



Naftali Chayat

Translation:  
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# DANCING WITH THE JAPANESE



## Impressions of a Folk Dance session in Japan

**I**n April 2024, two dancing families, the **Shachar family** – Orly and Yair, and the **Chayat family** – Naftali (me) and my wife, Ilana went on a vacation to tour to Japan. We wanted to experience various aspects of Japan – culture, art, history and, of course, dancing. I looked for information, and one of the dance gatherings, in Osaka, suited our itinerary. The group, led by **Akira Nishikawa**, focused on Balkan and Israeli circle dances.

In our correspondence about our visit, we decided that I'll teach the group two of my dances:

1. **"Pilpel U Batata"** (a Hebrew version of the Bulgarian "Dilmano Dilbero" song, that suited the Balkan agenda of the group): <https://bit.ly/3KsStXn>
2. **"MeEver LaKeshet"** – a simple dance based on an internationally renowned "Over the Rainbow" song: <https://bit.ly/3K6KZZF>

## International and Israeli Folk Dances in Japan

Why are international folk dances popular in Japan? Why are Israeli dances popular? It is said that after World War II, Americans had introduced Israeli folk dance in Japan as part of the effort to break the hierarchical structure of Japanese society – i.e., the folk dances are egalitarian; everybody holds hands in the circle. This is how the first Israeli dances were introduced including "Mayim Mayim (U'Shavtem Mayim Besason)" which became such a popular tune that it even appears now in some computer games! [See: <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/jewcy-mayim-mayim>].

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Flying "Over the Rainbow" in the Japanese Alps

Moreover, folk dances seem to suit the Japanese character – you must learn numerous dances, cope with complexity and strive for perfection.

Akira told me that the group in Osaka has been dancing since 1956! He himself has been dancing for over 30 years. Five years ago, with the sudden passing of the group's previous leader, he stepped into the leadership role.

There are many international folk dance groups around Japan, including groups that focus on authentic dances. Each year several workshops with guest instructors are held, including workshops with Israeli choreographers, for example, **Moshiko Halevy** and **Shmulik Gov-Ari** who have visited often. Also, **Dudu Barzilay** (2015/2019/2022), **Avi Perez** (2016), **Yaron Ben Simchon** (2018), **Nurit Melamed** and others. Before the COVID outbreak, Akira learned new dances primarily at the workshops, but since then he has learned many dances at online dance sessions, such as Harkalive led by **Ilai Szpiezak**.

Is the interest in Israeli dances related to a sympathy for Judaism or for State of Israel? Akira thinks that knowing the background is important, however, most of the people who dance Israeli dances have little interest in the national background, and simply like the dances and the challenge associated with them.

### Moshiko on his seminars in Japan



*Moshiko teaching in seminar in Japan*

Moshiko has led seminars in Japan since the late 70's. During each visit, which might last for a month, several sessions were held in different parts of Japan. Most of the sessions were organized by the Japanese Folklore Federation of Japan [The Folklore Society of Japan], and the large gatherings in Tokyo, were attended by hundreds of people. The Japanese dancers loved his dances, and some attended his seminars year after year. Over the years, he says he met many dancers who knew his dances very well. They learned very quickly and expected that each visit would be accompanied by additional dances.

They could learn 6 - 7 dances in a session, but on the other hand, Moshiko found that this pressure to choreograph, although the dances were excellent, was creating the sense of a "production factory". Eventually, he convinced his impresario to engage with **Shmulik Gov-Ari**, and then they started holding seminars in Japan alternately – i.e., a year by Moshiko and a year by Shmulik. Moshiko had his last workshop in Japan in 2018.

### Visiting the "Harkada"

We arrived by train on a rainy day directly from our trip, dressed in our casual clothing. The taxi driver sensed our urgency and speeded through Osaka... and then it took some time to find the location in the labyrinth of the commercial building.

At the entrance to the studio, we were asked to take off our "street shoes". Everyone changes from street shoes to dance shoes. This was not an issue for me – I dance barefoot. (I had checked with Akira in advance that this is okay, i.e., within the accepted cultural codes.)



