation of choreographers use existing steps from different dances and incorporate them into the dance they have composed. They already belong to the group of "choreographers" who see themselves as "creators".

You also have reservations about the common definition of "folk dance". What makes this definition problematic?

Folk dance must be a cultural cross-section that characterizes our people and reflects the

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diverse cultures of our people. This is true for different peoples of the world. Folk dance has a common denominator with characteristics and steps rooted in a culture of generations of the same people.

The people of Israel come from various ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, our dances do not have a specific characterization of our society and culture, so I find it difficult to call them “folk dances,” but rather, “communal/recreational dances”. Our dances do not have a common denominator for everyone and therefore my definition. I neither deny them, nor do I pass criticism; I am very pleased with this very blessed social activity. All we have to do is call it by its appropriate name.

And what do you think about dance sessions throughout Israel?

I think that engaging in dance sessions as a social factor – breaking the routine, listening to music and the actual activity – is important. I would say that the aspiration to become refreshed is also a good reason to attend sessions, to take part in a social gathering, to recharge your batteries and that finding a partner is also part of the legitimate motivation.

I would like to add some insights regarding our partner dances. Many of the dancers are older people and those who are approaching old age. Due to the complexity of the steps, there is an element of memory sharpening in the dance activity. I suggest not fleeing from either challenging or innovative dances, nor settling for familiar and beloved “nostalgia dances.” I am aware of the fact that a significant proportion of dancers are discouraged by the abundance of new dances and refrain from learning them. I suggest not to give up! You should make the effort and learn. It is good for the brain and to polish the memory. Once you have tackled the new, you do not have to adopt it. The decision is yours.

Another thing that I find unusual is the phenomenon where some dancers come to classes with pre-arranged partners. This, in my opinion, is an anti-social phenomenon. A social activity in which there is no change of partners is an activity that does not serve the social idea. At the beginning of my career as a dance composer, I choreographed a dance called “Ga’aguim – Longing”, during which the couple changes partners four times. I saw this as a very important social value.

Unfortunately, this phenomenon only exists in Israel; the dancers are already captive to the established concept of fixed partners, without compromise. I personally have not encountered such a practice in any country in which I have visited and taught.

Another note refers to the joining of hands that has almost completely disappeared from our dances. The purpose of holding hands (while dancing) was to transfer energy from one to the other in order to create harmony between the dancers, and it is a pity that this positive attitude no longer exists with us.



Moshiko Halevy with Ron Huldai

There is a difference between “inventing” and “discovering”. Everything exists in the universe. We must acquire the tools that will help us discover the missing parts.

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Moshiko, many of your songs and dances are not widely known within the dancing community in Israel, and only some of them are danced in the many sessions in the country. This is compared to currently popular dances that have been choreographed to familiar songs.

Indeed my dances, in steps and style, constitute a fundamental difference, and they are suited to dance groups that seek and love to undertake challenges. The challenge in my dances allows the dancers to transcend themselves, and their satisfaction is greater. I can still remember the beginning of our Israeli folk dances. They consisted of innocence, naivety, and some simplicity compared to the dances choreographed today, which express a lot of confidence and positive Israeli presence.

It is interesting that in the wider world my dances are danced without difficulty in light of the extensive experience in the folk dances of different peoples. I hope that in the future we will find a way to overcome and we will also be able to perform complex dances.

Today, many dances that are danced in Israel have been choreographed abroad. Are these Israeli dances?

We live in an open country which is exposed to external influences. We, as a relatively young country absorb literature, music, movies, and more. In my opinion, there's nothing to get excited about, especially because dance choreographers from Israel lend a hand and cooperate. This is neither a work of art nor a labor of a deep thought; it's but a coincidence and I'm not surprised that these dances are danced by us (in Israel).

What exactly makes a dance an inalienable asset, surviving for years on the dance floors, compared to lots of dances that are learned and disappear after a short time?

