

Tikkun Olam, Tikkun Atzmi: Healing the Self, Healing the World

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Beginning with the Self

Rooted in its mishnaic meaning denoting “enactments undertaken for societal benefit” but also incorporating its broader kabbalistic meaning of “repairing the brokenness of both God and the world,” the phrase *tikkun olam* has taken on the contemporary meaning of “pursuing justice and repairing the broken world in which we live, through social and political activism.” This worthy modern reimagining of *tikkun* can yet benefit from the richness and expansiveness of earlier kabbalistic sources, which see the repair of this world in a broader context: one that includes the repair and transformation of the self. I wish to briefly explore the place of self-transformation in that broader task, and in particular how self-transformation is crucial to a genuine and sustainable healing. I will argue for a kabbalistic–hasidic political and social activism that is based on love and not hate, which does not make opponents into enemies and which does not undermine its work for compassion and justice by pursuing it from a place of anger and animosity.

We can see the beginnings of this approach to *tikkun* in the Zohar, in *Parshat Va-yak-heil*, where it is taught:

In prayer, the body and soul of a person are healed (*mitatkan*) and one becomes whole. Prayer is reparative reparations that repair (*tikkunim mitaknan d'mittaknan*) as one, and they are four. The first *tikkun* is the *tikkun* of the self for its perfection.

The second *tikkun* is the *tikkun* of this world. The third *tikkun* is the *tikkun* of the upper world....The fourth *tikkun* is the *tikkun* of the holy name....¹

Each of these four *tikkunim* (self, world, upper world, holy name) is then associated with a particular part of the prayer service: the *tikkun* of the self, with the introductory parts of the service (Birkot Ha-shaḥar, the recitation of the sacrifices, and the introductory blessings); the *tikkun* of this world, with P'sukei D'zimra; the *tikkun* of the upper world, with the Shema and its blessings; and the *tikkun* of the holy name, thus the *tikkun* of God, with the Amidah.² Prayer here serves as a technique to heal the self, the world, the divine worlds, and God.

The Interdependence of *Tikkun Atzmi* and *Tikkun Olam*

This image of *tikkun* has some profound lessons to teach us.³ First, it sees these various levels of *tikkun* as interconnected. One is not possible without the other. *They are one, which is four.* On the one hand, this means that one cannot repair the self without repairing the world. To do so is to be lost in a kind of false narcissistic understanding of self-transformation. This illusory self-work is mistaken not only in its abandonment of the world, but in its very focus on the self. This self-centeredness is contrary to the very nature of genuine self-transformation, which is a loosening, softening, and letting go of the self in compassionate service of the world. Self-transformation, to be genuine, must always be directed outward as well as inward.

On the other hand, one cannot repair the world without repairing the self. To do so is to care about the suffering out there while neglecting the suffering in here: the suffering of one's partner, co-worker, children, and self. It is to work for a social justice organization that is doing tremendously beneficial work while creating a toxic work environment. It is to become, as my grandfather noted of one

prominent Jewish activist and colleague, someone who “would sell his mother for the cause.” It is to pursue change from a place of aggression, hatred, and anger—and so to sow the seeds of the very cruelty and injustice one is fighting against. Perhaps even more frighteningly, it is to become what one is fighting against—a legacy of too many revolutions, where the victorious oppressed merely become another brutal oppressor.⁴

We can see this inseparable connection between acts of compassion and self-transformation in a teaching by the sixteenth-century kabbalist Rabbi Benjamin ben Matatyah on *tzedakah*, the giving of charity. He teaches:

The essence of the giving of *tzedakah*, which God commanded us in order that a person might aid one’s brother, is to show that we are all the descendants of one person and that we are all one spark and one limb and a divine portion from above. And if one has pain in a single limb, then all of one’s limbs are pained concerning it.... Thus all Israel is one limb from a portion above, and if one [person] is impoverished and oppressed with the sufferings of poverty, then the other must support and strengthen that one through *tzedakah*.⁵

Here, giving *tzedakah* to another person is not only an act of compassion toward that other, but it is also a practice of self-transformation whereby both giver and receiver are meant to understand, enact, and embody the truth of their fundamental connectedness. That is: in giving charity, one is meant to simultaneously challenge one’s sense of self, to see oneself not as an independent entity but as an interconnected aspect of a greater whole. Giving charity is a practice directed at both the recipient and the giver, and it is meant to provide both material sustenance and self-transforming insight. This insight of non-separation applies across the board and governs every manner of relationship—whether a familial, political, communal, or workplace relationship, or a relationship to oneself.

In addition, repairing the self is crucial to repairing the world, for the transformation of the self is essential to sustaining the work of transforming the world. Transforming the world without transforming the self too often leaves the self burnt out, despairing, and overwhelmed. Unable to sustain the commitment to transformation, because one is acting from a place of anger, attachment, and demand, the activist eventually drops out—an unhealthy relationship to justice work that leads some, at least, to abandon the field and temper their passion.

Beginning with *Tikkun* of the Self

Tikkun olam, the repair of the world, must then involve *tikkun atzmi*, the repair of the self, as the Zohar teaches. Yet the second insight we can glean from the Zohar comes from the order in which the series of *tikkunim* takes place. The repair of the self is first. We begin with ourselves, with what is closest, so that we do not mistakenly pursue the broader work of *tikkun* from a place of hatred and enmity, a place that would ultimately damage that which we aim to heal. Indeed, the insight of non-separation that we are meant to learn in the giving of *tzedakah*, according to Rabbi Benjamin, has important implications for the work of *tikkun olam*—for this insight of non-separation makes it impossible to make anyone an “enemy,” since they too are ultimately part of that “one spark and one limb.” They too are “a divine portion from above.” We must recognize that no person is ever completely separate from us. We must rather see every person—ally or opponent; victim or victimizer; colleague, employee, or boss; partner, parent, or child—as in fact intertwined with ourselves. Moreover, we start first with the *tikkun* of ourselves so that we are able to pursue this work of healing with wisdom and compassion, without feeling overwhelmed, and without becoming burnt out from the magnitude of the task we face.

