

The Peoplehood Papers 29

February 2021 | Adar 5780

**A 21st Century Peoplehood with
Tikkun Olam at Its Heart –
What Does it Mean and How is it Done?**

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Design and Production: Stephanie & Ruti Design

Published by the Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education
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From the Editor

Shlomi Ravid

In the last few decades, we have been witnessing a significant rise in the Jewish public's interest in the notion of Tikkun Olam. The shift in focus - from catering to the "good of the Jews", to seeking to bring justice and help to communities in need, coupled with the call to personally serve that cause, represents no less than a paradigm shift. Using Rav Soloveitchik's framing, it seems to reflect a shift of the Jewish ethos from the covenant of fate to the covenant destiny.

In collaboration with **AJWS, JDC Entwine, OLAM, Repair** and **GPM** we set out to explore what this shift means and what it implies. To explore - in Jewish terms - the meaning and purpose of Tikkun Olam; to review the state of Tikkun Olam within the Jewish collective consciousness, the achievements of the field and its challenges. Has it indeed become a significant part of the current Jewish ethos? What needs to happen to further enhance its impact? And what would be the future implications – sociological, ideological, theological, political, institutional, practical, etc. – of this changed collective focus.

Some of the questions we set out to explore were:

1. The growing centrality of Tikkun Olam in the emerging Jewish ethos: a passing fashionable phase or a significant paradigm change?
2. Are Jewish self-interest and the universal values of human rights and democratic rights binary and separate or can they be fully complimentary?
3. A Tikkun Olam focused 21st Century Peoplehood - Why? How? Opportunities and Challenges?
4. At a moment when Israel is no longer a unifying idea for global Jewish peoplehood, how might the work of Tikkun Olam and caring for the stranger catalyze a sense of global Jewish peoplehood?
5. Can Tikkun Olam galvanize the Jewish People in the 21st century? Can this shift enhance our global impact? What will it take and how do we make it happen?
6. Can we accept that only a portion of world Jewry will commit itself to Tikkun Olam as an organizing principle for Jewish life? If YES, is that sufficient? If NO, what should we do?

7. What is our takeaway from Covid-19 regarding our commitment to Tikkun Olam?
8. What is particularly Jewish (and not just universal) about the commitment to caring for our most vulnerable neighbors?
9. In what ways the pursuit of justice through a Jewish lens might look different than the pursuit of justice through another lens?
10. While the concept of Tikkun Olam is rooted in Jewish religious thought, can we accept that diverse paths lead different Jews from different backgrounds to the work of Tikkun Olam, including Biblical and Talmudic texts, Jewish historical experience and the lived experiences of marginalized Jews and other marginalized people worldwide? Can we integrate this diversity into a pluralistic approach towards the work of Tikkun Olam?
11. Has Tikkun Olam proven to be an attractive concept for Millennial Jews and what can we learn from this?
12. What does it mean for the future of organized Jewish life if Tikkun Olam is one of, if not the most resonant, Jewish concepts for this rising generation of leaders and philanthropists?'
13. How might the growing diversity of the Jewish community impact our understanding, practice, and prioritization of Tikkun Olam?'

The outcome of this process is a rich and diverse selection of articles. The writers represent a broad spectrum of ages, denominations, professional backgrounds and perspectives. But they all share a deep passion for Judaism and the Jewish collective enterprise, as well as an inspiring belief in the importance of Tikkun Olam. Their joint work here does not aspire to complete the conversation but is rather a call to engage in it.

On a personal note, I set out to initiate this publication through the prism of an eight-year membership on the board of the Gabriel Project Mumbai. I did it because I strongly believe that this conversation extends far beyond the discussion of Tikkun Olam per se. That it is really a conversation about the Jewish ethos of the 21st century. I want to thank my partners in this collaboration as well as all our writers, who rose to the challenge of addressing the topic on these terms. With Pesach approaching, may this publication provide some fresh food for the soul as we continue to interpret the meaning of freedom, our role in the world and our collective purpose in the 21st century.

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The Exodus Story Defines our Duty Towards Refugees

Yuval Cherlow

The Jewish world needs no proof of the importance of the story of the exodus from Egypt. Mention of that story prologues the Ten Commandments and therefore, it is the fundamental commandment of faith. Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi determined that recognition of God as He who took us out of Egypt is the basic tenet of faith. Even Maimonides, who based faith in God on the creation story in Genesis, determined that the commandment to believe is a fundamental commandment learned from the Ten Commandments. The Master of the Universe did not create the world and then abandoned it. He accompanies the world each and every day and He is present in it as the God of history. Moreover, we make mention of the Exodus every day and from the time of Rabbi Elazar ben Azariya, we also mention it at night. Many of the festival days in the yearly cycle are inspired by the exodus from Egypt – From Pesach and Succoth, for which the Exodus is a pivotal event, to all the other festive times in the Torah which are “a remembrance of the exodus from Egypt”. Of course, that is also true for Shabbat. The wording on the tablets as mentioned in the weekly portion of “Va’etchanan” tells us that Shabbat is also a day on which we remember the exodus from Egypt. “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God took you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore, the Lord your God commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.” (Deuteronomy 5:15). The links between cessation from work on Shabbat and rest for a slave are explained by the medieval commentators in a variety of ways. One of those explanations states that an individual is duty bound to grant to others, some of the benefits he himself has accrued.

That explanation of our duty opens our minds to the realization that there is a gamut of commandments linked to the exodus from Egypt, but not associated directly to faith or the festivals. Instead, they connect with social and moral aspects in our lives. The Torah teaches us that anyone who was once a slave and experienced longing for a day of rest on which he will not work, must accord that same rest to all those under his aegis. The Torah states explicitly: “...so that your slave and your maidservant may rest like you.” (Deuteronomy 5:14). That teaches us that no man is permitted to be uncaring about the

need for rest felt by his slave and maidservant. **He must grant them that rest because they are partners in awareness of slavery; he was also one of an enslaved people in past times. Therefore, he entered into a covenant with all slaves and that covenant obliges him to halt their work on Shabbat.**

From the societal aspect, memory of the exodus from Egypt is not limited to just the day of rest. Elsewhere in the Torah we read: "You shall not mistreat a stranger, and you shall not oppress him for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Exodus 22:20). The Halacha informs us that this prohibits mistreatment of a righteous convert. However, it is a well-known rule that "no scripture oversteps its simple meaning". Therefore, the simple meaning of Exodus 22:20 also applies to all strangers, because we were not righteous converts in Egypt; we were aliens living there (and that is the meaning of "... for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.") The verse is telling us that it is our duty to avoid mistreating a stranger, including any strangers living among us, even though formally it is not as compelling an instruction as the prohibition on mistreatment of a righteous convert. Furthermore, even if in formal terms the commandment refers only to a righteous convert; as a matter of principle, the Torah once again highlights the moral obligation and the covenant between us and all those who are oppressed and requires that we must never forget we were slaves in Egypt.

Does that principle apply only to Egypt or is it a general principle in the Torah? Let us remind ourselves of what happened to us seventy years ago. Let us remember those who sought to destroy us as well as those who closed their gates; those we gave us no respite and not only blocked the entrances when we came here; they sent us back there. Are we duty bound to say that the Torah is teaching us a principle broader in scope than mention of the exodus from Egypt in the narrow sense of that expression? In my opinion, the Torah does indeed teach us the moral principle stating that all those who have experienced suffering and exploitation; who have been ignored and discriminated against, have entered into a covenant of solidarity with all those suffering and repressed in the world and that is the basis for our duty towards refugees.

It is important to emphasize that the moral commitment is not our only obligation. We bear responsibility for a range of issues and we must not focus on that alone. We are also responsible for the State of Israel's Jewish identity; we are responsible for our security and that of its citizens; we are also responsible for not taking on tasks beyond our capabilities; the considerations here are complex. Therefore, I am not proposing that we must solve the refugee problem on our own. All that I am trying to say is that this is one of the core moral considerations we are taught by the Torah and we must take it into account when we determine policy for the State of Israel.

Thus, remembering the exodus from Egypt leads in two opposing, but complementary directions. The first was expressed as the “passing over” which differentiated between those loyal to God, who painted blood on their door posts, and all the others. That “passing over” is the basic element in the revelation of the choosing of the Jewish people and their differentiation from all other nations. Ever since the exodus, the Jewish people has taken its own special path. It has been blessed by receiving the Torah and by fulfilling its commandments in the Land of Israel. The Jewish people has been tied to the Torah since the days of the Patriarchs. That understanding is the source for our unique blessing over the Torah: “...who has chosen us from all peoples and given us the Torah.” The Jewish people was the nation chosen to bear and sanctify the name of God in this world. It is the people carrying on from Abraham’s journey to the Land of Israel as the father of the believers. The second direction leads to the moral responsibility arising from that belief. The Master of the Universe, who brought us out of Egypt is also the father of all those marginalized by society – The stranger, the slave, the concubine, the Hebrew slave, the orphan and the widow. Renewal of the links with that responsibility is an integral part of the constant renewal of that covenant with the exodus from Egypt. “... it is God who seeks the pursued.” (Ecclesiastes 3:15) is one of the most significant elements in God’s providence and the responsibility we must bear arising from that providence.

In every generation, following both those paths is also part of our duty to see ourselves in every generation as if we were actually part of the exodus. Even today, we are commanded to renew the covenant with our Jewish national identity, as distinct from and differentiated from all other nations. That identity must find expression in many different ways and it is an integral part of our vision. Faced with a multi-cultural world seeking to blur nationality boundaries and any collective identity, we stand firm and reconstruct the exodus from Egypt, which separates us from those trends. We are commanded to build “... a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (Exodus 19:6). At the same time and with no contradiction, we also experience the status of slaves in Egypt from the private and personal aspects and based on that, we cultivate moral sensitivity at different levels – By granting a day of rest to foreign workers in our midst; through proper, fair dealings with them for as long as they are with us and also by providing end of contract grants for those who need them to begin their lives anew. **The two lines extending from the exodus from Egypt join together as the core factor in our historic consciousness and through memory of the exodus from Egypt, we reach the reality in our lives and take it by storm to shape it in the proper way that is just and lawful.**

This is not a stand-alone issue. It is part of the overall responsibility that must be borne by the Jewish nation vis-à-vis all of humanity. At the very beginning of Abraham’s journey,

he was told: "... and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you." (Genesis 12:3). It is part of our destiny to bring blessings down into the world. That moral duty does not abrogate our permission and responsibility to first and foremost, ensure our very existence and "your life takes precedence over another's" is a well-known principle in Jewish ethics. At first glance it is a very egotistical principle, but in fact, it is the diametric opposite. Its basic premise is that only one whose needs and existence are guaranteed can open up to the world and expand his scope of responsibility. In contrast, those clamoring the claim that man must prioritize the needs of his fellow to his own is making statements contrary to human nature and in practice, does not fulfill that moral stance.

It must be emphasized that this moral principle – "Your life takes precedence", has two meanings. The first permits us to tend to the needs of the Jewish nation first. The second – The very use of the term "precedence" teaches us that responsibility for all and the world in its entirety is extant. However, even though it is the second task in the order determined, it is not secondary. That order also clarifies one of the most distressing problems in the Jewish world. The idea of "tikun olam", "repairing the world", has been adopted by various movements, some of which interpret it as disengagement from the nation of Israel and universal assimilation into mankind in general. **This is an acute problem for two reasons: The first is assimilation and the weakening of commitment to that great journey undertaken by Abraham and continued by the Jewish nation throughout the generations, true to that special covenant. The second reason goes in the opposite direction. It is the distancing of the Jewish nation, including those who keep the commandments, from any involvement in "repairing the world". Identification of "repairing the world" with movements weakening links with the Jewish nation creates an opposite, boomerang effect that is the distancing from that ideal by those who feel that the existence of the Jewish nation is important.**

Where there is conflict between those two movements, the particular and the universal, another approach can come into being, an approach that unifies and links the two movements. As previously mentioned, whereas on the one hand, ensuring the existence and needs of the nation is a primary element in the Jewish moral world; on the other hand, we must fulfill our duty to be a blessing for the world and expand our activities from singular focus on ourselves to encompass all mankind, created in the image of God. Moreover, the current definition of the term "your city's poor" changes because this age of the global village has radically shortened distances and all of mankind is now much closer one to the other. This is a challenge with the potential to bring endless blessings in two directions: The "repairing the world" people will be able to reconnect with their

Jewish identity and there will be significant expansion of contact between those loyal to the nation's covenant and commandments with all mankind. We can but hope.

