

**'IT IS YOUR FACE I SEEK': REFLECTIONS ON PSALM 27**

**Rosh Hashanah Second Day**

**September 22, 2017 ✧ 2 Tishri 5778**

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On this Day of Remembering  
we recall the generations.

On this Day of the Shofar's sounding  
we listen for the voices within.

On this Birthday of the World  
we start anew.

Let us hallow this day, as we bless  
the ever-flowing wellspring  
that nourishes us.<sup>1</sup>

It is the second day of Rosh Hashanah, and the party continues. The poet Marcia Falk reminds us that we are celebrating the Birthday of the World, The Day of Judgement, The Day of the Shofar's sounding. How shall we nourish our souls? Have we prepared for this day? Did we go to the spiritual gym each day in the month preceding this moment, taking time to reflect on who we've been in the past year and who we'd like to be in the year to come? Or, did we show up to the race without ever running a practice mile?

Like most things in life, we get out of the High Holy Days what we put in. I struggle to do the spiritual preparation that this season requires, while also fulfilling my normal day-to-day duties at home and work and preparing to lead the congregation. I know that I am not alone in this struggle. Daily life demands a lot of each one of us and sometimes the additional demands of emotional and spiritual self-improvement are too much to handle. But, each year I try and I trust you do too.

As I prepared for the coming of 5778, my thoughts turned to Psalm 27. This is a prayer that generations of our ancestors have recited in the lead up to the High Holy Days, the Days of Awe, the *Yamim Nora'im*. It is a work of Biblical Poetry, one of the oldest texts that we have in our Bible. Poetry can often be difficult to understand, all the more so with a piece that is at least 2600 years old. Psalm 27 is especially enigmatic, so much so that the prevailing scholarly assessment is that its fourteen lines are actually two different psalms stitched together over the centuries. The two halves of the Psalm appear to be diametrically opposed. In the first seven lines, the author speaks confidently of God's presence in his life. "Adonai is my light and my help. Whom shall I fear? Adonai is the stronghold of my life. Whom shall I dread?" And the implicit answer is "no one!" No need to fear when God is here. The first half ends with, "... I come with offerings, amidst the shofar blasts, to God's tent, chanting and singing praise to Adonai." A joyful celebration of God's power and protection on this Holy Day.

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<sup>1</sup> A prayer/ poem by Marcia Falk, slightly adapted.

The second part of the Psalm continues, however, in a very different mode: “Adonai, hear my voice as I cry out; be gracious to me, and answer me.” How quickly the tides have turned! The rest of the poem is filled with despair ending with the pleading hope, “Would that I could see God’s goodness in the land of the living...” and the speaker’s voice trails off, only to be answered with the directive, *Kaveh et Adonai* – “Place your hope in Adonai.” *Hazak* – “Be strong and take courage and place your hope in Adonai.” This is a far cry from the assurance and bravado of the opening lines!

Writing at the end of 2001, a year into the second Palestinian Intifada in Israel, and BEFORE the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York, a distinguished American Rabbi from the Conservative Movement<sup>2</sup>, confessed that he had always seen this psalm solely through the lens of the first half. He saw it as a psalm of hope and certainty. That is, until he had lived in Israel through the year from September 2000 – September 2001. Then he began to hear in this psalm a poet, “... struggling to keep his faith, his hope and confidence at a time when there was little factual evidence to justify these feelings. [The poet] stands strong and puts up a good front, but is beset by doubts.”<sup>3</sup> But another commentator suggests that our Psalm is, in fact, one cohesive psalm that expresses the extremes of life: total assurance and deep despondency.<sup>4</sup> It gives voice to life’s duality.

After the year that we’ve just come through, I can understand this sentiment. Last fall it seemed as though we were continuing a forward march of progress. A country which had drunk deeply at the well of racism was nearly 8 years into the presidency of its first black president. In a stunning display of the speed with which social progress can sometimes advance there were 3 states that allowed gay marriage at the end of 2009 and 37 by the end of June 2015. Nearly 70% of the states changed their laws in the span of less than 6 years! Recognizing all our flaws, we were finally a country that had a modicum of protection for those experiencing the inevitable season of illness in their lives. We were confident! We had hope! We had bravado! Then, for many of us, abruptly, all of that changed. The doubts crept back in. Will the government truly protect me and my family? Those in my community with less wealth or access to power and resources?

