What Is *Tikkun Olam* and Why Does It Matter? An Overview from Antiquity to Modern Times

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Jews today speak of *tikkun olam* as a central Jewish precept; concern for literally "fixing the world" by making it a better place, through activities we often call "social action," is certainly at the heart of a contemporary Jewish perspective on life. That meaning of the term *tikkun olam*, however, is itself very new in Jewish history.

The first occurrences of the phrase *tikkun olam* in the Jewish tradition appear in the Mishnah and Tosefta (both edited c. 200 C.E.), which state that the rabbis instituted a number of changes in Jewish law *mi-p'nei tikkun ha-olam*, "for the sake of *tikkun olam*."[1] In these earliest usages, the term probably means—as the Alcalay and Even-Shoshan dictionaries suggest as their first definition—guarding the established order in the physical or social world (with derivative nouns *t'kinah*, meaning "standardization," and *t'kinut*, meaning "normalcy, regularity, orderliness, propriety").[2] In the twelfth century, Maimonides expands on this considerably, claiming that the rabbis created *all* of their rulings, customs, and decrees—that is, the entire rabbinic legal tradition—in order "to strengthen the religion and order [i.e., fix] the world."[3] In this earliest meaning of the term, then, the rabbis sought to repair the legal and social worlds by making Jewish law apply fairly and effectively in their contemporary circumstances, thus giving the world proper proportion and balance.

The next time the phrase is used, now with a different meaning, occurs in the second paragraph of the Aleinu prayer, which was first

used in Jewish liturgy in the fourteenth century. That paragraph is much less often sung than the first and therefore it is much less well known, even though it is the core of the prayer's meaning. The first paragraph says that we Jews have a duty to praise God for making us a distinct nation and for creating and ruling the world. The second paragraph then states:

> Therefore we hope in You, Adonai our God, soon to see the glory of Your might, sweeping idolatry away so that false gods will be utterly destroyed, *to fix [perfect] the world by [to be] the Kingdom of the Almighty (**l'takkein olam** b'malkhut shaddai)* so that all human beings will pray [call out] in Your name, bringing all the wicked of the earth back to You, repentant. Then all who dwell on earth will acknowledge and know that to You every knee must bend and every tongue pledge loyalty. Before You, Adonai, our God, they will bow and prostrate themselves, and they will give honor to Your name. All of them will accept the yoke of Your sovereignty, and You will rule over them soon and forever; for sovereignty is Yours, and You will rule with honor always and forever, as it is written in Your Torah, "The Eternal will rule forever and ever" (Exodus 15:18). Furthermore, it is said [in the Prophets], "And the Eternal will be acknowledged sovereign over the whole earth, on that day the Eternal will be one and God's name one" (Zechariah 14:9]).[4]

Notice several things about the concept as it appears in this prayer (where it is expressed as a verbal form: *l'takkein olam*, "to fix [or perfect] the world"). First, because God chose us, created the whole world, and rules it alone (that is, without the aid of any other god), as the first paragraph asserts, we hope and pray that *God* will fix the world. This is definitely not the modern notion that we *human beings* are called to do that.

Second, the "fixing" about which the prayer speaks is *not* what moderns reference as social action. It is rather theological in nature: that Adonai—the God of Israel—will be recognized by all human beings (literally, "all creatures of flesh"), and not solely by Jews, as the one and only God. This will make God's rule, and therefore God's moral standards, absolute and universal, forcing "all the wicked [people] of the earth" to turn to God—and, presumably, to change their ways. A "fixed" world will thus involve universal recognition and acceptance of a clear and exclusive standard of behavior, with all people adjusting their expectations, attitudes, and behavior to conform to that standard. But while this prayer envisions a moral renaissance as a corollary to universal recognition of the one and only God, it does not speak of a world rid of war, poverty, dissension, and disrespect—except, perhaps, implicitly. That is, if everyone is following God's rules and aspiring to God's ideals for human beings, that may well produce a world in which those limitations no longer exist—but that kind of moral ideal is not the explicit message of this prayer. It is rather an expression of a hope for a theological ideal, that of monotheism.

The third time the phrase appears in Jewish history, in Lurianic Kabbalah, it has yet another meaning. Isaac Luria (1534–1572) created his own distinctive form of Kabbalah. From the time the Zohar was written in the thirteenth century until Luria's own time, Kabbalists had depicted a God consisting of ten spheres (*s'firot*), with multiple interactions among the spheres. Human beings were to try to become one with God through study of the esoteric meanings of the Torah and through obeying God's commandments, which were also given new, mystical meanings.

Luria, however, claimed that in creating the world, God had used too much of the divine energy and benevolence, thus shattering the finite vessels that God had created. (Those "vessels" include all finite beings, both inanimate and animate: mineral, vegetable, animal, and, especially, human.) When Jews study the Torah, especially its

esoteric meanings, and when Jews fulfill their obligations under God's commandments, Luria maintained, they literally help to fix the shattered world. Jews thus potentially have immense power—a comforting message to Jews battered by the pogroms and massacres of Luria's time—for even if they are often helpless victims in their lives on earth, in the celestial realm they can do nothing less than fix God's vessels and the world God created.

For Luria and his followers, obeying the commandments certainly included what we would call the social and moral imperatives of our tradition, but those social ideals were not their primary emphasis. They focused instead, as did all Kabbalists, on fixing one's own life by making one's will and one's very being one with God. For Luria, Jews observing the commandments would also, quite audaciously, fix the *s'firot* that collectively are the God that humankind may know. In a world physically, economically, culturally, politically, socially, and religiously hostile to Jews, one can readily understand how Jews needed to find meaning and hope by turning away from that world and focusing instead on their own inner lives—and, for Luria, that included the world of divine being as well.

The Maharal of Prague (Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel, 1525–1609) uses the phrase *tikkun olam* in yet two other senses. First, he maintains that the whole purpose of the Torah is to teach us how to fix the world, ridding it especially of our penchant to do evil. Thus we—that is, all Jews—fix the world when we obey the dictates of the Torah, because we thereby purge evil from the world.[5] This is not the modern conception of social action, because the Maharal means both more and less than what moderns have in mind: more, because he clearly thinks that Jews must obey not only the moral dictates of Judaism but also its ritual commandments in order to free the world from evil (while moderns usually do not have rituals in mind as part of what they mean by *tikkun olam*); and less, because freeing the world from the desire to do evil is not the equivalent of the much broader social agenda that most moderns intend by the phrase (since

they mean to include also the need to feed the hungry, house the homeless, and so on).

