Tikkun Olam: An Over-Used Term and Its Missing "Inner Point"

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Speaking as someone who has been involved in the instruction of liberal rabbis for more than ten years now, I feel that the much loved, but far over-used, expression *tikkun olam* is itself in need of some serious *tikkun* (or at least some thoughtful refinement), and I wish to explain in this essay what I mean by that thought.

The expression itself—which, as is well known, derives from ancient halakhic texts—has in our day turned into nothing more than a slogan that people regularly use when arguing for the superiority of a liberal approach to Judaism. I don't imagine this is done consciously, yet it seems obvious to me that we liberal Jews regularly use the expression to underscore the ways in which we suppose our approach to Judaism to be more worthy than its analogue in old-style, fundamentalist/traditionalist Judaism. Indeed, in our effort to free ourselves from untoward subservience to ancient *halakhah*,[1] we (unlike more traditional Jews) like to think that we have adopted a more exalted sense of purpose than mere obedience to the law: our goal is nothing less than the "repair of the world," which is the precise translation of the Hebrew term *tikkun ha-olam*.[2] In this we distinguish ourselves from those whose goal is merely to remain steadfastly observant of the complex collection of laws and rules that have come down to us from the distant, gloomy past and, more recently, from the *shtetlach* of pre-Shoah Europe.

Two points in particular seem worth making explicitly:

1. Even as we self-define in halakhic terms, we reject the notion of observance that is mindless, dryly vague, or pointless. Indeed, for us the *halakhah* as we observe it is part of a larger, more complex program of *tikkun olam*. And when, just a bit exaggeratedly, we invoke the spirit of the late Ashkenazic chief rabbi of British Palestine, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935) in this regard, it is specifically to buttress our sense of the reasonableness of connecting the minutiae of observance to greater goals and principles.
2. The expression *tikkun olam* itself has become central in our thinking precisely because it serves to distance us from the isolationist approach of fundamentalist traditionalism. We reject that approach as wrongheaded precisely because, by infusing the concept of Israelite chosenness with unbecoming superiority, it leads not to the great goal of unifying the peoples of the earth under the sovereignty of God, but instead serves to create a sharp, unwarranted distinction between Israel and the gentile nations…and thus also creating an unbridgeable chasm between Judaism and the spiritual bearing of the rest of humanity.

The expression *tikkun olam*, as we have come to use it, thus underscores the degree to which we liberal Jews see ourselves primarily as citizens of the world, whose Jewishness serves us as the specific framework in which we work toward the great and inclusive goal of repairing the world—and in this regard, we are precisely like the spiritually adept of other nations with respect to their own spiritual frameworks.

That, in my opinion, is precisely the problem—and it is a thorny one indeed! As someone both personally involved in and very

sympathetic to the liberal beliefs and practices that are subsumed under the general rubric of *tikkun olam*, my problem is not with the expression itself (which is lovely), but specifically with what it has come to mean in the way we use it today.

Anyone who listens closely to the undertones that almost inevitably accompany the term, as people use it today, will recognize easily that it either directly or indirectly serves to trumpet a kind of exalted distinctiveness—not the isolationist distinctiveness mentioned above between Israel and gentile nations (with whom we labor intently to live in peace), but rather between the reasonableness of liberal Judaism and the intransigent obstinacy of pre-modern fundamentalism with which we are so little eager to identify, even accidentally. It is to underscore the exalted distinctiveness of the liberal Jew that we so openly and vigorously wave the flag of *tikkun olam*.

I wish to stress the following points to highlight three interrelated serious problems that I see hiding behind this specific usage of the term *tikkun olam*. First, I believe that it is almost instinctive for people to wave flags vigorously, because they wish to distract onlookers and thus keep them from scrutinizing the underlying ideas that have brought them to act as they do. (People who live mindful lives fully in sync with their own values do not need flags to draw attention away from what they are actually doing in the world.) Second, I believe that it should be possible to learn a lot from tradition, even as we respectfully insist on distancing ourselves from those parts of traditionalist praxis or belief that we find objectionable…and self-confident liberal Jews should not need to demonstrate the validity of their approach to Judaism by using slogans that only serve to draw attention away from their beliefs or activities. And third, I find something objectionable in the mechanical use of a slogan as a pennant to be waved on behalf of a particular religious outlook, and I feel that way even if the slogan and its flag themselves are justifiable and reasonable.

