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 have with us Rabbanit Leah Sarna and Rabba Dina Brawer, who have produced a podcast called PrayerFull: A Guided Prayer Podcast, also in this area of Jewish prayer. Perhaps let's start. Dina, do you want to just introduce yourself, and tell us where you are physically in the world, and what you're up to?

DINA:

Yes. Hi, good morning, Jonathan. I'm in Boston where I moved recently from London, and I also would say that I am Italian. So that's kind of like my short, Jewish journey, the physical journey, and it's a pleasure to be with you.

JONATHAN:

Thank you. And, Leah, where are you? What are you up to?

LEAH:

I'm currently in the Philadelphia suburbs, but originally from the Boston suburbs. So, Dina and I are chasing each other around a little bit.

JONATHAN:

What are each of you doing? I mean, aside from the podcast, what engages you in the world? Where are you located in terms of the Jewish world?

LEAH:
So I work full-time for the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education, which is based out of New York. I'm part of their education team in general. Which means I teach *shi'urim* online now year-round. And then over the summers, I run an intensive Torah program for teenage girls

JONATHAN:
And Dina.

DINA:
So I came to the rabbinate as an act of activism after launching an Orthodox feminist movement in the UK. And I have been working while living in Boston, also remotely, for my own rabbinical school, Yeshivat Maharat, to recruit women into this holy work. So it feels like really a blessing to do this passion of mine day to day. And over the summer, I will be shifting gears and taking a new role at Gann Academy in greater Boston, which is a pluralistic school. And I will be the assistant head for Jewish education.

JONATHAN:
How do you sense that prayer has been a part of this process? – you geographically meandering even more, Dina, than Leah – perhaps in terms of you're coming to the rabbinate even, and the way in which you engage in the work that you're doing, whether it's at Drisha or working now, ultimately it Gann?

DINA:
That's a really good question. I think prayer has been part of the fabric of my day-to-day life all the time since I was a child. But interestingly enough, for me, prayer wasn't associated with synagogue or rabbis. I learned prayer at school, in my Jewish school, and I learned prayer with my mother at home. So weekday prayer was very much powered by communal song in my primary school. And that is still a little bit the background to day-to-day prayer, even nowadays. And Shabbat and Festival prayers, often, I learned how to pray, and the tunes, with my mother. Living in a small community, Milan, going to shul without an eruv [defining perimeter that permits carrying in public on Shabbat], was not always practical for women with younger children. And so I did go to shul occasionally with my dad, but more often I learned how to pray and sing the Shabbat prayers with my mom.

JONATHAN:
Which was part of the inspiration to really dedicate yourself to the Jewish world?

DINA:
I think that was definitely part of the inspiration. There were many different elements that I think coalesced to bring together my passion for serving Jewish communities. I grew up in the Chabad movement. So this idea of service to community and responsibility for other Jews was something that I picked up as a teenager while studying in high school in Israel. And it brought together this, and fueled this passion for teaching the richly textured Judaism and sharing it with other people. So prayer is a very important personal component, but I think it's one of many others that come together to bring this very rich tapestry.

JONATHAN:
And Leah, is there a piece of that that's true for you?

LEAH:
In some ways it's almost the opposite from Rabba Dina's story. I grew up very synagogue oriented. I grew up in a synagogue that was founded by my grandparents, going to synagogue with my parents, praying next to my mother, who is one of the world's experts in Jewish liturgy. And one of my teachers during my year in seminary, when I was living in Israel, said that the person who you pray next to becomes a prayer *havruta* [partner] for you. And truly my mom has always been that to me. Praying next to her has always been a joy. And that was something that we did sometimes at home, like on Friday nights my family would pray together at home. But really something that happened in synagogue in particular. And growing up, I went to a co-ed Orthodox day school, which meant that we were praying in a synagogue three times a day at school.

And then when I was an undergrad and after that, I continued really going to synagogues three times a day. And my rabbinate and that path was really powered by my love for synagogue work. Which you might wonder how my current work fits into that. And the truth is that I was working at a synagogue until about a year ago. We relocated to Philadelphia for my husband's work, and I left a very beloved synagogue community that I've been working for. But I do hope to some day return to that kind of work. But one of the things that's wonderful about Drisha is that, although it's the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education, we really see prayer as a piece of that education. And so all of our immersive programs have very intense prayer elements to them. And the truth is that when I was a student at Drisha, in the summer of 2012, that was a very formative moment in my prayer journey in terms of some of my commitments to how a praying

community should look and feel. And I really owe a good deal of that education to Drisha.

