



Open My Heart:

Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Rabbi Denise Eger

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 Denise Eger, who's recently edited and published “Mishkan Ga'avah: Where Pride Dwells, A Celebration of LGBTQ Jewish Life and Ritual”. It's been published by the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Reform rabbinat. Denise, really happy to have you here with us. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

DENISE:

Hi, Jonathan, I'm glad to be here with you today. I am a rabbi for more than 30 years in the Los Angeles area. I've served in the LGBTQ plus community during those years. I'm the founding rabbi of Congregation Kol Ami in West Hollywood, California. And I had the distinct privilege of serving as a president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 2015-2017, the first openly LGBTQ person to do so.

JONATHAN:

That's tremendous. And I read in your introduction to the book that you were actually in seminary at a time when you couldn't be out, but were clearly out.

DENISE:

It was a funny time. I mean, it was in the early, early 1980s. At that time, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion was very clear: you could not be gay or lesbian, and that's how we talked about it back then, and be ordained. In the mid-eighties there began

to be a conversation within the Reform movement about the ordination issues. We'd already, in the Reform movement, welcomed two LGBTQ congregations as full members. But there was still this bar on spiritual leadership. And so many of us, it was many of us who were very active, including many straight allies in working to change it. And while I was ordained in 1988, it was still basically, if you will, illegal to be. But I -- as I described in the book, in the introduction to the book, it was kind of the plexiglass closet as what I called it. Those who wanted to see, saw that I was a lesbian.

We had to walk a very fine tight-rope in those years. And ultimately I was ordained, but I was turned down for every job that I ultimately applied for. Not because I didn't have the talent to do those positions, but because people were afraid to hire someone who was a lesbian, and told that explicitly by number of places. So the only position open to me, and I was invited to become was the Rabbi of Beit Chayim Chadashim, which is the world's first LGBTQ synagogue here in Los Angeles where I am now. And it was the height of the AIDS crisis. So that was my entry into being a rabbi. And those years shaped my existence very much.

JONATHAN:

So, you've really tracked the opening of the Reform movement, certainly. And then the other movements, from the Conservative movement, for sure, to be not only quote unquote "more welcoming" but actually functioning where gay people and gay clergy find their place fully in the rabbinate and the cantorate and as leaders of our community

DENISE:

And not just tracked, but actually involved in the change. You know, in 1990, when the Reform rabbis took up the issue of could a gay or lesbian person be ordained to be as rabbi, it came to a head at their Seattle convention that year. I actually came out publicly in the press in The LA Times to give a real face. There were other gay and lesbian rabbis, but deeply closeted in those years, deeply, deeply closeted, for fear of losing a job, losing a professional that they had trained for, that they were passionate about. And worked very hard through these years on issues of marriage equality. I wrote the original resolution for the Reform movement on officiation, and carried it through as president of the then fledgling Lesbian and Gay Rabbinic Network in 2000. I worked very hard on marriage equality issues, and then consulted with the Conservative movement as they came through with their position papers with the Committee on Law and Standards in 2006.



So, I've had a hand at those levels for many, many years, and pushing the “welcoming tent,” as we talk about it, to include LGBTQ plus people. And I've been doing a lot of work with transgender and non-binary people in the last number of years as well, to help people learn and understand, especially within the Jewish community, how to continue to this thread of hospitality, of that ancient, ancient value of our ancestors.

JONATHAN:

So, this book though is not a political book and it's not a position paper. It really has a different audience and a different purpose, wouldn't you say?

DENISE:

Yes, “Mishkan Ga'avah's” purpose is very much about private prayer, personal prayer, and the part of the book about communal Jewish prayer. And through the years, Jonathan, as a rabbi serving in the queer community, there were no materials. So, in the late eighties and early nineties, as the beginning of the – what we used to call the Gayby boom, the baby boom within the LGBTQ community, in part that baby boom was a response to the AIDS epidemic and crisis, and of so many of our chosen family dying – I had to create ceremonies. There weren't any ceremonies for two moms at the baby naming. There weren't *ketubot* [Jewish marriage contracts] that you could buy commercially for couples who wanted to get married. There wasn't material for a Jewish take on gay pride, right? That was kind of fledgling. Or how might we rethink about Passover and what is the theology of liberation? Well, now people think about: to do a liberation Seder, a Pride Seder, is nothing. But in 1989 there wasn't.

