



Open My Heart:

Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Rabbi Neil Blumofe

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 Neil Blumofe, who is student, a colleague, and a friend. Hey Neil, I'm really happy to have you here today. So, tell us a little bit about yourself.

NEIL:

I'm really honored to be here, Jonathan, and happy to support your vision, and this podcast of prayer. I've lived in Austin, Texas for over two decades. I really enjoy serving a community, and really appreciate, too, the improvisatory nature and the recognition that every day is going to be a surprise. And I try to appreciate that within not only the relationships that I have with the community, but also in the prayers that I try to model in our congregation.

JONATHAN:

Thank you. I'm really excited to be part of your practice. So, I'm going to turn things over to you now, and thank you for sharing your prayer with us.

NEIL:

Thank you. I would like to explore the blessings between the *ברכו/barkhu*, the invitation for us to pray, and the Shema Yisrael, the recognition that all of us, all things, all creation is connected in a way that is profound. And even if we start our prayers in the morning, disassociated or apart or estranged, we recognize that it is these prayers – there's two

of them, which we'll speak about in a moment – there's two prayers that bring us into relationship and renewing possibility. What I'd like to do is weave together poetry, niggunim, or singing with some of the traditional liturgy that we have, exploring some of the themes of this morning. These are prayers that are recited every morning, and it's a way of us connecting, and being in relationship, all of us together, between ourselves and our soul, and between us and the divine energy as well.

So, we begin with the ברכו/*barkhu*, an invitation for us to gather, an invitation, an invitation for us to be present. And I would like to offer a conversation as we would have, let's say with God, or we would have with ourselves or our community or our doubts. I would like to have a conversation between two poets who mean very much to me. One is Yehuda Amichai, and one is Leonard Cohen. So thinking of where we might be spiritually in this time and this place, where our soul might be – I chose an idea, maybe ironic, to signify the ברכו/*barkhu*, this invitation, this generosity, a poem of Amichai's, translated into English called: "Do not accept".

So, as we look around, as we're trying to find common ground, commonality, a sense of achievement and purpose together, I want to ground our intentions with this poem, perhaps reflecting a deeper inner nature for us, called "Do not accept":

Do not accept these rains that come too late.
Better to linger. Make your pain
An image of the desert. Say it's said
And do not look to the west. Refuse

To surrender. Try this year too
To live alone in the long summer,
Eat your drying bread, refrain
From tears. And do not learn from

Experience. Take as an example my youth,
My return late at night, what has been written
In the rain of yesteryear. It makes no difference

Now. See your events as my events.
Everything will be as before: Abraham will again
Be Abram. Sarah will be Sarai.

(trans. Benjamin & Barbara Harshav)



Barkhu et Adonai Hamevorakh

בָּרְכוּ אֶת ה' הַמְבָרֵךְ :

Barukh Adonay hamevorakh l'olam va'ed

בְּרוּךְ ה' הַמְבָרֵךְ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד :

Having us be off balance; having us recognize that we are not sure, that this is not rote, that this is something we look at allowing us to stutter-step into our day, brings us into a recognition of what's really at stake. Prayer is not just a practice that brings us into a sense of somnolence or sleep. It wakens us up.

There's a beautiful *niggun* called "צמאה לך נפשי/*Tzam'ah lekha naphshi*": "My soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where no water is found. So, may I look for you in the sanctuary, to see your power and glory" (Ps. 63:2-3). This is a beautiful *niggun*. And as we open ourselves up and recognize what is lacking, what is missing, what is desiccated, we begin stepping into this desert land.

[singing]

Tzam'ah lekha naphshi

צָמְאָה לְךָ נַפְשִׁי

Kamah lekha b'sari

כָּמָה לְךָ בְּשָׂרִי

B'ereetz tziyah v'ayeph b'li mayim

בְּאֶרֶץ צִיָּה וְעֵינֵי בְּלֵי מַיִם

Yelalai lai, yelalai lai, yela yela yelai yelala lai

Ken bakodesh chazitikah lir'ot uzkha u'khevodekha כֵּן בְּקֹדֶשׁ חֲזִיתֶךָ לְרֵאוֹת עֵינֶךָ וּכְבוֹדֶךָ

Yelalai lai, yelalai lai, yela yela yelai yelala la

It's a dry and weary land with the בָּרְכוּ/*barkhu* we open, perhaps, and see another. Perhaps reminding us of the story of one who is wandering, lost, profoundly lost in a forest. And then, miracle of miracles, coming upon another. And the person running up to the second person, and saying, "Oh my God, I'm lost. Do you know where we're going?" And the second person saying, "I don't, I'm lost also. However, together, let's go together. And perhaps we'll find our way". The בָּרְכוּ/*barkhu* reminds us that we are not alone. It may be a dry land. We may have a crisis of confidence, knowing that the rains of yesteryear are perhaps all that we remember. And yet our soul, our soul thirsts for something greater. And even in this place where no water is found, we will find the land of plenty.



