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# *Open My Heart:*

## *Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater*

Rabbi Aviva Chenick

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, Aviva Chernik, who is a student and a friend. Hi Aviva. I'm so happy to have you with us here today. Tell us a little bit about yourself. Would you?

AVIVA:

Hi, Jonathan, I'm glad to be here. So I'm in Toronto right now, just to give you some context. And I'm an artist and a teacher, a meditation teacher. I lead Phila and the artists and residents at Beth Tzedec Synagogue in Toronto and my meditation community is called neySHEV

JONATHAN:

That's wonderful. 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 prayer with us.

AVIVA:

Thanks, Jonathan. It's nice to be here and it's nice to get to share this practice with all of you

So there was a mezuzah on the door to the home that I lived in when I was child. There was a mezuzah on the door to every room. You may be familiar may or may not be

familiar with the mezuzah, the ritual object, that's on the doorpost of the house; that contains within it a scroll that has the words of the Shema, the central prayer of Judaism, oneness, and texts from Deuteronomy. So, I knew those were there, mezuzot, around the house. I didn't have much else to do with them. Just I knew they were there. And in Hebrew day school, we studied about what they were. I guess the only other connection I had with the mezuzah is, well, two things, one, they're usually very beautiful. The container can be anything, it's an art piece. But it really could be created out of absolutely anything. The scroll inside, I would engage with that text as a child in the morning, not usually in the evening prayer, but before bed. So twice a day, I would say the Shema.

And then somewhere along the way, I started to see other people, as I became an adult, kissing the mezuzah. I like that because, well, I like kissing, and I love ritual. And so I thought: Oh, I'll try that out. That became interesting for me, because actually I wondered: so are they kissing their hand and then giving a kiss to the mezuzah, or are they touching the mezuzah, and then kissing it. And that made me curious about that piece of interacting with the mezuzah. and also with the Torah, when it gets passed around at services. I liked it. But it still was missing a fair bit of sort of, I think context or maybe just deeper connection.

When I took my Jewish mindfulness teacher training with IJS, my teacher, friend and colleague Jordan Bendat-Appell, did one teaching that really has stuck with me so much that I've shared so many times. And that is a teaching about *zekhirot*, about reminders. And I think one of the questions is: what are your reminders and reminders? of what? Reminders that bring me into contact with, with this present moment; that bring me back into my body. Reminders that I am not separate, that I'm not alone, that I am in a body in this moment, breathing. That bring me into presence. And those could be anything really, but the example that Jordan brought to us certainly began with the mezuzah. And this is the text that's actually talked about in that paragraph from Deuteronomy that we say after the line of the Shema, and that is on the scroll inside the mezuzah.

So, okay. So I thought: Oh, this is great. I love this about the *zekhirah*; it is a reminder of how I want to enter into my home. "And you shall love"; all is one and you shall love; and how I want to leave, and walk out into the world. But somewhere along the way I got another, a piece of input around it. And somebody, maybe I think somebody must have told me that they, that they were extending that practice. I don't really know, can't remember who it was. I can't credit them unfortunately. And what exactly the extension



of the practice was. But I did get the thought that it could be more than just kissing them mezuzah, having the intention, and going about my day. So I realized I need to start to say the text.

Now my house is like this: there's a front door to the house itself. I'm on the second-floor apartment. So, there's no mezuzah at the front of the house, but at the front of my door. So, I open my door to my apartment, and on the right side is a mezuzah. And then there are 15 stairs. So, I realized, I need to say the words. I need to actually connect with what the text is inside that mezuzah. So, I started to practice that, and to play with the words. This is very, very helpful for me because it was tying together action and the words. So, movement, the moving of my body, the relating to my body, feeling, my feet actually own the steps rising. Slowing down the minute I opened the door, stepping onto the first step; kissing the mezuzah, and slowing down into this moment. Feeling the back of my body – and I'll share more with you about that, exactly how I, how I move into my body...

But maybe just to say, when I started to engage with the words started to play with: okay, maybe I'll be still on the first step for the whole line of the Shema and *barukh shem k'vod* (בְּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְבוֹד). And then I'll start to move on the beginning of the paragraph *V'ahavta* (וְאַהֲבַתְּ). So, I started to play with that: this step – *V'ahavta*, and you shall love; *b'chol levavkha* (בְּכֹל לִבְבְּךָ), with all your heart; and you shall teach, *V'shinantam l'vanekha* (וְשִׁנַּנְתֶּם לְבְנֵיכֶם). And I would move another step, another couple steps, and you're going in, you're coming and you're rising up and you're resting.

