

*My Cup Runneth Over – Erev Rosh Hashanah 5778
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Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester
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The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want
God maketh me to lie down in green pastures
God leadeth me beside the still waters
God restoreth my soul
God guideth me in straight paths for His name's sake.
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
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies
Thou annointest my head with oil

My cup runneth over
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life
And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever

The 23rd Psalm. Stirring words. Solemn words. Words of memory and loss. Words of hope and faith. Words for anxious times.

We usually stop listening to this psalm after hearing the arresting words: Valley of the Shadow of Death. We stop there because when we grieve we seem to reside in that Valley. When we sit with friends who lost a loved one, we walk that Valley with them, our very presence bringing them comfort and solace. We stop at that verse, because it resonates with the sadness of a funeral moment.

But that Shadow spreads far beyond the Valley of grief. We confront this darkness in the pages of our newspapers, on the screens of our phones. Hurricanes and earthquakes and wildfires. Nazis and racism. A discriminatory chokehold on immigration. Our globe getting ever warmer. The fear of a mushroom cloud. All this as background for the vicissitudes, the ups and downs of our own lives. Yes, for many of us the darkness of the Valley of the Shadow seems to know no bounds in these through the looking glass days.

In response to the Shadow, Psalm 23 says: *ō* I will fear no evil. *ö* What an audacious claim. Who among us can claim to fear no evil? Who among us looks around our world and feels no fear? Over the centuries our people have known troubles too many to count: discrimination and hatred, expulsion and wandering, pogrom and genocide. Not only as a people have we suffered, but as people we have suffered. We lose loved ones. We experience illness. We lose jobs. Our children worry us. Through the millennia, in spite of the Jewish experience and the human experience we have continued to recite this psalm and these words: *ō* I will fear no evil. *ö* How? How can we make this assertion without allowing naiveté to rob us of the

wits we need to survive? How can we make this claim while suffering setback after setback, watching our world walk backwards instead of forwards?

The Jewish imagination teaches that King David himself penned the 23rd Psalm. A man of action, David saw his share of trouble and terror. A man of passion, he knew of good food and drink and the pleasures of the flesh. A warrior of deep faith, he answers the Shadow of fear and evil with vigor: *ö I will fear no evil for Thou ó God ó art with me.ö* Right after he acknowledges the Valley, right after he calls to our hearts the terrors that hide in the Shadows of the human spirit, he tells us to fear no evil for God remains at our side.

King David's resilience, his strength, stemmed from his faith. For millennia our people endured what we can barely imagine sustained by a belief in a God who would see them through, who would one day come and bring redemption, who would reward them in a life after this one. For most of us, faith looks different today though it can still imbue us with great power. Already 2,000 years ago the great Rabbi Hillel taught: *öIf I am not for myself who will be for me?ö*¹ He knew that for many, faith begins with a faith in oneself. We have faith, too, in the people around us. Family and friends form the bedrock of meaning. These relationships form the webs in which we place ourselves, in which we place the moments of our lives to find purpose and depth. And, we have faith in ideas. The idea of America. The idea of capitalism. The ideas of the intellect. The ideas democracy and law. We place great faith in these complex human constructs around which we organize our lives. And yet, these are only ideas.² They exist only in our shared consciousness. Their power comes from faith alone.

With all of our faith in humans and our ideas, many of us also put faith in God. Jewish tradition leaves wide open the theological doorways through which we might walk. Some call God an omnipotent, all powerful creator or maybe they see God as the benevolent force for good in the universe. Some imagine that God is the feeling we have when we do the right thing or perhaps they conceive of God as the glue that binds us to those we love. A healthy, intentional spiritual life means that our theologies change as we do, they evolve when we let them shape the contours of our lives and allow our lives to shape the form of our faith. We cannot know the content of David's faith, a man so buffeted by history and passion, by war and desire. But we know that his faith sustained him in the Valley of the Shadow of Death. His faith overcame his fear. So, while Judaism does not insist on particular theology, it asks us to embrace a faith which helps us rise above fear: a transcendent faith that, together with faith in friends and family, faith in community and ideas, can bring light to Shadowed Valleys. When we walk with that faith in our hearts, we need not fear.

: I will fear no evil for Thou art with me.

