

In the land of the Rising Sun

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Impressions from an instruction tour in Japan

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Last November I set out on an instruction tour of two weeks in the land of the rising sun (known as Japan) in order to teach the Japanese Israeli folk dances (not one Jew participated).

To a person who was brought up in the Western World Japan looks like a different planet. Japan is a country whose culture is a blend of the modern west and the unique local ancient tradition, especially manifested in the people's behavior. Japan is very different from Europe and the United States we are so "accustomed" to. The first and most obvious difference lies in the fact that the Japanese are very disciplined, orderly, and extremely polite.

The Japanese do not speak English even though they learn the language at school. The road signs are only in Japanese and so are the signs in the trains, except for the names of the stations which are written in really small letters and hard to decipher while traveling. You can easily get lost and I would definitely discourage traveling without a guide. I was really lucky because my hosts took care of me, and for two entire weeks I was like a resident alien in Japan.

Toru Kashima, a Japanese who is a devout fan of Israel, had invited me to Japan. In the 80s Toru heard a lecture about Israel which inspired him to come for a visit. The visit was extended and lasted 4 years in which he accomplished many things. At first he lived and worked on a Kibbutz as a volunteer.

He went to an Ulpan and acquired a good Hebrew, which he still speaks quite well. Then he moved to Rehovot and worked in the chemistry department at the Weisman Institute. He learnt dancing at the Hemlin Institute for folk dancing, and danced with the Gvanim Group in Rishon LeZion where he befriended Ilana Segev and Tuvia Tishler with whom he has had a good relationship since then. (Toru invited Tuvia last year and he is planning to visit Japan this year too). Toru left Israel in 1991, at his parents' request, because of the Persian Gulf War.

Toru leads a group of folk dancers at the JCC community in Tokyo and is closely connected with regional instructors and directors throughout Japan. He is a devout reader of Rokdim and distributes our products in Japan. He set up the website of Rokdim in Japanese and lends it his full support. The website is: <http://www.rokdim.co.jp>

Toru organized 4 workshops for me in 3 cities – Osaka, Kyoto and Tokyo. The local instructors were in charge of each of the workshops: they sent out the invitations to the dancers and to the regional instructors, they advertised the workshops, and dealt with the organizational strategies.

We conducted two workshops in Tokyo. One workshop was carried out at a local university where a number of young students displayed a wonderful mastery of Israeli dances that had been taught by Yonatan Gabay and the late Gurit Kadman and had been passed on since then from generation to generation. The other workshop was at the JCC of Tokyo where Toru is teaching. It is a small group but the repertoire of the dances is much more diverse than in other places because they dance only Israeli dances. In between, I managed to visit two other, rather small, groups of dancers (about 10 female dancers in each) in order to see how our dances look like where there is no instructing visitor from Israel.

Each workshop lasted for about 6 hours, including lunch and breaks. The dance halls everywhere were luxurious, with parquet floors, outstanding amplification systems, comfortable toilets, and boards for registering the names of the dances taught, as well as the names of the creators and choreographers, the meaning of the names of the dances, etc... After a dance had been taught Toru wrote down all the details on the board, in Japanese, and the participants copied them into their notebooks.

It's quite astonishing that the Japanese who are known for their love of electronic "toys" play their music on simple tapes, compact discs and mini disks. Our use of the computer with DJPower software, and consequently the successive dancing (with no need to stop after each dance) was quite a remarkable and refreshing revelation to them!

There were about 120-140 participants in each of the workshops, 95% of them women. The age of the participants ranged between 30 and 60, part of them were teachers in various parts of the city or around it.

My first impression was that the Israeli dances are not so popular as in Europe or the USA. The East European and the Balkan dances were their first priority. Most of the groups dance international folk dances and the Israeli dances are part of them. The women were dressed in skirts according to the Eastern European style, and each group had its own color. They danced in groups in the general circle.

Since I don't create dances myself, I had no obligation to specific dances and I was able to teach anything I liked, according to the level of the dancers, their "spirit", and my personal favor.

Each workshop began with warm up dances, chosen by the local instructor, to boost the atmosphere. This made it possible for me to estimate the general knowledge of the participants and, to a certain degree, the kind of dances usually danced in Japan.