*Studying "MeEver LaKeshet", visualizing the rainbow*

The group was already dancing, and many of the dancers wore masks on their faces despite the lack of air conditioning – a habit for many years that became even more pronounced during COVID. As we entered, we heard Israeli dance songs. There were many excellent dancers, who were meticulous about following the subtleties the nuances of the dances. Together with them, we danced "Kochav HaRuach" and "Alizut" by **Moshiko Halevy**, "HaNahar" by **Shmulik Gov-Ari**, "Mishaela" by **Rafi Ziv** and "Normali" by **Michael Barzelai**. [https://youtu.be/E\\_d5tbxdoQ0](https://youtu.be/E_d5tbxdoQ0). It seemed that in honor of the guests from Israel, Israeli dances were given an extra emphasis, although it was evident that they were danced regularly.

Then the Balkan dances started, and it became challenging... The dances were fast and intricate, suiting the group but posing a challenge to us. Most of the dances were not familiar to us, and indeed, they were better suited to the young, energetic dancers at the session. We did our best to fit in. And then came my turn to teach.

I started with "MeEver LaKeshet – Over the Rainbow". In this picturesque dance, the hands illustrate the rainbow, the skies and the birds that are free to fly up with our wishes and prayers. The Japanese dancers perceive hand gestures as an organic part of the dance and not as something optional... They copied them with the steps, and only for the "birds" ending did I provide an explanation. As the song is internationally popular, for the second time through the dance, I surprised them with a Japanese version of the song! <https://youtu.be/aox0WNQb3Xs>

Immediately afterwards, I taught the dance, "Pilpel U Batata". It was evident that the group had a background in Balkan dance and were familiar with the use of beats of varying duration. I illustrated the rhythm with mock English lyrics – "po-ta-to, po-ta-to, I want to plant a po-ta-to". They laughed at the explanation, but immediately grasped the rhythmic idea of the dance.



*The ending of "Mishaela" (Rafi Ziv)*

Another amusing moment came when I suggested that they can “cheat” and replace 4 quick steps with 2 slow steps, for those who find it difficult. This provoked laughter... it seems that for Japanese dancers there’s no cheating with dances, you either dance them as they are – or you don’t dance them at all. **Miho**, instructing the group with Akira, even has asked me about the details of holding hands in the second part of the dance. <https://youtu.be/W55dRDqztb8>



*Playing and singing after the “harkada”*

*At the end of the session Akira presented me with a Japanese bamboo flute! It was lacquered on the inside, in the best tradition of Japanese craftsmanship.*

We danced a few more Israeli dances, among them “Debka Uriah” and “Anavai”, and we ended with a calm Balkan dance. Then came a surprise. In my preliminary conversations with Akira, I mentioned that I play traverse flute and that I’m looking for a traditional Japanese flute – and at the end of the session Akira presented me with a Japanese bamboo flute! It was lacquered on the inside, in the best tradition of Japanese craftsmanship. As we exited the studio to the empty corridor of the commercial center, I took out the flute, that I was not yet used to, and tried my best to play “MeEver LaKeshet” – and Miho, joined, singing in English with her beautiful clear voice. <https://youtu.be/37-5RFoZYN8>. Eventually, we exited the building going back into the rain, and some of the dancers accompanied us to the nearest subway station.

### **Orly shares her impression:**

All my trips abroad did not prepare me for Japan. Within all the things that have been new to me, visiting a session of Balkan-Israeli dances with Japanese dancers was one of most extraordinary experiences. My lifelong “home turf” looked different and surprising, and the encounter with a different culture in the context of familiar dances was a unique experience.

As we entered the studio, “BaChalom” (by **Ami Ben Shushan**) was already being danced. How did this lovely dance reach Japan? As I joined the circle, they started a vigorous and complex Balkan dance, and I understood that my familiarity with “Florica” [Romanian folk dance] and “Bucimis” [Bulgarian] would not help me follow the complex rhythm and fit into the circle.

The dancers followed the dances in detail, as in a dance troupe. And then “Yisrael” by Dudu Barzilay was played. “Israel is my home, Israel is my dream, Israel is here and now”. Israel? Until now nobody was interested in the trouble-ridden country



*Dancing Moshiko's "Debka Uriah"*

***It became apparent that they do not speak English and, of course, not Hebrew. But the meaning of "Yisrael Sheli – My Israel" was clear to them, and they expressed it with their bodies and with hand gestures, with evident emotion and love.***

we came from, and we were free from the ambassador role. Then, suddenly, we experienced such sympathy from people who would probably not have been interested in Israel without the exposure to our dance culture.

