Tikkun Olam as Text and Context: Interpreting the Jewish Mandate to Fix the World through Law, Liturgy, and Narrative

Adena K. Berkowitz[1]

The term *tikkun olam* is variously translated as repairing, healing, or improving the world, and it has become, in contemporary times, a shorthand phrase for social justice. Whether referenced by elected officials,[2] Jewish organizations,[3] or children's books and shows,[4] the phrase *tikkun olam* has become a sound-bite that describes the guiding philosophy that Jews (especially younger ones) invoke to find meaning in their Judaism—by reaching out to society as a whole and doing their share to improve communities.[5]

According to Dr. Lawrence Fine, the first use of the phrase *tikkun olam* in modern Jewish history in the United States was by Brandeis–Bardin Camp Institute founder, Dr. Shlomo Bardin, in the 1950s.[6] Bardin looked toward the phrase in the Aleinu prayer, *l'takkein olam b'malkhut Shaddai* ("when the world shall be perfected under the reign of the Almighty"), which in context suggests a utopian vision, and took it instead to refer to the responsibility of Jewish people to work toward a better world.[7] However, the question that arises is: do the biblical, rabbinic, and liturgical sources that discuss the concept of *tikkun olam* support the contemporary usage of the term, as well as the social justice movement associated with it, or is it being taken out of context?[8] And, if that is the case, are there any actual prooftexts within classical Jewish literature for what *tikkun olam* has come to mean: a Jewish imperative to be engaged with the wider world and seek to repair and improve it? If traditional sources that discuss *tikkun olam* cannot be read to imply the greater obligation to

achieve social repair, then what sources *do* imply that sacred calling to complete God's creative work by improving, even perhaps trying to perfect, the world?

In rabbinic literature, the phrase *tikkun olam* is used to describe pragmatic legal decrees that promote the appropriate functioning of society.[9] In the Mishnah, the earliest extant compendium of the Oral Law, the phrase *mi-p'nei tikkun ha-olam* ("for the sake of the *tikkun* of the world") is used repeatedly to justify some adjustment to an existing law or practice.[10] Whether it is the rabbis seeking to resolve issues connected with divorce, payments to a widow under her marriage contract, or ransoming captives, the decisions of the rabbis appear grounded in the overall desire to maintain and improve social and legal policy within the Jewish community—specifically by addressing apparent flaws in the system that threaten to overturn the entire system, in order to ensure the ongoing stability of the system as a whole.[11] Yet this is not truly a universal imperative: even when discussing the case of purchasing ritual items from non-Jews, the point of the analysis has to do with the impact of such purchases within the Jewish world; the mishnaic analysis does not point in any way to a larger social good to be achieved outside the boundaries of the Jewish world, but is concerned only with the internal functioning of the Jewish community itself.[12]

Within mystical Jewish thought, in particular Lurianic Kabbalah,[13] the concept of *tikkun* refers to "repairs" that are performed on an individual level. When God contracted part of the Divine Self into vessels of light in order to create the world, these vessels could not contain God's essence and they shattered, scattering God's light. In order for the world to be restored to its holy perfect state, humanity must be engaged in cosmic repair. In the popular reconstruction of classic Lurianic mysticism, the idea then becomes for humankind to reunite the scattered shards of God's light, and thus to bring about the perfection of the world, by reparation—specifically, by engaging in prayer and fulfilling religious commandments. And it is this great effort that is labeled *tikkun*, the repair.[14]

But we can find traces of the idea that *tikkun* is a Jewish imperative to repair the world and seek the welfare of society in a far earlier text. The source for this is the Aleinu prayer:

> It is our duty to praise the Ruler over all, to acclaim the greatness of the One who forms all creation. For God did not make us like the nations of other lands, and did not make us the same as other families of the earth. And neither did God place us in the same situations as others, nor make our destiny the same as anyone else's [for they prostrate themselves before nothingness and emptiness and pray to a god who cannot effect salvation, whereas[15]] we bend our knees, and bow down, and give thanks, before the Ruler, the Ruler of rulers, the Holy One, blessed be God—the One who spread out the heavens and made the foundations of the earth, and whose precious dwelling is in the heavens above and whose powerful Presence is in the highest heights. The Eternal is our God, there is none else. Our God is truth, and nothing else compares. As it is written in Your Torah: "And you shall know today, and take to heart, that the Eternal is the only God, in the heavens above and on earth below; there is no other" (Deuteronomy 4:39).
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> Therefore we put our hope in You, O Eternal One, our God, to soon see the glory of Your strength, to remove all idols from the earth, and to completely cut off all false gods; to repair the world, Your holy empire; and for all living flesh to call Your name, and for all the wicked of the earth to turn to You. May all the world's inhabitants recognize and know that to You every knee must bend and every tongue must swear loyalty. Before You, O Eternal One, our God, may all bow down, and give honor to Your precious name, and may all take upon themselves the yoke of Your rule. And may You

> reign over them soon and forever and always. Because all rule is Yours alone, and You will rule in honor forever and ever. As it is written in Your Torah: "The Eternal shall reign forever and ever" (Exodus 15:18). And it is said: "The Eternal will be Ruler over the whole earth; and on that day, God will be One and God's name will be One" (Zechariah 14:9).

