

The Debka Of My Life



Heli Livneh

Translation:
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As I approached the café where Moshe and I were to meet in Jerusalem, from afar, distinctly standing out from all the diners was an adult figure, dressed in a plaid buttoned shirt, tailored cigar pants and a clean-shaven face. His head was covered with whitish curls that were cloud-like as seen at the end of the winter and a neat mustache that made me confident that, even from afar, indeed this was **Moshe Eskayo**. Moshe was sitting on a chair in the café and waiting. He looked like the type of person who, in older age, hides behind an old curtain with countless refreshing and intriguing stories about his life. "Oh, here she comes!" He rose at once and called to me. His blue mischievous eyes smiled at me and I could see immediately that his older appearance is only a cover story for a young man, mischievous and energetic, as we all know him, a guy who has his whole life ahead of him.

When **Moshe Eskayo** heard the special Arabic

tune on a highway in the USA, he immediately stopped on the side of the road and within twenty minutes he had almost finished creating "Debka Keff – Fun Debka". But then, a police car suddenly stopped alongside him. An American police officer stepped out of his car and came towards him, fully equipped and with an eloquent accent loudly asked him, "Why are you dancing on the road, man?" The officer took his notebook out of his pocket and immediately gave Moshe a ticket and a summons to appear in court.

"The day of judgement arrived and I had to show up in court", Eskayo says. "Something made me take the dance music recording of 'Debka Keff' to court. I wanted the judge himself to feel the great urge I had in those moments when I danced on the side of the highway. When my trial started, the same officer who had stopped me said to the judge: 'This man was dancing on the highway!' The judge turned to me, looked at me and gave me permission to speak. I asked him to play the music, and without much talk, I danced to the sounds of my Debka and argued to the judge: 'Should I get a ticket just because I was dancing?' Much to my surprise, the judge who saw the dance, accepted my arguments on the subject".

Moshe was born in 1931 and grew up in Zichron Tuvia, now part of the Nachlaot neighborhood in Jerusalem, after his family had moved from the Old City. Moshe spoke in Ladino until he went to "gan" (preschool) where he learned Hebrew.

"My mother was born in Israel but her family is from the Atlas [Maghreb] Mountains [across northwestern Africa, spanning Morocco, Algeria

Moshe in front of his childhood home in Zichron Tuvia, Jerusalem



"In my life, I've seen many dance troupes dancing the debka. I fell in love with this dance style. To me, the debka is a very powerful dance. It is something that creates a very strong atmosphere. The debka is a very masculine and stylized dance".

and Tunisia]. My father was also born in Israel and his family is from Monastir (Bitola), [Southern Serbia, Yugoslavia] which today is Macedonia. When I was born, I was called Moise by everyone, but in my early years of life, I took a piece of glass, put it in my mouth and swallowed it. My life hung by a thread. In those terrifying moments, my life was saved and, for that reason, they gave me additional names and since then, I was called: **Moshe Nissim Eskayo**. And indeed, during my life a number of miracles [nissim] have happened to me. We are seven brothers and one brother died several years ago. All my other brothers live in Israel".



Moshe dances with his wife, Ann (Chana)

□ How did you get to the world of dance?

I studied at the "Alliance" [secondary] school together with **Yossi Banai**, z"l, who was my best friend. How I loved Yossi! I really miss him since he passed away. I used to walk around a lot in the Machane Yehuda Shuk [market located in Jerusalem] with Yossi, my good friend. Yossi's mother lived on the second floor in a house at the center of the shuk. When she wanted to shop for groceries, she would arrange it through the window. She would yell to the greengrocer [British for a retailer of fruit and vegetables]: "Shimon, are my vegetables ready?!" At one point in his life, Yossi wanted to relocate her from the shuk to a place that was less crowded, but she strongly refused.

When I was a child, I loved playing soccer and I didn't dance. When I was 15, I joined the Scout Movement [Tsofim] in Jerusalem, and every Saturday night we had a dance night and played



Moshe leads the debka

a game called: "Who is that girl who turns around the circle?" In this game, everyone stands and claps to the sound of the music. Each person who enters the center of the circle chooses a partner to take their place in the center and so on. We danced the "Hora" for hours; danced and sweated with joy and the "Hora" was an integral part of the Scout Movement routine.

