Douglas Rosenberg

Abstract:

Tikkun Olam: To Repair the World

This paper will explore the overwhelming contribution of Jewish artists to the creation of Modernism and subsequently to Post-modern practices in to the 21st century. The paper is predicated on the theory that Jewish artists, either secular or otherwise, entering post-war arts culture at mid-century, brought with them a deeply embodied commitment to tikkun olam. Tikkun olam is an aspect of Tzedakah, derived from the Hebrew root Tzade-Dalet-Qof, meaning righteousness, justice or fairness. Engaging in acts of tikkun olam is a primary means of satisfying the need to create a sense of Jewish community and identity, however, this paper posits that for post-war Jews, engaging in acts of tikkun olam, was a way of repairing the world at large, healing the gaping wounds of WWII, and instantiating righteousness through art practice. Even while practicing assimilation, European émigré Jewish artists and their American born peers performed a particular kind of art making practice that engaged their Jewishness, albeit often surreptitiously, toward a more egalitarian, democratic ideology that reified the value of the individual in society as well as the healing power of art.

"After Auschwitz to write poetry is barbaric" was Theodor Adorno's challenge to post-war culture. In dance, Jewish artists including Anna Sokolow, Anna Halprin, Liz Lerman, David Dorfman and others have performed a particular brand of tikkun olam within the dance world, which has gone largely unidentified as such. Post-modern performance art practice, growing out of the feminist movement in the 1970's largely ignored issues of race, though arguably the women at the forefront of feminism and feminist performance brought their Jewishness to bear. Even in the face of Adorno's radical proclamation, Jewish artists have persisted in making art that is as radical as Adorno's statement in it approach to healing the world and giving voice to those without.

This paper will explore the relationship between doctrines and practices created by Jewish artists and critics in the fine arts beginning at the end of WWII and their counterparts in the nascent Modern Dance world as their trajectories overlap in the latter part of the 20th century. A pivotal figure in the shift from object-based art making to performance or body-centric artmaking was Allan Kaprow, who proposed the concept of "lifelike art" through his writings and Happenings in the 1960's. His theories helped to galvanize a kind of practice in which the boundaries between performer/audience, maker/ receiver, artist/critic, etc. were devalued. Further, he brought artmaking to the site of the body opening the door for numerous experiments in 1st person representation of real-life activities and concerns as legitimate artmaking material. Moreover, his theories democratized the social spaces of art praxis.

It is the theory of this paper that the confluence of Jewish artists in dance, criticism and the fine arts at a particular time in history instantiated a life-like art that was and continues to be a major paradigm shift in the histories of art-making into the 21st century.

Tikkun Olam: To Repair the World
(Writing/Righting History)

"After Auschwitz to write poetry is barbaric" was Theodor Adorno's challenge to post-war culture. In dance, Jewish artists including Anna Sokolow, Anna Halprin, Liz Lerman, David Dorfman and others have performed a particular brand of Tikkun Olam within the dance world, which has gone largely unidentified as such. Post-modern performance art practice, growing out of the feminist movement in the 1970's largely ignored issues of race, though arguably the women at the forefront of feminism and feminist performance brought their Jewishness to bear. Even in the face of Adorno's radical proclamation, Jewish artists have persisted in making art that is as radical as Adorno's statement in its approach to healing the world and giving voice to those without.

Although the dance world is often seen in isolation from the other arts, there is a tremendous overlap and oscillation between the visual arts and dance in the 20th century and beyond. This shared

history, if you will, is a history in which Jewish thinkers and art makers, many of whom are diasporic Jews, lay a foundation for the modernist experiment. It is the theory of this paper that the confluence of Jewish artists in dance, criticism and the fine arts at a particular time in history instantiated a life-like art that was and continues to be a major paradigm shift in the histories of art-making into the 21st century. This shift is at its core, one in which Jewish artists culturally inscribe artifacts of religious practice in the form of Tikkun Olam onto the culture at large.