If Manny Rivera was known as the "Great Closer" for the New York Yankees, then the Aleinu prayer can be considered the "great closer" in the framework of daily Jewish prayer. Aleinu originated as an introduction to the section of the High Holy Day Rosh Hashanah liturgy called Malkhuyot ("the Kingship Prayers"), where Jews declare God to be the Sovereign, but sometime in the Middle Ages it migrated to the daily prayer service and is now universally recited at the end of morning, afternoon, and evening services, as well as at the conclusion of certain other prayer services.[16] Where does it come from originally? Some traditional sources claim that it was authored by Joshua as he captured the city of Jericho.[17] Others, including such luminaries as Manasseh ben Israel (1604–1657), attribute the prayer to the men of the so-called Great Assembly of the Second Temple period;[18] still others posit Rav, the third-century rabbinic sage, as the author.[19] Some claim that there is a version of Aleinu going back even earlier to the time of Rabbi Akiva, who died decades before Rav was even born. This would then imply that Rav did not compose the prayer but merely included an already-extant Aleinu prayer in the Rosh Hashanah liturgy.[20]

Aleinu speaks of God in the third person and comes across more as a declaration of faith than as a prayer.[21] It speaks of a Jew's duty to worship and prostrate him or herself before God, acknowledging God as the Creator and Sovereign of the universe, praising God for allowing the Jewish people to serve God, and then expresses the hope that one day the whole world will recognize God and abandon idolatry.[22]

But Aleinu is a composite prayer and lays out a distinctly particularistic model in its first paragraph—which stands in sharp contrast to the universalistic theme of the second paragraph, where the words *l'takkein olam b'malkhut Shaddai* are found. While we do not find words that depict Jews as the chosen people picked to serve God as a role model to others, the first paragraph of Aleinu does describe the Jewish nation as distinct from other nations. In the words of the Aleinu prayer, it is the Jews alone who—unlike the other nations of the world—worship and prostrate themselves before God.

Because of the singular emphasis on Jewish particularism in the first paragraph of Aleinu, the placement of the *tikkun olam* reference in the second paragraph becomes that much more significant—especially when contrasted with the original text of the first paragraph, where a textual reference that was excised from European prayerbooks by Christian censors originally described non-Jews as those who "bow down to vanity and emptiness, and who pray to a god that cannot save."[23]

Despite the original connection of this phrase to condemnation of pagan idolatry, no different from countless analogous texts found in the prophetic writings[24] (or even in other liturgical texts composed prior to the rise of Christianity), it was nonetheless censored by church and governmental officials working under the impression that it had been written *specifically* to speak to the Christian claim that there was no possibility of salvation outside the church. Jewish apostates pointed out that the word for "emptiness" (*va-rik*) is numerologically equivalent to 312, which happens to also be the numerological equivalent of *yeshu*, the most well-known Hebrew version of Jesus' name.[25] While the phrase remained in Sephardic and Mizrachi prayerbooks published in the Muslim world (for example, in Yemen), it was removed from Ashkenazic prayerbooks published in the lands of Christendom, due to pressure from Christian censors in Europe. In some prayerbooks, however, a space was left

to indicate that something was missing from the text.[26] In recent times, however, these words have reappeared in several contemporary prayerbooks, including the very popular Artscroll and Koren/Sacks *siddurim*.[27] Its return is justified as a simple effort to restore the text to the original version, and specifically not as a contemporary attack on Christianity.[28] Whether or not worshippers take it that way, of course, is a different question entirely.

Although the placement of this phrase was apparently not originally directed against Christians per se, the phrase clearly was read as an anti-Christian phrase during the Middle Ages.[29] But regardless of why it was placed in Aleinu in the first place, it provides a stark contrast when juxtaposed with the expansive theology expressed in the second paragraph. The first paragraph provides a very clear denunciation of the beliefs of the nations of the world, in contrast to Jewish views of one God—who is here referred to in the third person. However, the tone of the second paragraph is completely different: it takes on the form of a prayer in which one turns directly to God and prays that the entire world will reject idolatry and instead recognize and worship God as Jews do—that is, that all human beings will follow the example set by the people Israel and accept upon themselves the sovereignty of God.[30]

The popular interpretation of *l'akkein olam b'malkhut Shaddai* is "so that the world will be perfected under the sovereignty of God," and this implies that by accepting God's sovereignty and seeing ourselves as created in God's image, the *tikkun* that is to take place requires humanity to work to overcome social misery. This understanding of *tikkun olam* then provides an encompassing call to practice social justice as a religious imperative.

There are two problems with this interpretation, one from a linguistic perspective and the other more theological in nature. The first concerns recent scholarship, which has focused on whether translating the word *tikkun* as "repair" is itself reasonable. Versions of the prayerbook exist in which the Hebrew world *l'takkein* is

spelled with the letter *kaf* instead of the more common *kof*, with the meaning "to establish" rather than "to fix" or "to repair."[31] (The word spelled in that way, for example, can be found in the prayerbooks of Rav Saadiah Gaon [c. 882–942], Maimonides [in the version of the liturgy included as an appendix to the Sefer Ha-ahavah section of his Mishneh Torah[32]], and in many prayer texts found in the Cairo Genizah.[33] In current Yemenite prayerbooks, it is spelled that way as well.[34]) As this second section of Aleinu is fundamentally a prayer for the establishment of God's kingdom, Mitchell First (who has documented these variant spellings) points out that the reading of *l'takkein* spelled with a *kaf* is a more appropriate fit: in this context, it makes sense to speak of "establishing" the world under God's sovereignty, rather than "repairing" it.[35] However, as First also points out, there are many other sources within the early European prayerbook tradition—such as *Maḥzor Vitry* and *Siddur Ḥasidei Ashkenaz*—where the word is indeed spelled the more familiar way, with the *kof*.[36]

But regardless of the spelling, there may be a second barrier in understanding Aleinu to be the source for the contemporary understanding of *tikkun olam*. The plain reading of the entire second paragraph doesn't outwardly seem to appeal to humanity to accomplish that goal, but rather implies that it is God alone who will bring this about…and presumably without any human input.[37]

If Aleinu then fails as the source of *tikkun olam* (in its contemporary usage), either for linguistic or theological reasons, can we find an alternate source for this idea, within the large corpus of rabbinic literature?

