Fixing *Tikkun Olam*

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Tikkun olam—a phrase that is so often used, even abused—sounds simple enough. It means, on a superficial level, "the fixing of the world."

But the precise meaning of the phrase is fraught with questions. Is it possible for any single individual to fix the world? Presuming that *tikkun olam* is an obligation, if not an official *mitzvah*, and that it is impossible to do a full fix, how much of a fix are we obliged to carry out?

Is it possible for a person living in any city to fix the world in another city, in another country? Are we obligated to fix the world in places where no Jews are welcome? Which *olam*, which world, is it our obligation to fix? And never mind another city: what about the city in which one lives? Is a "full fix" remotely possible, even in a much more limited area?

And what exactly do we mean by "fix"? Is it using spiritual crazy glue to bring together broken pieces? Is it just improving on the status quo? How is the improvement measured?

As an absurd example: suppose we find out via a survey that, over time, the percentage of the Jewish community that celebrates a given holiday—Shabbat or Ḥanukkah, for example—has gone up. Are there *tikkun olam* implications in this? Does this rise in percentage mean that the world is getting better?

These are just a few of the perplexities surrounding this often employed but seldom understood phrase.

What follows is an attempt to explore some nuances of the phrase *tikkun olam*, and to suggest the kinds of actions that this phrase ought to inspire us to undertake.

Conversion vs. Inspiration

Judaism does not encourage us actively to seek out converts.[1] We are obligated to welcome converts once they have embraced Judaism, but we are not in the business of convincing people to become Jewish.

We firmly believe that all righteous people have a share in the world to come, so we do not need to "save" them by making them Jewish.[2] They are good as they are.

At the same time, we do have responsibilities to the global community. Our major responsibility is not to convert; rather, it is to inspire. We are called on to inspire humanity.

The question is: inspire humanity toward what end? If it is not toward embracing Judaism, then toward what? Certainly not to another religion. That would hardly make sense.

Our responsibility is to inspire the world to acknowledge God, to embrace God, and to behave with the awe of God as the basis of all action.

That is a tall order, but it is an order we dare not ignore. For most of our history we were, to a greater or lesser extent, prevented from carrying out this mandate. So the mandate may have slipped out of our consciousness—but that does not mean that the obligation has disappeared. It simply was suffocated by exile, persecution, and subjugation.

That suffocation has ended. We can now breathe freely, and we therefore need to return to the mandate.

It is not as if we ever totally forgot this responsibility, even in the worst of times. The universal obligation is a recurring theme in our age-old prayers, in our teaching, in our thinking—as we constantly remind ourselves that we must be, as the prophet said, "a light unto the nations" (Isaiah 49:6).

The theme of infusing our lives with Godliness is recurrent throughout our daily prayers. Every day we yearn for the time that God will reign supreme over all the earth. This idea finds powerful

expression in the climactic ending of the Aleinu prayer, which concludes the morning, afternoon, and evening services.

How will this reign of God over the world be achieved? We could of course leave it to God, but we know that it is not the Jewish way to do so.

True, our fate is ultimately in God's hands. But it is clear from the mandates in the Torah that we are partners with God, not mere bystanders. This is surely true of personal fate. It is simply wrong to leave our destiny to God, and thus to neglect our own physical and spiritual responsibilities.

It is a sacrilege to consciously adopt bad health habits—such as smoking, excessive drinking, or overeating—and just leave our well-being entirely to God, Who controls our destiny. This is evident from the abundant health directives in the Torah. If how we behave does not matter, why would God ask us to take care of ourselves? Why would God instruct us, for example, to be "exceedingly careful" (Deuteronomy 4:15) concerning ourselves?

What holds true in the personal realm is likewise true in the communal, even global, realm. It is up to us to facilitate the global embrace of God—again: not through coercion, but rather through the inspirational force of our example.

