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IS RELIGION FOR THE HAPPY-MINDED? A Response to Harold Kushner

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In a very profound way, Harold Kushner's *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (Avon Books, 1981) and the themes it treats evoke in the reader feelings of warmth, compassion, and drawing one closer to all who suffer in this world. The tragic story of Aaron Kushner (the author's son) and the very real depth with which his parents experienced suffering cannot but make one feel like reaching out in love and respect to the author. Yet, at the same time, I found the underlying premises of the book deeply troubling. Its message, meant to be comforting, is, in fact, nothing short of terrifying.

Kushner, claiming to speak for Judaism, asserts that God is, in his term, "powerless" (pp. 42-44). "God does not, and cannot, intervene in human affairs to avert tragedy and suffering. At most, He offers us His divine comfort, and expresses His divine anger that such horrible things happen to people. God, in the face of tragedy, is impotent. The most God can do," Kushner eloquently proclaims, "is to stand on the side of the victim; not the executioner."

That God gives free reign to an executioner is a common Jewish position, classical, medieval and modern. "Once permission is given for the destroyer to destroy, no distinction is made between the righteous and the wicked." (Rashi Exodus 12:22).

Dedicated to the memory of Nisa Chaya Goffin, daughter of Cantor and Mrs. Sherwood Goffin.

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While Judaism certainly maintains that God, in His divine empathy, stands on the side of the victim, no classical Jewish position has ever maintained that God is incapable of controlling the executioner.

Kushner uses the book of Job to lend the weight of religious authority to his position. Merely to point out the obvious—that Kushner's interpretation of the book of Job, for instance, has little or nothing to do with the Biblical book by that name—fails to undermine the popular appeal that has propelled Kushner's book to the bestseller lists. In fact, Kushner feels quite comfortable admitting to intellectual dishonesty. In an interview with *Moment* magazine (November 1981), he was asked: "You argue that it is simply wrong to blame God for the bad luck, for the nastiness, for the evil; and yet you are perfectly prepared to praise God for the good, to thank God. How do you reconcile that?" To which he carefully replied: "Walter Kaufman calls it 'religious gerrymandering'." That is you draw the lines for your definition of God to include certain things and exclude others."

While I certainly believe that profound suffering moved Kushner to take up his pen, that still cannot justify intellectual gerrymandering.

The heart of Kushner's position is the claim that traditional beliefs about God's relationship to the universe, and to man, are *wrong*, and that his own account is *right*.

Kushner's basic method of argumentation is anecdotal. He cites particular cases of suffering and then attempts to demonstrate the inadequacy of various theodicies as applied to those cases. But the best theodicy is still a human, all too human, theodicy. No theodicy can give pat answers for every circumstance of suffering. Theological reflection can deepen our appreciation of the problem and provide frames of reference with which to approach the experience of suffering. However, from no single set of theological premises can an all-embracing solution be expected. God, we believe, knows the results of all good and evil, past, present, and future, and measures the diverse values (spiritual; intellectual, ethical, aesthetic, hedonic, etc.) which the universe displays, and with which man is confronted. Man does not. Therefore, we must beware of "refuting" theological reflection by showing that it has difficulty fulfilling claims that it has never made.

II

It is instructive to examine Kushner's position on his own terms. This section of the essay will comment on six of the life cases which

Kushner cites to support his general conception of religion, his rejection of classic theodicy and his central claim: that God cannot control what happens in our world.

The Case of Bob (pp. 94-96)

Bob has just made the difficult decision to place his mother in a nursing home. Although his mother is "basically alert and healthy and does not require medical care" she can no longer live alone. After a brief attempt, Bob and his family decide that "they are not prepared to make the sacrifice of time and lifestyle which caring for a sick, old woman requires." That weekend, Bob, who did not usually go to synagogue, went to services hoping they would give him "the tranquility and peace of mind he needed." As luck would have it, the sermon that morning was on the fifth commandment. The clergyman spoke of the sacrifices parents make in raising children and the reluctance of children to make sacrifices for older parents in return. He asked: "Why is it one mother can care for six children, but six children can't care for one mother?" It bothers Kushner that Bob was made to leave the service feeling "hurt and angry." Bob feels that religion has told him that he is a "selfish and uncaring person." He is haunted by the idea that if she dies soon he will never be able to live with himself "for having made her last years miserable because of his selfishness." And Kushner, too, is upset with religion because "the purpose of religion should be to make us feel good about ourselves" after making difficult decisions.

