

Dorna Nili performs during a workshop studying Persian Jewish wedding dances.

John Franzen

Dancing Into Marriage

by Judith Brin Ingber

Biblical commandments at first glance are ominous: Thou shalt have no other gods before Me; Thou shalt not murder; Thou shalt not steal, etc. What have such moral and ethical commandments to do with the joys, expression and freedom of dance?

Surprisingly, in Judaism, commandments have everything to do with dance. Each person is commanded to dance at Jewish weddings. That means wherever Jews have lived in past centuries, weddings have been celebrated with extensive dance. That's a powerful lot of dancing for over 2,000 years!

Until now, Jewish wedding dances have always been danced, but never studied. So "Dancing Into Marriage: Jewish Wedding Dance Conference" was a historical event. The conference — co-sponsored by the Congress on Research in Dance (CORD) and the Minneapolis Jewish Community Center (JCC) — took place on June 27-28 at the JCC, a large building with many different lecture rooms, an auditorium, dance studio, theatre and spots to picnic and relax. It was ideal for the variety of conference activities and the dancing of the ninety-six participants — some educators and many folk dancers, Jews and non-Jews alike.

The conclusion — a real wedding complete with reception and dances — was unique and appropriate. 400 people celebrated the marriages of Natalia and Meyer Garbuz and Sophia and Michael Lam. The two couples had been married in civil ceremonies in the Soviet Union before they

came to Minneapolis a few years ago, and they were eager to renew their marriage vows in a Jewish ceremony. The assembly witnessed the elements of Jewish marriage which have persisted over the generations despite changes in locale and time. The bride and groom were led by members of their families to stand under the *huppa*, the wedding canopy, a small cloth ceiling attached to four poles. The canopy symbolizes the home the couple will build together. The rabbi and cantor stood on the other side of the *huppa* to chant the seven wedding blessings and to read aloud the wedding contract or *ketubah* for all to hear. Rings, considered objects of value, were exchanged. The rabbi explained that just as a *huppa* is open to all sides, so a Jewish home is open to the world; but it must be strong and enduring. After the wine is blessed and the couple share in its drinking, the groom stomps on the wine glasses. This symbolizes that even at times of great joy, one remembers that there are destruction and adversity in the world (like the destruction of the Temple in ancient Jerusalem).

The commandment to dance at weddings was announced in a rabbinic decree at the time the Temple stood in Jerusalem. Why? Dancing, the rabbis concluded, is joyful, and brides and grooms *must* be joyful on their wedding days. Dancing assures the proper spirit, so everyone must dance. The question of *how* wedding guests were to dance was first posed by the great rabbis Hillel and Shammai in the first century.

The choreographic answers to the preceding ancient question were the subjects of the conference's workshops, demonstrations, films and papers on Jewish wedding dances in Yemen, North Africa (including the island of Djerba off Tunisia), Kurdistan, Azerbaijan, Iran and Eastern Europe, as well as among the Hassidim of America and Israel, in ancient Israel and on modern Israeli kibbutzim.

Weddings always have an element of drama. Most comedies end in betrothals and many tragedies end in marriage, pointed out Giora Manor, Israel's leading dance critic. Certainly, at the awesome moment of joining two individuals and two families, much is at stake on a number of levels. Anthropology professor Riv Ellen Prell of the University of Minnesota, in the opening address, explained that marriage paradoxically represents a crucial yet fragile bond, joining groups to create society, yet linking individuals who more often than not break or disrupt those bonds. Many arrangements, compromises and agreements must be reached for the new couple to be included in society and to carry on the traditions and rules of a particular cultural group. The culture often gives symbolic expression to the fears and mysteries of joining a man and woman with elaborate wedding rites. Judaism's solution for handling the awesome moment is to mandate that all those present dance and be happy.

The variety of Jewish dance evident in all the different films, workshops and papers

astounded the conference participants. The explanations for these differences are historical as well as anthropological and religious. Judaism and Jewish dance began in the independent nation of Israel which had its zenith before the Roman conquest in AD 70. After the Romans conquered Israel, the Jews were dispersed throughout the Occident and the Orient, first as prisoners of Rome, later as travelers, merchants and settlers throughout the known (Roman) world in Europe, North Africa, the Middle East and as far east as India, settling in some seventy different nations. In each area, the Jews took on something of the look, sound and color of their adopted homelands while maintaining the distinctiveness of their Judaism. These differences were apparent in the wedding dances of Jews from around the world.

