the light lab podcast

Episode 60: Open-Source Judaism (with Aharon Varady)

Eliana (00:13.338)
Shalom, everybody. Welcome to the Light Lab podcast. My name is Eliana Light. This is the place where we play with prayer and hold the gems of our liturgy to the light. And I'm so happy to be bringing another episode to you today. A really great conversation with Aharon Varady of Open Siddur Project, which I will tell you more about him and that amazing project in a minute. But I just wanted to let you know a bit of an update and a bit of an ask.

We're going to have a bit of an irregular release schedule over the next couple of months. And that is partially so that I/we can take a step back and figure out how we can make the podcast sustainable. It takes a lot of time to make this podcast and it takes a lot of money and resources, particularly because it's really important to me that this remain A, free for everyone and anyone who wants to listen and learn and B, that it remains a high quality educational resource. A lot of the money that we put into the podcast goes into making sure that we have amazing show notes that Yaffa Englander has been doing since we started the pod, really, that every time something is mentioned, a text, an organization, a person, something that you might not know what it is or you'd wanna find out more information about it that we have that ready and available so that this can be a really great learning and educational resource. So the question is, how do we make this sustainable and also keep it free? Do you have ideas? Would you like to sponsor an episode of the podcast? Do you know of organizations or grantmakers, funders who might want to help make this resource free and keep it free. We would love to hear from you. So please email our amazing wisdom weaver, Rachel, at welcome@lightlab.co. That is co and not com.

You know, my mother, my mom said, you really don't do co because people are going to accidentally do com. I sometimes accidentally do com and then my emails don't go through. So I'm telling you, it's lightlab.co. welcome@lightlab.co. Let us know what you think. Let us know if you have any suggestions or thoughts about how to make it sustainable. We love doing the podcast. I love doing the podcast. I love getting to hang out with Josh and Ellen and learn from and with them. And I love getting to talk to so many amazing people about *t'fillah* including today's guest, Aharon Varady. Now, Aharon is the founding director and primary *shammes,* I guess we would say that a shammes is a caretaker, which I love using that word in this context, of the Open Siddur Project, and that's how I first reached out because I am a big user of the Open Siddur Project. We'll of course link to that in the show notes.

He's a community planner and a Jewish educator with a degree from the William Davidson School of Education, which is my alma mater as well. His work promoting open source Judaism has been written about in the Yiddish Forverts, the Atlantic Magazine and Haaretz. We'll link to all of that.

And if you find any egregious mistakes in his work, please let him know. He quotes in his bio, Psalms 1913, who can know all one's flaws from hidden errors, correct me. I love that. A big part of being an educator and a big part of what it means to work in the field of open source, which he's going to talk about. To directly support his work, donations can be made via his Patreon account, which we will link to as well. Open Siddur is an incredible resource for versions of the Siddur translations, seeing how the Siddur has evolved over history. We're gonna get into that. I hope you really do enjoy my conversation with Aharon Varady.

Eliana
Shalom, welcome to the Light Lab, Aharon. It's so good to have you.

Aharon N. Varady (00:06)
I'm really honored to be the subject of your attention.

Eliana (00:13)
Well, I'm excited that I and our listeners get to spend some time talking siddur and *t'fillah* with you as we like to do. But before we start with what you're up to now, I want to take us way, way back. And I'd love for you to share with us what your relationship with *t'fillah* was and your experience with *t'fillah* was when you were a child, when you were young.

Aharon N. Varady (00:38)
Well, when I was growing up in a neighborhood of Cincinnati with a really eclectic Jewish population, we had about six or seven synagogues or shuls, also a *shtibul*, located within walking distance. And my father, this was, this went on for a few years, we would walk in the afternoon after school, we would walk to *mincha* services just down the block to this synagogue. I don't exactly know what tradition, I think it was probably an Ashkenazic shul, whether it was Polish or like a little bit more German. I can't say. I just know it had been changed from a very old theater into a synagogue. And so there is, the bima was like where the films were projected at some point. And there was a huge row of seats in between the entrance and the bima. You'd walk down and these seats were really vintage. This material that was covering it was super soft and cushiony. And it was a very interesting place, but it had this musky odor that like, this place has seen many different people in it. And it was largely, for *mincha* in the afternoon, empty. I was never really thrilled to go there, but like my experiences...

My first experience as davening, or having a practice, was not quite willingly schlepping into this, into that space on weekdays and also on Shabbos we had a good number of other places to go to.

I was thinking about this last night. I also davened in our day school, but I have zero memory of it except once, when an administrator pointed me out for walking, taking my three steps forward and back in the wrong sequence. So—

Eliana (02:57)
Hmm. Oh.

