

BELLA CHAGALL

BURNING LIGHTS

THIRTY-SIX DRAWINGS BY
MARC CHAGALL



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ROSH HA-SHANAH

THE Fearful Days have come, and our whole house is in an uproar. Each holiday brings with it its own savor, each is steeped in its own atmosphere. A clear, joyful, purified air, as after a rain—this is the air of Rosh ha-Shanah.

After the black nights of the Selichot prayers a bright, sunny day dawns for the New Year. The week of Selichot is the most restless week. Father wakes up in the middle of the night, rouses my brothers, and all of them dress quietly and go off like thieves slinking through the door.

What are they looking for in the cold, in the dark streets? It is so warm in bed! And what if they don't come back at all—how mother and I would weep and weep! I am almost beginning to cry even now, and I wrap myself closer in my blankets.

In the morning when father drinks his tea his face is pale and fagged. But the bustle of the holiday eve dispels everyone's weariness.

The shop is closed at an early hour. Everybody makes ready to go to shul. There are more prepara-

tions than ever before, as if it were the first time they were going there. Each one puts on something new—one a fresh, light-colored hat, another a new necktie, still another a new garment.

Mother dons a white silken blouse; she seems refurbished, she has a new soul, and she is eager to go to shul.

One of my elder brothers opens the thick prayer book for her and creases down the pages from which she must pray. They are marked with notations made by grandfather's hand many years ago: "Say this."

Mother recognizes the lines over which she wept last year. A trembling comes over her and her eyes dim with tears. She is in a hurry to go to shul to weep over the words, as if she were reading them for the first time.

A stack of books has been prepared for her. She wraps them in a large kerchief and takes them all with her. Must she not pray for a good year for the whole family?

As for father's books and talis, the shames came to fetch them to the shul during the day.

I remain behind, alone. The house is empty, and I too feel emptied. The old year, like a thing forlorn, drags itself away somewhere outside. The coming year must be a clear one, a bright one. I want to sleep through the night as quickly as possible.

On the following day in the morning I too go to shul. I too wear new garments from tip to toe. The



sun is shining, the air is clear and alive. My new shoes give a dry tap. I walk faster. The New Year must be already arrived in shul. The shofar must be sounding there; even now it echoes in my ears. I fancy that the sky itself has come down lower and hurries to shul together with me. I run to the women's section, I push open the door. A whiff of heat comes from in there, as from an oven. The heavy air stifles my breath. The shul is packed full. The high lecterns are piled with books. Old women sit bent, sunk in their chairs. Girls stand almost on the heads of the grandmothers. Children tumble underfoot.

I want to elbow my way to mother. But she is sitting so far off, all the way up at the front, next to the window that opens into the men's section. As soon as I try to move, a woman turns around to me, a weeping face gives me an angry look.

"Oh! Oh!" She breathes wrath at me.

I am pushed from behind; I am suddenly freed, and thrown to the handrail.

My mother signals to me with her eyes. She is glad that I am near her. But where is the shofar? Where is the New Year?

I look at the walls of the men's section. The ark of the Torah is closed, its curtain drawn. Silently and calmly the two embroidered lions guard it. The congregation is in a tumult, as though busy with something else. Have I come too early or too late?

Suddenly from under a talis a hand holding a shofar stretches out and remains suspended in the air. The shofar blares out; everyone is awakened. They are all very still. They wait. The shofar gives another blast. The sound is chopped off, as though the horn were out of breath.

People exchange glances. The shofar trumpets hoarsely. A murmur ripples through the shul.

What manner of shofar blowing is that? He lacks strength. Perhaps another man should be called up.

And then suddenly, as though the trumpet blower had pushed out the evil spirit that was clogging the shofar, there comes a pure, long sound. Like a sum-

mons it runs through the whole shul, sounding into every corner. The congregation is relieved: one gives a sigh, another nods his head. The sound rises upward. The walls are touched by it. It reaches me and my handrail. It throbs up to the ceiling, pushes the thick air, fills every empty space. It booms into my ears, my mouth, I even feel an ache in my stomach. When will the shofar finish trumpeting? What does the New Year want of us?

