In a review of The National Dance Competition in The Palestine Post, the critic pen named Rashi opened with the following prescient statement: "When a history of the Palestinian Renaissance comes to be written there can be little doubt that dancing will be cited for first honors among the arts." This foreshadowing comment testifies that a history of this period is well served by examining the intricate and complex development of dance in Eretz Israel.

At 8:30 PM on Wednesday, October 20, 1937, a large audience gathered to attend The National Dance Competition at Mugrabi Hall, a well-known theater and cinema building in the heart of Tel Aviv. Gathered behind stage were many of the leading professional dancers of the day, three accompanied by their students; some were prominent and others were unknown to the Tel Aviv audience on the evening of the event. The purpose of the evening was “to discover davka the Hebrew, Eretz Israeli dance.” Each of the participants was asked to show work that represented "original Eretz Israeli dance", ("harikud haaretz-Yisraeli hamekori") and the audience was asked to vote for the dancer who best represented this work. As the most central concern of the debates sparked by this performance was whether or not the dances shown were authentically Eretz Israeli, it is evident that the meaning of the term mekori, or "original or genuine", was infused with the issue of cultural authenticity. The competition shows how the new society wanted to create a culture that would be both authentic and original. These two concepts in and of themselves were fraught with tension, though, because the concept of authenticity is rooted in the past, while that of originality is rooted in the present. As a result, the concept of the most original or genuine Eretz Israeli dance was debated heavily and remained elusive.

The National Dance Competition took place in an especially fervent and productive cultural milieu. During the 1930s major cultural institutions were established: in April 1930, sound films came to the country; in 1931, Habima, the Hebrew speaking theater company which had been founded in Russia in 1918, moved its base to Palestine; in March 1936, the Palestine Broadcasting Service (PBS) was formed; and, in December 1936, the Palestine Orchestra was established. The competition occurred directly after the extremely successful first season of the Palestine Orchestra. It also took place within a context of other national and European dance competitions, festivals, and congresses as well as Palestine. Within the same month, a song competition was being held for Palestinian composers "of Jewish character musically." In addition, in the following month of November, there was to be an Eretz Israeli Song Competition at the Ohel-Shem Theater in Tel Aviv which sought to "find" the national Eretz Israeli song.

On the evening of the competition, the spectators watched the show until 12:30 AM, marked their ballots to vote for the "most genuine" Eretz Israeli dance, and waited for the results. There were 576 votes in total, though nineteen votes were disqualified. Yardena Cohen, a native of Haifa, won first prize (a shield from the Tel Aviv Municipality) with 176 votes; Rina Nikova, a Russian ballerina, and her Yemenite Company were awarded second prize (a silver cup) with 171 votes; and The Ornstein Sisters, twins from Vienna, received the third prize (a silver medal) with 156 votes.12 As is evident here, the results of the competition were quite close. After hearing these announcements, the spectators went home, having both witnessed and taken part in a remarkable moment of cultural creation and adjudication.
After her experiences in Europe, [Yardena] Cohen[, the first prize winner,] viewed her dancing experience as a process of rebirth and awakening in which she sought to separate herself from her European training. When she returned, Cohen first began to work with a pianist, a process that she found frustrating because she felt that she was "missing something essential, rooted." She then slowly began to seek out "Eastern" instruments and found Sephardi musicians, among them Eliyahu Yedid and Ovadia Mizrahi, whose music inspired a process which Cohen felt sparked an awakening in her body. As she states:

"Back in my country, in my home, I was immediately attracted by the genuine Oriental drum that belongs here, by those ancient instruments. Now I made a new start, searching after old new ways. I began to talk in a new language, and I experienced a feeling of being re-created. My childhood--worlds that had remained latent through generations--I consider it as an atavism in me."

Cohen interprets her move to the Eastern instruments as a return to her roots, to her true I self. She believes that the "genuine" Oriental drum and the "ancient instruments" delivered authenticity. The use of the term "atavism" is employed to denote genuineness and the use of the word "latent" is used in order to imply that Cohen has made a discovery of something that was already there. In essence, the past, which Cohen sees as housed in the "East," is referred to as establishing authenticity and of providing the material with which she can be "reborn." The Eastern music sets the stage for her to create authentic dance.

