

Tikkun Olam – Is It Enough?



For thousands of years Jews have been studying in pairs or in groups, respectfully debating each other, learning the stories and legal texts of Judaism, and investigating their past as a means for enriching their present. Tonight, we continue to engage in the millennia-old practice of exploring the written word as a means to connect with our tradition, open ourselves up to our inner selves, make sense of the world around us, and inspire us to action. Thank you for joining us on this journey.

*This evening's event is part of The Well's **CSI: Coffee. Study. Interpret.** series, in partnership with Moishe House Royal Oak and Motor City Moishe House, and is made possible in part by funds granted by The Covenant Foundation. The statements made and the views expressed, however, are solely the responsibility of The Well.*

Norah: “There’s this part of Judaism that I like. Tikkun olam. It said that the world is broken into pieces and everyone has to find them and put them back together.”

Nick: “Maybe we don’t have to find it. Maybe we are the pieces.”

-Nick & Norah’s Infinite Playlist, 2008



Tikkun Olam – The Origin Story

One of (if not the) earliest mention of “Tikkun Olam” in our tradition comes in the Aleinu prayer (believed to be composed in the 3rd Century; others say as early as the time of the prophet Joshua):

על כן נקוה לך יי אלוהינו, לראות מהרה בתפארת
עזך, להעביר גלולים מן הארץ להאילים כרות
יכרתון. **לתקן עולם במלכות שדי**, וכל בני בשר
יקראו בשמך. להפנות אליך כל רשעי ארץ. יכירו
וידעו כל יושבי תבל, כי לך תכרע כל בוך, תשבע כל
לשון...

Therefore we put our hope in You, Adonai our God,
that we may soon see Your might splendor, to
remove detestable idolatry from the earth, and false
gods will be utterly cut off, **to perfect the universe**
[I'taken olam] through the Almighty's sovereignty.
Then all humanity will call upon Your Name, to turn
all the earth's wicked toward You. All the world's
inhabitants will recognize and know that to You
every knee should bend, every tongue should swear.

Discussion Questions:

*Who's doing the repairing/perfecting of the world
in this example?

*This paragraph of the Aleinu is left out of most
Reform / liberal Jewish prayer books – why do you
think that might be?

“Tikkun Olam” also appears multiple times in the Mishnah (our early legal code) in a legalistic context. For example:

Mishnah Gittin 4:6

אין פודין את השבויים יותר על כדי דמיהן מפני תקון העולם
ואין מבריחין את השבויין מפני תקון העולם רבן שמעון בן
גמליאל אומר מפני תקנת השבויין

Captives should not be redeemed for more than their value, **for the sake of tikkun olam**. Captives should not be helped to escape, **for the sake of tikkun olam**. Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel says [that the reason is] to prevent the ill-treatment of fellow captives.

Discussion Questions:

- *Based on this text, how would you define tikkun olam?
- *Is this definition different than others that you’ve seen?



We start to see “tikkun olam” shift in its meaning towards “repairing the world” in the writings of Rabbi Isaac Luria of Safed (1534-1572) – Kabbalah yo!

The Shattering of the Vessels

Rabbi Isaac Luria

<http://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/how-the-ari-created-a-myth-and-transformed-judaism>

At the beginning of time, God’s presence filled the universe. When God decided to bring this world into being, to make room for creation, He first drew in His breath, contracting Himself. From that contraction darkness was created. And when God said, “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3), the light that came into being filled the darkness, and ten holy vessels came forth, each filled with primordial light.

In this way God sent forth those ten vessels, like a fleet of ships, each carrying its cargo of light. Had they all arrived intact, the world would have been perfect. But the vessels were too fragile to contain such a powerful, divine light. They broke open, split asunder, and all the holy sparks were scattered like sand, like seeds, like stars. Those sparks fell everywhere, but more fell on the Holy Land than anywhere else.

That is why we were created — to gather the sparks, no matter where they are hidden. God created the world so that the descendants of Jacob could raise up the holy sparks. That is why there have been so many exiles — to release the holy sparks from the servitude of captivity. In this way the Jewish people will sift all the holy sparks from the four corners of the earth.

