

PSALM 23
LEADER'S GUIDE

Rabbi Judy Weiss

Ice breaker: *Have you ever had a personal mantra you would recite to calm yourself or encourage yourself? Why might a mantra help?*

Leader: *Let's read the psalm together and identify elements that portray a relationship between a shepherd and his flock. What are they?*

Text #1

¹A Psalm of David. The Lord is my shepherd
I lack nothing.

²He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me to water in places of repose;

³He renews my life;
He guides me in right paths as befits His name.

⁴Though 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.

⁵You spread a table for me in full view of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil;
my drink is abundant.

⁶Only goodness and steadfast love shall pursue me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for many long years.

- A shepherd leads his flock to grassy pastures so the sheep may graze easily
- He leads his flock to water which is calm so sheep are not swept away in a flood
- He restores his tired flock to life with food and water
- He guides his sheep in right (straight) paths avoiding danger
- A shepherd may have a name (reputation) if he is watchful, gentle, caring
- Sheep like to walk in the sun, but even when a lamb must cross a shaded valley, it does not fear because its shepherd is there
- A shepherd's staff serves as a rod to fight off predators, and to guide the sheep in the right direction

Leader: *The same language in the poem may also be read as portraying the relationship between a devout person and God. Let's re-read the poem and identify elements that pertain to a human worshiper.*

- Grassy pastures and restful waters may represent prosperity or paradise where a worshiper receives spiritual sustenance after being emotionally exhausted
- God leads one on right paths keeping one from sin via God's commandments
- God's rod and staff can symbolize laws, or means of chastisements

- God's name or reputation includes being powerful, protective, caring, merciful
- When walking in the valley of Darkness (stress, illness, loneliness are forms of spiritual darkness), we do not fear if not alone
- A table set with food calls to mind a worshiper bringing food to the Temple as an offering before God (even a sacrificial lamb!) [yet here the roles are reversed and God offers the food]
- God sets a table for one before enemies-- perhaps before those people on whom one cannot rely for help
- Anointing oil was used to dedicate only king or priest who were special to God [another reversal: all are eligible for elevation by oil, not just the elite]
- Only goodness and love will pursue the worshiper [another reversal: usually troubles or enemies are the pursuers]

Questions: *Do you like the metaphor of shepherd and sheep to describe God and worshiper? What does "dwelling in the house of God" mean to you?*

Answers might include:

- Having no worries
- Living in a well-governed world
- Having found one's place in life
- Living a life full of holy acts
- Feeling chosen or specially dedicated, and thus able to accomplish anything

Question: *How can this prayer assert "The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing" if we know that life is not all grassy pastures and trouble is inevitable?*

Answers might include:

- The Psalm's language echoes the book of Deuteronomy: according to Deuteronomy 2:7, when Israel wandered in the desert for forty years, God was with them and they did not want for anything. If an individual thinks about positive experiences of the past, it may help foster hope during current difficulties.
- Prayer can be calming: by repeating I lack nothing, I eventually quiet myself and come to appreciate what I have.
- Prayer can be a tool for recognizing that green pastures are present, but that I cannot see them when I am wrapped up in my troubles.
- By starting with the Lord, the psalm reminds me to focus on true values (what is truly precious); by re-prioritizing I see that I lack nothing truly essential.
- With God, a patient shepherd, I learn patience.

Leader: *Notice that the psalm shifts in verse 4: it mentions danger for the first time, and then starts to speak to God using "You" (You are with me, Your rod and Your staff), whereas earlier the poet spoke about God.*

Discussion Questions:

When Natan Scharansky was in a Soviet prison, he studied the psalms; Psalm 23 in particular gave him courage as he recited “I fear not for You are with me.” For him, in part, “You” was his wife who gave him the book of Psalms, and who remained connected to him during his years of imprisonment via this book.

Divine acts are brought about in our world by real people. Who fills this sacred role in your life by keeping you from feeling alone and fearful?

