

Pinhas, the Quest for Purity, and the Dangers of *Tikkun Olam*

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The popular Jewish idea that human beings are obligated to “repair the world” (to engage in *tikkun olam*) is a valuable idea and, also, a dangerous idea. It can inspire much good but also, potentially, much evil. While visions of *tikkun olam* may reflect humility, thoughtfulness, and justice, they are often marked by arrogance, overzealousness, and injustice.

All of us who hope to improve the world need to guard against these sorts of vices. As we advance our visions for the repair of the world, we also need to tend to what the Jewish tradition has often called “repairing the soul” (*tikkun ha-nefesh*). It is good to be inspired by calls to repair the world—but only if we are careful to scrutinize our inclinations, realize the limits of our own visions, and listen to the criticism of others.

It is, unfortunately, generally easier to see the brokenness in the external world than the brokenness within one’s own soul. Focusing oneself on the brokenness of one’s own character and worldview requires that one admit one’s weaknesses—a task that most of us human beings do our best to avoid. Addressing the brokenness of the world, on the other hand, offers attractive opportunities to serve others—and opportunities to feel the sense of one’s righteousness that may accompany such service. When one is taking action in public, one may also be enticed by the promise of power and recognition. There is nothing inherently wrong with making use of power and being recognized for what one is doing. But efforts motivated by the desire for power and recognition—and so, too, efforts motivated by

the desire to bring great benefits to others—need to be subjected to continual scrutiny.

Moreover, the metaphor of “repair” can be enticing in potentially problematic ways, insofar as *tikkun* may suggest perfection, transcendence, and purity. The word is often translated as “perfection,” and the process of “repair” can be envisioned as a process that attempts to eliminate any flaw whatsoever. Indeed, many Jews throughout history have pinned their hopes on a world that would be perfectly repaired, unlike the world that we know—a world that would truly be perfect, harmonious, and unified in its devotion to God. At times, we have been guilty of imagining that we can articulate what that perfect world would look like—and, like most people imagining a perfect world, we have had trouble imagining that anyone other than us should have power within that world.

The alluring idea that human beings can envision perfection, be perfected, and perfect our societies or the cosmos can be catastrophic on many levels. Notions of “repairing the world” can be particularly dangerous when they are not tempered by a deep understanding of human limitations. Our efforts to “repair the self” require a similar sort of humility, as we should not think that that our souls have been—or can ever be—“perfected.” Some of the most troubling programs for *tikkun olam* in Jewish literature and history have arisen from those who have been confident that they have perfected their own souls, that they can access perfect truth, and that they can therefore envision the perfection of the world—a perfection in which they stand at the center. One of the tasks incumbent upon the Jewish people is to oppose such programs, helping their authors to reflect more deeply on their ideas and their limitations.

Pinhas: Zealotry as a Form of Repair

One figure in Jewish literature who plays a key role in many dangerous visions of repairing the world is Pinhas, the priest praised in the Book

of Numbers for his zeal in executing the Israelite tribal leader Zimri and Zimri's Midianite consort, Kozbi. According to the biblical account, while encamped at Shittim, Israelite men engage in sex and idolatry with local Moabite and Midianite women. God is incensed and, when Zimri appears with Kozbi before the whole Israelite community, Pinhas takes matters into his own hands: "He left the assembly and, taking a spear in his hand, he followed the Israelite into the chamber and stabbed both of them, the Israelite and the woman, through the belly" (Numbers 25:7–8).¹ A plague brought by God against the people of Israel is ended, and God commends Pinhas for his zealotry, rewarding him with a "covenant of peace" and the "covenant of priesthood for all time." Pinhas then leads Israel as the "priest on the campaign" (Numbers 31:6) that seeks "to wreak the Eternal One's vengeance on Midian" (Numbers 31:3).² As one classical *midrash* explains, Pinhas's presence in the war against Midian is crucial: it was he who had initiated the violence against the Midianites, and so he is now entitled to "complete the sacred task (*mitzvah*)."³ The task is finally completed when the Israelites wreak God's vengeance by killing all Midianite men, boys, and non-virginal women (Numbers 31:17).

While some classical rabbinic texts caution against emulating Pinhas's violent zealotry,⁴ there are many sources that praise it. The Mishnah even codifies the opinion that Jews are authorized to emulate Pinhas's model and attack Jewish men who engage in intercourse with non-Jewish women.⁵ Kabbalistic sources go further in describing Pinhas's soul as "perfect" and his violence as an act of "repair." In the Zohar, for example, Pinhas is described as having a "perfect (*shalim*) existence before God."⁶ He has, as the commentator Rabbi Yehudah Ashlag puts it, "repaired himself (*tikkein et atzmo*)."⁷ Moreover, by killing Zimri and Kozbi, Pinhas "repaired what had initially been distorted" within the Israelite community.⁸ In the previous generation, Pinhas's uncles Nadav and Avihu had sought to purify the camp, but inadvertently brought an "alien fire" (*esh*

zarah) into it (Leviticus 10:1).⁹ Pinhas, on the other hand, with his perfected soul, successfully exterminates the “alien woman” (*ishah zarah*) who is now threatening Israel. He “repairs” his uncles’ souls, and he repairs the cosmos.¹⁰ There is, from this perspective, nothing positive to be learned from foreign nations like Midian or Moab, and there is certainly no interest in hearing how Midianites or Moabites might envision a repaired world. Instead, the narrative indicates that these foreign nations are entirely evil, and that the repair of the world depends on those who can see truth most clearly, and who use violence to keep all sources of evil at bay.¹¹

Meir Kahane and the Purity of Jewish Ideas

Among the modern figures who drew on Pinhas’s example in constructing their own visions of “repairing the world” was the militant demagogue Rabbi Meir Kahane (1932–1990).¹² For Kahane, Pinhas was a Jewish hero distinguished by his confidence, his willingness to use violence and to take revenge against enemies, and his zealous commitment to the Jews’ uniqueness, purity, and superiority.

