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"Dancers of the Book: Yemenite, Persian, and Kurdish Jewish Dance"

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Introduction

Jewish dance is as old as Judaism itself. Judaism originated in the Middle East. Despite these facts, there is an unfortunate lack of scholarly research on Jewish dance in the Middle East outside of the modern nation-state of Israel. In this paper, I will explore the dance traditions and histories of three different Jewish groups in the Middle East: Yemenite, Persian/Iranian, and Kurdish Jewish dance. This paper will explore the dance of these groups on multiple dimensions, including their history, their characteristics, the contexts in which they occur, how they compare to each other, how they have influenced contemporary dance, and the relation of the dancers (both historical and current) to the broader societies in which they live.

However, this paper does not attempt to be comprehensive or present information that is directly parallel in each section but rather gives a faithful depiction of the dance traditions and histories of each of these groups based on the available information. As such, different information will be focused on in each group. While Yemenite Jewish dance will be discussed in its influence on Israeli concert dance, for example, there is no such influence from Iranian Jewish dance, which has far more sources focusing on Jewish dance in older historical contexts.

Notably, the title of this paper, "Dancers of the Book: Yemenite, Persian, and Kurdish Jewish Dance," refers to the term "People of the Book." This term is used in both Muslim and Jewish contexts (and, more recently, by some Christians to refer to themselves), and it is relevant in both cases. In its use by Jews, People of the Book refers to Jews.[1] In Islam, People of the Book refers to Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Sabians.

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[1] David Lyle Jeffrey, *People of the Book: Christian Identity and Literary Culture* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996).

In Islamic religious law and within most countries of the Middle East, People of the Book are considered protected minorities, with the legal right to religious practice in exchange for paying a tax called *jizya*.[2]

With these circumstances in mind, the play on this phrase is appropriate to the themes of this paper because it can represent Jewish identity more generally, as well as a more conceptual interpretation of this phrase as relating to the dubious status shared by Jews in majority Muslim countries, Mizrahi Jews in Israel, and dancers more generally in the Middle East. As I will show in this paper, Yemenite, Persian, and Kurdish Jews have had important roles in the dance of their broader societies but have been marginalized in these societies at the same time.

Yemenite Jewish Dance

Yemenite traditional dance is a rich cultural tradition that is done not for its own sake but as a part of cultural custom[3] and religious obligation.[4,5] Yemenite Jewish dance is also a vital part of celebrations for both holidays and life events.[6] While the Yemenite Jews share basic dance styles, in Yemen, the dance steps vary regionally, so each town and village may dance slightly differently.[7]
In Israel, these dance variations converged through the generations into a single broadened repertoire of dance steps due to regional identities becoming less relevant to Yemenite Jews living in Israel.[8]

Regardless of region, religious influence can be seen even in the hand movements employed by Yemenite Jewish dancers. When Yemenite Jewish

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[2] John L. Esposito, *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2004).
[3] Asher Tlalim, Teiman: The Music of the Yemenite Jews (Israel: Tel Ad Production Company, 1992), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YzpuQjU0F6Q.
[4] Nina S. Spiegel, "Mapping a Mizrahi Presence in Israeli Concert Dance: Representations and Receptions of Yemenite Jewish Life on Stage from 1920 to the Present," in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewishness and Dance*, ed. Naomi Jackson, Rebecca Pappas, and Toni Shapiro-Phim (Oxford University Press, 2022).
[5] Shalom Staub, "Repertoire, Values, and Social Meaning in the Wedding Dances of a Yemenite Jewish Village in Israel," *Dance Research Journal* 17/18 (1985): 59–63, https://doi.org/10.2307/1478082.
[6] Spiegel, "Mapping a Mizrahi Presence in Israeli Concert Dance."
[7] Tlalim, Teiman: The Music of the Yemenite Jews.
[8] Staub, "Repertoire, Values, and Social Meaning."

children watch their teachers read scriptural texts, they absorb the hand movements of their teachers into a distinctive "movement vocabulary," which is incorporated into the hand movements of their dance.[9]

