



Open My Heart:

Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Rabbi Myriam Klotz

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.

We're blessed to have with us Rabbi Myriam Klotz. Who's a friend and colleague Myriam. I'm so glad to have you here today. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

MYRIAM:

Hi, I'm so happy to be with you, Jonathan. So I am a long time faculty member, teaching embodied practices and yoga with the Institute. And I am the Director of the Spirituality Initiative at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and New York. And I have been engaged in somatic practice and, you know, sort of body-based spiritual practices and inquiry for a long time, both for my own personal, I think need and desire, and also because I felt that I wanted to explore where within Jewish practice and life we could lift up the sense of connecting to our physical lives as, as portals to deepen our appreciation of the divine, our sense of connectedness there.

JONATHAN:

Well, I've certainly experienced that with you over the years on retreat, and I'm just delighted to have you here and to be part of your practice. So I'm going to turn things over to you now and thank you for sharing your practice with us.

MYRIAM:

Thank you. So I have a practice every morning before I get up and get going. And it's a meditative prayer practice, really. I take a verse, or a phrase from a verse, from Psalms or from the prayers, and each day a different one. And I'll sit with it. And then what I do is a practice of relaxation and emptying out before the egoic self, my personality self gets up and going and busy into the day. I find that if I take the time to actually notice where I'm experiencing tension or tightness in the body, and I deeply relax while I'm not asleep, I pay like careful, try to pay careful attention to where in my body I'm holding tension and relax. And in that way, I find that I can invite for myself a deeper, a deeper receptivity to actually listen for God's presence, or the phrase from the Tanakh, the *kol d'mamah dakah* / קול דממה דקה, the still small voice. When I can quiet and relax deeply in, into that mode of a kind of emptying, there's I find for, for myself, the possibility of being met by a deep presence. I would name that presence sometimes more manifestly than others as the sacred, as God. And so the practice I'll share with you as I engage it, how I put myself in a relaxed position, and then go through sort of a body scanning of relaxation, and then I'll be for a time in silence. And in that silence is a deep listening. And if I find that, much like in mindfulness meditation practice, if my mind is wandering, I, when I catch it, I try to bring it back, and empty out, any holding that I might notice in the body or gripping in the mind, and I'm listening, I'm listening for God. And it's my prayer of receiving what may come by way of connecting to that bigger life force energy.

And so the verse that, the phrase I thought to share today for practice is from Psalm 27, from part of verse four, which is: "One thing I've asked from God, this is what I seek. This is what I yearn for. That I may dwell in, that I can dwell in the house, in God's house, *kol y'mei chayyay* / כל ימי חיי, all the days of my life. And for me, this is a sense of dwelling in the house, the *bayit* / בית of this physical body, as God's house. That this body isn't just my body, but is actually *b'tzelem Elohim* / בצלם אלהים, in the image of God, and that the divine life force moves through this body, all days that I'm alive.

And some days feel rushed, and some days feel less rushed. Some days there's more tightness and constriction in the muscular dimensions of this body. And some days it feels more the more open. But all the days – through all the good, the bad, the ugly, the ups and downs, and ins and outs – this is my practice. To open that day with whatever's going on; to try to drop in to, so that I'm really dwelling in this body in such a way as to allow the holding of myself, let that go, of the self, and drop in to being held, being met by God's presence.



So, to begin this practice, I would, I'll lie down, and make sure that my neck, my head are supported by a blanket or pillow. You might want to do that. I would suggest that if, if that's not possible, or don't want to do that right now, allow your body, as I'm doing, to be seated in a comfortable way. So that when we work the practice, or when I work this practice right now, just adjusted my chair, so I can sit without added extra holding. So I start from a position of relative comfort. I'm going to take a few breaths, just to settle and land and bring my attention to the body, to this body.

Noticing, noticing the eyelids, having a little flutter. That usually happens for me when I've been staring at a screen, or reading, or otherwise, really paying attention to some focal point outside of myself. So, I'm allowing the awareness of the fluttering, and directing, as much as I can, sending the lids, the eyelids, the message: It's okay, you can close, now. I noticed that the eyes behind the lids tend to look up towards the forehead. And then I scan the face, and relax the jaw. I'm noticing as I'm speaking; so, I'm going to approximate this, but I would relax the lips and the tongue; swallow.

And after the longer exhalation that I just did, I'll settle now into the verse. I'll plant the seeds of these words into my psyche. *achat sha'alti mei'et Adonai/ אחת שאלתי מאת ה'*, One thing I ask, ask you, God, I yearn for I'm seeking *otah avakesh: shivti b'veit Adonai kol y'mei chayyay חיי כל ימי ה'* that I can dwell in this house, your house, Shekhina, Presence. Holy One of embodiment of mystery. Every breath, through all the moments of this aliveness, that I may have, and that I have right now, help me land here, and receive you. Help me do less, and listen, and let go more.

