

***Tikkun olam*: A Jewish theology of 'repairing the world'**

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In Judaism, the process of *tikkun olam*, 'repairing the world', provides a theological imperative for social action. *Tikkun olam* is the fulcrum of my existence as a human being and as a Jew. For as long as I can remember, long before I knew the Hebrew term, I have believed that 'repair of the world' was the reason God placed me on earth. Born in the early years of the Second World War, I was conceived by my parents in their conscious fear that my father might not survive military service. At least I would be left behind to carry on the ideals and values of our family and the Jewish people.

From the earliest years of my life, I experienced *tikkun olam* in partnership with people of other faiths. In the Utah of my birth and early years, I was in continual dialogue with the Christians around me. In a Catholic nursery school I attended in Salt Lake City, a nun taught me to pray before sleep every night, concluding with the *Shema*, which she taught me in Hebrew. As a young Jew I was always proud of my membership in our tiny 'saving remnant', and the Christians around me reinforced the powerful, positive sense of Jewish identity and commitment instilled in me by my Reform synagogue.

The America of the forties and fifties was unquestionably a 'shattered urn'. Drills for nuclear war and the injustices of racial segregation befouled the air I breathed. But equality and compassion were core 'gut' values in the lives of my clinical psychologist father and social worker mother. In isolationist, racially segregated 'Bible Belt' Texas state schools, I grew up an impassioned egalitarian on race and an advocate of the United Nations. The Christians around me honoured both my social activism and my religious Jewish devotion. In Black churches throughout North Texas I preached sermons as a teenage Jew championing racial equality. From worship in Black churches I grew in my own Jewish spirituality and in my aspiration of rabbinic calling, devoted to *tikkun olam* and to the teaching of *Torah*. One summer I represented my synagogue youth region as a participant in the United Christian Youth Movement. In partnership with the devout black and white Christians I met there I led sit-ins to break the racial segregation of the Dallas of those years.

The world around me was indeed a 'shattered urn'. Yet, working in partnership with the Christians around me, I acquired the faith

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that we really could repair it, piece by piece, peace by peace. Today, whenever members of my congregation question my indestructible optimism, I cite the inspiring experiences of a lifetime of religiously based social activism. Who could imagine fifty years ago that we might overturn racial segregation in the American South? Who could envision fifty years ago driving a car from Paris to Berlin, crossing the German border without even a passport check, with only a sign welcoming us to Germany?

Who predicted fifty years ago that the world's two most intractable religious adversaries might become the closest of allies in religious dialogue and social action? The contemporary Christian-Jewish dialogue and partnership exemplifies the potentiality of human beings, based on our common faith in the same God, to put aside the mutual recriminations and hatreds of the past, and to build mutual respect, peaceful collaboration, and even loving friendships among us. As we have repaired the relationships between Christianity and Judaism, as we have erected new bridges between Christians and Jews, we have participated in *tikkun olam*. Piece by piece, peace by peace, we have exemplified restoration of God's unity reflected in the world we share. Children of the same God, created equal in God's image, we can repair the world, drawing strength from our traditional resources of love and compassion.

Creation in God's image, found in Genesis, is the foundation of Jewish ethics.¹ The text says: all human beings are created in the image of God – we are all God's children. We are all descended from Adam created in the image of God. No one human being can intrinsically be better than another. In fact, the Mishnah says that God created humankind from a single ancestor 'for the sake of peace, so that one person should not say to his or her fellow, "My father is better than yours."' ²

The creation of all human beings in the likeness of God excludes no one. A deep understanding of this principle is at the cutting edge of our local and global condition at this time. It is not difficult to love a pleasant neighbour. It is more difficult to see our kinship with people who may be considered as our enemies. This, for instance, was why the Israeli human rights body, dealing with Palestinian human rights, named itself '*Be'tselem*', Likeness (of God). Similarly, two early rabbis, Hillel³ and Meir,⁴ maintain that one should love all humankind.

This further leads to the notion of our human equality, which is expressed in Leviticus 19.18 with the command, 'Love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD'. The surrounding verses qualify this commandment: they prohibit unfair dealing and defrauding even of the defenceless and forbid vengeance and the bearing of a grudge.

The far-reaching ethical implications of 'Love your neighbour as yourself' have been discussed by rabbis throughout the history of Jewish thought. Akiva declared 'Love your neighbour as yourself' the most important principle of the Torah.

But in order to understand the significance of this principle, we ought to look at the beginning of the chapter. Leviticus 19 begins with 'You shall be holy as I am holy'. The moral behaviours that are delineated establish one's holiness in a direct link to God's holiness.

