

Atheism and Faith

Name _____

L. Schoendorf

Class Period _____

Kushner Worksheet: "What Good, Then Is Religion?" (Please TYPE and Double space)...

1. How does the reading from II Samuel 12:19-23 reflect Rabbi Kushner's beliefs about God and suffering?
2. In what ways does Rabbi Kushner suggest that God is limited?
3. According to Rabbi Kushner are the benefits of believing in a limited God?
4. According to Kushner, if God does not cause bad things to happen, if God cannot prevent suffering, then what good is God?
5. What is Kushner's "answer" to the question why bad things happen to good people?
6. What are some questions about suffering that are better to ask than "why do bad things happen to good people?"
7. Kushner suggests some positive meanings people give to suffering. What are they? Can you think of others?
8. Kushner suggests some negative meanings people give to suffering. What are they? Can you think of others?
9. According to Kushner WHY do we love God?
10. Choose one statement or phrase that stood out for you. Write it out and explain why it stood out for you.

When

Eight

Bad Things

What Good, Then, Is Religion?

Happen to

Good People

HAROLD S. KUSHNER

In a sense, I have been writing this book for fifteen years. From the day I heard the word "progeria" and was told what it meant, I knew that I would one day have to face Aaron's declining and dying. And I knew that, after he died, I would feel the need to write a book, sharing with others the story of how we managed to go on believing in God and in the world after we had been hurt. I didn't know what I would call the book, and I wasn't totally sure what I would say. But I knew that the page after the title page would carry a dedication to Aaron. I could visualize the dedication to him, and under it, in my mind's eye, I could see the quotation from the Bible, the words of King David after the death of his son: "Absalom, my son! Would that I had died instead of you!"

Then one day, a year and a half after Aaron's death, I realized that I was visualizing that page differently in my imagination. Now instead of the passage in which David wishes he were dead and his son alive, I saw in my mind's

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eye the words of David after the death of an earlier child, the passage that I have in fact used in part on the dedication page of this book:

When David saw the servants whispering, he said to them, Is the child dead? And they said, He is dead. And David rose and washed and changed his clothing and asked that food be set before him, and he ate. The servants said to him, What is this that you are doing? You fasted and wept for the child when he was alive, and now that he is dead, you get up and eat! And David said, While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, Who knows whether the Lord will be gracious to me and the child will live. But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him; but he will not return to me.

(II Samuel 12:19-23)

I am a more sensitive person, a more effective pastor, a more sympathetic counselor because of Aaron's life and death than I would ever have been without it. And I would give up all of those gains in a second if I could have my son back. If I could choose, I would forgo all the spiritual growth and depth which has come my way because of our experiences, and be what I was fifteen years ago, an average rabbi, an indifferent counselor, helping some people and unable to help others, and the father of a bright, happy boy. But I cannot choose.

I believe in God. But I do not believe the same things about Him that I did years ago, when I was growing up or when I was a theological student. I recognize His limitations. He is limited in what He can do by laws of nature and by the evolution of human nature and human moral freedom. I no longer hold God responsible for illnesses, accidents, and natural disasters, because I realize that I gain little and I lose so much when I blame God for those things. I can worship a God who hates suffering but can not eliminate it more easily than I can worship a God who chooses to make children suffer and die, for whatever exalted reason. Some years ago, when the "death of God" theology was a fad, I remember seeing a bumper sticker that read "My God is not dead; sorry about yours." I guess my bumper sticker would read "My God is not cruel; sorry about yours."

"God does not cause our misfortunes. Some are caused by bad luck, some are caused by bad people, and some are simply an inevitable consequence of our being human and being mortal; living in a world of inflexible natural life's unfairness."

"laws." The painful things that happen to us are not punishments for our misbehavior, nor are they in any way part of some grand design on God's part. Because the tragedy is not God's will, we need not feel hurt or betrayed by God when tragedy strikes. We can turn to Him for help in overcoming it, precisely because we can tell ourselves that God is as outraged by it as we are.

"Does that mean that my suffering has no meaning?" That is the most significant challenge that can be offered to the point of view I have been advocating in this book. We could bear nearly any pain or disappointment if we thought there was a reason behind it, a purpose to it. But even a lesser burden becomes too much for us if we feel it makes no sense. Patients in a veterans' hospital who have been seriously wounded in combat have an easier time adjusting to their injuries than patients with exactly the same injury sustained while fooling around on a basketball court or in a swimming pool, because they can tell themselves that their suffering at least was in a good cause. Parents who can convince themselves that there is some purpose somewhere served by their child's handicap can accept it better for the same reason.

