



# *Open My Heart:*

## *Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater*

Maor Greene

### 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're blessed to have with us Maor Greene, who is a student, and a friend. Hi Maor, I'm really happy to have you here today. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

### MAOR:

Thanks, Jonathan. Hi everyone. My name is Maor, and I use they/them pronouns. I'm a rabbinical student and doctoral candidate in Hebrew Bible at Jewish theological seminary. I'm also a musician, a spiritual director and training to be a yoga teacher at the moment. I'm coming to you directly from the banks of the Hudson river in New York city. The practice that I'm bringing you today comes from two different directions. The first is my experience in traditional Jewish prayer. Particularly on Shabbat morning when we're returning the scroll to the Ark, we say a prayer *אני חיים עיך/Etz Hayyim Hi*, that Torah is a living tree for everybody who grasps onto her. And then the second direction is my experience of taking mindful walks in nature. In my case, particularly along the Hudson river.

And it, at some point during these walks, I would look at a tree, a tree, which is somehow related to Torah. And I would look at it and I would say to myself: I have no idea how this is actually related to Torah. So, since I do take a lot of walks outside, I thought, well, let me experience trees for myself. What is it? What does the tree actually look like? How does it change during the seasons? What does the tree sound like? You know, one thing I, I love doing is in a sense, breathing with the tree. You know, right now there's a pretty strong wind that just came along and is blowing through the leaves.

What does it feel like if I pause and experience that wind, along with the sound of the tree is making in response to that same wind, what does a tree feel like? What does a tree smell like? No, there's so much to experience when we're open. So as a result of this practice, my own spiritual life actually shifted in three pretty dramatic ways. First, I am a musician. And so, I, you know, I wrote a song, with these English lyrics: her love is green, her arms shelter, me. She roots me to the ground, sings in the breeze,

And would never have written that as a kind of, uh, let's say, poetic translation of *Etz Hayyi Hi* without this, without this practice. The second big shift was in my experience of traditional Jewish prayer. Suddenly instead of reciting the words when the Torah was being returned to the Ark, I had memories of my own experiences of trees to draw upon. It would really, really bring a much, a fuller sense of a liveliness to traditional Jewish prayer for me. And then the third big shift was really unforeseen: now when I, when I hear the sound of wind flowing through leaves on a tree, which to be fair, I'm not sure the wind would be making a sound if the tree weren't there, but you get the idea. Whenever I hear that sound, I'm reminded that God loves us. And why does God love us? Because God made Torah and gave it to us. And there's, there's just a sense of connection that I have between Torah and nature that I just didn't have before I did this practice.

So rather than spending any more time describing this practice, what I'd like to do now is to actually do this practice with you. If you are indoors, I would invite you to press the pause button, and somehow, move this podcast outdoors next to a tree. Now maybe you have the headphones in one ear, or I'm not sure how you do it, but I think this practice is really impossible to do without a tree. So maybe you open a window. I don't know what you do, but find yourself a tree. That's the first step. So, I have found myself a tree already, and it's planted by the stream of water that is the Hudson. So now I'm ready to prepare my own heart for prayer. So I take a comfortable position. Sometimes that's usually – actually that's standing. In this particular moment it's sitting, because I've been here a while. Sometimes it's moving sometimes it's, it's more still. But I am connected the earth in some way. I'm conscious of my breath, usually in some way it's slowed down, to a certain extent. And I think most crucially, I am connecting to that part of myself that I know is connected to God. For me, I often experience it right in the center of my heart.

At the moment, I can feel it. Some days it's tough, and so it's, it's more of a memory of those experiences rather than the experience itself. But I'm finding a place groundedness and centeredness, from which I can then both, in a sense, look out at



what is, well look with all my senses, so also hear out, you know, what is happening around me as well as potentially lift up any prayers that I may have to God, you know, I, I have the, the working assumption, uh, that the entire, uh, the entire earth is filled with God's glory and that everything that I see apparently externally can function as a mirror for what is going on internally. And so, you know, usually it's without words, but if I had to put words to it, often I come to prayer, with the, the request that God might show me what I need to see today. Um, whether that's external or internal or, usually more often than not in that slippery space in between where we all live. So that that's the prayer that I am in a sense, I'm going to try to embody with you right now. You know, what is, you know, God, what do you wanna, what do you want me to see? What do you want me to hear? You know, I have this tree in front of me. If there's anything related to this tree, you'd like me to know, please do. And through this time, let me grow into a deeper awareness of who you are. So I'm going to be silent for a bit. So much of prayer, my prayer doesn't really have words, but I invite you to pray with me and we will come back together at the end.

You know, the funny thing about praying to God near trees is that I always kind of feel like a tree. You know, I started sitting, but I just wasn't able to help it, I had to stand up. And, I just, I guess I feel stretched and opened up, and more than anything, just grateful to be alive.

There's such an opening for me in nature and with the, with the teachers of nature. You know, at the moment, you know, it's, again, it's not really in words, but if I put it into words, sort of, "Thanks, God, you're awesome. You know, what are human beings that, that you're mindful of us?" And maybe also just a prayer that I might, that I might be living Torah.

Whatever that means, you know, be excited to see what God has to say as God unfolds. So, thank you for having me, Jonathan, thank you for everyone who prayed along with me. And God bless.

#### JONATHAN:

That was Maor Greene 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 practice as 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, 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](http://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](http://elanaarian.com). For more information about “Open My Heart” and the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, please visit us at [jewishspirituality.org](http://jewishspirituality.org). Shalom, until next time. We pray, you remain healthy and safe.

