



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 – who is a student and a colleague and a friend -- who's written a new book, “Amen: Seeking Presence with Prayer, Poetry, and Mindfulness Practice.” We have this opportunity to talk about it. So, hi, Karyn, tell us a little bit about yourself, where you are, whatever we need to know about you.

KARYN:

Well, I'm an ordained Reform rabbi. Currently, I am the senior rabbi at Congregation BJBE in Deerfield, Illinois, which is just outside Chicago. I've been here 18 years. I've had a very varied career, but writing has always been the constant ever since I could learn to write as a little child. I actually remember those big newsprint, block papers, with the blue lines and the thick pencil when I was young; learning how to write and watching the letters form and thinking: Wow, this is really amazing as I was writing “cat”, “dog”. And then ironically, when my third or fourth grade teacher said, “You're left-handed, I can't teach you how to write”, the paradox and irony of that, as I developed my imagination because I wasn't in the lessons, those two things combined were really quite spectacular.

But I lived in Israel for many years. And I am a faithful student of IJS, and very grateful for all of the classes that I've taken, and the courses I've been in. And Bekhol Levavkha, as a spiritual director and really, really thrilled to be here with you.

JONATHAN:

Well, we're really happy to have you and to have this opportunity to talk about, about your book. So why don't you just begin and tell us about what the book is and how you came to write it?

KARYN:

Well, I had one of those rare, wonderful opportunities where the publisher came to me and asked me if I would write a book. That's how you always want it to be. That's not how it always really turns out. I had absolutely no time to do it; the deadline was really, really tight. But you don't say no. So I wrote this book under the synergy of time pressure, which I do feel like is synergetic. It requires you to come in tight with the muse, and just to continue and maintain a focus. And so the book is not only prayers and poetry about the spirit. But it's also – in the back of the book – some small things about mindfulness practice: how to ask questions, how to set intentions. The book was written before the pandemic, but has really, as it ironically turned out, spoken to the spiritual state of being of many people during the pandemic.

JONATHAN:

So it's an interesting title, "Amen." Usually that's the end of things, but here it seems to be the invitation. How'd that come about?

KARYN:

Yes, well, I feel that sometimes all that really is required of us is a call and response. That as we settle in and attune ourselves to the purpose of our lives, the meaning of our lives, we recognize that we are being called by some transcendent force – which I call God, others would call something else – to be present, to be fully present. And the only response to that call is "Amen, Hineni; I'm here, I'm present." So every day we're granted the ability to live another day of life, we say amen to that gift.

JONATHAN:

That's interesting, that you bring up in those terms: that there is a subtle difference between Hineni and Amen. There is a receptivity to Amen, that I sense in how you open it up, sort of the story of the coming to the moment of amen, of acceptance, of acknowledging I'm not in charge. Which is different from: Okay, I'm here. Tell me what to do.



KARYN:

Right, of course. Amen, from the root of the word “faithful” or “faithfulness”, to show up as faithful. There's a beautiful quote, attributed to Mother Teresa – in all of my research I haven't been able to find out if she really actually said this – but she said something to the effect of, “I was not called upon in this life to be successful. I was called upon to be faithful.”

And at a very difficult time, I said, “Oh, thank God. I don't have to be successful. All I have to do is be faithful.” And then I went, “Oh my God! Faithful? Faithful to what? Faithful, how?” And so I feel that “Amen” is that dialogue, is that conversation, is that willingness to be faithful to something beyond oneself and to stay faithful.

JONATHAN:

Not a common Jewish word, “faith” and “faithful.” For so long we have said, “You know, we are a religion of action, not a faith!” Or, “We don't even talk about the Jewish faith, because we also have this history of being the Jewish people, which is so important.” But faithful is a way of coming into a relationship with that which is asked of us, isn't it?

KARYN:

The way I'm using the word “faithful” -- it's a way of walking through this world where you take yourself out of the center and become faithful to some higher good, some higher purpose. Now that's, of course, impossible if we see our lives like a big pipe-organ and some kind of transcended power coming through us, it has to come through our psychology, our brokenness, our dents and our dings, our fear, our hopes. It comes through us, that's the air that comes through us. But it sends us out in this world to realize that when we put ourselves in the center of the world, we are in a very lonely place. But when we put ourselves as a speck of radiant dust in a sweep of things, which is a very Jewish concept, to be part of something that is in a sweep of history and beyond history, both physical and metaphysical, then our lives have greater meaning. Faithful to that.

