

The Desecration of the Sabbath

by Marianne Langner Zeitlin

Lest the Jewish Sabbath be desecrated, the electrocutions were advanced to occur before sundown. Sarah snapped off the radio. The night before, the executions had been postponed to avoid the anniversary of the condemned couple; now judicial propriety decreed they be hurried up. Nor was the careful non committal tone of the announcer any different from the one used earlier in the month when the coronation of Queen Elizabeth had been the mainstay of the broadcasts. News was news.

Ever since the old socialist dreams had given way to the realities of Soviet purges and counter purges, right and left, Sarah had little interest in politics. Still, that the executions of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg had been advanced to before sundown so as not to desecrate the Sabbath was a new twist. Sarah sat down carefully, loosening the cords of her maternity skirt, and inhaled deeply. Any sudden jolt and the delicate balance by which she controlled her ever present nausea would be disturbed.

From the radio in the next apartment, a repetition of the news bulletin could be clearly heard through the thin walls. *If they would only have confessed*, President Eisenhower explained, *I would have granted them clemency. At least to Ethel Rosenberg. She is a mother, after all.*

To shut out the sound, Sarah turned on the water in the bathtub full force and pulled off her clothes. Diamonds of light quivered from the sparkling water and a vaporous warmth enveloped the bathroom.

If only she didn't have to go to Mrs. Contini's for dinner. Not that the thought of being alone was that enticing. Still, Mrs. Contini was the last person she'd choose to be with on a night when electrocutions had been rushed – and by a Jewish judge at that – so as not to desecrate the Sabbath. How many Sabbaths upon Sabbaths had she wanted to desecrate when after a huge quarrel, family members had been forced to dine together, silent recriminations imposing a fugue against the familiar prayers and songs?

Once she had tested God by lighting a match on the Sabbath and David, her little brother, had appeared from nowhere to run and tell Mama.

In her orthodox home, creating fire on the Sabbath was a sin. *Testing God? You're testing God?* And the blows had rained down on her head so that even David had shrunk into a corner, frightened and remorseful.

Sarah stepped out of her underwear and stuffed it into the hamper, wishing Shlomo were back already. Outside, the tiny courtyard was resplendent in bright June foliage, a sharp contrast to the rainy day when they said goodbye nearly two months earlier, when he was on his way to play at the Prades Music Festival. Gray was everywhere then: sky, sea, peeling paint on the S.S. *Constantin*, faded hand me down tent maternity coat. And so gray was Shlomo's cell in the ship's womb that despite her resolve, her eyes had puddled.

After adjusting the bath water to the right temperature, Sarah eased herself down, enjoying the movements inside her strained and mottled body. It was like having company and she loved the feeling. Earlier, while walking to the grocery, her resident trapeze artist had swung around so vigorously that a trickle had been forced from her dislocated bladder. Seeing her stop and bend involuntarily, a group of teenagers had laughingly shouted, "Hey, lady, can we take you to the hospital?" Now another pain shot through her and she sat up straight. False labor pains. Her doctor had said that it would be three more weeks. She stretched out and let the water run until it covered her enormous throbbing belly.

Sarah rang the doorbell to Mrs. Contini's penthouse reluctantly and listened to the muted chime. Usually, leaving her two room apartment – with its bedside box of *Uneda* crackers and refrigerator stocked with cottage cheese – to be fussed over by this adopted mother and her aging butler Thomas and served *cordon bleu* dinners, was a treat. Mrs. Contini had encouraged Shlomo ever since he came to the United States as a wunderkind of eleven. At their betrothal party, she had given Sarah a packet of all his letters which she had preserved through the years.

But tonight she was in no mood for the older woman's dogged cheerfulness, a kind of rose-colored view which could only be maintained by the blinkers of privilege. As Thomas took her shawl, Sarah surveyed the inlaid console and matching chairs in the foyer – their shining patina testimony to two centuries of loving care – with something like distaste. Where was the feeling of borrowed peace which usually enveloped her upon entering this hallowed domain?

No such gloom disturbed Mrs. Contini. Still hale and smooth-

skinned at eighty, she came bounding out of the living room to embrace Sarah and within five minutes had brought her up to date with the latest activities of her eight grand-children: this one had graduated full honors at Smith, that one was going on a deep-sea treasure hunt in the Caribbean, the other was interning at Columbia Presbyterian.

