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Repairing the World, Then and Now

There's a joke that an American Jewish tourist shows up in Israel and asks her guide, "So, how do you say 'Tikkun Olam' in Hebrew?" The phrase Tikkun Olam—Hebrew for Repairing the World—has become part of our contemporary Jewish vocabulary and we know that today it commonly means social action motivated by Jewish values of justice and compassion. Almost every synagogue has a "Tikkun Olam" committee or touts the word on its website. The phrase has moved beyond the Jewish community to such an extent that I was astonished to hear a clip of none other than Mr. Fred Rogers urging people of all ages to participate in Tikkun Olam, healing the world. Like the old slogan for Levy's Rye bread, it seems that you "don't have to be Jewish" to embrace the concept of Tikkun Olam.

But the meaning of Tikkun Olam is really much deeper than a catch-phrase for all good works. Since the second day of Rosh Hashanah last year, when Prof. Sarah Tauber and I had a dialogue about Tikkun Olam, I've been studying and teaching about the subject at PCS and other venues, for both Jewish and general groups. In the process, I've learned that Tikkun Olam, to heal or repair the world, is a concept that has transformed and gotten new meanings over the centuries. Every time the Jewish community faced down destruction, we responded with a new approach to repair. In the process, we enlarged our idea of "the world," and who could participate in the healing. There are three main phases in the transformation of Tikkun Olam, from the early rabbis to to the Kabbalah to the 20th century. By diving deep into the meanings of Tikkun Olam over the centuries, my own practice has been enriched, and this morning I would like to share some of what I have learned with you. (If you want to go into more depth and learn the sources firsthand, please drop in on our Shabbat noon study group for some lively discussions.)

The first meaning of Tikkun Olam emerged two thousand years ago, on the foundations of social justice in the prophets. It was a time after a breakage, the destruction of the Temple and Jewish sovereignty by the Romans. Our Sages responded to that destruction by rebuilding their world with law. In the Mishnah, the sages created what they thought was an ideal system of law based on the Torah. But almost immediately, they acknowledged that no system is perfect, and that like any complicated machinery, the laws of society need constant tweaking.

The rabbis couldn't tolerate situations where vulnerable people languished because others exploited the system to their own benefit. For example, they couldn't condone a situation in which a man could revoke his divorce and leave his wife uncertain of her status, or a slave was only halfway freed and thus unable to marry and have a family. They didn't accept it when the rich stopped loaning to the poor because the Sabbatical year with its remission of debts was at hand. The Sabbatical year was one of the most beautiful visions in the Torah, but if the poor were unable to get a loan, it wasn't working.

So the early rabbis set out to fix those situations of uncertainty and unfairness, even going so far as to change laws from the Torah. They weren't looking for a Utopia, and their methods were more evolution than revolution. They called their approach Tikkun Ha-Olam, meaning an *adjustment* to society, a small but crucial repair of their world.

What I take from this early version of Tikkun Olam is how much our sages cared about people who were being abused by their *own* rabbinic legal system. A person didn't have to be powerful to deserve a chance at fruitfulness and flourishing. When people were stuck in situations of toxic uncertainty, our early rabbis sprang into action, even if that meant changing their own rulings or even upending a Torah law in the process. They knew that as long as some were vulnerable, the whole system was off-kilter, and eventually the more fortunate and privileged would suffer, too. Fixing and recalibrating the system would be good for everyone.

I see so much of our current world reflected in their concerns.

Many people in our own society are living in uncertainty, anxiety, and insecurity. Immigrants and refugees, the poor, minorities, are the most impacted. But have no doubt, when some suffer from uncertainty and unfairness, eventually all of us will be impacted. What the Sages version of Tikkun Ha-Olam says to me is that as long our laws and society aren't working for the weak and those on the borders and margins, they aren't really working for any of us. Their ancient activism calls on us do our part to work for a better society here and now, in our democracy, civil society, and faith communities.

Phase Two of Tikkun Olam came about in the Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism. Fast forward several centuries to when the Ari Hakadosh, the Holy Lion, Rabbi Isaac Luria, reinvented Tikkun Olam anew. It was again a time after destruction, the exile of the Jews from Spain, where Jewish culture had flourished for a millennium. In his mystical imagination, the Ari beheld a version of the big bang—back in the 16th century!

The Ari envisioned the creation of the universe as taking place inside the vastness of God, in a tiny space that God vacated (as much as that's possible) to make room for everything else. He saw that when God sent some of the purest divine light back into that empty-ish space, the vessels designed to hold the divine light gave way, causing a cosmic rupture called *Shevirat Hakelim*, the breaking of the vessels.