In traditional Yemenite Jewish dance, these hand movements are particularly prevalent in the men's dance, which is distinct from the women's.[10] Yemenite Jewish men dance to the singing of the Diwan, a collection of Jewish liturgical poems and percussion. This custom of dancing to percussion and singing may have come from the banning of playing musical instruments during the mourning of the destruction of the second temple.[11] The words of the Diwan are incredibly important in the dance of Jewish Yemenite men, and it influences all of the movements performed by the dancers; while the footwork consists of mostly fixed steps, dancers improvise using the arms, hands, upper body, and head.[12] This has been described as "ecstatic but at the same time introverted."[13]

During this ecstatic but introverted dance, the singer and dancer work with and respond to each other. While the dancers express the singing in their movements, the singer will change up the melody or rhythm when "the atmosphere becomes charged."[14] The more this happens, the more successful the event is considered to be. The singer will never slow down the tempo. Instead, the dancing progresses through three sections (*daᶜaseh*, *darjeh*, and *saraᶜ*) that get faster and longer.[15]

On the other hand, traditional Yemenite Jewish women's dances are more fixed, being described as "one movement pattern repeating without change for the duration of a song."[16] Their dance is slow and delicate. Instead of the movement

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[9] Noémi Bahat and Avner Bahat, "Some Notes on Traditional Scriptural Reading Hand Movements as a Source to the Dance of the Yemenite Jews," *The World of Music* 23, no. 1 (1981): 20–25, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43562605.
[10] Spiegel, "Mapping a Mizrahi Presence in Israeli Concert Dance."
[11] Tlalim, Teiman: The Music of the Yemenite Jews.
[12] Bahat and Bahat, "Some Notes on Traditional Scriptural Reading Hand Movements as a Source to the Dance of the Yemenite Jews."
[13] Giora Manor, "Extending the Traditional Wedding Dance: 'Inbal's Yemenite Wedding' and the Beggars' Dance in Habimah's 'The Dybbuk,'" *Dance Research Journal* 17/18 (1985): 71–75, https://doi.org/10.2307/1478084.
[14] Tlalim, Teiman: The Music of the Yemenite Jews.
[15] Staub, "Repertoire, Values, and Social Meaning."
[16] Ibid.

improvisation present in the men's dances, the women improvise in their songs. Rather than dancing to the singing of the Diwan, Yemenite Jewish women often improvise their lyrics. The most common dance formations are circular, processions, or lines of two or three dancers.[17]

In an effort to investigate Yemenite Jewish dance further, Shalom Staub conducted research in a Yemenite village in Israel and discovered some interesting distinctions between what different groups of people valued in dancers. More traditional (often older men) valued a sense of religious obligation, the ability to match their partner, and *'adinut*, which Staub defines as "modesty, refinement, elegance, propriety, and stately decorum."[18]

In contrast, the less traditional, often younger, men valued dancers who were quick, light on their feet, danced with their entire body, had a large repertoire of dance steps, and had the quality of *histolalut*, which Staub defines as "fooling around, boisterousness."[19] All of the men valued stamina and the ability to understand the songs they were dancing to.

In contrast, the most important thing valued by women was the ability to sing, as Yemenite Jewish women are not considered good dancers if they cannot sing.[20] They also valued the ability to follow the drumming and *'adinut*. The more traditional women valued dancers who could dance more traditional dances, and the less traditional women had similar values as the less traditional men. Youth-valued dancers who were physically uninhibited could dance using their whole body and had a large movement repertoire.[21]

More specifically, in Yemenite Jewish weddings, dancing plays a key role, but there appears to be a difference in values held towards dancing as a part of a ceremony or for religious purposes and dancing to entertain others. Yemenite Jewish weddings traditionally have many days of various events and ceremonies. One of these, the henna ceremony, includes a dancing custom where (usually) the oldest female relative will balance the bowl of henna on her head while dancing

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[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.

and singing, and the other women dance around her in a circular formation.[22] During the actual wedding, the guests and couple do not typically all dance together as is common in weddings from many other cultures, but they will instead hire Yemenite dancers to entertain the couple and their guests.[23] Manor describes the attitudes towards these dancers as "ambivalent" as their dancing is seen as both necessary and dishonorable.

