



# *Open My Heart:*

## *Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater*

Judith Silver

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 Judith Silver, who has been part of this project since the start, as she has offered us her song “Open” as the opening to our podcast. And we have the opportunity today to chat a bit about her process of writing and of finding inspiration for her music. Judith, welcome.

JUDITH:

Thanks so much, Jonathan. I'm really happy to be here.

JONATHAN:

Tell us a little bit about yourself, where you're located, how you came to this. Just whatever we need to know.

JUDITH:

Well, I live in England. I'm in Hertfordshire, which is not very far from London. I was brought up in London. And yes, I've been composing and being with Jewish music for the last 25 years or so. I started my musical career as a singer-songwriter, without particularly having a Jewish focus. And then somehow it just, the path unfolded ahead of me somehow, and the Jewish texts and thoughts and prayers really called me in somehow.

### JONATHAN:

So, just tell us a little bit about what was the Jewish context in which you grew up. Was that part of a foundation that then allowed that piece of the path to open for you?

### JUDITH:

It's strange to think about it. You know, we went to a United Synagogue when I was a small child. And, but then, you know, my family moved to a Reform synagogue. And my older sister had a Bat Chayil, because it was before the days of Bat Mitzvah. And my brother had a Bar Mitzvah. And I -- at that time it was, yeah, I didn't have a Bat Mitzvah myself. I was very drawn to the Hebrew language though. So as a child, you know, on a Sunday morning, we used to go to *cheder* [religious school], and I enjoyed learning the, the mechanics of Hebrew. And I realized later in my life that learning languages, in general, is something that I really love. So, that really resonated for me early on. But I didn't really, you know, I didn't go to Jewish camps. I didn't sort of go through the ranks as it were of, of that sort of growing up process, or lots of people went to Jewish clubs and I didn't go to a Jewish school.

And what happened was my older sister was very into Israeli dancing, and sort of got me into that. So, I think what happened, is it really permeated in a very organic way. So, for years and years, there was just this whole sort of drip in, you know, through the words of the Israeli dancing songs. And, and then it was many years later when I started focusing more on doing music, having been a teacher of English language for the first 10 years of my working life, and a primary school teacher, I got involved in this, you know, songwriting. When I turned 30, I decided I would leave English teaching and see if I could be a musician of some kind. And my route in, originally, was through being a singer-songwriter, very influenced by the beautiful American folk traditions, particularly Joni Mitchell and James Taylor. You know, there's so many heroes of, of the musical world.

And then parallel to that, I, my grandma died, and my mom felt very drawn to go back to shul services. And the shul that we belonged to, Finchley Reform, were doing services with guitar and sort of singing in a, a more contemporary way. And that had a very strong effect on me, because suddenly I saw a kind of reflection of the kind of music that I was doing in the context of a synagogue service.

### JONATHAN:

That's a wonderful unfolding of a path. Not necessarily, I mean, the intentional piece was the choice to leave teaching English, and to begin trying to make this life as a singer



songwriter. But the various things that just happen along the way that open it up for you. Do you remember what was the first Jewish inflected song you wrote?

**JUDITH:**

Yeah, I do remember. So, you know about Limmud, the organization. So, I was invited to do some presenting at Limmud, again, thanks to my big sister. She led the way. I should say Rabbi Deborah Silver.... Many people will have crossed paths. Very, it's very funny with me and my sister, because sometimes Deborah gets, "Oh, you're Judith's sister," and sometimes I get, "Oh, you're Deborah's sister." It's all good.

Uh, so, uh, oh, I'm terrible at losing my thread. Where, where are we? Uh...

**JONATHAN:**

Your first Jewish song. And by the way, I do want to say that Deborah has been involved in the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, she was a participant in one of our clergy programs, and we're delighted to have her as part of this connection to share with you. But you're the star today.

**JUDITH:**

Well, hopefully a time will come where we can do a joint conversation. That would be a delight as well.

**JONATHAN:**

So back to your first song.

**JUDITH:**

So, Limmud. So, I was invited to do some teaching at Limmud. I said I would lead some singing sessions and I was looking for songs to teach. And I was already leading choirs and arranging songs at that point. And I had recently created a simple arrangement of a sixties pop song, an American sixties pop song. (I think it's American.) Which was "wishing and hoping and thinking and praying" [["Wishing and hoping"](#), by Hal David and Burt Bachrach, sung by British singer (!) Dusty Springfield, 1964.]. And I suppose that sound was in my mind, and I couldn't find songs that I felt really drawn to and motivated to teach. And I asked around friends and people were sending me things. And I somehow "Lo yisa goy [Nation shall not lift up sword against nation; לֹא יִשָּׂא גּוֹי אֶל גּוֹי הַחֶרֶב]" and "wishing and hoping" kind of bubbling around in my mind. And I said, I came up with this baseline first:



[singing]

*Lo yisa goy el goy cherev*                      לא ישא גוי אל גוי חרב  
*V'lo yilm'du od milchamah*                      ולא ילמדו עוד מלחמה

It was really directly lifted from [the Dusty Springfield song, which now singing]:  
“Tell him that you care, just for him....”

