



Naftali Chayat

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# Balkan Footsteps on Jerusalem Hills

Impressions from the 2024 annual gathering of the Dunav Association



**I** first heard about Dunav's annual party from **Yaron Meishar**, who invited me to dance and document, and so we set off to Jerusalem – **Orly Shachar**, Yaron, and I – to enjoy a rich evening of fine Balkan folklore. An evening filled with joy, dancing, live and recorded music, plus refreshments and a table of drinks...

The love for Balkan dances has been flourishing in Israel for decades. In the past, Balkan dances were integrated into Israeli dance sessions, but this trend has declined. On the other hand, groups dedicated to Balkan dances were created. Over the past 30 years, three associations have been hosting regular Balkan dance sessions in Israel: Jerusalem's Dunav, "Balkanitsa" in Haifa, and "Noa-Am" in the center of the country. Additionally, there are classes dedicated to Greek dances in Petah Tikva and Jerusalem (details at the end of the article).

These associations collaborate on special initiatives, such as the annual Dunav party in Jerusalem, where guests from the Tel Aviv area (like us) and even from Haifa attended.

Despite the high number of immigrants from the Balkan countries living in Israel, the love for Balkan dances can mainly be attributed to the development of this trend in the West. In the 20th century, a growing interest in folk dances emerged. After World War II, interest in Balkan circle dances increased. This interest was intensified by visits to the West by performance troupes from Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, as well as the fascination with the complex movement, rhythm, and musical elements of these dances. One could compare learning Balkan dances to mastering intricate "debkas" or the dances of **Moshiko**.

**The music of the Balkan countries was influenced by centuries of Ottoman Empire rule, during which musical traditions evolved that combine short and long beats, creating "asymmetrical" time signatures.**

In addition to the familiar 7/8 time signature (for example, in **Nachum Heiman's** song "Reiach Tapuach, Odem Shani"), there is a wide range of unique time signatures. The traditional instruments also contribute to a distinctive musical character – from the zurna (known to us from Kurdish songs) to the gaida (Balkan bagpipe), and from the kamancheh to the lyra (familiar to us through the musician **Mark Eliyahu**). And of course, there is simply captivating music, such as Romanian and Gypsy melodies.



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## The Dunav Association

I asked **Yehuda Ben Harush**, the leader and lead teacher of Dunav, how he got involved with Balkan dances and became the leader of Dunav. "The 'Dunav' Association has been around for 25 years," says Yehuda, "but Balkan dances have been danced in Jerusalem for about 55 years. It started under the leadership of **Cyrelle Forman-Soffer**. We have members who have been dancing for over fifty years."

"I was introduced to Balkan dances through Yaron Meishar, with whom I collaborated when I was in charge of the record warehouse of the record label 'Hed-Artzi'. Balkan dances excited me, and I began participating in the Jerusalem dance group in the early '90s. I was an enthusiastic dancer and learned quickly. Two or three years passed. Then, at one point, Cyrelle got sick and asked me to substitute teach for her. That's how I became a teacher and leader of the group."

### How many dances are there in Dunav's repertoire?

According to Yehuda, there are around 600-800 dances, of which several hundred are regularly danced. Some are popular and are danced nearly every week, while others are danced only once every few months.

One of Yehuda's greatest sources of pride is the Dunav website (<https://dunav.org.il/>). The Dunav Association does not settle for the passive role of simply dancing the dances. The people of Dunav took on a mission to systematically document the dances and produced about 400 videos of different circle dances. ("Noa-Am" did a similar initiative for documenting couple dances). The website, created by the association, includes not only the videos but also background stories of the dances and, sometimes, translations of the song lyrics.



Performance of the "Gute Gute" band



Dancers in a front basket hold





*Band members playing in the middle of the dance circle*

the belt of their neighbor, and dance groups love to honor this tradition). Even at the annual dance event we visited, people could be seen wearing traditional embroidered shirts and braided belts.

How are the dances introduced to the group? Most of the dances have been danced for decades. However, there are innovations. Leaders of dance groups in the country tend to visit seminars where dances are presented, usually as an outcome of ethnographic research. Sometimes, these are camps where dances from different regions are taught. Surprisingly, even the folk dance world is not exempt from new choreographies, often created by people with a deep knowledge of authentic folklore who compose dances in its spirit.