The success of the dance depends upon the combination of steps to the melody. Choreographers usually tend to compose a dance to popular tunes and songs. They think that the popular song guarantees fifty percent of the success of a dance. Then, they attach steps to it. Only survival over time will tell whether a dance is successful or not.

And the dance itself, should changes be made to the song, such as removing interludes that are not part of the song, shortening the number of stanzas, shortening the end of the song, or changing the speed?

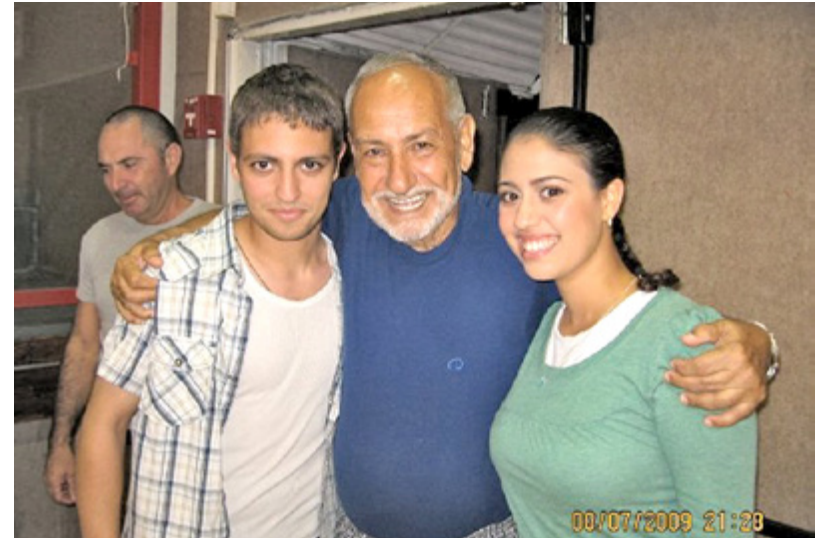
Choreographers use melodies and songs intended for singers, who need interludes for a short rest between stanzas. Since we do not have [music] composers who write specifically for folk dance, choreographers are compelled to adapt the songs to their needs. Many times, we see that steps are built into the interludes with choreography to the musical transitions in a song. The question is whether this is proper.

If we talk about the concept of "rikudei am - folk dance", after all, in the beginning of our Israeli folk dance path all of us accepted that the dance should be connected only to the original melody and not the intermediate sections, which are actually "a musical arrangement for a specific singer". Other singers perform the same song with a different musical arrangement and with different transitions. The solution was to take out the transition sections in the dance





Moshiko and his children: Yiftach, Chemed and Uriah



Moshiko and his children: Ben-Ya and Libi

recording and leave only the original melody, and even make a uniform structure of a stanza (or two stanzas) and a chorus and keep that structure throughout the dance.

On the other hand, if we are talking about “communal/recreational dancing”, as I explain below, everything the dancers do to increase their pleasure is blessed. Similarly, when the choreographer chooses to include steps for the musical transitions as part of his/her choreography, in my opinion, under the heading of “communal/recreational dance”, it is quite alright. The very ending of a dance is spontaneous – some people make up their own ending on the dance floor - that, too, does not in any way change the content of the dance.

The purpose of evening dance sessions is to have fun. Since there is no compulsion for the dancers to perform the dance the way it is, the dancers present their own interpretation for entertainment. Even in my dances – the dancers perform comic movements and in opposite directions. In my opinion, one should not get excited about the unusual phenomena. The goal is to maximize the enjoyment of dancing during the harkada.

Another phenomenon is the shortening of a dance song recording from three repetitions to two. In most cases the dancers are the ones who are not willing to repeat the dance three times and the instructor responds accordingly.

Moshiko, do you think that the Israeli folk dance choreographers should receive royalties for their dances used in the sessions, as do the lyricists and composers who receive royalties for playing their songs in public through ACUM [the Israeli ASCAP. BL]?

No!!! says Moshiko. There is no such precedent in any country in the world.

