



# *Open My Heart:*

## *Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater*

**Rabbi Amy Grossblatt Pessah**

### 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, I'm really happy to have with us Rabbi Amy Grossblatt Pessah to talk about her book “Parenting on a Prayer: Ancient Jewish Secrets for Raising Modern Children”, which is such a great title. It does often feel as if that's all parents have.

### AMY:

Yes, indeed. It is very true. I appreciated the double entendre of the title and I actually have to give a shout out to Rabbi Reuven Kimmelman, who I happened to be sitting in a carpool with. And we just happened – you know, the universe sort of puts us in situations that oftentimes are helpful. And we started talking about my book and I said: you know, I just don't even have a title for it. And he said: how about, you know, “Parenting with a Prayer”, every parent needs prayers. And I went: Oh My Gosh. If I actually use that title, I'm going to credit you for it. So indeed he is in the acknowledgements. We said maybe, I don't know, a hundred words to each other in our lifetime, but they were very important gleanings from that conversation.

### JONATHAN:

That's wonderful. That is sometimes how, how book titles come. You know, somebody just throws it out there. That's great. But it was clearly something that you were thinking about working on in terms of this relationship of parenting and prayer. How did that come about?

AMY:

Thank you. That is a great question that I wonder myself. Because I think back to my ten-year-old self at Camp Ramah in the Poconos, who got in trouble for talking during *tefillot*, during services, and was sent to the *sifriyah*, to the library, to write an assignment about the prayer *Ahavah Rabbah* (אהבה רבה/Great Love, before the Shema), since I was talking during services and clearly wasn't paying attention. And so it always makes me smile because the fact that I would write a book on prayer seemed so unlikely to me, way back when. And as I grew up, and evolved as a parent and as a Jewish educator and ultimately a rabbi, I've established and connected to prayer in a very different way.

And so I happened to be in services one Shabbat morning, and my three kids were in the babysitting room, which was a miracle. I had five minutes to myself and the whole prayer book in front of me. And it was almost like, you know, I couldn't even keep track of what page they were *davening*. And what did I want to do with these five minutes of silence before somebody came running in, you know, "I need something to eat, or he pushed me or he hurt me."

And so, I opened up the *siddur* and I started noticing the prayer that I was looking at. And I wish I could remember which one it was, and maybe it was the Shema. It felt like the prayer was almost sending parenting tips and parenting messages. And the more I read this prayer, about the Shema and listening deeply, and loving deeply, and listening carefully, and loving open-heartedly – I started noticing as I went back each week, different nuggets: parenting nuggets, I like to call them, that emerged from the prayer book. And it was really from my time spent in the services without my children – the irony of finding parenting information, right, when those who aren't tugging on my legs are present. I just found it so beautiful.

And over probably about a course of almost a decade, I took pen to paper and started writing. I guess I should probably say: the pen to paper part was the journaling that I did about my children. I keep a journal for each of my kids, sharing funny stories, questions, moments of pride, moments of frustration. And my intention is to give it to each one of them when they have their own children, if that is what they decide. And so, I had all of these stories, and they were starting to become juxtaposed with these parenting nuggets that I was finding in the prayer book. And eventually the book became a tapestry that wove into creation the stories of raising my children and these parenting tips and values that I think are important to help raise modern children, or probably any children. But since we're living in the day and age that we're living in, I'll say those ancient secrets for the modern children.



**JONATHAN:**

So, you are a Jewish educator. Is that where the parenting came from?

**AMY:**

Yeah, I was actually a family educator. So yes, I was a Jewish educator, but my specialty was family education. And I did that for three years before I actually had any children of my own. And then when I had my own – I know the irony, right – then when I had my first child, I thought: Wow, there's a lot of wisdom in this Jewish family education! And so, a lot of what I learned as a family educator I implemented when my kids were younger. I mean, the joke was that my kitchen became the classroom. There were quotes and signs and words of encouragement and Jewish texts that would permeate, you know, the windows and the refrigerator. And so, I really learned to incorporate my education background into raising my kids.

