



Open My Heart:

Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Rabbi Rachel Gartner

JONATHAN:

Today, we're blessed to have with us Rabbi Rachel Gartner, who is a colleague and a student and a friend. Hey, Rachel, I'm really happy to have you here with us. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

RACHEL:

Oh, it is such a pleasure to be here with you. I am living in Washington, DC. I've been serving as the Rabbi at Georgetown University for almost a decade now. And I entered into the IJS orbit through friendship and admiration of you, Rabbi Slater, and have been in love with the Institute and its work ever since.

JONATHAN:

Well, thank you. We're really happy to have you here today. I'm 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.

RACHEL:

A deep pleasure. I found over time in my life that I really come alive when I look at my life through both a psychological lens and a spiritual lens. And as I've worked with students at Georgetown over the years, I've really seen the same; that there's a depth and a quality of nuance and breath and efficacy, even when I approach it through those dual lenses. So, I think that's sort of what naturally drew me to the Musar movement, the Musar work. And what I'm calling this practice today, that I've been cultivating both for myself and along with my students is, I call it to myself: Middot and Meni'ot, or Musar My Way. And I say that because some of what I'll share comes from Alan Morinis and the Musar Institute. And some of it comes from teachings I've heard from Rabbis David

Jaffe and Shefa Gold, and of course all the folks at IJS. And some of it has come from students in my own process. So, what you love is theirs, and what you don't is on me.

So, I wanted to share with you this sort of fourfold process: first the framework, and then a meditation to prepare the way, and then a deeper exploration of the framework, with some suggestions for the path forward for you, if you so choose it. I am really in love with the Musar way of looking at the levels of the soul, the three levels of the soul, and that helps me frame this entire practice. So I'm going to read out of Alan Morinis' book, where he writes: "The Neshama is the most elevated and purest aspect of the soul. It shines at the deepest core of our being. In the morning. We say,

Elohai Neshama sheh-natata bi tehorah hi אֱלֹהֵי נִשְׁמָה שֶׁנָּתַתָּ בִּי טְהוֹרָה הִיא

God, the soul you've given me is pure."

And I will add, of course, as we know, Proverbs says:

Ner Adonai nishmat adam נֵר ה' נִשְׁמַת אָדָם

"the light of God comes through the soul of man": Our soul is the lamp of God. And the next dimension of the soul that Musar identifies is called Ru'ach. And as Morinis writes: "that aspect of the soul, that is the source of animation and vigor, no more, no less than the spirit of life." And he goes on to say, "the third level of the soul is the nefesh, where here we find," and I'm adjusting his texts a little, "all the familiar human traits, like anger and love, trust and worry, generosity and stinginess, pride and humility, responsibility, and laziness, loving kindness, and judgment and so on." And he writes, "if our nefesh is clear and unblemished, the light, the pure light of the neshama will shine through without obstruction, into the world without obstruction. But if it's foggy, the light can be obstructed."

So to my mind, our work is to gently, and with great love and care, refine the nefesh so that more and more of the pure and holy light, that is our deepest soul, our neshama, can find expression in the world. And because it, refinement, can be intense work. This is a sort of intense practice for me. I always start, when I do it, by centering or grounding in a meditation to remind me that my soul is indeed pure, and that I have everything I need to embark on the work ahead.



So, I do different meditations to get in touch with that different mornings. And today I want to share with you one that I feel very connected with. I think it's because when I was a child, my bat mitzvah portion had a lot to do with building the Mishkan, and it's always stayed with me. So, if you'd like to join me, please do. This is how I do in the mornings.