As they sat down on matching down pillowed sofas, Mrs. Contini reached for the crystal decanter on the coffee table, poured some sherry into wineglasses, and handed one to Sarah. “Cheers,” she said, lifting her own glass in a toast and drinking a mouthful. “Now, my dear, you must give me the latest news of Shlomo.”

“He’s on his way to Le Havre this minute. *The Liberte* sails tomorrow.” She patted her belly and crossed her fingers. “Three more weeks. So he should be here in good time.”

“I hope so.” Mrs. Contini laughed. “It almost looks as though the baby’s dropped already. It’s probably just my imagination. Anyway, now that the festival’s behind him, what do you think were his main impressions?”

Sarah set down the wineglass and opened and closed her fists against the eggshell silk upholstery. The furniture of the room was mainly Louis XVI, with gilded chairs and gleaming mirrors. French Impressionist paintings adorned the walls; across from her the colors of two Renoirs were radiant with the reflection of the fast setting sun. All over New York, schools and offices were closed and highways were clogged with people trying to escape for the weekend. On the lower East Side and in Bensonhurst, candles were being placed in candelabras as Jews prepared to greet the Sabbath bride.

The windows of the skyscraper apartment fronted on Fifth Avenue and, far off in the distance, on the other side of Manhattan, Sarah watched a boat going up the Hudson River. Soon it would be under the George Washington Bridge, the Tappan Zee Bridge, Dobbs Ferry and then Ossining where the prison fortress of Sing Sing was located and where the Rosenbergs were probably being strapped into their chairs at that very moment.

“His main impressions?” Sarah asked with a start after Mrs. Contini prodded her. “You’ll have to ask him. Playing for Casals, I’d imagine. Seventy seven and still going strong...fantastic—”

“My dear, seventy-seven is nothing nowadays,” Mrs. Contini said as she rose. “And I’ll prove it. No, don’t get up, just stay where you are and relax.”

From the large armoire which housed her music collection, she extracted a score and placed it on the music stand. Taking the cello resting on a chair in front of the pianos, she carefully inserted its steel tip into a

holder to protect the Kerman rug. After fidgeting until she sat in the correct position, she placed the instrument between her bony knees and lifted the bow to play, her parchment-skinned hand grasping it firmly.

At the sound of the opening chord, Sarah spilled a couple of drops of wine on her black tunic. It was Bruch’s *Kol Nidre*. Taking a long breath, she tried to concentrate on not being sick. *For all vows that will be made to Him and that will not be kept—forgiveness, please.*

Why did she have to play that—tonight of all nights? Could Mrs. Contini possibly know how appropriate *Kol Nidre*, the Yom Kippur prayer that originated during the Spanish Inquisition, was? Unable to practice their religion openly, the Jews assembled in cellars to pray, at the risk of being burned at the stake. For three hundred years the funeral pyres blazed with those who had been discovered, although amnesty was offered to any who would confess and convert.

Was she playing this deliberately? It wasn’t possible. Although Mrs. Contini’s family had once been Jewish, for at least two generations its members were Quakers and Unitarians. She must have chosen to play that work just to show off the progress she’d made on the cello.

Indeed it was remarkable. Having had to give up playing the violin because of arthritis, she had taken up the cello at age seventy; and made up in feeling what she lacked in technique, die-hard resolution behind every arpeggio.

As the last sliver of sunset vanished over the horizon, heralding the Sabbath, the notes became faint, then fainter and fainter. A new intense pain shot through Sarah, making her catch her breath. The ormolu clock on the mantle began to chime jarringly just as the rich full sound of the cello repeated the opening *Kol Nidre* theme. Cortisoned fingers quivering on the strings, eyes twitching, Mrs. Contini brought the long wail to a close.

In a blur, Sarah, placed the glass on the table and watched the bent white head of Mrs. Contini as she adjusted a string.

For a moment the silence was absolute.

“Well,” Sarah said finally, rising to hug the older woman, “it may not exactly be Dubrowinsky, but it’ll do, it’ll do.”

Mrs. Contini shook her head. “Don’t speak to me about Dubrowin-

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sky. I'm very angry with him. Imagine, he's talking about retiring already. At sixty six. He ought to be ashamed of himself."