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The Tikkun Olam Debate is No Debate at All

Sarah Eisenman

Tikkun olam is undoubtedly the most loaded concept in contemporary Jewish life.

In recent times it has come to be a catch all for, among other things, the variety of activities and causes whereby Jews, informed by Jewish values, work to alleviate the injustice or suffering experienced universally.

However, as many have pointed out – including Levi Cooper in *Assimilation of Tikkun Olam* – its deep roots in Jewish tradition, whether in rabbinic texts or kabbalistic mysticism, are arguably somewhat different.

So why is this organizing principle for millions of Jews – both its meaning and relevance – debated and its impact largely feared? Why is it reduced to a naïve aspiration instead of a real paradigm shift?

To explore the *tikkun olam* debate and dig deeper, we need to ask two opposing questions: Does helping non-Jews really threaten organized Jewish life or the life of our people? And conversely, will shifting to an organizing principle based on healing the world's ills really lead to some sort of nirvana in Jewish life? I would suggest answering these questions with three bold notions.

First, drop the false dichotomy at the heart of the *tikkun olam* debate. During a recent conversation with lay leaders, I was asked if Jewish mutual responsibility, *arevut*, would suffer given “growing trends” around Jewish young adult support for aiding of non-Jews. In other words: isn't *tikkun olam* the antithesis of *kol yisrael arevim zeh la zeh*, or Jewish guarantorship? My response: this is a false choice.

To understand this point, I offer some trends from JDC Entwine's work. Entwine is a network of over 30,000 Jewish young adults who have been drawn to our mission of making global Jewish responsibility. It also includes the largest global Jewish service program platform with nearly 5,000 alumni, predominantly from North America, who have joined trips and fellowships around the world. Most placements are in countries

where the focus is solely on the local Jewish community and others are in countries where JDC is involved in development work with non-Jewish populations or in Israel.

Those applying and traveling with Entwine are by-and-large young adults that one might assume would be more drawn to *tikkun olam* initiatives — two-thirds come from a low-to-medium Jewish background, close to 40 percent indicate that they weren't previously involved in organized Jewish life until traveling with Entwine, and the vast majority had not heard of JDC before. When we started these trips many suggested we just run trips to locations where we are working with non-Jews as surely this would be their primary interest if traveling with a Jewish organization.

That has simply not been the case. Year after year, the top five most popular trips are generally not *tikkun olam* trips, per se, but those to far-flung locations where the experience is focused on local Jewish communities. And if you segment applicant preference by trips focusing on Jewish vs. non-Jewish populations, the average applicant numbers are about the same, reflecting equal interest. While there are many factors that drive why one applies to one trip over another, surely interest in the population at the heart of the experience is a top consideration. Research done at Entwine's founding drives this point home: a survey of Jewish young adults found that they cared equally about helping Jews in need and non-Jews in need, but they knew far less about Jewish needs and issues. We had an education and motivation gap, not a commitment gap.

Ultimately, young Jews *are* interested in both focal points—how we help build Jewish life and how we as Jews help build better lives for all people. We don't need to replace a vision of peoplehood that centers on helping non-Jews, we need to adjust to the truth that there is already room for both in the hearts and minds of our constituents.

Second, the Jewish family is already reflective of this reality and set of values. The majority of Jews in North America, and likely around the world as well, have many non-Jewish family members and close social contacts. And this will only grow into the future. As noted in the Pew Research Center Survey of U.S. Jews, as of 2013 the intermarriage rate was 58% (a 15% increase from 1990) and when looking at only non-Orthodox Jews it was 71%.

Do we expect all these Jews to somehow not care about helping other people, or their own non-Jewish family members? Or believe that if we want these families to engage in Jewish life that they will do so if we remain committed only to our particular needs and interests? As a deeply committed Entwine alum remarked to me: "I support that your (i.e. JDC's) priority is to help other Jews and that is the primary focus. However, I can't be involved with you if you refuse to also help others who in theory could be my family."

The Jewish public of the future will very likely validate our need to build the Jewish community and ensure it continues to flourish. But we will need to take the leap and accept the full reality of their lives and that all parts of their identity belong, not just the few we are comfortable with. We will have to find a way to get beyond the lip service and demonstrate we are real partners in caring for those in need around us and in advancing righteous pursuits for a more equitable society.

Even if we wanted to only focus on our own needs, that will be impossible. The welfare of our constituents, of our organizations, and indeed the safety of our community is bound up with the march towards the greater good.

Finally, Jewish confidence does not mean Jewish isolationism. We have been witnessed to two great moments of Jewish exceptionalism – chosenness at Sinai and the establishment of the State of Israel. In both cases, we were endowed with responsibilities that set us apart but orientated our place *in* the world, not outside of it. The Jewish people have always balanced responsibilities to our God and people and those to our neighbors and non-Jewish loved ones (hearkening back to Moses, Zipporah, and Jethro).

If we reflect on where we stand today, we'll see we have by-and-large fulfilled the Zionist dream and simultaneously built unique, strong, and beautiful Jewish communities around the world. These achievements run contrary to a history of persecution and victimhood, even if we still suffer from antisemitism today. And both achievements require our constant care, investment of resources, and loving commitment. Our greatest allies, and even our most devious detractors, marvel at this ability to care for each other and our timeless commitment to our people. But then what comes next?

The answer comes from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks who explained that the promises of a Jewish State and the safety of the Jewish people have been our primary purposes. And while we can't take either for granted, there is another promise, a third one, we need to fulfill. And it is one beyond our own walls. Rabbi Sacks called this the last and hardest task of Jewish history and explained, "Both promises have been realized in the present era, leaving the third promise as the next challenge to perfect the world under the sovereignty of God."

One can view *tikkun olam* as part of the final stage of confidently reclaiming our identity as a sovereign and free people, no longer just trying to survive. As Sacks wrote, "It would have been absurd to raise our sights any higher... because who were we to change the world?" But today that is no longer the case, and in many ways, we are no longer afraid; we have arrived. The Jewish and Zionist enterprises can afford to say we will forever

ensure the future of the Jewish people and we can offer something that can uplift others and change the world.

Today, I create meaningful and authentic service and educational experiences for young Jews who are seeking out a Jewish community they can serve and that is reflective of them. For these young Jews, their families, and communities, Jewish identity cannot be a world of “us vs. them” or a life divided between “and/or” because it never was.

If you want a Jewish future that is strong and dynamic, accept the cold, hard fact that the debate about *tikkun olam* is no debate at all. It is part of who we are, and who we can become. And the struggle with it, like Jacob’s wrestling with the angel, only brings blessings.

Sarah Eisenman is both the Founder and Executive Director of JDC Entwine and an Assistant Executive Vice President at the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC). Sarah has a Master’s degree in Jewish Studies from Oxford University, and a BA in History from the University of California, Berkeley, where she focused on Jewish history in the Middle East and North Africa.



Want More Jews to Care About Global Issues? Make it Personal

Dyonna Ginsburg

In August 2019, *Haaretz* asked several leading Israeli scientists to depict life in Israel in 2100 if the world were to experience the expected rise of 2-3 degrees Celsius.¹ Their conclusion? By the end of the century, Israelis won't be able to exist without full-time air conditioning. Forget hiking Masada. Our bodies will not be able to withstand a walk around the block.

When I read the *Haaretz* article, I had already spent over a dozen years advancing social justice and environmental causes in Israel and the Jewish community. But, it was the first time I connected to climate change on a deep, visceral level. To paraphrase one of the scientists quoted, this wasn't about polar bears or melting ice caps. It was personal.

My kids are just shy of two and four years old. In 2100, they will be in their early eighties. People that age are among the most vulnerable to extreme heat, as the body's temperature regulation system deteriorates over time.

Reading the dire predictions, I pictured a future in which my Israeli-born children can't go to the park with their grandchildren or even breathe fresh air. Horrified, I envisioned the vibrant Israel I know and love fall into a heat-induced stupor. It shook my world.

It's no wonder this article touched me profoundly in ways that countless others had not. It took an issue that seemed vast and remote and made it tangible and close. The climate crisis was no longer just about the future of the planet; it was about my family and home.

In my work at OLAM, I struggle with the question of how to make other seemingly remote issues relevant to the Jewish community.

¹ <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium.MAGAZINE-the-sea-will-get-as-hot-as-a-jacuzzi-what-life-in-israel-will-look-like-in-2100-1.7688062>

As a network of 50+ Jewish organizations working in the developing world, OLAM and our partners use several tools to mobilize the Jewish community in support of the world's most vulnerable people. We put a human face on extreme poverty by bringing Jews to developing countries and having them meet and learn from local communities. We cite age-old Jewish values and teachings about the importance of taking care of the poor and the stranger. We draw upon our own people's experiences of forced migration, oppression, and genocide to connect our history to contemporary struggles of others.

There's one tool, however, that many of us in the progressive community are reluctant to use: Jewish self-interest. **Most Jewish social justice organizations (ours included) prefer to make universal moral claims, rather than talk about how our work stands to benefit the Jewish community. This reluctance stems from a concern that if we focus on Jewish needs we will overlook the needs of others or, worse yet, take advantage of others for our own ends. I share these valid concerns. But, as a sector, we do ourselves a disservice to ignore Jewish interests entirely.**

For a sizable portion of the Jewish community, the safety and well-being of other Jews is their primary, if not exclusive, concern. This is deeply rooted in who they are – their experiences, backgrounds, and affiliations – and it's unlikely that universal claims alone will convince them to devote a larger percentage of their time or money to people and causes outside of the Jewish community. If we want to expand our sector's base of support to include more nationalist and religious Jews, we need to do a better job demonstrating how Jewish well-being is intricately connected to the welfare of others.

Even for those in the Jewish community with an intrinsically universal orientation it can often be difficult to connect to issues that affect people in the developing world. Social psychology demonstrates that people conceptualize things that are distant from them (physically or socially) more abstractly than things that are close, and abstract concepts don't motivate people to act as strongly and quickly as concrete ones do. The more personal we can make an issue, the more likely people are to respond.

The current pandemic is an opportunity to do just that. A year ago, most Jews would have felt disconnected from the fact that less than half of the global population has access to essential health services.² Would Jews have acknowledged that global well-being is an important cause? Yes, certainly. Our cause? Hmmm, not sure. COVID-19, however, has made it clear that the health and basic functioning of Jewish communal life is dependent on the health of others, even those located far away.

2 <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal3>

Rather than shy away from speaking of Jewish self-interest, our sector should embrace the argument of "no one is safe until everyone is safe" to galvanize increased Jewish support for equitable coronavirus vaccine distribution and the establishment of strong healthcare systems in developing countries. Promoting well-being for all is not only the right thing to do, it is prudent for the Jewish community.

Admittedly, not all issues can be easily linked to narrowly-defined Jewish interests. And, just because some issues are more distant than others does not mean we should cease trying to get Jews to care about them. But, when we have the opportunity to help Jews connect global issues to their everyday lives, we should jump at it.

Since reading the *Haaretz* article a year and a half ago, I have taken several concrete steps to incorporate a greater climate consciousness into my own life. I now read voraciously on the subject. I donate to Jewish organizations tackling the climate crisis. I have transitioned to a more plant-based diet. These baby steps don't come close to the systems-level change needed. But, they're a start.

I was spurred to act by my own kids. Thinking about them helped me concretize an issue of global proportions. But, I know it's not just about them. Ultimately, my children's future – and that of all children worldwide – will depend on the actions of millions of strangers. Indeed, our fates have never been more deeply intertwined.

Dyonna Ginsburg is the CEO of OLAM (www.olanntogether.org), a network of 50+ Jewish and Israeli organizations working in the fields of global service, international development, and humanitarian aid. Prior to OLAM, Dyonna served as Director of Education and Service Learning at The Jewish Agency; Executive Director of Bema'aglei Tzedek, an Israeli social change NGO; and co-founder of Siach, a global network of Jewish social justice and environmental professionals. She lives in Jerusalem with her husband and two children.



