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# REPAIRING THE WORLD FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF JEWISH TRADITION

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The idea of “repair of the world” is an ever present notion for Jews since they conclude every worship service with the “Alenu” prayer, including the words “L’taken olam b’malchut Shaddai — Then the world will be perfected (repaired) under the kingdom of the Almighty.” We are thus reminded of two imperatives. The world is in need of repair as we aspire to wholeness and perfection, and such repair can only occur within the context of a humanity inspired by God’s reality and guided by God’s presence. There is ample evidence in our contemporary world of the need for repair, and on that basis alone the choice of the theme “Repair of the World” seems natural for a conference of religious educators. If the need is so obvious and religious imperatives so clear, what more might we say about this theme in a gathering of academics concerned with religious education? The challenge for religious education and religious educators lies in preserving the integrity of the ideal, “Tikkun Ha’Olam — Repair of the World” by locating it within our larger religious traditions and translating it into the life of our religious communities. This essay will attempt to analyze these challenges from the perspective of the Jewish tradition, the Jewish community, and Jewish education.

## *The Present Status of “Tikkun Olam”*

It is interesting to note that most synagogues, religious schools, and Jewish community agencies advocate “Tikkun Olam” as a central value and a rationale for social action activities within the Jewish community and the society at large. At some time in

almost any student's religious education there will be reference to "Tikkun Olam" and an indication of the kinds of involvement this value mandates. This past summer the Conference on Alternatives in Jewish Education included "Tikkun Olam" as an important theme in its program for 1,800 Jewish educators. There is ample evidence that synagogues have developed special programs for addressing hunger, poverty, homelessness — all in the name of "Tikkun Olam." We can conclude from this that "Tikkun Olam" is a compelling idea for motivating Jews to become involved with social issues within and outside of the Jewish community.

As a concept, "Tikkun Olam" conveys a sense of empowerment for human activity in the service of human betterment. Our actions can count and make a difference in the world, and that is inspiring and energizing. The prominence of this value may be related to the social action legacy of the 1960s, which harnessed the activism of that period to the ethical imperatives of the Jewish tradition. At the same time, if we examine educational materials from the 1960s to the present, we find, with some few exceptions, little discussion of what "Tikkun Olam" means and how this idea developed within the Jewish tradition. If the imperative of "Tikkun Olam" is to be grounded in its religious context and be related to other religious commitments and behaviors, we need to explore its development within the Jewish tradition.

### *The Voices of the Tradition*

In his essay, "Mipne Tikkun Olam in the Talmud: A Preliminary Exploration,"<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Eugene Lipman points out that the word "taken" or "tikkun" derives from a root meaning "to set straight." The author then traces the use of this root by the Tannaim, the scholars whose ideas are recorded in the Mishna and Tosefta. These scholars worked from the fourth century B.C.E. to the end of the second century C.E. and created the foundation for the oral Torah, which provided the interpretation necessary for sustaining the laws and principles of the written Torah in changing and challenging circumstances.

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene J. Lipman, "Mipne Tikkun Olam in the TaLmud: A Preliminary Exploration," in *The Life of Covenant: Essays in Honor of Herman E. Schaalman*, ed. Joseph A. Edelman (Chicago: Spertus College of Judaica Press, 1986), pp. 97-110.

The Tannaim developed “takkanot,” which were rabbinic ordinances that essentially expanded or amended the laws found in the written Torah. In many cases the “takkanah” could not be supported by specific biblical references, and another source of authority for the “takkanah” in question needed to be found. In the Babylonian Talmud there are 35 instances in which the phrase “mipne tikkun ha’olam — for the sake of setting right the world” is used as the justification or rationale for particular decisions contained in rabbinic “takkanot.” The use of the root “taken” in this way by the Tannaim, however, cannot lead us to a clearer understanding of the concept of “tikkun olam,” for as Lipman states, “It is as impossible to designate the legal status of ‘tikkun olam’ in the Talmud as it is to define the phrase in a way which will cover all its uses in talmudic literature.”<sup>2</sup> He does go on to elaborate, however, that the intent of setting things right, as the phrase implies, was not meant to be universal and apply to all of humanity. Rabbi Lipman concludes, “It seems to me that, in the Talmud, ‘tikkun olam’ means ‘for the proper order of the Jewish Community.’”<sup>3</sup> If we are to find the relationship between “tikkun olam” and a more universal notion of repairing the world, we shall have to examine other sources in the Jewish tradition.

