

Bad Things, Good People

Gut Yuntov.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his ground-breaking book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, shares the following anecdote from the early days of his rabbinate:

“I was a young rabbi just starting out in my profession, when I was called on to try to help a family through an unexpected and almost unbearable tragedy. This middle-aged couple had one daughter, a bright nineteen-year-old girl who was in her freshman year at an out-of-state college. One morning at breakfast, they received a phone call from the university infirmary. “We have some bad news for you. Your daughter collapsed while walking to class this morning. It seems a blood vessel burst in her brain. She died before we could do anything for her. We’re terribly sorry.” Stunned, the parents asked a neighbor to come in to help them decide what steps to take next. The neighbor notified the synagogue, and I went over to see them that same day. I entered their home, feeling very inadequate, not knowing any words that could ease their pain. I anticipated anger, shock, grief, but I didn’t expect to hear the first words they said to me: “You know, Rabbi, we didn’t fast last Yom Kippur.”¹

We didn’t fast last Yom Kippur? In this simple, heartbreaking sentence, there are many layers of questions, fears, and confusion.

How did this happen?

Where was God?

Was God punishing our daughter or us for something?

Are we somehow to blame for this loss?

¹ Kushner, Harold S. (2007). *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (p. 13). Anchor. Kindle Edition.

As Jews and as human beings, we have asked these questions, and questions like them, for millennia. Why do the righteous suffer? Why do bad things happen to good people? And, conversely, why do good things seem to come to those who are wicked, immoral, or unethical?

We all have these questions, and congregants searching for answers come to me at least once per week. One congregant wonders why his family has been stricken by so many unending health problems. One congregant wonders why she has been unable to find suitable employment after looking for several demoralizing years. Another congregant struggles to understand why a dear friend was murdered in a random crime. Yet another congregant wonders why he was in such a serious car accident that, in a split second, changed everything about his life and wellbeing.

Jewish thinkers and texts have long wrestled with the presence of evil, illness, and loss. I wish I could stand here today and tell you that there was one clear philosophy or one definitive answer in our heritage, but, in the great tradition of “2 Jews, 3 opinions,” we have many beliefs from which to choose, going all the way back to the Bible.

The Bible² presents a very mixed view about the presence of good and evil in our world. The Book of Proverbs, for instance, sets forth a clear reward and punishment system, as it contains the words, “The righteous can look forward to joy, but the hope of the wicked is doomed.”³ Psalms also warns of cause and effect, where living in a righteous manner leads to rewards: “I have been young and am now old, But I have never seen a righteous man abandoned, Or his children seeking bread.”⁴ Yet, we see hints of a sense of injustice or inequity in such texts as Jeremiah, who asks, “Why does the way of the wicked prosper?”⁵ Job, the most maligned, tortured man of the entire Bible, is confronted with the question of good and evil, and God says to him, in an attempt to put an end to his questions: “Would you discover the mystery of God? Would you discover the limit of the Almighty?”⁶

² Information on each major theology is culled from Rifat Soncino/Daniel Syme's *Finding God* (2002) UAHC Press.

³ (Prov 10:28)

⁴ (Ps 37:25)

⁵ (Jer 12:1)

⁶ (Job 11:7)

Another excerpt from Psalms suggests that, if we just wait long enough, we will see that the righteous find justice, and the wicked are appropriately punished. The text explains to us: “How great are Your deeds, O Lord, Your thoughts are very deep. The ignorant man does not comprehend them, Nor does the fool understand them. When the wicked spring up like grass, And workers of iniquity flourish, It is that they may be destroyed forever. . . . The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree, And grow mighty like a cedar of Lebanon. . . . To declare that the Lord is upright, My Rock in Whom there is no unrighteousness.”⁷ The psalmist wants to justify that the world’s apparent evil does not compromise God’s justice and righteousness. First, he does this by comparing the wicked to grass. The grass seed sprouts quickly; and one might predict that, because of this, the grass will ultimately grow high and strong. Yet an experienced observer will know that quickly sprouting grass will not only slow, but that grass is relatively temporary – it withers and dies within a few months. Conversely the righteous are compared to a palm or cedar tree. Unlike the more quickly sprouting and dying grass, the tree will grow more slowly and it will grow to be tall and straight and will last for generations.⁸

In the days of the Mishnah and the Talmud, between the years 200-500 CE, the rabbis began to take a more nuanced view of good and evil. They no longer perpetuated a simple system of reward for the righteous and punishment for the wicked. One Talmudic text reads, “Rava says: If a man sees that painful sufferings visit him, let him examine his conduct. If he examines and finds nothing objectionable, let him attribute it to the neglect of the study of Torah. If he did attribute it thus, and still does not find this to be the cause, let him be sure that these are chastenings of love.”⁹ In other words, you may think that you are righteous, but if you find yourself suffering in some way, it must be because you are not as righteous as you thought.

