

A Night of Dancing

Deliberately or not, they had been lying to us. With good intentions or bad, they had misinformed us. They wanted us to despair of Jewish youth in Russia, had attempted to persuade us of its increasing alienation from Jewish life. For years they had spread such lies, supporting them with arguments whose logic was hard to refute. After all, we were talking about the third generation after the Revolution. Even if they wished to be Jewish, where would they begin? Even if they wanted to study Torah, who was there to help them? It is only natural that they have forgotten their past; tomorrow they will have nothing to forget. And we listened, were saddened, but concurred. Yes, there was something to that. What can one do? It was the inevitable result of historical materialism. You cannot demand the impossible.

But they surprised us. Soviet Jewish youth has remained Jewish to a degree beyond anything we could possibly have expected.

I do not know where all these young people came from. They didn't tell me, although I asked. Perhaps there is no one answer, but tens of thousands that are all the same. No matter—they came.

Who sent them? Who persuaded them to come running to spend a Jewish holiday in a Jewish atmosphere and in accordance with traditional Jewish custom? Who told them when and where and why? I was unable to discover. Perhaps they knew but preferred not to say in public. Fine. Let them preserve their secret. All that matters is that they have one and that they came.

Still, there is something strange about it. Tens of thousands of youngsters do not suddenly emerge from nowhere at a specified time and place. Someone had to organize and direct them; someone had to make the contacts, maintain the necessary spirit, and inform them of the date and time. Who made all the preparations? Who breathed the spark into a flame? I didn't ask; they wouldn't have answered. Perhaps it is better for me not to know.

They came in droves. From near and far, from downtown and the suburbs, from the university and from the factories, from school dormitories and from the Komsomol club. They came in groups; they came alone. But once here, they became a single body, voicing a song of praise to the Jewish people and its will to live.

How many were there? Ten thousand? Twenty thousand? More. About thirty thousand. The crush was worse than it had been inside the syna-

gogue. They filled the whole street, spilled over into courtyards, dancing and singing, dancing and singing. They seemed to hover in mid air, Chagall-like, floating above the mass of shadows and colors below, above time, climbing a Jacob's ladder that reached to the heavens, if not higher.

Tomorrow they would descend and scatter, disappear into the innermost parts of Moscow, not to be heard from for another year. But they would return and bring more with them. The line will never break; one who has come will always return.

I moved among them like a sleepwalker, stunned by what I saw and heard, half disbelieving my own senses. I had known they would come, but not in such numbers; I had known they would celebrate, but not that their celebration would be so genuine and so deeply Jewish.

They sang and danced, talked among themselves or with strangers. They were borne along on a crest that seemed incapable of breaking. Their faces reflected a special radiance, their eyes the age-old flame that burned in the house of their ancestors—to which they seemed finally to have returned.

I was swept along in the current, passing from one group to another, from one circle to the next, sharing their happiness and absorbing the sound of their voices.

It was after ten. The cold brought tears to one's eyes. But it was easy to warm up; one had only to join in the singing or start talking with someone.

A girl strummed her guitar and sang a Yiddish folk song, "Buy my cigarettes, take pity on a poor orphan." A few steps away, a boy played Heivenu Shalom Aleichem on the accordion. Further on, others were dancing the hora. Still another group was heatedly debating Judaism and Israel. "I am a communist!" a young student shouted. I asked him what he was doing here. "I am also a Jew." Suddenly I wanted to go from one to the other, begging their forgiveness for our lack of faith. Our disappointment in Russian Jewish youth is a thing of our own creating. It is they who reassure us, they who teach us not to despair.

Hour after hour I wandered through that street, which had become a rallying point for pilgrims from every corner of the city. It seemed to have lengthened and widened, become a thing of joy and beauty. It seemed to have taken on a new soul and with it the sanctity of a heavenly dream.

A dark-haired and vivacious girl stood in the middle of a circle, leading a chorus of voices in a series of questions and answers.

"Who are we?"

"Jews!"

"What are we?"

"Jews!"

"What shall we remain?"

"Jews!"

They laughed as they chanted their responses. Someone translated the dialogue for me, urged me to join in the laughter and handclapping. It was a splendid joke. The Kremlin was ten minutes away, and the echoes of the Jewish celebration reached

to the tomb of Stalin. "It's too crowded here!" a boy cried. "Next year we celebrate in Red Square!" His audience burst into applause.

"Who are we?" asked the dark-haired girl.

"Jews!"

A little later I went up to talk with her. Would she speak to a stranger? She would. Not afraid? No, not tonight. And other nights? Let's stick to tonight. She was a humanities major at the university. She spoke Yiddish, she said, with her grandfather, sometimes with her parents, and occasionally even with friends when they were alone. Was she religious? Far from it; never had been. Her parents had been born after the Revolution, and even they had received an antireligious education. What did she know about the Jewish religion? That it was based on outdated values. And about the Jewish people? That it was made up of capitalists and swindlers. And the state of Israel? That it was aggressive, racist, and imperialist. Where had she learned all this? From textbooks, government pamphlets, and the press. I asked her why she insisted on remaining Jewish. She hesitated, searching for the proper word, then smiled. "What does it matter what they think of us . . . it's what we think that counts." And she added immediately, "I'll tell you why I'm a Jew. Because I like to sing."

