

## Introduction

THE GENESIS for this book followed the completion of my rabbinic capstone project. This project—the culmination of my five years of rabbinic study—was, as far as I know, the first of its kind at Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion in New York, combining a comprehensive, immersive study of the Book of Psalms with a presentation of an original *Hallel*—“set of psalms”—selected to be incorporated into a *Shacharit* (morning) service. The psalms I selected addressed the current moment through text, music, and digital images in the context of prayer.

While working on this project, engaging in the ancient practice of reading daily psalms, I started to see the psalms everywhere: in synagogues, at archaeological sites in Israel, in artwork, and in music. Their texts accompanied me every day. Their words became meaningful in situations when I found myself speechless and searching for words. I found that the psalms respond to human nature in a unique way. The language of the psalms is open enough to allow space for all of us to “come as we are” and to take what we need. The psalms also belong to American society as a whole: they are part of both the Hebrew and the Christian Bible, they appear widely in both our religious and secular culture, and their universal themes of fear, suffering, and rejoicing reach all people. The psalms enable us to access our spirituality at any given moment and in ways that speak to our souls.

As I incorporated psalms into places where I felt the set liturgy did not address contemporary experiences, I realized that a resource connecting the psalms to experiences in our lives, whether on an average day or one with unique pain or joy, would be very useful for the creation of rituals and worship. Additionally, such a book would be a rich spiritual resource for the personal practice of anyone seeking modern connections to our ancient sources. The volume in your hands aims to do exactly that: it pairs our traditional psalms with different moments of our contemporary lives.

My vision is that this volume will make the psalms more accessible and easier to navigate so they can be seamlessly incorporated into formal

worship and other moments of personal prayer. This, in turn, will create opportunities to deepen Jewish spirituality, since these psalms accompany anyone on any occasion: at home, in the hospital, by the graveside, while traveling, or during meditation. Finally, this volume and the psalms within it will, I hope, empower you to establish a meaningful, personal prayer practice, whether regularly or occasionally.

To meet the vision I have for this book, it was important to make this book easy to navigate by narrowing down the 150 psalms to 72 (four times eighteen, quadruple *chai*/life) and dividing the 72 psalms featured here thematically into six broad categories—anticipation, commemoration, despair, gratitude, pain, and relief. Each category is then further divided into specific moments and experiences, such as “Looking Back on a Life-Changing Moment,” “Experiencing a Climate Disaster,” or “While Waiting for Important News.”

The psalms can be divided in many ways. The Psalter may be divided numerically into five books, each ending with a doxology or words of praise to God, as Nahum Sarna explains in his book *On the Book of Psalms*.<sup>1</sup> They can be divided into groupings by title, author, or heading. In their first lines, many of the psalms are attributed to an author such as David or Asaph, while others begin with musical instructions like “For the conductor: On strings.” There are other ways to divide the psalms based on the ways that they have been and are used. For example, the *maalot* psalms, 120–134, all begin with the words *Shir HaMaalot*, “A Song of Ascendings,” and it is believed that these are the psalms that may have been sung by pilgrims as they journeyed to Jerusalem or even ascended the steps of the Temple. Today, we continue to recite what we call *Hallel*, Psalms 113–118, in synagogues on festive occasions. These are the same psalms our ancestors may have recited as they made their sacrifices during the festivals of Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot. Additionally, scholars of the psalms have divided them into many other categories by theme or content. In *The Book of Psalms*, Robert Alter divides the psalms into several categories including praise, supplication, thanksgiving, wisdom, and Zion.<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, in his *The Message of the Psalms*, divides the psalms into three categories: psalms of orientation, psalms of disorientation, and psalms of new orientation; he explains that we are all constantly in a state of movement from orientation to disorientation and from disorientation to new orientation.<sup>3</sup> In this way, Brueggemann explains that the psalms are “both sides of the conversation of faith”<sup>4</sup>—our side and God’s.

As I categorized the psalms, some clearly called to be linked with certain occasions, and then there were additional occasions that in turn called out for psalms. Clearly, by making these decisions, I made assumptions about your emotional responses to particular moments. You might find these inaccurate or one-dimensional. To help guide you toward a psalm that might ring more true for you, I offer suggestions in the footnotes of each psalm to at least one other psalm included in this book. I invite you to look for what you are feeling at any moment—beyond the way I have divided the contents, beyond the specifics of the occasions identified here, including among the remaining seventy-eight psalms that are not in this book.

