



Open My Heart:

Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Cantor Josh Breitzer

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 Josh Breitzer, who's a student and a colleague. Hey Josh. I'm so happy to have you here today. Would you tell us a little bit about yourself?

JOSH:

Thank you, Jonathan. I'm very glad to be with you today. I'm Josh Breitzer. I've served as Cantor of Congregation Beth Elohim in Park Slope, Brooklyn for the last 10 years. Ever since I was ordained at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, where I now serve on the adjunct cantorial faculty at the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music. I also serve as a vice-president of the American Conference of Cantors, overseeing membership and external partnerships. I am an alumnus of the IJS clergy leadership program, Cohort Three, from 2018 to 2019. And I make a home here in the Park Slope neighborhood with my wife, Donna, and our two boys: Jonah who's eight years old, and Gideon who's six years old.

JONATHAN:

I'm happy to have been in that CLP, that Clergy Leadership Program together. And I'm very 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.

JOSH:

Today, I'm going to take you on my commute from my apartment to my synagogue. It's usually about a seven minute walk, and I try as much as I can to treat it as a walking meditation practice. Just stepped out of my apartment, shut the door. I fixed the mezuzah, which is on the doorpost, and give it a little kiss.

I'm recording this on Wednesday, February 3rd, the day after Groundhog Day which is, in American popular consciousness, at least so emblematic of the days, bleeding into one another during the last several months of pandemic. And I try as much as possible then to use my commute, as I step into the elevator, as an opportunity to set apart a few precious minutes that are special, that are sacred in my day. As much as I take generally the same walk every single day to and from the synagogue, and back home, it's hard sometimes to tell what day it is. I try to be as aware and as intentional on my commute as I can, in every action that I take and every turn that I make.

So, I'm just taking you down the elevator, and I've been conscious of having to use my knuckle instead of my fingertip to press the button, in order to not spread germs as much; and to use the edge of my coat to push the door instead of my hand, for the same reason, just now.

Now stepping outside, where there are the remnants of the historical blizzard, still on the sidewalk here. And I can't help but notice that the outside looks much different; the walk looks much different today than it did the last time I made it last week, because of all of the snow on the ground. And so, in some ways, this day was tailor made for me to be attentive, and to notice your natural beauty, the hushed awe of my surroundings, still blanketed with one and two, three foot snow drifts and some cars still buried in it. I walk out of the courtyard and I turn right, taking a slightly more scenic route than normal. And I'm conscious now of each footstep I take in my well-insulated winter booted feet. And even though it's still early this morning, I can see that there have been people that have come out to before me. I can see their footprints in front of mine. I'm stepping where others have stepped, their tracks clearly evident in the snow.

And now, I find myself wondering how many other people use their experience of going outside here, in this Park Slope, Brooklyn, neighborhood, as an opportunity for sacred reflection. I know that I'm far from the only one trying to remind myself of the small miracles of being alive, being able to breathe, being able to go outside and to walk and to listen to the sounds of the neighborhood just waking up.



There are plenty of sparrows and pigeons in this neighborhood that don't migrate anywhere during the winter. So they're making their presence known. And I notice off to my left, I'm passing the Catholic cathedral around the corner. Another small reminder, if I'm open to it, of the power of the spiritual.

I'm also aware, as I pass the cathedral, and as I'm speaking these words, and as I'm breathing through my mask: my glasses are fogging up. Which, I suppose, is an occupational hazard of people wearing glasses and masks at the same time these days. And that it can obscure my vision, if I'm not careful. And I find myself now wondering about all of the other stumbling blocks to being able to see clearly in a more metaphorical way. I think about recent conversations I've had, recent zoom meetings I've had, recent technological struggles I've endured, that have all in some way prohibited me from seeing clearly, or seeing as clearly as I would like.

And so, as I breathe through my mask, while walking, while taking one step, and then another, and then another: if I notice I can see that the fog clears every so often. It's connected to either the inhale or the exhale. I can't tell. But the fog on my glasses is not a fixed substance. It does go away in a sort of rhythm connected to my very breathing.

I'm also noticing as I make my way through these snowy sidewalks, that there are certain blocks and certain corners where the path is clearer. Most probably because it's been shoveled by someone who wanted to make the way clear for themselves, for their neighbors, for others.

