



Institute for Jewish Spirituality™

Cultivating Mindfulness. Deepening Connection. Enlivening Jewish Life.

Open My Heart:

Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Rabbanit Leah Sarna and Rabba Dina Brawer

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 meet once again with Rabba Dina Brawer and Rabbanit Leah Sarna, the presenters of “PrayerFull: A Guided Prayer Practice Podcast,” who we met earlier this week. They're going to present the most recent podcast that they've produced, that focuses on the theme of love, which is so central to Jewish prayer, and such an important part of developing a personal spiritual practice. So I'm really happy to turn this over now to the PrayerFull podcast and to allow Rabba Dina and Rabbanit Leah to share their work with us.

[music, instrumental melody of the Shema]

DINA:

Welcome to PrayerFull. I'm Rabba Dina Brawer.

LEAH:

I'm Rabbanit Leah Sarna.

DINA:

Together through this podcast, we want to offer you a curated prayer experience. Each episode we'll take as its starting point a selection of traditional liturgy, *tefillah*, bound together by an overarching theme. We will then unfold these prayers through songs and personal reflection. We encourage you to experience this episode in a moment of quiet,

perhaps outdoors on a walk, or sitting comfortably with a warm drink; a break from the busy-ness of life, in tune with your breath, comfortable in your body, and available with your emotions and intellect.

LEAH:

The theme of this episode is *ahavah*, love. The Baal Shem Tov said that there are three loves: love of God, love of Torah and love of one's fellow. And all three are truly one. When we grow in our abilities for one, we expand our capacity for all of the others. We expand our capacity for love

[musical interlude]

DINA:

In Jewish tradition, on either side of the central prayer known as the Amidah, one takes three steps backward, pauses, and then takes three steps forward. These steps symbolize the transition into a sacred space.

As we begin, we invite you to slowly take three steps back, physically or mentally. With each step, focus on the exhale of your breath, and let go of a thought, a worry or a task that is on your mind.

And now, slowly, take three steps forward, focusing on the inhale of your breath, as you create and enter a new sacred space.

[sound of three steps, followed by music]

Rabbi Isaac Luria, the AR"l z"l, taught that one cannot begin daily prayer without first committing to loving one's fellow human. This teaching was embedded into Hasidic practice by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyadi, who inserted the following pledge as an opening to *tefillah*:

Hareini m'kabbelet alai mitzvat aseh shel v'ahavta l'rei'akha kamokha

הֲרִינִי מִקְבֻּלַת עָלַי, מִצְוַת עֲשֵׂה שֶׁל וְאַהֲבַת לְרֵעִךְ כָּמוֹךְ:

I commit to the positive commandment to love my fellow like myself.



This lofty and idealistic sentiment can be difficult to practice, but verbalizing it is a start. Declaring my commitment to loving another is the first step in expanding my capacity for love. Imagine tossing a pebble into a pool of water, visualizing the concentric circles that emerge as the pebble breaks the water's surface, and how the circles gently ripple and widen out...

LEAH:

[singing]

Hareini m'kabbelet alai mitzvot aseh shel v'ahavta l'rei'akha kamokha

הֲרִינִי מִקְבֵּלֶת עָלַי, מִצְוֹת עֲשֵׂה שֶׁל וְאַהֲבַת לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ:

DINA:

As you recite *Hareini*, imagine the innermost ring as representing your nearest and dearest, those who are closest to your heart, for whom your love is a given.

LEAH:

[singing]

Hareini m'kabbelet alai mitzvot aseh shel v'ahavta l'rei'akha kamokha

הֲרִינִי מִקְבֵּלֶת עָלַי, מִצְוֹת עֲשֵׂה שֶׁל וְאַהֲבַת לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ:

DINA:

As you continue chanting, focus on expanding this love outward, into ever wider concentric circles – encompassing close friends, colleagues, community members, acquaintances, fellow citizens – until the force of your love can ripple out, to encompass all of humanity.

Hareini m'kabbelet alai mitzvot aseh shel v'ahavta l'rei'akha kamokha

הֲרִינִי מִקְבֵּלֶת עָלַי, מִצְוֹת עֲשֵׂה שֶׁל וְאַהֲבַת לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ:



LEAH:

In the Shema, we recite our own obligation to love God. but the *siddur* knows that sometimes we need to feel loved before we can give love; that love is bi-directional, and grows in mutuality. Right before the Shema, we recite a prayer affirming God's love for us. *Ahavah rabbah ahavtanu* (אַהֲבָה רַבָּה אֶהְבְּתָנוּ), You have loved us with great love. *Chemlah g'dolah v'yeteirah chamalta aleinu* (חֶמְלָה גְּדוֹלָה וַיִּתֵּרָה חֶמְלַתְ עָלֵינוּ), and with surpassing compassion you have had compassion on us.

