



Gdalit Neuman*
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ד'תפ"ב

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Larger than Life

In Memory of the Choreographers Yonatan Karmon and Yoav Ashriel Z"L

In memory of Yonatan Karmon (1931–2020)

About a decade ago, I received a phone call from France to Israel. The legendary Israeli folk dance choreographer, **Yonatan Karmon Z"L**, who passed away two years ago, telephoned me for an interview for my Masters thesis. I didn't know this wonderful man beforehand, and he certainly had not heard of one **Gdalit Neuman** from Canada. He invested his time and money (he didn't want to hear about me paying him back for our lengthy long-distance call), in order to please an ambitious and stubborn grad student who had searched for him in Israel for six months. Even over the phone, Karmon was charismatic and full of energy; exactly as those who knew him well describe him.

I approached Yonatan following a recommendation by my friend **Ayalah Goren**, the daughter of the mother of Israeli folk dance, **Gurit Kadman**. She described Karmon as someone who "set the tone and created the prototype of the Israeli [folk] dancer, even though he himself wasn't a Sabra [native born Israeli]. There certainly was a Karmonian style, which very much influenced the Lehakot - Israeli folk dance performance companies." Ayalah called his style 'Karmoniut.' "He had a very strong influence," said Goren. "Concerning everything that he created - whether a dance, or a company performance, he always consulted with **Gertrud Kraus** and Gurit Kadman. When he was interested in movement matters, in general, [to see] if it was alright, he would go to Gertrud Kraus, and if he wanted to check if it was folkloric enough and suitable to the Am Yisrael (Israeli) style, he would go to Gurit. He would always consult [with them]."



Lehakot Alumim, Petah Tiqva



The first disc of Karmon Company



Karmon Company in Olympia Hall, Paris

Karmon was born in Bucharest, Romania in 1931. From the age of nine, once his parents were taken to a work camp in Transnistria, Karmon would alternate between living with relatives and residing at Jewish community institutions. Karmon and his brothers were saved from the Nazis and made Aliyah to the Land of Israel in the framework of the Youth Aliyah. "I arrived at home," Karmon told me. This sentence summarizes well his love of Eretz Yisrael [the Land of Israel].

He was sent to study agriculture at Meshek Ha-Poalot ("The Worker's Farm") under the direction of **Hannah Chizik**. Karmon was lucky in that on his first day on the job on the farm in Tel-Aviv, next to the corn field where he toiled, taught **Mia Arbatova**, the ballet pioneer in the land of Israel. It was through gestures, Karmon told me, that she invited him to his first ballet lesson. However, Hannah Chizik, the farm manager, refused to allow him to return to Arbatova because Arbatova, according to her, performed at night clubs frequented by British army personnel. Instead, Chizik suggested that he study under Gertrud Kraus, who encouraged the creation of Land of Israel art and worked in collaboration with the Zionist movement. He studied with Kraus, fought in the War of Independence and was a dancer and choreographer in the Harel Dance Company of the Palmach (Bar-On, Kessary, Schmidt 4).

After his release from the army, Karmon performed with The Israel Ballet Theatre (1951-1952), which was the most important artistic platform of its time in Israel with regards to theatrical dance. He became acquainted with Israeli folk dance when Kraus integrated Land of Israel

themes into her works. There, Karmon met the dancer **Tova Tzimbel**, who organized an event in honor of the Gordonia and Ha-noar Ha-oved Zionist youth movements. According to Karmon, that event had a great impact on him.

Jerome Robbins visited Israel in 1952 and taught his work Interplay to the advanced students of Kraus and Arbatova. This encounter illustrated to Karmon how much he needed to improve his technique. This time around he was determined to return to study with Mia Arbatova. Karmon performed in **Naomi Aleskovsky's** Rivia Ha-kamerit ("Chamber Quartet") as well as the Israeli Opera. Even still, he was drawn to the world of Israeli folk dance, which in his view, as he told me, provided a special and non-verbal expression to Land of Israeli identity.

Karmon's career in the field of Israeli folkloric dance is extremely



Karmon Company with Danny Kaye

When I asked Karmon about his dancers he said: "They were all beautiful people, the men handsome with their blorit and the women were beautiful and graceful. They were farmers, they worked the land, they acted differently. There was a generation in Israel with a different character."



