



Episode 61: Turning Sorrows into Song (with Rabbi Ilan Glazer)

Eliana (00:17)

Shalom, my friends, Eliana Light here, and welcome to another episode of the Light Lab podcast, where we play with prayer and hold the gems of our liturgy to the light, making t'fillah, Jewish prayer and liturgy, accessible and meaningful to all seekers still working on the elevator pitch. But once again, so happy to have you join us in this time of challenge and grief in our world, which we hold alongside the beauty and the miracle of everyday life, I think there was no one better to talk to than our guest today, Rabbi Ilan Glazer. I know Rabbi Ilan Glazer, he was for a time the rabbi at the synagogue I grew up at after I was a child. But we got to play and make music together there a few times, which was such a joy.

And it's been incredible to witness and benefit from all of the amazing work that he has done and is doing in the Jewish community. And I'd love to tell you a bit about that now. Rabbi Ilan Glazer is passionate about ending the stigma of addiction in the Jewish world and helping Jews in recovery and their loved ones find recovery and serenity one day at a time. He believes that life is a beautiful journey of learning and growth.

Suffering can be transformed into joy and everyone is a miracle, indeed. He's the founder of Our Jewish Recovery, author of the award-winning and God Created Recovery. Of course, we will link to all of these in the show notes. He's a Shatterproof Ambassador and Family Program Instructor, a member and director at large of the National Speakers Associations DC chapter. Rabbi Ilan teaches widely about healing, recovery, grief and mourning, happiness, spirituality.

Rabbi Ilan is a freelance recovery, relationships and transformation coach, a spiritual counselor, an accomplished storyteller and musician and host of the Torah of Life podcast. He lives in Baltimore with his wife Sherri and their cat Taylor. And as of this recording, their beautiful new baby. And we are going to talk a lot about something that wasn't mentioned in his bio, which is his album that came out earlier this year, Gam Ki Elech: Turning Our Sorrows into Song.

Holding the sorrow and the beauty all in one, which I think is something that our beautiful tradition invites us to do. So without further ado, please enjoy my conversation with Rabbi Ilan Glazer.

Eliana (03:05)

Shalom Rabbi Ilan. Welcome to the Light Lab. It's so great to see you.

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (03:10)

It's so great to be here.

Eliana (03:12)

It's been a long time. I'm glad we've gotten to share some virtual spaces. Someday soon, maybe you'll be in the same place to sing together. But this is really great to get to hear a little bit more about your story. And as we like to do on this podcast, I'd love to start way, way, way back. In your childhood, what was your relationship to t'fillah, maybe even to g?d when you were young?

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (03:38)

Well, you and I share the pleasure and privilege of being rabbi's kids. And you know what it's like to grow up in synagogues and Jewish day schools and Camp Ramah. And I really liked t'fillah as a kid. I always was drawn to the music, the melodies. I can't say looking back at it that I really had a sense of making it my own until much later. But I'm grateful that I grew up at a house where t'fillah was always regularly present. And certainly we were in shul every Shabbat and Jewish day schools. I was learning how to daven and read Torah and haftorah from a very young age. And that's helped me a lot in terms of sort of breaking down the barriers to entry and into being able to understand what the t'fillot mean. And I think I always knew that Tefila was a thing we did. And I'm grateful to be in a place now where it's a lot more personal as opposed to the thing that we start the day school warnings with. As you know, it's an adventure to learn how to make t'fillah our own and I'm really grateful that I had the foundation as a child, that my parents wanted to make sure that we all were very fluent and familiar with the siddur and with t'fillah.

Eliana (05:13)

So interesting. I feel like I look back on my own childhood and I'm also grateful that I had that foundation. And then there are some times where the adult me thinks, it would have been really nice to like explore a little more what this thing was that we were doing and where g?d was in all of this. Do you have a sense that that was ever talked about or shared? Or was it just, this is the thing we do and this is fine for now? And then it was later that those kind of levels of meaning were added.

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (05:41)

There was a sense that t'fillah is how our people have talked to g?d and that our using the same melodies and prayers was a way of honoring the tradition and our ancestors. And I think there was a sense that t'fillah could be a vehicle to connect to g?d.

Eliana (05:47)

Hmm.

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (06:05)

But I think the teachers were a little fuzzy on the details on exactly how that worked. And I think it was more of a sense of, oh, these are what good Jewish day school students are supposed to learn. Therefore, we're teaching it to you.

Eliana (06:09)

Hmm.

Were there experiences that you had maybe as a young adult or growing up where the t'fillah was meaningful or spiritual, either things you experienced or teachers you had that opened up maybe a different side of t'fillah for you?

