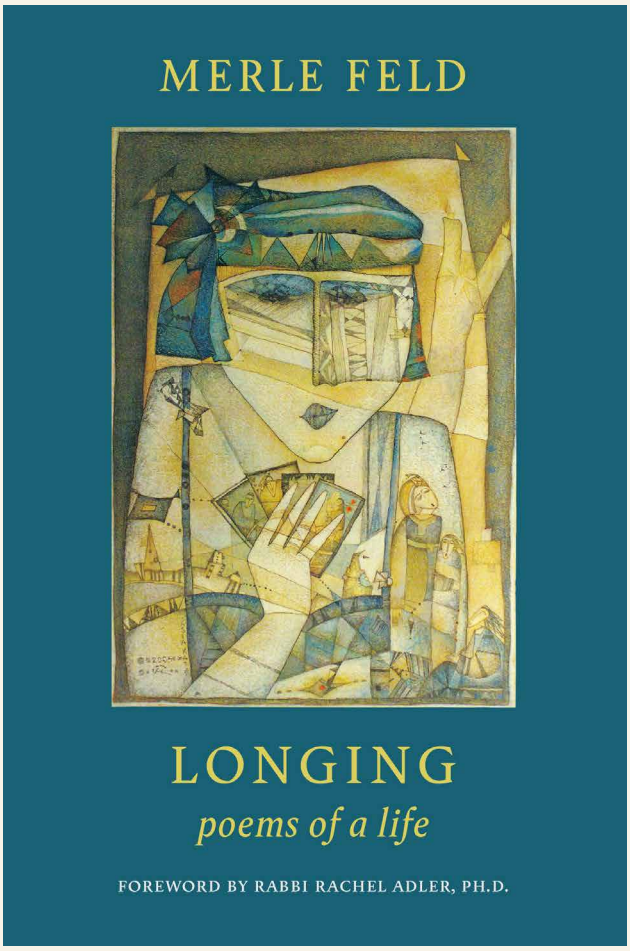

LONGING
poems of a life

Discussion and Journaling Guide

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Introduction

Let me begin this discussion/journaling guide created to accompany *Longing: Poems of a Life* by considering an initial question: Who are these poems for? My poetry addresses readers by sharing rich and complex life experiences. I believe you will resonate with the poems that give voice to your own moments of joy, trauma, soul stretching, loss, and wonder. Furthermore, I hope that you will feel enlivened, deepened, challenged, and gifted by poems that open moments you have never known. These poems speak to the widest human audience.

As poems emerged in writing this book, I found that they seemed to distribute themselves into seven themes, yielding the seven sections of the book. Within each section, the poems build upon one another and are in conversation. Each section also reverberates with the whole, perhaps a bit like the way midrashim (layers of Biblical commentary) echo, enrich, and complicate a story over time. In the introduction to *Longing: Poems of a Life*, I urge you to read the book straight through, in order, rather than jumping from section to section, to allow the poems to build.

I can imagine several approaches to using this study guide: for a book group selection, for a synagogue, campus club, or *chavurah* circle, in *chavruta* with a close trusted friend, or for solo personal writing. The guide begins with general questions on the book as a whole and then provides prompts focused on each section. Some questions may be better suited to group discussion and others to personal reflection. Note that some of the prompts may bring up painful memories and feelings. Please keep in mind that you can reach out for professional help and that healing is possible—that is surely one of the deepest truths of these poems. You don't need to struggle alone.

You might select a few poems from different sections that seem to jump out, demand your attention, and just sit with those. Or you might find it most fruitful to focus on one section at a time, choosing to explore deeply with other readers or in solitude for your own reflective writing with paper and pen (yes, I'm old-fashioned!). In fact, if you are writing your way through this book, you might also enjoy the writing program on Derekh.org, https://www.derekh.org/paradigm-of-prayer/.

—Merle Feld

General Prompts

1. The book is titled *Longing*—what is it that the poet longs for? What is the experience of longing? What do you long for?
2. What themes recur throughout the poems? How do the sections build on one another?
3. What obstacles must the poet overcome in order to lead a life of meaning and joy? How does she get there? What are or what have been some obstacles that you have struggled with? What has provided support and vision for you?
4. Choose three poems that speak to you most deeply. What is it about them that hits home?
5. The poet was a child of the 1950s and came of age in the 1960s. How do her experiences reflect that era? How do they speak to the here and now?
6. What did you learn about yourself as you read these poems?

