



Open My Heart:

Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Rabbi Jacob Staub

JONATHAN:

Today, we're blessed to have with us rabbi Jacob Staub, who is a teacher and colleague and a friend. Jacob, I'm really happy to have you with us. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

JACOB:

Thank you, Jonathan. I'm really delighted to be here and part of this project. So I am a rabbi, a Reconstructionist rabbi. I've been a rabbi since 1977. I've been on the faculty of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College for 38 years. I am the co-author of the book "Exploring Judaism: A Reconstructionist Approach", a co-author with Rebecca Alpert. I'm the co-founder of the RRC spiritual direction program in 1999 with Barbara Breitman. I was the co-director with Rabbi Myriam Klotz hall and co-director of Bekhol Levavkha, and co-director of another training, Jewish spiritual directors at RRC with Barbara Brightman, Bekhol Derakhekha Da'eihu.

In 1998 I met Sylvia Borstein at a proto-IJS retreat, and she has been my rebbe ever since. And in the middle of that three day mini retreat, I joined, I signed up for the first IJS cohort of the Mindfulness Leadership Training program, a two year program.

I was in my late forties. I was in a 25 year marriage. We had three children and I was a closeted gay man. And I couldn't sit in God's presence as a gay man. That is, I would sit and say, okay, I'm gay. And then I'd welcome God's presence in, and that awareness of my identity would depart. I'd bring it back and God's presence would leave. It's really quite palpable. I could not hold both of those things. When I was three or four years old, I was taught that you get "dressed up" before you go to synagogue. And you'd know before Whom you stand, so you have to be presentable. And so, for 40 years I had been "dressing up" to be in God's presence. And that was a situation that I found myself in.

And as a way of addressing that terrible problem, I already had a- had developed a daily mindfulness sitting practice: being aware of my breath and my steps, noticing what arises. In fact, that's one way that I discovered that I really was gay because I noticed what was arising. And I modified my daily mindfulness sit into trying to remain aware of my sexual orientation as I sat in God's presence. So, I wouldn't be getting "dressed up" to sit in God's presence. That's how I came to this practice. And it really helped me. I sat in this way for six months or more just until I was able to put those two presences together, those two awarenesses together. And it is morphed over the years to deal with all kinds of other ways of putting myself before the blessed Holy One.

JONATHAN:

I do remember spending some of the time in 1998 to 2000 with you, Jacob, and that process. Not that I knew it was going on, but I knew the end point. And I was moved by that, and invited in by that, and took inspiration from that for myself, which makes me very excited to be part of your practice. So, I'm going to turn things over to you. And so, thank you for sharing your prayer with us now.

JACOB:

My honor, and pleasure. Thank you. So, this is a prayer about sitting as my whole uncensored, unsegmented self in God's presence. And my initial *kavvanah*, intention, is often a chant of

Someikh Adonai l'khol hanophlim סוּמֵיךְ ה' לְכֹל הַנִּפְלִיִּים

God supports all those who fall.

I noticed sometime early on that it doesn't say that God supports those who don't fall. God supports those who fall, and in order to fall you need to let go. You need to let go. So, I might begin

Someikh Adonai l'khol hanophlim v'zokeiph l'khol hak'phuphim

סוּמֵיךְ ה' לְכֹל הַנִּפְלִיִּים וְזוֹקֵיךְ לְכֹל הַכְּפוּפִים



(God supports all those who fall, and straightens up those who are bent over; Ps. 145:14) over and over again from a Psalm 145, from *Ashrei*. So, I sit, and in this prayer, I think of the *Ru'ach HaKodesh*, the Holy Spirit, the spirit, the divine spirit as a *ru'ach*, as air, as wind (*mashiv haru'ach*, "You cause the wind to blow", from the daily *Amidah* prayer), the wind. And I sit usually, but not always my, my eyes closed. And I feel enwombed by the air in which I sit. If there's a ventilation where I'm sitting and the air tickles my cheek, I experience that as being touched, being supported, being enwombed by the *Ru'ach*, the *Ru'ach HaKodesh*.

So as an aside, this is something I can do any time. And when I'm driving, when I'm in the supermarket, when I'm at a committee meeting and I need support, I can fall back into the *ru'ach* in the room, the air, the godliness in the room. Because as we say every day, multiple times a day,

Melo khol ha'aretz k'vodo מלא כל הארץ כבודו

the entire universe is filled with God's *kavod*, with God's perceptible presence. Everything is filled with God or is in God. And specifically, the air is filled with, is the concrete instantiation of the divine. So that I sometimes take an instruction that has been very meaningful to me from Sylvia Borstein. It's the "don't duck" instruction: whatever arises, don't run away from it. Don't duck, let it in. That is hard to do, but it's a little bit easier to do when you are enwombed and you're feeling enwombed by the *Ru'ach HaKodesh*, by the Holy spirit.

