

Yom Kippur: Sephardi Style

– A High Holy Day Story from Guy Sasson



Our editor, Anne, has asked to write an article regarding what Sephardim do on Yom Kippur. Well, we fast as well! The synagogue I attended was the Spanish & Portuguese (S&P) Synagogue in Lauderdale Road/Ashworth Road, Maida Vale, London W9. At that time the members were mainly S&P Jews & it was a who's who of the origins of Anglo-Jewish history. There was also a large sprinkling of Mizrahi Jews (& mainly from Egypt). Today most members (& money) are from Jews from the middle east.

Kol Nidre was always special & one of the two most important & populated services (the other being Neilah). The synagogue would be packed to the rafters with many standing in the aisles & at the entrance (with no seat) wanting to be in the main service & not the overflow service, which would also be packed.

From my vantage point, being in the choir, located just behind the Rabbi (as in all S&P Shuls & not hidden away!), I could see a 'sea of top hats & bowlers' – men dressed smartly in 3 piece suits (a couple in tuxedos!) & women in beautiful hats & dresses & full jewellery. Was it really a Yom Kippur service they were attending? You could smell the money & importance of people. Even my dad, when he finally got a ticket for the main synagogue wore a grey bowler & my mum made most of her lovely hats! (but sadly no money!!). You knew where everyone sat (the Mocattas, Sebag-Montifiores, Vaz-Nunes, Cansino, Saatchi, Da Costa, De Sola, Martinez etc) & God forbid you sat in someone's seat who only came once a year!

Before I was in the choir, I'd sit with my dad in the overflow, where it was more laid back & most people there were from the middle east. We'd race the main service & try & finish before them. I have fond memories of those early years. I did not actually fast the full day until I was 7 years old. Until then dad would take biscuits with him & I'd sneak out & hide behind the curtain behind the Echal & eat biscuits when I was peckish. (No, I never felt guilty!)

The service was & still is very formal & always began promptly when the fast started. Two long candlesticks would have been lit & placed either side of the rabbi. The Echal would be opened & remain open the whole of Yom Kippur, only being closed & reopened at the end & beginning of each service. Two men would be given the mitzvah of standing by the Rabbi for each service. This mitzvah like all the others would have been 'bought' earlier for a tidy sum. On Kol Nidre, only one sepher is taken out & the carrier would stand on the tebah for the whole service. It is probably the greatest mitzvah to acquire & I remember being told in the late 70's that someone paid £20000 for this! My dad told me that in Alexandria, he'd buy all the Mitzvot & then distribute them to those who could not afford to bid for them. At the Indian Jewry synagogue in Newbury Park, the Mitzvot are actually auctioned just before the sepher comes out. It's like a market but great fun to watch & be a part of! Most Mitzvot would go for £18 (Yod-Hey).

I have listened to some great Rabbonim & Ministers – Beniso (still singing in Gibraltar), Joseph Graziani (sadly recently died & the father of a great friend of mine, Refi), Eleazer Abinun (now retired in Israel) & Halfon Benarosh (superb voice, just retired at Bevis Marks but can still be heard taking the occasional service). The Sephardi service has a lot of singing & it helps tremendously that we all use the one same book!! The choir is continuously involved so we had little time to

rest. However, Kol Nidre is not started by the beautiful haunting chant of 'Kol Nidre' – in fact it is not in the service. Apart from the Amidah/Musaph, a lot of the service revolves around singing 'El Melech' & supporting verses. It is in fact said (I think) 25 times during the day. Zemirot/Shachrit would start at 7.30am & the choir had to be there then (fortunately we lived about 12 mins away). It was the start of a very long day. We were only allowed out for a quick 'comfort break' – although I'd nip out just before the sermon, knowing I'd not be allowed back in until it finished. Refi & I really got that 'trick' right & we'd stand outside & chat! Because of this experience, I now (apart from Kol Nidre) don't go to Shul on Yom Kippur before 2pm – but then stay till the end. One challenge we'd do every year was to see who could stay standing the longest. (You're supposed to stand all day – Rachel's dad always did). I never won...I'd always give up during Musaph.

