



Open My Heart:

Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Alden Solovy

JONATHAN:

Today, we're blessed to welcome back Alden Solovy, a liturgist, poet, educator, and most recently the author of "[This Precious Life: Encountering the Divine with Poetry and Prayer](#)". Earlier this week, Alden and I spoke about how it came to this stage in his life when he is writing poetry and prayer and sharing it so broadly, especially through his publications and his website tobendlight.com. Today, Alden's going to share with us his personal prayer practice, which he uses, in part, to prepare him to write poetry and prayer. Hey, Alden, really happy to have you back again. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

ALDEN:

Thanks for the opportunity, Jonathan. I'm an Israeli American liturgist, living in Jerusalem. I've written nearly 900 new prayers that can be found in five solo volumes, three from CCAR press. My writing is anthologized in more than 20 volumes from Catholic, Christian, Jewish, and secular publishers. And I'm a guest instructor at Hebrew Union College and the Liturgist in Residence at the [Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies](#).

Now those are just resumé facts. What I really want you to know is that my personal mission is animated by the same mission as this podcast: to invite and inspire others to find their own personal voice and prayer.

JONATHAN:

Thank you for that. And thank you for offering to be with us now. I'm really excited to be part of your practice. And so, I'm going to turn things over to you, and thank you for sharing your prayer with us now.

ALDEN:

I'd like to begin with a prayer:

God, grant me the ability to quiet my mind, to hear my heart, and to do your will. Make my words a tool of your wisdom and your love. Let me be of highest service to you, to all who hear this podcast, and to all creation – today and always.

Today, I'd like to focus on one aspect of my personal prayer practice, which centers on two ideas. The first is the *middah* of gratitude, *hakarat hatov* (הכרת הטוב). The second idea, perhaps more mundane, is the simple act of journaling. But maybe not so mundane, if we think of writing as an extension of spiritual listening, which opens our hearts to a deeper sense of our own yearnings; opening our hearts to the kind of vulnerability that I aspire to have before the divine.

My journaling practice, that is my spiritual listening practice, fits into a morning prayer routine, which is simultaneously, and perhaps paradoxically, both structured and spontaneous, both traditional and individual; a routine that has evolved over the past 12 years into a not-quite-always-the-same *seder*, order of prayer. It's a morning practice, often an early morning practice, which on my best days, I move into seamlessly from sleep, which adds a clearness of soul just reunited with body that comes, for me, from waking into prayer. Let me start by sharing the general *seder* of my morning practice so you can see how journaling as spiritual listening fits into my prayer practice. Then we'll talk about the journaling itself in more detail.

So, in the morning I get up, say *Modeh Ani* (מודה אני / Grateful Am I), wash my hands, and say the traditional “waking up” prayers. Still in a bit of morning haze, with a cup of coffee by my side, I put on *Tallit* and *Tefillin*. Some days my *Tefillin* strike me as particularly beautiful ritual objects. So I add a personal prayer of thanks for the opportunity to use these handcrafted tools of love and connection with God.

I settle into a ritual space, sitting up, legs crossed, essentially in “easy pose”, with my journals and pens and *siddur* and some inspirational readers close at hand. And I breathe. Slow, deep, lung-filling breaths from the bottom up, Kundalini-yoga style. Two, three breaths. Settling further, I read a page from any or all of three inspirational readers. Not dwelling, simply letting those words wash through me. Then consciously breathing again, I move into meditation, which is also inspired in the moment, meaning it can be breath-work, mantra meditation, visualization, whatever that moment seems to request.

Coming out of meditation, I pray *shacharit*, the traditional morning service, from the *siddur*, following my instincts as to where to focus my *kavvanah*, my prayer intention for



that day. And I allow my focus to be with the prayers that I most need that day. After traditional prayer, I pray my personal prayers: prayers in my own words, sometimes spontaneously, sometimes using a particular prayer from one of my own books.

From here, from this space of openness to God, self, and prayer, I write. First, I write in my spiritual writing practice journal, following a particular order. Yes, it has a *sefer* of its own. Then if I'm so blessed, that is, if I'm inspired to write a new prayer, I turn to a second journal that I use solely for writing new prayers. That's my framework.

The spiritual writing practice I'm going to describe now is self-contained, that is to say, you can use it easily within the framework of your own personal practice. This journaling, the spiritual listening, has three rhythms, three themes: awarenesses, gratitudes, and intentions.

Awareness is about being in right relationship with God, self, and others. How am I showing up today? Am I awake to the me that I'm offering the world, right here, right now? Awareness gives me the choice of how I'm going to move from my prayer space into vibrant, spiritual living.

