



Open My Heart:

Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Rabbi Yosef Goldman

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 Yosef Goldman, who is a colleague and a friend. Hi Yosef, happy to have you here with us this week. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

YOSEF:

Thank you, Jonathan. Rabbi Yosef Goldman. I am prayer leader, educator, singer, and composer. I am currently senior advisor to Hadar’s “Rising Song Institute”, and I lead prayer at temple Beth Zion-Beth Israel here in Philadelphia.

JONATHAN:

That's great I'm really excited to be part of your practice. So I'm going to turn it over to you and thank you for sharing your practice with us now.

YOSEF:

Thank you, Jonathan. I'm grateful to you and to IJS for inviting me here today. My prayer offering this morning is focused on finding presence in the context of relationship with a beloved. I'll be using meditation, discernment, extemporaneous prayer, and improvised song, based in the words *אָנִי לְפָנֶיךָ מוֹדֶה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ / Modeh Ani Lephanecha*, and then the teachings of Rav Avraham Yitzhak HaKohen Kook, of blessed memory, in his commentary on the *siddur*, OLAT Re'YAH and also Rabbi Dov Singer, may he live in be well. He is the Rosh

Yeshivah of Yeshivat Mevor Chaim in Israel, and a pioneer in the field of spirituality and prayer, and has unique skill in developing a vocabulary of prayer, making accessible deep esoteric ideas about prayer and relationship with God. And I've had the pleasure of using his book "*Tikon Tefilati, Prepare My Prayer: Recipes to Awaken the Soul*" in my teaching about prayer and relationship with God, and in my own prayer life.

First, I'm going to give some context. Rav Kook, in his commentary on *Modeh Ani*, describes the path of spiritual awakening along which *Modeh Ani* guides us. As he describes it: We awaken spiritually to ourselves in the new day by situating ourselves in relation to God, to the One who is constantly renewing creation in goodness. We do this by first bringing our awareness back to the expressions of the life force that are constantly flowing; bringing awareness – in his words – to the exuberance of life, צהלת /tzahalat hachayyim, that each new day brings. In that awareness there is great joy. The vehicle for that joy is הודאה/hoda'ah, expressions of gratitude, of recognizing the great truths around us. But, *hoda'ah* is not only about acknowledging and orienting toward the *Ribbono shel Olam* [Master of the Universe]. Through the act of *Hoda'ah*, Rav Kook teaches, we find our אנכיות/anokhiyut, our sense of self, our I-ness, our uniqueness and infinite worth.

In contrast to the expensive stance of *hoda'ah*, Ravi Kook paints a picture of a default human small-mindedness, a self-centeredness, in which we experience ourselves as if we are separate, other from the rest of creation, from the source of all. Rav Kook warns that encountering the *Ribbono shel Olam* and the wonders of creation in this state of mind can actually be alienating and disempowering. He writes of a tendency to get caught up in comparisons, and alienation, a focus on our smallness and mortality, thinking that we are nothing when compared to the awesome powers of creation; how we are but a speck disappearing into the wholeness of existence.

When we say *Modeh ani*, and express *hoda'ah*, Rav Kook teaches, it brings us into the fullness of love, produced through active relationship. It brings us into the fullness of love produced through active relationship. And the *neshamah*/נשמה (soul) is illuminated by it. We find in the stance of *Hoda'ah* a spaciousness, and we are filled with light and joy. Recognizing that we are a part of the source of life, *chelek elohah mima'al*/חלק אלה ממעל [a portion of Divinity from above], our inner light is activated and in Rav Kook's words, the light of the inner intellect, *or hasekhel hap'nimi*/אור השכל הפנימי, is lifted up to recognize the light and the brilliance which are at the foundation of life, *or hachayyim*/אור החיים. Our own light, like the light of all life and existence, flows from the spring of goodness and its source, from the source of transcendent loving kindness,



which pours out abundant life to all of the world and its creation. This reminds me of the words of Dar Williams [in "After All"]: "Well, the sun rose with so many colors, it nearly broke my heart. It worked me over like a work of art. And I was a part of all that." So, we come back in touch with our *anokhiyut*, our I-ness, with our state of self, through attending to our relationship with the Source of Life. And so much of Rav Singer's book is focused on exercises that explore the contours of that relationship.

The second part of my prayer practice this morning will be one of those exercises, as presented in an entry that he calls. "*Ani-Atah-V'hu*/אני-אתה-והוא, I-You-and-They".

Hear is my translation:

Barukh Atah Adonai/ בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', You, Adonai, are the source of blessing – it's me, who is speaking to You

To you.