In another place, the Maharal uses the phrase in yet another sense—namely, to assert that sometimes societal conventions, based on our desire to fix the world (i.e., make the world work efficiently), contradict the Torah's laws. He maintains that such customs violate Jewish law unjustly, whether they produce a stringency or leniency:

> In chapter 2 of [the talmudic tractate] Bava Metzia, the rabbis said that a person does not have to return a lost object to its owner once the latter has given up looking for it. But this seems far-fetched to people: that a person should take something that is not one's own and for which one did not work or toil, and covet the property of another. This is not according to societal conventions (*dat ha-nimusit*), for such conventions requires that one return an object even after the owner has given up on finding it. The reason that is so is because societal conventions require us to do that which is suited to fix the world, even if reason does not require such an act [as a matter of justice]; but rather, that is simply the way of *tikkun ha-olam* [i.e., of fixing the world]. Thus: sometimes societal conventions are stringent with regard to a given issue, even if reason and the plain law do not require something. But sometimes conventions are more lenient in a given matter, even though reason does not approve—namely, when the act is not necessary to fix the world. Thus according to societal conventions, one must return a lost object after the owner has given up on finding it, and that is a stringency [i.e., it goes beyond the legal requirement of the halakhah]. On the other hand, if one found a silver or gold vessel and announced once or twice that one had found it, and nobody sought after it for a year or two, one may then take possession of it and use it, for there is no fixing of the world [in not

> doing so] after announcing it several times and waiting for a year or two or more, for the owner will no longer come for it [after that]. But that is not according to the Torah, for if one found a silver or gold vessel and announced it many times [and still nobody claimed it], one may never use it. It must just sit there forever until [the prophet] Elijah comes [to announce the messianic era], which is a great stringency.[6]

The Maharal then claims that in both instances the Torah, which is fully rational and wise, is actually right and societal conventions are wrong.[7] Property merely belongs to a person; it is not his or her flesh and blood. Therefore, if a person gives up hope of ever finding something, the despair (*yei·ush*) of ever retrieving it is enough to sever the item from its owner. As a result, it becomes ownerless (*hefker*), and any finder may keep it. On the other hand, if it is clear (from the value of the property, for example) that the owner would never give up hope of finding it, then the connection between the item and owner is not severed, and so the finder must forever simply keep it without using it. (The Maharal uses the traditional turn of phrase "until Elijah comes" to say as much.) Thus, the Maharal is using the term *tikkun olam* to indicate common sense—or accepted, utilitarian norms, intended to make the world work efficiently—and he is claiming that sometimes Jews must *not* seek to "fix" the world in that way, but rather must obey Jewish law.

It is only in the mid-twentieth century that the term *tikkun olam* came to mean that we human beings (and not just rabbis) may fix the world of concrete objects, animals, and persons by engaging in both environmental and social care and repair. Possibly a creation of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, the term with that meaning gained its most widespread use first in the Reform Movement, which was heavily invested in civil rights work. In the 1960s the phrase was not well defined, but *tikkun olam* was intended to be a Jewish term denoting any humanitarian action. Conservative and even

some Orthodox Jews who gradually began to use the term with that meaning were interested in identifying *tikkun olam* with specific, traditional commandments to work toward social ends, as well as in exploring the legal discussion of those commandments. Now it is used by Jews of all sorts to denote the broad Jewish mandate to care for others.[8]

Related Terms and Concepts in Older Texts

I once was on a panel with a very learned Jew who claimed that *tikkun olam* as it is used now is not a Jewish concept, and that its current usage is by those who want to abandon traditional Judaism and to remake Judaism into a religion solely concerned with social action. He was clearly right about the historical roots of the term; as I explained in the previous section of this essay, the term gains its present meaning only late in Jewish history, and its earliest meanings were significantly different from what we mean by the phrase today. The meaning of *tikkun olam* as environmental and social actions to repair the world is very new, spanning only five or six decades—like yesterday in Jewish time—and the types of action called for by the current sense of *tikkun olam* certainly cannot (and should not) replace all other forms of Jewish practice. At the same time, as I pointed out to my co-panelist, there are other terms in classical Jewish sources that denote some of the same things that we now mean by the phrase *tikkun olam*. Because these other terms have an ancient pedigree, one that continues throughout Jewish literature to our own day, one certainly cannot maintain, as he did, that social concern is a new form of Judaism, unrelated to the Jewish past. He was right, of course, in asserting that social concern is not the whole of Judaism; but it *is* a central feature of it, as moderns claim—even though this concern is expressed in different words than it was in earlier eras. The closest of those classical words for what we mean

today by *tikkun olam* are *ḥesed*, on the personal level, and *tzedek* and *mishpat*, on the communal level.

Ḥesed originally meant loyalty—to God and to one's neighbor. It therefore comes to mean what one does in faithfulness to God and to one's neighbor—namely, acts of love, kindness, and care. So, for example, Abraham's servant uses the language of *ḥesed* when he asks God to be loyal to his master, Abraham, in identifying the right woman to marry Isaac (Genesis 24:12, 14); God shows loyalty (*ḥesed*) to Joseph by making the chief of the jail into which he has been thrown like him (Genesis 39:21), and then Joseph uses the same language to ask the cup-bearer to show loyalty to him for interpreting his dream favorably by mentioning him to Pharaoh so that he can get out of jail (Genesis 40:14); and Jacob uses that same word when he asks Joseph to show loyalty to him by burying him in Canaan rather than Egypt (Genesis 47:29). With regard to the last case, the rabbis speak of burying the dead as *ḥesed shel emet*, a true act of loyalty, because the dead person cannot pay us back.[9] A later term is *g'milut ḥasadim*, extending acts of *ḥesed*.

