

Sufism inspires Israeli musicians

Rumi's teachings of peace, tolerance, oneness and love have inspired many throughout the world, including musicians in Israel.

By Menekse Tokyay for SES Türkiye in Istanbul -- 30/05/12

In search of spiritualism and inspired by the teachings of Rumi, Sufism is gaining ground among Israeli musicians and dancers.

The Yuval Ron Ensemble is among those Israeli artists attracted by Sufism and its spiritual message. Formed in 1999, the group aims to overcome national, racial, cultural and religious conflicts by uniting music and dance into a unique spiritual and mystical celebration. What makes their story unique is that the ensemble includes Christian, Jewish and Muslim artists.

Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi, the 13th-century Persian poet and Sufi mystic, whose teachings form the basis of the Mevlevi Order in Turkey, believed music, dance and poetry could help one reach God.

According to Sufi philosophy, everything is a manifestation of God, and people should first reach a short-term ecstatic intoxication of divine love and then extended human contact with God in order to ascend degrees of enlightenment.

"One of the ideas which attracted me a lot is that human beings serve [in Sufism] as an instrument and is empty to allow a divine voice to come through," Yuval Ron, the musical director of the ensemble, told *SES Türkiye*. Since his first encounter with Sufism, he has been exploring the connection between mystical Jewish teaching - Kabbalah -- and Sufi traditions.

The Israeli heavy metal band Orphaned Land is also inspired by Sufism, integrating Sufi-inspired sounds and Sufi dancers in their concerts.

"I have been attracted by a wide range of Sufi teachings: the tolerance they have and the fact that they see all as a creation of God, and above all, the fact that all is one," Kobi Farhi, vocalist of the band, told *SES Türkiye*.

"We borrowed some Sufi costumes in order to shoot some promo pictures for our latest album," Farhi added. "We borrowed them from a Muslim guy married with a Jewish girl in Jaffa [Israel]. We came into their home and saw their unique way of life. It was so special and expanded our view about life."

Oscar-winning Israeli musician Ron has also collaborated with the head of the International Sufi Order, Pir Zia Khan, to create new ways to promote peace and education around the world.

A significant number of Israeli artists have visited Konya, the central Anatolian city where Rumi spent his life. Konya is the spiritual centre for the followers of Rumi and the whirling Dervishes.

Ron went to Konya last year to meet with the head of the Mevlevi Order. "I did a *dhikr* [invocation] at the school of dervishes, and played with the musicians and singers of the Sheikh. It was one of the most memorable memories from my visit in Turkey," he explained.

The way of Sufism is also being expressed in dance, and in particular the ritualistic dances of the whirling dervishes, meditation, repetition of poems, and chanting with hypnotic effect. With these practices Sufis guide themselves into a trance and loose contact with the material world to emphasise their awareness of God, leading to divine ecstasy.

Ora Balha is one Israeli dancer who integrates Sufism into her dancing styles. She visited Konya twice, the first time by "running after her own heart" and the second time to visit local Sufis.

"For me, the Sufi dance is a practice of the heart, to clean your spirit and to become a better person by preparing yourself for the physical death," she explained.

"It has been an honour to teach and perform Sufi-inspired dances because I see that I'm changing people's lives by showing concretely this philosophy," she added. "People are attracted to this dance, but sometimes they are terrified because it is so powerful! Every time that I'm dancing, I'm having a direct experience with the creator."