Sarah nodded her head in agreement. "Shlomo played chamber music with him a couple of nights before he went to Europe. He told us he couldn't take it anymore. 'Ven I go out on stage,'" Sarah imitated the strong Russian accent, "'and stand at the vings to collect mineself, the chair out there, standing alone in middle of big stage, always look like electric chair to me...'" Sarah's voice broke and she turned her face away.

"Time to eat," said Mrs. Contini, taking Sarah's arm firmly to lead her to the dining room.

Sitting over the gleaming tablecloth and facing Mrs. Contini, Sarah was reminded of the Sabbath dinner rituals of her childhood. Rote, however inspired, was rote. Neither of them was hungry; Mrs. Contini heaped food on her plate and countered Sarah's protest with, "Don't forget, you're feeding two, my dear." Cutting a piece of beef and watching the dark blood form into little eddies on the plate, Sarah thought of the first time she ate unkosher meat many years earlier and nearly gagged. Now, after spearing a few peas with her fork she gave up, grateful her plate was removed without comment.

When Mrs. Contini struck the match that Thomas handed her to light the brandied *Cherries Jubilee*, Sarah felt a surge of fear. The blue flame hissed as it flared up and Sarah smiled. No David here to report that Mrs. Contini was desecrating the Sabbath. She spooned the hot liquid over the ice cream and Thomas placed a plate in front of Sarah. Not wanting to disappoint, she tasted it, but it was sickeningly sweet and she could barely get it down.

By mutual agreement, the evening came to an early end. The two women walked to the hall arm in arm. Thomas brought out Sarah's knitted shawl and draped it around her shoulders. As she mumbled her thanks, Mrs. Contini opened the door and stepped into the private elevator foyer to push the button.

"I'm glad we were together tonight, Sarah. It kept me from thinking about the Rosenbergs."

Not quite sure she'd heard correctly, Sarah looked at Mrs. Contini questioningly.

"Their little boys" – she shook her head vehemently – "orphans now. She was a mother, Sarah...a MOTHER...after all."

"So you did play the *Kol Nidre* deliberately—"

"The *Kol Nidre*?" Mrs. Contini frowned. "What's that got to do with—"

A piercing pain threw Sarah off balance and Mrs. Contini grabbed her by the arm. "What is it?"

"It's just another of these false labor pains," she whispered. "It's okay. They come and go. They've been happening all day."

The elevator door opened and the two women embraced. "Are you sure you'll be all right? Perhaps you should stay..."

"Not to worry, honest. I'm fine," she said, hastily stepping into the elevator.

The operator shut the door as Mrs. Contini waved.

A mother...a MOTHER. Sarah caught her lower lip between her teeth. Of course. Just like Eisenhower. Not only did she not play the *Kol Nidre* deliberately, she didn't even know its significance.

The elevator stopped on the fifteenth floor and a man and a woman entered, dressed in formal evening attire. Backing into a corner, Sarah tripped over a pile of copies of *Daily News' Extras*.

"Well, that's over," the man said to his wife, pointing down at the picture of the Rosenbergs strapped in electric chairs. "Good riddance to bad rubbish. Electric chairs! They should have been torn limb from limb."

The elevator operator slammed the door shut and started down with a lurch. Each lurch brought a corresponding lurch in Sarah's stomach. She was sure she'd never make it to the street. Pursing her lips tightly together, pressing the rail so hard the edge made welts in her palms, she squeezed her eyes shut.

When the door opened, she ran outside to the curb as her whole body wrenched in spasm. Out it all came, a sliver of beef, peas, cherries. From the corner of her eye, she saw the couple from the elevator look at her with distaste before driving off in a chauffeured limousine.

Fifth Avenue was curiously deserted and a stillness seemed to have enveloped the city. Springtime smells wafted across from Central Park. Everything was lush and green under the lamplights and the soft park paths beckoned, but she stayed on the safe side, passing the tall buildings guarded by officious-looking doormen. At 96th Street she waited at a red light. So

quiet was the street, she could hear the tick tock of the mechanism that changed the lights.