Tzedek means justice, as in the famous verse "Justice, justice shall you pursue" (Deuteronomy 16:20). The Torah's vision of justice includes both procedural and substantive elements. That is, the Torah demands that in court we ensure fairness by following specific procedures in judging people ("procedural justice"), and in society generally we must guarantee that there is a substantial safety net so that the most vulnerable members of our society—traditionally identified as orphans, widows, and the poor—get what they need to live, get an education, and find a mate ("substantive justice").[10]

Mishpat comes from the root *shin-pei-tet*, from which the word for "judge," *shofeit*, is derived; thus mishpat originally meant the decision of a judge, or a precedent. It has that meaning, for example, in the very first verse of Exodus 21, the opening of the weekly portion called Mishpatim—for as biblical scholars have pointed out, the norms contained in that section of the Torah probably originated as judicial

precedents. From this origin, the word *mishpat* expands to mean "law" more generally, especially in the plural form. For example: "See, I [Moses] have imparted to you laws (*ḥukkim*) and rules (*mishpatim*), as the Eternal my God has commanded me" (Deuteronomy 4:5);[12] "God issued divine commands (*d'varav*) to Jacob, divine statutes (*ḥukkav*) and rules (*u-mishpatav*) to Israel; God did not do so for any other nation, and of such rules (mishpatim) they know nothing" (Psalm 147:19–20); "You came down on Mount Sinai and spoke to them from heaven; You gave them right rules (*mishpatim y'sharim*) and true teachings (*v'torot emet*), good laws and commandments (*ḥukkim u-mitzvot tovim*)" (Nehemiah 9:13).

Finally, already in the Bible the word *mishpat* expands yet further to mean "justice." For example: "The Rock!—God's deeds are perfect, Yea, all of God's ways are just (*mishpat*)" (Deuteronomy 32:4); as well as the famous verse from Micah: "God has told you…what is good, and what the Eternal requires of you: only to do justice (*mishpat*), to love goodness (*ḥesed*), and to walk modestly with your God" (6:8).[13]

As this last verse exemplifies, the values of justice and kindness are often spoken of together in both the Bible and rabbinic literature, to indicate that they balance and reinforce each other. So, for example, in a verse Jews recite three times each day, the psalmist asserts: "The Eternal is righteous (*tzaddik*) in all ways and kind (*ḥasid*) in all actions" (Psalm 145:17).[14] More expansively, using many of the Hebrew words that have been historically used to express aspects of our contemporary notion of *tikkun olam*, the psalmist (36:6–8) declares:

> O Eternal, Your kindness (*ḥasdekha*) reaches to heaven;
> Your steadfastness (*emunat'kha*) to the sky;
> Your righteousness (*tzidkat'kha*) is like the high mountains;
> Your justice (*mishpat'kha*) like the great deep;
> humans and beast You deliver, O Eternal.
> How precious is Your loving care (*ḥasd'kha*), O God!
> Humanity shelters in the shadow of Your wings.

This intermixing of terms continues in rabbinic literature—as, for example, in this passage:

> Rabbi Eleazar quoted this verse, "God has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what the Eternal requires of you: only to do justice (*mishpat*), to love goodness (*ḥesed*), and to walk modestly with your God" (Micah 6:8). What does this verse imply? "To do justice" means to act in accordance with the principles of justice. "To love goodness" means to let your actions be guided by principles of lovingkindness. "To walk modestly with your God" means to assist needy families at their funerals and weddings [by giving humbly, in private]. Rabbi Eleazar said: Whoever does deeds of charity (tzedakah) and justice (mishpat) is considered as having filled the entire world, all of it, with lovingkindness (*ḥesed*), as it is written, "God loves what is right (*tzedakah*) and just (mishpat); the earth is filled with the lovingkindness of the Eternal" (Psalm 33:5). Should you suppose that one may achieve this easily, Scripture says, "How precious is Your loving care, O God" (Psalm 36:8).[15] Should you suppose that difficulty in executing charity and justice also affects those who fear heaven, Scripture says, "But the Eternal's steadfast love (*ḥesed*) is for all eternity toward those who fear God, and divine beneficence (*tzidkato*) is for children's children for those who keep God's covenant" (Psalm 103:17).[16]

Clearly, then, from the Jewish perspective doing justice is *not* restricted to abiding by or judging according to the rules; it certainly does demand that,[17] but it also requires that one balance justice with kindness.

The rabbinic tradition goes further than that. It values acts of kindness for the objective good they accomplish, regardless of the motive that may have prompted a person to do them. Thus, it prefers

acts of kindness to charity (even though it values that as well), for kindness can fix the world in more ways than charity can:

> Our rabbis taught that deeds of lovingkindness (*g'milut ḥasadim*) are superior to charity (*tzedakah*) in three respects. Charity can be accomplished only with money, while deeds of lovingkindness can be accomplished through personal involvement as well as with money. Charity can be given only to the poor, while deeds of lovingkindness can be done for both rich and poor. And charity applies only to the living, while deeds of lovingkindness apply to both the living and the dead....[18]

At the same time, the rabbis were not blind to the importance of motive. Thus while they valued all acts of kindness for the good they achieve, regardless of the reasons for which people perform those acts, the rabbis judged the moral worth of such acts according to the degree to which they are done with selfless, benign motives:

> Rabbi Eleazar said: The reward for acts of justice (*tzedakah*, usually translated as "charity") depends upon the degree of lovingkindness (*ḥesed*) in them, as it is written, "Sow justice (tzedakah) for yourselves; reap according to [your] goodness (*ḥesed*)" (Hosea 10:12).[19]

Thus, if possible, our acts of kindness should affect our inner being as well as the world at large. Here, though, one must remember the fundamental rabbinic educational psychology—namely, that although it is best to do good things for the right motives, one should do the right thing even for the wrong reason if one must, for "from doing the right thing not for its own sake, one will come to do it for its own sake."[20] That is, we should to do the right thing now, rather than wait to be inspired by the proper motive. I would

suggest that the rabbis maintained this for three reasons: first, the right motive may never come; second, even if one does the right thing for an improper motive (e.g., to get a good reputation or a favor from someone else), the good act hopefully accomplishes an objective good in society; and third, the way we learn good motives is by doing good acts (as the rabbis themselves said, in the text just cited).

