



Gurit Kadman, z"l
(the "Mother" of
Israeli Folk Dance)

Translation:
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and **Allen King**

Will We Have Our Own Original Folk Dances?

**On the beginning
of the creation
of Israeli dance
in the Land of Israel**



The article is from 1950 and was published in 1951 in the Gadna Command's magazine "Bamachane Alumim – In Alumim Camp"

For various reasons, this year's Folk Dance Gathering was cancelled, but the previous two gatherings were outstanding successes. We occasionally hold events like this, the purpose of which is to spread folk dances in the country.

However, isn't it a contradiction to speak of an "initiative" in connection with folk art? Should it be "activated"? Doesn't it thereby lose its very nature and value? Doesn't this art grow by itself? Yes, indeed, this art develops by itself and by its own virtue, but what are we talking about here – in the nations as they are at that time, but not the people of Israel, which does not constitute a "proper nation" – and not in the current period, which is not a "proper" period?

The experiences of the Jewish people, their dispersion and suffering, deprived them of most of the possibilities of developing an independent and living folk art. With the revival of the people on their land, the vital need arose for the vigorous development and cultivation of folk art, and folk dance as a part thereof.

Development out of awareness and desire, spurred by the magic wand of "no choice" – this is the foundation of our dance enterprise.

A dance enterprise exists among the other peoples of civilization, but it is different among us. Its primary meaning is: the salvation of the values of a tradition that has been forgotten and lost due to the current, fatal period, which erased folk customs and folk art. Given the dominance of technology, cinema and radio and their increasing influence, the diverse village customs of handicrafts, the decoration of the house with holiday costumes, folk shows, music and dances are disappearing.

In recent decades, enlightened youth, students, folklore researchers, and artists in Europe and America have stepped up to save, archive



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and record the remnants of these folklore treasures. Folk dance societies have been established to accomplish the revival of these dances in an organized manner and spread them among urban youth as well.

Thus, the content of their work is twofold: collection in the villages and distribution in the cities, a collection and educational activity - but not creative - apparently, it cannot be creative, because the spirit of our time does not allow for the emergence of folk dances. After all, through "seductive technology" everything is received ready-made. The technology paralyzes the inclination towards individual creativity - even in the village, which served as the primary location for the creation of folk songs and folk dances in the past.

And yet, contrary to the spirit, or lack of spirit, of the times, and to developments in other countries, there is an extraordinary and surprising fact: in Israel, new folk dances are being created and emerging. They do not grow slowly like trees. They spring into life like mushrooms after the rain. They are not the fruit of a centuries-old tradition, but rather the youngest of the young, five years old, three years old, a year old and we still have so much more to accomplish!

According to conventional concepts, they should not yet be called folk dances, because who knows which of all these nascent creations will be absorbed into the life of the people in the future and which will fall and be forgotten. They are still sprouts, blossoms, and aspirational folk dances.

Nevertheless, the people dance them to an ever-increasing extent. The enterprise is expanding with astonishing speed, and the folklorist experts who have seen our dances at international forums in Europe and America find therein a unique character and color, independent and unique lines. They relate to the "experiment" with interest, astonishment,

and admiration. Our dancers encountered such a positive and heartfelt attitude at the international conferences in Prague in 1947, in Budapest, and in Venice. I found the same attitude during my activities (teaching our dances) in the United States among wide circles interested in the dances of all peoples. The conclusion is that the five-year-old "plant" has already borne fruit and is on the right trajectory.

It is interesting to look back at its beginnings. Before me is an article about folk dance in the summer of 1938, which reflects the state of our dances at that time; (since then, my position has fundamentally changed!) and here are excerpts from that article:



*Gurit Kadman (the second from right) and her children, January 1945.
Source: Wikipedia*

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What is important to us are these questions: What, from this whole ingathering of exiles of folk dances, has been revived here?

And a second question – what is suitable for us, what do we want to instill here? To what extent is it possible to influence folk dance by willpower?

"We are the people of Israel who live in Zion - do we have a folk dance? We are a kibbutz galuyot (an ingathering of the Exiles) - and our dances are also a kibbutz galuyot. From the ancient, biblical period, no dances or songs remain, because they were not recorded. They must have danced a lot then. In the Bible, much is told about dances. One can assume that the dances then were similar to those of the Arabs today, but all of this is mere speculation.

The Israelites also danced in exile, in Yemen and Eastern Europe. The dance of the Chassidim, for example, is a true and original expression of the Chassidic existence, their suffering and joy, their abundance of physicality and spirituality, whereas the dances of the Jews from Persia and the Caucasus and even Yemen are apparently influenced by many of their neighbors in those countries and are less original.

