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**Opinion: The great shepherd king and a modern day shepherd boy**

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From December 18th  through December 26th, our Jewish brothers and sisters will gather around the Menorah to light a candle for Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights. This well-known holiday honors the great miracle bestowed by God at the time of the re-dedication of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, a miracle that caused one cruse of oil, sufficient to light the candelabrum for only one day, to burn for eight days.

In this time of rising antisemitism, imagining Jews lighting candles of hope and celebrating such a miracle is an example for all of us of what can happen when faith shines brightly to dispel the darkness of hate.

In honor of Hanukkah in recent years, I too have been celebrating another miracle of light arising from the Jewish tradition. This one arose from the shepherd boy who would become a great king, David, and how his words would reach across time to penetrate the unknown darkness of a modern-day shepherd boy with autism, my grandson, and enable him to recite the beloved Psalm 23 in David’s own language, Hebrew. This story is dedicated, in particular, to my Jewish brothers and sisters everywhere.

Truly, had I not witnessed it myself, I would’ve never believed it. It actually started eight years ago when my grandson was nine years old. At the time, I was studying Psalm 23 in Hebrew as part of my doctoral Hebraic studies and was playing a recording when my grandson came to visit. He seemed immediately drawn to it so I recited it with him a couple of times and then he was off to do other things. A week later, at his next visit, without hearing the recording, he simply started reciting the full psalm again. While some of the words were slightly slurred, anyone familiar with the psalm in Hebrew would have easily recognized it. I was astonished! In the following weeks, he would just extemporaneously say the psalm for, what seemed to be, his own enjoyment.

Fast forward four years. My grandson, husband, son and I were sitting around the dinner table. We were talking about some of the speeches and addresses we’d had to memorize in school when, suddenly, I had the urge to ask my grandson, “Do you remember when you could say Psalm 23 in Hebrew?

“Yes,” he said with great confidence.

“Adonai roee lo echsar…” I began thinking I’d help him get started. But quickly, he stopped me saying, “No, grandma.” Then, he proceeded to recite the full psalm in Hebrew. Again, except for a few slurred places, it was clearly recognizable. I am still amazed when I think about it.

I’m aware that those having knowledge of autism might confirm that such instances are within the behavioral spectrum, but I consider it a kind of miracle that a young boy, largely non-verbal, except for short directive sentences, could hear Psalm 23, in a language not his own and then recite it without effort or practice four years later.

There “is” something inherently intrinsic, even captivating, about the Hebrew language. Each letter has its own essence and purpose and seems to hold close its song reserved only for those ready to sing aloud. When strung together into words, the spirit seems to effortlessly recognize itself becoming a kind of songbird involuntarily quivering to the sweet harmonies of the creator. My grandson did not “learn” Psalm 23. He simply listened once or twice and then, without effort, became an instrument for the sound of God. And, for those of us blessed to hear, well, we were left silent and in awe.

As Jews around the world gather in celebration of the Festival of Lights, I’m pausing to remember the miracle of light that was shown through my grandson’s strong and certain voice as he, a young shepherd boy of today, found resonance with the Mizor L’David, the psalm of David, and with that shepherd boy of long ago who would become a great king. I am fully certain that they walk together in this valley of the shadow of death. And I trust that they will continue to be followed by goodness and mercy and dwell in the house of the Lord forever.