Let us ponder the case and Kushner's implicit assumption that religion has failed him. Bob has decided that he must put his mother in a nursing home. No doubt he loved his mother; he just didn't feel up to assuming responsibility for her care. "His mother hadn't wanted to go, she offered to be less demanding at home, less in the way. She cried when she saw the older, more crippled residents of the home, wondering perhaps how soon she would come to look like them." Without being judgmental, one must recognize that there is at least a serious possibility that Bob is doing a horrendous thing. Because of his unwillingness to adapt his "lifestyle," he literally forces his mother into the nursing home. What does he then expect (and Kushner demand) of religion? No less than "the tranquility and peace of mind he needed." But religion, on the particular weekend that Bob seeks it out, fails to pass the test; the sermon does not pat Bob on the back, saying: "Bob, don't worry! You're still a wonderful guy!" Kushner is outraged.

Let's assume the not unlikely possibility that Bob's decision is open to question, that it may even be wrong. In that case, Kushner's

analysis is mistaken. Honest religion should admonish Bob. Religion has every right to suggest to him that he is being a selfish and uncaring person. And, yes, religion should make him feel guilty. Guilt *per se* is not a misfortune. It is good that man be alerted, by psychic pain, of moral danger to his soul, just as it is fortunate when physical disease announces its presence with pain. Religion is not a sweet candy designed to furnish easy contentment; rather it brings the message that human decisions are a matter of some gravity, and at the very least, offers guidance to the individual making the choice.

Of course, it is possible that Bob has, in the final analysis, made the right decision. Yet, even if he was right to consign his mother to the nursing home, it is not at all wrong that he experience some sense of tragic anguish over it. Such an awareness of authentic anguish in the face of our free, responsible choices is not limited to theists. One finds it in an atheist like Sartre, for example. Even at this stage when the choice has been made, man's religious life is not exhausted by the search for tranquility and peace of mind. To present it so, as Kushner does, is to misrepresent dramatically God's relationship to man. God is not the fashionable kind of psychotherapist whose job it is to help his clients overcome their anxiety and feel good about themselves. God is rather a loving teacher who challenges and comforts, rewards and reprimands.

The Case of "A Woman" (pp. 19-21)

In one chapter, Kushner speaks of the "soul-making" theodicy. This view suggests that one purpose of suffering may be educational. Kushner quotes Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik as saying that "suffering comes to enable man, to purge his thoughts of pride and superficiality; to expand his horizons. In sum, the purpose of suffering is to repair that which is faulty in man's personality." Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik is not suggesting, as anyone even superficially acquainted with his writings understands, that suffering is solely explained through its educational benefits. Rather he is offering one possible approach to some instances of suffering. Kushner invokes the image of the loving parent punishing the child as another example of this type of theodicy. Although the child may feel hurt and injured, the wise observer understands that the parental actions are intended only to benefit the child. Kushner rejects this theodicy with the following paragraph:

The newspaper recently carried the story of a woman who had spent six years traveling around the world buying antiques, preparing to set up a business. A week before she was ready to open, a wayward bolt of lightning set off an electrical fire in a block of stores, and several shops, including hers, were

burned down. The goods, being priceless and irreplaceable, were insured for only a fraction of their value. And what insurance settlement could compensate a middle-aged woman for six years of her life spent in searching and collecting? The poor woman was distraught. "Why did this have to happen? Why did it happen to me?" One friend, trying to console her, was quoted as saying, "Maybe God is trying to teach you a lesson. Maybe He is trying to tell you that He doesn't want you to be rich. He doesn't want you to be a successful businesswoman, caught up in profit-and-loss statements all day long and annual trips to the Far East to buy things. He wants you to put your energies into something else, and this was His way of getting His message across to you."

