



[June 07](#)

The History of "Tikkun Olam"

Jill Jacobs

There may be no other term that is simultaneously as beloved and as reviled in Jewish progressive circles as the phrase "*tikkun olam*." For some people, this concept, generally translated as "repairing the world," offers the motivation for involvement in social justice work; for others, the term has become so overused and so little understood as to be meaningless.

I first encountered the term *tikkun olam* as a teenager active in United Synagogue Youth, whose community service programs are labeled "Social Action Tikkun Olam" or "SATO" in teen lingo. While I knew that Jews also involved themselves in political action, the "*tikkun olam*" projects of my youth primarily involved staffing soup kitchens on Christmas day and collecting clothing and cans of food for the poor. In college, I met self-identified secular Jews, for whom Judaism equaled *tikkun olam*, which equaled radical politics. In rabbinical school, I struggled to understand difficult mystical texts that viewed *tikkun* as the process of restoring a complex divine unity.

As *tikkun olam* has increasingly become the "in" Jewish thing, I have heard the term from the mouths of Bill Clinton and Cornel West, and have seen *tikkun olam* used to describe efforts as diverse as teaching Torah, volunteering for social service agencies, raising money for Israel, and supporting the creation of a Palestinian state. I have come across puzzling references to the "prophetic value of *tikkun olam*" or "the commandment of *tikkun olam*." As a post-biblical term, *tikkun olam* neither appears in a prophetic book nor constitutes one of the *mitzvot*. However, as this concept has come to be equated both with a general call to justice, and with specific philanthropic and volunteer activities, the definition of *tikkun olam* has been merged with those of *tzedakah* (financial support of the poor), *g'milut hasadim* (acts of loving kindness), and *tzedek* (justice).

As the meaning of the term *tikkun olam* has expanded to apply to virtually any action or belief that the user thinks is beneficial to the world, some Jewish social justice activists and thinkers have moved away from using the term at all. Complaining about the equation of Judaism with liberal politics in an essay titled "Repairing Tikkun Olam" [Judaism 50:4], Arnold Jacob Wolf comments, "All this begins, I believe, with distorting *tikkun olam*. A teaching about compromise, sharpening, trimming and humanizing rabbinic law, a mystical doctrine about putting God's world back together again, this strange and half-understood notion becomes a huge umbrella under which our petty moral concerns and political panaceas can come in out of the rain."

Rather than throw out the term *tikkun olam* altogether, or putting it on a twenty-year hiatus as others have suggested, I propose weaving together the four primary definitions of *tikkun olam* present in Jewish history: the anticipation of the divine kingdom in the *Aleynu* prayer; the *midrashic* call to preserve the physical world; the rabbinic desire to sustain the social order; and the Lurianic belief in our power to restore divine perfection. This definition will occupy a space between a limited definition of "*tikkun olam*" as relating only to a specific theology or legal process and an expansive definition that equates "*tikkun olam*" with any type of social action or social justice work.

The History of the Term

The term *tikkun olam* may have originated as early as the second century CE, and its popularity as a religious concept has waxed and waned in the centuries that have followed. This phrase is fascinating both in its endurance and in its capacity to change meanings according to the needs of the hour. Unlike many other well-known Jewish concepts, such as "*shalom*," "*Shabbat*," or "*tzedek*," the term "*tikkuntikkun olam*" does not appear in the Bible and appears only in a few discreet instances in the Talmud. Still, this term has, for many, become a de facto pillar of Judaism.

The words "*tikkun olam*" themselves defy easy translation. The Hebrew verb "*t-k-n*" is generally translated as "to fix," but can also mean "to establish." As we will see, this word takes on more specific connotations in particular contexts. The word "*olam*," usually rendered as "world," also signifies eternity, especially in biblical and other very early texts. Thus, the word "*l'olam*," common in biblical, liturgical, and modern Hebrew, means "forever" (for an eternity). Even when referring to the physical world, the term "*olam*" also carries with it a sense of permanence. To these complications, we can add the question of which particular "world" any given use of the term "*tikkun olam*" might signify. In some cases, the term refers to the physical world, in others to the societal order, and in still others to the dream of a fully realized divine manifestation. All of these questions make the phrase "*tikkun olam*" both difficult to understand and also richer in its complexity.

Aleynu: Establishing the Divine Kingdom

The term "*tikkun olam*" appears first in the *Aleynu* prayer, which may have been written as early as the second century. Originally part of the Rosh Hashanah liturgy, this prayer now concludes every Jewish prayer service. The move, probably made around the thirteenth century, from the once-a-year appearance of this prayer to its current thrice daily recitation speaks to the resonance of this composition for generations of Jews.

