

Come to me in your own way, for in my heart I'm thirsting for you - my holy God.

A psalm of David. The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures;

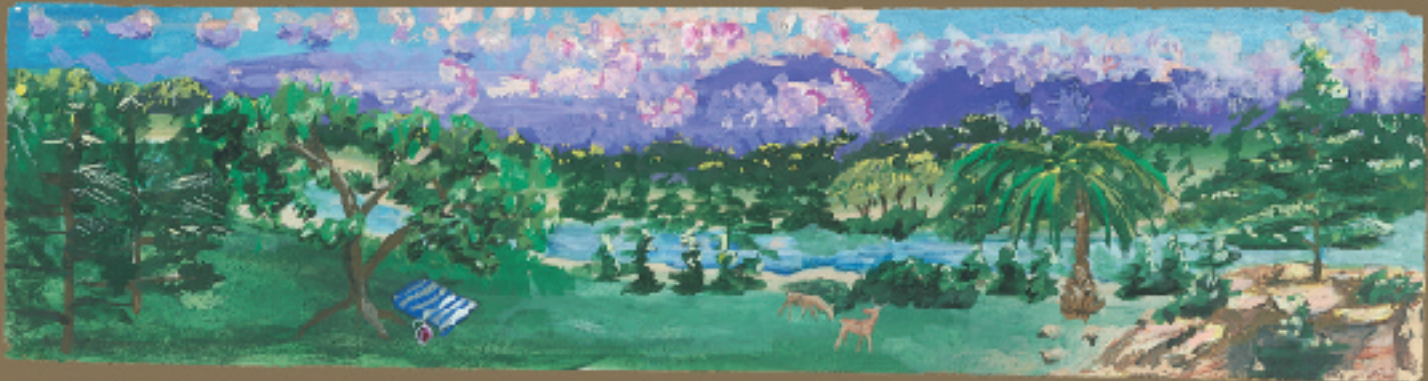
He leads me to water in places of repose;³ He renews my life;

He guides me in right paths as befits His name.

⁴ Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I fear no evil, for You are with me;

Your rod and Your staff - they comfort me.



⁵ You spread a table for me in full view of my enemies;

You anoint my head with oil; my drink is abundant.

⁶ Only goodness and steadfast love shall follow me -

all the days of my life;

and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.



"מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד יְהוָה רֹפֵי לֹא אֶחָסֵד:
 יְבִנְיָהוּ יְהוָה יִרְבֵּצֵנִי כְּלִמְיָ מַטְחֹת יְהוָה לִי:
 נַפְשִׁי יִשְׁבֵּב יְהוָה בְּמַעְגַּל־צֶדֶק לְמַעַן שְׂמוֹ
 יָגִם כִּי יֵאלֶךְ בְּגֵיא צְלֹמֹת לֹא אֶיִדָּא וְעַ כִּי-אֶתֶּה עִמּוֹנִי
 שְׂבַסְכָּה וְיִסְמַעְנִיךָ הַיְהוָה יִנְחָמֵנִי



"תַּעֲרֹךְ לִפְנֵי וְשִׁלְחֵנִי נֶגֶד צֹרֵר:
 דִּשְׁנַת בַּשֶּׁמֶן וְרֹאשֵׁי כֹסֵי דְחֵיבָה:
 אֶתֶּה טוֹב וְחָסֵד יְהוָה יִרְבֵּצֵנִי כְּלִמְיָ הַיָּם
 וְשִׁבְתִּי בְּבַיִת יְהוָה לְעֹדֵךְ יָמִים:

FPO



1 A psalm of David. The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.	א מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד יְהוָה רֹעִי לֹא אֶחְסָר:
2 He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me to water in places of repose;	ב בְּנֵאֲוֹת דְּשָׁא יִרְבִּיצֵנִי עַל־מַי מְנַחֹת יִנְהַלֵּנִי:
3 He renews my life; He guides me in right paths as befits His name.	ג נִפְשִׁי יִשׁוּבֵב וְנַחֲנִי בְּמַעְגַּל־צְדָק לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ:
4 Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, ²³ I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff—they comfort me.	ד גַּם כִּי־אֵלֶּךְ בְּגִיא צַלְמוֹת לֹא־אֶרְאֶה רָע כִּי־אַתָּה עִמָּדִי שִׁבְטְךָ וּמִשְׁעַנְתְּךָ הִבִּיחָה יִנְחַמְנִי:
5 You spread a table for me in full view of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my drink is abundant.	ה תַּעֲרֹךְ לִפְנֵי וְשָׁלַחַן נֹגֵד צַרְרֵי דַשְׁנָתְךָ בְּשֶׁמֶן רֹאשִׁי בּוֹסֵי רוּחַ:
6 Only goodness and lovingkindness shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.	ו אֵד טוֹב וְחַסֵּד יִרְדְּפוּנִי כָּל־יְמֵי חַיֵּי וְשִׁבְתִּי בְּבֵית־יְהוָה לְאֹדְךָ יָמִים:

LITERARY COMMENTARY

“The LORD is my shepherd” is probably the best-known statement in the Book of Psalms. Often mistakenly attributed to the New Testament, it is actually one of the “Psalms of David,” as indicated in its superscription (v. 1). Since the psalm is usually quoted in its King James translation or in one of the revised modern versions following the King James Version (KJV), we will initially refer to its verses in that style, but introduce in parentheses a few modern translations taken from the 1985 NJPS (New Jewish Publication Society) translation.