These mixed attitudes towards Yemenite Jewish performers are echoed in literature elsewhere as well. In Israel, particularly in the realm of concert dance, the attitude towards Yemenite Jewish dancers, in general, is often ambivalent, with their art both belittled and held up as a representation of "authentic" Judaism.[24] According to Spiegel, Yemenite Jewish dance is "soft and delicate, more confined, airier, 'Eastern,' and represents what has been perceived as feminine traits," which made it opposed to "dominant secular motifs in Zionist-socialism" and contributed to its marginalization in Israeli concert dance.[25]

Nevertheless, it has heavily influenced the development of Israeli folk dance (due to the perception of Yemenite dance as more authentic) as well as concert dance, with notable dancers and choreographers influenced by Yemenite Jewish life and dance, including Baruch Agadati, Rina Nikova, Rachel Nadav, Sara Levi Tanai, Margalit Oved, and Barak Marshall.[26] According to Spiegel, these choreographers draw many influences from traditional Yemenite dance, including Biblical themes, undulating qualities, hand gestures, foot movements, head placement, bent knees, rhythms, and the use of singing.

Sara Levi Tanai was one of the most influential of these choreographers and founded the Inbal Dance Company in an effort to connect to her Yemenite roots, which she didn't discover until she was an adult.[27] She incorporated many

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[22] Ibid.
[23] Manor, "Extending the Traditional Wedding Dance."
[24] Spiegel, "Mapping a Mizrahi Presence in Israeli Concert Dance."
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.

of the influences listed earlier in her dances but added her touch on things as well, such as the use of spins and men and women dancing together.[28]

She also incorporated many narrative elements and took a lot of inspiration from the daily life of Yemenite Jews, especially women.[29] These qualities can be observed in her *Yemenite Wedding* (1954), where she not only presented the dances that would take place at a Yemenite wedding but treated the full wedding process as a narrative and presented it all through dance, including parts of the wedding which usually would not be danced.[30]

Despite Sara Levi Tanai's work and the work of other Yemenite-influenced concert dance choreographers being firmly in the realm of concert dance, they still had to deal with their work being viewed as not truly in the realm of high art and labeled with terms such as "ethnic," "folklore," or "heritage" due to their Yemenite influences.[31] While many of these choreographers worked to fight against these labels being applied to their art, Barak Marshall, for example, embraced the term "ethnic" as a positive descriptor for his work.[32]

Persian and Iranian Jewish Dance

There are an estimated 10 to 20 thousand Jews in Iran, and Jews have lived there since 6th-century B.C.E when King Cyrus released the Jews in Babylonia from captivity.[33] The Jewish population in Iran has declined quite a bit from its previous numbers since the Iranian Revolution due to migration out of Iran, but despite this, Iran has the largest Jewish population in the Middle East after Israel.[34]

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[28] israelchanel, *Inbal Dance Theatre of Israel - Yemenite Dance (Israel, 1967)*, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0uBUikht5Q.
[29] Spiegel, "Mapping a Mizrahi Presence in Israeli Concert Dance."
[30] Manor, "Extending the Traditional Wedding Dance."
[31] Spiegel, "Mapping a Mizrahi Presence in Israeli Concert Dance."
[32] Ibid.
[33] Reza Sayah, "Life in an Iranian-Jewish Community," CNN, September 30, 2013, https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2013/09/30/pkg-sayah-iran-jewish-community.cnn.
[34] Hassan Sarbakhshian, Lior B. Sternfeld, and Parvaneh Vahidmanesh, *Jews of Iran: A Photographic Chronicle* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2022).

While there is often an image in the West of Jewish people being "trapped" in Iran, thousands of Jews intentionally decide to remain in Iran despite current and historical persecution.[35] While various political narratives have been spun surrounding the Jewish community in Iran as a result of the tensions between Iran and Israel, the lives of Jewish Iranians are more complex than Westerners often realize.[36]

Interestingly, even though there has been significant Jewish migration out of Iran, many of these Jews went to the United States rather than Israel, so there is little information about the dance of Iranian Jews in Israel.[37] There is also, strangely, very little information about Jewish Iranian dance in Los Angeles, despite there being a very large Jewish Iranian presence in the city, sometimes referred to as "Tehrangeles" because of the large Iranian population there.[38] Due to this unfortunate dearth of information on Iranian Jewish contemporary dance, many of the sources that have been found for this paper are historical in nature but often reveal how integrated (though often stigmatized) Jewish dancers have been in Iranian history. In many ways, "Persian Jewish dance" has often been synonymous with "Persian dance" more generally.

