

It Gets Better

Rosh Hashanah Evening Sermon
Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim
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Shanah tovah. What a wonderful sight it is to look out at all of your faces—and to *recognize* so many of them! We've journeyed a long way together this past year. And on behalf of this congregation I am so privileged to serve—on behalf of myself, Aaron and Eli—I want to wish each and every one of you a very happy, healthy and sweet new year.

I'd like to begin tonight with a book I picked up at Barnes and Noble early this summer that was in no way meant for me. First off, it was in the Teen Non-Fiction section of the store—a part I would probably never encounter, except that it's right next to the bathrooms and, after a tall tea latte, I find myself headed that way more often than not. Second, the target audience of this particular publication wasn't even the wider teen community, but a particular subset: specifically those struggling with their sexual identity, and among those—most precisely—teens encountering such bullying (from their peers, their families, themselves) they struggle to envision a future worth sticking it out for. I have the utmost compassion and concern for those for whom this book was written, but the book itself wasn't written for me.

So why then did I pick it up? Why did I stand in the aisle reading for a good 15, 20 minutes? Why did I ultimately buy the book, bring it home, and turn to it from time to time throughout the rest of the summer?

Because the title spoke to me. Three simple words that I imagine each of us have needed to hear, have struggled to hear, have benefited from hearing at some point in our lives. The title of the book was: *It Gets Better*. Friends, never let us doubt the power those three words can have when we can, we *need* to, take them to heart.

Those three words have had untold impact on the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender teen community in the past year. Exactly one year ago, in September of 2010, writer Dan Savage was devastated—as many of us were—by the rash of suicides committed by LGBT youth. It prompted us at KKBE to proudly host the We Are Family/AFFA Vigil in our temple garden, and it prompted Savage to reflect upon his own journey. Remembering the days that bullying plagued him, and then taking stock of the blessings that grace his life today, he realized the hope his story could hold out for others. Together with his partner, Terry, he recorded a simple video, uploaded it to YouTube, and hoped that he might reach kids and teens that may not be able to see a bright future for themselves. He hoped he might convince them to embrace one straightforward and restorative idea: *It Gets Better*.

And, boy, has his message resonated! In one year's time, more than 25,000 individuals, couples, and organizations have uploaded their own "It Gets Better" videos—videos which have been viewed in excess of *40 million* times. Contributors have included the President, Vice President,

and Secretary of State; famous actors, musicians, designers and entrepreneurs. Entire Major League sports teams, as well as the staffs of companies like The Gap, Google, Facebook and Pixar have recorded videos. And, of course, thousands of less-famous individuals, like you and me, have contributed their own heartfelt observation that it does get better.

But the most striking result and statistic is this: Many of the “It Gets Better” videos end with an invitation for those in crisis to call the Trevor Project—an organization determined to end suicide among LGBT youth by providing life-saving and life-affirming resources, including a nationwide, 24/7 crisis intervention lifeline. The Trevor Project has been around since 1998, but in the year since the “It Gets Better” project got off the ground with Dan and Terry’s first video, the number of calls to the lifeline has increased by 50%! The ability to hear, internalize and believe the message that it *does* get better, has motivated and empowered 50% more people to reach out for help.

Imagine what those three words could mean to us. When we gather together again on Yom Kippur, we will recite our confessions, not as individuals, but as one community. We will affirm that between us all, we have committed all of the sins enumerated in our prayer books, and we will seek forgiveness, not as hundreds of individuals, but as one congregation. Tonight we enumerate our suffering in the same way. As one congregation, there are among us, I assure you, those who are struggling with separation and divorce, addiction and abuse, bullying of all types and prompted by any number of perceived differences. We are coping with chronic disease and mental illness; infertility and disability. We are confronting joblessness and financial insecurity; loneliness and isolation. We are seeking solace in grief and facing our own mortality. We need to hear that “It Gets Better,” and we need to store that belief in our hearts.

And we can believe it, we can have faith and hope, if we accept three qualifiers that help us understand what it is realistic to hope for.