But beginning with the self does not mean that we wait until we have perfected ourselves before we start doing the work of transforming the world. Rather, the Zohar has us move through all of the various stages of *tikkun* every day. Beginning always with the self, grounding our work in self-reflection and self-transformation, we must always move outward to the world around us, always doing the best we can, given who we are at any particular moment. Yet, that beginning with the self colors the whole process. It incorporates a kind of self-reflectiveness, a questioning as to whether any given action is not only in service of the broader cause but whether it is also in service of, and consistent with, who we most want to be, on every level. It means pursuing *tikkun olam* from a place of love, rather than from a place of anger, hatred, and enmity. It means making no one into our enemy, but always recognizing that even the worst perpetrator and our most strident opponent is just another human being—perhaps mistaken and twisted, perhaps lost in anger, hatred, fear, and cruelty, but never separate from us and always, though perhaps hidden, a portion of divinity from above.

How Anger Hurts Us: The Suffering of Anger

Yet why not? Why shouldn't we fight for justice from a place of anger? Why shouldn't we see our opponents, especially when they are supporting and perpetrating profound injustices, as our enemies? Perhaps the answer to this question may be found in the following inquiry: Who is suffering from our anger? To whom is the anger causing pain? Who is the anger hurting? If we objectively investigate this question, we will discover that it is in fact we ourselves who suffer most from our anger, as well as those people around us—mostly our loved ones, who must encounter our angry self. It is not the perpetrator, opponent, or enemy who primarily suffers from our anger but ourselves and those around us. We have all said and done

things in anger that in a calmer frame of mind we wish we had not. Rabbi Hayyim Vital (1543–1620), transmitting the wisdom of his teacher, Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534–1572, popularly called the Ari) tells us:

The quality of anger, aside from serving as an obstacle to mystical inspiration altogether, [has other injurious consequences]...My teacher (the Ari), of blessed memory, used to be more exacting when it came to anger than with all other transgressions, even in a situation where one loses one's temper for the sake of some religious obligation....This is because all other transgressions injure only a single limb of the body, whereas the quality of anger injures the soul in its entirety, altering its character completely. This is the issue: when one loses one's temper, one's holy soul absconds altogether; in its place a spirit of an evil nature enters. And this is the esoteric meaning behind the verse: "You who tear yourself in your anger" (Job 18:4). For such a person actually tears one's soul, rendering it unfit, and kills it at the moment of this wrath and anger....⁶

Perhaps this description of anger feels familiar: does it not sometimes feel that we are possessed? that a "spirit of an evil nature" has taken control of our body, and some part of us wonders, "Who is this crazy person, yelling at his beloved!?" A friend has related that she sometimes sees her children looking at her that way when she loses herself in anger, as if they are saying, "Who is this monster, and what have you done with our mother?!" Does it not sometimes feel as if our soul—our wisdom, compassion, clarity, and love—has been torn from us, that we have betrayed and in some way damaged who we truly are? We kill ourselves in such moments, teaches the Ari. We injure ourselves and those around us. When we reflect on our own experience, we start to see that we and those we most love are ultimately the ones who suffer from our anger. If we are the primary

target, then our friends, families, and children bear the brunt of the collateral damage inflicted by our anger.

Yet no matter how angry we become, the anger itself does not change anything. We can rage at the world all we want, as many of us have, without anger itself accomplishing a thing. This is not to say that anger cannot motivate us to act; indeed, it can. Yet what our tradition suggests is that we can act more effectively from a place of love and compassion than from a place of anger. It is love and compassion, healing and repair, that can be not just the final goal of our actions but the very means and process whereby we attain that final goal, as well.

Anger and Unwise Action

We aim to act with love and compassion not only because doing so cultivates and manifests those very qualities of healing, but also because when anger is present wisdom is lost. When we act from anger, we act in inexpedient and unskillful ways. As Rav Huna teaches in the ancient midrash on Leviticus, *Vayikra Rabbah*: “In three places Moses became angry, and his teachings (*halakhah*) disappeared.”⁷ When we become angry, we lose our wisdom. Our mind narrows and is only able to see the current situation through the constricted lens of anger and the distortions it effects. In our anger we lose our stability and openness; we lose that quality of a settled mind so crucial to making wise choices. As Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai reminds us in *Bereishit Rabbah*, “hatred ruins judgment.”⁸ Caught up in hatred, anger, or enmity, we cannot see clearly. We falsely ascribe pernicious motives where there are none, make situations black and white and all-or-nothing, see our opponents as demonic and incapable of dialogue and fall into a host of other cognitive distortions that prevent us from seeing things as they truly are. We therefore make foolish and harmful choices, damaging ourselves and others.

Binding Ourselves to the Object of Hatred

Perhaps even worse, we bind ourselves to the object of our hatred. We make that which we oppose central to who we are, obsessing over our anger and enmity. As Vaclav Havel taught, “The fixation on others, the dependence on them, and in fact the delegation of a piece of one’s own identity to them” is part of the nature of hatred; this is so much so that “the hater longs for the object of his hatred.”⁹ We are imprisoned by our hatred and anger. We ironically give ourselves over into the power of that which we oppose. We become trapped by our anger and by whatever the anger is directed against, causing our mind and self to unhealthily wallow in thoughts of resentment, revenge, and destruction.

This trap of anger can hurt us and others even when arising from the most profound of injustices, and even in situations where anger, hatred, and a desire for revenge seem not only understandable but even appropriate. For their book *How We Choose to be Happy*, authors Rick Foster and Greg Hicks interviewed many happy people, including Hannah, a Jewish Dutch Holocaust survivor. They asked Hannah how it was possible for her to lead a life that is happy; given all that she had experienced, how was it possible for her to live her life without constantly aching for revenge? She responded:

These events were so horrible, so traumatic, that it took me a number of years to reconcile my feelings about them. But I never considered myself a victim of what happened during the war. Certainly, I have been terribly hurt. I felt extreme sadness, pain, and loss. But carrying around a feeling of victimhood? No, that would do nothing more than keep such horrors alive. I will not allow myself to be enslaved by the past. From the start, my interest is in positive ways to ensure that this will not happen again. Being a victim, blaming the Nazis, is not one of them....