Aharon N. Varady (03:10)
They kind of did something that was, I would say now as a Jewish educator, really transgressive. They singled me out in front of everybody to be like, you're doing it wrong. You should be taking two, three steps back, not three steps forward. And I was like, oh my g?d, you're, I mean, sure. But why am I doing this to begin with? Nobody had yet at that time instructed me in the structure of what I was doing or why anything was arranged that way or what. But it was this thing that we did and I got that. I didn't know if there was anything else I could do besides liturgical prayer.

We had prayer books, they're very common for school children. The siddur Dor Shilo, and they're all Hebrew. There's no translation. I think there's also numbers on the side, so if somebody is giving instruction on *t'fillah* they can say, oh, you know, we're looking at such and such page, *nishmat kol chai*, we're at line five, Aharon, why don't you read? And then we'll discuss.

Eliana (04:31)
Hmm.

Aharon N. Varady (04:35)
It wasn't until I think fifth grade and I had my first really wonderful teacher at a new school I was attending called the Cincinnati Hebrew Day School. And she's the wife of our principal who recently passed away like two years ago in ‘22. Her name, she is still alive, her name is Chani Janowski, I think she lives in Toronto now. Rabbi Janowski was our principal. I'm not 100% sure. If it wasn't her, it was one of the other like really sweet teachers we had there. She introduced me to the idea, the Maimonidean idea, that any *t'fillah* that is yours, you can follow this structure of praising, asking, and thanking. And I remember that being a huge turning point for me. Since I didn't really know what I was saying anyways, I was proficient in decoding Hebrew, but I wasn't anywhere close to... I didn't have a great grasp of the grammar or the vocabulary. I'm still working on that.

Eliana (06:02)

Same.

Aharon N. Varady (06:02)
But what was terrific was I could deviate. And it was my own personal space when we came to something like the Amidah. I could use that. I could use that place and just, you know, say, now's my time. I want to say what I really appreciated in the world. And then I'm going to ask for the things and then I'm going to do my thankful thing, and I did, and that was my first practice in articulating my inner voice. Before teachers had me doing private journal exercises, I think we started that maybe when I was a freshman in high school. So way before then, *tzvira* was just on a purely secular standpoint was my first practice in articulating my inner voice.

Eliana (06:55)
Hmm. That's really powerful and kind of illustrative that we have these two examples of educators having an impact on your relationship to *t'fillah.* One kind of calling you out for this ritual element and one, in a sense, calling you in, maybe, to the prayer part of liturgy and inviting you to do it yourself. And it definitely kind of connects with other people's experiences that I've talked to, that if you're part of Jewish life and Jewish education, you're not necessarily talking about why we're doing these things, just kind of doing them and learning to do them. Do you have a sense of what your family and or your teacher's goals were in doing *t'fillah* with you? Like, why might it have been important to them? Speculatively.

Aharon N. Varady (08:03)
In the different schools, I was in about three different schools from K through 8, and then a fourth school in high school, one which was a public school, and then actually there's two for high school. So I had a wide variety of choices to go through. Maybe the answer is really simple. I didn't get the sense in the programming time dedicated to *t'fillah* that our teacher was focused on anything more than getting through that time and really sort of looking after those kids who might be disruptive. So there was no kind of consulting or fostering guide as I think there is in other communities, there might be a *mashpia*, some person who is there and who's very conscious that this is a really important program for the day. I don't want to say the most important. Every time that we have programmed is intentional. I guess, every Jewish educator, that's gotta be their maxim. If we're doing this, we're committed to it.

And if the participant, if the kid or the adult doesn't seem to grasp that, then there is an intervention that's necessary.

I don't know, when I was young, I definitely was at shuls where the adults certainly didn't get it. It was such an accustomed part of the community, coming to shul being together, that the opportunity would have been wasted if people weren't schmoozing during their davening. So the point of actually coming to shul, the

liturgy and the things that we were doing was kind of an ambiance for this other thing, this other more important thing. And I think that's, if I was to say, just as like someone who both davens and has been a prayer leader and been the recipient on this end, I'd say like, this is really on the community level, like looking inside, just not on the level of an individual, but on the part of the community. I feel like this is maybe beyond the issue of actually understanding what we're doing with *t'fillah* or what we're doing with this time. Just knowing that getting together is a critical third space in our society. If we're not meeting each other at a cafe or a bar, for Jews that's going to be at shul. And maybe it'll be at Kiddush that people will schmooze and do that, but maybe that's not what they're there for in the first place.

I've always found it really hard. Once I came into adulthood and looking for third spaces to meet people, like how I was going to meet other single people to date, you know, and what was the space for davening? What an imperfect or a strange space by which to frame this. Or, you know, isn't that a really wholesome place to do that?

But I feel like the word wholesome and all of that is just not exactly neologism. It's not like a new thing, but it was, in my day, as now a middle-aged man, we didn't talk about things being wholesome or not. So it was just this really strange space by which to force a social engagement with people with this other very lofty or very integral personal goal, like a place where I'm going to be with community, but in my own space, doing this thing, this *t'fillah*.