While I wholeheartedly agree with Kushner that her friend misunderstood her needs by attempting to console her with a speculative rationale for her tragedy, this case in no way constitutes a legitimate refutation of soul-making theodicy. To begin with, it may indeed be true that this particular line of theodicy does not apply to this specific case. As I pointed out earlier, human theodicy cannot hope to answer every instance of tragedy. Only God or a prophet can authoritatively proclaim that tragedy X is caused by factors Y and Z.

Let us, however, ask ourselves whether the soul-making theodicy can be applied meaningfully in this case. In the short run, when one's most immediate concern is to help the woman in her state of shock, it would probably not be the wisest exercise of pastoral solicitude. But, in the larger perspective, might it not be at least a viable possibility? Is it really preposterous to imagine that a man or woman may become so completely immersed in material accumulation that he or she loses the proper sense of ultimate goals and values? Is it utterly absurd to think that, in a theocentric universe, God was indeed inviting our woman to reflect on her scale of values? Whether or not one subscribes to this approach, it certainly does not warrant dismissal.

The Case of Ron (pp. 21-24)

Kushner's ample files provide yet another case of a more dramatic refutation of the soul-making theodicy. Ron is described in the book as a person who was a "pretty cocky guy, popular with the girls, flashy cars, confident he was going to make lots of money, who never really worried about people who couldn't keep up with him." Ron buys a store and one evening, in the course of a holdup, is senselessly shot by a drug addict. Ron survives—confined to a wheelchair for life. Friends try to comfort him; some sit and commiserate with him, while others try to make sense out of his tragedy, saying: "Ron, now God has given you the opportunity to become a more sensitive and caring person." Kushner's observation that this is the last thing Ron

needed to hear on his hospital bed is both appropriate and sensitive. Clearly, the immediate situation calls for moral support, love, and concern. Yet, Ron's case does not discredit the soul-making theodist. As we have pointed out above, a theodicy is not demolished if it does not supply a fully adequate justification of any particular instance of suffering.

But, let us abandon our preoccupation with the fallibility of human attempts to develop theodicies. Imagine that God Himself tells Ron that He has taken from him the use of his legs because this would give him a unique opportunity to become a finer and more sensitive person. The question is: Would we/should we reject God in that case? If Kushner is right, then the purpose of God is to make us feel good and grant us tranquility. If Kushner is right, we must reject the ethical vision offered by such a justification, even if it is uttered by the voice of the Almighty God. If, however, we can imagine circumstances in which an explanation is morally tenable, then Kushner's dismissal of it is wrong.

While it is clearly impossible for us to say anything definite about Ron beyond the information supplied by Kushner, we may perhaps hypothesize from his information. What does Kushner tell us about Ron before the accident? He is a person who is, among other characteristics discerned by Kushner, "confident he was going to make lots of money, who never really worried about people who couldn't keep up with him." God? It is doubtful whether He plays any role in his life. If theism is true, then God has given Ron all he has, awaiting, requiring, only his acknowledgement and service. Ron does not respond. C.S. Lewis has described the ultimate sin of human pride. It occurs when "an essentially dependent being tries to set up on its own, to exist for itself. Such a sin requires no complex social conditions, no extended experience, no great intellectual development. From the moment a creature becomes aware of God as God and itself as itself, the terrible alternative of choosing God or self for its center is opened to it."² If theism is true, it is a matter of overwhelming importance that the individual respond to the Divine claim upon him; to live and die without turning to God, without assuming ethical religious responsibility, is to fail to fulfill one's destiny as a human being. If the accident offered Ron an opportunity to become the best human being he could be, then, from the perspective of a theistic outlook, according to which man is here to serve God, rather than vice versa, the accident is not without redeeming features, though it is folly for man to presume such a judgment.

"Tapestry Theodicy" (p. 49)

Using Thornton Wilder's "Bridge Over San Luis Rey" as a springboard, Kushner discusses the tapestry image theodicy. When we look at the reverse side of a tapestry it appears chaotic and senseless: no clear picture emerges. Perhaps, suggests Wilder, God sees the tapestry right side up. God understands that what may appear to be random threads, from a "beneath the tapestry" vantage point, are in fact part of His master plan, and contribute to the beautiful pattern of the tapestry.

