



Open My Heart:

Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Rabbi Dan Liben

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 Dan Liben, who is a colleague and friend, a participant in Institute programs, and a member of our Board. Hey, Dan, I'm really happy to have you here today. Would you tell us a little bit about yourself?

DAN:

Sure, Jonathan. Hi, it's so nice to be here. So, I am a rabbi of a congregation in Natick, Massachusetts. It's a Conservative congregation. But I'm really here because my great love has been my involvement with IJS ever since I think 2007. And, I'm here because IJS helped me to understand my prayer life as a practice, in the same way that my sitting practice is a practice, in the same way that other people might have yoga or other practices. And even though I had been a rabbi for some time before I came to IJS, it opened up a whole new world for me. So I'm here to share a little bit about how my prayer practice has evolved as a result of my involvement in IJS.

JONATHAN:

That's great. I'm really excited to be part of your practice. So, I'm going to turn things over to you now and thank you for sharing your practice.

DAN:

So, this is a practice in which I decided to rediscover and reclaim meaning of the second paragraph of the three paragraphs of the Shema. Rather than ignoring it because if it's

Deuteronomic philosophy, theology of reward and punishment, which so many people seem as unhelpful, I decided it was time to reclaim the second paragraph of the Shema for myself. And this is how I do it.

I see the three paragraphs of the Shema in a dynamic relationship. One with the other. *V'ahavta* ואהבת is the paragraph in which I allow myself to feel God's love and to feel connected and rooted in the eternal life force. The second paragraph of the Shema is the paragraph that reminds me that it is possible – not only possible, but it is probable that often in life, we will be disconnected. We will be cut off and we will feel as if the world is absolutely upside down and falling inward. The third paragraph, however, is the paragraph that affirms yes, it is possible when these moments happen to be reconnected. So the third paragraph becomes for me this wonderful, joyous affirmation that even though the promise of disconnection of second paragraph is real, it doesn't last, it doesn't need to last.

So, what I do in this practice is I use it as an opportunity to really get into the practice of words, to say every word of the three paragraphs of the Shema. And I sing it *trope*, as I'm davening. And I feel the content of the words: to feel the love in the first paragraph; to feel that disconnect, to notice in the second paragraph where some of the words are harsh in their sounding – for instance *v'chara aph*, וחרה אף, to really feel that; *v'atzar*, ועצר, – to feel the harshness of the words. Then to feel in my body, where the text talks about rising up and sitting down. And in my body, I'm actually rising up and sitting down to imprint this practice on my body in a physical way.

So I begin that practice with the Shema, followed by a period of silence, using that silence to allow myself to really listen, to hear what is arising in that moment, to hear the possibility of connection. And out of that listening, then I go into the *v'ahavta*, which of course expresses the love/ I feel that in my heart. I actually hold my hands over my heart and feel that space filling with energy as I sing the *v'ahavta*.

So that's my practice. And I invite you to it. And we'll begin with the Shema, going into a period of silence. And then the three paragraphs. Just taking a deep breath and preparation. And I'll say each word of the Shema on an elongated out-breath using the in-breath is an opportunity to hear, to feel in the body, to listen what's happening.

Shema שְׁמָעָא

Yisra יִשְׂרָאֵל



Adonaiiiiiii ה'

Eloheynuu אלהינו

Adonaiiiiiii ה'

Echaaaaad אחד

And out of the silence arises in me a sense of connection to God's loving presence, which feels so real and is expressed so beautifully in the words. *V'ahavta et Adonai Elohekha b'khol levavkha uv'khol nafshekha uv'khol m'odekha*, וְאַהַבְתָּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל, *I feel all of this in my body, my spirit and my strength. V'hayu had'varim ha'eileh asher anokhi m'tzavkha hayom al levavekha. V'shinantam l'vanekh v'dibara bam, b'shiv'tekha b'veitekha u'velekht'kha vaderekh,*

וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצוּרֵי הַיּוֹם עַל לִבִּי:
וְשִׁנַּנְתֶּם לְבַיִתְךָ וְדַבַּרְתָּ בָּם בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלִכְתְּךָ בְּדֶרֶךְ וּבְשֹׁכְבְּךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ
I can feel it moving upward and downward sitting and moving up in my body.

