CREATURES OF DANCE

A Podcast on Contemporary Dance in Israel

Yali Nativ & Iris Lana

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Breaking the Wall

Israeliness and canon in Ohad Naharin's ʻKyr' (1990)

Batsheva Dance Company

Episode 1

With

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Yair Vardi Founder and CEO of the Suzanne Dellal Centre in Tel Aviv (1987- 2019)

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Iris: In the background, we hear a rare recording from 1989 stored in the Israel State Archives. It is the only video documentation of the general rehearsal for *Echad Mi Yodea* by Ohad Naharin, from the Jubilee Bells show for the 50th anniversary of the State of Israel. It is a documentation of the general rehearsal, because the dance was not performed in the show itself- in what came to be called "The gatkes Incident ''. (gatkes is long johns in Yidish).

Radio host: You are listening to *Creatures of Dance* – a podcast on dance in Israel. *Creatures of Dance* with Yali Nativ and Iris Lana. And on this episode: Breaking the Wall: Israeliness and canon in Ohad Naharin's Kyr (wall in Hebrew) from 1990, for the Batsheva Dance Company

Dr. Yali Nativ teaches and researches dance in sociological and anthropological contexts. She is a senior lecturer at ASA, the Academic College of Society and the Arts. She writes about arts education, sociology of the body, movement and performance, and about dance and Israeli society. Her current research examines ageing professional dancers. Yali is the chairperson of the Israeli Choreographers Association

Iris Lana is a dance researcher and a lecturer at the Jerusalem Academy for Music and Dance. She served as the director of Batsheva Dance Company's Archive Project and was the director of the digital dance collections project at the Israeli National Library. Iris is the CEO of Diver Festival.

The hosts and interviewees in this podcast are played by actors.

Iris: Hi Yali

Yali: Hi Iris

Iris: *Kyr* is an hour-long dance, performed by 15 dancers, with rock band Nikmat HaTraktor (The Tractor's Revenge, in English) playing live on stage. Its premiere was held at the Suzanne Dellal Centre in Tel Aviv, which opened a year earlier, in 1989.

The work is composed of various scenes, some with all dancers on stage, and some involving a few dancers or duets. The stage remains dark and slightly smokey throughout the show, and stage lighting, by Bambi, who has been Batsheva's resident lighting designer ever since, plays a dominant role. It creates a rock and roll-like atmosphere, which is very unique for a dance show in 1990. The dancers' bodies are wild, seemingly unprofessional, not virtuoso in the normal sense of the word. They

do not dance a language of dance that is aesthetic and coded, but move wildly, crossing familiar limits of style.

I am watching the video of the show's second scene. It is an archival video made with the recording media available back then, which is very different from the capabilities we are accustomed to today. The scene begins in the dark: we hear a strange, unrecognized voice, the light comes up slowly, and we see a dancer. It is Erez Lotan. He is playing a huge noisemaker, in a demanding, Sisyphean physical act which activates his entire body. The light becomes slightly stronger, and we see Mari Kajiwara standing at center stage, dancing slowly, real slow, while looking straight ahead. Then dancers enter the single spotlights; they cross the stage behind her, running and jumping. A multilayered apparatus of slow movement and rapid movement is forming, and suddenly the female dancer catches the dancer who is holding the noisemaker, and everything becomes silent. They slowly exit the stage and disappear in the dark. We hear the sound of drums, and the dancers enter in a military-style drill, marching in routes that are becoming increasingly complex. (להאיץ קצת) One of the dancers walks and screams, his face turned upwards, and the dancers walk and fall, each time more and more dancers fall and get up and fall and get up, and they dance wildly, and there are occasional screams, and all this time we hear fast paced music in the background. Everything builds up and escalates to a peak of intensity, and then (הפסקה, שינוי קצב) – cut. Darkness. Silence. (pause) Describing a dance is not an easy task.

Yali: We dedicate the first episode of our first podcast series about dance in Israel to choreographer Ohad Naharin, and to the revolution he started in Israeli dance since his appointment as artistic director for the Batsheva Dance Company in 1990. Ohad Naharin, also known internationally as Mister Gaga, is a world-renowned choreographer with a Rockstar-like status in Israel.

Iris: So, what is happening in the dance scene of 1990? Some of the events occurring at the time have reshaped Israeli dance. First and foremost, the establishment of the Suzanne Dellal Centre in 1989 by the Dellal family and the Tel Aviv municipality, under the direction of Yair Vardi. Before Suzanne Dellal, there was no uniquely dance-oriented stage, and performances were held in different venues in

Tel Aviv, such as the Nahmani Hall, Ohel Shem, and Habima. Suzanne Dellal gave dance a proper stage and became a major dance center.

Radio Host: And now Yair Vardi, founder and CEO of the Suzanne Dellal Center until 2019.

