



Open My Heart:

Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Rabbi Nancy Flam

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 Rabbi Nancy flam is a teacher, friend, colleague. Nancy, I'm so happy to have you here today. Would you tell us a little bit about yourself?

NANCY:

Sure. I have been working with the Institute for Jewish Spirituality since its inception, and was its first executive director, and was very pleased to work for a number of years as its director, also, of the Prayer Project of which this new podcast is now a manifestation. And I'm here in North Hampton, Massachusetts, where I've lived for the last almost 24 years with my husband, and where we grew our children who are now young adults. Really delighted to be here.

JONATHAN:

Thank you, Nancy. I'm really excited to be part of your practice. So, I'm going to turn things over to you and thank you for sharing your practice with us now.

NANCY:

The Jewish prayer book features two parallel prayers, one in the morning and one in the evening. Each of which proclaim God's love for us: *ahavah Rabbah*/ אהבה רבה great love and *ahavat olam*/ אהבת עולם, forever love. These prayers, like most in our liturgy, are worded in the first person plural. And in *ahavat olam*, we ask God to never take this love away from us. Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi writes about these prayers in his book,

“Davening”. He writes “*ahavah rabbah ahavtanu/ אהבה רבה אהבתנו*, with a great love You have loved”, us quoting the prayer book. But he says, “this does not just refer to the totality of Israel. You really have to be yourself in saying that. And most of the time, when we say ‘you’ve loved us with a great love, and please don’t ever take that love away from us’, we hang up the phone right away. We don’t give enough time for that to happen. If I want to give those words real meaning, I need to sit and feel God’s love. The love that loves us no matter what.” And, he continues. He says, “This is not a matter of whether I think I’m worthy of love. This comes from an altogether different place. An alternative form of *ahavah Rabbah*, with a great love, is *ahavat olam*, a love of all ages, forever love, a love of the universe. The very fact that I exist is because I’m being loved into life. That is how I understand these words,” he says. And he continues: “An important part of davening, that is praying in a Jewish way, is to just sit in serenity of spirit and to allow for that to come in.”

“I once heard Terry Gross of ‘Fresh Air’”, he says, “interview Gene Robinson, the first openly gay Anglican Bishop. He had endured such controversy, brought so much rage down upon himself from the church that he loved. They were talking about his prayer life these days. And he said: ‘What I do, is I sit quietly, and close my eyes, and I let God love me. That’s where I remember who I am, whose I am.’”

I just love that. I love that. “I sit, I close my eyes, and I let God love me”. Now. It may be that for many of us, particularly us Jews, this attitude, this intention, this posture in prayer may be quite unfamiliar to us. But I want to share to you that it is truly central and real to me. And so I’m going to invite you today to join me in this kind of prayer. And I’ll explain how it’ll work.

So first, I’ll sing a devotional chant to help our hearts soften into this posture, this attitude. The chant is written by our colleague and friend, Rabbi Shefa Gold. And she sets a verse from the biblical Song of Songs. Shefa pairs the Hebrew with her own English elaboration. You’ll hear in just a minute. You may know that Song of Songs is that great erotic love poem that the rabbinic mind interpreted as representing the love between God and the people Israel: the great love, the forever love. The verse in our chant says *s’molo tachat l’roshi viy’mino t’chabkeini/ שמאלו תחת לראשי וימינו תחבקני* “God’s left hand”, as it were, “is under my head, and God’s right hand is embracing me.”

This line of Song of Songs is this beautiful vision of being embraced and held, feeling safe and secure and loved; loved into life by the source of life itself. So of course we have to allow ourselves to go with the imagery, deeply anthropomorphic as it is. But, that’s great. We want to engage the imagination in prayer. We want to allow our



imaginations to serve our felt experience. And so what we'll do is we'll sing for a bit, and then we'll sit quietly for about five minutes and we'll practice letting God love us.

So, find a comfortable way to sit, and allow these words to invite your own heart, to just soften, body soften. Let the mind just take a break, now, if you can, or to the best of your ability. And we'll go with this sense of feeling God's embrace.

I am resting in this divine embrace,
Ooh, timeless time and placeless place.
I am resting in this divine embrace.
Ooh, timeless time and placeless place.

s'molo tachat l'roshi viy'mino t'chabkeini/ שמאלו תחת לראשי וימינו תחבקני

[silence]

So, in this way, let us incline our hearts to resting in this timeless time, this placeless place. Allowing ourselves to relax, to the best of our ability; to release holding, to invoke a sense of being held by the source that has loved us into life. As we rest in our breath, and then the heart's space, that tender soft place where we can be together with the source of all. That *ahavat olam*, that forever love, that great love. So, sitting here, just like this.

[silence]

s'molo tachat l'roshi viy'mino t'chabkeini/ שמאלו תחת לראשי וימינו תחבקני
I am resting in this divine embrace,
Ooh, timeless time and placeless place.
I am resting in this divine embrace.
Ooh, timeless time and placeless place.

And before you open your eyes, if your eyes have been closed, I'd like to invite you to bring one hand to your heart center, and one hand to your belly; just to feel a warmth of your own embrace in that sense; that sense of peace and calm and goodness, and being held, that we can provide ourselves, as well, through gentle, compassionate kind



touch of heart and belly. Just this, like this. And then release your hands as they come to your lap and gently open your eyes.

I hope you've had a taste of possibility that there is a great love, a forever love there for us to, to explore, to perceive, as we practice this kind of prayer practice; perhaps again, perhaps for a longer period, shorter period. But I hope that you have been, at the very least, intrigued to consider that you might taste in your own experience, with practice, this great and forever love. Thank you.

JONATHAN:

That was Rabbi Nancy Flam 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.

