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The Jewish Dancing Body: Body Image in Jewish Folk Dance

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

THE JEWISH DANCING BODY:
BODY IMAGE IN JEWISH FOLK DANCE

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

PROGRAM IN WOMEN'S STUDIES AND GENDER STUDIES

BY

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ABSTRACT

Throughout my life as a dancer, I often wondered if body image issues were purely found in Western concert dance (such as ballet and modern dance) and if folk dance instilled a sense of ownership over one's body. It was apparent to me that being asked to stare at yourself in the mirror for hours on end in a ballet class, or any other dance style, forced you to see every tiny defect in your body. For me personally, this caused a lot of body dysmorphia and body image issues that I carry to this day. While some folk dance is done as performance, the initial reason for the dance is for the community and for the dancer alone. It is a means of celebrating and expressing the dancer's feelings. Based on my readings and understanding of Jewish folk dance, in Jewish culture, dance is primarily used as a means of celebration and formation of an identity. There is a place for both men and women in Jewish folk dance, but we will come to understand that in many sects of Judaism women are kept in the private sphere while men alone are allowed to perform in the public sphere. This thesis will explore how body image may manifest for women in Jewish folk dance. I will use the literature and autoethnography to look at a number of questions including: will self-esteem increase when gender is removed from the equation, or does making dance gender neutral force women to restrict their movement and remove their femininity? What are the similarities and differences for how Hasidic/orthodox women feel about their dance roles? Is there something specific about Jewish folk dance that differs from how other styles of folk dance when it comes to feelings of body image? These are the types of

questions I believe can be answered by looking at body image in performance dance and Jewish folk dance.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER ONE: THE IDEAL BODY AND BODY IMAGE	4
CHAPTER TWO: JEWISH FOLK DANCE	14
Hasidic Dance	15
Israeli Folk Dance	17
Concluding Thoughts	23
CHAPTER THREE: IN MY OWN BODY	25
Methodology	25
Context	26
Impact of Clothing	28
Background and Culture	30
Impact of Mirrors	32
Feedback from Teachers and Others	34
Style of Dance	38
Body Related Themes	39
Limitations	42
CONCLUSION	43
REFERENCE LIST	46
VITA	49

INTRODUCTION

When I was three years old, my mother put me in a tap and ballet combination class along with some of the other Jewish girls that went to my preschool. In this class, we all learned to shuffle ball change, *tendu*, *plie*, and leap to our little hearts' content. As we grew up, more and more of my Jewish girlfriends dropped out of dance classes. School work, sports, and studying for their *Bat Mitzvahs* became more important to them. My dance studio became a second home to me; one that I spent more time in than the home I shared with my parents. I took hours upon hours of dance classes every week and helped teach classes. I would do anything to stay in the place that I loved. Like many girls my age, I went to every intensive and dance camp I could find hoping to further my technique. Each new discipline of dance was one step closer to a dream. As the years went on, I decided that dance was the only thing I could see myself doing in college. I was nervous but confident that I would get into the school of my dreams and would be able to study dance consistently without the distractions of everyday life. I got into the State University of New York at Buffalo's dance program, and I could not have been more excited to get started. I wanted to dance in the student company and eat up every opportunity that came my way.

It is at this point in life that young adults start to lose their childlike bodies and morph into the adults they will become. This often comes with changes to one's weight. There is an expression of gaining "the freshman 15", meaning gaining roughly 15 pounds one's freshman year of college. I, on the other hand, gained the freshman 50. Things were starting to go downhill fast. I did not get into the student dance company; I no longer had the exorbitant confidence that

I had in my high school years; I compared myself to every other dancer in my classes and found myself inadequate. It was at this time that it became hard to look at myself in the mirror during dance classes. I could no longer focus on my turn out or how arms were placed; I could only see the weight that I had gained and my lack of ability.

Around this time is when I started to develop issues with my body image. I did not like who I saw in the mirror and did not know how to change it. I was a perfectly healthy dancer within a perfectly reasonable body mass index (BMI) but my body had changed so much over the years that I no longer recognized myself as I stared in the mirror for hours on end trying to perfect my movement. I constantly compared myself with others in my classes. My sense of body image was destroyed. While this is a very personal story, and one that is not easy to tell, it is a common theme amongst many dancers I know.

At 22 years old, I had studied ballet, tap, jazz, modern, baton, Rockette style kick line, and was certified in four levels of Cecchetti ballet. I had an impressive track record but could not shake my body image issues. I never lost my love of dance but stopped practicing it as the years went on and I became even more uncomfortable with my body. That is when I started to think more about my Jewish roots and folk dances that I briefly learned in Hebrew school. There were no mirrors or competitive thoughts in these one-off dance classes. There was only a teacher and a circle of students moving together. I now wonder if many of my body image issues stem from the style of dance I was doing. Would I have the same issues with my body image if I had instead focused my attention on Jewish folk dancing, or any other form of folk dancing? Jewish folk dance includes a lot of dancing in a circle and holding hands, and not focusing on your hip rotation, your core strength, and elongating your neck as a few examples. It is movement simply for the sake of moving and enjoyment. There is a tradition of using dance to celebrate in the

Jewish community. One cannot go to a wedding or *B'nai Mitzvah* without doing the *hora*. The *hora* became the only Jewish dance that I know, and I was hungry to learn more.

Through this thesis, I hope to connect to my Jewish roots and learn more about how Jewish folk dance can affect a woman's self-efficacy, body image, and connection to their own identity. I will first focus on body image and dance in general. Most of what I discuss will come from the ballet and contemporary dance world, but I will explore some folk dance as well. I will then discuss a couple forms of Jewish dancing. In this section, I will focus on Hasidic and Israeli folk dancing, which I have found to be two of the most recognizably Jewish styles of dance in the United States today. After reading about Jewish folk dance, I will take Jewish folk dance classes and describe my personal experience using an autoethnographic approach. Through this autoethnography, and my prior research, I hope to draw conclusions on how Jewish folk dance affects body image for women. My hypothesis is that Jewish folk dance will be an empowering experience and will give women positive body images. I have supplied this introduction to give you, as the reader, a sense of where this idea came from as it is one that is very personal.

CHAPTER ONE

THE IDEAL BODY AND BODY IMAGE

Throughout the dance world, there are many themes that affect how dancers view their bodies. Of course, these may vary from dancer to dancer, but research has found some commonalities. Most of this research comes from Western forms of concert dance, such as ballet, modern, and contemporary. I have found very little research on body image and folk dance, which is unfortunate as it has been observed that body positivity and body image for dancers is directly affected by the style of dance they are performing (Swami and Harris, 2012). While the common ideal for the ballet body is still thin with long limbs, other forms of dance have accepted different body types (Green, 1999; Barr and Oliver, 2016; Reel, Jamieson, SooHoo, and Gill, 2005; Oliver, 2008). As the ballet body is still the idealized form for many Western dance styles, those in charge of dancers (teachers, choreographers, and artistic directors) need to pay particular attention to what they ask of dancers. Dance professor and scholar, Wendy Oliver (2008) aptly points out that there are multiple external factors that can affect body image. Oliver suggests changes in the dance classrooms to make the experience better for how students see themselves. They state,

Based on research, it is clear that there are certain kinds of conditions that tend to produce a negative body image in the dance class. These are a competitive environment, negative comments from the teacher about students' bodies, tight fitting dance clothes, and the constant use of mirrors. Conversely, there are conditions that tend to produce a positive body image in the dance class, such as a focus on sensing movement from within the body (proprioceptive awareness), allowing students to wear clothing of their choice, and de-emphasizing the use of mirrors (2008, p. 24)

Most of the research found for discussion agrees with Oliver's statement, and specifically focuses on tight fitting clothing (or the "uniform"), mirrors, and negative interactions with teachers, choreographers, and artistic directors. Sometimes, the negative impact of the above items can lead to a dancer developing an eating disorder (Reel et al, 2005). This chapter will focus on the three most common things that affect body image for female dancers: use of mirrors, the dance "uniform," and the power dynamics between the dancer and the person in the front of the room.

To completely understand the issues facing dancers today we must understand exactly what is expected of dancers to begin with. What is the ideal dancer body? As previously mentioned, some of this will vary depending on the style of dance (Swami and Harris, 2012). According to Justine J. Reel, Katherine M Jamieson, Sonya SooHoo, and Diane L. Gill, "The ballet body ideal can be traced to the 1930s when choreographer [George] Balanchine introduced ultra thin ballet dancers to exaggerate the long lines" (2005, p. 39).

