



Open My Heart:

Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Cantor Bat-Ami Moses

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 Bat-Ami Moses, who's a student and a friend. Hey, Bat-Ami. I'm so happy to have you here. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

BAT-AMI:

Well, Jonathan, first and foremost, thank you so much for inviting me to share one of my spiritual practices with you on this podcast. And I also want to thank you for all the sacred work you do to uplift, and also ground and inspire so many people, especially during this challenging time. So thank you. It's truly an honor to be here with you this morning.

So a little bit about myself. I've been a Cantor/Hazzan for about 15 years, and I truly believe that it isn't just my job or even my profession, but rather a calling; that is a true synthesis of all my passions: of Judaism, music, teaching and healing. My first pulpit experience was at a very small traditional Conservative shul in Manhattan. It was actually the first time there was a female Cantor at the synagogue, and it was just a lovely, *heimish*, warm community where I spent five years, had my children, built my family. And then, both personally and professionally, I sort of made a 180 degree turn and moved to the Midwest, now here in Columbus, Ohio. I'm beginning my 10th year at a wonderful, large Reform synagogue, where I work with an incredible clergy partner, excellent staff, and a loving congregation.

So I really do feel comfortable in both Reform and Conservative settings. In fact, I feel comfortable in all denominations, and know that the true blessing lies in being able to serve a *kahal* (congregation) and be a part of a sacred community.

JONATHAN:

Well, I'm very, very excited to have you offer your practice today. So I'm going to turn things over to you, and thank you for sharing your practice with us now.

BAT-AMI:

Thank you. When we first discussed my sharing a personal prayer practice, I told you that the modalities of prayer that I connect with and that speak to me – before my work with IJS, the Institute for Jewish Spirituality – was connecting to God through words, movement, and music. And it actually was my beloved husband, Rabbi Jay Moses, who was in one of the first cohorts of rabbis who studied at the Institute, who lovingly suggested that mindfulness practice would be good for me, and opened me up to a new way to connect to the divine through stillness and silence. Which wouldn't negate the uplift I get through movement and music, but would somehow compliment it. As our Psalmist says (Ps. 65:2):

L'kha dumiyah tehillah לך דמיה תהלה

To You, silence is praise.

And let me tell he was right. So today I'd like to share a practice about *izzun* (אִזּוּן) or balance.

Balance in our lives is one of the greatest challenges I think we face personally and professionally: always teetering between the idea of being a “human being” or a “human doing”. I'd prefer to look at it like Rabbi David Aaron teaches, that we are a combination of these two: rather, “human *becomings*”. So, this practice is not about achieving perfect balance, not at all, but rather to experience the ebb and flow of life, embracing the darkness and the light, the chaos and control, the good and evil forces in our lives, and not fighting against them, not fighting against the dichotomy of them.

I actually first learned this practice at my very first IJS retreat at the Brandeis-Bardin Institute. And it was taught by my friend and teacher, Rabbi Jordan Bendat-Appell. So, I'll begin by taking you through the *madregot* (מַדְרָגוֹת), the steps that I take, when I enter into my personal prayer practice, that happens very early in the morning, even before the



rising of the sun. As I have a traditional davening in my practice, I like to describe this as my warmup, my sort *pesukei d'neshamah* (פְּסוּקֵי דְנִשְׁמָה). Instead of *pesukei d'zimrah* (פְּסוּקֵי דְזִמְרָה), verses of song, these are truly "verses" for my soul.

I'm a natural early riser, and I should have been named Shachar, meaning "morning", because I absolutely love *shacharit*, the morning prayers and blessings that bring so much hope to the day. I also love acronyms. I know sometimes they can be cheesy, but I love the one that I learned for "HOPE": Having Optimistic Perspectives Every day. And that's what my time in the morning gives me: a place to enter into prayer space. Even before morning light has appeared, I give myself the gift of time to embrace that hope.

So, the first step I take is connecting my spiritual self to my physical body, by putting on my *tallit* and *tefillin*, using the traditional blessings that one says when putting on these ritual objects. But I also add the Name "El Shaddai" as I wrap my last fingers in *tefillin*, recognizing that there is also and always a nurturing presence of God within me and in my prayer space. I find a comfortable seat and I place the soles of my feet on the ground. And I know it's a little kitschy, but I always like to teach that you can truly find your "soul" through your "soles": when you plant your feet on the ground, and can feel the gravitational pull that truly grounds you to the earth.

Then I will read a text, usually opening Rabbi Naomi Levy's book, "[Talking to God](#)," and reading aloud the morning prayer, which I'll share with you now. She writes:

A morning prayer.

There are so many things I take for granted. May I not ignore them today.

Just for today, help me God to remember that my life is a gift, that my health is a blessing.

That this new day is filled with awesome potential.

That I have the capacity to bring something wholly new and unique and good into this world.

Just for today, God, help me to remember to be kind and patient to the people who love me, and to those who work with me, too.

Teach me to see all the beauty that I so often ignore, and to listen to the silent longing of my own soul.