Prompts by Section

SECTION 1. *He is gone for many hours*

The poems in this first section of *Longing* address experiences of family violence, childhood trauma, unemployment, emotional instability, parent-child and sibling relationships, and the impact of these experiences—the effort to find comfort and peace, to become strong, and to heal. Admittedly, that's a very heavy lineup to begin a book. But the poems in this first section reflect my beginnings. It requires such huge amounts of energy to hide the truth or carry secrets. Slowly, over many years, I have put down those burdens to release spaciousness for life's pleasures.

I suppose at first glance my family stories may seem unusual, rare, or aberrant. I'm not at all sure that that's the case. Trauma tends to be transmitted from generation to generation. In my own family, I can imagine that the violence visited upon Jews in nineteenth-century Europe was internalized and then easily booked passage to the New World. Furthermore, I see how the wounds of the Depression—with its relentless smashing of youthful dreams, loss of jobs, and resulting disappointed lives—triggered explosions in men and no doubt in women too whose rage at their lot in life could not be contained. I keep wondering about our contemporary stress points: a contracting economy, many workers left behind, what goes on now in homes behind closed doors, and what has been the true cost of COVID isolation.

1. What was unexpected about these poems? What feelings arise as you read them? Which poem or poems in this first section hold particular power or meaning for you? Why?

2. What do you imagine these children are feeling? What do you imagine the mother is feeling? The father? What are you feeling?

3. Does every family have secrets? What was a secret your family held? What was the impact of that secret, or the burden on you of keeping secrets?

4. In your family, who had power and what kinds of power did they wield? Was each family member respected and safe? Why or why not? Tell a story of your own that comes to mind after reading this section of poems.

5. Was there violence in your home? Did you then, or have you since, confronted the destructive impact of that? Have you confronted or opened conversation with surviving family members? If so, what were the results of such conversations?

6. Did your family experience economic insecurity? How did your family cope with that? How did it shape you? What economic struggles are you coping with now? Are there others you can openly speak with about these matters? How does that help?

7. Was there something about you or your core identity that put you outside the family circle, e.g., gender identity, weight, height, illness, race, sexual orientation, intellect, artistic ability, athletic prowess, and emotional intelligence? What were the effects of difference(s) on you? Where and how have you found friends and communities that enjoy and honor who you are?

8. The child in these poems comes to feel crucial support from a few engaged teachers and perhaps other adults who go unmentioned. Could you be that person who gently supports a child who is suffering? How can you help others who are struggling?

9. Do any of these poems reflect your current reality? If so, where and how can you find help? *You don't need to be alone. The National Domestic Violence Hotline can be reached at 800-799-7233.*

SECTION 2. *Was he there, lying in wait?*

From my perspective, the #MeToo movement has made dramatic strides to alter attitudes around sexual harassment and violence. However, we have a long way to go to create a society where the experiences described in these poems are found only in the dim past. Note the progression of transgressive behavior that I was subjected to as a child and teen. I realize now, looking back on this progression of poems, that it's as though I was being inducted step-by-step into a system of disempowerment and objectification. I wonder if there are men reading these poems who have their own painful memories of experiencing harassment and abuse. I also wonder what these poems evoke for LGBTQ+ readers. If you are using this guide in a group, allow the possibility that the full group may want to discuss these issues together, or perhaps readers will want to form subgroups to feel more comfortable as they discuss particular issues.

1. Do any of the experiences remembered in the poems reflect your experiences? What are your stories from childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood regarding sexual harassment and abuse? How did you respond if/when you were approached/touched/spoken to inappropriately? How did you feel about yourself during/after and how did that impact you?

2. How do you reflect now on some of your experiences? What are the feelings that surface? Did you feel safe/were you safe/what did you need?

3. Who could you/did you talk to about what happened? Anyone? How did others respond to you? Were you able then or subsequently to find closure and healing? Is there something you might imagine doing now that could help you heal?

4. How did the cultural norms of your generation impact your formative identity? How have you readjusted your sense of self as you've grown and hopefully acquired greater self-confidence?

5. What do you see as having changed over the decades? What remains as unsafe and damaging (in the behavior not just of predators, but also in the attitudes still woven into the cloth of our society)?

