

Yom Kippur Journey

In early 1927 our family moved from the Bronx to Ozone Park in Queens, New York. Family members still at home consisted of my parents and four children: sister, Mildred, brother, Harry, myself (age eleven), and sister Frances, in descending order of age. At this time, none of the children were of working age. My father was the sole breadwinner.

The apartment was on Liberty Avenue, on the route of an elevated train line that terminated at Park Row, near City Hall in Lower Manhattan. The building was owned by my father's sister, Aunt Dora, and her husband. They also owned a stationery store in Woodside, Queens, where they resided.

Being in business and owning real estate put them on a wealth level well above her brother. My father worked in Manhattan as a presser of women's coats in the garment center near Seventh Avenue in the upper thirties. Work was seasonal and precarious. I assume that our move to Queens had to do with lower rent, or perhaps Aunt Dora needed a tenant.

I attended a local school at P.S. 108, which happened to be near Aqueduct Race Track. For the first time ever, I had men as teachers, Mr. Snyder and Mr. Decker in grades seven and eight respectively. I was graduated in June, 1928.

In October 1928, it was time for my Bar Mitzvah, [literally “son of the commandment”], a rite of passage to religious manhood. I had been tutored after school in a storefront “Hebrew School” by a young *melamed*, a teacher who teaches by rote. He and his “hickory stick” taught me to read Hebrew, without ever studying the meaning of what I read. I later realized that the purpose of my study was to learn to read from the prayer book at services. I think the idea was that God would be satisfied with the proper utterances regardless of the understanding of the supplicant. As a result, my Hebrew language capability today ranges from poor to none.

The Jewish Community in the area was comprised mostly of immigrants from central Europe and their American born children. They were what I would today call moderate Orthodox, and comfortable in a mostly gentile neighborhood. For a synagogue, they used a private home on 114<sup>th</sup> Street, ten streets away from our home. I too felt comfortable at school and was accepted completely by my fellow students. One of my early buddies was a tall fellow, Russell {Rusty} Beard, who delighted in chasing after me in the schoolyard because I was small and fast and could give him a good run.

When I was thirteen, my father was proud to present me to the small congregation. I was to read a portion from the Torah scroll and other appropriate readings. Then I was expected to give an address to the congregation, dedicating myself to the lofty precepts of an ancient people and tradition. I was told that I could speak in Hebrew or Yiddish. I chose Yiddish because it was my mother’s tongue [not my mother-tongue], and I could not understand Hebrew.

All went well. I was presented with a prayer shawl [*tallis*] and phylacteries [*tfillim*]. I was to use these for daily morning prayers at home, facing East toward Jerusalem, just as my father did. I quickly overcame the bindings and windings of the phylacteries and I did my prayers the next morning. But then I started to slack off and finally stopped.

About a year later, in October 1929, I took the elevated train down to Park Row. I was on my way to see my sister Lil and her family in Newark, where they had a candy store. I was to visit for a few days and help out. From Park Row I would walk over to the Hudson Tubes and stop off at the Newark station. From there, after a short bus ride to Frelinghuysen Avenue and a one-block walk to Bigelow Street, I would be there. That day was Yom Kippur, a most holy day, a day of atonement, and a fast day: strictly no food or drink. Even the most secular Jew would likely be in synagogue, unless the World Series was in town.

When I got to Park Row that day, I stopped off for a ham sandwich and a glass of milk, and consumed them with gusto. This was a youthful indiscretion. I had committed some kind of travesty!

1. I ate on the fast day of Yom Kippur
2. I ate non-kosher meat, pork
3. I ate dairy and meat together

Many would see these acts as cardinal offenses.

I wondered, did I sin?

I waited to see if God would strike me dead. NOTHING HAPPENED. So I walked over to the Hudson Tubes and completed my journey to visit my sister Lil and family.