

## **Discovering and Reclaiming my Jewish Yemenite Heritage and My Yiddishkeit Soul**

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It was in Palestine under the British Mandate when I was in first, or maybe second grade, when a mother of a classmate of mine stopped to ask me a question.

“What are you Ze’eva?” she asked.

I was truly perplexed and did not know what to say.

She repeated her question a couple of times until I came up with, “I am Jewish.”

“Well,” she said, “what kind of a Jew are you?”

“What do you mean,” I asked?

“There are German Jews, Polish Jews, Russian Jews.”

I had no answer.

When I came home, I asked my mother what I was.

My mother answered, “You are Jewish.”

“What kind of a Jew?” I asked. And further elaborated, “There are German, Polish, Russian Jews.”

My mother said, “We are Yemenite Jews.”

I remember not quite liking this answer. Intuitively, I felt that it was not to my advantage and had already begun to be a burden.

My mother was born in old Tel Aviv and my father arrived in Israel from Egypt with his Yemenite mother and uncle at age 4. As soon as they married, my parents left Neve Tsedek, their families’ poor neighborhood and moved from South to North Tel Aviv, which was then the newly-built and modern neighborhood. Their goal was to join their Irgun Ashkenazi comrades in arms who resisted the British rule, and fully integrate into the secular and modern European Jewish culture. They were part of the effort to create a new reality and image for the Jew of Israel.

My apartment building had eight units where eight families lived, and while the language spoken with the children was Hebrew, among themselves, adults spoke their home languages. As children we could easily identify the sound of Polish, Hungarian, Czech and German. Yiddish was spoken only by the Vilners, the family who lived in the garden apartment and had two daughters. As a child, I always considered the Vilners to be my second home and Bluma to be my alternate mother. Their home was my refuge when my parents involved in the Irgun underground movement were absent. To me, therefore, the sound of Yiddish became the language of love, intimacy and nourishment.

This sentiment co-existed with the covert attitude of the Israeli youth of my time, who avoided or rather distanced themselves from Yiddish because for them – it represented sentiments of

pain and shame. For them, it was a language of the “galout”, meaning the Jewish diaspora that led to the Holocaust. We were being taught after all, to become the new Jew of Israel, free brave and strident.

My family was the only family of Yemenite Mizrachi descent living in that Ashkenazi neighborhood and I was raised on Western tradition and culture. Only Hebrew was spoken at home, and I could not communicate with one of my grandmothers, who spoke only Arabic. In school I learned Western history and culture including Jewish authors of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, math, science, a secular approach to reading the Bible and its Aramaic interpretations, as well as English and French.

Looking back, it is evident that while Israel’s success to quickly unify Jews, who came from all corners of the world with no common language or culture, was achieved by opting for a secular Western education, as well as modern Hebrew as the common national language. This came at the price of neglecting rich Middle Eastern and Sephardic Jewish traditions. These traditions were marginalized and consequently, made to feel and appear inferior. I can also recognize that this neglect, was also true of Yiddish language and culture. It would have been embarrassing for me, a second-generation Israeli, to speak Arabic or Yiddish in Israel or create dances associated with these traditions.

By now I am sure that at least some of you, think that my presentation might reveal a sense of victimhood. If so, I am delighted to inform you that if given the option of re-living my life, I would not have changed a thing.

The excellent education I got, and primarily my creative dance training in Israel with Gertrude Kraus of the German Expressionist Dance movement, followed by my intensive training in the Graham technique and later with Anna Sokolow, prepared me to be part of the international dance conversation and practice. How else could I have been ready to move to New York in my early 20’s, study at Juilliard, lead a life as dancer and choreographer whose work was relevant and appreciated by American audiences? How else could I have built a dance program at Princeton University?

It is only now, however, since my retirement, when more time and energy have become available for reflection, that I better understand why it took so long for me as a choreographer, to reconnect with my Yemenite heritage, and allow it to integrate with my Western upbringing and training.

It is also clear now that this long process could only be activated once I was away from Israel and working in New York, where I have lived since my early 20’s and where all religions and cultures coexist and no collective memory of only one people’s history weighs on artistic creativity.

Before I discuss and show you video excerpts of my work that trace the process of reconnecting with my Jewish Yemenite heritage, I would like to clarify that most of my work is not centered on Jewish or Jewish Yemenite themes. My goal as a young artist was to find my individual voice as a human being relating to the larger world. Over the years, it has become

clear that in order to do this, I cannot ignore my own heritage, which then and now is alive in my body.

