

["A place for the soul" appeared in the Washington Jewish Week on May 30, 2002](#)

A Place for the Soul

For the past 12 years, on Thursday evenings, the spacious social hall at Tikvat Israel in Rockville has been transformed into a hopping Israeli dance floor. There, a turnout of 100 dancers and would-be dancers of all ages rarely miss a beat when it comes to their Thursday night date with their Israeli leader Moshe Shem-Tov. Bodies twirl, hands clap, partners rotate, and feet move double time to the music. Older dancers step and swirl to the familiar pioneer tunes of their childhood, and join younger dancers in whirly minis leaping and shimmying to Israel's contemporary music--the vigorous, embattled, humorous and tragic refrains of Israel today.

Shem-Tov is fondly referred to by a group member as "the Moshe factor", the glue that holds the class together, the teacher par excellence who takes newcomers under his wing, reads faces and wins converts, bringing energy into the dance with his strong, compact and graceful body and dark good looks, and feeding off the energy the group gives back.

Last Thursday evening was a time of appreciation, six months in the planning by the potpourri of his devotees. At 8:45, as the advanced dance group took their places on the floor, the unmistakable sounds of klezmer rang out, and the four members of Shir Delite klezmer band bounded in, launching the surprise celebration.

The love and joy in the room and on the floor was palpable, as many from as far as Richmond came to say todah and high step to the music. Shem Tov joined in, a bewildered look on his face. He turned to his dance partner and whispered, Ma zeh? What is this? An unassuming man who could not imagine that this was all for him. He soon found out as one by one, those who had been with him and encouraged him from the beginning to start the class rose to sing his praises.

Dahlia Cohen, who has danced all her life, remembers sitting at a barbecue table 12 years ago, pressing Shem Tov, then on a visit to the U. S., to start a dance class to ease his homesickness and bring dance to the community.

To this day, he says, "it fills a place in my heart that yearns for my country where my family still lives. It means everything to me."

Roberta Helzner, back then the Tikvat Israel synagogue administrator, remembers the "skinny kid who couldn't even talk English asking to rent the synagogue for an Israeli dance class. It took off right away and is still going strong," she says.

Appreciation for the class comes from all corners. Yael Yeheskeli, 21, a vibrant curly-haired jean-clad student at Towson University, got "hooked" a year ago, and is part of a weekly carload from the Baltimore area. "I grew up in Israel til I was 9," she says. "It's wonderful to spend time here with Israeli people. The music and the people bring back warm memories. It's something Jewish I can connect with without the religious pressures."

Russian-born Marina Klein, who emigrated to Israel at the age of 13 has been a member of the class for 10 years. Through the intimacy and joy of the steps she grew up with, she resurrects both the dances and the memories.

"Here is a place not only for physical activity," says the attractive blonde Klein, who dances in white shorts, a yellow crocheted top and pink leather flats. "It's community, it's family for so many of us who have limited family here. The majority of my adopted family is from this group. We arrange our business trips to be there on Thursday night. It is a commitment -to yourself, to your friends who miss you if you aren't there. It's your appointment with having fun once a week." As the clarinet's rich tones began to play the familiar and well-loved strains of Erev Bah, oldtimers in the room who had come as guests, and whose roots were in the early days of Israeli folk dancing in Washington, joined the newcomers who have found a special place in that room over the past 12 years.

"It's not just physical activity," says Marina Klein looking at the dancers. It's a place for the soul."