Kahane was fond of arguing that contemporary Jewish leaders should seek to be like Pinhas at Shittim. They should act with force, he contended, rather than engaging in endless deliberations. According to one midrashic tradition,¹³ Pinhas rose up to act at precisely the moment when the elders of the Sanhedrin were discussing what to do in response to Zimri and Kozbi. From Kahane’s perspective, the Sanhedrin failed when they chose to deliberate rather than taking action to immediately kill Zimri and Kozbi. Pinhas, by standing up and choosing to act, rightfully “overthrew the Sanhedrin. They forfeited their authority, and he received it.”¹⁴

Kahane urges his fellow Jews to learn from this example that “zealotry and vengeance are necessary against the wicked.”¹⁵ Especially when God’s honor is threatened, one must rush in to punish

those who are causing the threat—like Pinḥas did, by “burn[ing] with zealousness over the desecration of God’s name.”¹⁶ At times, an entire nation will threaten God’s honor, as the Midianites did, and that whole nation should be targeted. The same is true of any nation, for Kahane, that “cries its hatred of the Jewish state”—like, in the contemporary world, “the Arabs” with their “refusal to bow to Jewish sovereignty.” The zealotry of Pinḥas against the Midianites, for Kahane, should be a model for contemporary Jewish leaders in the state of Israel, who must act in “removing, burning out, the evil that is the Arab nation in our midst.”¹⁷

Kahane acknowledges that zealotry is not always a positive trait—but, he argues, it certainly is a positive trait when one knows that one is acting correctly, as Pinḥas did:

Zealotry and vengefulness are crucial attributes, but only if exercised for the sake of Heaven, as done by Pinḥas, Elijah, and others like them. If vengeful acts are motivated by sinful anger, however, that anger must be condemned. There is greatness in the very urge to zealotry and revenge, yet this must be tempered so as always to be for the Sake of Heaven. We must know when not to apply these traits.¹⁸

What gives Pinḥas his authority to kill rather than to listen to the Sanhedrin’s deliberation, then, is his purity of motivation. As Kahane puts it elsewhere, there is a “repair” at work here: Pinḥas is able to kill others for the sake of heaven, “repairing” the error of his ancestor Levi who had been overly motivated by pride in his violence against the city of Shechem.¹⁹

Since Pinḥas has achieved a level of perfection where his motives cannot be doubted, there is then no room to criticize him. There is no need to imagine that he might have benefitted from listening to the discussions of the Sanhedrin. Indeed, from Kahane’s perspective, the Book of Numbers makes it clear that Pinḥas is deserving of the

highest praise. And Kahane is certain that the text “is perfect, for it emerged from the mouth of the Perfect G-d.”²⁰ Kahane thus sees those who would question the justice of Pinḥas’s actions as unbearably arrogant. Proper “zealotry,” such as that of Pinḥas, is only questioned by people who are taking their cues from foreign cultures. Zealotry, Kahane writes, “has turned into a negative trait in the eyes of the nations and assimilationist devotees of the alien culture. Once more the contradiction arises between G-d’s perfect Torah and the alien culture that has pervaded the sanctuary.”²¹ Questioning the Torah with ideas from foreign cultures, here, is a sin comparable to Zimri’s sin—an act of compromising the purity of Torah with alien ideas. What is most appalling to Kahane is that those who learn from other nations, and often criticize the Torah’s ideas as “immoral,” sometimes claim that their ideas are in fact “Torah”:

There is no greater abomination than the brazen distortion of Judaism perpetrated by those who have cast off G-d’s yoke. They try to weave a forbidden amalgam of Torah and alien culture and present it as holy garb, the mantle of Elijah, i.e., Pinḥas, when their deeds are really those of Zimri.²²

Students of history might well respond to Kahane by pointing out that much of the written and oral Torah that Kahane views as perfect has, in fact, been shaped by a diverse array of foreign cultures. But Kahane is insistent that his Torah is perfect, that Jewish ideas as he understands them are distinct and superior to the ideas of other nations, and that the ideas of other nations are contaminating Israel’s purity:

Israel has been contaminated by the nations with loathsome falsehoods, such as the equality of the heathen non-Jew and the holy Jew, and the non-Jewish concept of “Democracy,” which transforms evil and good, bitter and sweet, darkness

and light, to equals. These people have introduced leprosy into the holy camp! Their clothing must have a tear in it, they must go without a haircut and must cover their heads down to their lips. “Unclean! Unclean!” they must call out.²³

And, for Kahane, Jews must respond to these threats with zeal: “Who shall rise up like Pinhas and, spear in hand, execute zealous judgment against the alien culture and abominable concepts which have destroyed the uniqueness, holiness, and separateness of the chosen, supreme people?”²⁴

As Kahane makes clear, he and his students are like Pinhas: they are part of a pure remnant of Jews, uncorrupted by foreign wisdom, possessing an “authentic” Torah. Upon founding his yeshiva—“The Yeshiva of the Jewish Idea”—he thus spoke of his hopes that it would produce “the people of the true and authentic idea” who would bring authentic Torah “to the world.” And this, he proclaimed, “is the great and awesome task of repairing the world (*l’takkein olam*) under God’s reign.”²⁵

Tikkun olam, from Kahane’s perspective, is thus only accomplished to the degree that Israel maintains its uniqueness, ensuring that there is “no nation like it” and thus that it is fit to partner with God (“Who has no one like Him”). Precisely to the degree that Israel joins God in maintaining its perfect and unique morality—in particular, its ideas about zealotry, vengeance, and chosenness that are often mocked by more liberally minded nations—it is able to “demonstrate the partnership between God and Israel in which these two unique entities are linked together to perfect the world (*l’takkein et ha-olam*) under G-d’s reign.”²⁶

This “repair” also requires Jews to seek out political power and to create a state in which threatening, non-Jewish ideas cannot be heard. The State of Israel, for Kahane, has the potential to become such a state, but only if it builds up the “walls of separation” that the “foreign women” at Shittim had sought to breach.²⁷ In Kahane’s view,

Only separation, only isolation, can protect the Chosen People from the poisonous influence of that [foreign] culture....G-d therefore established for His holy nation a holy land. It would be a vessel to house the Jewish people and their society, the Torah state G-d obligated them to create, and to separate them from the straying nations and their culture, which both errs and leads others astray. After all, whatever separates between Israel and the nations necessarily separates between holiness and the non-holy.²⁸

Non-Jews, for Kahane, are poisonous, impure, and less than fully human: “Unlike Israel, who are called ‘Adam’ [the Hebrew word for “human”], the other nations are not called ‘Adam’ [and so they are therefore less than human]. In contrast to the holiness and purity of Israel, there is only impurity and unholiness among the nations; and how can holiness exist with impurity?”²⁹ Indeed, non-Jews are only permitted to live in the Land of Israel if they accept the superiority of Jews and accept their own “slave status.”³⁰ They are, clearly, not permitted to influence the “perfect Torah state and society” that Jews are commanded to establish there.³¹

For Jews who imagine *tikkun olam* as leading to perfect clarity, homogeneity, and purity, one can imagine how this vision might be enticing. This is a path of *tikkun* that can transcend the ordinary messiness of political compromise, ambiguous texts, or dissenting opinions. Kahane can promise a sort of “repair” that might seem more complete and authentic than what more liberal modern Jewish thinkers have endorsed.