Cohen also views her music choice as a rejection of the "West" in favor of the "East." In her view, her music accompaniment distinguishes her from her European counterparts. In describing her arrival at the Mugrabi before the competition, she depicts the reaction of the Sephardi custodian's family to her dancing as follows: "... they immediately entered into the secret of my work and didn't see in me another 'Ashkenazi' dancer with 'piano,' but one of them." The piano represents the "West" and the Ashkenazim. Cohen's musicians, on the other hand, represent the East and associate her with it.

Another element behind Cohen's choice of Sephardi musicians was her impression of their tunes as invoking biblical life. Cohen used the Bible, which linked the Jewish people to the land of Israel, as a source of inspiration and a critical foundation for her work. For Cohen, the "East" meant the connection of the Jewish people to the ancient Hebrew life in the current rebuilding of the land of Israel. In her search after Jewish, biblical roots, Cohen viewed the surrounding Arab cultures, among which she had grown up, as sharing this biblical ancestry and Levantine culture. She describes her relationship to the Eastern style as follows:

"The Eastern style of mine on the stage, that is truly East, this I didn't learn in any place, this came to me from the blood. The intellect came from my parents. This is something else. My musicians who played... at coffee houses--klezmers--they would always when something came to me, they would say, "That's it, exactly." Meaning, they felt something from the nature, but with a spirit of culture (itarat). It is not a belly dance, it is a biblical dance."

In this description, Cohen illustrates her impression of the "Eastern" style of her dancing as being something inside of her, rather than something learned, and especially as an element that is separate from her European training. Furthermore, she sets up distinctions between her biblical dancing and "belly dancing," implicitly placing her dance into the rubric of high art, as it has a "spirit of culture." She simultaneously views her dancing as rooted in the ancient East, though, as it has "something from the nature." Cohen wants to be aligned with the "authentic East" and at the same time seeks to produce high art.
On the evening of the competition, Cohen captured the audience. She was an unknown solo dancer, without a studio to back her up, performing alongside several of the prominent dancers of the day. On this evening, Cohen was a young and flexible dancer who exhibited fluid and lucid movements with flowing lines. She had a small waist, long arms and torso, and flowing auburn hair. In each of her dances, she had an idea or a feeling, which she demonstrated with distinctness and with clear intent. The element that seems to stand out most for Cohen on this evening was her powerful presence that carried the stage. Cohen believed strongly in her work and was able to transfer that belief to her audience through her movement and her charisma as a performer. With her four Sephardi musicians dressed in white and playing live music on stage, Cohen transformed the stage into a different world—one that evoked for the audience the ancient Hebrew past—a mix of biblical and Eastern images. She performed four dances: "The Wedding Dance: How Does one Dance in front of the Bride"; "A Mourner: A Woman whose Art is to Lament"; "The Village Dance: Debka"; and, "The Sorcerer: A Magician and Someone who Tells the Future in Biblical Times and Today." In each of these dances, she depicted different characters, and brought to the stage her image and interpretation of ancient biblical life. In a personal interview with Cohen, she related how her sister, Ruth Jordan, described her as the "Isadora Duncan of the East". Cohen's work and artistic persona certainly had a Duncan sensibility.

The critic Batya Krofnik criticizes Yardena Cohen's dances as follows:

Yardena Cohen showed copies of Arab dances, maybe correct and natural copies, in very fine costumes, with a small orchestra that plays well on simple Eastern instruments. Perhaps, for her all of this is self-explanatory. But is this the right path to a new national art? What can you compare it to? It is as if they represented a perfect performance of synagogue tunes as new Hebrew music .... And behold there is in the case in front of us another missing thing, that the ethnography that is represented is not at all ours. Here Krofnik interweaves the dichotomies between the Middle East and Western Europe and between Arab and Jewish. Because Krofnik considers Cohen's dances to be Arab as opposed to Jewish and Middle Eastern instead of Western European, she then associates the dances with low culture, by referring to them as "ethnography." This ethnography is clearly distinguished from being Jewish, as it is "not at all ours" in Krofnik's terms. It is evident here that Krofnik is overlooking the Sephardi community, which was both Jewish and Middle Eastern. Krofnik's use of the term "simple" to describe and belittle the Oriental instruments further denigrates the Middle Eastern qualities. In addition, Krofnik asserts that Cohen's work is unoriginal, because it shows "copies" of the Arab dances. The Middle Eastern element, then, in Krofnik's estimation does not possess authenticity or creativity. Krofnik associates Arab and Middle Eastern components with low culture, and for this reason, views Cohen's work as the inappropriate path for a new national art.