Yair Vardi: Several private and public elements joined forces here to create a dance center in Israel. The Batsheva Dance Company was looking for a home, and they found it in Neve Tzedek. At the same time, the Dellal family was looking for a way to commemorate their daughter Suzanne, who passed away at the age of 26; they vetted libraries, hospitals, and synagogues all over the world, and nothing seemed right. During one of Suzanne's mother's visits to Israel, her brother-in-law, Ze'ev Sokolovsky, invited her to see an empty, deserted building, the former "Alliance Française" school for boys. She went to see it in the evening, by herself, stood in front of it and said: "The Suzanne Dellal Centre for Dance will be built here".

I immediately decided it would serve all the different dance communities in Israel. Batsheva certainly deserves a place of its own, and it was and still is a main entity around which many things evolve. Batsheva is one of the most acclaimed dance companies in the world, and we are honored to have it here, but alongside Batsheva, which performs multiple times a year, we were building the foundations for the contemporary Israeli dance scene. We did not have what we have today; we had Batsheva, we had the Kibbutz Dance Company up north, the Israeli Ballet, and there were some smaller companies. But there was no established, dynamic, creative dance activity in Israel. There were also very few venues. There was not much going on.

I formulated two courses of action: One was to rent out the premises, so that anybody who practiced dance would be able to use this place to perform. And the second - to initiate dance projects to let Israeli dance evolve, give artists a place in which they can create and develop.

Iris: But even before that, the first *Gvanim BeMachol* festival for new choreographers, which means "Shades of Dance" in Hebrew, took place in Ramla in 1984, and then again in 1987 where Liat Dror and Nir Ben Gal won first prize for their

work *Two Rooms Apartment*, marking a new trend of independent dance in Israel. Shortly thereafter comes Haramat Masach festival (which means Curtain Up in Hebrew), an initiative of the Dance Department of the Israeli Ministry of Culture, which becomes a central and influential stage. Choreographers like Noa Dar, Anat Danieli, Noa Wertheim, and Adi Sha'a, who founded Vertigo Dance Company, all performed in Curtain Up and are active and creating to this day. Batsheva moves into the newly opened Suzanne Dellal Centre, after years without a permanent home. This coupling of Batsheva and Suzanne Dellal was fundamental for Israeli dance, and also made Neve Tzedek one of the most prestigious neighbourhoods in Tel Aviv.

At the same time, a new process begins in dance education: the first dance program in a regular high school, not in an art school such as Telma Yellin, opens in 1986, at the Alon high school in Ramat Hasharon under the direction of Lea Avraham; and subsequently dozens of dance programs in high schools and junior highs open all over Israel.

Radio host: And now, an archival document

Iris: I am holding the program for *Kyr (meaning wall)* from June 1990, and I am going to describe it for you: its size – 23 by 23 cm, about the size of an A4 sheet of paper. The cover has a humorous title: "Which wall? What Batsheva? Why tractor?" It is 12 pages long and provides some details about the work; it contains the usual information: credits for the composers, dancers, and administration personnel of Batsheva. The latter includes a credit for coat checker Clara Shalem and chief electrician Gaddy Glick. In addition, it holds various articles and commercials, all in early 90s graphics.

Look, Yali, there are no more programs of this sort. Today, you can find credits in the informative pages that dance companies hand out before shows, but the articles have disappeared. In this program, which is more of a booklet, there are actual articles about topics that are directly related to the work, and also contextual topics – for example, an article by Danny Bluestein בלושטיין, describing the process of composing the music, and another interesting example, an article by Tamar Mokady about Fruma and Nissan Heissner, Ohad Naharin's grandparents. If we try to get into

the editor's head, this looks like an attempt to emphasize and establish Ohad Naharin's Israeli identity, after he had come back from 15 years in the United States: This is Ohad Naharin's family history, and it is a personification of the Jewish immigrants' resettlement of Israel-the Aliyah, the Kibbutz and the foundation of the state.

We rarely find such contextual articles in programs nowadays, nor do we find detailed information about the composers and artists. But alongside the articles and information, there is also an informal atmosphere, an attempt to shake everything up with this new spirit, the spirit Naharin brought to Batsheva.

By the way, a digital rendition of this program can be viewed on the Batsheva Dance Company's Archive Website.

We asked Tomer Heymann about the first time he had watched *Kyr*, and its relation to the film he directed years later, *Mister Gaga*.

Tomer Heymann: My first encounter with *Kyr* was by pure chance, and I even brought a certain antagonism with me, I am not sure towards what, but dance wasn't even a part of my world, I had only recently finished army service and moved to Tel Aviv, and I got an offer from my cousin, Naomi Bloch-Fortis who was then in one of her first positions at Batsheva, and she told me about this person who had arrived from New York and his name was Ohad Naharin. I had never heard his name or known of his existence, and she told me she had begun working with him, and did I want to go see a dance performance. I evaded her offer six, seven, eight times, until she finally told me: "Listen Tomer honey, don't do me any favors, I'm leaving you a free ticket at Suzanne Dellal for Friday at noon. That's your last chance. You want to come, come, you don't want to, thanks and goodbye."