...*u'veshokhb'kha uv'kumekha, וּבְשֹׁכְבְּךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ. Uk'shantam l'ot al yadekha v'hayu l'totafot bein eynekha*

וְקִשְׁרַתֶּם לְאוֹת עַל יָדְךָ וְהָיוּ לְטֹטְפוֹת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ

touching both my arms and my forehead. *Ukh'tavtam, וּכְתַבְתֶּם, I'm using my hand to, as if I'm writing out the words – al mezuzot beitekha uvish'arekha, עַל מְזוּזוֹת בֵּיתְךָ וּבִשְׁעָרֶיךָ.*

The second paragraph comes to remind us that that sense of connection will not last. It is a promise that the sense of connection will be broken.

V'haya im shamo'a tishm'u el mitzvotai asher anokhi m'tzaveh etkhem hoyom l'ahavah et Adonai eloheikhem ul'ovdo b'khol levavkhem uv'khol nafshekhem, וְהָיָה אִם שָׁמַעַתְּ מִמֶּנִּי, אֶל מִצְוֹתַי אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם לְאַהֲבָה אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וּלְעַבְדוֹ בְּכָל לִבְבְּכֶם וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁכֶם. There will be times of connection and feeling God's presence in nature and in our lives. God's fullness given to us, V'nanati m'tar artzekhem b'ito, yoreh umalkosh, v'asaphhta d'gankha v'tirosh'kha v'yitzharekha; v'natati esev b'sadkha liv'hemtekha v'akhalta v'savata.

וְנָתַתִּי מִטַּר אֲרָצְכֶם בְּעֵתוֹ יוֹרֵה וּמִלְקוֹשׁ וְאִסְפֹּת דְּגַנְךָ וְתִירְשְׁךָ וְיִצְהַרְךָ:

וְנָתַתִּי יַעֲשֶׂב בְּשֹׁדְךָ לְבַהֲמֹתְךָ וְאָכְלֹת וּשְׂבַעְתָּ:



But that connection, that promise, is also sometimes just not going to be there at all. *Hishamru lakhem pen yiphteh levavkhem*, הִשְׁמְרוּ לָכֶם פֶּן יִפְתֶּה לְבַבְכֶם. Our heart will look in other directions, *v'sartem v'avad'tem elohim acherim*, וְסָרְתֶם וְעַבַדְתֶם אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים. And we will worship false gods of all kinds. *v'hishtachavitem lahem*, וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתֶם לָהֶם. And this will cause a great separation. *V'charah aph Adonai bakhem v'atzar et hashamayim v'lo yihiyeh matar, v'ha'adamah lo titan et y'vulah, v'avad'tem meheirah mei'al ha'aretz hatovah asher Adonai notein lakhem*

וְחָרָה אָפָה' בְּכֶם וְעָצַר אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְלֹא יִהְיֶה מָטָר וְהָאֲדָמָה לֹא תִתֵּן אֶת יְבוּלָהּ וְאֲבַדְתֶּם מֵהָרָה
מֵעַל הָאָרֶץ הַטּוֹבָה אֲשֶׁר ה' נָתַן לָכֶם:

We will feel completely lost and separated from the grounding that God had given us.

