

It Gets Better

Shabbat B'shallach 5785

February 7, 2025

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“In September 2010, in response to a rash of suicides that claimed the lives of several LGBTQ+ youth, the first *It Gets Better* video was released on YouTube, urging young LGBTQ+ people to stay true to themselves, despite bullying and other challenges of adolescence. The message was simple—no matter how difficult things may be, it gets better. Those words, and the sentiment behind them went viral, inspiring more than 70,000 people to share their personal stories of resilience and triumph, catalyzing the world’s largest storytelling effort to uplift and empower LGBTQ+ youth.”ⁱ That’s how the It Gets Better Project describes its work.

We may reasonably ask whether events of the last three weeks have demonstrated the project’s message to be a lie. President Trump’s executive orders have taken aim at evidence-based gender affirming medical care for young people, transgender men and women serving America in uniform, and social integration support for young people in transition—in other words, anti-bullying efforts. Worse, the president has forbidden the federal government from recognizing trans and nonbinary folks for who they are, insisting that they be identified exclusively by the gender assigned at birth, with only two choices, male and female.ⁱⁱ

On other occasions, I have spoken about the evidence that backs gender affirming care for young people, the risk of suicide among those who cannot access that care, and the Jewish understanding, articulated most clearly by our rabbinic sages, that human beings come in a variety of genders, hardly limited to two. This sermon will not be on any of those subjects, but I mention them because there may be people listening who want that information, and I’m happy to provide it.

No, tonight’s sermon will instead be about enduring difficulties that last a long time. Torah and Talmud were born out of trauma, and our Jewish people has endured horrific persecution over periods of many centuries, more than once. After each of those terrible times, God and human partners have delivered our people to a better future.

In this week’s Torah portion, the Israelites finally leave Egyptian bondage behind. Having freed the Children of Israel, Pharaoh’s heart again hardens, and he chases them to the Red Sea. Pinned between the Egyptian armies and the sea, the Israelites are convinced that all is lost, asking Moses if he brought them out into the wilderness only because there aren’t enough graves in Egypt. Then, with

Moses's partnership, God parts the sea, the people cross on dry land, and the sea closes behind them, an unbreachable barrier between the Israelites and their now-former oppressors. It's finally over.

When we address these events, particularly on Passover, we most often concentrate on liberation, not on the persecution that preceded it. That's the point of Passover, of course, but something important is lost if we don't focus also on just how badly our biblical ancestors suffered.

Each year, I ask folks what the matzah symbolizes at the Seder. There are two answers, but I typically only hear one—rushing to leave Egypt, they didn't have time for the bread to rise. That's about matzah as the bread of freedom, but it is also “the bread of affliction” that our enslaved ancestors ate throughout **four hundred thirty years** of Egyptian oppression, enslavement, and attempted genocide.

Many of you know that the Central Conference of American Rabbis is preparing a new *chumash*, a Torah commentary, for our Reform Movement. Recently, Professors Elsie Stern and Daniel Fisher-Livne, the editors, described a new scholarly consensus that would influence the focus of the commentary: Torah was largely written and compiled as a response to trauma.ⁱⁱⁱ

That trauma was not the exodus. Instead, it was the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E., the exile of a large part of the Judean population, carted off to Babylon, and their return a half century or so later.

We can learn important spiritual lessons from the narrative about Egyptian bondage and exodus as a story told by Babylonian exiles. Surely, they felt hopeless. Banished from Judea, they were strangers in a strange land. They only knew how to worship their God at the Jerusalem Temple, now a pile of rubble, so they despaired, thinking that the service of יהוה would die. They had no idea that their exile would come to an end. Then, when it did, the land to which they returned was desolate, and the Judeans left behind had assimilated the ways of their conquerors.

The way they told the Exodus was consistent with the goals of the “It Gets Better” campaign. After briefly acknowledging the horror of persecution, they focus on the blessing of liberation.

Judaism as we know it was created by our rabbinic sages after yet another trauma, this one even worse and exponentially longer lasting: the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in the year 70 C.E. and the massacre of thousands of Judeans when they tried to retake their land sixty-five years later. The sages then

turned the people’s focus away from victory and freedom in this world, which was not possible for Jews until the creation of Israel, less than eighty years ago.

For nineteen hundred years, our people experienced “It Gets Better” only very rarely, but they never stopped dreaming and working toward a better future, a vision of messianic redemption. Even while perishing in Nazi gas chambers, many sang, אָנִי מֵאֲמִין, (*ani ma’amin*), “I believe with perfect faith that salvation will come. Despite the long delay, I still believe.”

The folks who created the It Gets Better Project were right. It does get better. They had experienced that in their own lives. Being true to themselves, they were living authentically. By 2010, Gay and lesbian Americans were living more freely and with less threat than ever before. Now, with parallels to Jewish history, America is a terrifying place for gays and lesbians and downright dangerous for transgender and nonbinary people, above all for adolescents with gender dysphoria.

The psalmist wrote, “Those who sow in tears will reap in joy.”^{iv} It’s poetic and hopeful—and again, we see the way that trauma shaped our sacred texts. The message to Judeans exiled to Babylon is clear: Your exile will end. Whether sooner or later, a time of rejoicing **will** come. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz adds another dimension. Pointing out that planting “requires hard work and tremendous effort, invariably accompanied by anxiety: Will the seeds bear fruit? But when harvest time comes, they harvest with joyous song.”^v

Today, we have hard work to do—and, at this juncture, what exactly will be effective is not clear. We don’t know which “seed” will sprout. The prophet Zachariah called our people “prisoners of hope.”^{vi} And so we plant our seeds of love and acceptance, of resistance to bigotry, and of loving care for one another. Then, without waiting nineteen hundred or even just plain old nineteen years, let us once again affirm: “It Gets Better.”

Amen.

ⁱ <https://itgetsbetter.org/about/>.

ⁱⁱ “6 ways Trumps executive orders are targeting transgender people,” *PBS*, February 1, 2025, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/6-ways-trumps-executive-orders-are-targeting-transgender-people>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Elsie Stern and Daniel Fisher-Livne, “Embracing Biblical Historical Context for Sacred Reading and Spiritual Growth, Central Conference of American Rabbis webinar, January 15, 2025.

^{iv} Psalms 126:5.

^v Steinsaltz to Psalms 126:5.

^{vi} Zechariah 9:12.