



Open My Heart:

Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Dasee Berkowitz

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 Dasee Berkowitz, who's the author of “Becoming a Soulful Parent: A Path to the Wisdom Within”, that recently came out. It's such a provocative title, and we're really so happy to have you here with us, Dasee. Thank you so much. So tell us a little bit about your background, of where you are physically in the world, how you came to writing this book and how it came to be published through Ayeka, and what Ayeka is.

DASEE:

Absolutely. So, I'm sitting in Jerusalem, and I'm a mother of three kids and my husband Leon. And I came to write this book really out of a process of about five years of work in parent education, with educators and rabbis throughout the U.S., which is where much of our work is. And what we found is that there was a longing for a different kind of parent education. So much of parent education, both in the Jewish and the general world, I'd say, has a deficit built in. And that deficit is something that really puts parents in this position that they're not enough: whether it's that they don't know how to do all the Jewish things well enough; or the expectations that maybe some of our wonderful synagogues and centers and havurot offer, but they don't know enough.

And the other is in the general world. And I think that the marketplace is so filled with parenting books, that I would say – it's strong to say – might even prey on the insecurities of parents: that they don't know how to feed their children, you know, a

well-balanced meal, or they don't know how to get their kids to sleep at night. And there's a way in which, while people flock to these kinds of books, because they just want the answer, and they just want anything that they can Google and say like: okay, this is why my child is behaving this way and doing this, and this is what I need to do – that I felt that there was a spiritual lens that was missing.

And that spiritual lens is one that puts the soul at the center. And the soul is that precious piece of each of us, that God-given gift and connection to the Source that all of us have within us that says, “You're important; there's a reason why you're here; you're endlessly special. And that anything that's an issue that you have in your life, or that your child may have, there's a way in which your child and you are on a journey. And you're meant to be in a process of discovery of what that journey is, of what that specific *tikkun* or way that you're meant to add to fixing the world is, that your unique soul can offer to the world.”

And I feel like that perspective is a much more grounding and an empowering place to begin. To say, and this is British psychoanalyst Winnicott's phrase, that I'm “the good enough parent”. I'm just enough; who I am is enough. Of course I can learn. Of course I can always read more. Of course, I can learn from all of the studies, and all of the experts in the world. But at the end of the day, I need to kind of really embody and embrace that I'm just the right parent for my child. And my child is just the right child for me. Anything that comes up that's a problem, that's an issue, that's, you know, rubs me the wrong way – Okay, that's my spiritual work. To understand it, to understand what I'm being called to do and respond to that moment. And it will be the work of a lifetime, the work of discovery of a lifetime.

And I would say with Ayeka, it's the Center for Soulful Education, and it's an organization that nurtured the “Becoming a Soulful Parent” project. You know, it first came out with lots of curriculum and did lots of trainings, and is really culminating with this book that I hope will be read more widely and it will reach more people. That Ayeka is, at its essence, about asking questions. And “ayeka” is the first question that God asked Adam in the garden of Eden. And that question is about where, where Adam is? And how can we always just ask ourselves: wait before I rush to a solution, before I rush to fill up something that feels empty inside of me, let me just say “ayeka”, where am I in this moment? And to be able to have that, you know, in Hebrew, it's *hitbonenut p'nimit* (הִתְבּוֹנְנוּת פְּנִימִית), you know, that's kind of like internal reflective practice of saying, “Let me think a minute, you know; let me separate myself from whatever the situation is that I'm in, and think about who am I, where am I? Journey a little bit more inward to this kind of a true core of ourselves to say: what am I meant to do in this moment?”



I think for parents, it comes up all the time. We never give ourselves that space. You know, we never give ourselves that time out. We're triggered all the time. We react so quickly. So, I think a part of the philosophy of Ayeka that's really informed "Becoming a Soulful Parent" is to say, "Let's pause." Let's put that pause, let's create that space, so that there can be a little bit more of a reflective practice for us. And maybe that would also be an amazing model for our kids as they grow and develop.

JONATHAN:

There's so much in there that is of interest, to me anyway. This piece, you quoted Winnicott of "the good enough parent": there seems to be such shame and guilt and fear among parents: that I'm going to ruin my kid; I'm going to spoil this, or I can't do it. They let me have a kid, but they didn't give me the manual. As if the kid is in some ways like our tech. And what's the spiritual element of that fear and, and guilt perhaps, or expectation of something mechanistic that I hear you addressing?

