

Commentary

NOVEMBER 2024 JUDAISM

The Unexpected Psalm of Thanksgiving

Jewish Commentary

by Meir Y. Soloveichik

A LITTLE OVER A YEAR AGO, I WAS FACING A DEADLINE FOR THIS COLUMN, AND I had no idea what to write about. There was not much new in the news when it came to the Jewish world. In Israel, citizens were still engaged in a bitter political debate about judicial matters, but I had already written about the issue to the extent that I was comfortable.

I had nothing, so I decided to write about a small bit of pop culture, a video of a recent episode of *Jeopardy!* in which three contestants, obviously educated people, could not identify the scriptural source for the most famous of biblical verses: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.” I proceeded to write my column, examining why the Psalms were so essential for the advancement of civilization and why it is still important today to remember that God accompanies us in the valley of the shadow of death.

I went back to check the date on which I wrote and submitted the piece. It was October 6, 2023, just before the outset of the festival of Shemini Atzeret. Only a few hours later, the Jewish people would sojourn into the valley of the shadow of death. I found myself, on the morning of October 7, with only fragments of information, instructing my congregation to engage in a liturgical activity I could

not really recall doing before on a festival day: reciting psalms of distress. Saying such psalms on Shabbat and the holidays as a form of beseeching is permitted in Jewish law only in times of great crisis; and I could certainly not have predicted that such psalms, rather than joyous ones, would become our weekly fare. For these psalms have been said in my synagogue—and in many around the Jewish world—on Sabbath after Sabbath, and so it will seemingly continue for the foreseeable future.

Thus, *Jeopardy!* notwithstanding, there are those who seem to understand how important Psalms actually is; and this would seem to be the case in Israel as well. Thus, on April 14, 2024, when Iran launched its first missile attack on Israel at 2 a.m. local time, there was one term that bleary-eyed Israelis seem to have googled again and again. The most popular search during the Iranian missile attack on Israel, the *Jerusalem Post* informed us, was “Tehillim, the book of Psalms.” In a striking joining of ancient and modern, citizens sought scripture on their iPhones, in order to commune with God in the words that David wrote when he faced his enemies in the very same land.

We must ponder how astonishing this is. One would wager that few, waking up after midnight in Rome or Athens in a moment of crisis in modern times, would turn to the original words of Virgil or Pericles. And no one in Iraq is seeking solace in the words of the Code of Hammurabi. But here Jews were reading words written in their land thousands of years ago, in the very same language.

Soon after the second Iranian attack in September, I spoke to a relative studying in an Israeli religious Zionist yeshiva. He, along with 9 million others, found himself in a shelter, and I asked what he and his fellow students did as the sirens sounded and they fled to safety. “We said *Tehillim*,” he casually replied, “and then we went back to studying Torah.” I thought to myself: Millennia ago, David engaged in a military exploit with his sling and then wrote psalms ascribing his survival to God. Untold generations later, Jews are being defended through a remarkable military-defense shield called “David’s Sling,” and, immediately after, they use David’s very words to beseech God for salvation.

This story is not normal. No other people have a story anything like it. It is a miracle. Only those formed entirely by a culture no longer inspired by the Psalms are too spiritually stunted to see it. And this is why, even as the year has marked its own sojourn into the valley of the shadow of death, it is also, as the Google searches of our brethren indicate, a time in which the Jewish people felt the presence of God.

One of the fascinating statistics about the Israelis' Internet searches following the April Iran attack is that, after the missiles and drones were largely fended off, Israelis did not merely go back to sleep. No, once again, the Psalms suddenly appeared in Google searches; only this time, multitudes were looking for what is known as *mizmor letodah*, a psalm of thanksgiving. And the words of another of the psalms of gratitude are as relevant today as when they were written:



It is a good thing to give thanks unto the Lord, and to sing praises unto thy
name, O Most High:
To shew forth thy loving-kindness in the morning, and thy faithfulness every
night;
... When the wicked spring as the grass, and when all the workers of iniquity do
flourish; it is that they shall be destroyed for ever:
But thou, Lord, art most high for evermore.
For, lo, thine enemies, O Lord, for, lo, thine enemies shall perish; all the workers
of iniquity shall be scattered....
Mine eye also shall see my desire on mine enemies, and mine ears shall hear my
desire of the wicked that rise up against me.
The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree: he shall grow like a cedar in
Lebanon.
Here you have multitudes of citizens, still traumatized by the events of the past
year, expressing gratitude to God: gratitude for salvation but also gratitude for
being part of a story that was centuries old when David composed Psalms, a
story that is anything but over. And as counterintuitive as it may seem, gratitude
after this difficult year is something we should feel as well. If it has been one of
the most difficult in modern Jewish memory, it has also been one of the most
inspiring.

Of all the columns for COMMENTARY that I have written since this column began seven years ago, none received a more overwhelming response from readers than the tale of the musically gifted educator and IDF soldier Yossi HersHKovitz, who, while serving in Gaza, composed a new tune for the verse in Psalms proclaiming that God was with him in the valley of the shadow of death. HersHKovitz fell in battle days later, but his song survived because it was taught to a comrade-at-arms, who taught it in turn to HersHKovitz's children. Readers wrote in, imploring that they be able to hear the song as well. The story, it seems, captured simultaneously the heartbreak of all that has been experienced since October 7—and also the heroism and the faith that have been a beacon in the darkness of the past year.

And that is why countless Jews, in Israel and the Diaspora, have emerged from this year with their faith fostered and their identity enhanced. They know they are part of a story unlike any other; and as they steel themselves for the months ahead and prepare to say more age-old words of beseeching, they nevertheless look forward to victory and to more psalms of thanksgiving to be said in the months to come.

Photo: Paper Boat Creative

We want to hear your thoughts about this article. Click [here](#) to send a letter to the editor.