



Open My Heart:

Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Rabbi Ruth Sohn

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 Ruth Sohn, who's a colleague, a student, and a friend. I'm so happy to have you with us here today, Ruth. Tell us a little bit about yourself, would you?

RUTH:

Sure, Jonathan. It's really a pleasure to be with you and everyone else who's here. I'm in Los Angeles, where I've lived for about 27 years. I'm a rabbi. I was in the first cohort of IJS, together with Jonathan, and IJS has been incredibly important to me in terms of so much growth, enriching my life individually – and so much of what I do with others, in terms of my teaching, how I “rabbi”, if you will, has been deeply, deeply affected by the spiritual practices we've engaged in together, and the ways in which we've done that: Jewish mindfulness meditation practice, the study of Hasidic text – for which Jonathan has been a primary teacher for me – and engaging in prayer more deeply, Musar, so many things.

I direct a rabbinic mentoring program at Hebrew Union College here in Los Angeles and also something called the Spirituality Initiative here on the HUC campus in LA. And in that program, the primary thing we're doing is we're offering spiritual direction or spiritual companionship to our rabbinical students. And we have other things going on as well: retreats, the introduction to Jewish spiritual practices outside of the most normative.

And I also do a lot of teaching in the community and some writing. And I very much welcome this opportunity to share a little bit about my own morning prayer practice.

So, I want to say that I've been committed to some kind of Jewish davening in the morning, as well as meditation practice, for many years. And my prayer practice has really evolved. Especially, I would say, in the last couple of years I've noticed that I've had to be more intentional about how I'm doing the practice.

That is, I'm really committed both to working with the traditional liturgy - which I really love - and personal, from-the-heart prayer. And I found that if I didn't, well ... there were periods where just working with the set prayer became a little bit rote. And then I would get a little disheartened, and gradually move away from a daily practice of it, and come back, and kind of in and out.

But where I am now – and it's been working really well – is I now really give myself permission to be more freeform with what I'm doing. But the basic commitment is to show up, and to spend at least 10 minutes, ideally closer to 20 minutes, in an open-ended way. So, it can always be more, but at least I'm showing up for about 10 minutes outdoors – living in Southern California I have that opportunity most of the year – for some kind of combination of personal prayer and working with the liturgy.

I find that while what seems to me to be most important is genuine prayer from the heart, when I engage in that – and I have now given myself permission to on occasion, just do that -- I don't necessarily have to even go to the set liturgy. But I almost always do. Because I genuinely find it enriching. It helps me go deeper. I've really come to appreciate even more - now that I've given myself this kind of permission - I've come to appreciate how the set liturgy enables me to touch on subjects. It invites me – compels me to go to subjects I wouldn't otherwise in what is just the prayer of my heart. And it really moves me to go deeper, even on the themes that I'm closest to.

So why don't I just get started? And I'll say a little bit, maybe as I go along.

I begin in the morning. I come outside, I put on my *tallit*. I first look up at the sky, and I look around me, and open to some gratitude, and say the prayer for putting on a *tallit*.

Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu melekh ha'olam



ברוך אתה ה'. אלהינו מלך העולם

Asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu

אשר קדשנו במצותיו. וצונו

L'hit'atef batzitzit

להתעטף בציצית

[Praised are You, Adonai, our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has given us access to holiness through commanding us to wrap in the *tzitzit* (the fringes on the *tallit*)]

And I put on my *tallit*. and I sometimes say the prayer that follows in a traditional *siddur*. This is a very beautiful paragraph from Psalm 36:

Mah yakar chasd'kha Elohim

מה יקר חסדך אלהים

"How precious is your loving kindness, O God."

U'v'nei adam....

ובני אדם [בצל כנפיה יחסיון]
[ירון מדשן ביתך ונחל עדניך תשקם:
כי עמך מקור חיים. באורך נראה אור:
משוך חסדך לידעיה וצדקתך לישרי לב:]

"And human beings find refuge under the shadow of your wings. They're filled with the rich, plenty of your house. You give them drink from your river of delights."

I love this line:

V'nachal adanekha tashkeim

ונחל עדניך תשקם

Ki imkha m'kor chayyim

כי עמך מקור חיים



“With you is the fountain of light. In your light we see light. Continue your loving kindness to those who seek to know you, your righteousness, to those who seek to be upright in heart.”

I find this just opens me so much to gratitude, to the idea of God as a source of loving kindness, and as really the source of this river of divine flow, divine light.

And then, either with the traditional blessings, often just with the intention, the idea of the blessings: gratitude for our bodies, gratitude for our breath and our souls. I open to those things sometimes just walking around my backyard, feeling – as I'm doing right now – really feeling, with each step, kind of kissing the earth. Feeling my becoming more aware of my body, gratitude for my body, for my breath, soulfulness, both of which are precious gifts of the divine.

Sometimes they say the *chatimot* (חתימות/concluding “seal”) of those blessings. Sometimes I don't. I just really focus on/open up to that gratitude.

I always do something for the *Pesukei D'Zimra*, the psalms, songs. Really opening up to gratitude. Again, being outdoors, what I really love to do is to walk around my garden. It's a small garden. To walk around our garden and look for what's new, what's growing. What do I notice that can really help me open up to the regenerative nature of creation?

