

Gam Zeh Ya'avor

It's been too long since I've been to Israel. My heart aches. I miss the days of traveling around the country, visiting my friends and family, shopping, eating, studying and connecting to my Jewish heritage and learning.

Each and every time I go to Jerusalem, I make my way to the Old City. I make my way to a magical jewelry shop called Hadaya—a jewelry shop I found on my very first trip to Israel in 2001; the trip that Adam and I met on and fell in love on.

Since we can't be there now, let me paint a picture for you: tucked in the winding streets of the Old City, this ancient shop was said to be the source of a magic ring from the time of our wisest king, King Solomon. King Solomon had a devoted servant named **beh-NAY-ah**. Benaiah was the King's favorite. He was always eager to serve. He really went above and beyond to do things right. This made other servants terribly jealous of him. King Solomon knew that this discontent was not good for the kingdom. That the discontent would breed, and he needed to put an end to it.

So King Solomon, being so wise, devised a plan to humble Benaiah at the upcoming Passover seder, in front of everyone. King Solomon gave his servant an impossible task—one he knew he could not accomplish. He asked his servant to go out and find a magical ring—a ring that King Solomon had never seen before-but had only heard of its unique power. A ring that, when someone was happy and looked at it, would make them sad and when someone was sad, and looked at it, would make them happy.

Benaiah embraced this task immediately, "Of course, my king," he said, I will try my hardest. I will go to the ends of the land." And so he did. Benaiah sent out all of his helpers near and far, and they all came back empty-handed. No one had seen this magical ring. No one had heard of this magical ring. They came back with **neat, nadda, klum, shum devar, zippo.**

As Passover approached and his deadline was nearing, Benaiah saw a little jewelry shop on a winding street, and decided to go in. Benaiah asked the old man behind the counter, "Do you have a ring here that, when someone is very, very sad and they see it, they will become happy, and when they are very, very happy and they see it, they will become sad?"

The old shopkeeper thought for a moment, pulled out a very, very simple ring, brought his magnifying glass out and etched a saying in Hebrew onto the ring. Benaiah, who was a servant and couldn't read at all, got excited at the prospect that he had something to bring back to King Solomon that might be magical. He ran back to the palace.

It was just about time for the Passover seder. He waited to be called on by King Solomon. As the meal went on, everyone started to stir with anticipation, knowing that Benaiah had been given this impossible task.

King Solomon called on Benaiah and said, "Benaiah, my servant, have you found me this

magical ring?” And Benaiah said, “I have,” and brought out this very plain, simple ring with a few words etched on it. King Solomon, on seeing how plain this ring appeared, smiled. He looked out, ready to teach his favorite servant a lesson in humility. King Solomon looked down at the ring; his smile started to expand—and then the smile began to fade. A tear welled up in his eyes and dripped down his cheek. The ring had caused King Solomon, who had been very happy only seconds ago, to become sad as he read: “*Gam Zeh Ya’avor*”—This too shall pass.

This is such a magical saying in our faith—a saying that oftentimes I struggle with. Because just as King Solomon said, in my happiest moments, when things are going so well, I can’t imagine them going better, I have my Jewish worry deep inside of me. My worry is that the other shoe is going to drop. My worry is that these happy moments cannot possibly last forever. My need to savor every single one of them, to seize the day, to not take anything in life for granted.

And also, just the opposite—when the days seem longer than usual, when the hours drag on, when the moments seem harder than anyone can bear—this simple phrase brings me comfort.

This summer, for myself and so many of you—absolutely for our congregation—has been hard. It began with a national tragedy. Sarah Milgram, along with her fiancé, was gunned down in DC. Our community came together. We did our best to comfort her parents, her brother and each other after the horrific act of violent anti-Semitism.

Just as the summer was off to a terrible start, we had more and more loss. Our dear Rabbi Karol, who grew up at B’nai Jehudah, who went off to serve Jewish congregations and then retired by coming home to work and volunteer in the community that raised him. Died unexpectedly after back surgery—And it’s so hard. Rabbi Karol should be on this bimah with us today. He should be here singing. It is a loss felt by our entire B’nai Jehudah family.

In the midst of caring for our congregational family, I needed to take personal time to grieve the personal loss of my mother who battled courageously and died of leukemia—a fight she was not ready to lose.

Our congregation also lost Jack Corral this summer at the young age of 17. Way too soon. Way before his time. Tom and Alice Lewinsohn, fixtures to our community, are both not with us this year. And the losses continued. Too many to stand and tell you about today, but they were numerous and heartbreaking. New fatal diagnoses and numerous near misses caught aneurisms and people saved after 15 minutes of CPR on the operating table.

Our team has had a rough time. I have had a rough summer. Many of us have been deeply disturbed by the news. People are worried about the stock market and their investments, their civil rights and the rights of others, foreign affairs and anti-Semitism at home, what is happening in Israel and how Israel is perceived. There is too much to worry about.