And this was very moving. I did this for some time. And then just, just seemingly out of the blue one day, I realized that this text wasn't talking to me, it wasn't actually addressing me. It hadn't bothered me at all before. Nothing about it had occurred to me before. What do I mean by that? I realized that the whole text was set in the masculine conjugation. You, you assuming masculine. But now just to, just to kind of remember that I've been saying this text since I was a little, little girl...and the thought of changing it... It's like I could change all kinds of other texts. I play with liturgy. That's part of, part of my work as an artist: to really, you know, explore the text and what is, what makes the text relevant and present in this moment, in our bodies and for the people with whom I'm leading, working, and teaching, facilitating.

But this text felt harder to change. It's right from Torah; so, so inside myself, my tissues. So I, I started to play with it and, and I didn't look up any help. You know, where is it written down in the feminine conjugation; the feminine conjugation of me, not of the



divine even yet, just of me. And so I started to play with that. And it's, and it was sticky and awkward. And I liked that, because it renewed the practice for me. It brought it alive once again. And for a while in my, in my not perfect, I think conjugation of Hebrew, I delighted in the fact that I didn't know if it was correct. I just got to play with it in the realm of my own space there on my stairwell. Just myself from the divine presence.

And then I, I guess I got curious again: what are the actual words here? I mean, you know, roughly had them, but what might be the conjugation? There were words, I didn't know, like, *uk'shartam* (וּקְשַׁרְתֶּם), and you shall bind them, talking about the *tefillin*, the phylacteries. And so, I turned to one of my favorite *siddurim*, which I don't get to lead out of enough, the Kohenet Siddur. And, they have the translation in the feminine, the conjugation in the feminine. But interestingly enough, it's the feminine with the feminine divine. And I often like to play with changing the words from the feminine and the masculine and going back and forth, because I'm not so interested in the binary aspect of the divine. Sort of interested in the divine that that reflects all of, all of it. Even though I felt strict in this moment about wanting the text to reflect me when it's talking to me, me as identifying as a female.

So anyways, so I had to go, and I had to then figure out the text on my own. And so, I got to look at texts that I've known all my life, that I've taught to many, many children, youth; that I've sung, that I've led in all times of the year, in many different synagogues and prayer spaces. And yet I got to look at it in a new way and that's been very moving.

And so, the final realization of focus that I'll share with you before we jump in to sharing the practice itself, to practicing being in this *tefillah*, this prayer, is that sometime after I'd then gotten into the stickiness with the words, sometimes for, you know, I'd get into the words and I feel, how it feels in my body. Oh, it's that word feels awkward. I'll just pause, pause, pause. When I'm ready, I'd go to move. Sometimes I lose the words, because I lose where I am, because I haven't memorized in a certain way. So I have to go back to the beginning. That's been kind of a neat thing too, is to, for that, to feel okay with that, and agile about getting lost, and feeling in the muck.

So, the final realization is that – there I go practicing, wrestling with the words, dropping into my feet, standing on the stairs, feeling my back body so that I can really be here now, arriving at the top of the stairs... And I realized *uv'shokhb'kha uv'kumekha* (וּבְשֹׁכְבְּךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ), *b'shokhbekh uv'kumekh* (וּבְשֹׁכְבְּךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ), when you lie down, and when you rise up. And at the top of the stairs is a landing, where my shoes are on a mat, but just



beyond that is the bedroom door. So that means that at the bottom of the stairs is a *mezuzah*, and at the top of the stairs is the place where I go to bed and where I rise up. And so,, I interact with this, *zekhirah*, this reminder, at the bottom of the stairs. And in between I remind myself that all is one. I remind myself to listen. And then I remind myself that I am actually not separate. And then I remind myself that my job is to love with all, with all of me and that I will forget, and it's okay that I forgotten and that the reminders are here. The reminders are when I rise up and when I go to sleep and when I go out of the door and when I come back and when I teach, when I pass it onward, when I bind it over between my eyes and on my arm.