The first section of the *Aleynu* prayer speaks of the greatness of God and of the particular relationship between God and the Jewish people. The second section introduces the promise that divine sovereignty will eventually encompass the entire world. Within the second part of the prayer, we find the line “*l'taken olam b'malchut shaddai*” “to establish/fix the world under the kingdom of God.”

To understand the meaning of the term “*l'taken olam*” here, we need to take a step back and to examine the context in which this line appears. As indicated, the second section of the *Aleynu* prayer focuses on the promise of God’s ultimate sovereignty. Immediately before introducing the concept of *tikkun olam*, the text pleads that “idolatry will be swept away, and false gods will be utterly destroyed.” Immediately following the promise of *tikkun olam*, the text speaks of a time “when all the people of the world will call out God’s name.” The triumph of divine sovereignty requires the elimination of any pockets of resistance to God’s exclusive rule.

To our contemporary pluralist ears, the rejection of other religions appears intolerant and proselytizing. Most contemporary Jews who extol the value of *tikkun olam* certainly do not understand this term as a mandate to impose worship of the Jewish God on all other peoples.

We may gain some consolation from understanding the *Aleynu* text as comparatively universalistic within the historical context. The biblical inspiration for this prayer is not the repeated injunction to wipe out idol worshipers and their altars, but rather, the comparatively radical promise, in Isaiah 56:7, that “[God] will bring [the other nations] to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be acceptable upon my altar, for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”

Such apologetics, however, go only so far. Indeed, the arrogance of the *Aleynu* prayer is one of the reasons that many communities, including the one in which I most frequently daven, do not recite this prayer out loud at all, and particularly reject the upbeat campy tune often assigned to the end of the prayer; some Reform and Reconstructionist communities have rewritten the text of the prayer. Still, if we put aside the specific issue of idol worship, or assume that most world religions do not practice “idol worship” as conceived by the Bible and early rabbis, we can learn from this prayer a sense that “fixing the world” means working toward the manifestation of divinity in every corner of the world. In our conception, this manifestation of divinity will not require the elimination of other means of religious worship, but rather the establishment of Godly qualities throughout the world.

In a comment on the line in question, David ben R. Yosef Aboudraham, a thirteenth-century Spanish liturgical scholar explains, “When the impurity is destroyed from the world, then the divine presence will return throughout the world, and the world will be repaired” [*Seder Tefillot Rosh Hashanah, Dibbur HaMathil “Al ken”*]. We can translate this idea of impurity into a modern context, and say that the achievement of *tikkun olam* will necessitate an end to all of the “impurities,” such as poverty and discrimination, that block the manifestation of the divine presence.

Midrash: Preserving the Physical World

A few *midrashim* (rabbinic elaborations on the biblical text) suggest a more literal understanding of “*tikkun olam*” as the physical repair or stabilization of the world. One such usage appears in *B'reishit Rabbah*, a collection of *midrashim* on the book of Genesis probably compiled around the fifth century CE. This particular *midrash* grapples with the question of why God does not proclaim “it was good” at the end of the second day of creation, as God does at the end of all other days of creation. The *midrash* assumes that this absence indicates that one or more of the phenomena created on the second day was, in fact, not good:

‘And God made the expanse, and it separated the water that was below the expanse from the water that was above the expanse. And it was so. God called the expanse ‘sky.’ And there was evening and there was morning, a second day.’ (Genesis 1:7-8) Why is it that ‘it was good’ is not written in connection with the second day?...Rabbi Chanina said, ‘Because on that day, a schism was created, as it is written, ‘let it divide the waters.’ R. Tavyomi said, ‘If because of a division made *l'taken olam* and to stabilize it, ‘it was good’ is not written in connection with that day, how much more so should this apply to a schism that leads to the confusion of the world.’ (*B'reishit Rabbah* 4:7)

What interests us here is not so much the rabbinic explanation of why God does not declare the creation of the heavens to be good, but rather Rabbi Chanina’s literalist use of the term “*l'taken olam*” “to fix the world.” According to this *midrash*, the world is “fixed” when it is physically viable, and not when it is spiritually or otherwise perfected as the *Aleynu* prayer or other texts that we will examine later would have it. Similarly, another *midrash*, also in *B'reishit Rabbah* explains that God created rain “*l'taken olam* and to stabilize it.”(13:16). As in the first text, this *midrash* uses the term “*l'taken olam* and to stabilize it” to refer only to the physical preservation of the world.

=====

Rabbinic Code: Sustaining the Social Order

Though the term appears earlier, “*tikkun olam*” only gains real currency within the Mishnah, the first attempt to codify Jewish oral law.