DASEE:

You know, I think that there's the, the first word that comes to my mind is actually bounce. Like it's a playful word. And I think it's okay for us to use playful words when we think about our lives as parents. But it's that bounce, or resilience, that is really just built in. I just remember, as a mother, at every moment I thought I was – my kid like hit the, swung their head in this direction or that direction, and I'm like: Oh my God, it's going to fall off. And I think that there's – it is such an awesome responsibility. You know, when we think back to that Talmudic quote that there are three partners in the creation of a child, you know: and that's the parents and the *kadosh barukh hu* (the blessed Holy One), [i.e.] and God. What an awesome responsibility to bring a human life into the world, and to steward them, and to help them, and to guide them. I feel like if we ... it's so much easier to reduce it to the relationship between a customer and a manufacturer: just give me the manual and I'll be okay.

But it's not that that there's something else there, and that something else is unknown and unknowable. We never know how our kids are gonna turn out. We never know how we're going to be responding in two weeks' time, or a month's time, to a provocation or a – an incident or a growth spurt, you know, whatever the age of our child, from grown children to toddlers. And so for us to be able to enter into a different mindset ... I talk a lot in the book about a "management mindset" and a "becoming mindset". And a "management mindset" is one where we're just managing things: did the kid eat, are they dressed, do they have the clothes? Did I get them into the right school? Am I putting



the right boundary around, you know, money and any dilemma that we might encounter? you know, as we raise children and as they grow. And that we're comfortable managing. It's like: we managed it. We have management positions, and things are in order, and we move things forward. And that's important. That's functional. And we have to have it.

But a “becoming mindset” says, “We don't know the story. It's not written yet. We're going to have to adapt and adopt different frameworks that can help us understand what's happening here in our lives.” And that framework can be the framework of trust, of faith, of having faith in our children, and having faith in ourselves. And having faith that resilience means that when there's something that's hard that our kids encounter, or that we encounter, most likely we're not going to break and it won't break them.

Sometimes I remember I said to a friend of mine, a while back when my kids were in grade school -- you know, we're saying like, “What do we want most for our children?” And I said, “I want them to experience difficulty.” And she's like, “God, you're an awful mother.” I was like, “I want my kids to be happy and successful and find love and all of that, it's absolutely true. But there was something about if they experienced difficulty in their lives – and that means that they're actually experiencing the fullness of life, the real stuff of life, the stuff that makes us empathic, and curious about others, and connect to others.” That's the great Hasidic teaching of there's nothing as whole as a broken heart. That brokenness can also yield a beautiful learning and beautiful understanding that might not be obvious, you know, to the plain eye that we all want to see in front of us. Right. We all want easy answers. But there's something there that just expands our lens from management to becoming; maybe from, from guilt and shame, to possibility and discovery and curiosity.

JONATHAN:

Another thing that I thought of in quite a different reference: in Monty Python's “Life of Brian” ...

DASEE:

I think the Talmud itself, another Talmud...

JONATHAN:

There's a scene where the followers of Brian say, “We all want to be an individual ... just like everybody else!” And this sense in terms of parenting, of both, “Well, it's our family and it's our way. And we have our things and we do it ourselves”. And this fear that we won't be like everybody else. And how connecting with one's own soul might address



that: that I can know I'm an individual, actually, **unlike** everybody else ... and therefore **like** everybody else. And actually sit in that, right?

DASEE:

Yes, absolutely. You know, I think, you know, we all have our own stories, but we're a part of the same library; you know, like, we all, we all have a place in this library.

Thinking about this, the Shema and the oneness, right. And that if we can understand that we all have this unique soul, and this unique place – but all of us do, and all of us are connected. And I, you know, it makes me, it makes me just so much more interested in other people, and who they are, and the stories of their own lives. But it doesn't overcome who I am, or what my family is about. You know, thinking a common thing now is, you know, that the kids will often say, “Well, you know, but everyone else lets us; that, you know, their parents let them do dah, dah, dah, and you don't, and you're the strict ones or you're,” whatever it is. And the answer is always, “Yes, but we're us and they're them and okay, and everybody will set their own boundaries and have their own rules.”