And so, in many ways, the book's start was really out of my personal and practical experience as a rabbi, trying to serve my community and help people connect Jewishly with our tradition and their authentic lived experience as a human being in the world. And I collected and wrote many pieces through the years.

But this book, interestingly, is not just my work alone. But we had a call for submissions. And I'm so thrilled, even though it's published by the CCAR press, the Reform movement's press, it includes contributions from Jews all across the spectrum: Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, secular Jews, people who don't identify, you know, who might consider themselves more of the “Jews of no religion” even. So, there's both some essays of reflection, as well as original prayers, original *berachot*, original pieces for both the personal prayer and then communal prayer.



JONATHAN:

The sense of need for a prayer for personal experience may sound unusual still for some people. And I suspect in the late eighties was the continuation, as we had spoken a little bit earlier about, the influence of the feminist movement. That there's so much of my life that I don't see in the traditional structures of Judaism, but for which I want to pray. And that's something that I think is still not fully recognized within the broad Jewish world, that isn't located in a feminist way, or in the community of "Mishkan Ga'avah." Where: "Oh, no, this is my life. And I have to pray about it, whether you wrote a prayer or not, I'm going to pray."

So, that's an interesting challenge to the rest of us straight folks about what prayer is: What do you have to say to me, to other straight listeners, and to gay or lesbian or LGBTQ listeners, who don't recognize: Wait, I thought prayer is what we do together. It's only this communal thing. Why do I need prayers for me?

DENISE:

Well, we have an ancient historic received tradition. You know, we don't realize that certain prayers are the prayers of Rabbi X, Y, or Z, that are actually now fixed part of our *keva* [established practice] right, In our tradition, the fixed part of our received prayer. But there's always been this tension between *kavvanah*, inspired prayer, versus the fixed and received tradition. And so, while our tradition has a lot to say about the general human condition, it can't, and doesn't address the varieties of different experiences.

And we did, as you mentioned, we did learn that, in particular, that came to life through the feminist revolution within Judaism, about embodied Judaism, that Judaism is also held within our bodies. We are a tribe, it's biological, it's cell work, right, at some level. And we say that for all of our Jews of choice, you're reborn in the mikvah, right? To, to change your very DNA to Jewish DNA, right, as you pass it on to the next generation. So, we have these hints of embodiment. But oftentimes the tradition, because it is patriarchal, doesn't reflect the breadth and depth of the human experience.

And so "Mishkan Ga'avah," in particular, tries to center the voices of LGBTQ plus people and allies and their lived experience, and to give a Jewish voice to that, a Jewish framework to that. And, you know, for those that think that the *siddur* is the be all and end all, I say, *gei gezunderheit* [go in good health]. But the reality is if that works for you, great. For others, it doesn't work for us. When we're talking about time for personal reflection and personal and private prayer, it may not be enough to *daven* the tradition, to



pray the tradition as it is received. Instead, there is important words, important opportunities to give voice to the experience that you're going through.

Let me just say this, Jonathan. When we make a *mi shebeirach* [a prayer for healing] for someone, for healing, when you're praying with someone, you can make a *mi shebeirach* one-on-one for somebody; to look into their eyes, and to have that experience, just to have those eyes be a window on the soul. We want to talk about what does it mean to pray for somebody in stage four cancer, and to ignore that. It's a very different experience than praying for healing, someone after childbirth.

I think there is- within our tradition, and deep within the tradition, within the received tradition -- still a notion of private prayer that is applicable to the moment. And "Mishkan Ga'avah," at least the first half of the book, does have that expression. It talks about prayers for non-binary people. What does it mean to receive your first hormone shot? It's a literally life-changing moment and an affirmation of what you may have felt in an emotional and psychological basis, and to finally have it embodied and expressed. Why shouldn't that be within a Jewish framework, as well? We say a *berachah* over the food we eat. We say a *berachah* when we see a rainbow. We say a *berachah* in private prayer, when we see a Sage ... why not also to mark these timely and important and critical moments in a Jewish LGBTQ person's life? And that's part of what Mishkan Ga'avah does, is to bring those two pieces together.

JONATHAN:

Which I suppose then would be an invitation to everyone to say, "Prayer can, should, and must be part of your everyday life!" Because things are happening to you all the time. And why think that, as Jews, we can't say prayer when that happens to us?