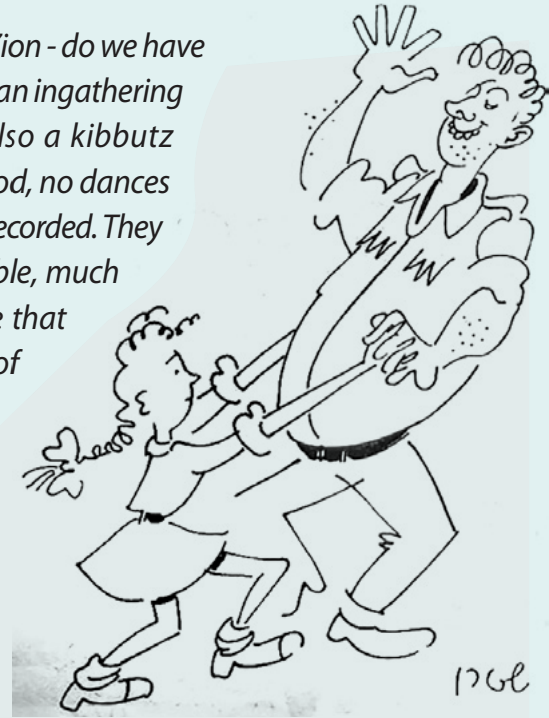
But the question of originality is not so important. What is important to us are these questions: What, from this whole ingathering of exiles of folk dances, has been revived here? And a second question – what is suitable for us, what do we want to instill here? To what extent is it possible to influence folk dance by willpower? What will we focus on and what will we try to revive?

It is strange that the most self-defining dance in our country is neither Chassidic nor a dance from the Eastern ethnicities (Edot Hamizrach), but rather a Romanian rural dance: The Hora. Strange, but understandable: a people returning to their land and to nature, needs an unproblematic simple, strong, healthy, social dance. There was none of this ilk among the original Jewish diaspora dances; they took it from a village of another people - the foreign dance became an expression - not original, but true – of our existence.

And the popular and beloved dances other than the Hora? Not a single one of them is of Diaspora Jewish origin either. Most, if not all of them, are borrowed from the various peoples who used to host us: Circassians, Russians, Poles and others (Tcherkessia, Krakoviak, Polka, etc.).

Should we regret this? No more than in all other areas of our art. We still do not have - nor can we have - an original individual style in any artistic genre. We do not have a large treasury of folk songs that live on in the mouths of the people, so how can we expect to have an original folk dance?

But the folklorist goes on and asks: How will a Jewish-Israeli folk dance be created in the Land of Israel? And the answer, like most of our questions: Hope for the future. Generations will arise that will not be burdened with foreign influences as we are.



The instructor and his pupil dance together.
Yossi Stern, 1951

If the people of Israel live a healthy and normal life and if global civilization even allows for the possibility of folk dancing – our original dance will emerge as well.

They will create their own way of life – and from it, virtually effortlessly, the suitable folk dance will blossom; it will bear the mark of the Land of Israel, the strength of its soil and the existence of its people.

But what will we do in the meantime? Two action items: First: a systematic collection of our folklore treasures, without which they are doomed to extinction. Second: taking advantage of the fact that we have been guests among all the peoples of the world. We will dance those dances of theirs that are most suitable for us. Perhaps here there is a pantheon of sorts of the dances of the nations. Ben-Shemen sets a fine example in this direction. Why should we accept in Israel only the dances of the Romanians, the Russians and the Poles? We will also learn from the Hungarians among us, from the English, the Scandinavians, etc.

And let us not fear that engaging in the dances of other nations will interfere with our own folk dance, which will be created in the future. If the people of Israel live a healthy and normal life and if global civilization even allows for the possibility of folk dancing – our original dance will emerge as well.

These were my thoughts in 1938! Twelve years have passed since then, and in the last five years, our dances have undergone a powerful development. What was said then about the historical origins of our dances remains valid, but the approach to the question of originality has changed completely. We soon realized that we had to choose either a "pantheon of the dances of the nations" or our own original



dance that needed to be developed. We chose – and abstained from – the "pantheon". We turned our backs on the dances of other nations, fought against their dissemination, demanded that the instructors and the organized youth spread only our own dances. We were a small handful of people who did not have the patience to wait until generations would come, in which the appropriate folk dance would flourish, without special effort – our own original dance. We began to accelerate the salvation; we tried to create. We sought out elements of our own original movement, the fundamental and elemental character of Israeli dance.

