

Together We Will Make It Through

*Written By Rabbi Michael Schwab for speaking on Yom Kippur
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Believe it or not, I have served as a rabbi in this wonderful congregation for over twenty years. And in that time, alongside all of the happy times, I have been with you through many *difficult* moments. Like, when you lost the beloved patriarch of your family, the person that made everyone feel good about who they are. Someone it was hard to imagine life without. Or when your loved one was afflicted with a terrible illness and you understandably struggled with the accompanying pain, anger and heartbreak that left you and your family feeling devastated or lost. And when we all endured *together* the tragedy of the July 4th shooting, shaking our collective foundations, as many of us literally ran for cover with our families, some of us scarred emotionally and even physically. I was with you as we processed, memorialized and recovered. And through *each and every one* of these difficult moments, and so many others, there was a constant refrain playing in my heart and in my head, “I just want to take away your pain. I just wish I could stop

your suffering. I so desire that there would be something I could say, or do, to just make everything OK.”

How many times have we all felt this way regarding people we love, after they have endured something terrible? When my kids hurt, physically or emotionally, I wish more than anything that I could just take away their pain, or fix whatever is wrong. When any of *you* hurt, I wish I had the power to take away *your* pain too. And when October 7th, and all that came after, happened to our people this year, my heartache grew to become almost unbearable and I desperately wished I could just stop the suffering for all. Nothing would make me happier than if Judaism had a magic answer to hardship, a secret that would allow us to *remove* the suffering and consequences from real life tragedies.

While preparing for these High Holidays I discovered a parallel to this feeling in our liturgy, while I was studying with my friend and colleague, Rabbi Eric Yanoff . During these days of awe we recite the iconic *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer and we sing with passion *U'Teshuvah*, *U'Tefillah U'Tzedakah Ma'vi'rin et Roah Hagezera*. In one of the most

well-known prayers of the High Holiday season we *literally* proclaim that **repentance, prayer and acts of righteousness** “*Roeh et Hagezeira*”, avert the severe decree, or as our Mahzor *poetically* translates it, “transforms the harshness of our destiny”. That somehow, through these three activities, we can *remove* the negative consequences of Gd’s judgment and put an end to their ramifications - we can *avert* the decree. On the one hand, this concept can be inspirational for us, and seems to suggest that we do have a formula for removing consequences to real life calamities. For this phrase reminds us of the power of our free will and that our choices *can* indeed affect our destiny. At the same time, for many, this notion has seemed *hard* to accept: that repentance, prayer, and acts of righteousness can actually *change* or *avert* Gd’s decree, or even that *any* of these elements can significantly diminish the difficult circumstances that may have already permanently altered our lives. We may feel that we have experienced moments in life when this declaration does not in fact ring true.

But maybe we have not been reading the verb *Ma’vi’rin*, often translated as “averts”, correctly. The Hebrew root of *Ma’vi’rin* comes

from the word *O'ver*, meaning “to pass **through**”. Perhaps, in this important prayer, we are not claiming that we actually have the ability to *avert* the decree, nor that, in a parallel fashion, we have the ability to *take away* someone’s pain from a real hurt or loss. Instead, the payer is asserting that what we *can do* is assist one to *pass through it*. To make the horrible, *endurable*. In other words, through *teshuvah*, *tefillah* and *tzedakah*: righteous acts of thoughtfulness and love, inspired by our contemplation and reflection, we *can* help someone to reach the other side of the most intense part of their pain, in tact, feeling loved and cared for, understanding that there is still meaningful life *after* the tragedy, when the suffering and pain become *less* all-consuming and when the blessings in life can return to focus. As our Mahzor translates, to “transform the *harshness*” of the decree, acknowledging that the decree will *still* remain a part of our lives. And yet, *also* asserting that our human actions, and responses to such hardship, can help us *through* the most devastating effects.

In her new book, *The Amen Effect*, Rabbi Sharon Brous shares a powerful and ancient Mishnah, a teaching from two thousand years ago,

which she uses as the anthem of her book. The text speaks of an ancient pilgrimage ritual, when hundreds of thousands of people would ascend to the Temple during the festivals. The crowd would enter the courtyard in a mass of humanity turning to the right and circle counter clockwise around the complex, engaging in the sacrifice and celebration, and exiting close to where they entered. But incredibly the text tells us that someone *suffering* - the grieving, the lonely, the heartbroken, the sick - that person would walk through the same entrance and circle in the opposite direction. As Brous writes, “[*They did*] Just as *we* do when *we’re* hurting: every step, *against* the current. And every person who passed the broken hearted would stop and ask, “What happened?” And the afflicted would answer, “I lost my son”, “I have terminal cancer”, “Life feels overwhelming”, “I fear for our people”. And those who walked from right to left would look into the eyes of the ill, the bereft and the bereaved. ‘May God comfort you’ they would say, one by one. ‘May you be wrapped in the embrace of this community’.

