

# THE BOOK OF PSALMS

## Introduction

Early this spring, Women's League was a sponsoring organization for a historic women's trans-denomination prayer conference held in New York City. Throughout that unforgettable day, over 300 women from every Jewish denomination – Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, independent – studied, experienced, and shared the vast and creative ways by which women throughout history have whispered their most heart felt yearnings through private prayer and internal dialogues with the Divine.

The Bible was the first of our sacred texts to develop Jewish prayer, majestically presented in the Book of Psalms. This collection of poems – prayers of thanksgiving, petition, anguish, and comfort – is one of the world's most celebrated works of literature. For three millennia, psalms have been integrated into our liturgy, law, music, art, and literature. We sing many by heart – *Shir ha ma'alot*, *ashrei*, *lekhu neranelah*, *betzeit yisrael mimitzrayim* – but all are integral to our religious lives.

Yet, their language and significance often remain elusive and it is up to each generation to offer new interpretations. By remarkable coincidence this year's Women's League International Day of Study overlaps the crisp memory of the prayer conference. What became apparent at the conference is that the issues that women confront today – that inspire creative and innovative expressions for dealing with life's pitfalls and successes, with its joys and sorrows – were already addressed long ago by the psalmist.

But we read them anew, with new eyes and new imagination. The presentations of psalms in this year's material reflect a diversity of methodology and insight by a team of talented women. Arranged topically by psalm, rather than by author, the organization is different from those of past Days of Study. Be assured, however, that this material provides the same ample opportunity for study, analysis, and dramatic inquiry. There is something to engage *every* woman – from close reading of the text to scripts illustrating very personal insights into the words of the psalmist.

The materials are timeless, and if your sisterhood cannot use them on the prescribed day of study, May 17, they can be used for many other seasons or events:

- Rosh Chodesh study groups
- tehillim circles
- Sisterhood meetings
- adult education or mini-study sessions

The timelessness of psalms makes them the poetry-for-all-seasons.

### Contents

Each Day of Study packet contains:

1. Introduction to the genre of psalms by Rabbi Judy Weiss
2. Mini-study guides of Psalms 23, 28, 51, 91, 113-114, and 126 for session leaders
3. Separate set of participant's study texts (to be photocopied and given out to all participants)
4. Colored art prints for participants to share

## Organization of materials and authors

As mentioned above, the study guides are organized according to psalm rather than author. While each psalm has one study guide, Psalm 23 has separate guides by all three authors, reflecting three unique perspectives on this most famous of all psalms.

**Rabbi Judy Weiss**, a Bible scholar, presents a close reading of the text, focusing on its language and imagery. The questions reflect her concern for the biblical context and her experiences as a rabbi who appreciates the approachability of the material.

**Debra Band**, artist and author of *I Will Wake the Dawn: Illuminated Psalms*, uses imagery from the text itself, from history, midrash, and poetry. Band's personal narrative, looking to the psalms as a source of comfort and healing, is apparent throughout this, her most recent work.

**Barbara Ellsion Rosenblit**, master educator whose Jewish studies classes seamlessly weave Jewish tradition and humanistic secular studies, offers witty and sometimes gritty dramatic readings of psalms that we thought we knew so well.

## Suggestions for the Day of Study session leaders

- Photocopy this letter and give a copy to each session leader.
- Remember that this type of study is an integral part of Jewish tradition, and that these texts can be read and studied and discussed over and over again. With each new exploration we can reach new understandings and insights.
- Study your own Leader's Guide until you are familiar with the topics and issue.
- Have sufficient photocopies of the texts and scripts for everyone to have her own copy. *Do not ask people to share texts.*
- The study guide offers more materials than the allocated session times will permit. Before your session, prioritize the material you wish to cover.
- You don't have to stick to the script. Encourage free-wheeling discussion, while keeping track of time and the subjects you want to cover.
- Emphasize that *there are no wrong answers*, and that debate and thoughtful disagreements are time-honored elements of Jewish textual study.
- Thank your participants and encourage them to continue their studies individually, or, following ancient tradition, with a *chevrutah*, or study partner.

Again, please note that we are sending you far more material than you can possibly use in one day. Think of other programs that might build on the foundation you establish at the initial sessions – including evenings of study.



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