



Open My Heart:

Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Hazzan Sabrina Sojourner

JONATHAN:

Shalom. This is Rabbi Jonathan Slater, and welcome to Open My Heart. Living Jewish Prayer, a prayer project podcast of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality together, we will investigate how personal prayer in its many forms is an important part of Jewish spirituality. Each Monday and Friday, we will offer a different practice led by a different person, all praying from the heart.

Today, we are blessed to have with us because Sabrina Sojourner is a friend and a teacher. I Sabrina. I'm so happy to have you here with us today. Would you tell us a little bit about yourself?

SABRINA:

Yes. Thank you for the invitation. I'm so happy to be with you. I am, as you said, a Hazzan and community chaplain. I work with, well, my primary gig, you could say, is with Revitz House, which is also the place where I live. It's a Jewish independent living center. And I also work with Saint Elizabeth's Hospital, which many people know as a mental health institution. In fact, it's the oldest in the country. And in addition to providing Jewish and chaplain services in both places, I also have a large community, which is centered in the Washington DC area, and extends this point around the world for whom I provide, and I'm blessed to provide, any of a number of different kinds of spiritual and communal services.

JONATHAN:

Well, we are thrilled to have you here with us today. So, I'm going to turn things over to you and thank you for sharing your prayer with us now.

SABRINA:

I'm so glad that you are having this conversation about prayer practice. My own practice is multifaceted. I am in this place where I have a conversation with the divine, with God, that's fairly ongoing. And for instance, this morning, I was making myself some breakfast and had down to have breakfast and have to say the blessing. And I suddenly realized that I was saying the blessing over Torah. So I finished. And then I asked myself: what is the Torah, since it is Monday, that I need to hear today? And it was loving my neighbor as I love myself. And the deeper meaning of that phrase for me is that the divine one expects us to love ourselves. And that's not always been easy for me. I had a lot of trauma as a kid and as a young adult, and have had bouts of depression and well. A lot of that was expressed with anger with God. And then I realized at some point that even my expression of anger and distress with God is also a prayer.

And at some point I started allowing that stillness, where I can hear God responding to my pain and my distress. And the first time that I allowed that to happen, was in a bout of depression and pain and crying, a lot of crying. And I remember screaming: where are you? And I don't remember how many times I said it, but I do remember when I just allowed my voice to ring in my ears and in my room that I heard: "I'm right here". And that right here was right here inside of me.

And as I was with that, I felt the hugs of my grandma, Sadie. She used to let me lie with my head in her lap. And she would just stroke my back and stroke my arms. And that's what I felt in that moment. And at different times it's been other important women in my life, all of them older, who just knew how to hold me, and how to hug me. And that's the energy that allows me to know that I'm in the presence of the divine in close proximity. God is always here and always with me.

And I also know that it's what has led me, that that relationship is what has led me, to be in relationship to my trauma and my pain, both past and present, and learning to make a distinction between the two. And the first time that distinction became really clear was in the wake of my dad's death 12 years ago. And what happened was I was in a conversation with friends and they asked, and one of them said, essentially: with all that's going on, you must be really depressed. And I said, no, I'm not. I am profoundly sad. And what I've learned is the distinction of being profoundly sad and depressed is: I'm numbed out. I'm not in my body. I have no sense of what I'm doing when I'm depressed. Everything is heavy. And what I experienced in terms of profound sadness is



I'm in my body, and I can feel the tears, whether I cry them or not. And if I, if I feel them arising, I allow them to, to come forward to let the water water in me and my soul.

And so what I'm inviting each of you as the listener to do in this strange time that we're in, with COVID, and the racial and economic injustices that are, that have been visible to those of us who experienced it, and now are, are visible to those who may have seen it, but didn't really take it in. And for those it who was, it was invisible: the noticing. What are the feelings connected with that noticing? And experiencing again and differently, a new wave ... it hasn't really started. I've been around police killings of black men and black women for most of my life. What is different is how white friends, colleagues, and strangers are paying attention. And having people who previously said, "I can't believe it. That's not possible. It's not that bad", any of that, and any of another thing -- actually finally willing to take it in: It really is that bad, that it has been for awhile, and that they've been complicit.

So we also have all sorts of things in our own lives: a new sense of loneliness, or maybe a deeper loneliness. We have the losses in our lives. The plans that we had made that we didn't even really have a chance to consider whether or not we should do them; they just were no longer available. We have the people that we've lost to natural causes, to COVID, to their own hands. There is so much discomfort to sit with. And yet that's exactly what I'm asking you to do: is to be with it, and to bring with you the women, and the men, the people who have held you in a way that let you know, you will really being held. There is no agenda; just wanting you to feel safe in someone's arms. Bring them with you as you're feeling all of the things that I mentioned, and let them, as a representative of the divine, hold you and be with you. And be with the feeling. It's not either/or; it's both. Don't worry about words, just be the feeling. God wants our hearts, and what our hearts have to say, more than our words.

Chances are you're feeling a little ache, a physical ache around your heart. It might feel that it's just on top. That's okay, just be with it.

I invite you now to call that energy in. Let it move through your body. Let it move through your limbs. May it move through your feet, and ground you. And may it move through the top of your head, and connect you.

Ahavah Rabbah, ahavah Rabbah, ahavah rabbah (2x) ahavatanu; אַהַבָּה רַבָּה אַהַבְתָּנוּ;

[You have loved us with a great love!]



Great is your love for us. And, oh, do we so need it during this time. Amen.

JONATHAN:

That was Sabrina Sojourner leading us in their personal prayer practice, which was so inspiring, and for which we are grateful.

We hope that you found this practice meaningful. You can use the recording as support if you choose to engage in the practice yourself and we encourage you to do so. First use the practices offered in this episode, following the instructions given you may wish to practice with the presenter several times to get a feel for the practice yourself over time, you will likely find your own inspiration and take the practice in new directions, which will be great for you and for the Jewish people. Together, we can shift the paradigm around prayer from going to services, to prayer as a spiritual practice.

We are grateful to Judith silver for giving us permission to use her song "Open" at the start of our show. You can find it and more of her music at judithsilver.com. We are also grateful to Elana Arian for giving us permission to use her song, "Ken Yehi Ratzon", as our closing. You can learn more about Elana's music at elanaarian.com. For more information about "Open My Heart" and the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, please visit us at jewishspirituality.org. Shalom. Until next time we pray that, you remain healthy and to safe.