The "**Pirkei Avot**" – also known as "Chapters of the Fathers," or, "Ethics of the Fathers" is a Jewish text that contains moral, ethical and philosophical teachings over a period of some five hundred years. Within the Pirkei Avot, in the Book of Principles, one finds the following:

"You are not required to complete the work, yet you are not allowed to desist from it."

—Pirkei Avot (The Book of Principles), 2:21

This passage describes the Jewish concept of tikkun olam. Perfecting, preparing or repairing the world: a credo that, to many Jews, prescribes what role they should play in the culture at large. The concept of Tikkun Olam was created by the kabbalist, Rabbi Isaac Luria in the city of Safed during the sixteenth century. Today, in many Jewish communities, Tikkun Olam is identified with working for social justice, peace, freedom, equality, and the restoration of the environment. Tikkun Olam is the imperative to repair the world, so that it reflects the divine values of Justice (tzedek), Compassion (hesed), and Peace (shalom). Clearly, all three terms are connected with each other, and all are aspects of Tikkun Olam - repairing a broken world. Tikkun Olam is our Jewish mandate to do what we can to make the world a better place for all people. Tzedakah is charity - and it comes from the Hebrew word tzedek, which means justice. Thus, giving tzedakah is simply doing what is right and just. G'milut hasadim are deeds of loving-kindness - giving of our time, our energy, ourselves, to help others on a personal level. Cooking for the homeless, visiting the sick or the elderly, paying a condolence call, are all examples of g'milut hasadim. Social action focuses on community. It is striving to effect positive change, it is protesting injustice, it is trying to create a more egalitarian and hopeful world. According to Reform Rabbi Andrea Steinberger,

"Over two thousand years ago, even as the generation of rabbis who wrote down the "oral law," or the interpretations, laws and stories that were passed on by word of mouth, the rabbis echoed the words of the ancient prophets: merely observing the rituals of Judaism was not enough. Ritual observance was not an end in itself but a means of leading a life worth living – a moral and ethical life – a life of action in the face of injustice. Today, even the most traditional Jews who maintain a life disciplined by strict ritual observance understand that these rituals must never be seen as an end, but are a necessary foundation for a thoughtful and just life.
That being said, most Jews today are not "Torah observant" Jews. Most Jews today are liberal, or even secular Jews who do not see themselves as bound by God's Torah. Yet even for these Jews, the notion of social justice with a keen eye toward fixing the brokenness of the world is somehow ingrained in them. Even with the reforming of the ritual life of the Jewish people, it was impossible to lose the sense of justice, the sense of standing up for the poor, the oppressed, the stranger, the widow, the orphan. These too, are basic tenets of Judaism. Even without ritual practice, the Jew continues to understand these obligations to heal what is broken in the world."

This description of the goals of tikkun olam, and Jewish ideas of social justice suggest much of what we would call "community work", the kind of work that dance artists like Anna Halprin have pioneered and the kind of work that one might refer to as, "artistic citizenship". The idea of elevating the "the work" above its ultimate reification or commodification, in other words valuing process over product, is one that is against the grain of much of 20th century culture. The idea that process is as valuable and as necessary as product flies in the face of consumer-driven culture. Yet, that is precisely the nature of much of what the dance world refers to as "community work".

History effaces Jewish ethnicity, as have many Jews themselves in the post war environment. However, if one scratches beneath the veneer of assimilation, there is bountiful evidence of Jewish artists inscribing elements of Jewish practice onto the body of Modern Dance. It is much like a book of

connect the dots drawings; the outline is there, but the whole picture has not been provided. The dots are the markers along the road to completing a picture in which a fully formed image moves from absence to presence.

I became aware of a kind of Jewish prism, which filtered my particular relationship to dance, and by extension all art, while watching a performance by Anna Halprin at the American Dance Festival around 1997. I had known of Halprin's work my entire life growing up in the Bay Area. I never thought of her as a "Jewish artist", but rather a highly visible member of the secular community in which I lived. I actually never tracked artists as Jewish at all until fairly recently. I don't recall considering the ethnicity or religious affiliation of the artists we spoke of in Art School in the 1980's and I don't recall Jewish artists and choreographers being designated as such in any texts, reviews, critiques or other media. I never thought of the philosopher Walter Benjamin as Jewish, nor the painter Ad Reinhardt, nor the choreographers Anna Sokolow, Anna Halprin, Bella Lewitzky David Dorfman or Victoria Marks. I never noticed the Jewishness of the artists and theorists whose work I was drawn to until I looked. What I mean by that is, while I'm sure that the ethnicity of their surnames registered in my subconscious, What did not register was the thread that ran through all of their work and the work of other Jewish artists that, in the context of critical discourse has been almost completely absent. This absence is not without a particular function from the point of view of post-war Jews in both Europe and North America.

