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# *Open My Heart:*

## *Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater*

**Rabbi Jordan Bendat-Appell**

### 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 Jordan Bendat-Appell, who is a colleague and a friend. Hey Jordan, I'm really happy to have you with us today. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

### JORDAN:

Thanks so much for the invitation to join you; really an honor to be offering this. I'm currently the director of Camp Ramah in Canada, but worked for the Institute for Jewish Spirituality for seven years before this. At the Institute, I did many things, including directing the Jewish Mindfulness Meditation Teacher Training. And I've been meditating since my early twenties, approaching my mid-forties now. For all that time, meditation has been a key part of how I've experienced prayer. And actually, the prayer practice I'm going to share today epitomizes for me that coming together of a mindfulness practice and Jewish practice of a more traditionally normative source. So, you know, even though I'm in the Jewish camping world, this is still such a central part of my life and really informs everything I do and is infused into the way I do this work. So, this kind of prayer practice is a key part of that.

### JONATHAN:

Well, that's very intriguing, and I'm really happy to be able to be part of your practice. So I'm going to turn things over to you and thank you for sharing your prayer with us now.

## JORDAN:

So, the practice I'd like to share today has been one that I've been really going into quite deeply for, oh, a good dozen plus years. It's one that comes from the traditional prayer book, the traditional liturgy, and just follows Birkhot Hashachar, and kind of is smushed in there in the traditional liturgy, right before Pesukei D'zimra really starts.

The title of it is Kabbalat Ol Malkhut Shamayim, accepting the sovereignty of heaven. I'd like to just talk through it a little bit first, and then we'll go through it together as a kind of example or taste of what it's like to engage in it, not just as something to talk about, but to really experience as a practice.

One of the reasons I, I love working with this piece of the liturgy is that it's, relatively speaking, quite short and has a kind of a *shlaymut*, a kind of wholeness to it as it's composed. I find it to be really helpful, especially when my time for practice is quite limited, as it almost always is. It gives me an opportunity to bring a mindfulness practice and the kind of seeds of prayer into my heart, into my body, into my mind. To touch upon these different spiritual truths, all of which I could very easily lose track of if I don't remind myself of them. And so I go through it and I touch upon these different spiritual truths, and then each step along the way I'm breathing. I'm really trying to enter into the words through my, my body. I'm feeling it each step along the way. So, that's probably enough to say as an introduction.

The prayer begins – again, the title is Kabbalat Ol Malkhut Shamayim (קבלת עול מלכות שמים) – and the translation is “accepting the sovereignty of heaven”, but literally it's “accepting the yoke of the sovereignty of heaven”. I like to focus on that word “yoke” to begin with, because to me it's really a substantial word that actually sets the tone for the whole prayer experience. This metaphor of yoke, and really accepting a yoke upon yourself, is one that at first glance, I know I'm resistant to it, because it feels sort of like about subjugation, or just feeling the weight of something on you and it's weighing you down. But when we enter it into this metaphor a bit more deeply, and reflect upon: what is the purpose of a yoke? The purpose of a yoke is to take an animal; we attach to the yoke to that animal, and then we're able to use the strength, the power of that animal in a productive way. We can use that animal energy to plow a field, to bring food into the world.



And so, for me, when I come into this practice, I touch upon that idea of all of yoke as essential: that I'm really going into this with the sense that I can harness my animal energies towards a productive good; I can take the energy in my body, in my psyche, in my emotions. And that energy, if it's not well-directed, it can be harmful in all kinds of ways, or just not helpful. And really the purpose of this prayer is to harness it, so that the energy is, can have an outcome that's life-affirming; like putting a yoke on an animal could help bring crops.

So, I begin with that and I touch that truth and just remind myself of it. And then I go onto the next piece:

*L'olam yehei adam yerei shamayim baseter u'vagalui, umodeh al ha'emet, v'doveir emet bilvavo, v'yashkem v'yomar*

לְעוֹלָם יְהֵא אָדָם יִרָא שָׁמַיִם בְּסֵתֶר וּמוֹדֶה עַל הָאֱמוּנָה וְדוֹבֵר אֱמוּנָת בְּלִבּוֹ וַיִּשְׁכֵּם וַיֹּאמֶר :

A person should always be God-fearing privately and publicly, acknowledging the truth, and speaking it in one's heart.

With this piece, I'm moving into reminding myself that I should really be leading with truth with the quality of *emet*. Really, a commitment to honest looking. And as the words lay out here, there's an element in which we should assume that we will naturally try to hide from the truth, that we will try to deceive ourselves or others. And I'm reminded as I touch upon these words, and bring them into my body, that this quality of *emet* is so essential, because inherently we have blind spots and we are predisposed to avoiding all kinds of truth. And so, with these words of prayer I am setting my intention to come into this practice from the perspective of *emet*, of honest looking. And I know that requires courage, and commitment, and returning back to it over and over again.

