

Option B: When Life Doesn't Go As Planned

I was fifteen years old when I first read Rabbi Harold Kushner's book "When Bad Things Happen to Good People." Following a horrific car accident that left two men I admired with traumatic injuries, I sat down with the rabbi at the synagogue where I grew up to find out what kind of God would let such a thing happen and what Judaism had to say about how such a tragedy could occur. We talked for a while, and my rabbi handed me a copy of Kushner's book. Rabbi Kushner wrote the book following the death of his fourteen year old son from progeria, a devastating disease that ages the body overnight and leads to painful and premature death.

I read the book as soon as I got home in hopes of finding the answer to my question. Furious when I got to the end, I went back to the synagogue and let my rabbi know that it was completely unhelpful — for Kushner never answered the question of why bad things happen to good people. My rabbi calmly pointed to the title. Kushner never intended his book to answer the *why*. He had written the book to answer the *when*. WHEN bad things happen - as they inevitably will; WHEN you experience the pain, the disappointment, the unfairness that goes hand-in-hand with being human...then what? What do you do then?

Jewish comedian, Jack Benny, received many awards during his career. In one of his acceptance speeches, Benny remarked "I don't deserve this award, but, then again, I have arthritis and I don't deserve that either." In his unique, witty way, Benny touched upon one of the most profound challenges of human existence: the gap that often exists between what people "deserve" and what they get. In our visceral sense of right and wrong, bad things shouldn't happen to good people, and when they do, it strikes us as profoundly unfair.¹

And so, Rabbi Kushner asks his readers: "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 the world's imperfections and love it because it is *also* capable of containing great beauty and goodness, and because it is the only world we have?"²

Can we do the same with our lives? Rather than focus on why bad things happen to us and people we love; why our best laid plans haven't worked out the way we so hoped they would; can we shift the question to focus on how we can respond, what we intend to do now with our current reality.

In 2015, Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook, and her husband, Dave Goldberg, then CEO of SurveyMonkey, were on vacation in Mexico. They were happily married with two healthy children, and every opportunity at their fingertips. Then, one night, as Dave was running on a treadmill at the resort, his heart stopped and he died at age 47 from a cardiac arrhythmia.

At the end of shloshim, the first thirty days of mourning, Sandberg reflected on her loss in a Facebook post that ended up going viral. She wrote, in part, "*I think when tragedy occurs, it*

¹ As taught by Rabbi Richard Block.

² Rabbi Harold Kushner. When Bad Things Happen to Good People. Pg. 148.

presents a choice. You can give in to the void, the emptiness that fills your heart, your lungs, constricts your ability to think or even breathe. Or you can try to find meaning.

And I have learned that whatever rug you are standing on can be pulled right out from under you with absolutely no warning.

[The other day], Sandberg continued, I was talking to a friend about a father-child activity that Dave is not here to do. We came up with a plan to fill in for Dave. I cried to him, 'But I want Dave. I want option A.' My friend put his arm around me and said, 'Option A is not available. So let's just kick the heck out of option B.'

Every one of us lives a version of Option B. In some part of our life there is a gap between what we had envisioned for ourselves, and our reality. We can plan, and we do, but ultimately we learn that it's not always up to us. And, often, we find ourselves needing to recalibrate our expectations, pivot, and adjust our plans.³

Sometimes Option B is more than just an inconvenience or hassle. Sometimes having to shift to Option B can be heart-wrenching. An unexpected diagnosis, the death of a loved one, the loss of a relationship, difficulty in becoming parents, educational or professional setbacks, personal disappointment — a variation on the way we thought everything was going to happen.

And yet, even when life throws us an unexpected curve-ball; even when we are brave enough to dream and find ourselves with some dreams that come true and a lot of broken pieces of dreams that didn't; even when life shows up in all of its messiness and unfairness and pain...we do STILL have a choice.

Psychologist Adam Grant, Sandberg's co-author, suggests that our willingness to embrace Option B has to do with our level of resiliency. He writes, "I think about resilience as the speed and strength of our response to adversity. Resiliency is about how quickly and effectively we are able to marshal strength and either overcome the challenge or persevere in the face of it."

Rabbi Kushner adds in the dimension of faith. "I find God not in the tests that life imposes on us," he writes, "but in the ability of ordinary people to rise to the challenge, to find within themselves qualities of soul, qualities of courage they did not know they had until the day they needed them. God does not send the problem...and God does not take it away when we find the right words and rituals with which to beseech Him. Rather, God sends us the strength and determination of which we did not believe ourselves capable, so that we can deal with, or live with, the problems that no one can make go away."⁴

The message within our High Holy Day liturgy reads a little differently. "On Rosh Hashanah it is written," we are told. "And on Yom Kippur it is sealed. How many shall pass on and how many will be created. Who shall live and who shall die. Who in their time, who before or after their time," and so forth. And the text concludes, *u't'shuvah u't'filah u'tz'da'kah ma'a'vee'reen et ro'ah hag'zeirah* — But repentance, prayer, and charity soften the harshness of the decree.

On the surface, this reading seems to say that within these next ten days, our fate for the next year is determined. But we can change things if we say the right words, act in the right way, and repent sincerely.