A Jewish philosopher in Alexandria writing in the first century CE named Philo, agreed with this theory. He felt that if something bad happened to you, it must be because you aren’t righteous enough. Philo also felt that you might be punished for something your ancestors did – not much you could do about that!

⁷ (Psalm 92:6–8, 13, 16)

⁸ Kushner, Harold S. (2007). *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (p. 18-19). Anchor. Kindle Edition.

⁹ (BT B’rachot 5a)

And, even if you truly are righteous, there are those that say God might just be punishing you out of love. That's the kind of God that I like – one that punishes me as a way to show me how much I'm loved. Yet, the rabbis also identify that there seems to be much about the ways of good and evil that they do not understand, and they admit it without hesitation in *Pirkei Avot*: “It is not in our power to understand the prosperity of the wicked, nor the sufferings of the righteous.”¹⁰

If these theories were all we had to work with – if this was all our tradition taught – I know that I would feel confused and powerless. I would wonder – how will I ever know if I am being righteous enough? I could strive for ritual perfection, but what if I make some tiny, unconscious mistake? Never mind my own mistakes, but how will I know whether or not I might be punished for some transgression committed by my great-grandfather? This way of thinking is unacceptable to me.

The next major shift in belief is found in the teaching of the Jewish mystics. The Kabbalists taught that the world was created when a vessel containing all of God's Divine light suddenly shattered, therefore sending Divine sparks out into the universe. These sparks entered every single thing, creature, and person. The Kabbalists also taught that this initial brokenness is the cause of evil, illness, and loss in the world. But we can do something to heal the broken vessel which contained God's Divine light. When we do mitzvot, good deeds, and take care of each other, we bring sparks back together, reuniting parts of the Divine Light, and healing some of this brokenness. This repairing – which they called *Tikkun Olam* – slowly helps eradicate evil in our world and heal the universe.

A 17th century philosopher who was very controversial in his time, and even excommunicated for some of his seemingly heretical views named Baruch Spinoza believed that “good” and “evil” were simply human concepts. Spinoza believed that God was beyond characterizations of good and evil. He gave a terrific example of how subjective we can be by designating something as either all good or all bad. He said that “One and the same thing can be at the same time good, bad, and indifferent. For instance, music is good for him that is melancholy, bad for him that mourns; for him that is deaf, it is neither good nor bad.” Thus, according to Spinoza, each person's perspective, and the context in which something happens, greatly determines whether

¹⁰ (Pirkei Avot 4:19)

we can deem something as good or bad. I'm sure you can think of times when you've known someone who died who had suffered in pain for quite some time. While a loss is very sad in many circumstances perhaps it was a relief to all involved that this person was released from his/her suffering. Death, often felt as a bad thing, may be considered merciful in these cases.

Spinoza also taught that when we think of something as evil," it is only because we have partial knowledge of things and are in the main, ignorant of the order and coherence of nature as a whole, and because we want everything to be arranged according to the dictates of our own reason."¹¹ This is a fancy way of saying – there's a big, Divine plan, and we just don't understand it. God must have had a reason for causing this or that to happen, and we just aren't privy to the "big picture." According to Spinoza, everything was already determined by God, and we don't know why things might happen the way they do, but that's just how the world worked.

An early 20th century Jewish thinker named Martin Buber, used his I-IT and I-Thou (please enunciate or act this out clearly – it's difficult to understand this phrase if someone is hearing it for the first time) theories to explain why bad things happened in the world. According to Buber's theory, we encounter everything in our world in one of two ways – either as I-IT, which objectifies the other person or thing into a mere "it," or as I-THOU., Buber believed that if we only ever view the world around us as an IT, then we have no relationship or connection to it. This leads to evil acts, both passive and active. Conversely, if we view the world around us in an I-THOU fashion, we will seek out genuine and authentic personal experiences with any person or thing we encounter.

Later, as a response to the horrors of the Holocaust, Martin Buber developed the idea of "radical evil," to explain that there are some extraordinary times when God withdraws from humanity. We do not know the reason for this "eclipse of God," this "silence of God," or the loss of God's nearness. Buber wrote that for some reason, God sometimes turns away from us. But, Buber struggled with a question that so many of us ask when we are struck down by loss, tragedy, or suffering: Can we believe in and trust a God who allows vast injustices – such as the Holocaust – to occur? Just when we most need a response to this question, Buber ultimately leaves it unanswered.