To explain why I feel as I do, I wish now to turn to a brief consideration of a very deep and satisfying hasidic story that, in my opinion, can serve as a useful jumping-off point for considering the relationship of the slogan and the false way it is used today as a banner.

A Hasidic Story about the Gerer Rebbe, Rabbi Isaac Meir Alter

> Rabbi Bunim…of Lublin…related how his grandfather once went…to stroll about a bit in the courtyard of the *beis medrash* [study hall] in Gur and he went along with him. It was the month of Elul. Someone asked his grandfather if they had blown the traditional *shofar* blasts that morning in the *beis medrash*, whereupon he responded with these words: "When someone becomes the spiritual leader of an entire generation, he must obviously provide all the necessary accoutrements for that kind of leadership. He needs, for example, a *beis medrash* with rooms and tables and benches. And he needs someone to serve as beadle and someone else to serve as sexton, as well as others to serve in various other positions…But then, shortly after all is finally set in place, the Accuser [i.e., the accusing angel] comes and steals away the inmost point of the whole operation, leaving the rest in place to revolve around a now-empty center…*un dos reidel dreyt zikh veiter* [literally, "and the wheel continues to turn"]! This is what we must fear the most of all: that the day may come when all will be exactly in place as it is right now, but the central point of the whole community will be missing." Afterwards, he called out in a loud voice, "Our blessed God will help us! *Men zoll zikh nisht lozn*—we must not let this thing happen!"[3]

Rabbi Isaac Meir (Rotenberg) Alter (1799–1866), the protagonist of our anecdote, is well known as the founder of the hasidic dynasty of Gur, and this detail alone already suggests the tension between the individual and the community that lies just beneath the surface of the narrative.[4] However, in contradistinction to the brutish iconoclasm we would expect from the standard anti-hero of a modern novel, what we find here instead is the intense tension that derives from the fact that the individual in question, who might well have chosen a different "story" to express his frustration, is also the man who feels called upon to lead his community forward.

Moreover, the individual has fallen into an unexpected trap: when, as leader, he should be acting as administrator (and it is worth mentioning in this regard that Rabbi Isaac Meir was well known in his day as a talented organizer and builder of this hasidic community), he finds himself struggling with a task that goes against his very nature: to build "structures" for the community. And thus we see that the authenticity of the individual is threatened by the monster that is organizational effort—a monster that he is also personally responsible to sustain. Indeed, it is for that very reason that the story begins with a walk around the courtyard outside the *beis medrash*. A walk is generally defined as a stroll with no specific destination, and it usually takes place somewhere within the world of nature. That is what the courtyard represents in the story, I believe, and it is meant to serve as the opposite of the determined march forward of people on their way to some specific goal, the kind of activity that characterizes the effort of an organization to move into the future. The community must exist as a well-oiled machine if it is to survive—yet that is the very effort that its own leader fears will make the larger operation meaningless.

The walk "outside" is far from the "central point" around which all the organizational industry has been orchestrated, which by itself establishes governance over the masses; it is that specific point, inside, from which originally flows the rabbi's authority to lead the

community. The "central point" appears to have as its natural locus the *beis medrash*. Our story thus contrasts the "outside"—nature, alive and wild—with culture, with the order found on the inside. The irony in the rabbi's words derives, in fact, directly from the fact that order, once it is established, becomes a threat in its own right. It becomes its own version of the wild "monster" against which the rabbi must struggle.

