**NOT YOUR PARENTS HEBREW SCHOOL – REFLECTING ON 25 YEARS AS A JEWISH EDUCATOR**
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**TEMPLE SHOLOM – VANCOUVER BC**
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Rabbi Harold Kushner, often best known and associated with his landmark and transformational book, "When Bad Things Happen to Good People" died last week. Rabbi Kushner was one of the G'dolei HaDor – the great minds and leaders of his generation.

His book, whose title it so often misremembered as "Why Bad Things Happen to Good People" instead of correctly as "When" sold more than 4 million copies in at least 12 languages. I alone probably account for a few hundred of those sales. During my 25 years as a Jewish Educator, a milestone I will celebrate on Monday when I receive an honorary doctorate in Jewish Education from Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles, I have given away countless copies to students and congregants. If you are among the handful of North American Jews not familiar with the book order yourself a copy, read it and then make an appointment with any one of our Klay Kodesh and let's discuss.

In fact, hold on to that suggestion, read a Jewish book and discuss with your Rabbis or Cantor, I am going to return to it in a moment.

But it's actually not Kushner's well-known book that had the most profound impact on my own Jewish thought and professional life, rather it was an article that he penned for his own synagogue bulletin, Temple Israel of Natick, Massachusetts

The article was about the crisis in Jewish education, he wrote it decades ago and it has shaped my rabbinate ever since.

This is what he wrote to his congregation in their monthly bulletin:

*In the beginning you came to us, to the rabbis and Jewish educators, and you said to us: "Teach our children to feel proud of being Jewish and to care about it. And we said: "No problem. Judaism is so exciting and inspiring a guide to life that we will invite your children to be part of it with minimal difficulty."*

*Then you said: "In that case, let me make it a little harder. Teach my child to feel proud of being Jewish and to care about it, even though we live in a community with so many distractions, so many conflicts on Saturday and Jewish holidays, and no real Jewish environment outside the synagogue."*

*And we replied, "That will be harder, but give us enough time, good teachers and textbooks, and we will try to overcome those problems."*

*Then you said: "I'll make it harder still. Teach my child that being Jewish is one of the most important things in his life and let **<u>us</u>** teach him [sic] that it is one of the **<u>least</u>** important. You teach him to take Jewish values seriously, and I'll make light of them. You teach him to ask: 'What does it require of me?' and I'll teach him to ask: 'What does it cost?' And let's see who wins out."*

*And then we answered: "If that's the way you want it, that's how it will have to be. But it's not fair. We won't teach a child that his parents are wrong or to find fault with what he sees at home. Even if we tried, a child will side with home over his school in a conflict of values. All we can do is to try our best and ask you to ask yourselves what you had in mind when you set up these rules."*

In case you miss the not-so-subtle rebuke and hypocrisy that the Rabbi is pointing out – Jewish education is hard because Jewish educators are so often being thwarted by Jews who don't model or practice what they claim to hold valuable.

That's a pretty chutzpadik statement to make in a synagogue newsletter; I guess if you're Harold Kushner you can get away with it; but jeez as the son of a former Temple President I can only imagine the phone calls Temple Israel's President got that week.

I say that the article was transformative and inspiring for me when I began the process of becoming a Jewish educator more than 30 years ago because it crystalized the challenge that I have spent my professional and spiritual life trying to overcome.

How do you teach any Jew, child, teen, or adult that Judaism, "that being Jewish is one of the most important things in their life" when all around them family, friends and society at large champions secular values, pop cultural norms and a general rejection of anything associated with Jewish life as they bleakly remember it growing up?

How do you overcome, "I hated Hebrew School, and you'll hate it too, but you still have to go"?

Jewish education begins with the question, "Jewish Education for what?" What are we educating Jews, of any age for? Is it to maintain traditions to ward off disappointment from our parents or grandparents. Are we doing it out of guilt because Jews died in the holocaust? So that our children can lead a B'nai Mitzvah service, check that box on the Jewish score card? Maybe we send them to Jewish Day School or summer camp so they will marry Jewish? Those are common reasons, but they are not good reasons.

We are educating ourselves about Judaism because a Jewish way of life is a meaningful way of life. Full stop. Why be Jewish? So that you can live Jewishly.

To live Jewishly is to see the world with Jewish eyes; to live by Jewish time. The words and teachings of our tradition become the background music of our life story. This sacred covenant and tradition informs our choices, our actions, our values, how we live, work, play and pray.

Nothing else in my experience does that so thoroughly and so rewardingly. Not yoga, not veganism, not wealth, not even high learning. Those are all products of the underlying values that Judaism gives my life, that I believe it can give yours.

