

CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS LIFE AND THOUGHT IN ISRAEL

ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION

YOM KIPPUR AND THE WAR

by

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1.

Judaism had created a culture more of the ear than of the eye. "You heard the sound of words, but saw no forms; there was only a voice" (Deut. 4:12). It was not given to us to express our message in creative works of plastic arts. No doubt the "House of God" in Jerusalem was the visible manifestation of Jewish faith, but as regards the actual building of both the First and the Second Temple we hear of non-Jewish artisans, and the hymns of the pilgrims are a more direct reflection of the creative spirit in Judaism than is the building which inspired them.

The creative principle of Judaism has expressed itself more in holy times than in holy spaces. In his book on the Sabbath, Abraham Heschel depicts this day as the most genuine Jewish artistic work, a cathedral not built in space but in time. No religion has a holy day, shaped to the smallest detail, like the Jewish Sabbath, in which every hour from the welcoming of the Sabbath Bride on Friday evening until the farewell in the twilight of Saturday evening, has its own indelible mark. The way a living man experiences life within this fully structured framework cannot be better illustrated than by the tradition which tells that the Jew has been given a mysterious "additional soul" which only dwells in him during the Sabbath.

2.

The acme of this Jewish time-projected architecture is formed by the "Sabbath of Sabbaths", Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). On this day we stand, as the Bible says, "from evening to evening" fasting and praying, searching ourselves and our God. On the opening evening, with its sound of numinous ancient Jewish music, the Jews of Spain who were persecuted by the Inquisition and forcibly baptised, would steal away to pour out their hearts, on this one occasion in the year, before their God to whom they remained faithful in their inmost being. During the liturgy of this day the Jew falls upon his knees in prayer, which otherwise he never does, when it comes to remembering how once the High Priest would, on this one day of the year, enter the Holy of Holies of the Temple and cry in a loud

voice the unpronounceable holy Name of God. At the end of the day comes the hour on which, according to an ancient notion, God seals definitively the judgment written on every human soul. Then the congregation recites in highest tension its profession of faith and each one should, according to mystical doctrine imagine that at this moment he may be commanded to die for the Sanctification of the Divine Name. In conclusion we proclaim seven times the words of the people standing with Elijah on Mount Carmel: "The Lord – He is God". Then a trumpet blast of the Shofar releases the tension, which turns immediately into an outburst of joy and forms the transition to the joyful period of the Feast of Tabernacles,

Even among the secularised population, who strongly resent the imposition of religious restrictions on public life (such as the halting of public transportation on the Sabbath), Yom Kippur is observed as a day of reflection and contemplation. There is a virtual standstill of traffic, although no law prohibits public driving on that day. Even radio and television keep silent. The Jewish people, otherwise so hurried, take a deep breath, and an atmosphere which Rudolf Otto would describe as "numinous" hovers over the city as sundown heralds the approach of Yom Kippur. Even among convinced atheists there are many who take no food from one evening to the other. The authorities limit public services to the bare minimum, and even the army sends home as many soldiers as it believes can be spared. Such, until now, had been the Yom Kippur, this greatest work of Jewish architecture in the dimension of time.

3.

On this Yom Kippur at 13.45 the sirens wailed throughout the State of Israel, overwhelming the prayers of those who were praying and the silence of those who were resting. The Egyptians and Syrians launched a massive attack on the thinly held lines of the defenders. It will perhaps never be possible to know how many of them fell in battle during the first hours of the assault, and how many were murdered after being taken prisoner.

After this murderous assault on the supreme sanctuary of Israel, we will never be able to celebrate Yom Kippur as we had previously done year by year. We shall always have to remember that there is no longer any taboo providing safety from the attack of an enemy who is out to destroy us. We were too confident that there were some spiritual and human limits which even an enemy must respect, if only because of world public opinion. It was clear that the whole planning of the start of the war was geared to the special circumstances of Yom Kippur when the military lines would be thinly held, with many of the serving soldiers engaged in prayer.

