



JEWISH COMMENTARY

Psalms Have They, But They Know Not

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The Bible and its teachings helped form the basis for the Founding Fathers' abiding belief in the inalienable rights of the individual, rights which they found implicit in the Bible's teachings of the inherent worth and dignity of each individual.... Now, therefore, I, Ronald Reagan, President of the United States of America, in recognition of the contributions and influence of the Bible on our Republic and our people, do hereby proclaim 1983 the Year of the Bible in the United States. I encourage all citizens, each in his or her own way, to reexamine and rediscover its priceless and timeless message.

—PRESIDENTIAL PROCLAMATION, FEBRUARY 3, 1983

AT TIMES, a tiny cultural moment can reflect a titanic sociological shift. Such is the case with a 10-second video clip from *Jeopardy!* On July 12, 2023, one of the “Double Jeopardy” categories was “Walking and Talking.” The clue: “This Bible book gives us the line ‘Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.’” All three contestants—undoubtedly all highly educated individuals, as *Jeopardy!* candidates tend to be—stared

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blankly in silence until the signature buzzer sounded.

The answer, of course, was the Psalms. Thus did a show showing off individuals with wide and diverse knowledge reveal that it is possible to consider oneself educated in 21st-century America without recognizing the most famous verse of one of the most famous works of scripture, in an English rendering that marks one of the glories of literature. The moment revealed that today the Bible is no longer seen by many as “The Good Book.” Indeed, it is no longer seen by many as a book of importance at all. As recently as 1983, it was entirely conceivable for a president to mark by proclamation the Bible’s importance for America; four decades later, for at least a significant segment of society,

the Bible is no longer a cultural touchstone.

A single instant on *Jeopardy!* provokes us to ponder what has been lost. The tragic irony is that the entire story of Western culture is, in a sense, indebted to the Psalms; even if one does not believe in the theology expressed in the biblical book, one cannot understand the history of literature without it. The greatest of English writing—from Shakespeare to the modern novel—provides a window into the interiority of the human psyche. But this was not learned from the works of Homer, or Ovid, or Sophocles. Only in the Bible, and especially in the Psalms, could ancient literature provide such a window on man’s ability and need to look within. It is difficult to believe that the humanist literature of the West would have been possible without David’s inspiration and example. Thomas Cahill eloquently explained the literary debt owed David:

Prior to the humanist autobiographies of the Renaissance, we can count only a few isolated instances of this use of “I” to mean the interior self. But David’s psalms are full of I’s: the I of repentance, the I of anger and vengeance, the I of self-pity and self-doubt, the I of despair, the I of delight, and the I of ecstasy. The Psalms are a treasure trove of personal emotions and a unique early roadmap to the inner spirit—previously mute—of ancient humanity. Whereas the historian must normally guess at the emotions of his subjects from incomplete or indirect evidence, David’s Psalms reassure us that three thousand years ago people laughed and cried just as we do, bled and cursed, danced and leapt—that our whole repertoire of emotions was theirs.

But the Psalms are most essential because of their theology. In an ancient age when the state reigned supreme, when the monarch was worshipped as a god, the Psalms presented us with a king named David who assured his subjects that there was something, Someone, higher than he, to Whom he owed everything, and to Whom even the most powerful of rulers will be called to account. As Reagan noted, it is this notion that lies at the heart of American liberty; and it is only the faith in this that has sustained some of the most heroic opponents of tyranny—millennia ago as well as today.

As I watched the clip, I was reminded of Natan Sharansky’s magisterial memoir of his experience in the Soviet Gulag. There he describes his most cherished possession, a small book of Psalms gifted him by his wife. Sharansky took it upon himself to study them, knowing little about them beforehand. Their words, he

tells us, “lifted me above the mundane and directed me toward the Eternal. I especially liked Psalm 23: *Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For thou art with me ...*”

He and a Christian inmate studied scripture together and chose an unusual name for their studies: “We called our sessions ‘Reaganite readings,’ first, because President Reagan had declared either this year or the preceding one (it wasn’t exactly clear from the Soviet press) the Year of the Bible, and second, because we realized that even the slightest improvement in our situation could be related only to a firm position on human rights by the West, especially by America, and we mentally urged Reagan to demonstrate such resolve.” In the process, David’s interiority and faith sustained him:

King David now appeared before me not as a fabled hero or a mystical superman but as a live, indomitable soul—tormented by doubts, rising against evil, and suffering from the thought of his own sins. He was proud, daring, and resolute, but in order to be bold in combat with his enemies, he had to be humble before the Lord. The fear of God guided David when he entered the valley of death.

Thus the title chosen by Sharansky for his memoir: *Fear No Evil*. Several have reported meeting Sharansky in Jerusalem and having him readily produce the Psalms book from his pocket. When surprise is expressed that he still carries it, he immediately replies, “It carries me.”

One wonders, therefore, what Sharansky would say if he saw this clip and realized that an America that once inspired him had reached a point where the scriptural source of his inspiration could be so utterly unknown to so many of its citizens. His own story reminds us, however, that the Psalms can inspire hope even when things look bleak—hope that society may find inspiration from David once more, hope that one day an American leader would find the eloquence to declare a “Year of the Bible” once again.

If such a leader does arise, he or she can draw on the fact that there are still many millions of Americans who find daily inspiration in the Bible. Students such as my own at Yeshiva University study the sacred scriptures as well as the great Western texts, and a silver lining of societal scriptural ignorance may be that the men and women I teach have an intellectual advantage as contestants on game shows. But still, as I watched that clip, I felt nothing but foreboding; for I realized what that moment on that game show meant, warning us that civilization itself is in jeopardy. 📖➡️