



# *Open My Heart:*

## *Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater*

Rabbi Ari Lev Fornari

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 Ari Lev Fornari, who's a colleague. Hi Ari Lev, I'm so happy to have you here today. Would you tell us a little bit about yourself?

ARI LEV:

Here I am sitting in West Philadelphia. I'm the rabbi of Kol Tzedek Synagogue, a Reconstructionist synagogue, and, really a place that is spiritually alive and politically brave. And that really challenges me and all of us to figure out where the edge and the weaving of spirit and politics are.

JONATHAN:

That's very exciting. So I'm, I'm really thrilled 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.

ARI LEV:

So here I am, I'm sitting in, sitting right next to my meditation cushion, and I have my *talit* draped over my shoulder. I like to begin this way, just always grabbing my *talit* as this kind of is a sensory experience. I find there's a way in which one of the things I was told about prayer, that isn't true, is that it's a cognitive experience. And in fact, for me, it's very much about recentering in the body, and allowing a calming of the body to actually calm the mind. So I have my *talit* draped over my shoulder, and I'm going to take it and open it up. It's my, uh, my weekday *tallitot*, and I'll drape it over my head, saying the

blessing for the wrapping of *tzitzit*. *Barukh Atah Adonai, Eloheynu Melekh Ha'olam, Asher Kid'shanu B'mitzvotav V'Tzivanu L'Hit'atatef Batzitzit.* / בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ לְהִתְעַטֵּף בְּצִיצִית

I always have a series of additional verses, some from liturgy, some from Torah, that I recite to myself, kind of my highest intentions for my practice. And I've accrued them over time. Sort of started one by one. And some of them appear actually on the *atarah*, on the collars of my different *tallitot*. The first is *V'asu Li Kikdash V'Shakhanti B'tokham*, ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם, Make within me a sanctuary, a center of calm, where holiness can dwell within me. And I can dwell in its midst. *Ki Imkha M'kor Chayyim, B'orkha Nir'eh Or*, כי עמך מקור חיים באורך נראה אור, For with you, Holy one, is the source of life, by your light we see light. *V'taher Libeynu L'ovdekiha B'emet*, וטהר לבינו לעבדך באמת, Purify my heart that I may be of authentic service.

Who knows what else will get added to these phrases? Many people recite Psalm 104 in this place. For me, these have just organically over time, I've sort of found these verses have kind of glued themselves to my heart. And then I get to bring them closer and be reminded of their intentions. Every time I put on my *tallit*, and I do this both during personal practice, and also when I'm leading, take the *tallit* and drape over my shoulders. And I remove the watch from my left hand so that I can wrap my *tefilin*. There are a couple of reasons I'm so attached to wrapping *tefilin* in the morning. The first is which, um, is that my *tefilin* were actually my father's, and they were given to him for his bar mitzvah. And he was never taught to actually lay *tefilin*. And when I was in rabbinical school wanting to learn how to do it, my teacher suggested I ask anyone in my family if they happen to have a set, and my father pulled this never unwrapped set of *tefilin* out of his closet. And the *tefilin* bag actually has his initials on it. So, there's this kind of ancestral reclamation that is inherently part of me wrapping *tefillin*, kind of reconnecting to my family's traditional roots. My family that came from Rome and Turkey, my Sephardic and my Italian family, who would have identified as traditional Jews. There's a piece of cultural loss that I get to do a Tikkun on every time I wrap *tefillin*, not to mention the gender transgression, the reclamation of this idea that all of us can choose to take on ritual practice, regardless of, regardless of our gender or sexuality.

But most importantly is actually as I'm putting this *tefillin shel yad*, my arm *tefillin* on. I think of it really as it's connected deeply to the roots of anxious and acupuncture. And acupressure said that the lines that the *tefillin* follows along the left arm, and ultimately to the pointer finger, connect directly to veins to the heart. And as I wrap *tefillin* on my left arm, I'm counting the seven using the verse *poteach et yedekha umasbia l'khol chai*



*ratzon*, פותח את ידיך ומשביע לכל חי רצון. Once again just kind of connecting to my greatest purpose, which is actually to open up my hands and sustain all living beings, which is to say, just to find a way to be as generous and giving as possible in this world. Just connecting to that sense of purpose is a reminder that actually the feeling that I have enough comes from giving; from *g'millut chesed*, from acts of kindness, from being generous; that the more we give, the more we actually have. And I wrap the *tefillin* around the palm of my hand.

As I take out my *tefillin shel rosh*, head *tefillin*, some things I'm so moved by is this idea that, um, I often will think about what I'm wearing that day and how it will impact my *davenning*. Will this be a good shirt? Will I be able to roll up the sleeve enough? If I wear a sweater, will I take it off so that I can lay *tefillin*. It's another reminder of how embodied the practice. It even affects what I wear. We center this on my forehead: *Barukh Atah Adonai Eloheynu Melekh Ha'olam asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu l'hani'ach tefillin* בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ לְהַנִּיחַ תְּפִלִּין -- the one who has wisely instructed us to lay *tefillin*. That's how I think of a mitzvah. It's many things. It's something that joins us together, joins us to each other and to tradition, but I also think of it as a wise instruction.