[singing]

Yelalai lai, yelalai lai, yela yela yelai yelala la

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We are not alone. We are lost together, moving together. And we recognize, with a different gaze, that we are indeed in the land of plenty. As Leonard Cohen writes ("The Land of Plenty"):

Don't really have the courage
To stand where I must stand
Don't really have the temperament
To lend a helping hand

Don't really know who sent me
To raise my voice and say:
[May the lights in The Land of Plenty](#)
Shine on the truth some day

I don't know why I've come here
Knowing as I do
What you really think of me
What I really think of you

For the innermost decision
That we cannot but obey -
For what's left of our religion
I lift my voice and pray:
May the lights in The Land of Plenty
Shine on the truth some day

The prayer that we pray, opening lights, letting us see differently; seeing that we are, in fact, in the land of plenty.

[singing]

Or chadash al tziyon ta'ir

V'nizkeh khulanu meheira l'oro

Barukh ata Adonai, yotzer hame'orot

אור חדש על ציון תאיר

ונזכה כלנו מהרה לאורו

ברוך אתה ה'. יוצר המאורות



May the lights and the land of plenty shine on the truth someday.

We recognize that we are grateful for not being alone. Perhaps we have feelings that transcend our own feelings of being adrift. Something that creates a sense of love or longing within us. A recognition that we share something, even if not in person, beyond who we are and where we are in the moment. I wonder how sustainable that is. As we think of it, Yehuda Amichai writes ("Once A Great Love"):

Once a great love cut my life in two.
The first part goes on twisting
at some other place like a snake cut in two.

The passing years have calmed me
and brought healing to my heart and rest to my eyes.

And I'm like someone standing in the Judean desert, looking at a sign:
'Sea Level'
One cannot see the sea, but they know

Thus I remember your face everywhere
at your 'face Level.'

My prayers, I think perhaps of the torturous rapture, perhaps, that Moses had as he yearned for the one-on-one connection, the פנים אל פנים/*panim el panim* connection. And each of us, perhaps, opening ourselves up, an invitation for us to get beyond ourselves, and not put ourselves literally in a little box. But rather to break free, as Rabbi Akiva moved from one end of the room to the other, expressing himself. And that memory of once a great love, a recognition of the great love, I think, is connected to a song of Leonard. Cohen's called "Love Itself". He writes:

The light came through the window
Straight from the sun above
And so inside my little room
There plunged the rays of love

In streams of light I clearly saw
The dust you seldom see,
Out of which the nameless makes
A name for one like me



I'll try to say a little more
Love went on and on
Until it reached an open door
Then love itself
Love itself was gone

Then I came back from where I'd been
My room, it looked the same
But there was nothing left between
The nameless and the name

All busy in the sunlight
The flecks did float and dance
And I was tumbled up with them
In formless circumstance

I'll try to say a little more
Love went on and on
Until it reached an open door
Then love itself
Love itself was gone
Love itself
Love itself was gone

As we pray a prayer before the Shema connecting us to אהבה רבה / *Ahavah Rabah*, to great profound love. Perhaps it's a love that is absent. That affects us most deeply.

[singing]

V'keiravtanu l'shimkha hagadol selah b'emet

L'hodot lekha ul'yachedkha b'ahavah

Barukh ata Adonai,

habocher b'amo yisrael b'ahavah

וְקִרְבַּתָּנוּ לְשִׁמְךָ הַגָּדוֹל סֵלָה בְּאֵמֶת

לְהוֹדוֹת לְךָ וּלְיַחַדְךָ בְּאַהֲבָה

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה'.

הַבוֹחֵר בְּעַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאַהֲבָה

What is our language? What is the language that keeps us going? Our yearning that keeps us going? Perhaps the greatest that we have, the greatest poetry that we have is not Amichai, and not Leonard Cohen, but perhaps the Song of Songs:



“I sleep, and my heart is awake. Knocking is the sound is the voice of my beloved: ‘Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one! For my head is filled with dew, and my locks with the drops of the night” (Song 5:2)

[singing]

Ani yehsheinah v'libi eir, v'libi eir

אָנִי יִשְׁנָה וְלִבִּי עֵר

Kol dodi dophek pitchi li

קוֹל דּוּדֵי דוֹפֵק פִּתְחֵי לִי

Achoti, rayati, yonati, tamati

אָחֹתִי רַעֲיָתִי יוֹנָתִי תַמָּתִי

She'roshi nimlah tal

שְׂרָאשִׁי נִמְלָא טַל

K'vutzotai resisai Lailah

קְוֻצוֹתַי רְסִיסַי לַיְלָה :

We are traveling in a land of plenty together, perhaps traveling with the memory of another, with whom we were close. We walk knowing that there's nothing left between the nameless and the name. And yet my heart is awake; knocking, I hear that sound of the beloved “open to me open to me, change me, transform me, be with me, see me”. And we move from a place of dryness to a place of verdancy; a place where we can recognize that in all that we are, all that magnetizes us and all of that repels us, we are one.

[singing]

Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheynu, Adonai echad

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ ה' אֶחָד

Barukh shem k'vod malkhuto l'olam va'ed

בְּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹד מַלְכוּתוֹ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד

[singing]

JONATHAN:

That was Rabbi Rabbi Neil Blumofe leading us in their personal prayer, which was so meaningful, 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.