One approach has been to analyze the roots of *tikkun olam* through the prism of Jewish–gentile relations, in particular through the seven so-called Noachide laws, rules that have traditionally been understood to lay out moral and ethical standards for humanity as a whole.[38] (Noah is identified in the Torah at Genesis 6:9 as a righteous person, at least in his own generation, and so it follows

logically that God would give these laws as a binding set of laws to the descendants of Noah—that is, humankind—as guidelines for living as righteous a life as their progenitor.) In the view of the rabbis, righteous people of all nations have a share in the world to come if they follow these precepts.[39] As enumerated in the Talmud, these seven laws are: the prohibitions of idolatry, blasphemy, murder, sexually immoral behavior, theft, and the ingestion of an animal's flesh while the animal remains alive, and also the requirement to set up courts designed to enforce laws. In the traditional Jewish conception, Jews are required to observe 613 commandments while gentiles are bound solely by these seven Noachide laws.[40]

In contemporary times, Rabbis J. David Bleich and Michael Broyde have examined whether the Noachide laws can serve as a basis for Jewish involvement in social justice and the welfare of general society.[41] They explain that the significance of the seven Noachide laws is that these laws provide the outline for a just and stable culture. As such, the desire to create a more just and stable world would be based on a form of *tikkun olam* arising out of these laws, as they provide the foundational examples for the correct functioning of secular society. According to Bleich, the Noachide code exists not just for the benefit of humanity (namely, by regulating human conduct and preventing anarchy), but also to fulfill a divine mission. Jewish thought is "bound by divinely imposed imperatives that oblige him [i.e., the Jew] to be concerned with the needs—and morals—of his fellow."[42] As a result, the Jewish people—themselves elected to serve God—are obligated to assure that God is served by all of God's creatures. If these rules provide the outline for joint interest in being engaged in the welfare and betterment of general society, what then are the requirements for Jews vis-à-vis their implementation? Is the mandate that Jews only provide non-Jews with detailed instructions as to the specific ways to obey the Noachide commandments? Or do Jews have a general obligation formally to compel, as best they can, gentile observance of Noachide law?[43] Both Bleich and Broyde

conclude that while the seven Noachide laws are binding for non-Jews, there is no requirement for Jews to demand their acceptance by gentiles, but rather only a voluntary approach to encouraging them to fulfill these commandments.[44] This stands in contradistinction to the view of Maimonides, who argued that Moses commanded Jews by the word of God specifically to compel all people on earth to accept these commandments bequeathed to the descendants of Noah; Maimonides thus believed that Jews *are* required to compel gentiles to follow these laws.[45] In contemporary times, as Broyde points out, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–1994), taught that Jews *are* obligated to teach and persuade Noachides to observe these commandments.[46] Broyde cites many authorities, including Rabbi Moses Isserles (1520–1572, called the Rema), who disagree with Maimonides and who thus do *not* see any obligation to attempt to compel non-Jews to follow these rules. Rather, according to them, Jews can see themselves as being able to set an example as a form of providing *or la-goyim* ("light unto the nations") and to impart specific knowledge to non-Jews when requested.[47] Both Broyde and Bleich agree that while there is no actual legal requirement to enforce compliance, there are grounds for a meta-halakhic practice of encouraging non-Jews to observe these commandments.[48]

What we have to consider, however, is that the moral order described in the Noachide laws are not neutral principles connected only to social justice. While setting up courts or not stealing or murdering are moral values that all can embrace, the prohibition against blasphemy and not engaging in idolatry require a particular theological orientation of those non-Jews who accept these laws—and, thus, of society as a whole. As Gerald Blidstein explains, the realm of *tikkun olam* that may flow from the Noachide laws asks us to share with others what we see as a religious vision of the world that all of humanity can accept. It means, then, that universal concepts regarding social justice and ethics are wrapped up in acceptance of a monotheistic faith and worldview.[49]

How do we make the leap that calls upon Jews to embrace a mandate to be concerned with the welfare of general society, which does not necessarily endorse a religious position? Are we merely concerned with what was bequeathed to us at Sinai as the bearers of a unique covenant, or do we also see ourselves as part of the general picture of all humanity created in the image of God?[50] As Blidstein writes, there exists a "paradoxical possibility that Israel best fulfills whatever responsibility it has for the welfare of mankind by acting in devotion and probity before the Lord, rather than by busying itself in attempting to directly affect the spiritual or material state of the world…."[51] And he writes further that, in his opinion, "We can safely say that 'responsibility for the welfare of general society' is not the highest priority in our scheme of things, at least on the day-to-day level. The people Israel seems called upon primarily to keep its house in order and to care for its own, to serve God and to witness to Him. At the same time this exemplary life ought to have an overall incremental impact on mankind as a whole."[52]

One aspect of this "paradoxical possibility" is explored in a seminal essay of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Confrontation."[53] Soloveitchik, the pre-eminent authority for the Modern Orthodox movement in the twentieth century, identifies a double confrontation that characterizes the Jewish role in the world. The Jewish people are called upon to maintain their own unique relationship with God but also, and at the same time, to take part in the universal confrontation of humanity with the cosmos. He makes the point that up until the modern era, the Jew's engagement with the modern world was not ideological, but rather born out of historical reality. Ironically, in this essay Soloveitchik calls upon Jews to be engaged in relationships with non-Jews regarding general civic issues, standing "shoulder to shoulder with mankind…for the welfare of all."[54] But when it comes to theological dialogue, Soloveitchik feels that *that* is part of the intimate relationship that each faith community has with God, which should neither be trespassed upon nor engaged with.[55] Yet the

question we are left with is whether the theological realm can really be divorced from the political or civic realm.