When it turned green she began to cross. A violent contraction ripped through her body immobilizing her midway, until cars honked at her angrily and she struggled to the other side. Blinded by pain, and not quite knowing why, she kept walking, fast and faster through the dark night until, a street later, she was jolted sharply again, doubling up as pain pierced through her like serrated knives. Suddenly a big gush of water burst out and covered her legs and shoes. *Ob God, not here. Not now.* “Taxi, taxi,” she cried, barely able to lift her arm, but they were all full or had their OFF DUTY signs lit as they whizzed by.

The whole city was deserted, transformed into a Southern town after a lynching. Should she return to Mrs. Contini’s? Life within her kicked in protest. In the distance everything had a surrealist quality; a canopy fluttered as the wind rustled the trees. At her wedding, so many rabbinical relatives were present that four of them had been honored with a pole of the canopy to hold. This canopy, however, was standing unaided. There was something significant about it, but what could it be? Up above a few faint stars were visible in the sky, a rarity in New York City.

Taking her shawl, she stuffed it between her legs, trying to absorb the still oozing amniotic fluids. Knees jammed together, she crept slowly along, even as she once walked down the aisle keeping time to the beat of the wedding march. Each square of cement was a whole city block. Slow and slower she inched her way forward, feeling her mother and father supporting each arm and her sister and brothers and their smiling faces at the end of the aisle. And Shlomo’s face—solemn and expectant under the canopy. Shooting pains in her legs further delayed her progress. After twenty one cement squares, she stopped short.

There in front of her was the blue and white canopy of her hospital. Mt. Sinai, she’d reached Mt. Sinai.

The lobby was empty; strewn magazines and candy wrappers on chairs and couches testified to the life there shortly before. Now a big silent void faced Sarah again, broken only by the ticking of a large clock. The receptionist—who a sign identified as Miss Nichols—was busy inserting a cord at the switchboard, and did not see Sarah cross the lobby to stand panting uncertainly at the counter. “Na, the big rush’s over,” she said into her mouth-piece, “the place is deader’n a doornail—”

As a strangled groan escaped from Sarah, the receptionist swiveled around to stare at her through thick-lensed glasses. “Where’s your suitcase? Didn’t the doctor tell you to have a suitcase ready?”

Sarah stared at her uncomprehendingly.

“You speak English—*Habla ingles?*”

“Yes,” Sarah replied, finding her voice, “but I was walking—”

Miss Nichols lifted an eyebrow. “For Chrissake, you walked to the hospital?”

“We-ell, I didn’t expect to, but—”

“Where’s your husband?”

“He’s in Europe.”

Up went the eyebrow again. “Didn’t you let him know?”

Sarah’s lips trembled. “We-ell he’s in France...he’s traveling right now.”

“How about your parents?”

“There’s only my mother, and she lives in Canada.”

“Don’t you want to phone her?”

“I can’t phone her because she doesn’t answer the phone on the Sabbath.”

“Not even when you’re having a baby?”

“Look, Miss Nichols,” Sarah cried, water trickling down her legs, “how would she know if the phone rang what it was for? She’d think it was a wrong number and wouldn’t answer. One mustn’t desecrate...” A stabbing pain in her vitals. “Look—”

“Now SEE HERE,” Miss Nichols cried, as a burst of green viscous fluid burst from Sarah’s mouth to the floor.

“I’m sorry,” Sarah said, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, “I just can’t—”

“Take it easy, for Chrissakes. I’ll have to get the maintenance people and they won’t like it a bit.” She rang the button repeatedly but there was no answer. “Damn, they’re never where they’re supposed to be.” She inserted another cord and received an immediate response. “Dr. Bader, please come to the lobby.” She listened to the doctor’s protests as a light began to flash on the board. “Look, somebody has to come—” She quickly unplugged and replugged a cord over the flashing light. “Hello...yes, I know Mike, but I had Dr. Bader on the other wire. I’ve got a big mess up here. For Chrissakes, get up here on the double.”

While the clock loudly ticked and then chimed eleven times, Sarah resignedly stood rooted in the same spot. She was almost surprised when a bespectacled intern placed her on a wheelchair, helped her fill out the hospi-

Model: Bethany Rand



tal admission form, called her doctor, and carted her away.