Kahane’s rhetoric offers an extreme but illustrative example of how a vision of *tikkun olam* may be animated by a certainty about one’s ability to understand perfection and an unwillingness to accept criticism from others. Kahane—like Pinhas—is deeply convinced of his own righteousness. He writes off as impure (like Kozbi) those non-Jews who criticize him, and he writes off serious challenges from

his fellow Jews as reflecting the “assimilationist” mindset of Zimri. Kahane sees himself as largely beyond criticism, as he sees himself as having internalized the virtues of humility, justice, and zealousness commended by God in Numbers 25. He sees himself like Pin as: humble (having submitted to God’s will), just (ensuring that both Israel and the impure nations are given what they deserve), and appropriately zealous (knowing that it is appropriate to kill others “for the sake of heaven”).

From the perspective of most other Jews, of course, Kahane appears in desperate need of *tikkun ha-nefesh*—the repair of his own soul. He lacks humility, as demonstrated by his self-righteousness and his inability to listen to perspectives other than his own; he lacks the qualities of justice that would recognize the fundamental equality of all human beings; and he lacks the qualities of moderation that would restrain his zealotry. Kahane’s followers, however, have continued to praise Kahane for his faith in himself, his justice, and his zealotry. Their efforts to follow their teacher’s vision have not always been successful, but have led to at least one successful mass murder: the killing of twenty-nine Muslim worshippers in Hebron in 1994 by Kahane’s student Baruch Goldstein, directly answering his teacher’s call to “repair the world” by “removing, burning out, the evil that is the Arab nation in our midst.”³²

Yitzchak Ginsburgh: Repairing the Spirit, the State, and the World

Among the rabbis who publicly praised Goldstein’s violence in Hebron, Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh, a rabbi from the Chabad Lubavitch sect of hasidism, was perhaps the most prominent. A fellow traveler of Meir Kahane in many respects, Ginsburgh is a contemporary Israeli *rosh yeshiva* who shares Kahane’s stress on Jewish superiority and the importance of vengeance. Like Kahane,

Ginsburgh also stresses the need to cultivate inner virtues such as humility, justice, and zealousness, and to act so as to effect change in the world. He stresses the importance of inner spiritual development somewhat more than Kahane, though, and his writing is more suffused with the language of “repair” (or, in his preferred translation, “rectification”), both when speaking about the inner life and about the external world. Ginsburgh’s rhetoric regarding internal and external “rectification” can help us to see, further, how morally pernicious these concepts can be.

Like Kahane, Ginsburgh sees *tikkun olam* as a concept that should inspire human activism: “More than just accepting the world as it is, we are commanded in the Torah and implored by the sages and prophets to become partners with God in rectifying and elevating the world.”³³ At the root of the task is the “the sincere probing of the heart and mind” and the repairing of the inner brokenness that one finds³⁴—for “all physical rectification must be predicated by spiritual rectification.”³⁵ The spiritual *tikkun* that is essential for *tikkun olam* includes rectifying “our emotional makeup”—specifically, emotions that correspond to the seven lower divine *s’firot*, which Ginsburgh understands as “love, fear, mercy, confidence, sincerity, devotion, and humility.”³⁶ One must also develop intellectual clarity about the three ideas that Ginsburgh sees as essential truths for all human beings to understand (and which correspond to the three upper *s’firot*): that the Torah is completely authoritative; that all Jews must live in Israel, settling all of the land and building a kingdom guided by all of the Torah; and that Jews are superior to non-Jews.³⁷

There is, here, a critique of those who would view *tikkun olam* in purely material terms, focusing on physically building the State of Israel while neglecting the spirit;³⁸ at the same time, there is a critique of a traditional hasidic posture that would focus on the inner life but neglect political activism.³⁹

Pinḥas is one of the numerous figures who serves as an inspiration for Ginsburgh’s vision. Like Kahane, Ginsburgh sees Pinḥas as a

perfected individual, whose act of killing Zimri and Kozbi was solely for the sake of heaven. According to Ginsburgh, Pinḥas had no self-interest; as he tells the story, Pinḥas proved his moral excellence when he refused to take pride in his deed, despite the fame that he achieved among the people of Israel.⁴⁰ Pinḥas was a *tzaddik*—as Ginsburgh defines it, “someone who has fully overcome the evil inclination of his animal soul (and converted its potential into good).”⁴¹

Jonathan Garb has argued that, in Ginsburgh’s thought, the *tzaddik* (in traditional hasidic parlance, “the rebbe”) is a sort of embodiment of God—that is, someone who can intuit the truth directly and who does not generally need to seek the advice of others or seek out “halakhic backing or precedents to justify his actions.”⁴² In Ginsburgh’s own words, the rebbe “is sure of himself, and has no need for precedents....More than anyone else, the ‘rebbe’ is able to recognize the exceptional needs of the generation.”⁴³ As Garb points out, Ginsburgh’s vision is grounded in traditional hasidic teachings regarding the centrality of the *tzaddik*, the perfected spiritual leader; but Ginsburgh is in fact advancing a “modern, anti-traditionalist” conception of authority, in which the accumulated tradition, with all of its ambiguities, can be replaced by the clear vision of a single charismatic leader.⁴⁴

Pinḥas, for Ginsburgh, is an ideal Jewish leader of this sort. As Ginsburgh notes, one interpretive tradition teaches that Pinḥas “did not even ask Moses what the *halakhab* in such a case is.” Rather, his “youthful vigor...burned within him,” and he knew that in a place where God is dishonored, he could not “wait for someone else to do what is needed.”⁴⁵ This was precisely what Ginsburgh admired about Baruch Goldstein’s massacre of Muslim worshippers in Hebron: Goldstein understood that “the honor of heaven takes precedence over the honor to one’s teacher”—such that, as Don Seeman has explained, Goldstein could ignore those rabbis who would criticize him, “the community of scholars who would tend to prohibit acts of zealotry.”⁴⁶ He did not, needless to say, seek out the counsel of

anyone who might have criticized him, just as Pinḥas did not seek to listen to the caution that members of the Sanhedrin might have offered him.