Joyce Mollov, lecturer in Jewish dance history at Queens College in New York City, detailed these differences of time and place in her paper. During the Medieval period in Europe when Jews lived in cramped ghetto quarters in France, Germany and Poland, they built wedding houses or *tanzhausen* where the entire community could fulfill the obligation of dancing at weddings. These European communities like order in their celebrations, so the role of a special wedding dance leader developed. The *badchan* was the dancing master and entertainer who conducted the wedding festivities and introduced the various members of the wedding party to the community through song, verse and the all-important wedding dance.

Oriental Jews, the Jews who lived in Arab countries, conducted their celebrations differently. They emphasized (and still do) individual improvisation and, among the men, solo performances. The Jews of Yemen and Persia and their dances connote something exotic, at least for Americans whose heritage generally ties them more directly to Europe.

The Yemenite Jews probably left Israel when the first Temple was destroyed in the sixth century BC. They traveled the spice routes and camel caravans south through Saudi Arabia to the southern-most tip of the desert bordering the Indian Ocean. Yemenite cooking is highly spiced with curries of cumin, tumeric, saffron and chili peppers, not unlike Indian cooking. Yemenite Jews are very devout. Their religious rites and celebrations are intricate and elaborate, like the silver filigree they spin into fine jewelry. Some Yemenite Jews returned to Israel in the 1880s to farm and tend citrus groves, but the majority returned in 1948, when Israel was declared an independent state.

Yemenite dancing still is very special and the wedding ceremonies continue to be elaborate. To start a week of celebration, meals and dancing take place at the homes of the groom and bride. At the henna ceremony, a special feature of Oriental Jewish weddings, the Yemenite bride is dressed like a queen with elaborate brocade

and embroidery. She is so laden down that she is able only to sit in a special chair and to reign over the festivities from there. At her henna ceremony, the women of the community come to her home. Dancing women bring incense and candles, and the elderly have the honor of bringing a special plate with the leaves of the henna plant. The leaves are mixed into a special paste while songs and dances highlight the henna's preparation. The henna is then applied to the fingernails, the palms of the hands and, in older times, the soles of the feet. The special patterns are signs of good luck and a happy life.

