# 3. Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*

## Alan Lew, *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation*

Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, New York: Schocken Books, 1981

**Rabbi Harold Kushner** (1935–) is Rabbi Laureate of Temple Israel of Natick.

If a man who knew nothing about medicine were to walk into the operating room of a hospital and see doctors and nurses performing an operation, he might assume that they were a band of criminals torturing their unfortunate victim. He would see them tying the patient down, forcing a cone over his nose and mouth so that he could not breathe, and sticking knives and needles into him. Only someone who understood surgery would realize that they were doing all this to help the patient, not to torment him. So too, it is suggested, God does painful things to us as His way of helping us. (21)

Such answers are thought up by people who believe very strongly that God is a loving parent who controls what happens to us, and on the basis of that belief adjust and interpret the facts to fit their assumption. It may be true that surgeons stick knives into people to help them, but not everyone who sticks a knife into somebody else is a surgeon. It may be true that sometimes we have to do painful things to people we love for their benefits, but not every painful thing that happens to us is beneficial.

I would find it easier to believe that I experience tragedy and suffering in order to "repair" that which is faulty in my personality if there were some clear connection between the fault and the punishment. A parent who disciplines a child for doing something wrong, but never tells him what he is being punished for, is hardly a model of responsible parenthood. Yet, those who explain suffering as God's way of teaching us to change are at a loss to specify just what it is about us we are supposed to change. (23)

We have all read stories of little children who were left unwatched for just a moment and fell from a window or into a swimming pool and died. Why does God permit such a thing to happen to an innocent child? It can't be to teach a child a lesson about exploring new areas. By the time the lesson is over, the child is dead. Is it to teach parents and baby-sitters to be more careful? That is too trivial a lesson to be purchased at the price of a child's life. Is it to make the parents more sensitive, more compassionate people, more appreciative of life and health because of their experience? Is it to move them to work for better safety standards, and in that way save a hundred future lives? The price is still too high, and the reasoning shows too little regard for the value of an individual life. I am offended by those who suggest that God creates retarded children so that those around them will learn compassion and gratitude. Why should God distort someone else's life to such a degree in order to enhance my spiritual sensitivity? (24)

Alan Lew, *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2003

**Rabbi Alan Lew** (1943–2009) served as the Rabbi at Congregation Beth Sholom in San Francisco. He was Co-Founder of Makor Or, a center for Jewish meditation.

Yom Kippur is the day we all get to read our own obituary. It's a dress rehearsal for our death. That's why we wear a kittel, a shroudlike garment, on this day; why we refrain from life-affirming activities such as eating, drinking, and procreating. We are rehearsing the day of our death, because death, like Yom Kippur, atones.

And what our tradition is affirming with these claims is the healing power of time. What our tradition is affirming is that when we reach the point of awareness, everything in time—everything in the year, everything in our life—conspires to help us. Everything becomes the instrument of our redemption.

The banks of the river roll by. We leave home to return home. Loss is inevitable. Entropy is a fact of life. What's done cannot be undone—but it can be healed; it can even become the instrument of our healing. The year rolls by with all its attendant loss and failure, death and disappointment, but at the end of the year there is a day that heals. Life rolls by, and the same is true of the end of life as well. (29)

And here is the bad news I have come to deliver. This is a true story, and it is not about me or my mother or a man desperate to blow the shofar. It is about you. It is really happening, and it is happening to you, and you are seriously unprepared.

And it is real whether you believe in God or not. Perhaps God made it real and perhaps God did not. Perhaps God created this pageant of judgement and choice, of transformation, of life and of death. Perhaps God created the Book of Life and the Book of Death, Teshuvah, and the blowing of the shofar. Or perhaps these are all just inventions of human culture. It makes no difference. It is equally real in any case. The weeks and the months and the years are also inventions of human culture. Time and biology are inventions of human culture. Language and stories, love and tragedy, are inventions of human culture. But they are all matters of life and death, all real and all inescapable. Even though we invented the idea of weeks, we die when our allotted number of weeks has gone by. So if this event is merely the product of human culture, it is the product of an exceedingly rich culture, one that has been accumulating focus and force for three thousand years.

