

MENDRAH

SPARKS of
JEWISH
RENEWAL

ג'ה

Tevet 5741
December 1980
Volume II, Number 1

Project on Jewish Institutions, Public Resource Center • 1747 Connecticut Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009

\$1.50

MOON RITE: Dance and Prayer

By Hannah Parvati Frydman and Simcha Steven Paull

The Jewish Arts Community of the Bay (JACOB) hosted a Mid-Winter New Moon Celebration in San Francisco last January. In a spirit of group celebration, Havdallah—farewell to the Sabbath—and Kiddush Levana—sanctification of the new moon—were presented through music, dance, drama, costume and set design.

The purpose of this and other programs presented by JACOB is to provide an opportunity to explore and communicate the essence of Jewish spirituality through the arts. This particular program was designed to allow those unfamiliar with Judaism to appreciate the intent of the rituals; for those acquainted with these Jewish practices, the use of artistic media provided a refreshing and innovative perspective.



By Sandy Rosenblatt

Below is a description of the Havdallah/New Moon program and some indication of the creative process involved in its production.

The Cast: Kohenet (High Priestess), Kohen (High Priest), Seven Dancers (male and female), Narrator, Witness.

Musicians: cello, guitar, flutes, clarinet, sax, shofar.

Visual Design

The visual design was inspired by the colors and ritual accoutrements of the Temple as described in the Bible, and by mythical fantasy.¹

An altar was set at the back of the stage consisting of a table covered with purple, blue and crimson cloths and a banner frontal piece exhibiting a large letter Shin, a crescent moon and a circle. A variety of ritual implements embellished the altar including an oil lamp serving as a Ner Tamid, seven colored Havdallah candles, twelve white candles and incense sticks set in sand, two Kiddush cups, two enormous challot, a cornucopia of fruit, and fresh flowers. At the base of the altar stood five baskets filled with bay and eucalyptus leaves. Very large metal menorahs were placed at the four corners of the stage.

The dancers wore dark turtle necks over white loose fitting pants. For Havdallah, they wore light shirts as well. For Kiddush Levana, they wore half-faced two dimensional fabric masks. Designed to produce an other-worldly mythical atmosphere, the masks were blue and silver crescent shaped moons with long golden tassels.

The Kohen wore a brown caftan, embellished with a long red tasselled rope, gold jewelry resembling the Breast-

plate, a multi-colored Kipah and a black woolen cape. The Kohenet wore a long flowing white chiffon dress with a royal blue velvet cape, blue jewelry and sparkling streamers in her hair. During Kiddush Levana, Kohen and Kohenet wore elaborately decorated multi-colored masks with full circles, Magen David and the letter Shin created in fabrics, yarn and feathers.²

The Performance

After some introductory, mood setting music, Kohen and Kohenet walk on stage and chant alternately, "Who is not a priestess when she stands in the temple of her own body? And who is not a priest when he bows at the altar of his own heart?"

This is followed by DANCE OF THE ONE AND THE MANY** in which seven dancers depict the cycle of coming together and going apart, the pulse of the universe.

The following narrative is spoken while the dancers take Havdallah candles and stand in front of the altar in the shape of a menorah:

All Praise to you, O Shechina
Bride of the Sabbath
Descending on wings of light
Bringing eternal peace to earth.
O Glorious Schechina
To you we dedicate all that follows.

Welcome seekers and pilgrims from near and far
You who cross over bridges and freeways
And well-trodden undiscovered footpaths,
Welcome to this eve of dance, ritual, celebration.

Tonight we recreate the Ancient of Days;
We rebuild the Holy Temple.

In Havdallah we dance in joy and sadness
With the departing Sabbath Bride.
We renew the weekly cycle;
The Bride departs,
And yet, her sweetness lingers.

Kohen, holding a Kiddush cup, and Kohenet, placing a basket of eucalyptus leaves at her feet, begin chanting Havdallah, alternately in Hebrew and retranslated English. Kohenet portrays the meaning of each phrase through movement.

After *Borey Pree Hagafen*, Kohen offers wine to Kohenet and to each dancer. Dancers return candles to altar and take up either baskets of fragrant leaves or incense sticks. Four dancers do a simple DANCE OF THE BASKETS.** Kohen then moves to center stage and says the blessing for spices as two dancers gracefully come forth with incense. Following the blessing, Kohen and dancers move into the audience and give each person a spice offering.

Kohenet and a woman dancer then do mirror movements as they recite the blessing over fire. Kohen joins Kohenet on stage and they chant the final brachot in English and Hebrew. The candles are extinguished in the wine. The dancers, still in the audience, having given out spice offerings, begin singing ELIJAHU HANAVI.** As the audience joins in the song, the dancers return to the stage for DANCE OF ELIJAH which they conclude by greeting each other "Good Week". . . .

"I've seen the New Moon! I've seen the New Moon!" calls a witness suddenly from the back of the room. Kohen and Kohenet question the witness and when it is clear that she has seen the new moon, the shofar is sounded.³

Kohenet tells the audience that we have celebrated Kiddush Levana for centuries. She tells a story of the Baal

Shem Tov about the night after Yom Kippur when the clouds were so thick he mourned at not being able to perform Kiddush Levana. His hassidim, not knowing of his sadness, gathered in the next room and began to dance. In ecstasy, they broke into his chambers dancing. He joined them, forgetting his sorrow. Just then someone noticed that the night had cleared and the moon shone in all her glory.⁴

The shofar is sounded and the following proclamation is heard:

Kiddush Levana—we sanctify the New Moon.
In ancient times

Our ancestors brought to the temple altar
The New Moon Sacrifice
Of one ram,
Two bullocks,
Seven He-Lambs
Oil and flour,
And a drink-offering of wine.⁵

Tonight, we sing and dance to celebrate the New Moon.
Born before our eyes is the silver crescent.
As the Moon reflects the greater light
So may we all reflect the Light of Shechina.
May Shechina and all the gathered tribes be united.
Blessed Be Shechina.
Blessed Be Humanity.