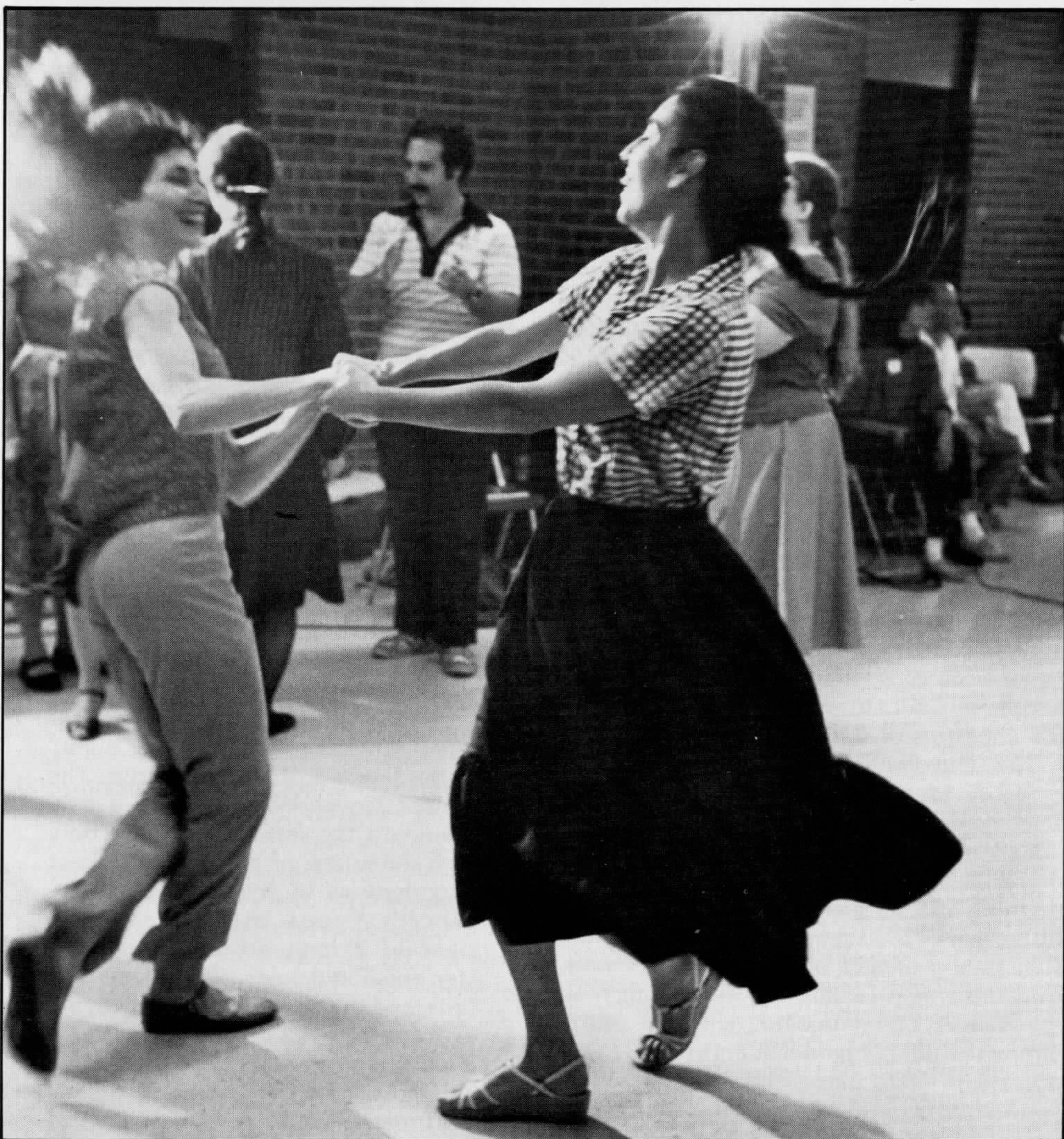
In Yemen, as in Europe, marriages were arranged by the families' fathers, and the bride and groom met for the first time at their wedding. The fine thirty-minute film of Inbal Dance Theatre's "Yemenite Wedding," by choreographer Sara Levi-Tanai, was shown at the conference. It illustrated the style of Yemenite wedding dances in a dramatic realization of a couple who are destined to live together and share their lives but who do not set eyes on each other until their wedding night. The ballet, choreographed in the early 1950s, was filmed on tour in Australia with Margolit Oved (now on the faculty of the dance department at UCLA) in the main role of the

mistress of ceremonies. She explains in English all the different festivities of the week prior to the wedding. The film drew much applause for its touching scene between the shy bride and her nervous groom. It projected the lithe, paradoxically petite build and dramatic character of the Yemenite Jews and their exotic, nasal and wildly rhythmic singing and drumming that accompanied the exuberant dancers.

Shalom Staub both lectured on and taught the Yemenite wedding dances at the conference. He had studied them in Israel during the fifteen months he lived in a small Yemenite farming community to learn the nuances of their dances. As he is trained as an anthropologist and dancer (now Pennsylvania's director of folklore), his lecture was both informative and lively. He explained the differences between the dances of older and younger men and women as well as teenagers. His field films illustrate the old men's free improvisations in elaborate rhythmic and movement patterns. The men dance to songs of the psalmist and Jewish liturgical prayers. The women, on the other hand, have less elaborate rhythmic dances with less invention, but they compose them on the spot while they sing about the bride and her daily life. Today the young Yemenites choose freely among the com-

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Seminar participants discover the joy that is an inherent part of Jewish wedding dances.



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plex older style, the improvisatory spirit, disco and the hypnotic, repetitive women's dances.

It was a challenge to understand the style and rhythmic patterns in one workshop. In the last dance Staub taught, the contrasting rhythms of feet and arms challenged all but members of Minneapolis' Ethnic Dance Theatre and UCLA dance professor Elsie Dunn, an expert in complex Balkan rhythms.

Dorna Nili, a Persian Jewess who recently moved to Minneapolis, spoke about the henna ceremony when she was a bride. She explained that it is the dancing and music that keep everything lively, while the dancing itself generates joy. "The night before the wedding," she commented, "all the women went to my parents' home and decorated the soles of my feet and palms of my hands. I danced many hours at my own henna party, and my mother kept saying that I must sit down to rest. But I refused because I was so happy.

