



Open My Heart:

Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Cantor Lizzie Shammash

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 Lizzie Shammash, who is a colleague, a student, and a friend. Hi Lizzie. I'm so happy to have you here today. Tell us a little bit about yourself. Would you?

LIZZIE:

Hi Jonathan, I'm delighted to be here today. Sure. I'm a Cantor. I live in Philadelphia and I serve Adath Israel in Merion Station. I'm a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary, and I'm also on the faculty of the IJS Clergy Leadership Program, which is a great honor. And I teach the weekly IJS Online Yoga Studio. My spiritual practices have included singing and yoga for many, many years; over 25 years each. And so, I'm curious in my spiritual practice about where the breath, voice, and movement intersect, and how God shows up, or how holiness enters into these spaces.

JONATHAN:

Well, I'm very excited then 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.

LIZZIE:

Thanks. So, I'm very interested in finding small pieces of liturgy, like bite sized pieces, to focus on and to take into my heart and metabolize slowly. And this quiet, personal type

of practice helps me gain an intimacy with the words of our *tefillah*, which in turn helps me to have confidence and a very clear intention when I then return to the synagogue and lead davening. The more internal practice helps me know how to design a phrase when I then daven publicly, knowing, you know, where I want to move more quickly through text, or where I want to dwell and allow a musical phrase to flower, so that it might be planted within the hearts of others. It helps me know naturally where I feel a *krechitz* [an emotional expression], or a piece of filigree, to ornament and highlight a word or group of words. So, this external practice then also becomes totally innate and tethered to my heart and to my internal practice.

In my quiet practice lately, I've been noticing how scattered my mind often is. And I think this is true for many of us. It's a difficult time we're going through now. It's often hard to focus, and there's so many emotions and thoughts swirling, and I've heard from many friends and congregants that they suffer from brain fog. I think it's a common occurrence. It's very hard to feel into what's even present in our own hearts and minds.

So, I've been rooting myself in a line that appears in the paragraph right before the Shema in the morning liturgy, a part of the *Ahavah Rabbah* section, talking about God's love for us. It says:

V'yached l'vaveinu l'ahavah ul'yir'ah et shemekha

וְיַחַד לְבַבֵּנוּ לְאַהֲבָה וּלְיִרְאָה אֶת שְׁמֶךָ

Unite our hearts toward love and toward awe of Your Name.

The verse says:

V'ha'eir eineinu b'tor'atekha וְהָאֵר עֵינֵינוּ בְּתוֹרַתְךָ

Enlighten our eyes to your Torah

V'dabbek libbeinu b'mitzvotekha וְדַבֵּק לִבֵּנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתֶיךָ

and cleave our hearts to your mitzvot.

Unite our hearts to love and to rest in awe of Your Name, so that we will no longer feel shame, because in Your holy Name, in your greatness, we can trust, rejoicing and feeling gladness in your deliverance.



And for me, deliverance or salvation, *yeshu'atekha* (יְשׁוּעַתְךָ), is every moment I allow Awareness, capital A, to help me choose a wholesome action over an unwholesome action.

Rabbi Shefa Gold has written a beautiful chant for this verse, *v'yached levaveinu*:

[singing]

V'yached l'vaveinu l'ahavah ul'yir'ah et shemekha

וְיַחַד לְבַבְנוּ לְאַהֲבָה וּלְיִרְאָה אֶת שְׁמֶךָ

So, I pray for the unity of the heart, not just for myself, but for all of us, as it's written in the first-person plural: *v'yached levaveinu*. It helps me to plant the *kavvanah*, or the aspiration – through exhaled breath, through vibration of sound – the *kavvanah* that the disparate parts of my mind or heart-space can come together and unite into a focused self. And then this heart, which is strong, which is unified, can rest in the inner knowing, the deep, deep knowing of divine love. And the word “love”, *ahavah*, appears six times in this paragraph. So, this calls me not only to know God's love in an intellectual way, but to call this love to unite my distracted heart.

The paragraph traditionally speaks about the, the ingathering of exiles from the diaspora to the Land of Israel, from the four corners of the earth:

V'havi'einu l'shalom mei'arba kanfot ha'aretz

וְהִבִּיאֵנוּ לְשָׁלוֹם מֵאַרְבַּע כַּנְפוֹת הָאָרֶץ

And I imagine this as bringing us to wholeness or to *sheleimut* (שְׁלֵמוּת) from the four or more places of our own distracted beings.

So, the practice that I do is to begin quietly with the chant, rooting myself in these words. And then I bring the focus to my breathing, feeling myself in my body. And then I gradually draw myself in literally from the four corners of myself, or what I perceive as myself. I begin at the outer edges of my body, and I draw inward, in concentric circles, toward the heart: first sensitizing to where my skin meets the air, feeling that differentiation of air and body; then feeling my hands and feet literally *arba kanfot* of the body; and the moving inward contacting the outline of my shoulders and hips. And lastly



coming right to the heart, feeling my own heartbeat, feeling those four corners, those four chambers of my heart.