So we're teaching our children what it means to say, “I'm a part of this unit and this unit has this identity, and this is how we move through the world. And these are the priorities and the values that we have. And we can also honor and respect, for all sorts of reasons, they have different rules and priorities, and they'll do it their way. And it's okay.”

So I think that also gets to this sense of questions about: we're unique, but we're also interconnected. And also the question of how do I stand (and both for, for parents and also for kids), how do I stand in my values and beliefs and honor, and respect, and also say I'm different than other people's values. And that's also an important lesson. This piece of, I speak about it in the book a little bit, about as *ezer k'negdo* (עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ); helpmeet) and partnership. That the help is the opposition sometimes. And this is in relationships, you know, that we might talk about spousal relationships when there's disagreement.

But I think that we can expand it and say for all difference: the help is in the opposition. It's helpful for us to define our boundaries, as individuals or as a family, when we see how other people are doing it. And maybe we might stand in opposition to it, but we can clarify who we are and what we believe in based on that. And I think that there's so many ways, especially now with COVID, that that's really come up: What does your family do?



How much are you going to meet other people or not? What are your priorities – safety over the meaning of life and being around other people?

So, it's these things that I think is kind of conversations that have been a little bit under the radar for a long time. And because it hasn't felt polite to bring it up, has suddenly come to the surface in a very real and profound way. And I feel like it has a really deep spiritual message also: that difference is good; that difference is productive; that difference is generative; difference is clarifying. If we can have a, as in Hebrew, you say *si'ach m'chabbed* (סִיחַ מְחַבֵּד; an honoring conversation) about it, then it can be, then it can be very rich.

JONATHAN:

So, the title is “Becoming a Soulful Parent”, and the book is clearly grounded in Jewish traditional texts, although not particularly prescriptive in terms of Jewish religious practice. And there's then this piece of what it means to raise a child in the unique way that they need to be raised, which demands a lot of me as a parent, that also includes recognizing that they're not me, who's the parent; of they're not going to be me. And yet raising them in a way where they understand common values, or shared family values, or religious commitments. And, and I think that other people will find those issues, maybe not around religious observance, but about: “well we're vegetarians at home, so you can't have a hotdog at the movie”, or “we don't do X or Y and other people do”. So how do you place that in that piece of having boundaries and setting limits, that also is for the sake of the child and their unique expression?

DASEE:

You know, there was a beautiful question that I heard just yesterday, actually, which was, “At what age do we allow children to have their own values?” And I thought that was such an interesting question. And I think it probably has to do with, you know, the stage of cognitive development. But I think that sometimes we feel as parents, I think many parents would probably identify with this -- and Wendy Mogel actually speaks about this, you know, the author of “The Blessing of a Skinned Knee”, and “of a B-minus” and many other books -- sometimes you could just talk too much. You know, that parents will lecture, will say, “These are our values. This is what's most important to us. We don't do this as a family. We do this as a family”. And I think that our kids learn a lot more from seeing and watching and noticing than by the kind of verbal transmission of values. But I think that the level that I want to get to is the difference with ego and soul, you know. And that for us as parents to be able to distinguish, what about my child acting out and saying, “I'm getting the hot dog of the movies, because I don't care about you,” is about their ego wanting to be like all the other kids, you know; that they're sitting there and it's



awkward and they all got hotdogs and they're bringing them into the movies. *Hallevai hallevai* (if only!), we should go to the movies, and...

But how much is happening on that level? And then our response is, "How dare they," you know, "We're vegetarians and you're not respecting me," and all of that, which is also our ego that says, "My kid doesn't come with a user manual, and I don't come with this sign that says, 'respect me'". The Torah says that you should respect your parents, but a kid might not do that automatically. You know? So, there's that kind of ego place. That's where a lot of the friction comes in and the fighting and the arguing and the jockeying, where you're trying to win out those kinds of battles.

And then there's the soulful place. And that soulful place says, "What's going on here?" You know, "What's going on at a deeper level?" Not what's being done or said, but as my mother would always say, "All behavior is communication." So, what are they trying to communicate with me here that I need to become more attuned to? My child wants to fit in, my child wants to express their uniqueness, and they're at a stage of their life where they're really trying to do that in opposition to what we're doing at home. All of those kinds of, kinds of questions. And, you know, so there's a difference between that ego and that soul piece. But then in the soulful space, there are certain qualities that we need to exercise more as parents: listening; listening generatively; creating opportunities and spaces where we can listen; asking open questions.