As the psalms are ancient sources, there are some inherent challenges in reading them today and applying them to our present moment. Throughout this volume, you might notice transliterated Hebrew words that are not translated into English, such as *nichtam* in Psalm 16 and *Mut-laben* in Psalm 9. Most of these transliterated words refer to technical musical instructions whose exact meanings have been lost, so they are presented in the original Hebrew through transliteration. Similarly, you will see that the Hebrew words for God appear in transliteration as well, such as the words “Adonai” and “Yah.” Much like the English word “God,” these Hebrew words offer an invitation to imagine the Divine in any way that we find meaningful. Additionally, the psalms sometimes contain problematic texts and metaphors that may not speak to us in the twenty-first century. These include, but are not limited to, descriptions of violence, vengeance against enemies, gendered language, and theologies that do not resonate with our own (for example, Psalm 137:9, “Joyful the one who seizes your children and shatters them against the rock”). When reading the psalms, I often find myself focusing on just one or a few verses; this alleviates the tension and allows me to take what I need from the psalms and release problematic texts. To help guide you through this challenge, I chose one verse from each psalm included in this book, which you will see featured in Hebrew at the top of the page as well as in bold lettering in the English translation. I also wrote *kavanot*, prayerful intentions, to help connect moments from our lives with these ancient words. You are welcome to start with the *kavanah*, focus on the verse in bold lettering, or read the full psalm and find others that you connect with.

Remember, too, that psalms are poetry, and almost all poetry is metaphor. The beauty of metaphors is that they can be redefined. Perhaps you

could consider problematic texts as invitations to reinterpret and redefine the metaphors and even to write your own psalms. Some books that might help you in this approach include *New Each Day: A Spiritual Practice for Reading Psalms* by Rabbi Debra Robbins, *Flames to Heaven: New Psalms for Healing and Praise* by Debbie Perlman, and *Talking to God: Personal Prayers for Times of Joy, Sadness, Struggle, and Celebration* by Rabbi Naomi Levy.<sup>5</sup>

The translations in this book are adapted from *Songs Ascending* by Rabbi Richard N. Levy, published by the CCAR Press.<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Levy's English translations are poetic yet clear and largely preserve the intentions of the original Hebrew. For me, where *Songs Ascending* really meets the work of *To You I Call* is not in the unique translations themselves, but rather in Rabbi Levy's richly spiritual commentary, where he raises questions like "How might this psalm articulate an aspect of our spiritual lives . . . help us celebrate a holiday or another special day? How might it accompany us when we are ill, or visiting someone who is ill? How might it provide comfort when we have lost someone dear to us?"<sup>7</sup> I turned to the psalms because I was looking to answer exactly these questions. What I needed was a concise resource to inspire me. My hope is that the volume in your hands will be exactly this: a resource and a space to see the psalms as poetry, prayer, and song to inspire our spiritual journeys. I encourage you to turn to *Songs Ascending* and its meaningful notes when you have a question about Rabbi Levy's translations, as that commentary and explanation is beyond the scope of this book.

The title of this book, *To You I Call*, is taken from Rabbi Levy's translation of Psalm 30. It captures the spirit of the psalms and applies to many of the situations and moments included within these pages. I hope it calls to you.

## NOTES

1. Nahum M. Sarna, *On the Book of Psalms: Exploring the Prayers of Ancient Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1993), 15–16.
2. Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), xvii–xviii.
3. Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).
4. Brueggeman, *Message of the Psalms*, 15, 19–23.
5. Debra J. Robbins, *New Each Day: A Spiritual Practice for Reading Psalms* (CCAR Press, 2024); Debbie Perlman, *Flames to Heaven: New Psalms for Healing and Praise* (Rad Publishers, 1998); Naomi Levy, *Talking to God: Personal Prayers for Times of Joy, Sadness, Struggle, and Celebration* (Doubleday, 2002).
6. Richard N. Levy, *Songs Ascending: The Book of Psalms in a New Translation with Textual and Spiritual Commentary* (New York: CCAR Press, 2017), xvii.
7. Levy, *Songs Ascending*, xvii.