Just for today, help me God to remember You.

Let this be a good day, God, full of joy and love.

Amen.



I take three deep breaths: one of *Haya*, the past, releasing anything that doesn't serve me anymore; then the most important breath, of *Hoveh*, the present, recognizing this is it – the most important moment, now [deep breath]; And then one of *Yehiyeh*, of a hopeful future [deep breath].

And here's where I begin this *izzun*, this balancing practice through meditation, by focusing on the concepts of *Netzach* and *Hod*. If you aren't familiar with these two Hebrew words in short, they are two out of the 10 *sefirot*, the *sefirot* being the 10 attributes or emanations of God, according to medieval kabbalists who studied the mystical tradition of Judaism. The Kabbalists believed that God could only be understood by revealing attributes that interact with each other in the world. Just as human beings are made up of various internal traits or tendencies of personality, they thought God was, too. The *sefirot* are often manifested or described as a Tree of Life, and also correspond to the human body with visual, physical, and even sexual energy.

So, *Netzach* is usually translated as “victory” or “endurance”, and *Hod* is translated as “awe” or “splendor”, and they are counterparts to one another. *Netzach* emanates on our right side or right leg, and *Hod* stems from the left side of our body, the left leg. To me, *Netzach* represents the ability to endure, to persevere, to find strength, courage, resilience, and hope in a changing and challenging world. And *Hod* has the exact opposite elements that counterbalance that drive; that cause us to soften, to release, surrender, accept, and be gratefully in awe of the beauty and majesty of the world. Now it doesn't ask us to ignore the pain or suffering of humanity, but it causes us to bless and acknowledge even within the heartbreak and the fear.

So, using these two concepts as anchors is the method in which I balance myself, using them to focus my meditation practice, finding the connection between the physical sensation and my spiritual awareness. So, I'll guide you now when a couple of rounds of how I use these *sefirot* to reconcile that yearning and longing to find balance: holding *Netzach* and *Hod* simultaneously, without being forced into binary opposition.

Placing my two feet, my soles, on the ground, I begin with my right side. As I start on the sole of my right foot, breathing the word *Netzach* [breath], all the way up. I start at my ankle, my calves, my shins, my kneecap, the back of my knee; all the way up to my thighs and my hips and my side body; all the way up to my shoulder and my arms; flows down into my wrists and my hands; all the way back up. And while I'm harnessing the energy of *Netzach* back up through my shoulders, to my neck, to my ears; up to the crown of my head, I'm thinking of the endurance, the resilience, perseverance, strength,



and courage. "I can do this". And just when I reach the top of the crown of my head, I'm feeling this awesome strength and power on the right side of my body.

And just at the top, I release. I surrender and I give in to *Hod*, breathing down *Hod*; down my side body, repeating the word *Hod*. As I soften, surrender, and recognize the awe and splendor of life, and of my life, *Hod* cascades down through my left side, my left ear, my jaw, my neck, my shoulder; all the way down through my arms, down to my wrists and my hands; then flows back up through my arms, finds my left side body. Surrendering, releasing, acknowledging the beauty in awe. Down my side body, my left hip sockets, to my thighs, to my knees, to my calves, to my shins, down to my ankle, until I find the sole of my left foot.

And here I am. One side full of victory and strength, and one side full of release and glory. But I'm off balance and I need- I need to create this balance, this dance, where each side can feel what the other feels. So, now I start where I left off. I start with my left foot, and I breathe in *Netzach*. And once again, I do that full body scan, all up my left side:

Netzach

Netzach

Netzach

until I find that endurance and that strength and perseverance and courage all the way up to the crown of my left side, till it's so strong that I'm just forced to release.

Release and surrender to *Hod*. *Hod* that, once again, cascades down through my right side body:

Hod

Hod

Hod

Hod

until it reaches the bottom sole of my right foot, a completion of each side.

Let's do a couple more rounds together, finding that ability and that freedom to find your own dance that these two traits give you to fully embrace all aspects of life.

We begin on our right side again:

Netzach



Netzach

Netzach

Netzach

And release:

Hod

Hod

Hod

Hod

Now we begin on our left side:

Netzach

Netzach

Netzach

Netzach

And release on our right side:

Hod

Hod

Hod

Hod

Out of this practice I enter into song, the last step in preparation for beginning my full *tefillah*. With one inspirational *pasuk* (פסוק), one passage from the traditional words of liturgy, inviting us to embrace the idea that every day is an opportunity to begin again, to renew ourselves and the world, and to balance all the victory and the beauty we have to give and all that we constantly receive.

[singing]

Hamechadesh b'tuvo הַמְחַדֵּשׁ בְּטוּבוֹ

Hamechadesh b'tuvo b'chol yom הַמְחַדֵּשׁ בְּטוּבוֹ בְּכֹל יוֹם

Tamid תָּמִיד

You renew, in Your goodness, each day, constantly [the works of Creation].



JONATHAN:

That was Cantor Bat-Ami Moses sharing her personal prayer practice, 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.

