

Introduction

Life's journey inevitably takes us through the valley of the shadow of death. God's presence is a source of revival, comfort, guidance, and kindness.

A Psalm of David. *God is my shepherd; I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, and leads me to still water — renewing my life, guiding me in the right paths as befits the divine name. Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no harm, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff—they comfort me. You spread a table for me in full view of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my drink is abundant. Only goodness and steadfast love shall pursue me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in God's house for many long years.*

מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד י-הוּוֹה רֹעִי לֹא אֶחְסָר:
בְּנֵאוֹת דְּשָׁא יִרְבִּיצֵנִי עַל־מֵי מְנוּחֹת
יִנְהַלֵּנִי: נַפְשִׁי יִשׁוּבֵב יִנְחֵנִי בְּמַעְגְלֵי צֶדֶק
לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ: גַּם כִּי־אֵלֶךְ בְּגִיא צַלְמוֹת
לֹא־אִירָא רַע כִּי־אֲתָה עִמָּדִי שִׁבְטְךָ
וּמִשְׁעֲנִיתְךָ הַמָּה יִנְחֵמְנִי: תַּעֲרֹךְ לִפְנֵי
שִׁלְחוֹ נֶגֶד צַרְרֵי דְשִׁנְתְּ בְּשִׁמּוֹן רֹאשִׁי
כּוֹסֵי רְוִיחָה: אֵךְ טוֹב וְחֶסֶד יִרְדְּפוּנִי
כָּל־יְמֵי חַיֵּי וְשִׁבְתִּי בְּבַיִת י-הוּוֹה לְאָרְךָ
יָמִים: (תהלים כג)

This is undoubtedly the most famous of all the Psalms, and for good reason: Everyone lives in the shadow of death. Mortality is a fact of life. At times, we feel encompassed by that shadow, “in the valley” (בְּגִיא צַלְמוֹת). It might be our own death approaching, or that of those we love. Either way, it feels all-encompassing, like the mountains above are closing in on us. Precisely at this moment, the Psalm teaches us that we have a shepherd to guide us through this harrowing path, “I fear no harm, for You are with me” (לֹא־אִירָא רַע). God’s presence provides tranquility, renewal, and guidance. “He makes me lie down in green pastures, and leads me to still waters (בְּנֵאוֹת דְּשָׁא יִרְבִּיצֵנִי עַל־מֵי מְנוּחֹת יִנְהַלֵּנִי). Fear and anxiety are natural, yet the Psalm speaks about goodness and kindness. “Only goodness and steadfast love shall pursue me” (אֵךְ טוֹב וְחֶסֶד יִרְדְּפוּנִי).

How does God’s presence soothe us under these circumstances? Perhaps it’s the feeling that religious teachings guide us on how to make complex decisions or how to respond to illness and death. Maybe it’s the belief that there is a better world over the horizon. Possibly it’s knowing that there is something larger than what we see on Earth that gives us trust in the meaningfulness of all that befalls us. Or perhaps it’s simply the feeling that we are not alone. Or all of the above. Whatever it might be, the Psalm helps us understand how our belief can help us get through these difficult moments.