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# *Open My Heart:*

## *Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater*

Elana Arian

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 Elana Arian, who graced us with her song “Ken Yehi Ratzon” as our concluding music. And now have the opportunity to sit and talk and learn a little bit more about her and about her work. So Elana, really happy to meet you and have you here today.

ELANA:

Thank you so much. I'm so happy to be here.

JONATHAN:

So, tell us a little bit about yourself. Where are you from? Where are you now?

ELANA:

Sure. So I am originally from Westchester County, New York – Larchmont, New York, specifically, a beautiful town on the Long Island Sound, a great place to grow up. And I've lived in the New York area really my whole life. I went to college in Connecticut, and then I moved right back to New York City and I lived there for 18 years.

And then about a week ago, I moved to Tarrytown, New York, which is where I live now. So we are kind of in the thick of getting adjusted to a new environment and enjoying it so far. And I grew up in a family that really valued Jewish music, and expression of

Judaism and spirituality through music. And so I think that's kind of a big part of the answer to where I'm from. That's kind of the fabric behind...

**JONATHAN:**

Do you want to expand on that a little bit just to locate yourself in terms of what those influences are?

**ELANA:**

Sure. So, my mom is Merri Lovinger Arian, and she's a professor at Hebrew Union College in New York City, a graduate of IJS. And she teaches a number of courses to clergy about sort of empowering the congregational voice, and about the power of communal singing, and about sort of how you partner in community to bring the power of music to everyone. My dad, Rabbi Ramie Arian, was a leader in Jewish, nonprofit work. He worked with NFTY and Young Judea. He started the Foundation for Jewish Camp. And both of them are lifelong song leaders and leaders -- leaders of communal singing. And so I have many -- many of my most formative, early experiences are, you know, falling asleep on the table at the song session at Kutz Camp, in my pajamas, you know, while the kids are jumping up and down. And I think that it's in a lot of ways -- kind of the soundtrack to many of my memories is music that either my parents were leading or -- or being in the -- in the sort of company of others, using music to bring spirit and bring community and bring joy and prayerfulness to -- to others. And so I feel proud. The work that I do is slightly different, but only ever so slightly. You know, in some ways I like to say this is the "family business."

**JONATHAN:**

That's great. So, was camp a big part of your life or were there other contexts, as well, in which music and singing was a part of your life?

**ELANA:**

Yeah, absolutely. So, we were lovingly called, uh, "fac brats" at Kutz Camp, but it was... I spent every summer of my young life -- my parents were both faculty at URJ Kutz Camp in Warwick, New York. That particular camp was a leadership Institute only for teenagers. So, it was a very long time until I was of age to be a camper. But I spent many summers kind of just soaking up in all the best ways -- you know, all that camp can provide in terms of just like a real sense of rootedness and community and, you know, connection to nature, and connection to sort of -- I just feel like the best -- the best of things in a lot of ways.



My birthday's at the end of April and my -- my first summer at camp, I was, you know, six weeks old or something. So in the eighties, you know, we didn't have like a day camp for staff kids. We just kind of roamed around like a -- like a herd together. So, just a beautiful sense of freedom in that. And then when I became old enough to be a camper at other sleep-away camps, I spent, I don't know, eight or nine summers at Camp Harlam in Kunkletown, Pennsylvania, which is a place that I met friends who are still some of my closest friends in my life.

And then I also -- in middle and high school and it became clear that music was a really important part of my life. I also went to some music camps as well to sort of nurture that. So I was a student at Tanglewood in Lenox, Massachusetts, and a few other camps there.

