

“LETTERS TO MY SON.”

By BEN ELIEZER.

XI.—OF DANCING.

My Dear Son,

The other day while playfully guiding your footsteps in a simple childish dance on the verandah of our house, I was interrupted by the doleful remonstrations of a middle-aged friend of mine. He stood scanning me with an air of hurt surprise and pained reproach, and his whole attitude proclaimed: “Et Tu Brute!”

“You are beginning rather early,” he moralised, “There is no need for you to initiate him into the principles of this art at so tender an age. You may rest assured, my friend, that he will learn this “Torah” soon enough without any aid from you. Nay, he will learn it all too readily, and a time will surely come when you will endeavour with all your might to suppress the impulse you now encourage, but alas! like me, you will be powerless.”

And my friend continued to recount the numerous evils from and vices and general moral depravity that result from the modern craze for dancing. He emphasized its harmful effects in distracting the young people from all serious occupations and its pernicious influence in inducing precocity.

After he had left me, I commenced to reflect on the attitude the majority of our people adopt towards this social phenomenon, and I discovered that my friend was not at all singular in his views on dancing. It was only a short time ago that the chairman of a literary society, anxious to convince me of the superiority of his colleagues, informed me that dancing had been eliminated from their programme of amusements. A young lady of high intellectual pretensions, was equally emphatic in declaring her contempt for the pastime. A well-known Zionist recently complained, from the public platform, that young people never attended a lecture or a debate unless induced by the promise of a dance at the end as a reward for their attendance. A young merchant of my acquaintance, a past “Yeshibah-Bachur” with a tendency to philosophise, whilst watching, a little time ago, the dancing in a ball-room, maintained to me that he could never see any sense in dancing, and he was always genuinely puzzled how people of the twentieth century could indulge in an exercise which to him savoured of barbarism. I could quote numerous other opinions, culled from various spheres of our society, showing the contempt which dancing evokes in certain sections of our people! Yet these people never stop to consider that an exercise which makes such a universal appeal cannot be summarily dismissed as a mere craze or fad. It must satisfy some vital need of human nature, and instead of thoughtlessly condemning the wide-spread love of dancing they should endeavour to understand it.

For dancing is indeed contemporaneous with the existence of mankind. Even the lower animals possess a sense of rhythm, and movements of the limbs and body as a means of expressing emotion are common to many species besides man. In fact, the principle of rhythmic movement is found throughout nature: the ebb and flow of the tide, the reverberations of sound and light, the automatic pulsations and flections of the blood and tissues, the involuntary beating of the feet of children, the regular rise and fall of the metre in music and poetry, the movements of the celestial spheres, as well as those of the simplest cell—all obey the same principle of rhythm.

Thus an indifference to the art of dancing is but a failure to understand one of the most poignant means of expressing both the physical and the spiritual in life. There is no doubt that the other arts had their origin in dancing, for it is the most primitive expression of love and worship. In our own religion the saltatory art has always played an important rôle. The ancient Hebrews danced before the Ark, and the great significance attached by them to dancing is evidenced by the passage in Psalm 150: “Praise Him with timbrels and dance.” Thus, during the “Hakafas” there was always dancing in the Temple. The pious men and the saints in the joyous procession to the well, danced with torches in their hands and recited hymns aloud. According to Philo, the Essenes of Judea and the Terapuetae of Egypt were wont to dance in their Synagogues mysterious dances in imitation of the solar movements of the stars round the sun. The ecstatic dances of the modern Chassidim with their ennobling, socialising and even sanctifying influence are well-known. The numerous occasions in which dancing is mentioned in the Bible are a true indication of the place it occupied amongst our people. All religions according to Havelock Ellis, were “in their early stages, saltatory. As a man danced so he believed. Just as we moderns have, in our ritual, prayers appropriate to all the great occasions of life, birth, marriage and death, so had the primitive savages in their ceremonial dances which could express their feelings on all stirring occasions. Each people and sometimes each tribe had its own religious dances, a study of which would well repay the student of anthropology. According to some writers the Christian Church was originally a theatre and the word Choir is supposed to mean a space enclosed for dancing. Dante, who was no doubt influenced by Christian thought

of his time, described dancing as one of the principal occupations of the inmates of Heaven and he depicts Christ as the leader of the dances. In our own Hagadah we read that “in the hereafter God will prepare dances for the virtuous in the garden of Eden.” Until modern times dancing formed an integral part of the services in most of the cathedrals of Europe. In short, dancing has been an essential and fundamental part of all vigorous religions throughout the world.