One night at the scouts, on a day of a dance session, a sweet girl named Tikva approached me and wanted to dance the Krakowiak with me. I, who was a very shy boy who had only danced the Hora and never danced with a girl before, agreed to Tikva's request and we danced together. That night I couldn't stop dancing with her. I felt as if I was in a dream. Till this day I remember that initial innocent contact with her. That entire evening, I felt wonderful! It was then that I decided to seriously study dance.



That's how we danced "Hora Keff"

continued to dance is thanks to the existence of the dance, "Debka Ramot". And indeed, to this day, it is relevant at all dance session.

I have another dance, named: "Ilu Tziporim". People were accustomed to me choreographing mainly debkas to Arabic songs, and then I choreographed the dance, "Ilu Tziporim". One day a dancer came to me after I had choreographed the dance and told me: "Finally you've created a dance to an Israeli song..." but what he didn't know is that, the song "Ilu Tziporim" was translated [in 1978] from the French (*Si Les Oiseaux*) to Hebrew by **Naomi Shemer** [1930-2004] and it isn't exactly Israeli...

With "Debka Gid", I have bit of a painful story... I choreographed it at my home in the USA. The day I started choreographing "Debka Gid", all was going well. Step by step, I felt that I was creating the right dance... but one moment after performing some movement with my leg, I suddenly heard a "pop!" Some kind of loud noise, as if something was torn in my leg. I had almost finished the dance... but after an examination, I found out that I had torn a tendon [gid] in my leg and therefore, I named this dance: "Debka Gid"...

□ Tell me a little about the camps you established in the USA

I had folk dance camps: I always thought that "I discovered America!" I felt a true sense of mission because I had sent many new immigrants to Eretz Yisrael – the Land of Israel through the Jewish Agency. They got married here in Israel and, thanks to me, they remained here and started raising families. With all

Moshe with
Eileen Weinstock



Moshe Eskayo instructs the dancers

modesty, my camps in the USA were a household name. People didn't want to go home. Each camp was between three days to a week; some camps were even two weeks long.

Each camp had an organized program and choreographers and dance session leaders would come to teach: **Shlomo Maman, Moshe Telem, Meir Shem-Tov, Avner Naim** and many others. They came and "premiered" their dances, teaching them even before anyone had ever seen the dance. The best instructor that I had at that time, in my opinion, was **Eileen Weinstock**. Beyond her gracefulness, inner and outer beauty, she knew how to teach and explain the dances very well and correctly. At times I had choreographed a dance and I couldn't remember the steps... Eileen immediately corrected me and reminded me what to do...

□ A propos of women in folk dance, who do you think this world belongs to?

It does not belong to anyone. While it is true that professionally there weren't many women who taught, I personally felt that they didn't have sufficient daring and courage to do it. I don't know why, even though they did have the talent and the ability to dance well. I'm all for women choreographing dances and the more the better. We are a democracy!

□ Tell me about your creative process

To me, first of all, there is the music, but I had a number of dances which I created without

I started studying ballet with **Rina Nikova**, the classical ballet pioneer in Israel. Nikova was the ballet mistress at the Palestine Opera, directed the ballet company of the Israeli Opera, and founded the "Biblical Ballet" [which was based on Yemenite folklore] and the "Jerusalem Biblical and Folk Ballet – Jerusalem Ballet of Bible and Folklore", and she combined classical ballet with Yemenite steps. At some point, the company traveled to South Africa to perform. Then I went to France. There I studied jazz and modern dance. For a short period in France, I watched performances by **Juki (Yakov) Arkin** [1933-1996]. Arkin was a mime, dancer, choreographer and an Israeli actor. He was among the first graduates of "Lahakat Pikud Merkaz – Central Command Band", studied acting at **Moshe Halevi's** drama studio and mime with **Shaika Ophir**, z"l. I always wanted to get more and more experience in dance, in all kinds of styles. I wanted someone professional to teach me".

□ Which style of dance are you particularly fond of?

