

Psalm 23: Living Theology in Song

A Sermon in Song by Cantor Lauren Adesnik

Temple Emanu-El | Yom Kippur Mincha | 09.28.2020~10 Tishrei 5781

Play Adonai Roi from Leonard Cohen's Chichester Psalms:

To Listen

 **Chichester Psalms: No. 2 Adonai roi**

<https://youtu.be/cwit6qXik-A>

Welcome! G'mar Tov. Today we will journey together through poetry and music to discover Psalm 23, arguably one of the most famous, if not the most famous psalm in our Canon. Psalm 23 is an anchor, most often when we face tragedy and loss. The words of this psalm bring us comfort, catharsis, and hope as we move through the mourning process.

Psalm 23 provides us with a central, living theology we can ascribe to throughout all of the stages of our lives. In times of joy and celebration, heartbreak and sorrow, this Psalm reminds us that we are never alone. Through lush meadows and times of elation, through dark valleys and times of despair, God's strengthening, sustaining and guiding presence is with us always. Ultimately, as we grow through this psalm, we discover that we exist in a dynamic and reciprocal relationship with God.

A small note: We have been conditioned to refer to the authors of our texts and even to God with the he/him pronoun. Our history, texts, authors and even God exist beyond the specific boundaries of our given pronouns. So, for today, I decided to utilize the feminine pronoun when referring to our psalmist. I invite YOU to replace it with YOUR preferred pronoun.

A Psalm of David.
The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures,
He leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul.

He 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 mine enemies.
Thou anointest 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.

Psalm 23 is a Theology in Song.

Rabbi Harold Kushner offers the following interpretation of this text:

In this brief psalm we receive "an entire theology, more practical than we can find in many books. [The psalmist] teaches us to look at the world and see it as God would have us see it. If we are anxious, the psalm

gives us courage and we overcome our fears. If we are grieving, it offers comfort and we find our way through the valley of the shadow. If our lives are embittered by unpleasant people, it teaches us how to deal with them. If the world threatens to wear us down, the psalm guides us to replenish our souls. If we are obsessed with what we lack, it teaches us gratitude for what we have. And most of all, if we feel alone and adrift in a friendless world, it offers us the priceless reassurance that "Thou art with me."

-Rabbi Harold Kushner, The Lord is My Shepherd

We might experience the Psalmist's words as a three-part drama. Act 1 opens upon a pastoral scene of lush greenery and sustaining cool waters. Our author feels safe and secure; God as shepherd provides her with that sense of security and sustenance.

Act 2 brings darkness and challenge into the psalmist's life. Trauma, tragedy, and bereavement strike, leaving our artist feeling desperate and alone in a valley of shadows. It is in this dark place that she learns she is not alone.

Our psalmist comes to realize that God is more than a source of security and sustenance; God also is a source of comfort and consolation through life's tribulations and losses. Step by step, it is God that leads the psalmist through and out of the valley of the shadow, helping her to discover how *"infinitely more sweet the sunshine is when she makes it to the other side."*

Act 3 unveils a changed soul, one who has matured from innocence, grown through hardship and with God's guidance, comes to a more sophisticated knowledge of God. Our artist learns that God is more than simply a strengthening presence by our side: our artist realizes that she exists *in a reciprocal relationship* with God. God offers the psalmist a place to dwell forever, through anything life may bring our songstress.

Hebrew text and music are naturally linked together. Hebrew consonants and vowels often sound like the words they describe. In biblical poetry, there are several Hebraic expressions that link Psalms and Music together, illuminating the idea that the Psalms are really musical expressions of poetic text.

Tehillim is the Hebrew name for the Book of Psalms, and its closely related word, *Tehila*, means to praise. The book of Psalms is a collection of praises to God.

Often, psalms begin with the words *Mizmor'l David* or, *l'David Mizmor*, Mizmor is hebrew for making music, and these words are often translated as "A Song of David, or To David, a Song." This kind of opening is a literary clue, known as a "head-note." This tells us that the Psalm was in fact, a song; other textual openings such as "*L'am'netzach Bi'n'gi'not* (*to the leader with*

instrumental music)” refer to how the psalm might have been sung, or what kind of accompaniment might have been used.

It is also important to note that trope markings accompany each word written in the book of psalms; as all of the biblical books do, however their relationship to the original melodies is unknown.” You can see, I have marked the trope symbols on the slide in RED.

