

Elul WhatsApp / Telegram Messages

9th Elul – Monday 9th September

I didn't know the late Yehudi Menuhin, one of the world's greatest violinists, but I had a very interesting phone conversation with him when he had just been made a Lord. I don't know what his relationship was with Judaism. He came, like his cousin Sir Isaiah Berlin, from a distinguished rabbinical family. They were, if I'm not mistaken, both descended from Rabbi Schneuer Zalman of Liady, the first Lubavitcher Rebbe. And as his name makes clear, his parents wanted to announce to the world in a way that was unmistakable that he was a Jew. The story goes that when his parents came to America, they were about to rent an apartment in New York when their prospective landlady said, not realising who she was speaking to, "And you'll be glad to know that I don't rent to Jews." They walked away in disgust, but Menuhin's mother made a vow that "her unborn baby would have a label proclaiming his race to the world." So she called him Yehudi, the Jew.

But I guess that he drifted a long way from that faith in the course of his lifetime. So I was surprised when he phoned me up – I was Chief Rabbi at the time – and said that he would like me to draw up for him, in the kind of lettering you find in a Sefer Torah, the words Chochmah, Bina veDaat, "wisdom, understanding, and knowledge," the initial letters of which spell Chabad. He wanted those words to appear on the coat of arms he was having designed, to which he became entitled as a peer of the realm, in other words as a Lord.

In the end, he changed his mind. But it was clear to me that at that moment he wanted to reaffirm his connection with Chabad, Lubavitch. And I suddenly remembered the last concert I had heard him play. It was at Banqueting House opposite Horse Guards Parade in London, the last remaining part of the Palace of Whitehall that was the home of Kings and Queens of England from 1530 to 1698, the place where Charles I was executed in 1649.

To my amazement, in that most English of settings, he played, on solo violin, a medley of Chabad niggunim, Lubavitch tunes, including my own personal favorite (I played it on the BBC as one of my Desert Island Discs) *Tzama lacha nafshi*. That beautiful line from Psalm 63: "I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water."

What was going on in Yehudi Menuhin's mind and soul in those last years of his life I have no idea. But I have the strongest possible feeling that he, like Heinrich Heine and Gustav Mahler and others, heard however distantly the call of the shofar, reminding them of home.

However far we have drifted, there is a voice, the voice of Ellul, that says: come home.