The songs they sang were mostly products of the nineteenth century. The most popular was a Yiddish folk song, "Come let us go together, all of us together, and greet the bride and groom."

But they had updated the lyrics, substituting for the last phrase, "Come let us greet the Jewish people," or "the people of Israel," or "the God of Israel and His Torah."

One group of students had formed a human pyramid. The young man at the apex was yelling defiantly, "Nothing can help them! We shall overcome them!" His audience roared back, "Hurrah! Hurrah!"

More cheers came from a nearby group that was celebrating the holiday in a manner decidedly Russian, tossing one of their number into the air. Five times, six, seven. Higher, higher. A girl pleaded with them to stop, but they paid no attention. Eight times, nine, ten. Nothing would happen. Nothing did. A carpet of outstretched hands was waiting to catch the hero upon his return from on high. "Hurrah! Hurrah!"

This is how Russian soldiers celebrated their victory over the Germans, and how the Jews celebrate their triumph over despair.

"What does anyone in America or Israel care if my passport is stamped 'Jewish'? It doesn't matter to me, and it doesn't matter to these young people here tonight. So stop protesting about things that don't bother us. We have long since ceased being ashamed of our Jewishness. We can't hide it anyway. Besides, by accepting it we've managed to turn obedience to the law into an act of free choice."

The man I was talking to had served as a captain in the Red Army and had been decorated in

Berlin. Like his father before him, he was a sworn communist. But like all the rest, he suffered on account of his Jewishness. Were he Russian he would have long ago been appointed a full professor at the university. He was still holding an instructorship in foreign languages. One day, he said, he decided that as long as they made him feel like a Jew, he might as well act accordingly. It was the only way to beat them at their own game. "Two years ago I came to the synagogue on the night of Simchat Torah. I wanted to see Jews, and I wanted to be with them. I didn't tell my wife, who isn't Jewish, or my sixteen-year-old son. Why should I burden him with problems? There was time enough for that. I came back last year for the second time. The youngsters were singing and dancing, almost like tonight. I found myself suddenly in the middle of a group of youngsters, and my heart stopped . . . I was standing face to face with my son. He said he'd been coming for the past three years, but hadn't dared to tell me.

"Would you like to see him?" he asked me.

"Yes, very much."

"He's here, somewhere," he said, gesturing at the crowd as if to say, "Look closely, they are all my son."

I talked with dozens of people. Some of them questioned me incessantly about the Jews abroad; others tried to debate with me the issue of diplomatic relations between Israel and Germany; a few almost openly acknowledged that they suffered because they were Jews. But not one of them criti-

cized the state or the Russian authorities. And they all claimed, "They will never succeed. Jewish youth in Russia will not disappoint us."

Anyone who was there that night can attest to the truth of this statement. Young Jews in Russia want to return to Judaism, but without knowing what it is. Without knowing why, they define themselves as Jews. And they believe in the eternity of the Jewish people, without the slightest notion of the meaning of its mission. That is their tragedy.

Ilya Ehrenburg wrote in his memoirs that he would call himself a Jew as long as a single anti-Semite remained on earth. There is no doubt that this way of thinking is an important factor in bringing young people together at the synagogue to rejoice in the Torah. Precisely because it is not easy to be a Jew in Russia, Jewish consciousness will continue to grow. "We are Jews for spite," one student said to me. There is some accuracy in this. For want of better teachers, it is the anti-Semites who are making them Jews.

I said to one of them, "You don't know Hebrew, you never learned Jewish history, you don't fulfill the commandments, and you don't believe in the God of Israel—in what way are you a Jew?"

He answered, "Apparently you live in a country where Jews can afford the luxury of asking questions. Things are different here. It's enough for a Jew to call himself a Jew. It's enough to fulfill one commandment or to celebrate one Jewish day a year. With us, being Jewish is not a matter of words, but of simple endurance, not of definition

but of existence. If my son were to ask me one day what a Jew is, I would tell him that a Jew is one who knows when to ask questions and when to give answers . . . and when to do neither."

"Hurrah!" the voices thundered. "David, King of Israel, lives and endures. Hurrah!"

This evening gave me new hope and encouragement. We need not despair. The Jews in Kiev, Leningrad, and Tbilisi who had complained to me about the doubtful future of Russian Jewry were wrong. They were too pessimistic, and apparently did not know their own children or the hidden forces which prompt them, at least once a year, to affirm their sense of community. Everyone has judged this generation guilty of denying its God and of being ashamed of its Jewishness. They are said to despise all mention of Israel. But it is a lie. Their love for Israel exceeds that of young Jews anywhere else in the world.

If, on this night of dancing, gladness finally overcame fear, it was because of them. If song triumphed over silence, it was their triumph. And it was through them only that the dream of freedom and community became reality. I am still waiting to see tens of thousands of Jews singing and dancing in Times Square or the Place de l'Etoile as they danced here, in the heart of Moscow, on the night of Simchat Torah. They danced until midnight without rest, to let the city know that they are Jews.