

Yom Kippur in an Ancient City

A Traveller's Experience in Prague

By

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IT has become quite popular among pulpiteers to compare Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur to the stock-taking period of the business world. This may be a trite comparison, but is it not true that in comparing existing conditions with those in vogue a few centuries or even decades ago, we become better able to understand the present and plan for the future?

Were it possible to roll back the curtain of time and transport ourselves to the ghettos of bygone days we would witness sights that would haunt us for years to come. Let us then in our mind's eye live the life of our ancestors and learn what this holiday season meant to them.

We are in the ancient city of Prague, that old world mass of towers and battlements, with its Jewish district located on the banks of the Moldau. We walk through narrow and winding alleys that pass for streets. How uncanny! We hear nary a sound. Are all these houses deserted? What has happened to our people? We understood Prague has a good sized Jewish community. A glance at the *luach*, as the Hebrew calendar is called, will solve the mystery. This is Yom Kippur Eve and our people are at synagogue for services.

IS not the synagogue a sight that will forever remain in our memory? Hundreds of white robed men, all lost in thought and prayer; that overhead hum from the women's gallery where the mothers and daughters of the ghetto are gathered to offer their petitions to the God of Israel! Watch those spluttering lamps and candles that for the next twenty-four hours will throw their flickering rays into the darkest corners of the synagogue and play hide and seek in the shadow. If only we were artists and able to transfer this picture to canvas!

Yom Kippur Eve! What is the secret of its spell? Why on this evening do Jews throughout the world gather to pour out their hearts to their Maker even as other Jews have done for hundreds of years? Why do we in other cities, several generations removed from these worshippers in the Prague synagogue, do even as they do? And what is it that will make Jews long after we have joined the great procession, fill our places on Yom Kippur Eve? Listen and you will hear one of the reasons.

HOW pale the old cantor looks as he comes to the reader's desk! Little wonder, for he is to act as the representative of his people in intoning a prayer centuries old, a prayer the words and melody of which have sunk deep into the heart of the Jew. His is a function not to be taken lightly! Now two officials of the synagogue draw aside the white silk curtains of the ark and take from its deep recesses two scrolls of the law covered with white mantles. A stillness that can almost be felt envelops the synagogue as the Torahs containing Israel's laws are carried to the desk where the bearers take their places on either side of the chazan. This uncanny silence seems to frighten us; we wish something would happen; why the delay?

A low pitched melody greets our ears; the cantor has started his chant! No words are heard and yet the tones seem strongly familiar. Where have we heard them before? Another and yet another measure, and then a cry that seems to mount to the very heavens—"Kol Nidre!" That is it! Now we know. That very prayer, although in English, is being offered this very night in our own synagogues in far off South Africa. Strange how its minor notes bind us across the centuries. This eighteenth century Kol Nidre thrills us even as does the twentieth century Kol Nidre. The cantor's voice has dropped again, he seems to be exhausted by his efforts, yet must he have strength to repeat the prayer a second and a third time. From all parts of the synagogue arise suppressed sobs; parents and children are recalling dear ones who are no more; they are wondering what the future may have in store for them. Who knows, their century is not as tolerant as is ours. Well may these European children wonder at their fate.

WHAT about this prayer that ushers in and has given its name to the whole evening service of Yom Kippur? Kol Nidre dates back to Spain of the seventh century when bigoted rulers compelled the weaker among the Jews to give up their faith. Though outwardly Christian, in secret many of these converts observed Jewish rites. Once a year there came a time when they desired to pray in the midst of their fellow Jews. That was on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Kol Nidre, meaning "all the vows," was then recited to absolve these baptized Jews from

the promise they had made under compulsion, never again to pray with their loyal brethren. This prayer does not rescind all vows made by Jews as our enemies have charged. Judaism teaches its followers to live up to every promise made, particularly when a third person's interests are involved in such obligations.

It is doubtful if the Kol Nidre prayer would have survived without the beautiful melody associated with it. In its traditional form it is hardly what we sophisticated moderns call "artistic music." But does that matter? Not at all. Few chazonim in those centuries of yore understood rules of music. Even if they had been musical adepts, why bother confirming to rules? By all rules of mankind the Jew should have died out long ago, and yet here he is on Yom Kippur Eve, intoning his traditional prayers as his fathers have done before him. Kol Nidre expresses two thousand years of Jewish suffering and hope. There is nothing like its music anywhere. Who its composer is we do not know, his name is of but little consequence. Kol Nidre will live on as long as a Jew will be found in the world.

WE know that Yom Kippur is the holiest day in the Jewish year. From sunset to sunset services are conducted and we turn away from the world and its pleasures. No food passes the Jews' lips for twenty-four hours. Fasting in and of itself means little; it does not make one better unless it serves the purpose for which it was intended. Fasting must recall to us that there are those who often go without the necessities of life and that we must do our utmost to help them enjoy the blessings that are ours.

On Yom Kippur we confess, following a traditional formality, our sins and resolve to refrain from repeating the mistakes of the past. It has become customary for the Jew on the Eve of Yom Kippur to beg forgiveness from his fellows for any injustice he may have done them. This is characteristic of the social attitude of our faith, no forgiveness can be had from God unless forgiveness is first had from man.

The service is ended. Silently these Prague Jews leave their house of worship. We would linger with them, but unfortunately must leave behind this fascinating spot to return to our own world—South Africa of the twentieth century.

But perhaps we shall return home, inspired by the sights we have seen, imbued with greater devotion to our faith and a determination to remain as loyal to it, in our prosperous environment, as were these poor haunted Jews amidst the squallor and persecution of the ghetto.