

## Which Human Sin Is the Most Harmful?

It seems to me not a bad idea to develop some familiarity with the thoughts of men and women who have developed a reputation for wisdom. There are, fortunately, a number of such individuals. Last April we discussed some thoughts by the Benedictine Abbess Joan Chittister in a talk titled "Are You Awake?" This morning we will turn our attention to the well-known Jewish rabbi and prolific author Harold Kushner. I am not suggesting that we agree with everything he discusses. I am, however, suggesting that his views are worth thinking about. I hope you agree.

I expect many, if not most of us, have heard the name Harold Kushner. If his name is vaguely familiar I would bet its because in 1981 he authored the best-selling book "When Bad Things Happen to Good People." He has now written a total of 13 books and I suspect we all could do far worse than to take advantage of his wisdom. Listen to just a few of his other book titles:

Overcoming Life's Disappointments

Who Needs God

How Good do we Have to be?

Nine Essential Things I've Learned About Life. As far as I know, that is his most recent book published in 2015.

In his most recent book he states that his spiritual life - what he believes, teaches, and practices - was shaped primarily by two circumstances. The first was the home and synagogue he grew up in. He described the religion practiced in his home as "observant but not compulsive." The rabbi at his synagogue was Israel Levinthol, recognized as one of the outstanding preachers in the American Jewish community. He, clearly, was a major influence.

The second circumstance that shaped his religious outlook was the illness and death of his son, Aaron. Aaron died from one of the world's rarest diseases, progeria, the "rapid-aging" syndrome. That disease is so rare that at any one time there may be fewer than two hundred people in the world affected by it. Consider the agony of watching your son or daughter prematurely age and die at age 14. This tragic experience convinced Kushner that the traditional religious perspective that he had grown up with and had been taught was inadequate. That perspective taught that God has His reasons, which we cannot comprehend or judge. This view neither made sense of the suffering nor offered him and his wife much in the way of comfort. If he was to continue to serve as a rabbi and honor his son's memory, he knew he had to find a better explanation. This is how he put it.

"The notion that an all-wise, all-powerful God who is totally good must have His reasons beyond the comprehension of a human mind or soul, was worse than unhelpful. It was offensive, saying to us either 'You must have done something to deserve this' or 'In times to come, you will understand why this was the right thing to happen to you.' I heard this from many people after my book came out: 'Now you know why God did this to your child, so that you would write this book that would help millions.' I'm sorry, but I choose to believe that any God worth worshipping would say, 'I really don't need you to be my press agent. I need you to bring solace and comfort to my bleeding children on earth.' "

Now, let's consider Kushner's words "any God worth worshipping" a bit further. I suspect, although I don't know, that many of us have some sense of an Ultimate Being, Great Spirit, or God even though we might be, at best, uncomfortable or perhaps completely unable if asked to describe such a Being. Harold Kushner and Marcus Borg both have written about using a

similar tactic when confronted by a student or parishioner who simply could not believe in a supreme Deity. After listening in silence to their stated disbelief, both Kushner and Borg would quietly ask, "Tell me about this God you don't believe in. There are lots of gods I don't believe in, either. Maybe we'll discover that we both reject the same notion of God, and then maybe we can find an understanding of God that we can both accept."

Kushner reminds us of an 2006 experiment we may have read about. This was an experiment to see whether prayer would help sick people heal faster. A large number of postoperative patients, matched for severity of illness and discomfort, was divided into three equal groups. One group was prayed for by people who believed in the power of prayer to invoke God's healing touch, and the people were told that they were being prayed for. A second group was also prayed for but were not told about it. A third group was not prayed for at all. What would you guess the result was? Well...there was no discernible difference in the speed or quality of the recovery of the people in any group.

CNN interviewed Kushner shortly after the results were announced and he was asked, "Doesn't that prove that prayer is an ineffective waste of time and effort?" Kushner replied, "It doesn't prove a thing. It isn't God's job to make sick people healthy. That's the doctors' job. God's job is to make sick people brave, and in my experience, that's something God does really well."

Then Kushner says this. "Think of it this way: no scientist has ever seen an electron but all scientists agree that electrons exist. No physicist has ever seen a quark, but all physicists believe that quarks are real. Why? Because when they look into their microscopes, they see things happening that could only happen if quarks and electrons existed. I believe in the reality of God the way scientists believe in the reality of electrons. I see things happening that would not happen unless there is a God."