The demolition of the Jewish sanctuary was thus not accidental but formed the real core of this war design. Had Israel wished to retaliate in kind, it would have been incumbent on her – in face of a religion whose

holy things are more related to space than to time – to assault renowned mosques! But such a barbarous thought has not occurred to anyone in Israel. The actions of the State of Israel are not dictated by religious fanaticism. More than that: by such insanity we would possibly have fulfilled the most secret wish of those who designed this war plan.

In well-informed political circles it is assumed that the idea of planning the surprise attack on Israel on Yom Kippur came from Soviet advisers. I see no reason to doubt this assumption. The cynical exploitation of religious factors for political aims is more in line with the spirit of Soviet than of Arab politics. To mention only one random example of the light-hearted way representatives of this ideology know how to manipulate religious practices: at a recent international sporting event in one of the Eastern Bloc countries, an Israeli team was rejected on the grounds that it was not proper for representatives of the State of Israel to appear at the contest on the Sabbath.

4.

Such a degree of unscrupulousness is not in the nature of a Muslim. Though he might be easily inclined to mobilise all his religious fanaticism in a “Holy War” against the unbelievers, he has nevertheless an inborn sensitivity for the holy in other religions. This lies in the structure of Islam which claims to be the conclusive revelation without, however, denying the relative titles of the previous revelations. It was not for nothing that it was Islam which partly peacefully, partly violently, took over holy spaces from Jews and Christians. For the Muslim, the sanctuaries of other – at least monotheistic – religions are not outlawed.

But these observations might be too theoretical and too general to decide about facts. Let us stick to the facts: on November 18 General Ahmed Ismail Ali explained in an interview with the editor of the leading Egyptian paper *Al Ahram* the motives which guided him concerning the timing of the attack. He mentioned the availability of sufficient moonlight at the decisive hours, favourable fluctuations at the Suez canal, the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan in which the Jews would not expect an attack, and the election campaign in Israel which diverted attention. That is all. All these things point, in fact, only to an approximate date. He thus concealed from the Arab public the crucial fact that the chosen day coincided with the highest Jewish festival. Why did he want to conceal his most effective calculation? One may say that the conquest of the bunkers east of Suez would lose much of its splendour if the people should know under what vile circumstances it was carried out. A successful stratagem may enhance a general’s fame, but only when the public approves of the means that were used. But when the people would feel unease and would sense that something had been touched which must not be touched, then it would

be better to conceal the truth. The Arabs should not know that he had followed Soviet advice, for otherwise they would realise to whom, for the sake of short-term advantages, he had sold Islam.

The Soviet policy has, in the last two decades, scored excellent successes, but one element is always a hindrance to her and forces her to greatest care, namely the strong religious forces which are still alive in the Orient. These have to be broken, but as the Near East is the cradle of the great world religions one has to reckon on tough resistance. Therefore whenever a sanctum totters, that is a step forward. In that sense the Soviet policy may consider the attack on Yom Kippur a success, and it would have been most favourable for the planners in Moscow if Israel had retaliated in kind.

5.

But who is willing to open the eyes of the peoples of Islam and to point out to them the purpose for which they have let themselves be misused? Who is willing to confront the Arab masses with the religious crime which General Ismail Ali concealed from them? Can the peoples of the West stand by in weak neutrality, while in the cradle of all religions, their own included, sanctuaries are being violated and destroyed?

In our time a Jewish-Christian dialogue has emerged; we have not yet achieved a Jewish-Islamic dialogue, although in the course of the centuries we have mostly felt ourselves closer to Islam than to Christianity. But world politics had driven a wedge between us, and Soviet policy is very much interested in driving this wedge deeper and deeper. On the last Yom Kippur she made good progress.

We prayed on this Yom Kippur a prayer which will be repeated every Yom Kippur.

“Impose, O Lord, Thine awe on all Thy works, and Thy dread upon all that Thou hast created . . . that they may all form a single band to do Thy will with a perfect heart.”

If the holy is to be saved in the world, then humanity must not keep silent about what has been done to our Yom Kippur. This is the first step towards the single band for the sake of which mankind has been created.

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