



Jewish Community Center of Paramus  
Congregation Beth Tikvah  
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## A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

Friday May 19, 2023 ~ Parsha: Bamidbar

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

### America's Rabbi

There are more than a few who have claimed the title, "America's Rabbi." Others were given this title (believe it or not) by secular publications. The United States has never had a designated Chief Rabbi like so many other nations throughout the world. There are all types of important reasons for that. Indeed, I would oppose anyone serving in such a role unless it was me! But if America had a Rabbi, it would have been Rabbi Harold Kushner, who passed away on April 28, 2023.

Rabbi Kushner was an amazingly successful pulpit Rabbi in Natick, Massachusetts for over 30 years. He was a gifted writer, whose method of crafting sermons, especially High Holiday sermons, strongly influenced me as I developed my own style. He was an outstanding teacher, leader and recognized as a scholar among his colleagues. I should add that he spoke at our synagogue in 2002, as part of our congregation's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration.

What was it about him that made Rabbi Kushner, at least in my opinion, "America's Rabbi?" In 1977, Rabbi Kushner lost his son, Aaron, to the degenerative disease [progeria](#). That tragedy, which affected him personally and challenged him professionally, led him to explore the question of faith in God, especially in the face of suffering. He then wrote about these issues in his book *When Bad Things Happen To Good People*. Published in 1981, this book sold more than 4 million copies and was a New York Times. It has been translated into over 12 languages.

Rabbi Kushner's book touched the lives of millions of Americans. It struck a resonant chord because all human beings have struggled with the theological implications of

loss and suffering. He taught that we can make three statements about the world, but we can keep only two of them to have a coherent world view.

There is evil and suffering in the world.

God is all powerful.

God is good.

It would be foolhardy to deny the reality of tragedy, suffering and injustice, so that statement is true. But what of the other two statements?

Rabbi Kushner could not reconcile the other two statements and in what can only be described as a significant, if not radical break from traditional Jewish theology, discarded the idea of an all-powerful God.

What is a particularly interesting thing about *When Bad Things Happen To Good People* is that for the vast majority of those who read it, it was probably the first, if not the only significant book on religious theology they ever studied. Rabbi Kushner tapped into something in a way that few other books of religious thought ever achieved. That's what led to its success. The book spoke to the authentic lived experiences of its readers in a way that transcended traditional religious divisions and addressed a fundamental human question. Is it possible to maintain faith in God after suffering such pain?

I was never completely comfortable with Rabbi Kushner's theology. I say that as a person who has also suffered painful losses that have made me question and struggle with traditional Jewish concepts about God. But what I always admired about Rabbi Kushner was his honesty, his humility and his uncommon brilliance. Indeed, *When Bad Things Happen To Good People* may be the best-selling book on religious thought of all time, second only to the Bible itself. Rabbi Kushner wrote 11 other books, six of them bestsellers as well. But you would never know it from his demeanor.

I will always remember that Rabbi Kushner taught me perhaps the most important lesson I ever learned in my life. Speaking to Rabbinical students at the Jewish

Theological Seminary of America one afternoon in approximately 1986 or 1987, he made the following statement. In a talk about theology, he said something like, "...if Judaism had a cardinal sin, it would be to use somebody." He was making a larger point about our responsibilities as religious leaders. But what he was really teaching us was to recognize and respect the humanity in every person we encounter, for they are created in the Divine image. That is the way to elevate God's presence in the world. It all boils down to treating everyone properly.

He practiced what he preached, and earned a *Keter Shem Tov*, the crown of a good name through scholarship, service, and the influence he had on so many, Jew and Gentile alike. Even people who did not know his name or his background knew the book, and understood why so many were touched by it.

We have no shortage of great Rabbis in our country. But for his unique ability to touch all people and his lasting legacy on religious life in America, in my mind at least, Rabbi Harold Kushner was truly America's Rabbi.

May his memory be a blessing.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Arthur D. Weiner