The ALEPH Study Guide to
Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi’s
Psalms in a Translation for Praying
Yonatan Yussman, EdD
Contents

I. Background on the Book of Psalms 4

II. The Uses of Psalms Today 4

III. Different Numbering Systems 5

IV. On Translating Psalms 5

V. Comparison of Translations of Psalm 23 6

VI. What Makes Reb Zalman’s Translation Unique? 8

VII. Spiritual Exercises with Psalms 9

A Poem for God
Letter to God
Meditation/Contemplation
Journaling
Embodied Psalms: A Pairs Exercise
Daily Recitation of Psalms
Communal Recitation of Psalms

VII. For Further Psalms Study & Spiritual Practices 11

About the Author 11
I. Background on the Book of Psalms

Courage and anger, fear and hope, despair and love…so many emotions churn within us. We grapple with existential questions—What is the right thing to do? What is the truth? What should I do if I fail? How do I love? What if I don’t live up to expectations? The Book of Psalms addresses this broad range of human feelings and questions like no other book of the Bible. It is a powerful tool to help us discuss and relate to our emotions.

The Book of Psalms is a book of poetry for God found in the Writings/Ketuvim section of the Bible/Tanakh. Each of the 150 poems in the book is considered a single psalm. Traditionally, it is said that King David composed the Psalms, but modern biblical scholars disagree. The Book of Psalms is now thought of as a collection of psalms compiled at different periods, though it is possible that some of them may go back to David himself. Many of the psalms are liturgical, meaning that they are related to public worship. When the ancient Jewish Temple in Jerusalem stood thousands of years ago, the Levites sang a psalm for each day of the week and on the Sabbaths and festivals, accompanying the songs with instrumental music.

Notice that in Psalms in a Translation for Praying, the ascribed authors and performance notes have been separated from the body of the psalms themselves, and appear under the psalm number.

II. The Uses of Psalms Today

Often, when people find themselves in trying or emotional times, they turn to the recitation of psalms to comfort them. This happens because the psalms express emotions and reactions to both the difficult and happy situations that humans face in their lives, and they also express emotions about God. This is the one book in the Bible in which God does not place demands on people. Rather, the book represents the emotions and prayers of people in search of God. These emotional poems are universal and timeless, and can give words to people looking for ways to express themselves to God in just about any situation they find themselves.

One can see how the Book of Psalms has become central to many people’s devotional prayers. In Judaism, for example, multiple psalms are said daily in worship services. Some Jews recite the whole Book of Psalms each week or in the course of a month, and “saying Psalms” is often practiced as a prayer for a sick person or when other misfortunes threaten.

Christian churches have also made frequent use of the Psalms for devotional and ritual purposes, with a cycle for the recitation of all or most of them over the course of one or more weeks. The Christian Scriptures quote from the Psalms more than any other book of the Hebrew Bible. Psalms are important to Islam as well; the Koran confirms that the Psalms are inspired by God, and considers it a revelation of Allah.
III. Different Numbering Systems

The Book of Psalms is divided into five sections or “books”:

- Book 1 (Psalms 1-41)
- Book 2 (Psalms 42-72)
- Book 3 (Psalms 73-89)
- Book 4 (Psalms 90-106)
- Book 5 (Psalms 107-150)

The numbering of Psalms varies in different religious traditions, as described in the table below. Protestants tend to use the Hebrew numbering, while Catholics use the Greek for liturgical purposes and the Hebrew for modern translations. The reason for the different number systems is likely due to carelessness of copyists over the centuries, and neglect of the original poetic form of the psalms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hebrew Numbering</th>
<th>Greek Numbering</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>1-8</td>
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<td>9-10</td>
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<td>11-113</td>
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<td>146-147</td>
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<td>148-150</td>
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IV. On Translating Psalms

There are dozens of Bible translations. Which is the best translation? Which is closest to the original text? First of all, the Bible was originally written in Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic. As with any translation from another language, there is no such thing as the “correct” translation. **All translation is interpretation.** Some are more literal, even if it reads somewhat strangely in English. Some are more dynamic, and seek to communicate the original meaning in modern English, even if it means straying from the literal wording of the text. But unless we are reading the original text in the language in which it was written, we are reading an interpretation. All the moreso regarding the translation of prayers, which are even more likely to be explanations and contain the theology and philosophy of the translator.