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (06:41)

I'm sure that there were. I know that I enjoyed my summers at Camp Ramah in the Poconos and being outside definitely makes a difference and having a more relaxed feel to it. And being out of the house also was definitely helpful. Although my parents were there too. I know I can remember a Klezmer band performing in one of the synagogues we were part of. And I remember hearing them just sort of take some of the melodies that we were familiar with and take them wildly differently than we had ever imagined. And that was very cool for me to see that t'fillah could be more than just sit, stand, pray, bow, kneel and do these things that we always do.

I remember when I was 16, I went on a summer trip with USY to Poland and Israel and we met some creative daveners there. But even the first night of the trip, I remember one of my friends was standing in the back of the room during the service. And that was the first time I think I had ever seen anyone give themselves permission to stand during a service.

Eliana (07:58)

Hmm.

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (08:01)

I was so used to, you have to be sitting in a chair. That's usually uncomfortable. Right? was like, you could do that? And yes, you certainly being in Israel was, was very formative and had some, beautiful services in Jerusalem and throughout the country. And certainly when you're in Israel, it sort of takes on an additional layer of meaning to.

Eliana (08:04)

Great.

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (08:25)

to pray t'fillah in a language that is spoken by the people there and to see people in Jerusalem walking around on Shabbat going to shul and singing melodies was really beautiful. one of the formative experiences was when I was 20, I participated in Chazon's first event, which was a cross-country Jewish environmental bike ride from Seattle to DC.

And I remember the first day of the trip when we cycled 40 miles over the Cascade Mountains out of Seattle. And I remember at one point I was riding with a friend and there was like a forested area, there was water and there was campground and I'm just, we're riding, it's gorgeous outside.

I just heard some of the Psalms coming to me. Praise g?d with the mountains, with the trees, with the rivers. And I'm like, oh, actually makes sense in the outside world. I can just sort of feel the forest coming alive. And the Psalms say, the trees of the field will clap their hands, which makes no sense when you're sitting in a... How could trees clap? How could possibly trees clap?

But when you're outside, I just had this moment of really getting a sense that the natural world is really alive with holiness and is a beautiful vehicle for connection. And that led me to become a Jewish environmental educator, which eventually led me to a rabbinical school and many other beautiful things. And just I'm always grateful for those moments where t'fillah can come alive. I think one of the challenges is that...if you grow up immersed in it, it becomes too rote for many of us too much of the time. And I think the job for me and for so many others is to really try to unpack what's happening and make it fresh. And I love those moments when a new insight comes in and certainly praying in a forest that day and many days since has been a key vehicle for me to find meaning in these beautiful words of ours.

Eliana (10:44)

Also along this journey, I'm wondering if you have a sense of where g?d was in all of this or kind of what your relationship to g?d was, how you thought g?d worked in the world and if that changed as you got older.

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (11:00)

Yeah, I will say that I struggled with g?d for many, many years. And I will say that that's largely a result of growing up in a fairly dysfunctional, traumatized household. And my mother was in and out of hospitals my entire life and had a couple liver transplants and five different forms of cancer and really was not well much of the time.

When she was well, she was the principal of a Jewish day school and highly functional and a beautiful teacher of Torah. And as she said, she had two speeds in life, fast forward and reverse. And when she was ill, I was often called to step in and teach some of her classes and did a lot of the cooking and cleaning and taking care of my younger siblings and sort of running the house as much as I could. And I couldn't understand how a good g?d would allow for so much suffering in the world. And I couldn't understand how someone who was teaching Torah every day to Jewish students and others in our communities, I couldn't understand why she had to suffer so much. And...

It took me a long, long, long time to get to a place where I don't blame g?d for all illness and suffering. But as a kid, I definitely struggled with wondering how can a good g?d allow such terrible suffering to happen? I still wonder that sometimes. And I have not landed on a great answer. I'm not sure there are any great answers to that question. But I think now I'm in much more of a place where I can feel g?d's presence even amidst the suffering and the sadness we experience. And that is a better place for me. It's not a perfect place theologically, but all theology is imperfect and it's better for me to feel that that g?d is still here and still holding me and others even amidst the tsuris of life and that feels more authentically me and Jewish and if I have to let g?d be imperfect in order for me to have an imperfect theology so be it.

Eliana (13:21)

I think that's the world we live in also, right? That's the truth of our world is the imperfect world. Along this journey, I'm wondering if there were any experiences you might be able to share where you felt g?d or spirituality or holiness, however you wanna define that in a place or time that didn't feel like that could happen. For example, like you felt t'fillah riding your bike through the mountains.

Do you have like a g?d moment where you didn't expect one?