For decades, the ballet ideal body, as set out by Balanchine, has been the standard for all forms of Western concert dance. Generally, the ideal dance body has followed suit with what Western society has deemed an attractive female body. There are many attributes to this ideal that dancers cannot change even though they will continue to worry about them. How far a dancer can turn out their feet properly (meaning turn out from the hip joint and not the knee) is something that often cannot be changed, yet this feature will greatly affect how a dancer feels about their movement and their own body (Green, 1999). According to Gail Grant's *Technical Manual and Dictionary of Classical Ballet*, turn out is described as "the ability of the dancer to turn his or her feet and legs out from the hip joints to a 90-degree position," (1982, p. 122).

While some dancers have the ability to get closer to this 90-degree goal naturally, others have to work much harder to become more flexible. Other trends for the dancer body found in the Western ideal of a woman's body include a short torso, long legs and arms, and a skinny waist (Oliver, 2008).

Since dance body ideals are still very influenced by Western society stereotypes of female beauty, looking at representation outside of dance is very illuminating. Times have started to change from the early 1990s when supermodels were expected to be extremely skinny. Now we can see representation of many different female body types in clothing advertising including women with curves, larger breasts, wider hips, plus size models, and the list goes on. While this has been an improvement for the representation of women, the dance world is still playing catch up with what types of body it deems desirable. Oliver points out that society places an "enormous pressure" on everyone to look a certain way and to maintain a certain type of body (2008, p. 20).

Oliver is not the only researcher to bring this idea up. In *Belly Dance as an Embodying Activity?: A Test of the Embodiment Model of Positive Body Image*, Marika Tiggemann, Emily Coutts, and Levina Clark, responding to a study of Belly dance in Australia state, "The authors concluded that the thin ideal and body dissatisfaction have become international phenomena, likely due to the increasing globalization of Western media" (p. 198). This statement suggests that the thin body ideal is not one that is just found in concert ballet dance, but in society at large. Some people are born with this ideal body type but for many dancers, they must work to achieve and maintain this figure.

There are a couple of important tools that dancers, teachers, and choreographers use to perfect each movement; these two tools are a uniform and mirrors. To allow teachers,

choreographers, and artistic directors the ability to see the dancer's body, dancers are frequently required to wear a uniform of tighter fitting clothing. The typical ballet uniform for female dancers is a black leotard and pink tights. While this attire allows teachers and choreographers to see the dancer's lines for corrections as needed, it can also make a dancer feel self-conscious as it leaves no room to hide weight or body concerns (García Dantas, Amado Alonso, Sánchez-Miguel, del Río Sánchez, 2018). This uniform may be traumatizing for young girls whose bodies are still changing. Many other forms of Western concert dance have moved away from this uniform and are now allowing dancers to choose their clothing, which permits them to hide certain body parts and show off others (Reel et al, 2005). Granting dancers the right to choose their own clothing also gives the dancer a sense of empowerment. No longer tied to the restrictions of super tight clothing, dancers have the chance to remove focus from parts of their body that they are unhappy with. According to Oliver, in their article *Body Image in the Dance Class* (2008), mirrors and the dance uniform can be more important than teachers and audiences in affecting how students see their bodies.

The mirror has become a staple tool in dance studios around the world for many forms of dance. Dancers and teachers use the mirror to teach choreography, make corrections, and generally to look at bodies in motion. While this tool can be very useful at times, it can also cause a lot of anxiety. According to Oliver, "Students in a dance class are constantly under surveillance by their teacher, their peers, and themselves. The most obvious contributor to self-surveillance is the mirror. The mirror provides constant feedback about the movement and shape of our bodies" (2008, p. 22). This feedback is important as a dancer continues to hone her craft. They can see how they are moving in comparison to their teacher/choreographer, and others in the room. Further, the mirror is not only a place for self surveillance and correction, it also

becomes a way for dancers to compare their bodies to other dancers. This comparison can cause anxiety within the dancer if they feel that their body is not as ideal as another's (García Dantas et al, 2018).

When a dancer looks in the mirror, she is seeing herself as the object. This self-objectification can cause an out of body experience that allows for sharper critique and a harsher view of the dancer's self as they start to view their body as something external (Radell, Keneman, Mandradjieff, Adame, Cole, 2017; García Dantas et al, 2018). Internalizing this objective feeling of one's body "can negatively or positively affect her dance performance in the studio. Perhaps more disturbingly, a dancer's perception of her body influences her perception of herself, or in other words her psychological health." (Radell et al, 2017, p. 135). As dancers become more advanced, they usually become more in tune with their bodies and can therefore use the mirror less. When dancers are younger, or more novice, they will tend to use the mirror more often as a learning tool (Radell et al., 2017). It is at this point that a dancer may become more impressionable about their bodies and find flaws. As we can see, the mirror can be a very useful tool for a dancer but has the potential to cause a lot of harm to self-image. Dancers are not the only ones that can misuse the mirror though. Teachers and choreographers also have a big influence on dancers and how they learn to use their tools in a healthy manner.

Teachers, choreographers, and artistic directors are three roles that are the ultimate authority for dancers and can become role models, or a dancer's enemy. They often hold the power in the room and can affect how a dancer views herself. According to Eliza Larson, in their book chapter entitled *Behind the Curtain: Exploring Gender Equity in Dance among Choreographers and Artistic Directors*, "It should come as no surprise that women outnumber men in the field of dance. [...] Men receive prestigious choreographic opportunities at a rate

disproportionate to their numeric minority in the field. These choreographic opportunities represent positions of leadership and power in the field of dance, further exasperating this imbalance of gender" (2017, p. 39).

According to Larson's research, women comprise roughly 63% of all choreographers in the field, however their work is relegated to smaller stages and less funding than their male counterparts. It is up to the teacher, choreographer, or artistic director to set the standard in the room, including how the mirror will be used and the uniform style. As discussed, both of these items can greatly affect a dancer's self image. In best case scenarios, a dance teacher or choreographer can be a source of inspiration to a dancer and often becomes someone that she can look up to or to whom she feels confident seeking advice. Some teachers, on the other hand, use intimidation and physical force to alter a dancer's body by prodding and touching and manipulating (García Dantas et al, 2018). This teaching style attempts to push the ideal body image on dancers, which can include forcing a dancer's leg to lift higher or pushing a dancer's turn out. This style of teaching is very destructive and can cause damage to the dancer's body (Green, 1999).

According to Jill Green's 1999 study,

...pressure to meet the standards led to dysfunctional habits and strategies such as tucking under, hyperextended knees, forced turnout and a number of other physical ailments, injury, lack of feelings or connectedness and well-being, physical and emotional distress, and pain. Furthermore, participants suggested that the overriding message was not to trust their sensory impulses or take care of their bodies; The teachers were experts who should be obeyed without question or reflection (1999, pp. 90-91).

In addition to physically manipulating a dancer's body, teachers' and choreographers' negative comments can dramatically impact the dancer's self-image (Green, 1999). One study has suggested that a teacher's influence over a dancer is more common in Western concert dance (specifically ballet) than other forms of dance. This same study notes that "the most prevalent

factor noted by participants as the strongest predictor of body dissatisfaction within the conservatory was *teacher* (19.4%; both what they do and what they say), which was roughly twice as prevalent as either *uniform* (11.7%) or *mirror* (11.46%)" (García Dantas et al, 2018, p. 43).

Teachers and choreographers also have the final say on which dancer gets which part in a performance. Many times, dancers find that the smaller/lighter weight dancer will get a better role in a piece over a dancer that does not have the ideal body type (Reel et al, 2005). In addition to the above-mentioned effects a teacher, choreographer, or artistic director can have on a dancer, maintaining a specific weight has been a significant factor. There have been many documented cases of a dance teacher, choreographer, or artistic director telling a dancer that they need to lose weight. Two of the more well-known cases of this behavior discussed in Oliver's article are the stories of Heidi Guenther and Gelsey Kirkland. These circumstances can lead to unhealthy behaviors (Oliver 2008).

Many dancers suffer from eating disorders due to the pressure to maintain a super thin physique. According to a study by Sherrie Barr and Wendy Oliver, "A meta-analysis of 33 studies found the overall prevalence of eating disorders was 16.4% for ballet dancers, as compared to 12% for all dancers combined, which is about three times the level for the general population. This seems to indicate that many dancers were and are striving for the perfect body at considerable expense to their health and well-being" (2016, p. 104). In one extreme case, dancer Heidi Guenther died from cardiac arrest caused by an eating disorder as she was told to lose weight by the artistic director of a ballet company (Oliver, 2008). This higher rate of eating disorders among dancers is cause for extreme concern as they work towards the ideal body type. Reel, Jamieson, SooHoo, and Gill discuss in their work that, "The pressure to fit societal

expectations for appearance and body type may be understood by using the objectification theory which posits that girls and women are socialized to internalize messages from others. Self-objectification is a form of self-consciousness, in which self-monitoring of one's outward appearance is constant and contributes to psychological consequences such as anxiety and disordered eating" (2005, p. 40).

