

WHAT WOULD HAROLD KUSHER SAY TO US TODAY?

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Dear friends and fellow mourners

What do you say when a giant has fallen and the pain of his loss fills you and many other people all over the world with such sadness that we do not know what to say?

What do you say when you don't know how to give comfort to others on this dark day? and what do you say when you don't know how to give comfort to yourself?

What do you say when you don't know whether your place today is among those who stand at a lectern and try to comfort the mourners or whether your place is with the family and the mourners, and you feel the same need for comfort that they do?

I know what I always did whenever I needed comfort or guidance or help and whenever the pain in my life was too much to bear, I would turn to my friend, Harold Kushner, and I would ask him how to bear my pain and how to overcome my grief.

And so, this is what I want to do today,

I want to turn to his words and to his deeds and try to share with you some of the wisdom that I think that he would say to us if he could speak to us today.

The first lesson that I learned from Harold Kushner

Is one that he never put into words, because I think that he would felt it vain to say, but as I watched him over the years what struck me and what I think made him so special was that neither great tragedy nor great success spoiled him.

That is not the way it is with many people that we know. You and I know some people who were good and kind people until they suffered a terrible loss. And when that happened, these people changed and they became bitter and angry and hostile people.

And no one can blame these people when that happened. And no one has the right to judge them. For when a cruel and devastating blow strikes you or strikes someone whose life is bound up with yours, and when that blow seems to come at you for no rational reason, it is no wonder that such a catastrophe can destroy your character and crush your spirit.

And you and I also know some people who used to be good and kind people until they achieved enormous success in life, and then that success spoiled them and made them vain and arrogant and self centered. And when that happens, we cannot blame these people and we cannot judge them. For success has the power to turn people around and make them think that they are the center of the universe, and that the world revolves around them. It can make people unfit to live with. It can turn them into people who look down on everyone else.

but the wonder of Harold Kusner's life is that neither great tragedy, nor great success ever spoiled him.

To have lost a child who was as sweet and as bright and as life loving and as kind as Aaron was would have been enough to ruin many of us and to make us bitter and cynical and angry people. To have marked his every birthday with the knowledge that it

meant that his end was coming closer and closer....to have watched his classmates become athletes and watched them begin to date and begin to mature and to know that Aaron would never have any of these experiences? This would have been enough to embitter the spirit of any parent. It would have been enough to warp the character of any parent who loved his child.

But it did not do that---not to Harold and not to Suzette and not to Ariel. Harold somehow emerged from that pit of grief and pain with his spirit intact. He came out of that morass of sorrow into which he had been thrown for no reason that he or anyone else could comprehend-with the determination to help others who were in distress and to keep Aaron's memory alive in this way.

And so he travelled the country speaking to other parents who were facing the loss that he had gone through, and more important than talking to them, he listened to them and he held their hands, and he shared their pain.

Who cannot be moved by the fact that Harold was not destroyed by the pain that he lived through? Who cannot be awed by the fact that he used his talents to write a book that would be a tribute to his son and that would enable his son to live on?

And then came the time when Harold achieved enormous success in his life. The title of his book: "When bad things happen to good people" became a part of the English language. And his book, which he thought would be read by a few readers, became a best seller, not only in America but all over the world. This book which was so personal ended up being translated into many languages and it ended up speaking to the minds and hearts of people on every continent.

And he became famous beyond the Jewish world. And whenever and wherever he spoke, people came from great distances to listen to him.

That kind of success would have been enough to spoil many of us.

And yet the wonder of Harold Kushner's life is that neither great tragedy nor great success spoiled him. He remained the same, kind, caring and loving human being that he had always been both in time of tragedy and in time of success.

And so let this be the first lesson that we learn from Harold Kushner's life today.

Let us learn from him that what counts the most in life is not how much pain you endure but what you do with that pain. What counts the most is not how difficult your life is, but what you do with that difficulty and whether you transcend it and learn from it,

And what counts the most in life is not how much honor or how much power or how much wealth you achieve, but what you do with this power and this wealth and this honor.