Successful choreographers are booked to teach abroad and are generously rewarded; there is no justification for an additional source of income. Choreographers should be pleased with the fact that their dances are done in sessions all over.

Moshiko, as mentioned, you are, indeed, unique in your field of work. Song composer, lyricist, choreographer of the dance steps, the musician and singer for some of your songs. I do not think there is anyone else like that. How do you do it? What goes through your mind with this rare combination?

This phenomenon started with me quite accidentally. I had been far from Israeli musical

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sources; I then examined my skills and talents in composing music. I play chalilim (recorders/flutes), then I record myself, and that's how my melodies are born, even though, I neither read or write music notation. Some of the melodies were composed especially for verses from the [Jewish] sources.

In time, I realized that I have the talent to produce melodies and songs of my own. Dancers around the world have responded positively to the melodies and songs and especially to the dances, and from them I drew encouragement. The positive reaction of the dancers gave me confidence.

On one of my tours in Japan, I taught a few dances that were not mine. The Japanese told me that they prefer to hear melodies and songs that I had composed. It was an encouraging and moving compliment. As a result, I immediately recorded nine (!) vinyl records in the United States. Over time, those records, as well as many more that followed, became CDs. To date, I have produced over 20 CDs. I worked with the best musical arrangers and producers, such as, **Albert Piamenta, Amir Froilich, Herzl Bodinger, Haim Hadad, Gabi Suissa** and these days I work with **A.B. (Avshalom) Kazes**.

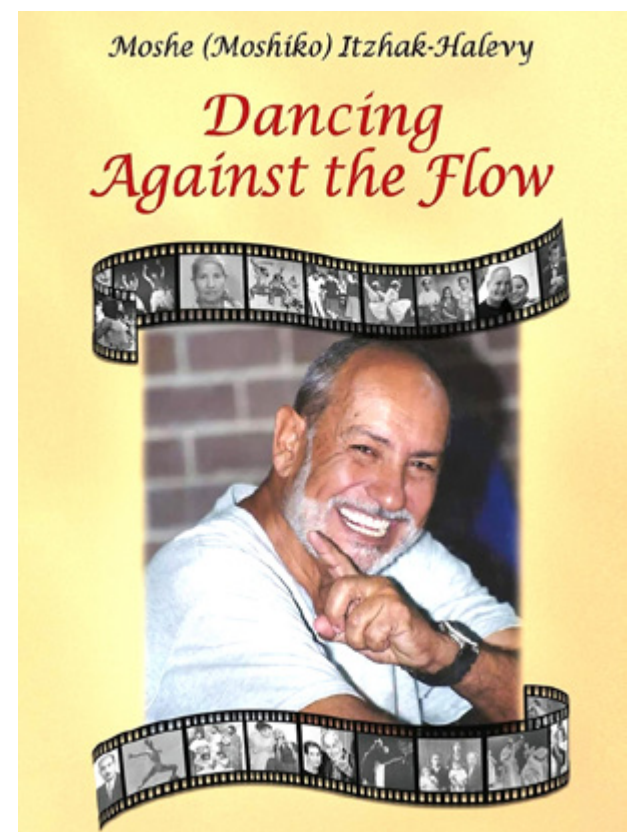
Moshiko's Big World – A Life Story

In 2017, Moshiko's book, "Dancing Against the Flow" was published. It is an extensive book that unfolds the rich, adventurous, often challenging events of his life, filled with good deeds around the world, the culmination of his diverse talents. A huge legacy in the field of dance, written from a personal and national perspective.

Moshiko was born in 1932, on the outskirts of Tel Aviv, to his parents, **Shalom** and **Rachel**, from a well-known family among Yemenite Jews of that time. The Aliyah (immigration to Israel) of the family from Yemen is a fascinating story in itself, and the family's integration in the Land of Israel in the 1930's consisted



1950s at the Tel Aviv beach



of a series of coping strategies with the living conditions in the days of building the Promised Land, which did not always live up to its promises.