It became apparent that they do not speak English and, of course, not Hebrew. But the meaning of "Yisrael Sheli – My Israel" was clear to them, and they expressed it with their bodies and with hand gestures, with evident emotion and love. This was truly amazing. I was deeply moved to see how the cultural gap was bridged by the Israeli dances, our ambassadors in this foreign country in the huge city of Osaka (yes, the same one we see in the "Shogun" series).

Their reaction to Naftali's dances was very interesting. The familiar "MeEver LaKeshet – Over the Rainbow" song evoked emotions, while "Pilpel U Batata" amused them, when the meaning of the lyrics were explained. Interestingly, for both songs, they preferred the Hebrew versions to the Japanese and Bulgarian versions, respectively. The speed with which they grasped the dances was surprising.

At this point, they suggested that we choose dances. I proposed "Debka Uriah" and was told that it's a difficult dance. I was surprised – I got used to believing that nothing is too difficult for them. When we started dancing, I noticed that the instructor, who held my hand, had minor errors with directions, but still was very accurate with the rhythm, and even with details of the fourth part which is rarely danced correctly even in Israel.

I'm not sure to what extent they copied and to what extent they knew the dance in advance, but maybe "difficult dance" referred to knowing "just" 99% of the dance... not 100%. When it's not perfect, they do not refer to it as "knowing" the dance.

The repertoire was very interesting – a combination of older dances, dances of Moshiko and Gov-Ari, along with dances from the modern repertoire, mostly dances that are not very common in Israel. All those were interspersed with complex Balkan dances. No "harkada" in Israel features such a combination, as it requires interest in a very broad range of musical styles, rhythms, and dance abilities. How is such a broad knowledge accumulated in just two hours a week?

When the session ended, the room was divided by a partition, and men and women changed clothes on both sides. On the women's side where I was, the clothes were changed down to underwear. Why? We have danced for just a couple of hours... it reminded me again of the absolutism when it comes to cleanness and hygiene in Japan.



*Studying "MeEver LaKeshet", visualizing the skies above*

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And as we were changing clothes, the women told me that indeed, two hours a week are enough. The group leader participates in monthly seminars and enriches them with new repertoire.

I wondered about wearing masks. Ostensibly, the justification is the seasonal pollen-related allergies. But another reason that I heard from the women while we changed, is that they feel more comfortable being less exposed and keeping their privacy. Indeed, while the women were very friendly with me, they kept a distance. When I proposed staying in touch, for example on Facebook, it was met with silence. It was clear that our codes of jumping into friendship do not work here, and the masks that help people with the distancing are exactly what they need.

For us, the Israelis, who are used to confidence and control (even when not fully justified) it was very different to experience “the power of the group”, in which people strive to fit in and be like everybody else rather than feel that they are “better” or “unique” – especially in the context of folk dancing, where you want the group to dance well, and not each individual dancer just for himself/herself. And it works. They look like a trained performing group when the truth is that for them, dancing is just a hobby.

When you discover the history of Israeli Folk Dance in Japan – you understand the success of the idea to blur the social hierarchy by making everybody equal, having everybody hold hands and jointly strive for perfection. It seemed that for these dancers it also was an opportunity to escape from the rigid social codes, even if just for a couple of hours in a week.

We are blessed to have our dances, our choreographers and instructors, who are our ambassadors spreading our culture to countries as far away as Japan.

## Epilogue

The visit to the dance session in Japan became one of the major experiences of our visiting this unique country. For days after, we were singing “Mishaela” in our car. As we have reached the “Japanese Alps” we felt the urge to do a small flash-mob in which we danced “MeEver Lakeshet” to the Japanese version of the song, thus drawing attention and cameras of the Japanese tourists.

We were glad to discover in Japan a community that is so connected to Israeli songs, without a direct relationship to Israel or to Judaism. This attests to the uniqueness of the Israeli dances within the global complex of folk dance, and of the quality and sophistication of the dances by leading choreographers. It was a firsthand experience to see the respect and the accuracy with which these dances are danced.

Visiting a “harkada” abroad is an opportunity to meet people, learn about them and their community, and communicate with them on another level. In Japan, it was also an opportunity to communicate with the Japanese on a different, international level of music and movement. I hope to be in Japan again, and I’m certain to seek meeting again with Japanese dancers.



*“Ishkhanats Par” – a vigorous Armenian dance*