



SHABBAT SERMON

Jonathan Magonet

Psalm 109 is labelled as one of the 'imprecatory' Psalms, full of curses against the Psalmist's enemies and therefore distinctly unsuitable for inclusion in the Hebrew Bible. But I am quite satisfied that the bulk of the curses in the Psalm, from verse 6 to verse 19, are actually quoting the words the enemies have used against the Psalmist. This totally changes the way we read and experience the Psalm. We find ourselves standing in the shoes of someone constantly attacked and abused verbally, and even physically threatened. In the present social climate, where hatred is spewed out daily on the internet, this Psalm deserves recognition for the warning it gives and the empathy with the victim that it evokes.

It is possible to read the Psalm's opening verses as a sequence of increasingly worsening stages. 'For the voice of the wicked and the voice of the deceitful have opened against me. They have spoken to me the language of falsehood.' (109:2). We can imagine the circumstances that could lead to this outcry, the betrayal of trust or of love, discovered too late. But the next phrase is quite chilling. *'v'divrei sin'ah s'avavuni vayillachamuni chinam'*. 'And words of hatred surround me and they attack me for no reason.' (109:3). Given the current political scene, these words take on a disturbing immediacy. Whenever there is an escalation of hate language it is inevitable that the next step will include acts of violence against the individual or group that has been targeted. So self-evident is this inevitability to the Psalmist that the language itself expresses it through a word-play. The verb *'lacham'*, 'to fight', 'to do battle', merges seamlessly with *'chinam'* which means 'for no reason', 'without any justification'. *'vayillachamuni chinam'* 'they violate without valid cause'.

The Psalm itself begins with an appeal to God: 'O God of my praise, be not silent.' And this silence of God led me to explore how this last section of the Book of Psalms could have come to such a despairing and bitter place after its triumphant opening.

Psalm 107 describes four situations of danger from which God has rescued people. The ending of the Psalm promises that this is how it will always be: 'Whoever is wise, let him observe these things, and let them consider the mercies of the Lord.' (107:43). But the very next Psalm confronts the opposite situation. The Psalmist begins: 'My heart is steadfast, O God, I will sing and bring praises, even with my whole being.' (108:2). But it is clear that the Psalmist is facing a national disaster where it seems that God has abandoned the people. So distressing is this accusation against God that the Psalmist may have felt it necessary to borrow words from an earlier Psalm to justify the complaint. 'O God, have You not cast us off!' (108:12, 60:12). The experience of being supported or of being abandoned by God is one theme of these Psalms, affecting both the nation and the individual.

With this background we are now prepared for the bitterness and distress of Psalm 109. However, the silence of God, about which the Psalmist has complained is now answered in Psalm 110 by a divine oracle and a divine oath. Despite the obscurity of some of its imagery and language, the Psalm ends with a triumphant military promise, that God will execute judgment against the nations.

Having restored faith in God's providence, Psalms 111 and 112 offer a kind of formal, pious, reassurance. The former proclaims the righteousness and compassion of God. The latter offers a complementary image of the ideal righteous man, who shares with God the identical qualities: *tsidkato omedet l'ad*, 'his righteousness stands forever' (111:3, 112:3,9), and '*channun v'rachum*', 'compassionate and merciful' (111:4, 112:4). The certainty expressed in these Psalms is reinforced by the common use of the alphabetic acrostic, suggesting the completeness and perfection of the twin images. If we are still disturbed by the bitter experience of the author of Psalm 109, Psalm 112 ends with the promise that 'the wicked will see the success of the righteous and be angered, he will gnash his teeth and melt away; the desire of the wicked shall perish.' (112:10). Perhaps as a fitting conclusion to this section, Psalm 113 acts as a kind of doxology, praising God who, though located in heaven, descends to intervene positively in the life of people.

What we experience if we read these Psalms sequentially is a profound inner struggle about divine providence. On the one hand are the promises of the wisdom tradition that right conduct will ensure personal success, and the spiritual tradition that God stands with Israel and rescues them from distress. But on the other hand, the honesty of the Biblical record demands that we also recognize the bitter reality of sufferings, struggles and defeats of individuals and of the nation itself. The two positions are juxtaposed and so far, each seeming problem has been resolved, or at least countered. But life is never so simple, and nothing in life is guaranteed. Perhaps that is why two of the major Psalms that are contained in the Hallel, confront this reality, each in its own way.

Psalm 116 is the voice of the faithful person, who finding himself close to death, prayed to God and was answered. From his experience he could proclaim the attributes of God: 'Gracious is God and just, our God has compassion. God protects the simple, saving me when I was weak'. (116:5-6). But in a second reflection on his experience he could acknowledge that ultimately, life is not guaranteed: *yakar b'einei Adonai ha-mavta lachasidav*, 'Precious in the sight of God is the death of God's devoted ones.' (116:15). This sentence jars and confuses. As if God suffers that the individual must die and is powerless to intervene in the natural process that God has created. But the solo voice that speaks in Psalm 118 can go a step further. He can recognize in his troubles not only the protection of God but also the role God has played in his suffering itself. *yassor yissrani yah v'lamavet lo nitanani*, 'God has chastened me exceedingly, but did not hand me over to death'. (118:18).

A rabbinic teaching suggests that when suffering comes upon us we should examine our behaviour and see if we have done something that would justify such a punishment. If we cannot find such a cause, we should check whether we had neglected our study of Torah. When this is also ruled out, we are left with a final possibility, that these are '*yissurim shel ahavah*', 'chastisements of love'; that however hard they may be to bear, such experiences belong to God's ultimate concern for our spiritual welfare and growth. Perhaps only in retrospect can we accept such a view, but that is the teaching embedded here in our final Hallel Psalm, an attempt to explain the presence or absence of God in our life at our time of greatest need.

We have gone on a rapid journey through a range of complex and subtle Psalms. The struggle I have indicated remains the ultimate one faced by the religious seeker. The experience of these Psalmists may not be ours, and may we never have to experience the pain, fear and sufferings that some of them describe. But if we can take any comfort, it is from the fact that the Psalmists did survive their experience, could express it honestly, record it and pass it on to give strength and courage to us and to generations yet to come