

THE MUSIC OF MIDNIGHT  
REFLECTIONS ON THE NOAM ELIMELECH 2008  
(YARZHEIT)

"Do you know what King David is all about? Why King David keeps us alive?  
Do you know what King David is all about? Shabbos is over, right. I make havdallah, Shabbos is over. Suddenly I realize, I can't forget about Shabbos. I look around *gevult, gevult*, Shabbos is standing on the other corner. And that feast is even deeper than Shabbos. *Gevult, gevult*, is that deep. Because *gevult* is that deep. So King David gives us strength to keep Shabbos until next Shabbos.

REB SHLOMO CARLEBACH ZTL.

"Affliction makes God appear absent for a time, more absent than a dead man, more absent than light in the utter darkness of a cell. A kind of horror submerges the whole soul. During this absence there is nothing to love....The soul has to go on loving in the emptiness, or at least to want to go on wanting to love...then one day God will come to show Himself to the soul and to reveal the beauty of the world to it, as in the case of Job.

The infinity of time and space separates us from God. How are we to seek Him? God crosses the universe and comes to us. Over the infinity of space and time, the infinitely more infinite love of God comes to possess us. He comes at His own time.

Waiting for God: Simone Weil



**David Schluss Limited Edition Sculpture: " David's Harp "**

Sweet is the day of sacred rest;  
No mortal cares shall seize my breast;  
O may my heart in tune be found  
Like David's harp of solemn sound.

Isaac Watts (1674–1748), British hymn-writer.

In the following texts I would like to present a portrait of mystical theology that might serve as healing texts for those who suffer in silences, who must endure what Simone Weil calls "affliction". She distinguishes between suffering and affliction:

She says that pain is merely physical, and that suffering is both physical and mental, but that "affliction is the pulverization of the soul" (Panichas, p. 462<sup>1</sup>). She says that "affliction by its nature is inarticulate" (Panichas, p.327) and that "human thought is unable to acknowledge the reality of affliction" ( Panichas, p. 332) "It takes possession of the soul and marks it through and through." (Panichas, p. 439) "There is not real affliction unless the event has gripped and uprooted a life attacks it...in all parts, social, psychological and physical. At the very best, he who is branded by affliction will only keep half his soul." ( Panichas, p. 441) Affliction is also a time when we have the chance to be the closest to God, but in a round about way.

"Affliction causes God to be absent for a time, more absent than a dead man... during this absence there is nothing to love... but the soul has to go on loving in the void or at least go on wanting to love... Then, one day, God will come to show himself to this soul....as in the case of Job." (Panichas, p. 442)

In the following texts i see a similar notion, albeit from an oblique reading against the grain, whereby the very body of suffering, through the meditative practices demanded by mystical Judaism, might serve as a paradoxical spiritual opportunity for growth and closeness to the divine. This is seen in the following texts by the Hassidic rebbes of the eighteenth century specifically Rabbi Elimelech of Lizensk and Reb Nachman of Breslov. In their writing about the midnight prayers called tikkun Chazot, they refer the the author of the psalms, King David and his nightly risings to praise God at midnight from psalm 119. From the midrash about the harp suspended over his bed, they wove a beautiful lesson into midnight, suffering, dark night of the soul and the melody that might awaken the spirit of man and hope for recovery.

## THE TEXTS:

### TALMUD BAVLI: BERACHOT 3B.

"But did David know the exact time of midnight? Even our teacher Moses did not know it! For it is written: About midnight I will go out into the midst of Egypt. Why 'about midnight'? Shall we say that the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: 'About midnight'? Can there be any doubt in the mind of God? Hence we must say that God told him 'at midnight', and he came and said: 'About midnight'. Hence he [Moses] was in doubt; can David then have known it? — David had a sign. For so said R. Aha b. Bizana in the name of R. Simeon the Pious: A harp was hanging above David's bed. As soon as midnight arrived, a North wind came and blew upon it and it played of itself. He arose immediately and studied the Torah till the break of dawn."

The commentaries to the Talmud (Berachos 3b) attempt to explain the phenomenon of the harp and the wind. Rav Hai Gaon says that David's harp functioned like a wind gauge or anemometer. At midnight, the wind would come from the north and reach a certain velocity. David's harp was positioned in such a way as to catch this northerly wind and record its speed

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<sup>1</sup> Panichas, George A. (ed.) *Simone Weil Reader*. Moyer Bell Limited. Mt Kisco, New York.1977.

through the vibrations of the harp strings. When the wind reached a certain predetermined velocity, David knew immediately that midnight had arrived.<sup>2</sup>

## EICHAH RABBA II:22

22. ARISE, CRY OUT IN THE NIGHT, AT THE BEGINNING OF THE WATCHES (II, 19). {Lam. 183} Rabbi [Judah ha-Nasi] said: There are four watches in the night and four in the day. An 'onah is the twenty-fourth part of a sha'ah, an 'eth is the twenty-fourth part of an 'onah, and a rega' the twenty-fourth part of an 'eth. How long, then, is a rega'? R. Berekiah said in the name of R. Helbo: The length of time it takes to pronounce the word. The Rabbis said: The twinkling of an eye. Samuel said: A rega' is one 56,548th part of a sha ah.