JONATHAN:
And this may seem unusual to many listeners, that one learns prayer from one's parents, or from who you sit next to in synagogue, rather than that being the person who you exchange baseball scores or recipes or gossip. And there's something that you're saying, which is not, “I learned the words of the prayers”, or even “I learned the melodies”: “I learned something about me internally and about what prayer is about”. How would you talk about that?

DINA:
I also want to add that, unlike Rabbanit Leah, who has been in one synagogue in one small community her entire life, I moved around many different synagogues, with my father and then as a teen in Israel. And so I experienced both the Sephardi synagogue with its own melodies, and Ashkenazi High Holiday Hazzanut. And those were both interwoven into the fabric of my childhood and young adulthood. And so there is a really interesting mix that comes together and it's a language and a practice that kind of helps you connect. We talk about some classic pieces of Jewish practice and melodies that, anywhere in the world, you can come in and join. Some really are like that – Kabbalat Shabbat might be one of them, especially now that people have sort of almost universal tunes that you can pick up everywhere. But there's also the very kind of interesting and specific inflection of a particular prayer communities that have their own rhythm, right? Some of the Sephardi communities just take turns, don't have one Hazzan, take turns, people chanting out loud. And there's a lot of that kind of rhythm of each word being iterated and said. There isn't the Ashkenazi *voozhevoozhe*, right; that kind of, sort of like mumble sometimes. But there's just a different aesthetic and a different kind of sound. And I think those each offer something unique and kind of when you can experience all of them, you get a much richer prayer experience.

JONATHAN:
That's a very important piece that you just brought up. Which is that there is an issue of aesthetic, which in Western terms sometimes becomes very structured and externalized. And we fail to realize that aesthetic is something that is experienced internally. That ultimately what the aesthetic is, is something that's supposed to come in and affect us internally. So how did all of this lead the two of you to think of a podcast?

LEAH:
So I want to jump back onto what you were asking about prayer Havruta model. Because part of where this podcast came from – Dina, Rabba Dina and I have been imagining for a long time to do a prayer thing together. And we did in-person little things together. I would visit her community in London. We put on a Selichot together, one year. So we've done little projects together in the past. Then we should mention, by the way, that we're also a long-term Torah-study havrutas – at Yeshivat Maharat for four years, and we've been learning together weekly ever since. And that we wanted to dive in together on a project.

And that the pandemic really opened up many, many big losses, not just the most kind of heart-wrenching ones of death and illness, but also loss of community. And for Jews, for whom synagogue is the central locus of their community, prayer community, as well. And a lot of prayer, sort of communal prayer, still is happening over Zoom. And just to turn back to this idea of a prayer havruta: that's what you lose over Zoom. You lose the person next to you who's praying on their own, along with the whole community, but who was also inspiring you, right in your ear, right next to you.

And I think that's actually something that our podcast really offers. That there's no feeling of "I wish I could be closer, but I'm sitting on my couch at home". It's as close as it could be. Meaning it's in your ear buds. Your prayer havruta is us, in havruta with each other, each episode was worked over by us in havruta. It was these two voices spinning together between song and meditation and *kavvanah* [spiritual intention] about a particular theme that emerges in Jewish liturgy. But then we're also as close as we could possibly be to you, right? It's almost inside your own brain, with our songs and our thoughts. And I think it brings a closeness that people really lost out on when synagogues closed.

JONATHAN:
There's a teaching from the Netivot Shalom, the Slonimer Rebbe, *zichrono l'vracha*, of the late 20th century. And I personally come back too it often. It's from *parashat Vayiggash*, where Jacob sends his family ahead, and he goes back across the river at night. And then the Torah says *vayevater ya'akov l'vado*, Jacob remained alone by himself. And it was only then that he was attacked by this "being", and has the night struggle. And the Slonimer suggests that it was because he was alone. So he goes through a lot of different teachings, as he does in his *sefer*, of ways of understanding what could have been, what connected him. But the one that I come back to is: If you have a havruta, even if they're not present, but you know you're connected on a soul level, you're not alone. And perhaps what you're aiming at is creating an experience that

then will unfold for people when they go back to synagogue, which is: You're not distracting me. Your davening is inspiring me. Or: I can't just sit here like a log. You need me. I can't say, “I can't sing.”

