

A Friendly Place?

Albert Einstein once said that the most important question we might ask is this: “Is the universe a friendly place?” In his book, *The Lord is My Shepherd*, we think Rabbi Harold Kushner provides a clear and compelling answer to that most significant question about the world’s friendliness. In his book, Kushner examines the marvelously compact 23rd Psalm, comprised of only fifty-seven words in its original Hebrew. But the brief psalm is a powerhouse of assurance about the friendliness of the world.

Consider the psalm’s opening line...*The Lord is my shepherd*. In this line we hear the assertion that despite this being at times a difficult, intricate, demanding, unpredictable, and even frightening world, there is someone who cares about us. Let the newspapers report what they must. Let the radio and television commentators share the grim news of the day with us. We can face these things and more with courage and confidence, knowing we are not facing life’s troubles all by ourselves. There exists someone who knows us, watches us, and subtly guides us. We are not alone.

The second note of assurance about the friendliness of the world that jumps out at us from the psalm is found in the line, *I shall not want*. In other words, we will have the resources we need. Now, some religious traditions support renunciation of all worldly material goods. They seem to say that by not wanting things, we will not be distracted or disappointed. And then there are those religious traditions that support the accumulation of worldly goods, claiming God really wants us to be materially successful. This psalm does not promote either position. It is simply saying that while our every extravagant desire may not be met in this life, we will get as much as we need by God’s generous hand. And indeed, if we find that such simple and fulfilling gifts from God as green pastures and still waters are restorative to our souls, then we’ll have plenty. If we trust God to be the provider of all essential things, then what could be missing? Or as Kushner says, “If the Lord is my shepherd, what more do I need?”

A third significant word of assurance about the world’s friendliness comes to us from Psalm 23 in this line: *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil*. Walking through that valley of the shadow of death is not optional. We all must do it. How will you face it? Some respond to the inevitability of their deaths by living lives of numbing self-indulgence. Some become despairing when they realize nothing, even their own lives, can escape time’s relentless push toward the valley. But some, those more fortunate we believe, decide that if our days are to be limited, we should not waste a moment, but set to work at using our time to gain wisdom, to offer service, and to grow in faithfulness and love.

Of course you know how this beautiful psalm concludes. The writer claims with authority that, *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever*. If you asked the psalm writer whether the universe was a friendly place, what do you think he would say? We think he’d answer without a moment’s hesitation that it’s more than friendly. It’s actually a place of endless wonder where we’re never alone, where we get what we really need, and where we have nothing to fear... not now, not ever.