JONATHAN:

So as a congregational rabbi – and you say that your congregation has not only supported you, but asked that you continue to write, as you have in this book – have you noticed that they have discovered being faithful? That it's a language or a way of being that they've internalized?



KARYN:

A hundred percent. We were privileged to build a new building about 10, 15 years ago. And so, in building the new building, we had to ask all kinds of interesting questions. And one of the questions we asked is: How do you manifest holiness? How do you physically manifest holiness – not just the sanctuary is holy, but everything is holy? And what are your values and how do you build a value, physically build a value? And what's your central value? So our central value is community. And in this great big communal space we have three arches. And in the arches, both in Hebrew and English, are the words "Faith," "Courage," and "Wisdom."

And that's almost been the rallying cry of this congregation. As a matter of fact, in times of crisis, particularly in this last several months, a year-plus, I sign all my correspondence "FCW." FCW: faith, courage, and wisdom. And what the word "faith" means, and what it means to be courageous in your living, and what it means to become wise means something different constantly and ever evolving as you twist and turn in your life and dig deeper. But yeah, for sure, it stands in the arches of the center of our synagogue, and it is what we aspire to: to be faithful, to be courageous and to grow wise.

JONATHAN:

I love that connection of faithfulness to courage because there is also a perception of faithfulness being passive.

KARYN:

Oh yeah. Not at all. Not at least not in the way that I'm thinking about it. We all have the ability to be the hero of our lives. And the more difficult life is, the more the call is. And as somebody once said to me: You know, heroes are made in conflict. You take this conflict and you become the hero of your life, through understanding what it means to have courage and wisdom, and to approach the world and your life with resilience and fortitude. Mental toughness is probably one of the most important things that we have, because it's with mental toughness, with courage, that we won't be defeated by the circumstances of our life – made up or, or real. Most people make up their trouble. You know, "I can't believe she said this." And, "Do you believe he did that?" We spend a lot of time making up our trouble. But there's a lot of trouble we don't make up. And the person who was not defeated by their life circumstances has nothing to do with their life circumstances. It's that one day they woke up in the darkest part of their night and they shook their fist at the heavens and they said, you're not going to get me. You're not going to get me. And then that way made the spiritual decision, because decision is a



spiritual principle, made the spiritual decision to become the hero of their life with courage.

JONATHAN:

So what role does prayer play in cultivating faithfulness and courage and wisdom?

KARYN:

That is a very important question. I think prayer, in the non-traditional sense, is a settling in and a centering and a moment of listening and discernment of the gentle whispers within our being that tug at us and pull us into a direction that leads us to the purpose of our lives. That's a big definition. The way I talk about prayer in this moment is ... can I read something?

God speaks in whispers.
Silent brushes of wind,
moments that
implore you to take notice.

There is so much, I do not understand:
How to sing when I'm choking.
How to forget.
How to remember.
How to discern the blessing within the pain.
How to heal so that I may
hold on to greatness and grandeur.

Rather,
I wish for softness and stillness,
For the relinquishment of all that no longer matters.
I wish for goodness to linger like the scent of Jasmine
on a hot summer day.
It's enough already. It's enough
resenting people and circumstances so far away
that even the scars have dealt with age.

Out there, beyond my small self,
is vastness and forgiveness and fortitude and love.
I long to fall gently into the arms of a loving world.



God speaks in whispers
silent brushes of wind
and moments that implore you to take notice.

JONATHAN:

So prayer that so often we think about as our saying something, or telling something to God, it can also be a prayer of listening, of falling into, of releasing.

KARYN:

Of opening, of discerning. Prayer is an opening of the, of the heart, of the soul, to the tenderness of the world and to finding meaning in that tenderness; in the beauty of the world. There's so much beauty, which is such a high spiritual value. To notice, to listen.

JONATHAN:

We're so busy. It's very hard to remember to do that. So remembering to take moments for prayer is to allow us to come back into who we are in that way.

KARYN:

That's one of the things the pandemic has taught some of us. We've been in a sustained time-out. We've been put into the corner and been told by the gods of the universe: stay there until I tell you to get up. And we've dealt with that time-out in many different ways. But one of them, I think collectively is a *cheshbon nefesh*, an accounting of what it means to be busy and how busy-ness distracted us -- was almost, even in its exhaustion, easier than sitting still and listening. And that distraction is a defense mechanism.