Throughout the 20th century, in much of the world, Jewishness was a liability. As the century progressed, for many it became a death sentence. When I hear the term, "Identity theft" used to describe a phenomenon in which someone's personal information such as credit card and social security numbers are stolen, I think, "what an ironic and cynical use of language." The idea that the loss of a set of numbers associated with one's personal business constitutes a loss of identity is a sign of how quickly the culture discards larger narratives out of which such metaphors grow. However, it is out of these larger narratives that the metaphors of identity and its attendant spirituality that much of the work made by Jewish-American dance artists in the modern and post-modern eras springs from. Narratives of social justice and activism perhaps are easily contextualized within dance history. However, spirituality is more difficult to identify in the largely mythologized historical narrative surrounding modern dance. Precisely because the modern era sought to reform religious doctrines and assimilation into the melting pot of America was a goal of most immigrants, along with new breakthroughs in medicine, science and elsewhere, there was a general pulling away from issues of the spiritual in the face of the forward march of modernism. Jews in particular were committed to leaving behind the memory of shtetl life in Eastern Europe as well as the anti-semitism that had created unbearable living situations prior to emigrating to the United States. To do so, often meant sacrificing one's identity as well as one's outward signs of faith, especially if that fait marked one as "other". Eschewing the trappings of faith, one also leaves spirituality behind and unnamed, especially in the public sphere of performance, where it was not unusual to change one's name in order to pass.

Spirituality, or at least religiosity has been hijacked in this country by the far right. The recent discourse surrounding the appointment of the next Supreme Court jurists as well as the current administration's very public blurring of church/state separation and invocation of the Christian God in reference to all things remotely applicable leave little room for the possibility, at least politically, of the god of other faiths. Along with the Christianization of culture goes the appropriation of all things moral and righteous. However, it is not Christianity so much as a kind of Protestantism or even Puritanism that pervades the mythology of Modern Dance. As an intellectual movement, Protestantism grew out of the Renaissance and universities, attracting learned intellectuals, as well as politicians, professionals, and skilled tradesmen and artisans. Subsequently, nascent Protestant social ideals of liberty of conscience, and individual freedom, were formed and the Protestant movement veered away from the constraints of tradition, toward greater emphasis on individual conscience, anticipated later developments of democratization, and the so-called "HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Age_of_Enlightenment"Enlightenment" of later centuries. However, these ideals including democratization, conscience and further, egalitarianism, were not solely the purview of Protestantism.

The story of the founding four, the "pioneers" Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman and Hanya Holm--who revolted against the conventions of ballet to produce American modern dance, presents a pastoral and easily consumable version of historical events. It also conveniently elides

the left-leaning, politically committed and largely Jewish dance presence happening simultaneously in New York. Ironically, much of the critical language for omitting or minimizing the work of groups such as The Workers Dance League (later The New Dance League) and others is the same rhetoric one encounters throughout modern history for diminishing the value of work created by disenfranchised and marginalized groups in general. In Ellen Graff's "Stepping Left", the author points out that by 1935 John Martin, arguably one of the most important advocates and critics of Modern Dance, "launched a full-scale attack on The Workers Dance League". In his lectures at the New School for Social Research in New York, many of which were aimed at "educating all dancers to standards of professionalism", and "defining standards for a new American art form separating the worker's dance movement from what would become the mainstream of modern dance", Martin addressed form and technique but "content, the hallmark of any revolutionary art, was not discussed". This dialectic of form against content becomes the centerpiece of modernism itself, with form the ultimate victor, though there is a simultaneous and undeniable parallel history of both modernism and modern dance itself. It is in this alternate art-universe where the contributions of Jewish artists and scholars intersect with the teachings of Tikkun Olam to catalyze a social conscience that nags at the history of modern dance and at art history in general.

