



# *Open My Heart:*

## *Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater*

**Rabbi Mike Comins**

### 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 Mike Comins, who is a friend, a colleague, a teacher, and an ongoing member of the IJS community. Hey Mike, I'm really happy to have you with us today. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

### MIKE:

Thank you, Jonathan. It's great to be here with you today. I grew up in California, in Los Angeles, but lived in Israel for 15 years. I studied at the Pardes Institute, an Orthodox yeshiva, and at Hebrew University, and I was ordained in the Israeli Rabbinical Program of Hebrew Union College.

The same month that I received my ordination in 1996 I also graduated the Israeli Desert Guide Program. I began leading trips, spiritual desert trips, in the Sinai under the name Ruach HaMidbar, the Spirit of the Desert. I returned to the States in 1998 and started a spiritual sabbatical, if you will. Mostly about spiritual practice in nature with non-Jewish teachers. There weren't any Jewish ones at the time. And right around that time I also met you, Jonathan, and the others who created the Institute for Jewish Spirituality. I was in the very first rabbinic cohort of the IJS. Yes, 20 years ago now Jonathan ... more. And our teacher, Sylvia Boorstein, invited me to join a six-week meditation retreat at the Spirit Rock Meditation Center, a brand new place, which I did. And I followed up with a four-week retreat the following year. That is my mindfulness background.

There have been two major projects in my life and each one led to a book. I moved to Jackson Hole, Wyoming and started TorahTrek in 2000. I've been leading people on Jewish spiritual hikes and retreats in wilderness for over two decades. My book, "A Wild Faith: Jewish Ways into Wilderness, Wilderness Ways into Judaism", came out in 2007. And when the recession hit in 2008, I suddenly had a lot of time on my hands, and I turned to prayer, both personally and professionally. "Making Prayer Real: Leading Jewish Spiritual Voices on Why Prayer is Difficult and What to Do About It" came out in 2010. And I followed that up with a video-based curriculum for teaching prayer. And in both the book and the curriculum, as you know Jonathan, you and your fellow teachers at the IJS play a leading role. Today, we are going to learn a meditative walking practice that combines both of those projects.

### JONATHAN:

Well, I know those two books and those programs well, and so I'm really looking forward to hearing how you bring them together in this practice. So, I'm going to turn things over to you and thank you for sharing your prayer with us now.

### MIKE:

Thanks Jonathan. Today, we're going to learn what I call 25-25-50 Meditative Walking. It's a practice that I have been teaching for over two decades now and I'll just give you a heads up: when I get feedback from people who were now with me years before, and I ask them what stuck with you, it's usually this practice that they mention. It has the potential to be very transformative. It is meant to be done outdoors, and now that it is Spring, maybe Summer by the time you hear this, our timing is really good.

Let me say at the outset that if you have been to an IJS retreat or a Vipassana meditation retreat, this is not the same as "walking meditation." That is inward focused. 25-25-50 is outward focused, as we will see.

I'm going to talk you through the practice for the first time we do it and after that you'll be able to go right into wherever you want. You can do this practice anywhere. The goal of 25-25-50 Meditative Walking is to connect to beings in the natural world through mindfulness. We all know how easy it is to be walking down a trail and you're out in nature, but actually you are thinking about some problem that you brought from the office, or maybe you are thinking about what you are going to have for dinner tonight. In other words, you are not paying attention to where you are because you are lost in thoughts of past or future.

Our goal in this practice is to connect to the natural world by being present, and focused, and hopefully connected. I think of it as "I-Thou" meditation, to use the famous ideas of



Martin Buber. The goal is to connect to another being by being present and by listening deeply to another in their *shleimut*, in their wholeness, without judgment, from a place of communion. We usually think of "I-Thou" as a relation between people, but Buber thought it was possible with all beings. In fact, the first "I-Thou" encounter that Buber describes in his book, "I and Thou," is with a tree. And I think that most people, if they give it a try, will experience that as well.

The strategy to achieve the goal is to give the mind three, or at least two, foci of attention in the present. That way the mind is too busy paying attention to things in the present to get lost in thoughts of past or future.

I call it 25-25-50 Meditative Walking because the instruction is to walk with 25 percent of your attention on the breath, 25 percent on the contact of your feet to the ground, and 50 percent on the trees, the birds, the wind, the clouds, the butterflies, the flowers, on whatever you are encountering as you walk. Another way of putting this is that part of your attention should be on your breath, part of your attention on your feet, and most of your attention on the world around you. Now, the numbers - 25, 25, 50 - are meant to help, but they don't always. Sometimes people work on balancing their attention to perfectly hit 25 on the breath, 25 on the feet. Don't do that. This meditation is meant to bring us out of our thinking minds and into the present. So, you don't want to spend time thinking about numbers or anything else really. The numbers are meant just to give you a rough idea of where to put your attention and nothing more.