Does it make you vain and arrogant?

Or do you use it in order to help other people who need you?

The second lesson that he would teach us if he could speak to us today is that our personal happiness is not the goal of our lives; it is the by-product of living a good life.s

He put it this way in one of his books:

“Our souls are not hungry for fame, or for comfort or for wealth or for power, our souls are hungry for meaning. Our souls are hungry for the sense that we have done something worthwhile with our

lives, and that we have made a difference to the people with whom we live. “

So let this be the second lesson that we who are in grief today should try to learn from Harold Kushner, to live lives that have purpose and that are not centered simply on ourselves.

He put it this way in one of his books:

“Is there an answer to the question of why bad things happen to good people?

The answer is to forgive the world for not being perfect,

And to forgive God for not being perfect,

And to reach out to the people around us who are not perfect.

And to go on living.....in spite of the fact that we are not perfect,

And to respond to what has happened to others.

With the care and the compassion that they so much need from us.”

“And then Harold wrote these words:

“The happiest people I know are the people who don’t even think about being happy. They just think about being good neighbors and good people. And while they are busy being good, happiness kind of sneaks in through the back door and enriches their lives while they are not looking for it.”

Let these words be Harold’s lesson to us on this sad day. Let them remind us that after the pain there comes the task, the task of helping others and let them remind us that it is in that task of helping others that we find comfort for our own pain.

And now, let me tell you the last lesson that Harold Kushner taught us,

I remember the day very clearly. A number of us had been asked to work on the new Torah commentary that is found in almost every Conservative synagogue today. We struggled with the task of writing a commentary on the Torah that would contain the words of the Sages and we failed. We floundered around for many months, and we just couldn't do it. Somehow our work turned out to be boring and lifeless. And so we turned to Harold and we asked him to write a commentary that would bring together the words of the Sages on the Torah in a way that would speak to this new generation,

And at the same time, we called upon a certain other famous writer to be the editor of this book. And as he signed his contract, this writer turned to Harold, and he said: "you know, taking on this project is going to cost each of us a book of our own that we could have had the time and strength to write if we did not take on this project."

And Harold turned to this writer and said: "so"?

Harold said that if this turned out to be the last book that he ever wrote, and that even if all the books that he had written in his lifetime were forgotten., he would be satisfied if he could enable the words of the Sages down through the centuries to continue to speak to a new generation,

Harold loved the words of the Sages. He really did,

And so let me finish this tribute to him by citing a midrash about the death of Moses that Harold loved. It was a midrash that Harold included in the commentary on the Torah that was the last work that he did before he died, And I tell it to you now, because I hope that it will bring some comfort to you who loved him, as it does to me:

The Midrash says that when it came time for Moses to die, God said to the angel of death: stand aside, and let me take the soul of Moses---not you,

And so the angel of death stood aside, and God came down from heaven to take the soul of Moses.

And then the Torah says that Moses died: “al pi Hashem”,

That phrase can be understood in one of two ways.

It can mean that Moses died at the command of God, it can mean that just as Moses lived all his life at the command of God, so he died at the command of God.

Or it can mean that Moses died at the mouth of God, That is the expression that we use to this day, to describe what happens when someone died a gentle and a peaceful death. When someone dies a death with no pain, we say that he died by the kiss of God.

But then the midrash says that the soul of Moses said to God. “I do not want to leave this body, for this is the holiest and the purest place that I have ever been.”

And so what did God do?

God persuaded the soul of Moses to leave his body and go up to heaven with him by saying these six gentle words to him,

God said:

“Yagata harbey,

Amalta harbey,

Bo lanuach.”

You have worked hard,

You have achieved much,
Come and rest.

Will you join me in saying these six words now
To our teacher and our friend, Harold Kushner,
Who taught us and who taught the world so much,
About how to transcend grief,
And about how to transcend success,
Both by his words, and by his example.

Let us say to him,
With much gratitude and with deep appreciation:

You have worked hard,
You have achieved much,
Come and rest,

And to this let us all say amen.