For me, one of the delights of Jewish religious experience is its resemblance to theatre, with all of us as the actors. Jewish spiritual practise provides the opportunity to enact drama, to take on the roles within our narrative. The easiest examples to access are those in the Passover Haggadah, where we are explicitly invited to see ourselves as having personally gone out from Egypt. The Jewish calendar has days that ask us to truly feel joy, truly feel mourning, truly feel awe. Our texts also provide chances to enter into exciting dramas.

The book of Psalms is praised for its wide range of emotions, its scope of narrative from creation through exile to redemption, and the vividness of the many voices – individual, collective, and divine – that appear within its poetry. Psalms are recited for healing and comfort. They are studied and simply read and enjoyed. And they have become an integral part of Jewish liturgy. Miriyam Glazer, a rabbi and professor of literature, has written a book guiding the reader through the psalms that are included in full in the liturgy, approaching prayer in a way that I consider drama – personal, emotional, explored in real time.

*Psalms of the Jewish Liturgy* is a lovely, clear, easy to read book. Its small size and straightforward organization make it a good companion for services and for private contemplation. Especially helpful is the inclusion of entire psalms rather than excerpts, in Hebrew and the author's own translation. I enjoyed it at my bedside and carried it with me to read on my way. Glazer spells out her goals early and restates them at intervals. She encourages the reader not only to read and study the psalms, not only to pray the psalms as part of a service, but to find ways to experience the psalms in order to find personal self-understanding, meditative practise, and approaches to God.

She looks at the psalms that appear in Conservative Jewish liturgy. In each chapter, she provides a psalm or group of psalms in Hebrew, then in her own translation, and then presents a potential use for the psalm. The author suggests two main contexts in which to experience the psalms: during prayer with groups, that is, the liturgical context of these psalms, and in slow private
contemplation. Sometimes these can coexist:

As our congregation begins reciting the nine psalms that precede the Ashrei, I usually go into my own prayer-world, where one of the psalms jumps off the page at me, asking for my attention. I begin reciting each line of the psalm consciously and slowly. I pause when my attention is riveted by a particular phrase, a particular image -- “tall as a cedar in Lebanon,” perhaps... “Who understands why we stumble?”... I feel as if I am befriending the psalm anew.

In each chapter she provides a window on the use of psalms for personal, individual prayer. Her content varies widely -- sometimes she presents suggestions for guided meditation, sometimes historical or scholarly approaches to the text. At times we are guided through the emotions of the psalmist as a character in the narrative of the psalm, or through the wonders of pilgrimage to the Temple in ancient times. Glazer's own experiences may be presented in general psychological or emotional language, as detailed anecdote, or as image and metaphor.

Looking at Psalm 93, she describes her childhood experience as a metaphor paralleling those in the prayer:

...I remember how awestruck we were during hurricane season when the lightning flashed, the thunder roared, rain poured down furiously as we huddled at a window in our dining room to watch the mightiness of the massive, roaring waves as they rose and broke not many feet from our house... my sisters and I, all little girls then, nevertheless managed to feel safe, secure... Transmuted to a theological plane, the psalm is suggesting to us that the spiritual equivalent of that sturdy old house of my childhood is Torah.

Just as the only way to really assess a cookbook would be to try out the recipes in your own kitchen, the only way to really evaluate this book would be to try out the spiritual exercises. Overall, the book will be an effective resource for a reader who enjoys guided meditation and directed reading, with instructions for a focus to take with a text. Often, the author pauses to ask the reader a direct question.

Many of the questions are rhetorical, leading toward a point:

We are self-reliant. Why would we want to see ourselves as like “sheep” in “God's hands?”
Because, above all, it is not an image of passivity – it is an image of trust.

But some are open-ended:

What about you? From what fears are you released... What light has God cast upon your life?

In her detailed exploration of Psalm 19, Glazer suggests pausing after each line. In several chapters, she refers in general terms to her own prayer in this way. The book is not a spiritual autobiography or a systematically presented theology, but glimpses of both appear. We learn of Glazer's own attitudes toward God, toward faith, toward right behaviour.
And what about gladdening your heart? Filling your eyes with light? For me, for example...baking hallah with my daughter Avigal, or studying a challenging passage in Talmud with my havruta partners...What are the moments “sweeter than honey dripping from the honeycomb” in your Jewish life?... Clearly, if we recite these lines slowly and honestly to ourselves, pausing between each line, reviewing our lives, the psalm gives us a chance for a significant heshbon nefesh, an accounting of our own souls.

