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*Rosh Hashanah*  
*September 10, 2018*

### **The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm**

The Lord is my shepherd  
I shall not want  
He makes me to lie down in green pastures  
He leads me beside still waters  
Yay though I walk through the valley of the deepest darkness  
I fear no harm  
Your rod and your staff they comfort me.  
My soul is refreshed.

The year was 1959, not long after my father had died but an eternity when measured in longing. A recent college graduate, I lived in Jerusalem before embarking on my rabbinic studies.

Every night I would sit on my terrace which was several blocks away from the heavily wooded Valley of the Cross and I would hear soft music from a shepherds flute.

One night, on a whim, I decided to seek out the shepherd. The lights of the streets of Jerusalem burned brightly but suddenly as I reached the valley I was plunged into darkness. I remembered the Words of the poet Guillame Appolinaire

”come to the edge,’ the first one said

‘we can’t, we are afraid!’ they responded

‘come to the edge,’

He said ‘we can’t we will fall!’ they responded

‘come to the edge,’ he said

And so they came and he pushed them

And they flew.”

An inner force pushed me and on that night I entered the valley of darkness and found a little shepherd boy leading his flock of goats - I could not see him. It was pitch black. I only heard him and the tinkle of the goat bells.

As I walked I walked in fear. Where were we going? Did the shepherd know his way as one path converged with another. We seemed to wander deeper and deeper into an abyss of thistles, pine trees, junipers - and darkness. Without the shepherd I was lost. We walked for

about a half hour until, finally, we again emerged onto the lighted streets of Jerusalem. My young Arab guide turned off to his right, towards his village on the border of the city and I circled back to the safety of my home.

In the years to come, as I dedicated my career to the rabbinate, I often remembered that night and when I remembered I thought of the psalm of David - the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. One verse in particular resonates with me." Yay, though I walk through the valley of darkness." And in that verse a single word echoes over and over - through-through. I walk through. It does not say I dwell or I remain in the valley of darkness but rather I walk through.

This year, far removed from Jerusalem. I again found myself in the valley of darkness, slowly, oh so slowly, recovering from a stroke. I awakened each morning, not to the gentle melody of a shepherd in Jerusalem but rather to the somber chords of anguish and uncertainty within my heart. Each day I struggled to walk thru but there was always a pervasive question, a lamentation - When will I ever be myself again?

And I wonder, how many of you have been lost in a valley of darkness and how have you faced that darkness? How did you come out or, are you still there?

The Hasidic rebbe Nahman of Bratislav said that all of our life is a narrow bridge and the challenge is to cross over in spite of fear. Have you been stranded on that narrow bridge, standing on the edge of the valley of darkness, or perhaps in its midst?

You may have found yourself there for one or more reasons. Possibly it is because of the death of a loved one or the end a relationship. The valley may loom because of sickness, or, as the years pass by , at one time or another we may question the words of the poet Robert Browning "Grow old with me , the best is yet to be." It is possible that the often fragile dreams we held, for ourselves or for our children, lie shattered on the floor of our still evolving future - that the security we knew has been battered by the winds of time.

Yes, it is not unusual for any of us, on one occasion or another, to struggle to find our way out of the valley of darkness, to seek out the shepherds melody until we emerge into the light of healing.

Where is that shepherd? Where is the way out into a new day? And how do we get there?

Possibly we can learn from the barn swallow. In years past I have spoken about the swallows that once inhabited my garage, depositing signature white spots, their remains, on the roof of my light blue car. And when those swallows flew their flight was never in a straight line. Instead, they soared up to the heavens and then appeared to plummet to the earth. And I wondered, when they rose did they know that eventually they would fall and, when they fell did they know they would rise again? For that is the nature of life. To enter the valley of darkness but eventually find our way out, for life is not an even flight. At one moment we are up, all is right with our world and the next moment - well the next moment.

When we are soaring may we appreciate the joy of our journey. Andre Gide speculated : "You must know that joy is more rare, more difficult and more beautiful than sadness. Once

you make this all important discovery you must embrace joy as a moral obligation” - Being alive is a tremendous opportunity. What are we doing with that opportunity? Gabriel Marquez commented on loss but also on the appreciation of life when he said: “don’t cry, smile, because life happened.”

I have always admired the Greek myth of Sisyphus. Sisyphus was doomed by the gods to push a massive rock up a steep incline. But, when he reached the top, his mission seemingly completed, the rock rolled back down the hillside and Sisyphus was again condemned to push the rock. - over and over he was doomed to repeat the task. He had no choice. Yet victory was his because he never ceased to strive. And for a brief period of time he was on the peak of the mountain. Instead of dwelling on defeat, dwelling in darkness, he accepted the challenge and moved on. He kept striving.

Don’t dwell in the valley. Don’t stay there. Walk-through. Over and over again, walk through.

Near my home at Brant Lake the Schroon River flows on its way to the Hudson. As it passes under a bridge a giant boulder in the midst of the water is the platform where I can stand and cast my line with the hope of catching a giant trout.

Unwilling to tarnish my perfect record for never catching fish, on my last visit I left the fishing rod at home and instead watched the river racing from the north, convinced that the boulder would deter the flow. I was wrong ! When the

water reached the obstacle the water split, one half moving on the near side of the boulder, the other half on the far side. Then the waters joined and continued on their journey to the Hudson and the Atlantic.

This process became a metaphor for life. The water refused to cease flowing in spite of the potential obstacle. It went on, finding a way to circumvent the boulder. It went through.

Don’t dwell there! Find a way to go through.

Randy Pautch was professor of computer science at Carnegie Mellon University when he learned he had a fatal cancer. Before he died he arranged that after his death his wife Jai would receive a weekly bouquet of flowers. This would continue for 52-weeks and then, on the 52<sup>nd</sup> week, a note accompanied the flowers: “This is the last bouquet you will receive from me. Now get on with your life.”

Don’t dwell in the realm of loss. Get through it and get on with your life. Begin again. Don’t dwell there.

My father was a wise man. He was an intellect imbued with the scriptures and the Hebrew text. However that was not the wisdom I admired. No, what I most admired was his philosophy of baseball and subsequently of life which he shared with me when I was only a child of eight.

In those days I was a passionate fan of the Albany Senators. They were a minor league baseball team of great renown. At least in Albany! After all, they had the soon to be famous Frankie Staucet at shortstop. I knew that someday he would star for the New York Yankees, or the Red Sox. Unfortunately, instead of reaching the majors his destiny was to sell insurance in Albany. Yet, for a child of 8, my idol was Frankie Staucet and the Albany Senators. Every morning I jumped out of bed, raced downstairs, opened the Albany Times Union to the sports page and scanned the scores from the previous night. If Albany won, it would be a perfect day. And if they lost? If they lost my day was ruined. Then, my father would appear on the scene, and viewing his grieving son, offer the wisdom that I still remember.

"Daniel", he said, "Daniel, the Senators lost but don't worry. They will play again. It's a new day."

There is always a new day if we follow the melody of the shepherd and listen to the wooden recorder that tells us to go through the darkness - not to remain there. We control the placement of our fingers on the instrument of the years. We are our own shepherds. Eventually we will again exit into the light.

What does this year harbor for you? For me? Where will be at this time next year and, when we look back what road will we have traveled? Who knows, but in the words of Henry David Thoreau "Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn."

So as we enter a new year may we walk through the valley. Into the days still to come.

And for those of us who have lost our way in the world may we, as the Psalmist instructs, gather our inner strength. May we be strong and of great courage, and, with time, find our way out of the valley of darkness.