

“You Turn My Mourning Into Dancing”
Rosh Hashanah 5782
Rabbi Kelly Levy

Believe. This simple, yet substantive word is packed with meaning. It’s filled with emotion. It speaks to a higher level of connection, connection with others, connection with yourself, connection with the beyond. It’s powerful. It’s commanding. It’s also the word taped above Coach Ted Lasso’s office door.

Who is Ted Lasso, you might be thinking? Or, you might be laughing as you picture that bright, yellow sign sitting crookedly over the doorframe of the Richmond football coaching office. Whether you have seen the show “Ted Lasso” or not, just stick with me for a few more minutes. I promise this will all make sense.

The premise of “Ted Lasso” is simple; an American football coach named Ted Lasso agrees to take the head coaching position of a British soccer club, despite having zero experience with that type of football. Yes, it’s absurd. And yes, it’s absolutely hilarious. But what is most striking about this show is the positivity, optimism, and good-natured joy that the entire cast seem to exude through the screen.

Jason Sudeikis, one of the creators of the show, as well as the main star, portrays a jovial, happy-go-lucky guy who, “cares more about people than wins.” This fictional character’s approach to coaching soccer, as well as his approach to life, stems from a deep-seeded belief that all people deserve happiness, that everyone should find joy. He is rarely without a smile on his face, his funny, yet poignant one-liners fill you with gratitude, and his

eternal optimism makes you want to believe in a better world. Frankly, this is the show I have personally needed for the past 18+ months as we continue to slog through the pandemic, wildfires, political strife, serious climate change issues, and the rest of the lengthy list of things that seem to consume our every day.

The show is currently in the midst of its second season and, while I don't want to give anything away, certain new developments have revealed that Ted Lasso may not actually be the happiest man on the planet. For most viewers, it's completely shocking to see someone who always appears loving, caring, and downright joyful suddenly seem deeply troubled. I would also say it's an all-too-common situation for people to project one image to the world, while keeping their internal battles hidden.

How many of us understand on a deep level what it means to hide a part of yourself from everyone? How many of us feel like our facemasks do more than keep us healthy, that they allow us to physically build a wall between ourselves and the rest of the world? How many of us have avoided telling others their true feelings, their concerns, their fears, their reality? How many of us have denied the despair, the depression, the immense sadness that has built up over time? How many of us have considered the state of the world, put on a happy face, and pretended like everything was, ok?

I've thought long and hard about this. I decided it was time to come out and say it. *I am not ok*. I am not ok with what is happening in our world. I am not ok with the earth heating up so rapidly that the ice caps are melting, and new weather patterns cause insane winter storms to hit Texas. I am not ok with millions of people seeking refuge from their home countries because they are too dangerous to live in. I am not ok with a piece of fabric

worn on a face becoming a political issue. I am not ok with governments continuing to restrict and limit the rights of people to make choices for their own bodies. I am not ok with the growing number of people experiencing homelessness, and a city that turned their back on the thousands of human beings in our midst that need a roof or even a tent over their head. I am not ok with People of Color fearing for their lives because they decided to go for a drive, or to buy something in a store, or sit in their apartment, or go to sleep at night.

I am not ok. And, I know that many, most, or all of you feel the same. This past year has been exceptionally difficult. We joined together online last year, a year filled with promise that it would be better, that we would be vaccinated and could celebrate 5782 in our building. And here we are again, waiting impatiently to, as Rabbi Folberg said last night, reemerge from our caves once again.

I know that you are coming here today to find inspiration, hope, maybe even optimism. I wish I could be like Ted Lasso. I wish I could help us all to feel lighter, to believe in the good and hope that it shines bright. I wish I could offer some words of wisdom and guidance for making it through this extremely challenging moment in history we are all living through.

So, instead, I humbly offer this: When I think about it, I am like Ted Lasso, at least the newest version of Ted that we've seen in recent episodes. I am standing up and telling the world, No, I am not ok. But, (and this is the important part) I will be. And, you will be, too.

I know this because, as human beings, we have a wide range of emotions. I know that we can be simultaneously full of despair and feel hope blossom within us. I know that we can be filled with rage and use that rage to fuel

our passions and create lasting change. I know that our mourning can turn into dancing, and I know that we can find calm within a storm. We obviously experience this ourselves, but we also see it when we read about God, the very being in whose image we were created.