Only when an individual escapes from the feverish effort to produce and takes the time to go for a walk can that person listen to his or her inner voice. And so, in fact, even though the rabbi is the leader of his community, it becomes clear to him while strolling with his grandson that the monster threatens those who sustain it… because the monster is the embodiment of self-directed unknowing, of self-unawareness that risks swallowing everything in a single, devastating gulp…including the individual who was supposed to be in charge of keeping it in check.

Every couple that goes forth into married life imbued with the freshness of early wedlock and with the positive energy of young love eventually meets this monster. Indeed, this is true for all who start out fresh and pure, vital and alive and filled with potential: all such people eventually risk disappearing into the labyrinthine thicket of details that characterizes human industry at its least appealing. And this surrender eventually renders the industry itself devoid of purpose, as the "heart" within the enterprise that had provided motion and energy and that served as its "central point" is suddenly discovered to be missing.

I have written until now about spatial aspects of this parable, but there is a temporal aspect to consider as well. The story takes place during the month of Elul, the threshold month that serves as the transitional period between the year about to end and the one about to begin, and that is traditionally understood as the ideal time for introspection and renewed inner resolve. The *shofar*, in fact, is the ancient symbol of this out-of-time summons to the kind of inner

awakening that leads away from empty industry. (And the hasidic ear hears a link between the word shofar and the Hebrew word for self-improvement, *shippur*…which, in turn, eventually morphs on the common tongue into *tikkun* or *tikkun olam*.) Consider in this regard the words of Maimonides, who wrote as follows in the third chapter of his "Laws of Repentance":

> Even though it is a scriptural law that the *shofar* be sounded on Rosh Hashanah, it also hints at something else [that is, something extra-scriptural]. "Awaken," the *shofar* says, "awaken you who slumber from your sleep…you who have allowed the nonsense of daily life to distract you from the truth, you who have spent an entire year chasing after inanity and silliness.[5]

It is no wonder, then, that the rabbi's walk represents his effort to resolve a deeply stressful interior conflict, one that he allows to surface in a moment of intimacy in the presence of his grandson. And even though it seems as though his words are "about" the organization he must lead (and this is how the story is generally understood), the truth is that he is speaking just as plainly about himself, about his inner fear that **he** is about to become entrenched as "administrator" of an essentially empty, yet nevertheless complicated, hierarchal machine from which he will never escape.

And so he speaks, using code language well known to Gerer hasidim, about the "loss of the central point." The beauty in this description lies in the fact that the "point" is localized in the "center" of the *beis medrash*, the organizational center from which radiates out the great spiritual power of the spoken Torah…but it is specifically from this place, from this inside "point," that the rabbi flees to the outside. And it is exactly there, in the "outside," that he discovers that the "point" is empty and lifeless on the "inside." To harness the vivid energy that once motivated him, he must seek to recover the

"inner point" that has been lost. And he seeks it, entirely reasonably, outdoors in the courtyard, rather than in the formal place of Torah.

To describe the paralyzing inertia of the organizational structure, the rabbi uses the symbol of an ever-rotating circle that encircles… nothing at all. (In turn, this notion reminds me of the Tibetan custom of writing a prayer out on a piece of paper and then hanging it on a rotating prayer-wheel on the assumption that the wheel, as it turns, will propel the prayers attached to it toward heaven.)

At any rate, the circle completes whatever there is to say about the point. And it is that point, at least ideally, that can and should serve as the energy source that makes the circle revolve. Even the rabbi understands that he himself is done, his original spiritual energy source drained and depleted…and that he will surely not have it in him further to sustain the circle of hasidim around him, a circle that he now perceives as a noose around his neck. What remains, then, is a kind of lifeless skeleton that is rooted solely in inertia. One could even say that the power of the "inner point" decreases in inverse proportion to the degree to which the "point" becomes swollen and bloated with the kind of authority that derives solely from institutional structure.