How does Kushner dispose of the "tapestry image" theodicy? He writes: "How seriously would we take a person who said, 'I have faith in Adolf Hitler, or in John Dillinger. I can't explain why they did the things they did, but I can't believe they would've done them without a good reason. Yet, people try to justify the deaths and tragedies God 'inflicts' on innocent victims with almost the same words.'" Kushner's comparison between God and Hitler, from the theist's point of view, is not only offensive, but grossly misleading as well. Hitler would not kill without reason? Ridiculous! Why? Because there are overwhelming grounds to justify disbelief in Hitler's innocence. God, however, the theist is convinced, has conferred infinite benefits upon humanity. He has created us, granted most of us health, numerous experiences of pleasure, offered us many opportunities for gratification. He has given us the ability to love and be loved, and the capacity to appreciate and marvel at his world. Thus, religious people maintain that their belief in the goodness of God's Providence is justified, even at moments when this does not appear to be the case. No similar thesis can be plausibly propounded with regard to Adolf Hitler. Furthermore, man's experience of God is rooted in the encounter with holiness, what Rudolf Otto termed "the numinous." God is more than mere grandeur, or power, more even than creator and sustainer. God is numinous, mysterious, ineffable. Confronting God one experiences humility, a creature consciousness which inspires in us awe and reverence. Indeed, as Otto points out, the encounter with the Divine is "not all sweetness and light." It is an experience not inconsistent with accountability, responsibility, and sometimes punishment. We may set aside the fact that believing Jews claim to know of God, not only through His Providence for the natural universe, but in His revelation as well. Hitler and Dillinger have not left us with the kind of prophetic self-disclosure that would inspire confidence and commitment to their ethical principles. Thus, an examination of Kushner's rhetorically powerful comparison of God with Hitler and/ or John Dillinger shows it to be inaccurate, to put the matter mildly.

The Case of the Guilty Parents (p. 8)

Early in the book, Kushner tells about parents whose college-aged daughter has died suddenly of a burst blood vessel. As a young pastor, Kushner visits the parents. He feels understandably inadequate to the task of consoling them. He expects them to express their outrage and indignation towards God. Instead, he finds them contrite: "You know, Rabbi, we didn't fast last Yorn Kippur." Kushner dismisses their reaction as absurd, nay immoral. And, indeed, that anyone outside the intimate circle of grief should peddle simplistically one particular "cause" would strike us as not only shallow, but as atrociously glib, even more so when the death of one person is ascribed to someone else's ritual infraction.

Yet, there is a profound religious dimension to the couple's response to their tragedy, which Kushner totally misses. Dostoyevsky said: "There is only one thing I dread; not to be worthy of my suffering." Reb Levi Yitchok of Berdichev cries out to God, "I do not ask that I do not suffer, only that I suffer for Your sake." For, if there is a meaning to life at all, then there must be meaning to suffering. It is not clear that the non-observant parents whom Kushner wishes to guide are indeed adopting the simplistic theodicy he saddles them with. It *is* clear that they are committed to the search for meaning: "We don't know why our daughter died," they are saying, "but God must be sending us a message. We must examine our lives." This element of human response is imperative to the theist, and apparently reflects a significant psychological need as well. Kushner doesn't seem to understand it at all.

A similar blind spot in Kushner's "pastoral psychology" emerges from his critique of yet another partial theodicy. This view states that God never imposes upon man more suffering than he can bear (p. 25). Kushner's retort is that many people he knows have not withstood the challenge of suffering and have cracked under pressure. Obviously, says Kushner, God is not in control. What Kushner fails to take into account is the possibility that God did not cause these people to break; perhaps they failed themselves. They did not summon up the inner resources necessary to surmount their crisis. When there is a test there is always the possibility of failure. Has the Teacher "made the test too hard," or should the student have worked a bit harder? If the criterion of "successful explanation" is, as Kushner insists, purely pastoral, we may ask: which explanation of evil ascribes to human existence greater dignity, that which blames man's misery on factors beyond his control, or that which holds him responsible for the exercise of free will?

