



Open My Heart:

Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Rabbi Margot Stein

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 Rabbi Margot Stein, who is a friend, a student, and a colleague. Hey, Margot, really happy to have you here with us. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

MARGOT:

Thank you, Jonathan, it's great to be here. Thanks for having me. I am a Reconstructionist rabbi and I have been teaching liturgy there at the [Reconstructionist] Rabbinical school for a number of years. But in my early days, I came to Judaism as a singer-songwriter. And I began to experiment with the liturgy and trying to make it my own; and writing songs and chants that reflected my understanding of the words that were on the page, and trying to bring them to life, you know, in a new way. And over time I found fellow travelers, and we formed a troupe of rabbis who were called -- we were called “Shabbat Unplugged”. And we actually innovated a lot of the musical Friday night and *havdallah* services that we've seen in many places around the country. And we had the chance to really write and reflect and feel deeply into what the liturgy was trying to say. So, I guess these chants and musical approaches are a way of, for me, of really very personally connecting my body, my heart, my mind, and my experience in life with what the tradition is trying to say through the words of the liturgy.

JONATHAN:

Well, that's a great introduction and makes me really interested in what you're about to do. So I'm going to turn things over to you and thank you for sharing your prayer with us now.

MARGOT:

So what I'd like to say is that when I pray in the morning, I want to wake up with gratitude. I want to bring a sense of this body into this day, and that I'm seeking ways for body and soul to be in conversation through the music and the chants. But I don't want to be dependent on a *siddur*. I don't want the book to be the guide. And after thirty years of singing and chanting and praying, I feel that certain of these prayers are so deep inside of me, and the music helps me bring them forth. So, the music is my way of bringing them from inside of me to outer expression, where I can thank God for being in this day.

So, I begin with the gratefulness of *Modah Ani*, and of my soul returning to my body in *Elohai Neshamah*. And I return to the body -- to *Pote'ach et Yadekha* -- in the sense that God offers and opens God's hands to us, and fulfills our needs that way. And from that sense of fulfillment and possibility, I move into *Ahallelah*, into gratitude, praising God's name and into the Hallelujah, Psalm 150.

That's a whole section of prayer. And then I'd like to just bring you through a few other moments of the *Shacharit*, of the morning service towards its conclusion, just to give you a taste of that journey for me. But again, these are done choosing songs, chants, and prayers that I already know. So that I can move through this arc of waking up, of gratitude, and of connection, without turning the pages of a book. I can be walking outside or sitting quietly. And so, I offer it to you in that spirit this morning.

[chanting]

Modah ani lephanekha ru'ach chai v'kayyam מוֹדָה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ רוּחַ חַי וְקַיָּיִם

[I am grateful, before You, Living and Enduring Spirit]

[singing]

Elohai neshamah she-natata bi t'horah hi אֱלֹהֵי. נְשָׁמָה שֶׁנָּתַתָּ בִּי טְהוֹרָה הִיא

[My God, the soul You have given me is pure...]

[singing]

Potei'ach et yadekh umas'bi'a lekhol chai ratzon פּוֹתֵיחַ אֶת יָדְךָ. וּמִשְׁבִּיעַ לְכֹל חַי רָצוֹן



You open Your hand, I open my heart to this abundance;
and all life, all will is satisfied.

[Ps. 145:16]

[singing]

Ahallelah Yah b'chayai אֶהְלֵלָהּ ה' בְּחַיִּי
Azamrah l'eilohai b'odi אֲזַמְרָה לֵאלֹהֵי בְעוֹדִי

[I will sing to Yah with my life; I will make song to my God with my all; Ps. 146:2]

[chanting]

Kol haneshamah t'hallel Yah, Halleluyah כָּל הַנְּשָׁמָה תְהַלֵּל יְהוָה. הִלְלוּיָהּ

[Let all that has breath praise Yah, Hallelujah; Ps. 150:6]

I'm going to sing what I like to sing before I do a silent Amidah, which is using the words
Adonai S'fatai Titach [O Lord, open my lips]:

[singing]

Adonai s'fatai tiftach u'fi yaggid t'hilatekha אֲדֹנָי שְׁפָתַי תִּפְתַּח וּפִי יַגִּיד תְהִלַּתְךָ

[O God, open up my lips, that I might sing Your praises; Ps. 51:17]]

And then I give myself some time to connect with my body, my emotions, my intellect,
my spirit, bringing all four worlds together. And after I've taken some time for myself,
that way I'll sing the closing words of the Amidah on this in this way.

[singing]

<i>Elohai n'tzor l'shoni mei ra</i>	אֱלֹהֵי. נֹצֵר לְשׁוֹנֵי מַרְעַ
<i>U's'fatai middaber mirma</i>	וּשְׁפָתַי מִדְּבַר מְרָמָה
<i>V'limkal'lai nafshi tidom</i>	וְלִמְקַלְלֵי נַפְשִׁי תִדּוּם
<i>V'nafshi k'afar lakol t'hiyeh</i>	וְנַפְשִׁי כְעֹפֵר לְכָל תְּהִיֶה
<i>P'tach libbi b'toratekha</i>	פְּתַח לְבָבִי בְּתוֹרַתְךָ
<i>Uv'mitzvotekha tirdof nafshi</i>	וּבְמִצְוֹתֶיךָ תִרְדּוֹף נַפְשִׁי

My God keep my mouth from all evil
And my lips from spouting lies



May I think before I begin to speak
May my words be gentle and wise
Help me ignore those who wish me ill
Help me be humble before all
Open my heart to Your Torah
That I know how to answer your call.

And the words at the end of *Adon Olam* speak to me in that final embodiment of *B'yado*, that we are held in the hands of the holy Blessed One.

[chanting]

B'yado afkid ruchi בְּיָדוֹ אֶפְקִיד רוּחִי

B'ait Ishan v'aira בְּעֵת אִישָׁן וְאֵעִירָה

V'im ruchi g'vi'ati וְעַם רוּחִי גְוִיֹּאתִי

Adonai li v'lo ira ה' לִי וְלֹא אִירָא

[Into Your hands I commit my soul, when I am asleep and awake; and with my body, my spirit, too. Adonai is mine, so I shall not fear]

JONATHAN:

That was Rabbi Margot Stein sharing their personal 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.

