



SHABBAT SERMON

Jonathan Magonet

I never know in advance of the Bible Week what subject I will find for the Shabbat sermon. I will sometimes check on the Torah reading beforehand, but prefer to feel my way into the Week and the texts that we are studying. Perhaps something will jump out as a possible theme. This year, while preparing Psalm 77, one particular verse did precisely that. *Ezkerah n'ginati ba-layla, im-l'vavi asichah vay'chapes ruchi*. I remember my melody in the night, in my heart I meditate and my spirit goes searching. (Psalm 77:7)

Rashi, on this verse, assumes that the Psalmist in exile is remembering how he used to play music in the Temple. That was his '*n'ginah*', his special melody. But the verse also brought to mind an anecdote from the memoirs of Zalman Shazar, former President of the State of Israel. He had come from a Chasidic family, and at some point left home to go to study. Before leaving he visited his teacher who said to him. 'You know the *niggun*, the special melody, of our Rebbe. When you are away from here, always keep that melody in mind. Because if, one day, you cannot remember it, then you know that you should do *teshuvah*, repentance.' It would be as if he had lost some essential part of his spiritual identity in the experiences and temptations of the world.

This led me to wonder what was my own 'melody', *n'ginati*, that I would want always to remember as a way of keeping my own orientation in the world. One possibility came to mind at once. Next week the Torah reading is from *parashat 'reh'*, which was my barmitzvah portion. My memories of that event are not particularly positive. I belonged to an Orthodox synagogue in south London where we had to pass a barmitzvah test, and then had to learn to chant a section from the Torah scroll. I had had enormous difficulties mastering the Hebrew, mostly because I was very shy and hated to read aloud in public. If pressed I would break down in tears so that in the end it was decided that it was not possible for me to read from the scroll in synagogue on the day, just recite the blessings. But my father insisted that I should learn to chant the *haftarah*, the prophetic portion, and he taught it to me, using the melody that he had learnt as a child in a very orthodox family in a small town in Canada. Just to make things worse, the melody that he was using was different from the standard one taught at my synagogue, so I was even more uncomfortable as I had to master two different melodies, one for the reading and one for the blessings recited before and after. I was a mess! Somehow I got through the ordeal, but when I came to the strange idea of becoming a rabbi it took many years before I could overcome the mental block about reading or reciting Hebrew in public.

My father had insisted that I learn to chant the *Haftarah*, because he pointed out that in the orthodox world that he knew it was very unlikely that I would ever have to read from the Torah scroll, but it was quite possible to be invited to chant the *Haftarah*. Next week, as part of the cele-

brations of my seventieth birthday, I have been invited to read the *Haftarah* at Finchley Reform synagogue, and I hope to do a better job than I did fifty-seven years ago. So perhaps this is my *n'ginah*, my special melody that I have to remember in order to check where I am existentially.

And yet I do not think so. It carries a certain emotional weight, though to be honest, there are some notes I cannot quite remember, but somehow it does not speak to me directly. But having said that, perhaps next week when I chant it again, it will have an effect.

So what is my melody? I think that my answer must be more self-indulgent, and I apologise for putting myself into the centre of this sermon. Because it has been my peculiar good fortune at a certain time in my life to have written a number of songs. I say 'written', but the experience was rather different. The words somehow came and flowed into me, and I felt that my task was only to tidy them up and polish them. I always considered myself first and foremost to be a writer of words, but fortunately, as I strummed the few guitar chords I had learnt, some kind of melody seemed to fit them. I was rather startled when a musician friend asked me if I had ever considered that I might actually be a composer. So maybe in that collection of songs, most of them written or composed some forty years ago, is my *n'ginah*, my own special melody.

There are a few songs that might qualify. One of them, *Cavalcade*, is about the various spiritual teachers who have had an important influence on me, and in a way it has become my signature tune when I have sung in public. Though, to let you into a secret, I like to begin with it because the guitar chords are easy and the vocal range not too great. There is also a song about Sisters, that might be the one, as it is very much tied to the history of this Bible Week. But if any one of them in particular speaks to my own journey it is the song that I composed shortly after graduating from Leo Baeck College. The date on it reads 11th August 1971 and it was begun in Jerusalem and finished during a Bible Week in Bendorf. So it sort of qualifies as an ancient text worthy of study.

And it ain't no consolation just to know I'm doing fine
Just to know I'm doing well, it brings no comfort to my mind.
'Cos I know the game too well and it's an easy one to win
But whereabouts exactly does my life really begin?

I have heard with perfect hearing all the stories I can take
All the stories I can make to help the hours pass away.
But the music is too moody and it hurts too much to smile
And what's the use pretending it can last more than a while.

It's a funny sort of feeling living on the edge of doubt
Living on the edge of shouting all the failure I can see
But what's the point of showing what is on the other side?
Humility may only be another name for pride.

There's another sort of journey that is waiting very near
That is waiting very clearly for the moment to arrive.
But will I then be ready when the final round is played?
Is this the fear of heaven or am I just afraid?

Ezkerah n'ginati ba-layla, im-l'vavi asichah vay'chapes ruchi. I remember my melody in the night, in my heart I meditate and my spirit goes searching. (Psalm 77:7)

And it ain't no consolation just to know I'm doing fine,
Just to know I'm doing well it brings no comfort to my mind.
'Cos I know the game too well and it's an easy one to win
But whereabouts exactly does my life really begin?