As Moshiko says in his book, already by the fourth grade, he was transferred to the "Aliyah Alef" school where children with behavior problems were concentrated. Yes, even then, the boy Moshiko went against the flow. As a teenager, Moshiko was sent to

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Malkat Sh'va (The Queen of Sheba) – Margalit Oved, Meir Ovadia and Moshiko Halevy

abilities from the **Mia Arbatova** school, he was accepted to the "Li-La-Lo" and "Do-Re-Mi" Theater Companies as a dancer in musicals. He also substituted for the renowned dancer, **Yonatan Karmon**, in the dance company of **Naomi Aleskovsky**.

In 1953, the renowned Jewish choreographer, **Jerome Robbins**, ("West Side Story", "The King and I") visited Israel to get an impression of the level of dance in Israel. Several dancers were carefully selected to attend a special course given by Robbins. Moshiko was one of them:

"It was a challenge for me and I was glad I could meet the demands of the renowned choreographer," Moshiko writes in his book. It is interesting that precisely under the influence of Robbins, Moshiko joined the world-famous dance company, "Lehakat Inbal – Inbal Dance Theater", under the direction of the founder, **Sara Levi-Tanai** and was given leading roles. Moshiko also had had the opportunity to prove his choreographic skills as the troupe performed dances, such as, "Debka Kna'an", "Rikud Habani" and "Rikud Teimani Mekori - Original Yemenite Dance". His works were a great success in performances at various kibbutzim and at other places around the country.

After leaving "Inbal", Moshiko opened a school for tap and jazz dance, but after a year, he returned to Inbal for a world tour in Europe and America.

When "Lehakat Inbal" returned from a trip to the United States, Moshiko decided to form

a residential institution for needy students. After two years, he joined a "garin" (training group) at Kibbutz Giv'ot Zaid, in the Jezreel Valley, named after **Alexander Zaid**. As a boy, Moshiko spent most of his years away from home, although he maintained constant contact with his family.

His dance skills were revealed at the age of 17 to the famous dancer, **Hannah Eliazov**, who referred him to the Mia Arbatova Dance School. The latter happily accepted him since, at that time, there were not enough men in the field of classical ballet.

Moshiko advanced with the study of ballet and other dance styles. Upon his enlistment to the IDF, he was placed in a military troupe, "Carmel", and later on, in an army dance troupe. After military service, with proven



Moshiko Halevy as The Queen's Guardian

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his own company. With **Yona Levy** and **Yitzhak Eliazarov** he formed the dance troupe, “HaPa’amonim – The Bells”. This was a great success with a full repertoire for performances all over the country. The main style of Lehakat “HaPa’amonim” tended toward modern, ethnic, and Israeli culture.

After several quite surprising years, Moshiko was asked to return to “Inbal,” this time, as the director of the company. As part of his work with Inbal, Moshiko choreographed a dance without a melody. When the dance was completed, a melody was composed by **Nehemiah Sharabi**, Boaz’s brother. I liked that melody, and I named the dance, “Debka Uriah,” after my eldest son. According to Moshiko, at the same time, Lehakat HaKibbutzim was rehearsing for the 1959 Democratic Youth Festival in Vienna. The troupe’s management heard that Moshiko choreographed a unique dance and Moshiko was invited to work with the Lehaka on “Debka Uriah”.

At the Vienna Festival, the dance won the silver medal, second place after Yugoslavia and before the troupes from Russia, China, and many other countries with their more famous troupes. It was a huge international achievement. (The author of this article, **David Ben Asher**, participated in that festival as a volleyball player as part of the Israeli national team).

At that time, Moshiko had already taught his dances, such as, “Debka Uriah”, “Debka Kurdit”, “Et Dodim Kala” and others, in hishtalmuyot madrichim – folk dance instructors’ workshops.

In 1968, Moshiko accepted an invitation from the Dutch dance organization, “NEVO”, to teach his dances there. After a three-month stay in the Netherlands, Moshiko was surprised by the level of technical ability of the dancers who performed his dances with astonishing precision.

Moshiko returned to Israel and continued with folk dancing.

