

Kol Nidre

THIS evening the haunting notes of Kol Nidre will be heard in every synagogue throughout the world and will duly make its profound impression upon all worshippers. Numerous efforts to account for the origin of this chant have been made and various theories have been propounded. Some of these solve one difficulty, while others solve other difficulties, but it is apparent that no theory is sufficient to clear up all the objections raised.

The popular theory is that the origin of Kol Nidre comes from the Visigothic persecutions of the seventh century. These cruel rulers forced the Jews to forswear their faith and accept Christianity under the most fearful oaths and anathemas. The converts had solemnly to avow that they believed in the Trinity and that Jesus was the redeemer, that henceforth they would reject all rites, observances and customs of the Jews and hold no intercourse with their former co-religionists. They also had to denounce any convert who did not live up to these regulations. The penalty for disobeying these orders was stoning to death.

It was under these circumstances that Kol Nidre arose. The forced converts remained inwardly true to the Jewish faith and when the Day of Atonement came they found a way of celebrating it as the rest of the Jews, though in secret. But they felt that by so doing, they broke the oath which their oppressors extracted from them by force. They could not enter upon the sacred functions of the most holy day without first clearing their conscience.

In Kol Nidre, they not only gave expression to their overwhelming grief at their back-sliding from Judaism, but also asked forgiveness for and absolution from the vows which were forced from them.

A Formula

APPEALING as this theory is for its sentimental side, it is apparently not free from flaws. For in an article by Professor Davidson, which I read some little time ago, I remember he emphasised that it is a matter of doubt if Spain in the seventh century had Hebrew scholars learned enough to introduce Kol Nidre into the liturgy. Granting that it had such scholars, it is also doubtful if their authority could have been so great that other communities would follow their practice.

Furthermore, if Kol Nidre originated from the crypto Jews, what reason was there for communities free from persecution to adopt it? It appears, therefore, to be safer to regard Kol Nidre as a plain legal formula for the absolution of vows. The religious consciousness of the Jews, weighed down by the thought of the non-fulfilment of its solemn vows, led them to devise a comprehensive formula of dispensation.

In any case, tradition has given to the chant a rare holiness and reverence, and its intonation in the synagogue is always impressive and awe-inspiring.

Current Communal Comments

By
'Hamabit'

Wanted—a Gesture!

I RATHER regret to note that not a single South African university has so far shown its sympathy in the sad position of world-renowned savants who have become the victims of the present regime in Germany. Not one of the latter has received an invitation to occupy a university post in South Africa.

Yet I hear that a leading intellectual centre in far-away China is not unaware of its responsibility in this connection. The University in Shanghai is one with modern equipment in science and the department of mechanical engineering is advertising for a "German-Jewish professor of ability and standing." The project is receiving the support of the liberal Chinese-English newspapers throughout that country.

Which is to be the first South African university to invite a distinguished German-Jewish professor to head one of its faculties?

Sutro

A FINE dramatic craftsman passed away a few days ago in London in the person of Alfred Sutro. He belonged to the older school of British playwrights and was fortunate in that he enjoyed his own success in early manhood and middle-age.

I remember listening to Sutro giving his experiences to a Jewish literary society in London some twenty years ago. When his first play was accepted for production at a West End Theatre young Sutro spent many hours riding on the top of a bus and keenly gazing at similar passing vehicles, carrying on their sides large placards advertising Sutro's name as the author of the new play at the Haymarket Theatre. The thrill he received on that occasion he was never able to regain, even when he became a renowned dramatist.

Although Sutro's talent was never concentrated upon any Jewish theme, he was a conforming Jew and a member of one of the synagogues under the jurisdiction of the United Synagogue of London.

He was a prolific writer and was the author of some thirty plays, exclusive of translations and collaborations. Sutro had a remarkably fine technique in play-writing and possessed an excellent sense of character. None of his works, in spite, can be looked upon as fitting into the category of "great." No volume on contemporary British drama of the last forty years, however, can fail to find a place of distinction for Alfred Sutro.

"Quiet"

A FEW weeks ago in the city of Cologne in Germany a thousand delegates assembled to attend a conference of the Esperantists—the adherents of the universal auxiliary language.

The conference did not arouse the slightest interest in the public and was quite ignored by the press. It is obvious that a language that aims at international peace and understanding cannot evoke interest in a country

where nationalism of the crudest form is rampant.

I surmise that there may, of course, have been another reason for the silence—as far as the general public is concerned—in which the proceedings of the Esperanto conference were held. The founder of this international language was a Jewish doctor of Bialystok, in Poland—Lazarus Zamenhof. It is, of course, contrary to all Nazi traditions to pay the slightest attention to the work of a Jew, no matter how wide and vital is the spread of his influence in any enlightened work.

In previous Esperanto conferences, the name of Zamenhof was received with every indication of honour. At the conference in Cologne the name of the founder of this language was not even mentioned. Zamenhof was a man who never sought for fame. If he were alive, his satisfaction would no doubt be derived from the fact that the language he created still has hundreds of thousands of adherents throughout the world.

Seeking a Minister!

I NOTE that some of the American Jewish papers reaching me contain announcements to the effect that the Bloemfontein Congregation is seeking a Minister and invites applications. The new incumbent must be a Talmudical and Hebrew scholar and a capable preacher in English. It is further announced that a University degree would be a recommendation.

The advertisement has aroused interest among communities in America, where it is remembered that years ago South Africa took away a minister from New York, who later became the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Empire.

It would be interesting to learn the number of applications our friends in Bloemfontein are receiving in reply to their American advertisements.

Sound Advice.

A JEWISH young man recently left the comfortable home of his people in Capetown in order to experience the "high lights" of Johannesburg. It was not very long before the young man became financially embarrassed. He wired home to his parents in Capetown:

"Broke. Have no friends. What shall I do?"

Forthwith there came a reply from his parents:

"Make friends quickly."