The term *tikkun ha'olam* appears in ten separate places in the Mishnah. In most of these instances, the term is employed in relation to problems in traditional divorce law. In Jewish law, a husband may divorce his wife by giving her a *get* (divorce document), either in person or by means of a messenger. As soon as the woman accepts this *get*, she is divorced and free to marry another man. There is no way for a woman unilaterally to divorce her husband.

Both ancient and contemporary rabbis have devoted a disproportionate amount of time and energy to laws of personal status – meaning

questions about who is Jewish and who is married or divorced. In the case of marriage and divorce, a primary concern is that a woman who is already married will have a child with another man. A child born of such an affair is considered to be a *mamzer* and is prohibited from marrying a Jew who is not also a *mamzer*. Though most often translated as “bastard,” the status of *mamzer* should be distinguished from the connotation of the English word “bastard,” which refers to a child born out of wedlock. Given the massive repercussions for a child born of an adulterous affair, the rabbis spend a great deal of time trying to ensure that there is no confusion about who is and is not married.

As the Mishnah tells it, men tend to change their minds about whether to divorce their wives. In a number of cases, the rabbis combat this male fickleness by closing legal loopholes “for the sake of *tikkun ha’olam*.” For example:

At first, a man [who had already sent his wife a *get* by means of a messenger] would set up a *beit din* (court) in a different place [from where the wife lived] and cancel the *get*. *Rabban Gamliel the elder established (hitkin)* that this should not be done, for the sake of *tikkun ha’olam*. (*Mishnah Gittin* 4:2)

In this example, a man sends his wife a *get*, changes his mind about the divorce, and sets up a legal court to annul the *get*. Soon afterwards, the woman receives the *getand*, not knowing that this *get* has already been cancelled, marries again. The children of this second marriage are considered *mamzerim*, and therefore unfit to marry anyone who is not also a *mamzer*. Alternatively, a legally-savvy woman might receive a *get*, recognize the possibility that this *get* might already have been cancelled, and refrain from marrying even though she is legally permitted to do so. Given the rabbinic emphasis on the obligation to marry and procreate, this latter possibility also causes serious discomfort. *Rabban Gamliel* therefore decrees that a man may no longer cancel a *get* by means of a *beit din*, lest confusion over the status of *gittin* lead to widespread unintentional adultery or fear of remarriage.

In this case, the term *mipnei tikkun ha’olam* – for the sake of the repair of the world – justifies forbidding a practice that, while technically legal, threatens to disrupt the system as a whole. There are several other similar cases in the Mishnah, including one in which, for the sake of *tikkun ha’olam*, a woman is allowed more to easily collect on her *ketubah*, which specifies the money and property that she brought into the marriage, (*Mishnah Gittin* 4:3), and another in which a man indentured to two masters is freed as soon as he has paid off one of the masters, in order that he can avoid the in-between status of being half free and half enslaved (4:5). There is even one case in which *Rabbi Hillel* offers a technical workaround to an explicit law in the Torah requiring Jews to make loans in the year leading up to the *sh’mitta*, or sabbatical year, when all debts are forgiven (*Mishnah Sh’vi’it* 10:3).

In all of these *mishnaic* cases, we might translate “*mipnei tikkun ha’olam*” as “for the sake of the preservation of the system as a whole.” Within the Mishnah, this phrase is invoked in response to situations in which a particular legal detail threatens to overturn an entire system. That is: *gittin* of uncertain status may lead to adulterous marriages or to unnecessary celibacy; allowing individuals to be half free and half enslaved will prevent some people from fulfilling the biblical mandate to marry and procreate; and ignoring the inherent challenges of debt-forgiveness may lead to a wholesale disregard for the institution of *sh’mitta*. By invoking the concept of *tikkun ha’olam*, the rabbis fix the flaw that endangers the stability of the system as a whole.

Preserving the current social order might sound like a politically conservative move. It is worth noting, however, that the majority of these rabbinic cases involve the protection of a person or set of people who typically found themselves toward the bottom of the social order. *Hillel*’s loan workaround primarily benefited the poor, whose survival depended on loans from the wealthy; forcing a master to free a half-slave allowed this slave to reenter society as a free (albeit deeply in debt) person able to start a family of his own; and clarifying a woman’s marital status permitted her to remarry and therefore to guarantee her own sustenance. These “*tikkun ha’olam*” fixes all ensure that those who are most vulnerable are able to live full lives, rather than be restrained by a system that favors the more powerful.