The central shepherd metaphor of the first four verses—the LORD as the shepherd of the Psalmist or the worshiper—expresses quintessential confidence in a providential God: caring, guiding, protecting, comforting. The full confidence of the opening declaration is evident in the first four Hebrew words, *’Adonai ro’i lo ’ehsar* (The LORD [is] my shepherd, I shall not want [I shall lack nothing]). The phrase draws added force from the total absence of a causal conjunction; the text does not say, The LORD is my shepherd and therefore I shall not want. No sequence of cause or time is mentioned; the two key introductory phrases stand together. This is a declaration of faith, but it also serves as a supplication: May the LORD act as my shepherd throughout life.

The shepherd metaphor is further strengthened by specific examples:

He makes me lie down in green pastures,
He leads me to still (restful) waters;

The peaceful places, the pastures and the calm waters, are even more striking in the Hebrew where they appear first in two balanced metrical units followed by verbs conveying God’s actions:

*Bin’ot deshe yarbitseini,
’al mei menuhot yenhaleini.*

In the third verse, the pastoral imagery is endowed with a moral tone:

He restores my soul (life);
He leads me in the paths of righteousness (right paths) for His name’s sake.

PSALM 23

The pastoral image is conclusively reaffirmed in the fourth verse, where the Psalmist asserts:

Though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death (of deepest darkness),
I fear no evil (harm) for You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff—they comfort me.

The Psalmist's comforting sense of security derives from the shepherd's staff, which has evolved throughout history into the symbol of the pastor in religious and regal settings. Precisely at this point in the psalm, when danger and God's protection are invoked, the pronominal relationship changes from I-He to I-You. The presence of danger seems to generate a closer personal relationship between the Psalmist and God.

In the second part of the psalm, verses 5–6, we move from the shepherd metaphor to the banquet metaphor, from the pastoral to the urban. While preserving the second-person address to God and the reference to enemies found in verse 4, the Psalmist imagines God endowing him with material abundance: a set table, luxurious oil on the head, abundant drink. In a coda of hope, he asserts:

Surely goodness and mercy (lovingkindness)
shall follow (pursue) me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever (for many long years).

“The house of the LORD” (*beit 'Adonai*) in the Book of Psalms is always a reference to the Temple in Jerusalem and not merely to God's universe. The verse cannot be read literally, that the worshiper hopes to dwell in the House of the LORD forever (only priests and Levites lived in the Temple precinct). The Temple of the LORD with its sanctity and security is often seen by the Psalmist as the consummate emblem of God's majestic governance of the world. Its symbolism as the goal of pilgrimages and, by extension, of pilgrimage psalms, is widely attested in Psalms. This psalm thus progresses from the simple pastoral metaphor to the more complex Temple metaphor to convey the Psalmist's full trust in *'Adonai ro'i*, LORD, my shepherd.

Some commentators, relying on references to God leading God's people like sheep on the right path and to the Temple pilgrimages, read this psalm as an exilic yearning for a return to Jerusalem. And since the reference to the return from exile—a second Exodus in biblical literature—also implies future returns and redemptions in Jewish tradition, this psalm is recited at funerals and other occasions commemorating the departed. The phrase *'orekh yamim* (length of days) ordinarily means a long natural life, but can be interpreted to refer to existence after death. By adding to the four pastoral verses the last two banquet or Temple verses, the Psalmist has expanded significantly the range of possible readings of the psalm. The 23rd Psalm thus stands as a model of the complex composition we encounter in all the psalms.

COMMENTARY ON THE ILLUMINATIONS

Psalm 23 may be the most beloved of psalms. Millennia of Jews and Christians have taken comfort from its phrases in moments of personal distress, and Jewish tradition has integrated it into private prayers in time of sickness, recovery, and the home service prior to a funeral.²⁴ The illuminations explore the two mingled themes in the verses. As we have seen above, while the mention of the 23rd Psalm may instantly conjure up echoes of “the valley of the shadow of death,” a second theme arises in the later verses of the poem, an image of an omnipotent, Divine Lover laying a feast for the trusting believer. These paintings invite reflection upon these themes.

Serene confidence in the face of fearful threat, the Psalmist proclaims, imbues those who trust in God's care. While the psalms do not promise that evil will never befall the believer, Harold Kushner writes, “we will not have

PSALM 23

to face those bad things alone, 'for Thou art with me.' The news bulletins on radio and television will be no less alarming. But we will be able to face the world with more courage and more confidence because we will not be facing it alone."²⁵

Not only does the Psalmist know that God will protect him through the most terrifying adversity, but indeed, he asserts that the believer will be sought out, will even be feasted by the Divine Lover. The Psalmist's confidence rests not simply on a one-way reliance of human upon God, but also on the assumption that God *desires* the presence of the believer. Reflecting upon a passage from the Yom Kippur liturgy, "From the very first Thou didst single out man and consider him worthy to stand in Thy presence," Heschel remarks that "this is the paradox of Biblical faith: *God is pursuing man*. It is as if God were unwilling to be alone, and He had chosen man to serve Him ... All of human history as described in the Bible may be summarized in one phrase: *God is in search of man*."²⁶ The illuminations offer a pair of images: the horizontal landscape, and a bordering mat of gold wound with poetry, olives, grapes, and caper branches. Together, these images reflect upon the confidence that the believer finds in the protection, and even in the loving indulgence, of God, the Divine Lover.