The doctrine of “Tikkun” and the idea of “Tikkun Olam” are most fully developed in the thinking of Isaac Luria, reputed to be the greatest mystical genius among the Kabbalists of Safed who lived and taught during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Although Luria left no written record of his own, his disciples preserved Luria’s ideas and sayings in a number of volumes. For Luria the doctrine of “Tikkun” is connected to two other ideas — “Tzimtzum (Withdrawal/Contraction)” and “Shevirat HaKayleem (Breaking of the Vessels)” — all of which relate to the process of the creation of the world. In short, Luria believed that God contracted in order to make room for the world (Tzimtzum) and in the resulting void set vessels (Kayleem) to be filled with creative light. The power of the divine rays was so intense that the vessels shattered (Shevirat HaKayleem), resulting in a cosmic catastrophe that left much of the light trapped in shards in our material world. “Tikkun Olam,” then, is the process of gathering the shards

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<sup>2</sup> Lipman, p. 107.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 108.

and restoring them to their proper order, thus fulfilling God's original intention for creation.

This idea of "Tikkun" and its role in restoring the world to the perfection and wholeness that was intended has important implications for the role of humans in realizing God's plan for the world. Gershom Scholem, a great scholar of Jewish mysticism, emphasizes this point when he observes, "Certain parts of the process of restitution are allotted to man. Not all the lights which are held in captivity by the powers of darkness are set free by their own efforts; it is man who adds the final touch to the divine countenance . . . ." <sup>4</sup> To place this human activity in the context intended by Luria and his disciples, however, we must understand that it was particular acts by Jews that were seen as essential to furthering the process of restitution. Scholem explains, "The Jew who is in close contact with the divine life through the Torah, the fulfillment of the commandments, and through prayer, has it in his power to accelerate or hinder this process." <sup>5</sup> While Lurianic teachings place "Tikkun Olam" in a particularistic context, these same teachings provide a foundation for understanding human activity in the world as essential to a restoration of the unity and perfection of creation. Humans are partners with God in the process of repair, and spiritual action by individuals advances the world toward Messianic reformation. In this sense, "Tikkun Olam" as understood by Luria is the foundation for our contemporary understanding of what "Repair of the World" might mean.

### *Hearing the Voices of the Tradition*

There is a number of issues that emerge, however, as we attempt to place the doctrine of "Tikkun Olam" in a contemporary context. The first challenge is to reconcile the idea of a catastrophe at the time of creation, a process that emanates from God, with the many evils in the world which appear to be caused by humans. For example, can we really attribute world hunger or senseless killing to imperfections inherent in the world because of the shattered vessels? This is a question we must address. At the same time, can we assume that the world can be restored through

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<sup>4</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), p. 273.

<sup>5</sup> Scholem, p. 274.

human action alone; and if not, what role do we attribute to God in this process?

In the contemporary Jewish context “Tikkun Olam” often appears to be a program for which God is the “sponsor” rather than a process by which we help to bring God into the world and to fashion the world in God’s image. In the original understanding of “Tikkun Olam,” humans advance the cause of restoration through daily acts of study, prayer, and the performance of commandments. Today, we think about more global and heroic efforts to eradicate hunger, disease, and poverty or bring about world peace. It is true that the flaws or evils in our world are far greater than Isaac Luria or his disciples could have imagined, and accordingly they call for more heroic responses. Yet we may be missing an important point in regard to “Tikkun Olam” if we overlook the necessity to engage in daily acts which sustain us spiritually and remind us of our moral obligations to humanity. All of these issues are of vital concern to those who would teach and advocate for “Repair of the World” as a religious commitment.