Do you remember the biblical story, in chapter 32 of Exodus, about Moses, how, when he came down from Mount Sinai and saw the Israelites worshiping the golden calf, he threw down the tablets of the Ten Commandments so that they shattered? There is a Jewish legend that tells us that while Moses was climbing down the mountain with the two stone tablets on which God had written the Ten Com-

mandments, he had no trouble carrying them although they were large, heavy slabs of stone and the path was steep. After all, though they were heavy, they had been inscribed by God and were precious to him. But when Moses came upon the people dancing around the golden calf, the legend goes, the words disappeared from the stone. They were just blank stones again. And now they became too heavy for him to hold on to.

We could bear any burden if we thought there was a meaning to what we were doing. Have I made it harder for people to accept their illnesses, their misfortunes, their family tragedies, by telling them that they are not sent by God as part of some master plan of His?

Let me suggest that the bad things that happen to us in our lives do not have a meaning when they happen to us. They do not happen for any good reason which would cause us to accept them willingly. But we can give them a meaning. We can redeem these tragedies from senselessness by imposing meaning on them. The question we should be asking is not, "Why did this happen to me? What did I do to deserve this?" That is really an unanswerable, pointless question. A better question would be "Now that this has happened to me, what am I going to do about it?"

Martin Gray, a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto and the Holocaust, writes of his life in a book called *For Those I Loved*. He tells how, after the Holocaust, he rebuilt his life, became successful, married, and raised a family. Life seemed good after the horrors of the concentration camp. Then

one day, his wife and children were killed when a forest fire ravaged their home in the south of France. Gray was distraught, pushed almost to the breaking point by this added tragedy. People urged him to demand an inquiry into what caused the fire, but instead he chose to put his resources into a movement to protect nature from future fires. He explained that an inquiry, an investigation, would focus only on the past, on issues of pain and sorrow and blame. He wanted to focus on the future. An inquiry would set him against other people—"Was someone negligent? Whose fault was it?"—and being against other people, setting out to find a villain, accusing other people of being responsible for your misery, only makes a lonely person lonelier. Life, he concluded, has to be lived for something, not just against something.

We too need to get over the questions that focus on the past and on the pain—"Why did this happen to me?"—and ask instead the question which opens doors to the future: "Now that this has happened, what shall I do about it?" Let me once again cite Dorothee Soelle, the German theologian whom we quoted in chapter 5, asking whose side we thought God was on in the concentration camps, the murderers' side or the victims' side. Soelle, in her book *Suffering*, suggests that "the most important question we can ask about suffering is whom it serves. Does our suffering serve God or the devil, the cause of becoming alive or being morally paralyzed?" Not "Where does the tragedy come from?" but "Where does it lead?" is the issue on which Soelle would have us focus. In this context she speaks of

"the devil's martyrs." What does she mean by that phrase? We are familiar with the idea that various religions honor the memories of martyrs for God, people who died in such a way as to bear witness to their faith. By remembering their faith in the face of death, our own faith is strengthened. Such people are God's martyrs.

But the forces of despair and disbelief have their martyrs too, people whose death weakens other people's faith in God and in His world. If the death of an elderly woman in Auschwitz or of a child in a hospital ward leaves us doubting God and less able to affirm the world's goodness, then that woman and that child become "the devil's martyrs," witnesses against God, against the meaningfulness of a moral life, rather than witnesses in favor. But (and this is Soelle's most important point) it is not the circumstances of their death that makes them witnesses for or against God. *It is our reaction to their death.*

The facts of life and death are neutral. We, by our responses, give suffering either a positive or a negative meaning. Illnesses, accidents, human tragedies kill people. But they do not necessarily kill life or faith. If the death and suffering of someone we love makes us bitter, jealous, against all religion, and incapable of happiness, we turn the person who died into one of the "devil's martyrs." If suffering and death in someone close to us bring us to explore the limits of our capacity for strength and love and cheerfulness, if it leads us to discover sources of consolation we never knew before, then we make the person into a witness for the affirmation of life rather than its rejection.