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (14:18)

When I was in rabbinical school, I spent a year in Israel and studying at Pardes in Jerusalem and also with Nava Tehila and a little bit at the Conservative Yeshiva. And I was not in a fabulous place in my own mental health journey. And I didn't want to be in Jerusalem. I needed a break for Pesach. And I...

had connected with a wonderful couple in Tzvat, Ruvayn and Yehudit Goldfarb who are part of the Renewal community. And I reached out to them and they invited me to come for Pesach. And I had a lovely, lovely time with them. And I was amidst taking Rabbi Shefa Gold's Kol Zimra Leadership Training. And I spent most of the afternoons chanting for a few hours in their second floor room which overlooks the

forest in Tzfat And it was just gorgeous to be able to daven and to sing with the trees, which felt so close through the windows there. And then I decided at one point, well, why don't I go walk into those trees and experience them without the window between us?

Eliana (15:19)

Hmm.

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (15:40)

I went out their house and I went down the hill towards where I thought the stream was, because I knew the river was down there somewhere. And I will say I am blessed with many wonderful things. A sense of direction is not on the list. And I was looking for the entrance to the trailhead to walk along the river. And I ended up on a different trail.

And I ended up in the middle of a cow pasture. And there were cows all over the place. And as one might imagine, there was a lot of cow poop at the place pretty much smelled. And I was just like, well, OK, this is not exactly where I where I plan to end up here.

Eliana (16:26)

Oh no.

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (16:37)

And at the time, I was davening three times a day and it was time for the afternoon service. And I know there was there are teachings that say you're not allowed to pray in a place that smells because prayer is holier than that. And there was a baby cow there hanging out in the field. And there was a mama cow that came up to the baby cow and just started like licking it and cleaning it and bathing it.

and it was one of the sweetest things that I think I have ever seen. And I said, this too is a place of holiness. And I davened Mincha in that field with the cows.

Eliana (17:13)

Hmm.

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (17:16)

I surely did not expect to find holiness in the middle of a cow pasture, which as it turns out was about a 30 second walk from the trailhead that I had missed. But it was such a beautiful way of finding holiness and a sense of connection and g'd's presence in a place I would never have expected to find it.

Eliana (17:30)

Hehehe.

Thank you for that sweet story. I'm going to think of the sweet cows. That's so lovely. We've had Daphna Rosenberg on the podcast and Nava Tehila has a habit of coming up a lot on this show. I'm wondering from your year spent in Jerusalem, what were some of the things that you gleaned or learned about t'fillah, music, leadership, from that experience?

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (17:48)

I will say that that Nava Tehila really exploded my sense of what t'fillah could be. And I'm grateful to have to have connected with them. And I first met them at an Aleph Jewish Renewal Kallah in the summer of, I want to say 2008 or 9. And they came to perform and we had a evening program where Rabbi Andrew Hahn, the Kirtan Rabbi, did a kirtan and Nava Tehila were singing and a few other beautiful singers including my friend Hazzan Shulamit Wise Fairman and I drummed and there is nothing like 500 people singing and dancing and drumming and it was just it would I had never seen anything like it.

I didn't know that t'fillah could be that powerful and rhythmic and upbeat and that people would dance to it. We didn't dance in the synagogues I was raised in. Like, we just, you know, maybe we swayed a little bit, but the sense of joyousness I think was definitely missing for me and my t'fillah journey. And it was just, like, it was so powerful. The music was just sort of like vibrating in the whole room with so many people singing and moving together. And I just, I loved every minute of it. And I talked to Rabbi Ruth Gan Kagan over at Nava Tehila I believe at that, that Kallah, and I said, I'm coming to Israel soon for a year and she said, good, you'll be our drummer. And I was like, wait, did that just happen? And I did. And I drummed at all of their services and a few other events that year and then did a few North American tours with them and went to Limmud in England with them. And really, I think what they did for me were a few things. One is, again, the sense of joy of t'fillah was one that I desperately needed and I'm grateful to have found. Two is...

I love the sense that sometimes there are too many words. Sometimes we really can take one or two verses and go very deep with them. And to let those words be our medicine as Rabbi Shefa Gold and others teach. And sometimes the old melodies can work for us. And sometimes we need new ones. And it was really lovely to experience new melodies with Nava Tehila

Eliana (21:05)

Hmm.

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (21:11)

and to also have the Sephardi, Mizrachí, Yerushalmi music come through them. I

think I grew up in a very Ashkenazi musical household, which makes sense, right? There's a lot of beautiful Ashkenazi music, but it was a layer that I really loved. And I will say between my time with Shefa Gold and with Nava Tehila melodies started coming to me as well. And I had never seen myself as a composer of t'fillah. I could lead a nice davening and borrow tunes from lots of places, but somehow in a way that I don't entirely understand, as I spent more time with beautiful daveners, I became a vehicle for melodies to come through. And that portal definitely opened during my time with Shefa and with Nava Tehila and Jerusalem and has continued since.

