

Palestine - A Contrast

Pesach at Afikim - Lag B'Omer at Miron.

By

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There is a spirit of celebration in the air at Afikim—it is the eve of the Seder. Last-minute preparations are taking place everywhere—in the dining-hall tables are being laid and decorated; outside, the chaverim are hurrying to accommodate their guests; children are being dressed; a steady stream of people is rushing to the shower-rooms—everywhere there is a bustling and a joyous expectation.

The dining-hall presents a scene of infinite beauty. A colourful frieze extends right around the room, artistically depicting our exodus from Egypt, while above the main door is a gigantic illuminated picture of Moses about to smash the tablets of the law before the Golden Calf. The tables are gaily decorated with choice flowers, adding a festive air to the room. What an unforgettable scene is presented, when fifteen hundred people dressed in white are seated around white tablecloths, laid with gleaming silver, and brilliantly-hued flowers. On a raised platform a choir of eighty voices takes its place, together with a small orchestra.

The anticipation is almost unbearable. The conductor raises his baton, the crowd falls silent, and then . . . suddenly, as a shock, a full-throated burst of song fills the air in a breathtaking paean of joy. The voices are grand, powerful, and blending a harmony that is almost unearthly. After the initial thrill the crowd relaxes and prepares to enjoy a perfect evening. And it is indeed perfect. Song follows song—beautiful melodies are rendered still more beautiful. Sometimes a solo voice takes up the melody and soars high and clear, and sometimes the audience is invited to join in.

The scene changes. A procession of children aged six, dressed in white, with garlands on their heads, march in, carrying symbols of the harvest. A simple mime is enacted on the stage, illustrating the gathering of the omer, to the accompaniment of the orchestra. A ballet dance follows, perfectly executed by a group of older girls, dressed in long flaring white robes—the national spirit of a people determined to live flows out of the dance, and imbues all with a steadfast faith in the future.

The seder ends in a climax of song, at midnight, but not the evening. Outside in the moonlight the trees cast flickering shadows in the slight breeze which has come up. These shadows are soon augmented by human figures, who softly begin to sing and sway in national dance. Groups form on different parts of the lawn, and the singing and dancing gathers strength. The hora becomes wilder and wilder—some fall out, others join in; elsewhere, couples dance the new national dances to the accompaniment of accordion or mouth organ, and the spirit of the festival is broadcast far and wide.

Gradually the night wanes, and the eager spirits accept the new dawn as the answer to their prayers so fervently executed in song and dance, and retire with renewed confidence in the future.

Miron at Lag B'Omer presents a strange contrast. Thousands of pilgrims have come up to rejoice at the graves of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai and his colleagues. Outside the courtyard has been transformed

into a market. Stalls have been set up, and a brisk trade is being conducted in national foods—each vendor crying out his wares in an unashamed courting of trade. Coffee sellers wander in and out of the milling crowds; children eagerly compete in the selling of candles; the maimed and the blind solicit alms. At the graves crowds pray, and place their lit candles, while the women weep and beat their heads against the unresponsive stones. An unforgettable scene is imprinted on the mind of a strange collection of people who cannot be identified as Jews. And yet there they are—Jews from Yemen, Jews from Baghdad, strangely-costumed Khurdish Jews, Jews from Arabia indistinguishable from the Arabs encamped on the surrounding hills; Jews with primitive habits, living in dirt and squalor—all united in their pilgrimage, and mixing aggressively with the Jews of European customs, who have come as onlookers.

Meanwhile, the gaily-decorated car bearing the Sefer Torah from Safed, is approaching at the head of a large convoy of motor cars and buses. The crowds throng to meet it. A Chassidic dance starts up immediately, and in song and dance triumphantly the Torah is borne inside—each one is trying to snatch the sacred article from the next one, in order to have the holy privilege of having danced with the Torah in his arms. The dancing increases in fervour as the Torah nears the graves—other circles form in different parts of the courtyard, and the noise of song and chanting is deafening. The youth dance the hora and the aged dance their traditional dance, earlocks and caftans fanning out in the violence of their exertions. One old man, who has tired, is lifted onto the shoulders of his son, who continues the dancing for him, while he conducts the song. Occasionally someone rushes into the centre of the circle to execute a wild solo dance; then two or three join him, accompanied by the music of drum and fiddle and the wild stamping of feet.

As darkness approaches huge fires are lit at the top of pillars on the balcony, and circles form around each column of fire, which seems to add inspiration to the whirling figures, rhythmically chanting their prayers. The dancing becomes wilder and wilder; a religious frenzy overtakes their senses, and they begin to fling their garments into the fire to feed the flames. Hour after hour passes, but the dancing does not abate. Those with passion spent whip their flagging steps to go round just once more. When they have perforce to fall out, others take their places, and the dance goes on uninterrupted. Onlookers press their faces to the railings, clap their hands, and beat time to the stamping of feet.

After twelve hours of watching the dancing, one's mind whirls in confusion, and one seeks relief outside, stumbling over the figures which have dropped down in a stupor from sheer exhaustion. Just outside the courtyard, the evening lies quiet and peaceful, while the serene harvest moon looks down incredulously on this fantastic scene of a particular type of Jew, who clings tenaciously and fanatically to his past, and derives spiritual comfort by identifying himself with it in this weird spectacle of a bygone age.

YOUTH MONTH.

Successful Programme Carried Out.