Tikkun Olam – An American Model for Unity

Cindy Greenberg

In fall 2020, Anna Dresdale was looking for their next step. Anna, who uses they/them pronouns, were applying to graduate school and paid work, while looking for ways to continue volunteering in their Harlem community. They found the Serve the Moment Service Corps, powered by Repair the World, a way for them to expand their knowledge of community mutual aid work, and an opportunity to connect with others during an isolating time.

When asked about their experience, Anna said, *"In a moment when I was floundering for how to continue my activism in a meaningful, hands-on, safe way, I learned about Serve the Moment and was given a structure to use my existing skill set and excel. Serve the Moment has meant community, nature, 'doing Jewish,' and light in a dark time. Serve the Moment has been able to slough away some of my cynicism about the way we show up for each other in NYC, during a pandemic, and as Jews, while giving me tools and education to interrogate injustice, and that is something that will deeply inform the ways I engage in volunteerism, and the workplace, moving forward."*

Anna is just one of thousands of Jewish young adults who, in response to the pandemic, economic downturn, and racial justice reckoning, have stepped up to live their Jewish values by caring for their most vulnerable neighbors. These young people are committing their time to feed the hungry, tutor children impacted by learning loss, support homeless families, and provide vital resources to those in need.

Some are inspired by their Jewish values. Sarah Levitt, a Bay Area Serve the Moment Corps Member, recently shared, *"The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened my understanding of the systemic injustice disproportionately impacting our Black and Brown, disabled, and otherwise oppressed neighbors and communities. From a Jewish lens, I found myself thinking about our obligation to repair the world (tikkun olam), pursue righteousness and justice (tzedakah) and spread acts of love and kindness (g'milut hasadim), which our Jewish values tell us we are responsible to practice and uphold."*

Others are inspired by more universal values and, through their service, discover that Jewish ideas and community can be personally meaningful in their life. Jasmin, a Boston Serve the Moment Corps Member, shared, *“It has been so meaningful being part of a Jewish organization committed to service. I learned a lot about the intersection between Judaism and service - I had these two parts of me that I didn’t realize were actually the same.”*

In pairing service with engaging and sophisticated Jewish learning, we can open hearts and minds to exploring Jewish wisdom while also building Jewish community. Whichever set of values most compels them to serve, we want them to find the right entry point. Then, it is on us to show them the interconnectedness of both sets of values.

For those of us working to elevate service in Jewish life, the pandemic put us at a significant crossroads. We could respond—and leverage the increased desire by many to serve—by continuing to offer meaningful experiences enabling people to create change. Or, we could use this moment to create something unprecedented in the Jewish service field—an enormous coalition coalescing around a common, laser-focused goal to catalyze 100,000 acts of service to support those most impacted by the pandemic. We chose the latter. As a result, the Serve the Moment initiative was born from a coalition of more than 40 Jewish organizations that form the Jewish Service Alliance. Each partner committed to make service a top priority in the coming years. Together, the Jewish Service Alliance is working to reach more people—with service opportunities in more than 100 communities—and offer them more compelling entry points to serve than ever before. Investing our energy and resources in tikkun olam will strengthen our own sense of purpose, create connections between Jewish communities around the world, inspire people to engage in Jewish life, and ultimately fulfill the Jewish vision of a more just society.

Never before has it been more apparent that a focus on tikkun olam is vital to ensuring young people live inspired Jewish lives. Caring for our vulnerable neighbors is a central message of the Jewish narrative and should play a defining role in 21st century Jewish peoplehood.

The pandemic has amplified what we already know to be true from research: Gen Z Americans, those born after 1996, are the most civically engaged generation alive today.¹ **We are in a remarkable moment where the defining interest of this generation is aligned with the central imperative of the Jewish people.** The work of Jewish service

¹ Civic Life Today. Points of Light, 2020.

in response to COVID is providing a platform in which we see just how relevant and resonant Judaism and Jewish values can be right now.

In fact, during the pandemic, preliminary research in the Jewish community shows that while interest in Jewish causes is decreasing, interest in social justice has increased dramatically.² Jewish life has the potential to resonate in the 21st century, perhaps more than ever before, by uplifting Judaism's focus on the pursuit of justice.

There have been claims that the idea of tikkun olam is just a thin Jewish veneer layered over progressive politics. Much of this claim is based on a critique of the misuse of the technical term tikkun olam. Whatever term we use to describe our collective work towards a more just world, let us be reminded of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' teaching that, "Jewish ethics is refreshingly down-to-earth. If someone is in need, give. If someone is lonely, invite them home. If you know of someone who has lost their job, do all you can to help them find another. The sages called this 'imitating God.'"³

In this moment, when support for Israel is no longer an unconditionally unifying force in the Jewish world, the work of tikkun olam has the potential to catalyze a sense of global Jewish peoplehood. While Diaspora Jews and Israeli Jews may not always agree on politics, they can certainly come together in a powerful way to serve their communities and create social change. Israel has a robust and innovative field of social change makers focused on both domestic challenges and international development who have an important role to play in leading this effort alongside their diaspora peers.

Every Jewish community around the world, traditional or progressive, politically conservative or liberal, in Israel or the Diaspora, understands the Jewish imperative to care for the poor. It is not just a universally accepted, but a universally practiced Jewish ideal. While the implementation may look different across communities, the values that drive this work are the same and have the potential to deeply unite us.

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2 Aronson, J., Boxer, M., Brookner, M. A., Magidin de Kramer, R., Saxe, L. (2020). Metropolitan Chicago Key Findings. *Building Resilient Jewish Communities: A Jewish Response to the Coronavirus Crisis*.

3 Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005)



What Is Our Takeaway from COVID-19 Regarding Our Commitment to Tikkun Olam?

Nora Feinstein

For months during the COVID-19 pandemic, many people, myself included, expressed a desire to return to the “before times.” Now, as the possibility of return to some version of what was tempts us from just beyond the horizon, some may yearn for a retreat to the status quo ante. Going back to a pre-pandemic world, however, is neither possible nor desirable. Instead, we must begin to imagine and work toward a more just and compassionate world.

The pandemic has highlighted systemic injustice, inequity, and discrimination that are woven into the societal fabric here in the United States and, indeed, around the world. We cannot go backward: these deep ruptures need to be named, faced, and addressed.

We are not the first in Jewish history to contemplate core questions: How should we, as Jews, relate to other people? How should we, as Jews, relate to and move through the world around us? COVID sharpened these questions. After months of rampant death, illness, and loss touching every continent, we cannot but see ourselves and our lives as intimately bound up with the lives of other human beings, each of whom is created in the image of the divine and deserving of dignity and respect.

As Jews, we have an opportunity and obligation to pursue justice, *tzedek*, and engage in acts of *hesed* (generosity or compassion), values that are often associated with the notion of *Tikkun Olam*. Often translated as repairing the world, *Tikkun Olam* serves as the *raison d’etre* for many Jewish communities throughout the world.

But *Tikkun Olam* can too often become an empty catchphrase, one that can provide convenient cover for those in our community who would rather bandy slogans about than engage in the hard work justice requires. *Tikkun Olam* is a meaningless concept unless it is coupled with action and grounded in learning. To invert a famous saying of Rebbe Nachman, if you believe it is possible to repair, you must also believe it is

possible to destroy.¹ To engage in reparative justice, one must first grapple with the extent of the rupture rampant in our midst—a rupture that has been at once both revealed and exacerbated by the pandemic. Pursuing justice requires that we be specific about injustice, thoughtful about our interventions, honest about our intentions, and clear-eyed about our impact.

Bryan Stevenson of the Equal Justice Initiative teaches that we “cannot create justice without getting close to places where injustices prevail. We have to get proximate.” If we claim to believe in *Tikkun Olam* as the essence of our Jewish identity while our lives are comfortably insulated from the world’s despair, if we purport to care about *Tikkun Olam* but cannot wait to reconstruct our pre-COVID lifestyles, then we are missing the opportunity for true justice and healing this moment demands of us.

Our lives are deeply interconnected with all kinds of people; we are enmeshed in a web of myriad relationships. Frequently, we are uncomfortable seeing the poor and the needy as our responsibility, especially when they are not a part of our community, however we define those boundaries. Disproportionately, poor people of color are the victims of the pandemic in this country, more likely to be in jobs that require them to be out of the house, more likely to have health risk factors, less likely to have their symptoms believed and treated appropriately when they seek medical care, more likely to die.[1] I recognize that Jewish communities grapple with the pandemic and the economic fallout it brings in its wake. I do not mean to negate the very real loss of life and life as we knew it that so many of us are experiencing at this time. And yet, by and large, many Jews are relatively well-resourced, able to shelter in place, and to avail ourselves of medical care.

What will we learn from COVID-19? As we prepare to heal ourselves, our communities, and our world, I hope we will do so in full acknowledgment of the dignity of every human life. The work of justice and of healing may necessarily begin in our respective corners of the world, but it must not remain there. I hope we will take seriously the pursuit of justice, starting here and now, because we cannot return or repair to what was.

If *Tikkun Olam* is to be more than a convenient slogan, then it’s time we live up to the values our community professes to hold dear. Let’s listen to, learn from, and follow the cues of those most impacted by disparities in our society. Let’s name root causes. Let’s

1 לַעֲבֹד הַתְּחִינּוֹת לְבַל יִפְּלֵ הָאָדָם בְּדַעְתּוֹ מִחֶמֶת רַבּוּי הַפְּגָמִים וְהַקְּלָקוּלִים שֶׁקָּלָקַל עַל־יְדֵי מַעֲשָׂיו, עֲנָה וְאָמַר: אִם אֵתָּה יְיָ מֵאֲמִין, שֶׁיִּכְוֹלִין לְקַלְקֵל, תֵּאֲמִין שֶׁיִּכְוֹלִין לְתַקֵּן On the topic of *hitchazkut* (encouragement)—a person should not fall into despair on account of the many blemishes and harm their actions caused—the Rebbe declared: If you believe it is possible to destroy, believe it is possible to repair! (Likutei Moharan II:112:1)

talk, let's educate, but let's also mobilize. Let's ground our lives in the pursuit of justice, a reverent wrestling with Jewish tradition, a dissatisfaction with the world as it is, and a compelling vision of the world as it could and should be.

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What is “Tikkun Olam” Anyway?

Peter A. Geffen

When I began my work as a young Jewish educator at the Park Avenue Synagogue in New York City in 1967 the most significant aspect of my work with their high school students was not taking place in my Hebrew language class. It was the fact that I was a civil rights activist who had worked for Dr. King in the summers of 1965 and 66 when I was 19 and 20 years old. My status as a social activist opened their hearts and enabled their trust. Within a few years, as the movement against the War in Vietnam grew, our student roster grew as well as we became the Upper East Side center for Jews Against the War. There was no terminology in use for this work. It was not called “tikkun olam.” It had no name. It was experienced by our young faculty (all of us in our 20’s) and our students as...what Jews do.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel set the tone. “To speak about God and not protest the war in Vietnam is blasphemous” he said. Years later, when one of my former students, the outstanding NY Times journalist, Amy Harmon won the Pulitzer Prize in 2008 she wrote:

In awarding the prize for explanatory reporter, the Pulitzer jury cited “her striking examination of the dilemmas and ethical issues that accompany DNA testing.” I have always been drawn to writing about ethical issues. And it was at PAS (the Park Avenue Synagogue High School) that I learned about ethics, because Peter made ethical issues come alive in every subject we covered. On Yom Kippur, for adolescents whose impulse was to mock tradition, Peter countered with Leonard Cohen’s take on the sacrifice of Isaac. In his Current Events classes, he asked questions about Israeli policies that we thought were taboo and led us to answers more nuanced than we’d imagined possible.

“...and when I am only (concerned) for myself, what am I?”: the often quoted and less fully understood teaching of Rabbi Hillel is the most powerful lesson for our times. Our moral compass as a people is set by the standards we set and live by in relationship to others. “Others” in our families, our communities, our nations and throughout the

world. All different and yet inherently all the same. All created בצלם אלוקים (in God's image).