Are you the face of God in the life of someone else?

Barbara Ellison Rosenblit

INTERGENERATIONAL READING

INTRODUCTION

The 23rd psalm is ubiquitous. If one knows only one psalm in the liturgy, there is a good chance that it's the 23rd. We are so used to hearing this psalm at funerals, at the yizkor service, and at ecumenical ceremonies that we may feel there are no other lenses through which to read it.

We attribute this psalm to our most famous shepherd-poet-king, David, particularly appropriate since the lens of the shepherd informs the message. Today we want to shake off whatever we think this psalm is supposed to mean and explore the words anew. We will put on other personae and try and react to the psalm through new eyes.

THREE INTERPRETATIONS

We'll look at three interpretations to shake us up a little, and then you will be in the position to read it for yourself, through your own lens.

In the first reading, we'll gather three generations together and find verses that touch each age.

In the second exploration we'll become an eight-year-old child, trying hard to make meaning out of a school assignment.

And last we'll struggle through the eyes of a woman facing imminent death.

Then it's yours to read. What does it say to you?

Guiding questions: *The writer has retranslated this psalm.*

1. *In what way is translation itself is a kind of interpretative tool?*
2. *This translator tries to justify her choices. Do you like the translation?*

[The translator picks words to reinforce what she wants the message to be while attempting to stay true to the essence of the poet. Because biblical Hebrew has far fewer words than English, sometimes offering as many as half a dozen choices for one Hebrew word, the translator can use nuance and suggestion to imbed a message in her word choice.

Some may feel that the familiar King James translation is just too good to let go of. This is a perfectly reasonable opinion and worth a few of minutes of discussion. The "child's view" will later look at this translation.]

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD THE INTER-GENERATIONAL READING

Introduction

The first reading of this psalm can be thought of as a reading/play.

Choose 5 players to sit at the front of the room, three chairs at the front, one off to one side, one off to the other. The three central characters are a child, a middle aged woman, and an old woman with a cane.

Props: a lollipop for the child, a cane for the grandmother might be appropriate. If not props, then labels worn to differentiate the three would work. The characters sitting off to the side are the filmmaker and the commentator.

Give each character a script:

Imagine a family reunion where three generations have gathered together. A zealous young film student in the family is making an intergenerational video. She queries the three. Their answers, in ***bold italics***, spoken in three voices, comprise the text of the 23rd psalm. *Unbolded italics* signal each character's thoughts, also spoken, though softly.

Filmmaker: *Who is God to you?*

Child: ***The Lord is my shepherd; I shall lack nothing. To lush grass He leads me/ By calm waters He herds me.***

Filmmaker: *Who is God to you?*

Mother: [to herself, perhaps looking away, spoken softly]: *Who is God to me? I have lived long enough to witness injustice in this world. I look to God to renew me, to clear my confusion, to revive me, counsel me, give me a measure of justice. Please God, I need Your help.*

[in full voice, addressed to the filmmaker] ***The Lord revives my spirit; He counsels me in the spheres of justice for the sake of His Name.***

Grandmother [interrupting her daughter –but closing her eyes]: ***And though I have walked in the valley of the death-shadow [her granddaughter quivers at the image] Even there I will not fear evil because You stand with me.***

Mother [to herself, again, looking away, softly]: *Listen to her—she calls to God intimately. "You," she calls God, not "He." The old woman has called out to God. I seek justice, and she seeks solace. Her eyes are closed. She is looking for God, here close to the end of her life. She has come to God again and again seeking comfort and solace, offering praise and thanksgiving.*

Grandmother: [to herself, softly] *I am bent, and my bones are brittle.*

[She reaches to touch her cane, which rests on the arm of the chair. She sighs aloud]:

Your tribal rod and supporting staff console me.

You prepare before me a table in the view of my enemies

[To herself, softly]: *Does a hospital room among strangers await me?*

[She scans the room and looks lovingly at both her daughter and granddaughter. She pats her eyes with a handkerchief.]