Yonatan Karmon receiving the Acum Prize

Students) in Bucharest in 1953. After almost a decade of him leaving Romania as a war refugee, he returned proud, upright, and leading a delegation of dancers who represented his adopted homeland. According to Karmon, the audience was easily able to recognize where they came from. "Here come the Israelis, they shouted," he told me. "We had our own style, a body language of our own and specific look. Unlike the European dancers, we were barefoot, and that changed the movements."

The original Karmon Company won first place in an international choreography competition in Lille, France; Afterward, they performed in New York, on Broadway, at Radio City and on the famous **Ed Sullivan** [television] Show. In addition to the company's many successes on international tours, it also performed on distinguished stages in Israel (Bar-On, Schmidt 4-5).

When I asked Karmon about his dancers he said: "They were all beautiful people, the men handsome with their blorit [popular Israeli hair style for men, with its characteristic front curl], and the women were beautiful and graceful. They were farmers, they worked the land, they acted differently. There was a generation in Israel with a different character."

Journalist and culture critic **Uri Keisari's** description from 1961 accurately depicts the essence of Karmon Company performances in those days, and corroborates Karmon's impression: "They were about a dozen youth - with each, and all, comprising the dew and the [strong] rain, not only of the hills of Judea and the Galilee, but of something which cannot be defined nor explained, only if we say this - that it is the proclamation of life, the will to live of young people in this land. They danced, of course with their legs, and certainly with their hands and bodies, but they also danced with their eyes; eyes which smiled with joy, with a sense of love and longing for love."

Karmon established the Karmiel Festival in 1988 and was its director for twelve years. From the mid-1960s, he also served as the artistic director of the famous Olympia Theatre in Paris, where his company had previously performed. Karmon's reputation preceded him in Israel and around the world. For decades his dancers performed in every corner of the globe and presented the beauty of the State of Israel. Karmon's sudden passing during his visit to Israel in the winter of 2020 shocked Israel's dance community.

impressive. He began creating dances for the Dalia Festival in his youth. He also directed holiday performances throughout Israel. In the 1950s Karmon led various companies, such as Lehakat Alumim ("Youth Company"), The Hapoel [sports association dance] Company of Tel-Aviv (Lehakat Hapoel Tel Aviv), The Students' Company of Jerusalem (Lehakat HaStudentim Yerushalayim), and the central company of the Histadrut [general workers' union] – HaLehaka HaMerkazit, which eventually became the Karmon Company. In the framework of his company, Karmon worked with the best Israeli musicians, such as **Ilan and Ilanit**, **Boaz Sharabi** and songwriter/poet **Haim Hefer** (Bar-On, Schmidt 6).

His company performed at the 4th Democratic Youth Festival (World Festival of Youth and

Yoav Ashriel (1930–2020)

Yoav Ashriel ז"ל is a well-known name in the world of Israeli folk dance. Born in 1930, he was raised in Kibbutz Ramat David, in the Jezreel Valley. He choreographed over 100 dances and directed many dance companies. He was one of the organizers of the Dalia festivals and he mentored generations of dance instructors.

A decade ago, I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to interview him at his favorite coffee shop near his home. I have chosen to document the interview verbatim:

"It was a very difficult situation. The kibbutz was just established and there was no money. I was born when the kibbutz was four or five years old. They called us Sabras because all the [other] kibbutz members came from abroad. It was a surprise that children were born in the Land of Israel and they were alright. They decided that the children would also learn something. The two [adjacent] kibbutzim, Ramat David and Gvat, established a joint school, and there weren't that many children. They endeavored to educate us according to their ideology then: to build the country, pioneering, to be content with little [material things]. We were educated on the ideology of **A.D. Gordon**. In the first or second grade we were already working on the farm. They said: 'Our children must learn to work!' We were in a children's house with all the children together since that was the only place where it was possible to accommodate children. We truly loved each other. All the children who were with me in the children's house were like my siblings."

"The kibbutz members had books in German, Russian and Yiddish. There weren't that many Israeli books and there weren't many Israeli songs either. Then **Mordechai Ze'ira** began writing "Laila Laila" ("Night Night"), which he composed and "Sovevuni" ("Spin Me") to which I later choreographed dances. He went from one kibbutz to another and organized a lot of communal



Great love – Yoav and Mira in their youth



Yankele Levi with Mira Ashriel and Yoav Ashriel with Rivka Sturman in the Guitar Dance

singing, and he taught songs in Hebrew – Israeli songs. When the kibbutz members danced the hora they sang Hassidic and Russian songs; there were not many songs in Hebrew.

