Dance and Judaism

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What’s Jewish about Dance?

Dance has been used to express joy, festivity, and celebration since the days of Moses, and is still used for Jewish religious events, weddings, and to simply portray emotion today.

Dance can help the Jewish people connect to each other and their past through the ritual dances and celebrating together.

Dance is a form of communication and community building - an expressive art form.
Dance in the Bible

In the Bible, Mishnah, and Talmud, dance is referred to in various contexts as an important ritualized activity and as an expression of joy.

Dancing is mentioned in connection with celebrations of military victories and in rituals such as the golden calf dance and the bringing of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem.
Verbs mentioned in religious text in relation to dance:

Sahek (שחק) - “ordinary sense of the word dance”
karker (כרך) - “but also rotated with all his might”
pazez (פצז) - “jumped”
rakad (רקד) - “skipped”
daleg (דלת) - “leap or jump”
kafotz (קפץ) - “jump with both feet”
Savav (סבב) - “go around”
paseʾah (פסח) - “skip”
ẓalaʾ (צלע) - “limp”
ḥagag (חג) - “dance in circle”
Victory Dances

After the triumphant crossing of the Red Sea, "Miriam, the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances" (Ex. 15:20, 21).

When David and Saul returned from the battle with the Philistines, "the women came out of all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with timbrels, with joy, and with rattles" (I Sam. 18:6).
Victory Dances (cont’d)

There is a detailed description of a victory parade, where Judith leads the women in the dance, to the accompaniment of a special thanksgiving song: "And all the women of Israel hurried to see her, and they praised her and made a dance for her… And she went out in the dance before all the people, leading all the women" (Judith 15:12, 13).

On his triumphant return from battle to Mizpah, Jephthah was greeted by his daughter with timbrels and dancing (Judg. 11:34).
Ecstatic Dances

King David dancing before the Ark of the Covenant

Luigi Ademollo 1764-1849
King David brings the Ark into Jerusalem
1816
Fresco
Room of the Ark, Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti, Florence

Adriaen van Stalbemt 1580-1622 King David dancing before the Ark of the Covenant

David Danced Before The Lord With All His Might - James Tissot
Life Cycle Dance

Birth and circumcision

Weddings

In 1905, Ukrainian village of Anatevka, a typical shtetl in the Pale of Settlement of Imperial Russia
Life Cycle Dances - Birth

In many Eastern communities, the mother and newborn son were the center of special events. According to popular belief the demons – headed by *Lilith – are jealous of those blessed with a son who would soon fulfill the mitzvah of the circumcision; they are increasingly dangerous as the circumcision approaches.

In Morocco, Jews would perform the taḥdid ceremony. The term is apparently derived from the word ḥadid, which means iron, so named in reference to the sword used the night before the circumcision to banish the evil spirits. The sword is brandished in all corners of the house and around the beds of the mother and child, while a selection of biblical verses and appropriate psalms are chanted.

In Persia, the father would engage professional dancers for the night before the ceremony.
Life Cycle Dances - Birth

Among the Sephardi Jews of North Africa, the Tray of Elijah, used in the circumcision rite, would be carried in procession with song and dance and lighted candles, from its last place of use to the home of the newborn.

In Syria and Lebanon, on arrival of the tray, seven guests would be called on to dance with the tray in turn.

In Kurdistan, the Chair of Elijah would be brought in procession from the synagogue and the guests would circle it with dances.

In Aden, the guests would take turns to dance with the Chair of Elijah as if dancing with the prophet Elijah himself.
Dancing in honor of the bride gave rise to the *Mitzvah* dances.

A 16\(^{th}\)-century source published in Venice described the *Mitzvah* dance as a form of group dance in which the men danced with the bridegroom, and the women with the bride. This conformed to the prevalent practice and the restrictions against mixed dancing in Jewish communities. Later publications describe a modified *Mitzvah* dance. Men took turns to dance with the bride after wrapping something around the hand as a symbol of separation (J.M. Epstein, *Derekh ha-Yashar*, Frankfurt, 1704). By the beginning of the 19\(^{th}\) century it became the practice for men to dance with the bride while separated by a handkerchief held at opposite ends.
Other dances performed at weddings in East European communities were *Koilich Tanz*, a dance of salutation to the bride and bridegroom performed by a woman holding a twisted white loaf and some salt to wish them abundance; *Klapper Tanz*, a dance with much handclapping; *Redl, Frailachs, Karahod, Hopke*, vigorous circle dances done by men; *Besem Tanz*, a man dancing with a broom used as horse or musket; *Flash [Bottle] Tanz*, dance with a bottle on the head; *Bobes Tanz* for the grandmothers; *Mechutanem Tanz* for the relatives of both families; *Broyges Tanz*, a man and a woman portraying quarrel and reconciliation; *Sher, Sherele, Quadrille*, dances based on square and longways dances performed with partners; *Lancelot, Kutzatsky, Bulgar, Pas d'Espagne, Vingerka, Waltz*, forms of popular Russian, Polish, and Romanian dances.

