



Open My Heart:

Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Cantor Louise Treitman

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 Louise Treitman, who is a student and a friend. Hey Louise. Really happy to have you here. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

LOUISE:

Thank you, Jonathan. It's so great to be with you today. I'm a cantor and I've served in the Boston area since the 1980s. I'm blessed to be Cantor Emerita of Temple Beth David in Westwood, Massachusetts, and I also – at Hebrew college in Newton, Massachusetts – I teach rabbinical and cantorial and education students. It's a pluralistic seminary here. In recent years, I've been serving a World Union for Progressive Judaism congregation in Italy. First, I was in Florence and then most recently in Rome. This is for the High Holidays, and currently via Zoom for monthly Shabbatot. I've been involved with the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, IJS, almost since its beginning, and was thrilled to finally be in the first Clergy Cohort. I've led some of the regular Daily Meditations, and I've also been listening to these personal prayer practice podcasts since they started. And I'm so grateful to be able to share my own practice with you today.

JONATHAN:

We're really happy, Louise, to have you here with us, 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.

LOUISE:

Thank you. So let me explain a little bit first about my personal prayer practice. It has three layers. I've developed these over the years in this order. The first layer started about 15 years ago when I learned Reiki. I'll explain a little more. The second layer comes from the mystical Jewish tradition of Kabbalah, and I'll explain that a little bit more, too. The third is a special melody for the familiar hymn "Adon Olam". For me, I have integrated all three layers. I know that you are hearing this for the first time, and I invite you to focus on any or all of them, whatever works for you.

So Reiki, what is it? Reiki is an ancient Eastern system of healing touch, a kind of laying on of hands. It had been hidden for many centuries, and it was rediscovered in the 18th century by Mikao Usui in Japan. I was lucky to learn it from a neighbor and a friend, Dr. Cynthia Piltch, who is a Reiki master teacher and health educator. The healing energy is actually invited into one's hands from the universe, with some opening words in English and Japanese to learn. We were told to practice the hand positions on ourselves. These hand positions are based on the chakras, various energy points on the body that are used in Eastern medicine and meditation. Perhaps you are familiar with them.

As soon as I started my practice, I was struck by the connection between Reiki hand positions and the Jewish mystical tradition of *sefirot*, a system of divine emanations mapped onto the human body. In fact, the Reiki positions on the front of the body are almost identical to the *sefirot*. So it felt like a wonderful opportunity to explore both together. If you already know Reiki, you will undoubtedly find your own personal ways to connect to this practice. And for those of you who don't know anything about Reiki, don't worry. As you place your hands on your body, if you follow along with me, imagine that they are bringing a warm and healing touch, and be open to whatever sensations arise.

The *sefirot*, what are they? Please know that I offer only the briefest of introductions to this rich mystical tradition. As I mentioned, one branch of Jewish mysticism focuses on a system of divine emanations of God, or stages of consciousness. These named qualities, the *sefirot*, can be mapped onto the human body, starting at the top of the head and going all the way down to the legs. It is a way of bringing God's presence into the body. In so doing, it also brings God into the start of my day. Let me briefly explain each *sefirah* quality. Afterwards, when I get to the practice itself, I will give you the details about hand placements. Just remember: there are many translations and interpretations for each *sefirah*. I am sharing just a few.



We start at the top with *Keter*, crown, God's unknowable presence. Next come *Hokhmah* and *Binah*, wisdom, and understanding. These two qualities are always together, balancing each other. Next comes *da'at*, knowledge, following from wisdom and understanding.

We now come to the first of the lower seven *sefirot*: *Chesed*, and *Gevurah*. *Chesed* is loving kindness or loving connection. *Gevurah* is strength, judgment, wise boundaries. These two are also together as partners. Next is the *sefirah* of *Tiferet*, beauty, love, sometimes associated with balance, which flows from *Chesed* and *Gevurah*. Following that is another pair: *Netzach* and *Hod*, eternity or victory, and splendor or majesty. The sixth of the lower *sefirot* is *Yesod*, foundation. The last of these lower *sefirot* has two names: *Malkhut*, and *Shekhinah*, meaning majesty and God's indwelling presence. This is the connection from the upper world of spirit into the world of action, the world in which we live and interact. It reminds me that God's presence dwells both within me and all around me.

Adon Olam: here is my last and most recent layer of practice. Perhaps, you know this beautiful *piyyut*, this poetic hymn in the liturgy. It is said to be composed by the 11th century Spanish prayer poet, Solomon ibn Gabirol, but that's not for sure. It's perhaps most familiar as a closing hymn for services on Shabbat, but it actually came into the liturgy as the early part of the morning service. Some use it for weddings or funerals, or also as a prayer before bed. The opening words, *Adon Olam*, could be translated as "eternal Lord", "eternal master". Or it could be translated as "Master or Lord of the world". This opening presents God both as ruler of time and ruler of space.

Although it starts with a vision of God as ruler of the world, we see a shift in the fourth verse. The poet moves to a more personal God:

V'hu Eli, v'chai Go'ali וְהוּא אֱלֹהֵי יְחִי גּוֹאֲלִי

My God, and my living Redeemer, my stronghold in troubled times, my sign and my banner, my cup when I call out to God.

Then in the final verse, there is such a sense of God being right there, present with us: "In God's hand I trust my soul, when I sleep and when I wake. And with my soul, my body, too. *Adonai* is mine, I shall not fear".