From across the room came the sound of steady moaning like a distant Greek chorus. Sarah tried not to listen. She lay down carefully on her side, happy at the thought that she would soon be able to change from this one position. And happy to say goodbye permanently to those soaking clothes and cutting brassiere.

The shot of Demerol was just what she had needed. God was in his heaven; all was right with her world. School was out. *No more teachers, no more books, no more teachers' dirty looks.* She was lying on a beach enjoying the first hot sun of summer.

The wall clock tensed up and then struck two. She could hear two nurses conversing, words floating by. *Yes, it's over...they're gone now...finito...imagine a Jewish judge—and a rabbi is comforting him...court Jews...Uncle Hymies, you mean, both of them.*

From the distance, a black wave approached Sarah. At first it didn't even seem the wave was meant for her but, as it came closer, she saw, too late, it was heading directly her way and she went under. Her belly tensed and hardened. Engulfed in blackness, she somersaulted twice over in the violent convulsion. Down went sunglasses and sunhat.

"Breathe," one of the nurses said, patting her shoulder.

Breathe? Underwater?

Then the wave receded, leaving her awash on shore, taking long gulps of air and grateful to roll over back to her interrupted reverie.

Shlomo was looking at her over his eyeglasses in that professorial way she loved, and all around, as far as the eye could see, mountains stood guard. She stretched her arms overhead and lay sideways, letting her legs drag in the cool blue waters of Brant Lake, straining her face to

the sun like a plant.

A hawk flew over suddenly and created a shadow across the sun. The bird kept circling directly in the sun's path and, with a shiver, Sarah tried to row the boat away. The hawk anticipated her every movement and she turned to Shlomo for help, but he was no longer there.

A crack of thunder exploded right on top of her; waves tossed the boat high, capsizing it. Unable to hold on any longer, she went into the pain.

A voice in her ear said, "Breathe as you were taught to do. Breathe as you were taught."

Although she tried the short breaths through the mouth trick, her lungs would not obey, and she screamed as two plastic-gloved fingers plunged into her nether regions.

"Hold on there, hold on there," the nurse whispered. "It isn't time yet."

Time? What did that mean? The Sabbath wasn't over?

As the first rays of morning sun glinted through the pitcher of water on the bedside table, she synchronized her breathing with the heart of the clock.

Heaven. Heaven. Heaven. She was skipping double-dutch. *Two hundred, two hundred and two, two hundred and four...* And she wasn't even out of breath. She could skip longer than anyone, floating high above in slow motion. Like a reverse telescope she watched her friends get small and smaller. The smoke curled out of chimney stacks from the tops of houses below and dissolved in

air. Nobody could get near her now. Higher and higher she soared, leaving earthly contamination behind her.

From afar she saw her best friend Anne offering her some chocolate fudge cake and she joined her. Scooping a large piece, she ate slowly, savoring every morsel, leaving the icing for last. Grain by grain, she played with the icing on her tongue and let it slowly melt in her mouth. Total deliciousness. Another piece? She knew she shouldn't, but what the hell, why not?

Because it wasn't the same, that's why not. It was bitter. The vibrations in the room had changed too. Anne had changed. She was dragging her by the sleeve to the front parlor and hitting her. Why? What had she done? Anne, Anne...

But it wasn't Anne. It was Mrs. Contini with a long switchboard cord in her hand. Her brother David was cowering guiltily in the corner and on the floor the ormolu clock was smashed into pieces and ticking spasmodically. Why was she pointing that big finger at her? A manicured finger with a certain stiffness in the joints which suggested that while the hand could still claw, it could no longer caress.

"I didn't do it, I didn't do it," she screamed. Down came the cord with a stinging blow on her back. "I didn't do it," she sobbed, wishing she had so she could confess and have done with it.

Mrs. Contini came toward her again, but now she was her old self again. Instead of a cord, she held a towel and mopped the sweat from her forehead. "I didn't do it," she cried. "I swear I didn't..."

"There, there now," she whispered near her ear. The nurse was big and friendly and when she smiled, Sarah saw the flesh inside her mouth was rosy and dewy. She reminded her of her mother as she stroked her cheek. Sarah rubbed her face against the soft down of her arm. "It's hard work, child. That's why it's called being in labor. You have to push, push, push hard. Let the baby go free. You have to give it all you've got." With her rubber gloved hand she again probed into Sarah's body. "Y'gotta work hard, Sarah. As hard as you've ever done in your life."

