



Open My Heart:

Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Rabbi Susan Leider

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 are blessed to have with us Rabbi Susan Leider, who is a colleague, a student and a friend. Hey Susan, I'm happy to have you here. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

SUSAN:

Sure. So I live in Sausalito, California, an amazing place to be and an amazing place to work as a rabbi at Congregation Kol Shofa, in a little town called Tiburon, just North of where I live. And a life-changing experience for me has been the impact that the Institute for Jewish Spirituality has had on my life. And I want to share today, specifically, one practice that – while I was aware of for years and years, as someone with a prayer life and certainly a rabbi – this practice really came alive for me through the Institute, and through being freed, I would say, by understanding that this practice is truly living in my body. It's really living in my life. It's not something separate. It's not something that lives in a prayer book. It's not something that has to go in order.

And so each day, what this means for me as this practice unfolds, it's different. Each day it's fresh. Each day it teaches me something new. Each day I'm surprised – maybe sometimes even disappointed, which I'll explain a little bit about, too.

So the rabbis in our tradition really envisioned that the moment that we either opened our eyes, or had some experience of consciousness after coming out of sleep, that that would immediately be an opportunity for blessing; for awareness; for an

acknowledgement of what a miracle it is that consciousness comes back to us,, even at three in the morning. And doesn't necessarily to be at the time we're supposed to wake up. Right. But whenever it is that that happens, even though there's that deep disappointment of waking up at 3:00 AM often, instead of at the time that I had wanted to – this practice of *Birkhot Hashachar*, literally the Blessings of the Dawn – regardless of whenever we wake up, dawn or after, is a practice that is transformative each and every day.

And so what I want to do today is, I want to share this with you, what this looks like in my life. And what this is going to look like, you'll be hearing me share some blessings in Hebrew. I will also give you my own kind of free translation of what those blessings mean. But, even more important for me, I'm also gonna give you the context in which I'm saying these blessings. What is my body doing at that point? I'm going to describe that to you. I'm going to tell you how you're feeling at that point in the morning. What my next steps might be, what are my worries, my frustrations or joys or anticipations of the day.

So, here I go with my Birkhot Hashachar, my morning blessing, um, spiritual practice and what this looks like.

As I roll over in my bed, I feel that familiar pulling of that not quite pain, but sensation in my right hip. That familiar reminder that I suffered a bout of sciatica this year. It is still with me, but I know what it is. And I roll over and I, and I say to myself:

Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheynu melekh ha'olam, hanotein lasekhvi vinah, l'havchin bein yom u'vein laylah.

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם. אשר נתן לשכוי בינה להבחין בין יום ובין לילה

Thank you, God, that even through my hip today, I'm able to come to consciousness, and to distinguish between the sleep that I am coming out of and the day that I am coming into.

Oh, my left arm reaches over: there goes the alarm clock. Nice that I woke up before, then push the alarm clock off and roll over onto my left side. Again, conscious of my back, guiding me in every step. My awareness and gratitude for my back working.



And as I push up on my left side, I roll my back up, I unfurl my spine. I feel the miracle of each vertebrae unfolding.

Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheynu melekh ha'olam, zokeph kephuphum.

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם. זוקף כפופים :

Thank you, God, for this miracle of my spine unfolding.

Doesn't hurt as much as the hip. Oy, that's great. And then I rest my hands on my legs, prepare to stand up and to feel my feet on the wooden floor. And to be grateful for that nice small woolen rug that I have by my bed that feels warm and scratchy at the same time. And I press my feet into the floor, and I feel my body stand upright.

Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheynu melekh ha'olam, hameikhin mitz'adei gaver.

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם. המכין מצעדי גבר :

I feel my feet. I literally feel the ground from beneath my feet. That's the meaning of that blessing: Praise are you, O Divine One, who makes whatever I'm standing on actually firm.

And this is not just about my body. This is helping prepare me for the day, right? That wherever my foot may step, that I have the blessing of feeling the firmness beneath my feet and the miraculous experience of taking steps.

I try to turn my body in the very narrow space between my window and my bed. I reach for my glasses, new glasses, I might say. Happy about that. I pick them up, careful not to drop them on their face, scratch the new glasses. And I put them on. I have learned not to try to walk in the dark and my bedroom without my glasses on, the older I get. And I put my glasses on.

Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheynu melekh ha'olam, pokei'ach ivrim.

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם. פוקח עורים :



Blessed are you, God, who opens my eyes.

But maybe for me, this is the blessing of saying: Thank you, God, that I have glasses I can put on; that my eyes can work in conjunction with my feet, and carry me out of my bedroom as my husband continues to sleep as he does. We always get up at different times. So he's slumbering and I'm walking through my bedroom and going quietly out through the door, closing the door, coming into the room that I enter into in the morning.

And a variety of decisions come before me. What's next? Because while these blessings have a specific order that appears in the prayer book, the order of the blessings is not up to the prayer book. The order is up to me. The order is: what is the next thing that I am going to become aware of? What are the words and the blessings that come into my consciousness to name that experience in real time?

So, perhaps the next thing is that I notice that I'm thirsty and my water bottle, try to try to carry that with me.

Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheynu melekh ha'olam, she-hakol nih'yeh bid'vrao.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁהַכֹּל נִהְיֶה בְּדַבָּרוֹ

Thank you God, for all types of things that come into being, including water. Reminding myself that I need to drink water in the morning, I need to keep my body on track for all of the things that are going to flow and come through my body today. And that water is something that I'm aware of next that I need.