While scholars like Brenda Dixon Gottschild argue that the Africanist aesthetic and presence in modern dance history has been "invisibilized" by the pervasive force of racism, it is also true that the contributions of Jewish-American choreographers and dancers has been elided by the chroniclers of the same history. The focus of this paper is not dance history at large, so I will not attempt to further enunciate this argument. However, some context will support my argument that Jewish women, with a deeply held sense of Tikkun Olam, created a kind of dance whose potency and impact has had long periods of dormancy, percolating to the surface of dance practice as necessary over the course of the 20th century. It has been passed as if by osmosis to choreographers like Liz Lerman, Victoria Marks, Stephen Koplowitz, and others and I would propose that this is not a coincidence of circumstance, but rather a by-product of Jewish righteousness coming from a kind of immersion in the ethics of Judaism.

Many of the revolutionary dancers of the early 20th century were faulted for the heavy symbolism of their dances as well as their agit-prop techniques, both qualities that made their work radical. What makes the work of many Jewish-American choreographers equally radical as well as political, is the allusion to spirituality often found in the work. Modernism and by extension, Modern Dance eviscerated the spiritual in its quest for secular purity. Formal purity was the holy grail of modernism and high modernism was the secular temple which provided the context for Modern Dance. Yet, as modern dance was becoming, Jewish-American choreographers were offering an alternative that often relied on the stark reality of immigrant experience for its imagery. Even as many post- war Jews were attempting assimilation, harder to hide was the commitment to community that is at the heart of Jewish teaching and halaka or Jewish law. Even in assimilation, while attempting to pass, Jewish post-war choreographers often cannot leave behind their sense of Tikkun, an irony that often inadvertently outs them as Jews.

As I began reading theory in the era of multi-culturalism, the canon was under revision; a revision that sought to integrate and diversify it. The deconstruction of the official white male artist club was bloody and hard fought. Much of it was fought by first wave feminists, ironically, many of whom were Jews. They fought not for the inclusion or recognition of Jewishness, but rather for the inclusion of women. I believe that it was feminists, who inadvertently, while opening doors for women, opened the door for a Jewish renaissance in the arts as well. That is to say, many of the same barriers that kept women out of the culture of the arts, kept Jews from asserting their Jewishness within twentieth century art making and critical practices. In both cases the barriers were kept in place by a common foe. A sense of Jewish righteousness pervades early feminist activism, even though not identified as such in its time. Much earlier, the same righteousness is evident in the early modern dance of the 1930's and forties. Much of the most important work of that era was created by Jewish leftist women who were choreographers and dancers as well as activists for the left. That work was supported by, among other venues, the 92nd St. Y in New York. The Young Men's and Young Women's Hebrew

Association was founded in 1874 by prominent German Jews and went on to become a leading cultural center for Jewish and gentile artists, women and people of color as well. According to Naomi Jackson, from her book Converging Movements: Modern Dance and Jewish Culture at the 92nd St. Y,

"The easy convergence of modern dance and Jewish culture at the Y consequently occurred for a variety of reasons. For the Y's Jewish members and modern dancers of the time there were ideological as well as practical reasons for a smooth merging of interests. Both, for instance, shared a humanistic outlook on the role of the arts in modern life. Influenced by the various progressive movements of the time, they thought the arts and humanities uplifted men's souls, making them better individuals and citizens in a democratic society… If the intersection with contemporary art was to help define the nature of American Jewry, the reverse was also true. [William] Kolodney, [educational director of the Y] along with the Y's audiences, teachers and students helped to broaden modern dance to embrace diversity in terms of ethnicity, race, age, experience and stylistic experimentation".

