

Rabbi Harold S. Kushner, Reassuring Best-Selling Author, Dies at 88¹

With a wide-reaching spiritual message in books like “WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE,” he drew on his own experience with grief and doubt.

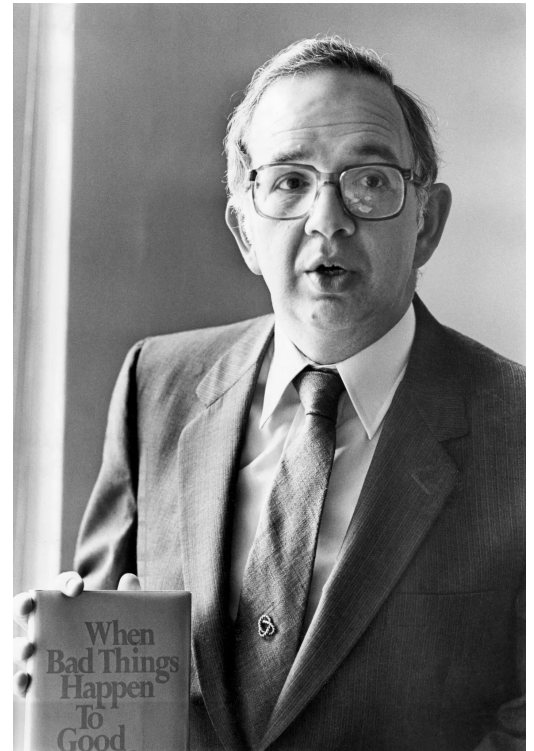
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Rabbi Harold Kushner, a practical public theologian whose best-selling books assured readers that bad things happen to good people because God is endowed with unlimited love and justice but exercises only finite power to prevent evil, died on Friday in Canton, Mass. He was 88.

His death, in hospice care, was confirmed by his daughter, Ariel Kushner Haber.

Several of Rabbi Kushner’s 14 books became best-sellers, resonating well beyond his Conservative Jewish congregation outside Boston and across religious boundaries in part because they had been inspired by his own experiences with grief, doubt and faith. One reviewer called his book “WHEN ALL YOU’VE EVER WANTED ISN’T ENOUGH” a “useful spiritual survival manual.”

Rabbi Kushner wrote “WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE” (1981) after the death of his son, Aaron. At age 3, just hours after the birth of



Rabbi Harold S. Kushner in 1981, the year “WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE” was published. He wrote it after the death of his 14-year-old son. “Like a lot of children who feel they’re going to die soon, he was afraid he would be forgotten because he didn’t live long enough,” he said, adding, “I promised I’d tell his story.” Neal Boenzi/The New York Times

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/28/books/rabbi-harold-s-kushner-dead.html>

the Kushners' daughter, Aaron was diagnosed with a rare disease, PROGERIA, in which the body ages rapidly. When Aaron was 10 years old, he was in his 60s physiologically. He weighed only 25 pounds and was as tall as a three-year-old when he died in 1977 two days after his 14th birthday.

“Like a lot of children who feel they’re going to die soon, he was afraid he would be forgotten because he didn’t live long enough, not knowing parents never forget,” Rabbi Kushner told the alumni magazine Columbia College Today in 2008. “I promised I’d tell his story.”

The book was rejected by two publishers before it was accepted by Schocken Books. It catapulted to No. 1 on the New York Times best-seller list and transformed Rabbi Kushner into a popular author and commentator.

“It was my very first inkling of how much suffering was out there, all over the world, that religion was not coping with,” he told The Times in 1996.

His thesis, as he wrote in the book, was straightforward: **“It becomes much easier to take God seriously as the source of moral values if we don’t hold Him responsible for all the unfair things that happen in the world.”**

Rabbi Kushner also wrote:

“I don’t know why one person gets sick, and another does not, but I can only assume that some natural laws which we don’t understand are at work. I cannot believe that God ‘sends’ illness to a specific person for a specific reason. I don’t believe in a God who has a weekly quota of malignant tumors to distribute, and consults His computer to find out who deserves one most or who could handle it best.

“‘What did I do to deserve this?’ is an understandable outcry from a sick and suffering person, but it is really the wrong question. Being sick or being healthy is not a matter of what God decides that we deserve. **The better question is, ‘If this has happened to me, what do I do now, and who is there to help me do it?’**”

He was making the case that dark corners of the universe endure where God has not yet succeeded in making order out of chaos. “And chaos is evil; not wrong, not malevolent, but evil nonetheless,” he wrote, “because by causing tragedies at random, it prevents people from believing in God’s goodness.”