And already a picture of the character and style of our new dances is emerging before our eyes. Here we enter into the thick of the problems. Without a doubt one fact exists: These dances have their own special character and hue. A second fact: It is not yet possible to accept their style and define it as something clear and specific. Various and numerous influences are at work and leave their marks. Elements from the West and the East intersect and merge but have not yet reached complete unity from a single mold.

Elements from the "[Hora](#)" are evident in a number of new circle dances ([Hora Agadati](#),



Performances of dance troupes at the Karmiel Festival, in the New Dance Choreography Competition

[Mechol Sarid](#), [Harmonica](#), [Im Hupalnu](#), etc.). The Arab debkas have enriched the creation of many new dances of our own ([Mechol Ovadia](#), [Hanoded](#), [Ken Yovdu](#), [Debka Gilboa](#), [Debka Rafiach](#), etc.)

The partner dances that the youth are most interested in were influenced and enriched in part by Europe ([HaKotzrim](#), [Har Vekar](#)) in part by Yemenite movements and their style ([El Ginat Egoz](#), Mecholot Hashnayim ([Dodi Li](#) and [Iti Milvanon](#)) and in some, no particular influence is evident, [Bo Dodi](#)).

Among the Jews of Eastern Europe, the one [dance] that has been spared and cherished in the Land as a unique and precious asset thus far – the “[Sherele](#)”, a square dance, is currently danced as a wedding dance in many communities. On the other hand, the influence of Yemenite dance on our dances is increasing. Many of their own dance steps, body movements, and handholds have made their way into our dances and determine their style.

The picture is very diverse and rich, and perhaps too much so, if we compare ourselves with other peoples with a typical development of tradition. We create and offer a large number and variety of dances out of hope and recognition that the people and history will filter everything: the unsuitable will be forgotten on its own, and the suitable will be preserved as a national treasure. This is how a tradition will be formed. Within a generation or two no one will know our doubts and concerns about our style, as it will be a living and existing fact. We are the generation of the beginning and the transition, with all the joy of searching and creating and all the suffering due to the doubts and impatience that this entails. So, it is in all genres of art and life, and so it is in dance as well.

In two related genres we are still undecided more than in dance: in the areas of music and costume.

Every nation possesses its national musical instruments, every village in the world its orchestra – we have neither one nor the other. We take from what is



*Couple dance
"Har Vekar",
by Zeev Chavatzelet*



Opening dance sessions on the sports field at the Karmiel Festival

available to us: here an accordion, there a Neapolitan orchestra, here a piano (which is not a folk instrument at all), there a symphony orchestra in miniature – to accompany folk dances.

Our dance melodies, most of which are songs with lyrics, are also, like the dances, highly diverse: some are European, some are Mizrahi, and in some of them – which are few in number and very dear to us – we feel the new Israeli tone. (Shall we call it a Semitic tone?). How exactly the dances should be accompanied, how these melodies should be performed – no one knows. The laws of European harmony in many cases are clearly not appropriate, but it is not clear what should replace them.

What kind of instrumental ensemble do we need? How can we acclimate the hearing of the musicians to playing together in joint improvisation, as rural orchestras throughout the world do, among the Blacks and among the Russians, the Indians and the Scots? Should they learn notes and receive printed material instead of accompanying themselves by improvising based on musical feeling and rhythmic harmony? Perhaps we should think about creating our own special new instruments and instrumental ensembles, which will suit our melodies, our kibbutzim, our dances? Regarding all these problems we are still at the beginning.

Even concerning the question of holiday clothes and dance clothes for the village, we are at the beginning. And here, in our efforts to create our own special style, we clash with a huge and powerful global force: fashion. Can we compete with the attraction of the "ideals" from Hollywood, of the concepts of beauty in magazines? We should not force people to wear clothes according to our calculated sketches, according to the stylistic suggestions of a group of artists or researchers. The suggestions must please everyone in order to become a tradition. The very question: what the style of our dance clothes should be remains unresolved.

It is desirable that it contain both contours from the Bible and modern contours. And to find this harmony with regard to men's clothing is even more difficult than with regard to women's clothing.



There is no lack of problems, but the question of all questions, the existence of our folk dance, has already been decided in the affirmative. And if we think about the short period of development so far, a period of five years – we must admit that we are now facing one of the wonders in the chain of wonders that marks the revival of the People of Israel in their land.