Kushner continues. "The God I believe in is under no obligation to be the kind of God we would like Him to be, or even the kind of God we need Him to be. Begging Him, bargaining with Him, even living by His mandates will not cause the rain to fall... nor will it cure our disease or help us win the lottery. God's role is not to make our lives easier...God's role is to give us the vision to know what we need to do, to bless us with the qualities of soul that we will need in order to do them ourselves no matter how hard they may be, and to accompany us on that journey."

More precisely with respect to the value of prayer Kushner adds this. "Prayer, as I understand it, is not a matter of begging or bargaining. It is the act of inviting God into our lives so that, with God's help, we will be strong enough to resist temptation and resilient enough not to be destroyed by life's unfairness."

Finally, he concludes, "God does not send us problems. Genetics, chance, bad luck, and external circumstances cause us problems." To slightly paraphrase Kushner, Sending us problems is not in God's job description.

I'd like now to briefly deal with a related topic that may surprise some of us. Kushner, along with a few other thoughtful authors of whom I'm aware, is very clear that doubt and even anger are not only permissible but necessary to a healthy, intelligent belief. He is very forthright. "I believe it is not only permissible but a religious obligation to question the existence of God. The only religiously unacceptable response is to reject religion entirely and close your mind to further speculation. I cannot believe that God would bless us with a critical intelligence, with the ability

to extend the frontiers of knowledge and understanding when it comes to biology and psychology and then say to us, 'Stop, go no further' when it comes to theology."

For Kushner, the alternative to faith is not doubt but despair, the conclusion that we are alone in a cold and unreliable world. He admits that the wisest answer he has found to the issue of the legitimacy of doubt comes from Anne Lamott who has stated "The opposite of faith is not doubt but certainty." That, in my view, is so wise.

"Doubts about God need not be seen as lapses of faith. They can be seen as manifestations of faith, concern borne of caring enough to be troubled by life's unevenness...Anger, even anger at God, can be an authentic religious response. Think of that moment at the end of act 1 in Fiddler on the Roof. The celebration of the wedding of Tevye's eldest daughter is interrupted by a pogrom, an anti-Jewish riot by local troublemakers. They overturn the tables, make off with the food, and ruin many of the nicest gifts. Tevye's wordless response to the violations is not to meekly bow his head and accept God's inscrutable will. He shakes his fist at God in exasperation."

One more thought on the topic of God. This one may surprise many of us. Let's take a very brief look at commandment number one of the Ten Commandments. In the King James version it reads as follows: "I am the Lord thy God which has brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shall have no other gods before me." Now, here is Kushner. "People are often surprised when I tell them that there is no commandment in Judaism to believe in God." Did we know that? I didn't. Kushner continues, "This first commandment...is not a commandment to believe in God. In fact, it is not a commandment at all. It is an introductory statement telling the Israelites ...how they should live in response to God's giving them freedom." Simply, they should have no gods that usurp the god that liberated them from bondage in Egypt. Period. Kushner again, "There is no theology there telling people what to believe." I had to re-read that statement multiple times before coming to terms with it.

Now then, this provides a handy segway into Kushner's second lesson for us today. Not all theologians agree with him here but I am convinced he has an important message for us. Probably every clergyman or woman plus, I would guess, most of us have either expressed this thought or heard these words expressed by an acquaintance of ours. "I am not religious but I am a very spiritual person." This or similar statements have become widely discussed in the literature and have spawned a number of books. And I have mentioned it in several talks. The implication seems to be that being spiritual, following a religion solely of the heart and mind, is a purer, more authentic way of communicating with God than the physical act of attending church/fellowship, supporting charitable causes, or performing good deeds. Kushner writes, "I never had a satisfactory reply to that claim until my friend and colleague Rabbi David Wolpe of Los Angeles shared his answer with me. He would tell his spiritual congregant, 'No, spirituality is what you feel, theology is what you believe, religion is what you do.'" Kushner continues, "The most sublime religious faith becomes real only when it is translated into behavior, into doing things you might not otherwise do as an enactment of your religious faith." Let me repeat that distinction. Spirituality is what you feel, theology is what you believe, religion is what you do.

The great Jewish theologian Martin Buber would agree. He was once asked, "Where can I find God?" He replied, "God is not found in churches or synagogues. God is not found in holy books. God is not found in the hearts of the most fervent believer. God is found between people." In other words, the religion of your heart becomes real only when it is translated into

action. So once again, religion is what you do. Religion is an obligation. Religion is dissatisfied with the world. Religion mobilizes, organizes, and creates.

Here's a wonderful example of why Kushner is so beloved and it fits right into this discussion. Some years ago he was the Jewish representative on an interfaith panel of clergy. The moderator invited panel members to comment on the Seven Deadly Sins of Christian theology. To refresh your memory these are lust, gluttony, greed, anger, sloth, pride, and envy. The moderator specifically asked the panelists to comment on which of the seven was the most harmful, which was the most common, and which was the hardest to avoid committing.