6. What wisdom might different generations have to share that could contribute to collective growth?

SECTION 3. *Ein Gedi*

The title for the third segment of *Longing* is taken from the first poem in the section, "Shabbos together." In this poem, I refer to my beloved as having the "soul of Ein Gedi." After the first two—often quite rocky—years of marriage, we flew to Israel to spend the summer in a rented apartment in Jerusalem. During that summer, which was my first trip there, we traveled all around the country. I fell in love with the terrifying, overwhelming majesty of the Judean Desert and the oasis Ein Gedi. I can still remember the force of the water from one of the waterfall springs and my struggle to stay afloat. Its purity and wonder reflected the same deep presence I felt in my beloved. Despite this earnest encomium to young love, our early years together were frequently interrupted by fierce fighting. This tore us, confused us, and took us years to untangle.

While the poems in this section tell unfolding stories of heterosexual love and "traditional" marriage, ending with hints of the blessings of children, I hope these poems enjoy an even wider life and speak to the full range of experiences reflected in the prompts below.

1. When and how have you experienced "beginning a new life" as described in these poems? Were you alone or with others when horizons widened for you? What were the particulars, the details, of that unfolding?

2. Tell a few stories about how your "old world" opened for you as you traveled along. What made these openings, these new worlds, possible? What did you do to make such growth possible?

3. Do you fight with the people you love? If so, how do you fight? Are you able to learn something and grow from fighting, or do disagreements only flare into anger and pain? Are there ways of fighting well?

4 When in your life have you felt lost (like Katharine Ross at the back of the bus in the poem "Red enamel chairs")? How did you find yourself and establish a firm identity?

5. In 1976, when I miscarried my first pregnancy, no one was writing about that experience; it was an invisible heartbreak. The pervading silence around it increased sorrow, as with any unacknowledged loss. Have you lost a pregnancy, as the one carrying the child or as the partner? What was the impact of this loss? Have you struggled with the pain of infertility, the waiting and hopes falling? How has that difficult journey impacted you?

6. Tell a story about a time you felt profoundly blessed. What is the point—and what is the power—to be found in "counting your blessings"?

7. How can you navigate your life right now to increase your blessings and improve your ability to recognize blessings?

SECTION 4. *Lillian*

My mother was diagnosed with leukemia in the fall of 1973. She was sixty-two and I was twenty-five. I remember her cheery voice reassuring us that the doctor had said she could live ten more years, that she had "the good kind" of leukemia. I had and still have no understanding of what that actually meant, but I knew she was trying her hardest to soften the blow. After receiving the news, I walked the few blocks from our home to one of the imposing Princeton University buildings where my husband, Eddie, was about to start High Holiday services as the new Hillel rabbi on campus. I found a bathroom, locked myself in a stall, and sobbed uncontrollably. Finally able to compose myself, I took a seat alongside students welcoming the new year.

We got a phone call the Monday night before Thanksgiving, 1976, that she was in the hospital and that "this was it." We flew out the same night to be with her. The poems in this section revisit the four days we spent in the Clearwater Hospital as she lay dying. She had lived three years and three months past that Rosh HaShanah phone call.

1. Have you lost a parent or someone else very special to you? What were the circumstances surrounding their death? What are some of your memories of that time?

2. Were you able to be present when your loved one died? Did that proximity offer added insight, comfort, or the opportunity for final conversation? What changed during those final conversations?

3. How did losing a family member shift the remaining family dynamic? What's missing after that loss? Have new relationships emerged?

4. Has your understanding of your parent been a process of "unfolding"? What insights shared by the older generation or lifelong friends have given you a different view of their life?

5. Have you come to identify more with your parent(s) as you have aged, to understand more fully who they were and what their life story was? Or have you been more deeply affirmed in your judgments about the painful parts of your relationship with them? Or both?

6. Have you been able to come to peace with a parent who was difficult/destructive/a source of harm? Does considering their own life struggles change the way you view their behavior?

SECTION 5. *Temporarily, unexpectedly*

With one exception, each poem in this section recaptures treasured moments with someone I loved and lost. I still marvel at the Monopoly game with Zalman and can taste the exquisite pleasures of the art of conversation with Max and Esther. I read the vignettes that capture adventures with JM and ache for more, ache that she cut short her life. And Aunt Julie, who disappeared piece by piece. Each of them, and so many others, left deep imprints and blessings. The act of remembering has the power to restore a person to life.

1. Why the title "When they're gone, do people know that they're remembered?" What seems special or unique about Max and Esther's home? What do you make of the story of Bontshe Shvayg? How do you understand the last line of the poem? What is the power of remembering someone who is gone?

2. What is the picture that emerges of Reb Zalman in "His many foreign lands"? What does the question posed at the end of the poem mean? Tell a story, capturing the details, of a truly exceptional person you've known and how they influenced you.

