



Open My Heart:

Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Cantor Shayna DeLowe

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're blessed to have with us Cantor Shayna DeLowe, who is a student, a colleague, and a friend. Hi Shayna. I'm really happy to have you here with us today. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

SHAYNA:

Thank you so much. I'm so honored to be here with you today. You're such an inspiring teacher to me. Um, my name is Shayna. I live in Brooklyn with my wife and two kids, and I am the associate Cantor at congregation Rodeph Shalom in Manhattan, where I have been since leaving Hebrew Union College many years ago. And I'm a very grateful graduate of the clergy training program through the Institute for Jewish Spirituality. I was part of the first clergy cohort, and it was transformative for me personally and professionally. And I'm just very grateful. Thank you for having me

JONATHAN:

Well, we're really happy to have you here with us and 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. Thank you.

SHAYNA:

I hope that wherever you're listening from today, that you are safe and that you have the things that you need today. I'm going to share with you a window into this moment in my

current personal prayer practice, which is one developed maybe by accident, maybe by necessity, and is in no way set or static. But in any case, it's evolved, because I had to so drastically adapt my professional prayer practices during this time of pandemic. And the gift that comes from having to course-shift like that, is the opportunity to look at things anew, and to let that spill over, to help a personal prayer practice evolve in this time, that's for this time.

During these many months of sheltering at home, I've had to really reevaluate what prayer means for me personally, as well as professionally, and I made some realizations. So, I realized my sense of prayer has always focused very heavily on the communal, which I'm sure is not unique. But most specifically on communal singing. And the time of COVID-19, communal singing is a thing that we are least supposed to do. So suddenly, it's this one huge piece that made it prayer for me was just completely gone. And it wasn't only that it was gone, it was also that it became dangerous. I was a huge blow to my heart, actually, to not have access to that huge piece of myself. And I continue to really struggle with that.

And it's not that I consider singing alone to be bad. I'm perfectly happy to sing alone. I just don't think I always define that as prayer, because of this unparalleled inspiration I get from voices joining together. But one of the things that this time has clarified for me, is that singing alone can absolutely be prayer, and should absolutely be prayer. And what it took for me to realize that was just shifting what I was singing.

I have certain traditions and parameters that I follow in my particular job, and that's what I spend most of my time focused on because I'm most often praying in that construct. But my prayer life is not only based around my professional obligations, which is sometimes hard to remember. And there's also my personal preference. And truthfully, for my personal prayer, much of the sort of highly composed or complicated music that I often sing at my synagogue, it really did not speak to me while I was singing alone, with just me and my guitar. It didn't really speak to me as Cantor, but certainly not as a prayer.

And so, it prompted a shift: first, in how I planned the prayer services that I was leading as a Cantor; and then, letting that give way into my own personal prayer needs. And I have shifted to a focus on the simple: *niggun*, repetition for the sake of really internalizing a tune, more folk songs, which is actually my initial entryway into music.



So, a bit of a homecoming. And actually, using a lot more English. So, either using secular songs as prayer, or compositions that somehow translate themselves.

And this came, because I realized that if I'm singing a prayer that is totally in Hebrew, and a person who is listening cannot access the meaning of those words, or cannot pronounce them easily, then I have set up a barrier for them. And I know that's true for many people in my congregation. And I think this is a time when people need fewer barriers. And so, I thought: okay, if a song is going to be in Hebrew, maybe I use a tune that's very easy to grasp. If the words are not, then just finding a way to invite people in, in some way with every prayer. In turn, so I realized that even though I do have access to the Hebrew, these tunes, these simple tunes, they're also really speaking to me at this time, and giving me a way that I can access personal prayer. So that's been a small shift, but an important one for me.

Then the other piece that I've realized from my pre-pandemic definition of prayer, is that it really had to do with the physical spaces that I considered to be sacred. And I was used to praying in places that sort of felt sacred or looked sacred, and that were, you know, used for making the sacred. And I happen to work in a synagogue that is physically very beautiful. It has multiple rooms that are considered sacred spaces to me. And so, I definitely took that for granted: that prayer happens in these spaces that were created just for that purpose. And right now I do not have regular access to those places and spaces. And when I do have access to them, they're totally empty, so they don't have the same feeling.