The dancers then reappear masked and present DANCE OF THE NEW MOON.** ending in a crescent. Kohenet invites members of the audience to join dancers in offering their fragrances at the altar. Kohen gives each dancer a fragrant leaf. The dancers then move into the audience and encourage people to participate. Nearly the whole group (over 1500 people) joins in a snake dance to the altar when Kohen and Kohenet greet each person as they make their offering. As the lines progress, circles are formed. The music stops and Kohen invites the audience to reach for the moon, saying

Even as we dance before you
 And we cannot touch you,
 So shall all our foes be unable to touch us.
 And even as we sing to you,
 And your light touches us,
 So shall all our lovers be able to touch us.*

Music begins again and the dancing becomes even more joyous. When the music finally stops, the priestly benedictions are recited in English and Hebrew.

After a brief intermission, there is live music and joyous dancing.

Closing Notes

We are beginning an exploration of Jewish ritual forms through group celebration. There lie before us vast areas of Jewish life which can be creatively and innovatively experienced. Connections with the sun, the earth, the stars and the elements can be further explored. Through the multimedia of the arts, and with a universal and humanitarian consciousness, we have begun to understand and present the oral and written tradition in refreshing and meaningful ways which speak to us in the language of our times. We hope our experience will inspire others who are experimenting with creative Jewish expression, and we look forward to your comments and feedback.

*See, for example, *Exodus* 25:10-27:19 and chapters 35-39. The inspiration and impetus for the performance as well as the visual design came through Freda Rider, a San Francisco artist. Original script by Simcha Steven Paull and Arieh Lev Breslow.

**The altar and masks were designed and created by Freda Rider; the Kiddush cups and pot for the Ner Tamid, by Susan Felix; and the menorahs, by Emil Sher.

For a description of the sounding of the shofar on the new moon, see *Numbers* 10:1-10 and *Mishna Rosh Hashana* II:6-7. The following were also valuable resources in connection with the new moon celebration:

"Moon," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 12.

Abraham Milgram, *Jewish Worship*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, pp. 262-268.

Fanchon Shur, "Rosh Hodesh: New Moon Ritual of Renewal," in *Moon, Moon*, by Anne Kent Rush. New York: Random House, 1976, pp. 367-373.

Richard Siegel, Michael Strassfeld, Sharon Strassfeld, *The Jewish Catalog*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973, pp. 96-99.

*Adapted from "The Strength of Community," Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, Schocken, p. 53.

**Adapted from *Numbers* 28:11-15, which is part of the traditional New Moon liturgy.

*Adapted from the traditional New Moon liturgy.

MENORAH: SPARKS OF JEWISH RENEWAL is published monthly by the Project on Jewish Institutions of the Public Resource Center at 1747 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009. (202) 483-7902. All letters, ideas for articles, draft articles, etc. should be sent to the editor at the above address. For subscriptions and changes of address etc., write: Menorah, P.O. 1308V, Fort Lee, N.J. 07024. Individuals, U.S. \$15 / year, \$25 / 2 years. Foreign surface and Canada, \$20 / year, \$30 / 2 years. Community subscription (20 copies a month, 1 year), \$77. Air mail rates on request. Copyright © 1980 by Public Resource Center. Third Class postage paid at Washington, D.C.

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Logo designed by Stuart Copans.

Typesetting by Wordscape.

*The Jewish Arts Community of the Bay is dedicated to the expression of Jewish identity, values and traditions in art. Among its members are musicians, theater people, dancers, writers, visual artists, video and film makers, and people working in creative liturgy. Members range from the religious to the secular, from those deeply involved in Jewish communal life to those without any formal Jewish affiliation. All are welcome. For information, comments or copies of the script of the New Moon Celebration (send \$1.00 for the script), call or write Jacob Picheny, 2619 Regent, Berkeley, CA 94704. (415) 849-4174.

***Dance of the One and the Many* (choreography: Jacob Picheny, Naomi Puro and Jeffrey Weinstein): Dancers enter, each from a different direction. Physically feeling and depicting their separateness, they move toward each other, weave among each other, separate into two groups—joyously moving together—then each dancer spins out as an individual.

Dance of the Baskets (chor.: Parvati Frydman) Four dancers with baskets of fragrant leaves do a simple folk dance, swaying to the right and left in a gesture of offering and then spinning, swaying to the left and right and doing a camel step.

Dance of Elijah (chor.: Jacob, Naomi and Jeff): Partners and trios walk in a variety of directions, creating designs with a joyous dignity and ending, all in a circle.

Dance of the New Moon (chor.: Jacob, Naomi, and Jeff): Each person enters with an individual joyous dance, greeting the moon. They join each other in a chorus, moving rhythmically, close together. The dance ends as they form the shape of a crescent moon together. Performed with masks.

Psalm 150. Hallelujah By Judith Steigler

Call — reach out in every way to touch the flowing force of God.

Call to Him in the glorious flare of His holiness.

Call to Him in the cosmos stirred by His vigorous strength.

Call to Him in the mighty source where His creation arises.

Call to Him in the core of His swelling expansiveness.

Call to Him with blasting horn.

Call to Him with plucking strings and brushing strings.

Call to Him with jangling hands and flying feet.

Call to Him with singing strings and moaning strings.

Call to Him with rousing cymbals.

Call to Him with shouting cymbals.

All of creation, call to God!

Call — reach out in every way to touch the flowing force of God.