And I think one other -- one other big influence actually, as I'm thinking about it is: my family's home congregation was a Havurah. It was a 25 family community with a limit, I believe at 25 families, based in Westchester. And I had three other kids in my Hebrew school class, and we were very, very close, you know. We had services in each other's homes. That was the model. So, if your family's week to do services, you know, you'd work with, they always had a student rabbi from HUC, a student pulpit, and you'd work with them and create the service and the very creative readings and things like that. And then, you know, doing Shabbat services was like sitting on the floor in your friend's living room, you know, and singing. And in that context, my parents were leading all the music. And so I do think that the, sort of, the sort of way that I primarily connect to my own spirituality, and my own Jewishness, and my own sort of grounding is, has always been in that sort of no extra pretense, just kind of, we're sitting on the floor, we're singing together.

I feel really grateful that that's the way things started for me. Because -- because now I work in -- in congregations all around the country. And, you know, I spent 12 or 13 years playing in the instrumental ensemble at Central Synagogue. And I remember the first time I went into that sanctuary--and even now as I travel to other communities, as an artist and residence--that sort of the grandeur, and the majesty. It's like such a different form than what I was raised with. And so it's nice to sort of feel that I can always come home to that.

#### JONATHAN:

So, as you've made this entry into that world of these synagogues, some of which are quite big and grand like Central Synagogue in Manhattan, has that affected your music,



how you experience music, how you work with people in terms of music, bringing them into it? Anything else?

**ELANA:**

That's a great question. Yes, I definitely think so. And I remember when I first started working in these other kinds of environments, feeling myself quite intimidated by the scale, and having an awareness that that can be present for people sometimes. That a place that is grand, and majestic, and sort of designed to communicate that, it has the positive side of communicating that, but also it can be a place that makes people feel maybe smaller or, or less than, or, "I don't know the words to this," or, "I don't know enough to do what everyone else is doing." And I think that having my own experience of transitioning from a form of spirituality and Judaism that existed really like on the living room floor, or in the camp dining hall, to a version that can exist in a broad, you know, majestic kind of a sanctuary space, I think helps me to be, you know, more empathetic to the, the spectrum of what people can come into the -- to a space like that with. And so I think that when I write or when I'm leading worship or teaching in the context of worship, I like to think that I'm trying to create the sitting on the floor in the living room, even if it's a different kind of a space. And that works for me as a way in. You know, that it doesn't have to feel far away. It can be something that everyone can participate in.

**JONATHAN:**

That's a great opportunity for us to talk, then, about how you understand your role as both singer songwriter, and then also song leader, but then also worship leader. How has that evolved for you? How does that come together?

**ELANA:**

Yeah. How indeed?

You know, so much of all of this, I think, is just about people. You know, it's just about people relating to each other and how that works; and how people feel brought in and invited; and what things make that possible. So, I think for me, it's taken time, you know, to feel that I can comfortably step into leading worship. Usually when I go to a congregation for a weekend, you know, I work as a part of the team with the -- the clergy team and any musicians that they have. And we do a lot of conversations and prep work before I arrive at a place where we've had a lot of conversations as a team to find out what do they normally do and what are their goals and how can I help, you know, that kind of thing. Because that's the point, you know. It's not meant to be a performance or



something about me, but more about me meeting their community and you know, us experiencing something new together.

So I think it's taken some time to feel that, you know, that I can stand with the clergy team and do something that could be helpful or meaningful or help to support or elevate whatever the normal experience is in the services. And I'd say as a writer, I guess just the more time that I've spent traveling to different communities and understanding kind of the -- the range of what is out there, the more that the writing can be for a particular purpose, a particular moment, a particular need. You know, "Oh, I see that there are a lot of congregations--" and it's -- it's delightful to see that there are a lot of congregations that are beginning to integrate, you know, small moments of -- really explicit moments of mindfulness, or explicit moments of meditation, or a longer period of silence, you know, as part of their regular practice and how could music support that type of thing, you know? Or for example, "This text is very -- seems to be very difficult for people to get into their mouths everywhere that I go. Let me see what I can do, musically, that would make it easier and more accessible." So I do think the longer I've done this work, the more I'm learning ways that the writing can help the actual doing. And in a lot of ways, I think lots of the music that I love the most is -- is like that. It's great on its own, you know, as just a piece. But that doing it and using it and singing it with people that a lot more of the power is there.