Not many, there were a few, but not many. There weren't any Israeli dances. The kibbutz members danced the hora. When I was a child, I danced the hora with members of my kibbutz and they sang. Hora is a Romanian dance and the Zionist pioneers brought it to Israel and [people] think that it's an Israeli dance since they danced it in an Israeli style. That's what we knew. When someone brought a garmushka - a harmonica - then we also danced 'Krakowiak,' 'Polka' and 'Korobushka.' There were no Israeli dances."

*When he was almost seventeen, an invitation arrived at Ashriel's kibbutz for a pair [of dancers] to attend a folk dance workshop 'in Hebrew,' which was [being] organized by **Gurit Kadman**. Because Ashriel was already creating dances in his kibbutz, and since, according to him, he was very athletic, he was chosen for the assignment along with another girl from his kibbutz:*



Yoav (from left) leading line dancing at the Karmiel Festival – Yoav's 80 birthday

"I saw Israeli dances for the first time. Gurit Kadman organized the course. It turns out that she did this in preparation for the Dalia Festival. She wanted to present more of the Israeli dances. I saw Israeli dances for the first time in my life. I was incredibly excited. It was so beautiful and I liked it very much. In three full days we learned eight dances, including Sherele, and **Rivka Sturman's** Kuma Echa, Harmonica and Kol Dodi. I was hooked then and that spark burns [brightly] until today."

When I asked Ashriel what he loved about Israeli folk dance, he answered:

"That it's ours! It's so beautiful and so exciting. Back then, they used to play accordion for folk dancing. There was no recorded music. At that time, there were no records then at all. They didn't play a lot [of music] and there weren't many Hebrew [as in Ivri- Eretz Yisrael] songs, but they took the Israeli songs [that did exist] and choreographed dances for them. First of all, it's ours, and I identified with that."

Ashriel danced in the inter-kibbutzim (bnei hakibbutzim) dance company and that is how he

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joined the delegation which travelled to Budapest for the 2nd Democratic Youth Festival (World Festival of Youth and Students) in 1949: "There was a Democratic Youth Festival and delegations were sent to the festival from all countries. The Kibbutz Movement decided to send a delegation [from Israel], to show that Israel exists, to show the entire world that we exist and to take pride in our dances. We were extremely well received. It was new, all the Israeli dances, and it was very nice. Everyone thought it was nice, and the most emotional part was the encounter with the Jews of Budapest."

"The Jews welcomed us warmly. It was a communist country and it was forbidden to speak of Israel and Zionism. The Jews stood in front of our hotel, thousands [of them], to see people who came from Israel - to see different Jews from Israel. Our company director said that on Shabbat we must go to the synagogue to show the Jews that we've arrived."

"This synagogue was full of people, and all the streets around [as well]. This was the first time that we saw Jews who were not Israeli, who were so excited to see us! We didn't meet with them. It was forbidden to approach us in order to talk. They said that they will give us the kavod for one of us to make an Aliyah to the Torah. That was the most emotional experience, to meet the Jews there. And on the way back, they brought us to Vienna. There was a DP (refugee) camp for Jews who returned from the war. We performed in front of them. A huge excitement!"

I asked Ashriel if that was the first time they (in the Diaspora) had seen Sabras. "Yes, yes," he answered:

"Sabras, that there exist Jews who are different from them. There are Jews who are alive.

They experienced the Shoah. We didn't understand all this. They were very emotional. They hugged and kissed us. What did we know of this? Where did we come from? Four years after the war there were DP (refugee) camps, and it was clandestine. It was forbidden to say where they were. They took us to the secret location with buses. We drove about two hours until we arrived. Somewhere in the forest. Very far away. Refugees, and they brought them to Israel. We didn't know about all this."

Ashriel returned to Israel and enlisted in the army:

"When I enlisted in the army, I was in general basic training and then they established the Nahal [Brigade]. They said that they (Nahal members) will work in the kibbutzim as well as train. They created a particular course in the Nahal and invited me to join the course for four months. I was a platoon sergeant for new soldiers. I instructed, prepared them – marching drills and weapons, and near the end of the course, I prepared a folk dance performance with them.