Feeling that I'm a victim of the Nazis gives them a perverse power over me. It would keep me in their hands and allow them to continue damaging me and my family fifty years later. Letting go leads to happiness.¹⁰

I cannot begin to imagine Hannah's experience, nor her strength and clarity in her refusal to be a victim; but I have profound and stunned admiration for her refusal to be trapped by the past, to be trapped by hatred that would only hurt herself and those she loved, to be trapped in relationship to those who perpetrated horrors against herself, her family, and her people. Her abandonment of an attitude of hatred and victimization is not a refusal to see that she has "been terribly hurt," nor a refusal to feel "extreme sadness, pain, and loss." Nor is it an abandonment of the pursuit of attaining a just society and preventing such unimaginable cruelty. Rather, she is committed to "working in positive ways to ensure that this will not happen again." But in her staunch refusal to be chained to the Nazis and thus trapped by the perpetrators of unimaginable evil, Hannah poignantly shows us how letting go of anger can be transformative, allowing the self to grow into places from which it can accomplish good in the world. In this way Hannah demonstrates how, even in the face of the most unimaginable horrors, we can choose to free ourselves from the prison of hatred.

Anger, Control, and False Protection

Our anger is also misguided because it is ultimately only another strategy to preserve and protect our sense of self. Rabbi Jacob of Radzin, a nineteenth-century hasidic rebbe, teaches that our anger is "like a person who thinks that he is the master of the house, and becomes angry when things are not according to his intent...but does not become angry when he is in a friend's house."¹¹ That is: our

anger is connected to our sense of self. Only when we mistakenly think of ourselves as having mastery and ownership of the world, only when we think that we ought to be in control, does anger arise. We see ourselves as an independent self who should rightly be able to control what is ours. The constant violation of that control, when things regularly do not turn out the way we would like, gives rise to anger. Yet if we gave up the illusion of control, the misconception of some self who could be in control (as we might do when visiting a friend's home), then anger need not arise.

This connection to mastery is crucial. It is not having a preference, or even a strong desire, that gives rise to anger. One may, in this analogy, have a strong desire that things could be otherwise at a friend's house—but, recognizing that one is not in control, anger does not arise. According to Rabbi Jacob, it is the illusion of control, and the tension and neurotic striving that it produces, that give rise to anger. Rather, as this hasidic school teaches, “the earth is the Eternal's and all that is in it” (Psalm 24:1).¹² We are called upon to recognize that we are not the owners or masters of this world, only God is—and in that recognition, anger dissipates.

No longer struggling under the illusion of control, a kind of acceptance becomes possible when things do not go as we would like them to. When this acceptance is present anger does not arise, because we become angry only because we are not willing to accept the reality of some situation. Anger is our attempt and desire to control that which we find unacceptable, to change it or make it go away—or to at least let ourselves *feel* that we have some control, some ability to manage the situation. It gives us a sense of power and efficacy in some way, even if it is just armchair anger, even if we actually do nothing. The anger makes us feel justified and strong. We feel less vulnerable to the sense of loss, hurt, fear, failure, or sadness that underlies our anger. Anger in this sense is a form of protection, a way to protect our fragile self from what feel like unacceptable and overwhelming emotions.¹³ It is an attempt to shield ourselves from

full truth of the situation, just as it is. It is easier to blame and become angry, in small and large ways, than to really feel what is so painful, vulnerable, and threatening in the injustice and hurt.

Anger is, then, just another avoidance strategy, but we do not have to succumb to it. We can instead turn to the current situation with a deep acceptance, acknowledging that we are not in control but that rather “the earth is the Eternal’s and all that is in it.” This acceptance is not an affirmation that what has happened is good. It is not a Pollyanna-ish acceptance which says that “all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.”¹⁴ We may still work hard to make the world a different place, but we can do so in a non-neurotic way because we recognize that though we are not impotent we are also never in control. We cannot determine how things will be. We are not the masters. We can only do our best and then accept, in the sense of acknowledging the truth of, the world as it is in this moment—though we may work to change it the next.

Anger Making and Becoming Enemies

Finally, anger is hurtful because it turns the object of anger into an enemy, into a demon. In our family, our beloved or our child is suddenly an object of rage and scorn. In our community, our anger creates tension, “sides,” distance, and suspicion, rather than enabling us to work together to solve whatever difficulty is arising. In our political lives, our lives of social activism, hatred ultimately demonizes and dehumanizes the opponent, making such people no longer worthy of our respect and care. At its extreme, this results in the victorious oppressed merely becoming the next brutal oppressors, the conquered having no claim on our compassion; but in less radical ways, we can see the roots of this pattern in our own life. Consider your worst political enemy, whoever that may be: the head of the party you despise, the human rights perpetrator, etc. How do you feel

towards that person? Do you see them as a human being created in the image of God? Do you have feelings of anger, hatred, and violence towards that person? Does this kind of reflection help you become more aware of your anger? Making others into demons creates the conditions that fuel the cycle of hatred, violence, and anger. It traps us in a distorted and unhealthy relationship with the other and leads us to indifference and even cruelty, dispositions unbecoming to our divine nature.

How to Be with Anger

Yet being aware of the danger of anger and hatred does not mean that we repress it, nor that we berate ourselves when anger arises. Doing so merely adds a kind of self-violence to the violence of anger, reinforcing the very energy we mistakenly seek to reject. The question, rather, is how we can be wisely present with anger as it arises, so that we are not trapped in it and the suffering that it produces.

