

Some Notes on Traditional Scriptural Reading Hand Movements as a Source to the Dance of the Yemenite Jews

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Every Jewish male child in every traditional home learns from early childhood to read the Bible with the cantillation accents (*te'amim*). These *te'amim* have three distinctive functions:

1. To mark the correct accent of each word or phrase;
2. To make clear the syntactical logic and thus the real meaning of every sentence;
3. To represent the melodic patterns of the cantillation and assist the reader in singing the text.

Of these three functions the second is undoubtedly the most important and the most significant.

The traditional manner of reading the scriptures is studied and practiced in the *Heder* (religious school for children) with the Rabbi (*Mori*, as he is called by the Yemenite Jews) or at home with the father, or grandfather or other grown-up relative. Often it is done both in the *Heder* and at home. In certain Jewish communities, as in the Yemenite one, movements of the teacher's right hand, mainly the fingers, palm and forearm, aid this process of study.

These manual movements are a kind of stimulus to the pupil but serve mainly as a mnemotechnical device.

Two forms of the scriptural text are in use:

1. That on the scroll in the synagogue, which is hand-written with neither punctuation marks nor accents, a bare text consisting of unpointed letters only;
2. That in the book used for learning, where the bare text is reproduced from the scroll and beside it the full pointed and accented text is added.

While learning, the child watches the hand movements of his teacher, each of which becomes associated in his mind with a particular accent in the text. When he comes to

read the unpointed text of the scroll in the synagogue, the hand movements of the reading guide will remind him of the correct way of phrasing and chanting the text.

The Biblical accents are divided into two main groups: disjunctive and conjunctive. The disjunctive are subdivided into strong, **final** accents and weak, **pausal** ones. The hand movements are likewise divided into groups:

1. Decisive and strong, with pressure of the finger on the text page, for the final disjunctives (*sof pasuq* = full stop, and *etnah* = comma);
2. Open with hand withdrawn, for the **pausal** disjunctives;
3. Continuous, flowing, urging forward, for the conjunctives.

The child sees the movements of his teacher and imitates them while reading the scriptural text. This he practices for several hours each day over several years and naturally the movements become an integral part of his body language, spreading later into other areas in his life for other purposes: into the recitation of prayers, the singing of *piyyutim* (sung poetry) at home, and the dances that accompany them.

The body movements of these dances spread therefore from the finger, the palm and the forearm, into the upper arm, the shoulders, the head and the whole upper body.

The Yemenite Jew uses his hands abundantly in illustrating his everyday speech; in this rich gesticulation there are many elements derived from the scriptural reading movements.

We cannot say which of the two came first, natural gesticulation or movement associated with reading of the scriptures, and we shall probably never know, but both are part of a very characteristic movement vocabulary, unique among the Yemenite Jews.

This movement vocabulary becomes part of the body language; indeed it is part and parcel of the spiritual world of the Yemenite Jew. The personal vocabulary becomes a communal vocabulary, preserving personal features of the teacher and the pupil, but at the same time they have a common basis, which is much wider than the personal variants.

When singing from the *Diwan* (paraliturgical book of devotional poems), the Yemenite men accompany their singing with spontaneous hand movements related to the contents of the poem as well as to its poetical and musical meter, adding hand-clapping and clicking of the fingers in a free but stylized way.

The dancing of the male Yemenite Jews is based exclusively on the singing of the *Shira* part of the *Diwan* poems, which is the central musical event at any social or ceremonial gathering (*shira* = literally "singing"). The texts, written in the Middle-Ages and later, were copied by hand while the music and the dance were transmitted orally from father to son. Hence, the dance is linked with the poem and the written text is the basis of all body movement.

Since movement is so closely connected with text in the performance of the *Diwan*, it is logical to assume that those same movements have their source in the manual signs that are used as mnemotechnical aids in the reading of the scriptures.

A characteristic feature of the Yemenite male dance is the equilibrium set up between certain constant elements and improvised body movements. The dance has a more-or-less fixed structure based on the poetic-musical form, but the dancers respond to the singers and vice versa, so that every performance is unique and unrepeatable. The unchanging aspect of the dance is found mainly in the steps and movements of the legs and feet. A good dancer has to know these fixed formulae well and must be able to manipulate them, creating different forms space. The dancer adds to these basic formulae the spontaneous improvisation of the upper body, head, arms and hands. In this way the dancer makes his personal creative contribution to the dance and this is something that his audience looks forward to.

In conclusion we may also note that this vocabulary of dance movements is becoming integrated into contemporary dance, as can be seen in some pieces of the repertoire of the **Inbal** Dance Theater, especially those created by Sara Levi-Tanai or in some newly created Israeli dances of a folk character and even in some dances performed by modern dance groups. In addition, these movements are used also as a basis for creative work in choreographic workshop and in seminars for teachers of dance movement. In such workshops possibilities are opened up for experimentation with dance movement vocabularies from many sources. Thus the hand movements used by the Yemenites when reading the scriptures do not only constitute the basis of their own dances, but may well be a fruitful and inspiring source for the development of new techniques and forms of expression in the world of dance.