



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. So happy to have you here with us today. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

DEBRA:

Well, thank you, and thank you for having me. I am a rabbi, ordained by the Hebrew Union College. I work at Temple Emanu-El in Dallas, and have served here my entire career, since 1991. And I'm really fortunate to have had a lot of jobs in one place. I'm also a wife and a mother and a dog owner and lover.

JONATHAN:

That's great. Well, you're also here because you're an author, having recently published through the CCAR Press, with whom we've had some dealings over these weeks, “Opening Your Heart with Psalm 27: A Spiritual Practice for the Jewish New Year.” It's a wonderful, wonderful book. And tell us a little bit how it came to be and what it's meant for.

DEBRA:

Jonathan, this is such a perfect question for **you** to ask me, because this book came about from the work that I did as part of [the rabbinic] Cohort Seven at the Institute for Jewish Spirituality. And you were among our lead teachers during that time, and

introduced me to this practice of being able to take just a phrase – a tiny little bite, nibble, if you will -- out of a larger passage, and really unpack it; and come to sort of embody it, and be able to sing it and know it and hold it throughout a day or throughout a week, to let it speak in multiple ways. And so I'm really grateful to IJS, and to you, for introducing me to read text that way. I did not know about it before. And it's that practice that then led to the traditional reading of Psalm 27 that's done at the season leading up to the High Holidays, to try to read it in that way. And I developed my own practice around it for several years, and then was encouraged by some members of the congregation to share the work that I was doing in a broader context within our congregation. And then suddenly we looked at it, I looked at it and said, "Hmm, there might be a whole book here."

JONATHAN:

So, this work is based on Psalm 27, which is read, as you say, in the month preceding the High Holidays and through the High Holiday season. What is it that you understand, what do you take away from why it is that Psalm 27 plays this role during this time of year?

DEBRA:

Yeah, this is probably the question I get asked most about the book. Like, why Psalm 27 of all the 150 Psalms? The rabbis had to make a huge choice. 150 Psalms! They're all fantastic! And I really believe they picked exactly the right one. I think the most obvious reason that it might have been picked is for its imagery. It captures a lot of the imagery of the season. It has the shofar for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It mentions the Sukkah, because we read this through the holiday of Sukkot. It introduces, you know, this sort of imagery to us.

But I think what's more important, is that it not only introduces the imagery of the season, but it opens up the seasons of our soul that we become so attuned to at this time of year. So, it opens us up to our fears, and our doubts, and our anxieties; the enemies that await us; that we have to face the darkness that's out there. And also promises us the promises of kindness and shelter and compassion, and above all, courage and hope. That really is at the core of the Psalm. And so I think the rabbis were ingenious, brilliant, inspired if you will, to pick just the right psalm. And it's manageable. It's only 14 verses. You can put your hands around 14 verses.



JONATHAN:

So, it's not just one a day. I mean, you kind of have to use all of those verses throughout the whole of the 40 or 52 days of this season.

DEBRA:

Yes. So the book is organized sort of in order of going verse by verse, but there are only 14 verses. And so this practice of sectioning it off, I don't like to call "breaking it," because it's not broken, or "fracturing it," it's not fractured. But taking it in smaller little bites, phrase by phrase is very, very important. It allows us to sustain the practice over a 50 day period, and also to know that we can also rearrange them. And so that sometimes you have to jump ahead or jump back, or during Sukkot we want to focus on the Sukkot verses. And that ultimately the message of the season, and the message of the psalm and the book, is to put it all back together into one sense of wholeness and that we can have that in our lives too.

JONATHAN:

Ah hah. So even as we work with phrases or sections of verses over the course of all of this time, it brings us to a sense of wholeness at the conclusion of Sukkot, when we finish reciting the psalm as part of our routine.

