



Open My Heart:

Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Hazzan Harold Messinger

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 Hazzan Harold Messinger, who's a student, a colleague and a friend. Hey Harold, I'm so happy to have you here with us today. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

HAROLD:

So, I'm a Cantor at Beth Am Israel in Penn Valley, PA. I've been here 14 years. I have been blessed with a community that is open to improvisation and kind of following my lead, and me following their lead. And it's been a great partnership. So, I'm very excited to share what I do each morning now through COVID for sure.

JONATHAN:

How wonderful. I'm really, really excited 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.

HAROLD:

One of the things that COVID and being in this Zoom world has afforded me is a chance to actually pray every day and lead prayer every day. It's not something that I had been doing on a daily basis. I would lead on Shabbat; Friday night, Shabbat, holidays. But as soon as the pandemic hit, Rabbi David, who I partner with here at the synagogue, and I decided: let's build a zoom minyan, something we hoped to do in real life, but which we

never really were able to pull off. But right away there was an openness from our congregation to be part of a zoom minyan. We've had a minyan every morning.

One of the things that I was experimenting with was how to actually create prayers in real time. It's something that started a couple of years ago. And so, one of the prayers that, that I was thinking about was the Modeh Ani (מודה אני). And there are so many tunes for Modeh Ani. But somehow, I got interested in these two chords: just a simple, you know, minor chord to a major chord [guitar playing]. And over time it grew into this, which is a Modeh Ani and I attached it to Elohai Neshamah (אלהי נשמה). So did that for a little bit, just so you can hear what it sounds like. And again, this was, this began as a real improvisation, in the moment, in real time and grew and grew into something that we've kind of settled in as our go-to opening melody.

[guitar playing, singing]

Modeh Ani lephanekha ru'ach chai v'kayyam מודה אני לפניך רוח חי וקיים.

[I am grateful before You, Living and Enduring Spirit...]

Elohai neshamah she-natata bi t'horah hi אלהי נשמה שנתת בי טהורה היא

[My God, the soul that you have given me is pure.....]

One of the things that this zoom minyan, and this zoom *tefillah* [prayer] world; one of the big challenges, of course, I think for everybody is praying seeing faces, but not hearing the voices. At first, I think I struggled with the fact that there was this, there felt like there was this wall between me and the people who I was just being able to look at. But somewhere in the spring, there was a shift. And I started to notice that people were engaging. People were singing along, people were moving their bodies. And it gave me this incredible energy that I hadn't yet even anticipated.

And so it's been this really interesting space of how we're building a shared prayer space together, in this not virtual world, it's a real-world. And I think that's part of what was so interesting about it, that it wasn't virtual prayer. We were actually praying, we were actually in a minyan, and people were looking around and keeping their screens on and feeding off of that energy. So, it wasn't just that I couldn't hear them. It was, I could actually really feel their energy. And that was a really positive change in how I was viewing this model: which was not to feel sad that I couldn't hear the voices. I was, of course, but also to really feel like we are in prayer together, we're in this, this thing we're doing together.



So, one of the things that I do, especially in that *Birkhot Hashachar* (the morning blessings), in *Pesukei D'Zimra* (passage of psalm and song), is to just try to build an energy and to allow the prayer to kind of take me, and take all the people in the minyan, wherever it needs to go. So, one of the way I do that is that I like to bring in a lot of music, not just the prayers themselves.

So we might start off with *Birkhot Hashachar* and this is Joey Weisenberg niggun:
[guitar and singing]

We get that going. And I may, you know, introduce:

*Barukh atah Adonai Eloheynu melekh ha'olam, asher natan lasekhvi v'nah l'havkhin
bein yom u'vein Lailah*

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם. אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לְשִׁכְוִי בֵּינָה לְהַבְחִין בֵּין יוֹם וּבֵין לַיְלָה

[Praised are You, our God, Ruler of the Universe, who gives discernment to the rooster to distinguish between day and night.]

I invite people to stretch, breathe, and just bring awareness to their bodies, which is really what the *Birkhot Hashachar's* meaning for us to do. And then the prayer will continue silently.

