

Of Whom Shall I be Afraid?: A Teaching on Psalm 27  
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5778  
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Shanah tovah everyone. This year it is particularly powerful and beautiful to be together as a community to celebrate Rosh Hashanah - for these are not easy times.

Many of us come this evening concerned for friends and family who have been impacted by hurricanes, earthquakes and wildfires, or simply aching for the loss and destruction experienced by so many. We are also keenly aware of the hateful actions and rhetoric of white nationalists and white supremacists that unfolded not far away in Charlottesville; and we are concerned that the President's shameful, equivocal response has emboldened them.

We may feel anxious and vulnerable to real or perceived threats. But we can take comfort in this: our people have persevered through centuries of challenges that held both promise and grave darkness. As we have in the past, we turn to each other, and to our life-giving tradition, for the wisdom and strength to find our way.

So, this evening, I'd like to share with you a psalm that has been with our people, guiding us for over 2,000 years. It is chanted every day from the first of Elul – the month leading up to Rosh Hashanah – until the very last day of the Sukkot cycle, Shemini Atzeret – which completes the High Holy Day season. This psalm, Psalm 27, is the shimmering, spiritual thread that weaves through all of these festivals. Let's look at the first half of it together to understand the strength and hope it has given our people and can give us.

Let's begin with the opening verse:

לְדָוִד.	Of David.
יְהוָה אֱוֹרִי וַיִּשְׁעֵי	The Eternal is my light and deliverance,
מִמִּי אֵיֶרָא	whom shall I fear?
יְהוָה מְעוֹז־חַיִּי	The Eternal is the strength of my life,
מִמִּי אֶפְחָד:	of whom shall I be afraid?

The rabbis understood that the reference to light in the opening line of the psalm is a reference to Rosh Hashanah. Salvation refers to Yom Kippur and the healing that comes from atonement (at-one-ment with God)

“Of whom shall I be afraid?”

The psalmist asks this central question and then answers it himself. He has a long list. It may seem to be just a rhetorical question, but he's naming real fears. Let's look at the next three verses:

בְּקִרְבֵי עָלַי מְרַעִים	When evildoers approach
לְאָכַל אֶת־בְּשָׂרִי	to consume me,
צָרִי וְאֹיְבֵי לִי	they, my adversaries and enemies,
הִמָּה כָּשְׁלוּ וַנִּפְּלוּ:	stumble and fall.
אִם־תִּחַנְּנָה עָלַי מִחַנְּנָה	Were an army to encamp against me
לֹא־יִירָא לְבִי	I would know no fear;
אִם־תִּקְוֶם עָלַי מִלְחָמָה	though war were waged against me,
בְּזֹאת אֲנִי בֹטָח:	I would retain my trust.

I almost always encourage us to read this section as metaphorical: During this season we are doing the difficult internal work of confronting all our failures, our brokenness, our habits of heart and mind that stop us from being our best selves. These habits and flaws are the enemies, the obstacles that we must have the courage to face.

This metaphorical way of reading the psalm is still open to us, of course, as we do the internal, personal work of *teshuvah*. But this year a more literal reading of the psalm might speak to us as well.

We step into the shoes of the psalmist, and understand that he is trying to find his way in a world where he feels threatened. He takes his fears and his anxieties, and he first articulates them. He then seeks to reassure himself of God's unchanging presence: God's light, God's salvation and God's strength.

אֶחַת שְׁאַלְתִּי מֵאֵת-יְהוָה	One thing I ask of the Eternal,
- אֹתָהּ אֶבְקֶשׁ -	only this do I seek —
שְׁבִתִּי בְּבַיִת-יְהוָה	to dwell in the House of the Eternal
כָּל-יְמֵי חַיִּי	all the days of my life;

The psalmist, though, goes further. He next asks something of God, but ultimately what he's really doing is demanding it of himself. He says:

What is the nature of this request?

The psalmist isn't asking to be whisked away from all difficulties and transported to paradise; rather, he asks to be able to feel that God is close here, in the everyday world - "all the days of my life."

Who is the active party? It is the psalmist who acts, who seeks a sense of nearness to God each day, even when wrestling with feeling overwhelmed by threats and problems.

How do we do this today? How do we feel this presence, this protection in troubling times? To experience God's presence we must do our part in making God manifest.

And we make God manifest by honoring the divine spark in each other.

By reaching across all the differences that others use to try to divide us.

By strengthening the bonds of connection through respect, love and care for one another.

By supporting and protecting the most vulnerable – for we were once strangers in Egypt.

When we honor and see the divine in others, God is near. The psalmist then elaborates further on his request -- a continuation of

לְחַזוֹת בְּנֵעַם-יְהוָה	to behold the beauty of the Eternal	the call to
וּלְבַקֵּר בְּהֵיכָלוֹ:	and to frequent God's Temple.	action:

Again, the primary actor here, the subject of the verb is not God, but the psalmist.

The psalmist has the power to hold onto a vision of God's beauty – a vision of a world that reflects God's presence. No enemy can take that from him.

We have that power as well. We hold onto that vision – of a world that reflects God's justice, compassion and truth -- by creating it before our eyes. In doing so, we are directed by hope, not controlled by cynicism and fear.

I want to pause and acknowledge all the ways our community has worked to help us create and hold onto this vision. The list is long, and this is just a sample:

– Joining with our faith partners - St. Paul A.M.E., the Durham mosque, Jamaat Ibad Ar-Rahman and [a local evangelical church, the Gathering Church] to create an interfaith meal of welcome for area refugees from the Congo, Burma, Iraq, Eritrea, Cuba, Syria, Latin America

and Zambia . We will join with our faith partners to hold another dinner in the coming year as well.

– Loving and respecting one another in life and in death through the work of our Caring Committee and Sacred Burial society.

– Participating in an interfaith build with Habitat for Humanity.

– Supporting refugee families with resettlement

– Helping to recruit volunteer lawyers and translators for emergency legal aid workshops for our immigrant brothers and sisters.

– Staying up until midnight to advocate at a Carrboro Town Council for the creation of IFC's Food First soup kitchen and food pantry. And then committing contributing our resources with the broad faith community to make it a reality

In the year to come we will respond to the challenges that surround us, like the psalmist, by knowing God's presence and holding fast to a vision of God's goodness. We'll keep reaching out and building the world that reflects God's justice and God's love. L'shanah tovah, everyone. May it be a year of strength, clarity and blessing.