So how and when was I introduced to traditional Yemenite dance and culture?

Since my parents hardly ever took me to visit my grandmothers in the old neighborhood of Neve Tsedek, my main exposure to Yemenite dance was in context of the Israeli folk dance, which children encountered either in school, in the various public squares, or in context of the Youth Movements to which they belonged. While the Yemenite step as adopted by the European folkdance choreographers seemed bland, Sara Levi Tanai's choreographed folk dances, danced to her original songs in Yemenite style, felt like the "real thing." They were richer and, at least for me, more enjoyable to perform.

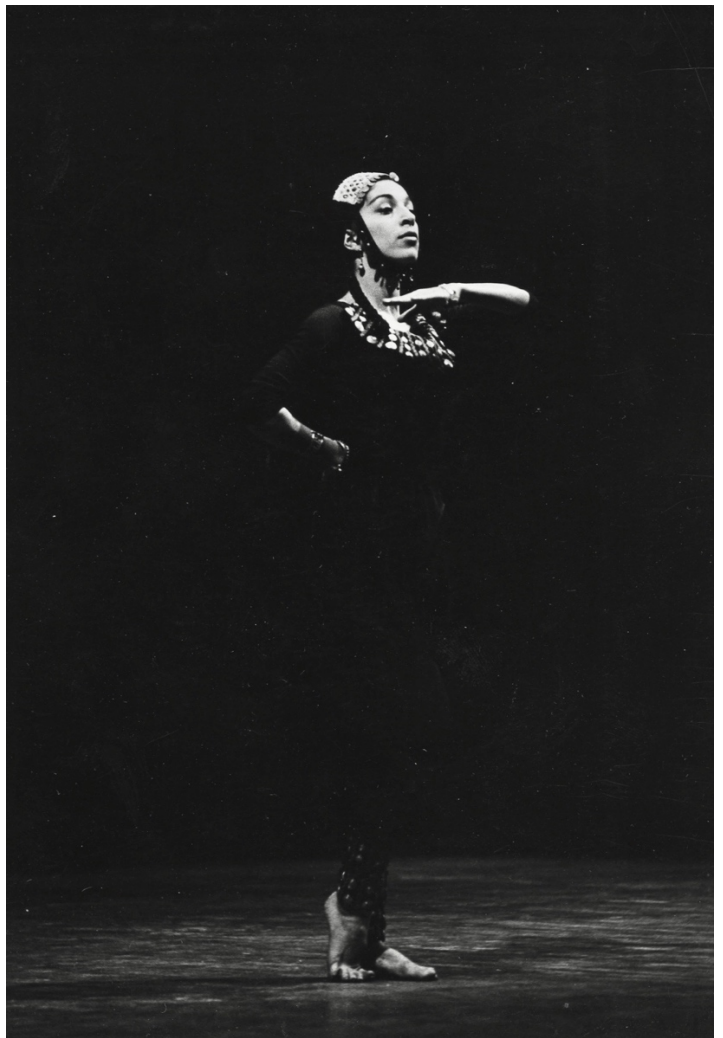
My other early exposure to the Yemenite dance culture occurred during my grandmother's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday party that the Yemenite community organized for her. The exuberant party took place in her large all-purpose living room in Neve Tsedek. The amazing joy and spontaneity expressed in the singing, drumming and dancing was a total surprise. I was enchanted but also felt like an outsider. I could only observe but not participate. The thought of - why didn't I know this kind of joy existed in my parents' traditional community-- passed through my mind but did not linger.

Then there was the Inbal Dance theater, the company that was formed by Sara Levi Tanai. The company was formed in 1949 with young dancers and singers recruited from the newly arrived Yemenite immigrants after Israel's independence. While Levi Tanai's goal was to preserve and develop authentic Yemenite movement material in order to create an Israeli modern dance theater, Inbal was viewed by the Israeli dance community as an ethnic folk-dance company.

Why I did not quit my modern dance training with Gertude Kraus and join Inbal was a question I was asked several times by various people. In the early 50's, the cultural gap between the Inbal dancers and myself was too big. I also viewed Inbal as a folk-dance company and my goals were very different.

