



Open My Heart:

Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Rabbi Danielle Upbin

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 Danielle Upbin, who is a student, a colleague, and a friend. Hi Danielle. I'm so happy to have you with us here today. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

DANIELLE:

Thank you, Jonathan. It is such a pleasure to be here and, really an honor. I'm a Conservative rabbi in a congregation. I'm a community educator as well. And I have found that the work that I learned at IJS has completely transformed my rabbinate in a way that has allowed me to bring out what I feel are my true gifts and I'm still learning what they are. But, definitely I began a new journey when I was part of the rabbinic cohort, -- the third rabbinic cohort, oh, so many years ago – that the work that I began there has really blossomed for me, and helped direct my work that I do today. I'm a teacher of meditation and mindfulness practice, Jewish mindfulness practice. I'm always connecting the material to the text and to our prayer book and to our Jewish rituals and Jewish life.

I became a yoga instructor, so I'm a certified yoga instructor, which is fun because that's something I could do with the community, but also just studio work. And I always feel like I'm bringing that IJS teaching with me, you know, to the studio, in terms of connecting the spirit and the mind and the body, and bringing my full attention to each breath and each movement. And I'm a singer as well, and I'm a prayer leader in my synagogue. And so, I've done some recording work and recently two new pieces that

took me a long time to really get out, to be recorded, and have the confidence to actually put videos along with them, as a gift to the community. So, I feel like in many ways my rabbinate is evolving. But the mainstay, and what is even flourishing, is this connection to mindfulness, teaching and practice of study and of prayer. And so, for that, I am very grateful to IJS for putting me on that path. I have four children and my husband's a rabbi as well. So, we're all involved in together trying to help each other, stay calm and focused, in this, these crazy times that we're living in

JONATHAN:

Well, I'm really excited to hear how all that comes together in your practice. So going to turn things over to you and thank you for sharing your practice with us now.

DANIELLE:

Thanks. So, what I'd like share with you is my approach to מוֹדָה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ / *modeh ani liphaneckha* or מוֹדָה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ / *modah ani lephaneckha*, if you are a female saying this, but really either one. It's the first prayer that we say in the morning. Like literally when we're still in bed, our tradition directs us to articulate a word of gratitude. And that's the very first thing we say: thank you. I wanted to bring this practice that I've adopted for מוֹדָה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ / *modeh ani liphaneckha* so we can practice it together. And again, while מוֹדָה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ / *modeh ani liphaneckha* was created, the intention was to be said, when we first get out of bed in the morning or while we're even still in bed, I think it's perfectly legitimate to bring the prayer to whenever we're ready to sit down with intention to pray. And as I've learned from my teachers at IJS, I think it's comfortable to bring that practice of prayer and meditation into a chair and not to, you know, worry about props, but simply to feel comfortable where we are.

And so, I bring this prayer experience to us now, not just as like the first thing that you do in the morning, but this is something that like I have definitely done in the middle of the day, or later in the morning, when I'm like ready to focus and be intentional about prayer. It could even be done at night, quite frankly, because it's whenever we feel we're ready to pull ourselves together with intention in prayer.

What I'd like to take you through is a practice of this one beautiful line of prayer, and see it, practice it as three parts. The first part is about simple gratitude, whatever arises. The second part is going a little more deeply into gratitude for the breath, and connecting to the spirit, which is the intention of this prayer. We're saying, thank you God, for returning my soul to me. The connection being: my breath is my connection to my soul. And so



how do I thank God for my soul? Oh, I thank God for this breath; this breath, that returns moment to moment, and keeping my attention on that in the prayer practice. And then the final part, the third part is, is a commitment, actually; is recognizing the end of the prayer, רַבָּה אֱמוּנָתְךָ / *Rabbah emunatekha*, great is your faith. And I think this might be my favorite line in all of prayer, where we recognize, or I recognize, that I'm saying to God, "Great is your faith". God has faith? I have faith, you have faith, but we in this prayer, we're recognizing that God has faith in us. God has faith in me. And so, in that last part of this, of the prayer practice, is to we think about and consider: what does God have faith in me to do? What is it that I could commit to, or recognize in this moment, as a *kavvanah*, as an intention for this day? Is there something that I could do or say or recognize to bring into my life?

What is my purpose? What is the purpose and what is the plan and what can I do? And so, it's taking the prayer from prayer and breath into action. That's what I really love about returning to this prayer again and again: because there seems to be, there feels like there's a call to do something with the recognition and the moment that we, that we create. It's more than just this moment. It's taking the moment into the day.

And because מוֹדָה אֲנִי / *modah ani* is so well known, a lot of people like to sing it. And you may have your own melody that you love. There's so many different ones. Sometimes I just make up my own, even though there's so many that I love. When I'm feeling like real deep into my own prayer, I may just chant it the way I'm feeling it.