I think I'm best at debka dances. This is also my greatest love.

□ How did you actually get from ballet to debkas?

I always loved to listen to Arabic music. My mother danced in an Arabic style home, to the sounds of Arabic music, and my father



Moshe dances with Yankel Levy Z"l.

would sit and play the drum while my mother danced. That's how I grew up. On the radio, on Kol Israel, for only half an hour, there were broadcasts once a week of beautiful Arabic music. Everything I absorbed in my childhood from the music, from home, brought me to love debka dances. I have choreographed about twenty debka dances that are being danced today around the world. In my life, I've seen many dance troupes dancing the debka. I fell in love with this dance style. To me, the debka is a very powerful dance. It is something that creates a very strong atmosphere. The debka is a very masculine and stylized dance.

■ THE METAMORPHOSIS OF A DANCE...

□ Moshe:

People dance to the sounds [of the music] of the dances I've created but few know the stories behind the songs. For instance, I choreographed "Debka Ramot" after my daughter, **Irit**, moved to the Ramot neighborhood in Jerusalem. One day a dance session participant came to me and told me that, one of the main reasons she has



Instructing at Camp Bitnua in Eilat



Moshe dances "Tfilat Michal" with his younger daughter, Michal

having any music at all. It was only after I had choreographed the entire dance that a composer wrote the music for me. "Debka Oud" for example, is such a dance. I choreographed the step sequences and **Shlomo Shai** composed the music. The guy who played "Debka Oud" was actually from Armenia.

When I first hear music that I like, I think of a new dance and slowly it crystallizes in me. The dance style I like and choreograph is difficult and complex. It is important to me that the dance will have a certain style and fit each one of the sounds that we hear. I don't want to just 'shove in' a clap with no good reason for such a clap. The steps have to relate one to another. One step has to be suitable and connected to the following step. For example, I would never choreograph a dance with a Yemenite step followed by a Romanian step. It would never happen. And if I have any criticism on the contemporary creative process, it is that today creators can easily 'fall' into this place of a lack of compatibility between one step and another or the addition of unnecessary elements.

■ FAMILY AND FRIENDS TELL US:

■ Irit Eskayo Vaknin, Moshe's daughter:

I was born in 1965 in the USA. My parents were married there and we lived in Manhattan [New York City]. My father came from Israel in 1961 and married my mother in 1963. They met at the 92nd Street 'Y' dance session in Manhattan, which is still ongoing today. From

a very young age, my sister [Michal] and I were involved in all the camps and dance sessions. Aba [Dad] started holding the camps in 1968 as folk dance weekends and in 1972 he started holding longer camps which sometimes ran for ten days.



At the end of the seventies, he started to hold exclusively Israeli folk dance camps. [This was after he ran International Folkdance Camps.] What was special about the camps was that choreographers would come from the Balkans, Romania, Russia, Mexico, literally from all over the world, and would teach the dances themselves. The camps were a type of "hishtalmut", a continuing education program. Many dance session leaders came to learn the dances directly from the choreographers and returned to their own dance sessions to teach them. That's actually how the dances were disseminated.

At camp, there were talent nights with performances and there were afternoons where they danced in ethnic costumes; everything was very colorful. There were music classes with drumming on a darbuka [a single head membranophone with a goblet shaped body] and flute playing and the choreographers who came from these countries, Bulgaria for example, had brought along with them original [vinyl] records and costumes which they sold at the camp. There were also dance troupes that volunteered to perform for the atmosphere. There was a great sense of unity. Every year there was a different T-shirt, unique to the camp.

Aba had a kiosk [canteen] where he made falafel and hummus. All was handmade by him. There was one year when Aba cooked everything for everyone for three entire days, just because he didn't like the food at the place. The camps were held at children's summer camps in the suburbs, next to a lake in which we could swim and surrounded by a pastoral forest. At a winter camp, we used to skate on the ice of the frozen lake. It was snowy and beautiful. It was an amazing experience.

"This is a memory I will never forget. I played the dance; we all went into the circle and danced around Moshe. To this day, I vividly remember the expression of joy spreading across his face. There was a special bond, since it is rare for all of us to dance this dance together".

