



Naftali Chayat
Translation:
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A Man of Israeli Culture



**Roni Siman Tov – Dancer,
Choreographer, Director,
Organizer, Producer, Manager**

Introduction:

I met with **Roni Siman Tov** at his home. I was surprised to learn that he and I were the same age, since, in Israeli folk dance, there was the sense that “he was always there”, because of the abundance of dances that he contributed to the folk dance community. It turns out that he choreographed his first dances at the age of 17 (Teivat Ha'Zimra: <https://bit.ly/3sUFc4a>), in 1983. While he was engaged in his artistic creations for the stage and the dance community, Roni also served as the chairperson of Irgun Ha'Markidim – the Dance Instructors Organization (of the Histadrut) for five years between 1999-2005.

For the past 35 years, Roni and his wife **Nira**, have been involved together in producing and directing performances as well as in artistic management and choreography – all while working with dance troupes (lehakot). After years of work with children, youth and adult lehakot, Roni started to work with lehakot that integrate dancers in wheelchairs with “standing” dancers. Among the lehakot that he instructed were Lehakat Beit Halochem in Tel Aviv and Lehakat ILAN in Rishon LeZion. But he is most proud of Lehakat “Galgal Ba'Ma'agal”, which has been operating under the auspices of the Herzliya Municipality for 25 years. This troupe also combines individuals in wheelchairs with dancers who stand next to them.



From the show "Laga'at Ba'Mayim, Laga'at Ba'Ru'ach - To Touch the Water, To Touch the Wind"

The Path to the World of Dance

Born in Givat Shmuel, Roni already started to dance at the age of 14 with the municipal dance troupe led by **Shalom Amar** ז"ל. At the age of 15, he was accepted into **Yonatan Karmon's** (ז"ל) troupe in Petah Tikva and he danced there for three years. During his military service, he moved to the Karmon-Jerusalem troupe. Roni describes his experience of meeting the well-known choreographer Yonatan Karmon and the many things he learned from him in his article in Karmon's memory: <https://bit.ly/3HERHoK>.

At age 17, Roni met his future wife, Nira, and in 1980 they together attended a marathon arranged by **Mira** and **Yoav Ashriel** ז"ל. The meeting between the two dancing couples developed into a long-standing friendship. Roni wrote about this in his article in Yoav Ashriel's memory: <https://bit.ly/3w38LSv>.

Choreographing Folk Dances

Yoav and Mira Ashriel, a special dance couple who arranged hishtalmuyot (workshops) for dance instructors, became Roni's mentors at the beginning of his journey as a choreographer. A few days after that marathon, Roni and Nira met with the Ashriels and showed them their dance, "Teivat HaZimra – Music Box" - Roni's first dance.

Yoav thought that the dance was too complex – "there are three dances here in one", he said. As a mentor, he helped to break down the dance, to give it structure and to "cook" (edit) the music, to fit the verse-chorus repetition structure to make it easier for the dancer. Yoav was a great believer in simplicity and he inculcated his ideas into many choreographers who knocked on his door so that their dances would be included into his hishtalmuyot that he conducted.

Yoav used to say that it's important to create "something simple and beautiful because a complicated dance won't be danced". To the couple's credit, it must be said that the Ashriels always nurtured as well as developed the young choreographers. At hishtalmuyot, Yoav took care to present

Roni as just another choreographer and made sure that he was judged by his dances and not by his age, which was difficult for some of the veteran choreographers to accept at first.

The lesson on "simplicity" was expressed in Roni's second dance – "Ahava P'Shuta – Simple Love". Roni himself asserts that when there's an idea and a connection to the music, the dance choreography is sometimes ready in minutes. That's what happened in this case.

But then came the dilemmas. Isn't it too simple? Maybe it should be made a little more complex? In the end, at Nira's suggestion, he left it in its original version. I think many will agree with me that "Ahava P'Shuta" became one of the most beloved and danced dances to this day. In contrast, the choreography for "Serenada L'Ada – Serenade for Ada" took longer. The song has a theatrical character and at the beginning it was difficult to express. But as time went on it came to him and the dance was quickly created.

