



Open My Heart:

Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Rabbi Debra Robbins

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 Debra Robbins, who is a student and a colleague and a friend. Hey Debra.

DEBRA:

Hey Jonathan. It's great to be here.

JONATHAN:

I'm so happy to have you here with us. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

DEBRA:

Well, I am I'm married and I have a son and I have a dog and I have a great job at Temple Emanu-El in Dallas, where I've been since 1991. I work with a great team of colleagues and I am proud to have been a member of R[abbinic Cohort] Seven at IJS, and my colleagues at Temple mostly now are all alumni of IJS, too. And we're all proud to be part of the family.

JONATHAN:

Well, we're happy to have you having been in the seventh cohort of rabbis, which is now only one among many clergy cohorts that we've had in the program. And, and as you

say, we have had so many of your colleagues from Temple Emanu-El to be part of us. But really more important, I'm very excited to be part of your practice based on your book, "Opening Your Heart with Psalm 27: A Spiritual Practice for the Jewish New Year." So, I'm going to turn things over to you and thank you for sharing your prayer with us now.

DEBRA:

I'm excited to be here today. It's not always easy to get myself to the desk and to this practice, which has become a form of prayer for me. And I usually do it early in the morning. Get up before I do anything else and make my way into my library. Or I've tried, if I'm on a good day, set it up the night before, so that my materials are all ready for me, so I don't get distracted trying to find them. I like to write in the same place, around the same time of day, and use the same ritual. And it's that ritual that has become the core of my book. It began as a personal practice, and then developed into a congregational practice, and then turned into a book that I've been able to share with others as well. And I still practice it myself.

And it's really given my days a lot of structure and a lot of meaning. And while this practice is associated directly with the seven weeks around the High Holy Days, it really has informed my way of study and prayer all year long, all the time. So I'm going to do it now, and sort of talk about it while I'm doing it, and offer it up as, as my prayer on this day.

So, I've gathered here at my desk a copy of Psalm 27. That's the core text for this work. I have the reflections of focus that are written, one for each day, leading from the first of Elul to the day after Simchat Torah. On the Jewish calendar, it takes us through 50 days of reflection. I like to do my writing in a paper notebook, that's a sort of a composition book. It's not easy to tear things out of it. I like to write it in pencil. My earliest writing coach taught me this. I think of her and give thanks to her, as I settle in each day. Some people like to do it on the computer. That's fine. You may want to do it on your phone. That's fine. No judgment here. The idea is to be able to write, and to let the words flow. I find it really helps me to have a break from writing in the way I write all day long at work. So picking up a pencil and having to do it long hand in a particular notebook takes me really far away from typing with my thumbs in a text to my son, or typing, with my fingers, a memo to my staff or my colleagues, and puts me into a different, more spiritual prayerful kind of mode for writing.



I have a timer nearby. I tend to use the one on my phone. I make sure that everything else is turned off. I sometimes play some music to get myself settled in. I'm so grateful that Richard Cohn, Cantor Richard Cohn, IJS graduate and teacher, and Director of the School of Sacred Music – the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music at the Hebrew Union College – composed a piece to verse 14 from the Psalm. And it's beautiful to be sung on just a *niggun* [wordless melody], or to sing it with the words. And it really carries through the season. But some music helps me to settle in, too. So I sometimes have that handy, or I just hum it to myself, which is probably what I'll do today. So try to not be distracted. Start with just a couple of deep breaths, just to land in my space. To just be present.

[singing wordlessly]

I feel better already. I feel my breath slowing, my pulse slowing, my heart softening, getting ready, maybe, to open. I find myself more focused. The melody brings me back. I've heard it before. Sat here before. Done this before. Heard this song before, but it's new again in this moment.

So grateful for this opportunity. I always like to begin with blessing. I like blessings that have a little context before I offer them to help me remember what it is that I'm praying about, or for, or with.

Hareini m'zamenet/m'zamein

הַרִינִי מְזַמְנֶת/מְזַמֵּין

Eit pi l'hodot

אֶת פִּי לְהוֹדוֹת

Eit yadai litzor

אֶת יָדַי לִיצוֹר

Eit libi lifto-ach

אֶת לְבִי לְפִתּוֹחַ

V'eit chayai laavod b'divrei Torah ut'filah

לְעִבּוֹד בְּדַבְרֵי תּוֹרָה וּתְפִילָה

Here. Now. I prepare my lips to praise,
My hands to create
My heart to open
My life to be lived with holy words.
With all my being, I bless.
With all I have, I bless.
Wherever I am, I bless.