In this book, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (“Reb Zalman,” as he prefers) did not translate literally (which would have been appropriate for studying), or with “high sounding” language (which would have been suitable for ceremonial purposes). Rather, he rendered his translation
of the psalms as personal prayer, a direct and heart-connected version that draws upon his own experiences and worldview. Reb Zalman teaches that anything, even what others consider sin and heresy, can be God’s will, and this philosophy can be seen in this translation by his not smoothing over Psalms’ vindictive passages. Reb Zalman’s egalitarian sense led him to avoid anthropomorphic, masculine and authoritarian association of the word “Lord,” and he chose instead to use YaH, a breath/spirit-like name for God that is associated with the attribute of Compassion. Reb Zalman’s approach is an empowering one that encourages ritual and liturgical innovation, helping to renew a healthy spirituality in Jewish life and beyond.

V. Comparison of Translations of Psalm 23

To give one a sense of how Reb Zalman’s translation compares to others, on the following page is a line-by-line comparison of some of the more popular translations of Psalm 23, perhaps the most familiar of the Psalms. These particular translations were chosen to give a sense of diversity among common ones. The simple exercise of comparing and contrasting these translations should demonstrate that, as noted above, translation is really interpretation.

In the chart, a “/” indicates a line break, and a “//” indicates a double line break.
Psalm 23 • Four Translations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A David Song /</th>
<th>A Psalm of David. /</th>
<th>A psalm of David. /</th>
<th>A psalm of David. /</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
<td>YaH, my shepherd, you supply my needs; / I don’t ever feel deprived. / The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. / The LORD is my shepherd; / I lack nothing. / The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing. /</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td>You feed me in the meadows; / I am led to quench my thirst by a quiet stream. / He makes me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. / He makes me lie down in green pastures; / He leads me to water in places of repose; / He makes me lie down in green pastures, / he leads me beside quiet waters, /</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
<td>You stir my soul / and guide me gently / through the thicket / of right action; / such is Your Fame. / He restor eth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. / He restores my life; / He guides me in right paths / as befits His name. / He refreshes my soul. / He guides me along the right paths / for his name’s sake. /</td>
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<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td>At times, I must make my way / through dark and dangerous gullies, / but because You are with me, / I won’t panic if I have to face evil. / / Both Your rebuke / and Your bracing support / give me comfort. / Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. / Though I walk through a valley of deepest darkness / I fear no harm, for You are with me; / Your rod and Your staff – they comfort me. / Even though I walk through the darkest valley / I will fear no evil, / for you are with me; / your rod and your staff, / they comfort me. /</td>
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<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td>In the presence of adversity, / You set me a feast / at which my anxious head is soothed / and my thirst is amply slaked. / Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. / You spread a table for me in full view of my enemies; / You anoint my head with oil; / my drink is abundant. / You prepare a table before me / in the presence of my enemies. / You anoint my head with oil; / my cup overflows. /</td>
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<td><strong>6</strong></td>
<td>[Because you have invited me,] / I affirm that only goodness and graciousness / will manifest for the rest of my life, / in which I will be always at home with You. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever. Only goodness and steadfast love shall pursue me / all the days of my life, / and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD / for many long years. Surely your goodness and love will follow me / all the days of my life, / and I will dwell in the house of the LORD / forever.</td>
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1 King James Version, 1611 – More of a literalist translation. Written by a committee from the Church of England, this translation’s high language is fitting for resonant and dignified public reading.

2 Jewish Publication Society Tanakh, 1983 – These Jewish scholars based their translation on the Masoretic Hebrew text rather than the Septuagint, and strove for a faithful, idiomatic rendering of the original scriptural languages.

3 New International Version, 2011 – A Christian Bible for primarily Protestant readership. Tries to balance the literal word with modern English and the “intent” of the biblical author(s).
VI. What Makes Reb Zalman’s Translation Unique?