The impulse to infuse the Jewish educational experience with what I would prefer to call "social responsibility" is therefore not something new. However, as with any idea or concept, the simplistic inclusion of "good deeds" into Jewish school curricula and youth group activities under the banner of "tikkun olam" can certainly raise the question of how much self-congratulation is legitimate. The rendering of the Hebrew into "repair the world" seems to me a little grand; "seeking to repair the world" might be more accurate. Giving our students the idea that their acts of common humanity are grand and even great gestures is to me, both mis-educative and misleading. Frankly, I have never used the term in my work.

However, we are being asked a deeper question. Does concern for the "other" come at a cost: a diminution of our specific identity and commitment. The question is legitimate if what we are witnessing is a *replacement* of content rather than an *enhancement* with experience (in this case acts of social responsibility). Effective and meaning-filled Jewish education must provide a sophisticated and thoughtful integration of Jewish source content and the experiential - not as purely discrete and separate pieces but as textured woven tapestry. If Jewish education becomes only, or even primarily, the realm of what is being called "tikkun olam" then we will likely see a continued erosion of Jewish identity. Without a doubt in so-doing we will provide the world with a cadre of dedicated and competent people to serve the world's many needs, but they will be less literate in the history, language and sources of the Jewish People and its Traditions.

The original, Biblical source of our social activism must inform the acting out of our values if Jewish Identity is to be enhanced in the process. From a theological point of view, the mandate for social justice is found in the Torah's story of Creation. As Rabbi Heschel taught: "God is every man's pedigree. He is either the Father of all men or no man. The image of God is either in every man or in no man." A universal commitment to seek justice in all forms for all human beings is at our core: it is the beating heart of Judaism. Self-centeredness as an individual or as a religion or nation is not.

The 21st century has already demonstrated its dramatic need for a social activism, a commitment to the pursuit of social justice in its broadest interpretation that is grounded in a religious worldview: an authentic and non-utilitarian appreciation of the basic rights of human beings to equality, peace, and justice for all. To work effectively towards this goal requires a source, a recognized center from which our values flow. Otherwise, we will blow in the winds...the winds of change.

Our job, as Jewish educators, is to attempt (in all modesty) to preserve the Jewish people. We must teach and lead in inter-locking and inter-related ways. We must of course teach our own language, history and traditions. We must teach about God and Prayer, and Holiday observances. And we must do these well, very well. We must convey the majesty, power and resilience of the experience of Jewish civilization from ancient times until tomorrow. **BUT we must seamlessly weave through this weighty material the core value of the Torah: “Love your neighbor as you would love yourself, as you would take care of yourself.”**

Our students will have no way of understanding that there is an intrinsic connection between Judaism and social justice without their acts of social responsibility being intrinsically linked to Jewish sources and experiences – both textual and historical.

Peter A. Geffen is the Founder and President of The KIVUNIM Institute and Founder of The Abraham Joshua Heschel School in NYC. He has been a social activist since his service as a civil rights worker for Dr. Martin Luther King, jr. in the 1960's.



Ta·a·roch Le·fa·nai Shul·chan/You Spread a Table Before Me

Yardena Gerwin

Every Shabbat after the wine was drunk, and the crumbs were scattered, guests would join my family in a rendition of Psalm 23. Those unfamiliar with the niggun would hum along “You spread a table for me in full view of my enemies.” Our guests spanned decades, zip codes, continents, and religions. To me that table felt like the best Judaism had to offer. A space where everyone could contribute, debate, and commune. As a child falling asleep to this familiar tune on my father’s lap, I savored the holiness of the moment. If Psalm 23 was true, my table felt impenetrable.

On January 6th, 2021, the collective table of American Jewry was cracked if not split. Our enemies stormed the Capitol brandishing Confederate flags, flaunting swastikas and wearing “Camp Auschwitz” sweatshirts. The Capitol riots were not the first anti-Semitic incident to occur in my lifetime and certainly won’t be the last.

The enemies of the Jews have shaped both cultural and religious aspects of Judaism. After all: How many holidays can be described as “they tried to kill us, we are still here, now let’s eat!”? As someone who was born in and lived in Israel for two years, I am acutely aware of how charged the word “enemy” becomes in dialogue around the Israeli-Palestine conflict. The Jewish people are not a homogenous population. We encompass different ethnic, religious, political, and cultural backgrounds. Like shaping challah, there is tangible tension as we braid our ethical values with the necessity for self-perseveration. As a faith, as a people, when we lead from a place of fear it is easy to view the entire world within the boundaries of us vs them.

Tikkun Olam speaks to our better angels. It decentralizes the individual as protagonist, calling us out into the greater world. It is a religious cry for action, an opportunity to first repair what has broken in the world and then find strength through healing. Tikkun Olam is a chance to connect with our ancestors: to don hats and organize like Bella Abzug, and pray with our feet like Abraham Joshua

Heschel. In a world in which companies have divisions of “Social Responsibility” or “Social Good,” Tikkun Olam or “Repairing the World” fits right in. The phrase sounds like it belongs on Bill Gates’ To-Do list rather than a phrase coined by rabbis in the 3rd century Mishnah. This is why Tikkun Olam is one of the more compelling concepts that Judaism has to offer to Millennials and Gen Z. Unlike so many other aspects of Judaism, Tikkun Olam lacks the steep learning curve of language, history, or custom required in other Jewish practice. It is also among the least archaic Jewish concepts. Depending on one’s Jewish viewpoint, issues of gender, interfaith, queer, and disability rights are either fixed, or open to religious reinterpretations. Tikkun Olam is not quite so contentious, making it accessible across various Jewish denominations as well as an interfaith notion.

Yet, while many Jews are all for repairing the world, some would prefer we stick to particular nations within it. In my teens, this unspoken presumption that Jews must only aid certain approved “others” was the elephant that roamed Manhattan’s Upper West Side neighborhood. When I was fifteen, I developed a rare autoimmune condition that forced me to take a leave from Jewish day school. My health and education – two privileges I had presumed as a given my whole life – suddenly hung in the balance. I had always known that girls in other countries lacked the same rights to health, safety, and education that I took for granted each day. After developing my own disability, what once was background music became an anthem, a song I could not get out of my head. I found Girl Up, a campaign of the UN Foundation, and lobbied legislation into law for girls to gain birth registration; I raised funds to purchase bicycles so girls in Rwanda could safely bike to secondary schools far from their homes. The people I met along the way engaging in this work, affirmed the notion that humans were made in God’s image. Unfortunately, some members of my Jewish community and even my extended family saw it differently. They did not see my work, they saw “UN.” They questioned, they interrogated, they provoked. How could I support an organization that was critical of Israel? Why wasn’t I dedicating my time to Jewish causes? If we do not support our own kind, who will?

Over more than one Shabbat dinner I stared at the faces of people who I had grown up with, whom I loved dearly, and instead of supported, I felt cheated. I considered the phrase Tikkun Olam over and over again. If the Rabbis wanted us to only exercise our care for fellow Jews, wouldn’t they have left us the term Tikkun Bishveel Yehudeem? Ultimately, on the question of whether or not Jewish self-interest and universal values of Human Rights can truly co-exist with Judaism, I defer to Rabbi Hillel. He reminded us, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?” (Mishna *Pirkei Avot*, Chapter 1 verse 14).

When it comes to twenty-first-century Jewry, Hillel is right. The time is now. The words of Psalm 23 have never rung truer. The feast of the Jewish people is being spread before us in full view of our enemies. The threat exists but we have a choice. Do we wish to be defined by our enemies or by those we invite to the table?

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The Universal is Particular and the Particular is Universal: No More False Dichotomies

David Jaffe

Energy Entrepreneur and social activist Yosef Abramowitz tells a story from his time as an undergraduate at Boston University in the 1980s when he was active in the South African divestment movement. There was an anti-South African apartheid protest the next day, scheduled at the same time as a free Soviet Jewry protest on campus. He asked his teacher, Professor Elie Weisel, which he should attend as he was committed to both movements. Professor Weisel advised him to attend the Soviet Jewry rally saying, “if you don’t attend that one, who will?”

This is a powerful story because it so clearly frames the dilemma of concern for one’s own particular group versus concern for the universe outside of one’s tribe. Indeed, **in a reality of limited time and money, hard decisions need to be made about priorities. Unfortunately, in our contemporary discourse, this issue of priorities has morphed into one of identity – are you a Tikkun Olam Jew and care about the world, or are you a Tribal Jew and care about Jews. One side sees the other as provincial and chauvinist, while the other is seen as naïve and misguided. This dichotomy between Tikkun Olam and, what might be called, Tikkun Aztmi, repair of the self on a national level, is a false one, as they are both mutually reinforcing aspects of Jewish peoplehood. As a worldwide Jewish people we will be better able to navigate difficult priority choices if we have an accurate perspective on the essential interdependence of particularism and universalism in Jewish identity.**

The starting point for this integrated self-understanding is one of the first statements of Jewish particularity in the Torah, where God spells out the terms of the covenant with Israel just before the revelation at Sinai:

וַעֲתָה אִם־שָׁמַעַתְּ תִשְׁמְעוּ בְּקוֹלִי וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת־בְּרִיתִי וְהֵייתֶם לִי סִגְלָה מִכָּל־הָעַמִּים כִּי־לִי כָל־הָאָרֶץ:

Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine,

וְאַתֶּם תְּהִי־לִי מְמֻלְכֶת כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי קְדוֹשׁ אֱלֹהֵי הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר תְּדַבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

but you shall be to Me a **kingdom of priests and a holy nation.**' These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel."¹

The term, "holy nation", while on the surface quite chauvinistic sounding, actually contains within it Israel's integrated particular and universal mission. Nachmanides (d. 1270, Israel), commenting on this verse, clarifies that, "[By stating] "and a holy nation," [the Torah means,] for cleaving to the Holy God, as it says (Leviticus 19:2), "You shall be holy because I, the LORD, am holy." What does it mean to be holy? Rabbi Shimon Shkop (d. 1939, Belarus) has a striking understanding of this term. In his introduction to *Sha'arei Yosher*, he writes,

Blessed shall be the Creator...who created us in [the Divine] "Image" ... and planted eternal life within us, so that our greatest desire should be to benefit others, to individuals and to the masses, now and in the future in imitation of the Creator (so to speak)...That is, that we, ...should constantly hold as our purpose to sanctify our physical and spiritual abilities, for the good of the many, according to our abilities. In my opinion, this whole concept is included in [the] mitzvah [of] "Be holy, [for I am Holy]...."²

For R. Shkop, holiness is about benefiting others and desiring to benefit others. He goes on to describe how individual growth involves expanding the scope of one's "I" from raw physical and material self-interest, to encompass spiritual life, one's family members and the Jewish people and ultimately all of humanity and creation. In this formulation, concern for self IS concern for other and vice versa because the self has now expanded to include other. According to Shkop,

...this idea is hinted at in Hillel's words, as he used to say, "If I am [not] for me, who will be for me? And when I am for myself, what am I?" It is fitting for each person to strive to be concerned for themselves. But with this, they must also strive to understand that "if I am for myself, what am I?" – that if they constrict their "I" to a narrow domain, limited to what the eye can see [is them], then their "I" - what is it? Vanity and ignorable.³

1 Exodus 19:5-6

2 As quoted in *Widen Your Tent: Thoughts on Life, Integrity and Joy*, Rabbi Micha Berger, Mosaic Press, 2019, p. 45-6

3 Ibid., p. 55-6

R. Shkop affirms the importance of self-interest but cautions that we shouldn't constrict our sense of self too much. When we expand the "I," love and care of self becomes love and care of other all at once.

While Rabbi Shkop is describing an individual's soul development, we can apply this idea of holiness, as Nachmanides does, on a national level. A holy nation is one that understands its purpose as benefiting others. It must nurture itself, but not for its own sake, rather, for the sake of the world that is included in its self-understanding as essential to itself. This understanding of holiness is an important corrective to what can be the constrictive, chauvinistic impulses of nationalism.

Well over a century ago Rav Kook noted this danger. Yehuda Mirsky, in his biography of Rav Kook writes, "Kook categorically denies that Jewish Nationalism (which he refers to by the Hebrew *leumiyut*) is akin to non-Jewish nationalism, because the former is guided not by passion but by the mind, and thus knows that its true vocation is an ethical mission for the benefit of all humanity. Without the restraining hand of tradition, he wrote in the *Ha-Peles* essays, Zionism would degenerate into what he derisively referred to as *nazionalismus*, which was nothing but self-loving chauvinism and an easy pretext for immorality and xenophobic violence. "⁴ Our self-definition as a Holy Nation must include a concern for all humanity, or we won't actually be fulfilling our part of the eternal covenant.

