



Open My Heart:

Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Rabbi Shefa Gold

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 Rabbi Shefa Gold who is a teacher, a colleague, and a friend. Hey, Shefa, I'm happy to have you here with us today. Would you tell us a little bit about yourself?

SHEFA:

Thanks for having me, Jonathan. I live here in the mountains of New Mexico and my life is very much involved with spiritual practice. Something in my own practice shifted a few months ago and just sent me on a journey. And that's really what I want to share today.

JONATHAN:

That's very exciting to be in the middle of the practice with you. So I'm going to turn things over to you and thank you for sharing your prayer with us now.

SHEFA:

Thank you. A couple months ago I had this realization: we read Torah every week, and that takes us a year to go through a cycle. And then at some point, the rabbis decided: let's add a haftorah reading from the Prophets to go along with that. Then we read that each week. And I had this realization about the Song of Songs: that it could also be a central text. And I was really tipped off by a rabbi Akiva, who lived in the first and second century, and who was a great proponent of the Song of Songs as being a central text. He

said that all the writings of Torah are Holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies, meaning for mystics, it needs to come into the center.

And what I realized was that if I brought the Song of Songs into the center of my textual life, it would serve a purpose of bringing love into the center of my being – and hopefully bringing love into the center of the world. And I feel like Judaism is potentially a path of love, and the Song of Songs is our guidebook on that path.

And so, I divided the Song of Songs up into 50 something little portions, a couple of lines each. And each week my practice, my prayer practice, is to dive into that text, just a couple of lines each week, and to live with that. And so, each week my practice really changes, because I am guided by those words, those sacred words of love around me.

Rabbi Akiva also said, something else he said: had the Torah not been given, we could live our lives by the Song of Songs. And that just intrigued me to no end. It really spoke to me as someone who tries to embody sacred texts through chant. And the purpose of my practice is to take that sacred text inside me, and allow it to live and move me in my life. So, I wanted to share with you the practice that I am working with this week, and which is:

Kol dodi hinei zeh ba

קול דודי הנה זה בא

That's the first, the first words say: "The voice of my beloved here it comes! leaping over the mountains, skipping over the hills. My love is like a gazelle, a wild stag. He stands there on the other side of the wall, gazing through the window, peering through the lattice." (Song of Songs 2:8)

So, I've been living with this text, and asking this question of it. You know, what, what is it teaching me? How can I live this text? And what I sense from the text is a kind of expectancy, which is different than having certain expectations of life. It means that I am open to surprise. So, each week I also create a question for contemplation. And the question that I'm sitting with all week is: Can I open in expectancy, to the surprise of life unfolding in miraculous ways that I could never imagine?

So, sitting with that question just changes the way that I see the world. And I want to share with you just a meditation that, that I created this week in order to live this text.



And it begins with a visualization. And the visualization is: I close my eyes and I see a far horizon. And I sense that just beyond the horizon, there is something there that is calling me, that is out to rise, that is filled with potential. And I connect to this deep place of yearning inside me with that place beyond the horizon. And then I chant these words: *kol dodi*, the voice of my beloved, *hinei zeh ba*, here it comes. And I build in the chant a sense of, of anticipation of that kind of willingness to be surprised and openness inside me. So I set first that, that visualization and the kinesthetic sense of that deep place inside me connected to the beyond. And then I chant with all my heart and in the silence, I'll come back to that visualization and allow whatever it is that is rising to, to come into me.

[chanting]

Kol dodi hinei zeh ba

קול דודי הנה זה בא

In the silence, I Keep my eyes closed, and I bring my attention to the breath. I imagine breathing into the center-most place inside my heart, and then seeing before me that imaginary far horizon. As I breathe out, I send my breath out beyond that far horizon. Breathing in from the place that is out past the, beyond, breathing that beyond into my heart. Again, breathing out, setting up a connection between that deep heart-yearning, and that place of pure potential. And then I bring all of my attention to the point just beyond the horizon, and allow whatever wants to rise, rise up. It could be a word or an image, a feeling. Whatever it is, I take it into my heart, take it into my body as a gift from the Beloved.

And this week, from that practice, I can pose an affirmation that says: I open to the surprise of life unfolding in miraculous ways that I could never have imagined. I welcome the new year with loving curiosity and enthusiasm.

So, my practice this week and every week is to take the Song of Songs inside, and allow it to guide me on the path of love. Thank you so much for allowing me to share my practice with you.



JONATHAN:

That was Rabbi Shefa Gold sharing their practice with us, 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.