DENISE:

I mean, I think of the Amidah, the *Tefillah* section of our worship. Yes, okay, the *Shemona Esrei* [standard standing prayer, which includes thirteen petitionary prayers among eighteen others] during the week ... but there is an invitation within that to add your own voice to that. Always. That's always been. It's not just, "Hurry up and say the 18 [blessings] and get it over with each day." There's an invitation within that to personalize it, and to stand before the Holy One of Blessing, and to be able to pour out your soul, and to pour out your voice in what you need.

And what you need, right. Exactly. It's *hitpallel* [the Hebrew word for prayer], right. To pray in our tradition, *tefillah* comes from, really, in our tradition, really, from, "to judge



oneself". So, if the self is absent, then we're not being true to who we are in our tradition either.

So, I think that's part of what "Mishkan Ga'avah" does, is also maybe opens up not just for the LGBTQ world, but for the Jewish world in particular. Why not creative liturgy? It doesn't have to replace everything within the tradition, nor should it. But this is an adjunct, if you will, an opportunity to create a prayer for what you're going through at the time you're going through it. Are you in the process of getting divorced? There's so many feelings with that, right? Whether you're straight or gay. What do you need, spiritually, to support you in that journey into re-imagining yourself, not connected to a particular individual? Why shouldn't we create prayer for that? We should indeed.

JONATHAN:

So, the flip side of this is: I don't see myself in the *siddur*, and this is a way of saying, "I see you."

DENISE:

Oh, yes, it is the flip side. And that's why "Mishkan Ga'avah" is not a *siddur*. There are *siddurim* out there – a couple of the LGBT focused congregations have published their *siddurim*, Sha'ar Zahar in San Francisco, Congregation Bet Simchat Torah in New York – have published full *siddurim*. This book, "Mishkan Ga'avah: Where Pride Dwells," was not meant to be a *siddur*, but it was meant to be an adjunct to the *siddur*. Again, to give voice to the LGBTQ experience Jewishly, but also assuming that we're also making an assumption that we're a vital part of the larger Jewish community, and that the *siddur* that we use, whether every day, or on Shabbat or on the *chaggim* or festivals, are exactly that: part of our inheritance as well.

JONATHAN:

That's great. So are there parts of the book that you'd like to share?

DENISE:

And all of these pieces are beautiful, but I want to share one written by Dave Yedid, who is a Conservative rabbinical student at JTS. It's "A Blessing for My LGBTQ Ancestors", based and modeled a little bit on *Avot* and *Imahot* in the *Tefillah*, in the Amidah. But for LGBTQ people as part of a larger LGBTQ community: yes, we have our biological families, our grandparents, our great-grandparents, but we're also part of a community for whom there are spiritual ancestors. And this is a blessing and a prayer recognizing that received tradition of that community.



You, who fought to love.
You, who prayed to the same God I do.
You, insisted on your dignity even when the world said you had none.
You, who died of AIDS while fighting for a cure, so that people like me might live.
You, who were shot in a massacre while on a dance floor.
You, who could not come out and held your secret to your dying day.
You, who were insulted, shamed, beaten, and brutalized, yet kept walking.
You, who contributed your fierceness, your originality, your art, your voice to this world.
I walk in your memory.
I walk this path smooth and chartered by your sacrifice towards justice, towards holiness, towards freedom.

Barukh atah Adonai magein Avraham v'ezrat sarah

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' מִגֵּן אַבְרָהָם וְעֲזָרַת שָׂרָה

Blessed are You, *Adonai*, Sarah's helper, Abraham's shield.

To me this just speaks of a beautiful way of tying in not only our Jewish ancestors, our matriarchs and patriarchs, but another community, that's immensely in part of where we are now. That we would not have received some of the blessings of openness and inclusion without the struggles of the past, and that we merit their blessing as well.

JONATHAN:

What a wonderful model for, again to be really generic, the straight Jewish community. You know, because I think so many kids grow up going to “Hebrew School” and “regular school”. And “Hebrew School” is not part of regular life. And this is an invitation to say, “The whole of my life is part of my Jewish life. And my Jewish life is part of the whole of my life.” What a wonderful invitation.

DENISE:

Yes. I think that's right. It is an invitation. And it calls upon us to look differently, I think, for all Jews. Like: what's your invitation? Don't think that you're not invited. You are invited and we want you to be invited.