How are we, in this present age, to understand the notion of 'love your neighbour as yourself'? In modern times, as Borowitz points out, the idea of what is the Jew's neighbour has evolved to include all humanity. The understanding of what 'love your neighbour' means, has also, correspondingly, been universalized.⁵ Samson Raphael Hirsch makes the love of all humankind a condition for being a true Israelite.⁶ Hermann Cohen considers it the necessary and unique concomitant of Jewish monotheism.⁷ Leo Baeck writes: 'In Judaism neighbour is inseparable from man . . . there is no "man" without "fellowman", no faith in God without faith in neighbour.'⁸ Buber posits the I-Thou relationship which entails the love of neighbour as a cornerstone of his philosophy and goes so far as to hold that it is through these interpersonal relationships that God is encountered.⁹ Concern for the non-Jew is understood to be part of the Jewish goal of promoting peace. From this commitment a whole range of moral responsibilities vis-à-vis gentiles rests upon Jews.

In fact, creation in God's image underscores the sanctity and dignity of every individual, for all of God's creatures, not just neighbours, but even strangers, and enemies. As Numbers declares: 'One law and one ordinance shall be both for you and for the stranger that sojourns with you.'¹⁰ The stranger who sojourns with you must be treated as an equal. This should mean no more discrimination, prejudice, or bigotry against the stranger, against the person different from you. Why must the stranger be treated as an equal? Because the stranger is also created in the image of God. This is a remarkable and profound idea, but even more profound is the fact that we know that we are created in the image of God. Knowing this and accepting it, creates two basic theological and political concepts. First, we are required to adhere to the idea that all humankind is equal. Second, we are compared to God, an image of God, and as a result, we are required to compare ourselves to an image of perfection.

This is a rather difficult comparison for us to live up to. But it provides tremendous incentive to imitate God's attributes, according to Martin Buber.¹¹ This forces us to strive to function in God's image, to perfect our souls and to walk in God's ways. What are the ways of God? As proclaimed to Moses – to be 'merciful, gracious, long-suffering, abundant in lovingkindness and faithfulness'. Moses was not permitted to actually see God's 'face', but he did learn God's

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'ways'. Indeed, the concept of *imitatio Dei* – imitating God's attributes of kindness and mercy – lies at the heart of both Judaism and Christianity.

Commanded to love both God and stranger, we might sometimes experience God in our neighbour, someone near to us yet far. We might also see God as the Stranger, someone unlike us, distant, yet close at hand – here yet not here, invisible, elusive, alien – 'wholly other' – in our world yet not of it – and to be loved no less for that.

Every one of us, as human beings created in the image of God, aspires by virtue of our creation to attain *imitatio Dei*. Godliness includes those attributes of God that we can attain on this earth – compassion, justice, righteousness and loving-kindness: *Rachamim*, *Tzedek*, *Hesed*. These are the attributes that we all seek to imitate, in our search to know God. The book of Micah teaches: 'What does Adonai require of you? To do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God.'¹² Similarly, Jeremiah said:

If one practises justice and righteousness
If one champions the cause of the poor
Then it is well with one.
This indeed is to know Me, says God.¹³

Knowing God leads to the emulation of God's attributes and ceaseless labour for *tikkun olam*. Nahman of Bratslav explains that we are partners with the God of creation in perfecting God's world.

The ways of God are not like the ways of humans. When a person makes an article of clothing, it seems very important when it is new. But, after a while, when it has been torn and been mended a few times, its importance becomes less each time as it gets older. But, the Holy One created the world, and at first it was faulty. Later, each time a righteous person came along, it was perfected a bit more . . . Thus, with each righteous act, the world is perfected a bit more, and for God, the world becomes more important.¹⁴

Abraham Joshua Heschel went even further and said that it is God's dream to have 'humanity as a partner in the drama of continuous creation. By whatever we do, by every act we carry out, we either advance or obstruct the drama of redemption.'¹⁵ Thus, the burden of acting in God's image and as God's partner sits heavily on the shoulders of every human being. As a copy of the divine self, we must accept God's role as the creator, and preserve life, rather than destroy it.

Thus our responsibilities extend to all. Living in democratic societies, we are dedicated to ending discrimination, prejudice,

bigotry, tyranny, poverty and hunger. This philosophical underpinning of democracy is reinforced by Judaism's understanding of pluralism. For Judaism, truth is multi-faceted, as affirmed in the disputes of our early sages. When Hillel and Shammai disagreed, a heavenly voice declared: 'Both these and these are the words of the living God.'¹⁶ Such pluralism reinforces the teachings of the Bible that the Other, the neighbour, and the stranger are our equals.

