



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 is a new friend of mine, the author of “Becoming a Soulful Parent: A Path to the Wisdom Within”. Hi Dasee. I'm really happy to have you with us here today. Tell us a little about yourself.

DASEE:

I'm in Jerusalem now. It's my second Aliya. I am originally from Boston and spent a lot of time in New York and I'm the mother of three children. I've been working on this project called “Becoming a Soulful Parent: A Path to the Wisdom Within” for about four or five years now. And just really the whole program culminated in this book that I'm so delighted is out and we can share widely. And so much of the book is biographical, with all sorts of, you know, Jewish wisdom, and wisdom from general culture woven in, because I felt that there were so many ways in which I was thinking about and refining and defining what it means to bring spirituality into the heart of parenthood. So, I wanted to share with you, a little bit about how I think about prayer.

Some might think that our lives are lived in big moments, right? The moments like our promotions at work or vacations that we take or life cycle events. These are the moments that are the most recorded and that we talk about and we tell stories about. But they really aren't where we live our lives. We know that, especially now, as we live alongside the pandemic: our lives are lived in the smallest places, in the cracks and the crevices; in our living rooms and in our kitchens; not in the grand cathedrals. I feel like

most of my life now is about living in the in-between moments: in between a work task and helping my daughter solve a math problem; or in between making dinner and putting out a fire between two of my kids; or in between sleeping and awaking, and wondering what today has in store for me and for all of us. So, these in between moments are like the white spaces on a page. Seemingly nothing is happening there, but it is in that space that makes room for the words and for the sentences, for the stories of our lives to unfold.

And it's in these white spaces that prayer lives for me. I have to admit that my prayer life today is not at all like it once was. It used to be quite robust and fixed when I was in my twenties and I was single. I'd daven Mincha [the afternoon prayer] regularly and of course, you know, went to Shabbat services on Friday night and Saturday morning. And when I got married, I mainly davened or prayed on Shabbat. And since having children, and especially now during COVID, even though my kids are a bit older, they're in elementary school, one's in junior high, my prayer practice happens when it can happen. And it mostly happens in these in-between moments.

So it happens when I wake up in the morning and I say *modeh ani* (מוֹדֵה אֲנִי, grateful am I). Often I'll wake up with this kind of, like, rush of anxiety when I open my eyes. It's – I don't know if anyone else feels this way – but it's this feeling of this kind of sleepy pre-conscious. “Where am I? Who am I? What's happening today? What day of the week is it?” And immediately when I say *modeh ani*- grateful am I- it shifts my orientation to saying, “Thank you,” and begins every day remembering how much I have and how much I'm grateful for.

And in the evenings and the, in between moment, between evening and nighttime, when I'm putting my kids to sleep, it's:

Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai echad שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ ה' אֶחָד
Hear, O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai alone

Which I say to my kids every night. They're older now, but it's actually the same ritual that I said, even when they were younger. I close my eyes at their bedside, as if in a trance. And I repeat “*Shema Yisrael*” again and again. This central prayer of Jewish faith from the book of Deuteronomy reminds us to listen. It reminds us that we are *Yisrael*, that we are those who struggle. I have struggled as a parent that day; my kids have



struggled with my expectations of them and what they're able to do with issues that went on for them at school; with what just happened right before dinner time.

But it reminds us that we are all ultimately one. *Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad*: that there is oneness; that all of the struggles will pass; that they can let go of them now; that they can be calm; that I can be calm; that I can let go for a few moments of an ego voice that says I need to be in control, and I need to have all the answers, and everything needs to go according to my plan. And it can make room for the soul voice, the voice that says, “I see you. I recognize you. I recognize your uniqueness. I recognize that you are endlessly precious and worthy, and that you are connected to the One”.

And beyond those moments of waking and putting my kids to sleep at night are other moments. These are, you know, as a mother of three children, there are so many flare up moments at home. And with the quarantine and social restrictions, these three active children, there's so much, a lot more rattling and bumping than usual. My prayer practice in these moments of conflict, is to put space between the action that is happening and my reaction. And it's so easy to be triggered. It is so easy to lose it. Some days I do. And sometimes we all do.

And other days I can remain calm. And what I do then is I create physical space. I go to my room or walk away from a challenging situation that I won't be able to really address properly. I put emotional space and remember that all behavior is communication. And that when things are happening between me and one of my children, it is a reflection of something much deeper than is happening inside of them that I can explore and be curious about – maybe later on, not when it's “hot” time. I also put spiritual space, to remember that each child is growing and then growing to be painful at times. That they are unique, unique souls. And each one of them I love and care about and cherish. And as their mother, I'm here to guide them; that ultimately they have their own path and their own journey and their own way to express their *neshamah* (נֶשְׁמָה, soul) in the world. And that's something that's yet to be discovered.

And while I create space between us when times are challenging, what is most important for me there, is to create space within me: through breath, the breath of my *neshimah* (נְשִׁימָה) that expands my *neshamah*, or my soul. And that breath, that deep cleansing breath, reminds me that God is both outside of me and inside of me. And that is my prayer.



So, these in-between spots are the transition moments where something has a potential to turn: in the morning, when it turns from anxiety to gratitude; in the evening, when I'm with my children, it can turn from that fragmentation to something more whole and more one; and throughout the day, whenever there are challenging times that prayer can turn from conflict to calm. So it's in these in-between spots where I live, where I love and where I pray.

JONATHAN:

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

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](#).

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.

