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The Grand Sanhedrin That Sits in the Hall of Hewn Stone

At the Meeting of Supreme Grand Chapter held on February 10th 1999 - E Comp Richard A. Crane, Grand Treasurer, gave the following address:

My talk today is based upon historical and Biblical grounds, although the Royal Arch and its ritual will of course be in evidence. The various experts are not completely at one on all the historical points, but I have chosen the path that to me seems most reasonable. So let us start by looking back about 2,500 years or so to the Temple days in Jerusalem.

Within the institutional framework of Judaism, the Temple held pride of place. Indeed, even now the Orthodox Jew prays daily for the restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem. However, two other institutions also played important roles in Jewish life --- the Synagogue and the Sanhedrin.

My few words today concern the Grand or Great Sanhedrin. Briefly the relationship of these three institutions, either to other, could be described thus. The Temple was the focus of Jewish national worship with an unrivalled place in Jewish religion. The Synagogue provided the scribes in Jewish life with a local place of worship, but perhaps more importantly, a place of instruction. The Sanhedrin --- for indeed there were several, provided courts of civil and religious law. The Grand Sanhedrin, or rather the two Grand Sanhedrin were the highest courts, one civil and one religious, and met only in Jerusalem.

Traditionally, the Grand Sanhedrin was the Council of Princes and Rulers of the people set up by command of God to assist Moses and the word means, 'the body of elders', Its foundation is recorded in the Bible as follows: (Numbers, Chapter 11)

V16. And the Lord said unto Moses, Gather unto me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom thou knowest to be the elders of the people and officers over them; and bring them into the tabernacle of the congregation, that they may stand there with thee.

V17. And I will come down and talk with thee there: and they shall bear the burden of the people with thee, that thou bear it not thyself alone.

V24. And Moses went out, and told the people the words of the Lord, and gathered the seventy men of the elders of the people, and set them round about the tabernacle.

V25. And the Lord came down in a cloud and spake unto him, and gave it unto the seventy elders; and it came to pass, that, when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied and did not cease.

Originally, therefore, the Sanhedrin consisted of seventy members, plus Moses; a total of seventy-one, not the seventy-two mentioned in our Ritual. However, as the High Priest was President of both Sanhedrins, it was necessary to appoint a Vice-President, the 'ab set din' or Father of the Court (Zugot). Thus the number increased to seventy-two. You will recall --- 'I place in your hand this Standard which you will ever have the right to bear unless seventy-two of the elders are present'.

Now I have referred to the fact that there were two Grand, or Great, Sanhedrins. The first was aristocratic in character and was the highest political or civil authority, the Supreme Court. There was no gradation of rank, but a committee of ten were senior to their colleagues. They met originally in one of the Chambers of the Temple to invest their civil discussion with apparent religious authority. But it was a secular Sanhedrin and the High Priest, as already stated, acted as President. In that it was a criminal court, it ran a police force and could pass the sentence of death. This court ceased to exist when the Jewish state finished with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans under Titus in A.D.70.

The second Great Sanhedrin was in charge of all matters religious. Its proper name was 'Sanhedrin Gedolah Hayoshebet Be-lishkat Ha Gazit' which being interpreted means 'The Great Sanhedrin which sits in the Hall of Hewn Stone'. It was more familiarly called 'The Bet Din', and I will refer to it as such.

This was the Sanhedrin that originated at the time of Moses. The hall of hewn stone was, of course, the Temple at Jerusalem.

The business of the Bet Din was to deal with all Temple matters such as the supervision of the Temple service according to Mosaic Law, which Priest should officiate, and the supervision of especially important ritual acts such as those required on the Day of Atonement --- when the High Priest alone, after many washings and purifications, could enter the Holy of Holies.

The Day of Atonement is the tenth day of the Jewish New Year and is known as Yom Kippur. The High Priest put on a simple white garment and offered a bullock as a sin offering for himself and the priesthood. Then taking coals from the altar, he entered the Holy of Holies and placed incense on the coals, causing a cloud over the Ark of the Covenant. After sprinkling the Mercy Seat (the covering of the Ark of the Covenant) and the Ark itself with the bullock's blood to atone for the priesthood, the High Priest sacrificed a he-goat as a sin-offering for the collective guilt of the priesthood. Again the blood was sprinkled in the Holy of Holies. He then took a second goat and laid his hands upon it and confessed over it the collective sins of the people.

This goat, called the scapegoat, was then driven away into the desert. This lamb or goat thus died for the sins of the Jewish nation as a whole. It is, of course, from whence we derive the word 'scapegoat'.

The Bet Din also had to decide which city was the nearest to a murdered body to properly determine who should bring the sacrifice of atonement to the Temple. It decided harvest tithes. It sat in judgement on women accused of adultery (until, it is recorded, there were too many of them). It arranged the calendar. It provided correct copies of the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament) for the King, and of course, rendered the final decision on all matters of religious law.

Previous to the destruction of the first Temple at Jerusalem, the Bet Din was convened for only special occasions. However, the need to issue and debate religious precedent and regulations brought reform. After the return to Jerusalem to build the second Temple, this Sanhedrin became a regularly constituted authority. The first convocation was recorded as being assembled by Ezra and Nehemiah and is called within Jewish scholastic tradition, 'The Great Synagogue'. It eventually became a standing body meeting daily in the Temple except on Sabbaths and Feast Days.

Originally the members were priests who belonged to prominent families under the presidency of the high Priest. But it is also recorded that the Grand Sanhedrin was eventually made up of the High Priests, which included the Acting High Priest and former High Priests, the elders of the people, and the Priesthood and Scribes. Rather like our Chapter committees.