As dancers get older and more advanced in their dance career, the pressures to maintain a certain weight and ideal body image only increase (Reel et al, 2005). It is not only because a dancer becomes more serious in her craft; the ideal ballet body tends to be seen as closer to a prepubescent girl, which explains why a dancer would experience more pressure to lose or maintain a certain weight with age. As with any sport, some dancers take this pressure to the extreme (Reel et al, 2005).

While dance has a history of body image issues, there are many in the community who are battling these stereotypes using techniques such as somatics, which puts the focus away from the outward appearance of the body and puts more emphasis on how the dancer feels as they move. For example, Tiggemann, Coutts, and Clark found that by taking the focus away from the mirror and putting it towards "internal experience" (2014, p. 203), one could have a positive body image while dancing. They state, "Here it was found that the effects of belly dance on positive body image were mediated by reduced self-objectification. This suggests that one mechanism for the observed positive effect lies in the reduction of the relative focus on external appearance and commiserate increase in the relative focus on internal experiences and competencies of the body" (2014, p. 203).

While this study is specifically about belly dancing, others have found the same principle to apply to all forms of dance. Oliver found a similar occurrence in Western concert dance styles

and states, “Because somatics is so focused on the internal sensing of the dance experience, it could serve as a much-needed counterpoint to the more outwardly directed energy of the typical technique class. When dancers pay more attention to bodily sensations than to looking in the mirror, it frees them to develop in a more holistic way” (2008, p. 24). According to Green, not all dancers respond to somatic teaching though. There will always be a careful balance that teachers, choreographers, and artistic directors will need to display between using tools (such as the mirror) and using internalized dance practices.

Dance, being a predominantly female dominated arena in numbers but rather male dominated in power, must also consider the expectations of society at large; it is not immune to the patriarchal ideals that women face on a daily basis. In *Somatic Authority and the Myth of the Ideal Body in Dance Education*, Green stresses this point by stating that,

One explanation for the sense of emphasis on the outward appearance of female bodies may be attributed to a dance culture that embraces the patriarchal values of the larger society. [Susan] Bordo claims that there are differences between how men and women's bodies have been historically disciplined. Often connected to emotion and uncontrolled evil, women's bodies have been associated with “dangerous female desire”. Thus, according to Bordo, in a patriarchal society women's bodies and “appetites require containment and control, whereas male indulgence is legitimated and encouraged” (Green, 1999, p. 92).

This idea of a woman’s body needing to be “contained and controlled” goes back through history in many different societies. It has been specifically prevalent in Western society where women have been seen as secondary citizens to men. While men face their own societal restrictions and ideal body type constraints, it is impossible to ignore the power they wield over women.

Remember that it was George Balanchine, a (white) male choreographer, who established the ideal female ballet body that is still enforced today (Reel et al, 2005). Historically, men have held positions of power in dance companies thus putting women in a lesser role of authority. As

noted above, many artistic directors, choreographers, and teachers identify as men, and it is these men that set the standards for their dancers.

Male leadership is not the case with every form of dance. Styles of folk dance like belly dancing have been led by women and more open to different body types (Tiggemann, Coutts, and Clark, 2014). A study in Australia conducted by Tiggemann, Coutts, and Clark looked at empowering women through belly dance and found that “belly dance is accessible to women of all shapes and sizes” (2014, p. 198). This acceptance of many body types is a welcomed relief in the dance world, particularly as belly dance (and other styles of folk dance) has become more popular in the physical fitness realm.

I am of the belief that changing the ideal female body is the first and most important step to helping dancers with body image issues. As mentioned above, this is starting to change in pop culture and in the dance world, but we are still in the infancy of this change. Time will tell whether this change sticks or if we fall into yet another unhealthy stereotype of what women should look like. One can only hope that with studying new forms of dance teaching, and with the acceptance of more forms of body in the dance world, that the prevalence of body image issues and eating disorders will go down. It is hard for me to imagine this world as it feels so far in the future. We can only take it one step at a time.

While this chapter has primarily focused on Western concert styles of dance (particularly ballet), I will be using autoethnography to further look at Jewish folk dance and body image. Before presenting my autoethnographic research, I will look at the history of Jewish folk dance. My next chapter will discuss gender and dance in the Torah, Hasidic folk dance, and the creation of Israeli folk dance.

CHAPTER TWO

JEWISH FOLK DANCE

While this paper focuses on how women feel about their bodies while dancing, there is little research on women dancing in the Hasidic/Orthodox community. This missing information is related to the rules on modesty found in the community. Looking back to the beginnings of Hasidism, one can see why women were not involved in the public sphere. Modesty laws in the Hasidic community require that women live their lives in the private sphere, while men broach both the public and private sphere. As I read more on women's dancing in the Hasidic culture, it is apparent that it is seen as immodest in the public sphere as it draws attention to oneself and, according to Hasidic tradition, should be shunned (Gellerman, 2011; Wodzinski, 2018). Further, since women are not allowed to dance in public, these moments are hidden away from public scholarship. According to Marcin Wodzinski in their book *Hasidism: Key Questions*, "What differentiated the Hasidim from others was that they possibly more commonly than most of the non-Hasidic segments of the Jewish society inherited the misogynistic kabbalistic tradition of associating women with the demonic" (p. 66). While men appear mostly in the public sphere, and are therefore more studied, women are restricted to the home. Consequently, movement and celebration would be seen by those outside of the community as something done by men since women stay hidden away (Gellerman, 2011). As Gellerman observes in their research, "To own and maintain Hasidic tradition after the Holocaust often meant to revere and sanctify the Jewish past while resisting foreign forms that did not fit the public face" (p. 301). As shown by their research and discussions with Hasidic women, this meant that Hasidic women were maintaining

a tradition that has been passed down pre-dating the Holocaust. By continuing to have men as the public face of the Hasidic community, these women played into a century's old tradition.

Therefore it is difficult to know much of what was going on with these women but I am going to discuss dance throughout the community with as much emphasis on women as the body of literature will allow.

Hasidic Dance

I have found that one of the most recognizable forms of Jewish dance has been maintained by the Hasidic community. While Eastern European Jews gave the culture several recognizable movements, the Hasidic male community has maintained some of these individual dance traditions in a way that other Eastern European dance traditions have not and so they have been lost. As in other Jewish folk dance traditions, male dancing has had a very distinct form different from female dancing. In the Hasidic communities we still see the virility of men's quick movements, leaps, jumps, and other acrobatic moves. This seems to have been a consistent concept passed down throughout the ages from ancient times (Gruber, 1981).

Tal Ilan, in *Dance and Gender in Ancient Jewish Sources*, discusses root words used in the Torah so that we can see how these root words help the reader determine if the dance is being done by a woman or a man. Ilan states that the root word “*rqd*” is used for men dancing, while the root word “*hwl*” is used for women dancing. When a scholar looks through the Torah, we find clear distinctions as to what styles of movement were preferred by each gender. “*Rqd*” usually meant jumping continually in other contexts whereas “*hwl*” was used to describe a circular object or people gathering in a circle (Ilan, 2003). Ilan states that, “[...] according to ancient Jewish sources, when men danced, they continually leapt up and down, while women danced in circles” (p. 136). As I will discuss, this statement is consistent with what we see from

men in the Hasidic community. Men are known for their leaping, spinning, and virility, whereas women are known more for circle dances carried out in a more subdued fashion.

In Yehuda Hyman's chapter, entitled *Three Hasidic Dances: A Personal Journey*, the reader is dropped into a world of Hasidic male dance. As Hyman describes, the dance style is all very fast paced with the most experienced dancers in the innermost dance circle almost performing for the other dancers. They whirl around in a circle with extreme speed, perform kicks and leaps, and eventually move into a more acrobatic portion of the event (Hyman 2011). Jill Gellerman describes an instance where men perform these styles of dancing on the streets of New York City for an audience of onlookers (both in the community and spectators) during *Simchas Bais Hasho'eva*, a celebration that takes place during the days of Sukkot. While Gellerman's article talks about the festival-like atmosphere surrounding the men's dancing and celebration, she focuses mainly on how women in the Hasidic community dance and celebrate in their own way. Gellerman does an excellent job of describing the often-hidden dances of Hasidic women in her article, *Rehearsing for Ultimate Joy Among the Lubavitcher Hasidim: Simchas Bais Hasho'eva in Crown Heights*. As she so aptly points out, "Because Hasidic men are in the public eye and more visible in the public rituals of the synagogue and the house study and because the public face is how the community represents itself, outsiders (especially male ethnographers) are not routinely exposed to the female experience" (Gellerman, 2011, p. 288). It is very clear that there is an entire section of Jewish folk dance that has been missed in study simply because it is part of a private act.

