

Tikkun olam

Tikkun olam (Hebrew: תיקון עולם (*literally*, "repair of the world", *alternatively*, "construction for eternity") is a concept in Judaism, interpreted in Orthodox Judaism as the prospect of overcoming all forms of idolatry,^[1] and by other Jewish denominations as an aspiration to behave and act constructively and beneficially^[2]

Documented use of the term dates back to the Mishnaic period. Since medieval times, kabbalistic literature has broadened use of the term. In the modern era, among the post Haskalah Ashkenazi movements, *tikkun olam* is the idea that Jews bear responsibility not only for their own moral, spiritual, and material welfare, but also for the welfare of society at large.^[3] To the ears of contemporary pluralistic Rabbis, the term connotes "the establishment of Godly qualities throughout the world"^[2]

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History

The phrase *tikkun olam* is included in the *Aleinu*, part of Jewish congregational prayer. The *Aleinu* beseeches God:

Hebrew:

לראות מהרה בתפארת עוזך. להעביר גלולים מן הארץ והאלילים כרות יכרתוון" לתקן עולם במלכות ש-די

Translation:

"to speedily see Your mighty splendor, to remove detestable (idolatry) from the land, and the (false) gods will be utterly 'cut off', to *tahken olam* in God's kingdom"

In other words, when all the people of the world abandon false gods and recognize God, the world will have been perfected.

Being that we share a partnership with God, humanity is instructed to take the steps towards improving the state of the world and helping others, which simultaneously brings more honor to God's sovereignty. Some scholars, however, argue that the phrase in the *Aleinu* prayer is actually not a valid source for the concept of *tikkun olam*, and that the confusion arises because of the homonym "I'takken" (spelled differently, לתכן) meaning "to establish" rather than "to fix" or "to repair."^[4] There are many sources where the reading of לתכן survives today. This section of *Aleinu* is fundamentally a prayer for the establishment of God's kingdom and therefore the reading of לתכן fits much better and makes much more sense. If so, the meaning of the phrase is something like, "to establish God's sovereignty over the world."

The meaning of the term in the Talmud is "to make a decree that makes a difficult obligation easier." It is normally unrelated to the more eschatological usage.

The American Conservative movement's prayer book, *Siddur Sim Shalom*, published by the Rabbinical Assembly and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, "A Prayer for Our Country" includes the verses, "May citizens of all races and creeds forge a common bond in true harmony to banish all hatred and bigotry" and "uniting all people in peace and freedom and helping them to fulfill the vision of your prophet: 'Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they experience war anymore.'" Both lines express wholeheartedly the idea of universal equality, freedom, and peace for all.

The *Mi Sheberach* prayer blesses all of those who are ill and are in need of healing.

The 1975 New Union, American Reform movement's prayer book, *Gates of Prayer*, includes the text "You [Lord] have taught us to uphold the falling, to heal the sick, to free the captive, to comfort all who suffer pain" (383).

Lurianic Kabbalah

Lurianic Kabbalah dwells on the role of prayer and ritual *in tikkun olam*. According to this vision of the world, God contracted part of God's self into vessels of light—partly limiting himself—to create the world. These vessels shattered and their shards became sparks of light trapped within the material of creation. Prayer, especially contemplation of various aspects of the divinity (*sephirot*), releases these sparks of God's self and allows them to reunite with God's essence, bringing them closer to a fixed world. According to Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, in his book *Derech Hashem*, the physical world is connected to spiritual realms above that influence the physical world, and furthermore, Jews have the ability, through physical deeds and free will, to direct and control these spiritual forces. God's desire in creation was that God's creations ultimately will recognize God's unity and overcome evil; this will constitute the perfection (*tikkun*) of creation. While the Jews have the Torah now and are aware of God's unity, some believe that when all of humanity recognizes this fact, the rectification will be complete.^[5] In recent years Jewish thinkers and activists have used Lurianic Kabbalah to elevate the full range of ethical and ritual *mitzvot* into acts of *tikkun olam*. These Jews believe that not only does prayer lift up divine sparks, but so do all of the *mitzvot*, including those traditionally understood as ethical. The application of the Lurianic vision to improving the world can be seen in Jewish blogs,^[6] High Holiday sermons^{[7][8]} and on-line Jewish learning resource centers.^[9]

The association between the Lurianic conception of *tikkun olam* and ethical action assigns an ultimate significance to even small acts of kindness and small improvements of social policy. However, this association can be a double-edged sword and has begun to trigger critique even within the social justice community. On one hand, seeing each action as raising a divine spark can motivate people to action by giving them hope that their actions will have long-term value. On the other hand, if this is done in a manner that separates the concept of *tikkun olam* from its other meanings as found in rabbinic literature and the *Aleinu* prayer, the risk of privileging actions that have no real significance and represent personal agendas is introduced.^[2]

The application of Lurianic Kabbalah to ethical *mitzvot* and social action is particularly striking because Lurianic Kabbalah saw itself as repairing God and the world to come rather than this world and its social relations. Author Lawrence Fine points to two features of Lurianic Kabbalah that have made it adaptable to ethical *mitzvot* and social action. First, he points out that a generation recovering from the tragedy of the Holocaust resonates with the imagery of shattered vessels. Second, both Lurianic Kabbalah and ethical understandings of *tikkun olam* emphasize the role of human responsibility and action.^[10]

Performance of *mitzvot*

Jews believe that performing of ritual *mitzvot* (good deeds, commandments, connections, or religious obligations) is a means of *tikkun olam*, helping to perfect the world, and that the performance of more *mitzvot* will hasten the coming of the Messiah and the Messianic Age. This belief dates back at least to the early Talmudic period. According to Rabbi Yochanan, quoting Rabbi Shim'on bar Yochai, the Jewish people will be redeemed when every Jew observes Shabbat (the Sabbath) twice in all its details. This suggests that *tikkun olam* will prove successful with the coming of the Messiah and the Messianic Age.^[11]