During the past month all the suburbs in the Cape Peninsula, as well as several country towns in the Western Province, had an opportunity of hearing a band of Youth speakers and talented artists, who visited the various societies under the auspices of Youth Month. In the various areas they brought a message from the entire Youth and suggested a new line of approach to Youth problems, in particular as they affected the future of the Jewish people. Special emphasis was laid on the importance of Chalutzuth, and the general impression gained by the speakers was that an appreciable advancement was made in clearing up certain misconceptions about this vital field of Zionist work.

The highlights of the month were a mass meeting held on Sunday, 11th May, a Mock Trial in the Major Zionist Hall on Sunday, 18th May. A report of these functions appeared in previous issues of the "Chronicle." The Mock Trial, more than any other function, fulfilled the task of enlightening the adult Jewish community on the various problems.

TRIAL REPEATED AT PAARL.

The Paarl Jewish community were fortunate in listening to a repeat performance of the Trial on Tuesday, 3rd June, when some of the participants in the original took part. Those who joined the cast on this occasion were Mr. L. Sutin, of Paarl, who appeared as a communal worker, Miss Ray Mofowitz, Mr. Hodes and Mr. R. B. Egert, all of whom gave a good account of themselves in their various roles in the Trial. Visitors were welcomed by Mr. B. Zetler, Chairman of the Paarl Lemaan Zion Society, who expressed the appreciation and gratitude of the Paarl Jewish community to the Western Province Zionist Council for arranging the function. Mr. J. Geffen associated himself with the vote of thanks at the conclusion of the Trial.

On Saturday, 24th May, there was a special service in the Gardens Synagogue, which was attended by children of the Cape Town Talmud Torah, Oranjia and Zionist youth societies of Cape Town. Rabbi I. Abrahams delivered a brilliant address, dealing with youth matters. Several of the Youth congregants were called up to the Torah.

SHAVUOTH MESIBAH.

The Shavuoth concert organised by the Western Province Habonim Chalutz group was one of the most interesting functions of the month. The programme which was executed with much skill, was a praiseworthy effort indeed (A report of this appears in the Youth supplement).

On Sunday 11th there was a Palestine Maritime League Youth sea outing including a visit to the 'D'rom Afrika'. This was organised by the Palestine Maritime League Youth Executive with Mr. A. Berezowski at its head in conjunction with the Cape

Zionist Youth Executive. In addition to the suburban meetings there was also a special meeting organised by the Bnoth Zion which was held on the afternoon of May 19th. On the previous Saturday several youth leaders met Rabbi Freedman at an informal gathering held at the residence of Miss Freda Rabinowitz.

SUBURBAN MEETINGS.

On Tuesday, May 20th, there was a meeting of the combined Zionist societies of Woodstock/Salt River. On Wednesday, May 21st, youth speakers addressed the Jewish community of Durbanville, on Thursday, 22nd May, there was a meeting of the Claremont Zionist Society and the Northern Districts Zionist Guild. On Sunday, May 25th, there was an Oneg Shavuoth at Maitland. On Tuesday, May 27th, the South Peninsula Zionist society had a special youth month meeting. The same evening Miss F. Rabinowitz addressed a meeting of the Histadrut Ivrit in Hebrew. Mr. H. Konvisser entertained those present with some Hebrew melodies. On Wednesday, May 28th, Mr. D. Senderowitz addressed the women of Observatory/Mowbray at their monthly meeting. On Thursday, May 29th, there was a meeting of the combined Zionist societies of Wynberg, as well as of the Goodwood Zionist Society. On Sunday, 1st June, a band of speakers and artists visited the Strand, where they addressed a meeting at the Strand Cafe.

It would not have been possible to arrange all these meetings had it not been for the willing co-operation of the speakers as well as the artists. The following speakers took part in the various meetings and functions:—Mr. D. Senderowitz, Miss F. Rabinowitz, Messrs. S. Kessler, A. Miller, S. Rubinstein, Jack Levin, R. B. Egert, B. Singer.

The following artists accompanied the speakers at the various meetings: Misses B. Berret, F. Levin, R. Kantor, Goldin twins, S. Rabinowitz and Mr. Konvisser.

On Wednesday, June 4th, the Western Province Zionist Council was "At Home" to Youth Month workers and leading members of the Youth movement. (A report of this will appear in a subsequent issue).

Rabbi & Mrs. Zlotnik to Visit Australia.

TO LEAD J.N.F. CAMPAIGN.

Rabbi J. L. Zlotnik, Director of the S.A. Board of Jewish Education, accompanied by Mrs. Zlotnik, will leave Johannesburg at the end of June on a special visit to Australia, where Rabbi Zlotnik is to lead the Australian J.N.F. Campaign.

Rabbi and Mrs. Zlotnik are going to Australia via the United States, where they will visit their daughter and son-in-law, whom they have not seen since Rabbi Zlotnik came to Johannesburg 10 years ago to assume the post of Director of Jewish Education there.

Irgun Broadcast.

Jerusalem.

The Irgun Zvai Leumi, over its secret radio, broadcast a repeated offer to observe a complete three-months' truce from violence if the Government similarly abided by the U.N.O. appeal, saying that it did not intend to maintain a one-sided truce. The broadcast violently attacked Mr. Ben Gurion for his statement on partition made at the Assephat Hanivcharim session.

Jerusalem.

There are now 31 settlements on J.N.F. land in Southern Judea and the Negev. Of these, 16 were established before October, 1946, and the other 15 since that time.