



Open My Heart:

Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Rabbi Lydia Medwin

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 Lydia Medwin, who is a student and a colleague and a friend. Hey Lydia, I'm so happy to have you here today. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

LYDIA:

Hi, thanks so much for having me. My name is Rabbi Lydia Medwin. I'm a rabbi at The Temple here in Atlanta, Georgia. I'm blessed to be married to Rabbi Dan Medwin. We have three cautious little kiddos, that we are juggling along with the rest of the world at home right now. I feel really lucky that I get to be the Director of Engagement at The Temple, which means I get to think a lot about how community comes together. I get to think about how justice shows up in our world. And I get to think about how all of that is impacted by and affects our spiritual lives as well.

JONATHAN:

I'm really 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.

LYDIA:

Thank you. And thank you so much for all that you've always done, and teaching me, and being my teacher and my confidant and friend, as well. I'm excited to get to share this prayer practice, in part because it's giving me an opportunity to really think intentionally about the ways in which prayer moments show up in my life. The practice

that I want to share today is about something that, similar to breathing, I think is innately human and probably happens for all of us very often. And that is just the practice of listening to music, actually. There is a way in which prayer opens our hearts to speak our deepest truths to God about who we are and who we aspire to be. And for me, and I suspect for many of us, music has always been a really dependable way of achieving all of that.

Music speaks to some kind of ancient part of our souls, and says things that words could never say. Our reality, if we think about it, our perception of reality, is really just a group of data points that we kind of collect, and then create stories out of. And music, I think, touches on what is between those data points. The things that can't be spoken into words, and yet are true and affect our hearts, and elevate our stories to connect with the larger story of the human experience. And so often in my day, music becomes a part of my experience, helping me connect to myself and to others; when I'm on my walks or runs; when I'm driving; when I'm making dinner; as I work – I play different kinds of music that end up coloring my experience or lifting my mood. And I sometimes even choose the music based on what will serve me, or what would bring others joy, and what will connect me to the deepest parts of myself.

But often I'm drawn to simply sit, and just listen to a piece of music or two with a kind of attention and intention. Listening to the layers of the music; listening to what inspires feeling, memories and associations, bodily responses, thoughts, connections. And for me, this becomes a form of prayer. This kind of listening. I especially try to listen in this way when I notice myself getting disconnected, when I'm seeming sort of snappy with my loved ones, or maybe even a little bit numb to my lived experience, feel my heart hardening in different ways. My listening becomes my form of prayer. And so with your permission, I'd like to take you all into a piece of music, to kind of talk more about how this works for me, from my perspective. It's a favorite piece of music of mine.

These days, I've been listening to it a lot. It's called "Change is gonna come". This version is by Otis Redding, and there are so many reasons why listening to this piece of music becomes a form of prayer. For me, it starts with the album cover. Of course, most of us don't have so much album cover access, but, nonetheless, even when I think of this piece of music, I can see the album cover in my mind. It was one of the first albums I ever got, sort of a compilation of Otis blues, what it's called, "Otis Redding Sings Soul". And it connects me, that memory, already connects me junior high, when I started collecting my first albums. You see, I grew up in Memphis, Tennessee and I therefore



was raised on gospel and blues music along with country, world music of so many different kinds. And then all mixed in with that was my, the Jewish music experience.

And so music itself is a powerful part of identity. Otis Redding actually worked in Memphis for many years at the beginning of his career. And so I associate even without like starting the first note, this piece of music has already for me connecting me to my identity, to, you know, the rollercoaster of youth, the highs and the lows, to a sense of home and warmth. So as I began to play, I'm going to invite you into listening in the kind of way that I listen. And before I even start, I want to invite us in these first few moments of the song to listen to the ways in which the trumpet affects your body. So for me, these, these initial notes, as I hear them, my heart just bursts open. I feel like a clenching in my throat and my face does this weird sort of scrunching thing. I can't even describe it, but it is all sort of associated with this feeling of just almost anguish, but a kind of joyful anguish. It's hard to describe. So as we listen, I invite you into this first moment of the song

[music: trumpets, guitar, fanfare] ...