Lurianic Kabbalah: Restoring Divine Perfection

The most well-known use of the term *tikkun olam* comes from Lurianic Kabbalah, a sixteenth-century mystical school that revolved around *Rabbi Isaac Luria*. *Luria* described creation as a process by which God contracted the divine self in order to make room for the world. In the Lurianic creation story, God then emanated Godself into the world through ten *sefirot* – aspects of the divine presence. God contained these *sefirot* within vessels, but some of the vessels proved too weak to hold the more powerful of the *sefirot*. The vessels shattered, resulting in the mixture of divine light with the *kelipot*, or shells of the vessels themselves. This process resulted in the introduction of evil into the world.

Lurianic Kabbalah imagines that *Adam*, the first human being, could have redeemed the world and restored the divine light to its proper place. Through his sin, however, *Adam* lost the chance to achieve this repair, and the responsibility for restoring divine perfection fell to later generations. The attempt to free the divine emanation from the *kelipot* is known as *tikkun* (repair) and is achieved primarily through the performance of *mitzvot* (religious commandments), as well as through contemplation and study. Before performing *mitzvot*, the 16th century kabbalists often recited *kavvanot* (intentions) in which they stated their intention that this *mitzvah* would help to reunify parts of the divine being. The kabbalists also instituted certain new rituals, including the practice of praying or studying at midnight, and a *seder* for the holiday of Tu B’shevat, all intended to advance the process of *tikkun*.

The mystical notion of *tikkun* introduces into Jewish thought the idea that human actions can have an effect on the cosmos. Earlier biblical and rabbinic writings suggest that God demands certain behaviors, that human beings are rewarded or punished according to their behaviors, and even that God celebrates or mourns the appropriate or inappropriate actions of human beings. The innovation of *kabbalah* was the idea that God is not static, but changes in response to human behavior. In deciding whether or not to perform a *mitzvah*, Jews thus must consider not only the potential consequences for themselves and their communities, but also the effect that a given action may have

on the cosmos.

Given the current popular understanding of “*tikkun olam*” as describing ethical actions, it is important to emphasize the connection, within Lurianic Kabbalah, between *tikkun* and *halakhah* (Jewish law). It is no accident that Rabbi Joseph Caro, one of the key figures in the Lurianic circle, was the author not only of significant mystical texts, but also of the *Shulhan Arukh*, which became the most influential code of Jewish law. If the *tikkun* of the cosmos would result, in part, from precise adherence to *halakhah*, then an accurate guide to legal practice became even more necessary than ever.

One challenge of applying the kabbalistic notion of *tikkun* to contemporary ethical behavior emerges from the ambivalence among mystics about what the world will look like once *tikkun* has been achieved. Given the focus on reuniting the divine self, it is not clear from mystical texts what, if any, place human beings will have in the perfected universe. Even while advocating the practice of ethical commandments, such as *tzedakah* (gifts to the poor), the kabbalists maintained a focus on the effect of individual behavior on God. Lawrence Fine in *Physician of the Soul* explains:

Although there is reference [in Lurianic text] to the actual giving of charity, and we have seen that Luria himself was meticulous about this obligation, the focus of contemplative attention is devoted entirely to its theurgical consequences. As individuals who were encouraged to be ethically sensitive – in conformity with rabbinic values – the Lurianic kabbalists doubtlessly believed in the intrinsic significance of *tsedaqah*. But the unmistakable inference one draws is that such mundane concerns were only the external dimension of deeper mystical goals. And yet, of course, the latter could not be satisfied except by means of the actual physical act – accompanied by the appropriate meditative intentions.

The brilliance of the Lurianic model of *tikkun* is the suggestion that human behavior can have an effect – positive or negative – on the world as a whole. *mitzvot*, both ethical and ritual, have an impact even beyond the immediate effect of the action. At the same time, the emphasis on realizing divine perfection, rather than on improving the condition of humanity, complicates the application of the mystical concept of *tikkun* to contemporary social justice work.

A New Definition of *tikkun olam*

The term *tikkun olam* more or less disappeared from popular usage between the sixteenth century and the 1950s, when the concept reemerged as the new shorthand for “social justice.” The term gained currency in the 1970s and 1980s, as the progressive Jewish world began to emerge as an entity separate from the so-called “mainstream” organizational world. The New Jewish Agenda, a 1980s attempt to create an alternative Jewish voice, used the term *tikkun* as a rallying cry, as do contemporary local Jewish social justice organizations such as the Progressive Jewish Alliance in California and Jews United for Justice in Washington, DC. The term has gained traction in general American liberal circles through the magazine *tikkun*, a left-leaning publication founded in 1986.

