

## Celebration in Moscow

Where did they all come from? Who sent them here? How did they know it was to be tonight, tonight on Arkhipova Street near the Great Synagogue? Who told them that tens of thousands of boys and girls would gather here to sing and dance and rejoice in the joy of the Torah? They who barely know each other and know even less of Judaism—how did they know that?

I spent hours among them, dazed and excited, agitated by an ancient dream. I forgot the depression that had been building up over the past weeks. I forgot everything except the present and the future. I have seldom felt so proud, so happy, so optimistic. The purest light is born in darkness. Here there is darkness; here there will be light. There must be—it has already begun to burn.

From group to group, from one discussion to the next, from song to song, I walked about, sharing with them a great celebration of victory. I wanted to laugh, to laugh as I have never done before. To

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hell with the fears of yesterday, to hell with the dread of tomorrow. We have already triumphed.

He who has not witnessed the Rejoicing of the Law in Moscow has never in his life witnessed joy. Had I come to Russia for that alone, it would have been enough.

It had snowed the week before. The day before, it rained. My friends in the diplomatic corps made no attempt to conceal their anxiety. Bad weather would ruin the holiday. Snow—that was all right. But we prayed to Him-who-causeth-the-wind-to-blow-and-the-rain-to-fall to postpone His blessing. For His sake, if not for ours, and for the sake of those who had waited all year long for this night, for this chance to prove that they are mindful of their origins, are mindful of Mount Sinai and their people.

The “festival of youth” has become something of a Russian tradition since it first began four or five years ago during the period of internal ease-ment inaugurated by Nikita Khrushchev. At first the festivals were attended by a few hundred students; then the number grew into the thousands. Now they come in tens of thousands.

Objective observers like to claim that the gatherings have no relation to Jewish religious feeling. Young people come to the synagogue as they would to a club, in order to make new friends and learn new songs and dances. If they had someplace else to go, they wouldn't come to the synagogue.

I should say this explanation is not entirely correct. There is no lack of meeting places in Mos-

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cow; young people can get together either downtown, at the university, or at the Komsomol clubs. If they come to the synagogue, it is because they want to be among Jews and to be at one in their rejoicing with their fellow Jews all over the world, in spite of everything, and precisely because they have received an education of a different sort entirely. They come precisely because of the attempts that have been made to isolate them from their heritage, and they come in defiance of all efforts to make Judaism an object worthy of their hatred.

If they were allowed to live as Jews in a different way, in a different time, or in a different place, it is true that they would probably not gather together at the synagogue on this holiday of light and joy. But they have no alternative, and if they seize the excuse to come to Arkhipova Street, it is a sign that they wish to live as Jews . . . at least once a year, for one full evening. Somehow that will make them capable of waiting until the next time.

But it must not rain. . . .

I, too, had made preparations for the night of Simchat Torah," as if for a great test or some meeting with the unknown. I was tense and restless. The many stories I had heard about the

\* Soviet youth movement, attached to the Communist Party. T.N.  
.. "Rejoicing of the Law"; last day of Sukkot festival, celebrating the completion of weekly Pentateuch readings in the synagogue and the beginning of a new cycle. T.N.

celebrations last year and the year before only increased my apprehension. I feared a disappointment. What if they didn't come? Or came, but not in great numbers? Or in great numbers, but not as Jews?

In order not to miss this meeting of three generations, I had arranged to spend the last days of Sukkot in Moscow. Unjustly, I had determined to rely neither on miracles nor on the Soviet airlines. I was afraid my plane might be delayed in Kiev or Leningrad, and I didn't want to arrive in Moscow at the last minute. I could not allow myself to miss this opportunity.

I might have seen the same thing in Leningrad . . . or so I was told. Thousands of students gather at the Leningrad synagogue on the night of Simchat Torah. In Tbilisi, too, young people crowd the synagogue even on an ordinary Sabbath. In Kiev I tried to convince myself that precisely because the Jewish leaders were attempting to suppress Jewish feeling and to drive away the younger generation, it would be worth staying to see what happened. But I was drawn to Moscow. Moscow would be the center; there the climax would occur. What would take place in Moscow could not happen anywhere else, inside Russia or abroad; so I had heard from people who had been there the past three years.