Apart from hundreds of differences, the Masorti & S&P services are the same! However, all Mitzvot are read out in Ladino. If your father/grandfather got called up, all the family would stand out of respect & even some friends. During the Cohanim blessing, you stood by your dad, who would cover your head with his Talit & he would repeat their blessing over you. My dad would add extra words after each main word. I loved this & miss being blessed by my dad both in Shul & Shabbat. My sister, brother & I would all be blessed on Shabbat & mum would bless us in Ladino. (She would say 'Novio, con padre y madre – literally meaning be a bride/bridegroom from mum & dad). However, the custom is still continued & I bless Adam on Shabbat. Some months ago, Rachel & I had the pleasure in taking part in a wonderful Shabbat at Ruth & Jacques & it was wonderful seeing Jacques similarly bless his sons, Daniel & Jonathan. I would love this tradition to be spread through our community. Another good Masorti tradition is having Yizkor during Shachrit. The S & P don't do this.

I do miss the many great tunes I grew up with. One of my favourites, which I hope to introduce to our Neilah service is 'El Norah Alilah'. Picture this, it's been a long hard day, it's getting dark & becoming cooler, you've come to within 90 minutes of the fast ending, the Shul is packed again with the top hats etc, the Echal is opened, another set of lit candles is put either side of the Rabbi, the choir stands & chants 'El Norah Alilah'.....it literally pleads for pardon as the closing hour draws in. The whole congregation joins in. At the end the Rabbi repeats the last two stanzas in a haunting way very similar to 'Kol Nidre' & then everyone stands. Just beautiful! The Rabbi then times himself to finish on time for the shofar blow of 'Teruah Gedolah' (more later). When he reaches 'Adonai Who Haelohim', he looks at his watch. This is said 7 times & repeated each time by the congregation. Time check again....if still too early he adds more of them. Once I counted 17 extra with repetitions! When the exact time of the fast end is reached, Teruah Gedolah is blown (at least 30 short notes & as always timed by us to see how long it is being blown). We don't have Tekiah Gedolah. When he's finished blowing he cleans the shofar with a large feather & the choir kids gather around hoping to be given the feather (Ok, we did not know better then!). Sad to say I got it once & I beamed!

The service had finished & everyone was rushing out the door even whilst the rabbi was reading Arvit.. The best was yet to come! I'd rush to my mum, who'd have bags full of home made Mediterranean biscuits, specially made for Rosh Hashanah & Yom Kippur – Kahka – both sweet & salty, Mahmoul – soft pastry filled with dates or nuts, Warayeba – the most delicious soft hazelnut shortbread, & cheese Borekas – real ones made with lots of cheese & real pastry not puff pastry as today, & Cheese & Spinach fila. As my friends got to know of this fantastic goodie bag, they'd flock around our mum & not theirs. I do miss many of these delicacies.

Once we got home, the tradition was then to have a slice of cholla soaked with olive oil. In those days, it was hard to get olive oil & you'd often have to buy it at the chemist or go to Charlotte Street (near Marble Arch) where the only Greek store was in London. It was to grease your throat & open your appetite. A big bowl of chicken soup with chicken & vermicelli followed & I can't remember the rest!

Fond memories & I hope I've given you a little insight as to what the Sephardim (from the middle east do & enjoy) on Yom Kippur. I do strongly urge you to visit Bevis Marks one Shabbat or Yom Tov. You'll have the wonderful experience of a most beautiful synagogue & service. Although I still go now & again for a fix, I would never want to leave our congregation. We have something unique here. It is not governed by who has the most money or is more important. We have a wonderful atmosphere & friendship. We all try to muck in. What we have is ambition, sincerity & above all a heart, which cannot be taken away from us.

On behalf of Rachel, Adam & I, we wish you Chag Sameach, Many Years & Chagim Uzmanim Ve Sasson (no pun intended!)

GUY SASSON

PS Echal = Ark, Tebah = Bimah, Mitzvot = Aliyot