Thus, on the one hand, Jews must see themselves as human beings sharing the destiny of Adam in his general encounter with nature—which means Jewish involvement in "every civic, scientific, and political enterprise" and as "human beings committed to the general welfare and progress of mankind," which leads to Jews being seen as useful, engaged citizens.[56] On the other hand, Jews are part of a unique covenantal community that cannot be shared with the world, and thus they need not set up for public scrutiny matters of personal issues of faith. Ironically, this appears to imply that it would be better if any Jewish involvement in the betterment of society *not* invoke any broad theological basis that could possibly lead to the kind of interfaith dialogue to which Soloveitchik was personally opposed.[57]

It would seem then that a more neutral way to invoke—and ground—the concept of *tikkun olam* would be as part of general moral impulses, by refashioning the parallel concept of laws undertaken "for the sake of preserving peace" (*mi-p'nei darkhei shalom*). Blidstein notes that Jews who live in a democratic society are obligated by mutuality of civic responsibility: "It is unfair, ugly, and eventually impossible," he writes, "to make claims on society without feeling part of it and making one's own contribution."[58] Nor, in his view, should we limit the application of this idea when we invoke laws enacted *mi-p'nei darkhei shalom*. While the spirit of *mi-p'nei darkhei shalom* has obvious pragmatic value,[59] it also expresses a "value of the spirit"[60] and could therefore be translated as "for the sake of harmonious relations." He takes it a step further and says that while there is a Jewish value to social justice,[61] we can rely on something beyond general notions of mutuality, respect, and moral impulse to develop a general notion of *ḥesed*, of righteous behavior, emphasized by the prophets and infused with the religious conviction that we are all God's children.[62] In other words, we should follow the admonition of the rabbis that we must visit non-Jews who are sick as

seriously as we take the injunction to visit Jews who are ill. Similarly, we must provide for all who are poor and not just the Jewish poor. This view is reflected in a relevant passage in Maimonides: "The sages commanded us to visit the sick of the gentiles and to [provide the means for them to] bury their dead [just as we provide for the burial of] the dead of Israel, and to provide for their poor together with the poor of Israel, because of 'the ways of peace.' Behold, it is written, 'God is good to all, and His mercy is upon all of His creations,' and it is also written, "Its [the Torah's] ways are pleasant ways and all of its paths are peace.'"[63] Rabbi Jonathan Sacks further elaborates the connection of *darkhei shalom* to *ḥesed* by defining the former as "*ḥesed* universalized"—that is, applied to those who are not members of the Jewish faith.[64] He points to the phrase found in Genesis 2:18, "It is not good for man to be alone" (speaking literally about the need for Adam to have a soulmate), as the birth of the concept of *ḥesed*, which he then identifies as the redemption of solitude, the bridge we build across the ontological abyss between I and Thou.[65]

There may be another theme that can be connected to *darkhei shalom*, one in which Jewish engagement with the wider community is defined not only as *ḥesed* but in fact as a form of *kiddush ha-sheim*, the sanctification of God's name.[66] To illustrate this point, I would like to draw on an account from outside the Jewish world, one written by African–American Yale Law School Professor Stephen Carter, describing his experience of moving, as a pre-teen, together with his family, into an all-white neighborhood in Washington, D.C., in 1966:

> In the summer of 1966, my parents moved with their five children to a large house near the corner of 35th and Macomb Streets in Cleveland Park, a neighborhood in the middle of Northwest Washington, D.C., and, in those days, a lily-white enclave…My first impression was of block upon block of grim, forbidding old homes, each of which seemed to feature a massive dog and spoiled children in the uniforms

> of various private schools. My two brothers and two sisters and I sat on the front steps, missing our playmates, as the movers carried in our furniture. Cars passed what was now our house, slowing for a look, as did people on foot. We waited for somebody to say hello, to welcome us. Nobody did.…I watched the strange new people passing us and wordlessly watching back, and I knew we were not welcome here. I knew we would not be liked here. I knew we would have no friends here. I knew we should not have moved here. I knew.…And all at once, a white woman arriving home from work at the house across the street from ours turned and smiled with obvious delight and waved and called out, "Welcome!" in a booming, confident voice I would come to love. She bustled into her house, only to emerge, minutes later, with a huge tray of cream cheese and jelly sandwiches, which she carried to our porch and offered around with her ready smile, simultaneously feeding and greeting the children of a family she had never met—and a black family at that—with nothing to gain for herself except perhaps the knowledge that she had done the right thing. We were strangers, black strangers, and she went out of her way to make us feel welcome. This woman's name was Sara Kestenbaum. Sara died much too soon, but she remains, in my experience, one of the great exemplars of all that is best about civility.[67]