I wanted to see young people, to measure the extent of their Jewishness and discover its means of expression. I rehearsed dozens of questions to ask them, scarcely realizing that when the moment

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came I would forget them all. While traveling through Russia I had spoken mostly with the elderly or middle-aged. Many of them had expressed anxiety about the younger generation, its increasing estrangement and assimilation. They told me there was little hope for the perpetuation of Judaism in Russia. In America and Europe I had heard Russian representatives, Jewish and non-Jewish, who had taken the line of cold logic—there is no Jewish life in Russia simply because Jewish youth is not interested in it. It is for this reason alone that there are no Yeshivot,<sup>\*</sup> no Jewish grade schools, no Jewish clubs, no writers and no readers and no future. Judaism is strictly for the old. This explanation is put forth by everyone who comes from Moscow to speak about the "Jewish problem" in Russia. Full blame is placed upon the younger generation.

But tonight we would discover the truth. Youth itself would take the witness stand. It was years since I had last prepared for the night of Simchat Torah with such anticipation, such a sense of awe and excitement. I knew something would happen, something vast, a revelation. I was taut and fragile as the string on a violin. One must not force things, my friends cautioned me; you expect too much, you will never be satisfied with anything less than perfection. Patience. As the sun began to set, its rays danced in a fantasy of color over the Kremlin's gilded domes. The sky was

<sup>\*</sup> Singular, Yeshivah: Rabbinic academy, institute for the training of rabbis. T.N.

clear blue, and there were no clouds. The weather must hold. It must not rain.

It didn't. And it did not snow. There was a cold wind that cut to the bone. That's nothing, my friends said. Young people do not fear the cold. They'll come, if only to warm up.

Apparently the Soviet authorities also expected a large crowd, and they did their best to frighten it away. It had been made known that during the High Holy Days everyone entering the synagogue had been photographed. And now in front of the synagogue two gigantic floodlights had been installed, illuminating the entire street. The Jews were not to forget that someone was watching. The Jews would do well not to become too excited or to betray an overly Jewish character in their rejoicing.

They came nevertheless. Inside, the great hall of the synagogue was crammed with more than two thousand men and women. Many brought their children, for children, too, were to see that the Jews knew how to rejoice. The atmosphere was festive. Young girls stood among the men on the ground floor. The balcony was overflowing. People smiled at one another. Wherefore was this night different from all other nights? On all other nights we live in fear; tonight we are free men. Tonight one is permitted even to smile at strangers.

The old rabbi seemed calmer than he had on Yom Kippur. The hall buzzed with conversation.

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Eyes reflected hope and well-being. "Would you give your flag to my grandson?" an elderly man asked an Israeli child who held a pennant in his hand. The boy smiled and nodded. "Here you are." The Russian child took the Jewish flag and kissed it. An informer came up and demanded that the old man return the gift. He hesitated a second, took courage, then said no. His friends stood at his side. The informer bowed his head. Tonight he was alone.

When would the processions begin? They had long since finished the evening prayers. Why were they waiting? It seemed that they were just waiting; they had no special reason. They waited because it was pleasant to wait, because it was good to be in the midst of such a large and living crowd, in such a joyful place. If they didn't begin, they wouldn't have to end; they could treasure the perfection of the holiday. Expectation itself became part of the event. They drew it out, trying to expand the holiday past the limits of a single evening or a single day. If one could only remain here, united, until next year.

"Festivities are already under way outside," we were told by new arrivals.

The gabbai decided they had to begin. It was already late. One could not stay here all night, or even if one could, it would be dangerous. There was no knowing what people might do or say once they had been given a chance to release their feelings. There was no knowing what the repercussions would be from above.

They had to start. The gabbai banged on the

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table and shouted for silence. Useless. Thousands of whispers grew into an overwhelming roar. The gabbai continued shouting, but only those standing nearby, as we were, could hear him. The congregation had come to hear cries of a different sort, or perhaps not to hear anything, just to be present, to partake of the sacred joy of the holiday.