Gratitude, as we said, is about practicing the *middah* of *hakarat hatov*, literally recognizing the good: intentionally and actively seeing the good, all of the good, small and large. Practicing gratitude through writing is an attempt to elevate awareness of the good that is already yours.

Intentions: writing them down is the practice of bringing forward, into consciousness, the way I want to bring my awarenesses and gratitudes into the world on this day.

Let me invite you now into a narrated, abbreviated version of my spiritual writing practice. For awareness, I use this prompt: "Today, I am aware that ...," writing it on the page, underlining it, with the date in the margin, and continuing with a bulleted list. The bulleted list just keeps it simple.

So, writing "Today, I am aware that ...," I add a bullet point:

- my right shoulder and parts of my body are still in pain – I've been carrying this awhile;
- Bullet: wonder what that is?



- Bullet: I'm tired and I slept funny;
- Bullet: I hope that doesn't show up as grouchiness today;
- Bullet: I've been grouchy in some of my communications – need to look at that;
- Bullet: I'm excited about my Talmud chevrotah today;
- Bullet: my eyes have been tired. They still feel tired. Feels like grief. I need to honor that.

I will continue this way until all of my awarenesses are on paper. If I'm struggling with awarenesses, I use any or all of four self-scans: physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual awarenesses, scanning myself for each of those areas. Over time, this will just flow.

Then turning to gratitude. I write a simple headline, "Gratitude", and underline it. And underneath I create another bulleted list: 10 things I'm grateful for that morning. What gets written doesn't need to be profound. It doesn't have to be new or different each day, just real and alive in the moment. Sometimes I'll list the people I love by name. At times, I'll add myself to the list. Some days, when gratitude seems most distant, the best I can do is to be grateful for small things:

- Bullet: Hot water;
- Bullet: Coffee;
- Bullet: My comforter....

Other days, my list is sweeping and large:

- Bullet: Torah;
- Bullet: My Talmud chevrotah;
- Bullet: My poetry;
- Bullet: My daughters, Nikki and Dana.

I write a minimum of 10 gratitudes. This is about seeing the good, bringing to mind that which I might take for granted, things that are so small as to go unnoticed, or so large that they seem foundational and, in the process, become unseen. By taking a few minutes to think about these gifts, my blessings become obvious. Life takes on a beauty formerly unseen.

The final step: intentions. These are aspirations for moving through my day as the best human I can possibly be – on that day. I add another simple headline, "Intentions", and



underline it, and write two to three intentions based on my awarenesses and gritudes. Today, I have two:

- Bullet: consciously breathe several times, as a way to honor my physical pain, and grief.
- Bullet: speak only when I can do that from a place free of grouchiness or pain.

And it strikes me to add one more:

- Bullet: remember to breathe a few good breaths today.

One note of caution. My intentions can often be loftier than my actual behavior. I am human. I stumble. It's easy to use yesterday's intention as a gateway to self-judgment. So, I don't go back to review my successes or misses with my intentions from the day before. But, only if it comes to mind, the next day I might write something like this in my awarenesses:

- Bullet: I'm aware that I would have been better served with more moments of conscious breathing.

But to be sure, I don't go looking to assess my success or lack of success with the previous day's intentions.

I close with simple spontaneous prayer. Something like: "may I be my best self today". Often, after my prayer-*seder* and my spiritual journaling *seder* are complete, I'll write a new piece of liturgy, as I said, in a different notebook.

So. let me close today with a short piece that emerged after a recent spiritual journaling practice, that may invite you to give yourself the gift of a breath:

Let kindness speak to and through you,
For kindness is sacred medicine.
Let patience speak to you and through you,
For patience is sacred medicine.
Let joy speak to you and through you,
For joy is sacred medicine.
Let love speak to you and through you,



For love is sacred medicine.
Yes. Love is sacred medicine.

JONATHAN:

That was Alden Solovy sharing their personal prayer with us, which was so moving and for which we are grateful.

We hope that you will take advantage of this podcast, of the books and resources mentioned in it, to deepen your own prayer practice. 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.

For more information about Alden Solovy and his work, please see the following:

Liturgist, Author, Educator at www.tobendlight.com

Liturgist-in-Residence, Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem

Author of: *This Grateful Heart*, *This Joyous Soul*, and *This Precious Life*

This Precious Life can be ordered [here](#). [Here's](#) a special offer on *The Grateful Heart / Joyous Soul / Precious Life* trilogy.