Finally, the word *Shirah*, commonly meaning “to sing, or song” ALSO means “Psalm.” A psalm is both poetic text AND A song. The book of Psalms, *Tehillim*, is a book of musical poetry that praises God.

Now for the music! Music brings the deeper shades and meanings of the text to a fuller light. Classical, secular, and Jewish composers throughout the centuries have brought the Psalms to life using various musical elements and composition techniques.

Combining text with rhythm and tempo-how steady or syncopated, fast or slow a composition is; utilizing various instrumentation textures such as choir or added voices, employing dynamics ranging from soft piano to loud forte, along with chosen keys, scale ranges and chromaticism (notes that stand outside of the scale) are features of musical expression that composers use to emulate the core of the text.

Let us dive into the first of our three-act drama. Music is our guide, shedding light on the different scenes we will experience, and different emotions the musical phrases may elucidate.

A Psalm of David.
The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures,
He leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul.

Gerald Cohen's setting illustrates the pastoral, lush imagery we encounter in the opening verses. The gentle chords and moving arpeggios in the piano structure illuminate a soft rustling breeze through the trees, a meandering stream of cool sustaining water. The melody is lyrical and repetitive. The addition of the choir and instruments adds a sense of supportive warmth.

The choral and instrumental textures along with the repeating melody create a sense of fullness and security one might feel as they are guided by their Shepherd. The addition of brief darker color chords and the haunting movement of the melody hint of the trauma to come later in the text, but only for the briefest moment. The movement in the voice, chorus and instruments serves to lull us into an eternal space where we feel held and secure by God our Shepherd.

This is Gerald Cohen's setting of Adonai Roi, Sung by Rabbi Cantor Angela Buchdahl of Central Synagogue, New York:

To Listen on YouTube:

 **Psalm 23, Rabbi Angela Buchdahl- Composed by Gerald Cohen**

https://youtu.be/PIKa9Lk_tbu

We move from feeling safe and secure in God's sheltering presence to our first encounter with trauma and tragedy in Act 2:

He 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 mine enemies.
Thou anointest my head with oil, my cup runneth over.

Here, the artist's life is shaken by tragedy and trauma. Although the first line is often read as "guideth me in straight paths," Rabbi Harold Kushner offers a more accurate translation of the Hebrew that describes God as "leading me in roundabout ways that end up in the right direction."

We might also interpret this line as Rabbi Richard Levy does, moving through "well-worn paths of Justice." We grow through life and we discover that our paths are not always easy or straight. They are often well worn, sometimes

hard to see; filled with holes, impediments, twists, turns, danger and fear. These winding paths sometimes lead straight again, and sometimes plunge down into the darkest of valleys. It is here, in her darkest valley, that the psalmist re-discovers God's presence. Slowly, the psalmist finds her way out of the shadow.

Michael Isaacson's setting of Psalm 23 highlights the danger and fear we encounter in this psalm. The opening organ accompaniment is sparse, leaving the voice alone, reminiscent of a stark cry to God. The angular, chromatic melody line mimics the broken sound of tears.

The half steps in the organ accompaniment and the slightly faster paced middle section suggest that God has heard our songstress's cry, and one step at a time, together they begin the journey through the valley of the shadow of death. The chromatic scale here illustrates enemies lining up, one by one before us. It is up to us to confront those enemies and challenges that face us. *How might we see them in a different light- learn from our encounters with them?*

The ending presents ethereal, open chords and a conversation between vocal line and organ. The voice represents our call to God, and the piano is God's answer to us. This shared dialogue proposes that God shares our pain, trauma and loss. God's presence helps us to move through these winding

pathways. God is by our side as we take tentative careful steps through our shadows back to the light. God's strength helps us to respond to our enemies and challenges in a different way. We might feel directed to a more open response to life's impediments, choosing to see what we might learn from the losses we suffer, from the people who might bring us harm; rather than fearing what we encounter, or insisting on remaining within our shadows for too long.

Isaacson's musical setting implores that we open our hearts, call upon God, and become vulnerable. In that vulnerability we exhibit the strength to take on that which we could not alone; we are able to more fully face our fears, roadblocks and turns with faith.

This is Isaacson's Adonai Ro'i, sung by Cantor Benjie Ellen Schiller:

To Listen:

 **Adonai ro'i (Psalm 23)**

<https://youtu.be/Ig7imY8uyUU>

Strengthened by her newly rediscovered relationship with God, our songstress enters Act 3.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the House of the Lord forever.