For Ginsburgh, developing the confidence to act in unconventional ways and developing the courage to risk condemnation, punishment, or death is a part of the “rectification” work that is essential for repairing the State of Israel and, ultimately, the world. Speaking of the centrality of Israel in the scheme of redemption in his book *Rectifying the State of Israel* (in Hebrew, *Tikkun Ha-Medinah*), Ginsburgh argues that “national rectification (*ha-tikkun ha-le’umi*) demands deviation from the ‘rules of the game.’ It demands a new, definitive source of authority, different from that recognized today, which must be honored and obeyed in building a rectified society.”⁴⁷ Such authority lies in the clear words of the Torah and its authentic interpreters and, when one commits oneself to that truth, one should develop the courage to boldly implement the Torah’s vision. “Boldness comes with a sense of direct, clear vision of the truth,” and “clear recognition of truth empowers one to act without fear of unwarranted criticism.”⁴⁸

Ginsburgh is careful to note that he is not opposed to all criticism—one should have the humility to listen to “constructive criticism”—but that one must be “bold enough to stand up against those that mock him in his service of God. To be bold in the face of mockery is in fact the very first instruction of the Code of Jewish Law.”⁴⁹ And a wise leader must allow for courageous individuals to fulfill this instruction, as did Moses in response to Pinḥas’s outbreak against Zimri and Kozbi. Thus, according to one commentary on the story of Pinḥas published by Ginsburgh’s students,

True leadership is one that knows how to give a place of honor to the outbreaks of individuals. A leader who is terrified by any outbreak that is not “according to the rules” and immediately and categorically rejects it is not a true

leader. Such a leader believes that it is only the dry legal system that maintains the people, and does not realize that without the inner burning, the engine that drives the people forward will be lacking. A true leader can appreciate the positive impulse that drives people to action.⁵⁰

Ginsburgh positions himself as a “true leader” of this sort—one who understands that Jews may sometimes need to act boldly, in unconventional ways, in order to bring about the repair of the world.

Ginsburgh’s outline for what must be done to repair the world closely resembles that of Kahane. “Our first act of rectification must be to declare Jewish sovereignty over the entire Land of Israel.”⁵¹ At first, this means ruling over the whole West Bank of the Jordan and replacing the current secular State of Israel (and, of course, the Palestinian Authority) with a new Jewish “theocracy.” “Within these borders,” all Jews must do the work to “rectify, on the communal level, the seven emotions.”⁵² And “the Israeli government must undergo a process of spiritual metamorphosis” and “rectification” “in order to open its ears to the truth of the words of the Torah.”⁵³ Establishing control of the West Bank and undergoing a spiritual transformation there is just the beginning of the process, though. Soon after, Jewish sovereignty should be expanded to encompass the land promised to Abraham, “from the Nile to the Euphrates” (Genesis 15:18). Eventually, when the world is truly rectified, “the borders of Israel will expand to encompass the whole earth,” and the laws of the Torah will govern the entire world.⁵⁴

For now, while the Land of Israel is confined to a more narrow space, Ginsburgh joins Kahane in recommending the expulsion of non-Jews from that land—with the exception of those who recognize the chosenness of the Jewish people and the truth of the Torah. Non-Jews must realize that “in the Divine plan for the rectification of reality the Jew has been chosen to be the spiritual giver to humanity”;⁵⁵ but they reject this truth and, instead, threaten

Jews, both spiritually and physically. When in the land alongside Jews, non-Jews have a negative spiritual influence, “arousing in the hearts of the Jewish people—whether consciously or unconsciously—a desire to mingle and assimilate with them.”⁵⁶ When they purchase land in Israel, they are “blemishing the integral wholeness of the land.”⁵⁷ And Ginsburgh is certain that most non-Jews seek Israel’s physical destruction as well; whenever they do so, “the threat must be eliminated.”⁵⁸ Even those among Israel’s enemies who seem to be innocent civilians may be targeted, in Ginsburgh’s view. As Ginsburgh’s close disciples Yitzhak Shapira and Yosef Elitzur noted in their 2009 book *The King’s Torah (Torat Ha-Melekh)*, a book strongly endorsed by Ginsburgh, it is permitted to kill “even those who are innocent, according to the needs of the moment and for the sake of repairing the world [*l’tikkun ha-olam*].”⁵⁹ As Shapira and Elitzur argue, even innocent children must sometimes be killed—as one can learn from examples such as the war against the Midianites.⁶⁰

The use of violence to purify the land, for Ginsburgh, must go hand in hand with extreme measures to purify the soul. At the heart of repairing the world is “rid[ding] the land of foreign, hostile elements,” and “this external act reflects an internal process that takes place within our souls, a process of purification (that is, ridding ourselves of undesirable character traits).”⁶¹ Ridding oneself of ego is at the heart of the internal process—just Israel needed to destroy Midian because Midian was characterized by self-centeredness, so one must nullify one’s own ego and humbly submit to God’s will.⁶² Humility before God, of course, does not mean passivity. As Pinhas understood, it sometimes means engaging in the acts of vengeance that God requires.⁶³ Purifying the soul also depends upon the character trait of “sincerity” (*t’mimut*), the trait that seeks inner purity. In Ginsburgh’s view, the work of social purification will help Jews to purify their souls; the increasingly “sincere” and purified Jews will, in turn, feel the need to further purify the world around them.⁶⁴

The spiritual task of holding the goal of perfection in mind is crucial to this process. For Ginsburgh, such a goal should inspire Jews to be unsatisfied with a State of Israel that has compromised its Jewish identity, given up its utopian aspirations, and accepted non-Jews and non-Jewish ideas. On the spiritual level, Jews must rectify these errors by constantly holding in mind the ideal world, which contains no such compromises: “Throughout the entire rectification process...the Messiah and the rectified Jewish state, the Kingdom of Israel, must remain in the forefront of our consciousness.”⁶⁵ “The full power of the will” can only be activated if we have an “inspired focus on the end of the process.”⁶⁶ If we recognize “how the complete rectification of the Jewish state and the area of redemption it will usher in is truly ‘good for the Jews (and the entire world),’ how it is an enticing, attractive, delightful, and achievable reality—the will to create that reality here and now is aroused.”⁶⁷

Facing the Dangers of *Tikkun Olam*

For most contemporary Jews, these profoundly racist, ethnocentric, utopian visions are easy to reject. But the ideas of Kahane and Ginsburgh continue to have influence, especially in contemporary West Bank settlements.⁶⁸ Their promises of a “repaired” world, with total purity and no compromises, continue to strike some Jews as “enticing, attractive, delightful, and achievable.” Their visions of purity are well-grounded in certain narratives of the Torah—such as the story of Pinḥas, among others—and in certain streams of the Jewish tradition. And a good deal of their appeal lies in their distinctly modern emphasis on values like authenticity, inner purity, and individual self-expression.