DEBRA:

Yes. And I think to emphasize that aspect: part of the practice is to read the entire psalm every day. So the whole practice doesn't take more than maybe 20 or 25 minutes a day. But the idea is you read the whole psalm, and then I've highlighted a phrase for each day. But you might easily pick a different phrase. You could actually do the book in any order that you want, and start it at any time. But by reading the Psalm every day, you see the context of it. Which I think, in modern biblical studies, sometimes we lose track of that, and we cite verses out of context. We just cite them to support an argument, or a particular point of view. And that this lands us back in having the sort of integrity to see it as the Psalmist saw it.

JONATHAN:

And so, you've spoken about this as a practice. So, what do you understand as practice, and what are you supposed to be doing with this?

DEBRA:

So, I'm a person who is a very – I love ritual. I like things that are the same, and that are fixed, and you do them sort of in a regular way. And so this book is designed to help the reader cultivate the practice of settling in each day to this time; having a fixed time and



space to do it. It leads you through a little bit of music; there's been music composed to accompany it. And also, you know, any melody that you have, but it really helps us to settle down. It includes a little bit of breathing. There's a blessing included in the practice; a blessing that I crafted from other verses of Psalms, for the person who's engaging in the study of Psalms to recite. And then you read the Psalm itself, and then the reflection for focus that I've written.

And then it invites you into our writing practice. Just five minutes. I like to write with pencil on paper. Some people do prefer to do it electronically. There's a prompt for each day to help you along to think about it. And then after the writing, and this is the part that people ask a lot about as well. And there's a little counter-intuitive: after the writing, comes the sitting, what some might call meditating. And that's because it allows what we've just written to sort of marinate a little bit, to settle into our minds a little bit. And maybe then there's an additional idea we have, or we're able to reflect on our own words in that spaciousness.

And then the practice concludes, and I always urge people who are doing it to not skip the last step: that the practice concludes with three small actions. Saying: "I forgive myself for..." And this for me is most often saying, "I forgive myself for getting distracted; not writing my best; not being prepared," whatever that might be. But forgiveness – super important at the season. "I will remember...": some key phrase from this that I want to carry with me through the day. And then of course we want to end with gratitude. So, a simple sentence of: "Thank you God for my hand, it was able to hold a pencil today." "For this brain that fired in the right synapses today." "For the sun that came in and shown on my desk while I sat here." Some small word of gratitude to close the practice.

JONATHAN:

That's very rich. Do you have a sense, then, of if somebody were to engage in this practice over the course of these weeks, month and a half, what might happen to them, for them, what you're looking for?

DEBRA:

Well, I've been very fortunate that I've been able to teach the practice. This past year, during the pandemic, there was no travel to go anywhere, but I visited a number of congregations and brought the practice to them. And we were able to offer a weekly time for people to come together online, to do the practice. And I taught it previously in our congregation as well. And what my students have said is that they have come to



really crave the opportunity to sit still with the Psalm. That it then empowered them to feel like they could read Psalms. That they could take this capacity to then look closely at a verse, or part of a verse, and see themselves in it, and how it might relate to them. So, I think people have found that they've been able to apply the practice to other biblical texts to – or, or to their lives and that they found it really is echoing with them.

So, it's been very resonant, I think, because for some people who really want structure in their practice, it's pretty highly structured. It's very forgiving. Right. It says, "Okay," -- sort of like yoga – "you missed a day. That's okay. Come back on the mat today. Stand over here and try again." So I think it's been very resonant with people for that reason.

And I'm -- I'm very pleased to share that because people have responded so positively, the CCAR is developing an app, actually, that people will be able to have it on their phones now, and hear it read aloud, being able to track your work online. There's photographs, there's prompts. It's a very rich offering that'll be coming out this year.

JONATHAN:

How lovely. How wonderful to look forward to. What's the relationship then to the title of the book, "Opening Your Heart with Psalm 27?" How do you understand that part of it?

DEBRA:

Until I began my work with IJS, and then even more deeply with my work with Psalm 27, I really understood text work as being about my brain. And what I realized in studying and in writing and in reflecting on Psalm 27, is that it wasn't about my brain. It was about my heart and my experiences and my faith and how my heart could be more open to other people, to holiness, to the beauty of God's world, to God, God's-self. And that this was a way of sort of helping that to happen.