The American Chapter – the 1970s-1980s

At some point in his career, Moshiko decided to work in the United States. In 1973, after a tour of Europe with “Inbal”, the troupe arrived in New York, and from there, a change took place in



A folk dance workshop with Moshiko in Hong Kong, China

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his professional life. Moshiko was fully booked for dance workshops across the United States and the creative momentum also did its part:

"If in Israel I choreographed 20 dances in ten years, Moshiko says, then, in all my years of activity in the United States, I choreographed 70 dances and composed dozens of melodies. It was a burst of tireless work," is how Moshiko describes that beautiful period.

The USA period lasted for 16 years, during which his name became known throughout the continent, where he was constantly sought after by Israeli and international folk dancers and instructors as well as dance lovers in general.

In the United States, Moshiko had a contact with **Fred Berk**, and Moshiko took part in the Israel Folk Dance Festival, directed by Berk, held at Madison Square Garden, which was a resounding success.

While in the United States, he was also invited to Canada to prepare choreographies for two troupes in Ottawa and Toronto. In Ottawa, he did choreography based on modern ballet and ethnic elements. And in Toronto, Moshiko worked on choreography based on classical ballet, jazz and tap dance. Moshiko was also in demand in other countries and made numerous trips to teach, train and impart knowledge in various forums.

Moshiko returned to Israel in 1989. Later on, Moshiko opened a dance session in Beit Dani, Tel Aviv, with **Haim Tzemach** – a dance class of various styles. Many of Moshiko's dances were danced in this session. At the same time, he continued, of course, to choreograph dances and to teach. That, in fact, has never ceased to this day.

Occasionally, Moshiko is invited to teach abroad at dance workshops in America, Russia, England, France, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany, the Czech Republic, Belgium, New Zealand, Australia, Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Moshiko's stylistic versatility is one of the characteristics of this dancer-artist.

The basis of his works is, in fact, classical ballet. From here, it evolved into modern ballet, jazz, tap, folk dance and folklore. Some people define Moshiko as "the mediating factor between the founding generation of the field of Israeli folk dance and the generation that continues in Israeli dance."

His dances emphasize traditional ethnic elements, even though he has extensive experience in other styles, as described here in the article. It is said that he draws his ideas from ethnic sources in Israel and from the Mediterranean basin and processes them to meet the needs of contemporary Israeli dance.

In our long conversation, the eloquent, enthusiastic, determined man was again revealed; he was determined to convey his ideas without assumptions and imbued with motivation to teach, persuade, add knowledge and quite a bit of uncompromising tenacity and opinion.

Moshiko, what do you want to do "when you grow up"?

"I'm now 89. I still continue to compose music, choreograph dances and write songs. Every day I hear sounds, see steps and write songs. Overall, I look back with satisfaction and a good

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"Overall, I look back with satisfaction and a good feeling that I contributed something. When I go online, on the computer or a tablet, I see people dancing my dances; it makes me very happy."

feeling that I contributed something. When I go online, on the computer or a tablet, I see people dancing my dances; it makes me very happy.

Time is now at my disposal and I take advantage of it in a positive way. So, I thank God, I thank the dancers and all dance instructors."

Yes, this man who has done so much for the culture of our country definitely deserves official recognition and his receiving of The Israel Prize. 🙌

Here is a song that Moshiko recently wrote and composed:

My Jerusalem

Lyrics and music: **Moshiko Itzhak-Halevy**

I will carry a prayer to my Jerusalem
My heart longs for Jerusalem
Your holiness is wrapped in beauty
From ancient times

Jerusalem, you are in my spirit
Jerusalem, you are deep in my soul
The eyes of the world are on you
The beacons are lit on your walls

Chorus:

All the big cities in the world
Bow to you, they bow in your honor
Because you are a joy, a joy to your cities
And I wish to kiss your stones

Jerusalem, you are the heart of the world
Your believers all worship you
Above your head the sun glows
Jerusalem, you are my consolation

My beloved Jerusalem