I don't think there's a resolution for it. You know, here in Cincinnati, I participated for like several years now. It's gone dormant in this last year after some difficulties within and post-COVID. We made a *chevra* and we created our third space. So it's on my mind. It was a really nice place that we made Shabbos, and sometimes on Yuntif, on a festival day, for getting together and doing this wonderful thing of praying together. But it wasn't, I don't feel like it ever really succeeded as the place where people were going to be meeting and socializing with each other. I feel these are two really discrete things that are needed in our community and they're layered on top of one another. Maybe some people are doing it really well. I just haven't seen it. I just haven't experienced that.

Eliana (14:11)
Hmm. That's really interesting and very true, right? Beit Knesset, the Hebrew word for synagogue, being a gathering place, and yet we say, this is when we are all going to get together as a community, and also each of us is going to be attempting to do spiritual heart work, but we're not really ever going to talk about what that is or why we do it, but this is the place and the time that we do it. Certainly an interesting way to think about it.

Was g?d ever a part of the conversation or the thought, whether for you, your family,

or your teachers? What role did g?d play in your life? Did you have a sense of what g?d was or a thought about that? Did that impact your *t'fillah* at all?

Aharon N. Varady (15:04)
It's a really good question. And maybe I'll take it from kind of a strange angle. And this is something of a segue from talking about *t'fillah* amidst other people. Like, you're alone, together with other people, and in that special alchemy, in a *minyan* however it's defined, something important is supposed to manifest. Even if it's just like a belief that it's manifesting, even if it doesn't feel like it's manifesting. That belief adds some special magical power to that substance. So the other, an other, or a group of others is still critical. And I know that there are Jews out there, part of their understanding of perceiving the divine, or having a divine concept that it's interrelational, that it's me and the other person manifesting the *shechinah,* the divine presence, by being, encountering them.

So I'm thinking about this and answering your question because my experience growing up was so, it was so reliant on my own cultivating a space in these places where I was definitely the youngest person there, with other people there who I couldn't really relate to, but I was helping to make a *minyan* or getting prepared to feel that responsibility and helping to make a *minyan*, but not ever reaching past that theoretical space into actual feeling like part of a community. So I never got past when I was younger a sense of this is on me, it's not *aleinu,* on us, it's whether I'm making this space special, it's on my shoulders. Under fluorescent lighting, or in a room without windows that I'm praying, or in all kinds of spaces that weren't exactly conducive to whatever, um, I might imagine ashram-like just to pull out from somebody else's practice or experience, what might be, quote unquote, spiritual. It was internal. It was an internal practice and I couldn't rely on anybody else. And that really became foundational, fundamental for me in my Judaism.

Eliana (17:55)
Mm-hmm.

Aharon N. Varady (18:18)
My work on the Open Siddur Project, or the inspiration for that, really comes from that place. If I'm pulling a siddur off the shelf, I'm using that to help me in my experience. And then I have to jump through the hoops of negotiating that particular siddur. But what if I'm taking the responsibility on myself?

Eliana (18:25)
Hmm.

Aharon N. Varady (18:47)
Even further, and I'm going to create my own siddur or when I go into a space that

other people are praying at, I've gone and I've made this even more directed and more personal, and I fully take responsibility and my practice with me.

It's not an idea for somebody to do that and to then lead services with their own idiosyncratic siddur, but really, in my mind, the motive was - let people organize their private practice. And if they are negotiating that to be more closely with where they expect to be or farther away or however the alignments, that's something that they will have autonomy with, rather than ceding that autonomy to whatever's available on a shelf. It's not for everybody, I thought.

Not everybody is going to have that kind of knowledge-base by which to generate that. But there are some of us already with our day school educations, who do something like that, or at the very least, there's something that they want to integrate into their davening, and they should feel empowered to do it. I know – I was online yesterday and a teacher friend, Rabbi Ben Newman was giving a eulogy for a rabbi who just passed away over the weekend, Rabbi Emmanuel Goldsmith. And he had written down a liturgy at one point for his student rabbi, that was Ben Newman, and it began with a quote from Einstein from a book he wrote in 1939 called, I think, Science and Religion. It's a really beautiful beginning he said, before *Barchu Hu*.

And he began this quote, and I thought, well, this is a really great quote for beginning, for preceding a *barchu* It's not a *kavana* the way somebody who only understands *kavanot* as kabbalistic permutations of letters and breathwork, as some people do before a *mitzvah* or *t'fillah*.

Eliana (21:08)
Hmm.

Aharon N. Varady (21:35)
It's a different kind of *kavana*, it's a modern *kavana*. It's the way a lot of American Jews understand the meaning of *kavana*. But at the Open Siddur Project, we still get correspondence with people who totally don't understand, like, what are you doing calling this thing by Einstein a *kavana*? Like, it doesn't have any reference to the gematria and to the breathwork of...

Eliana (21:47)
Right.

