

RH 1- Sept. 16, 2023

1 Tishrei 5784

FINAL To honor the memory of Rabbi Harold Kushner

When the history of twentieth-century Jewry is written, I believe that one of the most important, impactful, influential thinkers, will be Rabbi Harold Kushner, who passed away this year on Friday, April 28. He was 88 years old. I met Rabbi Kushner when I became the Jewish Family Educator at Temple Israel of Natick, where he was the Rabbi. He had a quiet, gentle voice. He was an unassuming suburban Rabbi. He led services, taught students of all ages and counseled congregants through pain and grief.

The Kushner's first child was a boy. Aaron was a happy, active child, growing normally...until the age of 1 year, when he stopped growing. He was diagnosed with a rare disease, called progeria, in which the body ages rapidly. The family learned this diagnosis when Aaron was 3 years old, just hours after the birth of their second child, a daughter.

I met Aaron when I was 7 months pregnant with my first child. I was the gym teacher for the Solomon Schechter Day School which at the time was located at a local Newton synagogue. When the 4th grade came to the make-shift gym, Aaron was doing a pull-up on the ponytail of one of his classmates. He was 10 years old. Physiologically he was in his 60s. His skin was wrinkled. He had no hair on his body and he weighed only 25 pounds. But they were both laughing. He was comfortable with his classmates, as they were with him. And he was as smart as a whip. He died in 1977 two days after his 14th birthday!

Because of the profound tragedy of Aaron's death, the Kushner family was confronted with what the Rabbi himself described as "the most important and terrifying question a person will ever confront: 'Why do bad things happen to innocent people?'"¹ Even as a young Rabbi, Rabbi Kushner had encountered and counseled many families who had

¹ When Bad things happen...inside cover

experienced profound tragedies in their lives. But with Aaron's death, he realized there was a significant misunderstanding of God and God's relationship with humankind, that he needed to address.

Like many children who die at a young age, Aaron worried that he would be forgotten because his life was so short. This book was Rabbi Kushner's project but it is Aaron's story. Rabbi Kushner offers a compassionate explanation of why his family and others in a similar situation had to suffer as they did. It has nothing to do with a God of judgment and punishment.

Rabbi Kushner knew he would write a book. He didn't know what its title would be, or even exactly what the subject would be, but he knew he would write it for his family and for others who would find themselves in a similar predicament.

Why Do Bad things happen to good people? is that book. In Rabbi Kushner's words, it can be shared "with the person who has been hurt by life, by death, illness or injury, rejection or disappointment- and one who knows in his heart that if there is justice in the world, he deserves better."²

Despite everything, Rabbi Kushner still believed in God. He wanted to share his understanding that God's relationship with humankind was "a relationship that would offer peace of mind, [and that would] affirm humanity"³ He wanted to help people develop and be able to depend on, a loving and comforting God. That was his relationship with God but it was not a simple task to share his perception. He wanted people to understand that their anger at God was not well founded and to dispel God's image as an angry God, punishing people for behavior God didn't like.

² Ibid , back flap of cover

³ Ibid

I don't imagine the average person would ask and be compelled to address the question of why bad things happen to innocent people. But Aaron's *life* and the family's experience, compelled Rabbi Kushner to share his perspective on God's role in our lives. Aaron's life made the book possible and his death made it necessary.

As many of you know, I have a twin brother and two younger sisters. It was not always that way. When my brother and I were 6 years old. We had a younger sister who was three. Our parents had a fourth child; a son named Roger. He was born without a bile duct and was certain to die at a very young age. The doctors recommended, given that there were three healthy children at home, Roger should not be introduced to the family. He would live with a woman who would care for him. He died at the age of two.

My parents were wonderful, smart, generous and loving people. I'm not sure how they dealt with the death of this son, the brother I never knew. They told us little about him, even when he died. I don't know whether and what counseling they must have engaged in. But, there was no conversation with us. What I do remember was a pretty normal life doing errands, going to school, Hebrew School and playing with friends. But always, when we saw a young boy, my mother would cry.

What is remarkable about Rabbi Kushner's book (this one and others) is that he was able to speak to people all over the world in a way that would bring them comfort and give them back their God. He wrote it for all those who wanted to go on believing, but whose anger at God made it hard for them to hold onto their faith and be comforted by religion. He wrote it for people who had a profound love for God, but a misguided devotion. So many people feel they need to defend God, rather than accuse God, so they blamed themselves for their suffering, persuading themselves that their pain was not something God had unfairly sent to them, but something they deserved.⁴

⁴ Ibid, p.4

True story: An 11 year old boy was given a routine eye exam at school. It was discovered that he was nearsighted enough to need glasses. Even though all members of the family wore glasses, for some reason the boy was very upset. One night when his mother was putting him to bed, the story came out. A week before the eye exam, the boy and some friends had found a copy of Playboy magazine. They looked at the pictures of naked women, but they felt like they were doing something naughty. When a few days later the boy failed the eye test at school he jumped to the conclusion that God was beginning to punish him with blindness.⁵ “Not true” Rabbi Kushner would say. If the boy felt guilty about what he did, he could and should share his anxiety with his parents. Somehow, he must know, however, that God would always be there to comfort him. God is not in the business of punishment!

Rabbi Kushner was able to talk about God in a way that would allow ordinary people, who do not usually talk about God at all, to find comfort and hope. His narrative makes God real and enables millions of people, Jews and non-Jews alike, to relate to God without defending or explaining God or feeling guilty themselves.

When bad things happen to good people is not a theological or an academic book. It presents a perspective of our lives which we can embrace. It includes ourselves, our communities and God. When bad things happen to us, we may become angry at God or even at another person or with ourselves; but none of that would help; it would only make us depressed. If we blame another person, that might scare them, and make it harder for them to help us, precisely when we need it most.

