



Open My Heart:

Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Rabbi David Stern

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 David Stern, who is a student, a colleague, and a friend. Hey David, I'm really happy to have you here today. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

DAVID:

It's great to be here with you today, Jonathan. I am a native of New York and I have lived in Texas for the last 31 years. I'm privileged to serve as Senior Rabbi of Temple Emanu-El in Dallas, and privileged to be part of a wonderful family. Both my wife and I are alumni of IJS programs. And I'll just share, as the conclusion of this introduction, that the Institute for Jewish Spirituality – and this was not a requested commercial – the Institute for Jewish Spirituality and the practices it has taught me have made a huge difference in my life, primarily; in my rabbinate, also primarily; and I'm privileged to work as part of a clergy team where the majority of us are IJS influenced, and it affects just about everything that we do, including some of the practices I'm about to share.

JONATHAN:

Well, thank you for that, David, and I'm really excited to be part of your practice. So I'm going to turn things over to you and thank you for sharing your prayer with us now.

DAVID:

Thank you, Jonathan. My prayer practices include meditation practice. But that branch of meditation practice has three further branches that go off of it in my prayer practice. The first is meditation, where I sit without any verbal anything. And I focus on the breath, or I might focus on an image, but it is sort of quiet within quiet. The second version of meditation that's part of my practices, is guided meditation where, through IJS or other resources, there is sort of spoken, verbalized guide through the meditation process.

The third is the one that I want to share with you today. And that is: If the first is one where there is no language, and the second where there is language that guides the practice, the third – that I'm gonna share with you today – is where language launches the practice. That is where I use language as a prompt to my quiet time.

And specifically, the language that I use as a prompt to the time of prayer is the language of poetry. Now, poetry is daunting to some, understandably, or unfamiliar to others, or for some relegated to some earlier time in their lives. For me, poetry is a fundamental element of prayer. Why? Because for me, the poetry is about both the words and the spaces between the words. Not unlike Torah being about the black letters, calligraphy, as well as the white spaces among them, what the mystics called “the black fire and white fire”.

For me, poetry works in that way. It's the words, and the spaces between the words. And in part that's important because the space makes room for the spirit. In part that's, because I think that's kind of how life is. It's the events, the words, the deeds, the choices, the errands, the responsibilities, and the spaces among the events, the words, the choices, the errands, the responsibilities.

So for me, poetry is a good mirror to my being and it's the language that helps launch me into quiet. So here's what we're gonna do. We're gonna do a kind of time-lapse of my practice. Because what I'm going to do is, I'm going to share three poems with you. I'm going to share them consecutively in the space of this time we have together. That's not how I typically do it. So you'll hear that one of them is a poem that I usually use as a launch to meditation in the evening. Another is a poem that I usually use as a launch to meditation in the morning. And another is a poem that's kind of a north star for me whenever I need to really understand the world. So, I don't usually line them up the way they're lined up today, but obviously because of the particular medium, in which I'm privileged to share them with you today, you're going to hear them consecutively.



So here's what we're gonna do. I'm going to read a poem and then following that poem, we're gonna sit quietly for three to four minutes. And I'm going to read another poem, and we'll sit quietly for three to four minutes. And then I'm going to read another poem, and we'll sit quietly for three to four minutes. And then our practice will be concluded. So what you have is the lining up of what is usually three separate things, but in each case, it's poem followed by quiet sit. So what I invite you to do in terms of your physical location right now is, if you're listening to this podcast while walking, try to make it a mindfulness walk and allow yourself the space of both the poetry and the silence that follows it.

If you're in a place where you can adopt the posture that you might, if you have a meditation practice, that's wonderful. So a meditation cushion or a chair in which you usually meditate. I usually meditate in a particular chair by a particular window. And I'm sitting in that particular chair, now, and sitting at that particular window, now. So whatever is the physical location and posture for you that allows you to be open to what's to come, that's great. If you are seated in a chair, I recommend that you uncross your legs. Have your feet flat on the floor, let your hands fall where they may -- palms up, palms down -- sitting erect, but relaxed. Let's begin with a deep breath in, and release that breath. I invite you to have your eyes closed if you wish, or in a soft, downward gaze.