From that place of *emet*, I then move on to the next part of the prayer:

*Ribbon kol ha'olamim, lo al tzidkoteinu anachnu mapilim tachanuneinu lephanekha, ki al rachamekha harabbim*

רְבוֹן כָּל הָעוֹלָמִים לֹא עַל צְדָקוֹתֵינוּ אֲנַחְנוּ מַפִּילִים תַּחֲנוּנֵינוּ לְפָנֶיךָ כִּי עַל רַחֲמֶיךָ הַרְבִּים



Master of all worlds, not because of our righteousness do we lay our pleas before You, but because of your great compassion.

I find this to be the perfect follow-up to the piece that came right before it. Because when I connect with this quality of *emet*, I very quickly realize, as I said – there are all kinds of truths to my life that I'd rather not look at. They can be painful. I'm aware of my own limitations. I'm aware of the ways in which I have tried to do good or better, and I have fallen short. I'm aware of the ways in which I've hurt people. And so this piece here – *Lo al tzikoteinu*, not because our righteousness – is still helpful, because it kind of short circuits that potential of saying, “Ah, when I'm honest, I realize I'm really not that great”. You know, what do I do with that? There's nothing to do with it. I'm just not such a good person. I've tried to do better, but I didn't do it. But here I'm saying it's *lo al tzidkoteinu*: it doesn't depend upon being a righteous person. It doesn't depend upon being a good person, even. But rather, I'm submitting myself to the divine compassion. It's not about earning it. It's not about deserving it. So, I feel that part and take it as a beautiful gift of granting permission to come into this experience of prayer, wholly and fully.

Then the next two parts of the prayer are just these exquisite expressions of two truths that operate in parallel, and that one might think are mutually exclusive. But they're brought together.

First, the first truth here:

*Mah anachnu, meh chayyeinu, meh chasdeinu, mah tzidkoteinu, mah yish'einu, mah kocheinu, mah g'vuroteinu? Mah nomar lephanekha Adonai Eloheinu v'Eilohei avoteinu v'imoteinu? Halo kol hagibborim k'ayin lephanekha, v'anshei hashem k'lo hayu, v'chakhamim k'vli da'at, un'vonim k'vli haskel? Ki rov ma'aseihem tohu lephanekha, v'yemei chayyeihem hevel lephanekha, ki motar ha'adam min habeheimah ayin, ki hakol havel.*

מה אנחנו מה חיינו מה חסדנו מה צדקנו מה ישענו מה פחנו מה גבורתנו. מה נאמר לפניך ה' אלהינו ואלהי אבותינו ואמותינו, הלא כל הגבורים כאין לפניך ואנשי השם כלא היו וחכמים כבלי מדע ונבונים כבלי השכל כי רב מעשיהם תהו וימי חיייהם הבל לפניך. ומותר האדם מן הבהמה אין כי הכל הבל:



What are we? What are our lives? What is our loving kindness? What is our righteousness? What is our salvation? What is our strength? What is our might? What shall we say before You, our God and God of our ancestors? Are not all the mighty like nothing before you? The people of renown, famous people, as if they'd never been? The wisest, as if they know nothing? And the understanding, as if they lack intelligence? For their many works are in vain, and the days of their lives are like a fleeting breath, *hevel*, before You. The preeminence of the human over the animal is nothing, for all is, but a fleeting breath.

This paragraph, which draws so heavily upon Kohelet, and I should say that also much of this prayer is found not only in our weekday morning prayers, but also in the Ne'illah Yom Kippur prayers. And we see why right here: because we're really setting a context of impermanence, of mortality. We're holding up the most powerful, most successful, most wise, most famous people – and we're saying it's as if they didn't even exist. You know, what's even the difference between a human life and an animal life? It's nothing because all is but a fleeting breath.

And so, we're affirming this reality, which we may not want. I know I often don't want it! When I reflect upon this deeply and I touch upon this reality of my own mortality and the mortality of those around me, and especially the people that I love, it's quite scary. But this is truth, nonetheless. And so I come into this part of prayer with the courage that must come with honest looking. I look at this truth and I bring it inside and I let myself feel it; feel that sense of emptiness, that sense of releasing and letting go into the vast emptiness of this universe, the vast flow that's so much bigger than my life.

In this frame, coming into this context, really changes how I see all the things that I'm struggle with day by day. And so on a typical morning, I come into this prayer, and I may be thinking about that meeting I have at two o'clock, and I'm worried about it. But when I really touch this prayer, and bring it inside, and feel it, and let go into it, it reframes and shifts how I see the work of the day. And so the meeting at 2:00 PM is just held in a different context, a much broader field.

And so we could imagine that the prayer would end there, but it doesn't. It goes into the second truth. The second truth begins with, ah, such a sweet word: the three-letter word *aval* (אבל), but.



