

## Why Bad Things Happen to Good People By Rabbi Michael Lotker

*When Bad Things Happen to Good People* is the title of a best selling book (which I highly recommend) by Rabbi Harold Kushner. *Why* bad things happen to good people is the question that we ask during times of global crisis (such as that of the earthquake/tsunami in Japan) or personal tragedy. It is also the most difficult question that religion has to face. Simply put, if God is all good, all powerful and all just, how is it that bad things happen to good people?

God knows! This is a very simple and very glib and not so satisfying answer but one that we must start with. We must begin with theological humility. No person should claim to know completely the mind or ways of God. In fact, I think much evil comes from those who are certain that they know exactly what God thinks about most everything. But God gave us a brain and the desire to seek to understand. I believe it's entirely kosher to ask answer these questions.

First, let's be clear; the problem before us is *tragedy* not *evil*. For me the question of *evil* is answered by God's granting us free will. We can use our brains and technology to build hospitals or gas chambers. The question is not "Where was *God* at Auschwitz," but "Where was *humanity* at Auschwitz."

Understanding tragedies is far more troubling. How to understand:

- a tsunami that kills thousands or even hundreds of thousands (the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami killed over 230,000 people in 14 countries)?
- the Haiti earthquake that killed some 200,000 and left 2 million homeless?
- the illness or accident that hurt or killed someone you love?

Broadly speaking, I can think of two answers that are consistent with Jewish tradition. The first suggests that God is really in charge and has a grand plan addressing all such things that we mere humans cannot understand. A small child getting a vaccination thinks he is suffering unjustly but we know a wonderful medical miracle is really the result of his momentary pain. Could it be that from God's perspective that the apparent tragedies that we see are somehow part of a grand master plan? Perhaps those that suffer in this life will be rewarded in the next. Some mystics would even say that suffering in this life is a way of paying for sins incurred in prior incarnations or past lives. God knows.

I, however, align myself theologically with a very different understanding, that of Rabbi Harold Kushner, who as a young rabbi watched his innocent son sicken and die at age 14 of progeria, a disease that causes a young person to rapidly age. Rabbi Kushner concluded that God's power is limited; that God does not override natural law to work miracles. The way I think of it is that if someone shoots a bullet in the air, where the bullet comes down is addressed by my old career (physics) and not my new career (theology). The earthquake happened because of geological forces that built up and not because God decided to inflict suffering on Japan.

This might lead you to ask “Who Needs God?” It turns out that Rabbi Kushner has also written a book with this exact title. We need God not as a miracle worker but as a teacher and inspirer. God may not work magic in the world but God’s influence in magical, teaching us that we should strive to solve the problems of the world, use our intelligence to cure disease, track destructive storms, make building earthquake tolerant, make peace, etc. and not to make war and inflict suffering. God also comforts us in prayer and study and in the people that our religions send to comfort and help in times of trouble.

One of our youngest Temple members, 10 ½ year old Ben Scheerger recently asked his mom “Why does God make diseases?” Here was my response.

To put it as simply as possible, God makes us God's partner in making the world a better place. If God did everything for us, if the world were perfect (no diseases, no war, no poverty, etc.), what would our job be?

Maybe, we could explain it as "How would it be if mommy and daddy always did everything for you kids. We would bathe you and feed you and select your toys and friends. You would never have to do a thing, never lift a finger and never solve a problem. This might work when you are little, but it's important for you to do things for yourselves to be grown up. So too, I think that God so respects us that God only took the creation of the world so far and left to God's partners, that's us, to complete it.”

The Torah teaches us that we are made in God’s image. I believe that this means that we have truly significant work to do in the world; that we are to work with God in perfecting and completing creation. But it's up to us to decide whether or not to be God's partner. God doesn't force us to do the right thing only begs us (actually commands us) to do so.

The question so often heard is “Why me, why her, why them?” It’s not a helpful question in no small part because there is no truly satisfying answer.. In my experience the helpful question is “What should I do now? How can I help?” This is a question that we can answer and, in answering it, bring comfort, help and healing to our troubled world. This is how I believe God works in the world.

May God bless and strengthen everyone facing pain and tragedy and self God’s partners to them in order to make their world and ours a happier, healthier place!