JONATHAN:

When you say, "Open your heart to yourself, to other people, to this world, to God's world, to God's-self," what's your experience? What does it feel like to be open hearted in that way, as opposed to thinking about an open heart, or thinking about any of those other areas?

DEBRA:

Yeah. Yeah. I think for me, I can only speak for myself, on the days when I'm paying attention to it and doing it as well as I can, I'm a little bit more patient with people. My heart is more open to where they might be in that moment when they're sharing



something, whether it's hard or, or joyous, but to be more present to it. My heart is more open to it.

I feel like, out in the world, it means I'm more attentive, when I walk my dog, to the trees and what stage of their blooming they're in, or who were the other people in the neighborhood. Or what else? What are the clouds doing at that particular moment? And that – that's having my heart open to the world. And maybe it actually moves me to – to say, “Gosh, what are we really doing to that sky? It may look beautiful to me, but I know what's going on in that ozone. And I better get involved in some climate change work.” Or, “Oh my gosh, the amount of big trash on my street! This is crazy, the amount of garbage that we're generating. What are we going to do about it?” I happen to live in a suburban area, so I don't walk by the homeless or see the needy as much in my daily walks in the neighborhood. But on a good day, like when I'm in the car, and I'm stopped at the underpass on the highway, my heart's more open to that person who is homeless and standing there and in need of help.

JONATHAN:

And then this practice, coming at this time of year, which is beginning in Elul, leading up to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and through Sukkot: Why would we want to be more open hearted then, as opposed to any other time?

DEBRA:

I didn't understand this as a child. I always thought that Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and the whole season was about, like, repairing ourselves. Like we had to do all the work on ourselves in relationship with other people and with God. And what I didn't understand is that that sense of *tikkun middot*, that sense of repairing myself, was a partner with these ideas about *tikkun olam*, that they had to go hand in hand. And that these meditative practices, these reflective practices, what makes them unique for us as Jews is that they sustain us and they nurture us and they open us up to be able to go out, not to retreat further in. And I think that that's so important at the High Holidays time: That we have to be focused inward, but only – like Shabbat every week – in order to strengthen ourselves that we can go back out.

JONATHAN:

And you've pointed to these social and environmental ills. And that, too, is a part of *teshuvah* [return, repentance]. It's not only doing the inner work of getting myself right. But as you say, it's getting myself right, because I have to also be able to do right in the world. I have to be able to act in appropriate ways. So being open-hearted sometimes



feels like being receptive. That is, things get in. But it sounds if you're also saying that being open hearted is that things get out.

DEBRA:

Yes, very much so. Very much so. I mean, it's very much that teaching about the *V'ahavta* [part of the Shema prayer]: That the words are "on your heart" so that when your heart opens, they can fall in. But if we think about the *V'ahavta*, that brings us out into the world, you know – when you go on your way, and when you walk about, when you go outside... you bring it with you. So I think it's absolutely both. It has to be both. It's too selfish if it's just about what comes in.

JONATHAN:

Right. Right. Which is an important piece about Jewish practice altogether: That we do both.

DEBRA:

Yes.

JONATHAN:

So, one of the things that you described is this practice of willingness to work just with a phrase, or with one verse, or a piece of a verse, or a word. That's a very different way of reading. And as you said, it's unlike modern, critical thinking in many ways. Spiritually, how do you understand the impact of that? Or what, what comes of being willing to sit with a phrase, and cut it out of the larger whole even, and just be with that? What does it tell you about prayer, or about God, or about our relationship to God into the larger world?

