

A Child's Jewish New Year in the Bronx
(with apologies to Dylan Thomas)

From the age of 10, my mother made it clear to me that I had to go to Shul on Rosh Hashana--Yom Kippur. She did not go to Shul. I went alone. I dressed in my best clothes and headed down the street to the Fox Street Shul, which is where I went to Hebrew School. It was also called the Hungarian Shul. Its real name was Congregation Beth David Agudath Achim.

To get into Shul on the High Holy days, you had to have a ticket. The prices of the tickets were scaled, based on the location of the seats. My guess is that they ranged from \$10 to \$25. Women sat in the balcony. I resented that people had to buy tickets to pray, but my mother explained that it was the only way for the Shul to survive. Most Jews in our neighborhood were not Shul members, but they wanted to be in Shul for Rosh Hashana, and especially for Yom Kippur.

As a kid, I didn't buy a ticket; most kids sneaked in. The Shuls hired cops to stand at the entrance to make sure everyone had a ticket. As with most Shuls in my neighborhood, there were services upstairs in the Sanctuary with a Chazen (Cantor) and a choir, and downstairs in the Bais Hamedresh, the study hall, without Chazen and choir. If I couldn't sneak in upstairs, I sneaked in downstairs. Unfortunately, there was no way to get upstairs to the Sanctuary from downstairs.

We knew Rosh Hashana was coming when we heard Mr. Cohen practice blowing the Shofar. He lived in a ground floor apartment and his windows were always open. And he blasted: Tekiah, Shevarim, Teruah. He was good. With the coming of the New Year, you sensed the excitement in the neighborhood. Everyone was shopping: for chickens and meat at the butcher store; for honey cake and round challahs at the bakery; for New Years cards at the candy store; and for new clothes. My mother always bought me something new for the New Year—a pair of shoes, sox, underwear, a shirt. And she was as busy as everyone else cleaning and cooking, getting ready for Yontev.

Back to Shul: after I sneaked in, I picked up a prayer book, found an empty seat, and asked the adult next to me to show me the place. I would then join in the "davening." The prayer book for Rosh Hashana—Yom Kippur is called a Machzor, and my Shul had Machzorim of many different publishers and editions. Some people brought their own. There was no way of knowing the place by telling someone a page number. You have to know the liturgy, and I didn't, and still don't. (I recently observed that when I was young, I asked an older person for the place. Now that I am old, I am asking a younger person for the place.)

The prayer books were in Hebrew—no English translation. Except for a few prayers we learned in Hebrew school, we had no idea what we were saying. We knew that we were praying to God, and he understood Hebrew, even though we didn't. Not knowing the meaning of the prayers made it more holy and mystical for us. Despite the fact that these were such holy days, there were always groups of older men chatting in the back. From

time to time, someone in the congregation would bang on his Machzor and shout “Shah!” and the talking would stop, but after a few minutes, it would continue.

The high point of the morning was when Mr. Cohen blew the shofar. Most of the kids would try to get as close to him as possible. He covered his head with his Talis, put the shofar to his lips, and another man stood beside him and whispered the kind of sound he was to make: Tekiah, Shevarim, Teruah. Sometimes, he had trouble getting the full sound out of the ram’s horn, and people became anxious, but he soon got back on track and his struggle was forgotten. If Rosh Hashanah fell on a Saturday, he didn’t blow the shofar, and the kids felt cheated.

After davening for a while, I would look around for kids that I knew. If I spotted someone, I would join him, and then the two of us would look for other kids. If my friend was with his father, it might take a little while for him to extricate himself. (I didn’t have that problem.) When we had a critical mass, we would leave and try our luck at crashing other Shuls in the neighborhood. There were four other Shuls within a five block radius. All of them were Orthodox. We knew that Conservative and Reform Shuls existed, but we had never been inside one. We were going to check out the other Shuls’ Chazens and their choirs. And to find other kids.

On one Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi Katz’ Shul on Hewitt Place had hired the world renowned Chazen, Moshe Oisher. Him, we had to hear. A rumor had been circulating in the neighborhood beginning the second day of Rosh Hashanah that on either Erev Rosh Hashanah or on the first day, Moishe Oisher had been spotted driving to the Shul. He parked a few blocks away, hoping not to be seen, violating this most holy of holy days. Even if he was Moishe Oisher, he was expected to walk, like the rest of us.

In addition to hiring outstanding Chazens, the Shuls competed in hiring outstanding choirs. The all-male aggregations were usually lined up around the choir master with the shortest singers on either end and the tallest in the middle. Very young boys were hired as the sopranos. The Chazen and the choir members wore white robes with matching prayer shawls (talesim). The Chazen also wore a large, domelike, white silk head covering.

