

A Disco No-Man's Land

Orthodox women tend not to let their hair down, but a series of discos, talent shows and plays has provided opportunities to cut loose.

By Sara K. Eisen

One of my favorite disco songs is playing, and I am debating whether to dance with my son's English teacher, Rachel, who lives down the road from us; the tall wife of an ex-coworker; or the woman I spent too much time with in the maternity ward last year when we were both waiting to go into "real" labor. ♀ Reluctant to approach any of them (How can a woman be shy about approaching other women? I wonder to myself incredulously), I end up dancing by myself; it's no big deal—other women are doing the same, although I am relieved when the D.J. starts a line dance.

Men are nowhere in sight, and these religious women, most of whom are married with kids, are enjoying a local community center-sponsored "disco evening" in Ramat Beit Shemesh, an almost exclusively Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox suburb about halfway between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Since Orthodox women do not sing or dance in front of men for reasons of modesty posited in *halakha*, this dance is a welcome event. The center's large gym has been transformed by candles and gauzy, colorful fabric—more *1,001 Nights* than *Saturday Night Fever*—and soon enough, a middle-aged, Rubenesque and liquid-limbed belly dancer gathers the women in a large circle and tries to show us how to move like she does (with varying levels of success).

LEAH SADRAS, THE EVENING'S ABLE D.J., NOTES THAT this type of group instruction helps break the ice at religious all-women's dance events; she has played more than half a dozen in Ramat Beit Shemesh alone during the past couple of years and has run several in Jerusalem as well.

Sadras says that the biggest difference between religious



All She Wants To Do Is Dance Single-sex boogie nights have become increasingly popular in Ramat Beit Shemesh, a suburb between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

women and their secular counterparts, in terms of their participation on the dance floor, is that "there is an issue of reticence versus freedom," she explains. That's why the line dances work so well to loosen up the mood—they provide a comfortable group structure for a crowd very much used to structure and groups as salient features of everyday life.

Sadras, who is secular, happily observes the degree to which these women are able to eventually let go and the confidence she sees growing in the room without the presence of men. There's a sense of solidarity and a lack of sexual tension. It is energizing in a whole different way.

ERIN TREIBERBAUM

So when the music changes to salsa, the women whoop, high-five and get into several lines to shimmy to the Latin beat—the head coverings and long jean skirts no impediment to free (very free) movement. Women of Valor, cha-cha-cha.

THIS TIME, I DANCE WITH THE woman from the maternity ward ("What else do I do for me?" she explains), who has come with a group of her 20-something friends, some of whom have clearly done their time soaking up MTV. The D.J. cranks up to Top 40 pop and the room is getting louder and darker.

In case there was any doubt, "women only" does *not* mean no showing off, although it's without the competitive edge; it's all about appreciating your sisters. Now that things are heating up a bit, the women with the moves are ready to come out and play to the crowd. "Where does a religious girl learn to move like that?" I ask Danielle Jacobs, a J. Lo look-alike in chandelier earrings and a bandana-style

headscarf, who had just taken the floor by storm with a Britney Spears hip-hop number. She later treats us to a Michael Flatley-inspired jig duet with another incredibly talented young mother.

It turns out that Jacobs is a photographer, dance instructor and choreographer—she's been dancing, she says, "from birth." As a religious woman, she works at women-only health clubs, and the productions she choreographs are also by and for women. *Olivia: Oliver with a Twist*, her recent hit, was performed (in Jerusalem, with a mostly Beit She-mesh cast) to benefit a local religious fertility clinic.

Jacobs says that productions like *Olivia*, and dance evenings like this one, are the life blood for women like her, who have strong creative and performance-based drives. Since transgressing modesty laws is not an option, "it's beautiful that I'm able to express my God-given talent in front of women—and be appreciated," she admits.

In fact, the phenomenon of women-only entertainment

Candles and gauzy fabric decorate the gym, where a liquid-limbed belly dancer shows us her moves.

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has taken Ramat Beit Shemesh and its older sister, Beit Shemesh, also a largely religious and heavily English-speaking community, by storm. The community center that is hosting the disco also holds women-only karaoke nights; an annual talent show; and female performers give "salon concerts"

for mothers and daughters that are advertised on a community Web site.

ALL THIS IN ADDITION TO TWO or three major annual productions, such as the recent *Footsteps*, an original play written by a local woman to benefit an organization

treating people with postpartum depression. It seems that Jacobs's sentiments are widely felt—women need to express themselves artistically and are not letting religious restrictions stand in their way. Who needs men?

Not that this trend is about bashing men, says local drama teacher and theater director Penina Shechter; rather, it is about reaffirming women and giving them a place to be heard. She observes that this is not that different from feminist developments in theater since the 1970's, when many plays had a curtain call consisting of all women. However, in the Orthodox community the issue is one of religious necessity and self-expression, not one of sticking it to men. And Orthodox men, she notes, get to perform in synagogue; for women, the opportunities are fewer and need to be created for them.

It was with all this in mind that Miri Shalem, the Ramat Beit Shemesh community center director, came up with the disco nights over two years ago—an idea that has been enjoying growing popularity ever since. She tries to hold a dance evening every two months. "How many Hasidic dances can you do?" Shalem reasoned. She seems to bring religious women (native Israelis and Western immigrants show up in representative numbers) out of their homes to an unself-conscious environment—i.e., not your neighbor's daughter's wedding—to lend legitimacy to their desire for physical expression sans men, beyond, says Shalem, "dancing in the kitchen."

Shalem is clearly Modern Orthodox (her short-sleeved T-shirt and pink stretch pants under a skirt give it away), but many of the women are ultra-Orthodox. There is an eye-catching duo of very pregnant women, clad headscarf to sensible shoes in black, boogying with all their ample curves to "I Will Survive."

I enjoyed watching them the most. **H**



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MWA/2002