"In Persia, we would all be in the courtyard for the *huppa* (wedding ceremony). The bride and groom afterwards sat on special chairs in front of silk carpets which were

hanging as a beautiful backdrop. Everyone danced in front of the bride and groom. Now we've modernized, and you can see boys and girls together. I even danced with my husband at our wedding. When the bride goes into the middle of the courtyard to dance, everyone else backs away — at least it was that way for me."

Dorna, who is a beautiful dancer, conducted an effective workshop on Persian Jewish wedding dances with her cousin Sima Askari. Like the Yemenites, the Persians emphasize the individual dancer with specialized improvisations. But the Persians have different movements starting with the face (raising one eyebrow is preferred when dancing), the head and neck cocked or moved horizontally, shoulders shimmied or moved forward to accent the beat, special arm and hand movements (which include snapping of the index fingers across the opposite hand while both arms are held high over head). The movements are associated with those of Mid-Eastern oriental dancing and are considered provocative by many. In one dance, Dorna's uncle, Monsoor Alyeshmerni, joined Dorna and her cousin, Sima Askari, to assume the role of the women's protector, dancing as if to shield them from the view of others, apparently a traditional relation in the dance.

The henna is an example of a cultural ar-

tifact that is found in many cultures. Jews, Moslems and Hindus all use henna in their wedding ceremonies, yet each gives it different symbolic meanings. The dance, too, can represent movements shared by different groups in the same area, but what imbues it with significance is the importance each group assigns to the movements. Staub explained how the Jews say that henna reminds the new couple to observe the laws of purity in marriage while further symbolizing marriage's great joys. The Yemenite Moslems use henna because it is mindful of Mohammed's inner and outer beauty since he used henna in his beard.

Other illustrative dances of Oriental Jews at the conference were presented in an unusual 1965 film produced by the Israeli researcher and folk dance expert, Gurit Kadman. (For a profile of this dance pioneer, see *Arabesque*, July/August, 1981) Never before shown in the USA, it depicted wedding dances of Jews from Djerba, off the coast of Tunisia, as well as from Azerbaijan, Russia, and those of Kurdish Jews from the farming village of Moshav Menucha in Israel. Kadman explained in a letter to the conference, "We staged parts of a wedding in the Djerba tradition in the Arab quarter of Ashkelon, the Israeli city on the Mediterranean coast. This area of the city looks like Djerba's Jewish towns. Djer-

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ba has one of the oldest Jewish communities of the Diaspora with special habits and customs of their own. We brought people of Djerba from all over the Negev in 1965. One of the rabbis who helped us with the filming played on Italian instruments for accompaniment because Tunis had been governed by Italy."

The film's footage of a man in the wedding processional through the streets of the city was unique. He carried a small wooden table by one corner, not, however, with his hand, but in his teeth. He managed to perform many acrobatic tricks with the table, including holding it aloft but level, set with glasses and wine.

For the majority of conference participants, the dances of European Jews should have been more familiar. Ironically, they are not, according to Ph.D. candidate Lee Ellen Friedland of the University of Pennsylvania's Folklore and Folk Life Department. She lectured and taught Eastern European wedding dances. "We know the least about our own. One reason is that, contrary to the foods of Eastern European Jews (gefilte fish, pickles and corned beef), the dances did not adapt very well to America. Dancing, by all accounts, was very important and was an inspiring part of all social occasions, the weddings in particular."

But European immigrants in this country wanted to Americanize as quickly as possible, shucking their foreign customs. Dances at weddings were the discarded casualties of that culture. Many of the dances took as much concentration to learn as the oriental ones, not because each pattern was so tricky, but because the entire group had to understand how to weave in and out in very specific ways. It took much repetition to get the dancers to duck under the outstretched arms of the people behind them in order to thread and snake in the required way to dance a proper *freilach*.

The dancers also learned the *sher*, a kind of square dance for couples and a *mitzvah tanz*. In addition to portraying joy and allowing the community a chance to celebrate, the dances of Eastern Europe were miniature morality lessons on how to behave. The *broiges tanz*, or angry dance, is a good example. The dance is meant to show the new bride and groom that their life will not always be full of contentment, love and agreement. The dance portrays a married couple arguing with much wagging of fingers and frenzied stomping. But after the anger is expressed, there is a reconciliation, the Jewish society's preferred method for the endurance of married life.