Dance, as it entered modernism was articulated by numerous voices, among them the "Jewish leftist choreographers" Jackson mentions, including Anna Sokolow and Helen Tamiris and even Martha Graham's early vision of Protestant America was largely written on and with Jewish bodies. Graham's early companies included, Sophie Maslow, Pearl Lang, Sokolow and Lillian Shapiro. In 1957, Sokolow found an affinity with the work of Franz Kafka and choreographed a work called, *Metamorphosis*.

"Anna's Eastern European Jewish ancestors believed that they had an intimate relationship with God. The despair in so much of Anna's work indicates how she turned away from this belief. Her viewpoint is more akin to that of Kafka, who as Irving Howe has suggested, knocks on the door of the lord, but never expects the door to be opened".

(Anna Sokolow: The Rebellious Spirit, Larry Warren)

The critic Clement Greenberg also invoked Kafka in his 1955 essay, "The Jewishness of Franz Kafka", (Commentary, April 1955). The essay,

"challenged a basic tenet of British literary theory, still the most accepted body of work on modern art criticism. In [Greenberg's] judgment, this axiom which held that "the value of… art depended ultimately on the depth to which it explored moral difficulties, precluded either Kafka or abstract art from receiving the recognition they deserved"

(Florence Rubenfeld biography of Greenberg)

So, while both explored the nature of Kafka's vision, Sokolow and Greenberg's particular hermeneutics led them to entirely different conclusions, in keeping with the practice of defining and redefining sacred texts in a modern era, their individual midrash, if you will, a concept I will briefly explain later. In a sense, Sokolow reformed Graham's vision (as Greenberg reformed criticism) as one movement in Judaism reforms another. Later, other Jewish choreographers including Anna Halprin, Bella Lewitzky, Meredith Monk, and Liz Lerman would reform Sokolow's as well as the dance world's vision of dance.

Sokolow was given institutional support early in her career from the Neighborhood Playhouse at the Henry Street Settlement in New York's Lower East Side. The Neighborhood Playhouse was founded by Irene and Alice Lewisohn, two wealthy young Jewish women who had hoped to become professional performers, but were forbidden to do so by their Orthodox Jewish father. Instead they turned their energies toward supporting theater and dance at the Playhouse.

"Miss Irene's avowed personal goal in her work was to develop in the young participants a pride in and inspiration from their ethnic backrounds. Something vital, she felt, was being lost in the passion for assimilation".

(Warren, Sokolow biography)

Though a secular institution, the work that the Neighborhood Playhouse produced was decidedly "Jewish" in its early years. Sokolow began studying dance at the Playhouse around 1925, principally with Blanche Talmud and later with Louis Horst. Her early solos created in the 1930's, in the milieu of the economic and social struggles of the time, reflected her concerns with social injustice, a hallmark of tikkun olam and a model for future Jewish-American choreographers.

Dance historian and critic, Sally Banes has reformed dance history in her numerous books on dance. *In Dancing Women, Female Bodies on Stage* she reinterprets, from a feminist perspective, a dance history that dates back to the 19th century, bringing the entire canon of western dance history and scholarship into question. Banes also brought into common usage, the term "postmodern dance" and radicalized thinking about dance by applying strategies to dance more common to visual art criticism. She has addressed issues of multi-culturalism and race in regard to dance in a way that has re-focused scholarship in the field.

"The issue of difference within gender-the diversity of women in terms of class, race and ethnicity-came to the fore in the woman's movement in the 1980's and 1990's".

(Sally Banes, Dancing Bodies, Female Bodies on Stage)

Banes' quote denotes the 1980's and 1990's as the coming of age of multi-culturalism. However, the question that persists in regard to multi-culturalism is "where do Jews fit in the equation?" Multi-culturalism was and is a difficult concept for many Jews, as we tend to feel ourselves of two cultures already. We as a group have historically been marked as other and treated as such by quota systems in education, by deep and pervasive anti-semitism, and misinformed mythologies. Modern Jewry has made space for the "cultural Jew", one who while not observant, identifies in a cultural way with the tenets and practices of Jewish faith. Yet, when the discourse of multi-culturalism began in early eighties, Jews had no box to check on the newly designed grant applications. Ironically, the kind of work prescribed by funders and multi-cultural attaches was precisely the kind of work that Jewish-American choreographers had been doing for years. Community work is tzedakah, it is tikkun and it is a mitzvah.