The speaking between us differs from day to day, in every moment, because I am constantly changing. And also you are revealed to me in your infinite facets. When I stand in prayer, I wonder who is the "I" that is directing intention toward You. I search for Your face. I feel out "Who are You?" It's possible, Rav Singer writes, to start from "I". Close your eyes is the exercise that he recommends; sit in silence for a bit; and breathing slowly, see if you can sense yourself in this moment, like you're feeling what gives expression to who you are in this moment. From there will emerge the precise attuned address for prayer.

Again, checking in, sensing where you are, opening up to what is giving expression to who you are in this moment. And I love this: allowing to emerge the precise attuned address for prayer. Starting with the "I": I am – who is the "I"? And You? That's what he's calling deep attuned address. For example: "I am sad, and you are joy itself". Or maybe: "I am sad, and you contain my sadness". Or perhaps: "I am sad, and you are indifferent".

Sometimes, though, I'm not so connected to myself. The sense of "I" is dimmed. And then, Rav Singer writes, it is worth trying the opposite: to start with sensing the "You", and from there, the, "I" will become clear. "You are ..." what emerges there? And "I", question-mark? For example: "You are truth itself, and I am full of lies". Or maybe: "You



are truth itself, and I'm trying, I'm making an effort". Or perhaps: "You are truth itself, and I, I am a tiny droplet of truth".

Speaker 1 ([11:57](#)):

So, here's the practice that I will offer. After a moment of breathing and checking in with my body, I will start by bringing it to mind one concrete example of the exuberance of life that I have experienced this day, offer an expression of gratitude for that. Then I will open up my channels of prayer through improvising a melody for the words of *Modeh ani lephanekha*. It's a powerful practice to just open your mouth and see what sounds come out; what is the expression of prayer that is wanting to be expressed, whether it's an improvised melody, or seeing what verse or prayer wants to emerge, and speaking it, or singing it with even a familiar melody, but allowing what melody that is to arise in the moment. After I improvise a *Modeh ani* melody, I'll come back to my body. Notice the opening, the softening, what has changed in me through this expression of *hoda'ah*?

I will then offer a sort of extemporaneous prayer based in Rav Shagar's [sic; Rav Singer was intended] writing. I'll sit in discernment and ask myself first: who is the "I" that is present here today? And allow to emerge the precise attuned address. "I am", and who is the "You"? And I will reverse it: "You are ... and I?"

Finally I'll sit for a moment to internalize that prayer, and then return to the *Modeh Ani* improvisation to close.

I'll find an upright, comfortable position; scan my body; notice the floor and the chair beneath me; bring my awareness to the breath.

What's coming to mind is my drive taking my daughter to school this morning, along the Schuylkill River here in Philadelphia. It's a very foggy morning. We were discussing the fog, noticing the way that the fog softens the image of the world around us, awakening as the morning grows lighter and lighter. And our horizon is shortened, noticing as we drive: the trees that were covered in fog emerging, full of color, the yellows, the orange, the red, purples and greens. So the return of life this morning was softer, is soft and a little wet.

And so I say: You, *Ribbono shel Olam*, thank you for bringing the world back in a softened way this morning.



[singing]

Modeah ani lephanekha

מוֹדָה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ

Thankful am I before You

[silence]

Modeh ani: It is I. Today I am ... excited and overwhelmed by all the work that is upon us to heal this broken world. And You? ... You are the all-powerful creator was eagerly waiting, to receive our efforts, our *hishtadlut*/הִשְׁתַּדְּלוּת, meet us, to support us.

Notice how it feels to speak that, and hear it spoken.

[silence]

And You?

[silence]

You are feeling the pain of constriction

You are suffering is your world suffers.

And I?

I am comforted, sitting in the space of the brokenness and the heartache, knowing that we sit there together.

Ribbono shel olam, dear one, holy one. Here I am. This is me. This is who I am today. May it be Your will, *rabbah emunatekha*, to give me strength to carry out what I was put on this earth to do on this day; my unique *avodah* (service) for this day. May I know throughout this day that my light is a piece of your light. All of life force I see around me, it surrounds me also fills me.



Modeah ani lephanekha, melekh chai v'kayyam, shehechezarta bi nishmati b'chemlah, rabbah emunatekha.

מוֹדָה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ חַי וְקַיִם. שְׁחַזַרְתָּ בִּי נְשָׁמָתִי בְּחַמְלָה. רַבָּה אֱמוּנָתְךָ

Thankful am I, Living and Enduring Sovereign, who has returned my soul to me with compassion. Your faithfulness is great.

JONATHAN:

That was rabbi Yosef, Goldman sharing his practice with us today, which was so moving 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.