[singing]

V'asu li mikdash, v'shakhanti b'tokham וְעָשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹכְכֶם

“They shall make for Me a sanctuary, and I will dwell among them” (Ex. 25:8)

So in the morning I remind myself that in Parashat Terumah, God issues for the call to the people: “Make for me Holy place, and I will dwell among you”. And then the rabbis teach that the body, too, is such a holy place, such a Mishkan, a dwelling place of divinity. In my meditation I strive to remind myself of that delightful and humbling and empowering idea, and to steady and ready myself for the work ahead of Musar. So, the rabbis taught: *b'mishkan*, in the Tabernacle, the cherubs spread their wings over the Ark; and in the body the wings of the lungs spread over the heart, which is the place of wisdom and understanding; and in the world, birds fly over the earth. So, I began by gently sitting up in a way that feels dignified, but relaxed, and lovingly turning my attention to my lungs. And I invite myself to experience them as wings, like the wings of a cherub. And with every breath, imagining my wings expanding as air enters and widening as they're filled and lifted with breath.

[breathing deeply]

I visualize myself, my lungs, like the undulating wings of a bird flying through the air, rising and falling with my breath, lifting and descending. And, of course, that breath for us, is *neshama*. It's the same as the word for soul.

And I call to mind the teaching of the rabbis: *B'mishkan*, in the Tabernacle, the Presence of the Holy One shines like the light of 70 suns; and in the body, the spirit, the neshama and the soul guide the body; in the world, the light, which illuminates and guides the world is, is hidden, but is there. So, as I breathe, I consider a guiding, illuminating



neshama, coursing through the deepest inner body, enlivening me. Always a light, a breath, a soul that shines with the same radiance as that which comes from between the cherubim in the inner most chambers of the Mishkan.

[deep breath]

And then I begin to relax my breath a little, ease up; a little less energy and focus there. And I move on to my body. And the rabbis teach: in the Mishkan there are planks fixed into the sockets; in the body the ribs are fixed into the vertebrae. So, I focus on my spine. I adjust to feel it stretch, feel its full length from the bottom, all the way to the top. And the Mishkan, and later the Temple in Jerusalem, was what some would call an axis mundi, a cosmic axis, the cosmic cord that connects heaven and earth. So too, I imagine my spine grounding me right now in my chair and the cradle of my hips. And at the other end, drawing me upward, I imagine a golden cord running through the length of my spine, making it my own personal axis mundi; extending on one end to the floor, through the floor, to the ground beneath the floor, penetrating the crust of the earth, reaching into the Earth's very core, rooting me. And at the other end, the golden cord reaches high, draws me heavenward.

Mah tovu [ohalekha ya'akov] mishk'notekha yisrael מַה טּוֹבוֹ [אֹהֶלְיֶיךָ יַעֲקֹב] מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל

[“How goodly are your tents, Jacob; your dwelling-places, Israel”; Num. 24:5]

Oh, how beautiful I am, how crowned in splendor. And the rabbis teach: in the Mishkan, the planks are covered in gold; gold tapestries spread over the gold covered planks; and in the body, the ribs are clothed in muscles and skin. So, finally I turn gently my attention to my muscles [deep breath], my tendons, my joints. And I allow all this to rest, *שִׁכְחָנִי/Shakhanti*, to rest in this Mishkan that is my body, to almost fall away from my bones, like a flowing tapestry. And then I do a body scan: where is there flow? Where are there snags in the cloth? Where is there constriction in my body? And where is there openness? Where is there tightness? And can I send some loving attention to those tight places that are calling out to me, that say, “see me, love me, send me breath and light and soul.”

I spend some time there. And then I invite myself to really pay close, close attention, and see if I can discern a little release, if ever so slight. To feel the deliciousness of that release of the tight place; the wonderful feeling of restriction relaxing just from the very



fact of our turning a loving, steady gaze its way. So I spend a moment sending love and light and breath to the tight places in my body that are tugging and that are calling out for my attention and care.

And in this moment, I feel like sealing this meditation with words from Mary Oliver, who says:

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.

