

Seven Pits: The Dance

Solomon G. Jacobson and Robert Rovinsky

Seven pits lie open for the good man [but he escapes]: for the evildoer there is only one, into which he falls. This, said Samuel to Rab Judah, is alluded to in the verse, "The righteous man falls seven times and rises up again." (PROVERBS 24:16)

About fifteen years ago, we participated in an improvisational dance group that drew inspiration from Jewish themes. Our teacher, Liz Lerman, helped us turn our religious thoughts and impulses into physical movement. Liz Lerman is director of the Dance Exchange in Washington, DC and an internationally known choreographer who has devoted her life's work to the creation of meaningful and beautiful dances for everyone, not just the "young, athletic, beautiful, and thin."

At the time Liz was teaching a course at the Jewish Study Center, called the "Dancing Dybbuks," in which she encouraged her students to explore their feelings about their Jewish identity through improvisational dance. Bob created a dance about his parents coming to America. As part of his Jewish reeducation, Sol was then studying Talmud with Paul Lichterman, of blessed memory. The class was studying Tractate Sanhedrin that contained the quotation about seven pits (see above). Sol, whose father called him "Mr. Oops," suffered from the permanent clumsy. He told Liz, "No thanks," he could not stand up and dance in front of everyone. "So sit," said Liz.

Sol followed her suggestion, knowing that Liz believes that every part of the body could express thought and feeling. Responding to the text in Sanhedrin, he created a dance to be performed sitting down using only the

performer's arms and fingers. Sol put these thoughts into "The Seven Pits" (see below) and devised movements for each verse. The style pays tribute to the Jewish acrostic prayers which follow an alphabetic formula and often use forced rhymes.

Righteousness, thought Sol, may protect us on our journey. Seven open pits sounds about right. Seven pits, seven ages, as in Shakespeare. Do we have a pit for each age? If so, how do we escape each pit? Our attitudes and physical attributes must influence our method of escape according to our age.

Sol remembered his grandmother praying for death when she could no longer do much around the house. Yet, when she became sick, she rallied and lived several years more. If we spot death, however weary we might be, do we embrace the angel or do we move on? Starting with the seventh pit, Sol worked backwards from the end stage to youth.

So much for the righteous person. Now the bad guy comes along with only one pit to fall into. What power could save the righteous from repeated falls, yet condemn the miscreant forever to a single pit? Maybe the love of others, thought Sol, had enough force to bring a person back up from a pit. Or love of God. The evil person, then, must know no love, must lack the buoyancy faith provides. Once tripped into the pit, all the weight of years of misdeeds must pull the person heavily, invincibly downward.

This imagery of the single pit may have come from Numbers 16:30-33 where Korach and his followers fall into a pit, newly made, and the earth closes over them. They fell into the pit in punishment for wickedness, specifically for sassing Moses, who seems to have had little humor about such matters. The Talmud writers in Sanhedrin created seven pits from which the good man rises in turn but the evildoer cannot escape even the first.

Wisdom literature through the ages urges us to follow a modest path and to expect occasional tribulations. We overcome obstacles through good deeds, faith, love, and the avoidance of evil. Our desire to live helps us rebound. The idler who rejects love, good deeds and, perhaps, life itself, can avoid some of the obstacles confronting the righteous, but ultimately ends rather badly in a pit with no escape.

Liz Lerman and fellow dancer Don Zuckerman helped Sol create the movements for the performance piece, which Bob describes after the poem on the next page.

"The Seven Pits" by Sol Jacobson

In youth we do not know there are pits we cannot escape,
So we emerge from our first fall
with nothing changed at all.

As a young adult, we have seen others in their pit and laugh at their struggle,
Yet in our second pit,
we struggle quite a bit.

As an adult, we wonder how many ways there are to fall and will it never end,
For in the third,
no voice is heard.

Now, in our prime, we taste of triumph and success, sure we have made an
end to pits.

So, in our fourth, we feel the pain
of having fallen once again

When we are mature, we are less certain the pits we can escape.
All our caution succumbs,
when the fifth pit comes.

Then we reach our older age and feel our energies begin to drain.
Still, hard to explain,
from the sixth pit we emerge again.

And into the end stage of our lives, we are unsure we even want to escape.
Yet if we spot death in the seventh pit,
thanks! we want to live a bit longer yet.

So, to a person, seven pits await
Into which we fall,
but we escape them all.

But, what of the person who knows no love?
How many pits await
the person filled with hate?

But one only.
Into which he falls,

struggles,
 but
 does
 not
 escape.

The Dance

To tell this story-dance, sit or stand facing the audience. Put out your left arm, fingers extended, in front of you, chest high. Lefties, reverse these directions. This is your stage. Your dancer is the two fingers of your right hand next to the thumb. Hold your right hand so these fingers hang straight down and put your thumb behind to hold the other two fingers. You can now walk or dance on your stage.