3. Aunt Julie lived in a time when we didn't know much about dementia. We saw it as shameful, something to be hidden away and not spoken of. More than fifty years later, what has changed? Have you experienced a loved one "disappearing," and what was/is that like?

4. What does it mean to "offer [someone] full-throated laughter"? What are the gifts these two friends exchange? Do you have a friend who has a particularly joyful nature? Describe a day or an adventure in their company.

5. If you've lost a loved one to suicide, you have wrestled with a particular type of sorrow. What, if anything, has helped you? Under what circumstances can you imagine not trying to intervene with someone's decision to take their life?

6. Consider this section of portraits. Who is especially compelling for you? Why?

7. Who are the people in your life that you'd like write about? Catch hold of an image or story, reenter the sensory details, and start writing.

SECTION 6. *Not even on the way anywhere*

I pause to ask where I have felt most at home among the varied places I've lived throughout my life. For the first twenty years, I was relentlessly on guard in the family apartment, and so I was not "at home" there, though I did feel at home in Brooklyn. I am Brooklyn in my bones. I also subsequently enjoyed the energy, proportions, and variations of the diverse neighborhoods of Boston. I relished the novelty of central Illinois cornfields, the different worlds I inhabited there, but no, that was not home. Against all odds of class and privilege, Princeton was deeply mine, made more so by the countless times I opened our home to others. There's a lot about Israel in my first book, *A Spiritual Life: Exploring the Heart and Jewish Tradition*. Once Israel was home most of all, though that home challenges me more and more.

I've lived in our small New England town longer than any other place. I am rooted so deeply in our house, our first house. I am connected to the little front yard garden, the lovely oak banister (that I now need to hold onto going up and down the stairs), the ever-changing view from my study window, the dining room where we welcome Shabbos every week, the living room where friends have gathered to trust, to raucously laugh, to sing, and to study together. Is this little town home? Not yet, though I'm proud to live in Massachusetts.

1. The first poem in this section begins with the self-description "broken." There are so many ways to be broken. What is the type of brokenness described here? When in your life have you felt broken? How/where did you heal? Who helped you? Tell that story or the story of how you helped to heal the brokenness in someone else.

2. What are the layers of irony in "January 9, 2017"? How can activism change the landscape and bring hope? How has it done so in your life? How can activism build community? The same theme of reaching out to others is present in "Icy listserv mornings," but on a somewhat different scale. What's the power of this story?

3. "Working from home" also exists on multiple levels—it does more than just offer a window into the poet's work life. How does it reference earlier poems, and how do earlier poems echo in this one?

4. The pleasure of laughter and gentle self-parody star in "What's your emergency?" What can you glean from the poem about the ethos in town and among neighbors? Why the ending quote from the staunch New Yorker?

5. Where are you living now? How long have you been there? What brought you there? Is it special for you? If so, what makes it special? Is it "home"? How did it become home? What do you need/yearn for to feel at home? Have you put down roots, and what does that mean to you?

SECTION 7. *Then laughed and laughed, ageless*

The final poems in the book are from the voice of an "older" woman. This fact reminds me of a story which has become classic in our family. Many years ago, I was speaking to a large gathering for a Jewish women's organization. The audience ranged from those in their twenties to others who were likely in their nineties. The person who was to introduce me had some business to dispense with, alerting members that next month there would be a program that would be of particular interest to "those of you who are aging." I couldn't resist. When I got up to begin my reading, I declared I was eager after my talk to speak with those in the audience who were not aging.

Many poems in this final section reflect on and grapple with the sense that time is limited, the sense that the body has been changing. These glimpses of life are far from the experiences of the child in section I, the teen in section II, the woman in her prime giving birth, or the person traveling around the world vigorous and engaged. And yet the title of the section is "Then laughed and laughed, ageless." Both perspectives are true. My body knows how old I am, and sometimes I am ageless.

1. Do you feel, as in the first poem, that "the enemy is time"? If so, when do you feel that way?
2. How do the poems in this section reflect the perspective of an older person? Can you relate to these insights and observations?
3. What new richness is brought by the poet looking back on the relationship with her mother in "Stay with me a little longer please"? Has this relationship seemingly changed over the decades? If so, how?
4. Do you continue to be in conversation with someone beloved long after they're gone? If so, how is that meaningful for you?
5. What life wisdom is shared in this final section? What life wisdom would you like to share, and with whom? How might you start to do that?
6. The final poem reflects a full life span of experience. Which vignettes especially call to you? How does this poem circle back to section I? Why is it dedicated to Warren?
7. What is the world that you "have longed for since the very beginning"?