And we can all be caught in, in this situation where we're just saying: "why did you do this? And what were you thinking?" And those are questions, that if anyone asked me those questions, I would back down and turn the other way. But questions like: "well, what did you mean by that? And what brought you to that decision?" Other kinds of questions that can open spaces, and open the connection, can be a lot more fruitful there. So, I think that they're like these modes that we're, we're kind of dancing between sometimes, in this ego place in the soul place. And I think that a part of what I want to bring to parents is to say: let's exercise being in that soulful place a little bit more and see what happens.

JONATHAN:

That's a very important element, again, of the title of the book, "Becoming a Soulful Parent", that really, this is about, in some ways, training the parent, not as a parent, but as an adult cultivating their soul so that they can respond to the soul of their child, soul to soul. And of course, they have to be responsible, they have to set limits, they have rules. But the open-ended question that you just suggested of not, "Why did you do that,"



but, “What were you thinking about,” or, “How did it feel,” or, “How do you feel now,” or – but to be able to ask those questions really with curiosity, and not as another tool to induce guilt, or get them to say what you want them to say, really is about the parent. You can't ask that question unless you really, really are in a place of curiosity.

DASEE:

Yes, yes. You know, and I think that there's something expansive about it for all of our relationships. I think a part of the work and the book is about, you know, really saying that our family lives are the, the laboratory for working out all sorts of relationships, you know. And oftentimes we'll say about workplaces that they have the father and the mother figure, and the one who's doting and the other one who's authoritarian. And it doesn't have to be gender defined. But they're just these, like, types and typologies. And so, we know that the way we are in families gets played out all the time in our public lives and in our professional lives. And so, if we can practice showing up differently in our family lives, then I think that also spills over, into all of our lives, and into the lives, you know, that we all live together.

What does it mean to recognize the soul and the uniqueness and the contributions of everyone we work with and everyone we're with? What does it mean to listen generatively, where we can help people come to their own answers and conclusions, instead of just listening for long enough so that we can then interrupt and say what we think about something? What does it mean to ask a question that invites someone to discover something new? I think it's kind of a mode and a model of connecting more widely. You know, and I also really do want to say that we're not foregoing the responsibility we have as parents, you know; that boundaries are important. And kids can get so confused, especially nowadays. So being clear and consistent are absolutely important. And in that, there's a lot of room for, for connection.

JONATHAN:

I'm inclined to say that this is a counter-cultural orientation. That it's not materialist. It's not about the child as a thing that has to be attended to, but rather as a spiritual entity that we have to cultivate our own spiritual lives in order to recognize. And that, that then changes as you said, our relationships outside of the home, like at work, but it also places us in the world differently. I wonder if in your work, in the groups that you've led through Ayeka, what you noticed or how you noticed cultivating a spiritual life for the parents changed their sense of their way in the world, but also their Jewish way in the world. Is that a byproduct? Is that an intention? Will that be true if somebody who's not Jewish picks up the book and works on cultivating their own soulful approach as a



parent for their religious tradition or not religious tradition, but that it will deepen their practices?

DASEE:

I love your question. And I think a part of it's that kind of breaking down the dichotomies in our own lives of saying – I remember someone in our very first group here in Jerusalem said, he identifies as Jewish, and he also identifies as a parent. And he didn't really think the two went together, you know. He's Jewish, and he does all the Jewish things that he does, you know. And then he's a parent, and he does all of the parenting things that he does. And we can think about it ritually that, of course you bless your children on Friday night, and there are all sorts of things in the Passover Seder, you know, Passover's coming up and that's, you know, so rich in what we can do from generation to generation.

But ultimately, we don't move through the world thinking, “What does Judaism have to say about me losing it with my kids?” You know, or, “What does Judaism have to say about when I'm really having a hard time, or when I'm really distracted and not focused and not actually hearing what's going on or seeing what's going on here?”