It should be noted that while the use of the terms "Persian" and "Iranian" may seem to be synonymous in their use here, they are two distinct categories. Iran is a diverse country full of many different ethnic groups, with Persian being the largest group.[39] Therefore, "Iranian" is a national identity, and "Persian" is an ethnic identity. Historically, however, the region was widely referred to as "Persia" in a way that was not ethnicity-specific.[40] Therefore, at times I use the terms "Persia" or "Persian" to refer to the historical regions that may or may not

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[35] Sarbakhshian, Sternfeld, and Vahidmanesh, *Jews of Iran: A Photographic Chronicle*.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Sayah, "Life in an Iranian-Jewish Community."
[38] Lior Sternfeld, "Iranian Jewish Los Angeles," 100 Years of Sephardic Los Angeles, 2023, https://sephardiclosangeles.org/portfolios/iranian-jewish-los-angeles/.
[39] Elton L. Daniel and Ali Akbar Mahdi, *Culture and Customs of Iran*, Culture and Customs of the Middle East (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2006).
[40] T.G. Baum and K.D. O'Gorman, "Iran or Persia: Whatís in a Name, the Decline and Fall of a Tourism?" (Strathclyde Business School, University of Strathclyde, 2016), https://pure.strath.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/80780792/strathprints008080.pdf.

have been located in present-day Iran but were nevertheless a part of various empires in this region.

That being said, we can learn about Jewish dance in one such empire–the Sasanian Empire–by analyzing the Babylonian Talmud. Laura S. Lieber specifically analyzes the five parts of the Babylonian Talmud that mention the slave Daru for information on dance and Jewishness in Sasanian Persia (224–651 C.E.).

Daru was the slave of Rav Nachman bar Yaakov, and he is unusual for two reasons: first, he is referred to by a name, which was very uncommon; and secondly, he is described as a dancer, specifically a "tavern dancer." The distinction of "tavern dancer" is very notable since, by looking at further liturgical work, we can deduce that it was indeed a profession, not just a description for someone who dances in taverns for fun. It was also sometimes used as an insult, revealing the stigma that these professional dancers often faced.[41]

The inclusion of tavern dancing in the Babylonian Talmud is an interesting addition because other occasions of dance in the Talmud happen for specific events, such as weddings, festival celebrations, and private feasts. They were social and communal activities that happened with free Jews. Tavern dancing is different because it is a professional activity that served as public entertainment and could have slaves involved as dancers, as we can see with the case of Daru.[42] Because of this, according to Lieber, "taverns, particularly as venues for public performance may have been a location where social boundaries became porous."[43]

As far as what this dance was like, Lieber describes that this dance likely "demanded expressivity of the entire body" and involved performers portraying multiple characters whose identities were conveyed by "a comprehensive vocabulary of body language."[44]

In larger Sasanian society, we can observe an appreciation, at least for the aesthetics of dance and dancers, through a variety of tapestries from Sasanian

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[41] Laura S. Lieber, "Daru in the Winehouse: The Intersection of Status and Dance in the Jewish East," *The Journal of Religion* 98, no. 1 (January 2018): 90–113, https://doi.org/10.1086/694658.
[42] Lieber, "Daru in the Winehouse."
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid.

Persia depicting dancers, but despite this, tavern dancers, at least, appear to have been looked down on by people.[45] This is a dichotomy that continues throughout Iranian history.

Whereas previously professional dance did not seem to be restricted or divided by religion, after the rise of Islam, multiple occupations, including music and dance, were proscribed for Muslims and became almost exclusively the domain of Jews and other religious minorities for a long time.[46] This is what informs my previous claim that "Jewish Persian dance" and "Persian dance" have often been synonymous, as while very little evidence of Jewish-specific Persian dance was found in the research for this paper, Jews have undoubtedly been a large part of a dance culture that has been very culturally important in broader Iranian society.

