



DANCING WITH THE DIVINE

A Flow of Grace

CARLA DE SOLA

EDITED BY DIANA WEAR

DESIGN BY DAVID W. McCAULEY, JR.

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Miriam's Daughters

Ilene Serlin



always danced. But when I went to Israel at age fourteen, I fell in love with the music and dance, and became the choreographer for Fred Berk's group in Habonim, a youth socialist group. The spirit of pioneers farming the land in Israel spoke to me, and the songs and inspiring dances touched my soul. This moment stayed with me through the rest of my life as a *kairos moment* of inspiration and a glimpse of the power of dance and the land.

However, I returned home to an American Reform Judaism which, to me, was sterile and boring. We sat in chairs while a rabbi talked about raising money for social justice in lands far away, nothing about my everyday life, emotions, or spiritual life. Eventually I discovered Buddhism...and Tai Chi...and folk dance...and belly-dance...and Sufi dance. I heard about a Christian Sacred Dance Guild and wished we had one for Jewish people. So began my search. Was there something comparable in my own tradition? What was that spark I felt in those early days in Israel?

Starting to recover my roots, I went back to Kamenetz-Podolsky in the Ukraine, where my grandparents

had fled the pogroms. I knew that they were Hasidic, and my great-aunt told me that she and her father would pray and sway and dance together.

On a sometimes-lonely search, I learned more about the dance that was almost always in the Jewish tradition, but just got lost. It was lost in the rabbinic era, when the Israelites were on the move and had only the Word and the Torah to sustain them, and during the age of enlightenment and modernity. The connection between the soul and movement had been lost.

I learned more about the Hasidic communities in Eastern Europe in the 18th century, where dance was an important part of devotion. The Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, used dance to increase devotion to God, saying that "the dances of the Jew before [*sic*] his Creator are prayers," and "All my bones shall say: Lord, who is like unto Thee?" (Psalm 35:10). The dancing by men only would take place in a circle, increasing speed and intensity until reaching ecstasy. Music reflected texts from the Bible or Talmud. Dance was promoted by the Ba'al Shem Tov's great-grandson, the famous Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav.

What is sacred Jewish dance? Is it the ecstatic union with the divine? Is it a state of consciousness? Is it in the symbols and themes of the movement? Is it in the communal ritual?

I learned that some Jewish dance was simple: David's hop-skip step before the ark. Timbrels and dance

were ways to praise God, according to the Psalms. Dance is part of the holidays such as Sukkah, where the priests played harp, lyre, cymbals, and trumpets while the men danced with torches in their hands. At weddings, the men danced in honor of the bride.

And then I discovered Miriam. Miriam was the prophetess who foresaw the greatness of her brother Moses and orchestrated his upbringing in the Pharaoh's palace. Most notably, Miriam's dance after the Israelites crossed the Red Sea was to the first song in the Bible and she became a role model for me ever since (Exodus 15: 20-21). The discovery of my dancing foremothers has been another *kairos moment* for me as I am now dedicated to learning more with communities of Jewish and non-Jewish sisters and brothers.

At this point, I understand that there are precedents for recovering the roots of sacred dance in Judaism. It has to be discovered, recovered, and recreated. It blends the streams of Jewish neo-Hasidism, somatic and creative arts therapies, and traditional texts in a way that balances the logos of rabbinic Judaism with the eros of the body. Now is a time of creativity and regeneration.

Somehow, I connected my love of dance and *kairos moments* with my own traditions as pathways to the soul, and with this integration, I feel home.