And the first poem is called "Let Evening Come" by the late poet, Jane Kenyon. This is a poem I read every night before I go to sleep: the *Hashkiveinu* (השכיבנו), and this poem to conclude my day: a reminder of letting go, and a reminder of never being alone.

Following the poem will sit for about three minutes.

Let Evening Come

Let the light of late afternoon
shine through chinks in the barn, moving
up the bales as the sun moves down.

Let the cricket take up chafing
as a woman takes up her needles
and her yarn. Let evening come.

Let dew collect on the hoe abandoned



in long grass. Let the stars appear
and the moon disclose her silver horn.

Let the fox go back to its sandy den.
Let the wind die down. Let the shed
go black inside. Let evening come.

To the bottle in the ditch, to the scoop
in the oats, to air in the lung
let evening come.

Let it come, as it will, and don't
be afraid. God does not leave us
comfortless, so let evening come.

[silence].

As we come back into the world of sound and words, I invite you if you wish, to keep your eyes closed, if you're seated. Or you can open them for the worded part, and close them for the quiet part. Figure out what works best for your own body and spirit.

This second poem of the three that I'm sharing today, is the one that comes from a specifically Jewish context. The poet is my mother, *alehah hashalom* (peace be upon her), Priscilla Rudin Stern, whose *yahrzeit* is actually coming this week. So I dedicate this practice in her memory.

This is a poem that I generally use as part of my morning, M-O-R-N I-N-G practice. It helps me, at the beginning of any busy day, begin with a focus on quiet center and hope that I can bring that with me as companion on the day's journey.

Walk with me into the woods
Leave the edge of the forest behind—

Come deep into the green
until the shafts of
sunlight are lost.
Feel the stillness of
the center.



Walk with me to the top
of the hill
Leave the broad path
behind.
Up—up beyond where
the trees grow.
Hear the quiet of
the heights.

Walk with me into
this New Year—
Into its demands
Into its joys
Into the clamor of
its unfolding.

Walk alone
each on her own right
path
With the echoes of the
blasts of the *shofar*
With the stillness of the
center
With the help of our God.

If your eyes have been open, I remind you that you have the opportunity to close them now, as you wish, as we enter our next sit.

[silence]

I again welcome you back into the dimension of sound and word. If you wish to have your eyes open for the poem, you may. You're invited to keep them closed. If you're remaining in a seated position, keep your, keep your heart's openness.

This third poem that I share today is, for me, a kind of “North Star”, orienting, anchoring, elevating everything. It has no particular time of day associated with it – unlike the first two that I shared – associated with it in my practice. This one is just at my side for



whenever I need to hear, and then sit with its wisdom. It's by the poet, the late poet, Lisel Mueller it's called "Monet Refuses the Operation":

Doctor, you say there are no haloes
around the streetlights in Paris
and what I see is an aberration
caused by old age, an affliction.
I tell you it has taken me all my life
to arrive at the vision of gas lamps as angels,
to soften and blur and finally banish
the edges you regret I don't see,
to learn that the line I called the horizon
does not exist and sky and water,
so long apart, are the same state of being.
Fifty-four years before I could see
Rouen cathedral is built
of parallel shafts of sun,
and now you want to restore
my youthful errors: fixed
notions of top and bottom,
the illusion of three-dimensional space,
wisteria separate
from the bridge it covers.
What can I say to convince you
the Houses of Parliament dissolve
night after night to become
the fluid dream of the Thames?
I will not return to a universe
of objects that don't know each other,
as if islands were not the lost children
of one great continent. The world
is flux, and light becomes what it touches,
becomes water, lilies on water,
above and below water,
becomes lilac and mauve and yellow
and white and cerulean lamps,
small fists passing sunlight
so quickly to one another
that it would take long, streaming hair
inside my brush to catch it.



To paint the speed of light!
Our weighted shapes, these verticals,
burn to mix with air
and change our bones, skin, clothes
to gases. Doctor,
if only you could see
how heaven pulls earth into its arms
and how infinitely the heart expands
to claim this world, blue vapor without end.

[silence]

Thank you for joining me for this practice today. Before I turn things back to my friend and teacher, I just offer this blessing:

May you be blessed in the oneness of all that is.

In what is silent and in what is spoken.

May you be blessed in this practice, this prayer.

May you be blessed in this day.

Amen.

JONATHAN:

That was Rabbi David Stern sharing their personal prayer 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 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.