Or perhaps God made the reality that all this human culture seeks to articulate. Perhaps God made a profoundly mixed world, a world in which every second confronts us with a choice between blessings and curses, life and death; a world in which our choices have incredible consequences; a world in which life and death, blessings and curses, choose us, seek us, find us every moment. And we live with the consequences of our choices. And perhaps we have chosen arbitrary spiritual language to express these things, or perhaps God made human culture so that we would express these things precisely as we have in every detail. It makes no difference. What makes a difference is that it's real and it is happening right now and it is happening to us, and it is utterly inescapable, and we are completely unprepared. This moment is before us with its choices, and the consequences of our past choices are before us, as is the possibility of our transformation. This year some of us will die, and some of us will live, and all of us will change. (105–106)

## COMMENTARY BY JOSHUA LADON

There is likely no better selling book written by a rabbi than Harold Kushner's *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?* The book, which tackles an eternal theological question in simple and clear prose, spoke to a generation of Americans reeling from a decade that saw Vietnam, Nixon, the OPEC embargo,

and the Iranian hostage crisis. As America's stature in the world declined, on the heels of what Tom Wolfe called "the Me decade," Kushner's book found an audience much broader than the congregants of his suburban Conservative synagogue in Natick, Massachusetts. I first encountered it as a bar mitzvah gift in the 1990s.

As a work of Jewish thought, Kushner's account of suffering is a popular, updated version of Maimonidean free will. As an artifact of late twentieth-century American spiritual life, the book offers a snapshot of the American Jewish search for meaning. Together with Alan Lew's *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared,* it tells the story of a spiritual Judaism that is increasingly inwardly focused, serving to answer questions of meaning but lacking commitment to any entrenched Jewish community. The power of these books is that they open doors. They meet the reader in their moment of need and bring them along to a fuller place. But they also predict a Jewish life that is increasingly niche and tailored for the individual to undertake alone.

It is difficult to understand how a book about God written by a rabbi would come to share the *New York Times* bestseller list with *Jane Fonda's Workout Book* and Dr. Joyce Brothers's *What Every Woman Should Know about Men.* Its reach was dramatic! In 1983, Philip Yancey, one of American Christianity's bestselling writers (fourteen million books sold) offered a serious treatment of Kushner's ideas in the Evangelical magazine *Christianity Today.* Noting the book's astonishing sales, he told of the way the book confounded church leaders, forcing a major Christian book distributor to issue a warning notice, "admitting that demand from readers virtually forced them to carry the book but acknowledging that Kushner's answers 'do not present an orthodox Christian theology of suffering.'"

Kushner's book emerges from the tragic loss of a child, his son Aaron, to progeria (rapid aging). It is written in a popular style, peppered with stories of the suffering he encountered as a young pulpit rabbi and his own efforts to comfort the bereaved. He strives for a universal tone and aims to set himself apart from popular notions of suffering. Reflecting on the funeral of a neighborhood boy who was hit by a car when he ran into the street, he references the boy's "clergyman" rather than specifying the officiant's religion by calling him a rabbi, pastor, or priest. Kushner is not interested in a religious polemic but wants to speak broadly to the needs of humanity.

Kushner quotes this clergyman as saying that, "This is not a time for sadness or tears. ... Michael has been taken out of this world of sin and pain with his innocent soul unstained by sin." While Kushner spends time later in the book offering theological arguments regarding suffering, his immediate desire is

to comfort, leading him to reject this view. He writes, "I heard that, and I felt so bad for Michael's parents ... they were being told by the representative of their religion that they should rejoice in the fact that he had died so young and so innocent." Kushner wants to remove God from a conversation about suffering. To Michael's parents and to others, he offers a vision of radical free will in which God steps back, providing humans the ability to be moral.

Beneath Kaplan's responses to individual vignettes of suffering lies the Holocaust. And when Kushner takes up the Holocaust directly, he does not try to explain it away, but he moves instead toward the cultivation of responsible moral action. The Holocaust does not teach us about God but about humanity, that our capacity for good comes with equal capacity for evil: "It happened because Hitler was able to persuade lawyers to forget their commitment to justice[,] ... because democratic governments were unwilling to summon their people to stand up to Hitler as long as their own interests were not at stake." It is free will that enables moral action and it is free will that unleashes evil. And, what then, is religion for? God does not punish nor does God reward. Instead, God is transcendence, God is value, and God is comfort: "the goal of religion should be to help us feel good about ourselves when we have made honest and reasonable, but sometimes painful choices about our lives."