They began. Rabbi Yehuda-Leib Levin was honored with the first verse, "Thou has caused us to know . . ." He seemed to have recovered his youthful energy. His deep, sorrowful voice seemed more melodious. How many Jews in that hall fully understood his meaning when he sang, "For God is the Lord, there is no other beside Him"?

"The celebrating outside is incredible," we were told.

Inside, too, it was the same. The Israeli ambassador, Mr. Katriel Katz, was given the honor of reciting a verse, "Thy priests shall be clothed in righteousness, and thy faithful ones rejoice." His voice, too, was lost in the roar of whispers, but his title was known, and the enthusiasm mounted. People stood on tiptoe to see the representative of the sovereign state of Israel. His presence made them straighten up; they seemed taller.

The scrolls of the Torah were taken from the Ark and the dignitaries of the community invited to lead the first procession. The night before, I had participated in this ceremony in a small side chamber where the hasidim pray. All the guests had been called for the first procession. Rabbi Levin had also been there, and we danced and danced



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until our strength gave out. We sang hasidic and Israeli songs in Yiddish and Hebrew. A tall, awkward, red-faced Jew had suddenly broken into the circle and caught the rabbi's arm. "Come, Rabbi, let us fulfill the commandment to dance! We must gladden our hearts for the Torah!" The two of them danced as we clapped our hands in time. The rabbi grew tired, but his partner goaded him on, more, more! They danced not for themselves but for the entire house of Israel. The tall one's happiness was mingled with rage. He could not sing, and he danced without rhythm in little jumps. His eyes shone with unworldly wrath, and I knew that his joy was real, flowing as it did out of an anger long contained. All year one is forbidden to be angry and forbidden to rejoice. Tonight one is permitted to rejoice. He was crying, too. Why, I do not know. Why does a man cry? Because things are good; because things are bad. Here the question is different; why does a man rejoice? Where does he get the strength to rejoice?

But that was last night, and they were hasidim. The people crowding into the synagogue tonight were simple Jews who had come to learn that it was possible to be a Jew and to find reasons for rejoicing . . . or to rejoice for no reason at all. Long-beards and workers, old and young, widows and lovely girls, students and bureaucrats. Among them there were many who had never prayed but who had come to watch the processions and to honor the Torah.

Processions? How could they lead a procession through this mob? The Jews formed an impene-

trable living mass. No matter. Here everything was possible. It would take time, but no matter. They had the time, and patience too. Somehow the parade would pass. In the meantime they sang, louder and louder. They were all looking at us, the guests, as if to say, 'Well, what's with you? Let's hear something from you.' The entire Israeli diplomatic corps was present, together with their wives and children. We sang, "Gather our scattered ones from among the nations, and our dispersed from the corners of the world." Five times, ten times. A number of the diplomats belonged to left-wing parties. In their youth they had scorned religion, and religious people in particular. Tonight they celebrated the holiday with hasidic enthusiasm and abandon. Differences of opinion and class were left behind. An American writer once told me, "As I stood among the Jews of Russia, I became a Jew." He was not alone; many who come here as Israelis also return home as Jews.

"Outside they are turning the world upside down."

Should we go out? There was still time. Here, too, the world was in uproar. Men who had not sung for a year were raising their voices in song. Men who had not seen a Torah all year long were embracing and kissing it with a love bequeathed to them from generations past. Old men lifted their grandchildren onto their shoulders, saying, "Look, and remember." The children looked in wonder and laughed, uncertain what was happening. No matter; they would understand later, and they would remember. Tzvikah, the vocalist in the

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Israeli corps, assembled his chorus and gave them the pitch, "David, King of Israel, lives and endures." There was not a Jew in the hall who was not prepared to give his life defending that assertion.