Eliana (22:21)

Yes, it has. I'm excited kind of later in our conversation to ask you more about your beautiful music that you have recently put out into the world. A couple stops before we get there though. The first is that I'm reflecting that we met because you became the rabbi at my childhood synagogue and that you came from this Renewal, Nava Tehila, Shefa Gold world.

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (22:33)

Sure.

Eliana (22:50)

and then worked in what one might call mainstream congregations. And I know I've had plenty of conversations with clergy and with other folks who can be frustrated or unsure how or if they should even try to integrate the beautiful things that they learned and experienced in those spaces into quote unquote the main sanctuary. So I'm wondering if you have any thoughts or insights or exasperations about what for you moving into congregational life.

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (23:25)

I enjoyed most of the six years I spent as a congregational rabbi, two in North Jersey and four at Beth Sholom in Memphis. And I'm really grateful for the opportunity to experience t'fillah day in and day out with people. One of the challenges of the...

Renewal progressive world is that we only get together for davening generally on Shabbat or holidays or shiva minyans. And there is actually something very profound at being in the same place. Most days of the week, we had an evening minyan five or six days of the week with morning minyan a couple of days of the week and certainly every Shabbat and holiday. And it can be hard sometimes to think about how much innovation is too much innovation.

And morning minyan, starting at seven or 7:30 in the morning is not the time to do major innovation with people who want to get through the minyans or they can say Kaddish have their scrambled eggs and then go off to work. Right. And so. Part of it

is just trying to understand where are people coming from? What do they need from the davening and what do they want?

I did spend a lot of time in the community at the beginning asking them, what would you like for Davening to be? I will say one of the answers that they told me was shorter. They would like the Shabbat morning service to be shorter. Okay. So I was able to help that out. And we, you instead of three hours, it got closer to two and a half and people were very happy.

Eliana (25:06)

It is very long.

Yeah.

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (25:18)

Not exactly the answer I was looking for in terms of finding more meaning in the service, but they definitely appreciated that. I did bring in a fair number of new melodies that they hadn't heard before. And I think for a number of people there, it was very, it was helpful for them to hear sort of different flavors and to...

see that others were using melodies in a way to bring us deeper into the davening itself. And we did create a monthly Friday night musical service there, and we spent a fair bit of time exploring whether or not musical instruments could be used halachically in a synagogue. And there are, of course, different opinions on that. We spent a fair bit of time studying the issue and then the community decided that yes, they would allow musical instruments only on Friday nights, once a month. And we created a really beautiful service that changed a little bit each time depending on which musicians were there and which melodies we brought in and what the Torah reading was and what we wanted to connect to. And that was a really beautiful space and there were certainly people who came to that as their primary way of connecting to the shul. I tried bringing in a few guest musicians wherever possible. Obviously, you were there a couple of times and grateful for the times when you dropped by to share some some wisdom with us and a few others came by and joined us either at the Friday night service or we did bring in Nava Tehila for a weekend and they did a beautiful Friday night service and a Havdallah concert with us. And there were people who really resonated with it. And of course, there were people who said, that's very nice. Can we have the traditional melodies, please? And I heard it said that pluralism is the art of making everybody uncomfortable some of the time. And obviously, I don't want people to be uncomfortable all of the time.

Eliana (27:17)

Mm -hmm.

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (27:32)

But I very much want people to...take t'fillah seriously and to see it not just as a thing that we think we're supposed to do, but as a vehicle for our own growth, our own healing, our own transformation and the wellbeing of our community. And I'm grateful that the shuls, both of them gave me some leeway to play around a little bit and...

I would encourage every rabbi to spend time playing around a little bit. Every community is different. There is no one size fits all approach to davening. I think people in communities are generally more willing to experiment than we give them credit for. I think change is hard. I think rabbis have a very hard job. I think that we can't change too much too soon. In that I don't want to come to a service where I don't know any of the melodies, right? There has to be a sense of familiarity with the service, but also invitations to draw in deeper. And I think when rabbis can experiment, and help people find ways of connecting to t'fillah I think it comes alive more. Now, every rabbi's bandwidth is different, not everybody has the time to prepare meaningful experiences in t'fillah, but I think we can all try to do what we can to make it meaningful. And the truth is, when it's meaningful for us, that will come through to the rest of the community as well.

And the more we can allow ourselves to go deep in t'fillah, the more people will experience that. And I know for me, as a congregational rabbi, it's very hard to get out of the continual thought process of who's coming up for the next reading and what time is it and how much time do I have for Musaf and have I you know how much time does the drash gonna take and what am I gonna talk about later and I'm not sure about the transition and who did I forget to call this week and they're in the congregation and I need to go up to them and get it right like all of those things are almost ever present.