As I mentioned before, many of the dances that are seen amongst Hasidic women are done in a circle. These circle dances consisted of, "an unofficial dance repertoire of informal phrases and simple steps," with progressions that are "often constructed by incorporating

selective elements from well-known East European Jewish, Israeli, international folk, or popular American choreography" (Gellerman, 2011, p. 292).

While watching and taking part in a party for a group of Hasidic women, Gellerman finds that she recognizes many of the dances being done as they consist of steps found in dances that women perform at weddings. In this instance, the dance was just for schoolgirls (ages 15-20) at the *Bais Rivkah* school. In talking with the women and girls performing these dances, Gellerman finds out that these are dances they have learned from each other or in their gym classes (p. 294). As the night goes on, Gellerman describes some of the social dances that the women perform (like the “*Yidden*”, which is a popular Hasidic line dance to a song of the same name). She then moves on to discussing the dances usually done by men. These dances were only allowed to be done by women since no men were present at the event. It is implied by Gellerman that if men had been present, the women would not be allowed to perform these dances. In fact, the room would have been segregated so that the men could not see the women being immodest while they danced.

Israeli Folk Dance

Folk dance usually forms naturally as a community of people continue to create and refine movement. It is something that is picked up by individuals and changes over time as the tradition gets passed down through the ages. How does one go about creating folk dance from scratch then? Nina Spiegel, in their article *Creating National Folk Dance: The Dalia Dance Festivals, 1944 and 1947*, poses the question, “The idea of ‘creating’ a folk dance form presents a paradox and raises the immediate question of authenticity: How does a people ‘create’ folk dance, when the very concept implies its gradual development among the ‘folk’” (p. 144). In 1944 Palestine, Gurit Kadman sought to create a new identity for the Jews that had moved to the

country through dance. She did this by creating a dance festival whose specific purpose was to create and pass on folk dance. While the *kibbutz* around the area had hosted dance festivals before, none had the intention of making a national push to pass on dances created there. Prior dance festivals were seen as theatrical performances; ways of showing off the new Palestinian Jewish body and vitality. Kadman sought to make this a national festival, inviting people from all over Palestine to participate and watch. She hoped that not only would people sit and watch the dancing, but that they would be able to get up and learn the dances along with the dancers (Spiegel, 2013).

Yet another popular form of Jewish folk dance can be found in Israeli folk dance. These dances originated in the 1940s to form a new culture and there continue to be new forms of Israeli folk dance choreographed to this day. Many of the Jews that moved to Palestinian *kibbutzim*, or communal farming settlements, did so to create a new culture for themselves — one that felt more attached to the land and was more secular in nature (Brin Ingber, 2011; Spiegel, 2013). In the 1944 Dalia Festival, these Jews challenged themselves with the task of creating folk dance to reflect this new-formed identity. Judith Brin Ingber, in her chapter *Shorashim: The Roots of Israeli Folk Dance* points out that, “At Dalia, the dances were performed for large numbers of people and were taught to many others. The dances thereby entered into everyday life and spread throughout the country, popular as folk dances everywhere and for every occasion” (p. 113). These Dalia Festivals became the birth of a new style of folk dance, one that had a rather short gestation period but would last and grow over the years to come (Roginsky, 2011).

When these Jewish choreographers and dancers first sought to create folk dance, they started with the Hebrew Bible and Jewish holidays. Their first thoughts in creating dance were to

go back to the ancient Israelis. Spiegel points out that, “folk choreographers incorporated biblical stories and influences into the new dances to assert that their creations encompassed ancient times and thereby represented ‘genuine’ compositions” (Spiegel, 2013, p. 148).

While the Bible does not say much about dancing, I have previously discussed that there were general themes that could be pulled out. We know the general style of movements used and the gender of the dancers by studying the words used in each section of the Torah. Whereas these Palestinian Jews were looking to create a more secular way of worshiping and storytelling, they also wanted to go back to their ancient roots with the land (Brin Ingber, 2011). The people creating these folk dances wanted to tie the movement that they created to the past; more specifically, the past in this region of the world. They believed that this would legitimize the folk dances being created as having organically come from stories in the Bible. The originators of these dances hoped to show that these folk dances did not appear out of thin air but were based on stories passed down throughout the ages (Spiegel, 2013).

The other focus of these new folk dances was to create new ways of celebrating the Jewish holidays. Most of the Jews living on *kibbutzim* saw themselves as secular, unlike the more religious Jews living elsewhere in Palestine. These secular Jews were particularly interested in creating new ways of celebrating the holidays. They specifically focused on holidays like Passover (the celebration of the Jews exodus from slavery in Egypt), *Shavuot* (the summer harvest holiday), and *Sukkot* (the fall harvest holiday) (Brin Ingber, 2011). Those that lived on *kibbutzim* centered their lives around the harvest as that was their primary source of work and income. It only makes sense that they therefore held holidays that also focused on the harvest as specifically important. Since it was these secular Jews who were creating folk dances for a new nation of people, they focused on holidays that held specific importance to them. They

wanted to create dance as a form of worship like the Hasidic Jews who danced in religious ecstasy (Hyman, 2011). Sara Levi-Tanai, a founder of Israeli folk dance, recalls, "[...] I especially remember Simchat Torah, the traditional holiday when men danced with the Torah scrolls in their arms. I saw the men dressed in their long black coats according to Hasidic tradition, their joy and religious fervor expressed in the *Hafafot* [circle]. I have a memory of my father too. I can still see how he danced with the Torah, all afire with great temperament - these I knew were my roots" (Brin Ingber, 2011). As we can see from this passage, the Hasidic means of dancing became a strong influence for the new styles of folk dance being created.

I have already discussed the style of dancing for Hasidic Jews. These traditions and styles were important to the formation of a new national folk dance. Spiegel brings up that, "As part of their search for connection with Jewish tradition, the choreographers and dancers examined the dances of two religious Jewish communities: the Hasidic Jews of Eastern Europe and the Yemenite Jews" (Spiegel, 2013, p. 152). They saw the Yemenite Jews as being closer to the land of Palestine and holding traditions closer to what the ancient Israelis would have done, whereas they also looked to the Hasidic Jews when it came to incorporating their exuberance and the divine ecstasy that filled them when they danced. Both of these sects of Judaism were very clear in their use of dance to tell stories from the Bible, to celebrate holidays and religious ceremonies, and to pass on the joy of life to others. The Jews living on the *kibbutzim* aimed at establishing the same sort of religious celebratory practice. In addition to choosing to emulate these two groups based on their use of dance in celebration, they also chose them for geographic reasons. The Yemenite Jews had been living in the land of Palestine for ages at this point and were the closest sect of Jews to have continuously lived on the land (Staub, 2011). Most of the Jews that lived in the *kibbutzim* were Ashkenazi and came from European countries. They were therefore related to

the Hasidic traditions of Eastern Europe (Spiegel, 2011). All of these influences were present and influential in 1944 related to the creation of the first Jewish folk dance festival.

Gurit Kadman spearheaded the creation of the first Dalia Festival in 1944. In the midst of World War II, and with the knowledge of what was happening in the concentration camps, Kadman received some push back on moving forward with the festival. She wholeheartedly believed that this festival, as a means of celebrating life, was still very necessary to push forward. While their culture and people were being decimated elsewhere in the world, in Palestine they were creating a brand new culture and showing off a brand-new type of Jew. This festival was a form of showing resilience against a country that would like to wipe the Jewish people from the face of the earth (Brin Ingber, 2011).