Everyone gets their share, sometimes more, of anguish and heartbreak. Everyone knows what it feels like to be hurt by life. Rabbi Kushner told an old Chinese tale about a woman whose only son had died. She went to the holy man and asked: ‘What prayers, what magical incantations do you have to bring my son back to life?’ Instead of sending her

⁵ Kushner, When bad things, p.12

away or trying to reason with her, the holy man said to her: ‘Fetch me a mustard seed from a home that has never known sorrow. We will use it to drive the sorrow out of your life.’ The woman set off at once in search of that magical mustard seed. At one house after another, she knocked on the door and said “I am searching for a house that has never known sorrow. Is this one like that? It is very important to me?” she added. But everyone told her she had come to the wrong place and proceeded to regale her with their own tales of sadness and misfortune. Often, she would say to herself “Who is better able to help these poor, unfortunate people than I, who have had misfortune myself”. And she would stay and comfort them. One after the other she would console them in their sadness and dissipate their grief. Ultimately, she became so involved in helping others that she forgot about her search for the magic mustard seed. She realized that helping others had driven her own sorrow out of her life.⁶

God does *not* cause bad things to happen to people, Rabbi Kushner teaches. Maybe we just have to call it fate- which Google defines as the development of events beyond a person's control. Floods, fires, earthquakes and all sorts of natural disasters have occurred since the beginning of time. We know that to be true even from reading our Torah. But God is not a micromanager. The laws of nature were established and God cannot and will not interfere with them. Sometimes in Torah these natural disasters are attributed to a mood or anger of God. An explanation that served some other purpose for the writers of Torah. (Have you heard an explanation of the “waters parting” so the Israelites could cross the sea, being attributed to a tsunami, for example? Even that would have been an act of nature, not something God would have created for the benefit of God’s people.)

When a person, especially a child, asks “Why didn’t I get what I prayed for?” the answer is often problematic. So many of us don’t know how to answer that question without words that will produce feelings of anger or hurt or even hopelessness within a child (or an adult

⁶ When bad things happen...pp110-111

for that matter.) When we say *Une'taneh Tokef*, and either (gently) beat our chests or rub our hearts with love, as I have suggested, I imagine most of us feel guilty or anxious, or hopeless. Personally, I get anxious as we approach that part (and others) of the High Holy Day services. Each year I pray with my mind and my heart and so much determination. As a young child I bargained with God like so many others: "Please God help me get the lead in the school play." Although it is not immoral to pray with those words, it certainly is inaccurate and ill informed. As I got older and more learned about religion, I prayed and asked God for courage or strength to bear what I thought would be unbearable. Over the years and in connection with other people I have discovered that kind of prayer usually helps me find my own reserves of faith or courage to which I had previously not had access.

Rabbi Kushner suggests "we can change our understanding of what it means to pray and what it means for prayers to be answered."⁷

The Talmud, the compilation of Jewish law to which I so often refer, presents a list of prayers that are inappropriate, sometimes because they intend to hurt another or that we are asking God to do something that is impossible. "You can't change the laws of nature" is a profound truth and God can't do that either. So what good is prayer if it can't help us when we hurt?

Jewish tradition reminds us that we can't be truly human, alone. The first thing prayer does is put us in touch with other people. There will be times when we will need a minyan, 10 adult Jews, to say kaddish for a diseased loved one; or times of great joy or frightening moments when we will want to celebrate or have friends gather round us so we don't have to face our fears alone. There are so many different reasons people go to a synagogue to pray. Rabbi Kushner tells a story by Harry Golden, a wonderful, funny and sensitive storyteller in the 1980's. This particular story makes exactly that point. When he

⁷ Ibid p. 115

was young, he asked his father: “IF you don’t believe in God, why do you go to synagogue so regularly?” His father answered, “Jews go to synagogue for all sorts of reasons. My friend Garfinkle, who is Orthodox, goes to talk to God. I go to talk to Garfinkle.”

Knowing that God, our communities, family and friends are there for us, brings comfort and solace. Ours is a God of justice, not of power. That is why God can and will still be on our side, available to comfort and support, even when bad things happen and when we make mistakes-even big ones! God can and will always be in our corner, so to speak. We just need to look a little harder or more deeply into our own souls. “Because our misfortunes are none of [God’s] doing” Rabbi Kushner explains, “we can turn to God for help. We will turn to God not to be judged or even forgiven, not to be rewarded [or] punished, but to be strengthened and comforted.”⁸

So often when I visit a person in the hospital because of a serious accident or illness, I hear “I know why I’m here. It is God’s way of making “me” a better more sensitive person.” Speaking for myself, I’m not inclined to anger but if it were me suffering in the bed, I would be furious. In reality, this is just another example of a person defending God rather than trying to understand what the reality is of the person in front of him. The patient and the comforter must be ready to avail herself of God’s endless comfort and love.

Rabbi Kushner did something virtually miraculous with this book: he talked about God in a way that landed for ordinary people, even those who don’t usually talk or even think about God. He made God real and relatable for millions of people, Jews and non-Jews alike. I do not know of a rabbi whose teaching had a broader reach or a bigger impact than Rabbi Harold Kushner.

Thank you for the opportunity to share his vision with this very special community of Temple B’nai Shalom. As a community we are always “becoming”, seeing and therefore

⁸ Ibid P. 44

influencing each other in profound ways. Together may we continue to elicit possibilities, encourage imagination and awaken hope and be motivated by an ever-expanding compassion.

And may the soul of Rabbi Harold Kushner, rest in peace.