Our first task is to reconcile the idea that the world is inherently flawed as a result of the cosmic catastrophe with the responsibility that human beings have for the ills of society and for the healing of those ills. One textbook on Jewish mysticism explains the relationship in terms of the world being in disorder as a result of the “Shevirat HaKayleem.” The authors suggest, “All the pieces are there — just not in the proper place or time and not equally distributed. Food, for example, is one piece. But some people waste food and other people starve.”<sup>6</sup> Such an understanding allows us to see a place for human activity in a world that is in a state of inherent disorder. Human behavior can either exacerbate the disorder and perpetuate the inequities which exist, or it can seek to create order and shape a world in which our resources are distributed with equity and justice. The potential for wholeness is always present within the chaos that characterizes our world — this is an important lesson of “Tikkun Olam.” We cannot excuse our inaction on the grounds that the world is essentially flawed and there is nothing we can do about it. On the contrary, we are held responsible by the doctrine of “Tikkun Olam” to perform

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<sup>6</sup> Deborah Kerdeman and Lawrence Kushner, *The Invisible Chariot: An Introduction to Kabbalah and Jewish Spirituality* (Denver: Alternatives in Religious Education, 1986), p. 78.

acts which unleash the potential for wholeness. God's original design for creation can only be realized through our partnership with God in putting the "pieces" back into order.

If our responsibility in the process of "Tikkun Olam" is so significant, how do we understand the place of God in this plan for restoring the world? In this age of technology, we might assume that if we can send people into space, we can also solve the problem of hunger, the environment, and disease. It is only a matter of human will and society's priorities. Thus science and financial resources can make the world whole. Only by placing the doctrine of "Tikkun Olam" in its religious context do we recognize why our human efforts in and of themselves are insufficient to achieve the vision of a repaired and restored world. When we repeat the words of the "Alenu" prayer at the conclusion of each worship service, we affirm two ideas as inextricably tied to one another. First, we say "L'taken olam — The world will be perfected," but then immediately we add the words "b'malchut Shaddai — under the kingdom of the Almighty" and thus affirm that the perfection of the world is only possible in a world where God is the ultimate reality. While there is ample evidence in history of destruction and human suffering being perpetrated in the name of God and God's will, this is clearly a distortion of our religious traditions. To affirm God as creator and to realize God's plan for creation is to commit ourselves to the sanctity of every human life. It is this affirmation and commitment that propels us to respond to the needs in our world, to set priorities that benefit humanity, and to utilize our gifts of intelligence and creativity to solve the problems that confront us. In this sense God is essential to our work of repair. If we are to teach the value of "Tikkun Olam," it is as important to relate it to the place of God in our world as it is to relate it to the mandate for human activity in addressing the problems of our world.

The traditional teaching of "Tikkun Olam" stressed the importance of daily acts of prayer, study, and performing the commandments in advancing the process of restoration. In the institutions of Jewish life there is much activity that is mobilized under the banner of "Tikkun Olam"; yet there is little reference to how the daily acts of religion relate to all this activity. One might argue that if "Tikkun Olam" motivates people to carry out good deeds, we need not bother ourselves with that lack of connection. By so doing, however, we fail to see the important relationship between the internal repair of each individual on an ongoing basis

and the repair of the society, and indeed the world. The health of our society is dependent on the day-to-day relationships between family members, friends, colleagues, and strangers. A sound society demands ethical business practices, respect for persons and property, the assurance of justice and equity for all people, and ongoing attention to the many small problems that the society encounters each day. This ongoing process depends on the spiritual, emotional, and ethical resources of individual human beings.

Prayer nourishes these resources. It is no accident that the Jewish High Holydays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur confront Jews every year with the need to take stock of these resources, and the medium is prayer within the community. During this period we are asked to assess our own individual needs for repair in order that we might carry out our responsibilities to our community, society, and God. In the same way, the study of Torah and other texts remind us constantly of what our responsibilities are and how we are to carry them out. We are in need of those constant reminders, that ongoing guidance, and the inspiration which enables us to go forward.