And it doesn't take long. We Jews, we may go up into the mountain, and cross our legs and, and convene with the eternal one, but we get down off the mountain and then go feed sandwiches to the poor. We don't stay on the mountain very long. So it doesn't take much. It can be even five minutes in the morning and five minutes in the evening. It doesn't take much to center and open up to what is beautiful and holy and divine.

JONATHAN:

Do you have a morning or an evening prayer that you want to share with us?

KARYN:

Sure. Here's a morning prayer.



I call upon the deep, the dark,
the hovering spirits, the God of creation,
the muse of the creative impulse.

Make of me a vessel,
ready to receive
the loving stream
from a transcendent good,
that it may of course its way
through my discerning mind
and complicated heart
and the purity of my soul,
O aspirational soul,
so that I may be
a force for good.

For in the beginning it was very good.

And this is our human destiny.
To be created in the image of those earliest moments of
Divinity—

when darkness danced
in flowing circles with light
and beauty cast to hue
upon all things
simple and complex,
known and unknown, returning,
always turning toward
the deep dark
hovering spirit of
the God
of creation.

I call upon You,
Creator of the universe,
make of me a vessel, a mere image
of paradoxical beauty.
Of mystery.



And oneness.

And love.

And love.

JONATHAN:

What a wonderful prayer to enter the day with. How have you come to, or how has your understanding of that relationship between prayer and poetry? It is part of the title, "Amen: Seeking Presence with Prayer, Poetry and Mindfulness Practice."

KARYN:

So no one has ever asked me that question before, and I'm just going to answer it honestly. I can't really call myself a liturgist, because I'm not a liturgist. I don't have a doctorate in liturgy and, and I have a hard time calling myself a poet, because: Oh my God, the great poets of this world! How can I call myself a poet? So in the sort of in-between of: well, I'm not this and I'm not that, but nevertheless, I'm writing ... I'm going to toss it to you and you decide, is this a poem? Is this a prayer? Is this a thought? Is this a meditation? Is this a contemplation? Because it's just what I'm thinking and feeling, and the best way that I can express the complications of my heart. So it's through the lack of definition that I went to both poetry and prayer.

JONATHAN:

And over the course of time, is there an intersection, as well, with a third part of that Venn diagram, where mindfulness practice comes into poetry and to prayer for you?

KARYN:

Hundred percent. Mindfulness practice – you know, I have to say, that in some ways, on some very significant level, they're all synonyms: prayer, poetry, mindfulness practice. With the outpouring of the human spirit onto the page, when it resonates with the reader, you find your moment, whether you use this as a *kavvanah* [focus intention] for mindfulness practice, or use it as a poem or as a prayer, that's how your soul will receive it in the moment. In some ways they're really synonymous. And you and I have spoken before how writing is a spiritual practice and we could teach it as thus.

So I was once told, as I was studying literature as an undergrad, that there are three poems on the page: One, the poem that the author intended; one, the poem that's on the page; and the third, the poem that the reader receives. And once you send out your intention, the rest is kind of none of your business.



JONATHAN:

Which I guess is part of a way of thinking about prayer. You know, even liturgical prayers, even the prayer of the siddur. Well, there is the prayer that was written, and the intention of the author, and then the prayer that's on the page. But then you have to pray it, which is your prayer. And also your own personal prayer. You put it out there, but you don't control what it's going to do, how it comes into the world.

KARYN:

Exactly right.

JONATHAN:

So what else would you like to share from the book for people to get a feel for the prayer, poetry, mindfulness that leads to presence?

KARYN:

I think this short poem/prayer answers that. It's called "Open My Eyes."

To gaze and
to linger.
To cultivate
the practice of pause.
This is the revolution!

To liberate the light
from the dull and routine
way we walk through this life.

How would you be in this world,
what would you say
if somehow you understood
that your true purpose is
to be a testifying witness?

JONATHAN:



What a wonderful invitation to be a testifying witness. It puts us in a relationship with everything, to everyone else, and to everything that we experience. And it's one of those places of faithfulness, and also have courage, to testify to what's true.

KARYN:

Right. To bear witness.

JONATHAN:

Thank you for that. You have another?