At hasidic weddings, an old practice was often revived of dancing in peasant costumes, animal skins, or even Cossack uniforms. Groups of young girls would also dance toward the seated bride from three directions singing *Keitzad merakkedim lifnei ha-kallah* ("How we dance before the bride")
Life Cycle Dances - Weddings

Groups of professional women musicians called tañaderas (drummers) in the Balkan Sephardi communities, mughniiyat in Yemen, mutribat in Kurdistan (poet-singers), and daqqaqat (drummers) in Iraq, conducted the ceremonies and sang to the accompaniment of drums, amusing the women and making them dance.

In Morocco, a small ensemble of male instrumentalists and a singer accompany the spontaneous dancing of women relatives and guests, performing individually gestures which call to mind the belly dance: the head tilted sideways and a kerchief in each hand.

In Yemen, it was considered an honor for the women guests to dance with the mazhera, a bowl containing the henna dye with which the bride's hands were painted.
Israeli Dance

Pioneers of the new state created folk dances because of the desire to have a local art form.

The pieces emphasized a Zionist ideal of returning to the land of old, of reviving the spirit of the days of the Bible, and of deepening love for the country.
Israeli Dance (cont’d)

To celebrate the success of the seasons, the kibbutzim re-created agricultural festivals from biblical times. As a result, new songs and dances were created as part of the pageants. Both the indigenous local population of Druze and Arabs and the influx of various Jewish ethnic groups, including Yemenites, Kurds, and Moroccans, influenced new dances.

In 1944 a dance festival held at Kibbutz Daliyyah, under the leadership of Gurit Kadman, provided an opportunity for dancers to meet and teach each other dances either brought from elsewhere or locally created. This event, at which there were two hundred dancers and 3500 spectators, is considered the start of the folk dance movement in Israel.
Gurit Kadman- "For people who fervently wished to have dances of our own in our lifetime, there was no choice than to break with the traditional view that folk dance takes generations to create."
Modern Dance: Anna Sokolow

Anna Sokolow was born on February 9, 1910, in Hartford, CT

Explored themes of exile and suffering in her dance

Kaddish - 1945: choreographed just as the Holocaust ended, drew upon traditional Jewish elements to express her intense pain and sorrow. Beating her breast and invoking tefillin by wrapping a leather strap around her arm, Sokolow created a heartwrenching manifestation of mourning.

*Dreams*, premiered in 1961, was the first serious dance exploration of the Holocaust.
Anna Sokolow - Cont’d

She didn’t solely mourn for lost culture

Many of her pieces explored the Jewish people's strength and courage in the face of great adversity; others commented upon Jewish religious and social traditions.

Sokolow based a number of works specifically on Jewish female figures, from the Biblical Ruth, Miriam, and Deborah to the modern Hannah Senesh and Golda Meir.

1943 *Songs of a Semite*, named after a book of poems by Emma Lazarus, presented a lonely Jewish woman who gained strength from remembering the courage of several Biblical women.
Dance in the Diaspora

Prior to the establishment of the State of Israel, the Jewish community in North America experienced an awakening of pride and interest in the culture of Erez Israel.

1948, the National Jewish Welfare Board published Jewish Folk Dance Book which contained dances created in Israel, e.g., Harmonica and Rikud Hazugot, dances brought to Israel, e.g., New Horah, and those created in the United States, e.g., Patch Dance.

Today, Israeli folk dance enjoys a wider popularity than ever, with programs on every continent and for every age group

Beyond its recreational value, the direct emotional bond resulting from participation in this culturally based activity is a powerful tool for instilling long-term commitment to and respect for Judaism and Israel
Videos!