

The White Kerchief

FOR OTHER WOMEN, the coming of the High Holidays is marked by the wearing of fur collars, velvet dresses, brooches set with seed pearls, golden bracelets—heirlooms from their grandmothers. Mother, for her part, has a black shawl and a jacket with mother-of-pearl buttons. But for her the most important sign of the festival is her white kerchief. It is in this that she wraps her Roedelheimer mahzor with its glossy brown binding. The gleaming kerchief is to her like the white curtain hung before the Holy Ark during the Days of Awe—a reminder that on the Day of Judgment, God is a pardoner of sins.

For my mother the very essence of the holiday lies in that white kerchief, whereas I find my joy of the season in a small bunch of grapes, like a cluster of frozen dewdrops, and a slice of red, juicy watermelon studded with black seeds. Mother buys these delicacies in honor of the New Year, so that I might recite the Sheheḥeyonu, the blessing for new occasions. She herself also eats a little of these costly fruits. In the course of the two days of Rosh Hashanah, she also eats a plum and a pear—fruits she has not tasted earlier in the season. As a child I always marveled: where did she find the strength and patience to keep herself all summer long from sampling the fresh fruits in her own baskets, so as to be eligible to recite the Sheheḥeyonu over them on the New Year?

On Rosh Hashanah, sitting in the women's section of the synagogue, she looked more joyous and radiant than any of the rich matrons with their fur collars. She is not a zogerke, a “spokeswoman”—no one has engaged her to pray for a good year for All-Israel—but the poor, unlearned women crowd around her to listen as she translates aloud into Yiddish the story that is being read from the Torah scroll:

“Sarah, the mistress, drove out the maidservant Hagar, with her child, into the desert. And Hagar wandered aimlessly until all the water in her goatskin bottle was gone. Then she placed the child under one of the trees and she herself sat down at a distance, as far as an arrow could fly, so that she would not see the death agony of the child. And she lifted her voice and wept. Then an angel of the Lord called out to Hagar and said to her that her son would become the father of a mighty nation. And God opened the eyes of Hagar, and she saw a well of water, and gave her child to drink.”

Even the women who cannot read are familiar with this tale, and they sigh: Life has always been bitter for the lowly. In their hearts they feel resentment against Sarah for her ill-treatment of the servant-girl. Yet the poor women also realize that God is a merciful Father Who can help them as He helped the maidservant Hagar. The moral of the tale is sweet, as sweet as the ḥallah dipped in honey that is eaten at the evening meal on Rosh Hashanah. But they cannot take much time to ponder this, for they are anxious to listen as my mother continues reading.

She reads how the ministering angels came before God and spoke to Him: "Lord of the Universe, do not take pity on Hagar's son, Ishmael. When the Children of Israel will be driven from their land, the children of Ishmael will meet them in the desert and give the exhausted Jews salty fish to eat and, instead of water, they will give the exiles skin-bottles filled with wind. It were better that Ishmael die of thirst now, while he is yet a child, than that such evildoers, the Arabs of the desert, should be his descendants." But God, blessed be He, answered the angels and said that each person may only be judged for that which he has already done, not for what he, or his children, may do in the future.

The women, peddlers and stall-keepers in the marketplace, have never heard this story before, and they are greatly moved and comforted by it. For who nowadays can vouch for his children, especially someone who is poor? One must indeed give thanks and praise unto Him Whose Name one may not utter unwashed, that He does not make a reckoning now for what will happen later.

The wealthy matrons hold maḥzorim whose covers have corners edged in silver. But they cannot keep up with the cantor and frequently lose the place. From time to time a broad-beamed matron makes her way from the East Wall corner to the fruit-peddler sitting in the westernmost nook, almost at the outer door:

"Vellenka, a good year to you. What are they up to?"

Quickly and familiarly, Mother turns the gilt-edged pages of the rich woman's maḥzor as she thinks to herself: "If only I knew how I stood with the Lord of the Universe as well as I know where the cantor and the congregation are up to in the prayers . . ."