Anna Halprin is the mother of Jewish activist dance makers in the latter part of the 20th century. Following in the righteous footsteps of the revolutionary dance makers of the earlier century, Halprin's work with disenfranchised communities, including people of color, those living with illness, intergenerational populations and her own body was/is a blueprint for what has come to be known as "community work". According to the theorist Richard Shechner in his forward to Janice Ross's forthcoming book on Halprin,

"In the 1960s, Halprin pioneered what was to be known as "postmodern dance." Her work was a key that unlocked the door leading to all kinds of experimentation in theatre, music, Happenings, and performance art. Over her long and fecund career, Halprin's glory has been to pay scant attention to boundaries".

Shechner notes that Anna was of two tendencies: connection to the landscape… and to various … ritual practices. He states, "These two tendencies – the Group and the Alternative – are the poles of American performance culture". Judaism is a faith that also inhabits those same tendencies. It makes space for personal, alternative practice as well as group worship. Halprin, while open to alternative spiritual practice was at her core, a Jew. Anna's Jewishness is written on her body. It is written in her commitment to community and to repairing that which is weakened or broken.

In her forthcoming book on Halprin, Janice Ross refers to Halprin's "deeply abiding Jewishness". In a conversation with Ross about Anna's particular relationship to Jewishness and further to the concept of Tikkun Olam, she says,

"I don't think… (the sense of Tikkun)… is inborn, I think it is trained, from the time Jewish children are sent home with tzedakah (charity) boxes. I think it is a way in which Jewish children learn to legitimize their choice of art as a profession. A commitment to making the kind of dance that is going to affect social change. It helps assuage the guilt that you are not a lawyer or doctor". In speculating on the difference between Halprin and others of her generation and the younger group of Jewish-identified dance artists, she says, "One generation tries to forget, another tries to remember." In

other words, the sacrifice that Halprin and others made to survive in an anti-semitic world is honored by contemporary Jewish artists who are in a sense bearing witness to the loss of their dance mother and fathers. In an act of Tikkun Olam, they repair the world by proclaiming their Jewishness and inscribing it in their dance works.

Rebecca Rossen is a dance maker and writer who has asked others to inscribe Jewishness on her in her project, "Make Me a Jewish Dance." In 2000, she approached Victoria Marks and Dan Froot and asked them to make her a Jewish Dance. Rossen also undertook the same assignment herself. The resulting solo according to Rossen, "interrogated stereotypes of Jews as well as stereotypes of dance." The title is a play on Yiddish phrasing and implies that one can make her a Jew while simultaneously creating a"Jewish" dance. Of course Rossen is already a Jew and acutely aware of that fact. When she engages other Jews in the question of what exactly makes a dance Jewish, she engages them in a kind self-analysis that calls into question their own insecurities regarding Jewishness as well as questions of faith, and practice. Dan Froot employs Yiddish-flavored shtick in his own work, is that Jewish? Victoria Marks is a maker of dance films in which differently-abled bodies, elderly and imperfect bodies interact in loving and supportive ways and in which family is often at the center of the work. Is that Jewish? Or perhaps it is Marks' outward manifestation of Tikkun, her attempt to repair a small part of the world by creating a legacy of images that speak to our notions of self, of tolerance and of spirituality. Rossen recently set the work on David Dorfman, and in doing so, she mirrored the process whereby Jewish culture historically moves from body to body and recirculates throughout communities; the diaspora embodied in a dance. A second project, "Dancing Jew-ish was made in 2002. At the beginning of the work, the narrator states that there will be no Klezmer music, it is not a piece about the Holocaust, etc. This tactic makes the viewer acutely aware that it is in fact a dance in which Jewish history is not only present, but is the prism through which the subsequent work must be viewed. The voiceovers present a community of Jews stating truths from their personal history, a list of things that "make them Jewish."

And what of spirituality? To perform art that is at its core, a spiritual endeavor is in a secular world an act of great courage. For Jews to project Jewish spirituality in a Christian culture is an even greater undertaking.