Lack of fear does sooth, but it did not satisfy our warrior poet king. In Psalm 23, David goes on to describe a feast in front of enemies, goodness, mercy, and God's house. On David's banquet table sits the *ö*, the overflowing cup. We can see our King: a regal banquet on the side of a battlefield after a successful conquest: the table laden with the earth's bounty, proud soldiers and grateful women, joyous children and wise elders. In David's hand a chalice worthy of a king, a

¹ Avot 1:14

² Harari, Yuval. Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind

cup overflowing with sweet wine, so many blessings in one place chasing away all remnants of the Shadow of the Valley of Death. With the psalm's words, King David paints an idyllic scene worthy of Thomas Cole or William Turner.

Blessings, thankfully, fill our cups, too. Most of us in this room have lives filled with blessings, many of which we take for granted. We have roofs over our heads and food in our kitchens. We live in safety and without threat from our neighbors or the authorities. Wine fills our cups from *nachas* from our children and love for our parents. Fun friends and meaningful relationships in our communities add vigor and joy to the wine of our lives. We celebrate weddings and babies and *bonei mitzvah* and birthdays and anniversaries ó these rare moments creating great vintages. These idyllic blessings fill our cups towards overflowing.

But our wine is not so simple. óThe reality is messier and richer.ö³ Besides the blessings, what else makes up the wine that overflows? What grapes give up their juice to our vintage? Surely some of it comes from the very things we fear in the Valley of the Shadow. Our cups fill first with our daily cares and concern, the pressures and constraints that make up our life week to week. The wine comes, too from our worries for our nation, from attacks on our free press, from Nazis marching in Charlottesville. We imagine the life of a refugee crossing global borders unwanted, alone, rejected, and the liquid rises higher as we see ourselves and our ancestors reflected in the face of that refugee. The waters of Harvey and Irma and Maria ó and the feeling that we cannot really help ó fills our cups higher still. Anxieties. Too many to name.

And, while the cup overflows with the tannins and sweetness of anxieties and blessings, the cup miraculously holds together. What is this cup? The simple metaphor suggests that a cup is a life. But that's too simple. The cup is so much more. Concentric circles of relationships and of ideas and of faith make up the cup. And the cup's worth, our ability to hold both our anxieties and blessings, depends on tending to each of these.

With our individual minds and bodies we form the inner core of the cup. We embrace the work and joy of living; we tend to our daily tasks, our desires, our bodies, and our souls. Into our own work and joy, duties and desires, health and sickness, knowledge and ignorance, into all of these we pour a bit of the wine. But this alone does not a cup make, by ourselves we cannot contain all that life asks of us.

We turn to one another. My greatest pride in our congregation, what makes Emanu-El so special, is that we are there for each other. In sickness and mourning, in joy and celebration, in the weekly and yearly rhythms of the calendar, we turn to one another in support. We hold one another up in this very room, this building, in each other's homes, and out in the community. The support comes from clergy and staff, from other congregants, from both. As life pours forth with all its blessings and all its challenges, this community is here for you, walking with you through the Valleys and peaks that make a life. This community is a piece of your cup.

Ideas form the next layer of our chalice. The idea of America, home to Jewish communities for over 360 years, our nation has provided the very best cup for the wine of Jewish life that our people has known since the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70. The ideas of the intellect

³ The Roots. óNo John Trumbullö, Hamilton Mix Tape

from psychology to history, from economics to human rights, these ideas create the context in which we understand our lives. The ideas of Judaism help us to mark the yearly cycles and the intense life moments. Alone and together we hold ideas that free us from our base nature, that craft a cup which allows us to face our lives and find meaning in the days allotted to us.

The last layer of the cup, the potters glaze that adds strength and color and richness, is faith. That faith which David knew, the faiths that we embrace today both earthly and supernatural, that faith holds the cup together even as it assuages our fears in the Valley of the Shadow. Self and community and ideas form the stuff of our lives. Faith gives that stuff form to hold the wine of challenges and blessings that overflows. With faith in ourselves, in our community, in our ideas, in our God ó whatever that may be ó with faith our cups will never crumble, they will hold together even when they overflow.

Tonight, we look ahead to a New Year. The year will have fraught moments, uncertain times. And, the year will have blessings. In these ten Days of Awe from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, we each commit to preparing ourselves and our community for the year to come. We commit to forging a chalice worthy of King David. We promise to hold what wine of life we can and to let the overflow fall around us with as much grace as we can muster. As Jews we do not pretend that life is only blessing, we do not imagine that we will avoid hardships. And, as Jews, we celebrate all of the goodness in our lives with heartfelt joy and gratitude. When we hold it all, when our cups run over, we know that we live a life of purpose and meaning. When we drink deeply of that cup we can surely traverse any Valley, bring light to any Shadow. When our cups overflow, we know that God is our shepherd; we know that we need not fear evil and that we shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

May this be God's will