The association stays connected with the global community of Balkan dancers, and over the years, it has invited many instructors from abroad. Among them are: Canadian **Yves Moreau**, Macedonians **Atanas Kolarovski** and **Sashko Atanasov**, Turkish **Ahmet Lüleci**, Dutch **Bianca de Jong**, Romanian **Maria and Marius Ursu**, Bulgarian **Iliana Bozhanova**, Bulgarian **Delyan Demirov**, and more.

## The annual gatherings and workshops

The tradition of the annual dance gatherings began in 2004, when a trip to Varna, Bulgaria, was organized, followed by several trips to Antalya, Turkey. Attending gatherings abroad was cheaper than a domestic vacation, and it also provided an opportunity to invite instructors from the Balkans and experience the culture firsthand. However, when relations with Turkey became strained, the Balkan gatherings moved to Israel. Most of them were held near the Sea of Galilee – at Ma'agan, at Ginosar, and in recent years – at Ohalo. But recently, there have been breaks in this tradition due to the COVID-19 pandemic and, in the past two years, because of the "Iron Swords" war. As a result, this year, the annual dance gathering took place at Dunav's regular meeting place in Jerusalem.



*Dancers in tight lines*

For many of gatherings in Israel, guest instructors were invited from abroad – from Balkan countries, or well-known instructors from the West in the field of Balkan dances. Instructors have come from Romania, Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Greece. Often, an instructor would be accompanied by a musician – an accordionist, a tapan (drum) player, or a gaida (Balkan bagpipe) player, and the dances were danced to live music, as is customary in the local traditions. Occasionally, Balkan music troupes also performed, and in recent years, the focus has been on Balkan music bands that emerged in Israel. During these gatherings, there were also performances by other Israeli artists – such as the late **Dan Biron** with the student band, and accordionist **Emil Aybinder**.

## Performance of the “Gute Gute” band

A live performance by the "Gute Gute" band was undoubtedly the highlight of the annual gathering in December 2024. The band members were joined by **Gergely Barcza**, a Hungarian wind instrument player, who has lived in Israel for many years. After the opening dance session, the band's performance began. The band played its own songs, such as “Katef LeTaltalyich” (A Shoulder for Your Curls), and the performance also featured instrumental ethnic, Balkan, and even Irish music. But the atmosphere really heated up when they began performing familiar dances, and people got up to dance to the band's live music. The captivating melodies and unique rhythms gained even more energy from the band's live performance.



*Circle of Balkan dancers from all corners of the country*

Yehuda explains: "Playing for dances is not the same as playing for a performance. When we invite a band to perform and accompany dances, we usually stick to the versions more familiar to the dancing crowd from the recordings. However, we still maintain spontaneity, staying connected with the dancers. The length or speed of the song can change, depending on the interaction with the leader."

For several years, we collaborated with the "Tse-Tse" band, developing a common language, but that band is no longer active. The "Gute Gute" band is newer, and we are building the connection while enriching the repertoire of dances they are involved in.

**Chana Englard** is a longtime dancer in the group, a founding member of the Dunav Association and also leads other Greek dance groups. Chana is a musicologist and folklorist and, during her academic work in Jerusalem, she made sure that Balkan music was not neglected. Chana shares:

The bands, most of whose members are graduates of the Academy of Music and Dance in Jerusalem, did not form with a Balkan agenda. Most of the performers of Balkan music in Israel focus on Gypsy music, in the style of the Cocek dance, rather than the diverse music of the entire Balkan region. The members of the bands that collaborated with Dunav are all excellent musicians who had no difficulty mastering the complex Balkan



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rhythms, but in terms of the dance repertoire, they needed guidance, and that's where I helped the bands acquire the materials adapted for the dances.

**Amitai Mann, a wind instrument player in the band, recounts:**

The band was formed by **Aviv Kest** (the singer and guitarist) and me in 2009. We were also joined by the double bass player **Yehuda Levavi**, who was later replaced by **Meidad Cohen**. At the beginning, we also had the accordionist **Ira Shiran**, who also played in the "Tse Tse" band. Thanks to him, we already played many Balkan pieces back then – Romanian, Gypsy, Klezmer music. We are graduates of the Jerusalem Academy, and our current accordionist, **Yanush Horvitz**, even studied with Emil Aybinder. Later, we also participated in seminars at the Academy in Plovdiv (Bulgaria), where we were exposed to the Israeli and international Balkan music community, and we continued to meet and play with them in Balkan music marathons across Europe. During these seminars, I learned to play the gaida (Balkan bagpipe), and Aviv learned, in addition to guitar and bouzouki, to play the gaidulka (Bulgarian string instrument).