Giora Manor, in his lecture on the uses of traditional wedding dances in stage and dance productions, talked about Inbal's Yemenite wedding dance and another Jewish European dance tradition, the beggars' dance. The poor and crippled had a traditional right to dance with the bride, just as everyone else. The beggars' dance is a central dramatic element in the play, "The Dybbuk," a classic of Jewish theatre originated in Russia by the Habimah Na-

tional Theatre which later moved to Israel. In the play, Manor explained, one beggar cries, "... to dance with the bride is more important than the gifts!" In the stage play, the beggars touch the bride, cling to her, tear her gown, limp and leap around her until she is frightened and repulsed by the surrounding frenzy. "There is a strong magical element in the beggars' dance," said Manor, "for the contact with the pure virginal bride at her blessed moment is supposed to bring luck."

Actually, in very devout factions of the European community, contact with the bride has been regulated since the Middle Ages. In the tradition that developed, the bride was separated from her dancing partners by a handkerchief. Zvi Friedhaber, the Israeli archivist and researcher of Jewish dance, explained in his paper that all the men of the community danced with the bride but remained separated by a kerchief held in various ways, sometimes draped over the bride's hand. In the ultra-orthodox Hassidic sect from Poland in the seventeenth century, this tradition saw its highest stage. Many kinds of kosher dances or *mitzvah tanzen* developed in the Hassidic European communities and were carried on despite the destruction of Hassidic communities by the Nazis. They can still be found in Israel and America.

Jill Gellerman, Ph.D. candidate at New York University's performance studies department, explained and taught Hassidic wedding dances. Using video tapes of some of the Hassidim living in Brooklyn (who allow filming, unlike their Israeli counterparts), she showed that instead of the separation by handkerchiefs, men and women are separated by a portable wall which divides the wedding hall. Men and women eat and celebrate separately in order to maintain the proper decorum of Hassidic life. Gellerman, who has been filming the Hassidic weddings of Brooklyn communities since 1975, emphasized the point of sexual separation by setting up at the conference two different video monitors, as if the participants were actually present at a Hassidic wedding. The band sits at the head of the partition so that both men and women can hear and see it. Although the music was the same, two different versions of the wedding dances occurred simultaneously.

The Hassidic rabbis said that through dance and music, Jews could have an ecstatic religious experience which brought divine expression and joy to life and, of course, to weddings. Men danced in groups and also improvised solo dances. Gellerman's videotapes showed bottle dances (whiskey bottles balanced on dancing heads), dance contests between men in which they made elaborate *kazatski* jumps, squats, turns, twists and even the rare revival dance in which someone suddenly falls down dead, but is revived by a kind of artificial respiration and ecstatic dance.