Lisa the goose-dealer's wife stands at her place and stares in confusion into her prayerbook; she has lost the place and has no idea what is being said. But she refuses to ask Mother's help—she will not give the fruit-seller that satisfaction. For ever-present to her mind is the recent occasion when she, Lisa, had openly combed and washed her hair on the Sabbath and Mother, so as not to have to witness such a desecration, had fled the courtyard with her Bible and gone back indoors.

When the cantor reaches the climactic *U'nessa'neh Tokef* prayer, there is such a crush of rich matrons and their prayerbooks about my mother

that, if only she had as many customers pressing about her baskets, she herself would become a wealthy woman. Her hollow cheeks are aglow with a subdued yet sweet excitement. Till now she has been ashamed to weep aloud, lest she seem to be lamenting more than others her bitter lot of widowhood. Only when the cantor reaches the phrase "Who shall live and who shall die," at which everyone weeps, will she too permit the wellspring of tears to flow freely from her eyes. Just then, however, she begins to look about uneasily, and the women near her, who have today crowned her with honor and respect, ask with much concern:

"Vellenka, what are you looking for?"

"For my kerchief."

Mother, just about to weep, suddenly notices that her white kerchief is missing. She feels a throb in her heart: such a loss—may it not turn out to be an evil omen for the New Year! Lisa, noticing that Mother is looking in her direction, also begins to search, and finds a white kerchief on the window-sill near her. Overjoyed, she picks it up and hurries over to my mother, carrying it like a white flag of peace:

"Is this what you're looking for?"

"Yes, Lisa. Early this morning, before the other women came, I sat near your window to say the first part of the prayers. Here, near the wall, it's dark, and my eyesight is already weak."

"Vellenka," says Lisa, trembling on this Day of Judgment, "may you have great joy from your son. What are they up to now? You are learned in the 'black vowel signs'—and on a day such as this no other learning is worthwhile."

Lisa is here hinting at her own knowledge of Russian.

Mother quickly turns the pages of Lisa's prayerbook, reflecting as she does so that to observe the Sabbath is more important for true repentance. One cannot, with mere pious babbling on Rosh Hashanah, buy absolution for the sins of an entire year . . .

The women's section has become still, like a cooing dovecote where silence falls just before a storm. A cloud of long-pent-up bitterness seems to hang in the air; a sobbing arises from heavy-laden hearts. A clap of thunder resounds through the synagogue. The cantor begins to chant: "*U'nessa'neh tokef kedushas ha-yom . . .*," and before he has reached the words "who shall live and who shall die," the women's section is already drowning in a flood of tears.

ON YOM KIPPUR, before the Afternoon Service begins, the beadle pounds on the cantor's table: there is to be a half-hour intermission.

The younger women, who have their little ones to feed, rush out from behind the partition of the women's section. The older matrons stay

in their seats, resting or chatting about daughters-in-law and grandchildren. Also remaining in the synagogue are the poor market-women: All year long they are too harried and preoccupied to enter the beth midrash; at least, then, this one full day, the Day of Atonement, they wish to spend wholly within the sacred walls. Thus it is with astonishment that they see Vella the fruit-seller wrap up her books in her white kerchief, place the bundle on her "pew," and leave the synagogue.

Mother is going home to feed our cat: animals are not obligated to fast.

As soon as she reaches the wicket of the main gate, she can already hear the cat's cry. The animal senses her mistress's steps from afar and is scratching at the locked door. At this, Mother smiles—her only smile on this Day of Atonement. It warms her heart to know that at least one living creature is so closely tied to her. Lonely as she is, in whom else can she confide? Her only son has lately become increasingly moody, and sunk in melancholy. He sits in the smithy all day, reading, always reading. She has long understood that he would never be overly pious; now she pleads with him: "Why do you bury yourself in this hole-in-the-wall? At least go out for a walk sometimes. Other young fellows find joy in living." His only response is to grow still moodier.

She opens the door and the cat jumps up at her. From the cupboard Mother takes the saucer filled with bread soaked in milk which she had prepared the day before, places it before the cat, and speaks to her:

"Lazybones, why do you always stay in this hole-in-the-wall? Go on out for a walk."