The act of choosing the point *and* the circle is fraught with meaning not solely for leaders themselves, but also for the communities they lead and for the ideology that provides those communities with their ideational substructure. The "inner point" of the circle itself houses an energy source that provides power and structure to the entire circle. On the macro level, the prototype of this kind of symbol is the sun, which sends forth its rays to the entire world. On the micro level, the most accessible model would be a piece of fruit, which houses seeds that may grow into similar pieces of fruit. How interesting is it that we consider those seeds to be garbage, and that we only esteem as valuable the part of the fruit that we can eat! Yet from the point of view of natural science, the flesh of the fruit is only of secondary importance and serves solely to house the seeds…and to entice birds to eat them, and thus to carry the seeds throughout the world. It is for

this reason, of course, that mystics of every age have tended to such seeds as symbols of the power to sustain the circle: the seed becomes the spirit that sustains the flesh that houses and surrounds it.[6]

In the medieval period, kabbalists—as well as Christian and Buddhist mystics—saw the circle as a symbol of wholeness. Jung in fact cited a medieval alchemist named Maier, who determined that the "circle is the symbol of eternity."[7] Jung himself saw the circle as a symbol of the well-integrated personality; however, that is true only—and we must emphasize *only*—if the core, the "inner point," keeps radiating its spiritual energy to the entire circle.[8] In this regard, it is also worth taking note of the interesting, if hypothetical, concept of "panspermia," a notion that goes back to ancient Greece but that continues to morph forward in different ways even in our own day—for example, in the work of Francis Crick, the co-discoverer (along with James Watson) of DNA. The basic concept, at least in its ancient guise, is that scattered throughout the universe are "seeds" of life, such that every living body contains some sort of "creative point" that is its life-seed. And there are those who think that these "inner points" of life derive directly from God.[9]

Considered from the vantage point of gender, some have identified the force of the "point" that leads to divine order in the universe as male—in light of the way that it sends forth its "seed" into the circle, identified in this context as the essentially female "flesh" of the fruit. If the "female" component responds to the "male" point and accepts its place in the proper hierarchy of things, then this merely constitutes the metaphysical analogue to human conception.[10]

Moshe Idel has even published a section of an old manuscript, which records a vision of Rabbi Isaac of Acre (fl. 13th–14th centuries). In the vision, Moses is seen receiving the Torah from God in the form of a circle (perhaps the image is meant to suggest a ball of fire), and it is by means of this circle that the visionary understood that Moses had become able to see everything in the world. In that medieval text, we read: "Seek to find the beginning of the circle or

its end or its middle and you will not succeed…for it has no such place of entry, but is rather completely whole."[11] In later Kabbalah, it became commonplace to observe that the beginning of the circle is its "inmost point," as Moses ben Shem Tov de Léon (c. 1250–1305) wrote: "The beginning of existence lies in the secret of the hidden point [that is, *s'firah* of Ḥokhmah]…and that point is the basis of all hidden things, and it was from thence that they spread out in all their variegated diversity."[12]

The Missing Point of *Tikkun Olam*

But, of course, all this is relevant solely to the social circle in which the "inner point" actually dwells. But to my regret, even for us liberal Jews, the normal situation is that the organizing principle—the "point" from which power flows out to the world and which is supposed to constitute the life-giving point embedded in the flesh of the fruit—has turned, just as Rabbi Isaac Meir feared, into a monster that consumes the seeds of spiritual vitality, leaving us burdened with an endlessly revolving wheel of empty ideologies. The truth is that, in the end, any great idea will begin to exist as a bureaucratic behemoth when it eventually morphs into an unwieldy, bloated organizational structure—even truly exalted and worthy ideas, capable of serving as "inner points" that can generate sufficient vitality and spiritual power to effect good in the world. This is because such ideas cannot avoid distorting their original nature—ironically, the very "inner point" that originally served as the conduit to the divine realm. And this is no less true of the idea of *tikkun olam*: the idea presents itself as a "slogan" that sounds praiseworthy and desirable, but upon closer examination we find that beneath the slogan resides merely emptiness, as the idea has been deprived of its inmost meaning and spiritual worth.

