

PSALM 23

THE LORD IS
MY SHEPHERD,
I LACK NOTHING.
HE MAKES ME LIE
DOWN IN GREEN
PASTURES, HE
LEADS ME BESIDE
QUIET WATERS,
HE REFRESHES
MY SOUL.

—PSALM 23:1–3A

A SONG OF THE SHEPHERD

Psalm 23 is arguably the most famous of all psalms. In the familiar and comforting words of the opening verses, King David compares God to a devoted shepherd who leads his sheep to lush pastures and streams of refreshing water. He makes sure that his flock is well cared for. As a sheep in God's care, David explains that he has absolutely nothing to fear. Even in the darkest and most frightening places, David will feel secure. He will take comfort in the knowledge that God is by his side.

Tradition teaches that this psalm was composed in the Forest of Hereth. David had gone there seeking asylum from King Saul, who wanted him dead. When David arrived in the forest, he discovered that it was as arid as a desert. There was no water and zero vegetation. David found himself in a brutally hot place where he would have surely perished, if not for God. The Sages tell us that God moistened the forest and provided David with ample sustenance. David responded by giving praise to God for His ability to provide for a person's needs, even in the harshest of conditions.

The Sages encourage anyone who feels anxious



about his current circumstances to recite, study, and ponder this psalm. The psalmist invites us to trust that the Almighty will provide us with our every need. Just as David found himself in a place of utter scarcity, and there experienced extreme abundance, so can we.

The psalm comes to a close by explaining the reason for our wanting. We don't want to live so that we can eat. We want to eat so that we can live. We aren't asking for an easy life so that we can live a life of pleasure. We ask that God's "*goodness and love*" (v. 6) follow us so that we can "*dwell in the house of the LORD*" (v. 6). In other words, we ask that God provide our needs so that we can concentrate on what we really live for: to serve God.

This is why Psalm 23 is traditionally said—or rather sung—on the Sabbath, particularly at the third meal. Out of the three meals held on the Sabbath, the third one is considered the most holy. That's because, by that time, we aren't so hungry. The first two meals we eat for ourselves. We satisfy our hunger. But the third meal is in honor of God. We demonstrate that we are deserving of God's sustenance. We desire it for the right reason—not to lead a life of luxury, but to pursue a life of spirituality.

Psalm 23 has become much more than a request for livelihood. It is a universal psalm that is recited in any time of crisis. The imagery of God as our shepherd has made this psalm the perfect companion for anyone who feels helpless and alone. Through the words of the psalm, we echo David's cry, "God, I can't do it on my own; only You can save me," and like David in the forest, we pray God will answer us with abundant blessings.

A CHRISTIAN SONG

*The Lord's
My Shepherd*
BASED ON PSALM 23

*Yea, though I walk through
death's dark vale,
Yet will I fear no ill;
For Thou art with me,
and Thy rod
And staff me comfort still.*

—FRANCIS ROUS (1579–1659)