JONATHAN:

Which is an important shift. I really want to highlight **your** saying that: “**We** want **you** to feel invited,” and to sense who's the “we”, and who's being invited? That the larger table, the broader community of Jews, is the one that's being created and modeled in this “Mishkan Ga'avah,” this “Place Where Pride Dwells”, which is the bigger tent.

DENISE:

It's the much bigger tent. It smashes the hierarchy, not just the patriarchy. Right? And I think this is something that we have to figure out. I mean, rabbis aren't priests. They're specifically not priests. They're teachers. They're facilitators. Yes, they are folks who study tradition. But our system is much wider than just rabbi and should be. Who am I to say that “Jew in the pews” Jewish experience doesn't have validity. What chutzpah, what horror!

And so I think that it's so important that we talk and we share our experiences, and that we listen most of all to each other's true experience, rather than the projections that we want to place upon people who smash those beliefs and assumptions. This is what's happening in the transgender and non-binary communities, particularly. “Don't make assumptions about my pronouns just because I present in a certain way. Hear my experience, not your perception of my experience, and know that I too am created *B'tselem Elohim* [the Divine Image].”

After all that first being, in the first creation story in *Bereshit* [Genesis] is both male and female. They're not binary. They're something else. This is also an important understanding for not just non-binary folks and transgender folks or gender nonconforming folks, but for all Jews: to be able to just be yourself! No child should have to be placed into particular boxes of ability. Right? We learned this from the people who have differing abilities, whether they're neuro differences or physical differences. Don't tell me what I can't do – help me do!

JONATHAN:

Which I think is probably, for some people, threatening. Because if I can be anything, and I want to be able to express my particular uniqueness, I mean, why do I have to be Jewish? If I'm not feeling it.

DENISE:

That's already happening, right? The Pew study came out, and there are many Jews who have no religion. They've already expressed it. They have an ethnic or tribal or familial



connection. I call it the “lox and bagels Jews,” for those that came from Ashkenazi backgrounds. Maybe it's the “borekas” who come from Mizrahi or Sephardi background, but don't have a sense of the grounding of their spirit of faith within Jewish expression.

And my hope is that, you know, the work like I've written in “Where Pride Dwells,” “Mishkan Ga'avah,” allows people the opportunity to make those deeper connections, even if they don't find them expressed within the traditional framework of Judaism. And that's my hope. I think it's a human -- a human need, Jonathan. I think spirituality is a human need. I don't think it's just for religious people, if you will. I think there is a deep human need to try and make sense and meaning of the world and our place in it. And that “soul-longing” to do that, it happens for different people at different times in their lives, at different crisis points, but good crises and negative crisis points. And Judaism has so much to teach and share with us about those transformative moments. And so “Mishkan Ga'avah” is an opportunity to invite those folks who may have not found themselves within traditional frameworks to give voice and to share their lived experience within a Jewish framework.

JONATHAN:

And so, in that sense, this is an invitation not only to find yourself, but also to express yourself in prayer.

DENISE:

To express yourself in prayer with part of those deep yearnings that are part of human, the human condition.

JONATHAN:

Right. Whether you are using the language of this book, which is a great place to start, or actually discovering your own...

DENISE:

Jews are searching. They're searching. I mean, there's a reason there's so many Jews that are Buddhists. The American Buddhist movement: If you look at the infrastructure of the American Buddhist movement, there are so many Jews that were born Jewish that are now part of the infrastructure of the Buddhist movement in America. People have a longing, and they haven't been able to find an expression within Jewish life. And maybe our synagogues and our institution haven't done the best job. They've focused in other ways. And “Mishkan Ga'avah: Where Pride Dwells” is part of those invitations to invite people to express their spirit, and to be connected to that level of spirituality in a



society like the United States, North America, Canada, too, that doesn't really want to use the spiritual yearnings and framework very much. So, I think that to open up those definitions of what is authentically Jewish and authentically spiritual is an important part of the work.

JONATHAN:

Do you want to share one more prayer from...

