

Birkat HaHammah

The Blessing of the New Sun

By Jerry Klinger

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"HEBREW FESTIVAL MARRED

Rabbi Arrested for Observance of an Ancient Talmudic Ceremony in Tompkins Square

No Permit Had been Thought Necessary for the Gathering and Policeman Foley
Could not Understand What It Meant

Occurs Once in 28 Years.

Orthodox Hebrews in every part of the world celebrated yesterday what is familiarly known among them as "the new sun." The festival comes once every twenty-eight years, on the fourth day, of the first week of the Hebrew month of Nisan, corresponding practically to the month of April. The celebration in New York was spoiled for some hundreds of people by the interference of two park policemen with a gathering in Tompkins square, the arrest there of Rabbi Wechsler, and the flight of Rabbi Klein.

The ceremony is a very old one. It is required by the Talmud Beroches, although there is no mention of it in the laws of Moses. The ancient rabbis calculated that on the night before the fourth day of the month Nisan of every twenty-eighth year the sun is in precisely the position in which it was placed at the moment of creation. In honor of this, it is ordained that on the morning of that day Hebrews assemble in open places where they can see the sun and repeat the blessing for the time – "God has again placed the universe as He placed it at creation," that being a free translation of the Hebrew words used.

Rabbi Wechsler and Rabbi Klein, who are the heads of large east side congregations, decided to call their people to meet in Tompkins Square. Nobody was in charge of the services, and nobody thought of obtaining a permit for holding a public meeting, as required by city ordinance. The Hebrews gathered by hundreds. The Talmud says that if the sun is shining the services for the

"new sun" must be concluded by 9 o'clock in the morning, while if the sun is invisible, it must be waited for until noon.

By 8 o'clock the square and the sidewalks around it were crowded. Rabbi Wechsler arrived about that time, and was astonished to see Rabbi Klein running away at "full speed." This last phenomenon was explained a moment later by the appearance of Park Policeman Foley, puzzled and excited.

The celebration is rather a complicated matter to explain to anybody. Rabbi Klein's knowledge of English is slight, while Foley's faculties of comprehension of matters outside of police and park regulations and local events are not acute. The attempt of a foreign citizen to explain to an American Irishman an astronomical situation and a tradition of the Talmud was a dismal failure.

Both became excited, and the people who clustered around them increased the confusion. When Foley was told in broken English about a "new sun," he was doubtful whether some new infection of lunacy had broken out on the east side. His demonstrations became so threatening that Rabbi Klein understood that he was in danger of being arrested and clubbed, and chose the easiest and fastest plan of escape.

Rabbi Wechsler's English is better than Rabbi Klein's, but he could not convey the significance and purpose of the assemblage to Foley. The one fact which that official's perceptions grasped was there was no permit.

After some parley, he seized the rabbi by the neck and took him to Essex Market Police Court. After being kept among the prisoners in the police court for nearly an hour, the rabbi was arraigned before Magistrate Cornell, who dismissed him because he had evidently not intended to do wrong, admonishing him, however, not to make troubles for Foley.

The people who were left in the square conducted their simple service of prayer without a rabbi. Similar services were held in other parts of the city. One or two east side congregations gathered on the East River water front and were not disturbed.

Rabbi Wechsler was good natured in his comments on the affair when seen by a reporter for THE NEW YORK last night. He said he felt no resentment against the policeman, who probably knew no better. The course of Magistrate Cornell, however, he thought would tend to encourage similar violence in the future.

Records of the synagogues show that "the new sun" service has been conducted by orthodox Hebrews in this country at intervals of twenty-eight years for 180 years. According to the Talmudic calculations the sun was 5,624 years old yesterday."