The same holds true regarding Kushner's claim that the authorship of "bad things" cannot be imputed to God in any way. This too

falls apart within the framework of his own relativistic pastoral dogma. For, if evil cannot be attributed to God, then we cannot, without a whopping measure of inconsistency, congratulate Him for the things we like about the universe. An impotent God should be just as impotent at causing good things to happen to people as **He** is incapable of preventing the bad. The world becomes a devastatingly chaotic place; life, "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." These are scarcely the comforting pastoral nostrums that Kushner has in mind.

III

In the final analysis, however, the theistic critique of Kushner cannot stop with the exposure of his imperfections from a pragmatic pastoral perspective. We must question Kushner's basic understanding of religion. Kushner rejects the above theodicies because, in his opinion, they are not comforting in time of bereavement. Kushner feels that a theodicy should not be adopted unless it helps us cope with our suffering. "Religion," he cries out, "is making us feel worse." The purpose of religion, he tells us, is solely to "help us feel good about ourselves." Here we arrive at the essence of Kushnerism. It is axiomatic, for him, that the purpose of religion is always to make its clients feel good. It should never cause them to feel worse, for that would contradict the true goal of religion. Truth of doctrine is irrelevant and immaterial. Religion is one of the many varieties of therapy.

This is the subjectivist dogma upon which rock Kushner erects his teachings. But Judaism is nothing if it is not theocentric. The encounter with God, the commitment to God, frees man from his anthropocentric predicament. The religious individual asks not what God will do for him-why hasn't God given me this or that?-but rather: am I living up to what God requires of me? Theistic religions in general, and Judaism in particular, indeed encourage the creation of healthy and happy living conditions. One should not underestimate the psychological, sociological, and therapeutic values offered by the halakhic ritual. At the same time, one must be very wary of reducing religion to a tool serving our needs. This is an error to which contemporary man is especially prone. For this reason, the point is important enough to justify further illustration.

The Sabbath, for example, is popularly taken to be a day of introspection, a day when we turn our creative energies inward, away from the physical world. Undoubtedly, this is a desirable result of proper Sabbath-observance. Halakhic Judaism, however, maintains

that to violate the Sabbath is tantamount to denying the entire Torah. Is this merely because an individual neglects to "introspect," omits a therapeutic activity? The Sabbath presented in the Biblical texts and their halakhic applications is a day on which we acknowledge the core truths of existence, most notably the non-anthropocentric axis of our world: God is the Creator of the universe (Exodus 20) and the Redeemer from bondage (Deuteronomy 5). To divorce the day from its theocentric anchor, expressed in the 39 kinds of prohibited work, would be to rob the day of its ultimate religious significance.

Or consider Passover. This holiday, we are often told, celebrates human freedom from tyranny and oppression. What we often forget is that, to borrow Fromm's famous terms, Passover marks "freedom from" as a means towards "freedom for." When, at rallies for Soviet Jewry, we hear chanted the Biblical verse "Let my people go," how often do we go on to the last words in the verse? The full reading is, "Let My people go, *that they may serve Me.*" Both the Sabbath and Passover inculcate belief in a Creator who loves and is thus actively involved in human affairs. If we wrest these observances from their original, God-oriented context, we cease worshipping God and begin worshipping ourselves.

IV

Let us examine one more major part of Kushner's presentation: his interpretation of the book of Job. Kushner summarizes the message of the book in three statements (pp. 42-46).

(a) God is all powerful and causes everything that happens in the world. Nothing happens without His willing.

(b) God is just and fair and stands for people getting what they deserve, so that the good prosper and the wicked are punished.

(c) Job is a good person.