In the workshop that took place at the local university (which had few participants, yet was surprisingly high in quality) we danced the following dances: "Lech Lamidbar", "Ma Naavu", "Hora Agadati", "Erev Shel Shoshanim", "Al Tira", "Kuma Aha", "Harmonika", "Kol Dodi", "Zemer Lah", "Debka-Debka", (meaning "meshuleshet") "Hora Mamtera", and "Hava Nagila". "Hava Nagila" (which is a line dance in Israel) and "Erev Shel Shoshanim" (a couple dance in Israel) are danced in a circle with different, yet quite nice steps. They must have been taught by instructors from the USA. Who exactly? - I don't know.

In Osaka they dance other dances- "Hine Ma Tov", "Yvarecheha", "Harmonica", "Erev Ba", "Yedid Nefesh".

In Kyoto, (where Tuvia Tishler taught last year, they danced "Shai", "Shkia Vruda", (both Shlomo Maman and Naftali Kadosh made

up dances to the melody) “Micarov”, “Zinguala” and “Yedid Nefesh”.

At Toru’s sessions in Tokyo they dance: “Eretz, Eretz”, “Haroa Hactana”, “Yedid Nefesh”, “Hahar Hayarok”, “Shabat Menuha”, “B’pundak Katan”, “Shir Al Etz”, “Tfilati”, “Eretz Israel Yafa”, “Hakol Patuach”, “K’shenavo”, “Al Kanfei Hakesef”, “Sheleg Al Eiri”, “Sham Harei Golan”, “Balada Lamaayan”, “Yesh Et Leamal”, “Omrim Yeshna Eretz”; in Tokyo: “Eretz Eretz”, “Harmonika”, “Eretz Israel Yafa”, “Yedid Nefesh”, “Kuma Aha”, and “Hinei Ma Tov”.

The teaching of the dances was slow, compared to Israel, not because they are slow learners, but because of the importance they attach to each movement, the accuracy they demand, and the serious way in which they treat each step and gesture in the dance. For example: when I taught the dance “Al Teshate Ba’Ahava”, I demonstrated the left turn into the circle and then the left turn out (which is somewhat confusing). They were happy to do it correctly, and when I raised my thumb to show the sign of success, they did the same and it was very funny.

The list of the dances was set up in advance in Israel according to my choice and in collaboration with Toru, who decided which would be fit for his dancers. My choice of dances included old and new, and only those popular in Israel. I was sure that the Japanese are knowledgeable of Israeli dances, but it turned out that they are not, and any dance I chose would have been appropriate. The teaching was done in Hebrew and English and Toru translated my instructions simultaneously (His knowledge of Hebrew finally paid off). Actually, they preferred Hebrew to English since both languages were irrelevant (they don’t know either of them).

The dances which I chose to teach (and which were performed in a different order at each workshop) were from the following list: “Yesh Et Leamal”, “Omrim Yeshna Eretz”, “Or Shivat Hayamim”, (the raising of the hands was peculiar to them at the beginning but at the end they liked the dance) “Shir Zmirot”, “Hamangina Haishana”, “Anhat Haadama”, (which was very challenging to teach, only in Kyoto) “Yareah Limon”, “Dvash Vehalav”, “Shiro Shel Aba”, “Bou Nashir L’eretz Yafa”, “Bo Beshalom”, “Ode Ode”, “Zemer Nuge”, “Al Tira”, “Lashir al Hakineret”, “Al Teshate Baahava”, “Biglal Haahava”, “Yad Leshalom”, “Shma Elohai”. The couple dances were: “Stav Lavan”, “Besheket Kimat Besod”, and “Ba La” (there is always one dance for fun).

The Japanese hardly dance couple dances, a custom stemming from a long tradition in their culture. Also, there is a shortage of men, but the women don’t mind coupling up for a dance.

The raising of the hands in the dance “Or Shivat Hayamim” seemed very funny to them, new, strange, even queer, yet later they loved it very much. “Yareah Limon” and “Dvash Vehalav” puzzled them, I think because there is no interaction among the dancers, as there is no holding of hands. The dance “Shma Elohai” aroused their sentiments for Israel because of the words of the song which were inspired by the lynch in Ramallah, at the beginning of the Intifada.

They were puzzled about the position of their hands in a circle dance where holding hands was not required. They always hold hands when dancing in a circle, and can’t understand why it should be done differently. I tried to explain that dances are a reflection of the society we live in. Once, when Israel was a new nation collectivism was most important and the holding of the hands was a natural expression of the feeling of togetherness, whereas people today have an individualistic attitude which is being manifested also in their resentment of holding hands. For the same reason, the dances are choreographed with a lot of turnings and hand movements, which does not leave much room for holding hands. In spite of my explanation they were not very happy about it.