On the women's side, the dances were much more modest and maintained the pro-

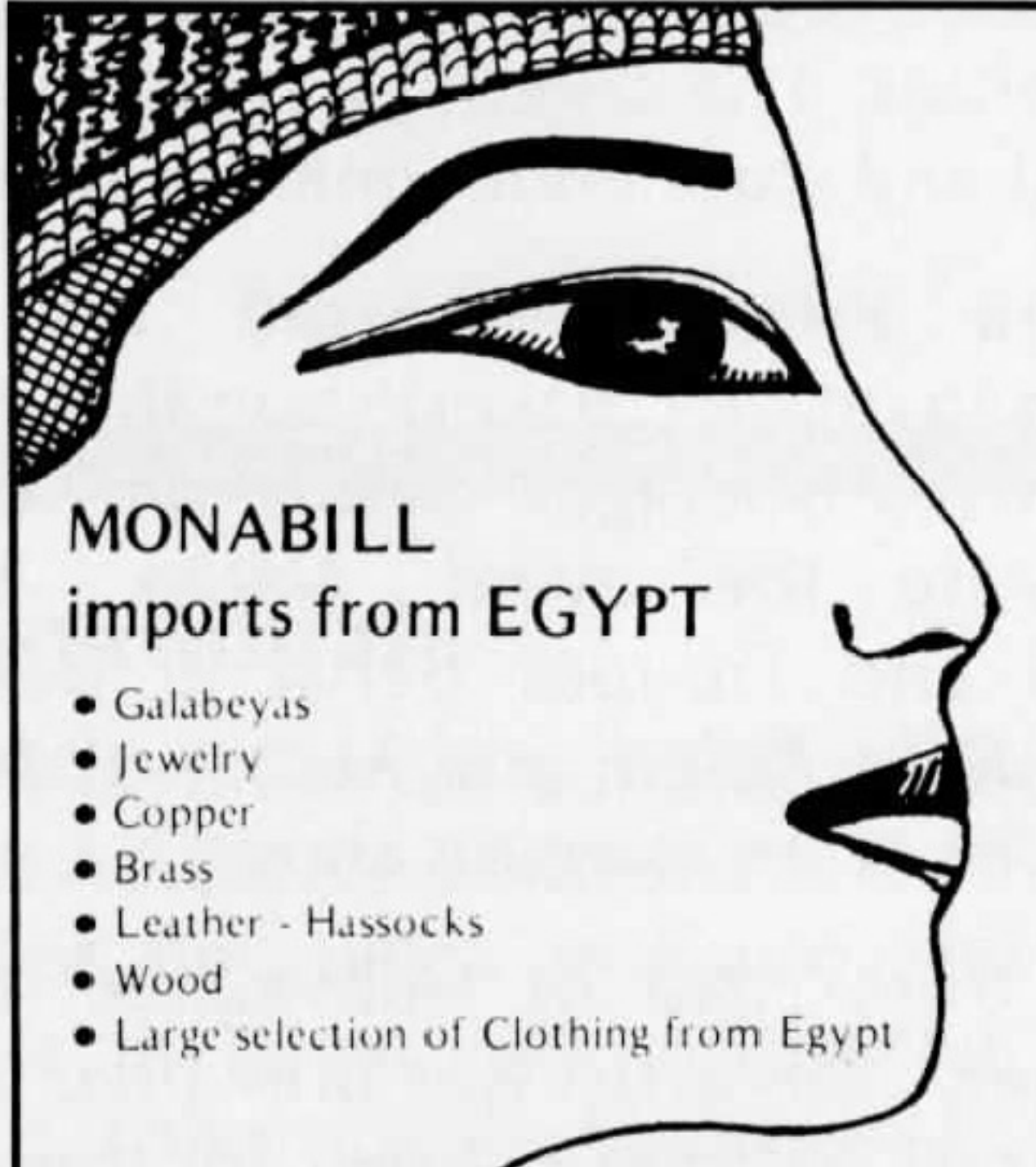
per decorum which is highly regarded in the life of Hassidic women. Gellerman spoke about the changes and developments in the women's dances she has been studying, noting the influences of cinema and popular Israeli folk dances. The Zorba dance was the Hassidic version of the popular Greek folk dance. Also seen were influences of popular American dances among the women, such as the bunny hop.

The wedding dances of the kibbutzim (cooperative Israeli farming communities) are also unique. I spoke at the conference about the work of Lea Bergstein, dancer from Kibbutz Ramat Yohanan. Different artists in different kibbutzim have created original ceremonies and celebrations for their particular groups who renewed life on Israel's land. Bergstein's *kelulot* or nuptial ceremony with music by Matityahu Shelem is almost fifty years old, which means that several generations of brides and grooms already have taken up her ideas of staging and celebrating a wedding for the kibbutz group. Bergstein, originally a Viennese expressionist dancer trained by Vera Skoronel and Gertrud Kraus, shows that artistic creativity also can contribute to the folk and cultural traditions of Jewish wedding celebrations.

The conference concluded with the gala wedding, and the participants danced at the reception with delight, enthusiasm and a new understanding of why they were dancing — to ensure the joy of the bride and groom. By doing so, they brought a very special sense of joy to themselves as well.

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"Dancing Into Marriage" was conceived and directed by Judith Brin Ingber. *CORD* will publish the conference papers in a special journal. Address inquiries to *CORD*, New York University Dance and Dance Education Department, 35 W. 4th St., Room 675, Washington Square, New York, NY 10003. Also, a videotape documentary of the proceedings will be available later next year. Address inquiries to Minneapolis JCC, Ruth Ann Issacson, Cultural Arts Department, 4330 So. Cedar Lk. Rd., Minneapolis, MN 55416.



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