Aharon N. Varady (22:03)
pronouncing this divine name or anything like that. Like, what are you, who are you? This is like, *narishkeit*.

Eliana (22:16)

Well, first I was going to say I don't think I know that kind of Kabbalistic definition of *kavana* so that's very interesting, that pushback. But what you said about, you kind of learned very early to take responsibility for your own, one might say, spiritual experience, within the realm of *t'fillah* is something I've been thinking a lot about recently, but not necessarily in terms of siddur, more as in I can drop in and take a breath, or focus on what I'm grateful for, or talk to the Holy One in whatever way I conceive it, wherever I am, even though so many of our physical prayer settings have been built, sometimes it seems exactly at cross purposes to that, which is why it can be so much quote unquote easier to have a spiritual experience, let's say in a beautiful place in nature, as opposed to a building with fluorescent lights and no windows. And what it means, but also not wanting the people who lead prayer to be off the hook either to say, maybe part of your goal can be bringing this liturgy to life for people, but then, okay, if they don't do that, then you can take it on for yourself.

Aharon N. Varady (23:42)
Yeah, you're putting me in mind of those spaces where there's a prayer leader who, a lot is on their shoulders. It's more than them, by reciting certain things, letting people know. Essentially, we're at the 10-minute mark, we're at the 15-minute mark. They've got a guitar in their hands and they are bringing people into alignment via their *nusach*, via their tune right now. We're doing this now together, either you're being passive about it and hearing, and that's okay, or you're singing along and adding to this chorus, and you can, and you're invited to. I didn't know that kind of davening growing up. I didn't.

Eliana (24:18)
Mm-hmm. Me neither.

Aharon N. Varady (24:39)
I didn't know that. And what I've been seeing as I've grown older is that is sort of marching forward, you know, into all sorts of different spaces. So long as it isn't Shabbos and Yuntif, I'm even seeing ortho folks doing that with people, I guess because I was working in summer camps as a Judaic specialist.

So I was seeing that, I'm thinking, wow, that's really unlike the experiences I had when I was younger, like in ortho, like in Camp Moshava, we didn't have somebody on a guitar and doing something special like that.

What do you think about self-directed spaces inside a communal setting, inside public? I don't know what to exactly call it, but how private space is negotiated and given, and not given, or how it's negotiated inside a public space, the private within the communal?

I guess I'm turning the tables.

Eliana (26:01)
Oh, that's, I was going to say. It's not in most interviews that I get asked a question. Oh, I'm honored. Not that I necessarily have a fully-formulated answer, but it's something I thinking about a lot these days, the idea that we are gathered together as a community to support each other in doing a fundamentally personal act.

The liturgy giving us shared language for it and the ritual giving us structure, which would be great because if we didn't have that, we'd be all on our own and we wouldn't have been brought together in this way. Even though I think sometimes that collectivity is at cross purposes and doesn't always make the inner work possible.

I think step one is acknowledging that we are here in service of doing heart work. And empowering people with the tools to be able to do that heart work within the communal context. I think whether they're familiar with the liturgy or not, I do think it's possible.

I invite people to, if we're in a place where there can be a little more *kavana*, not in the gematria way, but that there can be some *kavanot*, you know, even for a leader to say, as we turn to page 35 for *ahavah rabbah,* you are invited to open your heart to a feeling of unconditional love, that maybe that's what *ahavah rabbah* is inviting us to do anyway.

And by making it explicit, we give people the opportunity to do the heart work of *ahavah rabbah*. Or if it's a more traditional service, to tell people to look at the *chatimah* for a clue at what the prayer is inviting us to do, and to do that inner work. But I think it goes both ways. I think leaders can make it easier for people to do that personal heart work. And even if they aren't, it's something that you can feel empowered to do yourself.

Aharon N. Varady (28:42)
So the siddur is still very much a map or a guide by which this intention, *ahavah rabbah*, is a really crucial step right here. We're going to be thinking about that. And it's meaningful before we do this other thing, this saying the *shema* together.

Eliana (28:57)
Mm-hmm.

Aharon N. Varady (29:10)
The reason for the connection might require another class, like an adult learning seminar, or hopefully it's part of our elementary school education, maybe it's part of a Sunday school education, or a Wednesday afternoon education. I really don't know

the terrible choices that educators and programmers need to make about what gets preference in those settings.

Eliana (29:23)
Yeah.

Aharon N. Varady (29:44)
I feel it. I feel it. One of the things I felt in working on my own siddur was just imagining the siddur as not a collection of texts, but a container of time. That this book here is going to be 60 minutes, and how the things inside are going to be essentially exercises that are prompts for this important amount of time to be filled. I'm just speaking for myself. I don't make siddurim and the Open Siddur Project does not have the intention of making siddurim for everybody. I imagine like for 600,000 people that there could very well be 600,000 different siddurim. With some of the only differences being font changes and other accessibility indicators, but for sure, some prompts need more exposition and others less.

