

# **Hebrew sensitivity and dancing body poetry**

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## **Abstract**

After some thoughts on the hebrew sensitivity concerning the divine, a selective historic approach will be presented , taking into account that the important historic events influence the sensibility and the practices. The jewish monument “Sublime House” of Rouen will be mentioned and a choreography of the jewish artist Steven Cohen given there in 2013 will be commented .

## **Introduction**

The following presentation is an excerpt from a “Journey of Studies in Dance” given at the Evry University (France) on September 20<sup>th</sup> 2017 and published actually as “Magic of Dance” followed by “Choreographic Transversalities” (Editor L’Echappée Belle , Bagnolet France 2019)

The author is Delegate of the Association “The Sublime House of Rouen”. This monument of the 11th century , discovered in 1976 is the most ancient Hebraic monument conserved in France and probably in Europe.

A jewish community lived in Normandy during 1000 years till 1306 when Jews were expelled from France .

## **Hebrew Sensitivity**

How does Hebrew sensitivity can have anything to do with the poetry of the dancing body?

Answering this question implies the existence of a Hebrew sensitivity, of a specific sensitivity clearly identified. Now, I'm sorry for you, such sensitivity, very homogeneous, well defined, does not exist! Here is a joke borrowed from Jewish humor: "Put together two Jews, you will have three opinions" . Because, the plurality of identities is, without doubt, one of the major traits of Jewishness, which constitutes its wealth and helps it to survive. Because plurality of ideas, as well as a strong taste for debate, are two effective means of moving forward, of adapting continuously to a world in perpetual motion.

At the time of the Temple in Jerusalem, there were at least five currents within Judaism: the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes, the Zealots and the Publicans.

In the Middle Ages there were the Misraïm, who lived in the Middle East, the Sephardis, in Southern Europe, and the Ashkenazis, in Northern and Eastern Europe, each one with different customs and rites. Following incessant migrations, these old divisions have largely faded and the current opposition would be rather between the Orthodox, who can be qualified as conservatives or traditionalists, and the Liberals, who can be described as progressives and who, few people know, are the majority in the world. Not to mention atheistic or agnostic Jews, who are probably the most numerous in many occidental countries .

Without a well identified Hebraic sensitivity, I can give my personal conception of Judaism. For me, it consists of essentially two points : a relationship to God and a relationship to the Other, with a Capital Letter in both cases :

God is at the same time the Unknowable, the Unpresentable, the Unnamable, and yet it bears a Name (YHVH), He manifests Himself under many names and has a project for the world He created. As for the Other, the one we meet every day, we think we know, we love or hate, and yet he(she) remains forever unknown. As unknown as we are to ourselves. Perhaps, because the Other is the hidden face of ourselves, the one we want to ignore.

## Judaism and the dancing body

So, what is the relationship between Judaism and the dancing body?

To answer this question, I will use a historical approach, because the events of history cannot be irrelevant, neither on the sensibility nor on the practices of each one. I shall proceed to a selection of periods and events and study their relationship with their global evolution of the Hebraic culture.

### Paleolithic Period

As far back as we can go, man has always practiced dance to enter into communication with the Divine. On the walls of the Paleolithic caves, we found scenes of dance associated with the trance. In the trance, the rhythm of the drum is similar to the beating of the heart that is perceived by the fetus, not by hearing but by pressure on his body. Pressure coming from outside - *which is an experience of otherness* - enters into resonance with the interior and puts the body into movement. **To address God, body language has, therefore, very likely, preceded the word.**

### Ancient times

Paul Fenton, a great specialist in Jewish mysticism, recalls that "**dance exists from the origins of the three Abrahamic monotheisms**".

King David dances around the Holy Ark, rejoicing in the return of the Torah, which the Philistines had stolen. "*All my (body) members celebrate you O Lord*," exclaims King David, who is manifesting thus the exaltation of God by a bodily expression.

According to specialists, it is in this choreography that we must seek the origin of the rocking of the body, from front to back, observed by the Jews during the prayer. They sway forward to manifest their love of God, and backward to manifest their fear of God.

The dance that was practiced in synagogues in ancient times remains present in certain rituals, particularly at the "Simchat Torah" celebration, marking the end of the annual cycle reading of the Torah (every week we read a section of the Torah, called "parasha", and we start again, with the same passage, the following year). During this festival, the faithful parade around the reading platform (the "bimah"), wearing in their arm the scrolls of the Torah, singing and dancing.