KARYN:

Sure. I think a lot about forgiveness because, as I said before, those little dents in our soul can control us so fearfully, that in the spiritual world the opposite of love is not hate. The opposite of love is fear. Every negative emotion we have – regret, fear, resentment, guilt – stems from the fear of not having access to the abundant love in this world. And so forgiveness is not condoning or forgetting at all. That would not be something that our tradition teaches us. It's not okay. But forgiveness is the ability to not be controlled by the dents that have happened to us. So this is called “Perpetual Crossings”:

I walk softly on the damp wooded path.
Mostly I look down
and see the ground beneath my feet is
soft earth, gentle moss,
and, of course, fallen leaves, which,
like angels, have floated to earth
forming a gently lit path in the woods.

And for every chasm along the way,
for every fast-moving stream or deeply cut valley,
a bridge appears.
It seems that there is always
a way across,
a way to get to the other side of fear, of sadness, of
disappointment.



There is always a way.

Maybe goodness is the bridge, or beauty is the bridge.

Love is the bridge.

Forgiveness is the bridge.

Of this I am sure:

the path is eternal—it is our life and the length of our days.

And the bridge is eternal—

there are many ways to cross what seems impossible.

Stones in the river, ropes suspended, planks of wood,

arches of steel like love, patience, acceptance

and forgiveness.

JONATHAN:

Thank you. Thank you. So the third element of your book, “Amen: Seeking Presence with Prayer, Poetry and Mindfulness Practice,” is mindfulness practice. And there are a lot of different aspects to it. Many of which you explore in the book. But is there one that you want to share with us in particular?

KARYN:

Yes. I think, I think the art of asking questions is very powerful in terms of our own journey and our own healing and our discernment as to who we're supposed to be. You know, we in this Western society have been taught that the answer is very important. And we get graded on the answer. And there is a right answer, and there is a wrong answer. And we've also been told in our society that just ask any question, there are no stupid questions. But in a Jewish context, both of those things aren't really true. Not that the questions are particularly stupid, but some are better than others. For instance, the question, “Why did this happen?” Not a particularly useful question. It leads you down a path of potential despair, because anything we really want to know the answer to is essentially unknowable. “Why do good people die? Why did children suffer? Why, why, why is there evil in the world?”

We've been invited to live on an edge of mystery, and the world has been set up not to be able to answer the question “Why?” But we can answer, “What,” or, “How”. “Given this



has happened to me, what am I supposed to learn? How am I supposed to go forth in this life?" Those are good questions. And so the refining of the question is really, really important. You know, the rabbis of rabbinic literature, they pose a question and then they give this whole elaborate answer. And then they say *davar acheir*, which in essence means, "Or you can look at it this way." And they give an entirely different answer. Because they never intend the answer to be as compelling as the question.

And even if you look at the word "question" in English, the word "question" has within it, the word "quest." A good question will send you on a quest for a very long time. So when you're in a dilemma where you're trying to figure something out, the practice goes like this: You -- perhaps in conversation with a spiritual director or a friend or somebody who understands the art of asking questions -- you refine the question. What is it that you want to know? What do you really want to know? And you truly, truly refine it. So I pose a list of questions out here, in the back of this book, under "Courage":

If I were to say yes, what would change?
If I let go of the emptiness, what would happen?
Am I determined or scared?
How can I replace judgment with curiosity?

Or, under "Wisdom":

What am I pretending to be?
What negative forces prevail in my life?
What does my boredom really reveal?

So in the back of the book, I have many different categories of questions that can be triggers for the person to say, "Yes, this is my question. My question has found me." And then you kind of play catch with the universe. You sit down, and you pose the question, and you throw it out to the universe. And you do not look for an answer. You get up and go about your day. And every now and then you raise your question to consciousness, and toss it out again, and then go about your day. And then every single time, I guarantee you, lo and behold, standing in the line of a pharmacy, or watching a stupid television show, or in a dream, or just in an irrelevant conversation, suddenly the answer comes to you. Or **an** answer comes to you. And as you deepen in this practice, you continue to pose the question. You join in relationship with this question for a long time, sometimes years. A good question can take you on a quest for years. So questions I



think are not to look for the answer, but to be pulled into the direction of the meaning of your life.

JONATHAN:

Another wonderful other way to think about prayer, as posing the question and allowing the answer to arise. Rather than shaking, as you said, shaking your fist and expecting an answer. Say, "I'm not going to be overtaken, but I'm going to demand that ultimately I've learned the answer or an answer," as you say.

So thank you Rabbi Karyn Kedar, author of "Amen: Seeking Presence with Prayer, Poetry and Mindfulness Practice." We look forward to your presence in our next episode, where you'll offer your prayer practice. Thank you again.

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.