Partnering with God

Any doubts about the centrality of our mission to inspire the world to embrace God are removed once we fully comprehend the second part of the aforementioned Aleinu prayer. It reads as follows:

> Therefore we hope for You, Eternal our God, soon to behold Your majestic glory, to remove idols from the earth, and with the false gods totally eliminated, to perfect the world through the reign of the Almighty. And all humanity will call in Your name, to turn toward You all the earth's wicked. All the

> world's inhabitants will recognize and know that to You every knee must bend, every tongue must vow allegiance. Before You, Eternal our God, they will bend and prostrate, and give homage to Your honored name. They will all accept upon themselves the yoke of Your dominion, and You will reign over them speedily forever. For dominion is Yours, and for all eternity You will reign in glory, as it is written in Your Torah, "The Eternal shall reign forever" (Exodus 15:18). And it is said, "The Eternal shall be ruler over all the world; on that day the Eternal shall be One, and God's name One" (Zechariah 14:9).

How can all this happen without us? Remember that prayer is more than just mouthing words without attending to the meaning. Prayer involves understanding the words, and the obligations that derive from the words.

A further word about partnership is in order. If instead of partnership I use the term "covenant," this idea about our mission to inspire the world would resonate more readily.

But a covenant *is* a partnership. Obviously God is the Majority Partner, and overwhelmingly so, but God has brought us into the corporation/covenantal relationship with some significant clout, if you will.

We refer to this partnership daily, by reciting the faith affirmation called the Shema. The second paragraph of the Shema is all about covenant, about partnership. The terms are clear and blunt:

> It will be that if you diligently listen to My commandments that I command you today; to love the Eternal your God and to serve God with all your heart and with all your soul—I shall then provide rain for your land in its right time, the early and late rains; then you will gather your grain, your wine, and your oil. I will provide grass in your field for your cattle; you will eat and be satisfied. Be careful with yourselves,

> lest your heart be seduced; and you stray and serve the gods of others and bow to them. Then the wrath of the Eternal will be kindled against you, God will hold back the heaven and there will be no rain, and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will be quickly expelled from the good land that the Eternal gives to you. (Deuteronomy 11:13–17)

Here, God tells us in graphic terms that if we do our part, then God will take care of the rest.

There are abundant references to this notion of partnership in the Torah. Two well-known examples include: "If you diligently listen to Me and observe My covenant, then you shall be to Me a treasure from all the nations..." (Exodus 19:5) and "If you follow My statutes, then I shall give you rain in the proper season..." (Leviticus 26:3).

The Talmud even speaks about the partnership with God in the creation story itself, declaring: "Whoever prays on Shabbat eve and recites Va-y'khulu [the biblical passage describing the culmination of God's creating the world, Genesis 2:1–3], Scripture considers it as if that person has become a partner with the blessed Holy One in the creation process."[3]

Another better known reference to this partnership is the rabbinic assertion that there are three partners in the creation of a person: God, the father, and the mother.[4] The Talmud actually goes into detail regarding this partnership, spelling out the respective contributions of each partner: God provides the spirit and soul, the countenance, vision, hearing, speech, insight, and understanding; the father provides the bones, sinews, nails, and the brain; and the mother provides the skin, flesh, and hair, among other components.[5] The level of detail in this accounting reinforces how seriously Judaism takes this partnership.

The partnership carries through all the way to the proverbial "end of days." One of Isaiah's prophecies regarding the end of days is read publicly as a *haftarah* during the weeks leading up to the Days of

Awe. The passage concludes with the famous words: "The smallest will become thousands and the youngest into a mighty nation; I am the Eternal, in its time I will hasten it [i.e., the redemption]" (Isaiah 60:22).

The reader will notice an apparent contradiction in the last words of this verse: "I am the Eternal, in its time I will hasten it." If it is truly to occur "in its time," then it is not being hastened. If the messianic redemption is to occur at its pre-ordained time, then what does it mean to say that God will "hasten" that redemption?

The Talmud picks up on this conundrum and offers the following explication by Rabbi Joshua ben Levi: "If the people are deserving, I will hasten it; if they are not deserving, then [it will come] in its time."[6]

Ultimate redemption is part of God's plan, but *when* it happens is up to us. In other words: the redemptive context is one of partnership, not happenstance.

God can surely generate redemption, or anything else, without us. At the same time, God's clear preference is that we be involved in how quickly redemption unfolds…and this can only happen if we are deserving.

The Aleinu Plea

Our deservedness, the way we behave, impacts directly on how God will be acknowledged by the entire world—and it is this acknowledgment that, as reflected in the Aleinu prayer, is so central to ultimate redemption.