At the end of each workshop we conducted a discussion in order to get an idea which of the dances they liked most. “Ode Ode” and “Or Shivat Hayamim” were most kindly accepted, but “Al Teshate Baahava” and “Anhat Haadama” were also very successful. During these conversations they also asked me a lot of questions about Israel in general, and especially about our dance habits. They asked me about proportion of male and female dancers in Israel. They wanted to know how many dances we have, who the creators are, which countries dance our dances, etc... They asked about the Carmiel Festival, and if it was not dangerous to go there, since Arab dancers participated as well, and many other questions.

Three of the dancers went through all the courses and participated in all the workshops. I was amazed, and happy of course, when one of the dancers showed me her notebook where she put down all the dances she knew, listed according to the Rokdim videocassettes. Then she asked for more information about the names of the dances and singers, the meaning of the words in Hebrew, and more of this nature. I also noticed some colored papers she was holding which turned out to be translations from Rokdim, prepared by Toru, including pictures of dance groups, choreographers, and dance leaders, like Marco Ben Simon, Yaron Carmel, Uri Cohen, Giora Kadman, Gadi Biton, Liora Slotzki, Shlomo Maman, Rivka Shturman, and others.

A seventy-year old dancer, who is also subscribed for “Rokdim”, showed me an interesting document, which moved me greatly. It was an instruction pamphlet issued in the 50s, when Gurit visited Japan. The list of the dances is very interesting: “Kuma Aha” (which they dance correctly, just like the original), “Taam Haman”, “Havu Lanu Yain”, “Haroa Haktana”, “Bona Habanot”, “Hora Agadati”, “El Ginat Egoz”, “Eretz Zavot Halav”, “Dal’una”, “Debka Dayagim”, “Debka Kurdit”, “Debka Druz”, “L’or Hiucheh”, “Kalu Raglaim”, “Banot Alena”, “Maym Maym”, “Bat Yftah”, “Et Dodim Kala”, “Ahavat Hadassa”, “Nigun Atik”.

We held an interesting conversation with the coordinator of the workshop in Tokyo - Tacanari Kauakami. He is a teacher and instructor of folk dances and a member of the Japanese Teachers’ Association, whose aim is to enhance folk dancing in Japan. He teaches dancing almost every day of the week, and specializes mostly in Polish and Russian dances. When the workshop was over we had a long dinner with Tacanari and his wife (the Japanese food is an issue in itself and much can be written about it).

Kauakami told us that Israeli dances in Japan enjoy the same popularity as other folk dances, but not more. He teaches every night in a different place and he was very pleased with the workshop, with the many dances taught, with the method of teaching, and with the review of the dances taught. I think that the impact of the workshop was such as to make him promise that the Israeli dances will fill up a greater part of his regular evening sessions. When asked about Israeli dances he knew, he mentioned also the “Hora Krakoviac”. “Krakoviac”, as you know, is a Polish dance, and this reminded me of a story Yuzo Einbar told me. In the 50s Yuzo went to Poland with a delegation of dancers and when they danced the “Krakoviac” the people asked them to teach them the “beautiful dance”. Indeed

the name “Hora Krakoviac” illustrates the fact that we do not dance original “Israeli dances”, yet, we have a “unique style” and apparently, an exciting one too.

Kauakami told us that in Poland each village or district has its own special dance and quite often people dance different versions to the same song. In his opinion, this is real folklore, because it emanates from the daily existence of country life. I explained that Israel is a country coming to life after 2000 years of its people living in the Diaspora, that, it is only 54 years old, and that we try to build here a culture, created by a synthesis between the different communities, based on tradition, common religious holidays, and history.

I told him that for us it is of utmost importance that a dance be danced in the same way, in Israel and abroad, because it symbolizes our unification. Toru seemed intrigued by this argument of mine.

