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DEATH OF A MYTH

The uproar has been raging for two weeks so far, and is showing no sign of abating. Israel is shaken to the core – is it the postponed “disengagement plan? Is it the killing of demonstrators against the Wall? No, it’s a song.

Like a devout Christian, Naomi Shemer confessed, on her deathbed, to the greatest sin of her life: her immortal song, “Jerusalem of Gold”, is a copy of a Basque lullaby she heard some years earlier from a Spanish singer.

The way she told it, she had not stolen the melody consciously, but had absorbed it into her subconscious and taken it for her own. It was, as she put it, “a work accident”. She also took pains to stress that she had altered eight notes of the melody, so that, according to the law, she had every right to the royalties she had been receiving for 38 years.

Good. Can happen to anybody. You see or hear something, it enters your unconscious mind, and when it later emerges you believe it’s your own idea. But in this case, something more serious happened: several times in the past she was asked about the similarity of the songs, and she reacted angrily, denying any resemblance and even attacking the questioners. But in her letter of confession, addressed to a close friend, on the eve of her death, she admitted that pain of remorse had been gnawing at her guts, and had perhaps caused her fatal cancer.

Up to this point, a painful but not very important story. A songwriter makes a mistake, her song turns out to be a plagiarism. Except that she was no ordinary songwriter, and this no ordinary song.

Naomi Shemer is a symbol of what is called, nostalgically, “the beautiful Eretz Israel”. She was born in a socialist Kibbutz on the shores of the Sea of Tiberias and celebrated the landscape of the country in words and music. Even when she married an extreme rightist and became an icon of that trend, leftists continued to admire her for her modesty, engaging personality and the quality of her songs.

But the song was even more important than the songwriter. Not only because of its quality, but also because of its extraordinary history.

Exactly 38 years ago, on the eve of the 1967 Independence Day, Shemer took part in an Israeli song competition. For this occasion she wrote the song – lyrics and music – and insisted that it be sung by an unknown young singer. Just another song, just another festival. But the moment the song was heard in the hall and on the radio, something happened. It touched the souls of all who heard it.

Even then it would have remained just a beautiful song, if the Six-Day war had not broken out a few weeks later. The Israeli army conquered East Jerusalem, the soldiers reached the Western Wall, a remnant of the ancient Jewish Temple. Israel was swept by the intoxication of victory, spiced with a semi-religious mysticism.

Overnight, “Jerusalem of Gold” became the supreme expression of the national mood, the symbol of a victory that was seen as redemption, a second national anthem.

I myself saw in this an opportunity. I was a member of the Knesset at the time. I do not like – to say the least – our national anthem. It was written more than a hundred years ago, and expressed the longing of the Jewish Diaspora for the Land of Israel. It is a hymn of a dispersed religious-ethnic community rather than the anthem of a sovereign state.

Even worse, more than 20% of the citizens of Israel are not Jews at all, and it is not healthy that so many citizens cannot identify with the anthem and the flag of their state. By the way, the melody of the anthem, HaTikvah (“The Hope”) was also “borrowed”, but no one ever tried to hide this. It is a Romanian shepherd’s song (with a version appearing in The Moldau, the symphonic poem of the Czech national composer Bedrich Smetana.)

I thought that if I proposed Naomi Shemer’s song as a national anthem, I might be able to build a consensus for the idea of changing the existing one. I was not happy with several nationalist phrases added to the song, but I believed that we could change that along the way.

I introduced a bill to this effect. The Speaker insisted I obtain the agreement of the author. So I met her in a Tel-Aviv Café. I thought I detected a certain hesitation on her part, which I understand only now. In the end she allowed me to announce that she was not opposed to the idea.

The bill was never put to a vote, but throughout the years “Jerusalem of Gold” has enjoyed the unofficial status of a second national anthem, and especially as the anthem of the Six-Day War.

This is what makes the present uproar more than a scandal about a song and its author. “Jerusalem of Gold” has suffered the same fate as the Six-Day War.

That war was preceded by three weeks of mounting, nerve-racking anxiety, when almost all Israelis – from members of the cabinet to the last citizen – believed that the

state and its inhabitants were in mortal danger. The armies of Egypt, Syria and Jordan were poised – so it seemed – to invade its territory from three sides and eradicate it from the face of the earth, when the Israeli army attacked first, defeated all three and conquered not only the remainder of Palestine, but also the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights.

Years later, it became clear to historians that there had been no real danger to the state, that the neighboring countries has not intended to attack but merely to bluff, that Israel's victory had been no miracle but the result of meticulous preparations, especially by the Air Force. But the myth survives to this very day.

During the fighting and the following days, it looked like a classic war of defense. Nobody even considered a permanent occupation. It was clear that we would be compelled to leave the occupied territories very soon, as happened after the 1956 Sinai war. The question was who to give them back to: The government and most parties were thinking about Jordan and Egypt, while I and those who shared my ideas, including at the time several army generals, proposed handing them over to the Palestinian people, so as to enable them to establish the State of Palestine. Until that happened, it was believed, they would live under a “benign occupation”.

Since then, 38 long years have passed. The “benign occupation” has long since turned into a brutal and ugly regime of oppression. The prophecy of Professor Yeshayahu Leibovitz, that the occupation would corrupt us through and through and turn us into a people of exploiters and secret-service-men, has come awfully true. Nothing has remained of the “beautiful Eretz Israel” but a cloying nostalgia, of which Naomi Shemer was a standard-bearer. A small and gallant state, progressive and (relatively) egalitarian, respected by the world, has become an occupying and looting state, hostage to delirious settlers, full of internal violence and “swinish capitalism” (a phrase coined by Shimon Peres, one of those most responsible for this situation.) Throughout the world, the idea of boycotting Israel is gaining ground.

What looked at the time like a divine miracle now looks more like a pact with the devil.

Israel is a country built on many symbols and myths. What could be more symbolic than the destruction of the myth of the Six-Day war, now followed by the collapse of the myth of “Jerusalem of Gold”, that war's symbol in song?