But there was also so much that I felt I didn't know, especially as a first-time parent. And I was constantly reading other people's parenting books, wisdom, talking to parents who had older children. And while all of that was helpful, I still felt like there was something that was missing. And eventually what came to me was that it was **me** that was missing. It was my own internal, what I like to call GPS – Great Parenting System – that I believe we all have. So it was a way for me to figure out how to integrate wisdom and knowledge and teachings from other people with my own truth of how I wanted to raise my children. And so I see the prayer book really as a template to offer us guidance and insight. And my part of the equation is that we each have to add ourselves into the equation as well.

**JONATHAN:**

It's interesting, because wouldn't you have said that that's really what ultimately Jewish education or family education is about? That is: yes, there are these things that we want to convey to them, but it really only matters when it's connected to you.

**AMY:**

That's true, but that is not always the way education is done, right? Sometimes education is, "This is what you need to learn." Why do I need to learn it? "Because you need to learn it." In order to become a bar or bat mitzvah, these are the things you need to learn; in order to become a – you know, moving outside of Jewish education – in order to become a chemist, these are the things you have to learn. So I think, you know, it's really important to weave together the affective and the cognitive.



And I did learn that at my school, actually with Rabbi Bill Cutter, in an incredible class called “Confluent Education”. And he spoke about how we weave together the actual *tokhen* (תוכן), right, like the content, the subject, with where the individual is. Where is the student? How does it resonate with them? And it took me literally a year before I could integrate his class. I sent him an email a year later and basically said: I think I finally understand your class now. It was such a deep learning for me. I take that with me in my parenting and my friendships and my relationships with my students. You know, where are people in terms of their own inner landscape? And how will the material enrich, nourish and help to be more generative, so that we can grow into more full, authentic human beings?

**JONATHAN:**

It's interesting, then, also that the parents are as much the students – they're students of themselves – in order to parent well, and parents out of their own Great System.

**AMY:**

Yes. I love that. I'm so glad you said that. Right? We have this sense of: Well, I'm the parent and I know better. So you need to do what I think you need to do. And a lot of my own learning and growth came from relinquishing that thought system, to learn where my child is coming from, and what they're expressing, and what their needs are. And so I will say, and I continue to say, that my children have been my greatest teachers. You know, those parts of myself that I like, they might decide to hold a mirror up to and be like: Here, well, let me show you this *imma*, let me show you this mom. And it's, you know, also those places that I'm not so proud of that they hold up almost a double mirror, right? Like, let me just make sure you're really going to see this part of yourself – that they have absolutely been my greatest teachers. And I think that's when we can see ourselves as parents as students, and not just as teachers, I feel like that's when we have the most success in our relationships, and become symbiotic.

**JONATHAN:**

It is, I think, such a challenge for parents to orient themselves to a child-centered educational process and to say just what you said: Who is this child who is not me, right? They're not just a small version of me, or a failed version of me. They are themselves. And what do they need? It's not just, what do they need, you know, they need another chocolate cookie. No, what do they need to grow best into themselves? Not into what I think of themselves, but themselves, which is infinitely more difficult and time consuming. But I think infinitely more rewarding,



AMY:

A hundred percent. One of my stories that I share in the book is with my oldest son, Yossi, who is a self-professed atheist, right? So he's having this conversation with his mom who's in rabbinical school. And he basically says, in so many words – he was a very outspoken, kind, loving, wonderful out-of-the-box kid and quite challenging. So he says, you know, I don't understand *imma*, how you can be so smart and still believe in God. Okay. So, I start to try to explain. Well, I came to my faith in this way and it's, you know, he sort of accepted it, but then it became almost like a conversation that we had quite frequently. And he'd bring it up several times a week until finally I said to him: Look Yos, I don't need you to believe what I believe. I need you to believe what you believe. I've already done my work. I continue to do my work. I'm on my journey. And I want you to take that path. I don't want you to believe what I believe. I want you to believe what feels true for you. And do you know what? I will always love you, regardless of what you believe. And like, every time I tell this story, I tear up because I saw a tear in my 17 year old son's eyes. And I think it was ultimately that message, more than belief in God, more than his belief dovetailing with my belief, but it was the message of unconditional love, I would always love him regardless of his belief system. And I think that's the message that as parents is the most potent and the most powerful gift that we can offer our children.

