
Rethinking the American Jewish Experience
The American Synagogue World of
Yesterday, 1901–1925

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Because my father, ז"ל, had a “wanderlust” we moved many times from city to city. True, a rolling-stone gathers no moss but does gather experience. These are memories of unusual synagogue experiences during the first quarter of this century in this country.

I was born in New Bedford, Massachusetts—then a world-famous whaling and international port, and one of the largest cities in America. At that time there was a large Jewish immigrant population from Eastern Europe. The previous Jewish population were Sephardim from the Caribbean islands remembered by their old cemetery.

There were two Orthodox synagogues in this city not because of the number of Jews but because one served a concentration of Jews who lived on the north side, and the other in the opposite end of the city where there was another concentration of Jews. Both were Orthodox. Since it was forbidden to ride on the Sabbath, Orthodox synagogues in America (where Jews do not live in concentrated areas) were many so as to be within walking distance of the people.

Each of these two synagogues, which are no more, had unique features, perhaps imported from Europe.

One synagogue had a “well” before the ark—an area about a yard square which was about one inch lower than the rest of the floor. It was here that the leader stood when conducting services. That was to literally fulfill the observation of the biblical psalmist: “Out of the depths I cry unto the Lord” (Psalms 130:1).

The other synagogue had two unusual features.

1. On the street level, where daily services were conducted, there was an adjoining room for the women which was sometimes called “the women’s shul” (synagogue). This was a complete and total separation of the men and women. Neither could see the other. That room had its own entrance. There was a fairly large opening at the very top

of the partition between the two rooms so that the women might hear and follow and participate in the service.

Despite this strict separation of the men and women, a young girl, perhaps sixteen years old, would enter the men's section to recite the Kaddish for a parent. No one ever made protest or even a comment.

2. The Sabbath and holiday services were conducted "upstairs" on the second floor. It had a formal setting with an ornate ark at one end and a reading desk in the center of the hall.

The women occupied its balcony, which was of an unusual design. This balcony stretched more than half-way across the floor below. That made it almost impossible for anyone on the balcony to see anyone on the floor below, or for anyone below to catch a glimpse of anyone on the balcony. Those on the balcony could see the ark, and could hear the conduct of the service.

In most of the synagogues membership in our modern sense was practically unknown. A few did pledge a regular sum, but most did not. Contributions in the form of pledges were made when participating in the Torah service, contributing for the shul and/or rabbi and/or cantor and/or Talmud Torah and/or other causes. But the chief source of revenue for the shul came with the High Holy Days with the "sale" of seats and "honors." Perhaps the highest honor was to chant the Maftir at Neilah, the Yom Kippur Day concluding service—chanting the Book of Jonah. Universally that honor was most sought and went to the highest bidder.

1. In New Bedford a widow wanted "Der Roiter" (the Red One) to bid and purchase that honor at her expense, and to have him chant it in memory of her husband. Der Roiter was so named because he had reddish-hair and a reddish goatee. He also was considered a pious man.

Everyone knew her wishes, and saw this as an opportunity to take advantage of the situation—for the benefit of the shul, of course. The bidding went up and up, a full quarter at a time. The excitement grew. Der Roiter implored the widow to save her money, but she was adamant. The competing bidder was becoming uneasy, for fear he would be "stuck with it" if she quit outbidding him—so caution finally made him stop raising the ante. That year the Haftarah Jonah went for the unheard-of new record of \$12.75!

2. The very next year we were in Reading, Pennsylvania. Without

any prompting the three Luria brothers pledged \$1,000 for that honor—as was their annual custom, with none to compete.

3. In Paterson, New Jersey, Nathan Barnert was a generous philanthropist who gave and built a temple, the Jewish hospital, a Jewish home for the aged, and a Free Talmud Torah which also conducted services. (Mr. Barnert had been mayor of the city, one of only two men in America who had a monument erected by citizens while alive.) Each year he attended the Yom Kippur Neilah service at the Free Talmud Torah, chanting Jonah, for which he took care of the annual deficit.

At the turn of the century and for yet a score of years, many streets were still illuminated by gas, and lamp-lighters were still to be seen both evening and morning. Most homes were lighted by gas and/or kerosene lamps which were cleaned daily and their wicks trimmed. Homes were heated by coal stoves and grates, assisted by gas stoves.

With the advent and increase of electric lights, they became a must and a status symbol. Cities proudly displayed them in profusion. Practically every city had at least one busy downtown intersection with huge arcs criss-crossing, each arc with scores of colored bulbs. The horses sometimes bolted at the sight. People actually made a trip to see them.

Buildings indicated their modernity by the number of electric lights. New synagogues of that era (up to about 1915), and newly renovated synagogues which replaced their gas lights, installed electric lights promiscuously and in great number. Although a few, a limited number, would have been sufficient, what was important was the number. The more the better. People soon discovered that they not only shed light but also heat. The heat radiated by the lights became unbearable. Everyone was grateful when a light burned out, not to be replaced.