Despite Muslims not typically holding the occupations of musician or dancer, music accompanied by dance was considered necessary for any Iranian social event.[47] This resulted in a lot of Jewish dancers and musicians performing at these events, which further marginalized them due to negative views on their professions.

Jewish professional dancers and musicians were marginalized among the broader Jewish community for their work, with one of the reasons given for the low status of musicians being their association with dancers, "many of whom are known to be prostitutes."[48]

This association of dancers with sex work was not completely incorrect, as many "male dancers" had little choice but to rely on sex work for their income due to their low status and difficulty earning enough money to survive in Iranian society.[49] Male dancers and female dancers in Iran had difficult lives. Most of them became dancers either due to poverty, being an orphan, or because they

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[45] Ibid.
[46] Laurence D. Loeb, "The Jewish Musician and the Music of Fars," *Asian Music* 4, no. 1 (1972): 3–14, https://doi.org/10.2307/834137.
[47] Loeb, "The Jewish Musician and the Music of Fars."
[48] Ibid.
[49] Anthony Shay, "The Male Dancer in the Middle East and Central Asia," *Dance Research Journal* 38, no. 1/2 (Summer 2006): 137–62, https://www.proquest.com/docview/195925308/abstract/270A1554BFE942E9PQ/1.

came from a family of dancers, and it was the only option available to them. These families became almost caste-like because very few people wanted to marry someone who was a dancer.[50] When dancers became older, they often became musicians, formed performance troupes, and played music for younger dancers to dance to. Similar to musicians, most male dancers were Jewish, Armenian, or Georgian.[51]

In order to make a living in their difficult circumstances, it was necessary for male dancers to make every effort to be as impressive as possible, incorporating things such as acrobatic stunts, singing, percussion, acting, mime, and even balancing on knives. Iranian male dancers danced almost identically to female dancers, which, according to Shay, involved "sensual and erotic mimetic movements, graceful carriage of the arms and hands, articulations of the shoulders… [and] minute movements of the lips and eyebrows."[52] These sensual features of the dance, however, were usually meant to be comical. As many visiting Westerners were lacking in knowledge of the Persian language and culture, many of them took the performances seriously and returned to their countries and reported on them as such.[53]

Today, while there are still Iranian Jewish male dancers in some places, there is not much information about Iranian Jewish male dancers in the present day.[54] Much of the information found about contemporary Iranian Jewish dance relates to weddings. In contemporary Iranian Jewish weddings, the focus seems to be a bit less on *how* people dance but on who dances and when. An important Iranian Jewish tradition has the wedding party and closest relatives of the couple dance down the aisle before the couple walks down it.[55,56]

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[50] Shay, "The Male Dancer in the Middle East and Central Asia."
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Mona Shadia, "Shadia: How It's Done at a Jewish-Persian Wedding," Daily Pilot, February 22, 2012, https://www.latimes.com/socal/daily-pilot/opinion/tn-dpt-xpm-2012-02-22-tn-hbi-0223-shadia-20120222-story.html.
[56] Karen Cinnamon, "A Galia Lahav Bride for an Elegant and Energetic Persian Jewish Wedding at the Sheraton Universal, Los Angeles, CA, USA," *Smashing the Glass | Jewish Wedding Blog* (blog), May 24, 2019,

In everyday life, affluent Jewish youth in Tehran have many options of places to go dance for fun.[57] As just one example provided by Dallalfar in her article titled "Negotiated Allegiances: Contemporary Iranian Jewish Identities," on Shab-e Yalda, a traditional Iranian Winter Solstice celebration, a Jewish function hall hosted a dancing party specifically geared towards youth and secular Jews.[58] This may provide a window into what current dancing opportunities for Iranian Jews look like.

