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# *Open My Heart:*

## *Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater*

Alden Solovy

### JONATHAN:

Today, we're blessed to have with us Alden Solovy, who's a poet, a liturgist, an educator. He's published over 900 prayers, many of which have appeared on his website: To Bend Light ([tobendlight.com](http://tobendlight.com)) with which you may be familiar. He's also published five books of poetry and prayers, three of which have been published by [the CCAR press](#): "This Grateful Heart: Psalms and Prayers for a New Day"; "This Joyous Soul: A New Voice for Ancient Yearnings"; and most recently, "This Precious Life: Encountering the Divine With Poetry and Prayer". It's the publication of this last volume which gives us the opportunity to meet with Alden, and to speak with him about his work. Hey Alden, I'm really excited to have you with us today. Tell us a little bit more about yourself.

### ALDEN:

Thank you for that. "This Precious Life" is the third of a trilogy that just came out. The three books are designed really to think about different types of holiness, different types of sacred encounter. So, the first book, "This Grateful Heart" is about sacred time or encountering holiness in time. So, it's days, seasons, Shabbat, the festivals, as well as secular festivals. So, sacred time. The second book is "This Joyous Soul". "This Joyous Soul" is about sacred language or sacred words. So, it is actually tied to the rubrics of the *siddur*, our prayer book. And so, one could look to a particular rubric, say Shema, and find readings that relate to those prayers, those *tefillot*. And "This Precious Life" is about divine encounter, sacred encounter, the first 50 being explicitly based on divine encounter in *Tanakh*, in the Hebrew Bible, mostly Torah. So, how did our ancestors experience the divine and what might we learn from those encounters? And the second half, the second 50 being divine encounter in our day.

### JONATHAN:

That's really very inspiring, and really helpful to know, because there are so many ways that people look for and are hoping to find entry into their own moments of life, as well

as the life of the *siddur* and of the *Tanakh*. But how did you come to write these sorts of prayers and poems?

**ALDEN:**

So, this is a relatively new phenomenon in my life, about the last 12 years. Most of my career was in healthcare finance and healthcare journalism. About 12 years ago, around the time of some very serious crises; in fact, 10 very, very difficult years in which my two closest male friends passed away. And there was a fire with serious consequences and a variety of medical crises, including the death of my wife by traumatic brain injury. Followed six months later by my mother falling and having traumatic brain injury. She's fine. But we didn't know at that moment, you know, how she would be. So, this really grew out of a desire to heal myself, essentially, to bring myself back from a deep sense of grief and loss and guilt and sorrow. And I, I literally was writing my way back to a sense of joy, wholeness, fulfillment relationship with God.

**JONATHAN:**

Some people will do that through therapy and some people will do that in journaling, but you did it through poetry that's really prayer. Where does that sit in you? How did they come to be prayer in that way?

**ALDEN:**

You know, I, I don't know. I consider it a gift. I consider it grace of a certain kind. I attempted to write poetry in high school and none of it currently exists. I have destroyed it all. It was horrible and did not deserve to survive. And this poetic voice arose out of a prayer practice that has evolved. The writing actually shows up typically after a set of prayer practices that I do, and it's beyond, it truly is beyond me. I believe that I've been graced with a gift to be able to bring some words of healing and comfort and prayer to myself and to others. And that when God is done using me for that purpose, that gift will disappear as quickly as it arrived. And I'm just lucky enough in the moment to be able to bring something that is of value to people.

**JONATHAN:**

Were you a praying person before this process emerged?

**ALDEN:**

Yeah. I was a praying person and I, I turned away from it. I remember I was a day camp counselor at a Jewish day camp, meeting at the Solomon Schechter school outside of



Chicago. In a, one *tefillah* one summer morning worship, we were leading the kids in, in their prayer, and singing Mah Tov. And it struck me in the middle of Mah Tov.

*Va'ani tefillati lekha Hashem et ratzon* וְאֲנִי תְפִלָּתִי לְךָ ה' עֵת רְצוֹן

(I am my prayer to God; may it be in a propitious time)

*Hashem ahavti m'on beitekha* ה' אֶהְבֵּתִי מֵעוֹן בֵּיתְךָ

God, I love your house

And it struck me. I love God's house. I love these words. I love to pray. I was 15, 16, something like that. And it seemed to me in that moment, my mission was to serve the Jewish people in some way. Now I thought that meant I should become a rabbi. And I actually had a conversation with a rabbi, who actually did not think that was my mission; actually did not think I was suited to the career to, to service of the Jewish people in that way and mightily discouraged me. And I, I was discouraged. In fact, I was so discouraged I, I walked away from Judaism for quite a long time; the old, “well, if you don't want me, then I don't want you” kind of thing. And, as my family began to grow up, I felt that calling back into Jewish practice.

**JONATHAN:**

During that time of sort of distance from prayer practice, or distance from serving the Jewish community or thinking of yourself in that way, did prayer leave you? Did God leave you?