So now I'm sitting in open, attentive focus, and I want to continue to deepen the conscious practice of bringing my attention deeper into the physical; to more deeply connect to a kind of letting go and listening. Listening for what may stir. So I'm going to continue to send now from the head area, into the throat and the neck. And I tend to carry a lot of tension in the muscles in the back of my neck that connect the base of the skull to the, through the neck, to the shoulders and the upper back. So I'm gently moving, in really almost, I would imagine, invisible movements, but I feel them. Placing my attention in the back of the neck and the muscles; gently kind of moving left and right, and lengthening the back of my neck to kind of stretch out tightness, then I'm relaxing the throat and vocal cord area.

You know, the area in the center of the neck, throat, the sides of the neck. And then I'm just sitting with this. I'm sitting in this. Kind of dwelling a little more deeply. And then feeling that's leading me to descend a little more down into the area, for me, of my



shoulders, and relaxing the inner side of the, of the shoulder blades. Again, little subtle, subtle movements, just to kind of stretch out muscles or any places where the fascial tissue, the tissue underneath the skin is feeling a little tight. So I'm just going to stretch it a little bit. Then let that settle, and then bring my attention to the skin across the chest and the sides of my ribs, softening there.

And I'm breathing now with my attention around the heart and the lungs. And I'm noticing the ways that the chest kind of expands and contracts with the breath. Just feeling the softness there; remembering my intention. So I'm opening to God right here, right in, in the softening, in my heart. And it's a feeling, it's a feeling that shifts. And I'm now moving down to like underneath, below the heart area, descending a little more: there's the diaphragm. And I often find that my diaphragm, when I drop in here in this way, I notice that it's held, there's a little kind of constriction. So, I'm breathing around and into the diaphragm, with the intention of the softening, letting go. Oh, there it goes, I can feel it relax. I can feel it open. And I let for me right there, what just happened, that letting go: that's a prayer. That's the, that's the: "Oh, I'm here; Help me soften; Let me let go into you." So, the softening, that release, is the letting go into this *bayit*/בית to God. It's how I feel. I feel it in letting go of the muscular holding.

Now I'm into the realm of the belly, softening the, seeing what's here today in this belly. Noticing any sensations that might be attached to emotion or holding. Little flutters, little anxiety moving through; butterflies; softening around those, breathing into the area, mid lower back of where the kidneys are. Just bringing my attention now to the whole pelvis area. Just feeling some tightness in the hips, in the inner hips and the outer hips. Just noticing. So, I'm going to just, again, for me, it's just some little micro kinds of movements to, to encourage relaxation; sending a message of allowing a letting go.

And the skin on this whole, my whole torso. Now I'm going to just allow that to spread down into the legs and the arms. Allowing the bones to rest, like the bones to just let go. So the fingers and the toes and my palms; feeling a kind of softening in the fingers.

I'm coming back to my intention, now: may I rest in your presence? May I let go into, into this sacred, quiet, this aliveness. And so I'm gonna go into silence with an active listening. It's a conversation. It's a conversation in, in felt sense, with a waiting. No efforting, no efforting in the body. If I can notice that an efforting arises, kind of a quickening, a muscularity, I just try to come to it and remind myself in those areas: "Ahh, it's okay. Just, we're listening now. It's okay. Let go." I'm listening for the, whatever may come today. And I don't know what will be in this prayer, just what will be answered,



what I'll, what I'll be met with. But listening for a small, still voice that may come through some felt sense; or a word. I don't know. But just spending time with God in this place, in this *bayit*/בית . And allowing.

Ah, I just felt a rise of, of yearning for connection: in the belly, up, right through the diaphragm, into the heart. So just taking this desire for connecting, for listening, for receiving presence, God's presence. Taking, allowing this to move through. So I'm going to just go into this quiet, now; this quiet listening, receiving.

And I slowly begin to, I'm noticing a kind of up-swelling of gratitude. It's quiet. I feel it in the belly; it's moving up into my heart; the chest, up through really the whole, my whole body. just a kind of thank you. Thank you for this life, and for the feeling this sense of presence; of wellbeing and blessing really. So I say, thank you. Thank you. And I begin to allow to bring some movement into my, into the neck and into my fingers and my toes. And I stretch through my spine and kind of allow the, my, my ribs to move a little bit side to side, just bringing more of now the muscular sense of movement in tone. Aware of, I feel right now, like I have, I plugged in, plugged into this source; truly some sourcing and harvesting of, of this life force. My body feels slightly energized and, again, super grateful, and truly, really refreshed. So it feels for me like a time to say, thank you, thank you. And so, I'm going to let my, my eyes open and transition out of this prayer, meditation, dwelling practice.

JONATHAN:

That was rabbi Myriam Klotz 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.