Since then, Roni has created dozens of dances, both circle and partner dances. Many of them have become part of a permanent repertoire of dances in harkadot (dance sessions), among them: "Avre Tu", "Shir HaShayara (Song of the Convoy)", "Hakinor Hane'eman (The Faithful Violin)" "Shir Megaresh et Ha'Choshech (A Song Drives Away the Darkness)", Al Ha'ir



Nira, Yoav and Roni - Yoav's 80th birthday

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Afot Yonim (Doves Fly Over the City"), "Libeinu Lalaila (Our Hearts at Night); "Imri Li Ahuva (Tell me, Love)", "Ha'Ahava Ha'Yeshana (The Old Love)", and many others.

Here is a list of all of Roni's dances which appear on the Rokdim website: <https://bit.ly/3HBeHEY>

Roni notes that he always prefers classic Israeli songs and music, but having said that, he had no qualms and inserted new styles into Israeli folk dances. Thus, "Kayitz al Ha'ir (Summer on the City)" was the first tango in Israeli folk dances and "Masa Ben Kochavim (A Journey Between the Stars)" was the first representation of rock n' roll rhythm.

During his most fruitful creative period and, as one who choreographed many dances in special styles, Roni was invited many times to participate in dance camps abroad, primarily in the United States and in Europe. These camps, despite its connotation as a nickname, were a meeting place for dancers and instructors from all over the world, mainly, but not exclusively comprised of Jews.

These camps fostered collaborations and connections, some of which continue to this day.

This subject led me to ask a question that comes up often among the dancers: What is the place of nostalgia in relation to new dances? In Roni's opinion, the field of folk dance is constantly renewing itself and it is not appropriate to restrict the repertoire to some specific year. On the other hand, the instructor needs to be attentive to his audience, its age group, its background, its preferences and its level of fitness. The characteristics of the group should guide the instructor as to whether to place an emphasis on old dances based on classic Eretz Israel songs or on newer dances. Should "running step dances" be included in the repertoire or should one place an emphasis on more relaxed dances? The instructor should use discretion and choose a dance repertoire based on an artistic viewpoint and not just because "people are dancing it elsewhere".

In Roni's opinion, the fact that today "everyone is a choreographer" has caused a situation where many dances aren't properly constructed. Some even "interfere with the song", don't fit the spirit of the song or "break the holding of hands". The simplicity is thus lost and there is excessive pursuit of originality and new steps.

In retrospect, Roni is comfortable with the entirety of his choreographies. To my question – "From the perspective of time, are there dances that you would give up on?" – he answered: "No! Because each dance was right for its time. However, there are dances whose continued success surprises me, such as "Hapilpel – The Hot Pepper", which is still being danced fairly often even today".



Performance at Beit HaNassi



Roni is given a bouquet at the end of the performance "Zionism and Art"

"The fact that today 'everyone is a choreographer' has caused a situation where many dances aren't properly constructed. Some even 'interfere with the song', don't fit the spirit of the song or 'break the holding of hands'".

From the beginning of his career in the 1980s and until the beginning of the 2000s, Roni continued to choreograph dances such as "Imri Li Ahuva", "Libeinu LaLaila", "Ha'ahava Ha'Yeshana", "Tzchokam Shel Yeladim", and more. In the complete list of his choreographies there are some 20 circle dances and about 25 partner dances.

I was curious about why he stopped choreographing folk dances, and Roni explained: "Mostly I had had it with the "marketing" work that accompanies each dance. Promoting a new dance and getting

it into the repertoire required visiting different harkadot (dance sessions) and was involved with too much politics among the instructors. There were many cases in which the instructor was pleased to invite me but didn't back it up with his commitment or investment [of time] to learn the dance and continue to play and promote it."

Looking back, Roni can point to two main problems that occurred in the field of folk dance starting in the year 2000. The first is the fact that every instructor or even a dancer started to put together three steps and call it a dance. This caused a flooding of Israeli folk dancing with a significant number of dances. This doesn't even include the fact that beautiful and good songs were pushed out of the repertoire solely due to the fact that the dance wasn't properly constructed.

The flood of dances that hit the market without being vetted through hishtalmuyot or the critique of someone with experience, placed another obstacle before the instructors: a dance is taught one week and the following week must include a review of the dance. This means that two new dances are taught every month. But in a "flood" situation, the instructor is unable to discern the quality of the dance, to teach it properly, to go over it; he therefore collapses under the pressure of the dancers and teaches more and more... The result: many dances are removed from the repertoire too quickly, including really good dances.