As Adam Seligman has argued, such values are best described as values of “sincerity,” and they are values often privileged in modernity, both among religious and secular thinkers. At the heart

of the commitment to sincerity is “the belief that truth resides within the authentic self, that it is coherent, and that incoherence and fragmentation are therefore themselves signs of inauthenticity.”⁶⁹ Rejecting traditional attitudes that acknowledge and accept the imperfections of the world, “the sincere orientation rejects the fundamental brokenness of the world in a search for wholeness and totality.”⁷⁰ Seligman contrasts this orientation with an orientation that privileges ritual behavior and accepts the “imperfect” practices, motivations, meanings, and outcomes that may accompany the performance of ritual. Traditional Jewish practice, in Seligman’s analysis, has often permitted such ambiguities, rather than claiming to bring about perfection.⁷¹

Kahane and Ginsburgh, however, pick up on the strains of the Jewish tradition that are less tolerant of ambiguities and that lead to the very “sincere” idea of *tikkun olam*. The sorts of extremist movements that they have helped to lead—what are often called “fundamentalist” movements—are, as Seligman points out, characteristically modern movements in that they privilege values of sincerity, “striving for an integrative wholeness, an overcoming of dissonances” both within the self and within society.⁷² In fundamentalist movements, conventional rules and practices are devalued; aligning oneself with a transcendent reality requires a “deviation from the ‘rules of the game,’” to use Ginsburgh’s phrase.

With their programs for repairing the world, Kahane and Ginsburgh can appeal to Jews who seek experiences of transcendence, who want to join others in bringing their visions of perfection into the world, and who delight in their non-conformity. Perfect transcendence, after all, requires rejecting the ordinary world and refusing to compromise with it. This is typical of fundamentalist efforts; the goal of fundamentalist movements, as Seligman puts it, is to “overcome the chasm between the religious terms of meaning, transcendence, and unity on the one hand, and the simple fact that the taxonomic orders of the world do not, on the whole, recognize

these orders of meaning.”⁷³ From the fundamentalist perspective that Ginsburgh and Kahane exemplify, spiritually awakened Jews have bridged that chasm, and are able to see the transcendent clearly. They must be permitted to express the pure truths that burn within them, even when (or perhaps especially when) that expression requires killing those who reject these truths.⁷⁴

Most visions of *tikkun olam*, of course, do not lead to fundamentalist violence of this sort. But considering how they may sometimes do so is important for all of us who seek to develop visions of repair. Considering visions like those of Kahane and Ginsburgh can help us to develop better visions of improving the world that guard against the dangers of ideas like theirs.

This is important work precisely because most of us deny that our visions have anything in common with these sorts of “extremist” vision. But part of our work of “repairing the self” should involve considering whether that is the case. We should examine ourselves, for instance, to see if there are ways in which we also share some of the impulses to wipe out “foreign” threats that Pinhas acted upon. A good deal of evidence suggests that these impulses are found within all human beings, in various ways. Human nature is such that we tend to demonize those who are viewed as total outsiders; we view them as less than human, think that the world would be better off without them, and often call for their extermination.⁷⁵ When human beings imagine what it would be like to live in a perfect world, we tend to imagine that the world would be governed by people like us, and that all people would accept the ideas of nations or communities like ours. And when we are inspired by our visions of a perfect world, we are often indifferent or cruel to those who disagree with us. These are by no means uniquely Jewish tendencies, but they are tendencies that Jews should seek to avoid in interpreting the Jewish tradition and in responding to other traditions.

And so, as Jews dream of a repaired world, we should be careful not to place ourselves at the center of that world. Tempting though

it may be to imagine, with Meir Kahane, that there is “no nation” comparable to Israel, it is important to heed the prophecy of Amos that Israel is, in crucial ways, very much comparable to other nations, who were also liberated by God for their own purposes: “To Me, O Israelites, you are just like the Ethiopians—declares the Eternal One. True, I brought Israel up From the land of Egypt; but also the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir” (Amos 9:7).⁷⁶ And tempting though it may be for Jews to imagine a future in which Jews reign over others—as, indeed, many biblical prophets imagined—it is important to heed the caution from Maimonides that “the Sages and Prophets did not long for the days of the Messiah so that Israel might exercise dominion over the world, or rule over the heathens, or be exalted by the nations.”⁷⁷ Hermann Cohen, building on Maimonides, argued that the prophets instead hoped for “the eventual restoration also of [even] those states and nations which had fought against their own people.”⁷⁸ In this vision, true prophets, characterized by true humility, would hope for the persistence of a world of diverse nations from whom Israel might learn. As *Pirkei Avot* famously teaches, after all, the wise person is one “who learns from all human beings.”⁷⁹ There might even be something to learn from Midianite visions of repairing the world.

Many biblical scholars suspect that Israel did in fact learn from Midian in profound ways. There are reasons to think that much of what came to be called Israelite religion drew on Midianite models; for example, the story of Moses discovering God at a burning bush in Midianite territory may preserve a memory of how Midianite culture inspired Israel’s ideas about God.⁸⁰ The historical research that has led to such a hypothesis suggests that Israel was not a nation with “pure” ideas that were in radical disagreement with the “impure” ideas of its neighbors. Quite the contrary, Israel adapted ideas and practices of its neighbors in all sorts of ways. Maimonides had famously theorized that this would have to be the case, arguing that Israel could only access transcendent truths through ideas and

practices that made sense to them—ideas and practices that would have to resemble those of Israel’s neighbors. Israelite ideas and practices, from this perspective, were not “pure” or “perfect”; they were imperfect concessions that closely resembled the ideas and practices of groups such as the Canaanites and Midianites.⁸¹

Even the Bible itself describes Israel learning from Midianite visions in profound ways. In tension with the biblical narratives that glory in Israel’s destruction of Midianites are other biblical narratives that describe Midian as instructing Israel. In the Book of Exodus, for example, the Midianite priest Jethro is not only Moses’s father-in-law but is also one of Moses’s central teachers. When Moses is struggling with how to hear all the cases that his people bring to him, Jethro comes, criticizes Moses, and teaches him how to better organize a system of justice, suggesting the appointment of many more judges and a new system of social organization for Israel. Moses could have responded to Jethro’s ideas by invoking the language of Meir Kahane, complaining that Jethro’s “alien culture” that was threatening to pervade and contaminate Israel’s holy precincts; he could have protested that he alone possessed ultimate insight.⁸² Instead, “Moses heeded his father-in-law and did just as he had said” (Exodus 18:24).⁸³ Jethro makes his mark in helping to repair the fabric of the Israelite community, and then he “returns to his own land” (Exodus 18:27).