R. Nathan said: There are three watches in the night. R. Zerika and R. Ammi said in the name of R. Simeon b. Lakish: One verse states, At midnight I will arise to give thanks unto Thee (Ps. CXIX, 62), while another verse states, Mine eyes forestalled the night-watches (ib. 148). How can these two verses be reconciled? R. Hezekiah (another version: R. Zerika) and R. Abba discuss the question. One said that they can be explained on Rabbi's view [that there are four watches in the night], while the other said that they can be explained on R. Nathan's view [that there are three watches in the night]. There is no difficulty for one who accepts Rabbi's view; he who accepts R. Nathan's view [bases it on the occurrence of the phrase] The beginning of the middle watch (Jug. VII, 19). How, then, does R. Nathan explain the phrase 'at midnight'? Sometimes [David arose] 'at midnight', and at other times 'Mine eyes forestalled the night-watches'.

But how did it happen [that David changed the time of his rising]? When David had his meal in private, he ate until the ninth hour, slept until the beginning of the middle {Lam. 184} watch, and then arose to engage in the study of the Torah; but when he had an official meal, he ate until evening, slept until midnight, and then arose to engage in the study of the Torah from midnight onward. In any event, daybreak never found David asleep. That is what David said, "Awake, my glory; awake, psalter and harp; I will awake the dawn" (Ps. LVII, 9), which means, Be awakened, my glory, before the glory of my Creator; my glory is nothing in comparison with the glory of my Creator. 'I will awake the dawn', i.e. I will awaken the dawn and the dawn will not awaken me.

R. Phinehas said in the name of R. Eleazar b. Menahem: There was a harp placed beneath his pillow, and he used to rise and play on it in the night. R. Levi said: A harp was suspended above David's bed, and when the time of midnight arrived a north wind blew upon it so that it produced melody of its own accord. (That is what is stated When the instrument played (II Kings III, 15)--it is not written here, ' when he played on the instrument ' but 'when the instrument played', i.e. the harp played of its own accord.) When David heard its sound, he rose and engaged in study of the Torah; and when the Israelites heard the sound of David engaged in study of the Torah, they used to say, ' If David, king of Israel, is engaged in study of the Torah, how much more should we be!' They forthwith rose and engaged in study of the Torah.

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<sup>2</sup> Rashba describes this harp as a complex apparatus which resembled a water clock. Drops of water were released into a receptacle according to a precise schedule. The drops were released through the night, until at midnight the container was full. The full weight of the receptacle activated a mechanism which automatically strummed the harp strings and awakened David.

## ZOHAR I: 82

R. Isaac said: 'The Scripture tells us that "a river went forth from Eden to water the garden" (Gen. II, 10). It is this river which is the support upon which the world rests. It waters the Garden and causes it to bear fruits which spring up and blossom in the world, and which uphold the world and make possible the study of the Torah. What are these fruits? They are the souls of the righteous which are the fruit of God's handiwork. Therefore every night the souls of the righteous mount on high, and at the hour of midnight the Holy One, blessed be He, comes to the Garden of Eden to disport Himself with them. With which of them? R. Jose said, with all: both with those whose abode is in the other world and with those who are still in their dwellings in this world-with all of them God disports Himself at midnight. For the world on high requires to be stirred by the impulse of the lower world, and so when the souls of the righteous leave this world and mount on high, they all clothe themselves with a supernal light, with a resplendent figure, and God disports Himself with them and delights in them, since they are the fruit of His handiwork, and for this reason Israel who are possessed of holy souls are called sons to the Holy One, blessed be He, as it is written, "Ye are sons to the Lord your God" (Deut. XIV, 1), that is, the fruit of His handiwork.' Said R. Yesha, 'You say that God disports Himself also with the souls in this world: how is this?' He answered, 'At midnight all the truly righteous arise to read the Torah and to sing psalms, and we have learnt that the Holy One, blessed be He, and all the righteous in the Garden of Eden listen to their voices, and in consequence a certain grace is imparted to them by day; so it is written, "The Lord will command his grace in the day-time, and in the night his song shall be with me" (Ps. XLII, 9). Hence it is that the praises which are sung at night constitute the most perfect praise. So when God was slaying the first-born in Egypt, the Israelites in their houses were singing praises and psalms to Him. See now, King David too used to get up in the middle of the night, as it is written, "At midnight I will rise to give thanks to thee" (Ps. CXIX, 62). He did not remain sitting or lying in his bed, but he literally rose and stood up to compose psalms and praises. Therefore it is that King David lives for ever, and even in the days of the King Messiah he will be king, according to the dictum: "If the King Messiah will be from the living, David will be his name, and if he will be from the dead, David will be his name." He, as it were, awoke the dawn, as it is written, "Awake, my glory, awake, psaltery and harp; I myself will awake right early" (Ps. LVII, 9).