Maybe that's what an obligation or a commandment is. It's a thing that we really we ought to do,, because it has a positive benefit in our lives. We need to be told that; that's what *v'tzivanu* וְצִוָּנוּ is – that we've been told that that will happen. And the points that the *tefillin shel rosh* [head *tefillin*] sit actually are said to be very ancient acupressure points also, kind of stimulating and calming the nervous system.

I'm going to return to wrapping the *tefillin* around my hand, use a Sephardic wrap that one of my teachers, Rabbi Sarah Zachariah, taught me. There's also a way in which I always feel like, Oh, this is one of another pieces of deep cultural connection to my Sephardic ancestors when I lay *tefillin*.

Davening is also as simple as an invitation to breathe for me. The day is when I daven, I remember to pause in the morning, and that makes it easier to pause throughout the day. Pause and not get caught up in reactivity or frustration. And pause to remember to drink water and eat and go to the bathroom and take a walk. It creates a kind of spaciousness, a kind of connective tissue inside of me that can then extend to how I experience my whole day.



So I'm going to sit back and I'm going to hum to myself, some other words that feel resonant, that kind of just call me, call me to purpose. *Hareini m'kabbel alai et mitzvah haborei v'ahavta l'rei'akha kamokha, l'rei'akha k'mokha*, הֲרִינִי מִקְבֵּל עָלַי, אֶת מִצְוַת הַבּוֹרֵא, וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ, Behold, I take upon myself the obligations of my Creator to love my neighbor as myself, which is only possible if I also love myself.

I'm sort of sitting in swaying, seeing what arises within me: what words of praise, what passages of Torah are calling to me this morning. This morning, which is also Rosh Hodesh, I'm moved to think of the words spoken as the Israelites crossed the Sea, *b'tokh hayam bayabashah*, בתוך הים ביבשה. They were on dry ground in the midst of the Sea, maybe pray is also my way to find dry ground in the midst of the sea. *Ozi v'zimrat Yah vay'hi li li'yeshu'a*, *Ozi v'zimrat Yah vay'hi li li'yeshu'a*, עֲזִי וְזִמְרַת יְהוָה לִי לִישׁוּעָה [God is my strength and my son, and will be my salvation]. I'm not like an all-star singer. So, one of the reasons I love communal prayer is really to sing with people, to match their tones, and feel their vibrations. But I do also feel that when I daven alone, that I can kind of use the vibration of prayer to calm the nervous system.

*Barukh Adonai L'olam Amen v'Amen*, ברוך ה' לעולם אמן ואמן. This idea – *V'yemalei k'vodo et kol ha'aretz* – וימלא כבודו את כל הארץ – the whole world is connected with God's glory. That there is *kavod*, there is a weightiness, there is a potential, there's a sense of possibility in the whole entire world. And we can connect to that. We can bless that. We can say amen to that, to say that we believe in that. And prayer is kind of an affirmation of that.

You can see I just spent a lot of time, just breathing and swaying and letting there be quiet. Seeing what still small voice arises out of the quiet; seeing what sensations or feelings arise out of the words of Psalms themselves. I always like to end with Psalm 150. It's as though we've read the whole book of Psalms if we've read Psalm 150:

*Halleluya, hallelu El b'kodsho, hallelu birki'a uzo, הַלְלוּ אֶל בְּקֹדֶשׁוֹ. הַלְלוּהוּ בְּרִקְיעַ עֲזוֹ, .... Hallelu, hallelu, hallelu, hallelu halleluya hallel – kol hanshamah t'hallel Yah, hallelu halleluya, kol hanshamah t'hallel Yah, hallelu halleluya, הַלְלוּ כָּל הַנְּשָׁמָה תְּהַלֵּל יָהּ. הַלְלוּיָהּ,*  
with my whole breath, my whole being it's going to take, to really offer praise.

You can see, here I am, just navigating just within these three pages, Psalm 150, *Barukh Adonai L'olam Amen v'Amen* and *Shirat Hayam*, The Song of the Sea. It's all just kind of this gentle dance between it all. And in my own practice, when I feel warmed up, I stand: *Adonai sefatai tiftach uphi yaggid t'hilatekha*, אֲדֹנָי שִׁפְתֵי תִפְתָּח וּפִי יַגִּיד תְּהִלָּתְךָ [O Lord, open my lips, that my mouth may say your praise]. Some mornings, I read the traditional



Amidah. I recite it in my heart. I want to offer Marge Piercy's Amidah, "On our feet we speak to you". And I will actually read this aloud. I'll take three steps back, three steps forward and bend at the knees.:

We rise to speak  
a web of bodies aligned like notes of music.

Bless what brought us through  
the sea and the fire; we are caught  
in history like whales in polar ice.

Yet you have taught us to push against the walls,  
to reach out and pull each other along,  
to strive to find the way through  
if there is no way around, to go on.  
To utter ourselves with every breath  
against the constriction of fear,  
to know ourselves as the body born from Abraham  
and Sarah, born out of rock and desert.

