

PART OF THE FLORENCE SHRINE RITUAL THAT WAS DISCONTINUED

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Very old Mecca Shrine Divan (Officer) jewel,
originally owned by Mecca Member # 4645

Many people are aware that William J. "Billy" Florence was a popular American actor of the 19th Century. His travels took him to numerous continents and he was internationally acclaimed. According to his own account, he was in Marseilles, France, on one of his tours when he was invited by an Arabian diplomat who knew he (Florence) was a Mason to an elegant costume party. The exotic Near East-themed party impressed Billy Florence who, although gifted with a splendid memory to remember, rehearse, and act various theater scenes --- was so impressed that by his own admission, he made "copious notes" of the ceremony, full of elaborate costumes, passwords, action, intrigue and culminated in suspense by the solemnity of the Ritual (which later became the Official Ritual of the Shrine Ritual) which he {Billy Florence} handed to his friend Dr. Walter M. Fleming, 33^o and a Past Commander of Columbian Commandery #1 of New York City.

In 1870, Florence and Fleming and 11 of their closest friends regularly gathered at 12:13 PM at a famous restaurant known as Knickerbocker Cottage on 6th Avenue in New York City. They were caught-up in the so-called "Craze of 13" which prevailed after the U.S. Civil War triumph by the North, which commemorated the original 13 Colonies and the upcoming Centennial of the United States which, then, was only a few years away in 1876.

Mecca Shrine held its first formal meeting September 26, 1872. The Imperial Council's official seal of its inauguration as the international governing body is dated June 6, 1876.

The Mystic Shrine was laid out by Fleming and Florence and their eleven other cohorts to be a gentleman's fraternity. It had the original prerequisites of a candidate being either a Knight Templar of the York Rite of Freemasonry and/or 32^o Mason in Scottish Rite Masonry. For decades, membership in BOTH RITES was preferred. However, the prerequisite was changed in the year 2000, eliminating the necessity to join either Rite and simply permit Master Masons of the Third Degree to petition for Shrine membership. Speaking for myself, I believed in the desirability of both Rites (if possible), since in the opinion of the Shrine's co-Founders, Dr. Fleming and Billy Florence, along with the noted Masonic Ritualist, Charles T. McClenachan: it gave a semblance of "relaxation from serious Ritual" for the Oriental flavor gave great appeal to prospective members. Walter Fleming even described it as mirth combined with "regal splendor."



Some people have the misconception that The Shriners' Organization is Islamic --- not so !!! The words 'Arabic' and 'Islamic' are not synonymous. Granted, the Arabs constituted a heavy majority of Muslim adherents. However there ARE "Arab Christians" and "Arab Jewish Tribes." This misconception occurs when uninformed people read "Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine" and then jump to conclusions.

When William J. "Billy" Florence was invited to that Near east-themed party, few people {except ardent Historians} are aware that it was a costume party. Being held in France, it had a festival atmosphere similar to today's "Mardi Gras" festivals complete with masks for party-goers. The parallels don't end there. Both the festival of Mardi Gras and the Mystic Shrine's festivities used masks not to 'conceal', but to 'break-down social barriers' and stigmas. This appealed to Billy Florence when he saw that Social Classes literally "met on the level" and stigmas or prejudices among Jews, Christians and Islamic adherents were non-existent. This costume-party supposedly induced all attendees into a "secret-society" ---- but one based on commonality, universal kindness, and not exclusionary.

A great majority of North American Masons in the year 1872, were of a Judeo-Christian heritage. It is commonly known that The Holy Bible is considered one of "the Great Lights" which guide our lives. Many Masons are familiar with Leviticus 19:19 -- "Ye shall keep my statutes.....thou shalt not sow thy field with mingled seed: neither shall a garment mingled of linen and woolen come unto thee."

