



# The Inner Temple of the True Jew

*What happened when Yemenite Jewry was discovered? Why are people so fascinated with ancient Jewish communities?*

## When Yemenite Jewry Was Discovered

In 1901, a German Jew named Hermann Burchardt decided to tour the world and the most far-flung Jewish communities in existence. He loved researching exotic tribes and also loved photography, and being of a wealthy family, he could afford it all.

Before he left Germany, he learned how to speak Arabic and Turkish. He then traveled to Damascus, where he bought a villa that he would use as a base for his regional travels. He then set forth.

In the course of his visit to Yemen, while traveling through the middle of the desert, he was sidetracked by one of the most isolated communities of the Jewish Nation. It was the Jewish community of Sanaa, the capital city of Yemen. Burchardt settled in and camped out with the Sanaa Jewish community for almost a year. He got to know them, recorded their customs, heard their life stories, and wrote it all down in his daily diary.

But what was most important of all, and in an apparent historical first, were his photos. He captured the portrait of the Jews of Sanaa. He wrote a long essay on the Yemenite community, and along with extensive photos, he sent it to a Jewish newspaper in Germany.

The sights that appeared in the pictures ignited the Jews of Europe. Even though they knew that there were Jews in Yemen (20 years prior, in 1881, a lot of Yemenite Jews had moved to the Holy Land), still, to see photographs of Jewish communal life in Yemen, a place that was the most absolutely removed location from European influence, caused tremendous excitement in Europe. In those years, Jews were searching for the most authentic Jew, and many were asking themselves, “Are we truly living in the ways of the Tanach?” And now, to suddenly see Jews dressing and looking like they were from the world of 2,000 years ago, people started wondering if Jews might have really looked like that before the onset of the Diaspora; could these be the Jews of the Tanach?

So these European Jews wanted to clarify the customs of the Jews of Yemen—to examine their prayer books, to determine if their Tanachs and ours were the same, and so on. And indeed, it turned out that the Jews of Yemen have a tradition dating back to the era of the Destruction of the First Temple—and thus, in a certain way, they are more authentic than other Jewish communities.

## **The Ultimate Destruction**

But we can ask the question: Why indeed did the Jews of Europe really ask themselves if they were the continuation of the Jewish Nation? What was really bothering them?

Well, for starters, the white hues of Europe’s Jews don’t exactly evoke Avraham Avinu, whose origin was the region of ancient Iraq. But it runs deeper than that. And that brings us right to this week’s Torah portion.

In this week’s Torah reading, we read the portions of Achrei Mos and Kedoshim. And in the first part of Achrei Mos, the Torah tells us the precise order of service in the Beis Hamikdash on Yom Kippur.

In the Torah reading, the Torah goes into great detail, and detail on the detail, how exactly the Yom Kippur service was carried out in the Temple. The Kohein Gadol (High Priest) would have to wear flaxen clothing on that day, and would need to immerse himself in the mikvah each time he changed his outfit. He had to sacrifice two goats—one as a sin offering and the other as the famous “Sa’ir La’Azazel.” Then the Kohein Gadol would enter the Kodesh HaKodashim (Holy of Holies), where he would offer up Ketores (incense)—and thus, on the holiest day of the year, the holiest person in the Jewish Nation would enter the holiest place in the world to atone for the Jewish Nation and to secure for them a good year.

And then came the Destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70 C.E. It’s completely impossible to describe the magnitude of the destruction that the Jewish Nation experienced with the loss of the Holy Temple.

We can imagine what military destruction looks like, or what political or national destruction look like, but what happened here was much more serious. How was a nation that was built entirely around the Beis Hamikdash and its regular sacrifices supposed to now carry on its spiritual life without it? Who would atone for the nation’s sins without the Kohein Gadol, the Beis Hamikdash, the Sin Offering and the Goat to Azazel? How do we continue our connection with G-d without all this?

There was the same kind of destruction, the same kind of demoralization, among the Jewish People after the Destruction of the First Temple. However, the difference there was that they still had Prophets. Yirmiyahu and Yechezkel spoke the Word of G-d to them; they still had a direct line to G-d.

But with the Destruction of the Second Temple, what we had was a spiritual catastrophe. Ever since, other nations and religions that had

access to the Tanach have studied the path on which the Jewish Nation has traveled and the way in which they have served G-d since the Destruction—and have failed to reconcile the text of the Tanach with the traditions of the Jewish Nation in exile. They argue, “You are not the real Jews! Where is the Holy Temple? Where are the sacrifices? True, you don’t live in the Holy Land—so bring sacrifices wherever you live! How can you have atonement without the sacrifices? How can you have a connection with G-d without offering incense? That’s where the search for the historically authentic Jew comes from—perhaps there, in the middle of the desert, they would find the Jew whose life more closely resembles that which is described in the Tanach. Perhaps there in Sanaa they do sprinkle blood on the altar; perhaps there they still burn incense.

## **The Silver Lining**

But what the nations of the world don’t understand is that with the Destruction of the Temple, in a certain way, a wonderful thing happened.

As the Rebbe explained many times, “Our degradation is our reconstruction.” That means that as a result of the Destruction, the bond between the Jewish Nation and G-d went from the national level to the individual level.

For example, after the Destruction, Yom Kippur reveals to us that every Jew is a Kohein Gadol, every synagogue is a Temple, and every prayer is an offering of incense. The one thing that a Jew needs to atone for his or her sins of the previous year is to do teshuvah, to repent.

As the famous Talmudic Sage Rabbi Akiva said, “Fortunate are you, O Israel, for it is your Father in Heaven before Whom you become pure and Who purifies you,” and, “The mikveh [hope] of Israel is G-d: Just as a mikvah purifies the impure, so too does G-d purify Israel”

(Talmud, Tractate Yoma 8:9).

After the Destruction, the Jewish Nation became personally closer to G-d. Now, it was no longer possible to rely on the Kohein Gadol to do the work for us; now, each individual takes responsibility for his or her actions and his or her future.

The Rebbe says in a Sichah: “In the spiritual Beis Hamikdash that is found inside each Jew... when Yom Kippur comes, every Jew—the Kohein Gadol in his own Beis Hamikdash—needs to do all the services of the Beis Hamikdash without relying on someone else” (Likutei Sichos Vol. II, pg. 411 et al).

## **Authentic Jews**

So, going back to the Yemenite Jews of the 1900s, it was ultimately determined that the Jews of Yemen were acting exactly like all the other Jews throughout the world were acting. No, they didn't have a Beis Hamikdash and they weren't offering sacrifices. Okay, maybe they were wearing slightly different clothes and behaved slightly differently—but ultimately they acted like Jews always acted in every other community throughout the world: They put on tefillin like everyone, prayed three times a day, studied Torah, ate kosher and celebrated the holidays exactly like the Jews of the shtetls of Eastern Europe did.

As a matter of fact, a sure sign by which to recognize an authentic Jewish community is that they keep the same customs that every Jew throughout the world keeps. In other words, if you find some community somewhere that offers sacrifices and brings up incense, it's a sure proof that they are not the continuation of the Jewish Nation.

And so, my friends, what we learn from this is that every Jewish home is a Beis Hamikdash. And as a general rule, the husband is the king

and the wife is the Kohein Gadol. It is she who lights the candles in the home like the Kohein Gadol lit the menorah in the Beis Hamikdash. And the one who is able to achieve pardon, forgiveness and atonement for all, even for the king, is only Kohein Gadol...