Now, the psalmist understands that God's house is her reward for helping to create a sense of the divine on earth and for inviting God into her life as a

partner. Martin Kalmanoff's setting captures "the quiet drama and steadfast faith inherent in this psalm." Kalmanoff is most known for his many musical theater works that blend the popular style of the theater with the drama and expert vocalise of Operatic style. This setting highlights these blended techniques of musical theater and opera.

Our first three settings explored the Hebrew text, while this setting returns to the beloved King James translation. The symphony imbues a quality of wholeness, like a comforting blanket supporting the voice with color and texture. The melodic line is set like an operatic recitative, the melody and the rhythm echoes one's speech patterns, as though they were reciting the text. This allows the words to remain the focus of the setting, rather than the symphonic colors, melody or the voice.

There are several dramatic musical moments throughout the piece all of which lead higher and higher to the final musical climax, highlighting the end of our text "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 composer elects to change one element of this psalm, and repeats the words "I shall dwell forever." Repeating these words, writing them with a

vocal line that climbs higher and then higher again, makes a significant textual statement reaffirming the artists' steadfast faith in God.

The highest notes, and most energetic swells in both vocal and orchestra lines are at this point. This musical drama reflects the psalmist as she unearths a life with God permanently by her side. This steadfast, divine dwelling place is one of love, and enduring relationships. It is the ultimate expression of "I will always be with you." God's house is a refuge, and also a sanctuary, a place of holiness. The return to the tonic note in the voice as its last, gives the listener a sense of coming home after a long journey. We are tired, we are grateful for the vistas we have seen, the life we have experienced, the lessons learned, and incredibly happy to sink into our sustaining dwelling place.

This is Cantor Alberto Mizrahi singing The Lord is My Shepherd, by Martin Kalmanoff.

To Listen:

 The Lord is My Shepherd (Psalm 23)

<https://youtu.be/T9zxWjMwdU8>

Psalm 23 is a pastoral drama, an artist's depiction of one's journey through life. We all begin our lives in innocence and security, as we grow, each of us in our own different way encounters impediments, loss, trauma and crisis. The psalmist's words encourage us through that journey, so that perhaps like her, we

might be able to find faith in a God who may not be able to prevent those tragedies from happening, but who is able to provide comfort, guidance, strength and presence.

Each of these musical settings we have explored together expresses one of these theological aspects of our psalmist's journey. We began with the pastoral scenes depicted in Gerald Cohen's Adonai Roi, and moved into twisting turning journeys with Michael Isaacson's Psalm 23. Finally, we came home to a new perception of God with the expressive, high reaching tenor of Martin Kalmanoff's The Lord is My Shepherd. *And, let us not forget, always within us, is that still small voice, calling out to Adonai that we heard in Leonard Bernstein's movt. 2 of Chichester Psalms that opened this presentation.*

The psalmist's journey returns her home again, to that place of secure sustenance, but as a changed human being; one who has matured through experience and who has learned through challenge and confronted those enemies before her. As a result of her deeper understanding of herself, and of life, she is able to more fully dwell in God's divine house as a reciprocal partner, rather than as a sheep to be steered.

This is the overarching teaching of this Psalm! Partnering with God, helping to manifest a sense of the divine on earth through various acts of tikkun

olam and loving kindness brings our psalmist to a place of deeper security, safety and discernment. No, God cannot prevent life's trials, but God's strengthening presence will always dwell within and around her. It is this presence that will help her to move through all of life-good and bad. This is what our author means as she exclaims: "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 biggest step we will ever take is the step towards a partnership with God. How can we invite into our lives and trust a God who cannot prevent tragedy from striking?

We are stepping into a relationship with something which cannot necessarily see, or hear, or feel. This takes an enormous amount of vulnerability, courage, faith and trust. Psalm 23 tells us that in our bleakest hours, when we wish to shun everyone away, we must not estrange ourselves from God. On this day, the holiest day of the year, we are at our closest to God.

God yearns for our presence and closeness just as much as we yearn for God. With Psalm 23 as our foundation, let us take that step toward God and invite God in. In the words of 12th Century Philosopher, and Poet, Rav Yehuda Halevi: *"Where might I go to find You? Your place is exalted and hidden. Yet where would I not go to find You? Your presence fills the universe. My heart cries*

out to You. Please draw near to me. The moment I reach out for You, I find You reaching in for me."