#### JONATHAN:

You can not answer this [if you want]: but not being a rabbi or a cantor, and coming into context where you're working with clergy team who have been doing "X" for a period of time. And now either they're trying to shift, or they're curious about, or they know that something's not working, and here's an opportunity to work with you. What do you feel -- from what you've seen or in your own heart over time -- is the most needed piece to add to the prayer life of the Jewish people that you come in contact with?

#### ELANA:

Hmm. I think that ... it's interesting, 'cause I sort of have two almost opposing responses to that. One is one of the things that I have been struck with, and I really still am, but particularly when I first started traveling to places that were really different from, you know, New York, East Coast Judaism, very specific thing, right? It's different in El Paso. It's different in Seattle. It's different in Louisville, all of that. In all the ways that culturally things are different. So I remember being struck sort of simultaneously by how different the prayer life is in all those places. Some of that, some of that to do with numbers, some of that to do with resources, some of that to do with just cultural things, the way



that you feel different in California than you do in Texas, you know. That that's really present there.

And simultaneously to my mind, in terms of congregations, that type of model: most congregations are trying to answer the same questions, you know, solve the same kinds of problems. If they're not identical, it's very, very similar. And I don't mean the practical ones, which I think also are true about, you know, membership models and things like that. But more like how do you sort of reach people where they are when people are in so many different places? How do you provide the kinds of support and entry points for different kinds of people, with different kinds of comfort, with different kinds of families or different kinds of tradition? And, and make it feel meaningful and worthwhile to finish a long week of work, and still feel that it -- it will fill you up, you know, to go do the next thing in community?

And so, I think that when you ask that question, that's where my -- my brain went. Which was simultaneously all of these places are so different, and also, we are so much the same in terms of what our people need and what our people are asking. And what does it feel like to sort of live in this pace and this information environment and how do we balance the kinds of internal life that we want to have in the face of that?

I think if I had to say one thing that could be for everybody, it's not so profound, but I think that just listening, whether it's leadership or clergy or whomever, really being able to deeply listen to their congregants or making opportunities for congregants to really listen to each other. I think that there's a deep need for that always. And particularly, you know, you hear so much how divided we are. I think that's true, you know, in our spiritual communities too. And it's like the idea that there's, like, taking care of yourself, and then taking care of your family, and then taking care of your... and the sort of concentric circles. And I like to think that our prayer communities can be that way too. You know, there are opportunities for people to really deeply listen to each other and, and be with each other in difference, and still find ways to love each other. And so I think that when I see, when I see it, as I'm traveling, it really, you know, takes your breath away. When you see community, that's really making it possible for people to connect and deeply and feel heard, and be able to express themselves fully and, and not feel rushed and not feel afraid to say the wrong thing. I think that's something that every community of every type it's beneficial,

JONATHAN:



I hear in that capacity that you've cultivated, as well, in order to be able to respond to the invitation from a congregation to come spend a weekend with us. And you say, "Okay, tell me about you. What's going on here? Who are you? What do you need? How will this serve you?" Not, "How will this serve me?" Which is a very, very important spiritual orientation that is not immediately evident to everyone. That many people do. I -- I would say that when there is congregational life, many people are there. They're doing -- they [are doing], not just for me, but for you, for others, for the congregation, for the world. But cultivating that in other contexts.

So, in terms of listening, to shift slightly in our conversation, is that part of music writing? Is that how it works for you? What goes on?

**ELANA:**

It's funny. I don't know if I've ever made that direct connection, but I think it's -- it's really profound what you're asking. Yes, it definitely is. I think it's -- it's definitely about listening to something internal. I would imagine for most people, it's very hard to find a way kind of in, internally to -- or to ourselves, to really listen to what we ourselves are actually thinking and wondering and curious about. And I know for, I'll speak for myself, you know, as I said, we just made a major life transition. I have two daughters, one of whom is starting a totally new school and a whole new thing. The other one is a toddler, you know, running us around. And there's just always an endless list, and things to kind of get you away from what's there internally. So I think, yes. One thing is, is deep listening in terms of just trying to tune into what it is that I might be grappling with or feeling or thinking about.