Two thousand years ago the rabbis constructed a system of ritual engagement built on a profound psychological insight: when you are

suffering and *want* to self isolate, *instead* you should show up, *with* all of your brokenheartedness, and allow the community to *see* your pain and surround you with the care you need - to help you **through** your time of crisis. From the perspective of the celebratory pilgrim, imagine being caught up in the holiday and as you walk towards the exit, coming towards you is one who is afflicted. You *want* to avert your eyes, like we often do on a subway platform. You *want* to stay in your holiday revelry. But our tradition tells us we cannot. *Instead*, we are required to *meet* their eyes and *ask* about their pain. The sufferer presents themselves, the community embraces them, and the afflicted feels comforted. The pain cannot be removed, one *cannot* really take *away* such pain. But the sufferer feels seen, connected, loved and as a result, more hopeful that there *is* light at the end of the tunnel. That they *can* endure, with assistance, and one day find joy in life again. Today *you* may walk from right to left. But this ritual acknowledges that *tomorrow* you indeed might be the one walking from *left* to right. The ancient wisdom embedded in this custom reminds us of the power and responsibility we carry of being *present* for one another when we are in

pain and in expressing our caring for one another in *action* when we are needed.

You have heard me, along with Rabbi Kurtz in years past, quote the phrase from the Talmud, “*Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh Baze*h,” “All Jews are responsible for one another.” Or as Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai put it, “When one Jew is injured, all Jews feel the pain.” Our ability to *feel* the pain of our fellow Jews, and our foundational belief that we are responsible for one another, propels us, motivates us, and *obligates* us, to do whatever we can to support each other during these challenging times -- to help each other *through* our suffering, our anxiety and our pain, by virtue of tangible actions that we take in our everyday lives.

And we can use the *Unetaneh Tokef* refrain as a model for what we *are* able to do: *Teshuvah*, *Tefillah* U'*tzedakah*. *Teshuvah*, while often translated as repentance, literally means “returning”. Therefore, during this difficult time we can each **return** with more passion to our *people* and place a stronger emphasis on our support for Israel and for Jews around the world. *Not* to the *exclusion* of other causes, but to ensure that this remains, or becomes, one of our highest priorities. We can return to

our *traditions*, like during these High Holidays, reminding ourselves that in order to build a *strong identity as Jews*, and to find *spiritual meaning* in it, we *must* engage in the practices that have *created* the incredible culture of our people, which has sustained us for milenia. When we lose our traditions, we diminish our identity, and in turn our resilience! We can return to our *institutions*, like synagogues, to celebrate Judaism, to *rejoice* in each other's life cycle events, to learn with one another, and to find ways to strengthen the community *together*. And we can return to *each other*, making tangible efforts to connect with those *outside* our immediate family and friend group, to make our *entire* community and our people thrive. Like when we volunteer with the Hazak committee, or the Social Action committee, and deliver meals, give rides, support *Hesed* projects, pay shivah calls, or visit with those who are not well. *Teshuvah*, let us *return* to that which is most important and that which will help one another *through* whatever obstacles and difficulties lie in our individual, or collective paths.

Add to that, the next component, *Tefillah*, or prayer. Prayer is a way of expressing ourselves spiritually and communally. Prayer

connects us as individuals to our ancestors through a shared liturgy and a history of evocative music. We, here, feel that singing *Avinu Malkeinu* together, or chanting the *Ashamnu* prayer while collectively tapping our chests. But prayer is also embodied in vigils, rallies and memorials, which we use to sanctify our values, to lend meaning to loss, and to provide inspiration to act. It was incredibly meaningful to gather in this Field Family Sanctuary only days after Oct 7th for a memorial, giving us the space to experience our emotions with others who would understand and support us. And to share words and songs that united us in healing, giving us resolve and comfort. Through *prayer*, we proclaim what we *stand* for and we give ourselves opportunities to contemplate that which relates to the deeper meaning of life. And through *prayer* we can continue to celebrate the *smachot*, the happy occasions of our people, reminding us what we are fighting *for* and providing us with the *joy and togetherness* we *need* in order to move forward with optimism and hope. I don't know *what* I would have done this year if it were not for the wonderful *Bnei Mitzvah*, baby namings, weddings, anniversaries and birthdays that I celebrated with so many of you. Prayer is both an act in

and of itself and it is also a prelude and inspiration for further meaningful endeavors. And in all of its forms it is a powerful tool to help us *through*, whatever life brings our way.