So, I think that a part of my goal really was to say, “What are the ways that-” Often we'll have, like, writing exercises we'll do as a part of the process of learning about a new topic. And that writing exercise is about situating ourselves in the topic. But the last question is often about writing a mantra or a prayer to yourself. What would you carry around with you in your pocket this week about how to reframe chaos that you feel at home? And we would invoke *tohu vavohu* (תְּהוֹ וּבְהוֹ), or that sense of kind of that void and that unformed in Genesis. And to know that *tohu vavohu*, there's insight that comes at the end; there's light, there's days of the week that are ordered, and it will come. You know, so there are all sorts of ways in which what I really wanted to do was to say that Judaism and wisdom tradition is deeply grounding and can anchor us in so many ways as parents and as human beings and for us to, to really invite that in.

And I think what the reality also of what the Jewish community is, and how we organize our communities nowadays, that to have wisdom tradition alongside with you as a companion; God alongside you, holding your hand as a companion, can just help us in so many ways. As opposed to an approach that says, “No, it's only for Jews.” And then a non-Jewish spouse is not allowed in any way? So, it's, I think it's saying, like, “You're, you're surrounded and encompassed by these traditions and these teachings and let it tend to carry you.”



JONATHAN:

One, one last question. How did you come to organize the chapters and to identify the things that you felt parents needed to look at, or examine in themselves, or investigate soulfully, to be able to parent?

DASEE:

Well, I just wanted to say that in the process of writing the book at a certain point, I gave it to my colleague, Aryeh ben David, and he said, "Are you done?" You know, like, "Did you write everything you have to write?" And I remember just that question of, I don't know, I don't know if I'm done. I'm like, I'm sure there's so much more to write, but I'm done for now. It was kind of like to invite Winnicott, you know, "the good enough book": you know, well, it has to end, it has to end at a certain point. So, I think it doesn't have an end. There's so many sequels to this book. I wrote about what had the most resonance with the work that we've done, you know, over the years. And I feel like the first three chapters are really about this different orientation, about what does it mean for God to be a partner in your parenting? What does it mean even if we don't understand what God is to us? To open ourselves up to a spiritual orientation around parenting.

And then there were other, like, real, you know, just the stuff of our day-to-day lives. How do I deal with the chaos in my life? How do I try to be present when things are moving so fast? What do I do with siblings, and when they're fighting all the time? And how can I, can I respond to them? What about elders and grandparents? Where are they in helping really strengthen and ground me and help guide me?

And then of course the pandemic. You know, there were a few chapters that I added, really toward the end, about parenting through difficult times. And what does it take and what does it mean and how can we do it? So, I wanted to write the book not in a way that was kind of a memoir from beginning to end, but that could be episodic, you know? So, I think it reads in that way: that each chapter is a standalone. I've heard a lot of people say that it's their bedtime reading or their Shabbat reading, you know, that they'll pick up a chapter and they'll want to think about some of the ideas and then have it kind of live with them for a while. So, that was really, I think the way that I tried to orient the book: to be as user-friendly as possible.

JONATHAN:

And I do want to pick up on one of those pieces that you said earlier about the writing practices: in that this is as much a reading book as it is a writing book, a workbook, or a



reflection book. That it is your invitation for people to step into what it is that you've experienced. And that you are offering for them to ask the question, "How is this for me? Is this for me?" It's such a great invitation, rather than, "Here's a formula go do it".

DASEE:

Absolutely. Absolutely. You know, and I'll just say, in the end that I think that I, I wrote about my own life, so that people can see their own lives in the pages of the book. And we've developed this "care package" with discussion guides and instructional videos and all sorts of things that can help, you know, groups of friends or communities and rabbis and community centers invite parents together for, for intimate, real, honest, open, vulnerable conversations that are, that are rooted in Jewish wisdom and text.

JONATHAN:

Well, thank you, Dasee, for having created the program, and for having written about your experience and about this approach to parenting, and for offering us "Becoming a Soulful Parent: A Path to the Wisdom Within", which is a wonderful title.

I look forward to, in our next episode, sharing with you in one of your own prayer practices. Together, we can shift the paradigm around prayer from going to services, to prayer as a spiritual practice.

DASEE:

Thank you so much for having me.

JONATHAN:

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.

Make a donation, and receive a copy of the "Becoming a Soulful Parent" [here](#).

If you would like to stay connected to Dasee and the "Becoming a Soulful Parent" program, [please join our mailing list](#).

