

ACHREI MOT-KEDOSHIM – THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW

May 2, 2020

Rabbi David Wolpe

0:00

Shabbat shalom.

Mizmor le-David, Adonai Ro'i, lo echsar

Bin'ot deshe yarbitzeini, 'al-mei menuchot yenaahaleni

Nafshi yeshoveiv, yancheini ve-ma'gelei-tzedek le-ma'an shemo

0:45

Some of you will recognize that. It's the twenty-third psalm, or at least the beginning of the twenty-third psalm. And I sang it because we sing it so often sometimes at Shabbat, sometimes during the week, often in moments of trial or difficulty, at funerals, at bedsides of those who are sick. I know that it was *chutzpah*, that it was presumption, for me to sing something to you right after Cantor Feldman sang something. You know there is an old saying that if you say the cantor doesn't speak well and the rabbi doesn't sing, well that's Lashon Hara, that's evil speech. But if you say the Cantor doesn't sing well and the rabbi doesn't speak, well that's murder. So I want you to know that if your reaction to the beginning of this sermon was the rabbi doesn't sing, well it's not good, but it's okay. But at the end of the sermon you're not allowed to say the rabbi

doesn't speak well. And I sang it not because I thought you had a deep hankering to hear a beautiful voice since you just heard one, but because I thought that it would bring back to some of you the emotional resonance of hearing that Psalm at different times.

2:18

And I bring it up because the truth of giving *Drashah*, that giving sermons on Shabbat morning, is that we have wonderful opportunities to explore the lessons in the Torah. And this week is a very rich portion after all: *Acharei Mot K'doshim*, and I taught about it during the week, but sometimes there are other parts of the Tanakh, of our sacred scriptures, of the Bible, that we don't get to talk about because they don't come up on Shabbat. Or if they do, we don't focus on them because we talk about the Torah portion. But this week, both in the sermon and in the off-the-pulpit message that I'm going to send out later in the week, I want to talk to you about the most important word in the twenty-third psalm. It's the one that in English goes, "The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want, Maketh me to lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside the still waters, He restoreth my soul." It is probably among the best known or is certainly among the best-known passages in the Hebrew Bible in English translation.

3:42

The phrases from it are familiar to us from the King James translation: "My cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life." And the phrase that I want to speak to you about on this Shabbat is the phrase, *Gam ki-eilekh be-gei tzalmavet lo-'ira ra, ki-attah immadi*. "Though I walk yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I

will fear no evil for You are with me.” And I remember years ago when we studied to this psalm when I was student studying to be a rabbi, one of our teachers said to us that the most important word in this psalm is one that is often overlooked: It's the word, “Walk”... “Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. The word “walk” is critical in the Jewish world and Jewish tradition. You may know that Jewish law is called *halakha* it's called “walking,” because our belief is that you have to move through this world, that stagnation is death, that tradition does not mean immovability, that tradition is something that moves with the generations together hand-in-hand with modernity and innovation, but even more important in one's individual life...

5:30

When you find yourself in the valley of the shadow of death, what do you do? As a rabbi over the years, I have talked to innumerable people who are under the burden of grief, and grief as you know comes in all forms. There's mourning for parents, for children, for brothers and sisters, for grandparents, for other family members, for friends, sometimes for strangers... There's grief for things that we have lost that are not individuals like the loss of dream or the loss of home, or people who've been forced to emigrate, sometimes the loss of language: Our means of grief are innumerable, there are as many griefs as there are ways to lose in this world... And what is our reaction to that? *Gam ki-eilekh be-gei tzalmavet*. You must grieve, but you must walk. You cannot stay in the place of grief. When you lose someone close to you for seven days, you stay in your home sitting Shiva, but then, you have to walk around the block to end the week of Shiva. You must walk... because you cannot stay in the valley. If you do, then you are turning your back on life and on God's gifts, and that's why it says, “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for You are with me,” because it is in the walking that we

affirm our faith in God, that this world is still worthwhile that we still walk through it, that we do not stay there.

7:44

In a way, the whole world has been sitting Shiva. We've all been home wondering what to do, where to go. But the time is coming. Sooner or later in different ways, when the doors will be open and we must walk, when this time will end, this valley of the shadow of death that the entire world in different ways has endured. And when that time comes I hope that we will remember the message of the psalmist: That all of Earth is God's world, and as we walk through it, we experience the wonder of being able to absorb the lessons of the past and the difficulties of the present without letting them imprison our future oh.

9:13

Gam ki-eilekh be-gei tzalmavet

Tzalmavet lo- 'ira ra,

Lo- 'ira ra ki-attah immadi

Shivtekha u-mish'antekha

Shivtekha u-mish'antekha

Heimmah yenachamuni

Your presence, dear God, comforts us. And now, we will walk. *Shabbat shalom.*