

**A Child's Death: "Why Do Bad
Things Happen to Good People?"**

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Rabbi Harold Kushner died in Canton, Massachusetts on April 27, 2023 at the age of 88. Author of 14 books, several of which became bestsellers, he is best known for *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, published in 1981. It was translated into at least a dozen languages and has sold millions of copies.

As many are aware, the catalyst for Rabbi Kushner writing this book was the death of his son Aaron, two days after he turned fourteen in 1977. When Aaron was three years old, Rabbi Kushner's wife Suzette gave birth to their daughter Ariel. At that time, they had been concerned about their son's development since he stopped gaining weight when he was eight months old and his hair began to fall out after he reached his first birthday. On the day of Ariel's birth, they were devastated to learn that Aaron was given a diagnosis of progeria (rapid aging), described by his pediatrician as a condition from which he "would never grow much beyond three feet in height, would look like a little old man while he was a child, and would die in his early teens."

Among the many books that have had a notable impact on me, two especially stand out, *Man's Search for Meaning* written by psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl and *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. I often cite these books, each of which I have read several times, in my writings and presentations. Both books have enriched my knowledge about the outlook necessary for us to become increasingly resilient in the face of adversity. Their main points parallel the concept of "personal control" that I have described in many of my writings, a concept that highlights a key feature of what my colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein and I have called a "resilient mindset." Individuals who are guided by "personal control" tend to focus their time and energy on issues over which they have some influence rather than exhausting themselves attempting to change things over which they have little, if any, control. Some see "personal control" as having similarities with the sentiments of the "serenity prayer."

In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl calls attention to the reality that even in a concentration camp there some prisoners who would give away their last morsel of food to someone who was hungrier than they were. "They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a person but the last of the human freedoms—

to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." Frankl also stated, "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."

Rabbi Kushner's situation was very different from Frankl's, but in coping with significant suffering they arrive at a similar conclusion about the power of finding meaning in response to adversity.

Dedicated to Rabbi Harold Kushner

Given the very recent passing of Rabbi Kushner and the ways in which his writings have touched my life, I am dedicating this article to his memory. It is also a way of thanking him for his kindness seven years ago when my colleague Dr. B. Glenn Wilkerson and I co-edited the book [*Reflections on Mortality: Insights into Meaningful Living*](#). Glenn is a retired minister in Houston who is Founder and President of the ARKGroup that has developed acclaimed programs for parents, educators, and other caregivers. These programs involve teaching effective ways of enhancing the social and emotional lives of children.

When the initial draft of Glenn and my book was completed, I reached out to Rabbi Kushner and asked if he might review it for a possible endorsement. He was very gracious and said he would be happy to do so. I authored the first chapter of the book and quoted him on a number of occasions. He sent me a lovely endorsement (part of which appears on the front cover) and with a sense of humor he wrote, "Even if it was sneaky of you to fill the first several pages with compliments to me." Given how influential his book was for me and millions of others, my compliments were easy to bestow.

In an interview Rabbi Kushner wrote, "When Aaron realized he was going to die, he became anxious about dying young without having left any type of legacy. So, I promised him I would tell his story." In doing so, Rabbi Kushner attempted to share his understanding of why a benevolent God would allow people to experience intense anguish and pain. In a very personal and open way he described his struggles, especially as a member of the clergy, to hold on to a belief in a benign and good God given Aaron's death.

Rabbi Kushner reviewed possible explanations for his son's death that he had heard over the years but could not accept or find comforting—although he acknowledged they might be comforting to other people dealing with loss. He rejected the notion that God gives people "what they deserve and need" or that God gives you only what you can handle. He also expressed great

difficulty accepting that Aaron and other deceased children are in a better place, contending that we cannot know for certain of the existence of heaven. “Since we cannot know for sure, we would be well advised to take this world as seriously as we can, in case it turns out to be the only one we will ever have, and to look for meaning and justice here.”

Rabbi Kushner poignantly shared his journey from questioning some of these existing explanations for the death of a child to arriving at his own understanding of why good people are subjected to painful events. His understanding parallels to a great extent Frankl’s view of our capacity to choose one’s attitude and response when faced with adversity. This stance is one that has been an important feature of my work for many decades and one that I included in [my eulogy of my twin brother Michael 10 years ago](#).

A Shifting of Questions

In conveying Rabbi Kushner’s thoughts about why bad things happen to good people, I will rely on his actual words rather than attempting to paraphrase him and run the risk of missing some of the essential features of his insights and eloquence. As his obituaries in *The Boston Globe* and *The New York Times* indicate, some Jewish clergy as well as clergy from other faiths have disagreed with the conclusions Rabbi Kushner reached, including his thoughts about God. However, in reviews I have read, many other clergy and individuals from different faiths have found his position to be very comforting and deserving of serious reflection.

In nearing the end of his book, Rabbi Kushner posited:

Is there an answer to the question of why bad things happen to good people? That depends on what we mean by “answer.” If we mean “is there an explanation that will make sense of it all?”—why is there cancer in the world? Why did my father get cancer? Why did the plane crash? Why did my child die?—then there is probably no satisfying answer . . . and the pain and the anguish and the sense of unfairness will still be there. But the word “answer” can mean “response” as well as “explanation,” and in that sense there may well be a satisfying answer to the tragedies in our lives. . . . In the final analysis, the question of why bad things happen to good people translates itself into some very different questions, no longer asking why something happened, but asking how we will respond, what do we intend to do now that it has happened?

Those who have read *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* are aware that in recommending we shift the question from “why” something bad happened to “how we respond”

to the terrible event, Rabbi Kushner is not suggesting we push aside or suppress emotions such as sadness, grief, anger, and guilt, Rather, he believes that in considering how we respond, we can find meaning in the adversity, which will serve to lessen the intensity of our anguish.

To Tell One's Story

On a personal level, I know that my decision 10 years ago to devote my monthly article to my twin brother Michael who died of a rare disease, amyloidosis, was one way to honor him and let others know of and learn from his courage and resilience. I was guided by Rabbi Kushner's suggestion that we focus on what to do following such a loss rather than asking why such a good person developed a disease that took his life. I'm pleased I wrote about Michael. I have written more than 240 website articles, and I believe I received the most responses from readers following my posting of the column about Michael. Readers not only offered condolences, but many noted they benefited from Michael's attitude and determination in facing an incurable disease.

On the last pages of his book, Rabbi Kushner posed some thought-provoking questions, including: "Are you capable of forgiving and accepting in love a world which has disappointed you by not being perfect, a world in which there is so much unfairness and cruelty, disease, crime, earthquake, and accident? Can you forgive its imperfections and love it because it is capable of containing great beauty and goodness?"

In writing and sharing what he learned from his son's untimely death, Rabbi Kushner fulfilled his promise to Aaron to "tell his story," a story he shared with the world. In so doing, he found comfort in moving from a question of "why" to "what." He also described the way in which he benefited from writing the book with these final words:

I think of Aaron and all that his life taught me, and I realize how much I have lost and how much I have gained. Yesterday seems less painful, and I am not afraid of tomorrow.

Of Blessed Memory

In the Jewish faith when we refer to someone who has died, we often add "of blessed memory" to their name. In keeping with this practice, I am ending this article by thanking Rabbi Harold Kushner, of blessed memory, for having had such a noteworthy and meaningful impact on my life and the lives of countless others. I will always be appreciative of Rabbi Kushner's words on the front cover of Glenn and my book about mortality, a constant reminder of his graciousness and kindness.

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