I have now turned eastward on the street that the synagogue is on. And as the sun is coming up higher over the horizon I'm noticing that the gradations of white and gray in the sky on this cloudy day are slightly different where the sun is coming up. There is a slightly pink hue, more pink hue, where the sun is coming up. And so that brings my awareness to very subtle gradations of different colors that I can perceive through my occasionally unfogged glasses. And that there are different areas in the sky where the sun is coming up, that the color complements, or in some cases even matches, the color of the brownstones on the block that I'm walking on. They're not, contrary to the phrase, not all brown and certainly not all stone. But they come in many different colors, ranging from bright white to dark brown, dark reds, oranges, everything in between. And if I notice, I can see that the colors of the exteriors of these brownstones, and of the sky at this particular hour in the early morning, and even of the tree branches and whatever brown-red leaves still might be remaining on the trees this early February day, they all



complement each other. There is a sort of remarkable divine coordination in the way all of these natural and human made phenomena appear.

And I breathe a little bit more, the fog returns to my glasses, but it clears a little bit with each breath. I'm conscious of my gait, my stride, not really varying today. I'm walking at about the same pace that I would normally walk. I don't feel a sense of rush this particular morning, which is not to say I don't feel it other mornings. But when I do feel a sense of rush on the walking commute, again, it's a practice: but I try with all of my might to be mindful of my gait, of my stride; to be mindful of my posture – I'm carrying a backpack on my back right now, it's not too heavy, but I'm conscious of the weight on my back and to do my best to remain upright. זוקֵף כְּפוּפִים /zokeph k'phuphim (who straightens up those bent over; from the morning blessings), הַמַּיְחִין מִצְעָדֵי גֶבֶר /hameichin mitz'adei gaver (who sets firm a person's steps).

I've just crossed the intersection and entered the block that the synagogue is on at the end of it. And I'm liable on this block to encounter preschool families arriving for drop off, and to see the tracks that their strollers make, now, in the snow. Up to now, it's been a combination of boot prints and paw prints from dogs. And now, approaching the synagogue, stroller prints. And the tracks, I should say, left by a stroller are smooth and connected the whole way. Unlike footprints or paw prints, which appear in ones, twos, threes, fours at a time, separated by steps. But the wheels of a stroller provide for one continuous motion.

And as I reflect on that, now, I am likening it to, again, the act of breathing, where I might be led to believe that each breath is separate from the one that proceeds it, and the one that follows it, like the paw prints or the boot prints in the snow. But if I think on it a bit more, I realize that each breath is inextricably connected to the one that proceeds it and to the one that follows it as part of a single fluid motion or rotation, if you like, of inhale and exhale, that if I really think about it began the moment that I was born and continued right up until this present moment. And then that way, the cycle of breathing is not so different from the cycle of the wheels of the stroller as they make their way through the snow.

And then the patches where there is no snow and this, the sidewalk has been clearly and completely shoveled of snow, of course, all the tracks disappear. But it's not to say that, it's not to say that there still weren't people and animals and vehicles that traversed that place. But instead the path of their prints is not as obvious. And that's because what lies underneath is that much more clearly exposed.



And at the street corners and this neighborhood in Brooklyn, inevitably, there are larger snowdrifts, and I have to choose my steps carefully. Because if I don't, I'm liable to have my lower leg completely covered with snow. But again, I look for the paths that other, the paths that others have made. And I try to choose my steps accordingly and step where others have stepped. And in that way, as I reflect on it, am mindful of my not being alone in my experience of the days, blurring one to the next, and that others are making their way as best as they can, even as I am.

Good morning. Good morning. Good morning. Good morning. Good morning.

Walking into the synagogue now. And the fog increases as the ambient temperature of indoors rises, but I know my way, I can still make it out. I can still see the door leading into my study through the fog of my glasses. I open the door and I turn on the light and I close the door. I kiss the mezuzah that is here. in my study. I take a few more breaths. And a little more fog dissipates, and I feel a sense of arrival.

JONATHAN:

That was Cantor Josh Breitzer leading us in their personal prayer practice of walking and paying attention, 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 safe.

