



Open My Heart:

Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Rabbi Rachel Timoner

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 are blessed to have Rabbi Rachel Timoner, Rabbi of temple Beth Elohim in Brooklyn. Hi, Rachel, thank you so much.

RACHEL:

Hi Jonathan. It's great to be with you. Great.

JONATHAN:

Thank you. Tell us a little bit about where you are and what's going on for you these days.

RACHEL:

Well, I'm here in Brooklyn and my congregation is a large congregation in Park Slope and, you know, it's been a difficult time to be in Brooklyn, New York. The pandemic has hit really hard here. And for many weeks, people were very panicked and really afraid, and also suffering from all kinds of loss and in illness. So it's been, it's been a hard time, but it's actually getting a lot lighter now. There's fewer ambulance sirens. There are more people who've recovered, and people are starting to feel hopeful again.

JONATHAN:

That's great. That's great. And, and prayer has been an important part of this period of time for you as well?

RACHEL:

Yes. Well, I already, I always have a daily morning prayer practice and. I don't do it a hundred percent, but it is, it's been with me for a long time. And this time when it, when, when we realized, when I realized that we were going to be in quarantine, I decided to start offering a morning meditation on Facebook live. I started my first one was on March 15th, and I thought I'll do it for a week or two and see if it's useful. And now today was day 65. And I've been doing it every day, and it's an interesting combination of meditation and prayer. I really, each day, offer some kind of theme based on a passage from Psalms or a passage from the Siddur. And then, really invite people to sit with whatever the kind of *kavvanah*/ כוונה is, whatever the intention is, that comes out of that prayer. And it's been, it's been, I think it's been meaningful for a lot of people, for sure, for me.

JONATHAN:

Okay. And that's the most important of course. So thank you again for being here and I'm going to turn it over to you, for you to lead us in your prayer practice this morning. Thank you.

RACHEL:

Sure. So, one of the phrases I've come back to again and again, and this time is from Psalm 118. Um, it's *min hameitzar karati Yah. anani vamerchav Yah*/ מן הַמֵּצָר קָרָאתִי יְהוָה /עַנֵּנִי בַּמְרֻחָב יְהוָה /From the narrow place I called out to the Source of my life, to the Source of being, and from the wide open space I was answered.

This idea of finding ourselves in a narrow place, feeling the construction of the moment we're in, and also trusting that there is a wide-open place out there, and that we could call out and we could be heard. All of those ideas have been meaningful to me, in particular sometimes when I'm suffering and afraid. I forget that I could call out. I forget that that's available to me. And just the calling out brings relief, for me at least.

So the way that I've been doing this prayer practices, I start out by just kind of feeling what's happening, and just noticing where am I today, or where am I in this moment? And I take some time just investigating what's happening, what's happening with my body, and what's happening with my breath. And then I respond to what's happening with some verse. And as I've mentioned is this verse has been really present for me lately. And then I just kind of dwell within the words and ideas a little bit, and then, and



find how they want to be voiced through me. And I use those traditional words, but then I'm really trying to voice what is happening inside of me. What is the cry that I need to cry? And what is the call that I need to call it? And what is the answer I'm seeking? Or what is the need I have for a sense of expansiveness, if I'm feeling constricted. And I just kind of like spend time expressing that a little bit in my own words, and then come back to sit and see how I feel having done that.

So, there starts with some quiet, then with some words, and then with some more quiet. So we're going to do that now. So, start out by just, let's just find where we are. Let's just find our bodies in space right now. See if you can see, or what I'm doing is I'm just seeing, you know, where are my feet? What are they against? Are they on the floor, feel the solidity of the floor, and how are my legs, and how is my bottom? How are my sits bones? And how is my tailbone? I rock a little bit to feel myself against the seat that I'm sitting on, and feel myself held up for myself, supported by that seat. And then feel my spine lifting up from the base to the top, and feel my head there above my neck. And imagine that it's being pulled up so that I can feel a little bit tall, but not with any strain, and not with any effort; just kind of lifting up. And I feel my chest. I check in with my chest, and see if my hunched over. Can I make a little more space there, a little more openness? And I feel my upper back and see, what am I holding there and the tops of my shoulders. And I wiggle them a little bit and just let them be a little bit more relaxed and just release whatever's being unconsciously held. And then I notice my arms, and sometimes I'm just gripping with my hands or with my arms, not even knowing it. And I just kind of let my arms hang a little bit. I might shake them out a little bit and wiggle them a little bit, so that I'm releasing what's there. And I, then I come to my, to my face and I see what's been held there as I've been waking up. And if I've been in conversation or thought, sometimes I'm not even aware that I'm holding tension in my face. And I just invite that to release.

