

Psalm 23: Being ethical in the world

Psalm 23 must be the best known praise of God in the Jewish and the Christian Bibles. It even got to the far-flung reaches of the British Empire, Johannesburg, where I was educated at King Edward VII Preparatory and High Schools from 1943 to 1953. When we were 7 or 8 years old we knew it by heart. When the South Africans joined with the other Commonwealth armies in fighting and defeating Field- Marshal Rommel's Afrika Corps it must have been a comfort to boys at K.E.P.S. whose fathers were killed or wounded or taken prisoner in the war in Libya, Egypt and then during the invasion of Italy. My cousin Lulu (Louis) Berman was captured at Tobruk and sent to a German P.O.W. camp and all the family recited something like this fervent hope: "The Lord is my shepherd..." I thought of him and my uncles Dr Ben Bloomberg and Dr Alec Packard who were serving in the Medical and Dental Corps. As they dealt with the traumatised and the wounded they knew the heat and terror of battle and they could see and hear El Alamein and Tobruk. One can actually imagine soldiers going silently into battle mentally praying:

"The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want; he makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name sake, Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil for thou are with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me."

"Thou prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies, thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever."

On one of his leaves during the war my uncle Benny Bloomberg travelled to what was then British Mandated Palestine and wanted to settle there by the still waters of Kinneret or the green pastures of the Galil - after the hostilities were over. This would have been too stressful for his wife my aunt Sarah Bloomberg who was tied into an extended family of two sisters Anne Idelson my other aunt and my mother Minnie and their poor parents Rose and Philip Sacks. Benny was a distinguished consultant pathologist and in no way an ordinary religious believer but a Zionist. The Lord was not his shepherd in any fundamentalist religious sense. He showed me his copy of Baruch Spinoza's Ethics and urged me to read it - Spinoza, the heretic Jew from Amsterdam who was excommunicated by both Ashkenazi and Sephardi synagogues in the 17th century for pan-en-theism: the belief that God was an expression of reason and rational causation and everything was in God. Even evil. Spinoza must be wrong. God entails Nature and Nature entails evil. There is a logical connection here. But God does not cause evil. He is only immanent in us, not transcendent. Our freedom causes evil and good. One is praying to the immanent God in oneself for good to prevail over evil and for God to become transcendent as ethics-in-politics. "God" is a metaphor for ethics-in-politics.

Terrible evil was to fall upon Bennie and Sarah Bloomberg when their younger daughter was killed in her early twenties by a drunken lorry driver in Johannesburg. This cousin of mine was Michelle. Her daughter Kerry who was in a baby-seat in the back of Michelle's car survived. Until her father Clive re-married, Kerry was brought up by Michelle's sister, my other cousin, Ilana and of course her brother-in-law Clive.

This Psalm calls out to God in the face of evil and misfortune – ultimately death: “Thou prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” One of our enemies is accident, mischance, misadventure. The Psalm speaks of “the LORD” which in Hebrew is not Elohim but Adonai the pronunciation of the sacred name YHVH. To Moses YHVH says at the burning bush that his name (Jahveh) means I am that I am, (Eheyeh Asher Eheyeh), or I will be that I am, or I will be what I will be. Martin Heidegger and Jean- Paul Sartre speak of us as Being- in-the-World which can be made ethical at least in Sartre when Being causes us to act with a good will. Even Heidegger regards guilt as inherent in our freedom to choose to act – presumably according to a rational Aristotelean logos as much or more than in the name of whoever (Hitler?) claims to be inspired by being-in-Being. Although the universe is partly chaotic and violent it is also lawful. Again: the moral universe only becomes lawful when logos, reasoning and intuition, practical intelligence and interpretative wisdom become being in the world.

Being ethical and authentic in the world is being sustained in the valley of the shadow of death by the spirit of Being as ethical being. This happens when we relate to beings and Being transcendentally even when we face them as enemies – that is we are ready to make peace. For Hitler and the Nazi gangsters there could never be peace because their world-view entailed the total destruction of the Jewish “race” everywhere on earth. No theology or ideology or philosophy transcended their race-hatred. This wasn’t true of the Afrikaner Nationalists like F.W.De Klerk or Nelson Mandela or most of the ANC leadership. “Wat is verby is verby” – what is past is past – said Mandela at his inauguration in 1994. He shook hands with Percy Yutar in the 1990s when he left prison after 27 years. Percy Yutar is an orthodoxly religious Jewish advocate and was the chief public prosecutor of the Transvaal who had asked for the death penalty for Mandela and the other Rivonia trialists in 1963. Most of the whites on trial, like Denis Goldberg, were Jewish – Marxist atheists and members of the SACP. They certainly walked through the valley of the shadow of death – Goldberg also was imprisoned for 25 years “Dwelling in the house of the Lord forever” in Emmanuel Levinas really means being-with the face of the significant Other and waiting for us to be able to signal to each other this message - “I will not kill you!” In Martin Buber dwelling in the house of the Lord forever means moving from I-It relationships of instrumentality to “I-Thou” relationships of mutual respect or love. The moral universe only becomes lawful when logos, reasoning, and intuition, practical intelligence and interpretative wisdom become being in the world.