

Words to Sing in the Dark
Yom Kippur 5785/2024
Rabbi Hannah L. Goldstein

The 23rd Psalm is one of the most ubiquitous Biblical texts. Sacred in churches and synagogues, you are likely to hear these words at a memorial service, or a funeral, at a shiva house or in the face of crisis. But, you might as often hear them at *se'udah shlishit*, the third meal traditionally eaten on Shabbat afternoon, or at a Sunday church service, or sitting in a concert hall. They are words that, for some, offer the comfort of familiarity. The King James translation, rife with the gendered God language and grammatical formalities of another era, are like a soothing lullaby of religious comfort.

Psalm 23 begins, like many Psalms, with the opening words “*T’hilah L’David*” a Psalm of David. It is very likely a misattribution. While some believe that David wrote all of the Psalms, modern scholars have noted that the Psalms include historical references that would have been unknown to the Biblical David and linguistic style that would have been unlikely in his time.¹

I contributed to that tradition of misattribution. For me, and I imagine many other elderly millennials, I once believed these words were penned by the mid-90s rapper Coolio...who borrowed an excerpt from Psalm 23 as the opening lyrics of his hit “Gangsta’s Paradise.” “As I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I take a look at my life...and realize there’s nothing left.”² Who knew that it was Psalm 23 that provided the soundtrack to a generation of middle school dances?

I will admit that when I began reading these words as a rabbi, it took me a while to get Coolio’s tone and cadence out of my mind. But now, after more than a decade in this sometimes heartbreaking calling, I have offered these words at tragic funerals, and in shiva homes suffocating with despair. And, I will confess, that sometimes I have wondered about this seemingly paltry, almost glib, offering. How can these words

¹ The Jewish Study Bible. “Psalms: Introduction.” p 1282.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPO76Jlnz6c>

possibly be enough? In the face of the depths of grief, I come armed with a poem about a Shepherd. How could King David, or the Psalmist, or whomever wrote this ancient text possibly understand us, and our grief?

In this difficult year, I have found myself revisiting these words, trying to understand the message- the survival- of this text and even today, its relevance. And, in returning to these verses, I am comforted. Reassured that they are not a trite and empty offering. In fact, they are 6 verses that can hold us together in this painful and difficult time.³ They are words to hang onto, words that we can sing in the darkness.

“Adonai is my Shepherd, I shall not want.” The Psalm begins by asserting *lo echsar*...I shall not want. The text continues, “God makes me lie down in green pastures, leads me to still waters.” Beautiful imagery, and theologically challenging. On the one hand, idyllic and serene, on the other, the suggestion that if we are like sheep to the shepherd, if we just follow God, we will always be satisfied. A challenging assertion in a world where there are many people of faith who do not have enough and in a world where, even when we have plenty, we can be filled with want.

Now, the King James version of this Psalm is embedded in many of our brains. So “I shall not want” is the most obvious translation. But *lo echsar* could be understood to mean “nothing is missing” or “I lack for nothing.” The late Rabbi and author Harold Kushner, suggests that it is impossible not to “want” and that, no matter how you translate it, there is something life-giving, and energizing about yearning. Kushner writes, “There is a part of me that *wants* to want, despite the words of our Psalm. There is a part of me that wants to never be satisfied with who I am and what I have achieved, that

³ The idea for this sermon started on the New Jersey Turnpike, when I ran into Cantor Galit Dadoun Cohen. Galit was a few years ahead of me at Hebrew Union College. (My family was on our way home from Western Massachusetts and had stopped at a rest stop and everyone was in a bad mood– the line at the Shake Shack was very long.) Galit told me about how she had just returned from Israel, and she mentioned studying the 23rd Psalm. It planted a seed as I began to think about how Psalm 23 might speak to this particular moment in time. So, thanks to the New Jersey Turnpike and Cantor Galit.

yearns to reach higher, to understand more... Our challenge is to want more of the right things... I will never feel deprived or diminished if I don't get what I yearn for, because I know how blessed I am by what I have.⁴

There's nothing wrong with wanting. But when want becomes an obsession, wanting too much can blind us to our blessings. Psalm 23 reminds us to pause and consider what it means to have enough, to lack for nothing.