*Aval anachnu amkha b'nei vritekha, b'nei avraha, ohavkha sheh-nishbata lo b'har hamori'ah, zera yitzchak yechido she-ne'ekad al gabei hamizbei'ach, adat ya'akov binkha b'chorekha sheh-me'ahavatkha sheh-ahavta oto umi'simchatkha sheh-samachta bo karata at sh'mo yisrael v'yeshurun.*

אָבֵל אֲנַחְנוּ עַמְּךָ בְּנֵי בְרִיתְךָ. בְּנֵי אַבְרָהָם אֲהַבְּךָ שֶׁנִּשְׁבַּעְתָּ לוֹ בְּהַר הַמֹּרִיָּה. זֶרַע יִצְחָק יְחִידוֹ.  
שֶׁנִּיְעַקֵּד עַל גְּבֵי הַמִּזְבֵּחַ. עַדֵּת יַעֲקֹב בְּנֵדָד בְּכוֹרְךָ. שֶׁמֵּאַהֲבַתְּךָ שֶׁאַהֲבַתְּ אוֹתוֹ וּמִשְׂמֵחַתְּךָ שֶׁשְׂמַחְתָּ בוֹ.  
קָרָאתָ אֶת שְׁמוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל וְיֵשׁוּרוּן:

*Aval*, but, or “yet”, we are your people, the children of your covenant, the children of Abraham, your beloved to whom you made a promise on Mount Moriah; the offspring of Isaac, Abraham's only one, who was bound on the altar; the congregation of Jacob, your firstborn son, whom because of the love with which you loved him and the joy with which you rejoice in him, you called Ya'akov and Yeshurun.

This part, to me, offers such a beautiful and such a Jewish counterpoint, or second truth, that we're holding simultaneously or in parallel with the first truth of *Mah Ahu*, of “what are we”. Because here we're affirming that we do matter; we are loved; that we are connected in this chain of brit, of covenant, a chain of connection. The language in this paragraph is warm. It's loving, it's sort of schmaltzy, just kind of homey in a sense.

And as I go through this, and I live in it, I'm connecting with each of these ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And truthfully, you know, many days I'm resonating with different elements of their stories, feeling the love and sense of commitment that comes with feeling part of that brit, that covenant. With Isaac being bound on the altar, often I'm reflecting upon how I have suffered and how our people have suffered so much. It helps me redouble my efforts to take that suffering and bring something positive, healing, holy into the world that comes from it. But it's acknowledging that suffering, that feeling bound. And with, Yaacov that sense of really feeling singled out, really feeling connected, going back to that namesake of Yisrael:

*Ki sarita im Elohim v'im anashim vatukhal*

כִּי שָׂרִיתָ עִם אֱלֹהִים וְעִם אָנָשִׁים וַתּוֹכֵל:

You have striven with beings divine and human, and you're able to do it.



It's affirming to me that I'm able to be in this wrestling match, this beautiful holy wrestling match, to suffuse with the quality of love. And here, I often think of it not only as *ahavah* love, but also of *chesed*, a kind of covenantal, committed love.

So those two truths are there. And then we go into the next part, which really is saying: Okay, we have these two truths operating simultaneously. Now what? What do we do with it?

*Lephikhakh* (לְפִיכָךְ), therefore,

*Anachnu chayyavim l'hodot l'kha ul'shabei'khaka ul'pha'erkha ul'varekh ul'kadesh v'latet shevach v'hodayah lishmekha. Ashreinu, mah tov chelkeinu, umah na'im goraleinu., umah yaphah y'rushateinu. Ashreinu sheh-anachnu mashkimim u'ma'arivim erev vavoker v'omrim pa'amayim b'khol yom:*

אֲנַחְנוּ חַיָּבִים לְהוֹדוֹת לָךְ וּלְשַׁבַּחְךָ וּלְפָאֵרְךָ וּלְבָרַךְךָ וּלְקַדֵּשׁ וּלְתַתּוֹת שְׂבַח וְהוֹדָיָה לְשִׁמְךָ : אֲשֶׁרִינוּ מֵהַ  
טוֹב חֶלְקֵנוּ וּמֵהַ נְעִים גּוֹרְלֵנוּ וּמֵהַ יָפָה יְרֻשָׁתֵנוּ : אֲשֶׁרִינוּ שֶׁאֲנַחְנוּ מְשֻׁכְּמִים וּמְעַרְיָבִים עֶרֶב וּבֹקֵר  
וְאוֹמְרִים פְּעַמִּים בְּכָל יוֹם :

Therefore it is our duty to thank you God, to praise, glorify, bless, sanctify, and give praise and thanks to your Name. Happy are we: *Ashreinu, mah tov chelkeinu*, how good is our portion? How lovely our fate, how beautiful our heritage, happy are we who, early and late, evening and morning, say twice each day.....