We reach back through two hundred arches of hips  
long dust, carrying their memories inside us  
to live again in our life, Isaac and Rebecca,  
Rachel, Jacob, and Leah. We say words shaped  
by ancient use like steps worn into rock.

Bless the quiet of sleep  
easing over the ravaged body, who quiets  
the troubled waters of the mind to a pool  
in which shines the placid broad face of the moon.

Bless the teaching of how to open  
in love so all the doors and windows of the body  
swing wide on their rusty hinges  
and we give ourselves with both hands.

Bless what stirs in us compassion  
for the hunger of the chickadee in the storm  
starving for seeds we can carry out,



the wounded cat wailing in the alley,  
what shows us our face in a stranger,  
who teaches us what we clutch shrivels  
but what we give goes off in the world  
carrying bread to people not yet born.

Bless the gift of memory  
that breaks unbidden, released  
from a flower or a cup of tea  
so the dead move like rain through the room.

Bless what forces us to invent  
goodness every morning and what never frees  
us from the cost of knowledge, which is  
to act on what we know again and again.

All living are one and holy, let us remember  
As we eat, as we work, as we walk and drive.  
All living are one and holy, we must  
make ourselves worthy.

We must act out justice and mercy and healing  
as the sun rises and as the sun sets,  
as the moon rises and the stars wheel above us,  
we must repair goodness...

We will try to be holy,  
We will try to repair the world given us to hand on.  
Precious is this treasure of words and knowledge and deeds that moves inside  
us,  
Holy is the hand that works for peace and for justice,  
Holy is the mouth that speaks for goodness  
holy is the foot that walks toward mercy.

Let us lift each other on our shoulders and carry each  
other along.  
Let holiness move in us.  
Let us pay attention to its small voice,  
Let us see the light in others and honor that light.



In different moments, different people come to mind. This week, these weeks, I'm thinking of all the black lives murdered by police and state violence. I'm thinking of [Dominique] "Rem'mie" [Fells], *alehah hashalom*, עליה השלום [may she rest in peace], a trans woman murdered in my own neighborhood. George Floyd, Tony with Dave, Breonna Taylor, Amadou Diallu.

Remember the dead who paid our way here dearly, dearly  
and remember the unborn for whom we build our houses.

Praise the light that shines before us, through us, after us, Amen.

I take three steps backwards. I always return to the words that's the closing meditation of Amidah: *Elohai n'tzor*, אלהי נצור: Holy one, guard my tongue from speaking words of evil or deceit. *Yehiyu l'ratzon imrei phi v'hegyon libbi*, יהיו לרצון אמרי פי והגיון לבי, may the meditations of my heart and words in my mouth be acceptable unto You, *Adonai tzuri v'go'ali*, ה' צורי וגואלי, My rock, my Redeemer. *Oseh shalom bimromav Hu ya'aseh shalom aleinu, v'al kol yisrael, v'al kol yoshvei olam, v'al kol yoshvei teivel*, עֹשֶׂה שָׁלוֹם בְּמִרְמְיוֹ. הוא יַעֲשֶׂה שָׁלוֹם עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְעַל כָּל יוֹשְׁבֵי הָעוֹלָם, וְעַל כָּל יוֹשְׁבֵי תֵיבֵל. May the one who really brings harmony, peace, and justice to the heavens, bring it here speedily, in all of our hearts, to all who dwell on earth. *Oseh shalom bimromav Hu ya'aseh shalom aleinu, v'al kol yisrael, v'al kol yoshvei teivel*.

Sometimes I'll close with an extra song, something from the day, it may be the Psalm of the day. Today, because it's Rosh Hodesh, I'll close with line from Hallel. But what's really important is just that I've centered and I'm breathing. And to really be in this constant balance of what Rachel Adler says, where we really need to mean what we say when we pray. I'm thinking about the words as I'm saying them. I'm thinking about them when I'm singing them. That their meaning be resonant within me. I'm also finding a way to be in the ancient metaphors in the world, the "unassimilatable tongue" as Rachel Adler calls it; the world beyond language and reason, these ancient portals. And to think that the same grandparents and great-grandparents and great-great-grandparents who gifted my father this *tefillin*; and said, were reciting these same words of Psalms on the same days of the year. *Min hameitzar karati Yah, anani bamerchav Yah. Min hameitzar karati Yah, anani bamerchav Yah*, מִן הַמִּצָּר קָרָאתִי יְהוָה. עֲנֵנִי בַמֶּרְחָב יְהוָה. What narrow thing, what narrow constricted place, what feeling in me is arising that I want to call out, that I want to bring spaciousness and expanse, and feel heard?

What began as a practice that I can't seem to find enough time for, I tell myself, you only need to pray for five minutes, pray for 10 minutes. And once a minute, I find I don't want



to stop. So that's maybe one of my favorite things about personal prayer is it's as hard to get into it as it is to get out of it. And with that, I gently unwrapped my *tefillin* and welcome myself into the work of the day.

### JONATHAN:

That was rabbi Ari, Liv. Fornari 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 practice as 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, 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, you remain healthy and safe.