About 1909 a new synagogue was dedicated in New Castle, Pennsylvania, on a beautiful Sunday afternoon with considerable pomp. The officials, the rabbi and cantor, and other dignitaries were dressed in their Prince Albert coats and wore glistening high hats. The Torahs were ceremoniously removed from the old building, and lovingly held by those signally honored. They rode in burnished buggies, of course—drawn by beautifully curried and groomed horses—leather and brass highly polished. Most of the people marched in the parade from the old synagogue to the new. The procession moved slowly and in orderly fashion.

This was the day they had waited for. Ceremoniously they marched into the new synagogue, which sparkled with its hundred or more electric lights. All was light and joy.

All was quiet and serene when suddenly bedlam erupted. A man was shouting and pointing at the two menorahs—one on either side of the ark. Each menorah had seven large bright electric lights. Seven lights! That was a desecration, a sin, a disgrace, an outrage! And in a Jewish house of worship! The seven-lighted menorah belongs only in the one Holy Temple in Jerusalem—and nowhere else!

Many voices were raised in a shouting-match with proponents and opponents. It quickly became a riot, short of physical violence. One man, unnoticed, removed the center light from each menorah. People began pointing at the menorah—each menorah now with only six lights. And calm was restored.

In a sense two services were conducted simultaneously on the Sabbath—the one by the men and the other by the women.

Die lezerke (the reader) was greatly beloved among the women on the balcony at services. She was the one who could read the Hebrew prayers. Those who could not would crowd around her, forming a huddle. They felt that somehow by being in physical touch with her they, too, vicariously had recited the prayers.

But it was more than the Hebrew prayers that the *lezerke* read. During the Torah reading she would read aloud to the women from a book in Yiddish (the *Tzene Urenna*), which gave the essence of the Torah portion enriched with midrashim or anecdotes. It may be that the women received more from the weekly Torah reading than did the men.

A woman stopped a Sabbath morning service in 1911 in Akron, Ohio.

On Saturday mornings we always arrived at the synagogue long before the start of the services. There was a group of men who always came early and visited with each other. It was a weekly Sabbath ritual.

But this morning it was different. There was an air of excitement. Men were gathered in small huddles. Voices were low, muted, conspiratorial. It was obvious that something serious had happened. Apparently a woman claimed she had a grievance and had threatened to stop the service. They were considering what to do if that were to happen.

The service began and continued more quietly than usual. There

was an air of expectation—and of uncertainty about what might happen. We were now midway in the service. The Torah had been removed from the ark. It was now on the reading desk in the center. One could sense a feeling of relief—nothing had happened.

Suddenly there was a stir in the balcony among the women. A hush immediately fell on the congregation. A woman arose from her seat. With firm, measured step she made her way to the stairway. We could hear the echo of her steps on the wooden floor. We heard her descend step by step. Without a pause she marched into the men's section with determination. She strode to the center of the congregation, to the desk on which lay the Torah open for reading. She stretched out her arms and said, "I forbid the continuation of this service until I shall have received justice." It sounded like a rehearsed legal formula.

Much to my amazement there was no protest—no attempt to continue the service—not a voice raised. One man stepped forward. It seemed that he had been chosen or delegated to be the spokesman. Calmly he said to her in a quiet, conversational tone, "We faithfully promise to give you a hearing tonight after the conclusion of the Sabbath. Will you permit us to continue the service?"

She said, "Yes." The service continued.

I never knew what her grievance was or what might have been the ultimate outcome of her plea.

In 1905 a rabbi threatened to walk out on a wedding in Columbus, Ohio, and almost did so.

The wedding was to take place in a very large hall on the third floor of a downtown building. The room was brightly and blindingly lighted and warm with its many electric lights. The guests were gathered, awaiting the arrival of the rabbi.

We could hear him laboriously ascending the stairs. He now stood at the broad entrance to the hall. He made an impressive figure with his silvery-white hair and beard which glistened in the light. He wore a Prince Albert coat and a high hat—the silk lapels of his coat and the sheen of his hat reflected the light, almost mirror-like.

The rabbi stood at the door, looking over the audience with a benign smile of cordiality and friendliness. These were his people. This was a "simcha"—a happy occasion. Then he looked down at the white runner on the floor leading to the wedding canopy. Suddenly his features underwent a transformation. His face darkened. He seemed to be try-

ing to say something. He seemed to be on the verge of a stroke, of apoplexy.

Finally the rabbi sputtered with some coherence. Pointing to the huppah he shouted that it was a desecration. He had been insulted. He had never seen anything like it in all his life. He would not conduct the wedding. He turned on his heels, made for the stairway.

Some men jumped to detain him. They gathered around him on the stairwell to prevent him from descending. What had affronted him were three flowers which had been pinned to the front overhang on the huppah. Flowers on a huppah? Those flowers were a no-no. That was not Jewish!