David Dorfman makes work that is anchored in the idea of community. He often references the nature of family in his dances as well as his community residencies. His references to Jewishness are part of the fabric of his work and most often humor softens the serious nature of his work. His recent "Older Testaments" addresses the centuries-old history of Arabs and Jews and looks at the difficulties that divide them in their ongoing struggle for land. Land, home, belonging, are all touchstones for Jews. Dorfman engages all of the above in a work from 1987 called *Sleep Story*. Dorfman is not a devout Jew, but speaks to the place where Jewish practice lives in his physical memory. He conflates memories of a visit to a Holocaust memorial with those of the loss of an uncle and the loss of a relationship. While he speaks, he is repeatedly knocked to the floor in mid sentence by another performer. Each time he gets up and continues where he left off-recalling the story he has set out to tell. This is a deeply felt metaphor for Jews-to tell the stories that bind a Jew to the history of Jewish people is a mitzvah, and an imperative. When Dorfman rises after being knocked down, he does so for all people, Jewish or otherwise. It is an act of resistance and a show of solidarity to others who can not rise up. *Dayenu,* a nine-minute solo with text by Dorfman, was created in 1991 for Day Without Art. It was described by *Village Voice* critic Deborah Jowitt as a dance "that acknowledges current crisis ... cryptic, fast-talked litanies contrast with a body that is altering, maybe breaking up inside....Dorfman's ritual is twisted and jolted as if by disease or deprivation. Nothing is enough. Except the bad times." Dayenu embodies loss in the age of aids, and Dorfman channels the grief that many felt in those early days of the disease, filtered through the grief that Jews have carried since the Holocaust. However, what Jowitt fails to point out is the reference to the Jewish observance of Passover and the actual meaning of Dayenu. The song sung at the Passover seder speaks of the exodus from Egypt. It tells us that had God only done one favor for us, it would have been enough. *Dayenu* is not a song of complaint; it is rather a song of thanksgiving to God. Dorfman is speaking to multiple audiences in the work; those grieving in the age of AIDS and those grieving perhaps more inwardly, more silently, and channeling the pain of both. Jews may understand and embody the overlaps in Dorfman's work. Either way it is a healing, a mitzvah and an act of tikkun.

Written into the very fabric of Jewish tradition is the idea of midrash — of questioning and reinterpreting our sacred ideas and texts. Some midrash discussions are highly metaphorical, and many Jewish authors stress that they are not intended to be taken literally. Midrash as a practice, is a way of interrogating texts for deeper meaning. Applied to dance, midrashic questioning is a method of interrogating the underlying assumptions that one attributes to dance; who dances, what the cultural significance of dancing bodies is, what imbedded notions can dancing bodies dislodge or loosen? And if one extends the metaphor of midrashic discourse to the realm of the physical, in other words, if we suppose that bodies writing their histories in space, across stages, in specific sites is the same kind of metaphoric, often esoteric discussion albeit one had within the site of dancing bodies, then it is not a big leap to suppose that Jewish dancers, in particular Jewish women such as Anna Halprin were and are engaged in a midrashic dialog about the very nature of dance itself.

Benedict Anderson, in his book, Imagined Communities, reflects that communities, rather than defined by geographical boundaries, might also be considered contingent on common language. He proposes that a "sense of nationality" might survive beyond nation-states, preserved by language. If one extends this metaphor to the arts, and further to the Jewish diaspora, then it is possible to suppose that Jewish artists speak in a common language, be it visual, verbal, cultural or otherwise. It may be that the common language is as simple as tikkun olam; to repair the world through art practice and critical thinking.

Douglas Rosenberg is an artist working in performance, video and installation and an associate professor in the Dance Program at UW Madison. He is a member of the Center For Jewish Studies, where he recently developed and taught a course called, "The Conney Seminar in Jewish Arts" and directs The Conney Project on Jewish Arts. In 2004 he organized, "Experimental Jews: Projecting Jewishness in the New Millenium", a conference that looked at issues of identity among contemporary Jewish artists. He is currently writing about the threads of Jewish thought and action that course throughout modernism and into post-modern art practice.