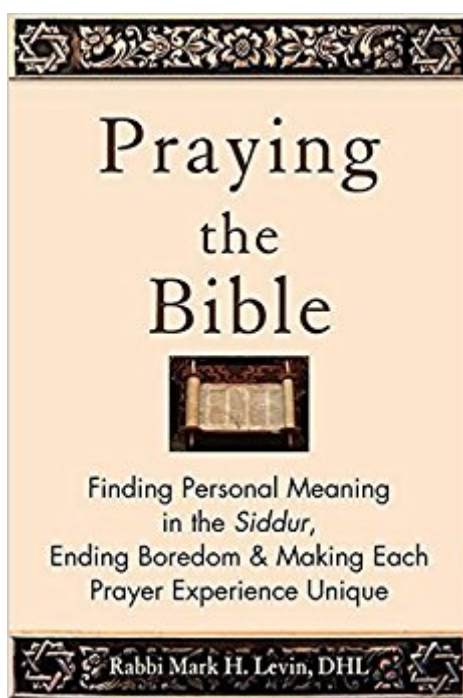


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# Praying The Bible: Finding Personal Meaning In The Siddur, Ending Boredom & Making Each Prayer Experience Unique



## Synopsis

The Jewish prayer book, the siddur, nourishes a vibrant interface connecting the praying person, Jewish history and redemptive contemporary living. Long description: What is the mystery of the Jewish people? How has Jewish spirituality triumphed over times of persecution as well as the enticements of assimilation? Out of the depths of Jewish despair, the rabbis of the first century and after developed a restorative prayer tradition that has invigorated the Jewish people for two thousand years, in both flourishing environments like the Golden Age of Spain and times of persecution like the Nazi Holocaust. Relying on biblical quotations hidden in each prayer, they developed a poetic interaction squarely placing each praying person in God's redemptive history. The problem is that most contemporary Jews are unaware of the power residing in their spiritual treasure chest. Praying the Bible is the key to opening the treasure chest. It explores and explains the prayers we read – cover and over again – and gives those prayers new meaning. It illuminates the Jewish prayer book as churning with the existential realities of human life and the struggles of the Jewish people. It places the praying person in the living covenant with God, showing how the prayer book can address individual life circumstances with reference to both parallel historical events and daily realities. It provides insights that resonate equally with lay people eager to add depth and meaning to their prayer lives and rabbis looking for engaging sermon material.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Rabbi Mark H. Levin is the founding rabbi of Congregation Beth Torah in Overland Park, Kansas,

where he served as rabbi for over a quarter century. He writes religion columns for the Kansas City Star, studies medieval haggadahs, does pastoral care and teaches in the Kansas City area.

Rabbi Levin's *Praying the Bible* has provided a zetz, an infusion of continuity to my prayer experience. With a bit of Levin's humor and knowledgeable historical perspective, I had the opportunity to reconsider and incorporate a different flourish to my prayer experience. The Table of Contents alone, from Adonai Sefatai: What does God Want From Me (The Amida) to Adon Olam: No Lexapro or Xanax Needed; to Avodah: Accept Our Prayers and Sacrifices; to Hoda'ah: Thanksgiving; to What the Words of Prayer Mean to Me is comforting and peaceful. Rabbi Levin's personal take on prayer and hopes for the reader, should pique the interest of Jew and non-Jew alike. I have learned, from many teachers as well as my personal experience that much of prayer for the modern Jew is rote. It matters little how devout or questioning we may be, it is the whole experience that draws us in. The lighting, the very sound and repetition of each word, the familiarity of the niggun, the gentle swaying and bending of the knee, whether in a large congregation or small, in public or private, on the front porch or in the clearing of a fragrant wood is comforting and peaceful. To some, the meaning of the words, either in the traditional Hebrew or the wonderful translations found in various siddurim, might not even be considered. I am an educated, studious Reform Jew. I learn, I pray, I experience. I choose. Rabbi Levin has taken that experience and provided an expanded pathway through an historical perspective that connects me to Biblical times, throughout the ages to modern times and straight to the heart. We are all a part of a long history that has grown and developed into an undeniable faith; if we choose to be open to understanding it. I have read *Praying the Bible* more than once. Some parts many times over, always learning something new to add to my life/prayer experience. It is a wonderful opportunity for both learning and teaching. I doubt, however, that I will be giving up my "Xanax" any time soon.

I really wanted to like this book. Alas. Levin does a fine job of showing how in many of the traditional prayers, including the Amidah, phrases from the Bible appear and/or are central. However, it goes downhill from there. Mostly, he fails to deliver on the promise of the subtitle, "Finding Personal Meaning in the Siddur, Ending Boredom, & Making Each Prayer Experience Unique." This failure is very unfortunate because he describes (p. 27) an actual experience of God. We want to know more about that, but instead mostly what he delivers is antiseptic history, and intrusive and unenlightening doses of leftist ideology. He seems trapped by the reform view of 'rationality' which, perhaps,

prevents him from accomplishing his stated objective. For example, on p. 45 he presents as "laughable" the idea, enshrined in traditional prayer, that the soul temporarily leaves the body during sleep. This idea certainly presents difficulties and questions, but it seems totally inappropriate in a book of this type to call the idea "laughable." He then offers no discussion of what could and should be a matter of careful consideration -- namely what is the soul and in what way might God be involved with the soul. This approach seems particularly troubling, given that he has devoted an entire chapter (2), pages 7 to 22, to Adon Olam, which climaxes with the plea to God: "In his hand I trust my soul, when I sleep..." (his translation). You should also know that Levin is a liberal, reform rabbi, and based on this book it is not clear how much he really knows about traditional interpretation of the siddur and its contents. He brings an unhealthy dose of 2016 political correctness to the text. For example, he makes the (absurd) claim "we live in a world that is striking back at our egregious exploitation and overconsumption of the earth's resources." This is wrong on so many levels that one doesn't know where to begin. And although his sentiment is consistent with modern reform "Jewish" thought, it is simply leftist politics wearing a tallit. One of the biggest problems today with liberal Judaism is precisely this substitution of leftism for Judaism. By reinforcing this, Levin makes it very unlikely that people will learn from his book skills or insights that will enable them to find personal meaning in the tradition.

I admit it. I've been bored during the weekly Shabbat services once or twice in my life. After all, it's the same prayers, over and over again. So I was delighted to read a book that provides new perspectives on the prayers I've been reciting all my life. As Rabbi Levin says in the book, "God loves words," and it's a pleasure to find words/chapters in his book that have helped me regain interest and gain insight on everything from Adon Olam to the priestly blessing.

This book, by Rabbi Mark Levin, is an absolutely beautiful exploration of the meaning of the prayers in the Jewish book of prayer. As a Christian myself, I found it to be very meaningful and inspiring.

Mark - As you know, I found the book enlightening to my understanding of the preeminent Jewish prayer, but also valuable in my Catholic Benedictine spirituality. The latter may not win points with Orthodox rabbis, but... Thank you for your scholarship and leadership. Paul G Marx

I have just started reading the book and so far I find it quite interesting and informative. I like Rabbi Levin's personal touch to help understand who is and his perspective.

Our favorite Rabbi

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