For centuries our tradition has taught us to embrace these emotions, to learn from them, to grow from them. The study of Mussar, the Jewish spiritual practice that provides guidelines for how to live an ethical and meaningful life, teaches that by welcoming our emotions, we may indeed become the best versions of ourselves. As Alan Morinis explains in his book, *Everyday Holiness*, “[Mussar] shines a light on the causes of suffering and shows us how to realize our highest spiritual potential, including everyday experiences infused with happiness, trust, and love” (p. 8).¹

Mussar emphasizes the need to sit with our feelings, to allow ourselves to experience the range of emotions that comes so naturally to us, including the difficult, painful, challenging, even (and possibly especially) the negative. Once we give ourselves space to feel sadness, to mourn and grieve, to be angry, to sit in the misery, we can actually begin to transform. We can own the misery, the sadness, the despair, and we can then channel it into healing.

We also have to find compassion for ourselves, for our emotions, for our personal experiences. Rabbi Folberg shared a story last night about Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Elazar immersing from their cave after 12 years of solitude, study, and escape, only to return because they lacked compassion

¹ Morinis, Alan. “The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar: Everyday Holiness,” Trumpeter Books, 2007.

for others. Today, I offer that in order to find compassion for others, we must start with ourselves.

By giving ourselves the gift of compassion, we can do more than just fuel our passions with anger and unhappiness; we can create emotional sustainability. From self-compassion grows the ability to move into the world and do true *tikkun*, repair. With emotional sustainability, we can do more, create more, and as I said previously, make lasting, important, crucial change.

I am reaching out far and wide, stating and proclaiming that this year MUST be a year of change, a year of good, a year of bettering the world. This year, we MUST decide how to make lasting changes that will truly help our planet, our community, humanity, and future generations.

These changes must begin immediately, and in fact, they began with our initial greeting of *Shana Tova*. In a recent Rosh Hashanah message from Rabbi Rick Jacobs, the President of the Union for Reform Judaism, he shared this beautiful teaching about the words, “*Shana Tova*.” He said:

“It is usually translated as Happy New Year, but the words do not mean ‘Happy New Year.’ The word ‘*tova*’ does not mean happy, it means good. And for us, it is our hope that there be goodness in the year, goodness in each of us. And we know that goodness is something we experience in community, when we’re not disconnected, but rather, connected. And the word ‘*shanah*’ of course means ‘year,’ but it comes from the root ‘to change.’ ‘*L’shanot*’ means to change something. And, of course this is the season where we try to change that which mars us and our communities and our world, and

to commit ourselves to plant those seeds of goodness and wholeness that we so desperately need.”

I take Rabbi Jacobs’ words to heart, and I hope you will, too. This is indeed a year of change, of necessary change, a year of goodness and wholeness.

I also take Ted Lasso’s words to heart: “Takin’ on a challenge is a lot like riding a horse. If you’re comfortable while you’re doin’ it, you’re probably doin’ it wrong.”

It will not be easy to make some of these changes. It will be challenging, it will be frustrating, it will cause a great deal of heartache for some. But this is a challenge I believe all of us are up for. I believe it because I believe in all of us. I believe that goodness and wholeness will win. I believe that despite the dire situation we seem to be in, the majority of us want what’s good for the world and future generations.

We may not feel ok right now. We may feel like the world is coming to an end, that it’s nearly impossible to see through the darkness. It is ok to not be ok. It is ok to sit with those feelings. It is ok to experience them. It is ok to retreat back into the cave and wait it out for just a little bit longer. It is also ok to tell someone that you’re not ok. Reach out and let someone provide you with a safe space, a place to let you be just as you are. Perhaps even allow yourself to face God with honesty about how you’re feeling. Your personal prayers may provide you with an opening to the world, an opportunity to let go of some of the past year. In doing so, you can start to heal.

For me, in this moment, I can feel a wellspring of hope building inside of myself. I can feel some of that optimism and excitement returning. I can see

a light at the end of this long, twisting tunnel. I am increasing my self-compassion so that I can turn my mourning into dancing. I am working towards channeling that misery into action.

I don't have a magical solution for any of this. Honestly, I am just feeling energized at this moment because I know so many of you feel the same, and that gives me solace. Knowing that we are all in this together, dealing with the trauma of the past 18 months together, hoping and believing that the world will be better, together. That togetherness, that connectedness, that is what will push us through.

I'll leave you with one final Ted Lasso pearl of wisdom in the hope it brings you some encouragement and inspiration, as it was intended: "Most of the time, change is a good thing. Now, I think that's what it's all about.

Embracing change. Being brave. Doing whatever you have to, so that everyone in your life can move forward in theirs."

Let's move forward, together, to a year of goodness, a year of change, a year of peace. Amen. Shana Tova.