You know, this is the same baseline. And so I created this “Lo yisa goy,” this four part song. And the first place I taught it was that.

**JONATHAN:**

How wonderful. I love it. You're talking my generation,

**JUDITH:**

The generation of music. Wow. Yeah.

**JONATHAN:**

So how did things evolve then for you from that? I mean, did, did that sort of say, “Oh, I can do this. I can bring these worlds together,” or, “I have this capacity to make the words come alive.” What were the pieces then of taking that experience of the first song, the Jewish song, and growing it for you? How did that happen?

**JUDITH:**

I'm not sure I'm really conscious of how it happened. There was a sort of opening of a door, I think, that happened with that song. And then I'm not sure of the order, but within, I suppose not much time, I got the idea for *Gesher*, which was one of my early songs. And I did an *Oseh Shalom*. And I remember, it was when I was doing some interfaith work in Germany. And that was when the *Oseh Shalom* came to me. And *Gesher*: I was in Wales visiting and I was going along a little country lane, and there was this tiny little bridge and a brook. That was when I was thinking about *Kol ha'olam kulo* [“*gesher tzar me'od*: כָּל הָעוֹלָם כּוֹלוֹ גֶשֶׁר צָר מְאֹד: the whole world is a very narrow bridge,” a teaching of Rebbe Nachman of Bratzlav].

**JONATHAN:**



So, here's this experience: You're walking along a country lane, and the little bridge appears, but the verse is somewhere rattling around inside. What happens then? What's your experience? How does it emerge then for you as a song?

**JUDITH:**

Well, I, I know that often I'm walking, or I'm driving, or I'm, you know, my brain's occupied doing something, or my body's occupied doing something. And then the phrase will just be, you know, like, percolating. It'll just be kind of, as you said, sort of rattling around. And there'll be just a lot of "sing it like this," "sing it, sing it like that." Funnily enough, I'm just at the moment thinking about *HaMakom Yenachem* [the words of consolation spoken to a mourner]. I'm looking for something to do with mourning. And I just read the words over and over, and just let them really, really sink in, and sing it in all different ways, until something feels like the way it should be.

**JONATHAN:**

Hmm. Hmm. So, it's, it's the shape of the language, it's the rhythm of the words, perhaps, even linked with the rhythm of your walking or the sounds in the world?

**JUDITH:**

Yeah. Recently, particularly over lockdown, another factor has come in, which is that I've worked a lot with GarageBand, the software on Mac. And I love playing around with loops. You know, there are thousands, there seem to be thousands of sound-loops, percussion sounds, and synthesizers. And, you know, I recently did a, instead of *Lo Alekha* ["it is not up to you" to finish the task, but neither are you free to desist from it, Pirkei Avot 2:16], I made it *Lo Aleinu* ["it is not up to us"]. But there was a marimba- I'd written about three lines already, three or four lines. And I was just playing with the loops, and there was this incredible marimba loop. And so that suggested to me the next couple of lines of the song, just because of the shape of it. So I brought in a sort of,

[singing]

We are all in this together, no one is alone....

And that was really thanks to the loop, that brought that out, you know.

**JONATHAN:**

So no one is alone. Uh, it's a very important, a very important message for today where there are so many forces that are pulling us apart. And certainly, as you say, lockdown,



it's been extremely potent for people, how far it is between us, and the sense of being alone spiritually. Do you have a sense, for yourself, of not being alone in your own life? Not just that you're not alone because you have friends and family with whom you're connected, even if it's over the ocean and far away from people, but do you have a sense of, of how that is for you?

**JUDITH:**

Yes, I do. Yes. It's funny. You know, I set up this organization, "Companion Voices," to bring singers to bedsides, and sing when somebody's dying. And I'm always saying to my groups that the songs themselves are our companions, too. So that's the sense of the--sort of--the creative connection and, and the thing about getting ourselves out of the way when we sing, so that there is a clear channel for us to just do service without our things getting in the way. So the songs help us, in a way, the songs help us to do that clearing. And, you know, we, we spend a lot of time together getting to know each other, and getting to trust each other, sharing our own stories and feelings about death and dying before we would ever go to a bedside. So, so definitely a strong sense of connection, of all different kinds. A web of connection.