She realizes with a start that she is speaking to the cat exactly as she has often (not to compare the two) spoken to her son. "I must be growing senile," she thinks. But just then she hears another cat mewing: Lisa has locked her cat up in the house, and he is wailing with hunger.

Wasting no time, Mother hurries back to the synagogue. Lisa is chatting with her "fine ladies" about clothes, and about all the work she will have, on the eve of the festival of Sukkoth, preparing the geese for her customers. When she sees my mother, stern-faced, heading toward her, she becomes uneasy—this time, for the life of her, she cannot think of any offense she might have committed against tradition. On the Sabbath of Penitence, between the New Year and the Day of Atonement, she had not gone out walking with her umbrella, and even her husband had taken his prayer shawl and gone to the synagogue. . . . Mother called her aside:

"Lisa, you locked up your cat. Go, give him some food—he's not obligated to fast."

"But I'll miss the Afternoon Service," objects Lisa, fearful of losing her chance to plead for and win a favorable decree for the coming year.

"That doesn't matter." Mother renders judgment with the assurance

of a rebbetzin: "The Almighty will wait for you. Your prayers will ascend to Heaven together with all the others."

Lisa obeys and goes to feed the cat. She walks with her head held so straight and stiff that, had a lamp filled with kerosene been placed upon it, not a drop would have spilled.

The congregation prepares to begin the Afternoon Service. But my mother, instead of reading in her *Tehinah*, as she usually does before the start of the congregational prayers, peers through the curtain into the men's section of the synagogue. The older men, wrapped in white linen kittels, are leaning against their oaken lecterns and resting. Others are making use of the intermission to study a paragraph or two of Mishnah. The young fellows stand in a huddle and talk. Only her son stands alone, in back of the cantor's pulpit, and speaks to no one. He looks pale, lost in his thoughts, and unkempt. She is saddened, and with a heavy heart she murmurs:

"Lord of the Universe! All the world says that a mother's heart feels her child's pain. I, however, do not know what it is that weighs so heavily upon my son. Is your Torah so difficult that it robs a young man of all joy? I know I am not worthy of having a son who is a great scholar. Then let him at least be an honest Jew, a craftsman like Reb Boruḥel, may he rest in peace."

OF ALL THE VOICES raised in either the men's or the women's section, I hear only my mother's plaintive cry. The fine threads of her weeping stretch toward me, entwine themselves about me, as spider-webs in autumn entwine themselves about the gnarled branches of trees. I stand behind the bima, unable to pray. Why is she so meek and humble toward everyone? Why does she always feel that she has sinned before God? Why can't I rescue her from her exhausting toil, so that she will not waste away in the heat of summer and in the frosts of winter, sitting beside her baskets? She feeds me and believes in my piety, and here I am deceiving her. . . .

WHEN, at nightfall, Yom Kippur ends and everyone leaves the synagogue, sons stand waiting for their fast-weakened mothers, to take them by the arm and lead them home. Only my mother always rushes home alone, to prepare sweetened tea—so that I may have something over which to pronounce the Havdalah blessings—as well as to warm my food for breaking the fast. She never thinks of herself.

This time, however, as she leaves the women's section, she abruptly stops, confused and surprised: I am waiting for her. I take from her the

maḥzor wrapped in the white kerchief, give her my arm, and lead her home. The narrow synagogue street is filled with Jews reciting the blessing for the crescent of the New Moon. I do not stop. Mother utters a weak, frightened laugh:

“Honoring your mother is an important commandment, but it would be better, at the beginning of a new year, if you too recited the blessing for the New Moon.”

“I am not that great rabbi of the Talmud whose mother washed his feet and then drank the water. I can’t forgive myself for letting you sacrifice yourself as you have so that I might study the Torah.”

Mother is silent. She feels a wetness in her eyes, as though the dried-up fountain of her tears is about to flow again. She has a premonition of some impending ill. On Rosh Hashanah she had lost her white kerchief, and Lisa had found it and returned it to her. That was a rebuke from Heaven, for she had chastised Lisa, while her own son . . . She is afraid to think further, and takes the prayerbook from my hand, as though fearing that I might lose her last comfort—the white kerchief.