Jews who have preferred to see Israel at the center of the world have, of course, retold this story of Moses and Jethro as a story in which Jethro acknowledges the superiority of the people of Israel, converts, leaves the impure Midianites behind, and ends up teaching Israel to be suspicious of Midian.⁸⁴ According to one tradition, Jethro is himself “zealous” in his devotion to his new God and new people; and he seems to pass this trait on to Pinḥas—because, in fact, according to another tradition, he is Pinḥas’s maternal grandfather.⁸⁵ Meir Kahane, accepting this storyline, adds that Jethro was willing to risk his life by rejecting his community and therefore merited to

have a grandson who would also risk his own life in rejecting that same community (and the Israelites that it enticed).⁸⁶ With these narratives, the purity of Israel can be affirmed; outsiders will not become teachers to Israel unless they are the sorts of converts who zealously reject the impure nations from which they came.

But those who are tempted to develop narratives like these should, again, inspect their souls. Why, indeed, is it tempting to tell the story in this way? Why reject the biblical story in which Jethro “returns to his own land”? Here, too, we should critically examine our impulses to eliminate the possibility of wisdom coming from outsiders. If we are to speak the language of *tikkun olam*, we should be particularly careful not to understand *tikkun olam* as a state of perfection that fails to respect the challenges that other communities may offer.

We can, in fact, only come closer to the transcendent if we hear those challenges, acknowledging our own individual limitations and the limitations of our communities. Grasping revelations of profound truth requires listening to as many voices as we can, critically considering the wisdom that those voices might offer, and seeking to repair our own imperfect visions of *tikkun olam* in light of the challenges that other voices offer. As the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas has put it, “The totality of the true is constituted from the contribution of multiple people: the uniqueness of each act of listening carrying the secret of the text; the voice of the Revelation, as inflected, precisely, by each person’s ear, would be necessary to the ‘Whole’ of the truth.” The acceptance of such a conception of revelation, of course, means accepting ambiguity, uncertainty, and contradiction. Such a conception is familiar to most Jews, who are used to understanding their tradition as possessing precisely these characteristics. But it is, of course, a deeply problematic notion for sincere zealots who believe that their souls have been repaired and that they clearly see perfect truths that need to be brought to the rest of the world.

Rejecting such notions, and accepting human limitation and the very real ambiguities that inevitably accompany the human search for truth should, then, be at the heart of the work of repairing our own notions of *tikkun olam*. We should seek to repair ourselves and, in doing so, we should see our own limits; and, to the degree that we can, we should help others to do the repair-work that brings them to see their own limits as well.

Keeping in mind the notion of the transcendent should help us to realize this. Such was the counsel of Rabbi Simḥah Zissel Ziv, one of the founding figures of the nineteenth-century *musar* movement, which emphasized the work of “repairing the soul” like no other movement in Jewish history. We learn from the Psalms, Simḥah Zissel taught, to “seek out the Eternal One and [God’s] might! *Continually* seek [God’s] face!” (Psalms 105:3-4)⁸⁸ Why must the work be continuous? “Because,” Simḥah Zissel says, “in all the days of your life, you will not have arrived at the end.” If you think that you have reached the end, he cautions, “you should have doubts: perhaps you have not arrived at the truth, and you must seek further.”⁸⁹

As we seek to improve the world, we can always seek further. Whenever we think that we have achieved clarity of vision, we must have doubts, inspect our souls, and make sure that we are walking humbly on a path toward a better world.⁹⁰

NOTES

¹ NJPS translation.

² Based on NJPS translation, substituting “Eternal One” for “Lord.”

³ Bemidbar Rabbah 22:4. The translation of *mitzvah* as “sacred task” follows *Midrash Rabbah: Numbers II*, trans. Judah J. Slotki (London: Soncino Press, 1951), p. 856.

⁴ See Eliezer Segal, “Disarming Phineas: Rabbinic Confrontations with Biblical Militancy,” in *The Twenty-First Century Confronts Its Gods: Globalization, Technology, and War*, ed. David J. Hawkin (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), pp. 141–156; Alan Mittleman, “The Problem of Religious Violence,” in *Political Theology* 12:5 (2011), pp. 722–726.

⁵ M. Sanhedrin 9:6. See Robert Eisen, *The Peace and Violence of Judaism: From the Bible to Modern Zionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 33.

⁶ Zohar III 215b. (*Shalim* is the Aramaic equivalent of the Hebrew *shalem*, meaning “perfect.”)

⁷ Yehudah Ashlag, “*Ha-Sullam*,” on Zohar III 213b, in *Sefer Ha-Zohar* (New York: Yeshivat Kol Yehudah, 2004), vol. 15, p. 4 (sect. 11).

⁸ Zohar III 57b; and see *Ha-Sullam*, vol. 12, p. 9 (sect. 26).

⁹ See Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, trans. David Goldstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 884 and 1199. Nadav and Avihu’s own sexual abstinence made them unable to unite God’s masculine and feminine aspects.

¹⁰ Zohar III 57b, III 213b–217a. The reference to the “alien woman” uses the language of Proverbs 2:16 and 7:5. Nadav and Avihu, according to the Zohar, become reincarnated within Pinhas.

¹¹ On the demonization of foreign nations in kabbalistic anthropology, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹² S. Daniel Breslauer, *Meir Kahane: Ideologue, Hero, Thinker* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1986), p. 156, argues that “*tikkun olam* plays no role in [Kahane’s] theology,” as Kahane fails to recognize that “the Jew has responsibilities here and now, obligations that demand action with both Jew and non-Jew for the sake of improving the world” (pp. 155–156). Kahane’s theology does not give a role to the sort of tolerant and cooperative vision of *tikkun olam* that Breslauer refers to. As I argue in this essay, however, a deeply intolerant and xenophobic concept of *tikkun olam* does play an important role in Kahane’s theology.

¹³ See Bemidbar Rabbah 20:25.