So on Friday noon, I went to Suzanne Dellal, I was an entirely different person then, I was someone who had nothing to do with dance, I had a very superficial image of it, that made me think that it was going to be boring and terrible, and that I would fall asleep.

But I went, and this huge magic happened, which I would even say was a turning point in my life, on so many different levels. It's not like 'I saw *Kyr* and went and made *Mister Gaga*'. This means there are 15, 16 years in which Ohad's works became part of my journey growing up, and it's also related to the gay representation in these works, it's related to a window to the world of dance opening up for me, the wish to understand how movement happens in the mind of the person who creates this dance.

The relation or connection I can see between the two, and maybe that also accounts for *Mister Gaga*'s exposure to a wide audience, was that I am not a dancer, I don't want to be a dancer, I don't remember ever wanting to be a dancer, and my connection to *Kyr* at the time, and also to the movie, is as a consumer of culture, as someone who watches it from a distance; and this artform has an effect on his senses and on his selfhood, becomes a very meaningful art.

In this sense, the seeds of my love of dance were sown in *Kyr*. We should also mention Nikmat HaTraktor - The Tractor's Revenge, the rock 'n roll sound, *Echad Mi Yodea, and* the military marches. Maybe also mention Naharin's *Mabul* and *Anaphasa*. These are three works that turn me upside down, and it's a bit of a cliché, but there are times in life when you discover the power of art. In a nutshell, I will tell you that what happens in those 16 years between *Kyr* and *Mister Gaga* is the wish to do some new textual reading of Ohad's work, while Ohad has been refusing for years, almost as an ideology, to discuss his works, to give them any sort of interpretation. *Mister Gaga* dares to create some interpretation between the biography and the dance, to take some liberty.

Yali: So, what is the name, *Kyr*, or wall in English? There are no walls onstage. But this name, this word, can lead to all kinds of thoughts and associations. As in - a metaphoric wall, against which the dancers are throwing their bodies, or a wall as a boundary, or the Separation Wall (long before such a wall existed in Israel). In English, it's written as K-Y-R, - and, according to the English dictionary, it's an abbreviation for "a thousand years" -

So we could say that all of these meanings are subject more or less to the active mind of the spectators. We can also say something more general about the titles Ohad Naharin gives to his works. As we know, Iris, most of his titles are abstract and enigmatic, holding some ambiguity or even mystery, like *Sabotage Baby*, *Anaphasa*, or *Virus by Ohad Naharin.*

Iris: This is Talia Paz, a dancer who participated in *Kyr*. Later on, she danced with the Cullberg (coolberg) Ballet, and today she is the artistic director of the School of the Arts of Dance at Seminar HaKibbutzim College of Tel Aviv.

Talia: I don't think Ohad ever stopped and asked us, the dancers, to sit down and explain why he had chosen that name. But it's a fact. It works. It has been working for 30 years.

Iris: Avi Belleli, musician and music producer, a member of the Nikmat HaTraktor band, recalls:

Avi: Sure, why is it called *Kyr or wall*? - because our guitarist, Ophir Leibovitch, said one night, as we were talking about how to open the show: "We'll do a wall of sound". There was a term like that, talking about guitars. We immediately knew it was very intensive, and Ohad asked: "What is that? What did you call it? What is a wall of sound?" So Ophir explained: "It's like a guitar sound, you feel it like a separation between the audience and the stage". In the end, we did not do that, because it was too intense, it would have been extremely strange to open with a metal-style wall, certainly in Suzanne Dellal at the time, in 1989. But we found our wall, and whoever knows *Kyr* remembers it opens with a sound, and from the sound emerges a scream. This is why it is called Kyr.

Iris: The term "wall of sound" was invented by producer Phil Spector, one of the greatest producers of pop music from the 60s. He invented a technique of lacing multiple layers of sound, creating whole orchestras by combining and duplicating recordings.

Back to Talia Paz:

Talia: The work process for Kyr was very exciting. Let's not forget that Ohad was a young choreographer who arrived at a rather colorless time for Batsheva, bringing with him something new and exciting, a choreographer with tremendous charisma, and working with him in the studio was certainly a memorable experience. I was a young dancer, barely over 19, and although I understood something new was happening, the full realization only came years later. Ohad brought Kyr, a work that is deeply connected to "Israeliness", to Israeli culture. You can say that *Echad Mi Yodea* ('Who Knows One' from the passover haggadah) is undoubtedly the most canonical part of this work. His connection to the rock band Nikmat HaTraktor (The Tractor's Revenge), who were young and restless back then, brought so much energy and novelty. It all happened together in the studio, it was composed together. The movement and steps are together with the music. Rehearsals took place at Suzanne Dellal, and it was truly exciting to come to the studio each morning. They lasted the entire day. He divided the work; in the morning, we worked on group choreographies, and in the evening on the individual pieces. Ohad also used the dancers' personalities, the characters that were in Batsheva back then. You can see it very clearly in *Echad Mi Yodea*, for example. In the sixth question, there was Itzik Galili who had a very jumpy quality to him, and he's the **one** who jumps on the chair each time, or when there's the wave that goes all the way to the end of the circle, and Erez Lotan-Levi, who had a quality that you could call, a bit suicidal, falls, crashes to the floor and gets up again. The costumes were Khaki. We wore Khaki shorts with t-shirts in different colors and what's called a "tembel hat", an Israeli bucket hat. I think they were bought at the Carmel Market or at the outdated Israeli brand ATA store. I think the visual side wasn't yet as well-formulated as it was later on, once Ohad started working with costume designer Rakefet Levy. I remember looking for a shirt in the storage room. What else do I remember? I remember the general rehearsals. It was Ohad's first collaboration with Bambi as lighting designer, and he invented something very interesting, some sort of silvery stripes he taped on the stage diagonally, and they returned light from the stage upwards, creating these diagonal rays of light. And there were the lights at the front of the stage that are used to this day, and called "Batshevot", literally "Batshevas".