You anoint my head with oil, my cup is filled.

[Now the three generations recite together the closing lines of this psalm, but for each the words express a different idea.]

Child, Mother and Grandmother in unison:

Goodness and grace will pursue me all the days of my life/ And I will rest in God's House for the length of my days.

Discussion Questions

- Can this psalm be read anew and still maintain its “holiness”? Does looking at this psalm through a multi-generational lens add to it or detract from it for you? Explain why.
- The child’s initial answer to the question, “Who is God to you?” employs a concrete idea, a shepherd, to understand her relationship to God. How does the child understand what it a Shepherd God does?

Possible answer: Her answer reveals her child-fashioned, concrete representation of God. The answer is full of optimism and trust in authority, and willingness to be led with the utter confidence that the places God will take her are safe and beautiful, verdant and nourishing. God guides and leads and takes charge.

- Does this metaphor work as we age? What happens to our faith as we mature and live? How is the Mother’s answer different from her young child’s?

Possible answer: The mother is in mid-life. Perhaps she has faced a rupture of faith. Unlike her young daughter, the mother seeks an active, interactive God. God is not a noun, a metaphor, a shepherd. God must do more than be. For this middle-aged woman, God must reveal Godself through action. God must do. God must be defined by verbs; God must *revive* and *counsel*. God must act.

- All three speak the final verse. Thinking about what stage in life they are at, can you suggest what each might have meant when they spoke this verse?

Possible answers:

- The grandchild, in her childish view of God as shepherd, takes comfort in knowing that what pursues her is undoubtedly good, and that she can rest with God whenever she wants.
- The mother perhaps understands that ultimate satisfaction will be found for her in faith, which may bring her the peace for which she yearns.
- The grandmother could mean that her final and eternal rest will be in God’s house.

Barbara Ellison Rosenblit
Interpretive Reading II

THE EYES OF AN EIGHT YEAR OLD

INTRODUCTION

The lens through which this psalm is viewed is that of a second grader. The student is curious and clever, a pleaser and a lover of words, but only eight years old, after all. Charged with memorizing a psalm in her dear teacher's class, she sets about the task with the spirit of an ancient tanna, scholar whose memory is more prized than her comprehension. But she tries to make sense of what she's committing to heart, though the results are often quite comic.

Leader: *Do you remember any occasions when you learned something as a child and only later realized that you had completely misinterpreted its intent? It can be funny, as the first words of the star spangled banner misheard and repeated as "Jose, can you see?" or it can be simply a mis-pitch, where the language is too complex or the ideas too foreign to make sense.*

This reading of Psalm 23 is just such an occasion.

[Let one person read the lines of the psalm (***bold italics***) and another read the musings of the earnest little girl]

THE 23RD PSALM BY KING JAMES
(OCTOBER 4, 1956)

Thoughts of a Second Grader Meeting the Psalm for the First Time

The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want.

Child: Mrs. Gibson said that this is a som.

I don't know what som means exactly, but it has a lot of lines that our class will learn by heart. Mrs. Gibson says that now that we're in second grade, we're ready to tackle this and other Bible pieces. I like Mrs. Gibson. She's old with gray hair and high-buttoned collars. Her shoes are black and lace up and she is strict but has a soft touch when she rests her hand on my back and leans over to see my work. I like my school work. We have spelling tests every week, and I always make hundreds. Except one, where I thought she said "cole" like cole slaw, but really she said coal, like the kind you burn.

This whole som is hard to make sense of, but the first part is not so hard. It says--I don't want a Lord who is a shepherd, but it says it backwards, because that's what soms do, mix words and phrases around to make them like a puzzle to unscramble. If I wrote it in plain English it would say, *I do not want the Lord to be a shepherd.*

That's an odd idea, isn't it? The Lord dressed up as a shepherd. What does that mean we are sheep? Lying around in the fields all day, eating grass, not much to do? Get our wool shaved off for sweaters, maybe become lamb chops. This is a good and funny beginning for this som-- Who

could imagine a worse fate than spending your life as a sheep, except maybe becoming a donkey like Pinocchio. I don't want the Lord to be a shepherd because I sure don't fancy being a sheep.

