



# *Open My Heart:*

## *Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater*

Rabbi Karyn Kedar

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 Karyn Kedar, author of “Amen: Seeking Presence with Prayer, Poetry, and Mindfulness Practice”, to share her practice with us. Hi, Karyn, really happy to have you. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

MARGOT:

Hi there, Jonathan. It's so great to be part of this. What an amazing project you have created. I haven't been able to stop listening. I'm the senior rabbi of a congregation outside Chicago, Congregation BJBE, and a writer, an author, and a spiritual seeker.

JONATHAN:

That puts you right in the line to be part of this program. So I'm excited to be part of your practice. I'm going to turn it over to you, and thank you for sharing your prayer with us now.

MARGOT:

Thank you.

The first thing that I want to mention about a prayer practice is the sense of place. It's really important that you have a place in which you create a sacred moment. In Hebrew, the word for place is *makom*. And it's also used as the word, in rabbinic literature, for

God. And also as the root within that word, *makom*, is the word *kiyyum*, which means existence. And so when we create a sacred space in our homes, and I'm talking about my prayer practice in my home, the little corner of holiness that I create is a convergence of sacred space, of the intention of allowing God to appear to me, and the place in which I contemplate the meaning of my existence, *makom*.

So my space in the house is in a blue chair. And beside the blue chair, to my left, is a window. And the window looks out into the East where I can see the sunrise. And there's a lane of which the cars come and go, and brick houses. To my right, there is a table, with a stainless steel pedestal and a black marble top. And on this table, there are books, books for this intention, anywhere from Blake to Rumi, to Hafiz, to Stanford, to Rilke, to Oliver -- a very diverse group of books. And then on the table next to the books, there's a candle. Sometimes the candle, the fire helps me focus. And there are also colored pencils and flairs, the writing utensils of my youth, in case I want to draw or sketch or underline something in one of my books.

After place, for me, very importantly, when I'm looking for a spiritual practice of prayer, is time. We're taught in the Talmud that when we go to heaven, we should all live 120 years, there are six things we're going to be asked. And one of those six things is: *kavata ittim latorah* (קבעת עתים לתורה), which means: do you have fixed times for the study of Torah? And as I study that text, I realize the emphasis is not on the word Torah, which in this context I believe to mean transformational learning. But rather emphasis on *kavata*. Did you fix time? Did you plan, did you schedule in moments of transformation? So for me, when I know that I'm going to show up at a fixed time, it allows me to focus myself, and open myself in my spiritual place, in the place that I've created for myself, my blue chair.

In French there is a phrase which basically means "the hour between dog and wolf". That's Twilight. That's the moment in which if you were to look off to the distance, the lighting was such that you can't discern whether that is a dog, a daytime, or a wolf, the nighttime animal. In writing, that twilight moment, that space in between writing and sleeping, is a time when it is said that creativity happens. And so Edgar Allen Poe, for instance, would sit in a chair and put a stone in his hand and a metal pan on the floor. And he would doze off. And as he dozed off, his hand would fall, the stone would fall. It would awaken him. And in that in-between moment, he went and he started his writing.

One of the times that I offer my spiritual practice is at that nighttime twilight. And that's when I offer the *Hashkiveinu* prayer:



*Hashkiveinu Adonai Eloheinu l'shalom*

הַשְׁכִּיבֵנוּ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ לְשָׁלוֹם

God, when I lie down, may it be for peace.

This moment of vulnerability ... may this not be a moment of fear, but rather

*Pores sukkat sh'lomekha*

פּוֹרֵשׁ סֻכַּת שְׁלוֹמְךָ

spread over me a canopy of peace.

And if I feel that I am hiding in the shadows of God's wings, *b'tzel k'naphekha* (בְּצֵל כְּנַפְיָךְ), and this is a place that I want to hide. And I kind of allow myself to drift off, to sleep, offering phrases, not necessarily in the right order, about the nighttime prayer: as I come in and as I go out ... guard me ... keep far from me ... great sadness ... keep far from me disease ...