Iris: Back to Avi Balelli

Avi: In the first meeting, let us go back a little. We came into the studio at Suzanne Dellal and started playing "Finale". We knew we had an idea that was good for two minutes, three minutes long, but what do we do next? – This "Finale" part was at least 10 minutes long. And we just improvised. Slowly it evolved from rehearsal to rehearsal; Suddenly we knew the movements, Ohad told us to pay attention, for example, if some dancer fell or turned around, that we should respond by adjusting our intensity, or by changing the dynamics. That is, we had some keys that were sort of conducting our improvisation.

Iris: What did the Israeli dance scene look like before Kyr? People sometimes think Batsheva was founded by Ohad Naharin in 1990, so here is some history. Batsheva Dance Company was founded by Baroness Batsheva de Rothschild in 1964. There were no dance companies in Israel at the time, except Inbal Dance Theater. All dance activity was conducted by newly immigrant female artists, whose professional background was German Expressionist Dance. Among them, we can mention Gertrud Kraus, the Ornstein Sisters, and Devorah Bertonov as some of the better-known choreographers of the time, but there were many others.

The performances were called Recitals, and naturally, there was no funding. No funding means there are no salaries for dancers, no money for equipment and set design, and the production value is very low. As a result, performances were scarce, and so was the audience, and everything was semi-professional. Dance classes, which were based on improvisation (as this was the essential technique of Expressionist Dance), were held at the dance studios, and the dancers, mainly female, were selected ad hoc from among the students.

In the 1950s, a few dancers/choreographers/teachers came to Israel and started to teach the methodical, intensive technique of Martha Graham, and to create dances in her choreographic language. Among these were Rena Gluck and Rina Shaham, who founded Dance Stage ("Bimat Machol"), and Anna Sokolow, who founded The Lyrical Theatre in Tel Aviv.

Rothschild's decision was a turning point: to form a professional, well-funded company, with salaries for dancers, who would bring the top choreographers of the time to Israel. Moreover, Martha Graham herself was an artistic adviser. Graham, who was called the “High Priestess of Modern Dance", was at the peak of her career, an awarded choreographer of dozens of masterpieces. She accepted Bethsi-bée's request (Bethsi-bée is Batsheva de Rothschild’s nickname) based on their personal relationship and the financial support Graham had received from her in the 1950s in the US. Many companies worldwide had requested to perform Graham's masterpieces, but that prestigious honor was granted to the Batsheva Dance Company alone, a dance company in a faraway young country in the Middle East, founded only 16 years earlier (the state of Israel was founded in 1948). But it wasn't simple, not for Graham and not for her New York dancers, who harbored a sense of ownership over her work.

This is how things went: each morning, the Batsheva dancers practiced the Graham technique in the studio Bethsi-bée arranged for them in the Bitzaron neighborhood in Tel Aviv. Then they rehearsed. Graham sent video footage of her works performed by her own company in New York, the Batsheva dancers learned the dances from the videos, then some of the New York dancers came to Israel to apply the final touch.

At the end of the process, Graham would arrive herself, several times a year, to work with the Batsheva dancers on their performance. Not necessarily on its technical aspects, but on the meaning, the internal world of dance, the essence of dance according to her artistic worldview. During the Graham years (up until 1974) many of the themes of the works in Batsheva were based on mythological topics: the Greek mythology in **her** works, and stories from the bible as local mythology explored by Israeli choreographers. Such were *Adam and Eve* by Oshra Elkayam-Ronen, *Bat Yiftach (the daughter of Yiftach)*, by Rina Sheinfeld, and *Ein Dor* by Moshe Efrati, all Batsheva dancers now creating for the company.

In 1974, Graham created *Dream*, inspired by the biblical story of Jacob's Ladder, the only dance she created especially for the company, and in which Ohad Naharin performed in the role of Esau. He had only recently started dancing, and his

encounter with Graham was the turning point that made him quit the company and move to New York, embarking on 15 years of study and independent work. In 1990, he was invited to act as artistic director to Batsheva, on a trial basis, טיפה אירוני and *Kyr* was his first work in this role.