¹⁴ Meir Kahane, *Tzofeh U-Manhig*, ed. Netanel Ozri (Jerusalem: Institute for Publication of the Writings of Rabbi Meir Kahane, 2005), Part One; available online at <http://www.rabbikahane.org/ArticleView.aspx?id=296>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Meir Kahane, *Beyond Words: Selected Writings of Rabbi Meir Kahane, 1960–1990*, ed. David Fein (Brooklyn: Institute for Publication of the Writings of Rabbi Meir Kahane, 2010), vol. 3, p. 436; cf. vol. 3, p. 441.

¹⁷ Ibid., vol. 3, pp. 441–442. Cf. Meir Kahane, *Commentary on Exodus: Perush HaMaccabee*, trans. Daniel Pinner (Jerusalem: Institute for Publication of the Writings of Rabbi Meir Kahane, 2014), p. 598, on Exodus 3:5, where Kahane draws the parallel between the immediate need for vengeance against Midian in the Numbers 31 narrative and the immediate need for “driving out the Arabs” in the present day.

¹⁸ Meir Kahane, *The Jewish Idea*, trans. Raphael Blumberg (Jerusalem: Institute for Publication of the Writings of Rabbi Meir Kahane, 1996), vol. 1, p. 288. To bring this citation into line with the general transliteration standards of this volume, I have substituted “Pinhas” for the original “Pinchas.”

¹⁹ Meir Kahane, *Peirush Ha-Makabi: Al Sefer D’varim* (Jerusalem: Institute for Publication of the Writings of Rabbi Meir Kahane, 1995), on Deuteronomy 33:18; available online at <http://www.rabbikahane.org/ArticleView.aspx?id=456>.

²⁰ Kahane, *The Jewish Idea*, vol. 1, p. 138. Kahane here avoids writing out the word “God” out of concern that the word might be desecrated, a common practice within certain Jewish circles.

²¹ Ibid., vol. 1, p. 281. Cf. Meir Kahane, *Uncomfortable Questions for Comfortable Jews* (Seacaucus, NJ: Lyle Stuart, 1987), p. 177.

²² Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 107–108. I have substituted “Pinhas” for the original “Pinchas.”

²³ Ibid., vol. 2, p. 996, with reference to Leviticus 13:14.

²⁴ Ibid. I have substituted “Pinhas” for the original “Pinchas.”

²⁵ Kahane, *Tzofeh U-Manbig*, Part One; online at <http://www.rabbikahane.org/ArticleView.aspx?id=222>.

²⁶ Kahane, *The Jewish Idea*, vol. 2, p. 699. Kahane brings the language regarding the uniqueness of God and Israel from Sifrei Devarim, §355.

²⁷ Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 740–741.

²⁸ Ibid., vol. 2, p. 543.

²⁹ Ibid., vol. 2, p. 747.

³⁰ Ibid., vol. 1, p. 320.

³¹ Ibid., vol. 2, p. 587.

³² Kahane, *Beyond Words*, vol. 3, pp. 441–442.

³³ Yitzchak Ginsburgh, *Awakening the Spark Within: Five Dynamics of Leadership That Can Change the World* (Jerusalem: Linda Pinsky Publications, 2001), p. 60.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 61.

³⁵ Yitzchak Ginsburgh, *Rectifying the State of Israel: A Political Platform Based on Kabbalah*, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: Linda Pinsky Publications, 2003), p. 173.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 16.

³⁷ See *ibid.*, p. 71.

³⁸ See Julia Schwartzmann, “Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh and His Feminine Vision of the Messianic Age,” in *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 12:1 (2013), p. 55.

³⁹ Jonathan Garb, *The Chosen Will Become Herds: Studies in Twentieth-Century Kabbalah*, trans. Yaffah Berkovits-Murciano (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 67.

⁴⁰ Yitzchak Ginsburgh, “Pinchas, Eliyahu, the Or Hachayim, and Rebbe Shlomo of Karlin” (July 18, 2006), available online at the website of the Gal Einai Institute, at www.inner.org.

⁴¹ Ginsburgh, *Rectifying the State of Israel*, p. 216.

⁴² Garb, *The Chosen Will Become Herds*, p. 81.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid. I have substituted “*tzaddik*” for the original “*tzaddiq*,” to conform to the general transliteration standards of this volume.

⁴⁵ Ginsburgh, “Pinchas, Eliyahu, the Or Hachayim, and Rebbe Shlomo of Karlin,” with transliteration of Hebrew modified to fit the general transliteration standards of this volume. The interpretive tradition cited stems from B. Sanhedrin 82a.

⁴⁶ Don Seeman, “Violence, Ethics, and Divine Honor in Modern Jewish Thought,” in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73:4 (December 2005), pp. 1026–1027. Cf. Kahane, *Beyond Words*, vol. 3, p. 437.

⁴⁷ Ginsburgh, *Rectifying the State of Israel*, p. 54.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 54, 159.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 159, referring to *Shulhan Arukh Admor Ha-zakein, Oraḥ Hayim* 1:1.

⁵⁰ Motti Inbari, *Jewish Fundamentalism and the Temple Mount: Who Will Build the Third Temple?* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), pp. 143–144.

⁵¹ Ginsburgh, *Rectifying the State of Israel*, p. 77.

⁵² Ibid., p. 176.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 95.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 177.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 67. Cf. Ibid., p. 66: “Although our ultimate goal is the rectification of the entire world so that all nations serve God together, the rectification of all humanity depends first upon our and the world’s recognition of the essential difference between Jew and non-Jew.”

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 59–60.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 59.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 89.

⁵⁹ Yitzhak Shapira and Yosef Elitzur, *Torat Ha-Melekh* (Yitzhar: Yeshivat Od Yosef Chai, 2009), p. 209. As Shipira and Elitzur indicate, this phrase draws on the language of Maimonides (M.T. *Hilkhot Melakhim* U-milḥmoteihem 3:10) and legal precedents from a variety of authorities. Ginsburgh’s words of introduction may be found in the volume on pp. 1–5. The authors are characterized as Ginsburgh’s close disciples on p. 1; see also Ginsburgh’s reference there to “the repair of reality” (*tikkun ha-m’tzi-ut*).

⁶⁰ Shapira and Elitzur, *Torat Ha-Melekh*, p. 220.

⁶¹ Ginsburgh, *Rectifying the State of Israel*, p. 106.