In 1947, Kadman set forth to create a second Dalia Festival. She faced push back at this venture too. World War II had just ended, and the trials at Nuremberg had yet to take place. Again, the group felt it necessary to celebrate life in remembrance of those who passed. The 1947 Dalia Festival included the first remembrance to those who died in the Holocaust. Israel would continue to carry on this tradition as it would become an important part of the culture. This festival was not without its own controversies. Kadman and her team decided to schedule the festival for a Saturday being the only day that *kibbutz* members have off for the Sabbath. The religious community took offense at this action though, and the organizers were left explaining their reasoning to this community. The *kibbutzim* saw dancing as a means of worshiping and celebrating the Sabbath, whereas the religious community believed that this was blasphemous. While it caused a division in the Jewish community for some time in 1947, the two parties were able to come to terms for future Dalia Festivals; an extra day of rest was created for the *kibbutz* workers and the Dalia Festival would be held on that day as opposed to the Sabbath. Yet another

feature of the 1947 Dalia Festival dealt with the curfew instilled due to the political uncertainty around this time (Spiegel, 2013). The U.N. Special Committee on Palestine had put the curfew into place which made traveling at night impossible. The attendees of the festival stayed up through the night, ignoring the curfew and dancing all night long (Spiegel, 2013).

Since its inception, Israeli folk dance has taken off with more dances added every year. According to Dina Roginsky, "In 1944, less than ten original Israeli dances were listed in the Dalia Festival program. In the first instructors' course organized by Kadman just a year later, about fifteen Israeli dances were presented. In 2010 more than 6,000 Israeli folk dances have been counted, including dances created both in Israel and abroad" (2011, p. 318). The *Histadrut*, or worker's union, was originally put in charge of the "Folk Dance Section" (Roginsky, 2011). This section was tasked with finding choreographers to create folk dances, and then teaching instructors so that the dances could spread throughout the country. Most of the dances created were circle dances where there is no leader, everyone can see everyone else, and there is a sense of community and togetherness (Roginsky, 2011). This practice continues today and more information on current Israeli dances can be found at <http://www.israelidances.com/>, including videos and lists of dances throughout the ages. It is important to note here that many of the original choreographers for the Dalia Festival were women, per my previously shown research. However, after this point in time there is no clear documentation as to how many female choreographers were continued to be sought out by the *Histadrut*. It is my sense that a majority of the choreographers brought in were women though.

We now understand that Eastern European, Hasidic dances are publicly faced by men whereas women kept dancing to the private sphere. I also understand from the readings that traditionally men and women did not dance together as this was seen as immodest. One change

that the secular Jews of the *kibbutzim* made to their new folk dances was the inclusion of women in the public facing dances. They also chose not to separate the men from the women and allowed sexes to dance together. Whereas the older traditions followed Talmudic law surrounding women's modesty, the new Jews of Palestine did not feel that this should be the case for their dances. These Jews had brought dances with them from their home countries. As Gurit Kadman points out, the Polish brought with them the *krakowiak* and the Rumanian brought the *hora*, *polka*, and *sherele rondo* (Brin Ingber, 2011). As told by Kadman, "The *kibbutznikim* loved the rondo form very much, and it became a favorite, maybe because it was the most community-conscious dance, drawing together all assembled" (Brin Ingber, 2011, g. 106). They wanted to create a gender-neutral dance or a dance that could be done together in celebration. On the *kibbutz*, men and women worked together to harvest. Women were seen as equals to the men both in work and in culture. It would therefore make no sense to divide the sexes when it came time to create folk dances celebrating the new Jew of Palestine.

Concluding Thoughts

From what we can see, gender is a definite player in Jewish folk dance. It can represent the modesty of a people such as in the Hasidic community, or the celebration of equality such as we see in the *kibbutzim*. Gender, as performed in dance, goes back to the times of the ancient Israelis and this tradition has been passed down throughout the ages with dances of celebration, mourning, and even courting rituals. It is evident that men and women still hold separate places in dance as shown by a group of women dancing in a gymnasium of a school in Crown Heights, New York versus their male counterparts dancing in the street for the same festivity (Gellerman, 2011).

As we have seen in both of the sects of Judaism described in this paper, men tend to have the more athletic jumping and leaping movements. They also were the face of Jewish folk dance up until the 1940s with the creation of a new type of folk dance; one that gives a voice to both women and men equally. Folk dance has evolved a long way from the time of the ancient Israelis with their separation of the sexes and rules about how each gender should move according to the Torah. Jewish folk dance is more than the *hora* performed at a wedding or *B'nai Mitzvah*. It has become a celebration of a people with dances that span meaning for every moment in life. While the wedding traditions of men dancing for the bride still exist in Hasidic communities, other Jewish sects have expanded the tradition to include women dancing for the bride making the *mitzvah* a more inclusive one. The Jews on the *kibbutzim* took this inclusivity one step further and gave women and men the same movements in their circle dances.

As Jewish dance continues to change, we see that many aspects stay the same. As American Jews continue to become more and more assimilated to Western culture, we see old traditions of separating the sexes starting to dissipate. We see this in the secularized circle and group dances that come out of Israel. While many things change, we still have the Hasidic community maintaining the traditions of the past. In a sense, this is a blessing to remember the roots of Jewish dancing. Either way, we can see that Jewish dancing is just as varied and eclectic as any culture would allow (or be?).

CHAPTER THREE

IN MY OWN BODY

Methodology

In order to study the difference between body image issues found in Western concert styles of dance versus Jewish folk dance, I used autoethnography. Heewon Chang describes autoethnography as, "Stemming from the field of anthropology, autoethnography shares the storytelling feature with other genres of self-narrative but transcends mere narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation" (2008, p. 43). They go on to elaborate on this thought by stating, "In other words, autoethnography is not about focusing on self alone, but about searching for understanding of others (culture/society) through self" (Chang, 2008, p. 49). I relied on my extensive background in styles of Western concert dance, such as ballet and modern, to inform my experiences with Jewish folk dance and to consider the differences between the two styles of dance.

As part of my process, I attended six Israeli folk dance classes between January 26, 2023 and March 9, 2023. After each class, I journaled about my experience. After finishing my journaling process, I used basic thematic coding going back through my findings, looking for common concepts and revelations. As I was writing other chapters at the same time as I was taking folk dance classes and journaling, I was influenced by that research. While I found many themes that I did not expect, there were a couple of themes that emerged as I was writing since I was thinking about the concepts discussed earlier in chapter one. Some of my experiences mirrored my most recent memory of participating in ballet and modern classes but many were

very different experiences. Below is a summation of my findings based on these themes that I identified from my journal data. The areas I look at are ones that all had some impact on my body image in different ways. These include: the impact of clothing, background and culture, the impact of mirrors, feedback from both teachers and other people in the class, style of dance being performed, and body related themes (which will be broken down into subsections of noticing individual body parts movement, as well as sweating and overheating).

Context

Before I start discussing the themes that I found in my journals, I would like to give some context in understanding the class structure. Over the course of the six classes I took, I met a number of interesting people. Most of them had been doing Israeli folk dance for many years although there were also a couple of other beginners as well as me. While I did not meet everyone, as the class was on a drop in basis and not a continuous class, I did get a chance to meet many of the regular dancers and teachers. All of the people I met were very nice and welcoming. With only a couple of rare exceptions, this group made me feel very welcomed and helped me figure out steps as I went along.

The first people that I met, when starting this class, were two of the teachers, Penny and Phil. Penny was the main teacher and worked specifically with new learners. I therefore got to know Penny more than I did the other teachers. She was very welcoming and excited to have a new person in the group. She also believed that I would be able to pick up the moves quickly with my extensive background in Western concert styles of dance. While her trust was encouraging, it also felt like a lot to live up to at times. Phil, on the other hand, was someone that I got to know only as a presence in the room. He taught the partnering section of class, which I only participated in once and found it to be too intimidating to do another time; Phil was also the

DJ/technology coordinator, including making sure that the teacher's microphone was on and working. He was in charge of the music both in the room and over Zoom, which usually had 10-15 participants.

All of the other people that I interacted with were there to take the class, or just dance and have a good time. As I noted above, these people were very friendly. Many of them mentioned that I danced very well and that they were impressed with this being my first time taking Israeli folk dance classes. One of these figures was an Israeli woman named Tamara. She made it a point to pull me aside in class to get to know me a bit more. While it was not my dancing that drew her over to me, she was more curious about my tattoos and piercings, she was still a friendly face to consider in future classes. She let me know that she was 23 years old and taught Hebrew while also babysitting to make money here in the United States.

While Tamara was a bit younger, many of the people that I met at these dance classes were older than me. Most were probably closer to 50-60 years old with a sprinkling of people in their 30's and 40's. The mix of ages in the group made it feel more inclusive. This style of dancing is not limited to a certain set of dancers where one can easily age out; this is often the case with Western style dances. I found that folk dance is a style that you can either pick up and continue on at any age. A majority of the group had been dancing for many years, as pointed out in my journal after the class on February 2nd where I stated, "I was shocked to hear that some of these people have been doing it for 20+ years! I figured that this class was going on only for a few years and that's how long people had been doing this style of dance. I was so wrong though!"; there were even some newcomers that fit into the 50-60 year old age demographics of the class. This point again just reinforces the idea that you can start Israeli folk dance at any point in your life as it does not demand much of the body.