The first step to wise presence with anger is to actually *be with* the anger, to allow oneself to feel it fully. There is no need to control and banish the anger. Indeed, as Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (the seventeenth-century founder of Hasidism, popularly called the Besht) explains, attempting to do so is only a kind of violence toward the self and merely makes the anger stronger. The Besht instructs that when these psychic “enemies” assault the self they must rather be embraced. “And if not,” he teaches, “if [one] rejects them, more haters are made through thickness and corporeality.”¹⁵ It is therefore necessary to not reject the anger but to only hold it in compassion. When we do so, we start to experience those emotions, discussed above, that are hovering underneath—such as a sense of injustice, threat, vulnerability, loss, discrimination, fear, and hurt. When we genuinely allow ourselves to feel these emotions, we are no longer trapped by them but can instead respond to them wisely with compassion. Following the divine

command to “circumcise the foreskin of your hearts” (Deuteronomy 10:16), we courageously open our hearts to all that arises, exposing its soft flesh, cutting it open, and making it vulnerable.

In particular, we become open to the felt sensation of anger, rather than to the story-line that accompanies the anger. We notice what we feel in the body and heart, the tension in the throat or the burning in the chest, while dropping the story in the mind. By dropping the story, we step out of that which is fueling the anger and making it overwhelming. We stop reinforcing the illusion of control or the thoughts that “things shouldn’t be this way.” We give up the sense of mastery. We step out of the projections and distortions of the mind that are supporting and maintaining the anger, and so the anger no longer controls us. As Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, an early twentieth-century hasidic rebbe, teaches,

Gaze inward, listening and attentive person, and see that it is a human law, if you engage in any of the sensations that rustle in your soul whether a sensation of imagination, will or feeling, love, fear or the other qualities, including if one is engaging with one’s consciousness, if one’s consciousness is engaging in the sensation, then through this engagement the sensation becomes more active, stronger, and agitated. And if consciousness does not engage in the sensation but rather about the sensation, about the imagination, about the will, or about love and fear, etc., then on the contrary—through engagement of consciousness about it, the sensation will fade and even cease completely.¹⁶

Rabbi Shapira’s use of the term “about” (in Hebrew: *odot*) can be confusing, but here it has the technical meaning of being mindfully present with a sensation (an emotion, thought, or feeling), rather than thinking, being trapped in, or falling into the “sensation.” That

is: when we are simply trapped in the story of the anger, engaging in the sensation of anger, then the anger is fueled, becoming “more active, stronger, and agitated.” But if we engage “about the sensation” of anger—that is, we mindfully observe the sensation itself, dropping the story-line and staying with the felt experience of the anger—“then on the contrary...the sensation will fade and even cease completely.” Rabbi Shapira continues:

And if a vice is aroused in you, whether jealousy or hatred of some person, or some other vice...or any bad thought that strikes you, God forbid, and it is difficult for you to repel it and annul it, use this means...Be careful that you do not think the bad thought, but only about (*odot*) the bad thought.¹⁷

Rather than getting lost in the story of the anger, rather than engaging *in* the sensation, we open ourselves to the pain of the anger itself and we engage *about* the sensation. Not rejecting it, but not supporting it either, we stay with the anger itself. And precisely in that pain and discomfort, we find a new way to be with our anger: a path of compassion that allows us to honor the anger without being trapped by it. It is as the Jewish teacher-sage-musician Leonard Cohen tells us: “There is a crack in everything, That’s how the light gets in.”¹⁸ Only by paying attention to the crack, the place that feels broken and scary, are we able to experience the light that enters in precisely that place.

Such work is of course quite challenging and it requires both creating a container of safety to allow that work to take place and also significant courage. Training in meditation, mindfulness, and presence; communicating with the scared parts of ourselves, and letting them know we will go no faster than they are able; and cultivating the supportive power of love and compassion—all of these can help make this work possible. In addition, just as we acknowledge and embrace the anger, we must acknowledge and embrace the fear of

working with it. We let ourselves know that it is fine to feel whatever is arising and that we will give ourselves all the necessary support to be with it, whether it is fear, anger, or something else. We accept our feelings with compassion and love, and are even prepared to forgive ourselves when we are not able to fully be with what is arising.

Present in the body and heart and no longer trapped in the story, we can now turn to the mind itself, lovingly challenging the thought patterns that give rise to the anger. One of the main thought patterns is being trapped in the illusion of requirements or needs, rather than the truth of desires. We can see this in a mundane way in Rabbi Shapira's imaginative modeling of this technique, where he envisions the practitioner reflecting on the desire and saying: "My whole self is handed over to my desire, so much so that it is difficult for me to separate myself from this food. For I will not die if I don't eat of it, and yet in any case how bound I am to it!" Here, in the case of food, one can recognize the desire itself and the illusion of needs that accompany the desire. One will not, after all, die if one does not have this food, though our mind sometimes acts as though we will. Similarly, we all want the world to be a certain way, often with great justification. Anger arises when that desire is expressed as a demand or requirement rather than as a desire, the thought that the world *must* be a certain way. The difference between demands and desires is not the depth of caring, but rather the recognition of not being in control: that no matter how much we may want things to be a certain way, there is no guarantee that they will be that way. One can deeply desire justice and struggle for it with all of one's might, but when it becomes an internal demand or requirement, then anger and other forms of suffering may arise if that desire is not fully realized. Yet when the desire stays and is recognized for what it truly is—a deep desire and aspiration for change, accompanied by the wisdom to see that the desire for change may not be fully fulfilled—there is an open passion and energy in the aspiration, which can fuel the work of transforming society.

In that sense, an important part of this work of *tikkun* is simply to deeply admit what it is that we really want, to *be* with the longing itself. Often anger is a way to escape from the discomfort of that longing, of really noticing our desires. This is one of the key roles of prayer: to help us touch and express, on a daily basis, that which we most deeply aspire toward. When we are really *with* the wanting itself, it does not have to turn into anger. The wanting can become a force of connection rather than of separation.