(“Wild Geese”)

The call to *עשו לי מקדש /asu li mikdash* (“make me a sanctuary”), is a call to remember the sanctuary that I already am, the pure soul I already possess. And as I *עשו לי מקדש /asu li mikdash*, I bring out the Mishkan already within, I allow myself to love myself into my best self. And as I *עשו לי מקדש /asu li mikdash* this morning, I honor the fact that God, *עָשָׂה לִי כֹל צְרֻכִי /asah li kol tzorkhi*: God has given me all I need to face this day. That *נְשָׁמָה שְׁנֵאתָתָ בִּי טְהוֹרָה הִיא /neshama shenatata bi t’hora hi*, my innermost soul is, in its fullest expression, pure and perfect, and has everything I need to engage in the challenging soul work of today's Musar practice.

[deep breath]

And I dwell, and that awareness for one last long delicious moment. And then I open my eyes.

So, believe it or not, that was the warm up. But it was also a template for the heart of the practice. And the heart of the practice is really the work of refinement of the nefesh. So just to recall what we're talking about: again, Morinis reminds us that in Musa, our framework, the nefesh is that spiritual, I would say “location” through which the pure light of the neshama passes on its way to finding expression in the world. So when our nefesh is clear, he says, the light shines through without obstruction. And where it is- I would say where it is clear, it shines through. And where is foggy, the light will be more



obstructed. And the work, I feel, begins in seeking out the foggy places that obscured the full expression of our neshama. That's really where for me, the work begins.

This is a little detour to explain a little more, but hopefully we'll just take us deeper along the path. This is where the issue of middot enter for me. So middot are talked about as spiritual qualities, spiritual traits. And I think about the middot as another name for the ways I want, I want to respond to life. The spiritual qualities I want to live out in the world. Musar teaches that embedded in each of us are all of these wonderful middot. They dwell in full force and purity in our neshama, but they come into life into varying measures – because the word middah also means measure – because of the varying contours of our nefesh. So we can think of this as light. I also think of it as flow. Some flow through with ease and in abundance, through places that are clear and open and unconstricted and wide. And other middot encounter restrictions and tightness and constrictions that act as blockages or מניעות/*meniyot* that prevent their fullest expression.

So, this for me is where my earlier meditation provides a powerful template. Because for me, the seeking of construction in my nefesh is kind of like a body scan, but we do a nefesh scan. Traditionally we call a חשבון הנפש/*cheshbon hanefesh*, an accounting of the soul, but I like to think of it as, as a scan. And there are different ways to go about that. One is to look at different middot, the list of middot, and kind of see what leaps off the page and says: Oh, there's a persistent desire in me to act more of this in my life. Therefore, there's something there for me to look at.

For me, the most effective, powerful, real way of engaging with the middot is not just to look at a list, but to lean into my life and look at my life, and feel around, and rummage through, and ask myself what comes up for me over and over again. And I can do that when I'm sitting at the end of the day, and taking account; or walking through the day and noticing; or looking back on a year, or on some months. And I pose the question to myself like this: where do I regularly, persistently, find a gap between a way I want to show up in life – for myself or for my loved ones or for my community – and how I actually do. Like the site of a physical constriction in our bodies, a tightness in our bodies, so the site of a spiritual constriction can be like a dull ache or a sharp pain. That gap between how I want to be and how I am, can feel like a constriction of flow, that feels like a pain. I experienced those places in my life, like a persistent tug, a reoccurring nagging, that usually comes with a reoccurring sadness, a sense of loss or lack, every time this issue comes up for me and I experienced that tug. Now I experienced that as my neshama calling out to my nefesh, saying: it's in us to do this differently. We have



what it takes. We just need to work on the tightness, on the *meniyot*, on the barriers, the obstructions, and we can do this.

So, when I first started this practice, I began this refinement practice by actually meditating on the middot that I aspired to express, but fell sort of living out. I started with the qualities. And I did the same with my students. I would have them think: what is it you want to be more of? But over time that actually proved pretty ineffective for me. And so my approach shifted dramatically.