And when enough holy sparks have been gathered, the broken vessels will be restored, and tikkun olam, the repair of the world, awaited so long, will finally be complete. Therefore it should be the aim of everyone to raise these sparks from wherever they are imprisoned and to elevate them to holiness by the power of their soul.

Discussion Questions (oh snap that was mystical!):

- *The text above is complicated – what are you taking away from it?
- *What are you still struggling to understand?
- *In Rabbi Luria’s vision, what is tikkun olam?



Did you know that considering Tikkun Olam a central principle of Judaism is a relatively new development?

The Place of Tikkun Olam in American Jewish Life

Professor Jonathan Krasner 11/1/14

<http://jcpa.org/article/place-tikkun-olam-american-jewish-life1/>

The extent of the meteoric ascent of tikkun olam can be traced by using the Google Books N-Gram Viewer. Google Ngram is a phrase usage graphing tool; it charts the usage of letter combinations (e.g., words and phrases) year after year, utilizing Google's extensive database of over 500 billion words from nearly 5.2 million digitized books published between 1500 and 2008. A database search (see: Chart 1) found no matches for the terms "tikkun olam," "tikun olam," "tikkun ha'olam," and "tikkun ha-olam" prior to 1946. In fact, they barely registered before 1970. After 1980, however, the incidence of "tikkun olam" grew steadily until 1992, when the increase in rate of frequency jumped even more dramatically before reaching a plateau in 2002.



Discussion Questions:

- *Are you surprised to learn that tikkun olam, while ancient, is actually relatively new as a central Jewish concept?
- *What are some other core teachings / concepts you perceive as being central to Judaism?

Is there a disconnect between the contemporary understanding of Tikkun Olam and traditional Jewish practice? Does one require the other?

Rabbi Eric Yoffie (1947-present)

(Former head of the Reform Movement)

“Social justice, in short, is required by our religious texts and is inseparable from our religious mission. There is no such thing as a morality that is selectively indignant — that looks within but fails to look without. And Judaism without ethics, both personal and societal, is a contradiction in terms.

Do we need to study Torah, embrace Jewish ritual and observe Shabbat? Absolutely, although Reform, Conservative and Orthodox Jews will interpret these obligations differently. The work of social justice, absent text study and ritual practice as a foundation, is inauthentic and will not sustain itself. Indeed, I have found that the work of "tikkun olam," for all its rewards, is lonely and discouraging work, and only by absorbing the light of the Shabbat candles and by studying and worshiping with a strong, dynamic Jewish community can I immunize myself against the cynicism and alienation that surround me.”

Discussion questions:

*Do you agree with Rabbi Yoffie’s assessment that the work of tikkun olam is lonely and discouraging?

*Are you convinced by his argument that traditional practice / being actively part of community is an essential component to doing the work authentically?

Please engage with the following two selections: First, excerpts from Rabbi Aaron Starr's (Congregation Shaarey Zedek, Southfield) high holiday sermon from this year. Then, the local Detroit chapter of IfNotNow's response to Rabbi Starr's sermon.

Selections from:

"Time to say Kaddish for tikkun olam"

<http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/time-to-say-kaddish-for-tikkun-olam/>

... I would like to suggest that perhaps it is *tikkun olam* itself that is destroying the Jewish community. Perhaps it is time to say *Kaddish* for *tikkun olam*...

... Rabbi Gerald Serotta added that the push to focus on *tikkun olam* was a "radical return to an understanding of Jewish wholeness which denies distinctions between Jewish and non-Jewish issues, and which seeks to bring Torah and Jewish learning to even greater application in the world." In other words, during the post-1960s era in which we American Jews experienced much less anti-Semitism and in which we find ourselves quite welcomed and successful on so many levels, *Tikkun Olam* sought intentionally to downplay both Jewish ritual practice and Jewish particularism in order to affect more global change.