And finally, *Tzedakah*, which is often translated as charity, but which is *more* correctly understood as *acts of righteousness*, from the root word *tzedeck*. *Tzedakah* is the value that teaches us to reach out to those in need and tangibly show our care for others - to volunteer with impactful not-for-profits and to help people through whatever they are enduring. And *tzedakah* compels us to advocate, to march, to raise awareness and to lift our voices about what we care about, in order to help us through whatever challenges we face. Over the last year we *have* performed, and need to *continue* to perform, acts of righteousness to ensure a vibrant Israel, to combat antisemitism, and to make the *entire* world a better and safer place. I praise the great work of so many of our established Jewish organizations along with local groups, like the Highland Park Shamash Women and our neighborhood synagogues, for giving us ways and opportunities to make our voices heard. I will *never* forget traveling with so many of you to Washington DC, when we

showed the world the power of *communal* action. I speak with pride when I share that a busload of us went to Israel to volunteer in the Spring amidst the conflict. And we did all of this, while continuing to organize individual acts of righteousness here at home, supporting the general community and congregants in need. And, of course, *tzedakah* is also about sharing our resources, about being generous. The ability to act often *depends* on having the *resources* to do it. *Thank you* for being generous to righteous causes and *thank you* in advance for your *continued* generosity. Indeed, through our acts of righteousness we *can* help each other and our community *through* difficulty to reach a better place.

In the book of Jeremiah, chapter 31, it states: “I will *turn* their anguish into joy, uncovering *solace* and even delight *amidst* their heartache”. Engaging in *Teshuvah*, *Tefillah* and *Tzedakah* we do the *only* productive thing we *can* do when we meet a serious challenge: we *go through* it, together. We find a constructive path into the future and we lead with our hope. In doing so we arm ourselves with the incredible resources of our beautiful, relevant and ancient tradition. We may *not* be

able to take away pain wholesale, or always make the challenges magically *disappear*, and we cannot always avert the severe decree. But we *can* make sure that we “uncover solace and even delight” *amidst* the heartache. And we *can* maintain our belief that our efforts will *one day* turn anguish into joy.

To illustrate, I share a classic Hasidic story: A child is walking in the forest, surrounded by sun-dappled oak trees. He climbs through the brambles and plays in the fallen leaves until the moment he realizes - *he is completely lost*. He *tries* to find his way out but each path seems to lead him deeper into the forest. When the sun begins to sink he grows increasingly afraid. But just then he sees *another* child approaching in the distance and he calls out to her excitedly. “It is so good to see you. I am lost, can you show me the way out of the forest?” “I wish I could,” she says, “I’m lost too. But take my hand - we will find our way **through** this forest *together*.”

When problems lie before us, it is perfectly logical to first and foremost attempt to find a *solution* to them - to find our way *out* of the forest. And of course, that is often what we would try to do. So when

we see *others* struggling, we also often seek first to find a way to fix *their* problem. Yet, A) *sometimes* what people need *most* is compassionate listening and **not** someone to try to fix things. I know *I* have made that mistake before and people have said to me, “I don’t *need* you to solve it, I just want you to *listen*”. And B), as this story points out, we don’t always have the *ability* to solve someone’s problem anyway. In fact, for complex issues, we *rarely* can. But the story also teaches us that when we *don’t* have a quick fix, like the girl who did not know a ready path out of the forest, there is still plenty we *can* do. We can see the other’s pain, we can be present for them, we can offer whatever aid we are able, and we can *accompany* those who are lost or suffering through the difficult journey ahead, *remaining by their side* as they make their way *through* the inevitable challenges that will arise.