Love, Not Anger

No longer being trapped by our anger does not mean that we fall into apathy and indifference. Rather, it means that another path of *tikkun olam* opens up for us: a path of love. Having done, and constantly doing, the work of *tikkun atzmi*, stopping ourselves from becoming trapped in anger and hatred, we can turn to the work of *tikkun olam* with no less passion but with more wisdom, compassion, and sustainability, caring about every person and every step in the process. When we shift to the perspective of love, something extraordinary happens: there is a lightness, hope, and clarity in our work that was not present before.

This attitude is described in the talmudic passage that teaches, concerning the righteous: “They suffer insults but do not respond by insulting [others], they hear shameful things being said of them but do not reply, they act out of love and take pleasure in their own misery. And regarding them Scripture notes, ‘May His lovers be as the sun rising in its might (Judges5:31).’”¹⁹ Those who are genuinely filled with love, those who are God’s lovers, feel no need to protect themselves from insult and offense. They have let go of their strategies of defense and so “act from love.” This does not mean they are passive. They act, but they act from love rather than self-protection. The Talmud recognizes the awesomeness, majesty,

and courage of such a transformation. Such people are, following the verse, like “the sun rising in its might.” The response of love, of seeking healing and connection, is not a sign of weakness but rather of extraordinary strength. Such people can experience joy even in the midst of their suffering, maintaining a wider perspective in the midst of life’s difficulties.²⁰

What would it feel like to choose to respond from a place of love instead of from anger? What would it feel like to stop trying to protect ourselves, to stop trying to answer insult or injury with the same, but instead to act only from love? The Talmud here calls on us to be warriors of love, to be profoundly vulnerable and compassionate even in the midst of threat and uncertainty. In doing so, we respond and act from a place of compassion rather than anger, bringing healing rather than destruction in our wake.

Acting from love means leaving no room for blame. We may see what went wrong, we may assign responsibility and work to correct whatever was wrong, but we do not blame (in the sense of condemning) the individual personally. We respond to the wrong someone has done from a wider perspective, which sees their divine goodness. Rabbi Menahem Nahum Twersky of Chernobyl (1730–1787), called the Chernobyler, interprets the injunction to “love your fellow as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18) as follows: “Even when you see something bad in your fellow, you must despise only that bad thing, so that you can love the holy portion in that person as yourself.”²¹ The Chernobyler asks us to never allow the recognition of wrongdoing to turn into a view of the individual person as essentially bad. Rather, we must always keep in mind that they too are a holy portion of divinity and divine limb from above. They may have acted in a harmful way, even an extremely harmful way, but that fact does not make them personally evil; it merely makes them trapped in their own confusion, hatred, and anger. This charge to abandon blame is quite challenging. It can be scary to let go of the thought patterns of blame, which so often seem to protect us and define our world.

It invites us continually to be open to the pain of every person in a given situation, rather than conveniently labeling some participants in a situation as evil—which would then allow us to be able to ignore their suffering and confusion.

My teacher Amita Schmidt encouraged me to inquire, whenever I am caught in anger: “What would love do?” This simple but profound question can completely re-orient our approach to a specific situation. Though we may begin with hatred and anger, asking this question can shock us into responding instead from a place of love and wisdom. We do not stop seeking to pursue justice, but we do so from a place of love rather than revenge. This allows us to remain acutely aware of the suffering and injustice of the world and be deeply committed to alleviating it, but to do so without turning the perpetrators into demons. Instead, we confront the perpetrators as an act of love, rather than as an act of blame and vengeance.

This is the meaning of the biblical injunction that “You shall not hate your kinsman in your heart; reprove your neighbor, and incur no guilt because of him” (Leviticus 19:17). We are commanded to reprove, but not from a place of hate. Indeed, proper rebuke happens precisely because we do not hate the other, but rather see our essential connection with the other person: that that individual is our kinsman. Indeed, this verse seems to imply that hate would often lead us to do nothing, allowing our kinsman to continue to act in damaging ways. That indifference is itself the product of our hatred, our unwillingness to be near or in conversation with such a person due to our antipathy, or simply our inability to communicate effectively with such a person due to our conflict—and it would mean that we are impotent to stop harmful behavior. It seems, according to the continuation of the verse, that we are then in some way held guilty for the behavior of others. It is our responsibility to not be trapped in our own hatred, so that we can effectively encourage others to reform their ways. When we see our own kin—and we are all each other’s kin, a portion of a limb of the divine body—acting harmfully, we can ask, “What would love

do?” We can rebuke from love, a rebuke that perhaps has the ability to be heard and to make an actual difference in the other person’s life.

When we act from love rather than hate, we give up the illusion of control. We recognize that love is calling on us to act in a particular way and to pursue a particular goal, but there is no guarantee as to the outcome. In a certain sense, acting through love is actually surrendering to love. It is about allowing the Divine to act through us, which constitutes more of a listening than a demanding. Indeed, Rabbi Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezritch, tells us: “The better way to say Torah is when one does not feel oneself at all, but rather one’s ear listens to how the World of Speech speaks through one’s own self. In such a situation, the speaker himself only appears to be speaking: as soon as the speaker begins to listen, that person’s own words cease.”²² In a sense it is less about us acting, and more about us praying for the right action to be given to us. It is less about figuring it all out, and more about listening to the divine wisdom already within us, asking what our body already knows in a way broader than does our mind.

All this is not to say that anger has nothing to teach us. It does. It can teach us when and how to say “no,” how to cut through surface appearances, and how to see when something is wrong. It can be a kind of clear penetrating wisdom that helps us see the problem in situations. This will not happen if we allow ourselves to become lost in our anger, consumed by it. But if we are prepared to be *with* it, as described above, and then respond to the wisdom it gives us with love, then our anger can be the goad that propels us to act wisely with action that will be healing both to ourselves and to others.

Making Enemies into Lovers

One of the tendencies of anger that we have explored is that it makes our opponents into our enemies. Those who act in ways we oppose become demons who lack the divine nature granted to every

aspect of reality, according to the hasidic masters. We have seen how damaging such demonization can be, from the mental suffering it produces in us to the persecution and revenge it can lead to. How do we move beyond this demonization, to a broader view that is able to see the damage people are doing without turning them into enemies or demons? How do we explore the possibility of turning an enemy into a beloved?

