

INTRODUCTION

The Death of the Rabbi's Wife

This is a book for the brokenhearted.

If you are going through a brutal, inexplicable loss—the death of a loved one, a shocking, unaccountable illness, a financial reversal, or any form of tragedy—I wrote this book for you.

In fact, if you are like me, you have quite possibly experienced a second loss that followed the first—a challenge to your faith, or perhaps even a loss of faith.

Isn't it God's job to keep us safe? Isn't it God's job to protect us, to love us, and to shield us from harm?

If so, when tragedy strikes, where are we supposed to turn? How can we go to God for solace, to help us come to terms with whatever bitter loss we are experiencing, if God is in fact the architect of that loss? Can He even help us get through another sleepless night?

Many of us don't lose only the loved one, our health, or our business. Collateral damage includes the loss of

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our hopes and dreams for the future, plans we made. We might lose our faith in God as well.

If I'm describing you, then this is your book.

Let me tell you my story briefly. I was an Orthodox rabbi, married with eleven children—that's right, eleven! I was the leader of a growing community and the director of a day school, the Hebrew Academy of Huntington Beach in Southern California. When people in my religious community or in our school suffered tragic loss, God forbid, you could say I was the consoler-in-chief.

It was my duty to sit with the families, to listen to them, to see if they wanted an explanation or a hug. I hoped to provide them with the time-honored answers that Judaism has always given to those who were spiraling through tragedy and loss.

I knew all the answers because I was a well-trained rabbi. On many occasions, I was thrust into situations where I had to explain sudden or prolonged loss to community members or members of the school population, such as the tragedy of a twenty-nine-year-old father of three young boys dying from pancreatic cancer. I had to give the answers Judaism provides as to how God could permit such tragedy and suffering to innocent people. I thought those answers were enough to begin the healing process or even to bring about a complete healing.

And then my wife died.

I was thirty-eight and she was thirty-six. We had a wonderful marriage, and as you can see, we took the bib-

lical commandment to *Be fruitful and multiply* very seriously!

Now all eyes were on me. An entire community and an entire school wanted to know: How could God permit something like this? How could a lovely woman like my wife—a person admired and respected in our community and a mother of eleven children, the oldest just fourteen years old—suddenly be taken from us?

People asked, as people ask at those moments: Where is God? How could God permit such a thing? Is there a God? Is God loving? If God is loving, how could this happen?

And for the first time in my life, I had to ask *myself* those questions, but on a deeper level than ever before. When someone else goes through a painful experience, we often say it's a test. But when we ourselves go through such an experience, we tell ourselves it's a tragedy. This is understandable. If we were not emotionally distanced to some degree from the losses of others, we could not get through the day. But when it comes to a loss we suffer personally, there is no such distancing. So now, as I reeled from my wife's sudden passing, I had to ask myself: Did the answers I had been giving others for so long still make sense?

The good news is that they did. Jews have had thousands of years of practice coping with tragedy and loss. Perhaps there is no group of people on earth who have gone through so much for so long! From our enslavement in Egypt to the attempt by the Nazis to annihilate us, not to mention countless expulsions and pogroms in between, we are masters at coping with the worst things that could

possibly happen in life. We have been supported through our calamities by timeless Jewish wisdom. We have distilled those bitter experiences into a philosophy and an approach to understand and deal with tragedy. In this book, it is my goal to share those teachings with you.

A while before my wife passed away, a book was published entitled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* by Rabbi Harold Kushner. The title is a rough approximation of Moses' challenge to God, "Why is there a *tzaddik v'ra lo?*" which literally means "a righteous person to whom bad happens." This challenge is cited in the Talmud.^{1*} In one sense, it's a question without an answer, because we can never understand, from our viewpoint as human beings on Planet Earth, exactly what God has in mind. But God has provided plenty of clues that our rabbis were able to decipher and translate into language that humans can understand. Developing these clues is the purpose of this book.

That bestselling book's answer to the timeless issues surrounding *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* is that evil exists because God is not fully in control of the universe. Kushner's view is that there are pockets of untamed evil and chaos that even God has not conquered. This is an intriguing idea, and while the book provided

* **Talmud:** A literary work of monumental proportions that draws upon the legal, spiritual, intellectual, ethical, and historical traditions of Judaism. The thirty-seven tractates of the Babylonian Talmud contain the teachings of the Jewish Sages from the period after the destruction of the Second Temple through the fifth century CE. It has served as the primary vehicle for the transmission of the Oral Law and the education of Jews over the centuries; it is the entry point for all subsequent legal, ethical, and theological Jewish scholarship.

comfort to many, to be frank, it is not a Jewish idea. In fact, I'm challenged to even call it a religious idea. We Jews believe that God is firmly in control of every corner of the universe, and, as hard as that may be to understand, bad things *can* happen to decent people.

In a way, it's a simpler course to throw up one's hands and say, "There are forces greater than God, and those forces are to blame for whatever unfortunate or evil thing happens in the world." God's role would then be that of the Sympathizer and Comforter-in-Chief Who sits on the sidelines. But again, that's not a Jewish approach. In this book, we are going to tackle a much more difficult question: How can bad things happen to good people, like the sudden death of my wife, or the loss that you are going through, while we maintain the belief that a loving God is always in charge of the universe?

I won't give you easy answers. There are no easy answers. Instead, I'm going to tap into an almost four-thousand-year-old tradition that has provided comfort, understanding, and ultimately peace to countless individuals throughout the generations.

There may be easier books to read on this subject. There are certainly easier books to write! I started this book over thirty years ago and have struggled with the concepts and the content all this time. As I survey our society today, I'm convinced that, more than ever, people who are suffering after great loss need what we call in Judaism *emes*—the truth, God's Truth. So this a book about the truth: about loss, suffering, and tragedy. It's about God, and ultimately, about hope.

Viktor Frankl,* psychiatrist, founder of the psychoanalytic school of logotherapy, and Holocaust survivor, is often credited with the following quote that affirms his teachings: “Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space lies our freedom and our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our happiness.” If you’re reading this book, it is because you are in the space between the stimulus—the crisis and tragedy you are dealing with—and the response: you feel challenged to integrate and process your painful experience. This is a very personal and sacred space.

I ask that you allow me to join you and share some of my experience and thoughts about this timeless problem. Together we might grow and, ultimately, celebrate the freedom that comes from it. Because this book has been written by someone in tears, someone who suffered such a loss ... for others who have also suffered such a loss.

So take my hand and let us begin.

Viktor Emil Frankl, 1905–1997: Founder of logotherapy. Frankl was professor of neurology and psychiatry at the University of Vienna Medical School. During World War II, he spent three years in various concentration camps, including Theresienstadt, Auschwitz, and Dachau. Frankl was the founder of the psychotherapeutic school called logotherapy, and he authored thirty-nine books, which have been published in thirty-eight languages. His most famous book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, has sold over nine million copies in the US alone.