Some people want an introduction text or an instructional text, and don't want the liturgy at all, maybe they'll compromise and say, well, I'll have that *chatimah*, but the other stuff I can handle, like I know what the intention is and I'm gonna work on that, and other people will be like very, will feel a disturbance in their force if they had that liturgy removed. Like, oh, there's such important prompts inside that, you know, I don't want to lose that. And other people will be like, meh, you know, I was just going through it because everybody's going through it. And really, that's what I'm doing here. This is not a container of time at all. This is a container of the *kavod*, the respect I give to my ancestors who innovated these prayers. Like, I am keeping them, and that's mainly what they are for me. I'm doing my duty in this thing. This heart work has nothing to do with actual work like that. It has everything to do with holding this thing—this respect I have for my father, my grandfather, my grandmother, my great-grandmother, all of my ancestors.

Eliana (33:34)
You've mentioned a couple of times Open Siddur and of course we made mention of it in our introduction, but I'd love for you to share a little bit about your inspiration. Were there experiences or teachers that drew you more into a fascination and connection with the liturgy and the siddur? Where else did the idea for this particular project arise?

Aharon N. Varady (34:31)
I mean, it's a really powerful thing, what I led into earlier, being in these spaces, as someone being initiated into Orthodox Jewish practice as a kid and wanting to take this seriously and feeling like making it my own. So that was probably the seed that was sown and that blossomed here. When, by the late 1980s, I began to see on the

shelves a new siddur. It was an art scroll siddur, not in the *nusach* or the rite that I was already familiar with, and from a publication they had years before, the Ashkenazi *nusach*, they had brought out the Chassidic *nusach*, the quote-unquote *nusach S'fard* version of their siddur, and for me that was an incredible opportunity to bring into my practice things that I had been wanting but that were previously inaccessible. Not everything, but certain things. The *kigavina* portion in Kabbalat Shabbat is a portion, it's after Psalms 92 and 93, it's kind of put in between Kabbalat Shabbat and Ma'ariv, and the traditional Ashkenazi *nusach* right there is to have a portion of the Mishnah read called *B'meh Madlikin*. And it's a very interesting portion from the Mishnah. It has also some really disturbing ideas about the role of women's purity and regulations on preparations for the Shabbat and how that Malik might have dangerous consequences for women's safety and health. And it never felt right for me, just personally. It felt disruptive for what was building up there, growing up, just a personal observation. For other people, it could feel totally different. And when I, for the first time, saw that there was this other thing that was like an alternate liturgy in that place, this very small portion selected from the Zohar, from the Zohar's commentary on Parshat Trumah that essentially explains Shabbat, like what is going on, what's the like mythopoetic narrative of Shabbat itself. Like you just thought this was a thing that was happening, but here's the cosmic reason for Shabbat. What's actually, what are we doing right now, according to the Zohar, the lineage that's recorded in the Zohar.

And it was, I want to say mind-blowing. It was heart, you know, it was heart-blowing. It filled me up and it made me wonder what else, what other *nuschaot* were out there, what other wisdom was being practiced outside of Ashkenaz. Later on as an adult, I would also say backwards, now that I'm familiar with how things are different from the Ashkenaz *nusach*, what can I appreciate more about the Ashkenaz *nusach*?

There was one other thing I point out in the *nusach* that was very important for me. I saw that in the Amidah, the portion selected for private prayer, the *bracha* with the *chatimah* that ends, blessed are you, g?d, who hears prayer. It's different in the *nusach* S'fard or the Chassidic *nusach*. It follows that as found in the Sfaradi *nusach*, right before the blessing it says you are g?d, who hears prayer from all, from the lips of all creatures. *T'fillat kol peh*. *Shomeah t'fillat ko peh*. And that was crucial for me. I don't want to daven the Amidah without this formulation because here I am when I'm davening. I'm thinking about not just human beings or human beings like nothing. I was super universalistic, I was a boy and I had a cat and I cared for all the creatures and I was learning. I had seen animals harmed. Part of my growing up was seeing animals injured and playing and replaying that back in my mind. And yearning for a world in which this kind of cosmic unfairness had been mitigated or fixed. I hadn't yet heard, you know, an idea of Tikkun Olam. I hadn't yet been taught chapter 11 from Isaiah. But I wanted a world in which all creatures and the yearning for all creatures, especially creatures who were unfairly doomed for ridiculous and

stupid and unfair reasons, human and in the non-human world, or non-humans in the human world. I wanted to be praying for, I did, like my personal prayer.

It developed when I was young. I still say something very similar to it, or at least I have the intention. I keep that. And I go into it, like my prompt for thinking about the needs of other creatures is *t'f- fill- ah kol peh,* and *davka* specifically not the formulation as it is in the Ashkenazi *nusach.* So I guess that reinforces liturgy is effectively, it's a series of prompts, and it's the prompts that we or our ancestors thought should be really important for us on a daily basis or multiple times on a daily basis. And we can have disagreements with those.