The Importance of *Tikkun Olam* and Its Related Values

The values we are discussing are among the most important of the Torah's values. As the Talmud asserts, *ḥesed* runs through the Torah from beginning to end:

> Rabbi Simlai taught: The Torah begins with deeds of lovingkindness and ends with deeds of lovingkindness. It begins with deeds of lovingkindness, as it is written, "And the Eternal, God, made garments of skins for Adam and for his wife and clothed them" (Genesis 3:21). It ends with deeds of lovingkindness, as it is written, "And God buried him [Moses] in the valley in the land of Moab" (Deuteronomy 34:6).[21]

> Once, as Rabbi Yoḥanan was walking out of Jerusalem, Rabbi Joshua followed him, and upon seeing the Temple in ruins, he said: "Woe unto us that this place is in ruins, the place where atonement was made for Israel's iniquities!" Rabbi Yoḥanan responded: "My son, do not grieve, for we have another means of atonement that is as effective. What is it? It is deeds of lovingkindness (*g'milut ḥasadim*), concerning which Scripture says, 'I [God] desire goodness (*ḥesed*), not sacrifice' (Hosea 6:6)."[22]

Furthermore, to refuse to care for others is to deny the reality of God: "Rabbi Judah said: When a person denies the duty of lovingkindness, it is as though he or she had denied the Root [i.e., God]."[23] Conversely, engaging in acts of *ḥesed* is nothing less than modeling oneself after God:

> "To walk in all God's ways" (Deuteronomy 11:22). These are the ways of the Holy One: "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness (*ḥesed*) and faithfulness, extending kindness (*ḥesed*) to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin..." (Exodus 34:6). This means that just as God is compassionate and gracious, you too must be compassionate and gracious....Just as God is righteous, you too must be righteous...as it is said, "The Eternal is righteous in all ways and kind in all actions" (Psalm 145:17). Just as the Holy One is righteous, so you too must be righteous. Just as the Holy One is kind (or: loving, *ḥasid*), so too you must be kind (loving).[24]

> "Follow the Eternal your God" (Deuteronomy 13:5). What does this mean? Is it possible for a mortal to follow God's Presence? The verse means to teach us that we should follow the *attributes* of the blessed Holy One. As God clothes the naked...you should clothe the naked. As the Holy One visited the sick...so you should visit the sick. As the Holy One comforted those who mourned...so you should comfort those who mourn. As the Holy One buried the dead...so you should bury the dead.[25]

Finally, *ḥesed* is one of the three values on which the very existence of the world depends, as we learn in this famous passage from the mishnaic tractate Pirkei Avot ("Ethics of the Fathers")—famous

both because it comes at the very beginning of the tractate, and also because it has been set to music and has become a popular song in modern times: "Simeon the Just...used to say: The world depends on three things—on Torah, on worship, and on acts of lovingkindness (*g'milut ḥasadim*)."[26]

The other Hebrew terms found in ancient texts that describe aspects of what we now mean by *tikkun olam* are *tzedek* (justice) and *mishpat*, especially in the latter term's broadest sense of justice. As indicated earlier, in many ways *ḥesed* denotes the personal, individual aspects of *tikkun olam*, while *tzedek* and mishpat denote its communal elements. Furthermore, similar to *ḥesed*, *tzedek* and *mishpat* are indeed core values of the Jewish tradition. Thus, at the end of the first chapter of Pirkei Avot, we read an alternative list of values on which the world depends: "Rabbi Simeon ben Gamliel used to say: The world depends on three things—on judgment (*din*), truth, and peace, as the Bible says, 'Judge in your gates truth and justice (*u-mishpat*) and peace' (Zechariah 8:16)."[27]

Like *ḥesed*, the justice aspects of *tikkun olam* are also part of God's very essence. As the psalmist declares, "Righteousness and justice (*tzedek u-mishpat*) are the base of Your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness (*ḥesed ve-emet*) stand before You" (Psalm 89:15; see also 97:2).

The Book of Proverbs similarly asserts that if a person pays attention to wisdom, "then you will understand the fear of the Eternal and attain knowledge of God....God reserves ability for the upright and is a shield for those who live blamelessly, guarding the paths of justice (*mishpat*), protecting the way of those loyal to God. You will then understand what is right, just and equitable (*tzedek u-mishpat u-meisharim*)—every good course" (2:5, 7–9). Consequently, to seek God is to seek justice: "Listen to Me, you who pursue justice (*tzedek*), You who seek the Eternal….For teaching (torah) will go forth from Me, My way (*mishpati*, literally "my justice") for the light of peoples.... Listen to Me, you who care for justice (*tzedek*), O people who lay My

teaching to heart!" (Isaiah 51:1, 4, 7). From the Bible's point of view, then, the tasks of discerning the just and the good and then acting on that knowledge are not just central to Jewish identity; they are what God demands of us: "Do what is right and good in the sight of the Eternal..." (Deuteronomy 6:18).

Many philosophical questions immediately arise from this last verse and the other passages we have been considering: What do we mean by the terms "kind," "just," "right," and "good" in the first place, and how are they different from each other? How shall we determine the courses of action that are right or good in morally ambiguous situations? What, for example, should we do when the kind act is not the just act? And how is God related to our moral discernment and action? I have delved into these deeper philosophical questions in several of my other writings.[28] For now, though, suffice it to say that *tikkun olam* and its component values have deep roots in the Jewish tradition, identifying core values in the identity of both Jews and God.

American vs. Jewish Views of Individuals and Community[29]

Most American Jews immediately warm to the idea of *tikkun olam*. In fact, for many, this tenet actually defines the most important part of their Jewish identity, the duty they see embedded in Judaism that makes them proud to be Jews. Many American Jews believe that commitment to repairing the world is widely shared by non-Jews as an imperative of their American identity. The truth, however, is that although non-Jewish Americans may feel a duty to repair the world on the basis of their religious convictions, the American identity of both Jews and other American citizens does not strongly support this duty. The same can be said for people living in other countries influenced by Enlightenment ideology.