DINA:
[Laughing] I can say that. Actually. I want to pick up on that. Because we really hope that the podcast isn't an alternative to prayer, but it's a way of developing the prayer muscle; the individual spontaneous prayer that people can strengthen and bring back to synagogue.

But it's interesting. There's something about being alone in prayer that can be liberating. Because when we are in community, and there are people around us, there are some inhibitions as well. So yes, you're talking about Ya’akov and the loneliness, that's one element. But there's also the downside of being in community and not feeling comfortable, perhaps, really letting go of our voice because it doesn't sound as good as everybody else's. Or perhaps you don't feel as confident. And so, on your own, you sometimes can sort of be more honest in prayer: both in what you want to dwell and pause and think about; and also in using your voice.

Communities create traditions, but sometimes your own tradition could be a little bit different to the community you're in. You may have a different tune, or even the same tune with a slightly different inflection. And sometimes you feel like your voice just skips that one beat or you can't quite join. So there is that moment of personal prayer where you can be completely yourself.

And so with the podcast, there is that little bit of accompaniment, but nobody listens to you. So you can actually use it almost like “song in the shower”, like for those who sing in the shower. I know that the real music plays in your head, you hear it in your head, but the people outside the shower it sounds usually not that great, unless you're a really good singer. The point being that you can just have having accompaniment in your head, but you can also let loose your own voice and music. And so we hope with the podcast that for some, it might be an opportunity to really express and sing. Because there is some music there that can sort of lift you. But really no inhibition, because, you know, nobody's listening to you, and so you can really be true to your own voice.

JONATHAN:
It's such a wonderful dimension of life that you're inviting people to investigate and enter into. Which is: how are we both alone and together? And cultivating the capacity to

pray alone is not to exaggerate or to raise up the ways in which “I can't pray with my community”, or “it's not like me”, but “OK, I have my prayer, and I also can be in community with them, and receive from them, get from them”, and sometimes step out, even in the midst of it. Which is not, I think, how many people experience prayer in the broad Jewish world, prayer in community or prayer alone, either one. Do you see that as part of your invitation, this piece of prayer alone together?

DINA:
I think there's also the part of spontaneous, personal prayer, in the most kind of raw form, the way Rambam, Maimonides imagined it: and that is scripted siddur prayer. And I think both are important; one shouldn’t replace the other. But sometimes we overemphasize one over the other. And I would say that our communities, in general, have sort of shifted to think of prayer really as something that's communally done, often just on Shabbat and Festivals, like that's the major kind of focus of prayer. And so this pandemic is maybe an opportunity to recapture that, and redevelop personal *tefillah* again. Again, because the two fill different roles and are equally important.

So over the pandemic, I have sort of developed an interest in songbirds. Just because, I guess, we all heard them a little bit more, at least us who have kind of garden and a little green around. And for my birthday recently, I received a beautiful book, all about birds. And I read that most birds inherited the template for their song but are not able to sing it until they hear it. So they have this in their DNA, but they actually have to hear it to be able to sing it. And it made me think about, with our scripted template, our siddur, we all inherit that. But then we have to find a community, and hear the songs, so that we can actually find our own voice in prayer. So I think that's really an important role. And yet, we have to also be able to pray individually in our own language, and feel deeply the words that we recite, sometimes, just out of habit.

JONATHAN:
So there's an interesting tension, well it’s not a tension, but you represent these two poles: Dina, where you grew up at home largely, or with this sense of it being personal and transmitted; and Leah, where you were in synagogue and it was in the context of the community *tefillah*. But your shared impulse of personal prayer for the sake of the larger prayer is something that one could look and say: Well here's **Rabbanit** Leah and **Rabba** Dina, of course women are going to do **that**. That's not **real**.

