



Peoplehood, Embodied.

Erica Goldman

"You don't have to know a dance to do a dance." I first said this to campers two decades ago at Camp Alonim in California when, as the Israeli dance director, I'd play a song and watch kids start to drift away from the dance floor because, as they'd say, "I don't know this one." I knew that they already had everything they needed to do the dance: the basic steps (*mayim*, *yemenite*, *cherkessia*!) and the understanding of how Israeli dance choreography works (*chorus*, *verse*, *repeat*!). What they were missing was recognition of what Israeli dancing represents: a welcoming to an extremely forgiving circle, a rich cultural delight with a very low barrier to entry.

At the most basic level, the Israeli dances taught at most Jewish summer camps are simple and repetitive by design. The very nature of *folk* dances denotes that they are made explicitly for the *people*; the average untrained individual (or self-conscious pre-teen who just wants to have fun with their friends). The dancers hold hands, so when one starts to go the wrong way, the community helps set them on course again. Someone falters, and the dancers on either side help them back to their feet. The pattern of steps repeats, so the new quickly becomes familiar. This is folk dancing, the literal meaning of *Rikudei Am*; it is also radical invitation to Jewish peoplehood, to "*Am*," and to an embodied joyful relationship with both Israel and diaspora, as Israeli dancing is actually a global communal phenomenon.

The modern Israeli folk dance movement [predates](#) the state of Israel. During the first waves of immigration, or *aliyot*, to then-Palestine, immigrants brought with them the national dances of their home countries, like the *hora* and the *polka*. The same pioneering spirit that animated Eastern Europeans to revive and speak Hebrew, work together to build *kibbutzim*, and learn farming and agriculture in a new climate far from their homes also created a desire to express themselves through dances that represented their new reality and the new world they were building. Original Israeli folk dance choreographies were at first disseminated through festivals and then via folk dance weekends and retreats, many of which still take place annually in communities around the world.

Today new Israeli dances are choreographed at the rate of about [250 per year](#), and of course dancers have taken to utilizing technology and social media to share them. Weekly Israeli dance sessions take place in cities across the globe, from [Los Angeles](#) to [New York City](#) to [Milan](#) to [Melbourne](#) to of course the [many, many sessions in Israel](#). Thousands of people gather to dance the same steps to the same music for an hour or two or ten in deeply pluralistic, multigenerational circles, representing all the many tribes and cultures of Israel. When are so many Jews—and non-Jews!—gathered together and not riven by disagreement or internal strife? Jewish summer camps, some during Friday night *oneg* celebrations, some on Saturday nights after a *havdalah* ceremony, some daily at lunch or morning flag-raising, provide an entry point to this Jewish collective effervescence.

When “you don’t have to know a dance to do a dance” became my catchphrase and something of a rallying-cry for campers, I didn’t realize that I, and the camp model itself, was tapping into a deeply Jewish idea. Doing-before-knowing is a basic tenet in Jewish tradition, the foundational philosophy of the pivotal moment of receiving the Torah: *na’aseh v’nishma* - we will do and [then] we will hear (Exodus 24:7). This is how the Jews at Mount Sinai understood the assignment: action will lead to understanding, deed matters, do first and study later. In fact, so much of what we know is learned first in the body and only later in the mind. A child gets in the habits of handwashing and teeth brushing far before they can comprehend what germs or plaque are, a kid in an observant home knows which spoon to use for cereal and milk before diving into the nuanced laws of *kashrut*, a camper sings along with *oseh shalom* before understanding how complicated and painful a longing for peace can be. Much of what is so rich and profound about the Jewish summer camp experience is the opportunity to try, to do, to bring one’s whole body to the task. Understanding will follow, and perhaps a deep appetite will take the young Jew into a world of study— whether into the thousands of Israeli dances and hundreds of dance sessions that exist, or the intricacies of other areas of Jewish culture and thought, thanks to the radical invitation to join the dance that camp offers.

Erica Goldman has been an engineering linguist, a high school English teacher, a nonprofit Chief Program Officer, and has taught Israeli dancing on five continents (so far!). A two-time Brandeis University graduate, Erica holds an MBA as well as a Masters in Jewish Professional Leadership and is a grateful Wexner Fellow/Davidson Scholar. She has been an Educator for the Foundation for Jewish Camp’s Cornerstone Fellowship for many years and is the Founding Director of Ma’agal, an initiative to improve Israeli dance education at schools and camps across the nation.