And that's not because that's what my music is about, but just because it helps me to kind of hone in on, you know, "Well, if I'm sort of grappling with this other people probably are too." I teach a class at HUC in New York on songwriting. And one of the things that sort of just becomes truer and truer over time, as I do this work, and also to have the great opportunity to teach it, is that -- that idea that the more sort of specific what you're expressing is to you, the more universally applicable it is. It's strange and like super counterintuitive.

But, you know, I've -- I've had this experience over and over in my teaching now, too: that a student who's newer to writing, is writing something very personal. It feels very, very specific to them. And it's just like, "Ah, I don't know though. It's like, who's gonna ... Is it just, for me, it's like a diary entry." But it ultimately -- if you find that balance where you're expressing something that's so specific to you, it just never fails to be the thing that so many other people are connected, too.



Like, I'll give you an example. I have a setting of *Dodi Li* [Song of Songs 2:16: "my beloved is mine, and I am his, he who grazes among the lilies"] that I wrote for my wife, Julia, and played it the night before our wedding. The chorus is -- is just the Hebrew of that little piece of Song of Songs, but the verses are English verses. And they just, in my mind, they very specifically tell the story, our story, which is a very specific story. I mean, everyone says, of course, but you know, ours is not sort of conventional in a number of ways. And I cannot tell you the number of times that people write or call or whatever for sheet music or whatever, often to sing at someone else's wedding or just performing at their own wedding, "When I heard that song, it just -- it's exactly the -- it's exactly my story with my, you know, whomever." And on the one hand it's like, it's so amazing, and it's so humbling that people feel that. But also it's like, "No, that's my, that's my story." Right?

So there is something about listening and really being able to kind of deeply get into your own vibrations, and what is moving you in what you're grappling with or struggling with, or curious about. That's purely from the, sort of, artist writing kind of zone.

And then, you know, at this point, because of doing the work out in the field, also, I think I do feel that listening -- certainly when I'm leading a song leading or worship leading or whatever -- it's a huge part of what I'm doing is listening to the sound of what's coming back to me. Whether that's about -- you're teaching a new melody that the congregation doesn't know, and if you really are teaching it, and you really want them to know it, then you have to be willing to listen enough that you hear that they didn't get it and, and go back and get it more comfortable, and move at their pace and not at your pace.

And so I think that, you know, that seeps into the writing, too. Hearing what a congregational type voice is able to easily do, or struggles with, and sort of using that as a jumping off point, in a like structural kind of way.

**JONATHAN:**

Do you want to go back and think about what was the first song that you wrote? Or the one where you really said, "Oh, this is something I can do."

**ELANA:**

Sure. So, I came to songwriting in general in college. I was -- I'm originally a classically trained violinist. That's my -- my first instrument, and my sort of most serious instrument. And that's what I sort of was pointed towards. And when I went to college it





was important to me to have a broad education outside of music in addition to music. But it was sort of clear to me that I was going to be a classical violinist.

And so, a couple of years into college, I met a group of the sort of like grungy, hippy, folksy types in my school. And they were in a singing group, not like an acapella group, but a group with, you know, instruments and folk stuff that was called "Tangled Up In Blue." And it was all sort of sixties, seventies, folk harmonies, and, you know, Americana instruments and stuff. And I really felt that I had found my people at school. And it had truly never occurred to me that you could just write songs, you know. Like you don't need a degree of some kind, you know, that just the -- the desire to do it and the openness to do it was enough.

