



Open My Heart:

Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Rabbi Chai Levy

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 Chai Levy, who is a colleague, a student, and a friend. Hi, Chai, I'm so happy to have you here with us today. Would you tell us a little bit about yourself?

CHAI:

Thanks, Jonathan. I'm happy to be here, too. I am a rabbi at Congregation Netivot Shalom in Berkeley, California, where I've been the rabbi for two years. Before that I was at Congregation Kol Shofar in Tiburon, California for 16 years.

JONATHAN:

Thank you so much. 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,

CHAI:

The prayer practice that I want to share today is something that I've been doing a lot lately: going out in my backyard. This is something that you can do, whether or not you have an outdoor space. If you do have an outdoor space, I invite you to take a moment to step outside. If you're not able to go outside, I invite you simply to look out your window, to look out, see the sky, see the trees. I want to start by sharing a quote from Anne Frank. She wrote:

“The best remedy for those who are afraid, lonely or unhappy is to go outside, somewhere where they can be quite alone with the heavens, nature and God. Because only then does one feel that all is as it should be and that God wishes to see people happy, amidst the simple beauty of nature. As long as this exists, and it certainly always will, I know that then there will always be comfort for every sorrow, whatever the circumstances may be. And I firmly believe that nature brings solace in all troubles.”

I'm sitting in my backyard And I'm thinking of the blessing that we say every morning: *Barukh Atah Adonai, Eloheynu Melekh Ha'olam poke'ach ivrim*, בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ פּוֹקֵחַ עֵוְרִים הָעוֹלָם, Blessed are You, God, you give sight to the blind. You allow us to open our eyes and really see. See the beauty. That's all around us. I'm taking some breaths, breathing the air. I'm smelling the smell of what's growing out here. I'm hearing the birds. I'm seeing the colors of the flowers. I'm seeing the leaves gently blowing in the breeze. I'm feeling the aliveness of everything around me, the divine life force that permeates the world. I'm Settling in. Noticing my own heart beating, my own breath. Breathing with the trees.

I think of the song of Rabbi Dovid Zeller, who quotes a Hasidic text, the *Me'or Eynayim*, of rabbi Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl. It says: when you're feeling down, when you're feeling in a low state, ask yourself, *Halo chai ani*, הלא חי אני, am I not alive? And who is this aliveness that I am? Is it not the holy Blessed One! This aliveness that I see in everything growing around me is the same aliveness that I am. I feel my connection to this beautiful world and I'm taking in.

“*yai diddidai dedai dai*, I am alive; *yai diddidai dedai dai* I am alive; *yai diddidai dedai dai*, I am alive, I am alive. And who is this aliveness I am? And who is this aliveness I am? And who is this aliveness I am? Is it not the holy Blessed One!”

Feeling my likeness. This is my prayer. It's a prayer without words. It's just feeling my connection to the life force of the universe. The life force that's flowing and growing and everything around me. Sometimes when I come out here, my prayer takes on very simple words, like good morning sun. Hello sky. Thank you, birds. Thank you, flowers.

I feel the generosity and beauty of creation.

Thank you. Air that I'm breathing.



So I'm just listening. I'm breathing, smelling. I'm opening my eyes to the beauty. I'm feeling my own life force, my own a liveliness, as part of the liveliness that's around me.

I'm reminded of a teaching that I learned actually from Rabbi Jonathan Slater, of Rabbi Tzvi Naftail Horowitz of Ropshitz. Where he talks about revelation as the divine saying, "Anokhi, I am" in everything, in everything around us and within us as well. My prayer is feeling experiencing that "Anokhi" of the world around me, that first word of the 10 commandments for God says, "I am". I am experiencing the "I am" that is being revealed. "Me'lo khol ha'aretz k'vodo, מלא כל הארץ כבודו, the whole world is full of God's presence". It's a prayer simply of experiencing that. It's a prayer, that is simply feeling my liveliness, and my connection, to everything that's alive.

"yai diddidai dedai dai, I am alive; yai diddidai dedai dai I am alive; yai diddidai dedai dai, I am alive, I am alive. And who is this aliveness I am? And who is this aliveness I am? And who is this aliveness I am? Is it not the holy Blessed One!"

I'm breathing, I'm feeling my aliveness. I'm feeling the gentle breeze on my skin. I'm hearing the wind. I'm hearing birds. I'm hearing my own heartbeat. This is my prayer. And for all of it I say: thank you. Thank you, life.

I want to end with Rebbe Nachman's blessing. Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav said, "Grant me the ability to be alone. May it be my custom to go outdoors each day among the trees and grass, among all growing things. And there, may I be alone and enter into prayer, to talk with the one to whom I belong. May I express there everything in my heart. And may all the foliage of the field, all grasses, trees, and plants awake at my coming, to send the powers of their life into the words of my prayer. So that my prayer and speech are made whole through the life and spirit of all growing things, which are made as one by their transcendent source".

JONATHAN:

Thank you so much. That was rabbi Chai Levy, 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. 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, you remain healthy and safe.

