

## American-Israeli Dance Troupe integrates arts through performance and education at local schools

BY AMY LYONS

It's fitting that the American-Israeli contemporary dance troupe Keshet Chaim named themselves after the colorful apparition that often arches across the sky after a storm: the rainbow. Keshet Chaim — meaning rainbow and life in Hebrew — has been celebrating the global spirit of Judaism and Israeli culture since 1983, with vibrant folk dancers donning multicolored costumes and stepping their way through a storied heritage full of ethnic diversity.

The mission of Keshet Chaim has always been “to express the global spirit of Judaism and Israeli culture throughout the world, and to combat prejudice through education and the arts.”

Executive Director Genie Benson has been with the troupe since 1987, wearing a variety of hats during her tenure and an even wider variety of shoes. When encouraged by a fellow Stephen S. Wise temple carpool mom to “join her husband’s dance troupe,” Benson said she felt a little reluctant. After learning that the troupe had plans to travel to Israel, her interest began to grow. When her friend’s husband — Keshet Chaim Artistic Director Eytan Avisar — came to see Benson dance in another folk show she was doing at the time, he asked her to “just come to a rehearsal.” Benson never looked back.

But dancing was not the only thing on her mind when she joined the troupe. Early on, Benson recognized that proper funding could propel the organization from its then-regular venues of festivals and fundraisers to bigger and better arenas with increased production values.

In 1988, she became the company’s administrator, applied for non-profit status and got a grant from the City of Los Angeles, which allowed the troupe to begin working on various in-school projects. “Since that first grant we have been given a grant every year,” said Benson, who is modest when talking about her success in raising the company’s level of visibility. “Eytan had passion and enthusiasm; I just gave him the tools to reach more people.”

With Benson in the role of administrator, Keshet Chaim traveled to Moscow in 2000, where they staged concerts at the famed Bolshoi and Tchaikovsky Theatres. Critically acclaimed Bolshoi ballet-trained choreographer and founder of the State Academic Folk Dance Ensemble of the U.S.S.R., Igor Moiseyev, came to see the troupe perform on that trip, a fond memory for Benson.

Just last November, Keshet Chaim



The Yemenites - Immigrants of the Magic Carpet.

opened for top Israeli World Music recording artist Idan Raichel at the Kodak Theatre in a sold-out show that marked the first appearance of an Israeli performer on the Kodak stage. Raichel’s blend of Ethiopian folk music with Hebrew choruses executed in a multitude of musical modes perfectly embodies the Keshet Chaim spectrum of colors.

“Twenty different temples were represented, with members coming down the aisles holding Torahs. Raichel explained the Sigd [a tradition in which Ethiopian Jews fast and rejoice, remembering the covenant in receiving the Torah on Mount

Sinai] and sang a song of prayer for the New Year,” said Benson, who took pride in Keshet Chaim’s role in the evening.

“Eighteen thousand Ethiopian Jews remain in Ethiopia and NACOEJ [North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry] has a compound to which they can come and make crafts. The crafts were sold in the lobby to help fund the cause of bringing the Ethiopian Jews to Israel,” said Benson.

On the educational front, Keshet Chaim is an arts partner with the Los Angeles Unified School District. Beginning March 1, they are going into several schools in Council District 2—including Carpenter, Kester and Chandler elementary schools—

to present 15 hours of workshops to students and professional development opportunities to staff members. On April 3, all of the participating schools will enjoy a performance and student folk-dancing session at Millikan Middle School. ☀

**The Colors of Israel** will perform at the Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza on February 25 & 26. The troupe will perform with singer Noa Dori. To purchase tickets, visit [www.ticketmaster.com](http://www.ticketmaster.com) or call 805.449.2787. For more information on Keshet Chaim visit [www.keshetchaim.org](http://www.keshetchaim.org)