And so that group of friends, you know, had a lot of people who wrote their own music. And I would go and hear them in coffee houses, in New Haven and around the campus and stuff. And -- and it just kind of blew my brain open, this idea that you could just do that. And so -- so I started writing in college. And I wrote, I would say for about 10 years. I was doing just secular folk music. I was teaching during the day and I was -- and during the week, and then I would go and play, and even travel and stuff to play acoustic music venues, secular music, and really that all was born from this group of musical friends in school and kind of made me feel like I could do that. And so that's what I did for a long time.

And actually because of my parents and the work that they did, I had the amazing, good fortune that Debbie Friedman, of blessed memory, was a close friend of my mom's -- a close friend of my family's. And so when I started getting my first gigs in New York, like the gross places that would give you your first gigs in New York, and Debbie used to come to the basement underneath the club to see me. And she started -- it was like a bit we had for years -- when, after she'd hear me play, and she'd say something nice about something that I did. And then -- and they'd be like, "Oh, this is a very nice Elana. What -- so when are you going to write something, you know, that the Jews can use?" Basically, that's what she was saying. And she really just stayed on me, and I was just not interested. You know, I think it was that family business thing. Of like, "I'm doing this other thing." And I love what a noodge she was about it. And she really was persistent and I just kind of laughed it off. And we just did that for a while.

And so, the first piece of Jewish music I wrote was when my daughter, Maya, who's eight now, was like just a brand-new baby. And I was in that new parent moment. Like my whole entire life had just seemed like all the little Ikea pieces had sort of come out,



you know, like it was just completely unrecognizable – Part A and Part W over there, and the little bolts, you know. I was thrilled about having this incredible baby, but every other part of my life, I was just like, “I don't recognize it. How do I do this?” Like, “When am I ever going to play music again?” You know, it's like that early newborn time: you're not sleeping, you know, you can't figure out when to eat.

And – and I remember I was changing Maya, and just kind of like humming to her to keep her calm. That thing that I was humming to her ended up being the first Jewish piece that I wrote. It was a prayer, you know, which was very surprising to me. Because I had really felt very strongly that that's not something that I did. But it came, sort of like a moment of spontaneous prayer. One of the few that I can really think of in my life that just kind of came out of me as a whole, without me trying, maybe with me actually resisting it, you know, the opposite of trying. And it was a setting of “*Yehiyu L'ratzon*” [Ps. 19:15; “May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart, be acceptable to You, O God my Rock and Redeemer”]: may the things that are inside of me, may the thoughts and the worries that I have, be okay, may they be acceptable.

I mean, that was already a couple years after Debbie died. And so I never got to share this music with her while she was here, but I like to think of her as having kind of nudged me a tiny bit to one side or the other to get onto that path, to put the grooves in it. And, when I think about the first piece that I wrote, in terms of the music that I do now, that's definitely the one that pops out,

**JONATHAN:**

Do you want to tell us a little bit about how “*Ken Yehi Razton*” came to be?

**ELANA:**

Sure. I just want to say I'm so honored that this piece could play a role in this project. I don't take it for granted for a second to just know that there's lots of people who are getting to hopefully use that piece in their own practice.

So, my wife, Julia, also a graduate of IJS, a dedicated meditator, practitioner of yoga – it's like a hugely transformative part of her life. And at some point she sort of gently suggested to me that I might, you know, explore some of those practices. You know, it's like, I grew up in New York, and we've been living in the City forever, and we have young kids and I travel all the time. I'm just like a kind of naturally high strung. So I think that's part of it. Anyway, I started kind of exploring different kinds of, sort of structured and guided meditations and things, to sort of help me get my toe in. And this was several



years ago. The thing that really stuck with me, that really worked for me, kind of in the broadest contexts, were different versions of Metta practice, loving kindness, meditation.

And so, you know, I find myself challenging myself to just do that in a regular way. It can be short, but just in a regular way of developing that kind of practice. And I found that it was really helping softening the edges in certain places, and helping to cultivate something internal, you know, that, that couldn't be as easily shaken.