And the more we can allow ourselves to go deep into t'fillah, I think the better our t'fillah can be. And ideally, we can train ourselves and our communities to say, all of those other things are important. And Shabbat is a time where we give ourselves space to really breathe into these t'fillot and have some beautiful moments of connection. And...

There will be some who don't like them, there will be others who really do. And it's easy to listen only to the naysayers who say, why are you changing the melody for Ein Keloheinu which we've done here for 8,000 years?

And they have a point and their voice is important. But often we don't hear from the people who think that it was very meaningful and different. But if we're really looking and paying attention, we can see who's connecting with us and who can't.

Eliana (30:52)

Mm -hmm.

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (30:58)

But I really want to honor all of the people who've spent time leading communities. It is not easy work and there is no magic eight ball or one size fits all answer.

I want to just invite people to play, because t'fillah is fun, and the more we make it meaningful, the better it is for us.

Eliana (31:15)

Yeah, 100%. I love thinking about t'fillah as play and the pray and the play are very close together. I want to ask about kind of another, maybe we might say significant piece of your work in the world, which is recovery. Your organization, Our Jewish Recovery in your book, And God Created Recovery. And...

how you bring Jewish wisdom to the realm of recovery and addiction. And I'm wondering if t'fillah wisdom is part of that, how that's been a part of your journey and how that's been a part of your, for lack of a better word, ministry, I guess, right? Your particular rabbiing in the world around these very, very important ideas.

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (32:08)

Yeah, I got into recovery about nine and a half years ago while I was in Memphis, actually, and spent a lot of time going to recovery meetings in churches, because that's where they are for the most part. And I started looking around the Jewish world wondering, surely I can't be the only person to have some issues with addictions. And my issues started from a very, very young age. And like many others, addictions often start out as coping mechanisms to deal with trauma and pain, and then they take over. And my first addiction was with food and codependency and pornography and skin picking and hair pulling and shame, guilt, procrastination and lots of other traumatizing experiences contributed to my addictive journey. And I will say that I didn't even know anything about addiction until I was in rabbinical school is really when it started for me. I did a unit of chaplaincy training at a hospital.

And we had a month-long unit on addiction to try to understand the questions that addicts ask and the inner life of addicts so that we can better respond and be a guide to them. And I'm at this point, 26, 27 or so years old, working as a synagogue rabbi in North Jersey, and I'm sitting there in this hospital room listening, watching these videos, and I'm thinking, wait a minute. The same kinds of questions they ask are the same kinds of questions that have been inside my head for many, many years. And what does that mean? And it took me a while to understand that, yeah, I

too had some behaviors that were addictions. I didn't even have the language for it at the time. Thankfully, I've done a lot of healing and a lot of journeying since. And one of the things that I really believe is that A, addiction is not new in the Jewish community.

It's an issue that we don't talk about generally, but we have sources going back to the time of the Talmud and the Mishnah, and one could even read into Torah that talk about our people's struggles with what it means to live well. And one can go all the way back to the Garden of Eden if one wants to read it that way in the, don't eat that thing, it'll kill you. And...

Of course, they ate that thing and it didn't kill them. And there was a sense of, oh, how much can I get away with? Or, right, don't tell me what to do. Or I have agency myself and let me explore just how much trouble I can get into because, oh, yes, it is very eye opening to discover things that are forbidden that people tell us not to do. The challenge, of course, is sometimes those things can kill us.

Sometimes quickly and sometimes slowly. And so when I was getting into recovery, I started looking around the Jewish world and eventually started a Facebook group which has now turned into a nonprofit. And we have a wonderful array of Jewish recovery meetings and classes and retreats and trainings and a lot more in the works. And what makes us different from other recovery organizations and fellowships is that I really believe that Jewish wisdom is part of the solution for us. We come from a tradition that is thousands of years old that is essentially a conversation about what it means to be holy and what it means to live well. And our people have known suffering and tragedy and trauma and pain for thousands of years.

We have some unhealthy coping mechanisms as a people that we have developed, but we also have really beautiful technologies and practices that can add more meaning and holiness to our lives, including, of course, t'fillah and having a sense of a closer connection to g?d's presence, which is really invaluable in the recovery process.

I'm not going to say that one has to believe in g?d in order to be in recovery. That's not true. But I will say that for so many people, one of the biggest challenges of addiction is the sense of isolation and loneliness that it brings. And to be able to feel like g?d is with me in my struggles and that g?d wants the best for me.

and that I can turn to g?d and ask for help and even get some beautiful responses and wisdom. That is an invaluable piece of recovery for me and so many others. And I'm often thinking about how to use t'fillah and Jewish ritual and liturgy as a vehicle for healing. And I try to immerse that into the work of our Jewish recovery.

because recovery and Jewish life have essentially not been in conversation with each other. And it's been really beautiful to see that for more than a few people, we've become their primary Jewish community. And for some people, we are a way back into the Jewish world, and then they go off and join a synagogue or a JCC or another group. But the sense that...

that Judaism is here to be part of our healing.

is something that I think most of us didn't quite get when we were younger. And I think it's core to why Our Jewish Recovery has grown over the years and what people really, really appreciate that we're here to be advocates for our recovery journey. And Jewish wisdom has a lot to guide us and having a sense of holiness on a regular basis.