But what are you saying to the Jewish world through this podcast, and through your putting it out there? Institutionally, there's Yeshivat Maharat, altogether is a new

phenomenon in the Jewish world, which is so important. And there is the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Association, of which you've been part, and have promoted. And the work that you did, Rabba Dina, in England. But you're putting out something that says to the Jewish world: Wake up! It's important that it's coming both from **Rabbanit** Leah and **Rabba** Dina, and that it's Leah and Dina who are speaking. Is that something that you particularly feel, or is it just: this is not an issue.

LEAH:
I've been, both of us I would say, have been quite invested for a long time in women's spirituality in particular. And at the same time, we feel that this podcast is for everyone. It's for everyone who cares about their own prayer life; for everyone who is interested in traditional Jewish liturgy, and in deepening their understanding and appreciation of it; and deepening and adding richness to their own personal prayer lives, and to the prayer lives of their community. It's a quite ambitious project, because we really feel like it's for everyone. And at the same time, exactly, as you point out, just the mere fact of it being a contribution by graduates of Yeshivat Maharat means that maybe there's something inherently edgy about it. Though you would say that investing in tefillah is not edgy at all.

Here's another thing I feel very passionately about. There's a long history of Jewish women being very intense in their *tefillot*, in their prayer: women reciting the entire book of Psalms, and women writing their own original prayers -- those are *techines*. And those happen all around the world. In every Jewish vernacular you can find *techines* written by women.

And then it kind of fell away. And there's, there's always this loss with women becoming more learned, and feeling like, you know, we're part of this bigger mainstream ... And at the same time, I still have all of these varied responsibilities at home and maybe I'm not in synagogue as much as I would like. And those two forces together meant that the traditional women's spirituality has in some ways fallen away, because of the push towards, "No, we're all doing this. We're all doing what has historically been the, more of a men's place, potentially".

But of course we do know that there were like *veiber shuls*, women's synagogues, where they were maybe engaging with traditional liturgy. But at the same time it was the synagogue which was the locus of that, and when they aren't in synagogue, then they're left with nothing.

So for me, there's been this kind of real sense that women need to show up, and we need to put in the time, because prayer is something that women do. And this is maybe a way of accessing both at once. That traditional, very personal, creative women's prayer. And, to connect that deeply into that siddur, and that classic ritual that in Ashkenaz, at least, kind of women weren't really doing -- we have a lot of literature that suggests that women weren't really doing that exactly, you know: women fulfill their obligation in prayer just by kind of talking to God a few times throughout the day. Which to me seems to say, "Women aren't using the siddur, and we have to understand why that's a correct thing for them to do."

And so we're at this funny historical moment where the reality that he's responding to isn't quite true anymore. But the alternative reality that existed at that time certainly doesn't exist anymore. And so there is this like observant feminist project of finding a new women's voice in prayer. And that project has manifested in all different ways. I grew up in a very strong women's *tefillah* environment. And that's certainly where I found my own voice out loud and musically and prayer, and maybe this is the continuation of it. But as I said, also, it's not exactly, because it's an offering for everyone, men and women alike.

DINA:
And not to forget that it is Hannah, the prophetess, Samuel's mother, Shmuel's mother, who invents prayer for us. So it is rooted, it's not heretical. It's a return to roots for women to innovate, or sort of lead in the realm of prayer.

And also my Hasidic upbringing has a lot of emphasis on personal prayers. So it was normal for me to see my dad pray individually, and not in shul all the time for different reasons. Sometimes because he had to pray after returning from a very, very early morning at work, before he could even pray. And sometimes because we were away from a synagogue community. But there is this emphasis. And so recapturing some of this kind of contemplative prayer – introspection, *hitbon'nut,* those Hasidic practices – are also important. And then again, it's not a feminist invention. It's a Hasidic tradition that is very rich and it was important to developing this prayer muscle.

JONATHAN:
Okay. So I'm going to take a risk and bring in the G word, which isn't "girls", but God. There is in the West – and I'd say "in the West" meaning, sort of, Modern Orthodoxy from Samson Raphael Hirsch and the Western *wissenschaft* world – where God

becomes the domain of thought, of philosophy and of men. And men talk about God, but God is distant.

