

Rabbi Harold Kushner addresses audience

By Perilla Wilson

"Hey, I'm not perfect!" was heard any number of times, said with a laugh, following Rabbi Harold Kushner's address, "How Good Do We Have To Be?" last week at Dauphin Way United Methodist Church. The best selling author of the book by the same name, as well as "When Bad Things Happen to Good People," spoke to 1100 people and was sponsored by The Mobile Area Christian-Jewish Dialogue, The Mobile Jewish Welfare Fund, Inc., Mobile chapter The Compassionate Friends, and AARP/Widowed Persons Services of Greater Mobile.

Kushner began by pointing out that any religion, "if done wrong," leaves one feeling unworthy and any religion, "if done right," leaves one feeling cleansed and optimistic. He believes that "God can still love you no matter how many things you do wrong." Even as a child, he felt that the Adam and Eve story left many loose ends, that telling someone "don't eat the fruit" of one particular tree was

a "set-up." As a child, he could not understand why it would be a bad thing to have "knowledge of good and evil." Then there was the difficulty of believing that God would punish so severely for just one thing done wrong, especially if it meant that God withdrew his love. "The primal fear of a child is that the parent will quit loving him/her," he said.

According to Kushner, children don't need perfect parents. They need role models of how to be good people even though they're not perfect. It would be so hard to live up to perfection. "As long as children know you love them, they will survive your mistakes. Children need love and reassurance more than scolding and disapproval."

He also pointed out that romantic love cannot tolerate the idea that their beloved have faults, but marriage needs forgiveness for survival. To forgive is to "let go," he said, "to transcend, to rise above. It is not to excuse," but it says that an offender has no right to live inside your head—

don't give him that power. The sense of being a victim hurts us worse than the offender.

Guilt, Kushner feels, is feeling bad for things you have done and the cure is to do good things. On the other hand, shame is feeling bad for who you are and is harder to get rid of, if it's become part of your identity. Mild shame can be cured by one person's affirmation of you; greater shame by acceptance from a group such as the 12-step program, —when you reveal yourself before others and experience acceptance.

God doesn't punish us for not being perfect. He didn't punish Adam and Eve but rather "sent them out to work" that they might feel useful. When God says in Genesis 17, "Walk before me and be perfect," He is saying that "your whole self is acceptable in my sight." Kushner says His is a compassionate voice saying "come before Me as forgiven. Trust Me to love you." If that is "good enough for God, it ought to be good enough for you and me."

Questions

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But forgiveness, Kushner says, requires incredible strength.

"Forgiveness is an expression of power. Forgiveness is a way of cleansing yourself of resentment and a sense of victimhood."

The strength and comfort of forgiveness ought to be what religion offers and provides, Kushner says. He laments that it doesn't always happen.

"God is a source of love and cleansing, not a source of judgment. The purpose of faith is not to protect you against bad things happening, but to give you the resources you need when bad things happen, and to impel you to reach out to others."

That reaching out, Kushner says, exhibits the best of humanity as well as the presence of God. In the final pages of his 1981 bestseller, "When Bad Things Happen to Good People," he writes: "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 commu-

nity after the flood waters have receded, do qualify as acts of God."

Through his books, Kushner chronicles the determination and compassion he and others receive through their faith. He entered the national circuit of commentators and consolers in 1981 with the publication of "When Bad Things Happen to Good People," his spiritual response to the death of his son, Aaron, 14, who suffered from progeria, or "rapid aging."

The book spent more than a year on the New York Times bestseller list and has been hailed by people of many faiths.

Nicki MacDonald, a member of Dauphin Way United Methodist Church, joins the chorus.

"He is just such a comforting person," MacDonald says. "A spiritual vacuum is what a lot of people feel when they have these catastrophic losses. He makes sense out of a lot of this, but he doesn't take your spirituality away."

"Bad things just happen," she continues. "When people have these awful things happen, they need to know that God loves them."

MacDonald speaks from experience. Twenty years ago, she founded the Mobile chapter of Compassionate Friends, a group for bereaved parents. The group,

along with the Mobile Jewish Welfare Fund, Inc., the Mobile Area Christian-Jewish Dialogue and Widowed Persons Services, was instrumental in bringing the rabbi here to speak.

Through faith and story, the author makes sense of chaos, and that's comforting, MacDonald says.

Kushner admits that it's a funny position for a conservative rabbi who asks more questions than provides answers. But he likes it.

"Let me tell you a story," he says, and he tells of a student who meets with his rabbi one morning. "Rabbi," the student says. "I was up all night worrying. What is the meaning of life?"

"That's such a wonderful question," the rabbi responds. "Why would you want to exchange it for an answer?"