The melody I sing most often was taught to me by a dear friend and colleague, Cantor Dr. Brian Mayer. It was first published in Frankfurt in 1911 as a special melody for the weekdays. At Hebrew College, for many years, we used to open our Friday *minyan* with this melody, sung in multi-part harmony.

So let's put this into action and let me talk us through the practice itself. And I invite you to join me for the next few minutes. Usually I take about 15 or 20 minutes for this practice. And personally, I prefer to lie down. It is possible to do this sitting or standing. I'm going to share what I feel on the journey today, but you may feel something totally different. There's no right or wrong for this practice. We just need to be open and present to what is.

On each step, I feel like I am gradually bringing God's presence into my day, into my body. I allow my hands to stay in each place, in each position, as long as it feels right at that particular moment, feeling the connection to a power greater than myself.

I begin by settling into a relaxed position. I take a few deep breaths. Then I open my hands above my head to receive. I recite the Reiki invitational and request. And so we begin:

I invoke the healing power of the universe.

I invoke the healing power of the universe.

I invoke the healing power of the universe.

Allow me to be a vessel for your light.

Allow me to be a vessel for your light.

Allow me to be a vessel for your light.

My hands start to tingle, more on some days, less on others. You may have some kind of reaction as well, or not. First, I cover my eyes with my hands, feeling the warmth, feeling the energy. Remember, you may feel something different.

Keter: the first, the highest *sefirah*. I placed my hands gently on the top of my head. For this one *sefirah*, I include a second position, moving my hands with the right hand on the front of the forehead and the left hand behind the head. This is sometimes called the third eye position.



[singing an open syllable, introducing the melody for *Adon Olam*]

I now spread my hands on the sides of my face. My pinkies are on the side of my nose. My thumbs are at the lower edge of the jaw. I take a few breaths.

Da'at: my hands move gently, one to the front and the other to the back of the throat, opening up this channel for the voice to sing, for the voice to speak to God. I take a few breaths.

Chesed and *Gevurah*. I place my hands across the upper body, so that my left hand is on my right shoulder. My right hand is on my left shoulder. I take a few breaths.

[singing]

<i>Adon Olam asher malakh</i>	אָדוֹן עוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר מָלַךְ
<i>B'terem kol yetzir nivra</i>	בְּטֶרֶם כָּל יִצִיר נִבְרָא
<i>L'eit na'asah b'chephtzo kol</i>	לְעֵת נַעֲשָׂה בְּחֶפְצוֹ כָּל
<i>Azai melekh sh'mo nikra</i>	אֲזַי מֶלֶךְ שְׁמוֹ נִקְרָא

Tiferet: my hands move to the center of the chest, spreading out and encompassing the heart space. I take a few breaths.

[singing]

<i>V'acharei kikhlot hakol</i>	וְאַחֲרַי כְּכֹלוֹת הַכֹּל
<i>L'vado yimlokh nora</i>	לְבַדּוֹ יִמְלֹךְ נוֹרָא
<i>V'hu haya v'hu hoveh</i>	וְהוּא הָיָה וְהוּא הוֹבֵה
<i>V'hu yehiyeh b'tif'arah</i>	וְהוּא יִהְיֶה בְּתִפְאָרָה

Netzach and *Hod*: My hands are spread out at the bottom of the rib cage, right hand on the right side, and left hand on the left side. The pointers are near the solar plexus. I take a few breaths.

[singing]



V'hu echad v'ein sheini והוא אחד ואין שני
L'hamshil lo, l'hachbirah להמשיל לו להחבירה
B'li reishit b'li takhlit בלי ראשית בלי תכלית
V'lo ha'oz v'hamisrah ולו העז והמשרה

Yesod: my hands moved together, flat on the lower part of the stomach, pointing downwards, tips of the fingers just above the pubic bone. I take a few breaths.

Remember this is when the verse of *Adon Olam* becomes more personal and more present.

[singing]

V'hu Eli v'chai go'ali והוא אלי וחי גואלי
V'tzur chevli b'eit tzarah יצור חבלי בעת צרה
V'hu nisi umanos li והוא נסי ומנוס לי
M'nat kosi b'yom ekra מנת כוסי ביום אקרא

Malkhut/Shekhinah: my hands move to the tops of my legs. We have reached the lowest of the *sefirot*, and the final Reiki position. I take a few breaths.

I rest my hands here as I complete the powerful and comforting final verse of *Adon Olam*.

[singing]

B'yado aphkid ruchi בידו אפקיד רוחי
B'eit Ishan v'a'ira בעת אישן ואעירה
V'im ruchi g'vi'ati ועם רוחי גויתי
Adonai li v'lo ira ה' לי ולא אירא



In God's hand I trust my soul
When I sleep and when I wake
And with my soul, my body, too.
Adonai is mine. I shall not fear.

Perhaps the Reiki energy was most important today. Or perhaps the energy of one or more *sefirot* was most important today. Or perhaps I just needed to hear the words and melody of *Adon Olam* today. Perhaps the Reiki opened up the *Adon Olam*, or the *sefirot* opened up the Reiki in new ways. Each day is different. I'm so grateful to share my prayer practice with you.

Thank you.

JONATHAN:

That was Cantor Louise Treitman sharing their personal prayer 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 safe.