The charge to be a Holy Nation calls on us to live paradoxically, understanding that care of self is care of other and care of other is care of self. The impulse to turn our backs on the world because of the persistence of anti-Semitism is understandable and yet, it is not the Jewish way. Similarly, the impulse to immerse in universal concerns, leaving behind what can seem like narrow, Jewish particularism is also not the Jewish way. A Holy Nation nurtures itself and its institutions with pride and vigor, knowing that it is fully implicated in and committed to the thriving and flourishing of the entire world. By engaging in both Jewish-specific efforts and universal Tikkun Olam we can maintain the dynamic tension needed to carry on with our covenantal mission to partner with God for the ultimate redemption of the entire world.

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4 *Rav Kook: Mystic in a time of Revolution*, Yehuda Mirsky, Yale University Press, 2014, p. 36



How *Tikkun Olam* Became Jewish Social Justice: The Origins and Evolution of a Jewish Value

Jonathan Krasner

Tikkun olam, a Hebrew term which literally means “to mend/repair the world” has gained currency in American Jewish circles over the past 50 years and has even entered the wider American religious discourse. The contemporary connotation, with its emphasis on human agency in bringing about God’s kingdom on earth, represents both a synthesis and reinterpretation of earlier conceptual frameworks and a response to the perceived failure of Jewish emancipation and integration in the West as exemplified by the persistence of antisemitism and the Holocaust. *Tikkun olam* has also become a vehicle for American Jews seeking to reconcile their theology with their political liberalism.

While Jews were always concerned with social justice, its association with *tikkun olam* is hardly a century old and was not widely adopted in North America until the 1970s and 1980s. The origins of the term can be traced back to Talmudic texts and the early post-Temple liturgy. The idiom made its debut in early rabbinic literature, and most notably in the second paragraph of the contemporaneous *Aleinu* prayer. In the Talmud, the justification of *mipnei tikkun ha-olam*, for the sake of the improvement or stabilization of society, was applied to rabbinic enactments that were designed to close loopholes perceived as damaging to the credibility of the legal system. By contrast, *Aleinu* envisions the repair of the world under the Kingdom of God, *l’taken olam b’malkhut Shaddai*. While this understanding of *tikkun olam* was more universalistic, its concept of repair as the eradication of paganism and the imposition of religious uniformity is equally far removed from the modern concept of social betterment.

Although it was invoked in the daily liturgy, *tikkun olam* remained a fairly obscure notion until it was appropriated by the kabbalists. The *Zohar*, by Rabbi Moses de León (1240-1305) effectively introduced the idea that human beings could repair “the flaws in the universe... and help restore the cosmic balance.” It was the thought of Isaac Luria (1534–1572), however, that fully elaborated the mystical meaning of *tikkun olam*.

Luria envisioned human beings as full partners with God in bringing redemption. The kabbalistic iteration of *tikkun olam* radically differs from both the Talmudic and third-century liturgical understanding of the idiom. While both the *Aleinu* and the Lurianic creation myth were eschatological, the Lurianic notion of redemption imagined a reunification of the Godhead and an end to the material world.

Luria's gnostic outlook caused him to reject the present world as fundamentally wicked. Humanity essentially was asked to pave the way for the undoing of its creation. Finally, while both the Talmud and Luria saw a role for humanity in *tikkun ha-olam*, the rabbis mandated concrete ameliorative steps in order to strengthen the social fabric and promote economic justice, while Luria invested the power of *tikkun* in acts of contemplation, study and the performance of *mitzvot* (commandments).

The association of *tikkun olam* with human agency, a human-centered utopian quest to realize God's Kingdom on Earth, most likely originated in the early twentieth century among the early Zionist colonists. Their embrace of modern nationalism and the upbuilding of a Jewish society in *Eretz Israel*/Palestine as a response to antisemitism, economic deprivation, and the failure of liberalization policies in czarist Russia defied the conventional Jewish teaching that only God could initiate the ingathering of the Exiles to Zion and the messianic era. It became an important component of the teleology of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935), the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of *Eretz Israel*/Palestine. As Rabbi Ben-Zion Bokser explained, Kook saw Judaism as instrumental in hastening human enlightenment: "For Rabbi Kook, the essence of Judaism, which flows from Jewish monotheism, is the passion to overcome separatism, the severance of man from God, of man from man, of man from nature. It is the passion to perfect the world through man's awareness of his links to all else in existence." Kook's teachings about *tikkun* and his perception of holiness of all of humanity became a springboard for a redemptive religious Zionism. He embraced the secular Zionists' rebuilding of a Jewish state as a holy project and regarded them as (unwitting) agents of messianic redemption and repair (*tikkun*).

During the Third Reich, another rabbi embraced an activist, this-worldly understanding of *tikkun olam* when confronted by catastrophe. Liberal Rabbi Leo Baeck (1873-1936) led the representative body of German Jewry, the Central Association of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith from 1933 until it was disbanded by the Nazis in 1938. His student, rabbi and theologian Emil Fackenheim (1916-2003), vividly recalled Baeck's sermon on the *Aleinu* prayer in the mid-1930s: "He preached about the abomination of the false gods, and everyone present knew what he had in mind," and "ended up with the subject of *tikkun olam*." Fackenheim noted that while the term can be translated in a variety of ways with messianic undertones, Baeck preferred a "more sober" interpretation:

“preparing the world for the kingship of God.” It was the responsibility of Germans and the world as a whole to facilitate the emergence of a more perfect future by sweeping away the abomination of Nazism.

Fackenheim had this story about his beloved teacher in mind in 1982 when he titled his influential work of post-Holocaust theology, *To Mend the World*. Indeed, *tikkun olam* acquired a new meaning as American Jewry struggled to come to terms with the implications of the Holocaust and the mission of Jews in a post-Holocaust world. One of the earliest public intellectuals to invoke *tikkun olam* in his response to the Holocaust was Harold Schulweis (1925-2014), a theologian and leading Conservative rabbi. In a 1966 symposium entitled “The Condition of Jewish Belief,” which appeared in *Commentary*, Schulweis insisted that the world was “created imperfect and incomplete.” Humanity was tasked with being “an ally of God in perfecting and repairing the incomplete world (*tikkun olam*).” Schulweis went even further and urged humanity to follow the example of Abraham and confront God with examples of divine moral lapses. “The high status conferred upon man as a morally competent partner of God produced and still cultivates a social consciousness and activism in the knowledgeable Jew,” he wrote.

Placing social action in the framework of covenant, Schulweis regarded *tikkun olam* as part of the tradition of Jewish “struggle,” as well as the brokenness of the world. He explicitly maintained that *tikkun olam* demanded this-worldly activism. Judaism must open itself “to those interests—economic, social, cultural—more often relegated to the secular in doctrinally-centered theology.” Furthermore, his insistence that the covenant was “people-centered,” meant that social justice was a communal responsibility as opposed to a solitary endeavor. Likewise, he argued that salvation would be realized collectively, not individually.

Schulweis’ social activist orientation regarding repairing the world contrasts with that of Fackenheim. To be sure, resistance is a central motif in Fackenheim’s work, particularly in *To Mend the World*. The resistance of Hitler’s victims during the Holocaust inspired and demanded living a “resisting life” in its aftermath. Yet Fackenheim’s posture was inward rather than universal. His call for resistance in the shadow of complete rupture was a plea for Jewish survival. The will to live as a people, as exemplified by the creation of the Jewish state, and the reclamation of the principle that human life is sacred constituted acts of *tikkun*.

Another post-Holocaust thinker who did much to popularize *tikkun olam* as part of his efforts to Judaize American Jewish civil religion was Irving Greenberg (b. 1933), the maverick modern Orthodox rabbi and founding president of the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership (CLAL). Greenberg emerged as the unofficial rabbi

to many baby boomer federation leaders in search of ways to find spiritual meaning in their communal work. Like Schulweis and Fackenheim, Greenberg's wrestling with the impact of the Holocaust on God's covenant with Israel led him to emphasize a this-worldly tikkun, "a final redemption within human history—not beyond it." Greenberg agreed with Fackenheim that the Holocaust entailed a rupture, the abrogation of the Sinaitic covenant. He envisioned a new post-Holocaust covenant where the Jews were not merely partners with God but "senior partners in action," entirely responsible for the execution of the covenant. In an era when God was hidden from the world, the thrust of Jewish activity would have to be in the secular realm.

Greenberg envisioned *tikkun olam* as integral to the mission of the new Jewish state of Israel. In the American Jewish context, the federations and communal agencies involved with defense, welfare and communal relations achieved post-Holocaust *tikkun* through their two-pronged domestic mission: assuring American Jewish communal welfare and Jewish cultural renewal and working for general social betterment in America and throughout the world. Greenberg more than anyone else, located *tikkun olam* among the core tenets of American Jewish civil religion.

In addition to public intellectuals such as Schulweis and Greenberg who helped bring *tikkun olam* into American Jewish discourse, Jewish education became important conduits for its dissemination in the 1960s and 70s. Reflecting the idealism of the Kennedy years, Los Angeles educator Shlomo Bardin invoked *tikkun olam* by way of inspiring young Jews at the Brandeis Camp Institute (now known as the Brandeis-Bardin Institute) to devote themselves to a life of service to the Jewish people and to the world over. Later in the decade, fearing trends of rebellion and apathy among American Jewish youth, several educators argued for curricular reform in the congregational school. A demand for more "relevance" in the curriculum joined a call for renewed emphasis on the teaching of Jewish values, including social justice, which was referred to as *tikkun olam*. By the 1980s, *tikkun olam* was routinely being promoted as an important Jewish value in religious school curricula. The subject matter presented in these curricula was eclectic, ranging from nuclear proliferation to sanctuary for illegal immigrants, and from extending support to HIV/AIDS victims to advocating for the right of Jews in the Soviet Union to emigrate. Educators found role models in Jewish activists fighting for causes like civil rights, like Abraham Joshua Heschel.

In the 1970s, *tikkun olam* also gained currency among members of the *havurah* movement. An article in the wildly popular *Jewish Catalog* (1973) was arguably most important in spreading the language of *tikkun olam* to Jews in North America. Modeled after *The Whole Earth Catalog*, and authored by three members of Havurat Shalom in Somerville, MA, the book aimed to be a "compendium of tools and resources" for

the Jewish counterculture. But its reach far exceeded its target audience. Rabbi Arthur Waskow (b. 1933) urged readers to “plant a tree somewhere as a small *tikkun olam*—fixing up the world—wherever the *olam* most needs it. ... Plant a tree in Vietnam in a defoliated former forest... Plant a tree in Appalachia where the strip mines have poisoned the forests. Go there to plant it; start a kibbutz there and grow more trees. Plant a tree in Brooklyn where the asphalt has buried the forest. Go back there to plant it and live with some of the old Jews who still live there.” Waskow overtly politicized and expanded the meaning of *tikkun olam* to include a variety of causes, both universal and particular, from environmentalism and anti-Vietnam War activism to caring for the Jewish elderly and neighborhood gentrification (ostensibly to make formerly Jewish areas safer and more livable for those who remained there).

Tikkun olam remained an important motif for progressive Jewish activists throughout the 1980s and 90s. Among those who took it up as a *cri de coeur* were left-wing political activist Michael Lerner (b. 1943) and his then-wife Nan Fink, who co-founded *TIKKUN*, a progressive political and cultural magazine in 1986. Each issue carried a definition of “*tikkun* (t · kün)” on its cover: “To mend, repair and transform the world.” Lerner expressed his frustration with the complacency of the American Jewish establishment. “The notion that the world could and should be different than it is...seems strangely out of fashion,” he complained in the first issue. Insisting that the Jewish commitment to liberal politics was based on deeply rooted Jewish values, and not merely on perceived political interest, Lerner hoped that *TIKKUN* would help keep “the Prophetic tradition alive.” Lerner defined Judaism as a religion that was “irrevocably committed to the side of the oppressed,” which led inexorably to a progressive political and social agenda. Lerner hoped to energize alienated Jews with a model of Judaism that rejected the crass materialism and hypocrisy of middle class suburban Jewish life in favor of a Jewishly grounded ethic of social justice. “A *tikkun* in the Jewish world” would be “the most important step in fighting assimilation.”