Dina Aldor אלדור, Batsheva's Executive Director since 2009.

Dina: In the official chronicles of Batsheva, Kyr, Ohad's first work as artistic director and main choreographer, was truly an earthquake. It felt this way.

It was so thrilling because he did things in real time, like the things that were being made elsewhere in the world. If we think about the 80s for a moment, even just from one perspective, the breakthrough of Flemish dance, of Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker and those working around her, and everything that was done in Europe at the time. Ohad was at the forefront, and he achieved here, with local dancers, all those disruptions that were being made and the novelty that characterized that time in Europe and in the United States. It was very thrilling, very exciting. Ohad, despite him saying that he doesn't refer to the place he is coming from, or to all sorts of national stuff, his works are very local, and even *Kyr* examines us from a different angle.
In the end, that is what is so moving about art, isn't it? It shows us the possibility of looking at things from a different angle.

Yali: I want to reflect on what makes this work, *Kyr*, so significant. What makes people talk about it in terms of a revolution or a new era? If we examine the prior decade in Batsheva, the 80s, we can see it had the greatest number of works created for the company. If we compare it to what happened in the years before. After Batsheva de Rothschild left and withdrew her patronage, the company was left with very little public funding. During this time, there was frequent replacement of artistic directors, who invited young (and you might say less expensive) choreographers to work. The Batsheva archive tells us that 116 works were performed in the 80s, with Moshe Romano and David Dvir as artistic directors, both of whom also danced with the company at the time. Among the Israeli choreographers who were invited, you can find Siki Kol, Alice Dor-Cohen, Igal Perry, Yair Vardi, and other Batsheva dancers.

We also see some well-known American choreographers such as Robert North, Gene Hill Sagan, Robert Cohen and Pearl Lang working with the company, as well as new local and international young artists, such as Nir Ben Gal, Ohad Naharin himself, and New York based choreographers Daniel Ezralow, Mark Morris and David Parsons - all of them on their path to becoming well-known dance makers.

It's also worth remembering that the company's morning classes in the 80s were based on classical Ballet. This is after two decades of a very specific Graham technique. The aesthetics of most of the works of this era were formalist and abstract as well, an incarnation of modernism. However, we can detect some of the first signs of a search for novelty in dance language, naturally introduced by the younger generation.

Then, at the onset of the 90s, *Kyr* brings something else completely. I think It is perhaps the most narrative piece of Ohad Naharin's -
It is danced angrily, spitefully, chaotically. It has a rock 'n roll unrest, a stubborn streak, but also moments of softness and melancholy. It's noisy, ritualistic, and filled with Israeli symbols and representations.

That's what makes it revolutionary.

No more beautiful, aesthetic movements, no more universal, abstract ideas, but reality, hardcore. The bodies are real, the bodies move, they work and suffer, they are in pain, they fall apart. In this sense, *Kyr* is a postmodern work in essence, because it breaks apart the traditional, aesthetic ideals of modern dance.

Having said that, what are the markers of Israeliness in this work, and what do they represent outside of the fictitious world of dance?

Iris: Back to Avi Balelli.

Avi: In our meetings, Ohad said the work was about nationality, society, community, and Israeli myths. I remember a lot of talk about the Palmach in those conversations (the Palmach was an elite force of the underground Jewish army during the British Mandate). Now it's an entirely different Israel. We talked about the

Palmach, to us it was a symbol, there is a reason that *Echad Mi Yodea* is performed in a Khaki Palmach uniform; all of *Kyr* is in this Palmach uniform.

Yali: The year 1990 in Israel began a decade of turbulent events: the IDF retreat from Lebanon, the Gulf War, the Temple Mount riots, the Oslo Accords between Israel and the PLO, a peace agreement with Jordan, suicide attacks on buses and in cities, and the assasination of prime minister Itzhak Rabin.

I think *Kyr* recognized the crisis of Israeli society. The dance gave a disillusioned view of reality, history, and tradition, and it outlined the future while expressing the great disappointment, fear, and despair of the time.

Echad Mi Yodea, or "who knows one", had become unprecedentedly famous and popular in Israel, taking its place in the cultural canon. It seems it had a life of its own and has since traveled far from its mothership, *Kyr*. How did that come about? And why is that part of the canon? What makes a certain work canonical?

Iris: Let us define what a canon is. I am looking at the Encyclopedia of Ideas on the net: the word comes from ancient Greek, and its original sense was a straight rod or a bar; a rule, a standard of excellence. A secular meaning, the one we use today, was added in the 18th century: a selection of masterpieces considered authoritative, eternal, and fundamental in arts and culture. Canonization is the culmination of processes of selection, appraisal, and measurement; in other words, it marks certain texts as better than others. Concerning questions of identity and values, the limits of the canon define the borders of social groups, therefore, the canon is a political issue, a territory of struggles. In this sense, this podcast is also an attempt to delineate the canon of contemporary dance in Israel, and our awareness of this significance is both challenging and intimidating.

