

Dominus regit me

- ¹ The Lord is my shepherd;
I shall not be in want.
- ² He makes me lie down in green pastures *
and leads me beside still waters.
- ³ He revives my soul *
and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.
- ⁴ Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil;
for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
- ⁵ You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; *
you have anointed my head with oil, and my cup is running over.
- ⁶ Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, *
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.
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The 23rd psalm: “The Lord is my shepherd...” is an ancient poem written 1,000 years before Christ was born. Both Jews and Christians still use this psalm in liturgy and it is popular with an amazing variety of people outside religious settings. People entirely unfamiliar with scripture know bits of the psalm or have rewritten their own versions.

Dozens of classical composers from Bach to Bernstein have set the words to music. The great jazz musician, Duke Ellington, wrote *Black, Brown and Beige*, his longest and most ambitious composition intended to parallel the history of black Americans. The queen of gospel singing, Mahalia Jackson, contributed her voice to Ellington’s music in an impromptu setting of the King James version of Psalm 23.

References to the psalm have appeared in a potpourri of musical styles from bands like Pink Floyd, the Grateful Dead and Megadeth. Rappers Coolio, Tupac Shakur, Jay-Z, Kanye West and Eminem have all put their own spin on the poem.

Even Hollywood has pointed to Psalm 23 in films ranging from *Full Metal Jacket*, *Jarhead* and *We Were Soldiers* to westerns like *Rooster Cogburn* and British horror film, *The Wicker Man*. Many of these references are self-serving, superficial or silly, and all are closely connected to suffering and death.

One of the characters in Clint Eastwood’s western, *Pale Rider*, a young girl, recites the psalm and adds her own commentary as she buries her dog that the bad guys killed. James Cameron’s *Titanic*

includes a ten-second scene in which a priest recites the psalm while terrified passengers run in panic.

Popular culture's use of the psalm almost always involves people running or staggering toward death or mourning at graves. Even most liturgical uses involve memorials or vigils. As a result, most people, churched or unchurched, religious or secular, closely associate this beautiful psalm with funerals, death and dying.

This morning, on Good Shepherd Sunday, if we can hear with fresh ears, or maybe better, if we can hear with ancient ears, we can also pray this psalm with joy, for life and for living. A little Jewish insight will help.

Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi was a Shoah¹ survivor, the spiritual father of the Jewish Renewal movement and an innovator in ecumenical dialogue. Before he died a few years ago, I was fortunate enough to get to spend some time with Reb Zalman. He described Psalm 23 with joy and laughter, fully recognizing that most people hear those opening verses and assume that they must be at a funeral.

Let me share what Reb Zalman taught me.

In Hebrew, "*Adonai ro'i*," "The Lord is my shepherd," implies a close friendship between God and David. David declares his faith in this close companion by singing; "*lo echsar*, I will not experience any lack; nothing will be missing."

The God of all comfort, the shepherd and friend that I trust so deeply, David sings, "makes me sprawl restfully in lush meadows by the waters of quietness that revive my life breath.

"You lead me on a circuitous path," David goes on, referring to an entrenchment worn into the ground by domestic cattle. God leads me, he implies, on a well-traveled path that returns us all to right relationship with God and with each other.

And David knows why God leads the sheep on the paths of right relationship: "For you are true to your name," he sings. One of God's many names in Hebrew refers to God's reputation, *Adonai Tzidkeinu*, and this name, Reb Zalman taught, is enhanced when God's people

¹ "Shoah" refers to the destruction of lives. "Holocaust" literally means "burned whole," but refers to a sacrifice. Six million Jews were murdered, they did not give their lives as an offering.

are in right relationship. “Righteousness,” he said, “tzedek, tzedek. Always seek righteousness.”

And then we come to a moment where the Elizabethan English of the King James Bible betrays the poetry of the Hebrew; the line most commonly borrowed by popular culture that refers to walking through the “valley of the shadow of death.”

Jewish tradition says that while he was still a young man, David wrote this psalm after sneaking back home after a battle in which Saul had plotted to have the Philistines kill him. And in Hebrew, the line in Psalm 23 reads more like “Even when I am walking in a ravine of shrouded darkness...” not dying, you see, but living in a dark time.

Even in the darkness of life, God’s sheep can say “I will fear no evil” because the God who is *Adonai Tzeva’ot*, Lord of the armies of heaven, is also *Adonai Shammah*, the God who is there. David sings gratefully to God for the comfort he takes in equal measure from both God’s corrective acts, the rod, and God’s consoling acts, the staff. Both make God’s guiding presence known.

“You spread a table before me in front of those who have brought me grief,” David sings. Coming out of the darkened ravine, David sees his tormentors. And in the presence of people that David associates with adversity, God has prepared a banquet.

God does not set this table to provide David a chance to flaunt some sense of superiority or to show contempt for those who have threatened him. The celebratory feast allows David to thank God for bringing him through his troubles.

Rather than seeking retribution, David sees those who have done him wrong and recognizes what he has gained by coming through the darkness with God. God has not removed all adversity from David’s life. Instead, David’s perseverance and God’s guiding presence have changed the context in which all future hardship will arise.

Recognizing the blessing God has granted, David acknowledges that God has anointed his head. And with that, David is satisfied. Once again, the King James version mistranslates the Hebrew. Rather than “my cup is overflowing,” the Hebrew phrase, *kosi r’vayah*, has far greater depth. Something more like “my cup is *saturated*.” Saturated with satisfaction, fulfillment and peace. “My thirst is quenched,” David is singing, “I am no longer thirsty.”

And then David goes a step further. More than a rather tepid hope that “goodness and mercy shall follow me,” David has become aware that the shepherd’s *tov* and *hesed* will pursue him relentlessly.

God’s *tov* is more than goodness. It is the word God used in Genesis to say, “it is good and beautiful and working the way I created it to work.”

And something beyond mercy will also chase David. What we hear in the English version implies leniency. Instead, what David sees coming after him is *hesed*, God’s loving-kindness expressed in action, a covenant love between the shepherd and the sheep that mutually respects the dignity, the freedom and the integrity of the other.

Together, sheep and shepherd agree to join their distinctiveness on a single path of open-ended right relationship. They will walk fearing no evil and being ever present to each other. “And I will dwell,” David concludes, “in the house of the Lord for long days.” Not in heaven after he dies, mind you, but in a place of harmony with the Divine in the borderless and timeless Now.

Or as Reb Zalman said: “Where else *could* I dwell?”

Just so, in these Great 50 days of Pascha, Psalm 23 can be more than a signal that we may be at a funeral. Like so many of the psalms, this poem confirms the darkness that so often surrounds us and yet reminds us of God’s desire to transform what emerges from darkness into prayers of praise.

The psalm, you see, can be for us a Pascha reminder to live; to *live* even as we walk through ravines of shrouded darkness. Because wherever we are, our loving God relentlessly pursues us with truth, beauty and goodness.

The good shepherd will *keep* pursuing *all* of God’s beloved sheep with lovingkindness until all creation is once again working as God created it to work. The Easter season is a joyful chance to wake up and recall who is chasing us and with what intent. And then, relaxing into the mystery of Easter, we can let God’s presence overcome our tendency to seek being completely *holy* without first being completely *human*.

In the mystery of Pascha, we seek instead right relationship. “Righteousness,” Reb Zalman said, “*tzedek, tzedek*. Always seek righteousness.”

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