In a manner that resonates with my own experience as a rabbi, in her book, Rabbi Brous reflects on her career, and notes that some of the most powerful moments she has had as a rabbi, amidst *all* of the diverse and intense experiences of congregational life, are the human encounters she had, when what was required, first and foremost, was bringing her

presence, informed by the wisdom of our tradition, in order to connect with others during life-changing moments of difficulty, joy or sadness. At these times, she could not *remove* the pain or *solve* the problem. But she could be a wise and comforting presence. It is what Brous calls the *Amen Effect*, how we, as both individuals and a community, **respond** to the events and rhythms of others, just as we respond “Amen” to the *multitude* and various prayers recited in our tradition. As she writes, “Reflecting on these experiences, I am struck by the essential nature of the bonds of *togetherness*. I have learned that human beings are fundamentally, deeply relational beings with an innate yearning to be known. To be seen, imperfect and striving. To find our way through the forest, together.”

“To be seen, imperfect and striving” as we find our way through - such apt words for how our tradition asks us to approach this very day. On Yom Kippur we lay bare our deficiencies and our struggles. We state *publicly* that we are imperfect and that we are striving to do better. Like people lost in the forest, together, **today**, we *all* hold hands, so to speak. **Today**, we chant the *Al Chet*, confessing our sins, *together*, out loud, and

in the plural. **Today**, we share with each other that though we may not know the exact route out of the forest, we commit to finding it, *together*. With each other, with our traditions, and with our collective wisdom to guide us, we give each other the confidence, comfort, strength and inspiration we *all* need, to move forward and to take *one step after the next* towards our desired destination.

And after the year that we have had, and with all that still lies in front of us, it can seem at times that finding and walking that path out of the forest feels as arduous as attempting to push a boulder uphill. But in the spirit of coming *together* to face our challenges, instead of picturing yourself alone attempting to move that huge stone, what if instead you pictured thousands, maybe millions, of people pushing *with* you. How does the task seem in this *new* picture? I imagine, much more manageable. And what about the ability to achieve a positive future? Significantly more hopeful.

Or maybe even better, imagine that boulder of challenges broken up into small stones that we can each manage to carry individually. Like when we at Beth El prepare for all of you each Rosh Hashanah: I depend

on each staff member and lay leader to do their part. Doing this alone would be impossible. Imagine every one of us in each situation we face as a community, doing what we *are* able, carrying the stone that we *can* each lift, walking *together* with our burdens, supporting one another, as we push through the forest to reach the other side.

For ultimately Yom Kippur *is* an optimistic holiday. In fact, it can be seen as one of the *happiest* days of the year. Based on our understanding of Gd's love for us and Gd's great mercy, we enter Yom Kippur with humility but leave with *confidence* that we can start the New Year refreshed and renewed. As we proclaim in the iconic prayer of *Neilah*, the final service of the holiday, *Pitchu Lanu Sha'ar* "Open the gates of light, blessing, joy, salvation, help, prosperity, kindness, peace and repentance. . . Go forth *joyfully*, and with a *full* heart partake of your meal and drink your wine". On Yom Kippur we can be made clean and whole again; we can be given a new lease on life. And as our liturgy reflects, that is surely something to celebrate!

As we know, sadly, in the life of a community, tragedies abound. Loved ones die before we are ready for them to go and life presents

challenges that make things more difficult in *enduring* ways. And tragedies happen to our people, as on Oct 7th, like they have for many centuries throughout our history. These moments do indeed change us, *forever*. We cannot *erase* the terrible things that have happened to us.

We cannot completely *avert* the decree, or simply *eliminate* the pain, or find a perfect solution to *remove* the complex challenges that lie ahead.

But as the girl in the forest from my story teaches us, there *is* a great deal we *can* do, *together*, to help us all *through* it. *Teshuvah*, return to your values, to your community, to our traditions and to the deep well of love we each have for life and for one another. *Tefillah*, pray, come together to assert your values, to celebrate our traditions, and to find both solace and inspiration. And *Tzedakah*: together we can act in righteousness.

We can advocate, share our resources and take actions to transform the challenges we face into *opportunities* for redemption, rebuilding and ultimately joy. *Today* we begin anew. *Today* we raise our sights to what *could be*, instead of being stuck on *what is*. And *today*, we come together and collectively *commit*: to helping each other *pass through* the challenges that lie ahead, to bring the light we know awaits us on the

other side. *Today* we come to partake in the Amen Effect, of compassionately responding to the events of each other's lives. For as our rabbis established over two thousand years ago, that is what it means to be part of a Jewish community. *Gmar Hatimah Tovah* - May we all be sealed for a year of effective *Teshuvah*, *Tefillah* and *Tzedakah*, so that together we can transform the harshness of our destiny and pass through the challenges to once again reach the joy. Amen!