And I picked this tune up a couple of years ago From one of my colleagues, Annie Lewis, over at BZBI (Temple Beth Israel-Beth Zion) in Philadelphia:

[singing]

Why, why worry when you can pray?

Why, why worry when you can pray?

Pray to the Most High,

Pray to the mothers and the fathers,

Pray to the Most High,

Pray for them to watch over.

Why, why worry when you can pray?



And then we'll do "Why worry when we can breathe, when you can love, and you can dance, when we can zoom..."

And that'll go, and then maybe we'll go into this, this [Delaney and Bonnie song](#).

[singing]

Well, there's a long road ahead and a lot to leave behind.

Yeah, there's a long road and a lot to leave behind.

Yeah, there's a long road ahead

And you gotta leave it all, leave it all behind.

We may do that a couple of times. And to close *Birkhot Hashachar*, we have that paragraph:

Ut'neinu hayom u'vekhol yom l'chen u'lecheshed u'lerachamim

וְתִנְנוּ הַיּוֹם וּבְכָל יוֹם לְחֵן וּלְחֶסֶד וּלְרַחֲמִים

[May we appear with grace, love and compassion (in Your eyes, and in all who behold us)]

And that reminded me of a beautiful melody that I had heard many years ago in San Francisco, who adapted just these four words:

Ahavah, rachamim, chesed v'shalom אַהֲבָה רַחֲמִים חֶסֶד וְשָׁלוֹם

[Love, compassion, lovingkindness and peace]

So I reset it to kind of keep the music going, to keep the feeling going all the way to the end of the prayer.

[singing]

Ahavah, rachamim, chesed v'shalom אַהֲבָה רַחֲמִים חֶסֶד וְשָׁלוֹם

So, there's a whole mix of that weave of niggun, simple chant, silence, a pop song, something from Joey, something from who knows where. And I won't necessarily do all of that on a given morning. But that's kind of what, you know, the people who've been



our regulars who are kind of used to. And they're used to me kind of pulling stuff out of thin air.

So, you know, when we finish that piece, we'll go into *Barukh She'amar* (the opening prayer of *Pesukei D'Zimra*) and then make our way to *Ashrei*. And during *Ashrei*, I believe this is a [Shefa \[Gold\] chant](#):

Ashrei yoshvei veitekha, od y'hal'lukha, od y'hal'lukha selah. אֲשֶׁרֵי יוֹשְׁבֵי בֵיתְךָ. עוֹד יְהַלְלוּךָ סֵלָה
[Happy are those who dwell in Your house, they shall praise You even more. *Selah*.]

But I was thinking about, you know, the theme of joy. So on a given morning, I would, I would start singing:

[Joy to the world](#),

All the boys and girls,

Joy to the fishes in the deep blue sea,

Joy to you and me.

And, you know, people will smile, usually at something familiar, something from a sort of a different place. Which I think part of it for me is to keep an element of surprise in the prayer. So that every morning, not just for the people who were there, but for myself, it keeps me interested. It keeps me awake in the prayer. It keeps my brain, that's all over the place, to kind of lock in and consciously think like, what can I do differently? Or where can I hopefully take everyone? So, Oh, they weren't expecting to hear a Three Dog Night song in the middle of *Ashrei*, but that's okay. Because in that, if it's a little whimsy or, or if it's something you can smile at, that can be prayerful too. And I think that's, that's a really important part. It doesn't have to be so serious and, you know, intense. It can be free, and it can, you, you can relax a little bit into the prayer. And again, like the community that I'm with, they're open to it. They're willing to kind of go. And it doesn't always work. But more often than not, it's been a good place and a positive connection for everybody.