***He maketh me to lie down in green pastures
He leadeth me beside the still waters.***

There, just as I predicted, making me lie down when the hills beyond are calling me, leading me to standing-still water like the smelly pond near our house with the scum that floats on top of it. This som is about not wanting to be led around like a bunch of sheep.

Before every spelling test, we all recite together, "Good, better, best--I will never rest until I make my good better and my better best." Sheep aren't good, better, best. The best are the ones who just do what they're told. That's nothing to aim for, to be the best at lying around and drinking from smelly ponds?

He restoreth my soul.

I wonder why King James wrote this som with all those *eths*. *Eths* do make it sound quite fancy, really, but they're hard to say. Maketh, leadeth, restoreth. Mrs. Gibson says that soms use that kind of language because that's the language of the Bible.

A soul. A soul is something that God gives you that may live in your feet, and when you die, my father told me your soul goes up to heaven. Is your soul divided between your two feet? If one is amputated, do you have only half a soul left? Could we damage a soul with shoes that don't fit? Mamma sits on the couch and cuts the calluses off her feet sometimes. She always tells us that she hopes we don't ruin our feet like she did. Her second toe curls over her big toe and there is this big bone that juts out of the side of her big toe. Daddy told me you can't see your soul and that everyone has a soul and that God put it there. How does it leave once you're dead? If we have souls until we die, then what does restoring your soul mean? Is it like resoling your shoe? What does a restored soul look like? Is it as good as a new one? Do all souls look the same? Most feet look the same, unless you have six toes or webbed toes. They're not like faces that tell who we are by just looking at them.

He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His namesake.

Who is God's namesake? Who is named for God?

My namesake is my grandfather--both my grandfathers, really--Barney and Louis. I miss not having any grandfathers, just their names to know them by. I beg for stories to know them better, to know if their names have magic.

Names are curious, aren't they? They tell a lot about us. Daddy calls me so many names--Sis--Sis Delaimes--Barbaronisis--Dolly. Every name he calls me is a pet name. When he calls me by one of those names, I feel happy. Daddy loves me. He never gets mad at me and always knows how to fix everything and he is patient and he can find anything that is lost.

Does God have pet names that the angels call him?

On the first day of school, Mrs. Gibson asked us to introduce ourselves by our family names and our Christian names. I am the only Jewish person in the class and was sure I didn't have a Christian name, and when I told her that, she smiled and said that Barbara was my Christian

name. Later, Joe LeVert asked me how I knew I was Jewish and I told him that I just was and he said to bring him proof. I couldn't. What proof is there? I felt bad and sort of afraid of him.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for Thou art with me/ Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me

This valley, what must it be? What does 'yea' mean? before starting off on the trek? Shadows of death. Grey and dark and not even the moon to light your way. Why does this som say that death is scary? I think that when you die you learn the pleasures of heaven. You find out the greatest mystery of the world--what God looks like.

I have thought a lot about God. God is surely not a shepherd. God is mysterious, and shepherds are just bored or maybe even not so smart, standing around with hardly anything to do. And so lonely. I've thought about it quite some time, and I have this idea that God is air. Air is all around us--invisible. God is all around us--invisible. If we shoot the air with a gun, it won't die. And God can never die; you can't kill God, and you can't kill air. Air gives us life and keeps us alive; we could not live without it. We breathe it in and it fills our body with life. We breathe out and it keeps the plants alive. When we are born our mouths and lungs open for the first time and God enters us. Maybe that's when the soul comes in and fixes itself in our feet. Air circulates through us to keep the whole world going. We breathe God in with every breath; is that what it means to restore our souls?