And if I'm not there, then I'm leading from – surprise, surprise – my bedroom, for months and months. That was the only place I led prayer from. And it was really difficult for me personally. I was so nervous, and trying to figure out technology, and worrying about internet, and such. And when I got some of that under control, I realized I do not want to only be focusing on getting through the service without a glitch. I want to pray and offer prayer for myself and for others. And so, I started to realize that in this new rhythm, I'd sort of stumbled on a very important piece of prayer that I had definitely short-changed in my life and career. And that is the piece of preparation. If I'm being really honest with myself, I used to do minimal preparation as a prayer leader: warm up my voice, show up in the space that was already beautiful, and lead the service. And the way things are now, that's just, that's not an option.



So if I'm leading from home, I have to take my bedroom and make it into a space from which I can lead prayer. I have to set up all the things: the microphone and the power cable on the laptop. And at first, I thought, well, maybe I'll just leave it all there, so I don't have to do that every time. And then I kind of found out that I didn't want to do that. I liked my little proto-ritual of preparing.

And so, I started making it more of an actual ritual practice, and to think of each step is necessary, and as sacred. And I took it a step further, and thought: why not make it look nice and different and sacred? And then I took it a step further. Maybe, maybe try thinking of it as an experience for all your senses. And suddenly it started to look like this: get the comfortable chair from the living room, get the meditation cushion to put under my feet, use a light that can be turned to a softer, warm color. If it's a service in which I'll lead Kiddush, get the glass cup that I bought in the Old City and fill it with rose, because I don't like red wine. And don't stop there. Get the vase with the tall feathers from the living room, and make sure that the lantern from Morocco is in the frame of the zoom. And then get that candle, the one that smells so good, and burn it only when you're praying there. And make it your prayer candle, and light at each time, and make your mind and your heart associate the smell and the flicker with prayer.

And lo and behold, a practice emerged. And it's one that I truly love and I depend on. Not just because I don't have access to the other definitions that I had of prayer, but because it's a good practice, and it's one that I want to continue, and morph into all the places that I pray.

So, preparing your space: it sounds so simple, but it's so important, even if you only have a little bit of space. And it makes me think of the Carrie Newcomer poem called "Three Feet or So". She says: "I can't change the whole world, but I can change the world I know, what's within three feet or so".

So, change your three feet or so, and make those sacred three feet. And then, sing songs that speak to your heart and pray them out to others. Or maybe just sing them alone, and let that be prayer: simple and thoughtful and steady ritual. And that's pretty much my practice. And it's what I'd like to try here together today.

So, I did some of my preparation beforehand so that I could be ready to be here with you today, but I'm going to finish my preparation ritual now. And I'm going to invite you to join me if you can. You could pause me speaking right now, if you want to go get some things that you might want to incorporate into your "sacred three feet" ritual. And if you



don't like the things you try the first time, try something else until you find something that feels good. So, you can pause now, if you'd like....

My chair already, my comfortable one from the living room, and I'm taking a moment now to set up my meditation cushion under my feet. And I'm turning on my light, and I turned it to a soft color. Or maybe you want to turn off the lights completely. Or maybe you want to open the shade and make it as bright as possible. Whatever speaks to you.

I already have my vase with beautiful feathers in it next to me today. I'm not leading Kiddush, so I have a really pretty cup of water next to me instead. And now I'm going to light my candle. Smells good. I invite you to set up your own sensory experience, and when it is set up, breathe. Breathe in your "sacred three feet; breathing the smells, and the sounds, and the feelings. Take a sip of something, if you need. I encourage you not to rush it, or skip parts, because you'll miss them, if you do. And after breathing in this full body set up, my hope is that you will feel open to prayer.

And at the wordless tune, we'll invite you to join your voice with mine. I'm going to sing some of the tunes that have spoken to me the most of late. It will not be a service, but songs inspired by Kabbalat Shabbat. And I will feel your voice. So, let us sing when you are ready.