American law is strongly rooted in Enlightenment assumptions, as articulated in the United States' Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." The ideological foundation on which American law is based, then, is that all people are individuals with rights. Whether we get these rights from our Creator, as Jefferson asserts, or from being recognized by legislators and courts, as the long history of "the rights of the Englishman" and the common law would suggest, much of American law—and, indeed, the American psyche—is based on claims of rights.

Like American law, Jewish law demands that each person be treated with respect, but for a different reason. In American law, this is because "all men are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." For Judaism, the reason is instead that all human beings have been created in the image of God.[30] In neither system, though, does this respect for persons mean that everything that a person does is to be applauded or even condoned. Hence there are laws defining what people must and must not do, and penalties are prescribed for violating the laws. Still, even those condemned to death for committing a capital offense must, according to the Torah, be removed before nightfall from the post on which they were hanged, for, as the Torah says, "an impaled body is an affront to [literally, 'a curse of'] God" (Deuteronomy 21:23). That is, the image of God in each of us must be respected, even with regard to someone who has committed the most egregious of crimes—and even19

in the process of that person being punished for that crime.

In American legal theory and as Americans generally see it, every community is voluntary. I may join or leave any group at any time, including my religious community. This applies even to the United States itself. Gaining American citizenship is hard, but if I am already an American citizen and have not committed a felony, I may leave the country and renounce my citizenship at any time.[31]

This voluntary nature of American notions of community should not be overstated. For all of their individualism—a more pronounced individualism than exists even in other Western democracies—Americans nevertheless put great stock in their multiple forms of association with others. President Barack Obama has stated this well:

> If we Americans are individualistic at heart, if we instinctively chafe against a past of tribal allegiances, traditions, customs, and cases, it would be a mistake to assume that this is all we are. Our individualism has always been bound by a set of communal values, the glue upon which every healthy society depends. We value the imperatives of family and the cross-generational obligations that family implies. We value community, the neighborliness that expresses itself through raising the barn or coaching the soccer team. We value patriotism and the obligations of citizenship, a sense of duty and sacrifice on behalf of our nation. We value a faith in something bigger than ourselves, whether that something expresses itself in formal religion or ethical precepts. And we value the constellation of behaviors that express our mutual regard for another: honesty, fairness, humility, kindness, courtesy, and compassion. In every society (and in every individual), these twin strands—the individualistic and the communal, autonomy and solidarity—are in tension, and it has been one of the blessings of America that the circumstances of our nation's birth allowed us to negotiate these tensions better than most.[32]

Even with this proper notice of communal ties in American society, the individualism at the heart of American culture and law makes communities in America, and American citizenship itself, voluntary.

In contrast, the Jewish tradition conceives of the Jewish community as organic. Classical Jewish law defines a Jew as someone

who is born to a Jewish woman or reborn, as it were, into the Jewish community through the rites of conversion. Once a Jew, a person cannot relinquish that status. A Jew who converts to another religion becomes an apostate, a *m'shummad* (one whose faith has been spiritually destroyed) or a *poshei·a yisrael* (a rebellious Jew).[33] Apostate Jews are subject to some penalties in Jewish law: their testimony is inadmissible in court[34] (except to free a woman legally chained to her first husband[35]); they cannot marry even retroactively through sexual intercourse, because they are assumed to be licentious (like other non-Jews);[36] the court may exclude them from their father's inheritance and pass it on to other members of the family who have not apostatized;[37] the Jewish community has no duty to redeem them from captivity and is actually forbidden to do so;[38] and Jews should not observe mourning rites for such people.[39] In modern Israel, the Supreme Court has ruled that an apostate cannot claim Jewish status under the Law of Return (the Brother Daniel case).[40] Still, the Talmud asserts that "a Jew, even though he has sinned, remains a Jew,"[41] and so if an apostate marries a Jew or even another apostate, the marriage is valid in Jewish law, and a male apostate would need to give his wife a formal writ of Jewish divorce (a *get*) if they wanted to dissolve their marriage.[42] That is also true for a convert to Judaism who subsequently returned to his or her original faith or became part of yet another faith community: once the person has become Jewish, even for an ulterior motive, the conversion makes the person part of the Jewish people, and a convert's betrothal of a Jew or another apostate is valid, requiring a Jewish writ of divorce to dissolve.[43] Furthermore, as a Jew, a female apostate passes Jewish identity on to her offspring.[44] Jewish identity, then, is construed as being part of the Jewish body politic; and just as a part of a body cannot on its own decide to leave the rest of it, so too no Jew can sever himself or herself from the Jewish community.

This thick, organic sense of community has widespread legal implications not only with regard to membership and apostasy, but also in a host of other areas. Most importantly for purposes of this essay, this organic Jewish view of community makes all Jews liable for each other's welfare: as the Talmud says, "All Israelites are responsible for one another" (*kol yisrael areivin zeh ba-zeh*).[45] So, for example, if I see someone drowning or accosted by robbers, I must, according to Jewish law, take steps to save the person (while still protecting my own life).[46] In contrast, in American law until recently, when most states passed "Good Samaritan laws," if I tried to help someone in need and unintentionally hurt the person in the process, I could actually be sued for any harm done. Conversely, only three states—Vermont, Rhode Island, and Minnesota—have enacted statutory duties that require individuals to perform non-risky rescues, and Wisconsin has a statute that requires persons present at the scene of a crime either to report the crime to the police or personally to assist the crime victim. All other American states accept the Common Law, which imposes no duty to rescue.[47]

Thus the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam* and its parallels in other religions are important complements to the American focus on individual rights. Frankly, the reverse is true as well: American commitment to individual liberty is an important balancing factor to the strong sense of community and duty embedded in such Jewish concepts as *tikkun olam*. To see this complementary balancing, however, one must first see that the American and Jewish traditions in fact differ in their approach to the duty to repair the world along the lines described above, one example of the larger distinction between them in their differing emphases on rights vs. duties.