**JONATHAN:**

A web of connections. And, I think that many people have a sense that writing music, like writing a short story, is: you sit down and you just do it, and **you** create it. But I have a sense that that's not exactly what goes on. **You** have to be there. **You're** the one in whom the verse is percolating or moving, and you're the one who's moving through the world. But then also **something comes** to you, like the marimba line. It just came to you. Is that your sense of how the music comes out? How you create it?

**JUDITH:**

Yes. I find it quite a mysterious process, honestly. I mean, I don't know if mystical is the right word, but an unknowable process. I feel privileged to somehow have the capacity to do it. I don't feel, it's funny, you know: that's the thing about copyright, and ownership and all that of songs, and that's absolutely, of course, it's so important. And there's also just that they somehow, I feel like they sort of drop into us. Yes, so we're, perhaps, we're the sort of cauldron that they, that they're formed in. And we bring, we bring so much to them, don't we? The sorts of, all the experiences of our lives, or in my case, well, in the case of a musician, you know, all the musical influences that you've had, and that all sort of plays into it, doesn't it? What comes out in the end?

**JONATHAN:**



Uh-huh. I'll add this piece from my perspective, sort of working in the realm of Jewish mystical thought and spirituality. We often have the sense of prayer being what **I** create. **I** say it. It's about **me**. **I** have to do it. **I** own this prayer that **I** offer. And there's a very strong sense in the mystical tradition, particularly in the Hasidic tradition, that prayer is actually God moving through us. And this sense of – and perhaps we'll come back around, then, to “Open” – that the Hasidic teachers say specifically that *Adonai s'fatai tiftach* (אֲדֹנָי שְׁפָתַי תִּפְתָּח), “God, open my lips,” is not, then, so that **I** can offer **my** prayer, but that my mouth can speak what **You**, God, are praising in the world. And that sense of the songs or the music dropping in sounds very resonant.

**JUDITH:**

Yeah. Yeah. That, that resonates for me.

**JONATHAN:**

Tell us a little bit, if you can, if you remember, how “Open” came to be. It's been so well received, and is such a wonderful piece, and it's been such a delight to be able to use it, to open our program.

**JUDITH:**

Well, it, it is funny, you know, with some songs, you know, the idea might come, and then for months it might just be bubbling around, and then one day, suddenly, it's the day when it's ready. And then other songs, they just seem to arrive fully formed. And the truth is, as I was saying earlier, the thing about influences: you know, I love gospel music. I love those traditions. I love the sound, the way that the harmony works, and the flow that feels so natural and powerful.

And so, the main song, the four-part harmony, I think of it basically as a gospel song. Somebody once said that they thought it was not quite simple enough, the line that goes, [singing] “Open my ears to good words, to pure words” – that that should kind of be simplified. And I chose not to do that. And then the thing about the call and response, you know, there's a bit that goes -- I can't remember if it's included now in the first snippet that you use in the program --

**JONATHAN:**

Which, by the way, is a great invitation for people to look it up, and find the full song and buy it, so that they can have it on their phones and take it with them everywhere.



JUDITH:

Thanks. Yeah. That's, that's very lovely. But yes, I wrote this thing, which is like a response. So in fact, it's like a, sort of a flowing three-way conversation where the first part goes

[singing]

"Open my ..."

and you get this

"Every day"

and then there's "open my" ... "every hour."

And then "every moment, open, open."

And then the third bit of it, the third wave is

"Open my / every / open my eyes..."

Open... open my eyes, open my lips. Open, open"

So they sort of diverged from each other and then they come back together. But you were asking about the process. It, it was not one that I tinkered with a lot. It just, it came out easily.

JONATHAN:

It was a gift.

JUDITH:

It was a gift.

JONATHAN:

And it was a wonderful gift that you offered us, in allowing us to use that piece. And I will in fact include in the transcript of our conversation, a link [to the song where people](#)





[can purchase it](#), as well as, if you will allow, [the link to Gesher](#), which you sent to me. And you mentioned earlier, so people get a broader sense of your contribution to the Jewish world of music and to the world of prayer, through your music. Thank you Judith for this time. And thank you for this conversation. It's been a delight and I'm very happy to get to know you this way and happy for our listeners to get to know you as well.

#### JUDITH:

Oh, it's been such a pleasure. Thank you. Thank you so much for using the song for approaching me about it. Inviting me to do this. It's just, it's really a treat.

#### JONATHAN:

Find more about Judith Silver at her website: <https://judithsilver.com/buy-judiths-music/>

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](http://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](http://elanaarian.com). For more information about "Open My Heart" and the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, please visit us at [jewishspirituality.org](http://jewishspirituality.org). Shalom. Until next time we pray that you remain healthy and safe.