Another problem that arose is the fact that the Instructors Organization (Irgun HaMarkidim), at a certain point, allowed every choreographer of a dance to register songs "on his/her account" to which he/she intended to choreograph a dance before even choreographing a dance to that song. So began an unfair competition of expedited registration of reserved songs in the bank, and the result was a drop in the quality of the dances or an excessive focus on a specific choreographer; this led many veteran choreographers to decline to participate in this "crazy race" and to retire from the joy of creation.

Even **Yaron Meishar**, in his films for the "Rokdim" website, sees himself as a documentarian and not as an examiner of new dances. So, under the current circumstances, perhaps it would be appropriate to consider establishing a committee that would filter the content a bit without infringing on artistic freedom.

For the above reasons, Roni chose to focus on his work as a director and choreographer for the stage and lehakot (performing groups). The only exception is the dance "Shir L'Ashriel", choreographed in 2016 as a tribute to Yoav Ashriel on the occasion of his 80th birthday.

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Instructor and Chairperson of Irgun HaMadrichim – the Instructors Organization

As soon as Roni completed his military service, he began instructing dance sessions. He led groups in Savyon, in Kiryat Ono and in Yahud, activities that continued until the outbreak of the COVID pandemic. His most outstanding period of activity was between 1999 and 2005, the period in which he was head of the Choreographers and Instructors Organization (Igun Ha'Choreoraphim Ve'Ha'Markidim).

As head of the organization, Roni worked on several fronts. He worked to clear up relations between the organization, AKUM and federations, with the understanding that folk dances are an inseparable part of Israeli cultural heritage. During his tenure, Roni worked to organize 5-6 annual hishtalmuyot for instructors under the auspices of the Irgun, including subsidizing the price of participation and cooperation with Yaron Meishar to produce instruction booklets and CDs for the hishtalmuyot.



From the dance "He Rak Rotza Lirkod - She Just Wants to Dance"

He also advanced the project of "Batei Sefer Rokdim" together with Yael Mero (who was then a senior supervisor in the Ministry of Education and later active in CIOFF, the International Folklore Association). In addition, he worked to raise the prestige of the instructors at the Karmiel Festival, raised funds for them for festival productions, for travel expenses and for proper management. In Roni's opinion, the Organization must "have the back of the instructor".

Among other things, he arranged for workshops and instruction days, not just vis-à-vis dances, but also addressing pedagogical subjects such as interaction with an audience and methodology of instruction.

The field of professional ethics is also very important. One must respect professional colleagues, avoid causing loss of income by not running dance sessions for free, and engage in fair competition. There should be a differentiation between an instructor and a dance leader, between a club and a dance session. The instructor, as opposed to the dance leader, must be equipped with pedagogical skills as he is teaching other people and serves as a role model.

Beyond this, Roni is well aware of the difficulty and uncertainty concerning income that is dependent on teaching folk dance. He therefore recommends that instructors have an additional job and income. Thus, during the period of COVID, when all sessions, clubs and troupes were closed, Roni received the proper certifications and started to work as an insurance assessor.

Dances, Food and Relationships

Roni considers folk dancing to be a multi-faceted activity, which includes social mingling, sport, community ties, and even establishing a family. As chairperson of the Organization he initiated a campaign with the slogan, "All the People in Folk Dance – Folk Dancing is the National Sport". He even distributed stickers to be placed on cars. He laments the stigma of negative social interaction



From the dance "The Troops"



From the dance "The Troops"

in folk dancing and prefers to focus on the positive side of the field – social connections that sometimes also lead to pairings and the emergence of stable relationships, and even weddings. That's how, by the way, he himself met his wife Nira.

This conversation led to the subject of couples for life who also dance together. Roni mentioned that often you can see wonderful harmony between them. But in some cases, dance partners who are also couples for life bring their tensions from home to the dance floor

and permit themselves to criticize one another in a way that wouldn't be done with a stranger. In such cases, a lot of tolerance is needed and a realization that some couples just don't have the same dance ability. If they are honest with each other and have enough understanding and mutual respect, it can be more easily accepted that they will both dance, just not with each other.