□ How was this experience for you as a child?

When I was young, I waited from camp to camp. I actually counted the days. My sister and I just waited for it to come. It was an attraction for us. We helped a lot in the preparations for the camp and we really loved to dance. My mother was also an integral part. Mom was concerned about all the bureaucracy involved in registering all the people who came. We did everything on our own. Dad even designed the flyers by himself. When they came back from the printer, we would put the invitations in the envelopes ourselves and send them off to their destinations. It was a family project. There was never a paid staff or secretary.

These are my main childhood memories. These were our vacations. We were involved, carried, hung, worked and felt very important. All the people who helped Aba through the years are still in contact with him to this day.

□ Aba Moshe and Irit?

I admired Aba, his creativity and dances. To this day, his dances are considered special and different from other dances. They are complex and have a lot of thought invested in them. When I came to Israel in 1983, I taught his dances at many dance sessions and hishtalmut/continuing education programs. My father greatly influenced me. Throughout the years, I mainly taught children and youth in different kinds of programs. I trained dance troupes in Jerusalem and Modi'in, created children's dances and when I had made 'aliyah', I danced with 'Horah Yerushalayim' [performing troupe].

When I had moments of crises, Aba always helped me. He worries about me. Even today, when I am 50, he wants me to call when I reach my destination. Until recently, when he was 80, Aba would come to Israel and go dancing until four in the morning. He would regularly go to Karmiel. About five years ago, Aba came to 'Camp Bitnua' produced by Gadi Bitton, so my husband Moti, our four daughters and I went to stay with him at camp in Eilat. The experience was amazing. We enjoyed and



Moshe with his granddaughter, Ayla

danced his dances; they did a whole evening, including a panel and a slideshow presentation, in his honor".

My mother died eight years ago. [Ann Helene Weinstein Eskayo, November 20, 1940 – February 19, 2011.] She was an American Jew. When my mom was a teenager, she came to work on a kibbutz and fell in love with Israel. She went folk dancing and that's where she met my father. My mother had a dream to immigrate to Israel [i.e., make 'aliyah'], which she never fulfilled. She was very Zionist and loved Israel very much. She loved the army and the country. Folk dancing was her path to this emotional place".

My parents separated when I was 25. My mother was diagnosed with Parkinson's when she was 50 and moved west, to live in Phoenix, Arizona. At the end, she succumbed to cancer when she was 70. Ima was very helpful and supportive of dad. My father is an artist and creator and she dealt with all administrative matters and authorities in English. My mom loved this world so much. Dancing was her entire world after her children and grandchildren.

■ **Ayla Sasson** (the daughter of the choreographer and dance instructor, **Yoram Sasson**, and Moshe Eskayo's granddaughter):

"Saba (grandpa), you see? When there are two blue check marks, it means he read your message," Ayla explained patiently to her grandfather, Moshe,



the technical features of his phone. They both sat together in Ayla's room on his last visit to Israel. Eskayo looked at Ayla, his granddaughter, with his blue eyes, glazed and full of emotion and pride and

patiently listened to her explanation, and she continued: "And when you want to send a picture to Ima, you have to click here on the camera icon to add it, okay Saba?" Ayla said, smiling at him. They will both forever remember how, over the years, they went together to dance sessions and marathons when he visited Israel. Moshe used to watch Ayla dancing and floating in the circle and great pride enveloped it all. Especially when she danced to the sounds [of the music] of the dances he choreographed. "This is my continuing lineage", he always thought to himself.

Saba lived in New York before my mother was born. To me, he was always the 'grandpa from the USA'. When I was young, he used to come more frequently to see his young grandchildren as much as he could. Saba always came with suitcases full of beautiful gifts, all sorts of things that we didn't have in Israel then; we were the whole world to Saba and Savta (grandma).

Saba loved playing with us and fooling around because he is such an entertainer. He would come to my kindergarten and school parties and, despite the distance, we were always very close. Saba is a very easygoing person, with a great sense of humor, and folk dance is the field that has occupied the biggest place in his life. It is his livelihood and the essence of his life. Everything revolved around dance and folk dancing. Together we went to many dance sessions in Israel, and he would look at me as I was dancing and he was very proud of me, especially when I was dancing his dances. I am his connection to folk dance in the family.