DEBRA:

It's very instructive about prayer. I think it says that: The impression that a lot of modern Jews may have is that prayer is sitting in a big, long service that's very structured and very orderly. And that you have to, sort of – I don't know if you grew up in a Reform congregation – you read responsively. It's pretty – it's pretty tight. And that this says, "You know what, if there's a phrase in a prayer that speaks to you, like, stay right there. That's a good place to be." *Shema* ["Listen"! To yourself, to the prayer]. If you never get to the rest of the *Shema*, and you just get to the "listen" part, that's great. What are you listening for? What are you hearing when you're listening? Where do you need to be heard? Like, one word can open up so many possibilities. And permission for people to



be in a communal setting and still have this personal practice, I think is very, very important for what Judaism could look like going forward.

JONATHAN:

So that both the words of the prayer book, of the *siddur*, but also the words of Torah, or the words of Psalms, clearly are meant to speak to Me!

DEBRA:

Yes, they're, they're there for us. And that we are texts ourselves. And how we bring our experiences to these classical biblical or rabbinic texts is a text also, and needs to be told and written. And that's also Torah.

JONATHAN:

And so that's a piece of the practice as well, which is writing our ability to write what it is that comes to us from reflecting on the phrase or this Psalm.

DEBRA:

Yes. I think the writing is very important. I think it lets us reflect in a more intimate, private way.

But I want to go back to part of the other question you asked, about how looking at just a small piece can be helpful in terms of synagogue or Torah, but also in how we understand God. And I think for me this has been so important. Because God has so many different names and attributes and ways to be encountered. That this allowed me to have permission, if you will, for the practice to develop, to say, "I'm just interested in this particular image right now." Like I don't have to take it all at once. I can take them one at a time. I can take one today and a different one tomorrow. I'm a big fan of "God, my Rock," right? I love that. But sometimes I really need "God, my Redeemer," or "God, my Creator," or "God, my Protector." And I found that through the Psalm that I could really play around with capitalization, and give God a lot of other names that we might not have necessarily thought of. So I use one it's called "My Light" – capital M capital L. It's a great name for God, isn't it? So I think being able to read that closely, and just sit with it and see what creative ideas bubble up.



JONATHAN:

Ah-hah. And how God shows up in any one of those phrases or words or passages. That rather than what I thought God was from this other place, what is God here right now? How is God speaking to me?

DEBRA:

And in this particular Psalm, I mean so many different images and names for God, right? In just in these 14 verses. So even if you didn't go anywhere else. And it could be confusing, right? How can God be all of these things and still be one, but that's the beauty of it.

JONATHAN:

That's so important to say: all of the diversity, all of the varieties of ways in which we meet God, in which God comes to us, in which we need God, in which we thank God are all aspects of something much greater than any of us can conceive of. So why limit God to one thing when God can be all of these things for us?

DEBRA:

Or be overwhelmed by the vastness of it! Which then sort of shuts us down, and we go back to whatever that sort of earliest first image was. And we say, "Well, I don't believe in that. So, I must not believe in any of it." And what I think this does is open up the possibility of, "So now I understand God that way. Well, maybe this is interesting, too. And maybe that's interesting, too." And all of a sudden you're holding a whole bucket of -- of different names or different images.

JONATHAN:

To go back to what you said before, then: That this is a way of opening the heart to God.

DEBRA:

Yes.

JONATHAN:

Which is not **A** God, but God, as I meet God in these ways, as God is present for me in these ways, however that is.

DEBRA:



Yes, which is why the title of the book is “**With** Psalm 27”, right? It's not “Opening the Heart **to** Psalm 27” and it's not “Opening your Heart to God,” because that's totally overwhelming to people. But this tried to sort of compact it down and make it accessible.

JONATHAN:

That's so wonderful. And again, it is “Opening Your Heart with Psalm 27: A Spiritual Practice for the Jewish New Year.” And so again, it is practice. We do this over and over. We do this in a variety of ways, but with a given structure.

That's so rich. Do you want to share one of the pieces with the listeners?

DEBRA:

Gosh, Jonathan, thank you. That's a lovely invitation. I love this one. I'll share this one. It's hard to choose. It's like if you had 50 children, which one of your children would you say, “This one should go out to the public today?”