Yali: With this in mind, I think we can define *Echad Mi Yodea* as canonical. First of all, we can see that it is performed endlessly. It is danced repeatedly, in different contexts and situations. It's included in other popular works by Naharin, like *Anaphasa* and *Deca Dance*, and it reached its peak in 2014 at the event for

Batsheva's 50th anniversary, at the Opera House in Tel Aviv, when it was performed by 100 dancers. It was a truly spectacular sight.

Avi: The Passover Seder was a key topic in this conversation. Ohad had an idea of working on one of the Passover songs, and the truth is we started with *Ha Lachma Anya (another traditional Passover song).* That was the first thing we tried, *Ha Lachma Anya*. We tried it, and I remember Ohad was sitting in the chair and we were playing, improvising, in a small room in Giv'atayim. These were the first meetings we had with Ohad about the music. We saw him making strange movements in his chair, and we were playing *Ha Lachma Anya,* and after a few meetings, we suddenly said: "let's try *Echad Mi Yodea"*. Green, the keyboardist, and I – it was before computers and all - we would be working with samplers and going to Tel Aviv Central Bus Station to collect cassette tapes of world music. We would sample them. And basically, the Echad Mi Yodea samples are from Afghan music; and there was a loop we liked, a few percussion loops, and one of them is what everybody knows from *Echad Mi Yodea*; and we said, "let's give it a shot". We played that loop, it sounded like Tom-Ta-Ta-Ta-Tom-Ta-Ta=Ta, and I started singing, and we just felt that that was it, we nailed it. Immediately came the additional barrages of drums that everybody recognises, those big boom-booms, and as it happens with good songs that it takes minutes to write music to, we figured out how to make it into *Echad Mi Yodea*.

Iris: It is especially interesting to examine the distribution processes outside of the professional and artistic dance scene. It can be said, quite confidently, that *Echad Mi Yodea* is the most popular dance that is performed in dance programs in schools in Israel, as well as in the graduation ceremonies of private dance studios. But that is not all. Searching YouTube for the dance, we found dozens of videos from elementary schools to high schools.

Yali: This, for example, is a video uploaded in 2012 by the Eli Cohen Elementary School in Kiryat Malachi in southern Israel. It has about 10,000 views, and it shows the pupils in "Dance for Passover Echad Mi Yodea" (this is the title of the video). We see about 30 to 40 children, 7 or 8-year-olds, many of them of Ethiopian descent, dressed in their everyday clothes. They're sitting on small, gray

school chairs that have been taken out of the classroom and arranged in rows.

The dance instructor, whose name is Siman-Tov Sfar-Adi, is listed as the choreographer of the piece!
She sits in the front, demonstrating the movements. The dance moves they perform together seem similar to Naharin's original choreography: they sit with their legs spread and move their back from side to side to the drumbeat, they do the wave, the famous back movement of *Echad Mi Yodea*, they get up together, sit down together, wave their hands above the chairs and walk around them, sit down and get up again.

Iris: Here is another video, uploaded in 2015. Its title is "Flash Mob Echad Mi Yodea, Lea Goldberg School Netanya". We see a community event: parents and families, children, babies, grandparents, all of them holding cameras, of course, and in the center of the school's yard, boys and girls in junior high, dressed in black suits and white shirts (inspired by the 1993 version of KYR). They dance and sing *Echad Mi Yodea* using black plastic chairs. And I ask myself, do any of them know the original dance? And does it even matter?

Edna: How does dance get in? Dance gets in, you could say, through the expansion of new practices of memory in Israeli schools. We usually do not see dance in the canonical ceremony.

Yali: Prof. Edna Lomsky-Feder is a sociologist in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology and the School of Education at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. We spoke with her about the ethnographic research she conducted in the late 90s on school ceremonies.

Edna: The physical practices in traditional Israeli school ceremonies were extremely disciplined, militaristic, and masculine, so to speak. Practices that are more readily associated with the masculine voice. What we see is that from the 1990s onwards, practices of dance are widely integrated.
I worked on about 110 ethnographies of school memorial ceremonies; they were composed of around 40% dance practices. Now, for me, dance practice is incorporating a more feminine component into the ceremony, and that goes hand in

hand: as military practices are cut down, dance gets more and more incorporated into the ceremony.

Yali: And what do you think makes *Echad Mi Yodea* so popular in school ceremonies?