■ **Avner Naim** (Choreographer, Session Leader Instructor and Radio Broadcaster)

I met Moshe in the early eighties through his

dances. Only later, I found out that he is from Jerusalem like I am. This is how the initial connection between us was created. When I began choreographing dances in 1990, Moshe loved them and every year he invited me to his camps.

□ **In your opinion, how were Eskayo's camps?**

Hora Keff was the biggest camp in the world. There was nothing like it. It was a household name. "Hora Keff" included dancers from all over the world. I attended these camps as a choreographer along with **Shlomo Maman, Meir Shem Tov, Gadi Bitton, Naftaly Kadosh, Moshiko Halevy, Dani Dassa, Israel Yakovee, Shlomo Bachar** and others... I think I attended about 15 camps. Every year.

The connection between me and Moshe was our simplicity. Although Eskayo has his "craziness" and complexities in his dances, all positive of course, there is also a great deal of beautiful simplicity. In addition, we both grew up on the same style of music: Arabic and Oriental [Middle Eastern]. Our first conversation was when we asked each other: "Do you know that song or this one?..." That's how we connected. Moshe has a very good sense of humor. We had many conversations about which dances would succeed in the long run and which would not.

As part of the camps, Moshe tried to "drive the camp crazy" with a special dance that he had choreographed for that year, and so it was: once "Hora Keff", a year later "Pnei Malach", "Tagidi" and others..."

□ **Tell me about Moshe Eskayo the man, the friend.**

Moshe is a friend to me. I think that because I am a choreographer that is what he most related to. We went everywhere together: marathons, dance sessions, camps. Moshe is just a simple person, very talented, and professionally, he is influenced by many types of music, mainly Balkan and Arabic music. We both have a very



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cynical sense of humor and it has created a very good bond between us. In the 1950's and 60's, choreographers, such as **Moshe Eskayo** or **Moshiko Halevy**, were not readily accepted. Eskayo's style is Oriental/Mizrachit [Middle Eastern] which was not accepted here in Israel. At that time, **Rivka Shturman**, **Gurit Kadman**, were at the forefront, and the establishment that controlled folk dance belonged to the workers movement [the Histadrut] and was greatly influenced by Eastern European music. Eskayo brought with him the Middle Eastern style and it was hard to digest it, in spite of the obvious great talent. In addition, Moshe had left Israel [moving to the USA], and there was some criticism about that.

□ And you must have had shared experiences.

Once, during a very cold winter, we were shopping in New York City and bought coffee at one of the cafes in the area. The streets there are big and busy and we wanted to cross; there were two lanes and a big traffic island in the middle. Moshe suddenly crossed the first lane very quickly without me, while holding the coffee in his hand; when he stopped, the traffic light for the drivers on his right turned red. One of the drivers probably thought Moshe was a beggar, and tossed a coin into his coffee cup and drove away... Some thirty years have since passed, and to this day, I laugh every time I remember it.

Another day in New York, at the beginning of the '90's, during the time of video and audio cassettes, I wanted to buy a VCR. Moshe and I walked around the stores together looking for a high quality device for me. Suddenly, someone approached and offered to sell us a VCR, claiming that the devices in the store were very expensive. The guy's offer was \$100. We checked the box and it looked good. I asked Moshe: "Do you think it's worth \$100?" Moshe nodded his head affirmatively and we returned home. When we arrived, we opened the box and slowly started to unpack it. One wrapping paper after the other, after the other... lots and lots of wrapping paper, until we were left with a black panel, small and narrow, with only hand glued buttons...

■ Yaron Meishar (the webmaster of the 'Rokdim' website and editor of "Rokdim-Nirkoda" Magazine)

I met Moshe for the first time at "Hora Camp" in New York in 1979. [In 1981, it became "Hora-Shalom".] From this camp, I brought the dance "Bakramim" (In the Vineyards) back to Israel. I taught it on a Monday at Moshe Telem's session at the University. I swear I taught it exactly like the original. I have no idea why, in Israel, it is danced incorrectly...