I consulted a wide variety of theologians: Christian, Jewish and Islamic. It seems that the Ceremony of "Burning the Prohibited Garment" occurred in ancient Judaism, dating back to the times of The High Priests of the Temple, circa the year 70 BCE. Apparently, at the costume party in Marseilles, France, that Billy Florence attended prior to 1870 was a dramatic "re-enactment" of the Burning of the Prohibited Garment. Billy Florence, being an excellent artist as well as an actor, not only made "copious notes", but also detailed diagrams which were re-printed in Frank Leslie's Illustrated Magazine in the year 1885, some six year before Florence's death.

Jemi Mansfield told me that the illustration published in Frank Leslie's Illustrated "is a Masonic ritual -- not something practiced in this manner in Judaism since the time of the Temple(s)." She also noted that "the Masons/Shriners have all sorts of rituals" most of which the "non-members would never hear of." In this case: the Ceremony of "the Burning of the Prohibited Garment" has been discontinued for over 116 years. She cited The Hebrew Bible with a very similar but slightly different wording in Leviticus 13:57 --

"If {the mark} then appears again in the {same} cloth, wrap or woof {thread} of leather item, it is infected, and {the article} having the mark must be burned in fire."

Ms. Mansfield noted that "while you don't hear much about shatnez, it is still a real issue for the ultra Orthodox in Israel.

By contrast, I received a response from the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania which states unequivocally: "We have never heard of this practice before; it does not exist in the Islamic tradition."



There is speculation which supports the viewpoint that this was an re-creation or re-enactment done in the year 1885 of "burning the High Priest's garments" when they got old or tattered Again, alluding to the time period of The Temple around the year 70 BCE. Rabbi Abby Jacobson, of Emanuel Synagogue, in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, looked at the illustrations and told me: "That's definitely not a Jewish casket..." She noted that "Jewish caskets don't have metal on them like that and never have. Also, very few rabbis have worn mitres like that, though some definitely have." Rabbi Jacobson said that Jews are commanded not to be wasteful. In modern times, any offensive or prohibited cloth in, say a man's suit collar, would simply be removed and given to a non-Jew.

However, there are conflicting theories. I contacted Rabbi David Rosen, of Congregation Beth Yeshurun, in Houston, Texas. He told me that the old traditional process to detect shatnez {the prohibited combination of wool and linen} was "by burning a piece of the fabric in an alcohol lamp" although in modern times, examination of questionable garments is "by using a low-power microscope". When I asked if an 'urn' might be used as a receptacle for catching the burnt ashes of the tested fabric. The Rabbi indicated that this sounds "plausible."

This view was corroborated when I contacted the Jewish Congregation of Sheffield, England. I was informed that the Rabbi said that "anything impure would be burned if it was impure not only clothes."

Interestingly, goat-hair is NOT forbidden. It is not considered Shatnez. Most people are surprised that a garment made out of a blend of linen and either mohair or cashmere is not Shatnez. What is the rationale? It is because neither mohair nor cashmere is made from sheep's wool, but from the hair of goats. Mohair is processed from the hair of an angora goat. Although goats of this variety are now raised worldwide, the breed originated in Turkey. The current capital city of Ankara, Turkey -- was formerly called 'Angora'. Cashmere is the name of the wool of the Kashmir goat, originally native to central Asia as the name implies. Therefore, if no sheep's wool thread is mixed into the mohair or the cashmere, the existence of linen in the garment will NOT make it Shatnez. Therefore such garments are acceptable.

Since its inception, the Mystic Shrine, has had at its emblem: The Two Tiger Claws united by the keystone. Upon the keystone is a Sphinx-head. Above the crescent is the Scimitar; and suspended beneath the crescent is the Star of Bethlehem. Interestingly, in nearly all old Shrine Center archives is the mention that on the reverse side of original Shrine Potentate Jewels as well as Divan Jewels was a Pyramid and 'urn' (as depicted in the top photograph at the beginning of this presentation).