Similarly, Leonard Fein (1934-2014), an activist and founding editor of *Moment* magazine, Fein argued that survivalism, either for its own sake or as a response to the Holocaust, was an instrumental value at best. He emphasized that the purpose of Jewish continuity must extend beyond the parochial interests of an ethnic group, no matter its venerable pedigree. **Fein viewed *tikkun olam* as the ground “where particularism and universalism meet,” where Jews are afforded the opportunity to live their ethics and thereby “move from ethics to justice.” He strongly maintained that far from endangering Jewish survival by making Judaism indistinguishable from liberalism or secular humanism, *tikkun olam* gave purpose and meaning to Jewish survival.**

Fein tried to spread his message through the founding of AMOS: The National Partnership for Social Justice in 2001. While that organization closed in the wake of the post-9/11 recession, its mission to connect young unaffiliated Jews to their Judaism through social justice and service learning was continued over the next two decades by a growing number of outward facing social justice organizations, such as AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps, the Jewish Organizing Initiative, Bend the Arc, Mazon, and the American Jewish World Service. **In short order, the call to mend the world became spur to activism for a generation of American Jews confronted by evidence of profound brokenness wherever they looked, from global warming to economic and racial inequality.**

Inevitably, the association of *tikkun olam* with a liberal, universalistic political agenda was roundly criticized by many on the Jewish right. The most astute critics, including Jerold Auerbach, pointed out that the elevation of social justice to a core principle was emblematic of a “search for compatibility between Judaism and Americanism.” In *Rabbis and Lawyers* (1990), Auerbach wrote: “How tempting to assume that the Hebrew Bible was a preliminary draft of the American Constitution, that the Hebrew prophets were the founding fathers of American liberalism.” Auerbach complained that American Jews “hear in prophecy what they want to hear.”

Tikkun olam's critics even included some left-leaning public intellectuals, like Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf, a Reform leader who believed that the term had inadvertently fostered complacency and smugness among social justice activists. He ridiculed his own movement leaders who in their reflexive invocation of *tikkun olam* had rendered it as anodyne as baseball and apple pie. His major grievance was that “the notion of *tikkun* only seems to require that which seems very good to us.... Our good faith is suspect when we demand so little of ourselves.” He decried the “distortion” of *tikkun olam*, a “strange and half understood notion,” into “a huge umbrella under which our petty concerns and political panaceas can come in out of the rain.”

Several earlier advocates of *tikkun olam* anticipated those who would criticize its unconcealed universalism. By presenting *tikkun olam* in the framework of the covenant between the Jews and God, for example, Schulweis intended to make it part of community-based practice. “Social involvement is not the concern of some individuals but of the entire community,” he wrote. Leonard Fein was fond of saying that “in order to survive, a people needs more than a strategy; it needs a reason.” **The secret of the rise of tikkun olam was its power to give meaning to Jewish identity by articulating a post-Holocaust Jewish mission in the world and reinforcing liberal political and social values that were already deeply ingrained in the vast majority of American**

Jews. Most Jews had a vague sense of correlation between their Judaism and their liberalism. Tikkun olam legitimized it and gave it a name.

(This essay was excerpted and adapted from Jonathan Krasner, "The Place of *Tikkun Olam* in American Jewish Life," *Jewish Political Studies Review* 25:3-4 (2015). See that article for a more in-depth discussion and citations.)

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Applying an Anti-Oppression Lens to Tikkun Olam

Analucia Lopezvorededo

Over the last century, *tikkun olam* has become one of the most well-known and widely used expressions in the Jewish world. Often translated to “repair the world,” the term is synonymous with Jewish activism, as it invokes a responsibility for improving or “repairing” what is broken in the world through charity, service and other forms of social action. For many, living out this value is integral to their observance of Judaism, as it can be tied to Jewish texts that suggest that human beings are responsible for finishing God’s work and improving living conditions for the world’s most vulnerable. With this understanding, numerous Jewish institutions have adopted *tikkun olam* as a central value of their organizational identity and engaged Jews of all ages in initiatives that connect them to a wide range of social issues in their communities and abroad. While many initiatives are responsible for sparking in community members a lifelong interest in philanthropy, few focus on critically examining the pervasiveness of oppression. **As we transition into a new era of activism, it is imperative that we stretch our *tikkun olam* practices to include the application of an analytical lens and a commitment towards becoming anti-oppressive.**

Systemic oppression refers to the historical and organized mistreatment of people via policies and practices within a society. Created by those in power, systems of oppression like racism, sexism, classism, linguisticism, nativism, ableism and more, cause sustained suffering at the individual, institutional and societal level. One doesn’t need to travel abroad to witness these systems in action. Disparities take place all around us, and many of us have experienced them at varying degrees. Despite that daunting realization, things can change. People are capable of healing and communities are capable of rebuilding. Change, however, doesn’t come easy. It requires people who have previously benefited from the hierarchical nature of these systems to recognize their privilege and commit to interrupting and eradicating structures that prevent communities from sustaining themselves with dignity.

For millennia, Jews have experienced oppression and been awarded privilege. Despite the pervasiveness of anti-semitism, many members of the Jewish community have experienced a proximity to dominant culture that has allowed them to access white privilege and more readily gain financial freedom through hard work alone. As a result,

we are collectively one of the most influential and affluent communities. While it's important to celebrate the resilience and the achievement of the Jewish people, it is also important to recognize that [anti-black racism](#) has prevented communities of color around the world from achieving similar success to ours. To take it a step further, when you consider the experience of people with multiple oppressed identities, the experience is compounded and drastically heightened. This phenomenon, known as "[intersectionality](#)," a term coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, recognizes that a straight, white, able-bodied woman will not experience the same obstacles as a queer, black, disabled woman. Understanding how oppression and hierarchies function--and how we benefit from them, are the first steps in deepening our commitment to anti-oppression and *tikkun olam*.

Tikkun olam is a bold statement that requires bold action. As we endure the second year of a global pandemic that has disproportionately affected the health and finances of communities of color around the world, it is time that we contemplate difficult questions regarding our roles in upholding unjust systems that create disparities in the first place. As a collective, the global Jewish community has tremendous power to resist the status quo and move towards designing new systems that are rooted in compassion, fairness and justice. Inevitably a change in the status quo will affect the way societies function. It will dismantle hierarchical structures that have previously worked in our favor, and thus we must be prepared to answer the following questions: What are ways in which we enjoy power, privilege and influence? And what are we truly willing to renounce in order to pursue *tikkun olam* and equity?

Jewish leaders and activists around the world have an important role in shifting the paradigm of *tikkun olam* to include a commitment to equalizing hierarchies. Furthermore, to become agents of change who make courageous decisions, we must begin to view *tikkun olam* through a lens of anti-oppression. Only by applying this lens, will we be able to understand how our social identities feed into hierarchical dynamics that lead to disparities and inequities. Being anti-oppressive, will not come easy for many in society. It will dismantle systems that have given the most powerful their platform, it will lead to the emancipation of communities that have systematically been kept small, and it will shift the activist identity to go from "helping those in need" to "prioritizing human liberation."

As we look towards the future, we have tremendous work ahead of ourselves. It's important to remember that as we continue to prioritize macro-systems of oppression, *tikkun olam* also requires that the Jewish community look inward and address and heal from internalized racism, colorism, sexism, antisemitism and more. As a global and multicultural community, we have to challenge ourselves

to engage in honest and open communication and need to listen to members of our community who have experienced varying levels of oppression (in and out of the Jewish community) due to intersectionality. No single experience is sufficient for unlearning our socialization within a culture built on multiple forms of oppression. Developing anti-oppression practices is life-long work and a shift in perspective will not be easy for many. Some will politicize justice and revert to left versus right tropes. As leaders, we must be prepared for that. We cannot lose sight of the opportunity to shape those committed to *tikkun olam* to also adapt an anti-oppressive mindset that not only enhances our local and global impact, but also fulfills our commitment to the living out the Jewish values of *tzedek, teshuva, b'tzelem elohim and more*. In closing, only a steadfast commitment to justice, will allow communities to heal and repair, and lead to a world in which every human being's light can shine the way the divine intended them to shine when they were created.

Dr. Analucía Lopezrevoredo is a Peruvian-Chilean-Quechua-American Jewtina, born in Peru and raised in Spain and the United States. An anti-oppression activist, educator and researcher, Analucía founded [Jewtina y Co.](#) in 2019 to offer Latin-Jews a platform in which to engage in critical dialogue about Jewish and Latin multiculturalism, while also working to eliminate racism, colorism, classism, linguicism, sexism and xenophobia within the community.



On the Centrality of Tikkun Olam in Jewish Thought and Practice

Ruth Messinger

The invitation to participate in this conversation included some fundamental questions regarding whether the concept of tikkun olam is or is not central to Jewish thought and practice in the 21st century. Should it be more central, and what might we do to make that the case?

Powerful questions...but for me the answer is, as ever, yes and no, on the one side and then on the other. This pull is always part of our human and very Jewish struggle to be the best we can be and to always demand more of ourselves. Especially in hard times, as we recognize that we may too often fall short.

I take seriously the original text examples of caring not only for ourselves, but for the other and the stranger. Of doing this because we are all equally made in the image of God, because we have an obligation rooted in morality—it is the right thing to do—and in history—we know what it means to be the other and stranger, and we should help others as we were helped or as we wish we had been helped.

And yet, I know that it is a stretch to ask people to be alert to an emerging genocide in Myanmar or to worry about the struggles of indigenous farmers to have title to their land in Guatemala. It is, fast forward to today, also a stretch to ask people to worry about the racial faults in our own society as these have been fiercely exposed again in the past year, when they are—understandably—worried about their own life during the pandemic and their own access to the vaccine.

In other words, as hundreds have said and written before, **we are both particularistic and universal in our outlook on the world, and it is often not easy to make that leap toward greater universalism or, even, to hold both of those ideas together as we make our individual and collective ways through life. But that is in fact who we are and what we must do.**

I have had the privilege of being raised in a Judaism that always told me to care for the other and the stranger, to fight for ever greater degrees of justice and equity because it was a Jewish thing to do. And I have had the extraordinary opportunity, during the almost two decades I was CEO of American Jewish World Service, to see this concern for the other, this determination to help in healing the world be the core motivation of not only our staff and our donors. It is an idea that resonates strongly with 21st century Jews and also the motivation of our grassroots partner organizations.

No, those organizations and their amazing indigenous leaders are not Jewish, but they are people who strive—often against odds that I cannot entirely fathom—to be leaders in healing their parts of the world, to be battlers for justice. They have, in all the ways they go about their work, become role models for me. My Jewish commitment to thinking universally, to believing I need to participate in helping to make the world better has been expanded and strengthened a thousand times over by getting to know people whose lives are devoted to this work, who do it, it appears, as a matter of course.

My earliest example from the field came with the first AJWS project I visited. It was in El Salvador where a group fighting for land rights, human rights and economic development—a group significantly motivated by faith that the poor had an equal claim on the world's resources—had received funds from us to help their participants become chicken farmers. The earliest funding went to provide individual and penniless households with two chickens [and with access to a rooster] so they could begin their own egg and chicken businesses. The organizers specified that every farmer who participated in the program was to give two chickens from each batch she or he harvested to someone less well off, so that the program benefits would spread.

Perhaps this is a trivial story to some, but for me it was dramatic: we had found a group we wanted to help, but they wanted to be sure that with the help they received they were thinking more expansively, taking on their own commitment to be both particular and universal, using their new and elevated position to help heal the world.

Over and over again—in many different countries—I have learned this lesson, and it has strengthened my Jewish commitment to work for justice and to fight for equity. It has also moved me to speak on these issues to Jewish communities and community leaders where it has had great resonance.

It has become a rallying cry for many in the Jewish community—they can work for a sustainable environment or for human rights or for fair immigration laws, and they can do it Jewishly, through a Jewish organization informed by Jewish values. For sure, this approach does not appeal to all [and sometimes it provokes arguments from those who

suggest we must be more, not less, particular in an era of rising anti-Semitism] but it does seem to me to have deep meaning to many in our 21st century Jewish community especially at a time when we enjoy many aspects of privilege as compared to the world as a whole.