Each class had a few teachers. The main teacher was Penny, who focused on beginners as I mentioned earlier, and taught at the start of each class. As more people arrived though, Penny would teach less. Throughout the night, different teachers would come in and teach new dances. As I mentioned in chapter two, Israel specifically seeks out choreographers to continue to add on new dances to the Israeli folk dance repertoire. The teachers of this class learn these new dances from Israeli choreographers and bring them to the class each week. We even had a couple of times where a teacher from a different country or different parts of the United States were brought in over the Zoom platform to teach a dance. One of these teachers was in Argentina and the other was in New York.

There were three main styles of dancing that took place in this class: circle dances, line dances, and partner dances. I will go more into each of these styles and how they made me feel in a later section of this chapter. A majority of the dances were circle dances and partner dances. We did a few line dances, but they were truly few and far between. Due to the late hour of the night, and my particular feelings around partner dancing which I will discuss, I did not stay for the partner section of class often.

Impact of Clothing

The first theme that I found was the impact of clothing. Focusing on the clothing that I wore during class is a theme that I picked out from my initial research into body image issues in Western concert dance. While there is a set uniform for many Western concert dance classes (such as ballet and modern), there are absolutely no rules about what you wear to an Israeli folk dance class. The main point of the class is to move and have fun; seeing the lines of the body is not something of anyone's concern. It was therefore easier to wear baggier clothing, or clothing that I generally felt more comfortable in and could hide parts of my body that made me feel more

self conscious. The only requirement with clothing was that you wear something you can move in.

Most of the time, I wore yoga pants and either a tank top or comfortable tee shirt to these classes. I was very self conscious about my top as I struggle with my weight there. At first, I was wearing sweatpants to class, as they are the most comfortable pants that I own, but I quickly realized that this was a mistake with the room being very hot. The class of February 2nd was particularly tough for me as mentioned in my journal, "I was wearing a t-shirt that was a little bit too tight for me, so that made me a little self conscious. Once I started dancing though, I thought about it less. I also wore black sweatpants. Again, these were too heavy apparently. I need to figure something out!". The heavy pair of pants and tight fitting top made me more body conscious, which caused me to feel worried about my appearance. However, this was not the only issue; since I was wearing heavier pants and the room was hot, my body kept overheating and I had to sit out of class more so. Sitting out was particularly disheartening as I was anxious to do the movement with the class and feel my body in motion. After this class, I made it a point to purchase lightweight pants. I found a few pairs of yoga pants that would suffice. After making this adjustment to my wardrobe the overheating became less of the problem. I will speak more about overheating in later sections of this chapter.

In general, the teachers were more concerned with your feet than they were with your body, which allowed for whatever clothes I felt comfortable in. I had come from a world (Western concert dance) that was not only concerned with your feet and arms, but with the shape that your torso was taking. Specifically making sure that you were holding your core muscles (abdomen and the muscles surrounding that area) in a tight manner while still allowing for breathing. Since this was not the case in Israeli folk dance, and because I am most self conscious

about my mid section, I tended to wear baggier tops than bottoms. No one in the class had issues with this and the teacher did not make any comments.

There was an array of clothing worn by other dancers. Some people wore long sleeve shirts, tee shirts, tank tops, jeans, yoga pants, and shorts just to name a few options. The fact that there were many options made me feel comfortable in my choices of what to wear to class. Had the rest of the dancers worn a specific dance uniform then I would have had to conform to that look and may not have been as comfortable as I became. After my first class I noted that “I had no clue what to wear. After deciding on a hastily thrown together outfit (more sweatpants have been purchased to keep up with this work out and class structure).” I think that this statement speaks to my lack of knowledge prior to this research on Jewish/Israeli folk dance classes and performance in general.

I feel that the lack of a uniform for Israeli folk dance was particularly helpful for my body image. I made note of this after my class on February 9th. I specifically pointed this out when I stated, “In general, I’m finding that the lack of mirrors and no need to be in tight fitting clothing has helped my body image while dancing.” This class allowed me to wear what I was comfortable in, which in turn made me feel more confident in my body. There were other pressures that made me feel more self conscious, but clothing was not one of them.

Background and Culture

I was not sure if my Jewish background would have an impact on the type of class that I was taking and how I felt about the dancing. As the classes went on though, I found that there was a distinct connection to my culture that I do not think I would have had if I was taking an Israeli folk dance class as a non-Jew. From the very beginning, the classes felt more like home to me than I originally thought they would. Usually, I am pretty nervous about starting something

new by myself. This aspect was true for me in these dance classes but was lessened by the fact that classes were hosted in a synagogue. As I mentioned in my journal after the first class, “Class is hosted in a synagogue. All synagogues look slightly similar to me, but this one reminded me a little bit more about the one that I grew up with. I can’t place exactly why I felt that way, but it must have had something to do with the architecture.” Had the class been in a different location, I do not believe I would have had such a strong tie to my culture and my childhood. After my last class I even stated in my journal that “I’ve also really focused on my heritage and I’m enjoying it so much! I don’t think I would have had the same experience in another kind of folk dance.”

Yet another part of my background that I think made me feel more confident was the fact that I came from a dance background. As I have mentioned above, many of the dancers in the class with me and the teachers thought that I would be able to pick up the movement quickly because of my background in Western concert style of dance. In fact many of the dancers that I took class with were shocked when I told them that I had never done Israeli folk dances before. I received many compliments about my movement style and the way I carried myself in class. The teacher, in fact, often said that she did not have to worry about me because she knew I would be able to pick it up easily. While this was the case most of the time, I did find it a bit harder to keep up with the dances later in the night as teaching stopped and it became more of just a giant dance circle. I would try to follow along with other dancers who obviously knew the movements well, but occasionally got lost. According to my journal after my first class on January 26th I talked about trying to keep up during this portion of the night and said,

I again became very focused watching the teacher and trying to keep up, but I felt like I was failing. Apparently, I didn’t express that on my face though since I was told at least

5 times that I was doing so well for my first time! It's always nice to hear things like that. Makes me miss my days of dance classes at my home studio.

This statement obviously shows that while I may not have been as comfortable in the learning of the steps during this point of the night, I still felt at home as if I was in the dance studio that I grew up in.

Impact of Mirrors

Another major theme that came from my research in Western concert dance styles and body image was the use of mirrors. I found this to be a particularly big theme in my journaling as well. I know that this was something I was aware of in my younger age, and I am sure that the research I was doing for other chapters influenced my thinking about mirrors in my journaling. In general, this was a theme that I feel I would have been looking for even without the research that I had been doing at the time of taking classes.

The space in which class was held did not have any mirrors. This was something that I noted almost immediately in my first journal entry. Overall, I feel that the lack of mirrors in the space was a good thing for my body image. Without the mirrors, I could focus on what the movement felt like in my body without the additional pressure of staring at myself and finding defects in my own body or comparing myself to others. Viewing flaws in my own body was something that I wrote about in my journal entry after my class on February 2nd. In this entry, I wrote, "In general, I have a different internal image of my body than what I see in the mirror. I still think of myself as much skinner. I think that the lack of mirrors in the classroom is really a good thing". The body image that I have in my mind (as stated above) is one from years ago before I put on weight. What I am not sure of is whether having a different image in my head

about what my body looks like is hurting or helping my self body image in dance classes and everyday life.

I contemplated how much of an effect mirrors had on my body image throughout my extensive years dancing in more Western concert style classes. While the impact of mirrors was one of the major factors on body image that I found in my research, I was still a little bit surprised to find out how important it was to how I saw myself. In my journal entry after my class on February 2nd, I mentioned that,

It's strange to think about how much a mirror can make a difference. I stared at myself dancing in a mirror for so long that I didn't think it even mattered. I thought that I would be stuck with this negative body image my whole life, but maybe that's not the case. Maybe it really is mirrors that create the biggest problem for me.

I now wonder if my body image would eventually change entirely as I continued on with these Israeli folk dance classes. I believe that the six classes I took were a good trial period, however it only gave me a small idea of what could have come had I continued or taken more classes.