One of the more prominent Officer positions in any Shrine Center's "Elected Divan" is the officer bearing the title "High Priest and Prophet." The origin of this office was undoubtedly inspired by the High Priest designated as the title of the presiding officer in a Royal Arch Chapter in York Rite Masonry. Many scholars {including myself} erroneously assumed the latter half of the Shrine title 'High Priest and Prophet' was a historical reference to the Muslim Prophet Mohammed. From all indications, it refers to the ancient Jewish 'Prophets' such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses. I wish to make it clear that no officer in any branch of Masonry or Shrinedom assumes an ecclesiastical role. The 'title' is purely 'symbolic' and comparable to the ancient stonemasons building King Solomon's Temple. Much of Masonry is "veiled in allegory illustrated by symbols."



The 2nd Shrine Temple to be organized in North America {after Mecca Temple # 1, in New York City}, was Damascus Shrine Center in Rochester, New York. Local Masons wanted to name it "Genesee Shrine Temple," but Dr. Walter M. Fleming objected since that name had origins referring both to a river and to India. Fleming wanted some 'Arabic' {meaning Near East} name for that Shrine Temple. Finally, the name 'Damascus' was chosen since it appears in both The Holy Bible and The Koran {Qur'an}. It is the capital of modern-day Syria which was once part of ancient Phoenicia as was the area near Tyre, Lebanon {although the City/Kingdom of Tyre retained self-government}. Hence, the Shrine candidate may see the various holy books: The Bible, The Koran, and The Veda, the scriptures held sacred to Hindus; but this in no way is a "practicing of Religion", but rather an illustration of how good men of different faiths can come together to form friendships. A friendship-society simply means being courteous to your fellow man. It does not imply any attempt to 'convert' his religious beliefs nor intrude upon his freedom to think and govern his life according to his own personal faith-system.

Freemasonry has members of various religious Faiths who keep their Faith unchanged in their hearts. Those men {past and present} have found a mutual friendship society that lets them widen their circle of acquaintances and associates. Some have been devout Jews such as Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, David Sarnoff, Harry Houdini, Al Jolson, and cinema film producer Louis B. Mayer---among many others. Bro:. (and Shrine Noble) Mayer helped found the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences which is famous for bestowing its yearly Academy Awards or "Oscars."

Walter Fleming and Billy Florence were faithful Freemasons who had achieved high stature in the Blue Lodge as well as in both major Masonic Rites. Yet, they wanted a diverse adjunct to the Fraternity that would showcase Masonry to the outside world. Whereas basic Masonic Ritual was largely confined to the Lodge Room or stage for portrayal --- The Shrine Ritual was (and is) so elaborate that it often extends beyond the confines of even the largest of Lodge Rooms to spread good cheer ---- at parades, at circuses, and to help cheer crippled and burned children inside the renowned Shriners Hospitals. The phrase "Spreading the Sunshine of the Shrine" didn't apply solely to members only. The clowns, the Shriners in miniature cars, the marching bands, the drill-teams, the football games and the wearing of the Red Fez in the outside world became almost as important as wearing the White Lambskin Apron of a Master Mason inside a Lodge Hall. A Mason is taught that there is no degree higher than the Sublime Degree of a Master Mason.

Even though we have the two major Rites: the York Rite and the Scottish Rite; along with a multitude of allied groups {including the so-called 'fun groups such as The Shrine and The Grotto} ---- it must be remembered that Freemasonry exists so that friends can "Meet Upon the Level and Part Upon the Square."

Some additional degrees have been developed; and many have become extinct or dormant. The Mystic Shriner's ceremony of "The Burning of the Prohibited Garment" portrayed actual historical events. However, it had a limited audience who could appreciate its significance. Just like a "stage play", if an audience doesn't "demand its dramatization" ---- it soon ceases its production. From all accounts, The Shriners of North America {now Shriners International} decided to drop any re-creation of this ceremony around the year 1898. It had been championed by men such as Billy Florence, Walter M. Fleming, Augustus Peters, Sam Briggs, and John Worthington. But other men, such as Past Imperial Potentate William B. Melish, 33^o and a Knight Templar decreed the



ceremony to be "humbug".....and urged that its portrayal be placed in 'abeyance' or suspension.

Although no longer portrayed, we, as Masonic Scholars can learn many interesting things from Rituals....even Rituals which have been abandoned and discontinued.