Kushner listened to his colleagues as they responded and then it was his turn. He began by saying that he didn't think any of those seven were the worst things a person could do. None of those seven would be at the top of his list of deadly sins. In fact, none of the seven would likely make his top one hundred. Why not? Because they all happen inside a person, not between one person and another. Furthermore, they have no impact on the real world until such time as thoughts are translated into deeds. Kushner's list of the worst offenses against God would begin with hurting another person, cheating another person, shaming another person. The Talmud characterizes causing another person's face to flush with embarrassment or anger as a form of bloodshed, a serious ethical violation. Sins, and for that matter, virtues, refer to how we treat other people, not to what we think or feel in the privacy of our hearts. Only when those feelings are translated into action do they become part of our shared world.

Now, any time we deal with other people we run the risk of someone taking advantage of us, directly causing harm to us or others, or just flat out behaving in some other unacceptable manner. How do we respond? I have spoken about forgiveness and judgment in an earlier talk but I want to focus here on several aspects of forgiveness as discussed by Kushner. This is our third lesson for the day. The ability to forgive is a toughie for many people. It certainly is for me. As Kushner puts it: "Revenge - getting even with someone who has done us wrong - is everybody's favorite sin. Clearly the Bible forbids it but something about it feels so virtuous." I would say, "Virtuous, heck - the point is that it feels so darn good." Mary and I had the experience once of a reckless speeder rocketing by us. Seconds later a police cruiser, with lights flashing and siren blaring, screamed by in hot pursuit. I couldn't help but feel, "Ain't that great!"

So...even if we set Biblical admonitions aside, why is it we are told not to get even with someone who has hurt us? For Kushner, the answer is that when we do so, or even when we try to do so, we run the risk of lowering ourselves to that person's level. To put that perspective a bit more graphically, "Nursing the effort to get even with someone who has hurt us has been compared to swallowing poison in the hope that it makes someone else sick."

Here's a somewhat different take on forgiveness. The writings of Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk, may be familiar to some of us. He comments, "A Christian does not restrain his desire for revenge merely in order that he himself may be good, but in order that his enemy may be made good also. Charity knows its own happiness, and seeks to see it shared by everyone." Do we routinely consider this thought of wishing to make our enemy feel good? My answer would be, "Ouch."

Here's how Kushner sums up his take on forgiveness. "...nursing a grudge only perpetuates the offender's power over you. He continues to live in your head, reinforcing your frustration,

polluting your imagination with thoughts of getting even. Don't let him get away with that. He may or may not deserve forgiveness, but you deserve better than to waste your energy being angry with him. Letting go is the best revenge. Forgiveness is the identifying marker of the stronger party to the dispute. It is truly a favor you do yourself, not an undeserved gesture to the person who hurt you. Be kind to yourself and forgive. That's a tough lesson.

I want to conclude by briefly sharing one more of Kushner's essential lessons. He emphasizes that there is more to life than the things we enjoy doing. As he states it, "Sometimes...it is necessary that we live for others...Live for the sake of those who love you, because they need you." He continues, "The best cure for feeling down on your own is to reach out and help someone else. I've never known it to fail. And the best prescription for adding joy to your own life is to share your life with others. You will increase the happiness in your life by sharing their happy times in addition to your own." Interestingly enough, Barack Obama has stated a very similar thought, "The best way to not feel hopeless is to get up and do something."

We have now briefly considered four important ideas or lessons.

- 1) If you believe in God, what kind of god do you believe in?
- 2) The meaning of religion and how it differs from spirituality
- 3) The importance of forgiveness
- 4) Finally, meaningful life consists of living for others

In the words of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sachs, "Judaism begins not in wonder that the world is, but in protest that the world is not as it ought to be." The insistence that the world is not yet what God intended it to be is, to Kushner, a more honest sort of faith than is an attitude of "if God made the world this way, with disease and crime and natural disasters, that must mean that He wants it this way until and unless He intervenes to change it." In other words, I'm not responsible.

Many of us may remember Robert F. Kennedy's paraphrase from George Bernard Shaw's "Back to Methuselah:" "Some people look at the world as it is and ask, 'Why?' I look at the world as it might be and ask, 'Why not?' "

- Why not be thankful for being alive?
- Why not care how we treat others?
- Why not practice forgiveness?
- Why not reach out to help someone else?

Why not?

Two useful books:

Nine Essential Things I've Learned About Life - Harold S. Kushner

7 Deadly Sins - Aviad M. Kleinburg