**ALDEN:**

I would say I left prayer and I left God. In fact, I would say that I got on the boat to Tarshish. You know, I rejected my calling. I, like Jonah, got on the boat and fled. And turns out that there was no whale to spit me back up onto the dry land, I just had to keep going until something else happened. And God was always there. God was waiting. And, and I saw, I certainly saw glimpses of holiness and the divine in the world and in my life

**JONATHAN:**

For many people heartbreak is a moment of transformation and of discovery. I know that in the early years that I was beginning to practice mindfulness meditation, people would say nobody would do this unless they realized that they really had to, because it is



so hard; because it brings us face to face with so much of our inner life and things that we don't want to look at; that telling the truth is hard. Do you have a sense of what your experience of heartbreak opened you to? Because it doesn't sound like it broke you. It sounds like it opened you: the deaths of your friends, the other things that you've gone through, opened you to something. Is that fair?

#### ALDEN:

I think it's correct, and I want to add a layer to it. About a month before my wife died of traumatic brain injury, my prayer practice, which was really just for me – where I would get up in the morning and say, Shema, and do a small amount of meditation and a little journaling – my prayer practice took off. And by that, I mean I became more deeply connected to the words of prayer. And I would say, unpracticed meditation that I was doing became completely clarifying, in a way I've never experienced since; almost a complete sense of stillness. And afterwards I wrote a prayer. And this is, this was shocking to me. It was completely surprising. And the next day, the same thing, and the next day too, and it, and throughout that month, it was two and three and five. And where are these prayers coming from?

It was on a Friday morning that, being unable to reach me, a police officer came to the door and said that I need to contact a particular hospital in Maine, where my wife was visiting. I need to call them right away. And it turns out she had fallen, and she had traumatic brain injury. And the hospital said she was going to die. So, I called my daughters up and I said, your mom's going to die today. We're going to go be with her for those last hours. We got there. It was Friday night, made some decisions about organ transplant. Shabbat morning, after a couple of declarations of brain death, it was over. That was Shabbat Haggadol 12 years ago, the Shabbat before Passover. And by the time we got back to Chicago, we had two days of Shivah and then it was *leil* [the night of the] Seder. So, we had two nights of Seders that I hosted, which in retrospect was nuts.

I had been saying that whole month: God's gotta be preparing me for something. I feel so full. I feel so full. I feel so full. And by the time the second Seder was over, it was: I feel empty. I got nothing left. I get it. I got a great gift from God to be able to do what I have no idea how to do, which is: escort, you know, my children on the journey to watching their mother die. And I said to myself, I never need to pray again. I got it. It was a great gift. I never need to do this again.

But it turns out I did. Turns out that to help my daughters, or to help me cope with my daughters' grief, I wrote a prayer called "For Bereaved Children", and that cracked me



open. And I just started writing and writing and writing to bring myself back from being the grief guy, to being what I consider now to be the joy guy. As I said before, God never left me. There were plenty of times I could have walked away from God again. And writing prayer kept me in the game, if you will.

#### JONATHAN:

So, just perhaps talk a little bit about your own experience of the play between our formal *tefillah*, our formal structured prayer, and the prayers that emerged for you, and that people now use as their own prayers.

#### ALDEN:

I'll tell you something radical, in fact. For me, my mission is about empowering others to pray in their own voice. In other words, put me out of business. Write your own prayers. Pray with your own words. If you need some words, if you don't have them, borrow some of mine, that's fine. But the writing has really evolved in two ways. One to empower others to pray in their own voice. And two, to invite people back to the *siddur*. The *siddur* itself is – it's not a book, it's a set of books that live in time and space, across cultures, across history. It's an amazing treasure trove of poetry and history and life. I want to invite people back to find what's true for them in the *siddur*. And so I would say the mission is fulfilled through the writing, but it's not the mission.

The mission is empowering others to pray, and inviting people back into the *siddur*. This is something, you know, I'm curious about your thoughts about as well; because, it's like I was thinking about this: what's *davening* versus what's personal prayer. And, maybe even versus what's *hitbodedut* [personal, expressed, informal conversation with God]. And the example is: I go hiking a lot in Israel. And every once in a while, we'll end up hiking on, on Rosh Hodesh, you know, on the New Moon. And there's this one guy, Jay, great guy. Jay and I, in the middle of walking, we'll start singing Hallel [Psalms 113-118, recited on various Holy Days]. So, we're using the classic liturgy out of the *siddur*, which is what I would call a definition of *davening*. It's employing the classic liturgy out of the *siddur*, but there we are being ourselves, singing in public, as we walk on the nature trails. That to me is somewhere between personal prayer and *hitbodedut*. So, which is it? And do I really need to know, you know, which is which?

#### JONATHAN:

Over a number of years working with the Institute, and certainly this podcast has the same ambition as you: to model varieties of prayer, and to invite people to recognize that they can pray, that they are praying people, and just using their own words as a way



of doing it. And that is so that they can then find their place in the *siddur*. A number of years ago, a beloved teacher and colleague of mine, Professor Rabbi Doctor Nehemia Polen, said: But remember *davening* is praying too – you know, right. If we do want to encourage people to use their own words, to find their own voice in prayer, and to know that the *siddur* is there as well. And I think that is a really important piece of this, of this work, that of the podcast, certainly, but I understand for you.