The following week is Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar. It begins the evening before with the Kol Nidre prayer which asks that we be absolved of all vows that we make to God that we are unable to fulfill. It is very moving, and everyone wants to be in Shul to hear it. Unfortunately, some people are still at home finishing their meal, since they will be fasting for the next 24 hours, so some miss Kol Nidre. They either get there in time for the rest of the evening service or skip the evening service altogether. They will be doing a lot of praying on Yom Kippur.

Beginning in the evening of Yom Kippur and continuing through the next day, interspersed among the other prayers, is an interminable listing of all the bad things we may have done the past year. When I was a kid, I didn’t know the meaning of all the sins I was asking God to forgive, but I knew they all began with the same phrase “Ahl Chait,”

“We have sinned.” When you read the list, you make a fist with your right hand and you gently and unobtrusively hit your heart. I later learned that we are admitting to foul speech, violence, fraud, falsehood, scoffing, dishonesty, haughtiness, irreverence, selfishness, stubbornness, gossip, and worse.

Perhaps the most important part of the Yom Kippur service is Yizkor, the memorial service for the dead. It was preceded in the Shuls in my neighborhood by a remarkable fund-raising event. The Yizkor prayer contains the line “charity is pledged,” so the Shul uses this opportunity to raise money. An officer of the Shul, usually the President, standing in the front, starts it off by asking the congregation, in Yiddish, how much they will give: \$100, \$75, \$50? Remember, this is during the depression. “Ver vet gibm fiftzik tuler?” Who will give \$50? Fifty dollars is a lot of money, but there are a couple of members who are prepped to make such a large contribution. Around the Shul a number of volunteer members are standing in the aisles, eyeing the congregants. After the \$50 contributions are announced, hands are being raised. The volunteer goes over to the first hand-raiser. The hand-raiser states his name and the amount: Sam Kaplan—Finf un tzvansik tuler. The volunteer call out to the officer in the front: “Sam Kaplan—finf un tzvansik tuler.” The officer repeats: “Sam Kaplan—finf un tzvansik tuler.” And on it goes for the next 20 minutes. Occasionally, a well-known member of the congregation would raise his hand and announce: “Un a numen- fiftsen tuler.” Without a name- \$15. When it gets to five dollars, the fund-raiser is ended. They then announced that Yizkor was to begin.

This was a difficult moment for me. All the young people in the Shul would leave, and I would be the only kid remaining. I would be standing there by myself, with the Machzor turned to the Yizkor service. The only English would be the words above the Hebrew prayers that said “in memory of a father” or “in memory of a mother” or a husband, wife, son or daughter. I read the one for a father and would insert my father’s name in Yiddish “Lazer Schlitt.” I would say it a couple times to make sure God heard it. And I would feel very sad. If I was sad, it was nothing compared to the heart-break the women in the balcony were feeling. Heart-rending cries, moaning, weeping and wailing. They really let you (and God) know how they felt about the loss of loved ones. You don’t hear anything like it today. (Perhaps in an old fashioned black church, but they don’t say Yizkor.) After the Yizkor prayer, those who didn’t have to say Yizkor would come back.

Everybody knows that Yom Kippur is a fast day, and as a kid you are told that you don’t have to fast until you are 13. But even if we weren’t 13, we gave it a shot. No snack at night, no breakfast, no lunch. However, by mid afternoon, the spirit was willing but the flesh was weak. We had left shul and had gone to our respective homes, but after a while we came downstairs and hung out. Then the question—did you eat? Nah! Aren’t you hungry? Yeah, but I am going to hold out to the end. Kids began to drift away and head back to their apartments where their mothers would encourage them to have a nosh. A little something. You wouldn’t want to faint. Have some juice, a cracker, a piece fruit. If the kids resisted, their mothers would put a little package together in a napkin to take back to Shul so they can have it when services are over.

We all made it back for the concluding service. I don't remember any cops there. They must have left some time in the afternoon. But this was the most exciting part: the finale. The Chazan looks like a prize fighter in the final rounds: a little weak on his feet, but you know he is going to make it. His voice is still strong. He is standing. The congregation is standing. The Ark is open and everyone is reciting the last prayers. Then everyone says the Sh'ma—Hear O Israel..., another prayer that is said three times, a prayer that is said seven times, and I am counting each of them on my fingers. And finally the Shofar is blown for the last time, and the congregation chants the wish of Jews the world over: L'shana haba b'yerushalayim—Next year in Jerusalem. Even though there is still an evening service, almost everybody rushes out of the Shul.

As we make our way down the stairs to the sidewalk we are engulfed in a cloud of smoke. Practically every man in the shul has taken out a cigarette and lighted it. All around me are smokers telling each other that it wasn't food they missed, but they were dying for a smoke. Everyone is wishing everyone a healthy and happy new year, and I head for home where my mother has prepared a wonderful meal to break the fast. We eat, wish each other happy new year, and turn on the radio to find out what has been happening in the world.

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