Professor Carter recalls that Kestenbaum and her family were deeply religious Jews, and he saw her behavior arising not just from a loving and generous nature, but as a result of deeply held religious beliefs:

> Civility creates not merely a negative duty not to do harm, but an affirmative duty to do good. In the Jewish tradition, this duty is captured in the requirement of *g'milut ḥasadim*—

> the doing of acts of kindness—which is in turn derived from the understanding that human beings are made in the image of God. This understanding imposes a duty to do as God would do…civility itself may be seen as a part of *ḥesed*; it does indeed require kindness toward our fellow citizens, including the ones who are strangers, and even when it is hard.[68]

Whatever proofs we may or may not find for current social justice efforts having their roots in rabbinic and liturgical understandings of tikkun olam, in the final analysis it would seem that the related concepts of *ḥesed* and *g'milut ḥasadim* provide wider catchment for understanding *tikkun olam*.[69] In turn, the need to resort to a legally mandated model becomes less compelling once we realize we have a model of *ḥesed* in which our definition of *tikkun olam* is grounded. Holocaust survivor and Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel expressed this idea well, when he said that "Judaism integrates particularist aspirations with universal values, fervor with rigor, legend with law.…A Jew must be sensitive to the pain of all human beings. A Jew cannot remain indifferent to human suffering, whether in other countries or in our own cities and towns. The mission of the Jewish people has never been to make the world more Jewish, but to make it more human."[70] Whether an ethical or legal mandate, *tikkun olam* is a Jewish necessity, and a vital part of our community and our DNA.

NOTES

[1] I would like to thank my son Menachem Leib Brenner (Yeshiva University, 2017) for his incisive comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this essay.
[2] See, for example, President Obama's speech to the AIPAC Policy Conference on March 4, 2012, available online at www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/03/04/remarks-president-aipac-policy-conference: "The concept of *tikkun olam* that has enriched and guided my life…" Cf. also the remarks made by the President and by (then) House Majority Leader Eric Cantor at the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations gala on October 13 2013, in which Obama remarked, "together we have upheld the principle that each of us has the obligation to repair the world" and Cantor declared that "we as Jewish leaders must continue the sacred religious tradition of communal leadership and *tikkun olam*." Both the President's remarks and Eric Cantor's are available online, at www.youtube/chGu-WiBjGE and www.youtube/6zO8vXBO714 respectively.
[3] See, for example, how the term is used by the following organizations on their websites: American Jewish World Service (www.ajws.org/what_we_do/advocacy), BBYO (formerly the B'nai B'rith Youth Organization, www.bbyo.org/about/mission, under "Core Values: Active Leadership"), and the United Synagogue Youth (www.usy.org/yourusy/sato/tikun_olam). Cf. also the remarks of Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union of Reform Judaism, "Opening Plenary Speech" (November 15, 2012), available online at www.urj.org; as well as the comments of Rabbi Shmuel Yanklowitz, founder of the social justice organization Uri L'Tzedek, in his "A Jewish Call for Social Justice," in *The Jewish Press* (July 29, 2009); and "The Role of the Divine in Social Change: Where is God in *Tikkun Olam*?" in *The Jewish Week* (December 14, 2011; available online at www.thejewishweek.com).
[4] See, for example, Vivian Newman, *Tikkun Olam Ted* (Minneapolis: Kar-Ben Publishing, 2012). And cf. also how the concept of *tikkun olam* was featured on the children's television show "Shalom Sesame" (see the "*tikkun olam* songs" at www.shalomsesame.org).
[5] A possible unintended definition of *tikkun olam* can be found in a 2012 interview with American music artist Bruce Springsteen: "We're repairmen, repairmen with a toolbox, if I repair a little of myself I'll repair a little of you, that's the job." See David Remnick's essay, "We Are Alive: Bruce Springsteen at Sixty-Two," in *The New Yorker* (July 30, 2012), pp. 38–57, available online atwww.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/07/30.
[6] Lawrence Fine, "Tikkun: A Lurianic Motif in Contemporary Jewish Thought," in *From Ancient Israel to Modern Judaism: Essays in Honor of Marvin Fox*, ed. Jacob Neusner, et al. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), vol. 4, p. 51.
[7] Fine, "Tikkun: A Lurianic Motif," p. 51.
[8] See, for example, the critique of Joel Alperson, "Abusing Tikkun Olam: Repairing the World Isn't Any One Political Stripe," in *The Jewish Daily*