Below are some ways that Reb Zalman’s translation of Psalm 23—to highlight just one psalm—is unique. There are many more ways, but here are ten:

1. “A David song” – Reb Zalman is the only translator who opens the psalm this way. He knows that the Hebrew word *Mizmor* implies that there’s a melody to it. Reb Zalman hears this psalm being sung to a tune.

2. Sheep imagery – Reb Zalman accentuates the sheep imagery. For example, in verse two, he uniquely writes, “You feed me in the meadows” [like a sheep]. Almost always, people seem to think, “The Lord is my shepherd; I’m attending a funeral.” Instead, Reb Zalman’s translation suggests, “The Lord is my shepherd, and I am a sheep.”

3. Perhaps most striking is that Reb Zalman’s translation uses much more down-to-earth language, and is almost conversational in nature. The entire psalm talks to God, rather than about God. This is because, in part, Reb Zalman knows that the Hebrew word *roi* in verse one not only means shepherd, but also friend. God is your Friend, whom you can trust and talk to.

4. Reb Zalman dispensed with the very famous phrase, “He makes me lie down in green pastures.” He knows that the Hebrew *yarbitzeni* doesn’t mean that at all. He continues with the sheep imagery, and his translation emphasizes that God makes me lie down like a sheep, with all four legs folded beneath me, and God feeds me directly.

5. Verse three has a somewhat surprising reference to God’s “fame.” Reb Zalman believes that God gets a good reputation when humans do well on this earth, so it’s a “win-win” for both the humans and God.

6. “Thy rod and thy staff”— This is another famous phrase that Reb Zalman has changed, into “Your rebuke and Your bracing support.” The Latin Vulgate translation implies that they equally give comfort. Reb Zalman’s interpretation is that God’s “rod” metaphorically gives a whack on your behind/tuches when you need it, and God’s “staff” is like a crutch when you are feeling shaky and about to fall down. How can they equally give comfort? Children like and need the comfort of parents who both provide boundaries and also are there for us.

7. “Shadow of death” – This is another familiar phrase that Reb Zalman translates differently. The Hebrew doesn’t actually say “shadow of death.” Reb Zalman imagines that David is sneaking back to his people at nighttime, and he doesn’t know what is waiting for him, having just dealt with Saul’s jealous rage. “Even though it’s dark,” Reb Zalman imagines David saying, “I will feel no evil, because You are with me.”
8. Reb Zalman also changes the more familiar “in the presence of my enemies” into “in the presence of adversity,” which is his common approach—to focus on sin, and not sinners. Reb Zalman doesn’t think it is useful to blame other people for your problems. Invite all the adversaries in your life to an imaginary banquet, and thank them…say, “Because of what s/he did to me, look what I learned, look what I gained. You difficult teacher, thank you!”

9. Reb Zalman gets rid of the literal anointing with oil in verse five, in favor of the metaphor- ical soothing one’s head of anxiety. Verse five has nothing to do with actual oil on the head. His translation goes along with God helping us deal with adversity and reducing stress (see note 8).

10. Perhaps the most famous phrase from Psalm 23 is “my cup runneth over.” Well, according to Reb Zalman, that is a mistaken translation in King James…The cup never actually runneth over! Instead, the cup is quenching, meaning “I no longer am thirsty after having drunk from this cup.”

VII. Spiritual Exercises with Psalms

Below are a number of exercises you can use to bring Reb Zalman’s translations of the Book of Psalms into your life. Teachers may want to start a class on this topic with an overview of the Book of Psalms (sections I-IV, above); follow with an interactive text study session (sections V-VI); and conclude with some of the following application exercises.

A. A Poem for God

As described in the introduction, psalms are poems for God. Many psalms describe the author’s relationship with God, and how God reveals Him/Herself to the world. In this exercise, you are encouraged to write your own poem to God. Reb Zalman comes from the tradition of the ancient psalmists who looked into the heavens and audaciously and personally addressed God as “You.” One of the innovations of Reb Zalman’s translation of Psalms is its down-to-earth, conversational tone with God.