V'samtem d'varai eileh, וְשַׁמְתֶם אֶת דְּבָרַי אֵלֶּה, but if we put these words in our hearts, *al levavkhem, v'al naphsh'khem*, עַל לְבַבְכֶם וְעַל נַפְשְׁכֶם, in our hearts and in our guts; *uk'shartem l'ot al yedkhem* וְקִשַׁרְתֶּם אֹתָם לְאוֹת עַל יְדֵיכֶם and bind them to our arms, *v'hayu l'totophot bein eineikhem* וְהָיוּ לְטוֹטְפוֹת בֵּין עֵינַיִךְ and place them again in front of our eyes. *V'limad'tem otam* וְלִמַּדְתֶּם אֹתָם, and once again, teach them to our children; *et b'neikhem l'dabber bam b'shib'tech b'beit'ech*, אֶת בְּנֵיכֶם לְדַבֵּר בָּם בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ, as we're sitting at our house, *u'velekht'kha baderekh* וּבִלְכַתְּךָ בְּדֶרֶךְ, and I feel myself getting out of my chair, *uvshokhb'kha* וּבִשְׁכֻבְךָ, and we're resting; *uv'kumekha ukh'tavtam al m'zuzot beitekha uvish'arekha l'ma'an yirbu yemeikhem viyemai b'neikhem*,

וּבְקוּמְךָ: וְכִתְבֶתְּם עַל מְזוֹזוֹת בֵּיתְךָ וּבִשְׁעָרֶיךָ: לְמַעַן יִרְבוּ יְמֵיכֶם וְיְמֵי בְנֵיכֶם

and then connection to the length of days on this land. And our grounding will be restored to us, *al ha'adamah asher nishba Adonai l'avoteikhem*, 'עַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע ה', which God has promised to our ancestors; *l'avoteikhem latet lahem ki'yemei hashamayim al ha'aretz*, לְאֲבֹתֵיכֶם לָתֵת לָהֶם כִּי־יְמֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם עַל הָאָרֶץ.

The third paragraph is the reminder that yes, God will give us the ability to remember so that when we forget, we will have tools to bring us back to this place of God's love and connection. *Vayomer Adonai el Moshe leimor: Dabber el b'nei yisrael v'amarta aleihem v'asu lehem tzitzit al kenfei vigdeihem l'dorotam, v'natu al tzitzit hakanaph p'til t'khelet*,

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם וְעָשׂוּ לָהֶם צִיצִית עַל כַּנְּפֵי בְגָדֵיהֶם
לְדֹרֹתָם וְנָתַנוּ עַל צִיצִית הַכַּנֵּף פְּתִיל תְּכֵלֶת;

that these fringes on our garments that connect us to the world. *V'ahu lahem l'tzitzit ur'item oto uz'khatm et kol mitzvot Adonai*, וְהָיָה לָכֶם לְצִיצִית וּרְאִיתֶם אֹתוֹ וְזָכַרְתֶּם אֶת כָּל, 'מִצְוֹת ה'. And we will remember all of the commandments that God has given us. And we will do them. *V'asitem otam, v'lo taturu*, וְעָשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם וְלֹא תִתּוּרוּ, and we won't, at least for a short while, we will no longer stray. *V'lo taturu acharei l'avkhem v'acharei eineikhem*



asher atem zonim achareihem; l'ma'an tizk'ru v'asitem et kol mitzvot Adonai, veheyitem k'doshim l'eiloheikhem,

וְלֹא תִתְּוֹרוּ אַחֲרַי לְבַבְכֶם וְאַחֲרַי עֵינֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם זֹנִים אַחֲרֵיהֶם: לְמַעַן תִּזְכְּרוּ וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֶת כָּל מִצְוֹתַי וְהִיִּיתֶם קְדוֹשִׁים לֵאלֹהֵיכֶם

And once again, we will be in holiness with God. *Ani Adonai eloheikhem asher hotzeiti etkhem mei'erezt mitzrayaim,* God, who led us from Egypt will lead us again out of Egypt, again and again, from all the Egypt's of our lives; *lehiyot lakhem l'eilohim, ani Adaoni eloheikhem,* .

JONATHAN:

That was Rabbi Dan Liben 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, 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 and more of her music at judithsilver.com. We are also grateful to Ilana Aryan for giving us permission to use her song. Can you hear out sewn as our closing, you can learn more about Alana's music at ilanaaryan.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 to see

Speaker 3 ([15:43](#)):

[inaudible].