A rod and a staff. I thought that a rod is what is used for hitting. "Behave or I'll take the rod to you." That was what Anne of Green Gables' teacher said to the boys misbehaving in class. Does this shepherd have a rod in both hands? How can these sticks used to keep you in line, to wop you if you misbehave, be comfortable, bring comfort? That's why I don't want God to dress as a shepherd-- I don't want Him to use a rod on us.

Thou preparest a table before me

A white tablecloth. Flowers. China. A feast. God could make such delicacies.

Imagine what delicious food the angels could prepare.

Delicious smells pouring from the heavenly kitchen.

We have a small kitchen in a tiny apartment, and Bubbie is there most of the time. She sits and shells pecans. First she pulls a long hairpin from her thin grey bun and she uses it to dislodge the nutmeats from the shells. She spends hours sitting there shelling, putting the nutmeats into glass jars. She snaps beans in huge pots; with a flick of the wrist, she takes off the ends and pulls the long string down the side of the bean. She loves to cook and she cooks all day. Bubbie is big and fat and old, and she wears shoes like Mrs. Gibson's, but her dresses are silky-looking flowered fabrics and have no shape. She doesn't much like kids around. Bubbie always has newspaper under her when she works, and she squints as she looks over her glasses. She says "ern-yuns" for onions and says "wrench" for rinse. She tells me and my brother to stay out of her way and go play in the other room and don't break anything.

In the presence of mine enemies Thou anointest my head with oil my cup runneth over.

What could be worse? God pouring oil on your hair, down your head, like sticky, glue covering your face while people who hate you watch; everything leaking out of the cup set at your place, spilling out, running out of your cup all over the clean white tablecloth. Nightmare! Why would God do such a thing? What did we do to deserve this? Is He an angry shepherd? Did the flock roam too far? I don't want a shepherd to torture me if I make a mistake. I want God to be air.

*Surely Goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life
and I will dwell in the House of the Lord forever.*

At least the som has a happy ending. But I don't know what went wrong that made God angry and what happened to make it right again. I don't know where God's house is, and how will everyone be able to dwell there. Doing anything forever sounds like an awfully long time, and I can't imagine not getting bored, being in the same house forever. Do you grow older forever? Can you take a vacation? Is this Forever House far?

Leader: *What parts of the poem does the young girl misunderstand? Can you understand what confuses her? Which of her misunderstandings seem funny to you? Do they seem ridiculous?*

The words of the psalm lead the child on some tangential reveries. Do psalms ever pull you down a path of memory, knowingly or not?

Did her confusion help you understand anything you hadn't understood before?

Is there value to learning and memorizing passages that don't make sense to us when we learn them?

Can you look back at a moment in your life totally through the lens of the child you were then? Is there any advantage to such an exercise?

Barbara Ellison Rosenblit
Interpretive Reading III

A VOICE CLOSE TO THE EDGE
As I Lay Dying

Leader: *The scenario for this psalm is set in the hospital. The text is the 23rd psalm. The commentary is the interior monologue of a dying woman in a hospital.*

Questions:

- What solace might reading psalms bring you if you're ill?
- What messages would the 23rd psalm offer?
- Do you have other favorites?

[Directions: Read the psalm with two readers, one the voice of the text of the psalm, one the voice of the ill woman responding through her pain to the words of the psalm.]

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall lack nothing
To lush grass He leads me
By calm waters He herds me.*

Woman: Tubes run through me, one nostril blocked as the tube runs down my nose into my stomach to suck the poisons out. My thumb rests on the button so that I can ease the pain -- they say "control the pain" -- with only so much as a twitch of the finger. *What do I lack?*

Is my husband, Jerome, asleep? There he rests, eyes closed, brow furrowed, feet propped up. Yesterday was our 47th wedding anniversary.

The doctor told me there are cancer cells on the liver, spread from the colon, and nothing can be done.

I have been to funerals, hundreds. All of Jerome's family is in the cemetery now. The blades of grass force their way up between the cracks in the stones, between the graves themselves. Lush grass, fields of grass.