The person who truly and profoundly believes in God must then acknowledge God as the Creator of all—meaning that we are all God's creations, created in the image of God, and we are therefore holy.

Deriving from the monotheistic belief in one God, in God as the One and Only, is the imperative of according respect to all of God's creatures. Belief in the One and Only God means that we are all united under the same God, and are all equal—and this belief leads directly to certain kinds of behavior.

Humility, sensitivity, and caring all become sacred and eternal values in a world wherein God is supreme. The message about how life and all humans are sacred extends toward fully affirming the value of each person, since all must be treated respectfully, kindly, and sensitively.

The Aleinu prayer is therefore not a triumphalist rant. Rather, it is a plea for a world of kindness and compassion, a world in which what are clearly identified as Godly values are the governing values of society. This is our ultimate hope, and it is so central to the Jewish hope for the world that we conclude every one of the basic prayer services with not just a passing mention, but rather with a detailed, descriptive statement of how the world should look, as expressed in the words of the Aleinu.

It is indeed a sacred task to be a light unto the nations, to inspire the world. There is no escape from this "mission." It is a mission to infuse the world with Godly goodness. There have been protracted periods throughout our history when we were rendered incapable of engaging in this mission. And at other times, such as the immediate post-biblical era, we were capable of doing so, but failed in this task.

There are no excuses now. The time is right; the world is ripe, for an inspired engagement that will bring out the divine goodness that inheres in every human being.

We have long recognized that it is possible to be good without being Jewish, just as it is possible to be Jewish without being good. It is more crucial to be good. It is an inescapable component of being Jewish that we strive to be good—as defined by the Torah—and that we inspire others, through our example, to likewise be good. And it is through goodness that the world will have enough redeeming qualities to merit God's forbearance.

To be good does not mean to observe Shabbat or to abide by the dietary laws or to fast on Yom Kippur. It is certainly good to do so, but that alone does not define goodness. To be good means to be honest, to be respectful, to be kind, to be appreciative, to be friendly, to be humble.

The Different Realms in Which We Actualize Our Mission

To inspire the world: that is a daunting task, surely beyond the capacity of any single individual or group.

On whose shoulders does the responsibility to inspire the world rest? In this massive mission, there are both individual and communal realms, and therefore both personal and communal responsibilities.

In the individual realm, it is incumbent upon every Jew to inspire the immediate environment, the immediate world in which that person travels.

On the communal level, there is a collective responsibility to put to work the communal resources to attain this goal.

For rabbis, this means alerting their congregations to this goal. For teachers, it means educating their students to this calling. For parents, it means being role models for their children, showing by personal example how to actualize this way of living.

This is a shared responsibility, shared by everyone, in differing degrees. But no one is free from participating in the collective responsibility we all have to God.

The foundational responsibility is to love God. It is a responsibility that flows naturally from the presumed gratitude we have to God for having been born into God's world. And this responsibility is articulated as part of the partnership agreement with God found in the Shema.

It is not surprising that we are commanded to love God (Deuteronomy 6:5). What is surprising, at least initially, is how this was actually understood.

According to the Talmud, it means that "the name of God should become beloved through you,"[7] so that via conducting our business faithfully and through engaging people pleasantly, people will praise those who taught us and will be inspired by our behavior and deeds. That is the foundation of the imperative that we all share, to bring the world under the rubric of God.

The Abraham–Sarah Model

Abraham and Sarah serve as role models of this mandate.

Tradition has it that they were deeply involved in missionizing, that Abraham converted the men and Sarah converted the women.[8] There was no Judaism then; the Torah had not yet been transmitted. To what faith, then, were the converts converted?

From all that we know, the approach of Abraham and Sarah was to move people away from idolatry with its attendant immorality, and closer to the embrace of monotheism, the belief in the One and Only God Who created the world and everyone in it, idolaters included.

Abraham and Sarah were renowned as having an open house and open hearts, a dwelling open on all sides for all travelers to enter and be welcome.

It was in this home that they worked their magic. But the food and drink were not intended as a strategic trick. The welcome that Abraham and Sarah extended to the world flowed directly from their understanding that God was indeed sovereign over everyone. If they were to profess monotheism and live by it, then by definition they would have to embrace all of God's creations.

