



# Open My Heart:

## Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Cantor Ellen Dreskin

### 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 Cantor Ellen Dreskin, who is a colleague, a friend, and this student. Hi Ellen. I’m so happy to have you here today. Would you tell us a little bit about yourself?

### ELLEN:

It's great to be here, Jonathan. Thank you. I am, as you mentioned, a Cantor. I received my ordination from Hebrew Union College in 1986. At the current time I'm an online educator and artist in residence, and I'm delighted to be with you today, coming to you from Ardsley, New York, just North of New York city.

### JONATHAN:

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

### ELLEN:

Thank you, Jonathan.

[Music] *Azamrah l'elohai b'odi* (2x), *ahallelah* (2x), *azamrah l'elohai b'odi*, *Halleluiah!*

אַזְמֶרֶה לַאֱלֹהֵי בְעוֹדִי, אֶהְלֵלָהּ, אַזְמֶרֶה לַאֱלֹהֵי בְעוֹדִי, הַלְּלוּיָהּ

Psalm 146: "I will sing to my God with my *ode* (עוֹד), with more than I think I have, more than I think I am, with my all." An enormous part of my own prayer practice comes from

song. Moments of singing are moments when I can feel my body at work. I'm more aware of the breath entering my lungs and of how, with varying degrees of effort, I release the air back into the world, learning to constrict or widen the passage-ways in my throat as the air from my lungs reenters the world in the form of musical notes, in particular rhythms, and with, or without, particular words. I'm aware as I sing of feelings of both liberation and tension. I cannot always be in control. Sometimes it's joyful. Sometimes it's painful. It always takes some effort. I sing *b'odi* (בעודי) with my all.

[Music] Halleluiah! *Azamrah l'elohai b'odi* (2x), *ahallelah* (2x), *azamrah l'elohai b'odi*.  
Halleluiah!

הַלְלוּיָהּ אֲזַמְרָה לֵאלֹהֵי בְעוּדִי, אֶהְלֵלָהּ, אֲזַמְרָה לֵאלֹהֵי בְעוּדִי, הַלְלוּיָהּ

I have a favorite piece of wisdom that I have adapted from a teaching by Rabbi Goldie Milgrom. She teaches that music is an odd invention. It always employs force. I think about it. The drum is a skin stretched to its tightest, which you then must pound away at with drum sticks. The guitar is strings pulled taught, which you then pick or strum at, exerting pressure on the right string. The piano works more or less like the guitar, with strings being stretched and then hit. The flute, the clarinet, the oboe, every wind instrument takes a breath, pushed strongly through it, and constraints it into a narrow space so that there is pressure on that breath until it escapes through an opening. All instruments are pressure concepts. As soon as you take away any tension, your instrument won't work. It needs pressure. In a world so finely tuned, a moment of pressure is often orchestrated for a response. Buckling under pressure, which does often happen, is very much like the guitar string that snaps under tension. Life can get incredibly hard. But often I can't help but feel that I'm being asked for a response. I can feel worthy of being picked to be played. And like the author of the very Psalm that we sing today, I can take each pressure, pain or tension and sing a song to the world all the while awakening me, filling me with gratitude and reminding me that I have the ability to respond. It is literally my response-ability. I sing in order to feel myself as one who is able to respond to the world.

[Music] *Azamrah l'elohai b'odi* (2x), *ahallelah* (2x), *azamrah l'elohai b'odi*, Halleluiah!

אֲזַמְרָה לֵאלֹהֵי בְעוּדִי, אֶהְלֵלָהּ, אֲזַמְרָה לֵאלֹהֵי בְעוּדִי, הַלְלוּיָהּ

There are two words for singing in Hebrew. The first is *lashir* (לשיר) to sing or express poetry. The second is *lezamer* (לזמר). The root means not only sing, but also to prune, as we do when we trim a bush or a tree. We need to remove excess baggage and dead



weight that keeps the tree or bush from reaching its full potential. Sometimes entire limbs must be pruned in order for growth to ultimately continue in a healthy way. *Lezamer* as pruning speaks to the power that music has to remove stumbling blocks, break down walls, trim away all of the tangled vines that I have watered and nourished in an effort to shield my heart from life's tensions and dis-ease. Sometimes life is hard. I just have to put up walls to encase myself in layers of soft, layers of familiar, layers of rightness, in order that my world still bears some resemblance to more comfortable days instead of breaking under the tension of the times.

*Azarah l'elohai b'odi*: I am reminded that pruning takes effort. That even as I steel myself for the day, or week, or month, or challenges ahead, I can use these songs to prune, to soften the sharp edges, to bring down the walls that I have built, and encourage my compassionate heart to emerge and guide me as I go through my day. We sit with our tensions. We exert effort in order to soften. As we sing, we praise life unfolding. We praise the balance between tension and liberation in our voices and in our lives. And we sing, because life is hard, and life is beautiful, and life is what we have. We sing

[Music] *Azarah l'elohai b'odi* (2x), *ahallelah* (2x), *azarah l'elohai b'odi*, *Halleluiah!*

אֲזַמְרָה לַאֱלֹהֵי בְעוֹדֵי, אֶהְלֵלָהּ, אֲזַמְרָה לַאֱלֹהֵי בְעוֹדֵי, הַלְלוּיָהּ

#### JONATHAN:

Hallelujah. That was Cantor Ellen Dreskin 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](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 that, you remain healthy and to safe.

