



Open My Heart:

Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Rabbi Hannah Dresner

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.

This week we're blessed to have with us Rabbi Hannah Dresner who is a friend, a student at a colleague. Hi Hannah. I'm so happy to have you here today. Would you like to tell us a little bit about yourself?

HANNAH:

Thank you for including me in this wonderful project. Jonathan, I live in Vancouver where I'm in my sixth year serving as rabbi of the oldest Jewish Renewal synagogue. At age 64, it's my first pulpit, having been ordained in 2014. For me, the rabbinate is a second vocation. Previously I taught visual arts in university, with an exhibition career. My artwork and teaching of art focused on multidisciplinary projects. And I approach my rabbinate with the same sense of being a weaver of many modalities. It's also for me in artistic expression.

JONATHAN:

Well, I'm very interested how that affects your practice. So I'm going to turn things over to you and thank you for sharing your prayer with us now.

HANNAH:

From an early age, *niggun*, a term referring to a legacy of mostly wordless melodies from the Hasidic tradition, has been my spiritual practice. It began as a ritual in the

family of my origin. My father was a scholar of Hasidism, and an avid collector of Hasidic melodies. And within Hasidic custom, we sang our way into the dark late on Shabbos afternoons, beginning with beautifully sung liturgical poems and moving to wordless melody when it became too dark to read. This close to the Sabbath is referred to as the *eit ratzon*, the hour of longing, because in that hour, there's a sense that the Sabbath will soon depart, our souls will sink back to their weekday aspects, and we'll be a little farther from access to God.

With that experience of these moving melodies in my growing up singing *niggunim* has continued as the best expression of my life with God. And while I've often sung in community, my daily practice is solitary and takes place in the sanctuary of my car. It's like singing in the shower: my voice reverberates against the walls of that small sonic container; and I experience the echo of my voice as my deeper self, joining in, singing with me, or singing back to me. With the singing, sometimes my rationality and criticality quiets, so that I'm available to the still small voice of emotional truth that's always singing deeper within.

I start by settling into a quieter mind. If I sit quietly for long enough, the *niggun* begins as an internal song, something I hear in my head, and then feel rising in my throat. And usually it emerges of its own accord. And I sing the *niggun* as I'm able. On any given day, my practice might be contemplative, or it might be ecstatic, a refuge, or a supplication. At its best, it's cathartic.

And eventually, whether softly or abruptly, the *niggun* comes to an end and I'm quiet again, unaware of the car or life outside the car. I put words to rest singing an unlanguageable mystery. Then I put voice to rest, and the *niggun* resonates inside the cavity of my body, while sometimes I experienced glimmers of understanding, which I might be able to articulate somewhere down the road.

I experience this quiet at the end of the practice to be calmer than the quiet in which I began. I'd say the *niggun* is in service of this quiet. With the exertion, I often feel emptied, and it gives me pleasure to imagine I'm revisiting the primordial quiet before God created anything. I go about the creativity of my day.

For our practice together, I've chosen a simple *devekus niggun*, a melody for cleaving to the Holy One. In the Hasidic world, it's known as *Tzam'ah lekha naphshi* (צמאה לך נפשי), and it's probably of old Lubavitch origin. Many *niggunim* are associated with verses from



Psalms, originally sung to those words. Then the words drop out. But for those who know the association, the melody continues to evoke the meaning of particular verses. *Tzam'ah lekha naphshi* is an adaptation of two verses from Psalm 64:

<i>ken bakodesh chazikitikha, lir'ot uz'kha ukh'vodekha</i>	כֹּן בְּקֹדֶשׁ חֲזִיתִךָ לְרֵאוֹת עֵינֶיךָ וּכְבוֹדֶךָ
<i>tzam'ah l'kha naphshi, kamah l'kha v'sari</i>	צָמְאַחַ לְךָ נַפְשִׁי כָּמָה לְךָ בְּשָׂרִי

May I behold you in the Holy place, to apprehend your vitality and your grandeur. My soul is parched for you. My body rises to you in yearning.

The melody of the *niggun* carries the longing expressed by the Psalmist. And it's my own longing that attracts me to it and makes me want to explore it, approaching it, feeling it around the edges, getting into it, getting lost in it, maybe releasing into it, and ultimately settling and sitting right there in the Kodesh, the Holy Place of the psalm and of the melody, whatever that is, wherever that is for me on a given day.

My invitation to you all is to join me, as you're able, listening to the melody once through, then singing, even imperfectly, until you hit your own groove. In a beautiful treatise on prayer. The Piaseczna Rebbe, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, teaches: If, at first you have had to make music for your soul, bit by bit, you will feel your soul begin to sing for herself. At first, it will be work, a conscious effort to integrate the melody and keep it going. But with practice, and maybe that doesn't come in this brief taste, I hope you come to experience your souls begin to sing for themselves.

With that, I'll start in silence, letting the *niggun* arise as it desires, and follow it till I've created a bit of a sanctuary to sit in. Then I'll sit in the *niggun*, as it were, letting it reverberate till its second life quiets. And then, ideally, I would sit longer to see what might arise.

Somewhere toward the start. I'm going to sing the words from Psalm 63, so you can hear them, especially that word *tzam'ah*: "I'm parched; Oh, I'm parched." Then my intention is to sing melody only. But I admit that with this *niggun*, sometimes that word *tzam'ah* wants to return.



[silence]

[singing]

<i>ken bakodesh chazikitikha, lir'ot uz'kha ukh'vodekha</i>	כּוּ בְקֹדֶשׁ חֲזִיתִךָ לְרֵאוֹת עֲזָךָ וּכְבוֹדֲךָ
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Yai-lala-lalala....

[silence]

May it be so.....

JONATHAN:

That was Rabbi Hannah Dresner 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.