Here's one: This is a reflection on Psalm 27:4, which is probably the best-known verse of the Psalm. “One thing I've asked of God: that I may dwell in your house.” I'll share it. It's called “One Hundred Times a Day.” One note before I read it. So, there's a teaching by Mitchell Dahood, who's a biblical scholar. And he suggests that the Hebrew word *mei-eit* [מֵאֵת] is related to the Hebrew word *mei-ah* [מֵאָה], which is the number 100. And so, he suggests that while the usual translation is “one thing I have sought from, *Adonai*, how I long for it,” he translates it, “One thing I have asked a hundred times ... this, O God do I seek.” Right? So it's a beautiful little wordplay. And then my reflection that I'll share with you now is a reflection on this particular word play. But you need to know the word play in order to get the piece. So here we go:

One Hundred Times a Day

First it sounds like I'm nagging.

“If I've asked you once, I've asked you a hundred times....”

Next, I start to sound focused.

“I'm not asking for a lot, not a hundred things, just one thing, and it's the most important to me.”



Then I remember
the Talmud's spiritual practice: "Offer one hundred blessings a day."
All day, ask God for one thing, a hundred different ways:
Please, receive my prayer,
I am alive in your house and I'm so very grateful.

One hundred blessings a day requires an early start.
Eyes open, thank You!
Breath flowing, thank You!
Standing upright, thank You!
Sun rose, thank You!
Ground firm beneath my feet, thank You!

In every challenging situation, thank You for courage!
After every difficult conversation, thank You for patience!
With every disappointment, thank You for hope!
For every physical discomfort, thank You for strength!
At each accomplishment, small and large, thank You!

The opportunities for gratitude abound.
With each bite of food, thank You for the soil!
Thank You for the sunshine! Thank You for the rain!
Thank You for the farmer!
Thank You for the man who transported this food
and the woman who sold it!

It takes all day to get from one to one hundred.
A beautiful pink cloud at sunset, thank You!
The silence of the night, thank You!
The stars spread across the sky, thank You!
The love of a spouse, a partner, a parent, a child,
love for myself, thank You!
The renewing power of sleep, thank You!



All day, every day, one hundred times a day, I ask one thing:
Please, receive my prayer,
I am alive in Your house and I am so very grateful.

JONATHAN:

Thank you for that. That's a wonderful, wonderful invitation to re-frame how we understand that injunction to recite a hundred blessings a day. Oh, it's a hundred acknowledgments of, "Thank You!" Of, "This didn't have to be this way. Here it is."

DEBRA:

Yeah. Yeah. And I hope it also, for people who are not so familiar with blessings, but the Hebrew may feel intimidating or you may feel like you need a particular formula, that "Thank You" itself is a prayer and a blessing. So just adding on your own to it makes it just right. And it makes it each one of ours. It doesn't require formal schooling, or knowing exactly the right thing. Again, sort of with an open heart to that our words flow out as gratitude prayers.

JONATHAN:

That is, again, so moving. And all of the pieces in this book are of a similar sort: not the same theme, but taking a phrase, putting it in context, and then opening it up. And all the opening it up is **your** writing. This is what you've come to out of your own practice. And then what you've done with other people over time. So this is alive. This is alive in you. And because it was alive in you, it can be alive for us as well, which is such a wonderful blessing and offering.

So, thank you Debra, for "Opening Your Heart with Psalm 27: A Spiritual Practice for the Jewish New Year." Again, it's published by the CCAR Press and you can find it online, you can find it from the CCAR Press. And I will include Debra's email address in the transcript (drobbs@tedallas.org). And if you have questions or would like to reflect with her on your own experience of "Opening Your Heart with Psalm 27", which we'll be doing not so late in the summer, in the beginning of August, as we begin to prepare for the High Holidays. And I'm very happy that Debra will be back with us for our next episode of "Open My Heart: Living Jewish Prayer." So, thank you, Debra. And we'll speak to you again next time.

DEBRA:

Thank you so much, Jonathan. It's been a pleasure.



JONATHAN:

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.