No Enemies, No Demons

We begin by again recognizing that there are no enemies, no demons, no forces of pure evil who are fundamentally separate from us. Rather, we must recognize two truths: that every human is created in God's image (with no exceptions), and that we are not fundamentally separate from perpetrators of evil, for the roots of their acts are present in us as well. Of course, we often deeply wish that there are people who are forces of pure evil, for that would make things easier for us. As Aleksandr Solzhnitsyn expresses it:

If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who among us is willing to destroy a piece of their own heart?²³

Despite his own history as a victim of persecution, Solzhnitsyn denies that there are evil people out there somewhere, whom we need only destroy in order to make everything alright. Rather, it is the case that evil, expressed in the actions of some particular people, is actually a part of every one of us.

On a mundane level, we can fight this illusion of the “enemy” by “not judging another until you are in that person’s place,” as the sage Hillel suggests. Rabbi Elijah de Vidas (1518–1592) expands on this aphorism in his work *Reishit Hokhmah* by bringing in the comments of Rabbi Joseph Yavitz, who teaches:

Most quarrels between people are caused by the fact that we do not apply the same standard in judging ourselves as we do in judging others...therefore we are instructed to withhold judgment of others until we can emotionally and intellectually empathize with them...For example, if someone has shamed you for something you have done, do not respond until you first judge yourself in the following manner: Were that person to have done to you that which you did, would you have not shamed that individual even more than that person shamed you? This is an important and comprehensive principle by which to increase peace in the world.²⁵

When we consider how we might think, feel, and act if we were in others’ situations, we start to realize that those others are merely faulty human beings like us, not demonic perpetrators of evil. It is not that, upon considering their situation, we would always have acted the in the same way, but rather that we are able to understand, without necessarily condoning, how it was that they came to act in the way they did. We start to reflect on the times that we have acted in ways that we are not proud of, and what it was that caused us to do so. We see that they are also responding, even if in a more systematic way, from their own fear, anger, suffering, and confusion.

Seeing Our Connectedness

Through such reflections and our own work of mindful observation, we see that we are not fundamentally different from those whom

we oppose. We see the violence in ourselves, the craving for power and control, the resentment and anger, the jealousy and fear, that are all part of every human being's experience. We see how, but for the grace of God, we could have been that perpetrator. I was recently watching a documentary called "The Interrupters," about former gang members who work with kids in violence-ridden areas in order to teach them how to interrupt the cycle of violence. It included a discussion among middle schoolers about how to respond to threats and provocations. In a moment of insight, I realized: had I been a middle schooler in a place where weapons were available and violence was a socially acceptable option, I too might have responded to my own pain in middle school with violence and even deadly force. Only by luck was I raised in the context of a community and family that made such a response extremely unlikely, if not impossible. There are no "evil people" out there. Rather, as Solzhnitsyn reminds us, "the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being."

Recognizing ourselves in others, even in the most painful acts of others, is a deep part of the work of transformation, the *tikkun atzmi* that leads to a wise and compassionate *tikkun olam*. This is the practice that Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polnoye (1710–1784), the primary disciple and amanuensis of the Baal Shem Tov, teaches. He explains that when we cannot find a way in which to share the sin of another person, when we cannot "find him 'close' to you, as your 'brother,'" then we, in a sense, bring that sin home with us. We cannot heal the sin and we cannot relate to our fellow properly. We must then "study Torah, and in that manner find the sin." That is, we must find the place by which we are connected to the person and their damaging act, the way in which we truly are that person's sibling, their compatriot in this human experience. We must find the way in which that sin, perhaps in only a nascent form, is present in us.²⁶ Through Torah we learn that we are not separate and alien from those who sin, but rather that the same sin has a place in us as well.

It is in this way that we can turn our enemies into our friends. It

is painful and courageous work. It is challenging to be able to admit all of the ways that violence, hatred, and injustice are present in us as well. Indeed, in *Avot D'Rabbi Natan* we are told: “Who is a warrior of warriors? One who conquers their inclination (*yitzro*)... And anyone who conquers their inclination is considered as if they had conquered a city full of warriors...”²⁷ This work is not for the faint of heart. It is like confronting a whole host of warriors, an army of demons, waiting to destroy us. It requires us to see, confront, and not become lost in our own hatred, anger, pain, and fear. It requires us to sit in the shakiness, pain, and discomfort of those feelings, the burning that can be sometimes feel unbearable, and refuse to escape the discomfort by lashing out or retreating into self-induced numbness.

Doing so is challenging, but the rewards are extraordinary. As the text in *Avot D'Rabbi Natan* continues, “And there are those who say: [Who is a warrior or warriors?] One who makes one’s enemy into a beloved.”²⁸ When we are truly courageous, when we are really able and willing to see the humanity of the other, the way we are fundamentally connected to the other—even an other who is acting in terrible ways—it is then that we can make them a beloved instead. Sometimes, this may be only internal, a shift in how we see and relate to that person. But sometimes, if we are lucky, there may also be an external manifestation, and the relationship itself changes—and someone with whom we had previously been embroiled in conflict can actually become a beloved friend.

From Victory to Transformation, From Destruction to Healing

This orientation shifts our broader work of *tikkun olam*, which now becomes less about defeating the enemy and more about creating healing. Though in any particular situation we may still be fighting for a political victory, and we may correctly see those pitted against

us as opponents to be overcome, in a deeper sense our goal is not to defeat our opponents but rather to help everyone (including them) transform, so that we can all act with more love, compassion, and wisdom. Indeed, this is the lesson that Beruriah famously taught to her husband Rabbi Meir when he, wrapped up in his own pain, anger, and confusion, sought vengeance on those who were “causing him pain,” praying for them to die. Beruriah rebukes her husband, reminding him that the verse asks that “sin cease from the earth,” not “sinners” (Psalm 104:35) and that the meaning of “there being no more evildoers” in the continuation of the verse is that those evildoers should return in repentance and hence cease being evildoers rather than that they should be destroyed. Rather than seeking his bullies’ death, Beruriah instructs Rabbi Meir to “request compassion upon them so that they return in repentance.”²⁹ Indeed, the classic talmudic language for prayer, “to request compassion upon,” is particularly appropriate here—as Rabbi Meir’s act of compassion toward both himself and his tormentors is his prayer for them to return to who they truly are: to return to God, to abandon their acts of malice, and to act from their genuine nature of love.