About five years ago, I went to visit a member of our community in the hospital. He was approaching 90. He had fallen and needed some significant surgery. When I entered his room, he was lying in his hospital bed, looking tired and frail. I asked him, "Frank, how are you doing?" His eyes brightened, and with a wide smile he responded, "I am wonderful."

And I knew he meant it, because to his core, he understood what it meant to be grateful--- for the simple gift of life itself, even with all of its challenges. Frank lived into his 90s, never taking a day for granted.

As a child, Frank, along with his family, left Germany. They left everything they knew as the dark clouds of Nazism gathered. They saw the rise of hate around them, many of his close relatives did not survive. Experiencing the worst of humanity can shape people in vastly different ways, but for Frank, it left him with profound gratitude for the gift of life, for the opportunity to grow old, for the blessing of having enough.⁵

Contentment, satisfaction with one's life does not mean to deny loss, or pain, but rather it is gratitude for the food that showed up for the shiva, for the calls and texts, for the people who came to your house to mumble through prayers that aren't theirs, for the good

⁴ Harold S. Kushner, *The Lord is my Shepherd*, pp 35, 36.

⁵ I spoke to Frank Liebermann's daughter Nancy to make sure she was comfortable with me sharing the story. She gave me her blessing.

friends who stayed a little longer to help clean up. For the words to speak in the darkness, when you have nothing else to say, even when you feel like so much is missing, there is this reminder, *Lo echsar*...I shall not want.

You could read Psalm 23 as a narrative. It begins with a person who feels content. They are “sheeping” around- enjoying their green pastures and still waters, they feel like they are walking in the right direction. Everything is good. And then, something changes. They are cast out of the idyllic landscape of the opening verses and now...they walk through the valley of deep darkness.

גַּם כִּי־אֵלֶךְ בְּגִיא צִלְמוֹת לֹא־אִירָא רָע כִּי־אַתָּה עִמָּדִי

As I walk through the valley, of the shadow of death...I shall fear no evil...for you are with me.

Now, the text brings us to the depths. The Hebrew is strange, *tzalmavet*. *Tzalmavet*, on its own, refers to deep darkness. But The King James translation separates the words- *tzal* and *mavet*- giving us the phrase “shadow of death.” Commentator Radak directs us to the Book of Job to understand the word’s meaning- where we find the word *tzalmavet* again. Job, in the midst of anguish and despair says, “Leave me alone... before I depart...*el eretz chosech v’ tzalmavet*...for the land of deepest gloom. A land whose light is darkness, All gloom and disarray, Whose light is like darkness.”⁶ A land so dark, that even the light is like darkness.

Psalm 23 reassures us. Even in this thick, impenetrable darkness, even in this place where death casts a shadow, I shall fear no evil, for You are with me. For some, this is the ultimate reassurance. That you are never alone. Even in the darkest depths– God is always with you.

⁶ Job 10:20-22

Perhaps you have been surprised to find yourself turning to prayer in moments of extreme stress and vulnerability.

When you can't find your keys and you're running late. Or standing in a hospital room, holding the hand of a loved one. Or in a dark room, with a sick kid who is having trouble falling asleep. Or when the world feels overwhelming and scary...maybe a prayer slips out...not because you believe in a God sitting in some Divine Headquarters, with a massive spreadsheet, calling on the angels, "Could you send some healing to Sibley Hospital...I'm seeing a prayer coming through from Washington." You turn to prayer because in those moments, when you're scared and uncertain, you're not sure what else to do. So you sing in the dark.