As noted, however, I in its current incarnation, *tikkun olam* can refer to anything from a direct service project such as working in a soup kitchen or shelter, to political action, to philanthropy. While once regarded as the property of the left, the term is now widely used by mainstream groups such as synagogues, camps, schools, and federations, as well as by more rightwing groups wishing to cast their own political agendas within the framework of *tikkun olam*.

Some have suggested imposing a ban or hiatus on the term *tikkun olam*, given the general confusion about the meaning of this phrase. It is hard to ignore, though, the tremendous staying power of this word as shorthand for any social change or service work. Enough people – both inside and outside of the Jewish community – find the term *tikkun olam* extraordinarily compelling, even more so than other Hebrew terms such as *tzedek* or *g'milut chasadim*, which have not gained the same traction in the general discourse. The popularity of the term *tikkun olam*, and the general emphasis on its Lurianic, rather than rabbinic, roots may indicate a desire to place one’s own work in a larger context of influencing the greater world. In an individual’s search for the meaning of his or her own life, it may be more compelling to think of one’s every action as contributing to the repair of the cosmos, than to think of the same actions as simply accomplishing a small fix to a much larger problem.

Rather than reject the term altogether as meaningless, I suggest a re-imagining of *tikkun olam* that combines the four understandings of the term that we have seen in traditional text: 1) the *Aleynu*’s concept of *tikkun* as the destruction of any impurities that impede the full manifestation of the divine presence; 2) the literalist *midrashic* understanding of *tikkun olam* as the establishment of a sustainable world; 3) the rabbinic willingness to invoke *tikkun ha’olam* as a justification for changing untenable laws; and 4) the Lurianic belief that individual actions can affect the fate of the world as a whole.


- From the *Aleynu* conception, our understanding of *tikkun olam* will include an emphasis on the elimination of evil and the restoration of the world to a perfected divine state.
- The *midrashic* emphasis on the physical maintenance of creation reminds us of the need to work to preserve the world at a time when human behavior is having a negative impact on global temperatures, hurricane systems, and other natural phenomena.
- The rabbinic understanding of *tikkun ha’olam* as the creation of a workable social and religious system leads to a definition of *tikkun olam* as a mandate to correct the systems that make our own society dysfunctional.
- Finally, the Lurianic belief that individual actions can have a permanent effect on the cosmos offers hope that our efforts toward *tikkun* will succeed.

These four strands, though complementary in some ways, also remain in tension with one another in some other important ways. The *Aleynu* prayer has the potential to direct Jews toward an inward focus on connecting with God and on spreading divinity through less tangible means, such as prayer or basic kindness, rather than through attention to more concrete human needs. The *midrashic* focus on the physical maintenance of the world might lead to an emphasis only on issues that affect the physical world – such as global warming, deforestation, or the extinction of animal species—and a concurrent disregard for human problems, such as poverty and health concerns. The rabbinic attention to fixing loopholes that disrupt the legal and social system may limit the definition of *tikkun olam* to issues that are understood to interfere with the large-scale functioning of society to the exclusion of issues that primarily affect a certain segment of the population. The Lurianic emphasis on the restoration of divine wholeness easily leads to an otherworldly focus, and a minimization of one's sense of obligation toward the here and now.

By combining the major themes of these four strands, we come to a definition of *tikkun olam* as the process of fixing large societal problems, while maintaining a belief that our actions can have a positive effect on the greater human and divine world. When I think about my own *tikkun olam* commitments, I ask myself whether the work I am doing makes our society, as a whole function in a more positive way; whether the work allows even the most vulnerable members of society to live fully realized lives; and whether the work contributes to establishing a world in which the divine presence is more readily apparent. If we each ask these questions of ourselves, we can help to ensure that our work is worthy of being deemed *tikkun olam*.

Images: *Hardly a Sea*, *Guidance* and *A Shoulder in my Pocket* by [Robin Ross](#).

Rabbi Jill Jacobs is the Director of Education for the Jewish Funds for Justice (JFSJ), a national public foundation dedicated to mobilizing the resources of American Jews to combat the root causes of domestic social and economic injustice. She received rabbinic ordination and an MA in Talmud and Rabbinics from the Jewish Theological Seminary, where she was a Wexner Fellow. Her writings have appeared in a number of magazines, journals, and websites, including *Conservative Judaism*, *Tikkun*, *The Reconstructionist*, *Lilith*, *the Forward*, *Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, and *MyJewishLearning.com*. She is also a frequent contributor to [jspot](#), a Jewish blog dedicated to domestic social and economic justice issues.

 © 2006 by Zeek Magazine and the author. This article may not be distributed for commercial purposes without the express written permission of Zeek Magazine (zeek@zeek.net). Reprints and other distributions must contain this copyright notice.

This entry can be found online at: <http://www.zeek.net/706tohu/>