During my coming video presentation, I will screen and discuss excerpts from four works that trace my evolution as dance artist exploring my Jewish/Yemenite heritage, and also my connection to the Yiddishkeit culture.

The following photographs taken in the mid 60's shows me as a student at Juilliard. I composed an arrangement of these Yemenite/Israeli folk dances, prior to leaving Israel thinking they would be useful for presentation in Jewish community centers and earn some money. The photo on the left represents a woman's dance and the one on the right – a man's dance. While these dances were easy to compose, I already knew they were not the answer to finding my own voice as a dance artist.



This photo is taken of a dance called *Landscape* that I created as a student in Anna Sokolow's senior choreography class at Juilliard. Anna found all our compositions to be derivative. She told us to get rid of our well-made dances and suggested that we go to a quiet space and stand there for as long as needed until we found the first movement that felt true to who we were. The movement that revealed itself was a small, circular movement originating in the chest that repeated itself again and again. It felt so good to do. That was a transformative discovery and became a source from which I developed further movement. Clearly, it was not a movement I ever encountered in class. I eventually recognized that this movement came from my Yemenite heritage. In this photograph you can see the prominence of the hand gesture's placement at the center of the chest, from where the newly found - movement originated.



My next breakthrough in deepening the connection with my Middle Eastern heritage occurred when I met Margalit Oved whom I knew as the lead dancer in Sarah Levi-Tanai's Inbal Dance Theater. While we talked, exchanging thoughts about our lives as touring artists, recently turned mothers, and living in the US, the idea of commissioning Margalit to create a dance for my solo repertory show was born. With a grant from the NEA in 1974, we proceeded to create *Mothers of Israel*, dancing the story of the biblical matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel.





Margalit created the dance, the text, the singing and the drumming. This is consistent with the Yemenite traditional dance where there is no separation between these elements. My task was to present each of these women's lives at a pivotal moment that changed the course of generations to come. As a performer, I was challenged to fully embody the traditional Yemenite movement style and gestures as developed by Margalit and to drop any affectation associated with classical or modern dance training.



When performing the four Mothers I felt that I was giving presence and voice to my grandmothers through revealing their beauty and humanity. For the duration of the dance I became my grandmothers.

The first video excerpt you will see is taken from a warmup Margalit taught me. This will be followed by three short excerpts from Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel.

[CLICK HERE TO VIEW THE MOTHERS OF ISRAEL EXCERPT](#)

The next three video excerpts, which I'll screen are taken from my own choreography that represent my later work starting in the mid 1990's. I hope you will be able to see in these works the integration of the circular chest movement I discovered early on, with fuller body movement introduced by Margalit, and with my own material as developed over the years.

The next video is *Women and Veils*, a dance I choreographed for a large group of women, in which this integration can be seen.



[CLICK HERE TO VIEW THE WOMEN AND VEILS EXCERPT](#)

The next two duets are *Negotiations* and *If Eve Had a Daughter*, in which I allowed myself to dance again at age 60 with my younger colleagues Aleta Hayes and Jill Sigman. These two dances are probably my most mature and fully realized work and they continue to give me a particular kind of joy. Here, I was able to integrate with fluidity material I discovered and learned over the many years with ease. Boundaries from East to West, from academic to folk, from generation to generation, and from inherited traditions to contemporary thinking, were crossed and integrated with no hesitation.



The first duet, *Negotiations*, is based on the difficult relationship between Sarah and her maid, Hagar. Rather than following the biblical story that ends with Hagar and her son's abandonment, the dance concludes with the two women negotiating eye to eye, and as equals.



[CLICK HERE TO VIEW THE NEGOTIATIONS EXCERPT](#)

The second duet, *If Eve Had a Daughter/ Mother Tongue's I Love You*, danced to Yiddish songs and Klezmer music, portrays the pain, tension and joy in a relationship between an old-time dominant Mother and her rebellious daughter, who wishes to keep up with the sensibilities of her time.



[CLICK HERE TO VIEW THE IF EVE HAD A DAUGHTER EXCERPT](#)



## **List of Full Video Works**

Mothers of Israel – The Complete Work

<https://vimeo.com/album/4920417/video/224853160>

Women and Veils II

<https://vimeo.com/album/4996174/video/254421307>

Negotiations

<https://vimeo.com/album/4996174/video/254423819>

If Eve Had a Daughter/Mother's Tongue I Love You

<https://vimeo.com/album/4996174/video/254420403>