There's a line before the *Shema*, really looking to God, reminding ourselves that God is the source of creation, not just having created the world, but continuing, the continuing source of creation:

Ham'chadesh b'tuvo b'khol yom ma'aseh v'reishit

הַמְחַדֵּשׁ בְּטוּבוֹ בְּכֹל יוֹם תְּמִיד מַעֲשֵׂה בְּרֵאשִׁית

[You renew, through Your goodness, each day, the works of Creation]

...really opening up to that idea, and feeling that aliveness in my own body, and in the world around me, and the connection between myself and this beautiful, beautiful created world we're part of.



So, what I'm noticing this morning is we have these sword ferns. There are some new ones, and the top of each of these new ferns is unfurling. It feels like you can almost see it slowly open. That is really very beautiful. And frankly, just the sun on the leaves, feeling the air against my skin.

On the rare occasion I don't go outside, because it's too cold or windy, I stand at a window or a door, as close as I can to outdoors, and really take in the natural beauty. And I try to do the same thing. And, you know, any time I pray, because it is- I think that's the ideal state: to be outdoors, or close to the outdoors, at the window.

My minimum is to have something at the beginning, opening to gratitude in this way. And then something with the *Shema*, and the *Amidah*. So again, I mix it up. I don't always do it the same way. But what I tend to do with the *Shema*, what I want to do with you this morning, and that is taking a moment ... sort of bringing this sense of the beauty, the liveliness, the gift of creation:

Barukh atah Adonai, yotzer ham'orot בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה'. יוֹצֵר הַמְאֹרוֹת

[Praised are You, Adonai, Creator of the Lights]

with that theme of God, the creative life force, creator of the lights.

And then really spend a little time with the theme of God's love. And the way I usually do this is spend some time with the opening words of *Ahavah Rabbah Ahavtanu* [אהבה רבה אהבתנו / "With a great love have You loved us"]. Sometimes singing them, often just saying them over and over. And really opening up, really guided by my breath, but opening to the possibility of really feeling and receiving divine love, God's love, which I see as really the primary theme of this paragraph before the *Shema*. God's love for us: *Ahavah Rabbah Ahavtanu*: With great love have You loved us.

"Great love":

Chemlah g'dolah chamalta aleinu חֶמְלָה גְּדוֹלָה וַיִּתְּרָה חֶמְלַתְּ עָלֵינוּ

The words continue with just the abundance, the infinite love kind of spilling over itself, that is offered to us. And just taking literally more than a few moments, closer to a few minutes to really open up to the *shefa* (bounty): flow of divine love, divine flow; really feeling it; inviting a softening in my heart area, sometimes saying the words of this paragraph, frankly, more often opening simply to receiving love.



And when I feel it, when it feels like it's really flowing, and I'm present to this inflow, I begin to feel a fullness overflowing. I gather my *tzitzit*, and I invite to myself an opening to the interconnected oneness, which there's potential to feel it more deeply, after being open to receive God's love.

I'm remembering, at the moment, the prayer in our liturgy, earlier, *Barukh Sheh'amar* (ברוך שאמר), where we acknowledge God as the source of blessing. God who called the world into being with words. And it's striking how much in that paragraph, the number of blessings of God's love for all of Creation.

So, feeling God's love, opening to our part of the created world; my breath, breathing in oxygen that the trees and grasses all around me have been breathing out, and then my breathing out carbon dioxide which they want to breathe in. feeling the breeze, this beautiful, interconnected web of life, opening to the *Shema*. Saying it's slowly:

[chanting, word by word]

Shema שְׁמַע

Yisrael יִשְׂרָאֵל

Adonai ה'

Eloheinu אֱלֹהֵינוּ

Adonai ה'

Echad אֶחָד

(Hear, O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One)

[whispering softly]

Barukh shem k'vod malkhuto l'olam va'ed בְּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹד מַלְכוּתוֹ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד

[Praised is God's glorious dominion forever and ever]



With the *V'ahavta* [the paragraph following the Shema], we're called from the opening lines, to respond from this living flow of love within ourselves, offering love back to the divine. Still staying with that sense of oneness, our being part of a far greater whole, breathing in love, breathing out love. I sometimes just stay with that practice of opening to receive, and offer back out love, with the focus now on offering it back out, embracing the world with our love, offering love back to the divine, or any other sense that the words of the *V'ahavta* opened up for you: "You shall love *Adonai* your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might."

And then, if you'd like, you can continue with the additional paragraphs, with the themes of them, with the actual words, whatever you're moved to.

And then similarly, with the Amidah, I invite you to continue. And I'll just say the general invitation here and let you go off on your own. In some sense, I'm really giving myself permission to do less in order to pray more deeply, with some kind of combination of the words, the beautiful words of our tradition, and working with the themes of the prayers, and whatever is awakened in my own heart. So I invite you to experiment with that. Maybe do some, starting off with the words and going off into your own prayer, and maybe continuing that way, maybe simply going with the themes and then for one or two of the paragraphs going with looking more closely and giving yourself the time and space to allow those words to be evocative poetry of the soul, inviting a deeper prayer from your heart.

Thank you so much for being with me this morning and blessings on your way forward with prayer. May it offer you deeper connection and greater meaning. Thank you.

JONATHAN:

That was Rabbi Ruth Sohn, offering their personal prayer, 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. 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.

