



Open My Heart:

Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Rabbi David Jaffe

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 Rabbi David Jaffe who is a friend and colleague, a teacher, and who is here to offer us something quite remarkable. So David, I'm so happy that you're here with us today. Tell us a little, little bit about yourself.

DAVID:

Jonathan. Thank you very much for having me. It's always great to do programming with the Institute. So, I'm a spiritual seeker, rabbi, author, activist, a lot of things I do. I'm particularly interested in Jewish spiritual practices of Musar and of a Rebbe Nachman of Breslov. Those are my two lineages of spiritual work within Judaism. And, so that's what I do.

I received my ordination in Israel about 20 years ago, 15 years ago, and was blessed to have amazing teachers in both of those lineages. And so I bring those two lineages. I also have a book called “Changing the World From the Inside Out”, that talks about these things.

What I wanted to do today is offer a practice from Breslov tradition, Hasidic tradition, called “Turning Torah into Tefillah”, turning Torah into prayer. So, I want to talk about it for about a minute or two, and then we'll do it together. We'll do this practice together. So, people may know of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, one of the early Hasidic masters. One of his central practices is called *hitbodedut*, or speaking solitary prayer with God in

your own language, in English or whatever the most easy language for you is. And it's having a conversation with God.

There's a branch of that practice that is "Turning Torah into Tefillah", turning Torah into prayer. And that's where you take something that's intellectual; you've learned something. Rebbe Nachman writes about this himself. He says: you hear a teaching from someone, or you read something, and it just lights you up. You know, the light bulb goes on, you feel excited about it. You take that teaching and turn it into a prayer. Don't just leave it in your mind, but ask God for help with living that teaching, with making it real in your life, and going forward with it.

So I am experienced with this myself, when I was in Yeshiva and I learned this idea. And we're sitting there and the teacher, Rabbi Gedalia Fleer, he taught something. I don't remember what he taught us, but it just lit me up. And I was so excited. I actually left the room and I went outside of the Yeshiva and I prayed. "I want to ... ah, please, God help me, uh, help me really live what I just learned." And so that's what it looks like is, is taking the Torah, making a prayer.

Just one additional teaching before we move into it. This is Rebbe Nachman's student, Reb Noson. He writes about, that really it's a very high thing to turn Torah into prayer. And he says, that's why the shofar blast accompanies the giving of Torah Mount Sinai. Because we receive Torah, which is an intellectual thing. But the shofar awakens our heart. And when the heart is awakened, and we then take the ideas of Torah and we pray about them and we try to make them real. And those kinds of prayers, which are about how do I, how do I love my neighbor as myself? How do I love God? How do I do these things that are in the Torah and really do them -- and make prayer out of them, that elevates Torah. And it's a very, very high level of prayer. So that's the potential that we have with this practice.

So, I want to demonstrate this and do it together with the audience, and then people will have an opportunity to do it. So this is what we'll do, and it's what I do myself, and also teach my students. We start with something called *hakhanah*, which means preparation. There's an ancient practice before entering, prayer of sitting. In the old days, people would sit for an hour. Today if we sit for 20 seconds, that's good. So, what I'd like to do is sit for a minute together, quietly, and just clear your mind. And notice you're about to enter a practice. So we'll start that right now. And then there's a piece of Torah that I want to learn together with you, and then we'll make that into a prayer. So, let's get



yourself to a comfortable position and let's sit together now for a minute, just to let your mind settle.

Let's take one more, deep in-breath and out-breath and we'll continue. Okay. So, the piece of Torah I'd like us to learn together is Pirke Avot, chapter four, lesson three. And if you want to grab that, if you have a Pirke Avot around or near you, please do that. Otherwise I will just read it for us together. And this is a teaching of Ben Azzai. And, Ben Azzai teaches, he said: "Do not be scornful of any person, and do not be disdainful of any thing. For you have no person without their hour, and no thing without its place." So I'll read that one more time. Ben Azzai used to say, "Do not be scornful of any person, and do not be disdainful of any thing. For you have no person without their hour, and no thing without its place."

So as a piece of Torah, we apply our minds to thinking about this. So, you know, I'm thinking about it: don't be scornful or disdainful, two different words that are being used for emphasizing it. So it's a lot of emphasis there on any person or anything. So he's really speaking to the value of a, in a, in a world of holiness and a world of the created world, that every person, everything has value. And to not disdain them because every person has their hour, has their time, has their moment. And every thing has a place. Everything has a place. And so everything has value. That's what I'm hearing from this. And that's what I'm learning from this: where everything has value. So that is, you know, that's exciting for me.

Again, it's not the first time I've seen his teaching, but I'm looking at it again. And it's really great to try to bring our beginner's mind to Torah, especially things we see over and over. And so every thing, every person has their value. That's an idea that I'm feeling in my heart right now. And so I'm going to make a prayer out of that. And again, I invite you, on your own time, if you want to sit with this verse longer, look at it, you can try that out. You can do what we're about to do with anything, any piece of Torah. And when I say Torah, I mean, you know, the Five books of Moses all the way up to today, and what people are writing today.

So now is the second step, or the third step: after the *hakhanah*, the preparation, then you learn the piece of Torah, and now make a prayer out of it. So, I'm going to demonstrate that. And you can write prayer out, you can speak it out, you can write it up and then speak it out. There's a number of ways of doing it. So here I'll go. I'll demonstrate for about a minute of what this would look like, what this looks like for me.



“Oh, God, help me, help me really know that everyone has their place, that everyone counts, that everyone counts, everything counts in your world of holiness. This is, I kind of know that intellectually, but open up to my heart. Particularly, I'm thinking about people that I, I really disagree with, particularly that I disagree with politically. Help me really know, help me really know that everyone counts, counts in this world, and that I can live that way, and open my heart, open my heart to people. Help me know that I count. You know, really God, help me know that I count, and I belong here. And that, um, the people of my family, the people in my community, uh, everyone I encounter counts. There's room for everyone. We can't have a world that leaves people out. Really, help me internalize that, God, to help me know that. And help me behave that way, God, please.”

So, I would go on in my practice, but I just wanted to demonstrate that for you. That's what it looks like for me. And so, I invite you now to take out a journal if you want to write. This is not, you are not writing a song, you're not writing a poem. You're just spontaneously writing the prayer of your heart about how you want to live whatever that piece of Torah is. And, um, if you just want to speak it out the way I did, that's a way to do it as well. Or you can write then speak. So, I invite you now to take, I would say at least five minutes, to give yourself real space to do the practice. And then we'll gather, and we'll do a short sit after that together.

So welcome back. Uh, I want us to sit together. I find this practice to be incredibly powerful and it really shakes things up internally, in my heart and in my body. So, we're going to sit together for a minute right now again, and, and let you settle into your body, whatever it was, whatever you spoke, emotions that arose, ideas that came up, let's let those settle in. And then we'll finish with one last piece. So again, make yourself comfortable in your seat and let's sit together and let settle in what has arisen through that prayer.

Let's take one more relaxed in-breath, and out-breath. And we end the practice with one word of gratitude. So, I'm feeling grateful now to our spiritual masters, Rebbe Nachman and many other spiritual masters, who've given us pathways to get close to God, to get close to our own souls, and close to our hearts. So, I'm thankful to them and thankful for you for participating in trying this out.

JONATHAN:

Thank you, David, for sharing with us, the practice of “Turning Torah into Tefillah”, of taking what sometimes can be just head learning and reminding us that it's so important to bring it into our hearts, so that we can much more effectively live it out, to



make it experiential and not just in their head. And, we're grateful to you just generally for all the teaching that you do. Thank you.

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.

