

RIKUDIYAH 2012
Israeli Dance Festival for Children

By Doris Strub Epstein

They poured into the big gym at CHAT [Community Hebrew Academy of Toronto] Wilmington to the beat of Israeli music, in a kaleidoscope of colour, children from the Jewish day schools in Toronto and Hamilton, to perform Israeli folk dances for their families and friends who filled the bleachers, clapping and cheering. They have been practising all year for this day [March 25].

Wearing their own distinctive costumes, each school took its place in its own area on the floor, as Teme Kernerman, founder and Festival director, welcomed everybody to the 42nd annual Rikudiyah, the Israeli Dance Festival for Children. The theme this year was the *chagim*, the Jewish holidays.

“The dances today tell the story of the Jewish holidays and reflect the rhythms of the Jewish year through music, dance and lyrics,” said Teme. “They connect us to the land and the people of Israel and to the struggles and joys of our people throughout the ages.”

A surprise greeting came from Prime Minister Stephen Harper, read by Harold Wolfe, member of the Committee for Jewish Education. He called Rikudiyah “an uplifting expression of Jewish culture and an opportunity for students to learn more about their culture.”

In couples, in lines, in circles, the children danced, dazzling the audience with the often intricate choreographies. When Teme announced that she would teach a new dance to the children and their parents, the response was overwhelming, as the adults ran to the dance floor. Teme glowed with joy talking about it afterwards. “This year, four generations were on the floor. It makes me feel proud and that Israel is alive and well in our city.”

One of the highlights was the spirited Dor L’Dor group, specially created by Festival artistic directors Ronit Eizenman and Ronit Weinreich for Grade 2 students, who each danced with a father or mother to Shirei Shemesh. The parents were dressed completely in black, in stark contrast with the children in orange and red. They carried a round fan that made a circle in orange and yellow that represented the sun. From circle to couples to lines, changing formations to the music and ending with the children sitting on their linked arms. They would have impressed and delighted on any stage.

Other special performance groups were the Bialik Dance Group, the Associated Dance Group, Chai Dancers Prosserman JCC, Nikoda Israeli Dancers from the Koffler Centre of the Arts, and an exhilarating performance from the UJA Makom Shinshinim, a group of Israeli young people who come to Toronto for a year to work with students. They bring a strong Israeli connection to the schools, synagogues and youth groups.

Dance instructor Anne Harari, who participated in Rikudiah when she was a child, said this year’s Rikudiyah was especially great. “The interaction, inviting the parents and kids to dance together, and the great response was wonderful. And having the Shinshinim involved is so motivating. When they danced with my Paul Penna group, the kids were thrilled.”

Teme Kernerman’s goal in creating Rikudiah was to connect Jewish children with their heritage and with Israel, internalizing through movement and music their culture. “You’re dancing today with high hopes for the future,” she told the children.

Participating schools and instructors were Associated Hebrew Schools, Posluns Campus, Sharon Chodirker and Anne Harari; Bialik Hebrew Day School, Ronit Eizenman and Alex Baker; Montessori Jewish Day School, Yaniv Abitbul; Robbins Hebrew Academy, Bathurst

Campus, Jenny Sumerlus and Sigal Nissel; The Toronto Hechel School, Sigal Cohen, Marissa Unruh and Ilana Oziel; Associated Hebrew Schools, Kamin Campus, Ronit Weireich; Beit Rayimn Hebrew School, Ilana Garber; Hamilton Hebrew Academy, Shani Holman, Shlomit Komar and Joy Zions; The Leo Baeck Day School, North Campus, Sofie Azen; and Paul Penna Downtown Jewish Day School, Anne Harari.

Rikudiyah is sponsored by the Koffler Centre of the Arts and the UJA Federation of Greater Toronto.