[singing]

Yai, yai, ya la lai....

[new song]

הַבָּה נְשִׁירָה / *Hava nashira, hava nashira, hava nashira*, let us sing
Come let us, come let us sing, come let us sing *hava nashira*

As we breathe in the song, we breathe in the notes. We breathe in the simple, we breathe in our sacred. We let our hearts breathe. And as we breathe, I offer you these words to accompany your prayer songs.

The things that have saved us
Are still here to save us
It's not out there somewhere
It's right here, it's right here



We are body, skin and bones
 We're all the loss we've ever known
 What is gone is always near
 We're all the love that brought us here

If I start by being kind
 Love usually follows right behind
 It nods its head and softly hums
 Saying "Honey that's the way it's done."

We don't have to search for love
 Wring our hands and wring our hearts
 All we have to do is know
 The love will find us in the dark

I can't change the whole world
 But I can change the world I know
 What's within three feet or so

[singing]

Yalalalalai, yalalalalai....

to the right and to the left. They part to welcome the Holy presence.

<i>Yamin u'semol tiphrotzi, v'et Adonai ta'aritz, al yad ish ben partzi v'nism'cha v'nagilah</i>	יָמִין וְשְׂמֹאל תִּפְרוֹצִי, וְאֵת יְיָ תַעֲרִיצִי, עַל יַד אִישׁ בֶּן פֶּרֶצִי, וְנִשְׂמַחָה וְנִגְלָה.
<i>Lekha dodi likrat kallah, p'nei Shabbat n'kablach</i>	לְכָה דוּדִי לְקִרְאת כַּלָּה, פְּנֵי שַׁבָּת נִקְבְּלָה.
<i>Bo'i v'shalom ateret ba'lah, gam b'simcha uv'tzoholah, tokh emunei am segulah, bo'i khallah bo'i khallah</i>	בּוֹאִי בְּשָׁלוֹם אֶטְרֵת בַּעֲלָה, גַּם בְּשִׂמְחָה וּבְצֹהוֹלָה, תּוֹךְ אֶמּוּנֵי עַם סְגוּלָה, בּוֹאִי כַּלָּה, בּוֹאִי כַּלָּה.
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To the right and to the left, they part to welcome the Holy presence,
 Glorifying God
 Through the one, descendant of Peretz



We shall rejoice and be glad.

Come, beloved, to greet the Bride, to welcome the Presence, Shabbat.

Come in peace, Crown of your Partner,
In joy and rejoicing
In the midst of your faithful, treasured people,
Welcome, O Bride, welcome, O Bride

Come, beloved, to greet the Bride, to welcome the Presence, Shabbat.

We pray in silence.

[singing]

My life flows on in endless song;
Above earth's lamentation,
I hear the reed, though far-off hymn
That hails a new creation

Through all the tumult and the strife,
I hear that music ringing
It sounds an echo in my soul
How can I keep from singing?

What though the tempest loudly roars,
I hear the truth, it liveth.
What though the darkness 'round me close,
Songs in the night it giveth.

No storm can shake my inmost calm
While to that rock I'm clinging;
Since love is lord of heaven and earth,
How can I keep from singing?

I lift my eyes; the cloud grows thin;
I see the blue above it;
And day by day this pathway clears,
Since first I learned to love it,
The peace of God makes restores my soul,
A fountain ever springing;
All things are mine since I am loved—
How can I keep from singing?



Prepare myself. Prepare my space. Be aware of what I'm bringing. Open my heart to simple song. How can I keep from singing.

That was Cantor SHAYNA DeLowe, 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. 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.

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Credits:

1. Rancho Bernardo Nlggun by Cantor Natatlie Young: https://www.oysongs.com/products/songs.cfm?artist_id=217&EzPage=R
2. Hava Nashira by Rob Aronson: <https://www.robaronsonmusic.com/>
3. Three Feet Or So by Carrie Newcomer
4. Lincoln's Nigun-Yamin U's'mol by Joey Weisenberg: <https://www.hadar.org/blog/lincolns-nigun-yamin-usmol>