Eliana (38:24)

Hmm.

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (38:42)

It is much better than turning to our addictions. Right? I think the addiction, the addictive process basically says, I need something else to fill the hole inside me, to fill the pain, to distract me from the questions I don't have answers to. Being able to sit with those questions, being able to...

bring Jewish wisdom into those questions has been invaluable for me and for others. And sometimes we can pray into those questions. And sometimes we can just sit and say some version of, Ribono shel olam, it is hard to be alive today. I could use your wisdom and guidance here. And we can turn to...

The answers g?d has given our ancestors. We can turn to the words of siddur and we can also learn how to be still and listen for that still small voice. And sometimes when we are able to quiet ourselves and ask the Holy One for guidance, we get what we need.

Eliana (39:55)

Hmm.

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (39:55)

And it's really beautiful to see that. T'fillah is not just about words on a page, and it's not just about honoring our ancestors, and it's not just about how we think we're supposed to do Jewish. I think for me it's about finding meaning and healing and a sense of purpose in this world. And I know that I am not going to have beautiful moments of transcendent connection to the Holy One every time I pray.

Eliana (40:33)

Mm -hmm.

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (40:34)

But I do know that A, the more times I pray, the more likely it is that something will come in and hit me in a new way. And B, as Heschel said, prayer may not save us, but it may make us worth saving. And for me, if nothing else, taking the time to turn off the to -do list and remember that...

The world is not about what I want. It's taking the time to remember that there's a good g?d up there and down here who wants the best for us can really bring a sense of serenity and peace if we let it.

Eliana (41:07)

Mm.

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (41:16)

And I would not have been able to say any of that before I got into recovery or went to a rabbinical school or davened with Shefa and Nava Tehila It's really interesting to hear myself thinking out loud to see how much music and t'fillah has been a part of my own recovery and what I try to share with others.

Eliana (41:20)

Hmm.

Beautiful.

So we're listening to the first track off of your recent album, Gam Ki Elech: Turning Our Sorrows Into Songs, which is such a beautiful title. And it's certainly clear after hearing, again, you kind of think out loud into your story that this music and the process of it and the pain from which...

the music was birthed, It seems to me that that wouldn't have happened without all of these other pieces kind of falling into place. So I would love for you to share. We will, of course, my friends, share lots of links where you can read more and learn more and listen to all of this beautiful music. But if you could share your story, you and Sherri and Shemaria and how this music came into being.

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (43:18)

Sherri and I have been married six and a half years now, very happily and wonderfully so. like many couples, we wanted to have children to have to hold, to raise, to love, to sing with, and all the other beautiful things that parents get to do.

And we tried for a couple of years to get pregnant and things weren't successful, we turned to the IVF process and did three different cycles of IVF. And we were using a book called Fertility Journeys by Mayyim Hayyim, the mikveh in Boston. And they have different kavanot, different intentions for different parts of the IVF process. And they had different verses that they thought would be helpful to reflect on as we were preparing for embryo transfers. And so three of the melodies on the album came from those verses from Mayyim Hayyim's fertility journeys guide. And the melodies actually came on the mornings of those implantations. And they came while I was...

sitting in the waiting room or while we were in the room together waiting for the embryologist to bring the embryos to implant. And the song that you just played at the beginning of, Adonai Yishmorcha was the third one. And that was the song that we sang to our son Shemaria each night. And our third cycle was...successful, sort of, and Sherri was able to get pregnant and we had this sense, these beautiful words, *Adonai yishmorkha mikora*, g?d will save you from all harm, *yishmora nafshecha*, will guard your soul, *mea tav yadalam*, now and forever, and we wanted a sense of g?d watching over Shemaria in the womb and helping him grow and...

praying and hoping that everything would go smoothly so that we could bring him into our home. Things unfortunately didn't go smoothly and it was really at the 20 week ultrasound where we found out that things were not developing properly and that led to visits to a few other clinics to do specialized testing and fetal MRIs and x-rays and ultrasounds and three different clinics made it very clear that his brain was not developing properly and the likelihood of any meaningful quality of life was slim to none. And we made the heartbreaking decision to terminate the pregnancy at 26 weeks, which we did and he was born still and we then...

had a full week of Shiva and a year of mourning and the and we kept singing to him each night for that year of mourning and asking hoping that g?d would be watching over him raising him in ways that we couldn't and the song really gave him his name we had other names picked out but once we understood what was happening, we wanted something else for him. And I am one who chooses to believe that he's up there somewhere and that maybe at some point in the future we will be able to reconnect and hopefully he's up there with our cat Taylor and other loved ones and ancestors. And Rashi has a beautiful comment that says that the...

babies who don't get a chance to learn Torah, g?d teaches them. And I love that image and hope that it's true and hope that g?d is still watching over him. And

Eliana (47:30)

Mm.