This means, Soelle suggests, that there is one thing we can still do for those we loved and lost. We could not keep them alive. Perhaps we could not even significantly lessen their pain. But the one crucial thing we can do for them after their death is to let them be witnesses for God and for life, rather than "by our despair and loss of faith, making them 'the devil's martyrs'." The dead depend on us for their redemption and their immortality.

Soelle's words make it clear how we can act positively in the face of tragedy. But what about God's role? If God does not cause the bad things that happen to good people, and if He cannot prevent them, what good is He at all?

~~First of all, God has created a world in which many more good things than bad things happen. We find life's disasters upsetting not only because they are painful, but because they are exceptional. Most people wake up on most days feeling good. Most illnesses are curable. Most airplanes take off and land safely. Most of the time, when we send our children out to play, they come home safely. The accident, the robbery, the inoperable tumor are life-shattering exceptions, but they are very rare exceptions. When you have been hurt by life, it may be hard to keep that in mind. When you are standing very close to a large object, all you can see is the object. Only by stepping back from it can you also see the rest of its setting around it. When we are stunned by some tragedy, we can only see and feel the tragedy. Only with time and distance can we see the tragedy in the context of a whole life and a whole world. In the Jewish tradition, the special prayer known as~~

the Mourners' Kaddish is not about death, but about life, and it praises God for having created a basically good and livable world. By reciting that prayer, the mourner is reminded of all that is good and worth living for. There is a crucial difference between denying the tragedy, insisting that everything is for the best, and seeing the tragedy in the context of a whole life, keeping one's eye and mind on what has enriched you and not only on what you have lost.

How does God make a difference in our lives if He neither kills nor cures? God inspires people to help other people who have been hurt by life, and by helping them, they protect them from the danger of feeling alone, abandoned, or judged. God makes some people want to become doctors and nurses, to spend days and nights of self-sacrifice concern with an intensity for which no money can compensate, in the effort to sustain life and alleviate pain. God moves people to want to be medical researchers, to focus their intelligence and energy on the causes and possible cures for some of life's tragedies. When I was a boy, early summer was the most pleasant weather of the year in New York City, but it was a time of dread for young families because of the fear of a polio epidemic. But human beings used their God-given intelligence to eliminate that fear. Throughout human history, there have been plagues and epidemics that wiped out whole cities. People felt that they had to have six or eight children so that some at least would survive to adulthood. Human intelligence has come to understand more about the natural laws concerning san-

itation, germs, immunization, antibiotics, and has succeeded in eliminating many of those scourges.

God, "who neither causes nor prevents tragedies," helps by inspiring people to help. As a nineteenth-century Hasidic rabbi once put it, "human beings are God's language." God shows His opposition to cancer and birth defects; not by eliminating them or making them happen only to bad people (He can't do that), but by summoning forth friends and neighbors to ease the burden and to fill the emptiness. We were sustained in Aaron's illness by people who made a point of showing that they cared and understood: the man who made Aaron a scaled-down tennis racquet suitable to his size, and the woman who gave him a small handmade violin that was a family heirloom; the friend who got him a baseball autographed by the Red Sox, and the children who overlooked his appearance and physical limitations to play stickball with him in the backyard, and who wouldn't let him get away with anything special. People like that were "God's language." His way of telling our family that we were not alone, not cast off.

In the same way, I finally believe that Aaron served God's purposes, not by being sick or strange-looking (there was no reason why God should have wanted that), but by facing up so bravely to his illness and to the problems caused by his appearance. I know that his friends and schoolmates were affected by his courage and by the way he managed to live a full life despite his limitations. And I know that people who knew our family were moved to handle the difficult times of their own lives with more hope and courage when they saw our example. I take these

as instances of God moving people here on earth to help other people in need.

And finally, to the person who asks, "What good is God? Who needs religion, if these things happen to good people and bad people alike?" I would say that God may not prevent the calamity, but He gives us the strength and the perseverance to overcome it. Where else do we get these qualities which we did not have before? The heart attack which slows down a forty-six-year-old businessman does not come from God, but the determination to change his life-style, to stop smoking, to care less about expanding his business and care more about spending time with his family, because his eyes have been opened to what is truly important to him—those things come from God. God does not stand for heart attacks; those are nature's responses to the body's being overstressed. But God does stand for self-discipline and for being part of a family.

The flood that devastates a town is not an "act of God," even if the insurance companies find it useful to call it that. But the efforts people make to save lives, risking their own lives for a person who might be a total stranger to them, and the determination to rebuild their community after the flood waters have receded, do qualify as acts of God.