I was born by a river, oh man, in this little old tent, oh
Just like this river, I've been running ever since

You can hear in those first few moments, this sense of desire, pain and striving and yearning, just with the trumpet and the initial sort of drums coming in and the initial kind of baseline coming in there. And so, you know, a part of this attentive listening is about unpacking the layers of a song, to hear all those different parts. And then to begin to imagine how they come together in tension with one another, in harmony with one another; the kinds of emotional play that you get, the dynamicism that you get inside of just those first few bars together. Whenever I hear that opening sound, it just, it pulls me in and, and begins to already work on my soul.

And then the words start "I was born by the river." Now, for me coming from Memphis, I can relate to that. I was born by the Mississippi river, spent a lot of time down by the river in those soul-searching moments. And so he's, in this moment in time, already singing my song, as if it's coming out of my mouth. And, and you can hear this kind of anguish and pain. And then as we come toward the chorus, you hear it begin to kind of resolve for a moment, and then go back into that minor key. And that, to me speaks about what it is to be alive, right? The kinds of anguish and pain that we feel, the kinds of longing and desire. And then we get these moments of resolve, that moment of connection, where everything feels like it's in harmony. And then life continues to



change, right? “Change is gonna come”. That’s the name of the song. It speaks about this experience of being alive, of feeling the sort of cyclical nature of what it is to experience joy and pain. So we’re going to listen for a little bit more then I’ll pause this again, to point out a couple more things.

[music, singing]

I was born by a river, oh man, in this little old tent, oh
Just like this river, I’ve been running ever since
It’s been a long, long time coming
But I know, but I know, a change is gotta come
Ooo yes it is
Oh my, oh my, oh my, oh my

So obviously we live in a time right now of social upheaval. People are in the streets, Black Lives Matter to more people today than they did a few weeks ago. And so, we can relate to Otis and this, this song of, of longing for change and, and this hope that change will come. And you can even sort of hear it reflected in that music, right, where he says, as he gets to the end of that chorus: “And I know change is gonna come, Oh yes, it is.” You can hear it coming to resolve right there. And then right away, we get right back into that trumpet and the sort of minor chords that this change doesn’t come without struggle, without its ups and downs, right? That, that the sort of stumbling nature, sort of staccato nature, even of the rhythm, is reflected in our own lives. As we kind of stumble our way from discomfort into realization and understanding, and then back into discomfort. And then these long drawn out notes where we can just feel all of the anguish, pain, hope, joy sort of mixed in together as they interplay with one another. We’ll listen to just a little bit more and see if you hear that too.

[music, singing]

It’s been too hard living, oh my
And I’m afraid to die
I don’t know what’s up there
Beyond the clouds

“It’s been too hard living, but I’m afraid to die. I don’t know it’s up there beyond the clouds.” To me, that’s, that is the bottom line of this. All right. These, this question about what is this life? What’s this life I’m supposed to live. And yet we know the only constant is that change is gonna come, change is always gonna come.



[music, singing]

It's been a long, long time coming
But I know, but I know a change is gotta come
Oh yes it is
Oh my, oh my, oh my

There's a time I would go to my brother, oh my
I asked my brother, "Will you help me please?", oh my oh my
He turned me down and then I ask my dear mother, oh
I said "Mother!"
I said "Mother! I'm down on my knees"

How many times do we go to our brother and our mother and just pour out our souls, right? And beg them: help me, help me figure this out. I don't understand what this world is trying to do to me. You can, you can just, it's so universal to be able to relate to the questions he's asking, the ways in which we search for some kind of anchor, some safe Haven, right? Sometimes we find it through those loved ones. Sometimes they leave us with more questions, right? And still, he goes back to this chorus, that change is gonna come. And even though you feel this sense of, of anguish and pain, ultimately the change, I think the song is about, the change that I can hear Otis Redding really talking about, is one of hope, is one of that, that long arm, long arc of history that does bend towards justice.