## Middle Ages

Important research has been conducted, the latter years, to discover the songs heard in the synagogues in the Middle Ages, the songs in weddings or circumcision, as well as the songs of the **minstrels**, Jewish troubadours who traveled around the world. Twelfth century manuscripts containing neumatic notations were found in the "guenizah" (deposit) of the Synagogue Ben Ezra in Cairo.

As regards dance, no manuscript was found that would enlighten us on the practices of this time. But, no doubt, the persecutions that Jews were then suffering, especially from the Crusades and even more by the Inquisition, were not resulting to the expression of bodily rejoicing. The body was suffering far too much : pogroms, torture and pyre to be able to express happiness.

The mystical current then took refuge in the study of the Torah (the written Law) and the Talmud (the oral Law). Hence the importance of Academies that flourished at that time and among them the **Academy of Rouen** is one of the most beautiful jewels. This current was mainly incarnated in Kabbalah, whose preoccupation was to preserve the esoteric tradition of Judaism, by studying the secret doctrine of the Torah. This culminated at the end of the thirteenth century, to the publication of the Zohar, sometimes regarded as the third holy book of Judaism.

To illustrate the vividness of this mystical current, I will mention a meeting held in Rouen, about 1220, under the direction of Master Menahem Vardimas. The Master had invited, on that day, a large and prestigious audience to listen to the mystic Samuel, nicknamed "the Prophet of Truth" who delivered a sermon on the "Canticle of the Sea", which Moses and the children of Israel sang after crossing unhesitatingly the Red Sea, to thank God for the miracle accomplished. After Moses had finished singing, his older sister, Myriam the Prophetess, "took the tambourine in her hand; and all the women followed with tambourines and dances".

We see that this hymn, praise to God, would not have been accomplished without this feminine intervention, without this participation of women to this song of redemption. This is a reference to Kabbalah, for which the world created by God is indissolubly, consisting of the male principle and the female principle.

## 18th century

This medieval mystical current will re-emerge with vigor in the 18th century, in Eastern Europe, in a movement of religious renewal called Hassidism that remains still much alive in our days through the current Loubavitch Hassidism which insists on joyful communion with God, that must express itself by singing and dancing, that is, by the body and not by the mind. One of the major innovations of Hassidism was the introduction of collective dances to celebrate this Communion.

Note, however, that in Hassidic dances, men and women are separated and women are practically absent, a fact which, from my point of view, demonstrates the way it remains for the fundamentalists to travel in order to re-discover the foundations of Judaism.

### 2013 : The Dance of Steven Cohen in the Sublime House of Rouen

When the South African performer, who describes himself as a "white, Jewish and homosexual monster", visited for the first time the Sublime House, the shock he felt was so violent that he wanted to pay homage to "this historic and memorial place". He settled down, barely dressed, in the middle of the low, damp and cold room, lit by the light of a candle alone. For hours, he performed a kind of motionless dance, which fascinated the spectators. Dressed with ridiculous paraphernalia, he moved, imperceptibly, accessories clinging to his body, like so many instruments of torture evoking the death camps. He was totally absorbed in his thoughts and we felt him in total communion with the Divine, beyond space and beyond time. Personally, I was unable to take my look away from this sepulchral image and I put a long time to turn away from this vision, both sublime and nightmarish. The memory that I kept [of this performance] is that of an exceptional moment, equivalent in intensity to the most beautiful choreographic moments that I was given to live.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I will let Steven Cohen explain the meaning of his choreographic work:

(*from an interview to a local paper "La terrasse"*)

"I implement a very refined, minimalist approach, mixing installation and performance.

I will use the light of the candle and stay barefoot, two elements culturally very evocative.

Being barefoot evokes the figure of the wandering Jew, the respect of the sacred ground, rituals of mourning, Moses in front of the burning bush, or Isadora Duncan and the shock of contemporary dance.

This space [he speaks of the Sublime House] addresses a message not only to the Jewish community but to humanity, and calls for mutual respect between cultures. With a very striking costume, without didacticism, I put myself artistically in a situation of risk, trying to bring back to life the body of this place.