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Overview: Jewish Dance

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As in biblical times, dance once again became a form for religious expression. The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, and his followers danced in circles, with increasing fervor, seeking a kind of ecstasy through their repeated movements. The dancers would sing a wordless melody (*niggun*) as they moved, and sometimes their rebbe would dance on his own before the group--creating new movements for the circle to pick up and integrate. This kind of circle dancing, still practiced in some Hasidic communities today, could last for hours.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, another kind of Jewish dance emerged: Israeli folkdance. Pioneers who came to the land of Israel from across Europe brought with them their own native dances. Using this material they created Israeli folkdances, expressing their passion and desire to return to the Promised land. Dancing barefoot, with fast movements like leaping and running, Israeli folkdances became an important form of expression for new immigrants. As the new state of Israel emerged, folk dancing became a national pastime. Gradually, Israeli dancing spread to Jewish communities all over the world, becoming an important way for Jews in the Diaspora to connect to the Jewish state. Israeli dance has also expanded its repertoire as Jews from different cultural backgrounds, including Yemen and Ethiopia, have contributed to the beauty and diversity of Israeli folk dance.

In more recent times, Jewish choreographers and dancers throughout the world have explored Jewish themes in modern dance. For example, the Avodah Dance Ensemble, founded by Joanne Tucker, has created many modern dance pieces inspired by Jewish liturgy, and has taken its work to congregations and prayer services around the world. Sometimes set in a concert setting and sometimes designed for the synagogue, new Jewish dance ensembles are synthesizing our long history of worship and expression with a renewed passion for dance.

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