Edna: "Popular"? That's arguable. I think most dances performed before were usually very different from *Echad Mi Yodea*. They are expressive, dramatic dances, performed by women, girls. On that background, we see, at the end of the 90s, the entrance of *Echad Mi Yodea* into this ceremonial scene, and although I cannot say it floods the ceremonies, this performance is highly interesting for various reasons.
But to answer your question, where does it enter, I think *Echad Mi Yodea* is superficially perceived as easy to dance, **as if** it does not require virtuosity. Now, the incorporation of *Echad Mi Yodea* is highly meaningful to me, for several reasons. First, it introduces men into the dance scene. Until then, there were almost always just girls dancing, only female students. With *Echad Mi Yodea,* boys enter too, they enter the ceremony as dancers. Secondly, it has a critical aspect, in the sense that it takes apart that very military element, right? There is something very disciplined, organized about it, but it also takes it apart. So inside the dance, we have a direct dialogue, even a subversive dialogue, you could say, with the military practices. And while previous dances were expressive and more about mourning women, *Echad Mi Yodea* incorporates a component of critique into the dance practice. It takes apart from within the elements of a disciplined, military, masculine body. And the last point is that there is an incorporation, you could say, of canon into the dance.

Yali: In what sense?

Edna: I think this dance is closely associated with Ohad Naharin, it is associated with Batsheva. And here, by the way, the different variations on *Echad Mi Yodea* are very interesting to see, but the framework of the movements still exists, and it is very different if we compare it to other dances made usually for the ceremonies, which provide creative liberty to the school choreographer; and to put it gently, it operates on a continuum of dance that is not necessarily of superior quality. And this is all the more pronounced in comparison to the written texts used in the

traditional ceremonies, because there are many canonical works with high standards of artistic quality, texts like poetry, for example, that are more sophisticated and considered high culture. *Echad Mi Yodea* starts creating a certain balance inside the ceremony between the dance and the songs or poems. Another point is that there is an element of continuity here. While the dance is usually, as I had said, a local improvisation and expression of each school, with no year-to-year continuity; [and without this sort of internal dialogue that exists between the texts – that is, there is a very distinctive repertoire in the ceremonies, that creates continuity through the songs and the poems that are being recited; in the sense that there is some sort of a ceremonial language.] *Echad Mi Yodea* begins to create some sort of a **canon** of dance, which establishes a certain continuity in the ceremonial language of the Memorial Day ceremony.

Iris: *Echad Mi Yodea* has a choreographic structure: a semicircle of chairs along the whole piece, beginning to end. The circle is a fundamental component in Choreography; it is a theme, a central motif, and also opens up a view of a historical timeline. In 2013, there was a comprehensive exhibition in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, titled "Out of the Circle: The Art of Dance in Israel.

Curator Talia Amar defined the circle as a fundamental structure in Israeli dance. It is rooted in the adoption of East European folk dances as a social practice among the Jewish pioneers of the second Aliyah, in the first decade of the twentieth century. These young socialist Zionists, most of them men, exchanged the Hassidic dance of the diaspora for the Hora, a folk dance originating in Romania. According to historical descriptions, they spent entire nights absorbed in the Hora circles, holding hands and dancing, barefoot, burning with fever.

How did the Hora become a collective marker of Israeliness? It was probably the combination of various elements: the simple steps, which are easy to pick up, so that even if you don't know them, you can let the circle drag you along; the physical proximity, created by the holding of hands, shoulders or waists; having an eye contact with all dancers, you can see everybody at the same time; the fact that everybody is equally close to the center, the sense of togetherness, and the rejection

of anything outside of the circle. All these turn the Hora into the paradigmatic dance of the Zionist-socialist Israeliness

In the third Aliya, when East European folk dance was gradually being replaced by original local folk dance, the circle became a defining structure. These new Israeli folk dances, created for example by Rivka Shturman, Leah Bergstein, and many other women choreographers, were intensively distributed in the folk-dance festivals at Kibbutz Dalia in northern Israel since 1944. Later on the distribution was operated by the Dance Department of the *Histadrut* (Labor Union), through organized educational programs, events of public dancing; and in future years, by official state institutions, which integrated Israeli folk dance into a structured organized activity in schools all over the country as well as in the army. Anyone who grew up in Israel in the 1940s, 50s, 60s, and even the 1970s took part in folk dancing. In a circle.

After marking the historic timeline of the circle, we can return to *Echad Mi Yodea*. In *Echad Mi Yodea,* the defining circle becomes a semicircle. The closed traditional structure of the circle opens up for a performative act, which is meant to be viewed on stage, with a distinction between performers and audience. And if we want to approach choreography as text, the effect of the semicircle is that its front faces us, the audience, and in this way, we are the complementary part of that circle, therefore, we participate in the dance.

Radio host: And now, the choreographic DNA of *Echad Mi Yodea:* a semi-circle, repetition, accumulation, a movement language diverging from the dance code of the time, a live music rock band on stage.

Radio host (from the Israeli radio archives): “The Deputy Minister of Housing, Meir Porush, demands that the participation of the Batsheva Dance Company in the "Jubilee Bells" show for Israel’s 50th anniversary be canceled, or that the piece *Echad Mi Yodea*, in which the dancers are to go onstage in underwear, be modified.

Radio host: This is what journalist Lital Levin wrote in *Haaretz* in May 1998, in her column "13 Years Ago Today".