In my final two classes, we worked on a line dance that occasionally faced the windows. Due to the class being at night, the windows almost became a mirror, because you could see your own reflection in them. I commented on this effect after my class on March 1st. In my journal, I wrote, "At one point, I was facing the windows and they almost acted like a mirror. Lucky for me, I felt pretty confident in the movement and didn't seem as bothered by the window reflection/mirror situation." This statement obviously shows more comfort with my own body as I felt fine looking at the reflection. If this had happened in my first class, I feel as if I would not have had the same reaction. In my first couple of classes, I was still dealing with nervous feelings of not really knowing anyone and being put in a new situation. By this class, I felt more comfortable with my surroundings and the people in class.

One place where I wish we did have mirrors was with the teachers. While many of the dances were circle dances where you could look at the teacher's feet easily, some were line dances and partner dances. Partner dances were taught at the later part of the night. I only stayed to take this portion of the class once on February 2nd. After this class I mentioned in my journal that, "The partner dances would have been nice to have a mirror though. I was having the hardest time trying to look over my shoulder at the teacher to keep up with his steps." I found this style of dance to be particularly difficult to follow along without a mirror. I also did not have much experience at all with partner dancing, so I found this part of class challenging to begin with. I believe that this speaks to the level of the dancer. Mirrors seem to be better for newer dancers and those not used to moving their bodies.

One thing that I did notice about the lack of mirrors in class was that I could focus more on how the movement felt in my body and less on how I looked doing the movement. On February 16th, I had a quick thought that I felt I needed to journal about. Part of this thought was about mirrors. I state in this journal entry that, "In fact, I've noticed in class that the lack of mirrors has really caused me to feel more in my body with the movement. I guess you could say it feels more somatic." In my earlier research, I found that somatic practices were a good combat against what I have started to call "mirror syndrome". Mirror syndrome, in my journals, includes any negative feelings associated with watching yourself dance in a mirror. I believe that somatic practices work best when a mirror is not included.

Feedback from Teachers and Others

For the most part, the teachers did not point out individuals and kept the class moving together. There were a couple of times that Penny mentioned that she did not have to worry about me as she saw that I could pick up the steps easily. The only time that I stayed for the

partner class was a bit different though. I journaled about being called out by the teacher and wrote, “He [the teacher] even called me out one time to say I was turning over the wrong shoulder. I tried to shake that off as if I didn’t care, but inside I was a little bit mortified.” This shows how much a dance teacher can affect their students. When I was not called out or praised, I felt confident and could focus on the steps at hand. When I was called out or corrected in front of the entire class (which at this point felt like a group of strangers) I got defensive and thought more about how I looked.

As the night went on though, there was less teaching and more just dancing. It was at this point in the class that I had a harder time keeping up as many of the dances really moved fast. After class on February 9th, I mentioned this issue and wrote about my experience of one dance stating, “Maybe I can ask for it to be taught at a slower pace so that I can really get into the full dance. That would be really awesome!” This dance was one that I found particularly fun in the moment even though I did not get the footing absolutely correct. I made note that the classes where there was more teaching and less just dancing, I felt more confident. I wrote about this after class on February 23rd, “We did more teaching in this class and less just dancing. I think that also helped me feel more comfortable as it was easier to keep up.” When I was able to focus on learning the dances, I felt more confident in the movement.

While I mostly felt more comfortable in dance class, there were small things that made me a little more self-conscious about my body. I have a number of very visible tattoos and piercings. In Jewish culture, tattoos are seen as a taboo. As I was taught, and as I understand the reasoning to this day, tattoos (and piercings in Orthodox and Hasidic communities) are forbidden for a two-fold reason; the first reason has to do with the fact that Jews believe that every person is made in the image of G-d and the second reason has to do with the forced tattoos put on Jews

during the Holocaust. In Hasidic and Orthodox culture, a person is not allowed to be buried in a Jewish cemetery if they have tattoos. This fact is important when considering the Holocaust and the tattoos that Jews were forced to wear. In fact, one woman in my last class mentioned that she was not sure if I was actually Jewish because of my tattoos. She had to ask me and then believed me after talking to me, but it did take some convincing. She was a bit surprised to find out that I was raised Jewish and not a recent convert to the religion.

A majority of the dancers that attended class were women; this did not surprise me. I have found that many dancers tend to identify as women. While there were a few men in the class, they were by far the minority in the group. At first, I found myself more self conscious around the men in the class but as I continued dancing and gaining more confidence in the movement itself, I began to find that feeling fade away. There were still a few men that made me a little more self conscious though. After my class on February 9th, I journaled about one particular man that did not make me feel comfortable. In this journal entry I wrote about, “one of the men who was trying to help me but didn’t seem that interested in actually helping me. Hard to explain, but he tried to tell me what I was doing wrong or to tell me the steps ahead of time but he almost seemed annoyed with me for not getting it”. What happened with this one man felt more like an isolated incident rather than the normal circumstances. On my final day of class (March 9th), there was yet another man that was more than helpful in telling me the steps ahead of time to help me get through the dance. In general though, I found myself feeling more comfortable around the women in the group than the men. Upon further reflection, I felt myself thinking about my body more around the men in the group. I even reflect on March 10th that it would have been great to have an all female class to compare these feelings to.

The final class was the most gratifying class that I took and after that class, I really reflected on how much the teachers supported my growth. I wrote in my journal on March 8th, “At the end of the night, I thanked Penny, who taught most of the dances (but not all). It was really the supportive atmosphere that got me through this too. While the teachers didn't pay much attention to any one individual (letting them figure it out on their own), Penny always had faith that I would get it without the hand holding, which was nice.” Had there been a different teaching style, I might not have been able to have as much confidence as I did in myself and my learning ability.

One other thing that I considered often when thinking about my body image was gender in the dance room. While I had a feeling that having men in the room with me would affect how I felt about my body (I would concentrate more on my outward appearance with men in the room), I also found a difference in how I felt based on the movement I was doing. Before class on February 9th, I wrote a quick thought that included the statement,

I think that there's something to be said about gendered dancing making, at least myself, more self conscious about my body image. I was able to just kind of forget about all of that when the movement was gender neutral in the circle and line dances. But it came back full force when we inserted gender into the equation again.

This thought was written one week after the class where I participated in the partnering dance portion. In retrospect, it was probably a very good idea for me to only participate in the first half of class, before partnering began. I feel that my self image was affected by playing a male role and also focusing more on the men in the room. Later, that night, I contemplated doing the partner class again, as I wrote in my journal, “Maybe I'll try partnering again at a different point, but my main focus is just feeling good in my own body (which is harder for me to do).” I ended

up following my own advice and not doing the partner class again as I just did not feel comfortable in it.

Style of Dance

As I expected based on my research and personal background, most of the dances done in class were circle dances. I found these much easier to follow along with as you could constantly keep your eyes on a teacher while dancing. The hardest part about learning the circle dances was when I was asked to turn around and face outside of the circle. In later classes I found that I could try to look at the steps that my neighbors were doing, and I tried to stick by the people that seemed to be more experts in this style of dance. Standing by the dancers who were more experienced became particularly tough as the class went on and multiple circles would start, and the more advanced dancers would move to the center circle for more room. In general, I found the circle dances to be the most fun. They seemed to flow a little bit easier than the other styles. I particularly liked the dances done in $\frac{3}{4}$ time signature as I have always been partial to a waltz.

The lesser taught style of dance was the line dance. I believe that within all six of the classes I took over the course of one and a half months, we only did a handful of line dances. I can remember doing three line dances in total during that time period. These dances tended to be a little more complicated than the circle dances and did not have the same flow. There was a lot more jumping and bouncing in these dances, which made me a little bit self-conscious. While the first few line dances we did were not taught, the music was simply put on for people to do the dance, the final one was taught. This final line dance was particularly reminiscent of a jazz dance class for me. It felt like a short combination that we were learning which repeated. Due to my background in jazz dance, I was able to pick up this dance rather quickly. It almost felt comforting to have a dance that felt so close to what I grew up doing. We did this dance for a

couple of weeks in a row and I was happy to continue learning it. While I do not remember the steps to many of the circle dances outside of class, this particular line dance is easy for me to remember.

The final style of dance that we did in these classes was partnering. I did not stick around for partnering that often as it was late at night and I also had a bad experience the first time I stayed for this section of the class. I danced the male role in the class because there were too few men for each woman to have a male partner. The few times I have done any sort of partner work, I have been put in the same position because I am a taller woman. I have very little experience with partner dancing though, so this section was more difficult for me. As I mentioned above, the teacher called me out at one point for turning the wrong direction. This call out made me particularly self conscious and I quickly left after the first dance was taught (not sticking around for any other partner dances to be taught). I was also more self conscious in this style of dance as I had to be touched and touch another person. I felt that they could feel my discomfort, sweat, and areas of my body that may be more overweight. Overall, it did not make for a good experience. I did observe a couple of partner dances though and they appeared to be harder than the circle and line dances. I was not the only person that left at this part of the night though, and this also became a time to socialize more.