The eternal legacy of Abraham and Sarah is not merely the promulgation of monotheism. It is also the marriage of monotheism and monanthropism (the one-ness of humankind), the marriage of the Godly and the human, the intimate connection between belief in God and kindness to all—the idea that one necessarily leads to the other, that they are inescapably intertwined.

To this day, we extol Abraham and Sarah as the exemplars of kindness, and we consider them to be present-day role models for the mandate to strive toward *tikkum olam*.

Abraham and Sarah actually had a colossal challenge: to re-orient an entire world. The challenge for us today is somewhat different: it is to address a more subtle idolatry, which presents itself in the guise of worship of the self and its attendant unwelcome consequences.

Admittedly, it is quite harsh to brand narcissism as the modern idolatry, but it is an accurate assessment. Consider that the idols of old were created by the very people who worshiped these idols. These images thus served as the vehicle, the front, for allowing idolaters to do whatever they wanted—in an instance of narcissism truly gone haywire—with the "blessing" of the idols they created. In modern times, we have done away with the idols, but the focus on the self—which too often comes with a negation of any responsibility to others—is still with us. We do not physically bow down to ourselves, but all too often we do surrender to self-infatuation. The end result is a less than caring society, which remains in need of a massive fix, a true *tikkun*.

The *Tikkun Olam* Imperative

The essence of *tikkun olam* may thus be understood as the imperative to continue the Abrahamic agenda of rallying against idolatry—especially in its modern-day guise of self-worship. This unfinished work was started by Abraham, appreciated by God, put on hold through centuries of persecution, and is now finally appearing out of the dark clouds of our history as a beckoning opportunity and obligation that calls out for us to fulfill.

The way we wake up, the thoughts that we contemplate when we wake up, can to a large degree influence our behavior for the day. It is therefore not surprising that the tradition mandates that we begin each waking day with an expression of thanks to God for being alive, by reciting the Modeh Ani prayer. That way, our day is more likely to build on that gratitude, as we go about our routine: at home, at work—literally, everywhere.

There are those who have the wonderful custom, as they begin their daily prayer affirmations, of expressing their intent to fulfill the obligation to "love your fellow as you love yourself" (Leviticus 19:18), an obligation that is as central to Judaism as it is all-encompassing.

If this verse is recited with sincerity and intentionality, it cannot help but impact on how the day will unfold. One who begins the day by saying this (and meaning it) is more likely to avoid insulting or cheating, and is more likely to go out of one's way to be kind and considerate to others.

There is another clarion wake-up call that seems fitting for *tikkun olam*. It is to awaken to the following contemplation: What can I do today to sanctify the name of God (*kiddush ha-Sheim*)? What can I do to inspire others to embrace the universal Godly values that are the foundation of a genuinely caring society?

If we wake up every day to this contemplation, and come up with good ideas that we translate into action, then eventually the whole process will run on automatic pilot, and doing all these inspiring deeds will be natural.

Note that "natural" is not the same as "by rote." Rote refers to doing things like a robot, without thinking or feeling. Natural means that the thought and the feeling are present and real, and do not need to be forced.

We know what Godly values are, because they are clearly articulated by the rabbis: "Just as God is gracious and compassionate, so too should we be gracious and compassionate."[9]

We fulfill God's word by actualizing the commandments—by undertaking what one might call "*mitzvah* obligations." But we become more like God when we are compassionate, kind, and gracious in the way that we fulfill God's commands to us.

If in the end we are accused of trying to bring kindness and compassion to the world, we should unabashedly plead guilty. There is hardly anything better of which to be guilty.

But such a "guilty plea," it must be noted, ought to be suffused with humility. We do not portray ourselves as better than everyone else, simply because we strive to live our lives guided by this mission. Instead, we humbly project God's word as ennobling and redemptive for everyone.

Jumping into *Tikkun*-Oriented Action

Once we make up our minds to do this—to act with kindness and compassion in order to imbue the world around us with a greater measure of Godliness—then the way to go about inspiring others is not that complicated. In fact, it is quite easy. Once we have made it our priority to inspire the world, we can easily draw up a list of things we can do that take little effort and cost nothing.

