When Bad Things Happen to Good People Summary

By Harold Kushner

This universal question has plagued us since the beginning of time. Why is it that bad things happen to good people? How often have you thought that you, or someone you love, doesn't deserve what life's thrown at you? And, how often have you blamed someone else, or God, for your suffering?

Tragedy and loss are certainties. As we try to make sense of what's happened, we usually have a torrent of questions and emotions. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* offers a pragmatic approach to dealing with feelings and questions around grief and loss.

Harold S. Kushner is a rabbi, with a spiritual perspective that's both simple and enlightening. Still, it's his personal experience of tragedy that makes him a comforting fellow traveler for anyone holding deep hurt. Rabbi Harold S. Kushner's son, died of progeria at 14 years of age. Progeria is a very rare genetic disorder, that quickly leads a child to age, leading to death by late childhood or early teens. Kushner's experience as a rabbi, means that he has a deep understanding of theology; however, he was somewhat at a loss in the face of tragedy.

He found himself asking the same existential and universal questions that we all ask when faced with extreme loss. And, as with many of us, he also questioned his faith. He wondered that if God existed, and if he was minimally fair, let alone loving and forgiving, how could He let this happen? How can God allow such suffering? Despite Kushner's deep

faith, he became painfully aware of 'the unfair distribution of suffering in the world.' This suffering challenges kindness and even God's existence, as people try to fit tragedy into a sense of an orderly universe.

This summary will briefly take us through the inevitability of tragedy and loss. Published in 1981, this book is about why God lets bad things happen to us. However, it's also so much more than this. It teaches us about comfort, and notably, what others need from us when they're faced with tragedy. It's short, simple, and suitable for anyone, irrespective of age or faith. So if you're trying to make sense of a world that can seem so unfair, this might offer some useful perspective.

How We View Tragedy, and Our Need to Create Order

We often see tragedy as God's decision to punish us for some wrongdoing, because we need to create some sense of order.

Rabbi Kushner became painfully aware of this, when he was comforting parents whose daughter died unexpectedly. He remembers them saying that they had not fasted the previous Yom Kippur. They, like many of us, immediately felt that they deserved to be punished. The trouble with this belief is that it has unpleasant repercussions. These repercussions often manifest as guilt, blame, and anger towards God and ourselves. We hope that, if we wait long enough, we will eventually see the logic of God's plan, or perhaps that our undeserved suffering has a purpose. Often we feel that God is teaching us a lesson, or that He must have a reason for letting this happen. We assume that God causes suffering, and we then have to justify why He would inflict this.

However, none of these answers are satisfying or comforting. Finding reasons, and needing to create order is futile. Kushner believes that all these explanations add to the burden of loss. He says that if God tested every person who suffers, then God would be miscalculating too often. It could just be that the world isn't neatly packaged, no matter how we try to make it so.

Maybe We're Asking the Wrong Questions

Perhaps we need to reframe how we think about suffering. It could be that God doesn't cause the bad things that happen, and maybe we're just asking the wrong questions?

The Book of Job expands this thinking. The Book of Job is the most evocative story about suffering in the Bible. We're told a story of one of the most pious of men, who loses everything that's important to him, including his children, wealth, and health. He then has to explore three possibilities. The first is that God is all-powerful and controls everything. The other is that God is fair, and people get what they deserve, and the final option is that despite what's been handed to him, he is a good person.

Kushner's analysis of the story led him to one conclusion. He suggests that we need to change our perception of God. Rather than seeing God as all-powerful and all-knowing, we should acknowledge that He may not be able to control what happens to us. Events are often random, and He cannot keep good people safe. This is a difficult concept to grasp, because it's human nature to look for cause and effect, even when it's non-existent.

If we take the view that God does not send bad things our way, then it's easier for us to take ownership of our emotions. This will help us to manage our anger and devastation, without feeling that we're in conflict with God. We're then able to call on God for support and comfort, rather than feeling judged.

How We View Luck

Why does a forest fire move towards some homes, and not others? Why does a small change in plan lead to someone escaping tragedy, while someone else succumbs to it? How many near misses have you experienced?

The response to how we view reason and order, is key to this book. What if we're able to abandon the idea that everything is reasonable, and instead, accept that the universe has a few rough edges?

Changing our worldview requires a profound shift in our thinking, because many of us believe that God has a role in everything. Kushner reminds us that God fashioned the world out of chaos, so how have we been conditioned not to accept the sheer randomness of the world around us?

What's more, laws of nature don't discriminate among people. An earthquake is an act of nature, not an act of God. Kushner takes umbrage at the idea that insurance companies refer to 'acts of God.' God doesn't have weekly quotas, a list of good people, and a blacklist. Good people are injured, just as often as bad people are.

We might have to live with the reality of a world that unfolds, independent of God's will. But the rabbi's fundamental insight that develops from this, is that when something terrible does happen, it angers and saddens God, as much as it does us. And that's an act of God. Acts of God are reflected when communities respond and rebuild after a tragic event. Essentially, how people support each other, irrespective of the event, is what matters.

