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# *Open My Heart:*

## *Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater*

**Rabbi Jonathan Slater**

### 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 coming to a wrap on this phase of the “Open My Heart” project. I don't know what's coming next, but as they say, “Watch this space.” We're thinking about all the other opportunities that will come up, and the things that we can do around prayer and Jewish spiritual practice, and look forward to sharing them with you in the future. I've so enjoyed meeting with and praying with the various presenters. And I believe that many of you have as well. The approaches have been diverse, but the impulse to bring one's heart and soul to this moment, to connect to what is true, and to offer our hopes, needs, thanks, and aspirations to God and our own listening hearts and souls is at the foundation of all that we've done.

So I'd like to review a bit, in this moment. What it was that prompted the beginnings of this podcast, and its life over these seven months. Yes, it's been that long since late November of 2020. So how did this come to be? Soon after it became clear that the pandemic was going to shut down our lives for a number of weeks, we at The Institute for Jewish Spirituality committed to offering a number of spiritual practices to support our people along the way. The first was the offering of daily meditation sessions and our weekly Torah Study to Sustain the Soul. In the works was also the plan for our Jewish Yoga Studio.

Not long after we began, I was in conversation with Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg, my teacher, colleague, and friend. And we were talking about all that's been going on in

these early weeks of the shutdown, how people were feeling, what the anxieties were, the unknowns that were still unknown. And reflecting on the offerings of meditation and Torah study, I said, "What more can we do?" And Sheila, in her purity and innocence simply responded: "Well, we could pray."

And it was that which actually spurred the "Open My Heart" project. It was clear to me that prayer really was an important and necessary part of the work that we would have to do during this time. But it wasn't that we needed a program to tell people what to pray, or to be a program of prayer for the pandemic. But rather, that everybody would have a sense that something needed to be done. And for some people, it may be satisfied by meditation. And for some people, it may be satisfied by Torah study. But some would need prayer.

But for many of us, prayer is inaccessible or unfamiliar. The prayers that we are familiar with in synagogue weren't available to us. Zoom was just getting up and going. People didn't have any real sense of how to shift from in-person prayer services to doing it on Zoom, and what would be satisfying, what would be valuable. But more than that was the sense that people were so accustomed to being led in prayer – by prayer leaders: rabbis, cantors, others, volunteers from their congregations – and also led by the words of the *siddur*, that the question or the availability of personal prayer was left unanswered. And it was that that we wished to turn to in "Open My Heart." It's so important for us all to learn to pray on our own.

I remembered a book that many of us read early on in The Institute by Jane Vennard, called "A Praying Congregation." In it she described her experience in a community, as a new pastor, and finding great tension and conflict among members about what worship should be like in the church. And she created a program that she hoped would foster conversations, that would open up understanding, and lead to a greater common purpose in the worship of the community. And the first question she began with was: Who taught you to pray? A very simple question, but I suspect that for many Jews, one without an answer. I know for myself: I can say who taught me to read the Hebrew letters, and then who taught me to recite *Shema Yisrael*. And I remember clearly in third grade, Ms. Sklarsh, who had us davening *minchah* every weekday that we were in Hebrew school and using the *siddur*. And I knew that. But nobody really told me how to open my heart, and to open my mouth to God in prayer.

It was that sort of inarticulateness and lack of knowledge that led me, on my first trip to Israel, to stand at the Kotel, knowing that something was supposed to happen there, and



not knowing what to do. So I could recite a Psalm or I could *davven*, which I did. But I also saw all those little papers squeezed into the cracks of the Kotel, of the Western Wall. And so I figured I'd write something, my own prayer, but I didn't know what to do. So I figured that if I'm going to write a prayer, my prayer, it had to begin "*Barukh atah Adonai/ הַבְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה'*". And I, and it couldn't just be, "Hey God, it's me. I need to say this. This is what I'm feeling. This is what I'm afraid of. This is what I need. This is what I yearn for. These are the joys of my heart. This is the thrill that I experience in this moment, standing before You."

It took me a long time to cultivate a personal prayer practice. But it was that which I wanted to address in the "Open My Heart" project: to open up all the varieties of ways in which people do pray in personal prayer, in their own prayers, as practice; so that they could model and invite people to join them in their prayer practice; to then spur the listeners – you who have been participating in this project – to then pray on your own.

Another premise of the program, following from this impulse for all of us to learn to have our own personal prayer practice, is: the more fluent we are in our own ability to pray, the more we'll understand what's going on when we join a community in prayer, the more we'll be able to bring our own praying hearts and prayer experience to the communal experience of prayer. And possibly also to know that in those moments when the communal practice of prayer does not address our need to pray right then, that we can remain in community while also turning inward to offer our own prayer. And I hope that that's been true for some of you.

So, what have we accomplished? Over the course of these seven months, we've had 55 different podcasts on prayer. Of these, five have been book talks, and one interview with podcast creators. We've also had a conversation with Judith Silver, who offered us the opening to our podcast, her song "Open," and with Elana Arian who offered us her song "Ken Yehi Ratzon" as our conclusion. Of those 50 other podcasts, so many have been the offerings of the heart of the presenter in their own deepest felt modality of prayer.