For example, saying hello to people of all faiths and persuasions and wishing them a good morning (or a good day) goes a long way. And, in fact, this dovetails quite nicely with the famous rabbinic directive to "initiate greetings to all people."[10]

Moreover, the Talmud reports that the sage Abaye would continually emphasize that one should increase harmony with others, including people of other faiths, so that the one who proffers greetings will be both beloved above (i.e., in heaven) and desirable below (i.e., on earth), and accepted by everyone.[11]

The Talmud then points to the great sage Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, about whom it is reported that no one—not even a non-Jew in the market—greeted him first. He was in the meticulous habit of taking the initiative and being the first to greet all people, no matter what their faith was. This is a most effective way to spread good feelings in general society.

A careful reading of this text underscores the critical point that saying hello to everyone is a way to gain the approval of God, and not merely a social nicety. But why would this practice be so important to God? The answer seems obvious: because the way to open up people to a full appreciation of God, and the embrace of Godly values, is for people of God—that is, identifiably religious personages like Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai—to be visible role models of goodness.

There are many opportunities for us to spread such a spirit of warmth and friendliness—for example, when waiting in line at a

checkout or ticket counter, waiting for a medical appointment, or riding in an elevator or on an escalator. These waiting times need not be frustrating moments when nothing is happening. Rather, they are opportunities to be friendly and spread goodness. We should eagerly seize them.

Another very easy way to generate good feelings and inspire others is by expressing gratitude to anyone who does nice things—both when they are done directly for us, and even when they are not done directly for us. Thanking a teller at the bank is a thank-you for a direct kindness, as is saying thank-you to a barber or hair dresser, or a bus driver or a taxi driver. Those are no-brainers, as is being gracious to the person operating a highway toll booth or a parking lot attendant, or an operator providing information, or the person at the supermarket checkout. It does not matter that they are only doing their job. That is not an excuse for being oblivious and blasé. Ingratitude has no place in God's world. Less direct, but still very worthy of thank you, is the expression of appreciation to a custodian for keeping a place clean, a bus driver for reaching the intended destination, and the many other ways our lives are made smoother by others that we sometimes only become aware of in their absence.

It behooves us to become sensitive to these niceties performed for us by others and to acknowledge them accordingly. Such acknowledgment should include leaving an appreciative tip, when appropriate. For many people, nothing conveys appreciation more meaningfully than a generous tip, graciously given.

Remember, too, the eloquent observation of the Talmud that the most critical component of any charitable gesture is the warmth and kindness with which it is conveyed.[12]

Gratitude feeds on itself, in that the more gratitude we express, the more grateful we become. The more grateful we become, the more gratitude we express, and the more other people are thereby uplifted, and then become more likely themselves to pass that gratitude on to others. We may consider this to be a "gratitude crescendo."

Bringing Godly goodness to the fore demands that we each get involved in some way to attain this lofty goal. No one can claim exemption, because it is a collective responsibility.

As to how we, the Jewish people—a mere speck on the map, thirteen million people in a world of seven billion—can inspire the world, remember that by refusing to allow our minority status to be a deterrent, and with God on our side and with Godliness as our objective, nothing is impossible.

To Fix or To Perfect?

We began with the presumption that *tikkun olam* means "to fix the world." That is not a bad translation. But it is an incomplete translation.

First, the more lofty goal of *tikkun olam* is not simply to fix; it is to "perfect the world" in line with God's desire that we complete God's work.

Further, the Aleinu, wherein we pray for *tikkun olam* three times a day, contains a fuller articulation of this concept, which we ignore only at our own peril. The passage reads: "to perfect the world through the reign of the Almighty" (*l'takkein olam b'malkhut Shaddai*).

This is obviously God's work, as is clear in the prayer itself. But we are active partners, not mere bystanders, in this work. And, as I have argued at length above, God wants us to be actively engaged in this work.

The perfection can only be achieved under the banner of God—because without God, any repair or fix is illusory and temporary, since it is not rooted in goodness that is linked with the Almighty. It can work for a while but it is transitory, subject to the shifting definitions of goodness that change from generation to generation.

The Talmud[13] records a fascinating insight into the global implications of revelation, based on the following verse: "All the rulers of the world will acknowledge You, O Eternal One, because they have heard the words of Your mouth" (Psalm 138:4).

