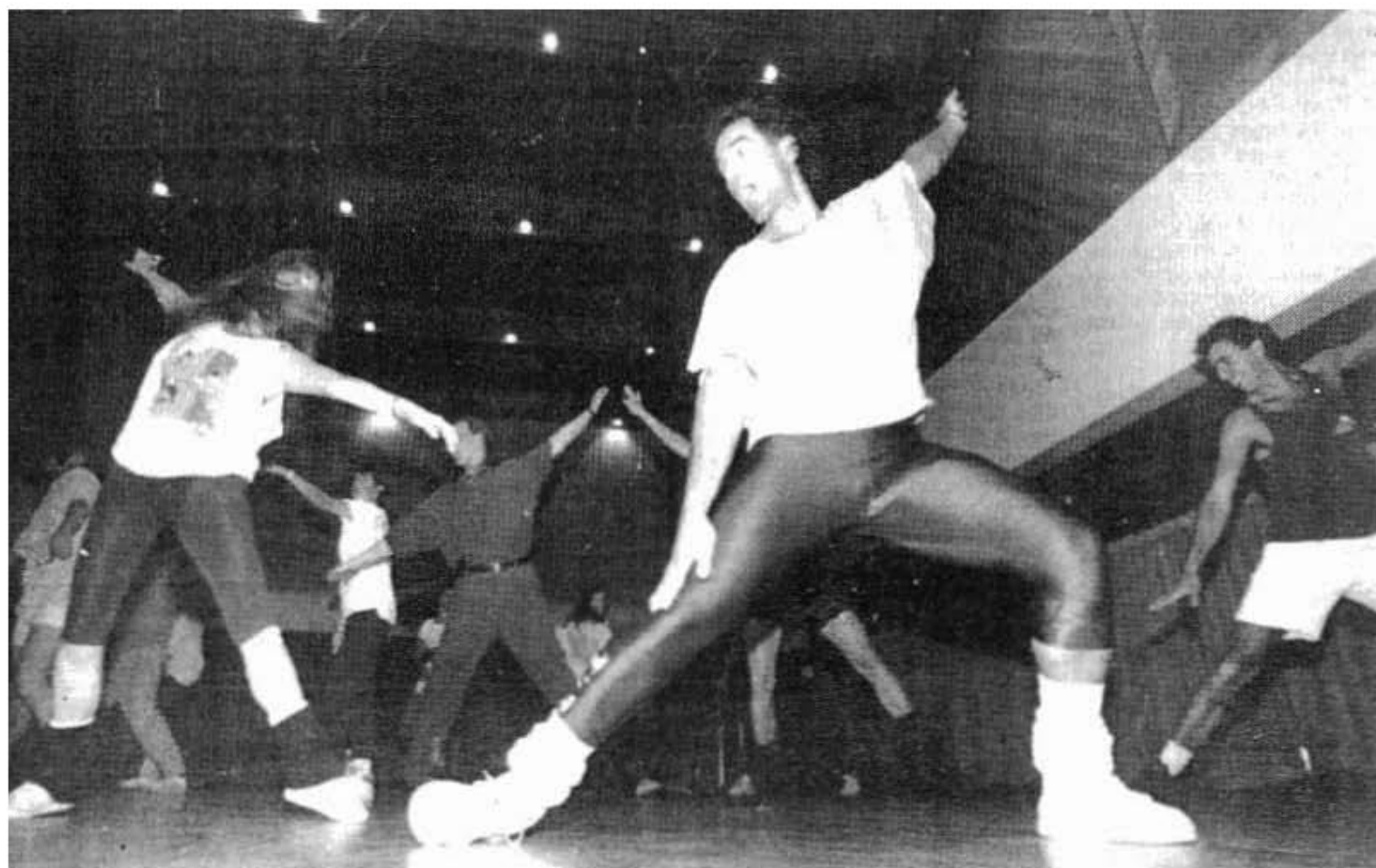


L.A. LIFE

DAILY NEWS

Dancing over the rainbow



Cecil Yates/Daily News

Genie Benson, left, and Eytan Avisar rehearse with Keshet Chaim Dance Ensemble, Los Angeles' only professional Israeli dance troupe

Keshet Chaim brings Israeli rhythms to L.A.

By Jody Leader
Daily News Dance Writer

By day, Eytan Avisar is president of a wholesale meat business he has had for 20 years. By night, the curly haired, youthful-looking 49-year-old Sherman Sherman Oaks resident is an Israeli dancer moving to the infectious rhythms of the Middle East.

