

THE BLACK FAST.

COMMEMORATION OF THE OVERTHROW OF A NATION.

Religious Services in the Synagogues of the Hebrews at Jerusalem—The Ninth of Ab the Anniversary of the Destruction of the Temple—Blessing the Moon.

On the last Saturday of July the synagogues of the Jewish community of Jerusalem were the scene of a very striking ceremony. It was the eve of the black fast commemorating the final overthrow of the Jewish nationality; for Saturday, according to the Hebrew calendar, was the ninth of Ab—"the ninth day of the fifth month" referred to in the Bible, the anniversary of the destruction of both the first and the second temples of Jerusalem. In Western lands the fast has long ceased to be kept by any save the strict few; but in the East—particularly in the Holy City, where the Hebrew still considers himself "in captivity"—he mourns the downfall of his nationality literally in "sackcloth and ashes" and with a passion that moves the stranger to wonder.

The order of observance is as follows: As evening approaches, the father of each household puts on coarse sacking, attires himself in his oldest garments, and gathers his wife and children round him. Some hard-boiled eggs, a little salt and dry bread, previously prepared, are placed in a tray upon the ground. This is known as the "mourner's meal," from the fact of its always being offered to those who return from the funeral of a relative. Nearby is a panful of ashes. The father seats himself upon the ground in the attitude of mourning, rends one side of his garment across, throws a handful of ashes upon his head and beard, and then, gathering a little dust from the floor, sprinkles some of it over the eggs, salt, and bread, and so eats of them. He afterward pronounces the mourner's benediction, and proceeds to the synagogue, which presents an unusual and rather weird appearance. The lamps and chandeliers are unlighted; the holy ark is hung with a black curtain rent across, and the reading-desk is covered with a cloth of the same funereal color. The minister is not standing in his customary place, but seated on the steps that lead up to the reading-platform; and the congregants, thousands in number, are packed in ranks upon the floor, shoeless and girt in sackcloth. In front of every two is a piece of wax taper giving enough light to read by and just sufficing to make the gloomy aspect of the interior visible. Suddenly there is a sound of parchment crackling, and all are silent as the precentor unrolls an old and well-worn scroll; for nothing printed or written on paper may be used in the synagogue service. And then amid perfect stillness, with many tears and much sobbing, he begins to chant the Lamentations of Jeremiah. The chant is slow and mournful, and is taken up now and then by the multitude present, who beat their breasts or sob an accompaniment to the reader.

For about three-quarters of an hour the chanting is continued, when the precentor ceases, and the chief rabbi of the community seats himself on the steps in front of the ark. At a signal two attendants on duty walk down each side of the edifice and commence to extinguish one by one the tapers used by the worshipers. Slowly the synagogue becomes darker and gloomier as they move along, until the place is in total darkness; only the faint glimmer of the "Ner Tamid," or perpetual lamp in front of the "Holy of Holies," remains, like a speck of light, in the far distance. Then the voice of the rabbi is heard firm and clear as, in the *ladino*, or Spanish of the fast, he reminds his congregants of how many years have elapsed since the temple was destroyed and Jerusalem sacked. In pathetic tones he dwells upon the persecutions that followed this event, and then passes in review all that has happened to the Jews in every part of the world during the year gone by. The effect of the "still small voice" speaking thus to some thousand worshipers in perfect darkness is most eerie; and when the rabbi exclaims in Hebrew, "Think, O Lord, what has befallen us!" there are very few dry eyes in the assembly. The cry is taken up too; and soon nothing is heard but the subdued weeping of men and the wailing of women, relieved now and then by the ever-recurring exclamation "Zechor me hayu lanu!"—"Remember what has happened to us!" In darkness the members of the congregation file out and return to their homes.

The celebration in the synagogue is only one phase in the solemnity of the fast. At midnight another scene is enacted in the city. From the "homes of learning" and "places of assembly" of the "Ashkenasim" Jews the wardens and elders come forth, heads covered and lanterns in hand. They are invariably elderly persons, most of them men who have come to the Holy Land in order to die there and be laid at rest in the cemetery of Zion. They walk silently through the deserted street, and march straight to the "western wall," the only fragment still visible of the ancient temple wall. Here they station themselves, after kissing the stones, and here they keep the midnight and morning watch as their forefathers were wont, but with wailing and lamentation over the evils that have befallen Israel. At daybreak they are joined by the adult members of the congregation, and later still by the women, who bring their little ones with them, even the babes and sucklings. The whole of the party sit upon the ground, crowding the open space in front of the "western wall," and filling every nook and corner in the vicinity. They pray and weep without ceasing until the sun is fully risen and it is time to attend the morning service. Unwashed and unkempt—for it is not permitted to wash one's face or comb one's hair on the black fast—partaking of neither food nor drink, all return to the house of worship.

But before partaking of either food or drink one of the strangest ceremonies of Judaism has to be performed—the moon has to be blessed. Going to some elevated ground where the moon can be clearly seen, the worshipers gather in knots of half a dozen or more and recite a short blessing. Then each puts his heels together, stretches out his hands toward the orb, and jumps as high as he can toward it, exclaiming as he does so, "Even as I jump toward the moon to touch it and cannot, so may mine enemies who move toward me fail to touch me for evil."