

Kol THE VOICE OF Barrack

Elul: Psalm 27: Teaching Courage | אומץ לב

I have lived nearly every year of my life by the academic calendar. I was a student for 24 years (not counting pre-school), and I have taught for 21 years. For me, the year starts in the fall. I prepare for that new year during the two months before by reflecting on the previous year and focusing on professional growth. Because I am so used to that rhythm of the year, it feels natural to me that the Jewish year also begins in the fall, and summer is the time to prepare.

In the Jewish calendar, the summer months of Av and Elul look towards Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. We recite special [haftarot of consolation](#) after the fast of the 9th of Av and continuing until Rosh Hashanah. With Elul, [preparation for the High Holy Days](#) kicks up another gear: we sound the shofar daily at the end of morning prayers, Sephardi communities begin to recite *selihot* daily, and Ashkenazi communities add [Psalm 27](#) to morning and evening prayers. In this Psalm, King David describes his fear and loneliness and yearns for protection and safety. Some of the verses evoke comfort, while others evoke insecurity.

The inclusion of Psalm 27 is a relatively recent development in the liturgy. It does not appear in the Talmud, the earliest siddurim, or medieval sources. The earliest mention is from 1706 as a [European Kabbalistic custom](#). Kabbalistic interpretations suggested that the Psalm has the power to annul evil decrees and to protect us from our Yetzer Ra, our evil inclination. [Other connections](#) between Psalm 27 and holiday season relate specific verses of the Psalm to Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot. Moreover, the Psalm's focus on God's power to protect us and save us when we are afraid resonates with themes of the season.

In looking ahead to a new school year, a particular verse of the Psalm struck me:

הֲרֹנִי ה' דִּרְכְּךָ וְנִחַנִּי בְּאֵרֶחַ מִיָּשׁוֹר לְמַעַן שׁוֹרְרֵי

"Show me Your way, Adonai, and lead me on a straight path despite my watchful foes" (Psalms 27:11). The word הֲרֹנִי, translated here as "show me," comes from the same root word as תּוֹרָה (Torah) and מוֹרֶה (teacher). Rabbi Yael Levy offers [another translation](#) of the verse that reflects this etymology: "Teach me Your ways. Guide me on the path of integrity. There is so much to lead me astray." While the new school year brings excitement and anticipation, there is often also trepidation. We feel nervous and unsure. Learning involves some vulnerability, because it means recognizing that there are things that we don't know or don't understand, and we have to ask for help. We will make mistakes and get things wrong. Therefore, learning is a brave act. My job as a teacher is not to skirt around that discomfort, but to guide a path through it with honesty and empathy and to recognize the courage אומץ לב of my students.

Psalm 27 concludes, קוֹה אֱלֹהִים יִצְקֶנּוּ לִבָּם וְקוֹה אֱלֹהִים

"Let your heart be strong and filled with courage. Cultivate hope" (Psalms 27:14, [Rabbi Levy's translation](#)). May we all have hope and courage to meet the new year with our hearts open.

Kol Barrack (The Voice of Barrack) is a periodic publication that recognizes the new month in the Jewish calendar. In this edition, history teacher Dr. Minna Ziskind shares her thoughts with our school community.



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HISTORY TEACHER

Dr. Minna Ziskind has taught Upper School history at Barrack for 15 years. Previously, she was an adjunct instructor at Penn State Abington and the University of Pennsylvania. Two of her children have graduated from Barrack (Ari '19 and Sarah '21), and one is going into 11th grade (Becca '23). She currently serves on the board of Germantown Jewish Centre. She has spent this summer working in her garden, walking in her neighborhood, and reading. She also completed an on-line class on Native American History with the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.

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