As long as Job is well we can believe all three statements. Once Job begins to suffer, Kushner tells us we must either give up our belief in logic or give up our belief in one of the statements. Job's friends give up their belief in Job. Job gives up his belief in God's goodness. Kushner gives up his belief in God's power, and this, he believes, is what God is saying when he answers Job from the whirlwind. Kushner puts the following words in God's mouth: "Job, if you think that it is so easy to keep the world straight and true to keep unfair things from happening to people, you try it. It is too difficult even for God to keep cruelty and chaos from claiming their innocent victims." Is this what God actually says? Read God's first speech (chs. 38-39) and Job's response:

Then God answered Job ... and said: "Who is this that complicates ideas with words without knowledge? Get prepared like a man, I will ask you and you tell me. Where were you when I established the world? Tell me, if you know so much. Who drafted its dimensions? Do you know? ... Did you ever command forth a morning? ... Have death's gates been revealed to you? Have you examined earth's expanse? Tell me, if you know. Can you ... guide the bear with her cubs? ... Does the hawk soar by your wisdom? Does the eagle mount at your command, and make his nest on high? ... " God answered Job and said: "Will the contender with God yield? He who reproves God, let him answer it." Job answered God and said: "Lo, I am small. How can I answer you? My hand I lay on my mouth. I have spoken once, I will reply ... Wonders beyond my ken ... " (Job 38:1-4, 12, 17-18, 32; 40:1-5)

Is God doing anything like admitting to Job his inability to govern His world? The meaning of these chapters is notoriously difficult, but it is patently not Kushner's. Rabbi Norman Lamm suggests the following: "But when God appears out of the whirlwind, Job is overwhelmed—not by the cogency of the divine philosophy, but simply by the Presence of the Thou whom he loves and fears, by Whom he is fascinated and overawed."³ One may, or may not, be persuaded that Rabbi Lamm or Otto or Gordis or Pope has hit the nail on the head, and arrived at the correct reading. One thing is clear, however. One ought not pretend to the authority of a sacred text by hiding behind arbitrary interpretations. Not only does Kushner's interpretation of Job contradict all previous scholarship, it has no rooted textual evidence whatsoever. For Kushner to offer Job in support of his personal therapeutic theodicy is an illegitimate gerrymander of the first order.

In Kushner's book our basic religious orientations are lightly dismissed as being childlike and misguided. The existential world of the theist with its intimate knowledge of joy and sorrow, triumph and failure, and most crucially accountability and responsibility, is viewed by Kushner as unsophisticatedly rooted in the outdated idea that God can make a difference, that He can intervene in human affairs. Kushner dismisses those to whom the religious view of man is a live option. He replaces this live world with an uncritical ersatz edifice which has no other goal but that of comforting the audience. Matthew Arnold quotes Carlyle's insightful observation that "Socrates is terribly at ease in Zion." Kushner, I submit, is terribly at ease in the very serious world of religious theology.

NOTES

I. Kaufman defines gerrymandering, the term which Kushner uses in the explicitly Kaufmanian sense to describe his position, as follows:

Gerrymandering: This is a political term, but, unfortunately, politicians have no monopoly on dividing districts in an unnatural and unfair way to give one party an

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advantage over its opponent. Many theologians are masters of this art. Out of the New Testament they pick appropriate verses and connect them to fashion an intellectual and moral self-portrait which they solemnly call "the message of the New Testament" or the "Christian view"; and out of other Scriptures they carve all kinds of inferior straw men.

Theologians do not just do this incidentally; this is theology. Doing theology is like doing a jigsaw puzzle in which the verses of Scripture are the pieces: the finished picture is prescribed by each denomination, with a certain latitude allowed. What makes the game so pointless is that you do not have to use all the pieces, and the pieces which do not fit may be reshaped after pronouncing the words "this means." That is called exegesis.

In fashioning straw men to represent other religions, theologians do not always find it necessary to use the pieces provided by rival Scriptures. Protestant theologians frequently rely on what Luther said about Catholicism, and both Protestants and Catholics get the major pieces for their portraits of Judaism from the New Testament. Those with scholarly pretensions go on to seek some corroboration from the primary sources. But, obviously, "Quotations can be slander/ if you gerrymander." (Walter Kaufman, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*, Harper and Row Publishers, New York [copyright 1958], chapter five, page 157)

2. C. S. Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, Macmillan and Company, 17th printing (copyright 1967), New York, chapter 5, p. 2.
3. Norman Lamm, *Faith and Doubt*, Ktav Publishing (copyright 1971), p. 25.
4. Pp. 8, 11, 12, 13, 15.