So, tell us a little bit about the formal ways that you've put this out into the world. We've talked about the three books, and the most recent one that's come out – “This Precious Life: Encountering the Divine with Poetry and Prayer” – that focuses on the Torah and other moments of meeting God, which is a really important piece. I don't know if prayer either prepares us for, invites us to, or presents us with God. All of that is pretty good to enter into. Also, there are other ways that you've been able to put your prayers out.

**ALDEN:**

Yeah. Thanks. Thanks for that. So, it started with a website “To Bend Light.com” – TOBENDLIGHT.com – where I first took prayers that I had written in little Moleskin notebooks, and I started putting them out. It seemed to me it was not of value to the world to keep prayers in a little Moleskin notebook. So, that's the place where I post my newest work. A lot of, as you mentioned, early on, a lot of what I would call “rapid response prayers”: whether it was after the attack on the Tree of Life Synagogue, or the fire in Notre Dame Cathedral. You name the event, I will typically come out with a rapid response prayer. Or experimenting, putting new pieces out for Shabbat, or the *haggim* and so on. And they'll typically end up first tobendlight.com. Also various blogs: Ritualwell, CCAR's RAV blog, on the URJ's Reform Judaism blog. So, I'm blessed with a number of places where my newest work can get displayed.

The first book, “Jewish Prayers of Hope and Healing” was self-published. And the idea was both of the website and of the first book was to get the attention of a “real” (doing air quotes), you know, a real publisher who would then be an advocate for my work. And Rabbi Hara Person, who at the time was the Vice President of Strategic Communications, and the head of CCAR Press, found my work and started incorporating it. And that is really what pushed my work out into a much broader audience. But she's now the Chief Executive of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and the publishing team at CCAR is amazing.

But if you want to be connected with my latest stuff, it's tobendlight.com. If you want to do some writing with me, I have a Facebook page called “Six Word Prayers”, and I put a



prayer prompt up every week or so. And we have a few thousand people who look at the prayer prompt. Some of them actually respond to it. But that's also part of the mission: just inviting people to pray in their own words. So, if you want to come pray with me, or play with me, "Six Word Prayers" on Facebook is also a fun place.

#### JONATHAN:

That's great. And just for our listeners, I'll put links to all of these things in our transcript, which you can find at [jewishspirituality.org](http://jewishspirituality.org), which is the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, where we host the podcast. That way you can follow up, and be in touch with Alden.

I want to begin this transition towards your presentation, which will be our next episode of the podcast, which is your own practice. What is your own prayer practice?

#### ALDEN:

Yeah, so my practice is a morning routine. I pray the classic morning, noon and night from the *siddur*. My personal practice, which we're really talking about, is a morning practice. The idea for me is at this time, this liminal time between being awake and being asleep, is very potent for me to be in connection with my spirituality, being in connection with the divine, to instill the idea that I want to be awake during the day to the simple truth – that God is right here right now. And I have a tendency to fall asleep, you know, just go through my day, not aware. You know, it's this idea that Rav Kook talks about: the constant prayer of the soul. If I just open myself up enough that prayer can keep flowing. So, the practice itself is about: I want to remember that God is right here right now.

I think there are two other aspects of practice for me that are really important. One is: much like an athlete, I practice for those moments and you need the skill. There are times when prayer fails me. There are times when I'm challenged. There's times when, and may the time be far off, someone I love passes on. And the practice is about being able to keep praying, even in those challenges.

And the third element is I do believe, and you alluded to this earlier, that prayer is about preparing myself to sight holiness when it arrives. Holiness can't be described. It can be encountered. It can be experienced. So, am I awakened enough, am I going to be awake enough when holiness suddenly appears? I call holiness "the mark of the Divine", the spark that takes place when the Infinite and the finite meet. Am I going to see that spark? Well, if I practice, if I practice in keeping my soul open, that constant prayer of the soul, maybe, just maybe I'll notice. So, that's the purpose of the prayer practice and it's,





or the three purposes of my practice. And it's a morning practice that includes classic *siddur*, and my personal prayer, and journaling, and writing.

**JONATHAN:**

That provides us a really great opportunity to pause here and end this episode of the podcast – and to look forward to meeting you in our next episode, where you'll share your practice, and invite us in to pray with you. So, thank you, Alden Solovy, liturgist, poet, educator, for sharing this part of your life with us.

**ALDEN:**

Thanks for having me.

**JONATHAN:**

That was Alden Solovy, author of “This Precious Life: Encountering the Divine with Poetry and Prayer”. Alden will join us in our next episode, to share his personal prayer practice, that he uses to begin his morning and to open himself to poetry and prayer.

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](http://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](http://elanaarian.com). For more information about “Open My Heart” and the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, please visit us at [jewishspirituality.org](http://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](http://www.tobendlight.com)

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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.