Kushner's book stands at the center of a popular inward turn from community to individuality, a towering example of the Jewish community's entrance in the popular self-help genre. Sociologist Micki McGee has identified the way the gospel of self-improvement employs a secularized version of Max Weber's Protestant ethic through a "therapeutic imperative to find self-fulfillment." It is telling then that Lew's *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation*, published more than two decades later, has become *the* handbook for American Jewish High Holiday survival, aiming to wake up slumbering Jews from their everyday lives.

Lew, whose memoir *One God Clapping: The Spiritual Path of a Zen Rabbi* won the PEN Josephine Miles Award for Literary Excellence, was once on his way to becoming a Buddhist minister when he had an epiphany and decided to become a rabbi. Even after he was ordained as a Conservative rabbi, he never stopped meditating, building a center for Jewish meditation out of San Francisco Congregation Beth Sholom, the pulpit he served from 1991–2005.

Opening the book, we are immediately shaken awake: "You are walking through the world half asleep. It isn't just that you don't know who you are and that you don't know how or why you got here. It's worse than that; these questions never even arise. It is as if you are in a dream." The book's purpose is

to sound an alarm as Lew maps out the "journey" of the Jewish High Holiday season from the ninth of Av in the middle of the summer through the end of Sukkot ten weeks later. This journey, Lew asserts, will be "one of self-discovery, spiritual discipline, self-forgiveness, and spiritual evolution."

If Kushner presents a God for humanity, unencumbered by religion, who has bestowed the gift of free will to all of God's children, Lew presents a Judaism designed for human self-fulfillment, with some God but much more consciousness. For Lew, the Jewish High Holiday cycle is a yearly exercise in attunement and an opportunity for self-transformation. Though Lew addresses the reader individually, there are moments when he draws attention to the need for community and action. In preparation for Rosh Hashanah he exhorts the reader to consider the videotape of their lives, painting a portrait of his own synagogue in a San Francisco neighborhood where homes sell for millions of dollars but people are sleeping on the streets.

Over several pages, he points to the success and wealth of his community and his readers, while simultaneously bringing attention to the small hypocrisies of their lives. From callous gossip to allowing poverty and drug addiction in the larger communities where they live, he weaves the good with the bad noting, "the tape didn't stop running in between the events we imagined were important. It caught all those small, in-between moments too, the moments when we thought no one was watching." But in the end, he does not implore his readers to join in fellowship with other Jews or service to the world around them. Rather, he ends on Sukkot, sitting under the stars, in a makeshift booth where the "illusion of protection falls away, and suddenly we are flush with our life, feeling our life, following our life." It is striking to me that he ends his book here and not with Simchat Torah, a day lived in community, focused on an ever unfolding heritage and tradition. It is not that I think he should have necessarily ended the book in synagogue, but why is he so alone?

These days, when the world's tragedies fly across the internet in moments, when videos of shootings and protests stream endlessly on individual handheld screens, when the boundaries of real and virtual blur into endless cycles of pings, beeps, notifications, and likes, messages of awareness and comfort are more relevant than ever. But in the networked individualism of the early twenty-first century, we cannot leave out the need for deep commitment to something beyond the self. In Abraham Joshua Heschel's *The Sabbath*, Shabbat observance serves as a protection against the far-reaching grasp of industrial society. To enter into the day, one "must first lay down the profanity of clattering commerce, of being yoked to toil." He calls it "a day for ourselves" and a "day for dominating the self."

He asks, "is there any institution that holds out a greater hope for [humanity]'s progress than the Sabbath?" Heschel's concern for the self is bounded with a concern for humanity and the world. For Heschel, the Sabbath enables recognition of God's dominion allowing us to "understand that the world has already been created and will survive without the help of [humans]."

The movement from Heschel to Kushner to Lew tells the story of an American Judaism hungry for meaning and ripe with ideas but simultaneously idiosyncratic and disconnected. These texts represent the possibility of American Judaism, full of vitality and transcending boundaries. But they also offer a warning. The next generation of American Judaism will have to further contend with the lonely Jew, not just sitting alone in their sukkah, but also alone behind the screen of their phone. How do we wake this person from their slumber into the life of service and purpose lived in community?