

## Will the Real Tikkun Olam Please Stand Up?

The keynote speaker at the 2011 Union for Reform Judaism Biennial in Washington DC was President Barack Obama. One can imagine how excited the 6000 attendees were, who had come from over 500 Reform congregations throughout North America. While I was not in attendance at this convention, some of our Beth Israel friends were. I can still recall the buzz that surrounded Obama's visit. This was big. One thing that I appreciated about the past president was how he spoke to the Jewish community in his annual Rosh Hashanah messages. His use of Jewish language always impressed me, from correctly pronouncing the High Holy day names to talking about *teshuva* and even quoting Pirke Avot. His Biennial speech did not let me down.

President Obama said: "...the Jewish community has always understood that the dream we share is about more than just doing well for yourself. From the moment our country was founded, American Jews have helped make our union more perfect. Your parents, your grandparents, your great-grandparents, they remembered what it was like to be a stranger, and as a result treated strangers with compassion. They pursued *tikkun olam*, the hard work of repairing the world."

How exciting! The president said *tikkun olam*. He was speaking our language. This Jewish term, however, has been thrown around by so many people that it has become commonplace for politicians and others in popular culture to use casually. If an outsider speaks to a Reform Jewish group, you can bet *tikkun olam* will come out of their mouth. I wonder if they—and the rest of us—really even know what it means in the first place.

Most of us have come to use this term as an umbrella phrase for "repairing the world," which might include such actions as purchasing fair trade coffee, advocating for the rights of migrant farm workers, driving an electric car, giving a homeless person some pocket change, marching for racial justice, supporting reproductive rights legislation, and even planting a home garden. We use it so often that sometimes I think it doesn't mean anything

at all. And for some of these specific issues, there's another side that might also be considered *tikkun olam* for people who hold different political ideologies. In reality, the term *tikkun olam* has a long history that has taken twists and turns along the way and the definition we use is the most contemporary.

The earliest use of the term *tikkun olam* is found in Tractate Gittin of the Mishnah, written around the 2nd century CE.

Here are two examples of how the rabbis used the phrase:

*At first, the husband would convene a court in another place and nullify the divorce document. Rabban Gamliel the Elder enacted that they should not do this, mip'nei (because of) tikkun ha-olam.<sup>1</sup>*

*Torah scrolls of the law, tefillin and mezuzot are not bought from Gentiles at more than their value, mip'nei (because of ) tikkun ha-olam.<sup>2</sup>*

Clearly, we don't get the sense that the early rabbinic sages had "repairing the world" in mind with their use of *tikkun olam*. In fact, these ancient texts always use the phrase *mip'nei tikkun ha-olam*, "because of *tikkun ha-olam*." In other words, *tikkun ha-olam* is not a goal in and of itself but is rather seen as grounds for explaining or justifying certain types of rabbinic legislative action.

While the words *tikkun olam* can translate to "repair the world," in the context we first find the phrase, it most likely refers to repairing a legal measure found in the rabbinic law codes that the rabbis understand to be unjust. Think about the story of the "Daughters of Zelophehad" who fought for their right to inherit land. Moses goes to God with their case and God amends the current law. You could say that God created a new law *mip'nei tikkun ha-olam*, because the first one was found to be unfair. "In the Talmud, *tikkun ha-olam* is a response...to a perception of overarching injus-

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<sup>1</sup> Mishnah Gittin 4:4

<sup>2</sup> Mishnah Gittin 4:6

tice, a sense that existing laws must be modified to create a more balanced society.”<sup>3</sup> While our current understanding of *tikkun olam* doesn’t mesh entirely with how the early rabbis used it, we can clearly see a connection to righting a wrong and the concept of justice.

The use of *tikkun olam* is found in others texts sporadically over the next thousand years. And then as we enter the 16th century, we find that the kabbalists, or mystics, living in Tzefat, Israel, create a new meaning entirely. Isaac Luria, also known as *ha-Ari*, or “the Lion,” is considered one of the most important figures in this time period. Luria’s theory about the creation of the cosmos has been studied by students of Kabbalah and lay people to this day. He teaches that God’s first creative action was an inward one. Before everything there was only God. In order for God to create something, such as the world, God needed to contract for that something to be birthed into. *Tzimtzum* refers to the process by which God contracts its essence, leaving a space in order to create an empty region. But God withdrew into an infinitesimally small space in comparison to God’s infinity and eventually there was an explosion which scattered vessels of God’s light into the universe. (And we thought the Big Bang theory was rooted in science!) *Tikkun*, according to Luria, is the gathering of the divine light so as to, “put God back together.” The way we do this “God repair” is through acts of prayer and performing mitzvot. It’s doubtful that the mystics would think that voting in support of clean energy bills or supporting gender pay equality would help put the shards back together. Only the most pious and religious Jews have any chance of making a dent in this task.