[singing]

Ahavah rabbah ahavtanu Hashem Elokeinu אַהֲבָה רַבָּה אֶהְבְּתָנוּ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ
Chemlah g'dolah v'yeteirah chamalta aleinu חֶמְלָה גְּדוֹלָה וַיִּתֵּרָה חֶמְלַתְ עָלֵינוּ

Do you know that you are loved? Can you feel that you are loved? Naming God's love for us, paying attention to each moment of felt love, is a practice that develops our capacity for recognizing love, whether shown to us by God, or by people.

Ahavah rabbah ahavtanu Hashem Elokeinu אַהֲבָה רַבָּה אֶהְבְּתָנוּ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ
Chemlah g'dolah v'yeteirah chamalta aleinu חֶמְלָה גְּדוֹלָה וַיִּתֵּרָה חֶמְלַתְ עָלֵינוּ

Once we have expanded our capacity for recognizing love, then we can return love. Then we can recite the Shema.

V'ahavta et Hashem Elokekha וְאַהֲבַתְ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ

B'chol levav'kha בְּכָל לִבְבְּךָ

Uv'chol naphsh'kha וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ

Uv'chol m'odekha וּבְכָל מְאֹדְךָ

Love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might.

[singing]

Ahavah rabbah ahavtanu Hashem Elokeinu אַהֲבָה רַבָּה אֶהְבְּתָנוּ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ
Chemlah g'dolah v'yeteirah chamalta aleinu חֶמְלָה גְּדוֹלָה וַיִּתֵּרָה חֶמְלַתְ עָלֵינוּ

Love God in equal measure to the love that God shows us. If only we have opened ourselves up to feeling it.



DINA:

In the final passage of the Amidah, the Silent Prayer, we ask *P'tach libbi b'toratekha* (פְּתַח לְבִי בְּתוֹרַתְךָ), open my heart with your Torah. These words are often invoked as a prayer to understand Torah. Here, we want to offer an additional, alternative reading: not only as a prayer to open our heart **to** Torah, but for our hearts to be opened **through** Torah – Torah, as the key that opens and sensitizes the heart, that awakens love.

LEAH:

[singing]

P'tach libbi b'toratekha פְּתַח לְבִי בְּתוֹרַתְךָ

DINA:

Torah as the portal that enables us to pass through and transcend our own perspectives, leading to empathy and resonance with others.

P'tach libbi b'toratekha פְּתַח לְבִי בְּתוֹרַתְךָ

Torah as our pathway to moral imagination.

P'tach libbi b'toratekha פְּתַח לְבִי בְּתוֹרַתְךָ

Uv'mitzvotekah tirdoph naphshi וּבְמִצְוֹתֶיךָ תִּרְדּוֹף נַפְשִׁי

Now take three steps back, gently easing out of your prayerful space, pausing to hold on to a feeling or a thought generated in prayer that you want to bring with you into the rest of the day.

[sound of three steps]

Thank you for joining us. We hope you enjoyed this episode of PrayerFull. This episode was brought to you in partnership with Yeshivat Maharat, the first Yeshiva to give *semikhah* [ordination] to Orthodox women including, of course, yours truly. Rabba Dina and I met at Maharat, and the training we gained there is part of what makes PrayerFull, this project, possible. Now in its 12th year, Maharat invites you to join in celebrating six



more women receiving *semikhah* on June 15th, 2021. For more details, see yeshivatmaharat.org/semikha.

We invite you to support the creation of further episodes on Patreon, by searching for PrayerFull on Patreon.com. Never miss an episode by subscribing to PrayerFull on iTunes, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts.

Prayerful is conceived and produced by Rabba Dina Brawer. This episode features vocals by Rabbanit Leah Sarna. Music, editing and sound engineering by Tucker Donalyn. We'd love to hear from you. Please follow us at PrayerFull podcast on Facebook and Instagram. Future episodes are available for sponsorship. If you or your organization are interested in collaborating with us, please get in touch.

[music, instrumental melody of the Shema]

JONATHAN:

That was Rabbanit Leah Sarna and Rabba Dina Brawer sharing their podcast, PrayerFull, 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 Ratson", 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.