¹¹ (A Political Treatise, 2:8)

As you might imagine, the Holocaust is a real turning point in Jewish theologians' understanding of why bad things happen to good people. This time it was different despite the fact that it's not as if we hadn't been persecuted before, or that we hadn't often been victimized by other religions and civilizations. But, for the first time, our complete annihilation had been sought, and millions of Jews of all ages and backgrounds were wiped out.

A conservative rabbi in the 20th century named Milton Steinberg started a theology known as "limited theism." While thinking about the bad things that happen to so many good people, Steinberg decided that God is all-good but not all-powerful. God created nature and the laws of nature, but now these continue to grow and evolve of their own accord. The world is in the process of evolving to better and higher levels, but some elements of the world may actually be stuck on lower levels of the evolutionary and spiritual ladder. Various forms of evil are found, according to Steinberg, on these lower evolutionary levels. Tragedies do not happen because God caused them, but because some elements of the world (certain people, bacteria, the planet) have not yet evolved to a higher plane. It might be scary for some of us to think that God's powers are limited, but it would seem to explain so much about the world. It would explain why one good person survives a plane crash, but another good person doesn't. It's not that God chooses one person over the other. In Steinberg's "limited theism" theory, God simply cannot control this situation. Therefore, inevitably, we are caused to feel pain and suffer.

The 20th century founder of Reconstructionist Judaism named Mordecai Kaplan, takes the "limited theism" theory one step further. The fact that humanity actually has the capacity to eliminate or transform evil in the world proves that evil is relative. We slowly cure diseases and try to eliminate war, hunger, and oppression. According to Kaplan, evil is not a hard-lined fact decreed by God. Thus, we can be comforted by the knowledge that, at some point in the future, we can eradicate all aspects of evil. God can actually be a part of the forces that bring about change, goodness, and growth.

These various Jewish thinkers' theories are examples of how the traditional views of Good and Evil have shifted throughout Jewish history. And, yet, how many of us are stuck with the belief from 2,000 years ago, that bad things happen and that we are somehow to blame? How many of us are stuck with the belief that evil presented to us is a test of some kind, one that we wouldn't

be given if God didn't think we could handle it. Often clergy, well-meaning friends, and loved ones don't know how to comfort someone coping with a recent loss because of our inner conflicts concerning why there is evil in the world.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, in *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, shares the following:

Writer Harriet Sarnoff Schiff has distilled her pain and tragedy into an excellent book, *The Bereaved Parent*. She remembers that when her young son died during an operation to correct a congenital heart malfunction, her clergyman took her aside and said, "I know that this is a painful time for you. But I know that you will get through it all right, because God never sends us more of a burden than we can bear. God only let this happen to you because He knows that you are strong enough to handle it." Harriet Schiff remembers her reaction to those words: "If only I was a weaker person, Robbie would still be alive."¹²

I'm sorry, but I will not be saying that to any of you. I apologize if this disappoints you in any way, but I refuse to give you any reason to blame yourself for the terrible, random, heart-breaking things that happen to us throughout our lives.

I refuse to believe that I was involved in a life-altering and debilitating car accident seven years ago because God needed to punish me for something I had done. Likewise, I refuse to believe that God let me survive it and eventually fully heal because I did something right. There are too many stories that are the opposite – bad people who survive terrible ordeals, or good people with their whole lives ahead of them who are struck down in accidents or by illness.

Perhaps, in the end, I am a limited theist, like Rabbi Milton Steinberg and like Rabbi Harold Kushner. I desperately want to share the message that God does not purposely cause bad things to happen. Maybe evil happens for some reason other than the will of God. In times of trouble, we often turn to the words of Psalm 121, the familiar song, "Esa Einai," which translates to: "I lift mine eyes to the hills; from where does my help come? My help comes from the Eternal,

¹² Kushner, Harold S. (2007). *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (pp. 36-37). Anchor. Kindle Edition

maker of Heaven and earth.” (Psalm 121:1–2) The writer does not say, “My pain comes from the Eternal,” or “my tragedy comes from the Eternal.” He says “my help comes from the Eternal.”¹³

We very much want there to be order in our world, and for things to make sense. If we always do *this*, then *that* will always happen. Randomness is scary, so we’ll often try to blame the victim in order to explain why the evil happened. “If the Jews had behaved differently, Hitler would not have been driven to murder them. If the young woman had not been so provocatively dressed, the man would not have raped her. If people worked harder, they would not be poor. Blaming the victim is a way of reassuring ourselves that the world is not as bad a place as it may seem, and that there are good reasons for people’s suffering.”¹⁴