Wrapped in abundant light, I bless.
With all my soul, I bless and give thanks.

I praise you, *Adonai*, as I give thanks, celebrate and engage with your sacred Psalms.

Baruch atah Adonai shenatan li l'hodot, ul'haleil, v'laasok b'divrei T'hilim

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, שֶׁנָּתַן לִי לְהוֹדוֹת, וּלְהַלֵּל, וּלְעֻסֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תְהִלִּים

So, I'll get busy now; occupy myself with these words of Psalms. Sometimes I read them in Hebrew. Sometimes I read them in English. I happen to really like this translation by Rabbi Richard Levy that's published by the CCAR Press, his text and commentary, called "Songs Ascending." I'm going to read that now. I like to read it out loud. It helps to actually give voice to the words, and to hear them, and to have them in our mouth.

Of David.

Adonai is my light and my victory—
From whom shall I feel fright?
Adonai is the stronghold of my life—
From whom shall I feel terror?
When evil doers approach me in battle to feed on my flesh—
my pursuers, my adversaries—
They have stumbled, they have fallen down.
If a camp in camps against me, my heart will not fear;
If a war arises against me, in this I would trust.
One thing have I sought from Adonai—how I long for it:
That I may live in the house of Adonai all the days of my life;
Then I may look upon the sweetness of Adonai,
And spend time in the Palace;
That You might hide me in Your sukkah on a chaotic day,
Hide me in the hiding places of Your tent.
Raise me high upon a rock.
Now my head rises high above my enemies roundabout,
And in Your tent I'll offer offerings to the sound of *t'ruah*.
I shall sing and chant praises to Adonai.
Hear, Adonai, my voice—I am crying out!
Be gracious to me, answer me!



My heart has said to You:
"Seek my face."
I am seeking your face. Adonai—
Do not hide Your face from me.
Do not turn Your servant away in anger,
You have been my help—
Do not forsake me, do not abandon me,
God of my deliverance!
For my father and my mother have abandoned me,
Yet Adonai gathers me up.
Make Your path apparent to me,
Guide me in the upright road
Because of those up ahead, who lie in wait for me.
Do not hand me over to the lust of my adversaries—
For false witnesses have risen against me, puffing violently!
Had I not the faith
That I would see the goodness of God in the land of life...
Wait for Adonai—
Fill your waiting with hope in Adonai;
Let your heart be strong and of good courage,
And wait hopefully for Adonai.

In my practice, I sometimes just see what verse bubbles up for me, what phrase caught my attention on any given day. That's how this book got started. With the practice itself, in the book, it's designed in a certain way to lead us through different phrases, different verses in a particular order. But the great thing about this Psalm is that you can pull out any part of it, and it helps us open our, our hearts a little bit. And today this particular verse speaks to me, this particular word speaks to me over and over again in this Psalm. It comes from the first verse: "*L'David, Adonai ori* (לְדָוִד ה' אֹרִי)": *ori* (אֹרִי) "my light." God is My Light. And I'm going to share this reflection that I wrote previously. It's related to Sukkot, but I think it could be applied to any day, any place It talks specifically about the sukkah, that temporary dwelling place of the fall holiday of Sukkot, but I think it could be in any home. Hopefully it could be in any synagogue, in any chapel, any place where we're gathered together with others, inside or out, permanent or temporary.

Your Light in my Sukkah.

I saw Your Light in my sukkah today.
It traveled ninety-three million miles for more than eight minutes.
Your light,



created at the dawn of the universe, renewed each and every day,
landed in my sukkah this morning.
It entered through the canopy of branches,
sun shining through the leaves.
Awesome.

I saw it:
shifting with Your Shadow, dancing with Your Wind,
glowing on our faces.
Beaming, not blazing.
Present, imminent, steady.
Sustaining.

I saw Your Light in my sukkah today.
A man holding another's baby,
A grandmother and grandchild eating cookies,
A new Jew, fervent in practice.
an inspiration to see Your Light with new eyes.
A child with small hands holding a large *etrog*,
shaking a tall *lulav* in all directions,
scattering Your Light,
confident You are everywhere.

I saw Your Light in my sukkah today.
Hebrew letters shining from the parchment of the Torah scroll.
Ink glistening in the light
animating the faces gathered around the sacred text.
Gather the beautiful branches together, "*us'machtem* (וַתִּשְׂמַחְתֶּם), rejoice,"
spread the light, on all, for all, "for seven days."

I saw Your Light in my sukkah today.
What more can I say?
Baruch atah Adonai...
Blessed are you, God, who gives us the sacred opportunity,
to shake the *lulav*, to spread the Light.

