Judaism on dances

“Dancing is a means to express happiness and joy and it is part of the Jewish tradition and culture. Traditional Jewish dances were incorporated into prayer services, praise services and worship. The ethnicity of the Jews is revealed in their traditional dances. Dancing has been one of the favorite pastimes of the Jews for ages.”

The girls will get into four groups, read the different kinds of dancing, and create their own dance based on their reading:

**VICTORY DANCES**

Dancing to the accompaniment of drums is associated with the celebrations of military victories and welcoming home heroes who have routed an enemy. The women's role was to receive and extol the fighters. 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). On his triumphant return from battle to Mizpah, Jephthah was greeted by his daughter with timbrels and dancing (Judg. 11:34). 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). 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).

**ECSTATIC DANCES**

The most telling biblical evidence of the power of music inspiring ecstasy and prophetic vision is connected with King Saul. A passage from Samuel tells that Saul goes to the hill of God where he meets a group prophesizing while in motion, accompanied by several instruments. The text adds: "And the spirit of the Lord will come mightily upon thee, and thou shalt prophecy with them, and shalt be turned into another man" (I Sam. 10:5–6). There is no mention of dancing, which typically accompanies ecstatic practices, but the movement that is an inherent part of the situation described may well allude to its ritual nature.

David's dance before the Ark was an example of the religious ecstatic dance performed by men. The Psalms exhorted people to "praise God's name in the dance" – "praise Him with timbrels and dance" (Ps. 149:3; 150:4).

**FOLK DANCES**

Detailed descriptions have been handed down to us from the period of the Mishnah, from which we learn that there was folk dancing at religious celebrations. During the festival of Tabernacles, there was a daily procession around the altar in the Temple following the sacrifices. The celebrations reached a climax in the dances of the water-drawing festival: "Whoever has not witnessed the joy of the festival of the water-drawing has seen no joy in life. Pious men and men of affairs danced with torches in their hands, singing songs of joy and of praise, and the Levites made music with lyre and harp and cymbals and trumpets and countless other instruments" (Suk. 5:1b). During this celebration, R. Simeon b. Gamliel juggled eight lighted torches, and when he prostrated himself he dug his two thumbs into the ground, bent, kissed the ground, leaped up, and stood on his feet (Suk. 5:3a).

The Book of Judges (21:21), in describing the annual feast in Shiloh tells of the bride-choosing ceremonies. The story of the capture of brides by the surviving men of the tribe of Benjamin indicates that choosing brides during the vineyard dances was a recognized practice in Israel. Others believe it was the celebration of the vines on the Fifteenth of Av. According to the Mishnah, R. Simeon b. Gamaliel declared, "There were no holidays for Israel like the fifteenth of Av and the Day of Atonement, on which the daughters of Jerusalem went out in white dresses which were borrowed so that no one need be ashamed if she had none. And the daughters of Jerusalem went forth and danced in a circle in the vineyards. And what spake they? 'Youth, lift up thine eyes and behold her whom thou wouldst choose'" (Ta'an. 4:8).

In the Song of Songs (7:1), one finds the rather obscure mention of "the dance of the two companies," which seems to have been taken from a traditional wedding dance, and may imply two groups of dancers, a type of dancing that can still be seen at Bedouin festivities in the Middle East. In Talmudic literature (Ket. 17a) the bridal procession was regarded with great deference and was given priority on public thoroughfares requiring even a funeral procession to make way. Dancing in honor of the bride at a wedding was considered an act of religious devotion. Rabbis and scholars performed it joyously, each in his own manner. R. Judah b. Ilai would take a myrtle twig and dance before the bride singing. R. Samuel b. Isaac, even when he was old, would juggle three myrtle twigs as he sang and danced. R. Aḥa danced with the bride on his shoulder (*ibid.*).

**HASIDIC DANCES**

With the rise of \*Hasidism in Eastern Europe in the 18th century, dance assumed great importance for the Jewish masses. \*Israel b. Eliezer Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, used dance to attain religious enthusiasm (*hitlahavut*) and devoted adherence to the Almighty (*devekut*). He taught his followers that "the dances of the Jew before his Creator are prayers," and quoted the Psalmist, "All my bones shall say: 'Lord, who is like unto Thee?'" (Ps. 35:10). Ḥasidic dance assumed the form of the circle, symbolic of the ḥasidic philosophy that "every one is equal, each one being a link in the chain, the circle having no front or rear, no beginning or ending." The Ḥasidim would start their dancing in slow tempo, and as the music became faster they held arms upward and leapt in the air in an effort to reach spiritual ecstasy. The accompanying melodies were composed to brief texts from either the Bible or the Talmud. \*Naḥman of Bratzlav, great-grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov, believed that to dance in prayer was a sacred command, and he composed a prayer which he recited before dancing. He and other ḥasidic rabbis called for dancing on all festive occasions and even on the solemn days of the Ninth of Av, Rosh Ha-Shanah, and the Day of Atonement. During the celebrations on Simḥat Torah, the usual processions with the scrolls reached a climax in the rabbi's own dance. Wrapped in a prayer shawl, with a scroll held high in his hands, the rabbi danced with spiritual ecstasy as the Ḥasidim sang and clapped hands in a circle around him. The Ḥasidim danced on Friday nights around the rabbi's banquet table, and at twilight on Saturday they danced with mystic fervor. Ḥasidic dancing has influenced the celebrations at Jewish festivals generally, and has served as the basis and inspiration of choreography on Jewish themes in ballet.