Unpersuaded, the journalist, critic and novelist Ron Rosenbaum, writing in *The New York Times Magazine* in 1995, reduced Rabbi Kushner's thesis more dialectically: "diminishing God to something less than an Omnipotent Being — to something more like an eager cheerleader for good, but one decidedly on the sidelines in the struggle against evil."

"In effect," he wrote, "we need to join Him in rooting for good — our job is to help cheer Him up."

Rabbi Kushner argued, however, that God was omnipotent as a wellspring of empathy and love.

Harold Samuel Kushner was born on April 3, 1935, to Julius and Sarah (Hartman) Kushner in the East New York section of Brooklyn. His mother was a homemaker. His father owned Playmore Publishing, which sold toys and children's books, especially Bible stories, from a shop at Fifth Avenue and 23rd Street that he hoped his son would take over. Harold felt he lacked his father's business sense.

"The only thing worse than competing with my father and failing would be competing with him and outdoing him," he said. "Going into the rabbinate was not a way of saying, 'I'm rejecting what you're doing.' I'm affirming it."

He was raised in Brooklyn (the family moved to the Crown Heights section when he started elementary school), where he was a passionate Brooklyn Dodgers fan. After graduating from Erasmus Hall High School, he earned a bachelor's degree from Columbia University in 1955 and a master's there in 1960.

He had planned to major in psychology but switched to literature after studying under Prof. Mark Van Doren, the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet. On a lark, but armed with a solid religious upbringing, he enrolled in an evening program at the Jewish Theological Seminary. By his junior year at Columbia he had decided to become a rabbi.



Rabbi Kushner in 2012 in the sanctuary of Temple Israel in Natick, Mass., outside Boston. He led the congregation for 24 years while writing many of his books. Art Illman/*Metro West Daily News*, via Associated Press

After Columbia, he enrolled full-time at the seminary where he was ordained, graduated in 1960 and received his doctorate in 1972. He studied later at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

He volunteered for two years in the Army's Chaplain Corps at Fort Sill, Okla., where he became a first lieutenant. Returning to New York after his discharge, he served for four years as an assistant rabbi at Temple Israel in Great Neck, N.Y., on Long Island.

Rabbi Kushner married Suzette Estrada in 1960 and moved to Massachusetts, where he became rabbi of Temple Israel in Natick, a suburb of Boston, in 1966. He served as the congregational rabbi there for 24 years and remained a member of the congregation until he moved into a senior living residence in Canton in 2017.

His wife died in 2022. His brother, Paul, a rabbi in Bellmore and Merrick on Long Island, died in 2019. In addition to his daughter, he is survived by two grandchildren.

Among Rabbi Kushner's other books are "HOW GOOD DO WE HAVE TO BE? A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF GUILT AND FORGIVENESS" (1997), "LIVING A LIFE THAT MATTERS" (2001) and "THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD: HEALING WISDOM OF THE 23RD PSALM" (2003).

He also collaborated with the novelist Chaim Potok in editing "ETZ HAYIM: A TORAH COMMENTARY," the official commentary of Conservative Jewish congregations, which was published by the Rabbinical Assembly and the Jewish Publication Society in 2001.

Rabbi Kushner often said he was amazed at the breadth of his readership across theological lines. In 1999, he was named clergyman of the year by the organization Religion in American Life. In 2007, the Jewish Book Council gave him a Lifetime Achievement Award.

In his books, other writings and on-air commentary, often as a radio and television talk show guest, he became a font of aphorisms embraced by clergy of all denominations. Among them were: **"Forgiveness is a favor we do for ourselves, not a favor we do to the other party,"** and, **"If we hold our friends to a standard of perfection, or if they do that to us, we will end up far lonelier than we want to be."**

“People who pray for miracles usually don’t get miracles, any more than children who pray for bicycles, good grades, or good boyfriends get them as a result of praying,” he wrote. “But people who pray for courage, for strength to bear the unbearable, for the grace to remember what they have left instead of what they have lost, very often find their prayer answered.”

He explained that his book **“WHEN ALL YOU’VE EVER WANTED ISN’T ENOUGH”** was intended to be “an examination of the question of why successful people don’t feel more satisfied with their lives.”

“Drawing on the Biblical book of Ecclesiastes, it suggests that people need to feel that their lives make a difference to the world,” he wrote. “We are not afraid of dying so much as of not having lived.”