And I'll tell you what happened. I started noticing – both when I would quiet myself in meditation and call up the day, or just when I was walking through a day or a week or a month – I started noticing that when people I know accomplish wonderful things, I long to be delighted for them. I want to be delighted. I wanted to be delighted for them full stop. And I want to share that delight with them from a genuine, generous, enthusiastic, and authentic place. And I noticed this because it came up a lot! Thankfully people in my life are doing great things. But I also noticed that for a long stretch, that's not what was happening for me. More often than not I felt sad at other's accomplishments and jealous; but mostly, truly just sad.

And that became a drag on me. And I started to frame this for myself as a gap between how I wanted to be and how I was. And for a while I said: okay, let's send a little love. So what is it like to identify when you, when I felt that, to sort of say, there's a gap, I'm going to send some love to that gap. I wonder if that's something that might happen for you, send a little love to that gap.

And the next thing I did was, I said: okay, well, I've got to look at the middot, because I'm sort of trying out this Musar thing. And I said, what, what I'm missing? Where's my spiritual weakness. What can, how can I go about strengthening it? What are the middot that are trying to come out in fuller measure in this moment, But I just can't seem to do it? And I identified a few. There are many different lists of different middot. Here's three that sort of seemed to circle around it for me: זריזות/*zerizut*, נדיבות/*nedivut*, and חסד/*chesed*.

זריזות/*zerizut*: enthusiasm zeal. I really wanted to be, like, enthusiastically excited for people. Generosity: I really wanted to be generous. And *chesed*: I wanted to be kind. And I wanted there to be an authenticity to it.



So I tried meditating and imagining these qualities, and visualizing them and using the Musar technique of getting a *parashah/pasuk* (biblical verse) that encourages generosity, that encourages *chesed*; or poems or songs. And by the way, I took the same approach with my students.

But it didn't take too long before I found both for me, and for them, that, that wasn't quite working. I came to see that so long as I focused on the middah that I wanted to strengthen, and not the *meniyah*, the barrier to it, not much really changed. And ultimately it felt like I was skipping a step. And that's when I shifted my approach to engaging the *meniyot* directly, hoping that the middah would follow the flow. Cause that seems where the real work needed to be done.

So I shifted. And I'm wondering if you went to your place where you feel that gap and say: okay, assuming that the middah is already and me, I asked myself, when can I live it out? When can I be delighted and generous and feel good, and express happiness for others accomplishments? When is it easy? Because that's evidence that it's there, the capacity is there. And that was easy to do. I could identify my son, my students, my partner, some of my friends. And I said, okay, it's there, it's in me. But then I started to ask myself where can't I express this? When does this come up for me? What is the situation? I started to come up with examples, and maybe you can do that too. What are the specific situations in which it is hard for me to live this out? Who's there, what's my mood. What happened just before it? What's at stake for me at a deeper level? What am I afraid of? What's the voice in my head? What do I hear when I can't get there, what do I see? How might this look, how might this, this situation in which I feel this gap look?

And I noticed that in almost every situation where I felt this blockage it had to do with – and this is me being really vulnerable on a podcast with anyone who listens – women, my age or younger, in my profession, who are having accomplishments, particularly in fields that I care most deeply about. And then I looked a little deeper and I said: is that really it? Kind of, it's not just that I care really deeply about the field. Because then I should, I would be happy that there's progress being made. No, it was in fields where I wanted to participate, and I wanted to excel. And that was it. That was the tightness. I started to invite, actually almost immediately, it just happened: I closed my eyes, and I invited an image.

Some might invite a feeling – or I'm sorry, not even invite – but sort of it happens. I paid attention in this situation. I took the situation from life and brought it into quiet meditation. And I called forth and climbed into the situation. And what did I see? I saw



these amazing women as blocks; as huge bricks in my path, blocking my access completely to the field of interest. Their success precluded not only my success, but my participation in this image. If they're already there, I can't do it. Those were the words for that feeling. So I said, okay. I put love towards the gap. Let me put some love and breath and light towards the barrier. Okay. Hand on heart in the meditation, allowing love and accepting that image and that narrative as one that has been operating.