As another concrete in image, and this will work in your own way, if you have a- an icon that you might use, like I am, that I use. So, when my mother died in 1996, I went through all the photos and found the favorite picture that I'd always had of my, my being about eight months old, all bundled up with a hat with ear flaps and outside. And my mother's wearing a skunk coat and a feather hat, and she's squeezing me cheek to cheek. And she's really happy: "This is my baby boy". And I'm really frowning. And I suspect might have started crying right afterwards. And so that is an image to me, of being held, being loved, and sometimes being loved in a way that is uncomfortable or hurt, hurtful, painful. So, when I need to image God as being robed in a skunk coat and a feather hat and sitting behind me, holding me, so that I can lean back into God's presence, into God's arms in a way that I imagine I would lean back into my mother's arms.



And so, with all of that kind of preparation, which comes automatically after a while, I'm ready to say *Hineini*; I'm ready to say, "here I am". Here I am, all of me. I'm frightened. I'm embarrassed. I'm uncomfortable, but I'm not going to hide. I'm not going to hide anything. I lean back into your arms. *Someikh Adonai l'khol hanophlim*, in the trust and the experience that God supports all those who fall, all those who stumble, all those who are uncertain, including me.

Thank God, at this point, I'm not doing my gay identity, but for six months, I would just say, "I am gay. I am gay. I have never said that to anyone out loud before. I'm saying it to you, and you are still holding me. You are still supporting me".

Nowadays, as I care for my husband, Michael, and it gets overwhelming, and I get a little short with him for needing this and needing that. And I, I lose my cool. I can sit like this and say, "Here I am. *Hineini*. Here I am, God. I am human. I am a human doing the best I can – doing pretty well, actually, by objective standards. But I'm- I wish I could be even more patient and more loving and more generous than I am. I could always be more patient, more generous, more loving than I am. And I know I won't always be that way. And God, God, because I am in your arms, because I am enwombed by your *ru'ach*, by your presence, it's okay. I can be who I am and not beat myself up about it. You see me as I am. All of me. You see into my heart; you see into my innards. I cannot hide anything from you. Even when I'm trying to hide, by ostrich-like burying my head in the sand and thinking you can't see me, but you can see me. I am seen. And that it can be very comforting, when I trust you".

Recently, I have done this practice in my terror about the future of our country. Truth to be told, I was expecting much worse after the November election. Should I say this for the record: that white nationalists attacked the Capitol was not the worst that I could imagine. You know, the Capital can be and has been and will be defended. And we will withstand that attack. I was really anticipating pogroms, really violent attacks all over the place and on vulnerable people. I was trying to figure out whether I, at age 69, could go back out into the streets, or how I could work to alleviate the danger. And I could sit in the arms of God and achieve a certain level of equanimity, some peacefulness, knowing that whatever came my way, I could rely on divine support to make my way through.

Sometimes I do a chant of "*min hameitzar* (מִן הַמַּצְרָה), out of the depths. I call. *Anani vamerchav yah* (אֲנִי בְּמַרְחָב יְהוָה), I get an answer from you, spaciouly" (Ps. 118:5). It allows me in, allows me into your womb. Sometimes when I'm full of shame and



self-doubt, I go to “The stone that the builders refused becomes the great cornerstone, Even *ma’asu habonim hay’ta l’rosh pinah* (אָבֵן מָאָסוּ הַבּוֹנִים הַיְתֵה לְרֹאשׁ פִּנָּה) (Ps. 118:22). I may feel small. I may feel totally inept. But I am a stone that I am despising, and I can be a cornerstone.

All the while. I remember my mother's squeeze. The discomfort of being squeezed by someone who loves me intensely. Love and support is not always comfortable. And I work to feel it, feel it, feel that love and support, even when it doesn't feel so comfortable.

So now I invite you to sit for a minute. To breathe and to feel yourself in the divine atmosphere and the divine air that caresses your cheek. It tickles you, maybe makes you itch uncomfortably. And to bring what is for you, your whole self, that has everything that you would say about yourself, and everything that you wouldn't say about yourself, though you subconsciously, secretly know about yourself. Your public self and your most private self. Bring it to your awareness and say: “Here I am, God. *Hineini*.” And, if you're comfortable, lean back into God's arms and be held, physically held.

Even though you're on a cliff, even though it's dangerous to bring to mind those secret parts that are hidden. *Someikh Adonai l'khol hanophlim*, God supports all those who stumble, all those who take risks, all those who fall.

I place myself in God's arms. “God is with me. I will not fear”, the last line of *Adon Olam*, the final prayer:

B'yado aphkid ruchi בְּיָדוֹ אֶפְקִיד רוּחִי

B'eit Ishan v'a'ira בְּעֵת אִישָׁן וְאֵעִירָהּ

V'im ruchi g'vi'ati וְעִם רוּחִי גְוִיֹּתִי

Adonai li v'lo ira ה' לִי וְלֹא אֵירָא

Into God's hand I commit my spirit

When sleeping and awake

And with my spirit, my body.

God is mine, I shall not fear.



JONATHAN:

That was rabbi Jacob Staub sharing his personal prayer with us, which was so moving and so inspiring.

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.