Finally, the performance of commandments reminds us that the world is made whole by the accumulation of daily acts by many individuals. It is the rare individual in our society who possesses the single-mindedness or courage to perform heroic deeds that make a difference. If we are all to participate in the process of "Tikkun Olam," it will be through the more modest good that we are able to achieve in carrying out God's intention through our religiously inspired daily acts. "Tikkun Olam" calls us to live our individual lives in a religious and spiritual context as the foundation for joining in the collective effort to repair the world.

### *The Challenges to Jewish Education*

This survey of the development of the doctrine of "Tikkun Olam" and the questions it raises in our contemporary context suggests a number of challenges for religious education. There can be little disagreement about values and morality as a central focus of religious education. Thus we can expect that a value such as "Tikkun Olam — Repair of the World" will be taught.

In the context of Jewish education "Tikkun Olam" is taught, and ways of making the world a better place are suggested. The sources for this value and its relationship to other important

Jewish beliefs is frequently ignored, however. That is to say, the value is isolated from its context and consequently from its religious grounding. Students learn that "Tikkun Olam" is something Jews do; but the connection of this activity to a belief in God, the teachings of Torah, or a Jewish view of redemption is lost. Religious considerations in regard to this value seem irrelevant except for the fact that it is taught in a Jewish context. This observation should lead us to consider the importance of grounding the moral values we teach in the soil from which they sprung. The failure to do so relegates our sacred texts, our religious models, and our rituals to a position of irrelevance in regard to morality. If religious education is to have significant impact on the development of a mature religious commitment that joins religious imperatives to moral behavior in the world in which we live, the relevance of religious sources must be revealed. Opening our texts to our students and our students to our texts, is an educational challenge we must take seriously.

Another important principle emerges from our discussion of "Tikkun Olam." We have seen how the very idea of "Tikkun" is transformed as it reappears in the developing Jewish tradition. This transformation is significant for it reveals the dynamic quality of the Jewish tradition as that tradition reinterprets the core ideas of Judaism. For the contemporary Jew this understanding of an evolving tradition grounded in eternal beliefs is an invitation to place himself or herself in that process of ongoing development. Religious education that presents values or beliefs isolated from their historic development represents religion as static. The student who experiences such education can neither relate to what has come before nor perceive his or her responsibility for the future of the religious community. The importance of tracing the development of our religious values through their evolution in our texts and in our communities should be apparent. If religious education is to carry out that responsibility, we need to examine what we teach and how we teach in our religious schools. We must guard against teaching "the bottom line" in both values and belief, for in so doing the richness and diversity of our traditions are lost, and the ability to see a place for those values and beliefs in new situations is limited. This requires attention to both connecting the value to a larger religious belief system and worldview, while recreating the interpretive process by which the understanding and applicability of the value expands.

In our own example of "Tikkun Olam," we would place the



value in a larger context of God as Creator and God as Redeemer. In that connection we would explore the responsibility of humans for sharing in ongoing creation and bringing about redemption, as these ideas manifest themselves through an ongoing text tradition. Students would come to understand that the insights of the medieval Jewish commentators on these questions are different from that of the Tannaim, as a result of the cultural and historical forces surrounding Jewish life. Likewise, we would learn that modern Reform response would relate our responsibility for creation to the questions of ecology and the threat of nuclear destruction. Finally, we might contemplate what new challenges face us that should call forth our responsibility for ongoing creation of the world and hastening the process of redemption. The dedicated social activists of the 1960s did not invent "Tikkun Olam," but they did appropriate it. If the next generations are to perpetuate that value, they will need to be inspired by what it has meant, how it has been expressed in communities through time, and what it might mean for their world.

Isaac Luria taught that each person has been assigned a specific role in this process of "Tikkun," and no other person can fulfill that role, perform that task. Thus restoration of the world is dependent on each individual. If "Tikkun Olam" is to be advanced, the task of religious education is to teach and model the myriad of ways in which a life grounded in religious commitment can contribute to restoring the wholeness of the world. Accordingly, each person can find the way to those tasks which will become his or her contribution to our collective responsibility to recreate a world of justice and peace in God's image.

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