JONATHAN:

Which of course is also a great challenge in a Jewish context where, you know, for probably most of us raising kids, there's this sense of: Oh, no, I have to transmit this. I want them to want to be Jewish. I need them to be Jewish. All of the other things that need of them and that the Jewish people need of them and so on.

AMY:

Yes.

JONATHAN:

What was your own process in getting to the point where it's sort of letting go of that argument still allowed you to sense: I'm raising Jewish children?

AMY:

I think it was my belief in the Divine and my belief that we are all souls on a journey to expand our consciousness and our understanding. And it felt very arrogant for me to say: this is what my child needs to do, because I think they need to do it. As opposed to



taking a more humble approach of: I trust that there is a plan for my child. I trust that there is something bigger than me, than him, than her, than all of us. And so, I'm going to defer to that, and allow that process to unfold in the way that I believe it's meant to, even if it's not what I want, even if it's painful, even if it's challenging. But for myself, I always go back to a place of not knowing, and the Divine unfolding.

#### JONATHAN:

That's a very spacious understanding of Judaism, as well, which is a language that I think is not familiar to many people as Jewish language. And was that something that was where you were when you first started as a Jewish educator or where you first became a parent or...?

#### AMY:

Oh no. Oh no, no, no, no, no. That was, that was lots of years of trials and tribulations, and studying other religious traditions, and studying spiritual teachings, and doing a lot of meditation and journaling, and really coming to a place of ... I would, I want to say: acceptance. And there is still part of my very active ego that is screaming out, saying: Really? Come on, are you really that accepting?

So I sort of hold it in tension, of coming to a place of accepting the world as it is while still continuing to work on the world as it should be, or as I would like it to be. Right. It doesn't mean that I'm going to throw my hands up and say to my kids: you know what, it's a free-for-all. I believe there's a path and you're just going to do whatever it needs to happen. We still call our kids every Friday night and give them their Shabbat blessing. And I just put Purim hamantaschen in the mail to them. And they know that I'm celebrating Shabbat, and that I'm going to do Havdalah, even if it's on my own. Right.

So, I'm continuing to do my process and I still and almost plant seeds, I like to think, for them. And they'll even say things like: well, this isn't important to me, or I don't agree with this, but I know what's important to you *imma*. Great. So, you know, we're in this dialogue, we're in this conversation and it has been a very long process, a worthwhile process, a process that is still evolving. But it did take me quite a while to get here.

#### JONATHAN:

There are approaches to congregational life, which I understand is far from this topic per se ... although, the role of the rabbi, male or female, is often projected upon by the congregant. And the system of expectation of "you're going to tell me what to do" – which sometimes is, "but don't", and sometimes is "Please, because I need that magic"



– but gets really confused when the approach is, “How is God emerging in you? What is God calling you to?” “Wait! I don't, I don't know how to do that!” But what a wonderful invitation.

**AMY:**

Yes. One of my favorite things to do is to offer spiritual direction, right? So I like to say, it's almost like having a God-therapist, right? Like, what is your relationship to God? Where is God in your relationship? How do you navigate? But I find the work so holy, because it allows exactly for that invitation that you just verbalized. It's allowing the space to be opened, to have two people sitting together and seeing what emerges: where is the divine or not; what's happening in your spiritual life; what's emerging in you; what's growing in you; what needs to be nourished?