On the association of dancing with love it is superfluous to dwell. Amongst insects and birds, dancing is an essential part of courtship and the males vie with one another in their efforts to charm and fascinate the females by the grace and elegance of their impassioned struttings. This primitive love dance of the lower animals persists amongst many savages to-day, and our own dancing is simply a more developed and conventionalised form of it. Amongst certain peoples, says Ellis, there was but one word for “to love” and “to dance.” It is during this erotic dance that sexual choice takes place. By their skill, energy and beauty the males strive to win the admiration of the females, who in turn, reserve their capitulation for those whose charms have been most difficult to withstand, thus fulfilling one of the first laws of natural selection—the persistence of the fittest. Viewed in this light, dancing performs a very important function, in that it revealed all that was best in the individual and endowed the least intelligent of creatures with a grace and beauty that was enchanting and mysterious. Amongst human beings it is not only the men who dance for the women, but in many parts of the world there is a season when marriageable men and women engage in dancing together, displaying to each other all that strength, endurance, grace and beauty which is yearning within them to be poured into the life-stream of the race. In this connection it is interesting to recall the annual dances at Shiloh, mentioned in the Book of Judges; when the young men and women of the country round about would gather together in dancing with a view to making their choice.

It is this erotic aspect of dancing, however, that has so often roused certain people to a bitter condemnation of it as a pleasure which leads to dissoluteness and immodesty and which instigates a cupidity of the flesh. That dancing is often abused, that it is frequently made indecent, lascivious and even obscene no one can deny. But to base one’s arguments, as to the value of a practice on the misuse and abuse of that practice, is to be foolishly narrow-minded. There is not one of the arts or sciences—be it music, painting, architecture, poetry or philosophy—that has not, at some time or other, been abused by degenerate individuals. Yet we could not make these facts grounds for a wholesale condemnation. Dancing, the oldest of all arts, the only art of which we ourselves are the stuff, is very often corrupted and perverted; yet rather than condemn it on this account we should try to rescue it from the influence of all kinds of decadents and raise it to its rightful position amongst us. We should cultivate it, not only as a safety-valve for elemental emotion, but as a national means of education. Besides being a great socialising, solidifying factor in the development of a race, it gives balance to the nerves, strength to the will and harmonises the emotions and the intellect with the body that supports them.

And what other people is more in need of this soothing and invigorating influence than the weather-beaten, hunted, nerve-racked members of our own race? The physical and spiritual regeneration of our people must synchronise with the revival of dancing amongst us—that graceful and expressive dancing which is the music of the body just as sweet rhythmic sound is the music of the soul. The new Jew, emerging from the Galuth, must make dancing an integral part of his education. He must train his ear to appreciate lovely sounds and his eye—graceful movements. Apart from its artistic value, dancing has great worth as a mentor of the body, for it regulates and controls the muscles and exercises the limbs. Hence it brightens the mind, is conducive to health and helps greatly to preserve the appearance of youth. The Chinese say that “One may judge a king by the quality of the dancing during his reign” and though we may not altogether share Plato’s view that a good education consists in knowing how to sing and to dance well, we know that dancing at its best is an essential part of a good education. The greatest minds of all ages have placed it amongst the fine arts. Marcus Aurelius likened the art of living to dancing. Beethoven’s 7th symphony is supposed to be the apotheosis of dancing, and Nietzsche, who conceived of life as a dance, thought it the loftiest, the most moving and the most beautiful of all arts.

And so, my dear boy, it is my desire that you should cultivate the art of dancing, but in doing so you must study the various types and forms of dance amongst all races and of all ages, and sift the chaff from the wheat. Your dancing must be brought into relation with real life and serve as a medium of its interpretation. It is only when each and every one of this rising generation strives for the fullest self-realisation, for the completest unfolding of all the faculties that nature has endowed him with, that a super-nation will emerge—a nation that will not only glory in its past, but serve as an example to present humanity.

Your loving father,  
BEN ELIEZER.