A bolt of fear shot through her. "But it's the Sabbath—I can't work on the Sabbath. Don't make me. It's a sin...a—"

"Nonsense, my child. It's not a sin. On the contrary, it's a *mitzvab*."

She was in true labor now. But apparently this kind of labor was permitted. This was an act of God. Strange world where you can't get insurance for acts of God yet could for acts of Man. Yes, it was a *mitzvab*—a credit in His holy ledger in which all our deeds were recorded. But you could never know for sure. Even when you were positive, along came a different rabbi with a differing interpretation. As soon as you were sure of something, the rule always changed. All those exceptions in Hebrew. The feminine became masculine and masculine became feminine and when it came to the plural, forget it. No logic applied as to which did what to whom or why.

She was sitting in the torture chamber known as Hebrew School. How she hated not being able to be out playing like the other kids, especially now that the days were getting shorter and soon it would be winter. But no, they were studying Genesis again. God had created the earth and heaven in six days and the seventh day was to be a day of rest. Mr. Shkop kept look-



ing at her for some reason. A day of rest. “Right, Sarah?” She nodded her head but a familiar pain had knotted her stomach. Now he was talking about Cain and Abel. The mark of Cain is really not a bad thing. It was misinterpreted. In fact, whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. Mr. Shkop raised a fist. Seven-fold...do you understand? Cain was a penitent sinner. A

prodigal son, you might say.

Sarah’s hand shot up. They like when you ask questions. “Mr. Shkop,” she paused, her heart jumping as all eyes turned toward her in the now silent room. “If God likes a penitent so much, why should people be good all their lives?”

Silence greeted her. She smiled tentatively at Rosie and Dinah and Anne, but they turned stony backs to her. She had gone too far. She hadn’t meant it the way it sounded. It reminded her of the way David could always twist the meaning of her words and get her into trouble.

Mr. Shkop’s dark eyes enlarged. Sarah knew that look when his neck and face turned beet purple. Banging on his desk violently, he shoved his chair back with a jagged scraping sound. “Sarah, come here.”

Afraid to look at him, she squinted her eyes. Mr. Shkop was in a courtroom dressed in black judicial robes and waved a ruler at her. She didn’t want him to hit her over her hands with it as he once had done. The other time her hand shook with fright but he caught it and held it firmly. The ruler had come down full force over her knuckles and the tingling pain in her burning hand had remained for days. She could feel it now.

But it wasn’t a ruler he held—it was a gavel, and would hurt even more. She tried to put her hands behind her back, but two guards were lift-

ing her on a bed with wheels and pushing her down a corridor.

She wanted to scream *Ob God...my God...Help me*, but the pain was too intense and she had no will power. Suddenly she was lifted under a searing white eyeball. Her feet were strapped into stirrups as the two guards stretched her apart.

They’re going to tear me apart—limb from limb. Crack me open clear down the middle. Mr. Shkop had once broken an apple in two just like that. His teeth had dug into the juicy pulp and then he spat out the seeds. A scream rent the air, as though every particle of flesh had joined in the effort, but Sarah did not realize it came from her. A ticking tocking machine had forced her back to primeval times and she babbled uncontrollably, the pain so fierce it was no longer pain but persistent electric shock waves administered somewhere in the center of that knotted mound.

She pushed so hard a roar went up, hurting her throat and chest and nose and ears until it was all out. All out, all blessedly out as blackness came to meet her and she was tumbling down a mountainside, down, down, down through green shoots and fields of clover and tumbling daisies and clusters of grapes and sounds of cooing birds and running waterfalls and dappled sunlight. The last rays of the Sabbath sun spread over the forest as she landed on soft downy earth.

Somebody was trying to tell her something. Sarah could feel tugging on her arm but she didn’t want to wake just yet. “Can you hear? Can you hear me, Mother? Look at your lovely boy.”

Mother? Mother wasn’t here. Tears scalded her eyes as with a burst she realized who this mother was. She could hear them very well but could not get up the strength to reply. Instead, she made a circle of okay with her thumb and forefinger. From somewhere a long way off, she could hear the cry of a baby and felt the warm weight of her *mitzvah* in the crook of her arm.