I would go further and say that the arguments themselves are healthy. After all we have survived through Biblical, rabbinic and more modern eras acknowledging being pulled in two directions, writing down many of our disagreements, recognizing that we have a fundamental obligation to ourselves and our personal and national and faith communities AND that we have a powerful set of reasons to help put the world to rights.

So, for some Jews all of the time [well, almost all] and for many Jews some of the time, we not only aspire to pursue and advance justice, but we actually commit ourselves to the task. We take seriously the teaching of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel that: “in a free society where terrible wrongs exist, some are guilty, but all are responsible.” We look to see what roles we might play in our time—how we might strive to make health care in the US less racially discriminatory, how we might provide for those at our borders the same welcome and care which others provided for our fore-parents—what hands-on work and what broader advocacy efforts are demanded of us.

It is my hope that these notions become more central to 21st century Judaism than they already are, that those who teach and preach and organize in our schools, our houses of worship, and our community organizations speak powerfully about tikkun olam. That they speak about it as an age old maxim of our faith, about an aspiration central to who we are, that we can act on today as we confront COVID or voter suppression or asylum seekers in order to be the best of who we can be.

I want more and more Jews and more and more others to think of and see Jews as a people committed to social justice—not as the only people committed to social justice and not as a people unable to also stand up for themselves—but as a people more than ready to reach across lines of difference for that healing that would matter for all of us.

My hope is that we recognize the wise words of not a Talmud scholar, but a Chinese poet, Lu Xun, who said: “Hope is like a path in the countryside. At first there is no path, but as more and more people walk again and again, a path appears.” As we walk the path of tikkun olam and commit ourselves to the work to be done, may more paths appear that lead us to a world of justice and equity.

Ruth Messinger is the Global Ambassador for American Jewish World Service, an international human rights and development organization which she was privileged to lead from 1998-2016. She works now also as a social justice advocate and consultant with the Meyerson JCC and The Jewish Theological Seminary and has completed the development of a social justice curriculum for congregations for Melton Schools. She has three children, eight grandchildren and three great grandchildren.



Tikkun Olam and Ubudehe: A Shared Ethic

Jean-Claude Nkulikiyimfura and Shiri B. Sandler

Twenty-six years ago, during the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, 10,000 people were brutally murdered every day for 100 days. This tragedy was the result of 50 years of the politics of hatred and recurring massacres of the Tutsi. Between 1959 and 1973, hundreds of thousands of Tutsi were forced to flee Rwanda and take refuge in neighboring countries. When the genocide was finally halted in July 1994, the task confronting survivors and returning refugees was daunting. The country was in ruins and mutual distrust was rife. For Rwanda's survival, its new leadership chose a path of unity and reconciliation.

To come together and rebuild, the country looked to the old value systems that had once been the foundation of a strong nation. Rwanda began to adopt what it would now call its *homegrown solutions*, beliefs which Rwandans can trace back to the 14th century. These solutions have deep resonance with Jewish values based in *tikkun olam*. Mutually informed by support for the vulnerable and a resounding condemnation of inequity, *tikkun olam* and the Rwandan concept of *ubudehe* are both rooted in the notion of responsibility for one another. *Ubudehe* is based on the idea of solidarity, where the community is jointly responsible for lifting individuals out of poverty; it is a social contract that ensures the vulnerable in society are not abandoned, but rather cared for communally.

This shared ethic is why the Agahozo-Shalom Youth Village (ASYV) has been welcomed in Rwanda. ASYV was founded by Anne Heyman, a Jewish woman inspired by the practice of *tikkun ha'lev* and *tikkun olam* in Israeli youth villages. ASYV's mission is to empower orphaned and vulnerable Rwandan youth to build lives of dignity and contribute to a better world. A community of more than 500 young people, ASYV is as close as an institution can get to being a family. It provides the stability, love, education, and healing that its students would receive in an intact family environment. **Based in the commonalities between Rwandan and Jewish experience – both in experiencing genocide and in the values of *ubudehe/tikkun olam* – ASYV is a prime example of what *tikkun olam* looks like when successfully applied to the non-Jewish world.**

To thrive, it cannot take root in inhospitable soil; it must be welcome and adapt to its new environment.

Pivotal to building ASYV in Rwanda was matching its impact to Rwanda's needs. Rwandans were involved in leadership from the beginning, making the matching of Rwandan and Jewish values inherent to the idea of ASYV. One crucial notion that took root was the understanding that *tikkun olam* creates agents of change. Rwanda is a small nation where survivors and perpetrators of genocide must live side by side, and so the only way to move forward was through unity. A strong, altruistic body of youth dedicated to their community and country's well-being would be agents of that forward motion. At ASYV and around it, there was a belief that a Village community founded on principles of healing and community service would be an essential part of rebuilding Rwanda.

Like Yemin Orde, ASYV is comprised of caretakers and educators whose calling is to love and support their students. The role of these staff members differs greatly between Rwanda and Israel, however, with ASYV adapting the Israeli model to fit Rwanda's homegrown solutions. In Rwanda, when a child loses their parents, they become the responsibility of the community. This tradition existed long before the genocide; in Kinyarwanda (the language of Rwanda), the word for maternal aunt is linked to the word for mother, and the word for paternal uncle is linked to the word for father. It is traditional in Rwanda for these family members to take in their siblings' children if the children are orphaned. This tradition explains why Rwanda has worked to close orphanages, believing every child deserves to be raised in a family. At ASYV, this tradition has been adapted and formalized in live-in staff members known as family mamas. These women are pillars of the ASYV community, responsible for supervising the family homes where students live and providing emotional care and counseling. The majority of family mamas have been with ASYV since its founding, having raised multiple families of ASYV students. During the genocide, they lost husbands, children, and other family members, and they suffered horrific personal and communal violence. They come to ASYV both to heal and to be a part of their nation's healing, as they help the children of trauma find hope, believe in the future, and learn to support others.

Learning that they have enough self-worth to be able to help others is a central part of the ASYV student experience. The kids know virtually no Hebrew; they come to ASYV speaking any combination of Kinyarwanda, Kirundi, Swahili, French, and English. But when they meet a Jewish visitor, they say, "oh, do you know about *tikkun olam*"? Asked to consider how they could give back to the community, *tikkun olam* becomes part of students' daily life. Through developing and implementing original community service projects, they learn they have the power to make a positive difference for people

in need. It is significant for kids who were never taught they have inherent value to learn they can improve someone else's life. Ranging from the organization of clothing donations to the delivery of gender equity presentations to local schoolchildren, these *tikkun olam* projects strengthen ASYV students' sense of self-esteem and inspire them to become leaders in the effort to build a more compassionate future for Rwanda.

As the ASYV family mamas find their healing in raising generations of Rwanda's most disadvantaged youth, **perhaps *ubudehe* is how community and unity are created as one Rwandan helps another; perhaps *tikkun olam* is how the Jewish people reckon with a world that has inflicted generations of trauma upon them. In Rwandan hands, *tikkun olam* enables the transformation of a traumatized child into the resilient, dignified future of a unified Rwanda.**

Jean-Claude Nkulikiyimfura has been with the Agahozo-Shalom Youth Village since 2011 and served as its Executive Director since 2015. His passion lies in Rwanda's development and the belief that Rwanda's success will be achieved through educated, empowered, and resilient youth.

Shiri Sandler is the Managing Director of the Agahozo-Shalom Youth Village. She has worked extensively in education, programming, and memorialization in post-genocide communities.



A Reform Rabbi's Reflection on Strengthening Peoplehood Through *Tikkun Olam*: Start Locally and Collaborate

Ethan Prosnit

Confirmants walk around the classroom looking at signs of over fifty Jewish values. As they pass by the values taped on the walls, they are to select the top five that they deem important to living their own Jewish life. I have facilitated this lesson for the past seven years, and at this point, before it even begins, I can tell you what the most popular value will be -- *Tikkun Olam*, repairing the world. In contrast, in the past seven years, only two students out of over 200 have chosen *K'lal Yisrael*, Jewish Peoplehood.

As a Reform rabbi in a suburban congregation in the New York City area, we do a good job teaching our students and congregation about *Tikkun Olam*. Many of them know the mystical underpinnings of the term, have studied texts on whom to help and how to do so. They intuit fully the idea that working to make our world more complete is a tenet of their Jewish identity. However, our discussions and learning about the value of Jewish Peoplehood has not made as significant of an impression. We address the importance of Israel, we highlight different Jewish communities around the world, and we teach about our responsibility to Jews in need, but for some reason, these lessons do not resonate as strongly. The question then is why do my students (and likely others around the country) not feel a stronger connection to *K'lal Yisrael*?

One explanation I would propose is the tension between the universalism and particularism in our Reform Jewish identity. Our universalist tendencies stress the common values and behavior with our non-Jewish community, while our particularist teachings stress the uniqueness of our Jewish tradition. We talk about helping the stranger, widow, and orphan but do not necessarily connect it to the Jewish community. We take an active role in social justice, seeking to dismantle inequalities around the world but too often we ignore how this impacts Jews locally and worldwide. It is hard to find a balance between universalism and particularism and it is during times like our

Confirmation “values walk” that I see how our actions may skew more strongly to the universal.

To Build Peoplehood we need to do Tikkun Olam Locally

“I didn’t know there were Jews in our community that needed food, I knew in Israel and around the world but not here in New Jersey.” A Confirmation student shared this reflection with me after volunteering at Jewish Family Services (JFS) of Central New Jersey’s community garden. Her words struck me. This student has been a committed part of our learning community and volunteered at numerous events, and yet, she did not know that there were agencies in our own backyard helping Jews in need.

For her, and so many others, there is a disconnect between the Jewish values of *Tikkun Olam* and *K’lal Yisrael* because she never saw *Tikkun Olam* in those terms. A significant portion of our prayer experience, learning, and programming is largely centered around our own synagogue community and the Reform movement’s walls. We can build an even stronger understanding of Peoplehood by focusing our *Tikkun Olam* efforts on our local Jewish community and making it clear that the two are indelibly linked.

Partnering with JFS of Central New Jersey has been an impactful experience for my congregation as we have been able to build strong connections and meaningful relationships with other Jews of varying observances. Students have engaged with Holocaust survivors who are homebound. They have shopped and delivered food to Jewish seniors who were in need of their next meal. While volunteering at a Newark food pantry and supporting new refugee families in our town has been critically important work, through this partnership with JFS, our students now have a greater awareness of the need of Jews in our local community and their obligation to help. This has strengthened a sense of Peoplehood as relationships have fostered over time.

To build Peoplehood we need collaborate with other Jews to do Tikkun Olam

Our synagogue is proud of our history and commitment to repairing the world. Yet, at times, we are too siloed in this work. A benefit of this commitment to *Tikkun Olam* when done well is that it allows us to collaborate across the entire spectrum of the Jewish community. While Jews from differing streams may not always be able to pray side by side, we can participate in repairing the world together. *Tikkun Olam* programs that emphasize hands-on or deep interactions between community members strengthen the understanding of *K’lal Yisrael*. When there is a shared goal and a strong partnership, we build understanding and connections with each other. Dov Ben Shimon, Executive Vice President/CEO of the Jewish Federation of Greater MetroWest says, “Peoplehood is Jews

doing Jewish things Jewishly with other Jews.” Additional avenues of collaboration must be created so we can deepen our sense of obligation to one another.

Tikkun Olam is a value that can transform our world and make it more whole. Tikkun Olam can also lead to a stronger sense of wholeness among the Jewish people, a Jewish community that feels obligated to help those in need and in doing so, benefit one another. Tikkun Olam is a central and essential aspect of K’lal Yisrael elevating both to a new understanding and level. As a rabbi, I commit to making the connections between *Tikkun Olam* and *K’lal Yisrael* more explicit. Next year, on the Confirmation “values walk,” my hope is that my students see the interconnection between their commitment to repairing the world and the blessings it brings to the Jewish community as a whole.