In parallel with activities in Israel, performances, and the release of two albums (several Israeli dances were composed to the band's songs, such as "Kipodim" (Hedgehogs) by **Yuval Tabashi**), we continued to perform in Europe with the "MishMash Band," formed from these encounters. At Balkan music seminars in Israel, we met the Israeli dancing community and immediately connected.

**We attended the parties and the dance gatherings of Dunav and "Balkanitsa," and became the house band of the Balkan dancing community.**

**Amitai Mann** identifies Balkan inspiration and influence in the band's Israeli songs as well. He shares his experience of accompanying dances: "Musicians tend to be freer and more improvisational. But when accompanying dances, we need to stick more to the performances familiar to the dancers, including maintaining the rhythm, not too fast and not too slow." The band even participated, after a period of preparation and coordination, in a tour where they played for Balkan dancers in Japan.



*Chana and Yehuda (with the hat), leading the circle of dancers*



The band's percussionist, **Meir Yaniger**, comes from a classical background, but alongside his natural integration into the band, he also leads an innovative project of Balkan music incorporating marimba and vibraphone. Regarding collaboration with **Gergely Barcza**, Amitai says, "He is a truly admirable figure, playing in the Hungarian band Besh O droM, is one of the best musicians in the world in his field, and it is a great honor to participate in projects with him and learn from him."

## Summarizing the 2024 Annual Dance Gathering

The highlight of the gathering was the Balkan circle dance session. The dances come from all regions of the Balkans – Serbian "Čoček" and "Kolo", Turkish "Esmer", the challenging Bulgarian "Kopanitsa", dances from the Dobruja region of Bulgaria, a variety of Greek dances – "Sirtos", "Kalamtiano", "Tsamiko", "Miserlou", and also "Dipat" from the Pongos region, now in Turkey. There were also Romanian, Albanian, and Hungarian dances...

In some of the dances, everyone participated, and in the more challenging ones, only the "hardcore" members danced, while many more watched, such as the energetic and highly varied "Tsestos", which is very popular in the group. In some dances, performed to live music, musicians joined the center of the circle to add to the joy and authenticity (<https://youtu.be/RPxiH1hyHU>).

The gathering also featured several couple dances. In the repertoire of the groups in Israel, there are only a few couple dances from the Balkans, and most couple dances come from the West. They are loved at the "Noa-Am" group, but are sparingly incorporated in other groups.

Of course, the culinary side was not neglected at the gathering, and this time it was done in support of communities in the Gaza Envelope. The food was accompanied by generous amounts of alcohol, which delighted the hearts of the dancers – with some traditional drinks from the Balkans, such as Ouzo, Rakia, and more.

## Impressions of the Israeli dancers

**Orly Shachar says:** I was very happy to attend this year's Dunav Evening in the company of Yaron Meishar and Naftali Chayat. I have a very warm place in my heart for Balkan music and dances, and at every opportunity I am happy to join in. I grew up in a house where my father and grandfather would play many Romanian and Bulgarian music records on the family turntable. As a little girl, my father would hold me in his arms, dance and sing "Alunelul alunelul hai la joc", or put me to sleep with the song "Yovano". As is the way with the first memories in life, this music was deeply ingrained in me.

During my studies at the Technion, I first encountered Balkan dances, an encounter that surprised me in many ways. Starting from my intuitive connection to music, through the social connection that flows so naturally in Balkan groups, and the rhythmic complexity that I have always been drawn to and challenged my brain every time, as I found myself repeatedly counting the musical beats and trying to understand them.



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As a music lover, I really loved the Balkan style and found myself searching for it in the world. At a dance at the university in Copenhagen, I found the dance "Nad Ilan" being considered a Greek dance. I proudly confronted the instructor about his mistake in this case, but most of the dancing was really in a style that today I know to call "Balkan dances." I took myself to Greek tavernas, to performances by great singers in Athens and Thessaloniki. I grew my collection of Greek, Gypsy, Romanian, Bulgarian, and Turkish CDs that I would listen to on long car trips. The love for Balkan culture began to flow through my veins.