From total assurance to urgent concern! The duality of Psalm 27 makes sense to me in a different way now, after the year that we’ve lived. I recognize the misplaced bravado of the beginning of 5777 and feel, to the depths of my soul, the despondency of the current moment.

As I mentioned earlier, the Psalm ends with the directive “Place your hope in Adonai.” The way that we sing this psalm most often at Beth-El Zedeck is a rendition of the final lines but omits three key words, “*hazak v’ya’amez libecha*” or “be strong and of good courage in your heart.” Be strong and trust. It is all well and good to be directed to “place your hope in Adonai,” but what does that mean? What does that look like? What are the daily practices that build up “hope?”

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<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Reuven Hammer

<sup>3</sup> Hammer, Reuven. “Psalm 27: A Psalm of Desperation,” *Conservative Judaism* 54 (2002): p60-61.

<sup>4</sup> Segal, Benjamin J. “Where Liturgy and Bible Meet: Psalm 27, for the Time of Repentance,” *Conservative Judaism* 54 (2002): p53.

One of the Jewish ways to build up our “inner goods” or character traits comes from 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe. It is called Mussar, or ethics. I looked to the table of contents of two of the most authoritative Mussar texts for our times. Neither one lists “hope” as a moral character trait that one can strengthen. “Hope” does not appear but “Trust” does. We can build up the muscle of trust by noticing, each day, when we are rewarded after trusting someone, with positive results. We can also meditate on what went wrong when others broke trust with us, or we with others, always with an eye towards repairing the breach for the future. We can gain courage of heart, strength of heart, by continuing to trust, or by trusting again and anew.

My personal affinity in Psalm 27 is to the word “my heart” or *libi*, in Hebrew. I love that one English word, with its roots in Old French and Latin, “courage” expresses the sentiment of the strength that comes from the heart, “couer.” My favorite verses come from the middle of the psalm: “*Lach Amar Libi, Bakshu Fanai, et Panayich Havayah, Avakesh*”<sup>5</sup> Our prayer book translates these lines: “It is You of whom my heart said, ‘Seek my face!’ It is Your presence I seek, ADONAI.”<sup>6</sup> Another translator says: “Speaking with your voice my heart sang. *Seek my presence. I will.*”<sup>7</sup> The difficulty in rendering these ancient words into English, even understanding them in the original Hebrew, adds to their allure.

My own theology leans to an embrace of the Mystery rather than to faithful certainty. This is why among the first ethical traits that my teacher assigned to me for a 4 month course of study and reflection was “Trust.” As often as my life allowed, I practiced by chanting words from Psalm 112:8, “*Samuch liba lo tira*” translated by my teacher of chant, Rabbi Shefa Gold as “Heart supported, fearless.” As we come to the end of the past year and begin anew, I feel the need to return to this practice. The practice of strengthening the muscle of trust.

After my father saw the 2011 movie *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* he took to saying one of its lines so often that I mistook it for a sage Yiddish saying, “It will all work out in the end and if it is not yet working out it is not yet the end.” This, I believe, is the ultimate point of Psalm 27, the psalm for this season. We find ourselves standing in synagogue again this year, requesting forgiveness and seeking a year of blessing. All year we spend our days searching for wholeness, somewhere between total confidence and utter uncertainty. Particularly at this time of year we seek assurance “that for this eternal quest there is hope. We must be strong and let our heart take courage.”<sup>8</sup> Shana Tovah u’m’tukah. To a Sweet New Year!

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<sup>5</sup> Set to music by Yoel Sykes of Nava Tehila in Jerusalem.

<sup>6</sup> *Mahzor Lev Shalem* p458.

<sup>7</sup> Fischer, Norman. *Opening to You: Zen – Inspired translations of the Psalms*. Penguin: New York, 2002. P40.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.