Forward (March 23, 2012), available online at www.forward.com.
[9] See Barry Freundel, *Why We Pray What We Pray: The Remarkable History of Jewish Prayer* (Jerusalem and New York: Urim Publications, 2010), p. 204.
[10] M. Gittin 4:1–5:3, and cf. also 5:4–7.
[11] See Jill Jacobs, "A History of Tikkun Olam," in *Zeek* (June 2007), available online at www.zeek.net/706tohu.
[12] The *mishnah* that prohibits the purchase of scrolls, *t'fillin*, and *mezuzot* from gentiles for more than their fair market price is M. Gittin 4:6. As Gerald Blidstein points out, legislation relating to gentiles, which is discussed in M. Gittin 4:8–9, is justified differently: in these cases, the rationale is given as *mi-p'nei darkhei shalom*, "because of the ways of peace" (i.e., harmonious relations). See Gerald Blidstein, "*Tikkun Olam*," in *Tikkun Olam: Social Responsibility in Jewish Thought and Law*, eds. David Shatz, Chaim I. Waxman, and Nathan J. Diament (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson (1997), p. 27, n. 12, and also p. 56. (This usage suggests a pragmatic approach, as opposed to an idealistic one.) Blidstein does reference one source in aggadic literature, in *Midrash Ha-gadol* to Exodus 21:1 (ed. Mordechai Margulies [Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1956]), p. 452, where the phrase conveys a universalistic meaning of repairing the world, describing human (political) activity after the great flood.
[13] The adjective "Lurianic" references the kabbalistic system developed by Rabbi Isaac Luria (1543–1572) in sixteenth-century Safed.
[14] See, for example, Fine, "Tikkun: A Lurianic Motif," pp. 38–39.
[15] The passage in brackets is usually omitted from the ancient hymn, but has lately been re-introduced in some prayerbooks, as explained in the course of the essay.
[16] Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History*, trans. Raymond P. Scheindlin (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1993), p. 63. And cf. also the detailed commentary on Aleinu in the medieval *Maḥzor Vitry* §330, ed. Shimon Hurwitz (1923; rpt. Jerusalem: Yitzḥak Malkah, 5748 [1987–1988], pp. 369–370, or the comment of Rabbi Eliezer ben Yehudah of Worms in his *Sefer Rokei·aḥ Ha-gadol* §324 (Jerusalem, 5720 [1959–1960]), p. 221. Some surmise that Aleinu was to be said at the conclusion of services due to its emphasis on God's sovereignty and uniqueness and its stress on God's unity. See also Freundel, *Why We Pray What We Pray*, p.227, n. 94, referencing Israel Ta-Shma, *Ha-t'fillah Ha-ashk'nazit Ha-k'dumah* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2003), chap. 10. Ta-Shma sees the origin of Aleinu as a concluding prayer arising from the custom to recite special prayers called *ma·amadot* at the conclusion of services. Based on Joseph Heinemann's work (*Prayer in the Talmud: Forms and Patterns* [Berlin and New York: Walter De Gruyter, 1977], pp. 273–275), Ta-Shma viewed the ma·amadot service, which began during the time of the Second Temple and continued on even after its destruction, as including an early version of Aleinu. Freundel also points to Rabbi Eliezer of Worms as an influence for its placement at the end of services: noting Rabbi Eliezer's association with esoteric mystical teachings and the mystical understanding of Aleinu as a prayer offering angelic protection for

one's "journey" as one travels from the spiritual experience of prayer back into the physical universe, it would make sense to place it at the end of the service as a point of transition back into the real world (see Freundel, p. 227).

[17] In *Peirush Siddur Ha-t'fillah La-rokei·aḥ* §132, ed. Moshe Herschler (Jerusalem: Mekhon Harav Herschler, 5752 [1991–1992], p. 656–657), Rabbi Eliezer writes that when Joshua entered the Land of Israel and witnessed the religion of the Canaanites, "he began to lift his hands up toward heaven, fell on his knees in fear, and said aloud in a melody that gladdens the hearts, *aleinu l'shabbei·aḥ*." He also points out that the words *bin nun*, which comprise the patronymic of Joshua's name (*Yehoshua Bin Nun*, meaning "Joshua the son of Nun") is equal in the kind of Hebrew numerology called *g'matriya* to the number of words in one part of the Aleinu prayer. See also *Siddur Ḥasidei Ashkenaz*, ed. Moshe Herschler (Jerusalem, 5732 [1971–1972]), p. 126, and Rabbi Avraham Ben Azriel, *Sefer Arugat Ha-bosem* (thirteenth century), ed. Ephraim Urbach (1939; rpt. Jerusalem: Mekitzei Nirdamim, 1962), p. 98, and also *T'shuvot Ha-ge'onim Sha·arei T'shuvah* (ed. Livorno, 1869), §43.

[18] Manasseh ben Israel, *Vindiciae Judaeorum* (London, 1743), p. 2. See also Joseph Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud, Forms and Patterns*, trans. Richard S. Sarason (Berlin and New York: Walter DeGruyter, 1977), pp. 270–273. The Men of the Great Assembly lived in Israel from the time of the rebuilding of the Second Temple in the sixth century B.C.E. until the time of Alexander the Great. Since the Aleinu specifically mentions bowing and kneeling, which were practices connected to the Temple, but contains no mention of rebuilding the Temple, some connect it to this period when the Temple was still in existence. See Joseph H. Hertz, *The Authorized Daily Prayer Book with Commentary, Introductions, and Notes* (rev. American ed.; New York: Bloch Publishing, 1948), p. 208.

[19] Rav is the universally used sobriquet for Rabbi Abba bar Aybo (175–247 C.E.), one of the most important talmudic sages of his day. And cf. further Y. Avodah Zarah 1:2, as referenced by Abraham E. Millgram, Jewish Worship (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1971), p. 455. Ruth Langer points out that although Rav lived in Babylonia, he had been a student of Rabbi Judah the Patriarch in the Land of Israel. And cf. also Langer's essay, "The Censorship of Aleinu in Ashkenaz and Its Aftermath," in *The Experience of Jewish Liturgy: Studies Dedicated to Menahem Schmelzer*, ed. Debra Reed Blank (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), pp. 148–149. (Langer believes that the first and second paragraphs of Aleinu were written at the same time, unlike other scholars who think they were written at separate times.) And cf. too Mitchell First, "Aleinu: Obligation to Fix the World or the Text?" in *Ḥakirah* 11 (Spring 2011), pp.187–197.