Even if we say for me, I'm going to disagree, they're still kept by the *shaliach tzibur*, if we're praying with others. And I like that, you know, like that's great that the *shaliach tzibur* will like be the preserver of tradition, can be the preserver of a tradition and that idea. And we can be the innovators and revolutionaries. We can keep on pushing and advocating even if it's only to articulate for ourselves. I don't want to, I don't want to say anything against anybody's concept of the divine, or talk about my own, I can talk about my own, but I simply want to respect other people having very different divine concepts. The life force that's woven through all creatures, or the creator within creation, or all kinds of beautiful panentheist conceptions.

For me, I care so dearly about a world in which we might come to at some point, maybe not during my lifetime, but just imagining a nature in which creatures don't have to feed off one another to sustain themselves is like my Judaism. It's not something that's reflected perfectly with the prompts that are offered to me, but it's there when I read Nishmat Kol Chai. It is there when I read Ki L'olam Chasdo.

So what I'm speaking to again, I think is dearly personal. It's something which is deeply personal for somebody who is engaging with it. Who needs to have personal translations even of liturgy. I wanna help make a space for people who are doing that and that they can feel empowered to hold that, that there should be a container for them to hold that and to be cross-pollinating their own liturgical wisdom with other people. That's what the Open Siddur Project is.

There is like a technological vision that we have and had. It's very ambitious. I don't think we're very close to it. But I don't feel like we should be defined by that. If we were, then we failed. That vision was that we would create a web to print publishing Project. And you would essentially, through a website or some other kinds of web-enabled application, and be able to produce a PDF that you could bring to an on-demand printer and do that all online and make all your edits and have those edits preserved and have those edits available to be shared by other people. And wouldn't that be great for us to have like a universal prayer book, which isn't universal by like a top down like here is what you're going to be davening but here is all the

material that everybody is modifying and changing and here are the differences between the different *nusachot* That's the vision I have.

And part of it was a sense, maybe it's very, very modern, a sense that like our liturgies and our prayers is our spiritual technology.

What I mean by a spiritual technology is techniques and tools to help mature and develop our creative and emotional intelligence. And the idea being, if we mature that for ourselves, we as a community also grow, and as a community we sort of help multiply our effect in the world for benefiting the world.

But ultimately it comes down to us as individuals and taking responsibility for developing and maturing ourselves. If we have a technology that does that, great. If we are sharing our technologies in the form of like liturgical exercises and saying, hey, I don't think this is optimal or optimized for this vision, how can we improve them such doing more, we can do more to mature our creative and emotional intelligence, let's experiment or try that. Right there, I'm already brushing up against the integrity of a tradition and whether that's going to be broached for some other purpose.

I have conservative impulses too. As much as we feel like the need to change things, how much can we first learn from what exists and existed? So let's go back. And I think that's why the Open Siddur is very different from other people who had somewhat similar ideas. Let's make a collection of prayers on our site that our people have newly written, newly written prayers. Let's collect those.

So I'm totally for that. I want people to be sharing their contemporary works, but I want people to also know what's historical and to integrate. So for that, we need a comprehensive library and maybe also a new attitude towards creative works. Creative works, here in America or the United States and worldwide. They would be immediately, I don't want to say imprisoned, but they're put into a jail cell as part of copyright. Here this thing is written, it might have been written with the intention that it be modified for the context of your community or you personally, but officially you're not allowed to make any changes or redistribute it.

So that kind of makes sense to me for commercial works in the publishing industry, where people are making their living off of secular works. But for a community project like prayer, and specifically a Jewish Project, I think we have to look at, what are the Jewish values concerning sacred texts and our own sacred projects? And how are those aligned with what our goals are for the thing that we've written. I definitely feel looking at the verso of title pages with the copyright pages and the warnings that are sometimes present there, that they're like Jewish values are not aligned with the values of copyright and what our communal and personal projects

are for, thinking of sharing our work.

So a big reason why the project is called The Open Siddur Project rather than the Siddur Project is because we very intentionally have quote-unquote open content licenses. Everything shared there with a few exceptions is shared under so-called open content licenses which mitigate against many of the restrictions of copyright. The material is still copyright but the copyright stewards have shared those works in a way in which other people are given license under the terms of the open content license. They're given permission or they're not restricted anymore by redistributing that work or making changes to it. So long as they indicate those changes, give proper attribution and don't make any claims to their ownership or monopolize the new work. It's not going to be agreeable to everybody. I don't know if Debbie Friedman would have said in her world whether that was okay for her. And maybe that applies differently for text than for tunes.

Eliana (53:38)
Yeah.

Aharon N. Varady (53:39)
I don't want to say yes or no to any of that. I just want to create the option for people so that our *t'fillah* project is more of a collective project and we can help improve and adapt what we're building. And isn't that like what the tabernacle is, the mishkan? It's a group project and people are giving *truma* offerings for building it and they're also creative people making creative contributions to it. Everybody who's heart is stirred. That's the lofty idea behind the Project.