During the week of shiva for my mother—I did not watch the news, I did not doom scroll and I did not look at email or newspapers. I can’t even remember another week when I have ever

been that disconnected. But it was necessary.

That thought— “*Gam Zeh Ya’avor*”—interrupts us in the midst of the life we are living to tell us that nothing lasts forever, neither joy nor sorrow. This simple comfort is sometimes all that we have.

In hard situations, these words provide a glimmer of hope. Someone receives a terrible diagnosis; someone is going through a divorce. One day the pain will subside and the worst will be behind us. It might not be soon enough, but one day.

I like that in the story of King Solomon, this shattering truth appears on a small ring. *Gam Zeh Ya’avor* can be incredibly jolting, almost too harsh to look at all the time. As a rabbi, my job is to comfort the agitated and agitate the comfortable. But can you imagine if we went around the room on a Friday night and as people called out their good news from that week, instead of our joyful “Mazel tov,” we said with a smile, “*Gam Zeh Ya’avor*—This too shall pass.” We are celebrating our 25th wedding anniversary, *Gam Zeh Ya’avor*. Our first grandchild was born—I just got a great new job—... *Gam Zeh Ya’avor*.

But even during the most happy, significant, exciting times in our lives, we need to pay attention—we must enjoy these good times while we can. *Gam Zeh Ya’avor*. Relish happy moments! Savor them, celebrate them. Don’t let a birthday or anniversary moment slip by unnoticed. Make each and every one of them count.

Children can demonstrate this saying in fast-forward speed, because no stage in their development seems to last very long. If your infant wakes up every night at 2:--am, just wait—this too shall pass. If your three-year-old is sweet and cute one moment, I’m confident it’s only a matter of time before they have a serious case of the “NOs!” *Gam Zeh Ya’avor*. It’s hard to remember when they are teens! But I hear one day, they will want our advice again.

Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel reminds us that “Judaism is not the pursuit of happiness; it’s the pursuit of meaning.” It’s up to us to make the moments of our lives count, because good or bad, happy or sad, they won’t last.

The great singer/songwriter Debbie Friedman taught, “Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy” (Psalm 126). You cannot appreciate or recognize joy unless you have felt true sorrow.

This summer I have tried to not mask the pain. I can’t and do not want to dismiss the pain I’m feeling. The losses of this summer are devastating, and while the grief will ebb and flow over time—*Gam Zeh Ya’avor*—we can still make meaning in its wake. We can sow tears and reap joys. We have within us the strength to do this.

Debbie Friedman herself suffered a debilitating neurological disorder for twenty years—one which hindered her ability to move freely, and sometimes even move at all—yet she kept singing and performing. She continued to inspire others. And with an awareness of *Gam Zeh*

Ya'avor, she left behind a beautiful legacy. Among the many songs she gave us is the *Mishebeirach*, which we often sing—the prayer for healing. It asks, “May the source of strength... help us find the courage to make our lives a blessing.”

What is this bravery but the courage to make meaning in the time that we have? She wrote the *Misheiberach* with a friend, Rabbi Setel. Together, they purposely translated the Hebrew words, “*refuah sh’leima*” as the “*renewal* of body and the renewal of spirit,” rather than the “*repair* of body and spirit.” Why? Because at the time they had many friends dying of AIDs for whom complete repair was impossible, and yet—they knew there could be solace in prayer by finding the courage to make their lives meaningful. Sometimes the only form of healing that is available to us is spiritual.

Friedman and Setel intended the song not only to be a prayer to help others heal, but a prayer sung by the community as a whole; because we all have moments of brokenness, and we all need renewal. To accept loss and embrace life, this is the essence of Jewish meaning-making. ([Setel in Forward](#) and [Kveller](#).)

Elie Wiesel was right. Happiness doesn’t last. Neither does sorrow. **But meaning does.** It’s found in the blessings we find in all the times of our life, if we practice the courage and intention to notice them.

In some versions of the tale, the story of King Solomon and the magic ring ends with the Wise King wearing the ring as a constant reminder that our hurts and happiness are both fleeting. Even King Solomon needed the comfort and awareness that all things change.

When I will return to Jerusalem? Will the same special jewelry shop be there? Waiting for me? No matter what, I can carry the memory of my trip to the shop with me, and I can create sacred spaces here at home. I can find the courage to look for meaning and recognize blessings, even as I sow tears.

Let *Gam Zeh Ya'avor* jolt you from your complacency and enrich your life.

Don’t waste a moment!

Be gracious for your miracles, find fortitude in your sorrow,
and make meaning, together, of this life.

This year, I pray for me and my family, and for you and your families,
that you reap joys and that if you must have sorrow—
that you remember that your pain will not last forever.

Gam Zeh Ya'avor

This, too, shall pass.