[20] Freundel, *Why We Pray What We Pray*, p. 212.

[21] Reuven Hammer, *Entering the High Holidays* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998), p. 53.

[22] Reuven Hammer, *Entering the High Holidays*, pp. 79–80.

[23] See, for example, the Artscroll prayer book *Siddur Kol Yaakov*/The Complete Artscroll Siddur (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1984), pp. 158–161, and the newer Koren prayer book, *The Koren Siddur*, ed. and trans. Jonathan Sacks (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2009), pp. 180–183.
[24] In Isaiah 30:7 and Jeremiah 10:15 we see a similar theme where God, who made the heavens and the earth, is contrasted with the false gods who did not—and this is meant to contrast pagans, who worship nothingness, with Jews, who worship the true God, the only Creator. See also Isaiah 45:20, which describes the pagan nations living at that time who pray to a god that cannot save. This phrase is present in the Aleinu prayer, dating to the period of the Second Temple, but the "they" that is referenced is understood to be Hellenistic and pagan cults. See Heinemann, *Prayer in The Talmud*, pp. 270–273.
[25] Pesach Peter, as cited in Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, p. 72, and cf. Millgram, *Jewish Worship*, pp. 455–456. Another coincidence is that the word *rik* is similar to the regular word for "sputum" in Hebrew (*rok*), and a custom developed among some to spit when saying this phrase. In 1703, the Prussian government issued a decree that not only required that this line be removed, but that also forbade spitting—with an added requirement that a government official be present at Jewish services to ensure compliance (Elbogen, p. 72). The act of spitting is believed to be the origin of the Yiddish expression *er kummt tzum oysspeien* ("he comes at the spitting"), which refers to someone who comes so late into the service that he has arrived at the conclusion of prayers, at the point when Aleinu is said (see Freundel, *Why We Pray What We Pray*, pp. 234–235). Freundel also references the thirteenth-century Rabbi Abraham Ben Azriel, who writes that the Hebrew words *la-hevel va-rik* has the numerical equivalence of the words "Jesus" and "Muhammed" (whom he calls Mahmat); cf. the *Sefer Arugat Ha-bosem*, ed. Ephraim Urbach (Jerusalem: Mekitzei Nirdamim, 5723 [1962–1963]), p. 468. Cf. also Freundel's citation of Yaakov Elbaum's essay "*Al Sh'nei Tikkunim Bi-t'fillat Aleinu*" in Tarbiz 42 (1973), p. 206, where Elbaum notes that many medieval Ashkenazic sources call Muhammed by the name "Mahmat," but cf. in this regard Freundel, p. 233, where this is disputed.
[26] See, for example prayerbooks from Venice 1545, Amsterdam 1699, and Dessau 1700, as cited in: Kenneth Berger's doctoral dissertation, *Issues and Developments in the Liturgy of Ashkenaz during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 2006), p. 225, n. 136.
[27] See *The Complete Artscroll Siddur*, pp. 158–160 and the Koren Prayer Book, pp.180–183.
[28] Ibid.
[29] In *The Vale of Tears*, a sixteenth-century martyrology, Rabbi Joseph Hakohen reports that the Jews of Blois, who were martyred by Crusaders in 1171, chanted the Aleinu on their way to their deaths. Some have suggested that introducing Aleinu into the daily service was an act of defiance against Christianity and its persecution and murder of Jews. Others view the recitation of Aleinu as the

Jews were led to their deaths as a legend. See, for example, Jacob Rader and Marcus Berger, *The Jew in the Medieval World* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), pp. 127–131.

[30] Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud*, pp. 270–273.

[31] Mitchell First, "Aleinu: Obligation to Fix the World or the Text?" in *Ḥakirah* 11 (Spring 2011), pp.187–197. First credits Meir Bar Ilan for first pointing out the possibility of this spelling, referencing the latter's essay, "*M'korah shel T'fillat Aleinu L'shabbei·aḥ*," in *Daat* 43 (1999), p. 20, n. 72.

[32] The passage is glossed over in many printings of the Mishneh Torah, but I am citing the Yemenite text published online by the Mechon Mamre at www.mechon-mamre.org.

[33] First, "Aleinu," p. 189, n. 6, referencing *Siddur Rav Saadiah Gaon*, ed. Israel Davidson, Simchah Assaf, and Issachar Joel (Jerusalem: Mekitzei Nirdamim, 5723 [1962–1963]), p. 221; and p. 190, nn. 7 and 8, referencing sources in Maimonides and many texts found in the Cairo Genizah.

[34] Cf., e.g., the text in the *Ha-tikhlal Ha-m'vo·ar, Nusaḥ Baladi* (B'nei Barak: Ḥayyim ben Naḥum Shalom, 5766 [2005–2006], part 1, p. 99. The expression *nusaḥ baladi* references the followers of Rabbi Yiḥye Tzaliḥ (1713–1805), called the Maharitz.

[35] First, "Aleinu," p. 187.

[36] Ibid., p. 191, nn. 15 and 16. *Maḥzor Vitry* was compiled in the twelfth century by Simḥah ben Shemuel of Vitry, a student of Rashi, the pre-eminent Bible commentator. This work contains many liturgical poems, responsa by Rashi, and laws connected with prayer and religious practices. It is the closest source to the Ashkenazic prayer practice of today. *Siddur Ḥasidei Ashkenaz* was written in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries by German pietists (called *Ḥasidei Ashkenaz*, literally "the pious ones of Germany").