The Arenas of *Tikkun Olam*

In what aspects of our lives should the values articulated by the Jewish value of *tikkun olam* find expression? Although there are many, the ones where Jewish writers have most often applied the term are these:

A. The Environment

"Repairing the world" can literally mean fixing the damage that we have done to our physical environment—and taking steps to preserve what we have now. Often called "Jewish environmental ethics," the roots for this concern begin in the Torah, are developed further in the rest of the Bible and in rabbinic and medieval literature, and find significant expansion in contemporary Jewish thought. This is not surprising, given that it is only in our time that the human population of the planet has exceeded seven billion, with the associated strains that that puts on the air, water, and food supply; and it is only since the Industrial Revolution and the development of modern modes of transportation that we have polluted the air as much as we have.

The theological root of Jewish concern for the environment goes back to the opening chapters of Genesis, where God creates the world. Although the Industrial Revolution has in many aspects of our lives severed the connection between creation and ownership—the person who puts the cog on the wheel does not own the car—it still is the case in some areas of our lives that one who creates something owns it. So, for example, one who writes something and copyrights it, or one who invents something and patents it, owns it and can determine the conditions under which others may use it. In the Torah, the fact that God created the world means immediately that God is *koneih shamayim va-aretz*, "creator of heaven and earth" (Genesis 14:19, 22)—where *koneih* means not only the creator but in fact the owner, and "heaven and earth" is a merism, meaning the heavens, the earth, and everything in between. Thus the Torah says explicitly: "Mark!

The heavens belong to the Eternal, our God; the earth and all that is on it!" (Deuteronomy 10:14). We humans, then, may use the earth only subject to the conditions that God sets in the Torah, generally stated already in chapter 2 of Genesis. We read there that Adam and Eve are placed in the Garden of Eden to "work it and preserve it" (2:15).

This theological basis for our duties to preserve the world (and repair it when we have damaged it) is probably best articulated in the following rabbinic passage:

> "See the work of God. Who can fix that which he has ruined?" (Kohelet 7:13). At the time that the blessed Holy One created the first human being, God took him on a tour of all the trees of the Garden of Eden, and God said to him, "See My works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are! Everything I created, I created for you. Pay attention that you do not ruin or destroy My world, for if you ruin it, there is nobody to fix it after you.[48]

This theological tenet explains a number of laws in the Torah itself and in later Jewish law. Thus the Torah requires that the land lie fallow one year out of seven (Leviticus 25:1–7), even on land that a person owns. When the Israelites go to war, they may only use those trees that do not bear fruit to build their siege works (Deuteronomy 20:19–20)—and the rabbis later extend this commandment to become a general commandment prohibiting wastefulness, that is, destroying anything that is not needed (*bal tash·ḥit*).[49] They also took steps to avoid bad odors, so tanning yards had to be located to the east (or, according to Rabbi Akiva, north or south) of town so that the prevailing westerly winds would not bring the foul odors produced by tanning leather into the town.[50] The rabbis also took steps to limit noise and air pollution (as, for example, in the forms of

dust or smoke), as well as other environmental factors that can harm someone's person or property.[51]

Modern authors have expanded on these themes significantly, taking into account the modern realities of overpopulation, pollution, global warming, and limited resources.[52] Given their general desire to preserve the tradition as it has been handed down, Orthodox writers have been less willing to extend the tradition in these ways than Conservative and, especially Reform, Reconstructionist, and secular Jewish writers have been, but even some Orthodox writers have sought to apply these traditional moorings to modern environmental realities.[53]

B. The Society

This is probably the other main area where many contemporary Jews think of the duties of *tikkun olam*. Efforts to prevent or alleviate poverty; to provide housing, clothing, education, jobs, and health care; and to guarantee that workers are treated fairly, are all part of what contemporary Jews commonly understand to be their duties under the Jewish value of *tikkun olam*.

Exactly how a person or group should work toward these ends is sometimes a matter of dispute. For example, if one wants to provide jobs for people out of work, does that, or does that not, entail working with unions? Which of these goals takes precedence over which? Or, given that one cannot possibly repair the entire world and that all of these are important needs, should a person or group just pick one of these needs and work on that? To what extent should these efforts be directed toward getting new laws or regulations passed by people in government? To what extent, if any, should a Jewish group support particular political candidates because of their positions on these issues? How should Internal Revenue Service regulations and, more generally, our interest in the separation of religion and state in the United States, affect the way we interact with the government?

On some of these issues Jewish sources abound, but others require more of a stretch to apply the Jewish tradition to modern circumstances. So, for example, in my own writings, I have fairly easily summarized what a Jewish approach to relieving poverty should look like in our time because the Jewish tradition has dealt with this question extensively.[54] On the other hand, until very recently in human history, health care was largely ineffective and therefore cheap, and so applying the Jewish tradition to the distribution of health care—who should get what, and who should pay for it—is much harder, requiring analogizing from other areas of Jewish law to this one.[55]

In my book on *tikkun olam*, I included several areas of social action that have strong roots in Jewish sources but are often omitted when contemporary Jews think about *tikkun olam*. Among these is the duty to be present for people in their times of need or joy. This includes, for example, visiting the sick and attending weddings and funerals, but it also includes responding to the needs of family and friends on an ongoing basis for comfort, advice, or just listening, for that is what members of a community should do for each other. In that book I also discuss Jewish duties to ransom captives and Jewish norms about how we talk to and about each other, all as communal forms of *tikkun olam* that are rarely discussed as part of that general concept.[56]

C. The Family

In the same vein, my book on *tikkun olam* include discussion of another arena of everyone's life that is not usually thought of when contemporary Jews speak about *tikkun olam*, namely, spousal and parent–child relations. In some ways, it is easier to participate in fixing everyone else's problems than it is to deal with one's own personal issues, and so people would rather focus on what they can do in general society. The Jewish tradition, however, pays considerable

attention to how spouses, parents, and children should and should not interact with each other. It even establishes legal duties that each member of the family has to the others, and it also deals with the ugly side of some families, where violence takes place.[57] Fixing our family lives may be the hardest type of *tikkun olam* to accomplish, but it also may be the most important.

