

A Non-Jew's 1841 Impressions Of Shearith Israel

By: **Dr. Yitzchok Levine**

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All quotes are from "Mrs. Child's Visit to a New York Synagogue in 1841" by Lee M. Friedman, Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society (1893-1961); Sept. 1948-Jun 1949; 38, 1-4; AJHS Journal. This article in turn quotes extensively from pages 25-35 of the 1843 edition of L. Maria Child's book "Letters from New York." The article may be downloaded at www.ajhs.org/scholarship/adaje.cfm.

Lydia Maria (nee Francis) Child (February 11, 1802-Oct. 20, 1880) was educated at home, at a local "dame school" and at a nearby women's seminary. After her mother died when she was twelve, she went to live with an older sister in Maine for some years. She is little known today, but in her time she was a famous anti-slavery activist. She was also a novelist, editor, journalist and scholar. She is best remembered for her poem "Over the River and Through the Woods," which recalls her Thanksgiving visits as a child to her grandfather's home.

"Mrs. Child was thoroughly imbued with the contemporary American philo-romantic, interested attitude towards Jews – an impersonal veneration inherited from Puritanical Old Testament study and reverence for Hebraic learning, with a total ignorance and innocence of contemporary Jews."

During a visit to New York in September 1841, Mrs. Child decided to visit Congregation Shearith Israel. The synagogue, then located on Crosby Street, had been built in 1833 and was considered the outstanding Jewish edifice in the city. This was the first time she had ever entered a non-Christian house of worship.

Mrs. Child obviously found her visit interesting, because she devoted an entire chapter of the first printing of her book Letters From New York to describing her impressions of the Rosh Hashanah service she attended. Her recollections give us "insight into the kind of impression created by the every day Jews of the time upon the self-sufficient, impersonal, pietistic American imbued with sentimental sympathy with the people of the Book."

Mrs. Child's Synagogue Visit

Below are some selections from Mrs. Child's description of the Rosh Hashanah services she attended at Shearith Israel on either September 17th or 18th, 1841. Mrs. Child was a committed Christian with a good deal of familiarity with the Hebrew Bible, and this is reflected in her writing.

I lately visited the Jewish Synagogue in Crosby-street, to witness the Festival of the New Year, which was observed for two days, by religious exercises and a general suspension of worldly business. The Jewish year, you are aware, begins in September; and they commemorate it in obedience to the following text of Scripture: "In the first day of the seventh month ye shall have a Sabbath, a memorial of blowing of trumpets, a holy convocation. Ye shall do no servile work therein."

It seems that when Mrs. Child entered the synagogue with a friend, they made the mistake of sitting in the front row of the men's section:

The women were seated separately, in the upper part of the house. One of the masters of Israel came, and somewhat gruffly ordered me, and the young lady who accompanied me, to retire from the front seats of the synagogue. It was uncourteous [sic]; for we were very respectful and still, and not in the least disposed to intrude upon the daughters of Jacob.

The effect produced on my mind, by witnessing the ceremonies of the Jewish Synagogue, was strange and bewildering; spectral and flitting; with a sort of vanishing resemblance to reality; the magic lantern of the Past.

There was the Ark containing the Sacred Law, written on scrolls of vellum, and rolled, as in the time of Moses; but between the Ark and the congregation, instead of the "brazen laver," wherein those who entered into the tabernacle were commanded to wash, was a common bowl and ewer of English delf, ugly enough

for the chamber of a country tavern. All the male members of the congregation, even the little boys, while they were within the synagogue, wore fringed silk mantles, bordered with blue stripes; for Moses was commanded to "Speak unto the children of Israel, and bid them that they make them fringes in the borders of their garments, throughout their generations, and that they put upon the fringe of their borders a ribbon of blue;" – but then these mantles were worn over modern broadcloth coats, and fashionable pantaloons with straps.

The chanting was unmusical, consisting of monotonous ups and downs of the voice, which, when the whole congregation joined in it, sounded like the continuous roar of the sea.

The trumpet, which was blown by a Rabbi, with a shawl drawn over his hat and face, was of the ancient shape, somewhat resembling a cow's horn. It did not send forth a spirit-stirring peal; but the sound groaned and struggled through it.

The ark, on a raised platform, was merely a kind of semi-circular closet, with revolving doors. It was surmounted by a tablet, bearing a Hebrew inscription in gilded letters. The doors were closed and opened at different times, with much ceremony; sometimes, a man stood silently before them, with a shawl drawn over his hat and face. When opened, they revealed festoons of white silk damask, suspended over the sacred rolls of the Pentateuch; each roll enveloped in figured satin, and surmounted by ornaments with silver bells.

Two of these rolls were brought out, opened by the priest [the chazzan], turned round toward all the congregation, and after portions of them had been chanted for nearly two hours, were again wrapped in satin, and carried slowly back to the ark, in procession, the people chanting the Psalms of David, and the little bells tinkling as they moved.

At points in her writing, Mrs. Child makes it clear she has innate prejudices against Jews. Nonetheless, she admits:

The proverbial worldliness of the Jews, their unpoetic avocations, their modern costume, and mechanical mode of perpetuating ancient forms, cannot divest them of a sacred and even romantic interest. The religious idea transmitted by this remarkable people, has given them a more abiding and extended influence on the world's history, than Greece attained by her classic beauty, or Rome by her triumphant arms. Mohammedanism and Christianity, the two forms of theology which include nearly all the civilized world, both grew from the stock planted by Abraham's children. On them lingers the long-reflected light of prophecy; and we, as well as they, are watching for its fulfillment. And verily, all things seem tending toward it. Through all their wanderings, they have followed the direction of Moses, to be lenders and not borrowers.

There is something deeply impressive in this remnant of scattered people, coming down to us in continuous links through the long vista of recorded time; preserving themselves carefully unmixed by intermarriage with people of other nations and other faiths, and keeping up the ceremonial forms of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, through all the manifold changes of revolving generations. To us they have been the medium of glorious truths; and if the murky shadow of their Old dispensation rests too heavily on the mild beauty of the New, it is because the Present can never quite unmoor itself from the Past; and well for the world's safety that it is so.

Dr. Yitzchok Levine served as a professor in the Department of Mathematical Sciences at Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, New Jersey before retiring in 2008. He now teaches as an adjunct at Stevens. Glimpses Into American Jewish History appears the first week of each month. Dr. Levine can be contacted at llevine@stevens.edu.

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