And I think part of it that makes it scary is that it is the unknown. It's much easier. I think, to have a rule book or a guide book, right? Step one, right? Express feeling. Step two. Think about feeling. Like it's much easier, I think, to be in that space, as opposed to be sitting with someone – the language that's used in the spiritual direction world, right, “to create a container” – What does that even mean? To create a container, to have the space between us and to trust that what each soul is feeling or connecting to will come out in a way that is helpful for the growth of that individual.

**JONATHAN:**

So looping back to where you started in family education, where some of that is parallel education – parents and kids come together, they do something, then they separate, they do their own things; parents learn, children learn, children learn their parents learn at the same time, all that's happening – but this is a very different sort of family education. Because it is: Judaism is meaningful to me because it lives in me in this way. I can use this word. I can use this prayer to show how it guides me, that it actually does. Which is what you're offering in this wonderful book: “Parenting on a Prayer”.

**AMY:**

Thank you. I don't want to diminish the power and importance of our tradition, and the words which have been around for thousands of years. Right. And as I say to my children and my other students: if it didn't work and it wasn't meaningful, I don't believe it would have lasted for so many thousands of years. And so it's for me really about connecting to those ancient words, whether it's in the Torah, whether it's in the *siddur*, in the prayer book, whether it's in the Midrash, wherever it is that we're learning Jewish texts – and to run them through our modern eyes, ears, hearts, and hands, right? Like



what, what is this text asking of me? Where can I see myself in the text? What is this text adding to my life? And how can I then go out to make the world a better place, knowing that they, I have this information. So it's really a way to integrate what was, what is, and ultimately what will be.

**JONATHAN:**

Which is what parenting is about. Because we are a piece of what was, we are what is, and our children are what will be.

**AMY:**

Exactly beautiful. Yes.

**JONATHAN:**

So, give us an example, another perhaps, or a specific from the book, of how you link a prayer to parenting practice.

**AMY:**

Alright. I will share one, which doesn't necessarily paint me in the best way, but I, I wonder, you know, be sure to let everybody know that the book is not, "Oh, look how amazing I am as a parent." It's, "Here's some lessons that I learned, and here's some things you might want to avoid, because I really messed up in this area," right? It's not a didactic book about, this is what you should do. So here's the story: The story is about my daughter who got new glasses. And it connects to the prayer from your *birkhot hashachar*, from the morning blessings, where we thank God for *poke'ach ivrim* (פוקח עיוורים), right, for "opening up the eyes of the blind".

And how would my daughter's new glasses connect to opening up the eyes of the blind? Well, apparently she needed glasses for quite a while, but I didn't quite get the memo until I got a letter from her teacher saying, "She can't see the blackboard – I think it's time that you get her glasses." So, we're driving to school the first morning with the new glasses, and she takes them out very carefully, and makes sure to clean them, and the lenses are pristine. And she puts them on, and all of a sudden it from the back of the car, I hear, "Oh my gosh, *imma*. Oh my gosh, is this what everybody sees? The world is so beautiful. Is this- oh- look over there."

Right. So part of me was so proud of her for being able to see the beauty of the world. Right. And in my head, I'm thinking: Oh, should be saying these blessings for, you know,





gratitude for the trees and the birds and right. “*Shekacha lo b’olamo* (שככה לו בעולמו/that there are such things in Your world)”, and all of these blessings. And then the other part is saying like, “Oh my gosh, you were such a negligent mother. You have not gotten your daughter glasses.”

And then I started thinking more about the notion of what does it mean to “open up the eyes of the blind”, right? So, we have the actual literal opening up the eyes of the blind: My daughter can now see what everybody else is seeing. And then the idea of: what does it mean for each of us to have stumbling blocks, right? Maybe there are things that we are blinded to, or blinded from. And how can we as parents, and as human beings, open up ourselves to those things in our life that we are blinded to? Fill in the blank! All you have to do is open up any social media, website, newspaper, and there are so many problems in the world that we might not have been attuned to, or it hadn't impacted our world in a certain way. And each morning the wisdom of the Jewish prayer book has us recite these words as a reminder. So we go through our day with open eyes. And what does it mean to see the world with open eyes? Not just the beauty of the world, but to see the challenges and the frustrations and the hurts. What does it mean to see them with open eyes? How can we become empowered to help repair the world?