**The easier Balkan circle dances are very social. Everyone who enters the circle immediately belongs to it. As the basic step pattern is repeated many times, the music enters the heart and everyone feels part of a group. The handhold keeps the dancers close together, and the group of dancers becomes a monolithic unity, as the energy and the sense of belonging flow in.**

In the past, unlike today, it was very easy for Israeli folk dancers to encounter Balkan dances. Some of these dances were an integral part of the weekly Israeli dance repertoire. In addition, there were dedicated International folk dance sessions. At Tel Aviv University, there was a folk-dance group with **Rafi Demer** on Mondays. Rafi's group was particularly interesting. I would enjoy the feeling of belonging at first, but quickly the dances would become very complex and challenging. I would watch and admire Rafi and the group of dancers, that looked like a professional dance troupe. Trying to understand, trying to copy. Sensing how far I am from these professionals who, over time, became my best friends.

Folk dance associations always held large festive gatherings in which they invited professional dance groups or musical groups from abroad. I traveled a lot, to Haifa, to Jerusalem, to enjoy the high level of professionalism.

Returning to the Dunav annual gathering, it had everything that I could look for. Although I did not master this repertoire, this did not prevent me from fitting in. Instructors were immediately available to help me fit in. And when the rhythm became too complex, I went out to observe and marvel at the perfect coordination in the circles.

The musical band that entered the dancing circle amazed me. The mastery of the rhythms by the musicians and the dancers formed a common language that orchestrated it all. A wonderful experience."

The Israeli dance leader **Nurit Greenfeld** also feels a deep connection: "When I started dancing Israeli folk dances fifty years ago, we integrated international folk dances, but this is becoming less and less. About 15 years ago, when I met **Gilad Tzaidi Eden**, my partner for dances and projects, he introduced me to the Noa-Am group. There, not only did they remind me of forgotten memories, but I was also exposed to international folk dances and Balkan dances that I




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had never danced or seen integrated into Israeli folk dance. Nevertheless, I fell in love. The unique music, the rhythm and special beats, the stylized steps that often repeat themselves like a mantra – captivated me. Of course, it's very individual."

And I, your humble servant (the writer of these lines), can attest that I had an immediate "click" with Balkan dances when I encountered them, at the age of 20, in Rafi Demer's class at "Bikurei Ha'itim." When I returned to dancing about twenty years ago, Balkan dances were among the first ones I came back to, and I enjoy dancing with the various groups in the country. I had the opportunity to participate in many weekends and workshops, and I greatly benefited from the musical, rhythmic, and choreographic richness, that "leaks" into my own activity in the field of Israeli folk dances.

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## Summary

The wonderful dance organized by the Dunav Association was a magnet for Balkan dancers from all over Israel; a community that is passionate about culture and full of joy. It was great fun to meet, dance, listen to live music and dance to it. I hope that this culture will continue for a long time. There are multiple dangers to its existence: the aging of the dancers and the lack of new members. But there are also signs of hope, such as the emerging generation of young musicians who are passionate about Balkan music and make it a central or important element in their work. We can only hope that the younger dancers will also discover the magic of Balkan dance culture. 

**See you again at the end of 2025!**

## List of Balkan Dance Sessions in Israel

If you wish to experience Balkan dancing – here is a list of regular dance sessions:

"Dunav" – Thursdays, 20:00-22:30, Kol HaNeshamah Synagogue, Asher 1, Jerusalem.

"Balkanitsa" – Tuesdays, 20:30-22:45, Small Sports Hall at the Technion, Haifa.

"Noa-Am" – First Friday of the month, 16:00-19:00, America Hall, Kfar Maccabiah, Ramat Gan.

Greek Dances – Mondays, 20:00-22:30, Recanati House, Einstein 23, Petah Tikva.

Greek Dances – Tuesdays, 18:30-21:00, Kol HaNeshamah Synagogue, Asher 1, Jerusalem.

## Links

The website of the Dunav Association – <https://dunav.org.il/>

A video from the Dunav 2024 experience – <https://youtu.be/RPxihH1hyHU>

The website of the "Gute Gute" dance troupe – <https://www.gutegute.com/>

The YouTube channel of "Gute Gute" – <https://bit.ly/3EC1rBz>

An article by Yehuda BenHarush (7/2021) about international folk dance in Israel and around the world: <https://bit.ly/4hHQP2I/>