### **NOAM ELIMELECH: Likutei Shoshana on Talmud Brochos 3b.**

#### Section I

"It appears to me that the bed is an expression of coupling in that the Zaddik is able to couple and unify (spiritual) worlds with his holy works and worship. And King David of blessed memory, had an even greater ability from his abundant attachment (d'veyikut) the songs would emerge automatically from within him with melodies and praise.

This is the meaning of "and a harp was suspended...above his bed" As midnight approached, (when the Schechina which is called midnight as it states in the Holy Zohar) since the time for unification of the Schechina approached, "a northern wind (ruach tz'fonis) blew across it", meaning the Holy Spirit (Ruach Hakodesh) which was (tzafun) hidden within him would blow in him by force, meaning in d'veyikut and inflammation (hitlahavut) so that it was able to play automatically (menagen mei-eilav) as I have expounded on the verse (Psalms 49:5):

ז זמרו אלהים זמרו; זמרו למלכנו זמרו. Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises unto our King, sing .praises

literally 'praises God', rather than 'to God...' for the Zaddik has to sanctify with all his holiness until the point that the Schechina sings praises directly from his throat. This is the same meaning of mei-eilav, the Ruach HaKodesh playing him directly not suspended above him rather within him.

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## Section II

This is also what King David of blessed memory meant when he said (Psalm 49:5)

ה אטה למשל אזני; אפתח בכנור, הידתי. 5 I will incline mine ear to a parable; I will open my dark saying up the harp  
The Torah is called a primordial mashal (parable). and a person needs to incline his ear to understand the content of the words of the Holy Torah and not imagine that it is merely stories (fables?) as the foolhardy suggest that the Torah is merely fables.

"I will open my dark saying (a koan?) my riddle" meaning even this I will work on in my service in truth through the harp as mentioned above, through song and praise I will open up an even higher greater world which is higher in spiritual elevation than this one, which is called the dark saying or my riddle.

For a riddle is a thing that is greater than that which one can hear (comprehend?) with his own ears.<sup>66</sup>

### **THE HARP Suspended Above King David's Bed**

The harp suspended above King David's bed. The bed represents the place of conjugation and unification of the upper and lower world of Hashem and the Schechina in exile. The placement of the harp, the musical instrument requiring a subject to "play it" was suspended "above" signifying a higher level of worship than that of the bed itself-a metaphor for the usual location of divine service.

The "Northern Winds" blowing as it does at midnight, the time Gevurot-severities-the "dark night of the soul" at the point of the greatest darkness, just prior to the grace, the chasadim, there's a wind that comes from the North-a place of severity and Tsafun-hiddenness that part of my soul that remains inaccessible to the light of understanding.

If one could imagine the wind or Ruach within the person's soul then this text claims that the usual manner of inner spiritual work (Torah, Mitzvot, T'fillah and Dveykut) allow one access to all spiritual planes (west, east, south, vertically up and down) of the "cubic" dimensions of Ruach/spirit, except the Tsafon-the northern aspect or plane. This remains Tzafun (note the pun) hidden and inaccessible.

But if one can surrender to a higher level of worship by King David's example of *Dveykut* and identification with midnight-*chazot lailah* meaning the Schechina, then the Schechina plays *Me-ilov* from itself automatically as if it could play David as it would a harp. The king became transformed into an instrument and he became the very mode by which the Schechina sang for the Almighty. His almost total identification with Schechina allowed for such a paradoxical access.

This then is plane of the 'northern face' of the ruach/spirit. the Psalmist continues :

"I will incline my ear to the parable",  
meaning the Torah as *mashal* or parable, the fictional narrative or myth that points to a reality beyond language. This northern face is hidden within Torah and is not readily accessible but remains hidden despite all manner of spiritual discipline. King David says in the psalm he will "incline" his ear and listen-pay attention to the parable that is Torah so that he may hear the voice that is beyond the parable; the voice beyond language.

In this exegesis the Noam Elimelech has placed the first section of his Torah explaining the spiritual phenomenology, in contrast to the second section where he brings a proof-text from a Davidic Psalm. Citing the verse psalm 49:7 David attempts to explicate the parable to something beyond itself projecting that which can be expressed in language to that which appears to be beyond language. He illustrates this with the use of the term *mashal* or parable requiring the parable to fictionalize its message, to illustrate what regular discourse could never do.