But we know that this is not how life works. There are no magic words that take away disease or insulate us from grief. There are no magic rituals that will ensure bad things will

³ From the teaching of Rabbi Karen Perolman. September 2017.

⁴ Rabbi Harold Kushner. The Nine Essential Things I've Learned About Life. Pg. 43-44.

never happen to us or to the people we care about. And we know that being loving, caring, and generous does not make us immune to suffering and pain.

So how can these three things — *t'shuvah*, *t'filah*, and *tz'da'kah* — help us build up our resiliency? How can they soften the harshness of the events in our lives that shake us to our core and cause us, force us, to re-evaluate our priorities and what is attainable and achievable now.

So often we translate the first word, *t'shuvah*, as “repentance,” but the word also comes from the root meaning “to turn,” or “to return.” Perhaps *t'shuvah*, here, calls upon us to RETURN back to life, even when our world has been rocked, even when we know it will never be the same as before. We return, but to a new normal, we take a different path than we originally envisioned taking, we open ourselves to the possibility that there may be meaning, a sense of purpose, and even happiness to be found in Option B.

There's also a transformative aspect to *t'shuvah*. Real *t'shuvah* only takes place when something inside us changes. *T'shuvah* allows us to be transformed, changed by our pain and by our experiences, but with the strength to take the next step and encounter life again, to embrace joy again, even if in a different way.⁵ As Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl once wrote, “When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.”

The notion of *T'filah*, prayer, can be difficult — particularly for those who have ambivalent feelings about a God who hears or responds to what we ask for. But at times of deepest difficulty, I am reminded of the prayer Moses uttered when he saw his sister Miriam suffering from disease. His prayer was simple — “heal her, please.” Prayer is a reaching out, an asking for help, an attempt to remind ourselves that we are not alone, even when it feels like we are. And, when we have no words, I believe that God understands the language of tears too.

In our Torah portion this morning, Abraham's concubine Hagar, and mother to his son, Ishmael, finds herself wandering alone in the hot, unforgiving desert with her young son, forced out of the house by Abraham's jealous wife, Sarah. Ishmael is crying for water, and, overwhelmed by the situation at hand, Hagar sits down and bursts into tears. In that moment, God calls to her and Torah says that “God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water.”⁶ It seems like such an odd story to read on one of the holiest days of the year. And yet, it brings with it a very important message. God didn't notice Hagar in pain and instantly perform a miracle bringing forth water from sand. Rather, God helped her open her eyes to the resources that were already there in front of her. Sometimes, when we are blinded by pain or sadness, calling out from where we are helps us see a possibility, a glimmer of hope, another option that we just couldn't see on our own. Prayer may not miraculously heal wounds, but it may just provide us with enough added strength to allow us to get through the moment at hand.

Lastly, our High Holy Day liturgy offers us the notion of *zedakah* as a way to live with meaning and purpose, even in the face of adversity. It has long been suggested that even in life's most difficult moments, if we can remember to still count our blessings and express gratitude for even the smallest things, it can shift our mindset a bit — reminding us that there is still gentleness and beauty in the world. I think it's why Judaism teaches us to say 100 blessings a day — pushing us to look for 100 things to be thankful for, grateful for, every single day. That practice is challenging enough on the best of days, when we can't believe just how well everything is working out for us. It feels next to impossible on the difficult days when even convincing ourselves to get out of bed is a struggle.

⁵ From the teaching of Rabbi Sarah Bassin. “*Transcending Option B.*” 2017.

⁶ Genesis 21:19.

But psychologists have found that counting our blessings and expressing gratitude is not enough, and suggest that we also count our *contributions* as well — our acts of *tzedakah* (not simply monetary giving, but that which we can offer to others). “While *feeling* thankful is passive, *contributions* are active: they build our confidence by reminding us that we can still make a difference.”⁷

We may not be able to control every event that comes at us, but we can use the adversity we never wanted, never asked for, and in fact fight against, to make a difference. In a world that is messy and imperfect, we can find meaningful ways to help others. And, in doing so, we may just begin to see that while Option B may not have been what we initially planned for our lives, and still may not be what we would have chosen for ourselves, it can still provide us with opportunities to contribute, to use our skills, talents and time to make life a little better for others who are also living some version of their own Option B.

“Life has a way of reminding us that we are more vulnerable than we think, but also stronger than we could ever imagine.”⁸ And when tragedy occurs, when the curveball is thrown at us, we are given a choice. We can tighten our grip on Option A and refuse to let go of shattered dreams, broken promises, and unrealizable hopes. Or, we can slowly open our hearts to Option B, and step into this new year transformed by the way our life has unfolded, transformed by the experiences we have had, and allow ourselves to take Option B seriously. It may not be exactly what we planned or anything like it, but in this new year may each of us be brave enough to remember that there is still love and joy to feel, new hopes and dreams to imagine, and a life filled with meaning and purpose waiting for us to live.

⁷ Frances Bridges. “5 Ways To Build Resilience, From Sheryl Sandberg And Adam Grant's New Book Option B.” Forbes. May 27, 2017.

⁸ Sheryl Sandberg. Commencement Address at Virginia Tech. 2017.