His dance company is Keshet Chaim Dance Ensemble, Los Angeles' only professional Israeli dance troupe. The group will celebrate its 10th anniversary next month with its fourth annual concert at the University of Judaism in Bel-Air.

Keshet Chaim ("Rainbow of Life") is a family affair. Like Avisar, most of the 24 dancers live in the San Fernando Valley. They are dentists, dental hygienists, massage therapists, music teachers and computer specialists. Half are Israeli, half are American. Most are married and often bring their children to rehearsals if they cannot find a baby sitter.

But this is no mom-and-pop operation. Witness the company's touring slate: Since January, the troupe has performed in San Diego, Palm Springs, for the annual Israel Bond Dinner in Century City and for the American Israeli Medical Society. Last year, they toured Florida and performed in Las Vegas and at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. In 1991, the troupe danced for a week at Club Med in Sonora Bay, Mexico.

The company averages three performances a month, much more than most local dance troupes.

Everyone works hard. Avisar's wife is in charge of costumes. "This time of year, my house looks like a sweatshop," Avisar said before rehearsal one Sunday at the University of Judaism's spacious dance studios overlooking the Sepulveda Pass. "We have women sewing all day long."

One dancer designs the posters. Kids sell T-shirts. Older siblings run the follow-spots. Publicist-dancer Genie Benson's husband is in charge of sound and lighting. "Everybody feels like they're a part of it," Benson said. More than half the compa-

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— Randy Weinstein
music teacher

years or longer, drawn by Avisar's infectious spirit.

"When I was younger, I made the choice between music and dance. This is my way of having both," said Randy Weinstein, a music teacher who lives in Tarzana. She has been in the company since its inception.

"We are a social group as well. There's a big time commitment — sometimes 10 hours a week — but I don't think any of us would do it if we didn't enjoy it."

On April 28, at the Church on the Way in Van Nuys, Avisar is determined to have the approximately 2,500 congregants dancing in the aisles. The Pentecostal church is hosting an Israeli Independence Day celebration — "a show of community support for Israel," said church ministry secretary Sandy Turner — and Keshet Chaim has been invited to

perform.

It's exactly the sort of thing Avisar loves to do. "People in Israel dance in the streets," he said. "It's a small country, but 250,000 to 300,000 dance. They dance in clubs. The kids dance in phys-ed classes at school."

Born in Morocco and raised in Israel, Avisar toured all over the world in the late '60s and early '70s with Jonathan Karmon's Grand Music Hall of Israel and Israel's Hatzabbarim Dance Group, the latter as its lead dancer.

In 1972, Avisar moved to the United States, and in 1983, he started Keshet Chaim in his back yard.

"What bothered me then was that the representation of Israeli dance in Los Angeles was so poor," Avisar said. "There was a lot of Israeli dance going on in cafes, but it was . . . old-fash-

ioned and conservative. Israeli dance is known for its dynamic spirit."

Avisar — who choreographs almost all the dances — combines traditional Israeli dancing with modern dance and gymnastics. When the company performed at the huge Karmiel dance festival in Israel in 1988 and 1990, the members were applauded for their flashy moves. "We caught the glitter of Hollywood," Avisar said. "It was an attraction for the Israelis."

Before the dances are modernized, months of research goes into obtaining an authentic look. A Russian dancer was brought in to assist on the "Russian-Chassidic Suite." A Greek dancer was consulted for "A Night on the Mediterranean," Avisar's tribute to the Jews of Greece. Avisar also consults libraries and scholars.

The company is a far cry from the small group that danced in Avisar's garage a decade ago. Annual concerts at the University of Judaism — which is the troupe's home — have forced the members to maintain a substantial repertoire, but it's a struggle because the dancers have other lives. The company only pays them a small amount for gas and

performances.

"A dancer will say, 'I'll be at rehearsal, but not if I get a call from someone who needs a massage. I can't turn it down. That's \$100.' What are you going to say?" Avisar said.

Avisar wants a sponsor to secure the company's finances and someone else to take over when he is gone. No one in the company has the necessary leadership qualities, Avisar said. And the company has no formal board of directors to take the reins.

"I want to know that it will have the strength to continue," Avisar said. "If we're not here, it doesn't go on."

THE FACTS

- **What:** Keshet Chaim Dance Ensemble and Israeli folk duo, The Parvarim.
- **Where:** University of Judaism, Gindi Auditorium, 15600 Mulholland Drive, Los Angeles.
- **When:** 8:30 p.m. May 8, 2 and 7:30 p.m. May 9, 7:30 p.m. May 10.
- **Tickets:** \$20. For information and reservations, call (818) 783-0344 or (310) 476-9777, Ext. 246.