As I reflect on 25 years as a Jewish educator I realize, and I am grateful that my life's work has been to help you see the value in that. It's the first challenge in Rabbi Kushner's bulletin article – "rabbi teach our children (or ourselves) to feel proud of being Jewish and to care about it."

The difficulty, as he well articulates is that many are not convinced Judaism is all that important, or more important than all of the other measures of social, educational and economic success society has on offer. I see it as means to an those ends, a way to achieve those desires, but some see it as an impediment.

Before I decided to become a Jewish Educator and Rabbi my father offered me the opportunity to follow in his footsteps and take over the family clothing business. I would have been the fourth generation of my family to sell suits and sportscoats. I worked after school and summers in his store. He never pushed me to take the business, but it was clearly on offer if I wanted it.

I realized early on that I didn't want to be in sales – little did I know that that's exactly where I ended up. Instead of spending my days trying to convince you to try on and then buy a new suit – I'm trying to sell you on a Jewish life in all its varied applications and definitions.

I've come to love it, just like my father actually loved selling suits – it's just that styles keep changing and so my Jewish inventory is constantly changing too – and it's so hard to stay ahead of the curve. To continue the analogy – when everyone wears suits it's easy to sell suits. In a Jewish environment it's easy to sell Jewish; but as societal trends change; when casual Fridays become – casual every day, or work from home in your sweatpants and a tshirt I either have to change you, the customer or change what the store is selling. And to take this analogy one step further – online shopping changes everything.

It's hard to summarize 25 years of Jewish sales philosophy in a 12-minute sermon; but if I could I would quote Steve Jobs when he said,

"Some people say, "Give the customers what they want." But that's not my approach. Our job is to figure out what they're going to want before they do. I think Henry Ford once said, "If I'd asked customers what they wanted, they would have told me, 'A faster horse!'" People don't know what they want until you show it to them. That's why I never rely on market research. Our task is to read things that are not yet on the page."

So that innovative and entrepreneurial approach has guided my work. If there is a criticism of me as a professional, and there are many, but if there is one that I genuinely embrace it's that I never met a successful program that I didn't want to try for my congregation. I love good ideas and have been so blessed to work with such talented professionals that tolerate my approach, and partner with me to implement what I hope becomes a shared vision. I don't always get it

right, I'm not superhuman in any way; but I'm often willing to try and always trying to learn from our successes and our mistakes.

In the book of Deuteronomy just two chapters before we read the Shema and the Vahavtah there is the verse: "And make them known to your children and your grandchildren" (Deuteronomy 4:9)

In context, Moses is telling the Israelites in this verse to make known to their children and grandchildren the events of the Exodus and the revelation at Mount Sinai, together with its laws, so that they will "revere God as long as they live on the earth" (4:10). The Talmud (B. Kiddushin 30a), however, uses it to claim that it is not only parents, but also grandparents who have the duty to teach the Jewish tradition to their descendants.

Maybe the most critical piece of a positive and sustainable Jewish Education is **practicing what you preach**. The whole point is that our values should reflect our actions and visa versa. We of course know this is true in day-to-day life, but there is no reason why that should be separated from our spiritual or Jewish life. In fact, the more integrated they are the more authentic we are to ourselves.

Modelling the values and practices we claim to be so important to us that we force our children to go to Hebrew School and study for their B'nai Mitzvah is the best mode of Jewish education. Nothing sells better than seeing how good that suit looks on someone you admire and wanting to wear it for yourself.

No matter our age we watch how our parents live or lived their lives and we model our own life to embrace the good examples and reject the stuff that we found lacking. Children who interact with their parents and grandparents to any degree – and certainly those who see them often – come to know them in all aspects of life, including the way that they express their Jewish identity.

In this grandparents play a particularly important role.

The Talmud (B. Berakhot 21b) teaches, "When a child is taught Torah by a grandparent, it is if that child received it from Sinai." My wish for all Jewish families, then, is that more and more Jewish grandparents and grandchildren experience such a loving, informative, and reconfirming experience each week.

I have known many Jews, whose model for being Jewish was one or more of their grandparents, even if their parents were not very involved in Jewish life. For children of interfaith couples, it is even more important that Jewish grandparents engage in this role as models of what being Jewish is all about. Moreover, grandparents usually do not have the same level of duty to raise the child as parents do, including the disciplinary aspects of good parenting, and so grandchildren can relate to their grandparents as loving, maybe even doting, people who are always on their side. Therefore grandparents, through their actions and their words, can present

a warm, loving portrait of Judaism through the psychological transference that occurs between the child's relationship with his or her grandparents and their Jewish convictions and activities.