First, it gets better, but it takes time. In times of distress, struggle, and heartache—we have to wait. Consider the counsel Rabbi Jack Riemer gives those who are suffering the death of a loved one. “You have to wait,” he says. “I mean that not only in the practical sense, that you shouldn’t make any big decisions while you are in turmoil, like you shouldn’t decide where to move or whether to sell the house right away. That’s obvious. I mean it in the spiritual sense. When life knocks you down, wait. As it says in Psalm 27:

Kavei el Adonai, chazak v-ya’ameitz libecha—v’kavei el Adonai.
Wait for God, strengthen yourself—and then wait for God again.

For there are no instant cures in this world. When you receive a crushing blow, don’t expect to snap back quickly. It takes time.”

Jewish tradition understands that; that’s why we have *shivah*, and then *Shloshim*, and then eleven months of *kaddish*, and then *Yahrtzeit*, for death is not a little thing. It is an amputation when we lose someone we love, and therefore we must give ourselves time. If we find ourselves crying in the middle of the day for no reason or unable to sleep at night... take time and wait, wait for God’s healing to come. For it comes... gently, gradually, almost imperceptibly... but it comes.

Second, we need understand that it gets better, but it doesn't get perfect. As one of the contributors in the book wrote, “When I say that it gets better, I am not saying that it will always be easy. [But] you will [develop] more choices about how to handle tough times, [and] that's a big improvement.”

One of those choices is our outlook, our ability to put things into a new perspective. There is a wonderful Jewish story familiar to many of us. It tells of a king who had the most magnificent collection of jewels in the entire world; it was the source of the king's greatest joy.

Then, one night, the king had a dream. He dreamt that somewhere there was a ring, the most precious ring in the world. This ring was so magnificent that it had special power—if a person were sad, it could make him happy; when he was joyful, it could intensify his joy; when he was afraid, it could give him strength.

When the king awoke from his dream, he called together his advisors and ministers, described to them the dream, and offered a fabulous reward for the one who could find the ring.

Each of his advisors and ministers went out in search, but each returned empty-handed—except for one, whose love for his master pushed him onward to keep searching even after the others had long since given up. He scoured the world, searched every gallery, every shop, every bazaar for the magical ring, but to no avail; he too returned empty-handed.

But before he would admit failure to the king, the minister looked one last place, at a shop close to the palace. He described to the owner what he sought, and the owner, an old man, simply smiled. “I have the ring,” he told the minister. “Come, let me get it for you.” And with that he took down an old box and handed the ring inside to the astonished minister.

The minister rushed to the palace; he entered the king's chamber, approached the throne, and presented the ring to the king. Excitedly the king opened the box, but what he found was a plain, unadorned, metal ring. Could this possibly be the precious, magical ring of which he had dreamt so long ago? It certainly didn't look like much, nothing like the jewels and precious gems of his magnificent collection. Then he saw the three Hebrew words engraved on the ring: *Gam zeh ya'avor*. Three simple, little words that meant: “This too shall pass.” Over time the king came to realize the magical power of the ring, and so can we.

Gam zeh ya'avor—not unlike “It Gets Better,” these three special words can help us endure the most difficult times in our lives. If we hold on long enough, if we stick it out, this too shall pass. But these words also remind us that the joys of life too will pass. Even in the valley of darkness, there are moments of light. Did you know there can be laughter and levity in a hospital room? Do we recognize that, even when our journeys have a long way to go toward wholeness and healing, there are significant accomplishments and milestones to celebrate along the way? If we can remember that all of life is fleeting, then when *those* moments come, we will seize them, embrace them, treasure them, knowing that—as with the bad times—these good times, too, shall pass.

Finally, we must know that it often gets better, because we work to make it better. As Cantor Jonathan Comisar so beautifully describes: “A Jew doesn’t accept the world the way it is. There is a fundamental dissonance between the way the world is and the way the world might be. Perhaps we haven’t gotten there yet, but it is our obligation and responsibility to move the world in that direction.” Or as Mark Pelavin, Associate Director of the Religious Action Center, summarizes the Jewish call to Social Action: “It gets better because together we’ll make it better. We’ll change laws, we’ll change attitudes. We will make it better.”

I recently learned of a nonprofit organization that provides support to widows in Afghanistan who have been afflicted by war, terrorism, and oppression. Decades of conflict have ravaged Afghanistan, leaving hundreds of thousands of women without husbands—a cultural necessity for Afghans. In many cases, Afghan widows have no means to feed, clothe, or shelter their children and their situation is indeed desperate.