Sources / References / Exhibits / Recommended Readings :

- The Holy Bible (Leviticus 19:19) {Telling of "the prohibited garment"}
- Mecca Shrine Center Archives, New York, New York.
- Damascus Shrine Center Archives, Rochester, New York.
- Al Koran Shrine Center Archives, Cleveland, Ohio. {That Temple was named by Shrine co-Founder Billy Florence}.
- Gizeh Shrine Archives, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada.
website: <http://shriners.bc.ca/gizeh/famous.shtml>
- Personal electronic mail transmission from Noble John McAloon, Divan Member of Mecca Shrine Center, New York City to Frater James A. Marples, VIII^o dated 14 January 2014; AND another communication dated 07 January 2014 attesting that Mecca Jewel #4645 probably dated to years circa 1900.
- William J. Florence drawings of his recollections of the Ceremony of "The Burning of The Prohibited Garment); as re-printed in Frank Leslie's Illustrated Magazine. New York Year 1885.
- Personal electronic mail transmission from Jami Mansfield to Frater James A. Marples, VIII^o, dated 19 February 2014....discussing Shatnez. Lev.13:57 and burning of 'infected' items.,,,specifically the ban on mixing wool and linen in garments. Jami Kostiner Mansfield is Congregational Affairs Director at Congregation Beth Israel in Portland, Oregon.
- Personal electronic mail transmission from the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh (PA) to Frater James A. Marples, VIII^o, dated 18 February 2014....which states no such ceremony exists in Islamic Traditions.
- Personal electronic mail communication from Rabbi Abby Jacobson, Rabbi at Emanuel Synagogue, 900 N.W. 47th Street, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, to Frater James A. Marples, VIII^o, dated 17 February 2014.
- Personal electronic mail transmission from Dr. Edward Mazur to Frater James A. Marples, VIII^o, dated 11 February 2014. Referring to Shatnez testing. {He notes that even today "people are specifically trained to detect the mixing of fibers."}
- Personal electronic mail transmission from Cantor Regina Heit, of Temple Emanuel, Denver, Colorado to Frater James A. Marples, VIII^o, dated 11 February 2014, whereby she notes that the ceremony may have been a "Community Custom" and that "sometimes "culture becomes ritual."
- Website : Yeshiva <http://www.yeshiva.org.il:5773/midrash/outershur.asp?id=15810>
It notes that goat-hair is not forbidden Shatnez.
- Personal electronic mail communication from Sheffield Jewish Congregation and Centre {Sheffied JCC} to Frater James A. Marples, VIII^o, dated 17 February 2014. It cites the Rabbi's view that all impure objects would be burnt, not only clothes.
- Mackey's Encyclopedia of Freemasonry. Allegory and Symbolism in Masonic Officer Titles. {Not a substitute for Religion, nor any implication of worship or veneration derived from such}. In other words: a title is a historical reference and the Mason (or Shriner) is only given depictions of historical events ...and is encouraged to find his spiritual education toward Salvation elsewhere ...be it in the Church/Synagogue/Temple or other House of Worship of his choice. Masonry does not interfere with a man's own Religion nor his Freedom of Conscience.



About the Author:

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Companion and Sir Knight Jim is a Life Member of the Wichita York Rite Bodies (Wichita Chapter #33 R.A.M.; Wichita Council #12 R.& S.M.; and Mt. Olivet Commandery #12 K.T.). He is also a Life Member of the Lincoln Nebraska Scottish Rite Bodies; The Robert-the-Bruce Association (California); The George Washington Masonic Stamp Club; Masonic Order of the Gordian Knot (Indiana); Masonic Order of the Sword of Bunker Hill; Kentucky Chapter #134 of National Sojourners and Heroes of '76; North Texas York Rite College #118 of Sherman, Texas; and Nebraska College S.R.I.C.F.

He is a Regular Member of The Allied Masonic Degrees; Grand College of Rites; St. David Conclave of The Red Cross of Constantine; Shawnee County Kansas Square and Compass Club; and Holyrood Council #61 of Knight Masons (Nebraska).