I think that, in the end, we ask the wrong question. The question should not be, “Why did this happen to me?” but rather, “God, I hope you see my suffering and my pain. Can You help me?” We can turn to God to be strengthened and comforted. We don’t need to turn to God to be judged or forgiven, to be rewarded or punished. We can turn to God to help us get through and cope with our loss or crisis. The Bible, after all, repeatedly speaks of God as the special protector of the poor, the widow, and the orphan, without raising the question of how it happened that they became poor, widowed, or orphaned in the first place.¹⁵ Once we feel that God is with us, comforting us in our time of trouble, we can ask an even more important question: “Now that this has happened, what do I do?”

What do we do? What do we do when the innocent become ill? When someone’s cancer worsens? When a newborn baby dies with no explanation? When a young person takes his own life without a warning? When a plane crashes with children, clergy, and good people aboard?

I give you my answer to these questions in the form of a story:

Once upon a time, a woman was in purgatory until she had fulfilled the expiation of her sins. After the woman was finally cleansed, the messenger came to lift her from the lowest depths to

¹³ Kushner, Harold S. (2007). *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (p. 42). Anchor. Kindle Edition.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 54.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 61-62

the height of heaven. The messenger put the end of a slim branch in the woman's hand and said, "Hold fast to this branch, and I will pull you up."

The woman seized the end of the branch and clung to it fiercely, as the messenger rose and began to lift her upwards. The woman passed others who were in these same depths: hands were outstretched toward her, and voices said pleadingly, "Take us with you." The woman answered, "Grab on. The branch will hold us all."

So they clutched at her, one seizing her by the arm, another by the skirt, and another by the waist. But, miraculously, no one fell, and the odd-looking group moved steadily higher, closer to their goal, supported by the branch which was as a link between the woman and the messenger.

Then, suddenly, the woman became afraid and she said to herself, "There are too many! The branch will break. It cannot support all of us!"

And she began to kick and turn, to shake off those holding her. She shouted, "Let go! Get off! It's my branch! It's my branch!"

As the words, "my branch" crossed her lips, the branch broke and the woman tumbled back to where she had begun.

The branch was strong enough for all when she said and truly believed, "It will hold us." It became too weak, even for her, when she said, "my branch."

Rabbi Lawrence Raphael, who shares this story in an essay about his own spiritual journey,¹⁶ writes, "*We are all in this grand mystery of life together. Life is too short and this planet is too small for any one of us to hold the branch and ignore all the others who dwell here. All of us have been created in God's image, and we need to be sensitive to God's great world, to be filled with wonder about our infinite capacity to learn and to grow, and we need to understand that our joy and our ability to be transformed can come from anyone, anytime, anywhere.*"

We must take care of each other. We must reach our arms out to others in our community, we should hold them, cry with them, allow them to be angry, sad, confused, and distraught. God

¹⁶ *Paths of Faithfulness: Personal Essays on Jewish Spirituality*. Ktav, 1997. P. 133.

may not be able to control all the bad things that happen, but God is found in our strength to live through challenges together that we never imagined we could survive on our own. God is found in our ability to comfort a friend through a loss, in our courage, endurance, and ability to find meaning even in the greatest adversities. God gives each of us the bravery to guide someone through a situation that we may have experienced in the past as well as the strength to share the wisdom we gained with others. We must remember that there is sweetness to be found in friendship, in love, and in care. In a phone call, a note, an email, a hug, and a hand to hold. Together, we create light in the midst of the darkness, hope in the midst of despair, and a smile in the midst of tears.

One more legend, this one of Chinese origin:

There is an old tale about the woman whose only son died. In her grief, she went to the holy man and said, "What prayers, what magical incantations do you have to bring my son back to life?" Instead of sending her away or reasoning with her, he 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. She came first to a splendid mansion, knocked at the door, and said, "I am looking for a home that has never known sorrow. Is this such a place? It is very important to me." They told her, "You've certainly come to the wrong place," and began to describe all the tragic things that had recently befallen them. The woman said to herself, "Who is better able to help these poor unfortunate people than I, who have had misfortune of my own?" She stayed to comfort them, then went on in her search for a home that had never known sorrow. But wherever she turned, in hovels and in palaces, she found one tale after another of sadness and misfortune. Ultimately, she became so involved in ministering to other people's grief that she forgot about her quest for the magical mustard seed, never realizing that it had in fact driven the sorrow out of her life.¹⁷

¹⁷ Kushner, Harold S. (2007). *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (pp. 149-150). Anchor. Kindle Edition.