The organization was the subject of an award-winning film, entitled “Beyond Belief.” Their work has been featured on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and hundreds of other media outlets. However, I learned of their work when I read about the mitzvah project of a boy preparing to become Bar Mitzvah in Needham, MA. After the devastating earthquake in Haiti in 2010, Ben and his friends came up with the idea of giving Haitian kids something fun to do as their country regrouped from destruction. As Ben loves soccer almost as much as do the kids in the Caribbean islands, he participated in a 62-mile bike ride and raised \$2,000 to purchase soccer balls for Haitian kids—soccer balls made by widows in Afghanistan who hand-sew them in their homes.

Ben’s project is impressive, and the organization that empowers the Afghan widows from whom he procured the soccer balls is inspiring to be sure. But here’s what really got me: On September 11th, 2001, Ben’s dad was killed while traveling on American Flight 11, and his mother founded the organization.

His mother, Susan, was seven months pregnant with her third child at the time. Several months later, Susan met Patti who had also been widowed on 9/11. Her husband was killed while traveling on United Flight 175, and she had been eight months pregnant with her second child.

Both women were adrift in grief and shock, but profoundly moved by the support of friends, family, and strangers from around the world who cared for them financially, logistically, and emotionally. This support had an enormous impact on their ability to navigate the strange and unexpected landscape of widowhood—and acclimate to becoming single mothers.

As Ben’s mother came to terms with her new life and followed media coverage about Afghanistan, she felt a connection to the vast number of Afghan widows. But this kinship was complicated. Susan couldn’t help but observe that widows in Afghanistan had none of the support that she and Patti had experienced.

She wanted to use her new voice and platform to do something tangible. If she could change the life of just one Afghan widow, she could encourage dialog and friendship, and perhaps somehow begin to understand her own loss. In 2003, Susan and Patti launched “Beyond the 11th” and their

vision became a reality. Soon their efforts in Afghanistan reached well beyond a single widow—ultimately changing the lives of hundreds of women, and the number keeps growing.

At a time when these two women and their families could easily have given into the misery of sorrow that could not be much worse, they found the courage and resolve to work to make the world better.

As Patti's brother, Jim, explains in the film that documents their work: "There's a way in which each of us makes small choices every day. And after a period of time those choices develop into a pattern. Each moral and ethical choice forms our identity. It seems to me that the terrorists who flew planes into the buildings on September 11th, they started making choices a long time ago—choices took them so far off center that flying a plane into a building seemed like the right thing to do. It's like any one of us. We choose our way into being ourselves. And I think that's what Patti and Susan do in little choices and in big choices. When given a choice between violence and love—they chose love. When given a choice between retribution and restoration of harmony—they chose restoring harmony. When given a choice between death and life—they've chosen life. That's just who they are. It's who they've come to be. It's who they've chosen to be. And because of that, their children are learning to choose life as well."

"Sometimes the only way to heal our own hurt is by helping others that need us. Perhaps that is why the consolation that we are supposed to give each other in time of loss is *Hamakom yinachem etchem b'toch sh'ar aveilei Tziyon Vi-y'rushalayim*, May God comfort you—we don't know how, so we say TOGETHER—with all the other people in the world who are mourning for Zion and Jerusalem. What does that blessing mean? I don't have enough troubles of my own; I have to hear about those that are mourning for Zion and Jerusalem? The answer is yes; you need to hear that there are others in distress, that Zion is in distress, that Jerusalem is mourning, that the world is in pain. Because knowing that places your own grief into a larger perspective. It reminds you that you are needed, that there are those whom YOU must comfort, and that is a kind of consolation." (Rabbi Jack Riemer)

My friends, it does get better. It may take time, but it gets better. It doesn't get perfect, but it gets better. And each of us can play a part in helping to make it better.

As we read in our Shabbat Siddur:

Standing on the parted shores of history
we still believe what we were taught
before ever we stood at Sinai's foot;

that wherever we go, it is eternally Egypt
that there is a better place, a promised land;
that the winding way to that promise
passes through the wilderness.

That there is no way to get from here to there
except by joining hands, marching

together.

As we begin the New Year, may we clasp our hands together tightly and *l'at, l'at*—step by step—march our way to the Promised Land. Amen.