The very creation of our physical universe was thus a process of breakage. But sparks of divine light are scattered everywhere in the material world, like drops of oil cling to shards of a broken jug. Fundamentally, the Ari was saying that physical existence itself is imperfect and that we are God's partners in making it whole through our spiritual practices. Buoyed by his vision, the exiles from Spain gained hope that their scattering and loss would give them the opportunity to gather and uplift more divine light and contribute to the redemption of the world. Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, once told me in an interview that while he didn't literally believe in the Ari's teachings, he found them,

“the most compelling metaphor” to describe the origins of our role as partners with the divine in healing our world.

From the Kabbalists, I learn a new dimension of Tikkun Olam. Specifically, that brokenness is intrinsic to creation. If the world were perfect it would be in stasis, not even exist, and certainly not grow. Even in the dark and difficult parts of life—*especially* in those places—we can find sparks of divine light.

Or as Rabbi Menachem Azariah of Fano said in the 16th century, just as seeds must break open, decompose and change in order to grow, so must the divine light be actualized by breaking open. I think Leonard Cohen was influenced by Lurianic Kabbalah when he wrote his famous song lyrics: “Ring the bells that still can ring, Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything, That's how the light gets in...” The second iteration of Tikkun Olam is both cosmic and personal.

Now we come to the third phase of Tikkun Olam, its meaning today. In the 20th century, Jews faced the greatest destruction of our history, the Holocaust.

And so we had to seek the most expansive and inclusive notion of Tikkun Olam. No longer would Tikkun Olam be something for elites: for sages to enact or mystics to contemplate. Twentieth century Jewish philosophers and theologians transformed our understanding of Tikkun Olam into a modern term for social action and social justice, and empowered *all of us* to do it. Feeding the hungry, cleaning a nature preserve, or marching in a civil rights protest are now all described as actions of Tikkun Olam. So are actions of building a just nation in Israel (Tikkun Olam was a favored term of early Zionist thinkers), and a righteous society wherever we may live.

Some say that the phrase Tikkun Olam has been stretched too thin and is too far removed from its original meanings, although as you can see the term already has a history of radical change. And it encompasses the spirit of our times so well. Maybe that's because our modern idea of Tikkun Olam is deeply rooted in the original laws and values of the Torah, which emphasize the rights of widows, orphans, and strangers, as well as the exhortations of the prophets about social justice and righteousness.

As the prophet Micah said, “What does Adonai require of us? Only to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”

Why is it that doing bad makes news, but we have to go looking for the people who do good and make repairs? I am inspired by Tikkun Olam heroes who dedicate their lives to bettering the world, who devote their resources and energy to justice, the environment, or peacemaking. Today’s social media valorizes “influencers” who make people aspire to their lifestyles and looks or possessions. My Tikkun Olam Heroes give me (hashtag): #mitzvahaspirations ! I’d love to hear about yours.

What I learn from this third and contemporary phase of Tikkun Olam is that it is the original version of “think globally, act locally.” The risk of labeling our actions “Tikkun Olam,” repairing *the world*, is that we can easily become paralyzed by the scope of the task. Our phones are sending us a constant stream of messages of what’s gone wrong today, and we can’t imagine our small deeds will make a difference on a global scale. Jewish tradition says that they do. Because *ha-Olam*, “the world,” is also here and now, right before us, *our* world.

Everything is inter-connected and we have no idea of the ripple effects created by every word and action.

As our sages said in Pirke Avot, “It is not up to you to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.” Or as Maimonides taught in his laws of Teshuvah, repentance: At a moment of choice imagine the whole world is balanced between good and bad, and your small action can tip the scales.

By diving into the wellsprings of our people’s wisdom through the ages, I have gained a much deeper appreciation of Tikkun Olam. It comes from a typical Jewish stance of activism and engagement, of partnership with the divine. From our Sages, I am called upon to continually repair the system. From the Kabbalists, I am challenged to find the sparks of light in the darkness. And from the modern mitzvah heroes, I’m encouraged to, well: “Just Do It.”

“For my sake the world was created.” For OUR sake the world was created. May we all, together, inscribe a good story in the book of life in 5779. Amen.

Bonus:

Here is the Study Sheet from our Torah Study and Discussion on the Second Day of Rosh Hashanah, “Rabbi Simcha Bunem’s Favorite Sayings”:

www.sefaria.org/sheets/129984