So the next part of the practice is a writing practice. It's an invitation to pick up pencil and paper and simply reflect. To let the words that are now flowing in, in my mind, spill



out onto the paper. And so I'm going to do that. And I'm going to try to share some of what I'm reflecting on with you as I'm doing it.

I'm thinking about the day that I wrote this piece, and the sukkah itself, and the diverse people that were seated there on that day. Our Temple sukkah is, is large, and we were maybe 25 gathered together. It was before COVID. We were squished uptight. And these were real people that sat there. A man holding somebody's baby, and a grandmother and grandchild that were eating the cookies, the *oneg* before the *oneg* [reception with food].

We have a custom in our congregation of reading the Torah outside, in the sukkah. We unroll it along an eight-foot table, and everybody comes up, stands around it. And the sun shines on those ancient letters, and they sparkle, maybe in the way that they did the first time they were written, whether it was Sinai, whether it wasn't, doesn't matter. But they have a certain glow to them, and that glow bounces onto the people's faces around them. But it was the light and the shadow that day. It was a beautiful, beautiful day. And the sun came down between the leaves and the burlap that was draping the roof. And it was on us, and it was God's light.

So, in this piece, over and over again, in capital letters, "Your Light," a name for God, shining on us. Not only on that day, not only up from that Torah scroll every time we open it, not just on Sukkot. But in all those people, each one with a spark of God within them, that shines out Your Light, God, in each one of us, not just on Sukkot, but in every encounter.

How can we keep it shining? How can we see it shining? That's really the challenge. We forget to look. We forget to let it out. We trap it inside. We clench up and keep it in. But every time we breathe out, we have the chance to put it back out into the world. Every time we open our hands, instead of gripping them tightly closed, every time we extend them, God's Light, Your Light, God, extends back out.

It flows out through the words we can write, through the words we can speak, the words that we offer silently in prayer, and the words that we give voice to when we slow down enough. If we recognize that we are fortunate to live in a world that has a *Sukkat Shalom*, a Sukkah, a Shelter of Peace, spread over it, all the time. If only we will sit still long enough, pay attention long enough, open our hearts even just to crack, to be able to see it and feel it and to support it and to sustain it.



When I do the writing part of the practice, I set the timer for five minutes, and I stop when the timer goes off. I just keep writing until that happens. It's not usually more than a page, maybe a page and a paragraph, a page and a few lines. And then I let myself sit for another five minutes. It's the resting phase. It's the marinating phase. I read recently that it's really important to let your chocolate chip cookies sit on the pan for five minutes when you take them out of the oven, before you take them off the pan. That's how they become crispy and perfect. It's like the chocolate chip cookies, it needs a little bit of time to sit, to rest, sort of crisp up and take shape.

And I often find that when I'm done with that sitting, I have to work hard to stay focused on it, to not move on to the lists for the day. But if I stay in that five minutes and think about the phrase, about the reflection of focus, if I go back to humming that beautiful melody or a different melody, and I stay in it, there's often something else that will emerge. Then I'll realize I hadn't finished writing. I hadn't finished reflecting. And it's oftentimes the best thing that comes out of that writing, or the most meaningful, or the most heartfelt, because the rest of it had sort of been the warm-up and it opens me up. So the sitting part is really, really important.

And then after the sitting, the inclination is often to just close the practice, close the book, close the notebook, put it all away. And I think particularly because this practice is designed around the High Holidays, but really for any time, that the close is important just as the open was important. They're bookends to each other. So, I always try to close with three things: I complete three sentences. Sometimes I write them down. It helps me to remember what they were. Sometimes I don't. Three sentences to close. "I forgive myself ... for being so judgmental of myself as I was writing. I will remember ... to be looking for my light everywhere I go today. Thank you God ... for this heart and this mind, and this hand, and this community, that allows me to have a place to pray, to offer my words to you."

I found that this practice, that this prayer practice, really helps me. It settles me for my day. It doesn't take a lot of time, and that its lasting benefits far outweigh the sacrifice of what I think is my precious time, that should be used for something else, to use it for this. That it really enriches my day and my life, and I think is a benefit to the people I encounter in the world in which I live.

So thank you. IJS for opening me up to these possibilities, and for this opportunity to share my prayer with our community,



JONATHAN:

That was Rabbi Debra Robbins, leading us in their personal prayer practice, which was so inspiring, and for which we are grateful.

You can find many of the materials, including the melody written by Cantor Richard Cohn, and the structure for this practice, at psalm27.ccarpress.org. And we hope that you will take advantage of those materials in your prayer.

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.