Apart from the workshops I also visited two local dance groups. One took place in a school class, with 10 participants, some of whom participated in the workshop I conducted at noon. They danced intricate Balkan dances (from Yugoslavia, Rumania, Macedonia, etc...) and also dances by Moshiko Halevi, some of which I have never heard of. After about an hour they “set up a table” with refreshments and for about half an hour we talked about dancing and about Israel. Unfortunately, the conversation was not very fluent, due to the difficulty in communication, but it was still very interesting. Another group that I visited had 12 female dancers. The leader of the group told us that she had participated in Shmulik Gov-Ari’s workshop, two days before (He too was in Japan at that time).

We arrived around the middle of the session, and here is the list of the Israeli dances they danced through the second half: “Nof Bagalil”, “Haleluia Btziltzelei Shama”, “Kiria”, “Morano”, “Sheanitani”(?) a song sung by Miriam Tzabari, “Hora Tzhoc”, “Balada La’Ma’ayan” (danced correctly, not like in Israel), “Amalel Shir”, “Debka Hamor”, “Al Kanfer Hakesef”, “Bou Nashir L’eretz Yafa”, “B’pundak Beiti”.

The leader remembers favorably the workshops with Dudu Edri from Los Angeles, and Shmulik Gov Ari from whom she had learnt most of the dances.

To sum up, I can say that there is a great possibility of promoting the Israeli dances in Japan.

Toru Kashima.

Even though Toru Kashima had been familiar with Israeli dances in Japan, before he came to study in Israel, he was still amazed when he saw the Israeli dancers at the University. He realized that the Israelis danced differently, and so he decides to start learning everything from the beginning. After two years of studies he danced like a born Israeli, joined the group of dancers "Gvanim", and even won a prize in a competition in Europe. He then continued studying in order to become a qualified instructor of dances. He was very meticulous in his studies, went to workshops, visited Yemenite villages, participated in a "Hina" ceremony, and even in a "Teimaniada". During the four years and 7 months he spent in Israel he made lots of friends like: Rivka Shturman, Sarah Levi Tanai, Jonathan Carmon, and others. Today, in Japan, he is very adamant in teaching the Israeli dances correctly.

Here is the translation of Mr. Sugie’s* letter, the manager of the Kyoto workshop.

Dear Toru.

I have been dancing Israeli dances for many years. I like both the old and the new dances. I have a lot of respect for Yaron, especially for his contribution to the issue of video- cassettes and compact discs. Still, I would like to take this opportunity to talk about a few things that are disturbing to me in the field of Israeli folk dancing.

1. I am confused about the fact that I dance a lot of dances that I learnt in the USA and Europe, but are unknown in Israel. I am trying to learn authentic Israeli dances, but unfortunately, many of the dances are of American origin and I can do nothing about it. I too have sinned, by teaching these dances, although I knew they were not Israeli, and I deeply regret it.

2. In my opinion choreographed dances are not real folk dances. Only dances that are taught by many instructors, and not by their creators, and are danced by many people, can be called folk dances.

3. In Japan, (and I believe the same holds for other places as well) once a dance has been taught (sometimes incorrectly), it is very difficult to change the incorrect steps after they have struck root. As for me, I always try to dance correctly.

4. I was appalled to hear that some creators believe that instructors "steal" their dances. It is an absurd notion, how can their dances become folk dances otherwise? As I have already stressed before, folk dances are those taught to masses of people.

5. I was amazed to find out that many choreographers changed their dances after they had taught them. They must have realized that something was amiss with the dance, and felt compelled to make changes even after they had already taught them.

6. In Japan, as in other places, people want to learn more and more new dances. Many instructors go to dance camps in the States and they return they become leading instructors in camps in Japan. I sincerely doubt that these instructors really understand Israeli dances. Too bad they are the ones to spread these dances. I am not saying this out of jealousy; in fact, this is the first time I dare talk about it openly.

7. I would also like to point out some things dancers who participated in Yaron’s workshops told me:

A. When the teacher in the workshop is the choreographer himself- he usually chooses to teach the same kind of dances, which makes it quite boring.

B. Yaron chose to teach various types of dances which made it very interesting and enjoyable as well.

C. Yaron is very energetic and his manner of teaching was very entertaining.

D. It is important to tell Yaron to continue in his efforts to bring the authentic Israeli dances - those danced in Israel- everywhere in the world.

* Mr. Sugie has a store for Japanese tea in Japan. About 30 years ago he happened to see a group of dancers perform Israeli dances during and international exhibition in Japan, and he was very impressed. Since then he has been dancing continually Israeli dances (circle dances only). Today, he is considered a first class instructor and is well known in the Western part of Japan.