Eliana (54:18)
It's a beautiful idea. And in what you just described, it's been really great for me as a user, a very frequent user of the resources on Open Siddur to see kind of the philosophy baked into the content and structure of the site itself. Like you said, trying to mirror or trying to encourage sharing and collaborating and kind of an open model in the way that the copyright is used or not used as the case may be, but then also including and potentially going out of your way to include, but I'd ask you if that is the truth, like old siddurim like siddurim that might not be in print, siddurim that we might not have known about, so that it isn't just about the new translations and the new things that are coming out, but seeing our work as part of a lineage.

A big part of my work I find in *t'fillah* education is talking about choice. We talked a little bit about the choice that individuals have kind of when they're davening to choose their intention or to choose a siddur. But it's also a series of choices that led to the creation of any particular siddur. Choices about translation and the millions and many infinite choices that are there or not. But also, like you said, choices about font and choices about what's added and what goes where and which right is it from.

And so I find it also a great resource to show, look at all of these choices that different people made using the same source material and how beautiful the tree just branches out that we can see ourselves as a part of.

Aharon N. Varady (56:24)
I should probably give one example of that for folks who are like, oh, what do you mean? There's choices. I'll pick a really, really old one.

Eliana (56:31)
Great.

Aharon N. Varady (56:41)
And a controversial one. In early Christian works, when there was less distance between early Jewish Christians and rabbinic Jews as both communities were evolving their liturgical practice, and also making choices like, can the Amidah be said in Greek, the lingua franca of the day?

Could it be said in Aramaic? A language that the angels don't understand. What should our preferred language be and what does that say about the sanctity of language or the importance of translation, not only in translating the Torah in a liturgical repetition of text, but also in our own articulations. What is acceptable in our self-articulations? Are we going to translate our prayers from our inner voice in Greek into a liturgical Hebrew so that they will be more effectively understood? And there was a time in which the Amidah was in Greek, and there's Greek versions of liturgical texts that were preserved in an early Christian text. So we have a Shabbat Amidah from this period. The way the Christians preserved it, some scholars late last century, or early last century, I should say, said, you know, it's kind of ham-handed. They would add the name of Jesus to some of the more traditional prayers, but it's very easy to parse out that material and see what is very clearly a rabbinic Jewish text or an early Jewish text. And a fellow in Kentucky worked on that text and published it, and when solicited by me, he's like, for sure, you can share this, the text of the Shabbat Amidah in Greek without the name of Jesus in it.

It's interesting to compare. So we have that plus the translation of the Greek and English set next to the Hebrew so people can compare it. So that if I had something like this when I was 12 or 13 years old, the particular type of geek I was then would have been really happy. Not everybody was me, but I felt really alone in where I was as a Jew. When I prepare a resource, I'm definitely thinking, there's gotta be somebody else in the Jewish world. It might not be everybody. I'm not thinking of like, my audience is the most people. I'm thinking about expanding the slice of Jewish culture that it's more than what Eish HaTorah or Chabad or any specific group, they're preparing important material and it's an expression of their ideology and philosophy and that's their philosophy might be cultural preservation. But I

definitely want to make sure that like, as comprehensive as we can be, we have more of Jewish culture and that's not going to be like everybody's preferred expression of even ancient Jewish culture. I love finding older texts, medieval and from late antiquity that make reference to angels. We have a good 800 years of pushback against including angels in our liturgy, but there is a time where angels had more of a place. And certainly in Jewish magical texts, angels are right there.

I would love to have a new generation of Jewish kids who are fluent in Jewish angelology and in our *shayd* culture, in the culture of Jewish animistic spirits and having that populate their imaginations. Not in a sense of like it being anti-science or the concerns that people had in the early 20th century and the late 19th century that it's supernatural and we need to remove superstition from our liturgy. But this is like an important part of the Jewish imaginary world and it's a precious sanctuary.

And *t'fillah*, maybe to come back around to where we started, the way I think of *t'fillah* is one extremely overt expression that a lot of Jews are introduced to for expressing that cultural imagination. Another way would be for Jews to be more fluent in Midrash Aggadah and Jewish storytelling, medieval and ancient and apocryphal.

The full tradition, it's so, so deep. The landscape, the lore, maybe it begins with learning the alef beit, but it's not essential. People talk about what's crucial for Jewish education. Is it like Israel education and understanding why, love of Israel on the land level or the government level, all these things are really important for some people. Other people are like, well, people really need to be fluent in Hebrew so that when kids are learning *t'fillah* they know what they're saying. That's for a lot of parents. That's their reason. I didn't, they'll say to themselves, I am sending my kids to Jewish day school because I want them to know what they're saying. I didn't when I was growing up.