Beruriah make clear that the real hope is for the transformation of those who are acting harmfully, not for their destruction. Indeed, I believe that this is the meaning of the “blessing on heretics” in the Amidah. The *b’rakhah* reads, “may all evil perish in an instant” and “may the willfully sinful (*zeidim*) be quickly uprooted, crushed, overthrown, and humbled speedily in our day.” Immersing myself in the meaning of these words day after day, I suddenly realized one day that this blessing was not talking about some others out there, but about me. I was praying for the parts of myself that were willfully sinful—that sought to cause harm and that lashed out from their own fear and pain—to be uprooted, crushed, overthrown, and humbled. I was not praying to wipe out the evil *out there*, but rather the evil *in here*. That includes the evil “in here” in each one of us. My prayer is

not just for myself, but is for the confusion and hatred in all of us to be uprooted and overthrown.

We see that others, just like us, act harmfully—not because they (or we) are essentially evil, but because they (like us) have turned away from who they truly are, they have gotten lost, confused, and fearful, and they have forgotten their genuine divine nature. Rabbi Nathan Sternharz (1790–1844, popularly called Reb Noson), the primary disciple of Rabbi Naḥman of Bratzlav (1772–1810), calls upon us to follow the example of King David in the psalms, who

prayed for very much to God to be saved from oppression and theft and violence of the Husks, which are the Evil Inclination and its armies who oppress—God forbid—the souls in their sins and who remove their holy garb, until their faces change [with shame] and they no longer recognize their preciousness and [as a result] they confuse good and evil.³⁰

David, according to Reb Noson, recognizes sinful people because “they no longer recognize their preciousness and [as a result] they confuse good and evil.” We know this is the case because we see it in ourselves, and from seeing it in ourselves we can understand the parallel process in others. When, due to the “oppression” of the evil inclination, we forget our genuine nature, our inner nobility, clarity, and goodness, then our selfishness, jealousy, anger, hatred, and unhealthy desires manifest themselves, and we lose our wise discernment and act in ways that we know, in a deeper place, to be wrong. Seeing this in ourselves and others, we see that those acting destructively are not enemies but simply other humans, fumbling along just as we are. They are not evil but just mistaken, confused, and suffering, tragically taking out their own suffering on others.

Stopping the War

What this perspective makes clear is that repairing the world, *tikkun olam*, and repairing the self, *tikkun atzmi*, cannot be separated. The personal is political and the political is personal.³¹ At a certain level, all conflict and hatred is one and so, as our opening passage from the Zohar taught us, healing must be done each day at every level. Reb Noson beautifully conveys just this insight when he teaches:

The whole world is filled with strife. There are wars between the great world powers. There are conflicts within different locales. There are disputes within families. There is strife between neighbors. There is conflict within a household, between husband and wife, parents and children. Life is finite; people die each day. Every day death comes closer. But people continue to fight and forget their true goal in life. All strife is identical. The friction within a family parallels the strife between nations. Each person in a household is the counterpart of a world power, and their fights are the wars between those powers....You may wish to live in peace, but you are forced into conflict. It is the same for nations, which might wish to avoid war yet still become caught up in war. Two other powers might demand its allegiance until it is forced to choose a side and join the war....A person living alone can become insane. Within such a person are the warring nations and that person's personality is that of the victorious nation. Each time a new nation is victorious, such an individual must change completely, and this can lead to insanity. Such a person is alone and so cannot express the war within. But when such a person lives with people, these inner battles are expressed toward family or friends....When the Messiah comes, all wars will end. The world will then have eternal peace.³²

Whether the war is between nations, family members, or aspects of the self, the basic nature of the war is the same, Reb Noson tells us. True healing, the messianic time, is when all of these wars will end. And indeed, if they are all the same, then it must be all or nothing. We cannot have political peace and social justice without familial peace and compassionate relationships. So too, we cannot have healed families and selves without healed societies and nations. Each level of *tikkun*—the self, the family, the community, the society, the state, the world, and the Divine—are inextricably connected with each other. We cannot hope to heal oppression and injustice by creating war. We cannot heal the world through hatred and anger, for the acts of healing themselves—our social activism—are undermined by the hatred and violence that accompany them. Rather, true healing must be multi-layered, pursuing *tikkun* at multiple levels at once. Our work of *tikkun olam*, our compassion toward the world more broadly, must be imbued with the qualities of *tikkun atzmi*, our compassion toward ourselves and those with whom we are in relationship. Only then can true healing take place. Only then can the war—both inner and outer, both private and public, both personal and political—truly stop.

This is the message of Reb Noson's beautiful prayer for peace. He prays:

May it be Your will, the One who bestows peace, Sovereign to whom peace belongs, that You may place peace among Your people Israel. And may the peace grow until it spreads out over all the inhabitants of the world. And let there not be any hatred, jealousy, competition, or triumphalism between human beings. Instead, let there be love and great peace among all, and let everyone know the love of the other, that the other seeks that person's good, seeks that person's love, and desires that person's success eternally—until they will be able to come together and gather together, all as though with friends, and they will speak to one another and explain the truth to one another. Master of peace, bless us with peace!³³

True *tikkun* comes in this way: from a peace that grows from the inside out, spreading until it encompasses the whole world. This is how injustice finally stops, when “everyone knows the love of the other, that the other seeks that person’s good, seeks that person’s love and desires that person’s success eternally.” Of course, in the meantime, we must struggle for justice and *tikkun olam* even when that awareness is not present, but we must do it with the aspiration to make that awareness present, to perfect ourselves as well as the world. We do not wait to achieve complete self-perfection before pursuing a perfected world but, as the Zohar teaches us, we start with it each day, committing ourselves to the inner healing that is necessary for the true outer healing to take place.