Kurdish Jewish Dance

The Kurdish people are ethnically related to the Iranian people, with their own distinct culture. Traditionally, they have been rural, tribal, sometimes nomadic or semi-nomadic, and spread out across Armenia, Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. They have been described as "a nation without a state" and are thus marginalized everywhere they go, including in Israel, where they have been unfairly stereotyped as primitive and unintelligent.[59]

Interestingly, Kurdish Jewish dance is unusual in the realm of traditional Jewish dance, as there is not a gendered distinction in Kurdish dance, and men and women dance together.[60] According to Goren-Kadman, Kurdish Jewish dance is often done in circles or open circles, the leading dancer may wave a scarf, and the dance could last for multiple hours. Like the Yemenite Jews, Kurdish Jewish dance also had regional variations that converged in Israel, but Kurdish Jewish dance has not changed much over time overall.[61]

Kurdish Jewish dance has two main categories: dances where the feet stay on the ground and the tempo is slow, and dances with shallow steps, lifting of

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https://www.smashingtheglass.com/a-galia-lahav-bride-for-an-elegant-and-energetic-persian-jewish-wedding-at-the-sheraton-universal-los-angeles-ca-usa/.

[57] Arlene Dallalfar, "Negotiated Allegiances: Contemporary Iranian Jewish Identities," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 30, no. 2 (2010): 272–96, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/393919.

[58] Dallalfar, "Negotiated Allegiances."

[59] Ayalah Goren-Kadman, "Feet on the Ground: Experiencing Kurdish Jews Through Their Dance," in *Seeing Israeli and Jewish Dance*, ed. Judith Brin Ingber, Raphael Patai Series in Jewish Folklore and Anthropology (Wayne State University Press, 2011), 171–82.

[60] Goren-Kadman, "Feet on the Ground."

[61] Ibid.

legs, and a fast tempo. Kurdish Jewish dance also frequently employs changes in direction. Goren-Kadman describes Kurdish Jewish dance movement as a "heavy, downward style with a wide stance of the legs, dancing on the whole foot and the torso moving as one unit, bending slightly forward."[62] Various Kurdish Jewish dances include *Wask Halafé*, *Sindiani*, *Haidoth Mammw*, *Arabka*, *Debka Adlai*, *Mirani*, and *Hurissa*.[63]

Similar to Yemenite Jewish weddings, Kurdish Jewish weddings also include a henna ceremony involving dancing.[64] In the Kurdish Jewish tradition, this is not gender-specific, and during the procession from the homes of the families of the couple, the guests carry the henna bowl and dance. When the henna is applied, the dancing and singing reach their climax.[65]

Another special occasion involving dance for Kurdish Jews is the bar mitzvah. During the procession from the synagogue to the home of the bar mitzvah boy, guests sing, dance, and play the zurna and dolma.[66]

As mentioned earlier, Kurdish Jews have had a bit of a difficult relationship with Israeli society due to the stigma and marginalization they have faced. Nevertheless, as immigrants to a new place, they face much the same pressure most immigrants to most places feel the pressure to assimilate. This has manifested in tension within the Kurdish Jewish community between acculturation to Israeli society and holding on to their Kurdish heritage.[67] However, the pressures of assimilation have luckily not won out over the preservation of Kurdish Jewish culture, and there have been successful efforts to not only keep Kurdish Jewish culture alive but get youth excited about it as well.

One such effort is the revival of the Seharane festival by Kurdish Jews in Israel. In Kurdistan, Seharane was celebrated on the 8th day of Passover, though it was not particularly religious in nature, and instead celebrated the coming of

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[62] Ibid.
[63] *Traditional Dances of Kurdistan Jews*, Gurit Kadman Folk Dancing Collection (Israeli Film Archive, 1954), https://jfc.org.il/news_journal/60845-2/?lang=eng.
[64] Goren-Kadman, "Feet on the Ground."
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid.

Spring.[68] There was also an element of Jewish-Muslim solidarity, as Jews and Muslims would often come together to partake in festivities together.[69]
Both in Kurdistan and in present-day Israel, dance is a prominent part of Seharane celebrations. In Kurdistan, traditional dances were performed with musicians accompanying dancers with traditional instruments: the zurne and the dula.[70]

The celebrations of Seharane were revived in Israel in 1975, with the day moved to Sukkot. This shift resulted in Seharane no longer being a celebration of Spring, but rather a celebration of ethnic identity, community, and Jewish-Israeli unity.[71] Dance remains an important part of Seharane celebrations, with circular dance formations and a blurring of the lines between performer and audience being commonplace.[72]