How We Should View Support

The rabbi says: 'Pain is part of the package deal of being alive.'

When people arrive to offer us comfort, they often add to our woes. It's not always easy to provide the right kind of support, so what can we say that doesn't make people think they deserved what has happened to them? How do we lessen their sense of isolation?

We often try to defend God, or give responses that fit in with our assumptions. Kushner recalls when he observed someone saying to their paralyzed friend: 'It's God's way of teaching you a lesson.' He also remembers when a teenager who had just lost his mother to cancer, was told that 'God took your mother because He needed her now more than you did.' And how many times are congregations urged to rejoice because someone they love has 'gone to a happier place.' These platitudes are meant to be helpful, but they only serve to increase guilt and anger towards a God that would do this to them.

When people ask the anguished question,' How can this happen?' Rabbi Kushner says there should be an exclamation mark, instead of a question mark after this. A question compels us to find an answer that fits what we

believe in, giving a comforting explanation. However, he emphasizes that this is a hypothetical question, and an indication of pain and suffering. It's a call for support that allows us to say what a good person they are. Furthermore, it's the idea that you'll rally together against the unfairness and cruelty of it all. And join them in the pain and suffering.

The rabbi gives a few valuable suggestions about what we should avoid saying, when trying to offer support. We should avoid anything that may sound critical, such as: 'don't take it so hard.' We should also steer clear of trying to downplay or minimize the pain, by saying things like, 'it could be worse.' Furthermore, we must avoid platitudes such as, 'she's better off now.' And finally, it's best to refrain from Implying that we can't question God.

When it comes to showing support, there are a few key things that we can do. Arrive with the courage to face the person directly, and to confront their sorrow. It's also so important to listen, and to hold their rage and grief. Being a silent presence, and understanding the universal sense of guilt that people experience, will go a long way in showing solid support. Frequently people need a sympathetic ear rather than advice, and compassion instead of theological explanations.

We tend to be uncomfortable with anger - our own or someone else's. We handle anger by dumping it on others, alienating them, or dumping it on ourselves in the form of depression. And we get angry at God, preventing the possibility of His comfort. The rabbi argues that we don't have to be afraid of our anger, or suppress it, but that we can express it in a way that doesn't make it harder to access help. Significantly, he clarifies where to direct our anger - and that's at the situation.

The Importance of Perspective

One of the crucial shifts that we need to make, is from 'Why did it happen?' to 'What do I do now that it has happened?'

In the process of our evolution, we have been given moral choice. An extreme example of choosing to do wrong, was the Holocaust. The rabbi's view is that God could not influence our choices between good and evil, but that God is the source of our experience of empathy and anger against injustice.

If we don't hold God responsible for what goes wrong, then we have to consider the purpose of prayer. It makes no sense to then pray for favorable outcomes. And the underlying implication is if we're asking for a good result, then we're hoping that God has a checklist, or that we deserve his attention. And if our prayer isn't answered, how can we not feel abandoned? Or how can we not feel guilty, angry, and hopeless? Our interpretation may be that we didn't pray hard enough, that God knows best, or that there's no God.

The suggestion is to reframe our understanding of why we pray. Prayer connects us to others who share a similar path of hopes and fears. It's good to share joy and sadness with other people, and an essential part of religion is to create a community.

Prayer serves two essential purposes. Kushner describes the Jewish custom of 'the meal of replenishment,' where, after a funeral, the bereaved person does not take food for himself, nor does he serve anyone else. Instead, others feed him, symbolizing the importance of a

community rallying around to fill a void of grief. Prayer rescues us from isolation and reminds us that we're not alone. Prayer isn't just about connecting us to others; it's about connecting to God. And not by presenting a shopping list, but by connecting with God to ask for strength to deal with what lies ahead. God helps us to find ways to deal with the loss that he did not cause in the first place.

In Conclusion

Rabbi Kushner wrote this book for his son, and eloquently expresses his reason for this by saying, 'the dead depend on us for their redemption and their immortality. We can let them be witnesses for God and for life.'

Ultimately, Rabbi Kushner talks about meaning. He emphasizes in his book, that years later he would still give up everything for his son to be alive, but he has no choice. His only option is to move forward, and where the tragedy leads him to. Life and death are neutral - our responses give it a positive or negative meaning. We can affirm life, and explore our ability to live fully, or become incapable of joy.

Surviving the bad things that happen, is learning to see tragedy in the context of life, which is balanced more in favor of good than bad. Context helps us to see what has enriched us, as well as what we have lost. Rabbi Kushner believes that God doesn't cause or prevent tragedies - these are random. However, he provides us with community and strength to find a way through the pain. He feels that proof of God's existence lies in our moral responses - our anger and resentment at unfairness, and our compassion towards others. He believes in a God of limited power, but a God of never-ending love.

So when it comes to bad things happening, we need to realize that there's no reason or logic, and that ultimately the world is chaotic. It's

how we deal with the chaos that makes us human.