When a person is dying of cancer, I do not hold God responsible for the cancer or for the pain he feels. They have other causes. But I have seen God give such people the strength to take each day as it comes, to be grateful for a day full of sunshine or one in which they are relatively free of pain.

When people who were never particularly strong become strong in the face of adversity, when people who tended to think only of themselves become unselfish and heroic in an emergency, I have to ask myself where they got these qualities which they would freely admit they did not have before. My answer is that this is one of the ways in which God helps us when we suffer beyond the limits of our own strength.

Life is not fair. The wrong people get sick and the wrong people get robbed and the wrong people get killed in wars and in accidents. Some people see life's unfairness and decide, "There is no God; the world is nothing but chaos."

Others see the same unfairness and ask themselves, "Where do I get my sense of what is fair and what is unfair? Where do I get my sense of outrage and indignation, my instinctive response of sympathy when I read in the paper about a total stranger who has been hurt by life? Don't I get these things from God? Doesn't He plant in me a little bit of His own divine outrage at injustice and oppression just as He did for the prophets of the Bible? Isn't my feeling of compassion for the afflicted just a reflection of the compassion He feels when He sees the suffering of His creatures?" Our responding to life's unfairness with sympathy and with righteous indignation, God's compassion and God's anger working through us, may be the surest proof of all of God's reality.

Religion alone can affirm the afflicted person's sense of self-worth. Science can describe what has happened to a person; only religion can call it a tragedy. Only the voice of religion, when it frees itself from the need to defend and

justify God for all that happens, can say to the afflicted person, "You are a good person, and you deserve better. Let me come and sit with you so that you will know that you are not alone."

None of us can avoid the problem of why bad things happen to good people. Sooner or later, each of us finds himself playing one of the roles in the story of Job, whether as victim of tragedy, as a member of the family, or as a friend-comforter. The questions never change; the search for a satisfying answer continues.

In our generation, the gifted poet Archibald MacLeish has given us his version of the Job story in a modern setting. The first half of his poetic drama J.B. retells the familiar story. J.B., the Job-figure, is a successful businessman surrounded by an attractive, loving family. Then one by one, his children die. His business fails, his health fails. Finally, his whole city and much of the world are destroyed in a nuclear war.

Three friends come to "comfort" J.B., just as in the biblical story, and once again their words are more self-serving than comforting. In MacLeish's version, the first-comforter is a Marxist who assures J.B. that none of his suffering is his fault. He just had the bad luck to be a member of the wrong economic class at the wrong time. He was a capitalist at the time of capitalism's decline. Had he lived the same life in another century, he would not have been punished. He is not suffering for any of his own sins. He just got in the way of the steamroller of historical necessity. J.B. is not comforted by this view. It takes his own personal tragedy too lightly, by seeing him only as a member of a certain class.

The second comforter is a psychiatrist. J.B. is not guilty, he tells him, because there is no such thing as guilt. Now that we understand what makes human beings tick, we know that we do not choose. We only think we choose. Really, we simply respond to instinct. We do not act; we are acted upon. Therefore we have no responsibility; and no guilt.

J.B. answers that such a solution, describing him as the passive victim of blind instincts, robs him of his humanity. I'd rather suffer every unspeakable suffering God sends, knowing that it was . . . I that acted, I that chose, than wash my hands with yours in that defiling innocence."

The third and last comforter is a clergyman. When J.B. asks him for what sin he is being punished so harshly, he replies, "Your sin is simple. You were born a man. What is your fault? Man's heart is evil. What you have done? Man's will is evil." J.B. is a sinner worthy of punishment not because of anything specific he has done, but because he is a human being, and human beings are inevitably imperfect and sinful. J.B. answers him, "Yours is the cruellest comfort of them all, making the Creator of the Universe the mis-creator of mankind, a party to the crimes He punishes." J.B. cannot turn for help and comfort to a God who is described as making man imperfect and then punishing him for his imperfection.

Having rejected the explanations of the three comforters, J.B. turns to God Himself, and as in the Bible, God answers, overwhelming J.B. with His awesomeness, quoting lines directly from the biblical speech out of the whirlwind.