*Ki eil shomreinu umatzileinu atah*

כִּי אֵל שׁוֹמְרֵנוּ וּמַצִּילֵנוּ אַתָּה

because You are a God that saves and redeems.

And this way of falling asleep at night sets my intention actually for the morning. Because then the night takes on the night, whatever happens: sleeplessness, insomnia, dreams, not dreams, a good night's sleep. The night takes its fold. And then I wake up in the morning and I go to that blue chair. And I say the morning prayer:

*Modah ani l'phanekha melekh chai v'kayyam*

מוֹדָה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ חַי וְקַיִם

I am truly grateful, for You are the ruling principle of this universe.

*Sheh-hechezarta bi nishmati*

שֶׁהִחְזַרְתָּ בִּי נִשְׁמָתִי

and you have restored within me my soul.

And then I skip to the other morning prayer.

*Elohai neshamah sheh-natata bi tehorah hi*

אֱלֹהֵי. נִשְׁמָה שֶׁנָּתַתָּ בִּי טְהוֹרָה הִיא



And this soul is goodness.

And in this most gentle moment, as I'm sitting in my chair, I'm reminded that the truth of who I am is goodness. Regardless of how I may behave, and the things they may do, I can always start again and go back to the source of goodness. It's a beautiful way to set the intention of the morning.

*Kol z'man sheh-haneshamah b'kirbi modah ani lephanekha*

כָּל זְמַן שֶׁהַנְּשָׂמָה בְּקִרְבִּי מוֹדָה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ

And as long as this soul is within me, I offer gratitude.

And that's why I pause. Silence. Pause. Not so much a meditation, more, an invitation, an invitation to awakening.

*Barukh atah Adonai pokei'ach ivrim*

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה'. פּוֹקֵחַ עֵינַיִם

Because I'm invited to open my eyes and push away the blindness.

And I sit in this blue chair, and I look out the window. Sometimes I see the horizon, where heaven meets earth. Sometimes I see the eagles that have built a nest near my home as they're floating around in the air. Sometimes it's just listening to the mundane sounds of the traffic going back and forth. Kind of wondering, who are you? Where are you going? Sometimes it's the color of the sky. Sometimes it's just really nothing. But having gone through that trajectory of the vulnerability of the night, asking to hide in the shadow of God's wings, to the gratitude of the morning, to the breath of life, to the awareness that I need to rid myself of my blindness, my sitting there in quiet, really centers me and makes the intention of my day start in beauty.

And then the last part of this practice is that I take one of those books that I have on my shelf, and I just randomly open the book. And I kind of go in distance and look and look, and then I let the words find me. So, as I'm talking to you now, I did that. I took from my chair "A Year with Hafiz", a beautiful book translated by Daniel Ladinsky, and I just managed to open to a prayer. And let's see if this is the prayer that found me for today.

Even the shadow of God is brilliant, so brilliant,



so much so even God has trouble looking at himself as that ... unless He is more disguised, hidden in illusion, hidden as He can be, in us.

This is an interesting prayer to have find me, because I talked about hiding in the shadow of God's wings over and over again. And the prayer starts out, "Even the shadow of God is brilliant, so brilliant". How's that for a phrase to take along with you for the rest of your day?

"hidden in illusion, hidden as He can be, in us".

So this prayer practice requires simply a moment in time, a corner of your room, anywhere from truly five minutes to 30 minutes, a settling in, an awareness of gratitude for being alive, and opening your eyes to the world, taking on the invitation of a new day, granted a new day in life. The looking of both our literature and other literature, in which a word or phrase finds you, and becomes a true faithful companion to you for the rest of your day. *Modah ani lephanekha*, I am truly grateful to you, O God, divine source of all that is good.

#### JONATHAN:

That was Rabbi Karyn Kedar sharing their personal prayer with us, which was so moving 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](http://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](http://elanaarian.com). For more information about "Open My Heart" and the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, please visit us at [jewishspirituality.org](http://jewishspirituality.org). Shalom. Until next time we pray that you remain healthy and safe.

