

The Yom Kippur Light Went Out

by Rosa Palatnik

TRANSLATED BY JESSICA KIRZANE

It was dawn on the day of erev Yom Kippur. Just as they did every morning at this hour, church bells pealed mystically through Mirel's low window. A fond memory pressed against Mirel's heart, and she searched longingly in the pale morning sky for a hint of this heartache. It seemed to Mirel that today the dreamy church bells sounded different from the rest of the year . . . these bells that she met so gladly every other day seemed today to have an urgent tremor in their peal:

Gim gum gom, gim gum gom . . .

It seemed to Mirel that they were calling out:

"Go to shul, go to shul . . ."

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Mirel had never been an observant Jew, not even in the Old Country. Quite the opposite—out of all the children who lived in her home, she was known as the irreverent one. She was not punctilious about the laws of *kashrut*, she didn't maintain Jewish laws, she did not observe the commandments directed at women. Nevertheless, as a child she had absorbed the majestic trembling of the approach of the High Holy Days, and this remained with her like a holy mystery every year.

Mirel, who had only been in Paris for a short while, still vividly remembered her father's white hands spread over her braided head, blessing her as she ventured into the wide world. His pious

lips murmured, “Don’t forget who you are . . . always remain a Jewish woman.”

Mirel went to Paris with a two-year-old child in her arms. She came fighting for her life, quarreling with her own destiny. For weeks and months she wandered over the happy boulevards of Paris, searching for work that could be brought home. Only eight days ago, a non-Jewish factory owner had taken pity on her. Looking her over from all sides, he asked her about her background and finally agreed to give her some work to take home. Since that time, her child played much more happily, cooing in the dawn like a joyful dove. Her childish laughter cheered the dark hotel room.

In the Old Country, Mirel could always sense the approach of Yom Kippur in the sky’s appearance. Even if the sun was shining in all its glory, for her the sky seemed full of sad clouds that were drawn gloomily toward the Seat of Glory to be judged together with all of the sinning souls on the Day of Judgment.

This morning Mirel saw the same Yom Kippur sky of her past, and she thought of how the Jews from home, with their damp *peyes* and white *kitels*, shuffled in their slippers over the streets, drawn to their houses of study. And the women, in colorful dresses with white sashes in their combed wigs, hurried with thick prayer books and thin volumes of *tkhines* under their arms, preparing themselves to cry loudly to everyone they met, wishing everyone they met, even their enemies, a *gmar khsime toyve*.

She also remembered the Yom Kippur eves of her childhood. Her mother brought her to *Kol Nidre* services. When the rabbi from Lublin, Reb Shloy mele Eyger, arrived at the *shul*, he was clouded in a religious awe. His pale face with its narrow beard took on an unworldly appearance. With his lyrical voice he sang out the opening tone with pointed sharpness, like a confident conductor certain that he stood before a well trained orchestra: “*Or Zaruah LaTsadik!*”

Soon, the rabbi raised his pale, gentle arms in supplication: “Master of the Universe, have mercy on Your people Israel!” . . .

He held his pale face in his white hands. The congregation could

sense a cry welling up in his throat. He could no longer speak, and his voice broke apart like a burning spark tossed into a dry barn.

This is how the rabbi's voice kindled the white-clad congregation:
"Or Zaruah LaTsadik!"

Everyone cried together. The Jews, wrapped in their white *talitot*, bowed and sighed with the rabbi's holy prayers like strong trees bending and creaking under the gathered momentum of a hurricane.

Mirel relived that image in her mind again this morning, and from the impression of that memory she decided to find out how they prayed *Kol Nidre* in Paris.

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All day long, Mirel prepared to take part in the passionate prayers. She recognized again the sad clouds, like family, that she remembered from Yom Kippurs past. She decorated her poor room with white curtains, spread a white tablecloth over her little table, and put on a white dress. She prepared Yom Kippur food, and in the evening, when a Yom Kippur mood covered everything, Mirel brought out a large Yom Kippur candle and set it on a box of sand on top of the covered table, remembering how her mother would bless the children before the Yom Kippur wine. She went to her sleeping child's bed and wordlessly held her warm little hands to her breast. Burying her head in the child's little pillow, she quietly sobbed as she fulfilled her *mitzvah*.

Just as she was praying for a better fate for her little girl, a knock on the door tore apart the quiet Yom Kippur scene. A tall non-Jewish man stood by the half-open door with his blond hair tossed to the side, holding a package of women's scarves under his arm. He ordered her with a gruff voice, "Here's your work . . . these have to be ready by morning."

Mirel stammered fearfully, "I wanted to go, I must go, I can't do it . . ."

Her boss's tall messenger winked at the Yom Kippur candle and spoke ironically, "If you are a worker in Paris and you don't want to go to the factory, then you have to work when your boss asks you to, and

not whenever you feel like it. *Au revoir!*”

Mirel stood, frozen, and stole a longing glance at the holiday table, which had been newly sanctified by the earnestness of her God-fearing preparations. She looked at the sewing machine resting quietly in a corner. And then her eyes fell on the disheveled package of work that lay there with the severity of a decree. It made her remember, despite herself, the hungry days and the sleepless nights spent wandering the streets and factories fruitlessly looking for work. And then her gaze fell on her crying, scared child sitting on the little bed. Mirel looked deeply into her child’s innocent blue eyes and finally spoke in a raw voice: “I am doing this for you.”

Stumbling as though drunk, Mirel approached her covered sewing machine, took off the cloth, and began to turn the wheel, watching as the spool of thread suddenly unraveled. She began to thread the bobbin that stubbornly began to sew. Her eyes fell upon the mirror hanging across from the machine. From there she could see the rising flame of the Yom Kippur candle that suddenly started to spark. And in the sparks it seemed to her that she saw a world of eyes looking at her, begging something from her. With quick and certain steps Mirel rushed, fleet as a deer, to the covered Yom Kippur table. She hurriedly blew out the Yom Kippur candle.

Source: Rosa Palatnik, *Kroshnik-Rio: Dertseylungen* (Kroshnik—Rio: Stories). Rio de Janeiro: 1953, pp. 194–198.