Another phenomenon that Roni noted in dance sessions is the whole concept of refreshments, or in his words "catering". Everyone likes to eat, but this is not the right place for it. The focus should remain on the dance session.

Youth, Youth

We talked about the future of folk dancing in light of the advancing age of the dancing population and the lack of younger dancers. From his perspective of many years of work with troupes and with youth, Roni noted that very few graduates of dance troupes go on to attend folk dance sessions. In his opinion, there should be an investment in marketing folk dancing to youth. For example, to combat the image of dancers as "nerds" and to draw them in by using more contemporary songs and music, even using old and familiar dances with up-to-date music (as is often done at Purim dance sessions). When the first obstacle is overcome, one can connect them to the history and the origins. Emphasis can be put on the social advantages, for example, the chance to break down social barriers between boys and girls and to dance together holding hands.

Production and Stage Direction

Roni's main activity today is in the field of staging and producing events within the framework of the "Niron Productions" Company, which he founded together with his wife, Nira, more than 30 years ago. The company engages in a wide range of productions for institutions and for individuals, starting with community building days, marking holidays and festive events, as well as artistic management and actual direction of onstage performances featuring a combination of artists, dance troupes, and other professionals.

For two decades Roni managed and directed dance troupes in various locations (Ben Shemen Youth Village, Modi'in, Beit Aryeh, Lev HaSharon, Drom HaSharon, Ramat Efal, Ra'anana), with a wide range of age groups: children, youth and adults, and several dance styles – folk, hip-hop, funk.

His greatest pride lies specifically in his work with physically handicapped people and those in wheelchairs. For 17 years he worked with the IDF (Israeli Defense Forces) Disabled Veterans Organization, including a musical production for them with many participants.

Roni is well aware of the difficulty and uncertainty concerning income that is dependent on teaching folk dance. He therefore recommends that instructors have an additional job and income.

This was presented on the best and largest stages around the country. At the same time, Roni invested in the advancement of the "Galgal Ba'Ma'agal – Wheel in a Circle" troupe, sponsored by the Herzliya Municipality for the last 25 years and today is considered the leading troupe in its field.

There are 12 couples in the Galgal Ba'Ma'agal troupe – one dancer sits in a wheelchair and his/her partner stands next to him/her. The troupe works on a varied repertoire and performs at different types of events including at assemblies in schools around the country. The message they bring is "different but equal". In recent years the troupe has been a permanent part of the central performances of the Karmiel and Ashdod festivals. The troupe also participated in international festivals and performed in many places around the world, among them Brazil, the United States and throughout Europe.

In 2017, the troupe even took part in the Celebrate Israel Parade on Fifth Avenue in New York City, along with the Israeli Ambassador to the United Nations and many other dignitaries.

Roni emphasizes that, in his work with this troupe, he relates to all the participants as dancers, and not as handicapped or people with limitations. The emphasis is on the professional and artistic work, but it's integrated with social activity. From his viewpoint as a choreographer, Roni focuses most of his energies on achieving an artistic outcome. The choreography obviously takes into consideration the physical limitations of some of the dancers, but with time and practice the bar is set higher each time. The wheelchair is not treated as a limitation; rather it is integrated into the choreography as a prop. Roni's choreographies focus more on the upper body, on hand and head work, on mimicry and strengthening the connection between the person sitting and the person standing. He constructs his dances for this troupe to suit the style of the music and makes sure that the message of his creation is supported by a matching costume.

Together we watched part of the last performance of the troupe, "Zionism and Art", and it was indeed impressive how Roni's approach is applied in practice: putting a regular chair next to a wheelchair as part of the choreography; taking advantage of the natural grading between those seated and those standing to create a visual effect; an appropriate use of the colors of costumes and the addition of accessories. This was an impressive performance on every level, and I am sure that the work of this troupe is a source of empowerment for everyone involved.

In conclusion I want to say that I was very happy to meet such a multi-faceted person as Roni Siman Tov – a dancer, choreographer, stage director, organization manager, producer and director, a man of Israeli culture. I hope I succeeded in sharing my impression of Roni, so many of whose dances we love and dance. 🙌



The finale of "The Troops" dance