As such, *tikkun olam* has devolved today to mean anything that fits into the categories of community service or helping the underdog. The focus on universalism has led to stripping the word "mitzvah" of any sense of divine obligation, and instead understands "*mitzvot*" to mean, simply, "good deeds." And, to me, most problematic of all, the teaching of *tikkun olam* as it has evolved over the last several decades places greater emphasis on valuing the global human community over caring for our fellow Jews and for the continuity of Judaism...

Please hear me clearly: repairing the world is an essential part of Judaism. Nevertheless, my fear, and history is coming to agree with me, that by dismissing the power of Jewish ritual observance and by undermining Jewish particularism, the universalistic commitment to *tikkun olam* by many Jews today could be, I believe, the downfall of American Jewry...

... [H]ow could Jews not put their love for the People Israel and the State of Israel above else, I wondered... But then I realized mine is the voice of the Holocaust Survivor. Mine is the voice of one who escaped czarist Russia. Or, perhaps, more to the point, the voice that screams out, "Protect Israel at all costs," is the same one that sees an existential threat against Israel and against the Jewish people wherever I turn. That voice, my voice, is the one that wants to shout out "Jewish family comes first..."

Selections from:
An Open Letter to Our Detroit Jewish Community

<https://medium.com/ifnotnoworg/an-open-letter-to-our-detroit-jewish-community-53964c503cea#.je3wnmsxs>

... Rabbi Hillel continues: ***“Uch’she ani l’atzmi, ma ani: If I am only for myself, what am I?”***, reminding us that we are all less human, less whole, when we ignore prejudice and violence against other people. We all have felt this brokenness. We feel it when our hearts harden to the pain of another community because we believe they have caused us pain. We feel it when we become cynical in Jewish spaces that used to bring us joy and meaning, because they no longer seem to represent our values...

... We challenge our community leaders to recognize that our generation’s declining participation in Jewish institutions is not a reflection of disinterest in Jewish values and ritual; rather it is a response to Rabbi Starr’s very sentiment. We cannot continue to participate in a Judaism that forces us to compromise our progressive and universal values, or allow its leaders to speak on our behalf. So to those of you who felt hurt, excluded, or misrepresented by these words — we hear you and we are here for you...

Discussion Questions:

- *What seems to be the central concern Rabbi Starr is addressing in his sermon?
- *Should Jews have some sort of obligation to fellow Jews before others?
- *Are there moments when you’ve felt your heart harden to the pain of others?
- *How do / should / can we reconcile universalistic values with a faith tradition that has historically preached particularism?

End Note:

Tikkun Olam in Pop Culture, Business and Politics

In an email interview with JTA, [drummer Max] Weinberg [of the E Street Band] said he is "certainly pleased if people respond to my musical offerings" and that his drumming "was my way of living a life of tikkun olam."

– JTA, 3/27/12

"Like the Israelites who Moses led out of slavery long ago, it is up to us to never lose faith in the better day that lies ahead," he stated, adding that "together, we can continue the hard but awesome work of *tikkun olam*, and do our part to repair the world."

– President Barack Obama, 4/3/15

"That's what happens when we're true to our values. It's not just good for us, but it brings the community together. Tikkun Olam -- it brings the community together and it helps repair the world. It bridges differences that once looked unbridgeable. It creates a future for our children that once seemed unattainable. This congregation -- Jewish American life is a testimony to the capacity to make our values live. But it requires courage. It requires strength. It requires that we speak the truth not just when it's easy, but when it's hard."

– President Barack Obama, 5/22/15

The potential for the U.S. marijuana market is so big, that companies from other countries want in. Israel wants in on the action in New York. Marijuana is illegal in the country, but in a twist, the country is a world leader on its research into the medical uses of marijuana. Tikun [Olam](#), which means 'healing the world' in Hebrew, is the only large-scale industrial producer of cannabis in Israel and operates under a license from the Israel Ministry of [Health](#). Tikun Olam announced that it was partnering with Compassionate Care Center of New York and applying to be a Registered Organization under New York's Compassionate Care Act.

– Forbes, 6/18/15

"This is about *tikkun olam*," Bill Clinton said at the Century Village at Pembroke Pines. "We have bridges in our country. We have to repair them."

– Miami Herald, 10/23/16