And for me also, when I listen to this song, I think about all of those souls, who have struggled for justice and struggled for peace throughout millennia. And how time and again, they come to this conclusion that we're headed in the right direction, that there is a reason to be hopeful. And so often, in my language, I would describe that hope as, as connection to the divine, a connection to a shared history that leads towards justice, that leads towards holiness, and greater holiness in our world. I think this, this song, as a prayer, invites me to ask myself, what is God calling me to do in this moment? What is the responsibility on me, as I live right here in the 21st century, even as this song is singing to me from the 19th century or the 20th century, sorry. And, and even as the song echoes questions that have reverberated throughout history.

And so this kind of listening as, as prayer, serves me, by really connecting me to my ancestors, connecting me to the spiritual benefactors that have come before me in the form of people like Otis Redding, and many others, especially those musicians who experienced different kinds of oppressions that they could sing about authentically. And



the fact that they continue to be hopeful adds to my sense of hope for us and for our children and for our loved ones.

So I'm going to actually start the song over again, and I invite you to sit and simply listen. Now, close your eyes, find a comfortable place to sit, or a comfortable posture. And see if you can, as you're listening, begin to unpack the layers of song, the music: with its main sort of melodic guitar or trumpet sounds; the bass that's kind of hiding underneath there, harder to hear, but, uh, is really the backbone of the whole song; the rhythm, how it changes and, and dynamic interplay with the, the other instruments. I'll invite you to pay attention to the words, and the way that the words really speak to something so deeply universal and powerful, really all about the human experience and the truth of that experience.

And then I'll invite you to turn even more inward and begin to pay attention to the effect that the music has on your body, where you feel opening, where you feel tightening, where you feel splendor. And pay attention to the feelings and thoughts that come to you. And then as the song goes on, I'll invite you also to imagine: where is God in this song for you, in, this whole experience for you? Where could God come up in other songs for you? And how could we use various songs at various points in our lives, even throughout our normal day, while going about cooking dinner, or accompanying your walk, or listening to a certain song in the car with your children or your loved ones, how could putting on a certain kind of music and inviting people to listen with you in a certain kind of way, with this quality of attentiveness, actually bring more holiness into your every day. And with that, we'll listen to our music and conclude our session together. Enjoy.

A Change is Gonna Come

Sam Cooke (adapted and sung by Otis Redding)

I was born by a river, oh man, in this little old tent, oh
Just like this river, I've been running ever since
It's been a long, long time coming
But I know, but I know, a change is gotta come
Ooo yes it is
Oh my, oh my, oh my, oh my

It's been too hard living, oh my
And I'm afraid to die



I don't know what's up there
Beyond the clouds

It's been a long, long time coming
But I know, but I know a change is gotta come
Oh yes it is
Oh my, oh my, oh my

There's a time I would go to my brother, oh my
I asked my brother, "Will you help me please?", oh my oh my
He turned me down and then I ask my dear mother, oh
I said "Mother!"
I said "Mother! I'm down on my knees"

It's been a time that I thought
Lord this couldn't last for very long, oh now
But somehow I thought I was still able to try to carry on
It's been a long, long time coming
But I know a change is gonna come
Oh, yes it is

Just like I said, I went to my little bitty brother, oh my little brother now
I asked my brother "Brother help me please?", oh now
He turned me down and then I go to my little mother, my dear mother, oh my
I said "Mother!"
I said "Mother! I'm down on my knees"

But there was a time that I thought
Lord this couldn't last for very long, oh my
Somehow I thought I was still able to try to carry on
It's been a long, long, long time coming
But I know, but I know a change is gotta come, ooo
It's been so long, it's been so long, a little too long
A change has gotta come
So tired, so tired of standing by myself
And standing up alone
A change has gotta come
You know and I know, and you know that I know
I know that you know, honey
That a change is gonna come oh yeah oh, I gotta....



JONATHAN:

That was Rabbi Lydia Medwin leading us in their personal prayer practice too, was so inspiring. And for me, I'm 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. 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 that, you remain healthy and to safe.