We'll pause there and finish the sentence in a moment.

Following these two truths, what do we do? We thank, we offer gratitude. And when I'm davening this, I really try to feel that gratitude and bring it in my body. And I rejoice. *Ashreinu*; we feel joy for our lot, as it is. And I'll say it in the singular: When I daven this, I really try to feel happiness for my lot in life, exactly as it is. I try to feel joy for this body exactly as it is right now. I try to really accept, with joy and with gratitude, this moment of life exactly as it is.

And then it says, and we are happy because we can practice. Twice a day we can say, *Shema Yisrael*. Coming out of that place of gratitude, and a sense of joy for this moment, and a sense of feeling satisfied with this moment on a deep level, I affirm that I



can rejoice because I can practice. I can grow. I can cultivate the qualities of being that I know will help elevate me, and do the work in this world that I really hope to do.

And so, then there's the *Shema* and then following that the *V'ahavta*, you shall love. That last piece of the *V'ahavta* to me is key. And that's typically where I conclude my practice of it. And I think it's so fitting. Because that word *V'ahavta* is saying: And now, you should love. It's saying: now is the opportunity for ongoing practice to orient myself towards this world with love. The prayer is speaking of orienting ourselves towards God, with love: with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might; when you sit at home, when you travel on the way, when you lie down, when you rise up. To orient yourself towards God, towards the world, towards everybody around with love. And so that's really the piece that I end on: the commitment to be in this world loving.

So, now we'll go back and daven it a little bit. I typically would take at least 20 minutes for this part, but I'll do it in a more condensed fashion, just highlighting some of these pieces. I'm not going to read all of it in Hebrew, but I'll just kind of signal some of the key words, and some of the key feelings that I come into, that I'm cultivating. And I first will sit with *tallit* and *tefillin* when I do this in the morning. And I'll sit for at least five minutes, just arrive, feel settled, or start to feel settled, as the case may be.

*Kabbalat ol malkhut shamayim*, receiving the yoke of the sovereignty of heaven.

May this practice be for the sake of receiving a yoke, to help me elevate and transform my animal energies into a productive, constructive, life affirming purpose.

*L'olam yehei adam yerei shamayim b'seter uvagalui*: one should always have a great respect, fear, awe, both internally and also in how we act. And may this support our capacity for being truthful, honest looking. May I tell the truth in as full way as possible.

*Ribbon kol ha'olamim, lo al tzidkoteinu anachnu mapilim tachanuneinu lephanekha, ki al rachemekha harabbim*: it's not because of my righteousness that I'm here. This is not about deserving or being perfect. But in the spirit of honesty, owning the fullness of who I am as I come into this prayer practice.

*Mah anu, meh chayyeinu, meh chasdeinu*: what are we, what are our lives? So as I'm davening this, reading the words, I'm letting go of that desperate need to matter, to last,





to be the best. And as honestly, and as courageously as I can, I'm really just trying to acknowledge this truth.

*Ki hakol havel:* for everything is, but a fleeting breath. [sound of breath] And I find some extended exhalations with this part of the prayer is really helpful – to be letting go. To not duck from this, in many ways, awful reality can be scary ... to let go like this.

*Aval:* But, there's another truth. *Anachnu amkha b'nei britekha...ohavkha:* I am part of this covenant. I am loved. I am worthy of love. What I do matters. I have suffered. We have suffered. Let me feel that love right now, that kind of healing love, deeply accepting love. A committed love; committed to live up to these names that we have. An energizing love. And I really try to feel it in my body. As I'm davening this, I'm surrounding all the words with breath, just letting them resonate, and feeling them in my body.

*L'phikhakh:* therefore. What follows from these two truths, gratitude, a feeling of joy. *Mah tov chelkeinu:* how great is our portion! And I often think of Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching here, of gratitude for the non-toothache. Sometimes I'll scan my body briefly and just feel grateful for all the places that don't hurt it, that feel fine. Or I'll think of the people in my life. And I'll just feel gratitude for them exactly as they are.

And then: *Ashreynu:* happy are we who can practice, who can say these great words of witness:

*Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheynu Adonai echad*

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ ה' אֶחָד :

*V'ahavta*, (וְאַהֲבַתְּ), and you will love. Committing myself, orienting myself to feeling that love, shining, forth, feeling it right now, as I commit to moving throughout my day, through this world, with an orientation of love towards the Divine, as I encounter the Divine with every breath, with every footstep.



## JONATHAN:

That was wrapped by Jordan Bendat-Appell 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](http://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](http://elanaarian.com). For more information about "Open My Heart" and the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, please visit us at [jewishspirituality.org](http://jewishspirituality.org). Shalom. Until next time we pray that, you remain healthy and to safe.