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (47:38)

During our year of grief, other melodies came as well.

And I'm still more than a little bit amazed that melodies emerge. And as you know, it's often a surprise when melodies show up and how do they know and how do we prepare ourselves? I'm not sure I know the answers to those questions, but I think the more we immerse, the more we keep the channel open and hopefully things will come as they're meant to.

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (48:11)

I think that I was trying during the year of mourning to honor Shemaria, to keep his memory alive and to sing the melodies that had been part of our journey. And we sang Adonai Yishmorcha and Gam Ki Elech at his funeral. And the rest of them just emerged during the year of mourning. And for example, we wanted a melody that we could...

still bless him with every Friday night. It's traditional to bless our children at the Shabbat table and we wanted to do that and we have a melody for that. And other verses are from different parts of our liturgy. And...

Some of them came in the hospital after he was born. There's a tradition that everyone has a verse that's associated with them and they use the first letter of your first name and the last letter of your middle name and Shomerani comes from that. That was his verse in the sense that, you know, guard me like the apple of your eye. And...

Eliana (49:20)

Hmm.

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (49:21)

When I found that verse, the melody came almost immediately while in the hospital with him. The last melody on the album, Ki Shama, came actually on, it was the last one that came, it was actually on my father's yahrzeit And I zoomed into a minyan in Denver to say Kaddish that morning. And Psalm 6 is part of the Tachanun service that I often skip and that morning they didn't and the words of Tachanun really just jumped right out at me and the phrase, ki shama Adonai kol bichyi, for g'd hears the sound of our cries. And I just had this sense that day that if g'd hears my pain, then perhaps it's done its job and I can let some of it go.

And it's not to say that I don't have any sadness or grief left because that's not how it works and we will always have a measure of sadness and grief that we don't get

to raise Shemariah on our own. But I just had a sense that g?d's been here with me and listening and directing and perhaps sending verses and melodies my way. But I had the sense that not alone in my sadness and that my pain has been heard. And it really allowed me to shift a little bit. And each of these melodies, I feel like they're sent to me from Shemaria and from the Holy One as a vehicle not just to honor Shemaria.

Eliana (50:53)

Hmm.

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (51:11)

but also for anyone who's been on a journey of healing, anyone who's felt that life is just too much sometimes, and it is. And these melodies, I think, are for those who are looking for some music and text to help ground us and lift us up in our troubles and to feel that g?d's with us even then.

And it's been so meaningful to me to be able to share these melodies. And I'm grateful that other people appreciate them and have supported the album in so many ways. And I feel like Shamaria is in these tunes. And when I sing them, I feel more connected to him, which is nice. And I'm...

I'm grateful and amazed that these melodies are helpful not just for my own healing, but also for others too.

Eliana (52:57)

this beautiful, beautiful, beautiful title track, as it were, from Psalm 23. I'm wondering about the Psalms in particular. So many of these songs come from words from Psalms and on its face, these words may strike us as being very sured right? The way walk in the valley of the shadow of death sounds like a very scary place, right?

I fear nothing, really. But then as an adult, I've started looking at the Psalms in another way, which is you only need to say that to yourself when you're very, very scared. And that in fact, it might be the times when the Psalmists seem the most assured, when I can imagine their humanity and how unsure they actually might have been in that moment. So I'm wondering about throughout the IVF, process and the time of grief for Shemaria that of course has the official Jewish ending time but then continues. How you think the Psalms, how have you connected to them? What role do you think they've played in this for you?

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (54:04)

I think why the Psalms hold so much power for us is that they don't shy away from the complexities of human emotions.

I think Torah has many wonderful examples of our ancestors doing good things and sometimes very bad things. But we don't often get a sense of the inner struggles of our ancestors when we read Torah. Sometimes we do. But for the most part, the Torah is a narrative, this happened, then that happened, then that happened.

And the Psalms really, we hear the yearnings, we hear the struggles, we hear the joy when life feels good, and we hear the, from the depths I call to you, when life feels especially difficult. And...

I think that's why the Psalms have really been a vehicle for so much reflection and music over the years, because...

To be human is messy and challenging and fraught with all sorts of struggles, and the psalmist shares those in very beautiful ways. And I think we can find permission in the words of the Psalms to make meaning from our experiences just as the psalmist did.

And it's not that...