Yali: We spoke to Naomi Bloch Fortis, who is currently the Executive Director of the "Mekudeshet" festival in the Jerusalem Season of Culture. Naomi was the co-artistic director and general director of Batsheva Dance Company until the end of 2009. She spoke with us about how the dramatic events of the Jubilee Bells affected the company.

Noami: So, I think that one, the company's ethos stood up in all its might and glory and became significantly stronger. The core value of creative freedom and freedom of expression, and artistic freedom, which has probably accompanied Batsheva since its foundation. The rebellion of the first dancers against an artistic director several decades before the events emerged in all its power, from the dancers and the entire team, and, led to the dramatic culmination of *this* crisis. I think it was such a defining experience for an organization that it was even passed on to the next generations, who never experienced Jubilee Bells or were a part of it. It breathes inside the DNA, it breathes inside the organization's veins to this very day. I think you can see it in other tests the company faced over the years; it was a huge and meaningful test back then.

There was an extremely dramatic moment, a few hours before the show, with Ohad. They kidnapped him to the Israeli president's house in Jerusalem, literally kidnapped him! There were no cell phones back then, and so I didn't know. At the president's house, he was alone under unprecedented pressure and with an explicit threat to the company's existence. There, at the president's house, Ohad said: *Okay, we will do what you ask us to do, and I will do the show as you ask, and I will resign.* At this time, the dancers were already on the bus, on their way to Jerusalem to perform. There were already all kinds of rumors on the radio. When we arrived, Ohad entered the bus, so very pale, there's even a video where you can see him, how pale he was at that moment, and he told the dancers exactly what it was about. He said, *"They put a lot of pressure on me, I decided that we would do it as they ask, but I'm resigning."* And then all the dancers jumped up and said: "We resign too". And I jumped up and said: "I resign too. We are not going to perform; we don't care what happens".

Iris: Avner Hofstein is an investigative reporter at the online newspaper The Times of Israel and a lecturer in Media and Communication studies, tells the story of Jubilee Bells from his point of view:

Avner: A lot of questions were involved. There was the question of modesty in the public arena, there was the question of whether they are entitled to this place, the space between artistic freedom and public funding. There were a lot of questions regarding the political culture of the Netanyahu era, who, in his first government – we forget this man is prime minister since our youth, more or less – brought many polarized struggles to extremes, whether intentionally or involuntarily. The polarization between law enforcement and politics, and the social polarization, including the one between ultra-orthodox and secular.

In that context, it was interesting to see how the non-institutionalized ultraorthodox media, I am not even sure there was an institutional ultraorthodox media at the time, saw this act, of a supposed attempt of forcing Batsheva on the Jubilee event, as an opportunity to examine secular society, which they perceived as degenerated, escapist, hedonistic and corrupt in the sense of the last days of Pompeii. Most of the radio hosts I was listening to were attacking the seculars quite harshly. Again, I don't even know if it was because of Jubilee Bells, or perhaps Jubilee Bells was just a platform, and an opportunity to go to the barricades. In this context you could of course see, for example, how Israel's Independence Day, as celebrated by secular society, or as the secular and religious society perceives it, as a vacation day with no religious significance, but rather a civilian one, how much the ultra-orthodox communities are estranged from these feelings. This is a difficult question. We understand that important artistic institutions such as Batsheva Dance Company, Habima National Theater, or the film foundations cannot exist without the support of the state. It's not like in the United States, where you have a potential audience of more than 300 million people. We are a relatively small society, and if we want quality in the arts, just like in science, we need some kind of state funding. And so, the question that automatically arises is whether the state can and should fund things that are supposedly, according to some people, undermining its very existence. And of course whoever believes the state has the right to censor the arts

because of its support, expands the question by saying: "okay, so Jubilee Bells is not a regular artistic performance that people purchase tickets to with their own money, it's a show for the general public, and so it is subject to certain standards of modesty." Now, of course, in the context of Batsheva, I will say this is complete nonsense, because Batsheva chose to perform a segment from a work with a well-justified artistic statement, and so the demand to censor them by wearing long tights (gatkes) or whatnot is insane.

Yali: What are the connections between *Kyr* from 1990 and Ohad Naharin's latest work, *2019*?

2019 sums up three decades of work, some more political than others.
But *2019*, like *Kyr*, expresses a well-defined, coherent political stance. Both of these works cast a painful, disillusioned look at their reality. And *2019*, like *Kyr*, has clear markers and representations of Israeliness and Israeli identity. We will hear more on “2019” in our next episode, “Look at yourselves”.

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You can read more about the content of this episode on our website, where you will also find images and links to relevant materials.

Music by order of appearance:

Echad Mi Yodea and an instrumental track from *Kyr* - Nikmat Hatraktor and Ohad Naharin.

Echad Mi Yodea - Traditional song performed by the Malka family, uploaded to YouTube on March 26th, 2013. Retrieved in March 2020.

Osher - Lyrics: Avraham Broshi. Music: Sam Simlu. performed by Fredi Dura, from "Artzenu Haktantonet: the songs of the 1950s".