I recall all my sins. God knows what will happen to me: so much has accumulated during the year!

I can hardly wait for afternoon. I am eager to go with mother to the rite of tashlich, to shake off all my sins, cast them into our big river. Other women and men are on their way. All of them walk down the little street that leads to the river bank. All of them are dressed in black; they might be going, God forbid, to a funeral. The air is sharp. From the high river bank, from the big city park, a wind is blowing; leaves are falling, yellow, red-yellow, like butterflies; they whirl in the air, turn over, scatter on the ground. Do our sins fly in the same way? The leaves rustle, stick to my shoes. I drag them along. Having them, it is less fearsome to go through the tashlich.

"Why do you stop all the time?" Mother pulls me by the hand. "Let the leaves alone!"

Soon everyone stops. The street seems suddenly to end; the deep, cool waters seem to be flowing up to our feet.

On the river bank dark clusters of people have gathered. The men, with their heads thrust out and their beards swaying, bend down to the water, as though they wanted to see the very bottom. Suddenly they turn their pockets inside out; little crumbs, scraps, detach themselves from the linings. The men recite a prayer aloud and throw their crumbs, together with the sins, into the water. But how shall I shake off my sins? I have no crumbs in my pockets—I do not even have pockets.

I stand next to mother, shivering from the cold wind that lifts our skirts. Mother tells me the ritual words that I have to say, and the prayers together with the sins fall from my mouth straight into the water. I fancy that the river is swollen with all our sins, and it rolls along with its waters suddenly turned black.

My burden eased away, I return home. Mother at once sits down to read psalms. She wants still to make use of the day to obtain something more from God. A humming fills the dark room. The air becomes clouded, like mother's spectacles. Mother is weeping, silently shaking her head.

What shall I do?

I fancy that from the closely printed lines of the psalms our grandfathers and grandmothers come gently out to us. Their shadows sway, they draw themselves out like threads, encircle me. I am afraid to turn around. Perhaps someone is standing at my back and wants to seize me in his arms?



"Mother!" I cannot contain myself, I shake her by the sleeve.

She raises her head, blows her nose, and ceases weeping. She kisses the psalter and closes it.

"Bashke," she says, "I'm going to shul. We'll be back soon, all of us. Will you set the table, my child?"

"Mother, is it for the shehecheyanu?"

As she goes out I open the cupboards. I drag out the tall paper bags filled with fruit and spread all of it

out on the table. As in a great garden, thick green melons roll on the table. Beside them lie clusters of grapes, white and red. Big, juicy pears have turned over on their little heads. There are sweet yellow apples that have a golden gleam—they look as if they had been dipped in honey. Plums, dark red, scatter all over the table.

Over what shall we offer the benediction of first fruits? Haven't we eaten of all these things all year long?

I notice that from another bag there protrudes, like a fir tree, a pineapple, a new, unfamiliar fruit.

"Sasha, do you know where pineapples grow?"

"Who knows?" She spreads her hands. "I've got other things to think about!"

No one knows whence the pineapple comes. With its scaly skin it looks like a strange fish. But its tail stands up at the top like an opened fan. I touch its stuffed belly, and it trembles from top to bottom. It is not a casual matter to touch the pineapple; it behaves somewhat like an emperor. I reserve the center of the table for it.

Sasha slices it pitilessly. The pineapple groans under her sharp knife like a live fish. Its juice, like white blood, trickles onto my fingers. I lick them. It is a tart-sweet taste.

Is this the taste of the New Year?

"Dear God," I whisper hurriedly, "before they all come back from shul, give a thought to us! Father

and mother pray Thee all day long in shul to grant them a good year. And father always thinks of Thee. And mother remembers thy Name at every step! Thou knowest how toilworn they are, how care-ridden. Dear God, Thou canst do everything! Make it so that we have a sweet, good year!"

I quickly sprinkle powdered sugar on the pineapple.

"Gut yom-tov! Gut yom-tov!" My brothers run in, trying to outshout one another.

They are followed immediately by father and mother, who look pale and tired.

"May you be inscribed for a happy year!"

My heart leaps up. I imagine that God himself is speaking through their mouths.