They were enthralled by it! Then they established an arts department within the Nahal. Ze'ev Havatzelet, who knew me from before in the inter-kibbutzim company, and in Budapest, said: 'Yoav Ashriel will organize the dance events for us in the Nahal.' And I took this seriously.

At first, I didn't want this because I said



Yoav Ashriel instructing a session



Karmiel

that I want to be an instructor in the Nahal; to fulfill the Zionist [dream]. He said to me: 'what you will do with dance is more important. This is what you know.' And they put me in charge of folk dance in the Nahal. That's where I met my wife, Mira. We organized hishtalmuyot (folk dance workshops) there."

"We passed through the divisions and taught dance. I organized a dance company in the Nahal; there were sixty people, and we performed at Dalia in 1951. We had a dance [called] Magal Va-herav ("Sickle and Sword"). It was about life in the Nahal; that [one] fights, as well as works. I played the accordion. We also had a dance [called] Emek ("Valley") with [the song] "Shir Emek" ("Valley Song"), which was famous, by **Marc Lavry**. Sixty people danced about work in the valley and the dances [of the Jezreel Valley]. "[Mount] Gilboa embraces [Mount] Tabor" were the words."

"When I was discharged from the army I didn't return to the kibbutz. I wanted to expand [my horizons], to see the world. I began to teach folk dance; I started to create. When I was in the Nahal, I choreographed a dance [called] Ta'am Haman ("The Taste of Manna"). It had Yemenite steps, and the tune is Sephardic. And my parents came from Europe. Gurit Kadman asked, "how could this be?" I told her, Gurit it's the in-gathering of the exiles! So she took this dance as an example of kibbutz galuyut ("in-gathering of the exiles") and it's danced until today. Since then I created many dances. I also directed dance companies."

"At first I only worked with dance companies from different places and I created dances about the Land of Israel, about labor, and joy and love and the Tanach. That was the background of our dances. The landscape of the Jezreel Valley, and the conditions, and the work, and the life there and the chalutzim who danced hora all night, and in the morning went to work. Every dance that I created, I would think about the atmosphere that exists in the kibbutz. That everyone is together, and they work together and are happy together and celebrate. My parents were at the kibbutz. I would visit sometimes."

"I remember that when I choreographed the dance Erev Ba ("Evening Comes"), I drove to the kibbutz in order to feel the atmosphere of the evening. To be together. By the way, regarding

that dance, they said to me 'how could it be? A soft song and you are dancing in a circle, that doesn't fit. A soft song should be used for a partner dance. Not a circle [dance].' In those days they only danced hora and debka in a circle. There were four beats and I divided it (in the third part) into three, three, and two. Then they said to me, 'it can't be!' The fact is that people get up and dance. It goes with the melody and that's what is important."

"I always followed the melodies. I liked melodies. For example, in Hora Nirkoda, the melody - it's very happy. We then celebrated Israel's ten-year anniversary and we were overjoyed that there was a state. So I decided to create, because the melody thrilled me. To me, melodies are important, very very important. For example, "Laila Laila" ("Night Night") is a beautiful song that I choreographed to."

"When I was a child Ze'ira taught it to us as part of communal singing. Also "Sovevuni" ("Spin Me") is his. I very much wanted to create a dance to it but it's a difficult song. It's hard to put steps to it. I believe a good folk dance is a dance which expresses a lot, says a lot but with simple movements, built simply, and flowing, in order for it to be easy. It needs to be worked on; one needs to know [how to go about it]. So I tried to express all that happiness with simple movements."

"I believe that in a dance for a performance, the viewer should enjoy it. In a folk dance, the dancer should enjoy it."



Yoav leading dances at Bikurey Haytim

"A folk dance needs to be built so that it is simple, easy and comfortable. No need to excite the viewers. If someone watches and gets excited, that's good, but the goal is for the dancer to enjoy it."

"I believe that in a dance for a performance, the viewer should enjoy it. In a folk dance, the dancer should enjoy it. When one constructs a performance, there is no need to consider the dancers' [needs and wants]. The dancers need to put every effort in for it to be nice, to be exciting and for it to say something. When working in a company a great effort must be made in order for it to express [the desired idea/emotion]."

