

*Opening Your Heart with Psalm 27: A Spiritual Practice for the Jewish New Year*

by Debra J. Robbins

(New York: CCAR Press, 2019), 178 pp.

One does not **read** *Opening Your Heart with Psalm 27* as much as one **lives** with the book throughout the week of weeks that begins on the first of Elul and continues through Atzeret-Simchat Torah. Rabbi Debra Robbins invites us to discipline ourselves throughout this journey of the soul, to set aside time each day to read the appointed psalm, to take in Robbins's poetic response to a word or a phrase from one of its verses, and to devote "just five minutes" to writing one's own reflection, ending with another five minutes of quiet reflection.

The seven weeks remind us of the trek from bondage to Sinai, the fifty days of Omer-counting that take us from Passover to Shavuot. In the early fall, though, the voyage is for each individual human soul.

Robbins teaches us that the daily recitation of Psalm 27 at the appointed season is of unknown origin, a source of speculation and mystery. Yes, verse 5 asks that God "might hide me in Your sukka on a chaotic day"; and verse 6 makes reference to the shofar's "sound of *t'ruah*." Still, even with the magnificent translation by Rabbi Richard Levy, z"l,<sup>1</sup> the contemporary Jew struggles to find, in the words of the psalm itself, sufficient meaning and connection to the *chagim* to sustain more than a rote practice of daily recitation across seven weeks.

For those who would join her in this endeavor, Rabbi Robbins makes words and phrases come alive in ways that surprise and delight. As an example, consider three words that form the heart of the psalm's last verse: *chazak v'yaameitz libecha* ("let your heart be strong and of good courage"). For the week before Rosh HaShana, Robbins addresses the phrase twice. First, she focuses on the

word *chazak* in her poem “Strength” (pp. 66–67), inviting us into her own personal lifetime struggle to be strong:

Teaching grief to smile is a lifelong job  
 because I learn differently at different stages of my life.  
 I was strong as a child facing the death of my mother.  
 I was strong when I became a mother without my mother.  
 I was strong comforting a mother whose child died,  
 a child whose mother died.

Next, she moves to *v’yaameitz libecha* in “Courage, Every Day” (pp. 68–69). Here, she struggles with translation:

The common translation:  
 “Be strong and of good courage”  
 is accessible but lacks “heart.”

Translation, she writes is “not easy.” In fact:

It might be easier to train for a marathon,  
 which is what we do when it comes to being strong  
 and courageous of heart.

Each person who lives *Opening Your Heart with Psalm 27* will react differently. Writing about “being courageous and strong of heart” will be one thing for a person with a heart condition, another for a person who struggles to stand up for herself; one thing for a long-distance runner and yet another for a person whose strength risks “lacking heart.”

Robbins returns to that phrase in her final entry, “Three Choices for the End of the Sacred Season” (pp. 122–23). “I think I finally understand the coda, the final verse,” she writes, offering resolution at the end of each year’s journey. Now, Robbins has translated for herself and for us:

*Chazak*. Be strong.  
*V’yaameitz*. Be courageous.  
*Libecha*. (Remember to use) your heart.

Don’t rush out to **read** *Opening Your Heart with Psalm 27*—and whatever you do, don’t buy an electronic version! Holding this

book, seeing the words on the page, is part of the practice as one writes one's own. Acquire the book and plan to journey through Elul and Tishri with Rabbi Robbins year after year. Like the verses of the psalm itself, and like the weekly Torah portions to which we return each year, Robbins's poetry will evoke the new responses whenever we confront it. Each year, her words will awaken whatever lurks at the forefront of one's mind or in the subconscious recesses of the soul as we return to the sacred season with Rabbi Robbins's composition as our companion.

**Note**

1. Richard N. Levy, *Songs Ascending: The Book of Psalms, A New Translation* (New York: CCAR Press, 2017).

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