To what "words" is the verse alluding? The Talmud explains that when God proclaimed the first two of the Ten Statements (Commandments)—namely, the obligation to believe in God and the prohibition against having any other god—the nations of the world said that there was nothing new here, just another self-serving deity interested in self-promotion.

However, when they heard God proclaim the obligation to honor one's parents, they retracted their skepticism and acknowledged the truth of God and of the Ten Statements, including the first two they had previously dismissed. This acceptance of divine governance started with the rulers of the world who controlled their people, and only then filtered down to the masses.

There are many vital messages in this talmudic passage, not the least of which is the revolutionary notion that honoring one's parents does not diminish from honoring God—a prevalent notion then, and even now in some quarters. Instead, honoring parents serves to further enhance the honoring of God.

But for our purposes, the focus is on the nations of the world "listening in" on the great revelation. Although the revelation was meant directly for the people of Israel, the nations of the world were also a target audience (albeit an indirect one).

It was important then that the nations accept the sovereignty of God. We have no evidence that they embraced the faith of the Israelites at the time, but from the Talmud we know that they were inspired; they realized at that time Who the true God was.

The fact that the Talmud stresses this aspect of revelation is further evidence, if indeed any further evidence is needed, that we are called to inspire the world toward the embrace of God as the One and Only God, and thereby to the embrace of the eternal Godly values.

Turning On the Light

The last line of the Aleinu, recited at the conclusion of all regular prayer services, is: "The Eternal shall be ruler over all the world: on that day the Eternal shall be One, and God's name One."

This verse is taken from Zechariah 14:9 and expresses our ultimate hope for this world. But what exactly do these words mean? What precisely is the difference between God being One and God's name being One?

All this becomes more clear if we understand One not as a mathematical concept, but rather as a theological one. A more accurate term for "One" would be "Only." It is more accurate to speak about God's Only-ness, that there is no other god. "The Eternal shall be One" refers to a world that is absent of any polytheism.

"And God's name One" refers, as suggested by many commentaries on the verse, to the time when God will be the only deity mentioned, and that the universal faith expression will be for the Only God, the God of all humankind, the God of creation.[14] The world will then move from passive acknowledgment to active embrace of God.

This is our bottom-line prayer, articulating our great hope for the world. We pray—and work—for a world in which all the false gods, including narcissism, have absolutely no currency. It will be a world permeated with goodness, an Abraham–Sarah world…the world that we are mandated to help bring into existence.

Much has been said about the ultimate Jewish aspiration, to be the light that illumines the nations. This idea finds expression in the verse, "The nations will walk by Your light..." (Isaiah 60:3).

This was understood by Rabbi David ben Aryeh Loeb Altschuler, a Prague rabbi of the eighteenth century, to mean that the nations will learn the ways of God from us and will be illumined (i.e., inspired) thereby.[15]

And this idea is in line with an earlier verse in Isaiah: "I am the Eternal, and have called you with righteousness and will strengthen your hand; and I will protect you and will set you for a covenant to the people, for a light unto the nations" (42:6). In this verse, God clearly calls on the Jewish people to be a light, via righteousness, to the nations. That is our responsibility. Once we have fulfilled that responsibility, the nations will walk by our righteous light. That is the redemptive vision that Isaiah has for us.

The light that we are asked to be is a very precise light: the light that illumines the path to God and Godly goodness.

We must do so individually, and also as a people.

Individually, this mission will unite us via our common purpose, and bring us together as a united people. That is surely a messianic hope. It is simultaneously the messianic vision. And it is mine as well!

NOTES

[1] B. Yevamot 24b and 109b.
[2] Maimonides, M.T. Hilkhot Teshuvah 3:5.
[3] B. Shabbat 119b.
[4] B. Kiddushin 30b and Niddah 31a.
[5] B. Niddah 31a.
[6] B. Sanhedrin 98a.
[7] B. Yoma 86a.
[8] Bereishit Rabbah 39:21, elaborating Genesis 12:5.
[9] B. Shabbat 133b.
[10] Pirkei Avot 4:20.
[11] B. Berakhot 17a.
[12] B. Kiddushin 31a–b.
[13] At B. Kiddushin 31a.
[14] Cf., e.g., the commentaries of Rashi and *M'tzudat David* to Zechariah 14:9.
[15] Cf. the commentary of the *M'tzudat David* to that verse.