After introducing the story, create your stage and your two-finger dancer and begin by introducing your characters:

(1) Say: *In youth we do not know there are pits we cannot escape*, and at the same time move your dancer across the stage from fingers to elbow in a quick, scurrying fashion, slightly bent. End each figure by moving your right arm around your left shoulder and head.

(2) Say: *As a young adult, we have seen others in their pit and laughed at their struggle*, and meanwhile, move your finger dancer along the stage recklessly, with one finger often at the edge—leaning the other finger over the side “looking down.”

(3) Say: *As an adult, we wonder how many ways there are to fall and will it ever end*, and meantime, cross your fingers, moving them in a twisted, confused fashion across the stage.

(4) Say: *Now, in our prime, we taste of triumph and success, sure we have made an end to pits*, and meanwhile move your fingers straight-legged, firmly, and haughtily across the stage.

(5) Say: *When we are mature, we are less certain of the pits we can escape*, and move your fingers very carefully and fearfully across the center of your arm.

(6) Say: *Then we reach our older age and feel our energies begin to drain*, and

make your fingers stroll, slightly bent, almost on the knuckles, but in an easy fashion, across the stage.

(7) Say: *And into the end stage of our lives, we are unsure we even want to escape*, and meantime, stick your thumb between your finger and lead with it, like it is a crutch, bending your fingers as you go.

Now pause and begin again, but this time use the full poem to add the falls after each passage. Each fall will be from your arm-stage into the “pit,” which is the space beneath your arm-stage.

Say and do (1) above, then have your fingers fall into the pit, continuing their fast scurrying around a while, and back up to the stage and off (around the left shoulder and the head) while you say: *So we emerge from our first fall with nothing changed at all.*

Now say and do (2), and have your fingers fall, and go to a few places in the pit with your reckless motion, then come up, but not so easily, while you say: *Yet in our second pit, we struggle quite a bit.*

Now say and do (3), and let your fingers fall, also twisted, and move them around all twisted and jerky. Then come back up the same way, while you say: *For in the third, no voice is heard.*

After saying and doing (4), the fall is sudden and sharp; let the fingers stay where they are for a bit, then, still stiff, let them bounce slowly up, while you say: *So in the fourth we feel the pain of having fallen once again.*

After saying and doing (5), suddenly tilt your arm-stage so that your finger-dancer falls. Move your fingers slowly around in the pit, then slowly climb back up. Meanwhile, you say: *All our caution succumbs when the fifth pit comes.*

After repeating (6), let the fall be slow and gradual with a slow and gradual return. Meanwhile, say: *Still, hard to explain, from the sixth pit we emerge again.*

After repeating (7), let the fall be slow and leave your fingers down for a while. Keep your thumb between your fingers. But when you “spot death,” stick your fingers out very straight, move away, and climb slowly back up using your thumb. Meanwhile you say: *Yet if we spot death in the seventh pit, thanks! We want to live a bit longer yet.*

Now drop your arms to your side, pause, and then say slowly: *So, to a person, seven pits await into which we fall, but we escape them all.*

Now, put back your stage and bring on a new character, made out of your right hand in a fist which keeps opening and closing above the stage, fingers spitting out towards the audience, moving back and forth across the stage and occasionally hitting your left arm, while you say: *But what of the person who knows no love? How many pits await the person filled with hate?*

Now drop your fist quickly into the pit, and continue the same motions in the pit moving back and forth, opening and closing the fist in frustration and agitation, using a varying tempo, while you say, very slowly and distinctly: *But one only into which he falls, struggles, but does not escape.*

On the last two words, “not escape,” open your left hand while keeping the stage level. Lower the left arm and grasp the right fist tightly with your left hand. Push both hands straight down in front of you. Stand for a moment in silence at the end.

A Final Note

The piece takes about 12 minutes to perform. Bob has performed Sol's piece in synagogues, at a friend's 50th birthday party, at the High Holidays, as an “intermezzo” during the all-night study sessions at Shavuot, and at storytelling performances. Probably it is most effective as an accompaniment to the Torah readings in Numbers, where it seems to enhance the otherwise difficult texts. Bob's dream for this piece is to teach it to those to whom dance is inconceivable. By memorizing a few lines and learning a few motions, they can move themselves and others, thus carrying on the vision and spirit of our teacher Liz Lerman.

Bob Rovinsky works at the Federal Aviation Administration, where he is responsible for reviewing air traffic control technology investments. He has been a Jewish storyteller for 17 years, performing for adults and families, and is a founding member of Voices in the Glen, a storytelling guild in Washington, DC.

Sol Jacobson provides training and technical assistance to health and human service agencies. He was one of Liz Lerman's first students and wrote the preface to her book, *Teaching Dance to Senior Adults*.