This inner situation so in need of *tikkun* finds expression mostly in the spreading about of shop-worn, tired slogans like *tikkun olam*;

and the matter seems especially tragic as we hear the phrase again and again in the mouths of so many who have no actual intention to embody its inmost principle in their own lives, by seeking to adapt in their own selves and actions the great call to true *tikkun olam*, the repair of a broken world.

A Path Forward

How might it be possible to revivify the original spirit that animates the "point" that was lost…and, in so doing, to rouse us to undertake anew an honest, forthright discussion—and a truly heartfelt one at that—about *tikkun olam*?

It seems that a solution to that question lies hinted at within the folds of the hasidic story we have been parsing in this essay as well. In order to awaken from its slumber, the Jewish community is going to have to pass two hurdles: the first is the hurdle of attaining self-awareness, and the second is what we could reasonably call the hurdle of becoming ready to open the door to the unknown.

Let me explain what I mean. A community that yearns to awaken from its slumber must first come to terms *both* with the fact that it has up until now been asleep and *also* with the fact that, since the situation cannot be fixed with speeches (even passionate ones) or with flowery slogans, the solution is going to require going "outside," to a kind of exile from the comfortableness of home (whether one's spiritual home is in the *beis medrash*, or any other place one is accustomed to and in which one feels at ease)…so as to be able, *by looking from the outside in*, to identify the specific parts of the cultural and institutional structures that, having become frozen with the passage of time, have wreaked such havoc with our lives. In past centuries, the hasidic masters developed—for this very reason—the habit of leaving their own communities now and then dressed as regular people and, so deprived of their rabbinic outfits, going

out into exile and wandering from place to place in the manner of simple people, sometimes even masquerading as paupers or beggars wandering from door to door in search of alms.[14]

It was not for no reason at all that the hasidic master in our story goes out for a walk in nature, at a distance from his regular home in the study hall—because only at a great enough distance to be able to fully ignore his status as rabbi and communal leader (who occupies a central position in the communal hierarchy) would it become possible for him to awaken to the inner point of divine worship. Indeed, only once our status as standard-bearers of importance and worth is completely eradicated—that is, once we finally come to see ourselves as simple and wholly *un*important people—only then can our inner awakening occur.[15]

Nevertheless, it is crucial to stress that this first stage of self-awareness lacks the power to bring us to real inner awakening…but it *can*, perhaps, bring us to the brink of that kind of awakening. A well-known hasidic lesson explains that although no one can force the sun's rays to enter one's home, one can indeed prepare one's home for that light by keeping the windows spotlessly clean.

This effort to achieve the first stage, then, is simply the basic cleaning that makes it possible for the light of the sun to shine into our personal windows. But we ourselves cannot control the shining forth of the divine light any more than we can dictate to the sun where to direct its rays; *that* is a function of God's grace, and in the normal course of events that kind of divine beneficence rarely comes to us from the expected corner, and neither does it arrive dressed in same garb it wore when it last crossed our path. For his part, Buber wrote succinctly: "The Thou meets me through grace—it is not found by seeking."[16]

It is for this specific reason that I prefer to describe the second stage as the opening of a door to the unknown and the unfamiliar. And, indeed, when we do not stifle with our own hands the possibility of God's light coming into our lives—and when we freely offer all we

have of God's presence to all whom we encounter, and when we do so generously and openly—then we can reasonably say that Elijah has been sent to us from heaven to guide us forward. In this way, the prophet will be garbed in an unexpected and unfamiliar outfit, and it will be in his company that the "awakening" we seek shall also come to us—that awakening for which we yearn and which we have anticipated for longer than any of us can remember.