Now an elder who defied rabbinical law --- the Rabbis interpretation of the Law of Moses, committed a capital offence. He had three hearings:

The FIRST at the foot of the hill on which the Temple was built, known as the Holy Mount Moriah.

The SECOND at the entrance court of the Temple.

The THIRD hearing was in the granite corridor of the Temple in front of the Grand Sanhedrin.

If found guilty, pardon was not possible and death was by strangulation. Note that, as in our Chapter, there were no female members of the Sanhedrin. In fact, according to Rabbinical teaching, a Jew ought to render thanks to God daily for three things:

Firstly that he is a Jew,

Secondly, that he is not ignorant of the Law, and

Thirdly, that he is not a woman.

Strict Orthodox Jews pray thus even today.

Please accept that compared with other tribes all those years ago, the Jews were very advanced in their treatment of women. Nevertheless, in the Ten Commandments given to Moses, women were amongst a husband's chattels. They had to stay behind gratings or in the woman's gallery of the Synagogue and could not progress beyond the woman's court of the Temple. This is surely the key to our all-male assemblies within Freemasonry.

With the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in A.D.70 this Sanhedrin continued as the Academy of Jabneh. The Sanhedrin, at Jabneh and then later at Babylon, ceased in A.D.425 there have been abortive or short-lived attempts to revive it in modern times.

Indeed, Companions, an interesting example took place in France:

Napoleon, in restructuring the French legal system, posed the French Jews a series of questions. They convened in 1807 a Sanhedrin which successfully answered the questions and allowed integration of the Jews within the French law. They met three times only. Pictures of it show three men sitting at the head as, indeed, does the only other somewhat romantic picture of an ancient Sanhedrin that I came across. The Sanhedrin also had a council of three elders which determined the calendar. So perhaps our three principals have a historical foundation.

Today, local 'Bet Din', local courts, meet all over the world to judge disputes and to control the sacred slaughter, the 'koshering', of animals for the Jews. You may well see 'under Bet Din control' over a Jewish butcher's shop.

In ancient times, membership of the Sanhedrin was very strict.

Various qualifications for membership have been listed by several writers. Members must have filled three local offices of gradually increasing importance. They were required to possess scholarship, modesty and popularity with their fellow men. Another writer required them to be strong and courageous and yet another that they must be tall, of imposing appearance and of advanced age, they must be well-learned and understand foreign languages as well as some of the arts of divination.

One wonders if divination refers to the use of the Urim and Thummin, two flat objects held in the High Priest's breastplate and used for giving guidance to the people. Sadly, the method of using them is not recorded.

Business was transacted according to a certain order with a formal agenda and a strict balloting procedure with a total of 71 votes not 72. All 71 members had to vote so that there was always a decision. The members sat in a semi-circle (the form of a Catenarian Arch) in order that they might see one another. They were served by two official scribes and a further three benches of scribes sat in front of them in order of seniority.

After the Babylonian exile, the scribes, generally of certain families, were bound together in guilds. Their task was to preserve the Law of Moses, both written and oral, to teach the law and to administer free of charge to the Grand Sanhedrin. One might say 'Lectors, expounders of the Sacred Law and attendants on the Grand Sanhedrin'. The scribes made their living in helping the ordinary people with their business transactions, particularly in property and marriage.

Companions, I have but skipped on the surface of the history and scholarship available, but the fact that the Bet Din met only in the Hall of Hewn Stone at Jerusalem, together with its functions, procedures, progressive offices, its restriction to seventy-two all male members, and its close association with the names of Ezra and Nehemiah, leads to the obvious conclusion that the Sanhedrin Gedolah Hayoshebet Be-lishkat Ha Gazit or the Great Sanhedrin which sits in the Hall of Hewn Stone is indeed the body we would equate to the Third or Grand and Royal Lodge. It exercised priestly, prophetic and national leadership all of which point to the Kingly, Sacerdotal and Prophetic dispensations.

Today we sit as an interesting replication of that ancient body within our own Chapter convocations. Within this supreme degree through historical and biblical connections the Sanhedrin Gedolah Hayoshebet Be-lishkat Ha Gazit lives on.

Now Companions, we have seen that in Temple times, the Priests acted collectively on behalf of both themselves and of the people. The best example of this is the 'scapegoat' that died for the collective sins of the whole of the people.

However, today it is accepted that we all hold the responsibility for our own lives and our own actions individually.

Companions, the Royal Arch, with its beautiful ritual, remind us clearly of that individual responsibility.

Instead, therefore, of being Princes and Rulers of the people, we endeavour to become Princes and Rulers of our own lives and actions. In the addresses on the Principal's robes, the beautiful colours of the Royal Arch thus direct our attention:

Firstly, to universal beneficence and charity. We are reminded that in the heart of man they should be as expansive as the blue arch of heaven.

Secondly, that purple should remind us to avoid discord, and make harmony and union our constant aim.

And finally, that crimson, the emblem of fervency and zeal, reminds us that we should act with that fervency and zeal in our devotions to God and in our endeavours to promote the welfare of man.

Companions, we are instructed that, by a faithful discharge of these our duties, when at last the King of Kings shall summon us into His immediate presence, from His hands we may receive a crown of glory that shall never fade.

Sanhedrin Gedolah Hayoshebet Be-lishkat Ha Gazit, the Great Sanhedrin which sits in the Hall of Hewn Stone is, I believe, symbolically within the Royal Arch, none other Companions than yourself.