*...And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.
Tenderly will I use you curling grass,
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,
It may be if I had known them I would have loved them,
It may be you are from old people, or from offspring taken
soon out of their mother's laps,
And here you are the mother's laps.
The grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers.... (1)*

I am multi-colored fluids filling the plastic receptacle that hangs from the bedpost. The silent, bulging bag that hangs from the stand above my bed leaks colorless fluid back into me; it will turn red and yellow before it seeps back out. Drop by drop. *Still waters.*

This is what I am now. Liquids in, fluids out, cancer trying to eat me alive from the inside out. No one will ever know who I really am. Who I really was. They can see a fragment, and that fragment only a reflection of themselves in me, what they think they see, what they want to see. My dreams and memories will die with me. I leave behind but a shadow.

***He revives my spirit.
He counsels me in the spheres of justice
for the sake of His Name.***

“Can you live ten years with cancer?” That’s what I heard Jerome ask the doctor. Can you believe him? I’m 79 years old, and he’s asking about 10 years. Do I have 10 months? 10 weeks? He doesn’t believe I’m on the way out.

My daughter cries when she thinks I’m asleep. Don’t cry. My life has been good. Happy. I would change nothing.

From the window, I see leafless trees. Tomorrow is new year’s eve. I have forgotten more than I remember. Yet I remember much of joy and love.

*What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why,
I have forgotten, and what arms have lain
Under my head till morning; but the rain
Is full of ghosts tonight that tap and sigh
Upon the glass and listen for reply,
And in my heart there stirs a quiet pain
For unremembered lads that not again will turn to me at midnight with a cry.
Thus in the winter stands the lonely tree,
Nor knows what birds have vanished one by one,
Yet knows its boughs more silent than before;
I cannot say what loves have come and gone,
I only know that summer sang in me
A little while, that in me sings no more. (2)*

Jerome sneezed. “God bless you.”

***And yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil for Thou art with me.
Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.***

Boy I hate to think that that rabbi will be doing my funeral. He doesn’t know me. Can eighty years be compressed into a hundred words? a thousand? three sentences in the newspaper? half a phrase chiseled on the face of the stone?

Shall I fear death? Maybe the Mormons are right and all your dead relatives gather together to welcome you into heaven. They have begun to come again and again in my dreams.

I have such strange dreams, full of dead people. Are they preparing me?

Sometimes sleep is the only relief I have from the thoughts that race around inside my head and keep me from rest. I welcome sleep; I cherish sleep, if only to free me from my fears. Sometimes I awake refreshed, ready to read the funny papers.

*You prepare before me a table in view of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil, my cup is filled.*

In my dream, I am lying on a hospital table, a white sheet covering the hard metal, separating me from it. Is it an altar? Am I an offering? Will I be sacrificed up to the insatiable god of illness and suffering? Does everyone have a good view? Those who care and those who don't? Will some rejoice as I die?

*Goodness and grace will pursue me all the days of my life,
And I will rest in God's House for the length of my days.*

Please God, don't let me linger, hooked up and helpless. That's all I ask.

Discussion Questions

- *Does this woman's reverie about her life and her death seem to reflect this psalm in any way?*
- *How do we face death? Can you talk about someone you know who has faced death? Do any of the lines of the psalm help propel those thoughts?*
- *Does looking through a different lens help us plumb meaning from a psalm? Are there other lenses you might like to look through?*

Cited Sources

(1) Walt Whitman, "Grass."

(2) Edna St. Vincent Millay, Sonnet (p. 42, Collected Sonnets).

This musing on the 23rd psalm was written by Barbara Rosenblit as she sat in the hospital with her mother who was in the final stage of her fight with cancer. Ed.