However, as Sharaby explains, there have been several significant changes to the dance performed during Seharane celebrations after the holiday's revival in Israel. One such change is that while Seharane was more of a holiday celebrating the arrival of Spring originally, more explicitly religious elements have since been added into the celebrations and dance, such as the practice of singing and dancing while holding Torah scrolls.[73] Additionally, since Israeli unity and community have become an important theme in Seharane celebrations, various other Jewish ethnic groups in Israel also join in on the festivities and present their traditional dances.[74] Nevertheless, there has been a significant effort to reconstruct and preserve Kurdish dance in Israel, though what is currently performed tends to be more rhythmic than it was in Kurdistan.[75]

Bringing the celebration of Seharane to Israel is not the only way that Kurdish Jewish dance has been brought into broader Israeli society. There has also been some influence of Kurdish Jewish dance on Israeli folk dance. An

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[68] Rachel Sharaby, "The Renewal of an Ethnic Tradition and Its Role in Shaping the Kurds Immigrants' Identity," *Historical Studies in Ethnicity, Migration and Diaspora* 35, no. 2 (2017): 129–47, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/02619288.2017.1335202.
[69] Sharaby, "The Renewal of an Ethnic Tradition."
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid.

important thing to note - contrary to most folk dance elsewhere – is that what is referred to as Israeli folk dance has generally been intentionally invented and choreographed.[76] Therefore, Israeli folk dances are typically attributable to a specific choreographer.

One such choreographer who created Israeli folk dances inspired by various ethnic groups in Israel is Moshiko (Moshe Itzchak-Halevy), who is of Yemenite descent.[77,78] In particular, Moshiko has choreographed numerous dances inspired by Debka dance.[79] Among the various traditional dances that have inspired Moshiko's choreography is Kurdish Jewish dance, which gave rise to his dance *Debka Kurdit*.[80] *Debka Kurdit* is a rhythmic, bouncing dance that includes lifting of the feet and back-and-forth leaning motions.[81] This dance employs the changing of directions and forward bend that Goren-Kadman identifies as being notable features of Kurdish Jewish dance.[82]

While Kurdish Jews have often faced persecution, it is clear from these examples that their dance has not only served as a way to keep their heritage and culture alive but has also influenced broader Israeli society.

Conclusion

As we have seen in this paper, Yemenite, Iranian, and Kurdish Jewish dancers have faced a myriad of challenges and stigmas throughout history and various locations. However, we have also seen how resilient these dancers and their dance have proven to be and the important impacts that they have had on broader dance traditions.

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[76] Nina S. Spiegel, *Embodying Hebrew Dance* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2013).
[77] Rammah Rikkudiah, "Moshiko Halevy," Daughter of the Arts, 2002, https://daughterofthearts.wordpress.com/2006/06/19/moshiko-halevy/.
[78] Folk Dance Federation of California, South, "Moshiko Halevy," socalfolkdance.org, accessed May 18, 2023, https://www.socalfolkdance.org/master_teachers/halevy_m.htm.
[79] Folk Dance Federation of California, South, "Moshiko Halevy."
[80] Aura Levin Lipski, "Debka Kurdit - Moshiko Halevy," israelidances.com, accessed May 18, 2023, https://www.israelidances.com/dance_details.asp?DanceID=1254.
[81] Lipski, "Debka Kurdit - Moshiko Halevy."
[82] Goren-Kadman, "Feet on the Ground: Experiencing Kurdish Jews Through Their Dance."

While Yemenite Jewish dancers in Israel have been marginalized and had their work belittled and dismissed in the concert dance arena, traditional Yemenite Jewish dance has had a significant impact on broader Israeli dance. Iranian Jewish dancers were crucial in proliferating dance in Iran, while dancing was prescribed for most of the population, despite their own marginalization for this act. Kurdish Jewish dancers in Israel have also notably influenced broader Israeli dance and demonstrated commendable resilience against pressures to assimilate to Israeli society, resist their marginalization and oppression, and maintain their cultural identity through dance.

Keeping the significance of these dancers in mind, there is an urgent need for more research into the dance of both these communities and other Middle Eastern Jewish communities outside of Israel. While there are copious amounts of fascinating Jewish dance all over the world and throughout history, it is important to keep in mind how we can work to elevate the art and culture of often-overlooked communities in the Middle East and beyond, and how we can shed light on important histories that deserve to be heard.

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