I can say, oh, the psalmist struggled, therefore I can struggle too. I don't need permission to struggle. But I think that what the Psalms do is they give voice to the struggles.

even when we don't have the right words. And they can help point us and hold us when we're really wandering and lost and sad and afraid and lonely. And I think we all know what it means to be in a place of deep darkness or the shadow of death.

We know that it's scary, it's isolating, it's painful. Is there anyone else in this place of deep darkness with me or am I here all alone?

Eliana (56:20)

Yeah.

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (56:29)

Sometimes...

We have to just put one foot in front of the other and keep walking.

But I think the more we can allow our tradition and the Holy One into those places of deep darkness with us, the easier it will be to keep walking in them.

Eliana (56:47)

Hmm.

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (56:48)

That's been true for me.

Eliana (57:36)

I have to say when I was listening to the album, I was unprepared for how deeply this particular melody would hit me in the sense that I felt immediately defensive. g?d gives and g?d takes, Adonai gives and Adonai takes away. May g?d's name be blessed. I can, of course, have my own understandings of...

how that might be helpful for me in times of distress, but I'm wondering, yeah, where this came from for you and how you, I mean, the word that's coming to mind is reconciled. I don't know if that is the correct word. Yeah, just to share what it means to you.

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (58:19)

So this verse is recited at the beginning of almost every Jewish funeral and as for a long long time. I've officiated at many funerals and I think I always had this sense that it felt like a rabbinic throwaway line. It felt like we have no idea what to say in the face of death. So we're just going to think, okay, somehow, someway, this is all g?d's doing. Maybe we'll understand it when we all get into the next world if we're so blessed. But the human experience is not entirely understandable. And let's just assume that it's all in g?d's hands and call it a day.

Eliana (58:39)

Hmm.

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (59:05)

And there's absolutely value in that, but it definitely felt like something to say when we really have no words.

Eliana (59:13)

Hmm.

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (59:15)

And this melody came and it started out slower than it became on the album. It started out more as a bit of a lament, a bit of a wail.

What does it mean that g?d gives and g?d takes? I don't believe that g?d took Shemaria from us. I don't believe that.

I do believe that g?d gave Shemariah to us.

And I'm aware that theology is messy and I want to see the blessings as coming from g?d. I don't want to see all of the challenges as coming from g?d because I don't think g?d is responsible for rare diseases and gene sequencing and car accidents and climate change and all the other ways in which humans mess up the world.

I think what g?d gives is sometimes people and it's sometimes the strength to continue.

I think what g?d takes away is perhaps sometimes people and perhaps g?d takes away the pain and the suffering that we have.

It's hard sometimes, it's hard often to feel a sense of g?d's presence in the midst of such terrible suffering.

Can I still praise g?d in the midst of the pain of my life? Sometimes. And sometimes I want to yell at the Holy One and say, how could you create this world in this way with so much pain?

Life is messy. Death is messy. Theology is messy.

I do believe that g?d is here with us in our pain.

I do believe that g?d is sending blessings our way.

There are too many blessings that have come to me over the years, including these melodies for me to think that I'm all alone and the world is totally random.

What does g?d give? What does g?d take away? I don't think there's one answer for that, but I, at least today, I'm in a place where I could say that g?d has given great blessings, but sometimes those blessings come with a lot of pain as well. And

I would give all of this music back if it meant that we could have a healthy child in our home.

Not an option.

I've heard it said that grief is just love doing its hardest job.

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (1:01:49)

I think g?d is with us in our grief and in our pain.

And I think the more we can remember that we're not alone, the more we can find other voices from Psalms, from prayer, from other Jewish texts and music and art and poetry and so much more, the more we can find our way through. And the journey is not always easy, but...

Rabbi Heshel said something really profound which helped give the album its name. He said there's only three ways to respond to suffering. The first is to cry out. The second is to sit in silence. And the third is to turn sorrow into song.

I hope that all of us who carry sorrow with us can find ways to find the music and the healing.

And keep going.

Eliana (1:02:45)

Amen. Amen. Amen.

Thank you so, so much.

for being here today and for sharing and for blessing all of us.

Rabbi Ilan Glazer (1:02:58)

It's my honor to be with you. I've been blessed to be a fan of yours for many years and it's been lovely to get to play together ages ago and hopefully again soon. And really grateful for our time today and all the beautiful work that you do bringing inspired tefillah to so many.

Eliana (1:03:20)

Thank you.

Eliana (1:03:20)

And thank you for listening. This week editing was done by our amazing podcast producer, Rachel Kaplan. Our show notes are done by Yaffa Englander. Check out our show notes at lightlab.co where you can find links to everything that we talk about in this week's episode. Our theme music is A New Light by me. Get ready for a Passover spark that will be coming your way next. If you are interested in supporting...

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