**JONATHAN:**

Which of course is something that kids will regularly help us with. They'll point out our inconsistency or what we're not seeing when it's most inconvenient.

**AMY:**

Exactly. Yes.

**JONATHAN:**

That's wonderful. And I can hear in it how on any given morning, opening up the *siddur*, it might've been that this would just jump out as: Oh, this is something to be attentive to.

But I want to go back to this piece, just before you gave the example, of how you don't want people to view you as you've got it all done and managed; about your understanding, your sense of what was happening in your own investigation of parenting, and parenting books, and your orientation to what you have to offer.



AMY:

So in a lot of the books that I read- it almost is a hard question to answer, because it was such a personal response. And my response was that I just didn't vibe with it a hundred percent. But like, so I would read something, and intellectually would make sense, but in my *kishkes* it just didn't vibe or jive with what or how I wanted to raise my children. And the other thing, which I found frustrating and true, was that what works for one child doesn't work for another. So I could have found this great parenting advice that was intellectually stimulating, did work, did feel right in the *kishkes*. Cause, and then I would try it out and it was a complete fail with one kid, but yet it might've worked for another kid.

So it didn't feel like there was anything, as we've spoken about, like there was no equation, right? There's no formula of what's going to work with each of our children. And so the piece that I like to offer in my book is have parents check in with themselves while rubbing up against the information that's being offered. Right?

So it's really a dual approach. It's not just, "Here. Here are ten things that you can do so that you won't have to yell at your child." But it's, "Here are ten things" - which I don't offer by the way, that's from somebody else's material. I would use the language, "Here are ten suggestions that you might want to explore." So, I feel like the language that I use is different.

And also interesting to note: because the book was written over ten years, I went back over the last probably two-ish years and rewrote a lot of the book and took out every single "should" that I had previously written. And to me that was the most growth that I could see in myself as a parent - is that there are no "shoulds". "Should" is a dangerous word, in my opinion. It has the potential to lead to lots of guilt. And I'm not sure that that's a healthy place to be. You know, we can do the best that we can with the information that we have at the time that we have it. And then if something changes, how do we change? Right? Maya Angelou says something very similar, right? We do the best that we can until we know better. And when we know better, we do better.

And so I feel like that is also part of what I offer: is the process and the unfolding and the not knowing the uncertainty; of how I view the divine as a reflection in this process. Right. And how I parent that way. Because we don't know what's going to happen. We don't know who our children are going to become. Right. What we do know is that, well I'll speak for myself: What I know is that love is what is the answer. I don't want to sound



like the Beatles, but you know, it's really, it's sort of true for me. And I imagine for, for a lot of people as well.

**JONATHAN:**

And in that sense, one of the most profound spiritual offerings is something that is so contrary to the self-help market, which is: if you do these ten things, it'll be just right. As opposed to saying: do the best with what you have as best you can, and know that you're not alone in this work. One, there's your child. Two, there's the whole of the family system. And three, there's God. That, as an offering to both greater commitment and dedication to parenting and also relief and trust, and dare I say, in a Jewish context, faith, which is a great gift.

**AMY:**

Yup. Yes. Beautifully said thank you for that summary.

**JONATHAN:**

Well, thank you, Amy. Thank you for this offering "Parenting on a Prayer: Ancient Jewish Secrets for Raising Modern Children". Thank you for being with us today. In our next episode, Amy will come back to join us, to offer her personal prayer practice.

**AMY:**

Thank you so much for having me. It's really been a pleasure and an honor to speak with you.