Debra Band
The Illuminated Text

THROUGH THE ARTIST'S EYES

INTRODUCTION

This interpretation of the 23rd psalm is viewed through the eyes of the artist. Based upon Debra Band's work, *I Will Wake the Dawn: Illuminated Psalms*, the author offers another prism through which we encounter this body of literature as living poetry and as a means of deepening our conversation with the Divine.

Leader: *As we consider this psalm and the illuminations, let's try to imagine the circumstances that inspired it and relate that to the meaning of the poem in our own lives. We will examine:*

- *What is the emotional tone?*
- *What is the message? What memories do you have of its traditional use?*
- *How do the illuminations convey emotions and thoughts of the psalm?*
- *Does this poem help you articulate your own thoughts and emotions in conversation with Divine?*

Text #1

¹A Psalm of David. The Lord is my shepherd
I lack nothing.
²He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me to water in places of repose;
³He renews my life;
He guides me in right paths as befits His name.
⁴Though 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.
⁵You spread a table for me in full view of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil;
my drink is abundant.
⁶Only goodness and steadfast love shall pursue me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for many long years.

Leader: *As we consider this psalm, try to imagine the circumstances that inspired it, and relate that to the meaning of the poem in our own lives. This psalm is attributed to King David, who as we know, spent his boyhood as a shepherd.*

What is the emotional tone of Psalm 23?

- fear
- gratitude
- faith in God's concern for the individual

What is the message? Can we find two related themes in the poem?

- verses 1-4: faith in the rescue from the Valley of Shadow of Death
- love between God and nation of Israel, the feast laid for Israel by its divine lover

How does the central metaphor convey the message?

- shepherd conveys caring, guiding, protecting, comforting
- full confidence of the opening declaration is evident in the four Hebrew words, *Adonai ro'i lo ehsar* (The Lord [is] my shepherd, I shall not want (I shall lack nothing)) which convey confidence in God's care, simply because the psalmist feels God is near

In the 4th verse, how do the pronouns reinforce the personal relationship with God?

Leader: *Within many traditions (not just Jewish) the 23rd Psalm is the most beloved:*

- In Jewish tradition, it is recited privately in time of sickness, recovery, and at home prior to a funeral.
- Across all western cultures, it has a special place in private devotions.
- In American culture it assumed particular significance during the Civil War (see Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years* (1993), in the Epilogue, "How the Twenty-Third Psalm became an American Secular Icon").

Discussion Question: *Can you think of references to the psalm in American culture?*

Illustrations 1-2

ARTIST'S INTRODUCTION TO THE ILLUMINATION

In the illustrations, the author treats the two themes in Psalm 23, the rescue from the Valley of Shadow of Death and the feast laid for the believer by the omnipotent divine lover, with two visual themes, using imagery drawn from the psalm, from medieval Sephardic poetry, and from her own reflections on a memorable hike. She writes:

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 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," Herschel reflected 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*." (Herschel, 136)

Leader: *How do the illuminations convey emotions and thoughts of the psalm?*

1. A pair of images: the horizontal landscape, and a bordering mat of gold, wound with poetry, olives, grapes and caper branches

2. Together, they reflect upon the confidence the believer finds in the protection, in even the loving indulgence, of God, the Divine lover.

Artist's Interpretation of the art

- A mountainous landscape spreads across the two paintings.
- (image II) a mountain-top lake clings to the cliffs above a steep and dark chasm.
- (image II) tips of the evergreens surround 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 dark abyss below.
- The image speaks to God's protection of the believer against the immanent risk of plunging into danger and abysmal despair.
- At (far) 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 Sea of Reeds:

Text #2

"And how I bore you on eagles' wings (Exodus 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 "(Deuteronomy 1.31).

- (image I) 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:

Text #3

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. (Jeremiah 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 Spanish Jewish 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:

Text #4

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.

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- 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.
- In a passage in the Babylonian Talmud where the rabbis compare qualities of Israel to various plants and animals, the caper 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.

What kinds of experiences can you imagine that this psalm would address?

Have you ever recited it to yourself?

Do you find the familiarity of the psalm comforting?