NOTES

- ¹ Zohar II 215b. All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted. Thanks to Martin S. Cohen for the alliterative English translation.
- ² Zohar II 216b–217a.
- ³ Putting aside our relationship to Zoharic metaphysics for the moment, the invitation here is to see how the Zohar might speak to us on a non-metaphysical level.
- ⁴ The Reign of Terror during the French Revolution is perhaps the modern model for such an unfortunate outcome.
- ⁵ *Sefer Tohorot Kodesh* (ed. Amsterdam, 1732), p. 44c.
- ⁶ Hayyim Vital, *Sba'ar Ru'ah Ha-kodesh* (Tel Aviv: Eshel, 1961), pp. 33–34. The translation presented here is substantially based on the one published by Lawrence Fine in his *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and His Kabbalistic Fellowship* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 90.
- ⁷ Vayikra Rabbah 13:1, ed. Mordechai Margoliot (Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1972), vol. 1, p. 269.
- ⁸ Bereishit Rabbah 55:8, ed. Theodor-Albeck (Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1965), vol. 2, p. 593. In the same aphorism, Bar Yoḥai also claims that love ruins judgment, in the sense of untoward favoritism. I would maintain that love only ruins judgment in precisely that sense of favoritism, though genuine impartial love supports fair-mindedness and balanced clear judgment. Hatred, on the other hand, spoils our judgment in general, and not only toward those we hate.
- ⁹ Cited in Sharon Salzberg, *Loving Kindness* (Boston: Shambala, 2011), p. 69.
- ¹⁰ Rich Foster and Greg Hicks, *How We Choose to Be Happy* (New York: Perigee, 2004), p. 63.
- ¹¹ Jacob of Radzin, *Sefer Beit Yaakov* (Warsaw, 1909), *Parshat No'ah* §19, p. 34a, as cited and translated in Don Seeman's essay, "Martyrdom, Emotion, and The Work of Ritual in Rabbi Mordecai Joseph Leiner's *Mei Ha-Shiloah*," in *AJS Review* 27:2 (2003), p. 254.
- ¹² See Seeman's discussion in *ibid.*, pp. 254–255.
- ¹³ I am deeply influenced in this analysis by my teacher, Amita Schmidt.
- ¹⁴ It may be that such a statement is not far from the view of the Izbica-Radzin, but I believe that even this most radical school does not hold such a view (though there is not space to substantiate such a claim here).
- ¹⁵ *Keter Shem Tov Ha-shaleim*, ed. Yaakov Emanuel Shoḥet (Brooklyn: Kehot, 2004), §75, p. 40.
- ¹⁶ *Hakhsharat Ha-avreikhim* (Jerusalem: Va'ad asidei Piaseczno [Committee of Piaseczno Hasidim], 2001), ch. 9, part 4, pp. 119–120. The slightly confusing shift from second to third person to third is a feature of the original text.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 123–124.
- ¹⁸ Lyrics from the song "Anthem," as reproduced online at www.leonardcohen.com.

¹⁹ B. Shabbat 88b, based on Isadore Epstein's translation (London: Soncino Press, 1960).

²⁰ That is, I read the term *s'meiḥin b'yissurin* (translated here as "joy in suffering") to reference their ability to experience joy in the midst of their suffering, not to suggest that they are happy that they are suffering.

²¹ Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl, *Sefer Me'or Einayim to Parashat Hukkat*, s.v. *zot ha-torah adam ki yamut ba-obel*, as translated by Jonathan P. Slater in his "A Better Way of Being in the World, a Way of Compassion" in *Jewish Mysticism and the Spiritual Life: Classical Texts, Contemporary Reflections*, eds. Lawrence Fine, Eitan Fishbane, and Or Rose (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013), p. 99.

²² Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezritch, as cited by Zev Wolf of Zhitomir in his *Sefer Or Ha-mei'ir*, in the section labelled *Rimzei Tzav* (ed. New York, 1954), p. 95c–d. "To say Torah" is a typical hasidic turn of phrase.

²³ As cited by Jack Kornfield in his *The Wise Heart* (New York: Bantam, 2008), p. 155.

²⁴ Pirkei Avot 2:5.

²⁵ Elijah da Vidas, *Sefer Reishit Hokhmah*, ed. Jósefów 5628 (1867–1868), pp. 182a–b. This translation is substantially based on the translation offered in Solomon Schimmel's essay, "Education of the Emotions in Jewish Devotional Literature: Anger and Its Control," in *Journal of Religious Ethics* 8 (1980), p. 271.

²⁶ Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polnoye, *Sefer Toldot Yaakov Yosef to Parashat Ki Teitzei*, §3, as translated and discussed by Rabbi Jonathan P. Slater in "A Better Way of Being," pp. 100–101.

²⁷ *Avot D'Rabbi Natan*, text A, 23:1, ed. Schechter (Vienna, 5647 [1886–1887]), p. 38a.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ B. Berakhot 10a.

³⁰ Nathan Sternharz, *Likkutei Halakhot, Birkot Ha-shahar* 3:3, as cited and translated by Ariel Burger in *Hasidic Nonviolence: Rabbi Noson of Bratzlav's Hermeneutics of Conflict Transformation* (Boston University: Ph.D. dissertation, 2008), p. 181.

³¹ There is an interesting connection between these kabbalistic–hasidic views of *tikkun* and this feminist insight: they both see how the modern tendency to separate the private and public, the personal and political, is fundamentally flawed.

³² *Sihot Ha-ran* §77, based on the translation by Ariel Burger in his *Hasidic Nonviolence*, p. 123 (and slightly altered here, for clarity).

³³ Nathan Sternhartz, *Likkutei T'fillot* §27, based on the translation offered in Burger, *Hasidic Nonviolence*, p. 243.