

Inside Magic

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Arthur Kurzweil: Our Hero

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Arthur Kurzweil

We were counting, for some reason, our heroes in this biz we call magic. There are magicians we admire for their ability, for their dedication, for their love of our Art, for their enthusiasm, and for other reasons.

Arthur Kurzweil comes to the top of the list for each of these qualities. We wrote about Mr. Kurzweil a while back and thought the time was right to revisit where he has been and what he has done.

Mr. Kurzweil is a genius in the sense of the MacArthur Awards' definition of "Genius." He is intelligent, learned, gifted and imaginative. He lives out side of the box and yet presents a message acceptable to those who live their lives within the box.

Mr. Kurzweil is a student of the Torah, Jewish history and all things Judaic. For 20 years – longer than my third step-mother has been alive – he worked as the editor-in-chief of the prestigious Jason Aronson publishers and those who share our interests, know he authored *the* book on Jewish genealogy.

But fitting for a magic website, he is also a magician par excellence.

Mr. Kurzweil studied magic since he was a babe in arms at three years old. He has moved from editing and writing to performing in the last few years. His show brings a message with the magic and should not be missed. If you see one religious magic show this New Year, let Mr. Kurzweil be the performer.

Mr. Kurzweil – our hero, if we didn't mention it earlier – brings a "serious magic show" and a theological lecture together. Mr. Kurzweil describes his presentation thusly: "My show is, in itself, an illusion," he says. "It's not a magic show at all. It's a discussion of perhaps the most profound and important ideas in all of Jewish thought."

The name of his show is perfect: "Searching for God in a Magic Shop."

He refuses to use the phrase *abracadabra* in his act. This is a relief for the orthodox in both Christianity and Judaism. In Hebrew, "abba k'dabra" means "I will cause as

I say” or “I will create as I spoke.” This is a pretty significant statement and one usually reserved for the prime mover of all things, God. For Catholics and other Orthodox religions, it is a bastardization of the consecration prayer (based on the Jewish Kiddush).

So what is a magician to say? "My own phrase is *gam zu l'tovah*," Kurzweil says, Aramaic for "this too is for the good."

Just as we magicians use misdirection, God does good even though we, His human audience may not see it because we lack a view of the full picture.

"The audience doesn't see everything. That's the human predicament -- we don't understand everything that is happening in the world because we don't see everything," Kurzweil says.

We have a very shallow friend – he is like a brother to us – who once asked after losing a significant sum at the races, “Why would a merciful God allow so much suffering?” (Actually, he asked “Why would a merciful God allow so much surfing?” but he was distraught).

Mr. Kurzweil tries to answer this question through his magic.

"It's a hard topic to discuss -- why did God make a world with so much suffering. I have studied what our sages say about this for about 25 years now, and I have found that a discussion of these things, in the midst of a magic show, can be quite effective."

The key, says Mr. Kurzweil, is the “soft way.” This is the concept of *gam zu l'tovah*. "Accepting the notion is life changing. *Gam zu l'tovah* is judging God favorably," he says. "This one phrase has transformed my life."

His act features him. Makes sense, eh? Well, he doesn't go for costumes or fake stage names. His is a magic show with a message after all. The message is not that he is a star. Mr. Kurzweil performs a variety of tricks. "No fire -- because of my beard," he says.

There is so much in the press these days about the topic “Christian Magic – A Sin?” But the question resounds in all religions. Mr. Kurzweil observes that the Talmud (commentaries on the Hebrew Scripture) is “wary about magic, concerned that naive people might think demons or dark forces are involved.”

He cautions his audiences that his show features tricks and illusions. It is not magic. "It's my obligation to let them know that these are just tricks."

In the early 1980's we were in the seminary studying to work within the Church. At the same time, Rabbi Harold Kushner's New York Times best-seller, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* was published and consequently the subject of many courses. Rabbi Kushner's book misses the point, says Mr. Kurzweil.

Rabbi Kushner's theme is similar to those of earlier Christian Heretics: there are aspects and times of our lives over which God lacks absolute power. Mr. Kurzweil correctly points out in his show that theory is "absolutely contrary to Jewish

theology and belief." We add, it is also contrary to Christian theology and belief – it is almost as if we are from the same root.

If you have read this far in our review, you are no doubt interested in the same subjects as Mr. Kurzweil and us. We can tell you, then, that Mr. Kurzweil's pronouncement of the philosophy of *gam zu l'tovah*, ("the 'bad' that appears to be bad turns out in the end to be for the good.")

"I would like to make that book disappear," Mr. Kurzweil says.

We post this article on the December 25th – the traditional date for the birth of Jesus. If ever there was a situation where one could have stood at the bottom of the cross, heard the lamentation from Isaiah voiced by Jesus – "why have you forsaken me?" – and thought there are situations when God has no control, this was one.

Mr. Kurzweil, the Talmud, Orthodox Judaism, Orthodox Christianity and the reality of God's message reject this notion. God is entirely in control. As we say in AA, "Nothing, absolutely nothing happens in God's world by mistake..."

God is. He tells us He is just as He told Moses. God is in control – that's how we know he is God and not a really nice person who generally likes us. Rabbi Kushner may tell us that the death of a child is a sad, tragic thing.

Mr. Kurzweil, however, tells his audiences God is not only caring and compassionate, but He is also in control. Because God's nature is good, nothing, absolutely nothing, happens by mistake but all is for good. Joseph's statement to his brothers rings true this day for Christians and Jews: the world may mean something for evil but God has intended it for good.

As we say at the race track, that's the kind of promise you don't often see: free and real.

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