This further means that we as Jews must look to our history to expand our understanding of ethics. As Jews we derive our ethical sensitivity from our creation in God's image, but also from our identification with the suffering of the persecuted, and from our standing at Sinai in Covenant with God. We always remember that we were 'slaves in the land of Egypt' and recognize God's commanding voice in our liberation from Egyptian bondage. Even the Holocaust has deepened our commitment to *tikkun olam*. Remarkably, miraculously, we have arisen phoenix-like from the ashes of one of history's worst calamities, the extermination of one third of our people, to an even greater moral passion, to cultural and political rebirth, even to faith and hope.

What Emil Fackenheim calls 'the commanding voice of Auschwitz' has become one of the master narratives of the Jewish people – second only to the exodus from Egypt and standing at Mt Sinai.¹⁷ We cannot discuss issues of justice and compassion and engage each other in dialogue without considering the issues that emanate from the Holocaust. If we concede that the insights and messages of the prophets do not only belong to another time and place, but rather they refer to our own generation, then it is important for us to apply these insights also when discussing the Holocaust.

We Jews see the Holocaust as the overwhelming metaphor for human brutality and genocide; its universal significance lies in the issues of moral responsibility that must be learned for all humankind. During an era of moral darkness, one is obliged to stretch out one's hand to assist others, even if that act endangers one's own life. Those who stand by and watch but do nothing to oppose the government or to raise their arms against the forces of evil, are considered guilty of terrible crimes of silence, of apathy, of being bystanders, which is to permit others to do evil by not opposing them.

In fact, according to the Bible, one is forbidden to stand idly by. 'You shall not stand by while your neighbour's blood is shed.'¹⁸ According to Deuteronomy, you must not remain indifferent; you must return lost items of value; you must show deference to the elderly; and you must help the poor and the downtrodden.¹⁹

We cannot discuss the Holocaust without also recognizing those who took a stand, acted with courage and did righteous acts – those

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righteous non-Jews who helped to save Jews. In our society, there is an erroneous supposition that one person cannot make a difference. However the existence of righteous non-Jews in the Holocaust proves this supposition to be false. We must not permit the stereotype of the Holocaust to frame the way we see the world. Not all Jews are victims and not all Christians are perpetrators. Rather, each and every one of us must accept the burden of knowing that we can make a difference.

Suffering is not an exclusive club. Nor can it be quantified. And most importantly, it must not lead to parochialism. All of us are survivors of Hiroshima-Nagasaki, at the same time that we are survivors of Auschwitz. Nor may we permit ourselves to become trapped in history – or in memory – and we must not let the legacy of the Holocaust distort our world-view. Rather, we are obliged to hear the voice of God – and it can only be heard when we are sensitive to the pain and suffering of others.

According to Levinas, my compassion towards the other, any other, is what constitutes my ability to be at peace with God, with the Universal. Compassion is a key component not just in Judaism and Christianity, but also in other religions, most notably in Islam – *al rahman al rahim* is the central epithet of Allah. The term ‘compassion’ itself as it is used in the English language is not translatable by one single term in the Hebrew sources. One possibility of rendering the term in Hebrew would be the combination of two terms, *hesed* and *rahamim*. The Hebrew biblical term denoting ‘compassion’, *rahamim*, comes from the same root as the noun *rehem* meaning womb. This connection suggests that the original meaning of the term was ‘kinship’ of those born from the same womb. This compassion is known to us also from other great religious traditions through the thinking of religious leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and the Dalai Lama.

In our search for compassion, we are obliged to pursue peace – peace among individuals and peace among nations. Thus every individual is unique, but compassion itself is universal and must be extended to all equally.

We human beings become God’s partners in the making of the world by completing the sacred work of creation, through personal dedication to righteousness, justice and compassion, which are the essence of *tikkun olam*. The goal of *tikkun olam* is to bring about a world of equality and peace. The Talmud teaches, ‘The purpose of the entire Torah is to establish peace.’²⁰ And what is that vision of peace? According to the text:

We must provide help for the non-Jewish poor as well as for the Jewish poor; we must visit non-Jews when they are sick as well as

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our fellow Jews when they are sick; and we must attend to the burial of their dead as well as the burial of our own dead; for these are the ways of peace.²¹

This is a universalistic view of the path to peace.²² These commandments of attending to the sick and providing burial for the dead bind Jews to humanity as a whole.

The rabbinic commentators on the Bible pointed out that the Torah does not say you must only love peace. Rather, it explicitly requires an active pursuit of peace. The Midrash states:

If you come upon the opportunity to fulfil a commandment, then fulfil it. If not, you need not. However, here the verse from Psalms, 'Seek Peace and pursue it',²³ teaches: Peace you must seek in your own place and pursue it even in another place as well.²⁴

I write as a proud citizen of both my native America and of my adopted Great Britain. Every day I watch the news of the disastrous war in Iraq with shame and sadness. How could the two countries of my citizenship get things so wrong? What my two nations have done in these past four years is the antithesis of *tikkun olam*.