So, I'm glad to, I'm moved, in sort of a nice, vulnerable way to share with you this very private practice that I've been doing in my own home. To bring you into my home with me and to invite you now to, to, to travel with me over to my stairs. We're going to do that. And, so I'm just going to head along through my place. I'm going to walk down the stairs and I'm actually, -- so you can hear me, I'm sure you can hear the movement -- I'm actually going to step outside my door so that I can open the door, because that part feels important.

I'm glad to be here with you. And thank you for joining me in this practice. I will, talk us, be in it, and I will be sharing with you, what's coming up for me as I proceed.

Okay, let's open the door [sound of door creaking open]. Beautiful orange *mezuzah* that I brought back from Israel. [sound of door closing, closing of lock, and kissing the *mezuzah*].

*Shema. Yisrael. Adonai. Eloheynu. Adonai. Echad.*

שְׁמַע. יִשְׂרָאֵל. ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ. ה' אֶחָד.

*Barukh. Shem. K'vod. Malkhuto. L'olam. Va'ed.*

בְּרוּךְ. שֵׁם. כְּבוֹד. מַלְכוּתוֹ. לְעוֹלָם. וָעֶד.

I slow it down. I move to the first step.



*V'ahavt et* ואהבת את

And today I want to call *Adonai Havayah* (הויה), the One of Being.

*V'ahavt et Havayah eloihayikh,* ואהבת את הויה אלהיך

And I note the first word of conjugation, the stickiness, but still

*V'ahavt et Havayah eloihayikh b'khol levavekh b'khol naphshekh uv'khol me'odekh*

ואהבת את הויה אלהיך בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך ובכל מאדך

And I move.

*V'hayu hadevarim ha'eileh asher anokhi m'tzvavekh hayom al levavekh*

On my heart: and that reminds me to drop back into my back body, where my heart is. And that brings me onto my feet more. And I can feel myself standing again. And I lose my place, and I go back:

*V'hayu hadevarim ha'eileh asher anokhi m'tzvavekh hayom al levavekh, v'shinantam*

וקיו הדברים האלה אשר אנכי מצוך היום על לבבך ושננתם

And I get stuck

*I'vanayikh uv'notayikh* לבניך ובנותיך

all the ones that I teach, that I lead...

*V'hayu hadevarim ha'eileh asher anokhi m'tzvavekh hayom al levavekh, v'shinantim ....  
v'dibart bam*



וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם עַל לְבָבְךָ וְשִׁנְתֶּם וְדַבַּרְתָּ בָם

And I move:

*B'shivtekh b'veitekh uv'lekhtekh baderekh uv'shokhbekh uv'kumekh, uk'shartim*

בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלִכְתְּךָ בְּדַרְךָ וּבְשֹׁכְבְּךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ וּקְשַׁרְתִּים

I pause in some of the stickiness of this conjugation

*uk'shartim l'ot* וּקְשַׁרְתִּים לְאוֹת

and I move

*al yadekh v'hayu l'totaphot bein eynayik* עַל יָדְךָ וְהָיוּ לְטֹטְפֹת בֵּין עֵינַיִךְ

And I pause, focusing on my eyes.

*v'hayu l'totaphot bein eynayik, ukhtavtim.... Ukhtavtim l'ot al yadekh*

וְהָיוּ לְטֹטְפֹת בֵּין עֵינַיִךָ וּכְתַבְתִּים... וּכְתַבְתִּים לְאוֹת עַל יָדְךָ

And I go back because I feel like I want to touch back....

*uk'shartim l'ot al yadekh v'hayu l'totaphot bein eynayik ukhtavtim al mezuzot beitekh*

וּקְשַׁרְתִּים לְאוֹת עַל יָדְךָ וְהָיוּ לְטֹטְפֹת בֵּין עֵינַיִךְ וּכְתַבְתִּים עַל מְזוּזוֹת בֵּיתְךָ

And I see the next *mezuzah*.

*Uvish'arekh.* וּבִשְׁעָרֶיךָ



And I move to the next *mezuzah*, and I smooch it.

Thank you for being in practice with me.

### JONATHAN:

That was Aviva Chernick, 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 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.

If you wish, you can access the Kohenet Siddur, *Siddur HaKohanot*, [here](#).