"We're a people that didn't have folklore. Every nation that remains on its land a hundred years, four hundred years and a thousand years, creates folklore, such as the Bulgarians and the Greeks, in Argentina and many other places, and with us it's not like that. So we need to create a new



Karmiel Festival: Yoav Ashriel is 80 years old

folklore. We didn't know what Israeli folklore is. We created it anew. We felt that we were creating a new culture, a new folklore. We felt that we are creating something in order for us to have our own image. Every place that Israeli dances were performed they said 'that's Israeli!' "

"When I entered the [field] of folk dancing there were female leaders. There were few male leaders. Gurit Kadman was the first, and Rivka Sturman choreographed very beautiful dances. Afterward, **Ze'ev Havatzelet** joined them – he was born in Israel – and **Shalom Hermon** who came from Germany, but he befriended them. He also choreographed dances. Most of their dances did not survive. Rivka Sturman's [dances] did survive. Back then we didn't know what was the Israeli style. We didn't know what was an Israeli step. Then they began [with] the grapevine step and the Yemenite step. When I started creating dances, I didn't know what folk dance was."

"Gurit Kadman was the engine behind all this. She taught everyone, including me. She also invented a language for the dance leaders. She did that. Then she came to Hapoel [Tel-Aviv, sports organization] and said: 'you are a movement for gymnastics; folk dance is part of this. It's also exercise, it's physical training. It's sport.' And she established classes and a dance company there. That was the only course in Israel, besides the kibbutzim. When I was released from the army, Mira, my wife, danced at Hapoel and she said that they were looking for a dance leader. 'I'll bring you,' she said. 'In the Nahal you were very successful with the dance events and companies.' They agreed. They accepted me."

"That's how I arrived at Hapoel Tel-Aviv. They had soccer, and volleyball and basketball and gymnastics, and there were folk dance [lessons/events]. I taught there. My imagination was fueled by kibbutz holidays, sheaves of grain, Chag Ha-Katzir (Shavuot), Chag Ha-Gez (the kibbutz sheep shearing holiday). I also created a Hassidic dance from my imagination. Everything [came] from my imagination. I choreographed a full two-hour performance. We did a show at Habima [Theatre, the national theatre of Israel]. That was the temple of the theatre [world]. We performed at Habima and made a big impression, and we performed throughout Israel with the costumes of **Tzila Binder**. Two companies [at Hapoel] danced Rikud Ha-emek ("Valley Dance"). They danced the kibbutz holidays and said that Yoav is bringing the kibbutz to Hapoel Tel-Aviv. Afterward I was a dance leader at the Tel-Aviv Municipality, in Holon, Ramat Gan and Givatayim municipalities."


Ashriel also led and choreographed for the Pa'amei Aviv ("Spring Times") companies in Tel-Aviv, the Petach Tivkah company and others.

"After I produced shows and after all my success, I started studying with Gertrud Kraus. There

"Every dance that I created, I would think about the atmosphere that exists in the kibbutz. That everyone is together, and they work together and are happy together and celebrate."

were courses for choreography and I began learning after my army service. Later on I came to know her, and later still I even became her assistant. She came to create shows in all kinds of places. They were big performance en masse, and I helped her and produced performances in Petah Tikvah for example, in Holon, in many places with hundreds of people."

Beginning in the 1960s Yoav Ashriel organized and led public dance evenings at today's Rabin Square (then Kikar Malchei Israel), in central Tel-Aviv. He wanted to bring the

folk dances to the people. He was the one who initiated the all-night Israeli folk dance marathons and he was the one who organized courses for dance leaders. His influence and contribution to the world of Israeli folkloric dance, both in the community and for stage, will be remembered forever. 

Notes

1. See "In the Light of Memories," **Rokdim-Nirkoda 103**, April 2020. The entire issue is dedicated to the memory of Yonatan Karmon.
2. Gurit Kadman and Yonatan Karmon's friendship began while he was still a young man. Indeed, a video exists called "Shir Ha-botzrim" ("Song of the Harvesters") from 1953, in which Karmon choreographed a dance together with Gurit Kadman for Lehakat Alumim. See youtube.
3. Karmon later studied at the following agricultural schools: Ayanot and Mikve Israel.
4. On the work of Tova Tzimbel see Dr. Zvi Friedhaber "Tova Tzimbel-Neta 'Ha-Na'ara Ha'choriographit,'" **Rokdim** 1989: 8-9.
5. The name "Sovevuni" is taken from the first word in the song and is the song's colloquial name. The real name of the song is "Hora Tov" ("Good Hora").

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