From my perspective, no war, however just, can comprise *tikkun olam*. *Tikkun olam* is rebuilding the United Nations, reconstructing the peaceful collaboration of the family of nations. *Tikkun olam* is the expression of justice, compassion and mercy in fostering the reconciliation of Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds within Iraq. *Tikkun olam* means a Marshall Plan for Iraq to rebuild its hospitals, schools and public services. *Tikkun olam* means the West's acknowledgement of Arab humiliation and the establishment of a mutual respect among Christians, Jews and our Abrahamic sibling Muslims.

I write as a religious Zionist and as a lover of Israel, my people Israel and the State of Israel. The Six Day War, the Yom Kippur War, the wars in Lebanon, and Israeli military hegemony over its Arab neighbours have not increased *tikkun olam*. Yes, Hezbollah and Hamas rejectionist policy and its sponsorship of suicide bombing have undermined those of us Jews most committed to reconciliation between Israel and its Palestinian neighbours. Nonetheless, progressive Jews cannot feel that Israel has done everything reasonably possible to promote mutual respect in our Holy Land. Too often we have allowed Jewish extremists to hijack Israel and the Jewish people to establish and expand Jewish settlements. Too often we have countenanced Israeli government policies which so humiliate and belittle Palestinians that Arab moderates find little basis for speaking up.

Despite all of the reasons for pessimism in the Middle East, I remain an optimist. *Tikkun olam* remains the most realistic hope for

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peace – *tikkun olam* based on religiously derived devotion to justice, compassion and mercy. Too often in our world, religion is marginalized altogether or given a role only in personal spiritual development. On the other hand, religion has too often been turned into fundamentalism, which makes religion into an absolute and all-encompassing tyranny. The shattering terrorism of Al Qaeda is but one example of such tyranny. With the concept of *tikkun olam*, however, religion creates a social vision with healing and repairing potentiality for the broken, unredeemed reality of our world. And because this vision is inspired by our tradition's belief in God's redemptive power, we can overcome cynical scepticism and with courage strive for its complete fulfilment.

Shalom is not merely the Jew's most fervent prayer to God, it is also God's most insistent commandment for our endeavour. Linguistically, *shalom* derives from *shalem* meaning 'whole' or 'complete'. According to the Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical tradition, the entire world was created together, as a unified whole, *shalem*. The Kabbalah speaks of the pristine world as an urn, shattered by human enmity and animosity, characterized by Cain and Abel.

Only the 'shattered urn' repaired to wholeness, piece by piece, peace by peace, comprises ultimate peace. In every group of which we are members, each one of us as an individual is commanded by God to engage continually in *tikkun olam*. Even as we speak with each other, with mutual respect, after careful reflection, with searching sensitivity, without hesitating to differ from each other kindly, we exemplify the 'repair of the world'. Every single second, every minute, every hour, every day of our lives presents the opportunity to repair the world, piece by piece, peace by peace.

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Notes

- 1 Genesis 1.27.
- 2 Sanhedrin 4:5.
- 3 Avot 1:12.
- 4 Avot 6:1.
- 5 Eugene B. Borowitz, 'Love of Neighbor' in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, CD-ROM edition (Tel-Aviv, Judaica Multimedia).
- 6 Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Horeb: A philosophy of Jewish laws and observances* (London: The Soncino Press, 1962).
- 7 Hermann Cohen [reference to be completed].
- 8 Leo Baeck, *Essence of Judaism* (London: Macmillan, 1936), p. 193.
- 9 Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, tr. W. Kaufmann (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1970).
- 10 Numbers 15.16.
- 11 Martin Buber, *Israel and the World: Essays in a time of crisis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963), pp. 71–6.
- 12 Micah 6.8.

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- 13 Jeremiah 22.15–16.
- 14 Sefer Sihot Maharar 239.
- 15 Fritz A. Rothschild (ed.), *Between God and Man: An interpretation of Judaism, from the writings of Abraham J. Heschel* (New York: The Free Press, 1965), p. 236.
- 16 Eruvin 13b.
- 17 Emil L. Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History: Jewish affirmations and philosophical reflections* (New York: New York University Press, 1970), p. 84.
- 18 Leviticus 19.16.
- 19 Deuteronomy 22.
- 20 Gittin 59b.
- 21 Gittin 61a.
- 22 Joseph Telushkin, *The Book of Jewish Values* (New York: Bell Tower, 2000), p. 201.
- 23 Psalms 34.15.
- 24 Leviticus Rabbah 9:9.