The dignitaries had made their way back to the pulpit. The first procession was over. The gabbai announced that all guests were to take part in the second, and the congregation responded with new bursts of song. From one corner came an Israeli tune, "Heivenu Shalom Aleichem, We have brought peace unto you"; from another, "Hava Nagilah, Come let us rejoice." A third group preferred a traditional song, "Blessed is our God who created us in His honor and separated us from the nations and implanted in us eternal life." Instead of resisting one another, the various songs seemed to fuse into a single melodic affirmation. Those who had spent years in prison or in Siberia, those who had only recently become aware of their Jewishness, now proclaimed their unity: one people, one Torah. Each of them had stood once at the foot of Mount Sinai and heard the word, "Anochi—I am the Lord thy God." Each of them had received the promise of eternity.

We held the scrolls tightly to our chests and tried to make our way through the congregation. But instead of opening a path for us they pressed in closer, as if to block the way completely. They wanted us to stay among them. We were surrounded by a sea of faces, creased, joyful, unmasked. Hats of all kinds, skullcaps of every color, handkerchiefs in place of head covering. A young

girl clapped her hands, an old man lifted up his eyes as if in prayer, a laborer sighed joyfully. Old men and their children and their children's children—everyone wanted to touch the Torah, to touch us. Everyone had something to whisper in our ears, a blessing or a secret. I have never in my life received so many blessings, never in my life been surrounded by so much good will and love. One pressed my hand, a second patted my arm, a third held my clothing. They would not let us move forward. They seemed to be trying to stop the progress of time. Through us they became freer, came closer to the reality of their dreams. They looked upon us as redeeming and protective angels. The fact that we were different, unafraid, was sufficient to elevate us in their eyes to the stature of saints and wonder workers. When I was young, we used to surround the holy rebbe in this fashion, begging him to intercede for us before the heavenly tribunal. But here, they asked for nothing. On the contrary, they brought us their gifts, their love, their blessings. Hundreds of them. Be healthy! Be strong! Be courageous! May we see you in the years to come! May we all live until that day! May you prosper! And may you sing! Do you hear? Just sing! A few went further, giving vent to their inmost feelings, but always in a whisper: I have a brother in Israel, a sister in Jerusalem, an uncle in Haifa. Short notices: brother, sister, grandfather, uncle, grandson. No names. They simply wanted us to know that a part of them was there, in the land of Israel. Others used clichés that in any other context would have

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produced smiles of condescension or contempt. "The people of Israel lives"; "the eternity of Israel shall not prove false"; "The redeemer shall come to Zion soon in our days." A Jew with a laborer's cap falling over his brow pushed forward and announced that he had something to tell me but no one was to hear. He began to hum in my ear the words of *Hatikvah*,<sup>\*</sup> finished the first stanza, and disappeared, his face alight with victory. A woman pleaded with me, "Say something to my daughter. I brought her so she would see Jews who are not ashamed or afraid." The girl was very beautiful, dark and mysterious, with flashing eyes. She said something in Russian; I answered in Hebrew. Neither of us understood the other; yet somehow we did. Her mother was satisfied; she kissed my hand, murmuring, "Thank you, thank you. Will we ever see you again?" I didn't know what to say. I forgot everything I knew, except those two words: Thank you, thank you. Thank you for the gift of this moment, thank you for being alive, for enduring, for knowing how to rejoice and to hope and to dream. Thank you for being Jews like us. And a thousand and one thanks for finding the strength to thank a Jew like me for being a Jew.

Our procession lasted about an hour. Pale and drenched with sweat, we relinquished the Torah scrolls to the next group of marchers and returned to our seats in the visitors' section. I was out of breath and exhausted. I wanted to rest, close my eyes and wait for my strength to return. The third

<sup>\*</sup> Israel national anthem (*The Hope*). T.N.

procession had begun. The singing reached me as if from a great distance or from behind a curtain, as in a daydream. I had never imagined that the weight and power of this experience would stun me as it did. If I had come for this alone, it would have been sufficient.

"They're going crazy out there. We must join them."

We went. The remaining processions we would celebrate outside. Luckily there was a side door; we did not have to pass through the congregation. They would never have let us go. Two or three "agents" got up to follow us. Let them. The Prince of the Torah protects those who come to rejoice in His name.

The street was unrecognizable. For a second I thought I had been transported to another world, somewhere in Israel or in Brooklyn. Angels and seraphim were serenading the night; King David played his harp. The city burst with gladness and joy. The evening had just begun.