Repairing the World as a Divine Call to Action

We have seen that the phrase *tikkun olam* has meant a variety of things, from its very first usage in the Mishnah to its contemporary meaning of fixing the world in its environmental, social, and familial aspects. We have also seen that although the tradition has used other terms for what contemporary Jews mean when they speak of *tikkun olam*—words like *ḥesed*, *tzedek*, and mishpat—the Jewish tradition from its very beginning has demanded such action of us, however it is described linguistically. So the tradition is clear about the essence and imperative nature of *tikkun olam*: God calls Jews to act to make this a better world, in all the ways described above.

At the same time, *tikkun olam* is not the whole of Judaism. In the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:5), we are commanded to love God "with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might," and that can happen only, as the rabbis remind us, if we commit ourselves to acting in all three of the realms upon which the world rests: "Torah, worship, and acts of *ḥesed*."[58] In addition, we Jews inherit a rich cultural tradition and strong links to Jews in the present, past, and future. May we all find the richness and fulfillment embedded in Jewish life as a whole, including its important imperative of *tikkun olam*.

NOTES

[1] M. Gittin 4:2–7, 9; 5:3; 9:4; M. Eiduyot 1:13; T. Ketubot 12:1; T. Gittin 3:12, 13; 6:10; T. Bava Batra 6:6. See also B. Ketubot 52b and Y. Pesaḥim 14b.

[2] Reuben Alcalay, *The Complete Hebrew-English Dictionary* (Bridgeport, CT: The Prayer Book Press, 1965), p. 2835; Abraham Even-Shoshan, *Milon Ḥadash* (Jerusalem: Kiryath Sepher, 1970), vol. 7, p. 2898. I want to thank my good friend Rabbi William Cutter, Professor of Hebrew Literature at Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles, for calling my attention to this original meaning.

[3] M.T. Hilkhot Mamrim 1:2.

[4] The translations of biblical passages throughout this essay are generally based on the "new JPS" translation of the Tanakh (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), hereafter referred to as NJPS.

[5] Maharal of Prague, *Tiferet Yisrael* (ed. Yehoshua David Hartman; Jerusalem: Makhon Yerushalayim, 5760 [1999-2000]), vol. 2, pp. 906–908.

[6] Maharal of Prague, *Be'eir Ha-golah* 2:6 (ed. Yehoshua David Hartman; Jerusalem: Makhon Yerushalayim, 5763 [2002–2003]), vol. 1, pp. 182–183. The passage from the Talmud cited is located at B. Bava Metzia 21b.

[7] The Maharal is using the word "Torah" here to refer to Jewish law in all its amplified complexity, not just the laws that actually appear in Scripture.

[8] For more on the evolution of the term *tikkun olam* over the last half-century, see the first chapter of my book The Way Into *Tikkun Olam*: Repairing the World (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2005), and also Earl Schwartz, "*Tzedakah*, *Tikkun Olam*, and the Pitfalls of Loose Talk," in *Conservative Judaism* 63:1 (Fall 2011), pp. 3–24.

[9] Bereishit Rabbah 96:5.

[10] I explore some of the more important aspects of both the procedural and substantive meanings of the term in my book *To Do the Right and the Good: A Jewish Approach to Modern Social Ethics* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002), chapters 5 and 6.

[11] See, for example, Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus,* trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press [Hebrew University], 1967), pp. 260–264, who points out that if Exodus 21–24 were really a law code, it should have clear rules about normal activities in life, such as contracting business deals and getting married. The fact that these chapters do not address such common things indicates that what we have in this section is simply a collection of judicial precedents on a variety of topics, rather than an attempt to give a full and systematic exposition of the law.

[12] The term is also used this way and appears in the NJPS translation as "rules" in Deuteronomy 4:8 and 14; Ezekiel 20:25; and Malachi 3:22.

[13] The term possibly also has the meaning of justice—as well as judgment—in Psalm 103:6: "The Eternal executes righteous acts and judgments [or, more generally, justice; *u-mishpatim*] for all who are wronged."

[14] It is possible that the original meaning of this verse is different—namely, that

both *tzaddik* and *ḥasid* are synonyms for "faithful" or "trustworthy." That would preserve the parallelism common to biblical poetry. The rabbis of ancient times, however, understood these words as they are translated here, and so at least in rabbinic theology, if not in biblical thought, righteousness and kindness are put in balance.

[15] Note that the word *yakar* can mean "rare," as Rabbi Eleazar is choosing to interpret it here in order to make his homiletical point. Its original meaning in its biblical context, however, is probably "precious" (as was translated above), because it is juxtaposed with verses that glory in God's care for those who keep the divine covenant. The rabbis frequently cite verses out of context and "misunderstand" them for homiletical purposes; this is fine, according to their procedures, as long as a given interpretation does not countermand Jewish law or values but rather reinforces them, for "there are seventy faces to the Torah" (Bemidbar Rabbah 13:15–16).

[16] B. Sukkah 49b.

[17] See note 10 above.

[18] B. Sukkah 49b.

[19] Ibid.

[20] B. Pesaḥim 50a.

[21] B. Sotah 14a.

[22] *Avot d'Rabbi Natan* 4:5.

[23] Kohelet Rabbah 7:1, §4.

[24] Sifrei D'varim, *Eikev*, on Deuteronomy 11:22.

[25] B. Sotah 14a.

[26] Pirkei Avot 1:2.

[27] Pirkei Avot 1:18.

[28] See, in particular, *Love Your Neighbor and Yourself: A Jewish Approach to Modern Personal Ethics* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), chap. 1 and Appendix; *The Way Into Tikkun Olam* (cited in note 10, above), chap. 3; and For the Love of God and People: A Philosophy of Jewish Law (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2007), chap. 6.

[29] For a more thorough treatment of the first part of this section, see chapter 1 of my book *To Do the Right and the Good* (cited in note 10, above).

[30] Genesis 1:26–27; 5:1; 9:6.

[31] See http://travel.state.gov/content/travel/english/legal-considerations/us-citizenship-laws-policies/renunciation-of-citizenship.html, which is the State Department website that describes the right to renounce one's American citizenship, as provided for in Section 349(a)(5) of the Immigration and Naturalization Act, and the ways in which it must be done—namely, by (1) appearing in person before a U.S. consular or diplomatic officer, (2) in a foreign country (normally at a U.S. Embassy or Consulate); and (3) signing an oath of renunciation.