Up to this point, MacLeish has given us the biblical story of Job in a modern setting. His ending, however, is radically different. In the Bible, the story ends with God rewarding Job for having put up with so much suffering, and gives him new health, new wealth, and new children. In the play, there are no heavenly rewards in the closing scene. Instead, J.B. goes back to his wife, and they prepare to go on living together and building a new family. Their love, not God's generosity, will provide the new children to replace the ones who died.

J.B. forgives God and commits himself to going on living. His wife says to him, "You wanted justice, didn't you? There isn't any . . . there is only love." The two narrators, representing the perspectives of God and Satan, are baffled. How could a person who has suffered so much in life want more life? "Who plays the hero, God or him? Is God to be forgiven?" "Isn't He? Job was innocent, you may remember." MacLeish's Job answers the problem of human suffering, not with theology or psychology, but by choosing to go on living and creating new life. He forgives God for not making a more just universe, and decides to take it as it is. He stops looking for justice, for fairness in the world, and looks for love instead.

In the play's moving last lines, Job's wife says:

*The candles in churches are out,
The stars have gone out in the sky,*

*Blow on the coal of the heart
And we'll see by and by...*

The world is a cold, unfair place in which everything they held precious has been destroyed. But instead of giving up on this unfair world and life, instead of looking outward, to churches or to nature, for answers, they look inward to their own capacities for loving. "Blow on the coal of the heart" for what little light and warmth we will be able to muster to sustain us.

In *Dimensions of Job*, edited by Nahum N. Glazier, MacLeish has written an essay explaining what he was trying to say in the ending of his Job-play: "Man depends on God for all things; God depends on man for one...Without Man's love, God does not exist; as God, only as creator; and love is the one thing no one, not even God Himself, can command: it is a free gift, or it is nothing. And it is most itself, most free, when it is offered in spite of suffering, of injustice, and of death." We do not love God because He is perfect.... We do not love Him because He protects us from all harm and keeps evil things from happening to us. We do not love Him because we are afraid of Him, or bear cause... He will hurt us if we turn our back on Him. We love Him because He is God; because He is the author of all the beauty and the order around us; the source of our strength and the hope and courage within us; and of other people's strength and hope and courage with which we are helped in our time of need. We love Him because He is the best part of ourselves and of our world. That is what it means to love. Love is not the admiration of perfection, but the acceptance of an imperfect person with all his imperfections, because loving and accepting him makes us better and stronger.

Is there an answer to the question of why bad things happen to good people? That depends on what we mean by "answer." If we mean "Is there an explanation which will make sense of it all?"—Why is there cancer in the world? Why did my father get cancer? Why did the plane crash? Why did my child die?—then there is probably no satisfying answer. We can offer learned explanations, but in the end, when we have covered all the squares on the game board and are feeling very proud of our cleverness, the pain and the anguish and the sense of unfairness will still be there.

But the word "answer" can mean "response" as well as "explanation," and in that sense, there may well be a satisfying answer to the tragedies in our lives. The response would be Job's response in MacLeish's version of the biblical story—to forgive the world for not being perfect, to forgive God for not making a better world, to reach out to the people around us, and to go on living despite it all.

In the final analysis, the question of why bad things happen to good people translates itself into some very different questions, no longer asking why something happened, but asking how we will respond—what we intend to do now that it has happened.

Are you capable of forgiving and accepting in love a world which has disappointed you by not being perfect, a world in which there is so much unfairness and cruelty, disease and crime, earthquake and accident? Can you forgive its imperfections—and love it—because it is capable of containing great beauty and goodness; and because it is the only world we have?

Are you capable of forgiving and loving the people around you, even if they have hurt you and let you down by not being perfect? Can you forgive them and love them, because there aren't any perfect people around, and because the penalty for not being able to love imperfect people is condemning oneself to loneliness?

Are you capable of forgiving and loving God even when you have found out that He is not perfect, even when He has let you down and disappointed you by permitting bad luck and sickness and cruelty in His world, and permitting some of those things to happen to you? Can you learn to love and forgive Him despite His limitations, as Job does, and as you once learned to forgive and love your parents even though they were not as wise, as strong, or as perfect as you needed them to be?

And if you can do these things, will you be able to recognize that the ability to forgive and the ability to love are the weapons God has given us to enable us to live fully, bravely, and meaningfully in this less-than-perfect world?

I think of Aaron and all that his life taught me, and I realize how much I have lost and how much I have gained. Yesterday seems less painful, and I am not afraid of tomorrow.

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