And we're already talking about generation X parents. I'm sure this was, you know, for sure the reason why preceding boomer generations were saying, well, this is why I want my kids. I don't want them to be like I was, not knowing Hebrew. Some schools are doing better at this than others. For me, who has managed to attain adulthood without a comprehensive fluency in Hebrew. Like fluent in English, learning Yiddish, open to knowing other Jewish languages.

What's been crucial for me since I was younger was having my imagination populated with stories of being deserted on desert islands, but discovering that there's a marginal population of Jews there. And they practice Shabbat every day. It's like a kind of liminal magical space. And they also know all kinds of magic that isn't available in other places. It's part of like a medieval folk fairy tale tradition, or not without fairies, maybe a few fairies. They're not called fairies. With fantastic elements.

I really, I don't want any more Jewish kids coming into adulthood only knowing about a tradition of fantasy that is limited to Tolkien and maybe adult-themed Renaissance fair type fictions. I want them to know and to integrate the Jewish historical experience in their fantasies.

Anyways, it's a little bit off the mark, but I have a spin-off project where I do roleplaying, Jewish roleplaying. It's called Mid- Bar Quest, and it started at Teva, a school for Jewish environmental education in northwestern Connecticut, just something we did among the educators to pass time in the evening. And it worked as a chug.

Eliana (1:05:58)
Amazing.

Aharon N. Varady (1:06:14)
and then it worked also as a chug at Eden Village Camp. And I just feels so important. We should have a place. *t'fillah* is one and storytelling is another where our internal voice and our imagination has a way to express itself. And it's a container of values. I worry about how are Jewish values or Rabbinic Jewish values might change or be distorted. So there's a conserving or a conservative impulse here too.

Eliana (1:07:04)
Mm-hmm.

Aharon N. Varady (1:07:06)
I'm thinking also of contemporary politics and responses to being attacked in pogroms, like what happened on October 7th. We have, we're not alone in knowing responses from *t'fillah,* like what newly generated *tfil'ot* came out of holding the trauma of past pogroms.

The Project has been helpful in coalescing and bringing together and translating even prayers that were written in modern Hebrew after October 7th. But right now, I'm thinking about a prayer for militiamen in Suriname from the early 19th century in communities in Suriname who had experienced an attack from neighbors and were anticipating future attacks and were drawing on previous resources to create and direct the prayers to hold that anxiety. At the very least, it provides us a reflection point across generations. This isn't something new, but it's something that previous generations encountered terrible traumas and responded to it as a community, and we can reflect just as a comparative. We don't have to agree with their responses or take it as for sure, like this is exactly we're going to hold this text as a golden text to adhere to.

Maybe that's an important lesson of *t'fillah* also. While the Torah is like a canonical

text and it comes from *shamayim* and we make it ours and we turn it over and interpret it and do things like that and keep it creative, *t'fillah* is like a Torah from the earth itself, and like we are generating it, and its direction is to heaven, is heavenward. And maybe in heaven, there's also like holding our *tfil'ot* and looking at it from multiple perspectives, by all the different entities that touch and receive our letters.

Eliana (1:09:55)
A Torah from the earth. I love that so, so much. And as we wind down our conversation today, I'm wondering if you could leave maybe our listeners with a hope or a blessing of what the siddur can be for us and what *t'filah* can be for us.

Aharon N. Varady (1:10:50)
There's this band that I loved called Boards of Canada, and they have a track on their album, Geoguidi, called Magic Window. And the entire track, it's about three minutes, maybe six minutes, and it's empty. That's the magic window. John Cage had a similar, many people know about it, his composition for 33 and what is filled with the silence and the emptiness in that space is the ambient noise and also whatever we've brought into that space inside and out.

The *t'fillot* at themselves, they're bones. They're, it's a skeleton. It's a *keva*, it's a structure. It relies on what we add to it.

So my blessing is that we are attentive to ourselves and to what our tradition has for embodying and articulating our concerns, our angst, that we don't shelve it, that we allow space for our imaginations. And that in doing so, by giving space and energy for that, it provides a fecund creative space for new possibilities, or at the very least, sustaining us with clear intention for kindness and compassion, extended across the human and non-human worlds as far into the cosmos as it can possibly extend.

Eliana (1:12:58)
Amen. Wow. Thank you so, so much, Aharon, for speaking with me today. I really appreciate it.

Aharon N. Varady (1:13:08)
Thank you. Thank you for asking me that question and allowing me the time to process and think through it.

Eliana (01:15:32.251)
And thank you so much for listening. Our podcast is produced by Rachel Kaplan. This week's episode was edited by me, actually. We'll see how that goes. Show notes as always done by the incredible Yaffa Englander. Our theme music is a new light, also by me from the album of the same name. Follow us on social media, be in touch with

us and let us know what your ideas are for keeping the podcast going. We would love to hear from you and please share the podcast with your friends who would like to play in the prayer with us a little bit. We really, really appreciate you and we can't wait to be with you very soon. Goodbye, my friends.