In the early 80's, when I started setting up the folk dance recording library, I became familiar with the recordings that Moshe produced and which were at a very high standard in comparison with recordings produced by others and definitely in comparison to the "White Records" (which were edited copies produced from copying the original recordings). Moshe was very strict about having high quality recordings for his choreographed dances, some of which also had different choreographies that are danced in Israel (e.g., Ha'yoshevet Ba'ganim, Debka Oud, Al Gmali).

Moshe was rightfully upset that his recording of the music for "Debka Oud", which was written especially for him, was taken and used for another dance choreography in Israel (that is different from the one danced in the USA).

Through the years, we've had many encounters and I even came to "Hora Keff" twice as Moshe's guest, and not as a choreographer. These camps had participants of all ages, from children to seniors. Some of them were session instructors (madrichim) from around the world. The camp site was lakeside, in the heart of a forest, in beautiful small log cabins. There was magic in this place. We were cut off from the rest of the world. The atmosphere reminded me of the kibbutz of old. There were self-served meals, sitting on long wooden benches, falafel and Israeli food.

Even though I didn't come to teach, Moshe took





care of me in a room within the instructors' cabin so that I would feel better, and he also allowed me to present and sell the Rokdim Magazine and the videotapes that preceded the DVD.

I remember that every night we continued dancing even though we were supposed to finish, and a kind of spontaneous "ritual" developed in order to prevent the music from stopping. In my opinion, the nightly dance sessions were the heart of the camp and gave the participants real "keff" (fun). The harkadot were full of energy, joy of dancing and with a warm and friendly atmosphere. The circle dances were always danced while holding hands.

There was an excellent collaboration between us in the recording of the dances and in the first discs (CD's) he produced as part of the "Keff" series. At his request, there were quite a few recordings which I sent him, on digital tape (DAT) – dances that Moshe wanted for discs and which he did not have the original.

■ Yaron Carmel (choreographer and instructor)



I've known **Moshe Eskayo** for 20 years already. In 1999, I was at the "Hilula" camp in the USA for the first time. It was **Gadi Bitton** and **Miriam Handler's** camp and Moshe was also there. Since that camp, I've been

exposed to all of his dances, including those we don't dance here in Israel. I became very attached to him as well as to **Eileen Weinstock**, and I have always had great respect for both of them. Over the years, as I've grown and became a professional, I've always allowed myself to invite him to my sessions in Israel. Today Moshe is amazingly dealing with his age and maturity. Despite the passing years, which naturally makes it harder on the body, Moshe Eskayo creates a special magic when he is inside the circle. It does not matter if I play his simplest or his most complex dances; he always goes into the center of the circle

and dances, and when he feels that he has had enough, he finds a way to make the group dancing around him laugh. Moshe has always made sure to say nice and kind words to me, and that has made me stronger. This is actually how our "romance" started.

At one of the times I hosted Moshe, about four years ago, we danced together: **Moshe Eskayo, Avner Naim, Mimi Kogen, Elad Shtamer** and I. At some point, Moshe asked that I play his dance, "Shir Hachatuna – The Wedding Song". This is a memory I will never forget. I played the dance; we all went into the circle and danced around Moshe. To this day, I vividly remember the expression of joy spreading across his face. There was a special bond, since it is rare for all of us to dance this dance together. For me and for all of us, these were moments of transcendence. There was an atmosphere of real magic.

■ And on a personal note from the author

"Pnei Malach (Yaldati)", "Ilu Tziporim", "Ma Avarech", "Debka Keff", "Debka Ramot", "Debka Gid", "Shir Hachatuna", "Tfilat Michal", "Liya", "Chanita" – these are just part of the rich dance repertoire by choreographer, Moshe Eskayo. Over the years, Moshe has taken care to plant his flower seeds in our garden. And our garden has become colorful and beautiful and each flower has a different character and a distinct wonderful scent. And we, the dancers, have made sure to water and preserve this beautiful garden in all the dance sessions and we will continue to do so. Thank you, Moshe. ✎

The dances Moshe choreographed:

<https://www.rokdim.co.il/#/SearchResults/Eskayo%20Moshe>