NOTES

[1] As, for example, at M. Gittin 4:3, where mention is made of an innovation by Hillel, the *prozbul*, that basically undoes the obligation to remain faithful to the clear intent of Scripture.
[2] The term as it appears in classical sources includes the definite article, *tikkun ha-olam*. In modern parlance, the article is elided and the concept is referred to simply as *tikkun olam*. (It might well be that the modern phrase is some kind of back-formation from the liturgical phrase well known from Aleinu, where it appears without the definite article: *l'takkein olam b'malkhut Shaddai*.)
[3] Avraham Issachar Binyamin Eliyahu Alter, *Sefer Mei·ir Einei Ha-golah* (ed. Warsaw, 1932), vol. 1, §547, p. 48. The Accuser, called the *satan* in Job, is the angel in heaven who exists to mock human piety and to accuse people of wrongdoing.
[4] Gur, also called Ger, is the Yiddish name of Góra Kalwaria, a town on the Vistula about sixteen miles southeast of Warsaw.
[5] Maimonides, M.T. Hilkhot Teshuvah 3:4.
[6] See Omraam Mikhaël Aïvanhov, *The Symbolic Language of Geometrical Figures* (Fréjus [France]: Prosveta, 1985), pp. 23–44; and see also Jill Purce, *The Mystic Spiral: Journal of the Soul* (New York: Avon, 1974).
[7] C. J. Jung, *Psychology and Religion* (1938; rpt. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 128.
[8] Ibid., p. 96.
[9] Ibid., p. 124.
[10] See Aïvanhov, *Symbolic Language*, pp. 26–27.
[11] Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, trans. Jonathan Chipman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 115.
[12] As cited in Isaiah Tishby and P. Lachover, *Mishnat Ha-zohar* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1949), vol. 1, p. 142, and cf. the discussion there about the importance of the "point" as a symbol in Kabbalah.
[13] See in this respect the theory of Max Weber as set forth in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. Hans Gerth (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1967), pp. 245–264. As an example one could mention the famous case of the sociological research on the *kibbutzim* in Israel that clearly showed the same phenomenon: while the first generation was motivated by the "inner point" that radiated naturally out to influence the entire arrangement of life of the *kibbutz* (which, at that time, was motivated almost solely by the concept of *tikkun olam*), the later generations were interested more in establishing their own solid financial status. See Yonina Talmon-Gerber, *Yaḥid V'ḥevrah Ba-kibbutz: Meḥkarim Sotsiologi·im* (Jeruslem: Magnes Press, 1970), pp. 222–230 and p. 232, n. 4.
[14] In this regard, see the list of hasidic rabbis mentioned by Netanel Lederberg in his *Sod Ha-da·at: D'muto Ha-ruḥanit V'hanhagato Ha-ḥevratit shel Rabbi Yisrael Ba·al Sheim Tov* (Jerusalem: Reuben Mass, 2007), p. 260, n. 149. Cf. also the relevant material gathered together by Elliot R. Wolfson in "Walking as Sacred Duty: Theological Transformation of Social Reality in Early Hasidism," in his

Along the Path: Studies in Kabbalistic Myth, Symbolism, and Hermeneutics (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 89–109. Similarly, see in this regard the essay by Haviva Pedayta, "*Halikhah V'tiksei Galut: Ritualim shel Geirush V'havnayat Ha-atzmi B'merḥavei Eiropa V'eretz Yisrael*," in *Yahadut: Sugyot, K'ta·im, Panim, Z'huyyot: Sefer Rivkah*, ed. Haviva Pedaya and Ephraim Meir (Beer Sheva: Ben Gurion University Press, 2007), pp. 7–147, esp. pp. 137–139, where the author focuses particularly on the questions of exile and wandering in hasidism.

[15] In the book *Shivḥei Ha-ran* by Nathan Sternharz (as published in Sefer *Shivḥei Ha-ran Im Siḥot Ha-ran* [s.a.; rpt. Jerusalem, 1992), §154, p. 122, we find the following tradition regarding Rabbi Naḥman of Bratzlav: "I heard it was said in his name that he once remarked that he only attained his level [i.e., of spiritual awareness] by assuming the demeanor of a *prostik* [i.e. by behaving like a simple layperson]."

[16] Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Scribner's, 1958), p. 11. And cf. also what I wrote regarding those words of Buber's in my essay "*Mavo L'mishnat Buber*," in *Mordekhai Martin Buber: Ani V'attah*, trans. Aaron Fleischmann (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 2013), pp. 160–231, esp. pp. 206–207.