And then the next step: moving towards refinement. I began to ask myself: is there another way I can see this? Is it necessarily true, or how it must be? Can I literally visualize something slightly, ever so slightly different in this visual image, or tell a slightly different story and what might that be like? And I played, and I played with stories, and played with, I know some folks when with some students I work with, we play with passages from Torah. We played with poems, different ways of looking. But mostly it was our own imagination. And soon in my meditation, a new image arose. This brick was now not standing up as a block in my path, but it was like it had tipped over. And it was now a part of the pavement that was paving my way. These women who were coming before me, who are doing amazing things, were paving my way to my participation, to activating myself in this field. There wasn't room only for them; they weren't a block. They were a channel.

And that was pretty good, but it still wasn't quite right. There was still a tug. I thought this isn't quite, quite – ah – I don't want to walk on them. You know, the image of stepping didn't feel quite right. It reminded me of a student who was working with the image of Moshe, seeing the Bush. And she kept going deeper and deeper and looking at the Bush from different angles until she found one that felt like that's, that's the spot, that's the release.

So, I brought it back to meditation and worked with the image again. And I'll tell you where I landed for now. Eventually the image arose of the *חֹשֶׁן*/*choshen*, the breastplate on the priest. It's kind of amazing because it's connected to the Temple and the Mishkan, the Mikdash. So, on that breastplate, there are 12 - not bricks, not paving stones - but gems, one to represent each tribe, all different colors, all glowing, all next to each other with plenty of room. The breastplate has plenty of room, each contributing a different color. And for me, the breastplate first, it was square. But then I tweaked that image, and I made it round. And in that process of working with that block, and pushing on it and massaging it, and asking myself for alternative ways and images, I actually came to see that I don't think the middah actually was enthusiasm or generosity. And that's why it didn't really work to focus on those. It was more about trust, and trusting in



the abundance of the universe, and trusting that there's room for all of us. And the feeling of walking around with joy and appreciation or on, on a great day and on a less great day, just a lot less sadness, is such a release. It's like when a muscle stretches and releases, and the deliciousness of that feeling. And from there enthusiasm and generosity just flow.

I want to conclude, I am moved by this opportunity to share my inner life and my inner practice with you. And invite you to consider the different possibilities for yourself, where you might come in or out. My students like to say: Oh, this is the “choose your own adventure part”, where you might identify a barrier and imagine the possibility. And by the possibility of a shift, by asking yourself some questions, to challenge, the narrative, or give you an alternative visualization, and try to walk through life with that a little bit and see what happens.

And another option might be to find a Jewish text or ask a friend or a rabbi: are there Jewish texts or images that speak directly to that block that might begin to invite an alternative that you might not quite be able to imagine without the help of all the wisdom that has come before us.

I wish you strength and flexibility if you engage on this path, as you stretch; and joy and peace, as you feel released. I pray that, like I have to remind myself, you too will remember that this isn't something we do once and for all and “poof”, we're refined and transformed, but a practice we can return to over and over that builds on itself. Each time we grow and strengthen and release a little bit more and how delicious that is.

And just to close our practice for this morning, after I do all that visualizing and work, I bring my attention back to my body and my breath. I remind myself of the purity and holiness and beauty of the neshama, and the strength and the radiance of the Mishkan. That is who I am. That is who we are. That is our essence and our potential, our source and our destiny.

Barukh atah Yah, eloheinu ru'ach ha'olam she'asah li kol tzorki

ברוך אתה יהוה אלהינו רוח העולם. שעשאה לי כל צרכי

I offer gratitude for having, having been given everything I need.



JONATHAN:

That was Rabbi Rachel Gartner sharing their personal practice with us, 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.