[37] We see this from the opening words: "We therefore hope in *You*...to rid the world of idolatry…" The phrase *l'takkein olam* seems to flow naturally from the idea that God—and not humans—will be effecting the "repair."

[38] According to Genesis, Noah and his family were the only humans to survive the flood. God made a covenant with Noah and his descendants to never destroy the world and also laid out a blueprint of basic moral rules required of all humanity. For more on the idea of the Noachide laws and their relationship to the idea of *tikkun olam*, see the essay by Michael Broyde and Ira Bedzow elsewhere in this volume.

[39] B. Sanhedrin 105a.

[40] B. Sanhedrin 56a.

[41] J. David Bleich, "*Tikkun Olam*: Jewish Obligations to Non-Jewish Society," in *Tikkun Olam: Social Responsibility in Jewish Thought and Law*, pp. 61–102; and cf. Michael J. Broyde, "The Obligation of Jews to Seek Observance of Noahide Laws by Gentiles: A Theoretical Review," published in that same volume, pp. 103–143.

[42] Bleich, "*Tikkun Olam*," p. 101.
[43] See the introduction to the volume, "Tikkun Olam," quoting Bleich, p. 7; and also Bleich, "*Tikkun Olam*," p.77.
[44] Bleich, "*Tikkun Olam*," p. 73, and Broyde, "The Obligation of Jews," p. 139. Bleich takes a middle-ground approach that Jews have to set an example and are obligated to respond to a request for specific information by non-Jews. Reference is made to the thirteenth-century compendium of Ashkenazic lore and practice called the *Sefer Ḥasidim*, in which it is noted that when one sees a Noachide sinning, one should correct that person if one feels able to do so. The text "proves" this with reference to God's readiness to send Jonah to Nineveh to bring non-Jews back to God's path.
[45] M.T. Hilkhot Melakhim U-milḥ'moteihem 8:10. Maimonides codified the requirement to compel gentile compliance with these laws as follows: "Our master Moses did not bequeath the Torah and [its] commandments except to Israel…And similarly, Moses commanded [us] by word of God to compel all people on earth to accept the commandments that were commanded to the descendants of Noah."
[46] Broyde, "The Obligation of Jews," p.136.
[47] Bleich, "*Tikkun Olam*," p. 73.
[48] Bleich, "*Tikkun Olam*," p. 73. Broyde, "The Obligation of Jews," p. 139.
[49] Blidstein, "*Tikkun Olam*," p. 19.
[50] Ibid. Michael Broyde notes that what is permissible according to *halakhah*, Jewish law, is not necessarily the same as that which is morally laudable. In the world of contemporary politics, *tikkun olam* is often invoked by Jews for a number of different issues, such as gay marriage or pro-choice legislation. How should an observant Jew seek to influence public policy, if one's view of *tikkun olam* in the public sphere would mandate being against the prevailing political ethos? If there is no technical obligation to do so, may Jews decide not to enforce Noachide law—especially if doing so would hurt Jewish self-interest and create a backlash against Judaism? (See Broyde, "The Obligation of Jews," p. 143.) How that notion should be applied practically, of course, is a different matter entirely.
[51] Blidstein, "*Tikkun Olam*," p. 25. For a contemporary view that reflects the perspective that all Jews, including the Orthodox-affiliated, need to engage in universal social justice, see Shmuly Yanklowitz, *Jewish Ethics & Social Justice: A Guide for the 21st Century* (Pompano Beach, FL: Derusha Publishing, 2012).
[52] Blidstein, "*Tikkun Olam*," p. 55.
[53] Joseph B Soloveitchik, "Confrontation," in *Tradition* 6:2 (Spring–Summer 1964), pp. 5–29.
[54] Blidstein "*Tikkun Olam*," p.19; Soloveitchik, "Confrontation", pp. 20–21.
[55] Soloveitchik, "Confrontation." pp.19–20.
[56] Blidstein, "*Tikkun Olam*," quoting Soloveitchik in "Confrontation," p. 20.
[57] Soloveitchik, "Confrontation," pp. 23–24.
[58] Blidstein, "*Tikkun Olam*," p.56.

[59] Often this term was understood as being based on broad self-interest, that of placating the gentiles with whom we live not to harm us or see us negatively, as opposed to doing it from a clear moral stance.
[60] Blidstein, "*Tikkun Olam*," p. 56.
[61] See, for example, Jacob J. Schacter, "Tikkun Olam: Defining the Jewish Obligation," in *Rav Ḥesed: Essays in Honor of Rabbi Dr. Haskel Lookstein*, ed. Rafael Medoff (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2009), vol. 2, pp. 183–204.
[62] We can see it within religious terms as *k'vod ha-b'riyyot*, respect for the inherent dignity of every person.
[63] M.T. Hilkhot Melakhim U-milḥ'moteihem 10:12, based on B. Gittin 61a and referencing Psalm 145:9 and Proverbs 3:17.
[64] Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (New York: Schocken Books, 2009), p. 98.
[65] Ibid., p. 47.
[66] Blidstein, "*Tikkun Olam*," pp. 20–22.
[67] Stephen L. Carter, *Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999), pp. 70–71.
[68] Ibid., p.71.
[69] For a different attempt to locate the concepts of social justice underlying the phrase *tikkun olam* in ancient Jewish sources, see the essay elsewhere in this volume by Elliot Dorff.
[70] Elie Wiesel, "What Being Jewish Means to Me," advertisement sponsored by the American Jewish Committee and published in the *New York Times* on September 29, 2000.