DENISE:

I do. Many communities – coming up on Pride Month, some of people may not know that it's actually a commemoration of a historical event, The Stonewall riots in 1969. Where a group of LGBTQ people gathered in the Stonewall Inn bar. They were actually throwing a kind of memorial for Judy Garland who had died a few days earlier. And she was a great musician and inspired diva and icon in the LGBTQ community. They gathered to sing around the piano, and to recall her influence. And, of course, the bars owned by the mafia were rated by the N.Y.P.D. And the group of people said: We can't even mourn someone that we feel that was inspiring to us! And they fought back for three days. And so, a year later in 1970, four communities, Los Angeles as the first, San Francisco, Chicago, San Diego, and New York, put on an anniversary protest march. Because this was happening across the country where the police forces would raid LGBTQ bars; sometimes, in those years, the only safe place together.

So, Pride Month is a commemoration of that. And many congregations, many communities, many groups of friends, march in Pride Parades – when we were able to march, and had those kinds of gatherings. And this prayer, written by a straight ally, Rabbi Greg Weisman in Florida, a prayer for when he gathered his social justice group and community people to think about the intentionality. For many people, they only frame it as a social justice act: Oh, we're just going to do *tikkun olam* [a term reflecting the Jewish social justice commitment to “repairing the world”]. But he framed it not just in social justice, but in a prayer, before we do it, to set an intention for spirituality before we're marching, and before we're bringing our Jewish values into the world with our feet.

So he writes:

We have marched.

When God called to Abram, *Lech I'cha*, “Go forth!,” Abram walked to the land God showed him.



When we endured the pain of enslavement in Egypt, we put one foot in front of the other.

When the Sea split, we marched towards freedom, celebrating with songs of joy.

In Selma, we prayed with our feet.

We have run in fear, and dashed in triumph.

We sang the words of our Movement as we marched for the values we stand for.

And so today, we march.

We march tell the world that every human being is created *b'telem Elohim*.

We march to show pride in those who share the beauty and wholeness of their identities.

We march to show solidarity with those whose identities are known only to themselves.

We march for those in fear who cannot march.

We march as allies, we march as friends, we march as family.

We march as Jews.

הַשְׂדֵה נִצָּחַ—*Neitzei hasadeh*—*let us go forth and let our message ring out, that God loves us all, that we love us all, and that love conquers all.*

JONATHAN:

Amen, that's wonderful.

DENISE:

So often the Jewish community that's politically active, social justice active, may not be the spirituality Jews, as I like to call them. But when we do those acts of *Tikkun Olam* in the world, it is a deeply spiritual act. And this prayer helps to frame that, and to provide that spiritual grounding before we go out and just try to change the world for better.

Marrying those pieces in a more overt way is really, really important for the sustenance of Jewish life.

JONATHAN:

Because then we know we're not doing it ourselves.



DENISE:

Right. We're doing it as part of the authentic expression of our Jewish values. It's not just politics. We get that all the time: "Oh, you're being political when you take a stand." No, I'm not being political. I'm reading our tradition, looking for authenticity within our tradition, and trying to express deep spiritual yearnings for transformation and for holiness. That's a really important framework with which to see, particularly in this case, the act of marching in a Pride Parade, which might not seem particularly holy for someone.

JONATHAN:

And in that sense, if it's a holy thing, God is with us.

DENISE:

God is with us. God blesses us.

JONATHAN:

Exactly. Denise, as we come to a conclusion, you want to tell us where we can get the book, and how best to use it, aside from using it to pray from?

DENISE:

Well, the book is available at pride.ccarpress.org, for "Mishkan Ga'avah: Where Pride Dwells." And right there, on that same page, is a free, downloadable study-guide and discussion-guide aimed at high schoolers and adults – for those of you that are educators or teachers or running an adult ed program, and want to engage in further discussion, including a great lesson on creative liturgy. So, this whole notion that we can take our lived experience and bring it into Jewish prayer language is such an important piece of what also "Mishkan Ga'avah's" goals are. So, I want to just commend that to a free downloadable study guide for "Mishkan Ga'avah" as well.

JONATHAN:

Well, thank you. This has been a wonderful conversation and wonderful contribution to our investigation of prayer as practice, and its role in our lives. So, I want to thank you again, Rabbi Denise Eger, the editor and publisher of "Mishkan Ga'avah: Where Pride Dwells, A Celebration of LGBTQ Jewish Life and Ritual."

DENISE:

Thank you so much.



JONATHAN:

Join us next time when Rabbi Denise Eger will invite us to join in a piece of her own personal prayer practice.

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.