The last iteration of *tikkun olam* emerges in mid 20th century America where it’s usage finally resembles the definition we are most used to. *Tikkun olam* from the 1960’s to the present is another way of referring to social justice work. The Reform movement took this newly defined concept, and in keeping with it’s historical emphasis on elevating ethical mitzvot over the more archaic rituals, popularized it with its commitment to being an advocate for disenfranchised peoples. Nowadays synagogues have *Tikkun Olam* committees that do everything from collecting winter coats for home-

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<sup>3</sup> Jane Kanarek, “What Does Tikkun Olam Actually Mean?” in *Righteous Indignation: A Jewish Call for Justice* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2009), p. 21.

less people to organizing letter writing campaigns, and hosting discussions about racial injustice, and spearheading efforts to bring refugees into our country.

*Tikkun Olam* is an imperative for us to bring about the healing of a broken world. Modern and progressive Jews are not waiting for a Messiah to come and make everything whole and perfect. We believe that this work is our responsibility and this is what motivates us to engage in social justice work. Of course a valid critique of this definition is that our contemporary understanding of *tikkun olam* is so broad and ill-defined that basically any cause can be brought under its umbrella. Furthermore, who gets to decide which causes are the ones we advocate for? It can't be that only liberal issues fall under the *tikkun olam* umbrella as even Reform Jews fall on every point on the political spectrum.

So which definition is the right one? And how do we reconcile the fact that our current understanding of the term *tikkun olam* has little grounding in ancient Jewish tradition?

I argue that we don't have to reconcile anything since in fact, our modern view of *tikkun olam* is just as valid as the ones taught by the rabbinic sages and kabbalists. Each of these three eras have defined for themselves what it means to "repair the world." Words can take on new meanings over time.

The rabbinic sages coined *tikkun ha-olam* to mean bringing about a more just society through changing laws when real life circumstances expose legal loopholes. Then the mystics redefined *tikkun olam* to explain the "Jewish big bang theory" and how the work of putting God back together is entirely in our hands. The former is a legalistic view and the latter a spiritual one. In our generation, we have embraced the call to make the world a better, equitable, and more inhabitable place for everyone. Climate justice, racial justice, gender equality, and criminal justice reform are just some of the myriad issues that *tikkun olam* covers. There are a lot of concerns, but they all belong. I wonder how the generations that come after us will redefine the term in their time.

Next week we read the haftarah from Isaiah on Yom Kippur. Instead of being told how to be a more pious Jew or how to deepen our relationship with God, on the day that is the holiest of the year, we will hear the prophet's message that engaging in the modern understanding of *tikkun olam* is what God wants most from us.

“Is this the fast I look for?” the prophet asks. “A day of self affliction? Bowing your head like a reed, and covering yourself with sackcloth and ashes? Is this what you call a fast, a day acceptable to Adonai? Is not this the fast I look for: to unlock the shackles of injustice, to undo the fetters of bondage, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every cruel chain? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless poor into your house? When you see the naked, to clothe them, and never to hide yourself from your own kin?”

Isaiah might not use the words, *tikkun olam*, but the message is the same. The prophet of God is calling on us to create a more fair, kind, and just society. We are directed to engage in small acts of *tikkun olam* by giving clothes and food to those who have less than us. And we are told to engage in large acts of *tikkun olam* by freeing the enslaved and oppressed peoples of the earth. What I find most fascinating about this text is that Isaiah's audience were Jewish refugees living in Babylonia after being forced into exile. They had no power to be change agents. They were the ones who needed help. And yet, the prophet tells this marginalized group that it is their responsibility to repair the world. What is our tradition trying to tell us on the holiest day of the year? If these Jewish refugees had the responsibility to bring about *tikkun*, then surely we do as well, especially as free citizens living in a wealthy democracy. Judaism is teaching us that this is what God wants us to focus on during the holiest time of year, even more than putting God back together.

*Tikkun olam* and social justice have become polarizing terms in our current political environment. My hope is that we can look beyond this and commit ourselves to practicing *tikkun olam*, *b'chol l'vav-cha, uv'chol naf'she'cha, uv'chol me'odecha*, “with all our heart, with all our strength, and with all our being.” May we look to the rabbinic sages and the mystics for guidance as

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we set out on this path towards repairing the world. Ken yehi ratzon, may this be God's will.