

THE DAY OF ATONEMENT

By Walter Zander

THE Day of Atonement, which is celebrated next Wednesday, October 1, is the culmination of the Jewish Year. It goes back to the words of Moses

“And this shall be a statute for ever unto you that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, ye shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all, whether it be one of your own country or a stranger that sojourneth among you. For on that day an atonement shall be made for you, to cleanse you that ye may be clean from all your sins before the Lord.”

(Leviticus 16, 29-:30.)

The day is celebrated in the greatest solemnity. A complete fast is held for more than 24 hours, and an atmosphere reigns of complete concentration of heart.

Like all Jewish festivals, it begins at nightfall. Large candles are lit in the synagogue, the congregation is clothed in white shrouds - representing death and purification - and the service opens with the ancient prayer *Kol Nidre*, written in Aramaic, a song full of mourning, woe, repentance and mercy.

Early next morning the congregation reassembles and remains united in prayer till night descends again, and the Shofar, a trumpet made of a ram's horn, is sounded for the last time.

Prayer, repentance and conversion of the heart are the means to achieve purification, and the centre of the liturgy is a common confession of the sin of man, made by the whole congregation; this confession is repeated several times during the service.

Everybody has to tread the path of purification himself. There is no mediator between the soul and God, but “*the broken heart*” which really turns back is sure of forgiveness and redemption. This way of conversion, called *Teshuwah*, is the innermost expression of the Jewish soul and forms the essence of its very character. **Teshuwah** is the aim of our life and the completion of our destiny. According to a Jewish legend every soul which has achieved *Teshuwah* has perfected itself and is now sharing in God's glory.

This inner conversion makes the spiritual the centre of our life, and external conditions lose much of their significance. History is drawn into the focus of our heart. We feel responsible for everything, we have committed the sin of man - as it is said later in Christianity: *mea culpa, mea maxima culpa* - and it is the **Teshuwah** which brings us salvation.

As far as transgressions against our fellow men are

concerned, forgiveness is only granted if we have reconciled our offended neighbour. Thus the day of atonement is not limited to an inner experience. It must radiate through all manifestations of our outer life and shape its character. Our relationship to mankind, therefore, is interlaced with our relation to God, and it was in full accordance with the fundamental vision of Judaism when it was said: “*Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*”

But the Day of Atonement aims at more. It means an immediate interference with social life, even in the juridical sphere.

“And thou shalt number seven times seven years. Then shalt thou cause the trumpet of the Jubilee to sound in the day of the atonement. And ye shall hallow the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof: and ye shall return every man unto his possession, and ye shall return every man unto his family.”

(Leviticus 25 ; 8-10.)

That means not less than the permanent and ever-returning attempt to reorientate the whole social life on the principles of justice. In addition to the great annual purification of heart, every 50 years the social balance has to be re-established, the slaves are to be freed, and the fields have to be returned to their previous owners. The day, therefore, which is destined for the purification of heart is also the day for the great restitution, and thus it was made clear that even the social revolution had to be based on the conversion of the heart. According to Maimonides seventeen Jubilees have been celebrated from the entry into Canaan to the Babylonian Exile, and although the Jubilee later ceased to be observed its institution must be considered as one of the greatest attempts to regenerate life in a permanent rhythm in order to establish the Kingdom of God in the social sphere.

The scope of the **Teshuwah**, however, reaches further still. It affects not only the social sphere, but is a means to shape history even without the aid of material power, and it is here that lies its great significance for our days.

Modern Jewry - as most other communities of our time - has been secularised to an overwhelming extent, and people seek the solution of their problems chiefly in the secular field. Religion, therefore, has lost much of its vitality. In accordance with this general development the attempts to solve the Jewish problem are mainly based on political, social and economic measures. But important as these are, it is more than doubtful whether they will be sufficient to solve so great a problem. I personally believe that no solution will

be possible which does not touch the centre of the human personality, and I think that personality should be put at the beginning. It is not sufficient to make external conditions responsible for our situation and to think that we ourselves are all right. The heart of the problem lies within us, and I feel a great longing among many Jews for a thorough purification of mind and heart, for a complete **Teshuwah** as the beginning of regeneration. They believe that this “turning of the heart” must come first and that then-and only then-our material problems will be solved.

The form of this purification may, perhaps, be new, but it will be essentially Jewish and fulfil the word of the **Talmud** that “*Israel can only be redeemed by Teshuwah.*” (Joma 86b)