So that's what I plan to do: is open with the chant of

modah ani lephanekhah, melekh chai v'kayyam, she-hechezarta bi nishmati b'chemlah rabbah emunatekhah.

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

Thank you God, living and enduring God. Thank you. Thank you for returning my soul to me. Great is your faith.

So, I chant it. I tend to pray in Hebrew, but if you have a *siddur*, or if you're used to saying the words, accustomed to seeing the words in English, by all means would suggest you say the words as you would. But I'll take us, guide us through the practice



the way that I would typically do it. I'm just going to grab a *siddur* here, so I'm set. Most times I don't need it, but you never know. Usually I don't for this prayer.

So, I'm getting into a comfortable, seated position. I like to feel that my feet are connected to the ground. To me, that's important in a prayer practice: to feel connected, connected, and rooted. And I'm not just a swirling sort of thought-bundle, but that I'm a living human integrated being with a body. And so, connecting the feet to the floor; settling in; feeling the support of the chair beneath me. Feeling the support of the chair. Spine straight and elongated; feeling my head floating above my neck; shoulders releasing away from the ears. Deep inhale and exhale. And another deep inhale and exhale for more than good measure.

And connecting to the energy cycle. Feeling one line of energy from the bottom of the soles of my feet, rising up through the earth, as I connect myself to this living earth that we live on. Drawing energy up through the spine, opening up the heart center in gentle uplifts in the chest. Deep inhale and exhale out through the crown center. Eyes are closed or with a gentle gaze. And for this prayer, I always find it's helpful to have a gentle smile because this is about gratitude

We begin with the chant:

[singing]

modah ani lephanekhah, melekh chai v'kayyam, she-hechezarta bi nishmati b'chemlah rabbah emunatekhah.

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

Thank you God, living and enduring God. Thank you. Thank you for returning my soul to me. Great is your faith.

מוֹדָה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ / *modah ani lephanekhah*. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you for the blessings of my life, for my children, for the opportunities to learn and grow.

Thank you. Thank you for helping me recognize where I need to be, and to leave the places where I don't need to be. Thank you. Thank you, God.



Sometimes it helps not to say exactly out loud, but just to think, and to let the mind and the spirit process the gratitudes as they bubble up. Let's take a few minutes here, just a few cycles of breath really is all we need to allow the gratitude to bubble up. Whatever it is. Not hanging on or judging what it is that we're grateful for. Letting them bubble up and arise and float, accompany, surround.

[silence]

Thank you. Thank you.

modah ani lephanekhah, melekh chai v'kayyam

מוֹדָה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ חַי וְקַיִם

...living enduring spirit of the world, sovereign of the world. I connect with both ideas. They feel different. They complement one another.

modah ani lephanekhah, melekh chai v'kayyam, she-hechezarta bi nishmati b'chemlah

מוֹדָה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ רוּחַ חַי וְקַיִם. שֶׁהִחְזַרְתָּ בִּי נִשְׁמָתִי בְּחַמְלָה

God, you restored my soul to me and compassion. This is an opportunity, now, to connect with the breath, more deeply. Inhale and exhale [sound of exhale]. Feeling the fullness of breath. Noticing the flow of breath, how it feels in my body: the rise and fall of the chest, the expanding and contracting of the belly, the side body, the back. Feeling the breath as continuous, life giving, and nurturing; as an extension of the Divine that is living and enduring.

Taking a few cycles of breath here to be fully intentional, noticing the breath. Feeling the breath in the body. Even extending the blessing of breath out through the heart center, out through the crown. Sharing the blessing of breath with the earth, with my loved ones, with people I don't know. Connecting to the intention of breath and spirit and gratitude.

[silence]



This brings us the last two words of this beautiful prayer: רַבָּה אֱמוּנָתְךָ /*Rabbah emunatekha*, great is your faith O God. Great is your faith. God you have faith in me. God has faith in us.

Taking these last few moments together, these last few cycles of breath that we share in this practice, to consider: what is God's faith in us? To feel what that faith feels like. What does God have faith in us to do?

And maybe allowing a vision of that faith to bubble up, a *kavvanah* maybe, for something that we can do today that is edifying, that fulfills this vision of faith in us. A kind word, an action, just the commitment to do something meaningful and fulfilling today. Something that resonates with God's faith in us. Sitting with this intention for the next few cycles of breath.

[silence]

[singing]

modah ani lephanekhah, melekh chai v'kayyam, she-hechezarta bi nishmati b'chemlah rabbah emunatekhah.

מוֹדָה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ חַי וְקַיִם. שֶׁהַחַזְרַת בִּי נִשְׁמָתִי בְּחֶמְלָה. רַבָּה אֱמוּנָתְךָ

If your eyes are closed, you may want to flutter them open. As we bring a smile to our faces, because we are ready to greet this day. Shalom, and thank you

JONATHAN:

That was Rabbi Danielle Upbin, sharing their personal 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.