And then I stay right there with the raw sensation of all the emotions that are there, if I'm able to contact them. I chant a little more. I touch in with sound as it meets breath. And I renew the hope to find a *yichud*, to find a unity within my heart. I name any feelings I'm experiencing. I sit quietly a little longer. I let myself settle. And then I'll close my practice with returning to the text, maybe one more time, as a *chatimah*, as a seal.

It's a practice I like to do first thing in the morning, if I'm able, as soon as I've opened my eyes while lying in bed. I find that I wake up many days with a lot of worry. And so simply feeling my body being held by the mattress, feeling my breath and the state of my heart, I'm able to orient myself positively and joyously toward the day. And sometimes even turn my mind state around before I get out of bed. So I offer it as a practice that you can do any time of day, and also in any position. You can be lying down or sitting in a chair, standing or even walking. It's just really helpful to be able to locate and name whatever's going on in the heart as well. Let's try it together.

[singing]

V'yached l'vaveinu l'ahavah ul'yir'ah et shemekha

וְיַחַד לְבַבְנוּ לְאַהֲבָה וְלִירְאָה אֶת שְׁמֶךָ

I begin by coming into my breath, becoming aware of the rise and fall of the belly and the chest, the expansion of the rib cage, the tenderness of the breath, *ru'ach Elohim* (רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים), literally the wind of the divine coming and going from my body. Sense that you are being breathed. Receive the breath. Notice what it's like. It's the place to rest and to be aware. Relax with the breath.

Next, I bring my attention to the outer edges of my body, and feel the distinction where my body meets the air. In particular, bring your attention to the hands and the feet. Try to sense the delineation between skin and air. Hands and feet representing the four corners, the *arba kanfot*, of the outer edges of your being.

Next, we move to the hands and the feet, sensing the skin of the palms and the soles of the feet. Become aware of sensation. I feel some tingling, some pulsation in my palms. You might sense something similar, some vibration, temperature of warmth or coolness. Notice what you feel. And I stay here for a few moments, feeling my own aliveness.



And then we begin to draw the attention a little further in on the physical landscape. So inhaling up the legs and up the arms. We place our attention on the shoulders and the hips. Join me here, as we find the outline of the torso, hip bones and shoulders floating directly in alignment above the hips. We can feel these four corners of delineation of the torso. And within these *arba kanfot*, the housing of so many vital organs, heart lungs, the organs within the abdomen. And take some breaths to feel, fully, your torso.

Then we draw a little further inward to the heart space. You might even wish to place a hand on your heart. Maybe you can feel the beating of your own heart: steady, certain rhythm. The heart also has its four corners, its *arba kanfot*, in the form of four chambers, the auricles and the ventricles. They have their individual tasks, but ultimately they come together functioning as one organ to keep us alive. We could feel together the vulnerability of this precious heart beating, this unified heart.

[singing]

V'yached l'vaveinu l'ahavah ul'yir'ah et shemekha

וְיַחַד לְבַבְנוּ לְאַהֲבָה וְלִירְאָה אֶת שְׁמֶךָ

And then I move to naming the four corners of my heart. What feelings need loving attention right now? What feelings seek unification? And you might name them aloud. At this moment I'm feeling some anxiety, and also some compassion for myself. Also joy and lightness. So, notice what you're feeling, as well the textures and the quality. And you could continue to name other things. It might be more than four. Holding all of this, we can welcome these heart-states as friends: You're all welcome here. Make yourselves known. You're welcome.

So, we'll sit quietly for a minute. Relaxing our hearts together, letting the breath reconnect us, re-relax us to our own presence.

[singing]

V'yached l'vaveinu l'ahavah ul'yir'ah et shemekha

וְיַחַד לְבַבְנוּ לְאַהֲבָה וְלִירְאָה אֶת שְׁמֶךָ

Now zooming out from the center of the heart, to take in the whole body right here, in this moment, being breathed. Notice how you feel.



Decide to call on your heart, that it may grow clear and free to welcome home your emptiness, that it may cleanse you like the clearest air you could ever breathe. Those words of the late poet, John O'Donohue.

Barukh atah Adonai, habocheir b'amo yisrael b'ahavah

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה'. הַבּוֹחֵר בְּעַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאַהֲבָה:

Blessed are you, *Yud Heh Vav Heh* (יה-וה-וה), the Eternal, who chooses us, your people with great love. Who chooses to be present for us, to hold us lovingly and compassionately, so that we know we're not alone.

JONATHAN:

That was Cantor Lizzie Shamash leading us in their 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.