Someone removed the three now wilted flowers, and the rabbi victoriously entered the hall and performed the wedding.

The rabbi spoke the truth—he had never seen anything like that before. In the shtetl from which he came he had never seen a flower on a huppah. Sixty years later I witnessed a wedding in an Orthodox synagogue, participated in by several internationally famous Sephardic and Ashkenazic rabbis; and the huppah was completely covered with white flowers.

In my experience in those years, in every synagogue in every city where I lived, there were two holidays which were used for securing assistance for those in need. We prepared for the observance of our Jewish holidays by first concerning ourselves with our needy.

1. We took seriously the behest to dwell in a succah during the holiday of Succos. The chill of the season and the inclement weather made us keenly aware of the situation of those who had to live through the winter in succah-like houses without heat or food.

At services contributions were solicited. It was the poor helping the poorer. Some offered a quarter ton of coal, and a few offered as much as a half ton! Some offered a bushel of potatoes or other foodstuffs. Actually the money was given for the purchase of these quantities. In preparation for the winter months, in those days people bought and stored food by the barrel and bushel, and the coal bin was filled.

2. Preparation for Passover began about a month before the holiday (at least beginning with the month of Nisan, when Passover is observed) with money contributions for *maos hitim* (the purchase of wheat), which reflected the time when people bought and ground their own grain into flour and baked their own matzo.

Maos hitim became a euphemism for helping those in need so that they, too, might observe and celebrate Passover in happiness. What was involved was far more than enough matzo, wine and food for a Seder or two; far more than even a Passover basket (similar to a modern Thanksgiving basket). The intention was to also clothe and take care of the needs of the people. These families came to services in their new suits, dresses, and shoes. They really celebrated Passover, and it was a happy holiday for all.

The “midnight hour” for the first Selihot service on the Saturday night three or more days before Rosh Hashannah varied in different communities. The tradition was that it must be sometime after midnight and before dawn. It was only in more recent years that the service was conducted as early as an hour after midnight.

Most of these communities conducted the service either at three or five in the morning—Sunday morning. New Castle actually had a man who knocked at our door to awaken us in the European tradition of a *klapper* (knocker).

It was an eerie experience to walk down the abandoned streets so dimly lighted by the gaslights; to hear the echo of our steps in the silent night which sounded so loud; to hear the occasional baying of the many neighborhood dogs. Then we came within sight of the synagogue, all aglow in the dark of night, with its windows pouring out rays of light. The hour and sense of aloneness gave a special meaning to that service.

The service was always impressive. Even congregations which had no cantor would secure one for this service and the High Holy Days. Congregational cantors who normally had no choir would train one for these services. Now cantor and choir sang their best. This was more than just a service. It was an opportunity to demonstrate what might be expected at the following holiday services, and to persuade those who had not made seat reservations to do so. I never heard a sermon or a word spoken except for the announcement that the committee on seating was in the foyer prepared to accommodate those who had made no arrangements.

In the foyer, on a table, were a number of plates for contributions. Each plate had a slip of paper identifying its recipient. Some slips that I remember identified plates for rabbi, cantor, shul, talmud torah, shamas (sexton).

Evoking tears was the primary attempt at Jewish funerals. Some psychologists would say this is a desirable and laudable thing to do—to give release to grief. Tears were considered to be a valuable gift. A midrash relates that when Adam and Eve left the Garden of Eden, God gave them a precious parting gift—the ability to cry.

The cantor used his musical talents to “tear at the heart-strings.” The *hespit* (eulogy) dwelt on such memories and themes as accentuated the significance of the loss. The excellence of the address was judged by the number of people who were moved to tears.

Some claimed that this effort was exercised to impress “heaven” with the importance of the deceased individual. The departed was being given a “send-off” and an introduction if necessary.

Mourners, professional and nonprofessional, were present at funerals of people with whom they were not related or associated in any way.

The last professional mourner (known as a *besbraier* in Yiddish) that I remember was an attractive, middle-aged, buxom, happy woman). She was always smiles and laughter. Her laughter was contagious. I saw her walking with a companion to a house of mourning—laughing and telling a story. In the midst of the story they reached the door; immediately on entering, without a pause, she raised her arms, began weeping and shrieking about her bitter loss, etc.

In a few moments others began to sob. She acted as though she were about to faint and became the center of attention as people attempted to revive her. Finally she left with her friend, and now outside, across the threshold, resumed her story as though nothing had happened!

A family some years from Eastern Europe, now living on the third floor of a house, had a death. Immediately one of the family went out to purchase a bale of hay, spread it over the floor of the bedroom, and placed the body on it. That was the practice in the shtetl from which they had come, where the floors were covered with hay. When someone died, they would spread fresh hay on the floor so as not to place the body on the dirty hay. The family now regarded the spreading of hay as mandatory.

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