He posits that the routine spiritual endeavor belongs to this first section whereby one can see the parable and hear its message, language being used to project towards a world beyond language through the toil and exegesis of the written word- the interpretation and history of canon reading. If one is able to read Torah in a way that keeps open the possibilities of the *mashal*, the possibility that language might refer to an experience beyond itself rather than a literalized reading that confines and reduces spiritual possibility. The result and the reward comes in the second half of the verse: "I will open with a harp my riddle" and might be able to open up for the riddle that was moved by connecting to the very instrument I am the harp. I might be able through the surrender to a higher consciousness to be played so as to find the harmonic solution to my riddle, the paradox of my very existence. The very tune, the melody that holds my salvation, my Tikkun, the Messiah must be by its very nature beyond language for a riddle remains a riddle.

My life, my struggle, my powerlessness is the Koan riddle. The application is beyond words, a higher world with no access to it other than a non linguistic metaphor such as music. To be played by it might gain me access to the paradox of my existence. The Noam Elimelech is thus suggesting to two levels of Torah existence and also spiritual existence the one-language, speech, parables pointing beyond itself to a revealed oral law of hermeneutics and interpretation and another level of musical language represented by the harp pointing to a higher world where harmony, counterpoint and melody point the way to and resolve the riddle and paradox of life itself.

This is the Torah of Baal Shem Tov, the Kaliver and the Modzitzer as well as the Vihznitser; all who understood the ultimate spiritual importance of the musical melody the Nigun. This is the Torah of Rebbe Nachman and his disciple Reb Nossan who articulated the tension between prayer and study, praise and song, music and study and the interdependence of one upon the other. Both are required for the full spiritual life talmud and tehilla, praise and song, both the head and the harp.

In my pain, in my revelation, in my midnight hour I still need to reach out in my own poverty, in my own stricken spirituality, for the language beyond that might express our alienation. Yet at

the same time to realize that each of us has an aspect of King David of Malchut: so each of us has a unique instrument in the harmonic of the Am Yisrael: God's symphony orchestra.

In the Dark Night of the Soul I arrive at midnight at the moment of greatest darkness and despair, forever renouncing the possibility that discourse and theology, that intellect and mastery will somehow rescue me through reason and ratio. To face the fear of the ruach tsafon that northerly wind that blows no good that represents my hidden darkness and that inaccessible part of my soul that remains uncanny and frightening, the hidden spirit within of our architecture. By surrendering to the Schechina at midnight, by accepting our powerlessness and forever giving up on rational understanding of the suffering and brutality of life, we also accept the mashal as the inexplicable parable that is the prime metaphor of Eicha Rabba. I accept in my powerless over everything in my life, even my lowly spirited state never mind my character flaws, my betrayals, my deceit, lies and self perfection-accepting all of that and surrendering it all despite myself to the Schechina realizing her exile is my exile that am Yisrael IS synonymous with the Schechina in exile and that without Her I have no life of my own. At that very moment the paradox of the riddle the chidah of my existence of my limited visual acuity opens up through the music of the Schechina breaking through as i am played in my surrender.

At that moment I have crossed the vacated space the chalal hapanui that vacuous space of no meaning, to the other side of meaning where opposites co-exist in some harmonic balance and i can somehow apprehend the unity of it all but only through music.

The dichotomy between discursive reasoning and intellectual interpretive approaches to understanding spirituality and Torah and the surrender of intellect to a mystical experience of the divine through music is expressed in the writings of Reb Nossan, the disciple of Reb nachman of Breslov in his Likutei Halachot.

### **Likutei Halachot Hilchot Keriyat HaTorah 6:3**

We are required to recite the text of Torah with a melody and with musical notes, in order to draw down the voice of nigun which comes through the agency of Torah which is above all other things. for there are in the written Torah, letters, vowels, crowns and musical cantillation marks. the cantillation marks which are that aspect of melody are above all the others for they represent music..

The essence of this Torah is the paradoxical notion that in the deepest sufferings of man the Zaddik/King David/devotee is able through spiritual practice, to see beyond his suffering, and to allow the divine/Schechina, to, so to speak, play him, allowing his body and spirit to become the musical instrument by which the music of the Divine is played. This alludes to the goal of becoming a "chariot" or merkava for the Schechina. Through understanding one's pain and being present to it during the dark moments, the midnight of spirituality, the chazot lailah, one becomes almost intimate in the silence and in the rupture. at these moments the niggun, the melody that will eventually be the song that will unite all humanity and herald the Messiah whose very nature will include all the tunes and songs of history's pain will come to center stage and heal the very heart of the world.

in my pain and suffering I too must become cognizant of the the importance of waiting and affliction in the very spiritual process of recovery. I too must become more patient in waiting for God through the daily midnight prayers of Tikkun Chazot, and the self-analysis and judgement needed for spiritual purification. Then I too will merit the niggun, the holy melody of redemption as dawn approaches and one has survived the dark night of the soul.