⁶² Yitzchak Ginsburgh, “*Parshat Matot* 5771: The Five Kings of Midian,” available on youtube.com (July 20, 2011). As Ginsburgh explains in his discussion, Midian represents “evil” and “the source of self.” He notes (9:14) that “there is a hasidic source that says that the general name of evil, all the evil that exists in the world, is self, [and] it is all from Midian” which represents the ego.

⁶³ Ibid.; *Rectifying the State of Israel*, p. 167 n. 24, and p. 183, n. 12; and see also Yitzchak Ginsburgh, “*Barukh Ha-Gever*,” in *Barukh Ha-Gever: Sefer Zikkaron La-Kadosh Barukh Goldstein* (Jerusalem and Golan: Shalom al Yisrael 1995), p. 20.

⁶⁴ Ginsburgh, *Rectifying the State of Israel*, chap. 12; as Ginsburgh notes in the glossary, p. 214 (and in various charts throughout the book), *t'mimut* is “the inner experience” linked with that chapter’s theme, “expelling hostile elements.”

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 44.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 43.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 42–43.

⁶⁸ For some documentation of this influence, see Max Blumenthal, *Goliath: Life and Loathing in Greater Israel* (New York: Nation Books, 2013), esp. pp. 308–310 and 325–329. For some important cautions regarding Blumenthal’s book, see Shaul Magid, “Goliath the Israel Slayer: Why Max Blumenthal’s New Book is a Painful Read,” available online at <http://religiondispatches.org/igoliath-the-israel-slayer-why-max-blumenthals-new-book-is-a-painful-read>. Magid has offered further reflections on Kahane’s influence in an important recent paper, “Was Meir Kahane a Zionist?” presented at the 2014 Association for Jewish Studies Conference, Baltimore, Maryland.

⁶⁹ Adam B. Seligman, “Modernity and Sincerity: Problem and Paradox,” in *Hedgehog Review* 12:1 (Spring 2010), p. 54. I am grateful to colleagues at the Institute for the Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia, especially James Davison Hunter, for first introducing me to Seligman’s work on this theme.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 60.

⁷¹ See, e.g., Adam B. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 24, 36–38, 66, 115–118, and 136.

⁷² Adam B. Seligman, “Ritual, the Self, and Sincerity,” in *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 76:4 (2009), p. 32; Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences*, p. 123.

⁷³ Adam B. Seligman, “Ritual and Sincerity: Certitude and the Other,” in *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 36:1 (2010), p. 32; Seligman, *Ritual and Its Consequences*, p. 125.

⁷⁴ See Seligman, “Ritual and Sincerity: Certitude and the Other,” p. 32; Schwartzmann, “Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh and His Feminine Vision of the Messianic Age,” p. 56.

⁷⁵ See David Livingstone Smith, *Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2011).

⁷⁶ NJPS translation, substituting “Eternal One” for “Lord.” Meir Kahane cites Sifrei Bemidbar §99 in showing how this verse can, however, instead point to Israel’s distinctiveness: “The Cushite is distinguished by [the colour of] his skin, and similarly Israel is distinguished by having more mitzvot than all the other nations of the world” (Kahane, *Commentary on Exodus*, p. 472, on Exodus 2:21).

⁷⁷ Maimonides, M.T. *Hilkhot Melakhim U-milh'moteihem* 12:4; following the translation of Abraham M. Hershman in *The Code of Maimonides, Book 14: The Book of Judges* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949), p. 242.

⁷⁸ Hermann Cohen, *Reason and Hope: Selections from the Jewish Writings of Hermann Cohen*, trans. Eva Jospe (New York: Norton, 1971), p. 120.

⁷⁹ Pirkei Avot 4:1.

⁸⁰ See Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The Midianite-Kenite Hypothesis Revisited and the Origins of Judah," in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 33:2 (2008), pp. 131–153. A briefer discussion may be found in James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), pp. 424–428.

⁸¹ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), III 32. See Menachem Marc Kellner, *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006).

⁸² Kahane sees Moses as having indeed sinned in Exodus 2 by taking refuge with Jethro when Jethro still lived among the Midianites and had not yet joined the Jewish people, as discussed in Kahane, *Commentary on Exodus*, p. 481 (on Exodus 2:22). Kahane concludes his discussion of Moses's encounter with Jethro in Exodus 2 (on p. 485 of the translation) with the message that "all intimacy with foreign influences can only undermine the authentic Jewish Idea." Cf. also Kahane, *Commentary on Exodus*, p. 592, on Exodus 3:5 Kahane's commentary on Exodus did not reach Exodus 18 and he has relatively little to say about Jethro's encounter with Moses there, but he gives no indication that Jethro should still be identified as a Midianite at that point or as drawing on non-Jewish wisdom at all.

⁸³ NJPS translation.

⁸⁴ See Zohar II 68a–69a, III 122a. Kahane accepts these sorts of traditions; see, e.g., Kahane, *Commentary on Exodus*, pp. 400 and 403, on Exodus 2:16; and p. 478, on Exodus 2:22. I imagine that Ginsburgh endorses these traditional narratives as well, though I have found little discussion of the character of Jethro in Ginsburgh's published writings to date.

⁸⁵ On the connection between Pinhas and Jethro, see B. Sanhedrin 82b. Mekhilta, *Yitro* 1, and Mekhilta D'Rabbi Yishmael, *Amalek* 3 tell of Jethro's zeal as the source of his name, "*Keini*." In its context, *Keini* would seem to indicate Jethro's foreign, "Kenite" identity, whereas the midrash understands the term as pointing to his rejection of that identity. Kahane refers to this midrash in his *Commentary on Exodus*, p. 430, on Exodus 2:18.

⁸⁶ Kahane, *Commentary on Exodus*, p. 401, on Exodus 2:16.

⁸⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, "Revelation in the Jewish Tradition," in *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, trans. Gary D. Mole (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 133–134.

⁸⁸ Based on the NJPS translation, modified for gender neutrality and with emphasis added.

⁸⁹ Simḥah Zissel (Broida) Ziv, *Sefer Hokhmah U-Musar* (Jerusalem: Me'orei Oros Hamusar Publications, 2003), vol. 2, p. 15.

⁹⁰ I began formulating this essay while debating with my uncle, Yoel (Joel) Lerner (1941–2014), a disciple of Meir Kahane and an admirer of Yitzchak Ginsburgh, who aspired to “repair the world” in line with many of the disturbing and dangerous ideas presented here. I dedicate this essay to my uncle’s memory, and I am sorry that I never had the opportunity to share it with him in its completed form.