And they varied. There've been prayers bringing the words and practices of the *siddur*, of the prayer book, to life. There've been contemplative prayer experiences; prayer grounded in meditation; prayers aroused by and enriched by being outdoors; prayers that arise through embodied practice, the awareness of the body and its experience leading us to awareness of our prayer; prayers expressed through song and music. We've had older teachers and younger teachers. We've had cis-gendered men and trans men; cis-gendered women and gay women. We've had Jews presenting their way of praying grounded in the tradition, but all with the intention of opening the heart through prayer.



What do we know about you, our listeners and participants? Well, we do have some data. As of the end of June, we've had 27,647 episode downloads (probably more by the time you listen to this). We average a thousand downloads a week, and about 600 unique listeners a week, with listeners from all over the world, including the United States of America, Canada, Israel, Germany, Australia, and the United Kingdom.

We've also heard from a number of you expressing your gratitude for this or that episode, piece of music, approach to prayer, or moment in life. A few comments:

Some of the prayer practices resonate for me and some don't. There are some that I listened to only once, others that I returned to many times. Sometimes when I'm walking or sitting outdoors, sometimes in my study. A practice in early March, I don't remember the author, about creating a sacred space to pray was especially meaningful to me. I'm still working on creating that space.

This just gives me a chance as an IJS student to add my own voice to the choir, no pun intended, about the podcast "Open My Heart." I adore it. I love my walks, listening to it and learning from, and with these astonishing teachers, these wonderful people. Thank you.

I've been meaning to write to let you know how wonderful your podcast is, and I couldn't let another week go by without expressing my deep gratitude. Thank you for continuing to be my teacher and for introducing me to other teachers and practices.

Your podcast has been terrific for me personally, expanding my awareness of the varieties of prayer practice, and my own engagement in prayer. I also want to be sure you knew that it has been a significant factor in clarifying for me the importance of getting this class to happen at our temple, giving me ideas about what it could entail, and building my confidence so that I could play a role in shaping it and supporting it.

I just wanted to tell you how wonderful this podcast has been. The breadth and variety of teaching and teachers has been amazing and inspiring and reflect the widespread influence you and IJS have had over the years in training clergy. The major take home, and I'm not surprised, is that the most important thing is intention.



Good morning to you. This morning's episode of "Open My Heart" truly awakened both my body and spirit. The creative and unexpected selection of music added inspiration and levity to my newly established morning practice.

These responses are reminders to us, all pointing us to how we might return to the podcast for inspiration, and to support us as we cultivate and deepen our own prayer practice. The variety suggests that there is no one way to pray, and no one prayer modality that will work for everyone. Indeed, it may be that one works for you today, while another will inspire you a few months from now. The important piece is to keep practicing.

So. Practice.

- Clarify for yourself what your intention is in your practice. What is it that you are seeking? What are you hoping to cultivate for yourself? An awareness? A quality of heart? A spiritual or moral capacity?
- Make time for your practice on a regular basis. Preferably at the same time of day, each day, or a number of days each week.
- Be clear about what the practice is and do it the same way.
- Observe while practicing what gets in the way of staying with your intention, that keeps you from engaging in the practice, that distracts you while doing it, the feelings that might surround even trying to pray, and so on. Allow those obstacles to be present without judgment, but also without giving in, so long as you can.
- And then come back to the practice.
- Over time, observe: what are you noticing both while doing the practice – about your heart or mind or soul or body – but also what are you noticing in your life? Has anything shifted, developed, grown, diminished?
- Without giving up on your practice, consider what might help you continue with your practice while clarifying your intention, and how to come closer to its enactment in your life.

And remember: we have to show up in prayer, but we are not in charge. Our prayers have to be connected to us in our lives, but they are not only about us. They are about orienting our awareness to that which is greater than we: God, the Holy One, the Universe, Oneness, Awareness itself. And then allowing that awareness to change us, and change how we are in the world.



In a sense, all prayer is a form of confession. Not confession of sin or of wrongdoing, but a confession of our finitude, of our own insufficiency. This is surely true of prayers of petition, where we're asking for something. But it's also true of prayers of gratitude, prayers of thanksgiving, prayers of desire, prayers of need, prayers of hope, prayers of joy. It's not about us. It's about how we can be, and who we can become; of what we know and how we are in the world; how we are with God in the world, and how God is with and in us in the world.

The mystics read Ps. 51:17:

*Adonai sefatai tiftach ufi yaggid tehilatekha*

אֲדֹנָי שְׁפֹתַי תִּפְתָּח וּפִי יַגִּיד תְּהִלָּתְךָ

Adonai, open my lips that my mouth might sing Your praises

and then change it. They say: it's not only about our desire to pray our personal prayer: "Adonai sefatai tiftach, Adonai, open my lips that I might sing Your praises." Rather, we ask God to open our mouths in purity of heart, mind, and purpose, so that ultimately the words we utter might be God's words of praise for us and for the world. May that be where our prayers lead us. May we all merit to open our mouths and for God to sing through 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.

