

The author of the book of Ecclesiastes says, “Be warned: of the making of many books, there is no end.” So why did I think that the world need another one, a Reflections on Psalms, written by me? The truth is, I didn’t set out to write a book. My intention was simply to read through the book of Psalms, one per week, over the course of just under three years, and write weekly reflections. My intended audiences were, first of all, me, to see what effect such an exercise would have on my spiritual life; second, you, to share whatever insights I developed with you in the Voice and on the synagogue website; and, finally, any other interested person who might stumble across the blog on my website.

I chose to read and reflect on Psalms because they are a significant presence in our liturgy, in our Siddur. In the early part of the service, we read through a half dozen or so Psalms in a meditative, contemplative, path towards preparing ourselves for prayer. We parade with the Torah while singing a psalm and in other parts of the Siddur, we quote extensively from Psalms. The book of Psalms is ascribed to King David. Biblical scholarship doubts this claim, but it’s not of interest to me who wrote each of the individual 150 Psalm. I found that I was more interested in the emotion and language that the author used, reflecting their struggle with the joys and sorrows of life:

When life is good, the Psalmist reaches out to God in gratitude.

When life is troubled, the Psalmist reaches out to God for help.

When life is sweet, the Psalmist reaches out to God with gentleness.

When life is frightening, the Psalmist reaches out to God in despair.

When life is cruel, the Psalmist reaches out to God in anger.

We, the readers of Psalms, react. We can be swept away by the power of the Psalmists’ words, which convey honesty and authenticity. We may identify with the Psalmist and think about times that we’ve been in a similar situation and reacted in similar ways. Or we might think about how hard we’ve worked to react differently, perhaps with a calm, gentle and loving demeanor rather than with reactive anger.

In my reflections, my response to the Psalm does not necessarily match the intent of the Psalmist. While I read the entire Psalm and try to understand it as the Psalmist originally intended, the verse or phrase that I selected to write about may have caught my eye because of something going on in my life or something in the news, and may not be related to the subject of the Psalm as a whole. In fact, once I pull the words out of context, my thoughts on it may not even fairly represent what they meant to the Psalmist. While this is not a legitimate method of Bible study, it is an age-old way to use Psalms, not dissimilar from the way a mantra might be used in meditation. Initially, the mantra has a certain meaning, but in repetition, the mind moves beyond the literal meaning and the mantra becomes a gateway for an expansion of thought.

To me, the study of sacred literature for the purpose of spiritual development is a key practice of Judaism. I find that the discipline of study and prayer opens me up to whatever message resonates when I start reading. I think of it as a message from the Divine, plucking at whichever one of my heart-strings needs plucking at that particular moment.

If the Psalms are meditations and prayers, my reflections became a kind of meta-meditation, using something in the Psalm as a launching point for a consideration of Jewish wisdom. And more than simply sharing wisdom, my desire is for you to consider the technique of how I approached the act of sacred reading or prayer. I offer it to you with the hope that it may resonate with your soul and inspire you to engage in your own deep reflections on our prayers today.

You know that Jewish prayer is packed full of words, some say, too many words. The Mahzor in front of you is heavy with words. We spend more than two hours on a regular Shabbat reading, chanting, reciting, and singing words. We spend double that much time today. There is a movement in some congregations to distill the words, reducing them to their essential message, incorporating an extended chanting of a single phrase or word into the service in place of pages of words. My goal in publishing my Reflections on Psalms is to push back against that movement. It is to say that for Jewish prayer to speak to each of us, it needs to be able to reach us in the moment with what we need to hear from our tradition. And to boil it down to a single message, no matter how powerful that message, changes prayer from a practice in which an individual struggles with their deficits and fears and hopes and dreams and joys, to a communal practice in which the prayer leader chooses one path that all must follow. I seek to demonstrate how a contemplative reading of sacred text with a mind open to the Divine message works. How a particular phrase from a page of words will grab our attention, and how that phrase will change from day to day, from week to week, depending on what's happening within our spiritual lives. I want you to immerse yourself in words as if immersing in a mikvah, and see what remains, clinging to your body, when you come up for air. I want you to sit with the piece of Torah, sacred scripture, Jewish wisdom, afterwards. Carry it around with you, listen to it, push back against it, embrace it, learn from it what it's trying to teach you.

Words or phrases of prayer describe God, a relationship with God, a human state of emotion, joy, shame, hopelessness, wonder, anger, calm, beauty, peacefulness. They evoke thoughts of our complicated relationship with the world around us, our obligations, hopes and dreams, relationships, triumphs and failures. Taken as a whole, the words, phrases, paragraphs, and prayers of the Mahzor build a compelling Jewish picture of the world and our role in it. If we pay attention to the words, day after day and week after week, we will find that some weeks, certain words grab our attention. We might linger on those words, those phrases, to see what they have to teach us about ourselves or our relationship with the Divine, or with family and friends and community around us.

These reflections are a glimpse into my soul. Through them, you can see what motivates me to live a life devoted to the study and practice of Torah. I offer these reflections to you as a model for you to use to engage in your own personal devotional reading, to examine and deepen your own engagement with your religious practice.

I want you to feel free to find a word or phrase that catches your attention on each page or each section of the Mahzor and let your mind focus on it for a bit. Don't worry about keeping up with the service. Rather, concentrate on what that piece of liturgy that captured your attention is trying to tell you. What message does God have for you, embedded in that piece of prayer? Or file it away for later consideration, continue with your prayer, keeping your mind open for the next snippet that jumps out at you. Prayer ought to be an active experience of a kind of conversation between you and the Divine Presence hovering over you.

May it be for you as God said to Joshua:

וְהָיְתָה בּוֹ יוֹמָם וְלַיְלָה ... כִּי־אֶזְרָא תִצְלִיחַ אֶת־דְּרָכְךָ וְאֶזְרָא תִשְׁכַּלִּי.

Meditate upon it day and night ... for then your path will prosper and you will be wise.

[Joshua 1:8]