Body Related Themes

Not surprisingly, because of my focus on body image in this study, several themes emerged that were tied specifically to my feelings about my body. I was able to subcategorize them into two main subthemes: noticing individual body parts movement as well as sweating and overheating. Each one of these sections plays into my overall feelings on my personal body image.

When I think about my own body image, I am particularly concerned with how overweight I am. The weight that bothers me the most is how my midsection looks. This is where I have carried most of my weight since I stopped dancing full time (as I was when I was working towards my undergraduate degree). Most of the time, I would not notice my weight or think about my body image except when we did specific movements. There were times when a jump or a hop would be included in the movement; this movement made me particularly self-conscious. Every time I jumped or hopped, I could feel my stomach and breasts bounce or move. I even pointed this out in my first journal entry on January 26th when I wrote,

One of the steps that we started to throw in was hopping (it was done in many different manners). I found myself extremely self-conscious doing these moves as I could feel my belly and boobs jiggle. I don't ever remember having that feeling in my life! I was absolutely disgusted with myself. I decided that the best thing to do was to fake the hops as much as I could so that I wouldn't focus on the negative aspects of my body.

The "jiggling" was the worst part about these movements. Had it not been for that, I would have felt much more comfortable doing the movement, and was in fact having a lot of fun doing the movement up until this moment. In hindsight, I could have worn different undergarments to have helped with the situation. Sports bras are made specifically for this purpose, but that would have been an extra expense that I did not have the money for. This ended up being something that I could not get over.

The next subcategory that I noticed in this theme was my sweating and overheating. These are both things that I have always struggled with, even outside of exercise or movement based activities. I have a long history of overheating to the point of fainting. This history causes me to be hypervigilant about recognizing the symptoms. The first thing that I notice when this happens is the feeling of being dizzy, which is usually followed by black spots in my vision, and then fainting. There were many times in class that I would feel dizzy and have to sit down before

I got to the other symptoms of my overheating. This was a particularly difficult experience as I wanted to be up and dancing with the rest of the people in the class. I found that I was overheating because the room was much warmer than I expected it to be. Not only was I trying to dress for winter in Chicago, but now I had to dress in layers that would accommodate the warm room where classes were taking place. I noticed a particularly rough night that I had overheating on February 2nd. I wrote in my journal the next morning,

I didn't journal last night because I really wasn't feeling good when I got home after class. This week was more of a struggle than last week. I kept overheating and having to sit out. I need to wear lightweight clothes, but also need to worry about traveling to and from class. I also am not sure that I have any lightweight clothes that would be appropriate. Specifically pants. I tend to do sweatpants, but those are just too heavy for this space.

As is apparent from this part of my journal and as I discussed when talking about the theme of clothing, the clothing that I wore was very important. It could mean the difference between a good class or a class spent in the corner trying to cool down. I specifically remember this night as many of the women in the class with me tried to get me to come back out and dance; I had to tell them that I was overheating and they suggested wearing more suitable clothing. This moment actually embarrassed me a little bit as it was putting the wrong kind of attention on me. Once I found the correct clothing, the lighter weight pants, I felt better and was able to dance longer without taking breaks.

Yet another issue that I have struggled with for my entire life is sweating. I take after my father in that I sweat easily and a lot. This issue became a constant source of strife in classes. I felt self conscious about how I looked. I specifically brought up this point in my journal after class on February 9th. I wrote, "As the night went on, I got super sweaty and became very self conscious about this. It caused me to focus more on my body from an outward appearance than I

wanted to. I was particularly self conscious as I had to wipe sweat away from my brow but there was hand holding in the circle dances.” Concentrating on how much I was sweating caused me to think more about my body image and less about the movement I was doing. This focus was particularly disheartening as I felt worse about my body when I focused on how I looked. I found the class to be fun and inviting when I was not focused on how much I was sweating, but this was a rare moment. After class on March 1st, I wrote in my journal about how I sweat when I dance for fun in other places too. I state at this point, “I always end up sweaty when I dance for fun though and it's just embarrassing. I feel like this is along the same lines. So I guess I've thought about my sweating before but never in the sense of body shame or body image.” It was doing this class and thinking specifically about body image that made me realize that my sweating was not just something embarrassing separate from my body image, but that it was in fact a large part of my body image and something that I consistently have not liked about myself.

Limitations

As I have mentioned above, because I was working on my literature research at the same time that I was taking Israeli folk dance classes, my thinking and journaling were influenced by this. I found myself focusing on the themes I was finding in my first chapter; specifically the use of mirrors or lack of mirrors, the clothing worn for each dance class, and the effect of teachers on self image. Yet another limitation that I have is that I did not have anyone else review my coding. All of my journaling and coding was done in a silo. If I had another person to review my journals for themes, there might have been a different subset of codes. My final limitation was that I only took six dance classes. If I had the chance to take more classes, I would have had more data to work with and might have found different themes.

CONCLUSION

After all of my classes, I believe that the research shows that Jewish folk dance, specifically Israeli folk dance, can help women with body image issues. It is uncertain if this would be true for anyone, or only for those that identify as Jewish themselves. I found that the closeness to my heritage was an additional factor that helped me have fun in the classes and not think about my body. I believe that other Jewish women would also enjoy Israeli folk dance as it is not just a form of exercise, but quickly becomes a social event. There were parties to celebrate birthdays and holidays (*Purim* took place while I was taking classes), we were able to discuss our backgrounds, and I was given recommendations of synagogues that might become a new Jewish home for me. I feel that folk dance of other backgrounds would have the same effect and would encourage women from non-Jewish backgrounds to try to take a folk dance class from their background.

I also found that my body image was improved through taking this class. Coming from the background of Western concert style dance, I grew very accustomed to a certain body type being the right body while others were seen as the wrong body type. In Israeli and Jewish folk dance, there is no right or wrong type of body. Since so much of what I did was gender neutral dancing, the focus was not on being feminine or masculine; the focus was simply to move. My research suggests that the greatest contributors to my own negative body image are mirrors and tight fitting clothing. Since neither of these were part of the class, I was free to focus on how I felt internally. I could forget about my weight or the defects that I find in myself and just focus on my feet, which in itself felt very empowering.

Throughout journaling, I was able to delve into my main research question: how do women feel about their body image while doing Jewish folk dance? Very early on in my journaling process, I started to see a difference in how I felt about my own body. While I had issues of being self conscious doing certain movements (hopping and jumping) or being worried about overheating and sweating, I still found a positive side to my experience. I wrote in my journal after my class on February 2nd that, "I thought that I would be stuck with this negative body image my whole life, but maybe that's not the case." This statement proves to be a hopeful moment for me.

Yet another topic that I thought about often was somatic styles of dancing. I wrote in my journal after class on February 23rd "I think that the recognition of the dances and the lack of other stressors, like mirrors or tight fitting clothing, allows me to be more somatic in my approach to the dances." This idea of feeling the movement and not worrying about how I looked was the ultimate experience I was hoping to gain. Even though I had hoped to get to the place of not thinking about how I looked, I did not know if I would get there. It was a pleasant surprise when I came to this point with only six classes.

In the end, I found that confidence was key to increasing positive body image. The more confident I felt in the movement, the less I was concerned about my body and the more I felt empowered to simply live in the moment. I feel that if I had taken more classes, I would have had more confidence and therefore have started to feel even more body positive. After my final class, I wrote the below in my journal:

I was so invested in the dancing that I didn't think at all about what I looked like. Actually, now that I think about it more, I did think about what I looked like but not in a bad way. I was simply more conscious of my arms. In general, I felt confident in the movement and therefore felt confident about my body. I think this somatic experience

was something I didn't expect at first. It was a really great way to close out the class taking portion of this research. Maybe that's why it was such a good class.

I think that this thought shows the upward trajectory of my own body image as my confidence increased with taking more classes. I believe that this shows that Jewish women can increase their positive body image by taking Israeli folk dance classes.

In further research, I believe that it would be important to talk to other women and their feelings of body image when taking Jewish/Israeli folk dance classes. As I mentioned in chapter three, the class was mostly women. I think that this would be a great place to start with this style of research. Yet another aspect of additional research I think would be important to this study is to have taken other styles of folk dance classes. I firmly believe that my background and heritage played largely into why I felt the way I did taking Israeli folk dance classes. I know that there are sometimes more restrictions with other styles of folk dance and I am not sure if I, or other women, would have the same experience taking those classes.

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