But prayer is about heart, about spirit, about body even, which isn't from the neck up, as the West is so much. And perhaps part of this interest in reclaiming prayer as personal practice is also finding a way for us to say, “Oh yeah, God is, can, and must be part of our personal lives”. That's why we pray. It's not prayer because we **have to**, that's not what you're promoting per se in the podcast. But prayer because we must out of a personal need, out of a personal desire, out of a personal yearning. How do you bring God in? Or do you touch it in the podcast? Is that an interest in a concern of yours? And do you feel that it's going to be off-putting or inviting to your listeners?

DINA:
Yeah, I think it's really important to think about who is the God that you're praying to. You know, for some who have been raised with the “old bearded man”, who might be angry most of the time, it is a very hard proposition to kind of spend time praying to a God like that. So part of it is also contemplating and thinking about how you imagine the Divine, right? How do we imagine God? And really our central prayer, the Shema – which is a key mitzvah on its own, all separate, it is separate to prayer – but we've included and folded into our sort of daily prayer routine. It's about contemplating this oneness, *echad*. Where it's not that there is one God, but according to the mystics, it is that this all is God. And so that we embody the Divine. And there is the Divine in all of our experience. And contemplating that enables us to find like the song, the thanksgiving, the sort of connection from within us. So part of prayer is also to develop the approach and the language to, to approach the Divine, the Godly and understand God. So, good prayer experience brings that together. For me, I have developed, through introspective prayer, a better understanding, better personal understanding of God and what it means to have Divinity in the world.

LEAH:
And I think for me, music really helps. I would say that I've always believed in God, but I **feel** God the most in music, and singing, and singing with other people – which has been one of the big losses of this time – and harmony. I feel like that's where -- that's where I feel -- experience closeness in the most obvious way. And I think that that's an experiential piece of our podcast. We use God language quite explicitly. I mean, we're talking about the siddur and the siddur uses God language. So we do. And there's certain ways that we're careful about God's language. We try and use it in a way that's not gendered, because we don't believe that God is gendered. We try to keep it gentle. I

think that the experiential piece of our podcasts, the music piece of our podcasts, really helps with that, too.

DINA:
But a musical imagination: I can hear the music in my head better than I can sing it. And so having the music … I take my own medicine very often. And so I listen to the episodes again and again. And sometimes I listen to them on a day where I'm not feeling the impetus to pray as joyfully as I normally do, and the music lifts and opens it up and sets me in sort of the right path to prepare for a personal prayer. So we offer the podcast as, you know, preparation for prayer. If you wish for an alternative mode of prayer, we always include three segments of prayer that we weave together through a theme. So we have looked at themes such as Renewal and Routine. So thinking about them also in their polarities, because there are things that are opposite, but each sort of contributes to a particular aspect that is important. And so we have to develop both. This is just a really important way to go deeper into the language of the texts that we inherited and find it as a launchpad, really, for thinking about greater themes, feeling the prayer and exploring personal moments of prayer that might take off from the siddur, and turn into a personal language of prayer.

LEAH:
And in each episode we offer suggestions for how to do that, too. So we'll have a musical piece, and then we'll have a reflection on that line or a piece of prayer. And then we'll have some encouragement for what to think about or what to work on while you're contemplating that piece of the liturgy.

JONATHAN:
Well, that's really quite inspiring, to think about the different ways to use the podcast, and all of the different elements that you weave through it; for us to be able to engage in our own personal prayer and then to bring that to our communal prayer as we emerge from our isolation in pandemic. But also because we all probably go back and forth between our own personal times of prayer, and our joining in community.

So I want to thank Rabba Dina Brower and Rabbanit Leah Sarna for being here with us for this episode of the podcast. And in the podcast to come, we're going to offer you, directly, through Open My Heart: Living Jewish Prayer, the podcast of PrayerFull: A Guide for Prayer Practice that Rabbanit Leah and Rabba Dina have been offering. And you'll be able to hear what it is that they do. And hopefully that will also support you and sustain

you in your prayer practice. So thank you both very much. And we look forward to listening to you in the episode.

LEAH:
Thank you so much for having us.

DINA:
Thank you for this opportunity.

JONATHAN:
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.