[32] Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Crown, 2006), p. 55.

[33] Other terms that are used are a *mumar* (one who changes [faiths]), *apikoros*

(heretic), and *kofeir ba-ikkar* (one who denies a fundamental principle of Jewish faith).

[34] M.T. Hilkhot Eidut 10:1–3; S.A. Ḥoshen Mishpat 34:1–3.

[35] S.A. Even Ha-eizer 17:3.

[36] Israel B. Pethahiah Isserlein, *T'rumat Ha-deshen* (New York: Keren Menashe v'Sarah Lehman, 1991), vol. 1, pp. 64–65 and 83–84. Isaac b. Sheshet, *Responsa* (Jerusalem, 1967), no. 11; *Piskei Din shel Batei Din Ha-rabbanim B'yisrael* (Jerusalem: Weiss, 1980), 7:35, 39–44; but cf. 54–55.

[37] A son is heir to his father by the mere fact of kinship (Numbers 27:8; B. Bava Batra 108a, 111a; M.T. Hilkhot Naḥalot 1:1; and S.A. Ḥoshen Mishpat 271:1). Nevertheless, the Mordecai (Kiddushin, chap. 1) ruled that an apostate does not inherit from his father. Most authorities maintain that by strict law he does still have the right of inheritance, but in order to discourage apostasy, the court is authorized to pass his inheritance to family members who have not apostatized, on the strength of the rule *hefker bet din hefker*, i.e., the court has the right of expropriation. For that principle, see B. Yevamot 89b and B. Gittin 36b. For its use to deny apostates their inheritance, see Asher ben Yeḥiel, *Kitzur Piskei Ha-Rosh* to B. Kiddushin, chap. 1, #23; Responsa of Rabbi Solomon Cohen 3:37; M.T. Hilkhot Naḥalot 6:12; S.A. Ḥoshen Mishpat 283:2.

[38] M.T. Hilkhot Matnot Aniyim 8:14.

[39] M. Sanhedrin 6:6; S.A. Yoreh Dei·ah 345:5 (unless the apostate met a sudden death, in which case it is assumed that he or she repented just before death; see S.A. Yoreh Dei·ah 340:5, gloss; and cf. 157 and Ḥoshen Mishpat 266:2).

[40] Israel's High Court Case of *Rufeisen* (Brother Daniel) 72/62, *Piskei Din* 16:2428–2455.

[41] B. Sanhedrin 44a; see Nahmanides on Deuteronomy 29:14.

[42] B. Yevamot 30b; M.T. Hilkhot Ishut 4:15; S.A. Even Ha-Eizer 44:9.

[43] M.T. Hilkhot Issurei Biah13:17.

[44] M. T. Hilkhot Ishut 4:15.

[45] B. Shevuot 39a.

[46] B. Sanhedrin 73a. For an extended treatment of this duty in Jewish law, see Aaron Kirschenbaum, "The 'Good Samaritan' in Jewish Law," *Dine Israel* 7 (1976), pp. 7–85 (Hebrew); reprinted in summary form in English as "The Bystander's Duty to Rescue in Jewish Law," in the *Journal of Religion and Ethics* 8 (1980), pp. 204–226.

[47] David A. Hyman, "Rescue Without Law: An Empirical Perspective on the Duty to Rescue," in *Texas Law Review* 84:3 (February, 2006), pp. 653–738, at p. 683. As Hyman demonstrates, four states have enacted laws requiring people who witness a person in distress, whether a medical emergency or a victim of a crime, at least to notify rescue personnel or police, depending on the nature of the emergency, and, if possible, to aid the person oneself if that can be done without significant danger to the rescuer—specifically, Vermont, Rhode Island, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. Several other states have imposed limited duties to report crimes: Florida, with regard to reporting sexual batteries; Hawaii, applying

to all crimes in which the victim suffers "serious physical harm"; Massachusetts, requiring the reporting of aggravated rape, rape, murder, manslaughter, or armed robbery to the extent that one can do so without danger to oneself or others, and requiring the reporting of hazing; Ohio, requiring the reporting of a felony; and Washington, applying to certain crimes against children and violent offenses.

[48] Kohelet Rabbah 7:19.

[49] B. Shabbat 67b, 129a, 140b; B. Bava Kamma 91b; B. Ḥullin 7b.

[50] M. Bava Batra 2:9; M.T. Hilkhot Shekheinim 11:4.

[51] For example, M. Bava Batra 2:3, 5, 8; B. Bava Batra 22b–23a.

[52] See, for example, Ellen Bernstein, ed., *Ecology and the Jewish Spirit: Where Nature and the Jewish Spirit Meet* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998); Arthur Waskow, ed., *The Torah of the Earth: Exploring 4,000 Years of Ecology in Jewish Thought* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000), 2 vols.; Jeremy Benstein, *The Way Into Judaism and the Environment* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2006).

[53] See, for example, Barry Freundel, "Judaism's Environmental Laws," in Bernstein, *Ecology and the Jewish Spirit*, pp. 214–225, and Norman Lamm, "Ecology in Jewish Law and Theology," in Waskow, *Torah of the Earth*, vol. 1, pp. 103–126.

[54] See my *To Do the Right and the Good*, chap. 6; and my *The Way Into Tikkun Olam*, chap. 5.

[55] Elliot N. Dorff, *Matters of Life and Death: A Jewish Approach to Modern Medical Ethics* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998), chap. 12.

[56] *The Way Into Tikkun Olam*, chaps. 4–7. For an example of a book that neglects these topics under this title, see David Shatz, Chaim I. Waxman, and Nathan J. Diament, eds., *Tikkun Olam*: *Social Responsibility in Jewish Thought and Law* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Press [The Orthodox Forum Series of Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University], 1997).

[57] See my *Love Your Neighbor and Yourself*, chaps. 3–5, and my *The Way Into Tikkun Olam*, chaps. 8–10. These topics are also omitted in the volume on *tikkun olam* edited by Shatz, Waxman, and Diament referenced in the previous note.

[58] Pirkei Avot 1:2, in a remark attributed to Simeon the Just.