And then I settle a little bit in this body. Having found myself here, having checked in with my body, I just find myself in it. And I notice what it feels like to breathe. And feeling the breath coming and going. I just am kind of checking in with, where am I today? What does it feel like in this body today? Is the breath really wide open and flowing smoothly? Is it kind of textured? Is there some construction? Is there, does it feel tight in there? Does my body feel like it's in a narrow place, or does it feel like you can just kind of melt outward and there's lots of room to be. What else is going on?

What's the energy like? Is it active? Is it very awake or is it sleepy? Is it riled up, peaceful? A million other possibilities of what it could feel like, but it's just kind of a



curiosity about how, how am I today? What is it like to be in his body? What is it like to feel like me today?

And then if I am on a day, when it feels narrow, when I'm feeling maybe narrowness in the world, or narrowness in myself, or tightness, or maybe suffering, maybe some kind of feeling of things being closed in. If I feel that way, this particular phrase, it helps me so much. Like right now, I am actually feeling some tightness in my chest and my throat. So I'm breathing gently into that. And then I think of these words *min hameitzar karati Yah. anani vamerchav Yah*. And I feel the narrowness. I let myself actually really feel it; like all the ways that I might generally try to avoid it. But here I am right now, feeling how tight it is; feeling, how closed in things feel. And from that place I call out. It feels so narrow right now. I feel smaller than I want to be. I feel like there's a tightness and I wish it was otherwise. I, I want it to feel open. I want to be able to relax, but I don't feel that way.

And then what's happening for me is I feel, I feel this kind of plea coming from inside my chest. It's kind of rising up asking for help: please, please. Help me trust you. Help me know that I'm safe. Make space for me to just be. Let me open, and know that I'm going to be okay.

As I turn towards my plea, I notice that my breathing changes. It's a little more rapid, and it has more feeling in it. My heart is opening in a kind of a cry. I want to be free. I don't want to feel trapped. I don't want to feel like everything is tight around me.

Please.....

In the crying out that's happening inside of my heart, there's a way that I'm just kind of turning it over to God. I'm just asking this Presence, this Source. I'm asking, I'm asking God to just hold my cry, to just take it in, to hear it until you hear me. I'm calling for help. And there is trusting that; there's trust that I could be heard and that what is coming through me will be received; and it's worth doing it's worth putting voice to it. It's worth feeling it. That something good will come from the feeling, and something good will come from the expression. And if I just stay with it, that there will be release for some, some relief.

And then, I kind of released myself into that idea of a wide open space: that there is some something there holding me, and holding all of this, and that can receive it in. It's



so big, so much bigger than I am. And I could just relax into it, even just dissolve into it, and just all of my narrowness and all of my tightness. It can be what it could be. I don't have to force it off to change it, but I can just let it be enveloped by this wide open place that exists that I could believe in and trust.

And then I come and I check back in with my body, see what feels different, or if it does feel different. For me, my heart is aching now in a way that it didn't when I began, it's pulsing differently. My breath is still kind of shallow, but it's touching into that icky place, which feels like healing. And I don't feel wide open, and I don't feel an end to the constriction. But something has shifted. And I just find myself here in space again, and feel the floor again underneath my feet, and feel the chair underneath my bottom. And I feel myself lifting up from that place. And remember that I have a body and I'm in it, and after awhile, I'll just open my eyes and come back to where I am.

JONATHAN:

Thank you, Rachel, for inviting us along in that way, we all find release from our neuro places in some manner. That's certainly what you offer to us today is one, one version of what we might do and how we might find it was a pleasure and an honor to be able to share that with you. So thank you. Thank you.

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 to safe.

