



# *Open My Heart:*

## *Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater*

Rabbi Jonathan Slater

### 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.

As we begin our podcast together, I'd like to share some thoughts about prayer. There are so many ways to think about it. There's the sense that's derived from the Latin root *precare*, to ask earnestly, to beg, to entreat. From this we have the sense of prayer being something that we do to ask something from God, to beg that God give us something that we don't have, that we turn to God to do something for us.

But we also have the where Hebrew word *tefillah*, which has many connotations. One interesting one is connected to the word *tefilin* and *petilim*. *Tefilin*, of course, are the boxes made of leather in which passages from the Torah, that enjoin us to bind the words of Torah as a sign upon our arms and as frontlets between our eyes; that they are bound to us by wrapping leather straps to our arms. And *petilim* is another word for the fringes, that *tzitzit* on the corner of our garments, or the *talit*. And so, we can understand *tefillah* as being something that we do that binds us up in or, connects us with God or, our own hearts and souls.

There's another fanciful interpretation and understanding of *teffilah* that is related to the root of the name of Jacob's son, Naphtali. That Leah says that when he's born, that this has been the result of her wrestling with, her struggling with, her sister to gain Jacob's attention and love. And so *teffilah* might be a way in which we wrestled with, or engage with God; in which we bind ourselves to God through active, energetic conversation, argument, forcing as it were a God to respond and be present to us.

We also have the root of the law and in the Hebrew word *lehitpalel*, to pray, which is related to the root pay *peh-lamed-lamed*, *palal* (פ-ל-ל, פלל) which is connected to the word for judging. We can understand *teffilah*, then, to be how we come to judge ourselves because *lehitpalel* is reflexive. It is how we bring an eye of self-assessment, of coming to know what's true in our own hearts, and how we actually are in the world.

There are many forms of prayer. There is devotional prayer: offering our hearts to God in chant, in loving response. There is yearning prayer: reaching out to connect with God; seeking to feel God's presence; yearning to know the love of God in one's life. There's ecstatic prayer that takes us out of ourselves, where we lose touch with our own common consciousness, and touch something beyond ourselves. There's also contemplative prayer, where we place our attention and our heart in the temple of the heart, or perhaps in the heavenly temple, as a way of being with God.

I've held an understanding of prayer from the first time I read Heschel's book "Quest for God". Prayer is the inner work we do, connected with our deeds in the world, to make ourselves worthy of God's attention. Rather than praying to get God's attention ("Hello! Over here! I'm here, God!), begging for God to do something for us, prayer is inner work that we do to make ourselves worthy, so that God would naturally, spontaneously, lovingly always wish to turn to us and be in relationship with us.

Related to this is an image that's remained with me from early on in my rabbinic career. It has to do with the *Aron* (ארון), the Holy Ark that was inside the Mishkan, in the Tabernacle, in the wilderness; and in the Mikdash, in the Temple, in Jerusalem. The *Aron* was essentially a wooden box overlaid with gold on the outside. But it also had a gold inside, so that it would be gold, gold inside and out. So the question is raised: Why did it need to be gold inside, since no one ever looked into the *Aron*? It held the tablets of the Commandments, the shattered ones, and the whole ones that Moses created. They were in the Ark, but nobody ever went in there to look at them, to read them, to refer to them. The Ark was closed, covered by the *kapporet*, the covering of which the *keruvim*, the Cherubs rested. So why would it need to be gold inside?

The response was one of moral and spiritual instruction: *sheyehei tokho k'varo* / שיהא תוכו כברו, so that its inside should be consistent with its outside. When I read that and thought about myself as a rabbi, and as a person, I realized that's how I would want to be; that I would show the world what is consistent with how I am on the inside. That what I feel and think would manifest outside; and that what I want to believe about



myself – to be honorable, just righteous, loving, compassionate, good to others, caring – would manifest on the outside. And inversely, that how I behave towards others – lovingly, compassionately, with justice, righteousness – that that's actually how I felt inside.

And so I hold both Heschel's teaching and this one about the *Aron*, about the Ark, together in my prayer practice. To be worthy of God's attention, I have to work to be whole, authentic, to have integrity, to be one in myself. And that requires telling the truth. Over time, I've come to recognize that there's a part of the morning *teffilah* that speaks to this intention: to be whole, to have integrity where inside and outside are consistent, where I'm worthy of God's attention. And that has to do with telling the truth.

That prayer practice that I've developed over time follows these steps. I settle myself, taking a few minutes of quiet attention to the breath, to ground in the moment, to let go of distractions. I engage in a chant that evokes the commitment to tell the truth in my heart, so that I can live it in the world. I sit again after chanting, to notice what arises in response to the chant, and my commitment to see the truth, acknowledge the truth, even if painful, even if difficult, and to live with the truth. I chant again, to set an intention to live in such a way that my attention to the truth, which is the seal on God's signet, will make me worthy of God's attention. And then I turn to my day, allowing the chant, and my intention, to work in my heart: holding up before me, the moments when I fall from my intention, when inside and outside are not aligned; but also when I resist or turn away from the truth; and then also, again, when I actually do live my full intention to live and acknowledge the truth.

So, I'd like to share that practice with you today, that it might be something that you, too, would find it meaningful, and that you can bring into your own prayer, as a prayer practice. So I'll invite you to settle for a moment. To feel yourself in your seat. Take a few deep breaths to relax the body, to come into a sense of the aliveness of this body, of being alive in this moment.

And now I'll chant this passage from the early morning prayer service. I've created an English translation to go with it. So, either one might become familiar to you, for you to use in your practice.

[singing, Hebrew, then English]



לְעוֹלָם יִהְיֶה אָדָם יֹרֵא שָׁמַיִם בְּסֵתֶר וּבְגָלוּי, וּמוֹדֶה עַל הָאֱמֶת, וְדוֹבֵר אֱמֶת בְּלִבּוֹ,  
וַיִּשְׁכֵּם וַיֹּאמֶר:

*L'olam yehei adam yerei shamayim baseter u'vagalui, umodeh al ha'emet, v'dover emet  
bilvavo, v'yashkem v'yomar....*

From day to day, from year to year, we must fear God, in secret and when in the world,  
and admit to the truth, to then speak the truth in our hearts, and then rise up to say.....

[Silence]

[Humming Hmm, Mm Hmm. Mm Hmm.

לְעוֹלָם יִהְיֶה אָדָם יֹרֵא שָׁמַיִם בְּסֵתֶר וּבְגָלוּי, וּמוֹדֶה עַל הָאֱמֶת, וְדוֹבֵר אֱמֶת בְּלִבּוֹ,  
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From day to day, from year to year, we must fear God, in secret and when in the world,  
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And we rise up to say ... We rise up to say good morning to this day; to say, good morning, to our loved ones, to our coworkers, the people we might meet, one way or the other; to place ourselves in the world with this intention, allowing it to work in our hearts and on our hearts. We might notice where we are aligned inside and outside; where we are speaking the truth in our hearts, and acting on it in the world. This is my personal prayer practice, among others. I'm happy to share with you today. And I hope that you'll join us from week to week throughout this Prayer Project Podcast Program, through the Institute for Jewish spirituality.

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.