A mountainous landscape spreads across the paintings. At one side of a mountain meadow a calm river flows into a lake clinging to the cliffs above a steep and dark chasm. The tips of the evergreens surrounding the hanging lake glint with the light of dawn, reflected below in the still surface of the water. Only through the strength of the narrow, rocky lip can the water rest calmly, prevented from plunging violently into the abyss. The image speaks of God's protection of the believer against the imminent risk of plunging into danger and abysmal despair. At right, an eagle soars over the plunging cliffs at the water's edge. The eagle, the early Rabbis asserted, symbolizes God's determination to protect Israel. Midrash on Exodus reflects upon God's protection of Israel at the Red Sea:

And how I bore you on eagles' wings (Exod. 19:4). How is the eagle distinguished from all other birds? All the other birds carry their young between their feet, being afraid of other birds flying higher above them. The eagle, however, is afraid only of men who might shoot at him. He, therefore, prefers that the arrows lodge in him rather than in his children ... As it is said: *And in the wilderness, where thou hast seen how that the LORD thy God bore thee, as a man doth bear his son* (Deut. 1:31).²⁷

At left, a stream flows gently toward the hanging lake. Dawn glints on the tops of the trees flourishing beside the water's edge, reminding us both of the promise of the new day, and of the vitality of the person who trusts in God. The palm itself is compared to the righteous person in Psalm 92; the image of the tree planted beside water draws upon the words of Jeremiah:

Blessed is he who trusts in the LORD,
Whose trust is the LORD alone.
He shall be like a tree planted by waters,
Sending forth its roots by a stream:
It does not sense the coming of heat, Its leaves are ever fresh;
It has no care in a year of drought,
It does not cease to yield fruit. (Jer. 17:7–8)

Surrounding the landscape, clusters of grapes and sprigs of olive and caper plant scatter across gold mats. Inscribed along the lengths of the golden mats is a poem by the 11th-century Judeo-Spanish poet Solomon ibn Gabirol. Whereas the psalm expresses human trust in God's care and desire for festive reunion with the Divine Lover, Ibn Gabirol here conversely voices God's longing for reunion and feasting with Israel.²⁸

PSALM 23

Come to me at dawn, love,
Carry me away;
For in my heart I'm thirsting
To see my folk today.
For you, love, mats of gold
Within my halls I'll spread.
I'll set my table for you,
I'll serve you my own bread.

A drink from my own vineyards
I'll pour to fill your cup—
Heartily you'll drink, love,
Heartily you'll sup.

I'll take my pleasure with you
As once I had such joy
With Jesse's son, my people's prince,
That Bethlehem boy.

The fruits scattered across the golden mats anticipate the festive reunion of God and Israel. In Jewish lore, olives, the source of the oil used in anointing the ancient Israelite kings, represent divine selection and nobility. Grapes, the source of the wine with which Jewish tradition welcomes all festive occasions, symbolize joy and sanctification. The caper, as we have seen in the illuminations for Psalm 1, represents Israel's ability to persevere through adversity, preserved only by the unseen hand of God. Israel thus rests in confident serenity, trusting that its Divine Lover promises ultimate protection from annihilation, confident of the mutually longed-for reunion with God.

NOTES ON TRANSLATION

The NJPS translation of certain phrases has been altered here to reflect the more familiar usage of the King James Version and the OJPS translations. In verse 1, "I lack nothing," is changed to "I shall not want;" in verse 4, "a valley of deepest darkness," is changed to "valley of the shadow of death" and "I fear no harm" is translated as "I fear no evil;" and in verse 6, "for many long years" is changed to "forever."

CHRISTIAN LITURGICAL USES

The 23rd Psalm enjoys broad use in Christian liturgical traditions quite apart from its treasured role in private devotions. The Roman Catholic Lectionary includes it in masses for the Season after Pentecost, All Souls' Day, the Season of Lent, the Season of Easter, Conferral of Infant Baptism, Confirmation, the Conferral of Holy Orders, the Masses for the Dead, Funerals of baptized children, and the Mass for the Unity of Christians. The cultural importance of the psalm in American Protestant tradition, in particular, increased dramatically during the years following the Civil War.²⁹ Protestant tradition includes it in services for Lent, the Fourth Sunday of Easter, and the Season after Pentecost. The Anglican Book of Common Prayer additionally uses Psalm 23 for services for Thanksgiving for the Birth or adoption of a child, Ministration to the Sick, the Burial of the Dead, Holy Baptism, and the Confession of St. Peter. Orthodox traditions include Psalm 23 in daily prayers.