One of the people who learned this on a TorahTrek group told me that she renamed it "Sky-Earth Meditative Walking:" Sky for attention on the breath, Earth for the feet. If that helps, then go with that nomenclature.

So, to repeat: as we walk, we are aiming for a minority of our attention on the breath, on the feet, and most of our attention on taking in the world around us.

Now, I am going to talk you through the practice the first time you are doing it, right now, and after that you'll be able to go out right into it whenever you want. And you can do this practice anywhere. I have a two block walk from my house to the local coffee shop and that is my prime practice time. You do not need to be in the Grand Canyon to do this practice. There are trees and plants and clouds everywhere.

So, the first thing is to find a place outdoors, and for this first time find a place where you'll be comfortable closing your eyes for a few minutes while we stand in one spot. If you have a backyard, then you might try that. If you're in Manhattan, or in a place like that, and you are perhaps uncomfortable closing your eyes in a public park, start out in your living room, or at home, and go outside when we start walking.



All right, let's do the practice. Stand tall. And relax, feeling your feet on the ground, and let's begin by simply following the breath.

[standing silently, breathing]

Did I mention to close your eyes? Please, close your eyes.

You might follow your belly going up and down, or the place where the air goes into your nostrils, or perhaps where it hits the top of your lungs through the throat. Pick a spot and let's follow the breath.

[silence]

Now, when thoughts come, and inevitably they do, the instruction is simply to let them go. You'll have a moment of revelation: "Ah! I'm thinking a thought." Say goodbye to it and return to the breath.

[silence]

[Deep exhalation]

We continue following the breath. Relaxing, gaining our focus.

[silence]

And, as you continue to follow the breath, we're now, I'm going to ask you to split your attention. Keep part of your attention on the breath and most of your attention on the feel of your feet touching the ground. You might rock back and forth a little bit.

[silence]

Feeling the texture of the ground against your feet, while following the breath at the same time.

[silence]

When the thoughts come, just let them go.

If you're meditating for the first time or near the first time, I think that the biggest mistake that beginning meditators make is to think that meditation is about banishing thought. Even the most experienced meditators still have thoughts. As Sylvia Boorstein taught you, Jonathan, and me: Meditation is about what you learn and what you do with those thoughts. If you get upset – "How come I can't do this? How come everyone else can do this but I can't?" – well, that emotion adds fuel to the fire. The thoughts will just get worse. As Sylvia taught us the trick is just to say, "Uh-oh, a thought," and gently go back to the feet and the breath with gratitude because each time I realize that I'm thinking it is an opportunity to go back to the present.



We continue.

[silence]

So, now I am going to ask us to shift our attention one last time. We are going to keep part of our attention on our breath, part of our attention on our feet, and we are going to start walking.

So, open your eyes and take in through your senses anything and everything that you encounter along the way. Don't be afraid to touch, to smell, to hear, to pay attention to whatever draws your attention. Please do so for the next five or 10 minutes. Turn off the audio, and when you finish with that, turn it back on.

[Take a break, and go for a walk – and PAY ATTENTION]

So, I hope the practice is going well. Before you get back to it, let me mention two things. The first is something that I have learned over the years. Some people find that three foci of attention is a little too much for them. They find it distracting. If you are one of those people, you might try simply focusing on one, either the breath or the feet, and taking in part of your attention, the minority of your attention, and most of it on taking in what's around you. The idea is to connect to the natural world and to practice mindfulness in this most tangible, practical way. So, whatever helps you to do that, that's what you need to do. Feel free to tweak this practice, experiment with it, and figure out what works for you on every level.

Second, and this is where we're going to take another step in the practice. When you connect to beings in the world around you, a very common response is to feel gratitude for God's creation. And when you receive a gift, the natural reaction is to want to say, "Thank you." So when I practice 25-25-50, at some point, or another, I integrate prayer into the practice. Any kind of prayer is good as far as I am concerned, but my preferred modality is to pray blessings. We have all kinds of blessings for beings in the natural world in the Siddur, in the Jewish prayer book. And I also love to offer spontaneous blessings. And in those, I tried to be as specific as possible. You know, the blessings you get in a prayer book have to be pretty general, because they need to be able to be said in many places over many time periods.

So, when I am looking right, as I am now, in my backyard. Thank you God, Spirit of the Universe, *Ru'ach Ha'olam* (רוח העולם/Spirit of the Universe), *Berukhah At Yah* (ברוך אתה/ Praised are You, Yah), for the light green leaves next to the dark green leaves on the gray bark on the tree that goes up to my side. Thank you God for the succulents and the cacti at which I can look and wait for their flowers now that the spring has come. Any blessing that gets specific I think carries a little more punch to it.



So, that is our practice for today and *b'hatzlachah* (success) in it. May you walk in peace.

#### JONATHAN:

That was Rabbi Mike Comins sharing their personal practice 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](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.