When we arrive, you know, at the end of *Ashrei*, we're building to go into Hallelujah (i.e Ps. 150). And I'll pick from, you know, two or three different Hallelujah melodies. And then we sort of arrive at *Ozi V'Zimrat Yah* [a phrase from Ex. 15: "God is my strength and my song"]. And that's been a touchstone tefillah for many years now at Bethl Am, [the](#)



[Shefa melody](#). But recently I've been adding just chant, over, on top of the guitar strumming:

*Az yashir Moshe u'venei Yisrael
et hashirah hazot L'Adonai va'yomru leimor
Ashirah l'Adonai ki ga'oh ga'ah
Sus v'rokhvo ramah vayam*

אֶז יִשִּׁיר מֹשֶׁה וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
אֶת הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת לַיהוָה. וַיֹּאמְרוּ לַיהוָה.
אֶשִּׁירָה לַיהוָה כִּי גָאֹה גָאֹה.
סוֹס וְרוֹכְבוֹ רָמָה בַיָּם:

[“Then Moses and the Children of Israel sang this song to God, saying: “I will sing to God, who is high and mighty. He has cast horse and rider into the Sea”; [Ex. 15:1-2](#)]

So, in anticipating *Ozi V'zimrat Yah, Vay'hi Li Liy'shu'a* – by including that text, first of all, it's just a way of teaching the opening of that text as a nice lead in to the prayer. Not just jumping right into *Ozi*, but giving a context for it, and talking about going through *Mitzrayim* [Egypt], and going through our own personal narrow place each day; connecting with our past and connecting with where we are now.

And so, after the *Ozi*, I found this beautiful melody by [Elana Arian](#). And if you don't know a lot of Elana's music, you must get to know her music, beautiful songwriter. So she wrote a melody for me *Mi Khamomha* (Ex. 15:11) which goes like this.

[singing]

Yay-nay-nay-nay....

Mi khamokha ba'elim Adonai מִי כְמוֹכָה בְּאֱלֹהִים ה'
Mi kamokha ne'edar bakodesh מִי כְמוֹכָה נֶאֱדָר בְּקֹדֶשׁ
Nora t'hillot oseh pheleh נוֹרָא תְהִלַּת עֹשֶׂה פְלֵא:

[Who is like You among the mighty, O God; Who is like You, garbed in holiness, awesome in praises, doing wonders?]



Who is like you, Adonai?

Ooh is like you, Adonai?

And usually we'll close *Ozi*, and *Shirat Hayam* (The Song of the Sea; Ex. 15), by singing *Adonai Yimlokh l'olam va'ed* (God will reign forever; Ex. 15:18), but to the tune of Amazing Grace, something we've been doing for many, many years,.

But even within there, you have some three or four different things happening within that same prayer. And it often builds a really nice energy with people. You can see people, I can see people moving, singing along. Some people will bring their instruments. We have a few people on drums. Again, everyone's muted, but that energy has been so important. I think for everyone to see mostly their screens are on and they're on for the whole time. And so, we'll close with this.

[singing]

Adonai Yimlokh l'olam va'ed ה' מִלְךְ לְעֵלָם וְעַד

And that'll lead into *nusach hatefillah* (the formal prayer chant for the central part of the service).

So we'll, I'll go right into *Yishtabach* (the concluding prayer of Pesukei D'Zimrah) and nusach (the formal prayers with chant). Most of *Shacharit* (the body of the morning service) is a back and forth between *nusach hatefillah* and different melodies that I'll incorporate. But that first 25, 30 minutes, and that's, you know, of the 45 minutes of our *Shacharit* service, I would say that *Birkhot Hashachar/Pesukei D'Zimra* is about 25 minutes of that. You know, even 30, sometimes. It's been a really nice rhythm and a really nice way to take our time, to invite people to sing. And I know that there are people who come on, maybe they're coming on to say Kaddish (a memorial prayer) or they're in some other mark a day. There's a nice element of surprise that we're doing this in a, in a musical way and taking our time with those prayers. And at the same time, allowing people space and quiet to reflect as well. And that is my, generally my morning prayer practice. And so happy to get to share it with you.

[Hazzan Messinger has shared the Spotify playlist from his community which some of the melodies from this podcast, as well as many more:



<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/18nSWjfr2wDQSt2oNmlrx3?si=msDnvojgRWaxl3e7zcOGMg>

JONATHAN:

That was Hazzan Harold Messinger

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.

