

Not One, but Three: The Beauty of Psalm 27

By Rabbi Susan Leider

Shabbat Shuvah

The *Shabbat* between *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* has a special place in Jewish tradition. *Shabbat Shuvah*, the Shabbat of returning, falls during *Aseret Yamei Shuvah*, the ten days between these two mega-holidays. And, of course, this year, it falls directly after *Rosh Hashanah*, adding up to our third straight day of holiday and *Shabbat* services – *Mazal Tov* for being here once again!

When pews swell again on *Erev Yom Kippur*, people from all walks of life enter synagogues again to join a community of prayer. And they do it for all kinds of reasons. Some come because it's the Jewish thing to do. Some come for the music. Some come to connect with other Jews. Some come to honor parents, some in order to enjoy the meals before or after services. Some come to model for their children. Some come to hear the rabbi.

All of these reasons are good reasons to come to shul on the High Holy Days. Synagogues are a portal to many different spiritual and cultural experiences - thank God that there are multiple reasons why people walk through the doors.

But on this *Shabbat Shuvah*, many of you came three days to shul three days in a row. You understand why this repeated act of showing up brings an opportunity to deepen our High Holy Day experience.

There is another layer of repetition that is a part of our liturgical rhythms this time of the year. Every morning throughout the month that precedes *Rosh Hashanah*: the month of *Elul*, we have included Psalm 27 in our communal prayers and will continue to do so through *Sukkot*. This beautiful psalm offers us yet another path to deepen our High Holy Day experience.

In verse 4, we read:

One thing I ask of Adonai, this I seek, that I will dwell in the house of Adonai all the days of my life, that I will see the beauty of God, and that I will visit God's sanctuary.

Before contemporary biblical scholarship demonstrated otherwise, our ancestors presumed that King David authored the Psalms. According to the *midrash* (quoted in *Likutei Torah*, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi), when King David says in Psalm 27, "one thing I will ask of You," he actually asks for more than just one thing:

to dwell in God's house all the days of their life

to see the beauty of God

and to visit God's sanctuary.

The midrash goes on to say that God notices this and then calls David out on it. What does David say back?

David reminds God, “Look, I learned from you that you didn’t come to the people Israel only asking one thing. Doesn’t it say in Deuteronomy Chapter 10:

“[God says] And now, O Israel, what does your God demand of you? Only this: to revere your God, to walk only in divine paths, to love and to serve your God with all your heart and soul, keeping commandments and laws, which I enjoin upon you today. . .”

So David learns this multi-layered ask from no other than God! What can we learn from a closer look to this multi-layered ask in Psalm 27?

To dwell in God’s house all the days of our life - Dwelling in God’s house means being familiar with God’s house. When we visit the home of an acquaintance, we might hesitate to open up the refrigerator and help ourselves. We may hesitate to put our feet on the coffee table. But in the house of a close friend, we do it. We don’t need to ask permission for everything we do. To dwell in God’s house means being there, time and time again; being comfortable because it’s familiar. This is one of the many gifts we experience by showing up on *Shabbat Shuvah*.

To see the beauty of God – This means taking the time to see the incredible miracles in our world. Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great 20th-century Jewish theologian, reminds us that [humankind] “What we lack is not a will to believe, but a will to wonder.” Here there is space to name the amazement of which Heschel spoke, to give thanks for everything from the clothes on our bodies, to our unique human intellect, to

our ancestors Avraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rahel, Jacob, Leah, Rahel, the ancestors we share no matter who our birth families are.

Giving voice to gratitude through prayer is very much like baseball, as Rabbi Elliot Dorff reminds us. He teaches us that: “Even the most gifted must practice. . . For the vast majority of us, praying well demands the time and effort of extended preparation - just as deft baseball playing does - but, with that, both can be effectively done by almost everyone.”

Rabbi Dorff goes on to describe the prayer versions of a base hit, a double, a triple, and yes, even a home run – all experiences of noticing the moments of wonder in our lives, to resist letting them pass by.

To visit God’s sanctuary - What does this mean? God? If we are already in God’s house, how can we enter? The Hasidic answer may be that **we are always in the sanctuary of the Divine**, even when we are not in shul. We can do anywhere, but here we are doing it together.

Psalm 27 invites us to come here and come often, to be familiar with this sanctuary, to give thanks, to stop, to recognize our blessings. And to do it in community. If we are going to really benefit from any spiritual practice, then it is a good idea, as challenging

as it is, to frequent that practice. The time is now, during the powerful ten days between *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*.

Many beautiful translations of Psalm 27 can enrich our spiritual connection to what is happening to us at this time of the year.

I close with this brief excerpt one such creative translation of Psalm 27, by my teacher Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg:

I seek only one thing, one thing alone: to connect to this moment. Nowhere else. Only this. Nothing less. My palace in time.

When difficulties arise, I have a hiding place in my own heart – a secret tent where I can go and feel safe, a rock to rest my head upon.

I affirm my faith in the power of goodness. . . May we take courage; may we be strong; may our hearts so filled with love there is no room for anything else. . .

This is my blessing for all of us – that in the year ahead, we may take refuge in that internal place, to rest so that we can re-emerge into the world with our hearts so filled with love that there truly is no room for anything else.

Shabbat Shalom – G'mar Hatimah Tovah.