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Tikkun Olam in a Pandemic and Beyond: Acting Together Globally

Lilach Shafir

In the midst of a global pandemic, social unrest, economic uncertainty and the climate crisis, many of us continue to vacillate between feeling angry, distraught and hopeful. The late Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel encouraged us to approach our lives with both “radical amazement and righteous indignation”—a prescription to recognize both the beauty and the brokenness in the world we inhabit. While there are many expressions of Jewish peoplehood, the practice of *tikkun olam*—repairing our broken world—provides a critical entry point for acting on this righteous indignation—within the Jewish community and beyond.

In my decade of work at American Jewish World Service (AJWS), I have come to understand that as we grapple with the massive challenges that exist in our world today, it isn’t enough to apply our hope and indignation inward, tackling the challenges in our own communities; we must look outward, recognizing that our actions affect people an ocean away, and vice versa. Taking global responsibility is necessary for the future of our planet and its inhabitants, and it’s an essential part of what it means to be a Jewish people in the 21st century.

It is also eminently clear to me that we cannot do this work alone. As we strive to build a better and more just world for everyone, we can be guided by two core facets of Jewish life that require us to work in tandem with others: partnership (*chevruta*) and humility (*anavah*). Together, these values enable us—as Jewish people and as citizens of this world—to advance justice for all people and bring about a more equitable world.

Modeling Partnership

For centuries, the core structure of Jewish learning has been to study with a partner—in *chevruta*—predicated on the notion that learning is an intrinsically social endeavor. Modern *chevruta* study is often decentralized, democratic and egalitarian. It often involves a room full of people—or these days, a Zoom gallery full of faces—who learn

not from an authority figure who provides the “right” answers, but with a variety of thinkers that each contribute their own unique experiences to increasing greater understanding.

How might we apply a model of *chevruta* to the work of *tikkun olam*? What does it look like for Jews to build partnerships that transcend continents, countries and cultures? Partnership is an essential framework for understanding the injustices in our world and for responding to them with integrity and purpose.

This belief is at the core of our work at AJWS. Inspired by our Jewish values, we support human rights advocates and social change movements in 18 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. And in doing so, we recognize the central role local communities play in solving the problems they experience. Just as in *chevruta* study, we do not see ourselves as the dominant authority with the “right answer.” We see ourselves as a partner. And we trust local advocates to develop and carry out their own solutions to build more just societies.

For example, in March 2020, when India suddenly announced a strict, severe national lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of people were left scrambling to protect themselves and their families, often with little information about the frightening new disease. My colleagues and I kept our ears to the ground to make sure people in rural areas—such as the village of Vangadhra in the Western State of Gujarat—were able to get the emergency support they needed. We learned about a 30-year-old woman named Shobhnaben, an elected leader in Vangadhra, who was educating her community about COVID prevention and training others in her village to spread this information in ways that they could relate to and trust. Instead of transplanting our own solutions with a U.S.-centered lens, we funded our long-trusted partners on the ground in India to support Shobhnaben in executing a plan that would meet the unique needs of her village.

Practicing Humility

Pirkei Avot (Ethics of Our Ancestors) teaches: “Do not seek greatness for yourself and do not covet honor... Who is honored? A person who honors others.” In our work at AJWS, we emphasize the importance of practicing humility in solving some of the world’s most enduring problems. Often, this means listening more than we speak, and building relationships with people whose lived experiences are different from ours.

We currently see these values at work with AJWS’s Global Justice Chavurah, a circle for learning and action we lead for rabbis and cantors who are advocating for justice. During the pandemic, we offer workshops for clergy to virtually “travel” to countries around

the world and learn from local activists pressing for their own visions of justice. These rabbis and cantors are experts in their own pulpits in the U.S., but they become students when listening to experts in different countries describe the complex challenges they face and how they are working to solve them.

Members of the Chavurah then apply the insights to their own advocacy toward the U.S. government. For example, in January 2021, 267 American rabbis and cantors from around the country signed a letter articulating a Jewish vision for progressive U.S. foreign policy, guided by what they learned directly from activists in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Partnership and Humility in Action

The combination of partnership and humility—in other words, acting in solidarity alongside others striving for change and letting those most affected by problems lead toward solutions—is a powerful vehicle for *tikkun olam*.

One of the most poignant examples I've experienced in my work at AJWS is our joining in the struggle for justice for the Rohingya people of Burma. This ethnic group has endured state-sponsored violence for decades—and in 2017, the discrimination and violence escalated to a full-fledged genocide, when the military began a vicious campaign of burning villages and brutally murdering people. Survivors of the genocide and Rohingya activists living in exile around the world are now leading a campaign for justice and accountability, and are calling for the safe, voluntary return of Rohingya people to Burma with equal rights as citizens. AJWS supports their struggle, led every step of the way by Rohingya leaders.

Heeding their call, we launched the Jewish Rohingya Justice Network, a coalition of 30 Jewish organizations from across the American Jewish religious and cultural spectrum, to act in solidarity with the Rohingya people. This group has mobilized thousands of Jewish leaders and allies to call on our government to support the Rohingya cause.

While this continues to be an uphill battle, this partnership of American Jews and Rohingya activists has contributed to incremental wins, from U.S. sanctions on military officials to increased foreign aid for the more than 700,000 refugees who fled the violence. And in 2019, with Rohingya survivors offering powerful testimony and advocacy and AJWS staff in attendance, the International Court of Justice at The Hague made a powerful first step toward restitution, by ordering Burma to stop the genocide.

Yasmin Ullah, a Rohingya activist and friend of AJWS, shared, “We are all seeking the same thing. We want accountability for the crimes against us, and we want to be treated with equality, dignity and respect.”

Heschel's words remain central to my daily work. I am full of righteous indignation when I examine human rights abuses around the world, from horrific genocide to the marginalization of people in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and yet, tireless activists fill me with radical amazement, both at how they persevere and the wins they achieve.

In fact, our history and our heritage have always called upon us to take action. But we know it is never enough for us to act alone. The future of Jewish peoplehood depends on us widening our circles of obligation and forging trusting, caring relationships with people around the world to honor our shared humanity and usher in a more just world for everyone.

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Responsible *Tikkun Olam*

Jacob Sztokman

For the past ten years, I have been engaged in the complex work we call *tikkun olam*, fixing our broken world. As Founding Director of Gabriel Project Mumbai, I have seen hundreds of Jewish volunteers, supporters, and friends come through the slums and remote tribal villages in India to observe or take part in our work to alleviate poverty, hunger, child labor, disease, and illiteracy among some of the most vulnerable communities in the world. They often leave joyful and inspired, and proud of our work as Jews. As an Orthodox Jew, I am deeply motivated by my Jewish heritage and ideals. In fact, I believe that *tikkun olam* is the most important aspect of Jewish culture by far. Our Torah instructs us dozens of times to help the most vulnerable in our society – orphans, widows, strangers, even overloaded donkeys. God, in the Torah, is a *tikkun olam* nudnik. The message is clear that in order for us to be worthy in this world, we need to find it in ourselves to act compassionately towards those who most need it. Indeed, the Pew report found that 70% of American Jews identified the concept of *tikkun olam* as being the most important part of their Judaism.

As a nation, this is more than just a tradition. It is our calling.

Unfortunately, however, the concept of *tikkun olam* can leave us in a painfully warped predicament. In order for us to heed the call to fix the world, we ironically need to have a broken world to fix. More than that, we need there to be people in the world who need to be broken. Which means, in order for us to engage in *tikkun olam*, the world needs to be built on inequality. It means that we are institutionalizing and indeed ‘spiritualizing’ a state of inequality in order for us to follow the dictates of our religion. We as Jews need to be in a position of power and influence while others must be in a position of helplessness and suffering. It is a power dynamic problem. Systemic inequality must exist in order for us to fulfill our mission, and we must be the ones holding power.

The reinforcement of systemic inequalities through *tikkun olam* language can be even more pronounced when we talk about Jewish peoplehood. Although I fully embrace the idea that compassion and care are our peoplehood mission, I have concerns about it when our work becomes more important for our *own* identity than for the lives of

the people we are serving. When we emphasize that *tikkun olam* is part of our Jewish collective identity, we almost need to have people who are dependent on us. At times, in our earnest desire to be good in the world, we embrace knotty ideas about the differences between “us” and “them”, messages that can cause unnecessary pain to those we wish to help, ideas that reinforce inequality rather than alleviate it. If our mission requires people beneath us and worse off than us in order for us to know who we are, then we have a problem. We may find ourselves forming our identities on the backs of other people who are vulnerable and suffering.

How do we reconcile these two conflicting issues? That is, on the one hand, wanting to make a better world for all, while on the other hand, the actions of *tikkun olam* can make us patronizingly self-righteous as we unintentionally use other people’s life circumstances to boost our own sense of identity and worth as a people with a mission.

I have some thoughts on this.

Essentially, we have to find a way to help other people without thinking of them as **other** people. We have to see people as no different than ourselves. We have to recognize that we are not different or special or better. But if we happen to be in a position in which at a particular moment we are the giver of help and not the recipient of help, this is nothing more than a matter of luck and happenstance. We need to accept that we are all givers and all receivers in our lifetimes, we all have moments of abundance and moments of lack. We are all the same, separated by accidents of birth. If we are the vehicle for giving at a particular moment, we are lucky, and we should remember that always.

Moreover, the people we may be helping are not here to give us anything. God does not make his dictates conditional. If we happen to feel better about being Jewish because of participating in an act of *tikkun olam* that is nice, but it is tangential. We cannot be idealizing a world in which people are suffering, just because it gives us a little buzz. The impact of these events is not that we feel better. We should feel worse knowing that there is so much suffering. The only time we should feel better in the world is when the pain of systemic inequality ceases to exist.

In addition, I strongly recommend that we get rid of the concept of charity. Charity is a bad word and it will always mean that one person has power, money and influence over those who don’t. By contrast, when we think about philanthropy, we are thinking about how to do *tikkun olam* in a way that will be respectful of the dynamic.

But most importantly **as we increasingly value the tikkun olam mission we must remove the concept of “us” as the people that are doing tikkun olam and “them”, the beneficiaries of tikkun olam. We must work together to achieve equality on**

equal footing and with humility. This is a central ethos of Gabriel Project Mumbai which I am very proud of; working with local community members and Jews from around the world in an atmosphere of equality, mutual respect and collaboration.

We need to be inexcusably aware of this dynamic and humble in our work. We must make painstaking efforts to be modest and emphasize the fact that if we succeed in our work it is only beneficial in that we can learn from the successes and use them to do even more impactful work.

Ultimately, self-awareness about our own power and privilege is essential to any work we want to do in the world. If we are aware of our own place within the brokenness of the world, if we teach and study the concepts of systemic inequality and tackle the power dynamic problem instead of avoiding it, then we -all of us- can start to do the real work of repairing humanity.

Jacob Sztokman is the Founding Director of Gabriel Project Mumbai, a development organization providing nutrition, education, healthcare and economic empowerment to underserved urban slums and villages in India.

The Peoplehood Papers provide a platform for Jews to discuss their common agenda and key issues related to their collective identity. The journal appears three times a year, with each issue addressing a specific theme. The editors invite you to share your thoughts on the ideas and discussions in the Papers, as well as all matters pertinent to Jewish Peoplehood: publications@jpeoplehood.org.

Past issues can be accessed at www.jpeoplehood.org/library

American Jewish World Service (AJWS) is the leading Jewish organization working to fight poverty and pursue justice in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. By supporting hundreds of social change organizations in 18 countries, we respond to the most pressing issues of our time—from disasters to genocide to climate change.

Gabriel Project Mumbai (GPM) is a grassroots organization promoting holistic development and empowerment for marginalized communities in underserved villages and slums in India

JDC Entwine's mission is to catalyze the current generation of Jewish young adults to view global Jewish responsibility as core to their identity. Entwine is a network of 30,000+ young adults and offers a continuum of Jewish service, engagement, and leadership development opportunities.

OLAM is a network of 50+ Jewish and Israeli organizations working in the fields of global service, international development, and humanitarian aid. Inspired by Jewish values and committed to high ethical standards, OLAM convenes and mobilizes leaders and organizations to take meaningful action in support of the world's most vulnerable people.

Repair the World mobilizes Jews and their communities to take action to pursue a just world, igniting a lifelong commitment to service. Repair the World is both activating the broader field of Jewish service through national partnerships and campaigns and mobilizing tens of thousands of people each year in meaningful service and learning through direct programming.



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