Last fall, Israeli soldier Yossi Hershkovitz had been humming a melody since he set out, in the dark, with his fellow soldiers. Over and over again. Another soldier, Golan Vach, finally asked him, "Yoss, what are you humming?" It was a song that he sang to himself, he explained. Vach asked him to sing it again. "I asked him to sing it. This was a very special moment when we were sitting there. It was total darkness, and he was sitting next to me and singing me a song. He sang it once and I asked him to sing it again. He sang it again and I started humming along, and ... that's it." It was a sweet and simple melody. A melody composed to contain the words:

Cantor Rachel Rhodes sings with words

גַּם כִּי־אֵלֶּךָ בְּגִיאַ צְלֻמֹּת לֹא־אִירָא רָע כִּי־אֲתָה עִמָּדִי

As I walk through the valley, of the shadow of death...I shall fear no evil...for you are with me.

On November 10th, Yossi Hershkovitz was killed in the war. One life, one whole world, in a year that has seen tens of thousands of worlds destroyed in Israel and Gaza. Yossi was an educator, a father, he was 44 years old. And Vach, at first, couldn't remember the

melody his friend had shared. Then, while he sat at Yossi's funeral, he found that the melody had returned to him. He clung to Yossi's melody, and as soon as he could, he taught it to Yossi's children.⁷ A piece of their dad, a tune he composed... I shall fear no evil, for You are with me.⁸

Psalm 23 is a Psalm about a shepherd and their sheep, about a walk through the deepest darkest dark. It's a Psalm that your grandparents might have known by heart, no matter their faith tradition, in English or Hebrew, or maybe another language. People of faith have been singing these words in the dark, for generations.

And when we sing them, or speak them, or read them, the King James translation, or Mishkan Hanefesh, set to a melody written by Franz Schubert, or Leonard Bernstein, or a frightened soldier...we add our voices to theirs. I shall fear no evil, for You are with me.

Rabbi Menachem Creditor suggests that the You, in "*Atah imadi*"... "You are with me" hasn't only been understood as an address to God. Rather the "you" is "you," the person who shows up, and walks by your side in the darkest dark. Citing a Talmudic text he writes, "it is not a miraculous appearance of heavenly light that the psalmist imagines, but rather the empathetic connection of kindred darkneses."⁹ For those of us who struggle with the Divine "You" perhaps, the "you," who is with "me," shares the darkness, maybe they have come to keep you company in the shadows. Perhaps that Y/you, is a human manifestation of the Divine.

It would be reasonable, after the year we've had to wonder why we do this. Why we get all dressed up, and park 5 miles away from Temple Sinai. Why we sit here in this sanctuary banging on our chests while the world around us is on fire.

⁷ This link includes a video of Hershkovitz's family singing his melody:

<https://www.israelnationalnews.com/news/381939>

⁸ <https://www.commentary.org/articles/meir-soloveichik/psalm-23-yossi-hershkovitz-israel/>

⁹ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/psalm-23-who-walks-in-the-valley-of-the-shadow-of-death/>, Pesachim 111a

I'm here, we're here, every single week, praying for a stubborn peace that refuses to come. Where is that Shepherd? After a year during which we have lost so much, for some of us as individuals, and certainly as a collective, at the dawn of a new year that makes no promises...that we enter filled with apprehension and reluctance...Where is that Shepherd?

But we come to sit at the table, set, in spite of the presence of enemies. We come to be reminded that in spite of all of the darkness, fear and anxiety...*kosi revaya*...my cup runneth over. Or at least, it's half full. We come to remember the multitude of ways that we are blessed. We come to be someone else's "you." To sit at that table among others, so that we might not feel so alone.

And, when the fear is overwhelming, when the pain is almost too much to bear, when the world breaks our hearts, over and over again...when there is nothing we can do, no promises, no guarantees. We have these words, to sing in the dark.

We dwell in the house of God...seeking goodness and love...we dwell here together. To gather up words to sing in the dark. And maybe...if you're lucky...someone else will join their voice to yours.