

Engaging Learners with *Inviting God In: A Guide to Jewish Prayer*

Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin

*I do not understand
the book in my hand. . .*

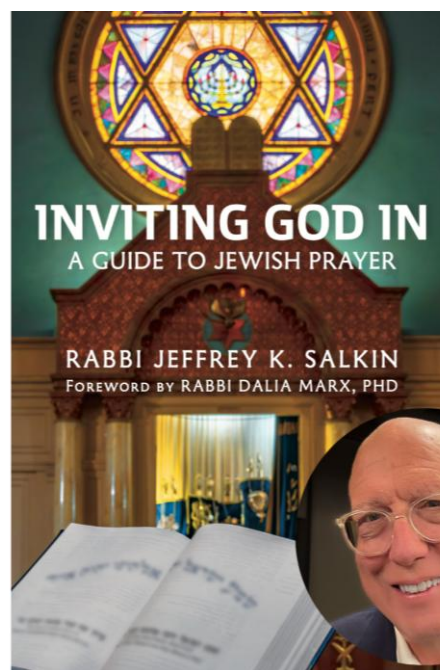
From “In the Synagogue” by Cynthia Ozick

At ninety-seven years old, Cynthia Ozick is one of the preeminent figures of American Jewish literature. The opening stanza of her poem hits hard, but she nails it. We do not understand the books in our hands—the siddur. We share the question Ozick poses in her poem—how do we return? We return—to knowing, to connection, to understanding—by taking the words of prayer seriously. Let us treat the words of prayer like we treat the words of Torah and actually study them.

That is the purpose of my new book from CCAR Press, [*Inviting God In: A Guide to Jewish Prayer*](#). On the one hand, it is a book for teens to use

to prepare for their bet mitzvah. However, it is so much more than that. When adults read it, they will uncover the very roots of Jewish spirituality.

American Jews have a prayer disability. Of all major religious groups, Jews attend worship services the least—and the more liberal the denomination, the less the attendance. Reform Jews are among the group of Americans who are least likely to be at a weekly worship service. This is disheartening on many fronts, because prayer is poetry that we believe in. Most Americans are poetry deprived; they simply don’t read poetry. This makes understanding our liturgy even more challenging.



Consider the story of a man who survived the Holocaust. When he entered Auschwitz, he was sure that he would survive, but he thought that he would be the last Jew on earth. It would be his job to rebuild Judaism, from the ground up. He decided to memorize the siddur, prayer by prayer, even though he did not have a physical prayer book with him. He would go through it in his head. He would play siddur “memory games” with other Jews in the camp to keep their minds alive. When he got out of the camp, he told his friends and community, “I am a living prayer book.” More than that: He was living Judaism. For in a very real sense, the siddur *is* Judaism.

How do we get the words of prayer to “work” for today’s Jews? We want *kavanah*—a spiritual intensity that connects us to the words, each other, and to God. Rabbi Chayim Soloveitchik (Belarus, 1853–1918) taught that there were two types of *kavanah*. The first type is *da lifnei mi atah omeid*, “know before whom you stand.” You are praying in the presence of God. This type of *kavanah* is what you *feel*. The second type is *peirush hamilot*, “understanding the meaning of the words that you are saying.” This type of *kavanah* is what you *know*.

How does *Inviting God In* help us with both types of *kavanah*? Consider three audiences:

Young people: I remember the rebellious young teen, preparing to become a bar mitzvah. He was all of twelve years old, and he was already a rebel. “Why are we saying this?” he wanted to know. That kid, and others like him, are the main intended audience for this book. In fact, the book flowed directly from the commentaries that I offered during religious school services. You can use *Inviting God In* in a similar way to create a running commentary during religious school services. Focus on one prayer a week over a period of several months. Use the questions at the end of each prayer as discussion guides.

Parents of kids: Create a class for bet mitzvah parents. Focus on big ideas that capture the imagination of those adults, using the prayers as your jumping-off point. For example, you can teach a class called “Who are the Jews, and why does the answer matter?” The prayer to us can be *she-asani Yisrael*, “who has made me a Jew” (page 100–101). Explore questions like how we define being Jewish, what it means for each of us to be *Yisrael*, and what our connection to global Jewry can be. Another topic could be the role of Israel in our lives, using the prayer for the State of Israel (page 184) to explore how the state of Israel reflects “the beginning of the flowering of our redemption,” and how ancient longing for Israel connects to modern Zionism. You could also introduce the words of psalm 95 and discuss the phrase “rock of Israel” (page 34). For another

class, you could focus on the Torah blessings (page 162) to discuss the topic “Are the Jews chosen? And for what?”

General adult learners: You can use the book for a class for the ritual (or religious, or worship) committee, giving them insight into the words of the prayers. This book is a rich resource to help you create learning services in partnership with clergy, other professionals, or lay leaders. It is also a ready-made resource for a regular class on understanding the meaning of our worship service and its prayers. Finally, the book’s insights can provide fodder for *iyunei t’filah* (prayer focuses/ thoughts).

However you choose to use *Inviting God In*, the time is now to create these sacred opportunities for engagement. As the contemporary Israeli poet Rabbi Dov Singer wrote, “Each word in the prayer book is a word that comes from the heart, and reaches the heart of the world.” When we understand our prayers — when we become living prayer books — this can happen. Our prayers can reach the heart of the world.

[Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin](#) is the co-founder/co-director of *Wisdom Without Walls*: an online salon for Jewish ideas. The author of numerous articles and twelve books, his latest book is [Inviting God In: A Guide to Jewish Prayer](#) (CCAR Press, 2025). Bulk discounts are available. Rabbi Salkin is available to teach both in person and online about prayer. To invite him to your community, email bookevents@ccarpress.org.