I look at the pile of clothes over on the chair. I've brought my clean laundry in that was hanging up in the garage; I didn't fold my laundry yesterday. And I thought, while there's many other things I should be doing, that pile caught my eye. I walked over to the pile and I picked up my clothes and I, I wanted to fold the clothes right there. I was barely awake. I wanted to fold the clothes. I pick up the clothes and as I'm folding them, instead of berating myself for folding clothes, instead of taking care of other things in the morning, I reflect on the blessing:

Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheynu melekh ha'olam, malbish arumim.



ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם. מלביש ערמים :

Thank you, God, for these clothes, for the ability that I have to own clothes. And not only to own that, to be able to put them on my body, to be able to make the decision of: Oh, what would I like to wear today out of this pile of clothes?

I then turn, of course, back to my back and say, I need to do my back exercises, right? Because that's part of caring for that spine. Being aware of the limitations of my body,

Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheynu melekh ha'olam, matir asurim.

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם. מתיר אסורים :

God, through doing these exercises I am literally freeing my body from being bound. I am allowing my spine to undulate in ways that will bring it health and hydration and life and health. And so through doing those exercises that I experience "*matir asurim* – who frees the bound. Am I a prisoner? No, but my body and my soul can feel imprisoned when that spine is not flowing. And so through those cat-cow exercises, or whatever it is that my physical therapist has given me to do, I'm connecting to that blessing through the action of my body.

Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheynu melekh ha'olam, ozer yisrael big'vurah.

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם. אוזר ישראל בגבורה :

Praised are you, God, who makes us strong.

And as press my arm back into that mat, do a little modified side plank, I marvel at the strength in my shoulder; at the realization that only two years ago I suffered from frozen shoulder, and now I'm able to be on this mat and I'm able to press into my arm. I'm able to open up my chest. I'm able to feel that sense of strength. That's another opportunity for gratitude. Another opportunity.

Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheynu melekh ha'olam, hanotein laya'eph ko'ach.



ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם. הנותן ליגוף כח :

By this time, I'm beginning to feel like my strength has been restored a little bit. I've opened my eyes. I folded some clothes. I'm doing some exercises. I'm connecting to gratitude for the way my body's functioning. Thank you God, who gives strength to those who are tired. So while I may have felt really, really tired when I first woke up, I'm now beginning to feel this awakening in my body. I'm experiencing these different things and moving.

Ah, I've reached up to my left. I feel a little bubble there on the eyelid. I think I have a little bit of oil caught on my eyelid. The optometrist warned me about this. It's an opportunity for another blessing.

Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheynu melekh ha'olam, hama'avir sheinah mei'eynai ut'numah mei'aph'apay.

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם. המעביר שנה מעיני ותנומה מעפפאי :

Thank you, God, for removing the sleep from my eyelids. Right? I'm noticing the sleep or the oil or the things that may be getting in my way, but as the day is starting, I'm going to be able to clear that a little bit. I'm going to be able to open my eyes and to be able to miraculously see and feel.

So, as I pause in this practice, I just want to share with you: I have not said every single blessing that's on page six in Siddur Sim Shalom, which is the name of the prayer book that I have in front of me. And you know what? It actually doesn't matter. Because tomorrow it's going to be different, just like it was different yesterday than it was from today. And in fact, one of our great medieval sages known as the Rambam, Maimonides, actually taught this.

He said, even though these blessings are going to appear in prayer books, and they're going to appear in different orders depending on what part of the world you might be looking at a prayer book in, or what era, the most organic way to bring this virtual practice into your life is to tie it to your own experience; is to literally kind of sanctify, to make Holy or separate out or name what you are going through. What I am going through in this moment related to these words that someone wrote a long time ago. But



you know what? That gratitude for the body working in our tradition is thousands of years old, but we are the ones who can make it come to life in our own embodied experience.

So, I'm going to close with a couple more. You could see that really this could go on throughout – and should, ideally, for me go on throughout – my whole day, all related, not to a book, but to my body, my soul, my breath.

So, I'm going to share another blessing.

Barukh atah Adonai, hagomel chasadim tovim l'amo yisrael.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' הַגּוֹמֵל חֲסָדִים טוֹבִים לְעַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Praised are You, O Divine Presence, who visits faithfulness and good love. Good love. And I am reflecting on my daughter having gotten married just several days ago. How is it that I can wake up on a Thursday morning and feel so much gratitude for this *chasadim tovim*, this amazing, loving experience of being able to witness my child, getting married as an adult, in the physical presence of family; in the virtual presence, the miracle of having hundreds of people come to this wedding who were not able to be with us physically during this time of COVID. This is *chasadim tovim*, right. I'm thinking about that moment just a few days ago and how grateful I am.

Barukh atah Adonay, m'kadesh et shimkhah barabbim.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' מְקַדֵּשׁ אֶת שִׁמְךָ בְּרַבִּיִּם

I'm getting ready to think about the world and think about the work I have to do. And stepping out from the private to the public, even virtually. Praised are you, God, who sanctifies, who sets apart Your Name. Where, where does this happen that God's name is made known, that God's presence is pervasive throughout space and time? it happens *barabbim*: it happens when we step from the private to the public. It happens when I get ready to transition from all these personal inner experiences and blessings to actually turning the computer back on, logging into zoom. I'm back in *rabbim*, I'm back in the public sphere, in a place where I'm now going to be interacting with other human beings. I'm going to be responsible for my language. I'm going to be responsible for listening and communicating and taking action, *barabbim*, in the public sphere.



So, I'm so grateful to be able to share with you a little inner window into my morning blessing practice. And I hope that you can see through this, this is something that I lived many years of my life not knowing would be so possible, so organic, so okay. So okay to be different each day, or to be individually me through this practice. But now it's something that flows every day, even when it's different from the day before. So I want you to give it a try and see what it feels like to name those moments as your day unfolds.

JONATHAN:

That was Rabbi Susan Leider leading us in their person 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.

