



Open My Heart:

Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Cantor Audrey Abrams

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 Cantor Audrey Abrams, who's a student, a colleague, and a friend. Hi Audrey, I'm so happy to have you here today. Tell us a little bit about yourself, would you?

AUDREY:

Sure. Thank you, Jonathan, for inviting me to share a practice today. I live in Minneapolis and just retired from my full-time position as Cantor at a large Conservative synagogue. This was my 31st High Holidays, though I haven't been their full-time cantor for that length of time. I began my career as a music therapist and that work has greatly influenced my cantorate. While being a music therapist and a Cantor of a synagogue may seem very different, they're actually very much the same. In my COVID retirement I'm continuing to work a bit at the synagogue, and also have time to pursue my own Jewish studies, as well as to dig deeper into my passion for creating art. That's a little bit about me.

JONATHAN:

Thank you very much. That's wonderful. 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 practice with us now.

AUDREY:

As I said, music therapy greatly influences who I am as a Cantor. Another great influence in my life personally, and professionally has been IJS. I've been learning with this wonderful organization since 2002 or 2003. I'm not exactly sure what year I began, and I've continued to participate and receive amazing support and learning for all these years. It's because of IJS that I added a spiritual focus to my work at the synagogue, through chanting, meditation, a deepening into prayer practice, *tikkun middot*, learning and more. And you are truly blessed to be studying with my teacher Rabbi Jonathan Slater. When Jonathan asked me to do one of these podcasts, I immediately say yes.

And then I went to that usual negative self-talk: who am I to do one of those? What do I know of practice? I don't meditate regularly. I don't do yoga since I've retired. I'm not leading chanting and on and on and on. And I pondered it for quite a few days. Then one day in the shower, I found myself talking out loud, as I usually do, singing morning chants as I usually do, and answering questions that have been stirring within me, as I usually do. And I had a revelation: this was a prayer practice. I realized at that moment I was a shower davener, a shower pray-er. And I had been all my life. It's in that space that I totally let go. There are no distractions, no one there. The water releases my stress, my anxieties. I breathe in that space. I talk to the universe, to my soul, to that place where I believe the presence of God, of holiness, resides in me. And I often find the answers, and I often find clarity. It was in my shower practice that I came to realize what I wanted to share today.

I've found over the years that when I personally need something spiritually or emotionally, others often need it, too. And right now at this time, this moment, I need to be held in safety and in love. I want to rest in the arms of that which is bigger than me and know that I am being supported as I move through my day. So today, I offer a sacred chanting practice to open us, to asking for what we need. The chants today are from our liturgy. One is from Psalms, one from the Prophet Isaiah, and one from our *siddur*. The music of the first two chants is by Shefa Gold, Rabbi Shefa Gold, my teacher, and the last one is mine.

I invite us all to close our eyes, if you're comfortable. Or soften your gaze down to the floor. And just let your breath move as freely and as easily as it wants.

[Sound of breathing]



With each breath, allow yourself to deepen a little more into whatever you're sitting upon a cushion, a chair, the floor, And see if you can release your shoulders, just ever so much, bit by bit with each breath. Release.

[Sound of breathing]

And we begin by calling out. Calling out from the depths of our souls, yearning to be heard. Using the words from Psalm 130. We say me ma McKim. Kara Tisa. Yeah.

Mi'ma'amakim keratikha YaH.

מִמַּעְמַקִּים קָרָאתִיךָ יְיָ

From the depths I called you. God.

[Chant continues multiple times]

One more time. We call out.

[One more repetition of the chant]

[sound of breathing]

Breathe into your heart. "From the depths I call to you, O God". Open to the words that you need to say, and the prayers that you need to speak aloud.

God, we ask for comfort for our souls. From when our hearts are heavy, when fear overwhelms, when anxiety overtakes, we ask for comfort from you. Isaiah says: "*Nachamu, nachamu ami* (נַחֲמוּ נַחֲמוּ עַמִּי), comfort, comfort My people". We ask you now, God: please comfort us.

Nachamu, nachamu ami (נַחֲמוּ נַחֲמוּ עַמִּי)

Perhaps we put our hands on our hearts to feel this sense of comfort.



Nachamu, nachamu ami (נַחֲמוּ נַחֲמוּ אִמִּי)

Breathe into your heart, the energy and the warmth of the chant. Allow comfort to seep in, and feel a loving embrace in your heart, and sit with it for a moment.

And finally, we ask you to be with us on our path. Help us feel your Presence, so we may have the courage to face, whatever is to be. Fill us with *bitachon*, with faith, faith that the spark of holiness within each of us, that piece of you, God, that each one of us has within, will carry us, support us, cherish us unconditionally with love and tenderness. These words from the last line of the prayer *Adon Olam: Adonai Li V'lo Ira* (ה' לי ולא אירא), God is with me. I need not fear

Adon Olam: Adonai Li V'lo Ira (ה' לי ולא אירא),

We breathe into our hearts a feeling of support, a sense of courage, a knowing, that we are not alone.

We called out, we asked for comfort and we feel your presence.

Barukh Atah Adonai, (בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה') blessed are you God, *Shome'a tefilateinu* (שׁוֹמֵעַ תְּפִילַתֵינוּ), who hears our prayers.

JONATHAN:

That was Cantor Audrey Abrams 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. 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.