So just as one form of context, that practice had been in my head for a while. And yeah, I mean, to be honest with you, I was sort of reeling from a surprising loss. It was like a shocking loss that I wasn't expecting. And I remember that happened, and then the next morning or something I had to fly out to work for the weekend. You know, when I go to do these weekends, like, as we were talking about, it's so much about listening and being present with people, and I just really was not feeling whole. You know, I just was like, "I don't know how I'm going to do this. I don't -- I don't really know how to flip on an autopilot switch with this work." Like, it's so about the interactions between people and being present.

And I was in my hotel room there -- it was in El Paso, Texas, visiting Temple Mount Sinai. I think I just, for myself, was just starting a kind of a loving kindness thing. And I was playing guitar and just kind of trying to let out some of what I was feeling, cause I didn't want to bring it into the space that I was going to and push it onto other people, you know. I was just trying to kind of let it flow through me. And I think that feeling of sort of shattered brokenness that we can feel sometimes with a sudden loss, there's something so healing about just being able to speak the words out loud, "May I be safe. May I be free." You know, "May I be whole." Any of those things that kind of helps to make me feel like I could be... that this was going to pass at some point, and I was going to at some point feel okay, you know?

And so that was really the impetus for -- it was just for myself. Again, like sort of listening to myself and just letting whatever flow through. And I had been sort of struck by the sort of parallel structure to the Priestly Benediction, *Birkat Kohanim*. Like, "May God bless you and keep you. May God be gracious to you." Like it has that, "May God give you peace." It has that same kind of formulation. And so I think that's where the -- the bringing together of those two -- of the Metta practice with the idea of *Ken Yehi Ratzon*, with the sort of refrain to that Priestly Benediction -- came to me.



And actually I will always, always have a very soft spot in my heart for that community, Temple Mount Sinai in El Paso, Texas. Because I arrived like in little shards to them, you know, and they just wrapped me up and let me be how I was. And – and it was very healing. And also, I think it was Friday night, after services, when I went back to the hotel is when I was working on “*Ken Yehi Ratzon*.” And the next day, like, after Shabbat went out, I did a concert, like an intimate concert for the community there. And I just was kind of dying to do this thing, because I had been singing it all day, and it had just been sort of helping me.

You know, part of writing music that's for communal use is that there's always a moment where you've never sung it with people before, and you don't know what it is. And “*Ken Yehi Ratzon*,” in general, is designed to be, you know – the verses are designed to be improvised. The meditation is the same as when you lead any other kind of practice. You're trying to be sort of in the moment and present and naming what's happening there. And so it was very scary, you know, to be like, “Let me try this thing that I wrote,” because also it doesn't really exist in a specific form. You know, it's kind of an improvised thing.

Anyway, I mentioned to them in the concert, “I think I may have written something new yesterday. I'm not sure what it is yet exactly. Can we try it?” And it was my first experience of this. What – what now is, you know – what's one of the most rewarding parts of these weekends is getting to lead this meditation with people and see again, how I don't know what each person is thinking about when we're doing this practice, but I can see that it makes a difference, and I can feel that it makes a difference, and it still makes a difference for me, you know? So there's nothing more powerful than that for me as a composer or spiritual leader or whatever I am, I have no idea, than just having something that you feel internally translate and do something for other people. And so that congregation in El Paso did that with me and we were all crying and I was just like, wow, this is like, this is something I don't know what it is, but...

#### JONATHAN:

Well, we're grateful to that congregation for having helped you in that way so that you could bring forth and share “*Ken Yehi Ratzon*” with the world, and then with us. Elana, thank you so much for this time, and for sharing your life with us in this way and your music, certainly. And we look forward to what new opportunities might unfold for us. And I encourage everyone to use the link that I'll put in the transcript to connect with Elana at her [website](#) so that you can download and purchase her music, and share in the life of her music, as well. So thank you very much. And, and thank you all for sharing this time with us.



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.