While many sections are primarily from Glazer’s point of view, or are focused mostly on instructions for spiritual exercises, other chapters also include interpretations of the texts drawing on Tanakh, Midrash, scholarly study, historical overviews, and contemporary issues. For Psalm 95, the events at Merivah and Massah are quoted from Exodus. Calls for justice and responsibility are accompanied by verses from the Prophets. Glazer adds these thoughts to her discussion of the portrait of God in Psalm 145:

“Where is God? Mendel of Kotsk was asked.”Wherever you let God in,” he responded... at the heart of Mendel of Kotsk's teaching is the assumption that we can experience God only through relationship... “You are my witnesses, declares the Lord, And I am God,” says the book of Isaiah (43:12) and the Midrash explains that line as meaning: “If you are my witnesses, I am God; if you are not my witnesses, I am, as it were, not God.”

Depending on the place of a psalm in the liturgy, the complexity of its concepts, and Glazer's own sense of connection to the prayer, the chapters differ greatly in length, although all are brief.

Psalm 147 receives five pages of interpretation as a “lovely dance of the infinite and the intimate.”

A much briefer chapter tells us “Ps 27 is a most tender expression of trust, an expression of deep yearning.”

Glazer effectively presents the psalms, with emotions and images that may at first seem disjointed, as integral poems, showing how one idea in a psalm sparks the next and leads to a conclusion. Psalm 24 begins with an affirmation about the whole universe, set firmly and securely:

But it is not enough to feel secure in our world, according to the psalmist. We have more to do with our lives: the spiritual challenge is to “ascend the mountain...” The next section of the psalm is like the next turn of a magnificent dance... now it calls for opening up the very gates of our world to God...

In a similar way, Glazer speaks dramatically of the sweep of emotions and expression through sequences of liturgy, such as the psalms for the days of the week, the psalms to welcome
Shabbat, and the daily and festival Hallels.

An important feature of the book is Glazer's own translations. In many ways I find them moving. She uses the simplest, plain English, never substituting a fancy “Bible word” when a familiar, contemporary word will communicate the text clearly. “Let us move closer to God's presence with gratitude,” calls the poet.

Beauty, I feel, is not one of the strengths of this translation. The simple, contemporary language leads to phrases that are long and cumbersome. From Psalm 19: “save me from my own arrogance – don't let it control me – cleanse me of any great wrongs.” This is very clear and very usable, but not lovely.

Glazer longs for “vividly accessible prayer-poems” with “aesthetic, spiritual and emotional resonance for most of us.” She cherishes the King James Version 23rd psalm as “a soulful, rhythmic English-language prayer-poem in its own right. We can pray this psalm; we can feel its resonance.”

I do think that I could pray these poems. It would take me some time, however, since I would need to adjust to some of the less conventional wording in some of these texts. Many Bible translations aim to come as close as possible to the meanings of each Hebrew word or phrase, with much attention to the original contexts of the words. Glazer praises the work of Robert Alter, and refers to the JPS editions and others.

Glazer's prayer-poems spell out what she considers usable, spiritually helpful implications of the texts. In place of the familiar “Teach us to number our days”, Glazer asks “Teach us how to make each of our days matter.” The Hebrew request “Chaneyni” could be translated as “Be gracious to me” or, as JPS offers, “Have mercy on me”. Glazer has the surprising and pretty thought “Be gentle with me”. Men who “are radiant” in JPS become those who “glow.”

The gender neutral approach of Glazer's language, about people and about God, is unstrained. I only noticed it when I began to compare her work with other translations. Some trivial circumlocution is required to avoid using male pronouns where they appear in the Hebrew, but this is a worthwhile trade-off.

_Psalms of the Jewish Liturgy_ is a lovely addition to my own collection of books about the Psalms. It will be a wonderful companion to readers who pray daily or weekly in congregations or on their own, to those who wish to use the ancient psalms and an educated author's personal perspective to enrich their own improvised prayers, and to those who look to Jewish texts for meditation. Glazer addresses a particular audience -- many of the terms for worship, scholarly
sources and the like will be most familiar to readers who are immersed in Jewish study or prayer. But other readers need not stay away. The clearly laid out Hebrew text, the accessible English, and most of all Glazer's passionate, vivid writing make this a welcome book for any reader.