There are many types of poems—it doesn’t really matter which you choose. It could be a rhyme, a haiku, an acrostic, or any other that you choose. (It does not have to be in the same style as the Book of Psalms). Choose a theme for your poem to God. Some ideas: God helps me overcome obstacles; I reach out to God, but He does not respond; God has done so much for me—or any other theme that you would like, as long as it reveals a relationship between you and God. In your poem, speak from your heart like Reb Zalman imagines the psalmists doing—let your feelings pour out.
B. Letter to God

Reb Zalman is a believer in every person’s ability to commune directly with God. The Psalms give expression to our deepest desires that God listens to our prayers. When viewed from this perspective, to the psalmists, God is a Being in direct relationship with humans. God seeks to heal the shattered human heart (Psalm 147:2).

Carry on in this tradition. Write a personal letter to God. Tell God anything you want, but if you get stuck, try to focus on these two questions: What is your relationship with God? How does God reveal Him/Herself in the world?

C. Meditation/Contemplation

Once you find a psalm that speaks to you and has meaning for you, consider focusing in on it for a set period of time. Reb Zalman is a strong believer in the power of meditation and contemplation. Meditating on Psalms can be a valuable tool in refocusing and centering yourself. Even the “simple” exercise of repeating the same verse over and over again can do wonders to quiet one’s soul.

D. Journaling

Ups and downs are part of the human experience—to have happiness and sadness, joy and pain, and a whole myriad of emotions. The Book of Psalms is an expression of the whole range of human feelings. Reading Psalms can help us express ourselves better by seeing how others have expressed their own emotions and experiences. We all have had something happen to us, and wanted to express ourselves, but didn’t quite have the words. In this exercise, you are encouraged to keep a daily or weekly journal, and write down your thoughts and feelings. Journaling is great for recording prayer requests, capturing inspiring thoughts, and noting your questions and ideas as you read Reb Zalman’s translation of the Book of Psalms.

E. Embodied Psalms: A Pairs Exercise

The choreographer and movement teacher Katya Delakova, z"l, taught a method of experiencing psalms in a kinesthetic way. People work in pairs as the “Sculptor” and the “Sculpture.” The job of the Sculpture is to be relaxed and pliant, and to hold the pose or gesture that the Sculptor places her/him in—like firm clay. The Sculptor molds the torso, head and limbs of the other person to express the emotions of a psalm through gesture. (Sculptors should be coached to be aware of their partners’ comfort, such as not leaving hands above the head for an extended period.)

Before starting, participants should also let their partners know if there are any parts of their body outside the “no-go bathing suit lines” that should not be touched, or positions that are particularly hard for them hold. The leader reads the psalm couplet by couplet, leaving time for Sculptors to work between each. The pair should switch roles at an appropriate point. This exercise is best done in a group setting, but can be adapted for two or three people working together.
F. Daily Recitation of Psalms

Each day, Reb Zalman recites the set of psalms assigned to that day of the Jewish month. The first psalm of each daily set is designated as “nth Day of the Month” in the headings of this book, and listed in the Cycle of Psalms for the Day (p. v). Each Jewish month has 29 or 30 days, so if you are adapting this practice to the secular calendar, on the last day of 31-day months, you may wish to recite whichever psalms touched you most during the month.

G. Communal Recitation of Psalms

In some Jewish communities, members form a Chevra Tehillim, a “Psalms Fellowship,” which gathers regularly to study and/or chant psalms together. One custom is that when an individual falls ill, the community divides the 150 psalms among all its members, so that the entire Book of Psalms is read. The community dedicates the recitation of Psalms to healing, strength, solace, recovery and so on. Some Christian communities have formed similar prayer groups. Consider asking some others in your community to form a Psalms Fellowship.

VII. For Further Psalms Study & Spiritual Practices


About the Author

Rabbi Yonatan Yussman, EdD, has been a teacher and administrator in pluralistic Jewish days schools for the past 15 years. He studied for three years at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem. Yussman earned an EdD in Educational Leadership, MA in Jewish Education, BA in Psychology, as well as private rabbinic ordination. Yussman has an esteemed record of collaborating with top educational and religious leaders, such as at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education, Bar Ilan University’s Principals’ Center, and the Hartman Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem. He and his wife Lisa have three daughters.