Observing Shabbat

Some explain the power of Shabbat by its effect on the other six days of the week and their role in moving society towards the Messianic Age. Shabbat helps bring about the Messianic Age because Shabbat rest energizes Jews to work harder to bring the Messianic Age nearer during the six working days of the week. Because the experience of Shabbat gives one a foretaste of the Messianic Age, observance of Shabbat also helps Jews renew their commitment to bring about a world where love and mercy will reign. This relates to the section on the role of *mitzvot* (above) that suggests that *tikkun olam* will prove successful with the coming of the Messiah and the Messianic Age.^[12]

Ethical behavior

In Jewish thought, ethical *mitzvot* as well as ritual *mitzvot* are important to the process of *tikkun olam*. Maimonides writes that *tikkun olam* requires efforts in all three of the great "pillars" of Judaism: Torah study, acts of kindness, and the ritual commandments.^[13] Some Jews believe that performing *mitzvot* will create a model society among the Jewish people, which will in turn influence the rest of the world. By perfecting themselves, their local Jewish community or the state of Israel, the Jews set an example for the rest of the world. The theme is frequently repeated in sermons and writings across the Jewish spectrum: Reconstructionist, Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox.

Also, the *mitzvot* often have practical worldly/social effects (in contrast to mystical effects as held by Lurianic Kabbalah).

Tzedakah

Tzedakah is a central theme in Judaism and serves as one of the 613 commandments.^[14] Tzedakah is used in common parlance as charitable giving. *Tzedek*, the root of *tzedakah*, means justice or righteousness.^[14] Acts of *tzedakah* are used to generate a more just world. Therefore, *tzedakah* is a means through which to perform *tikkun olam*.

Philanthropy is defined as giving money in order to "promote the common good".^[15] Philanthropy is an effective tool in performing *tikkun olam* as it supports the organizations that perform direct service. There are many different philanthropic organizations devoted to repairing the world. The United Jewish Federations of North America, one of the top ten charities in the world, counts *tikkun olam* as one of the three main principles under which it operates. Similarly, the American Jewish World Service supports grassroots organizations creating change in Africa, Asia, and the Americas.

The intersection between *tzedakah*, philanthropy, and *tikkun olam* is captured by Yehudah Mirsky in his article "Tikkun Olam: Basic Questions and Policy Directions". Mirsky writes:

The rich tradition of *tzedakah* is a model of communal social responsibility in the absence of a strong welfare state; it also connects to the burgeoning area of Micro Philanthropy, which pools large numbers of small donations resulting in more direct interaction between donors and recipients, or "givers" and "doers," higher resolution in the focus of giving and the creation of new networks of cooperation.^[16]

Building a model society

By performing the *mitzvot*, it is believed that the Jewish people will become a model society. This idea sometimes is attributed to Biblical verses that describe the Jews as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5–6) and "a light of the nations" or "a light to the nations" (Isaiah 42:6 and Isaiah 49:6). The philosophies of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch^{[17][18][19]} and Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook are prominent in this field, the former rationally and in terms of a *kehilla* (community) of Jews in *galut* (the diaspora) influencing their non-Jewish neighbors, and the latter mystically and in Zionist terms of a Jewish state influencing the other nations of the world. Some other Orthodox rabbis, many but not all of them Modern Orthodox, follow a philosophy similar to Hirsch's, including Joseph H. Hertz,^[20] Isidore Epstein,^[21] and Eliezer Berkovits.^[22] The philosophy of Religious Zionism follows Kook in his philosophy.

In Modern Orthodox philosophy (which often is intertwined with Religious Zionism, especially in America), it is commonly believed that *mitzvot* have practical this-worldly sociological and educational effects on those who perform them, and in this manner, the *mitzvot* will perfect the Jews and the world.

According to the rationalist philosophy of Hirsch and others, the social and ethical *mitzvot* have nearly self-explanatory purposes, while ritual *mitzvot* may serve functions such as educating people or developing relationships between people and God. As examples, prayer either inculcates a relationship between people and God or strengthens beliefs and faith of the one who prays, and keeping kosher or wearing tzitzit serve as educational symbols of moral and religious values. Thus, the ultimate goal of *mitzvot* is for moral and religious values and deeds to permeate the Jewish people and ultimately the entire world, but the ritual *mitzvot* nevertheless play a vital role in this model of *tikkun olam*, strengthening what is accomplished by the ethical.

Hirsch's *Horeb* is an especially important source, as his exposition of his philosophy of the *mitzvot*. He classifies the *mitzvot* into six categories:

- (1) *toroth* (philosophical doctrines);
- The ethical *mitzvot* fall under (2) *mishpatim* and (3) *chukim* (commandments of justice towards (living) people and the natural world (including the human body itself) respectively) and (4) *mitzvot* (commandments of love);
- The ritual *mitzvot* under (5) *edoth* (educational symbolic commandments) and (6) *avodah* (commandments of direct service to God).

Aside from the fact that by perfecting themselves, the Jews set an example for the rest of the world, there is thus the additional distinction that *mitzvot* have practical, worldly effects—for example, charity benefits the poor materially, constituting *tikkun olam* by its improvement of the world physically or socially in contrast to the mystical effects of *mitzvot* as held by Lurianic Kabbalah.

Improving the world

According to Jewish scholar 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 Shlomo Bardin in the 1950s.^[10] Bardin interpreted the *Aleinu* prayer, specifically the expression *le-taken olam be-malchut shaddai* (typically translated as *when the world shall be perfected under the reign of the almighty*), as a responsibility for Jewish people to work towards a better world.^[10] As left-leaning progressive Jewish organizations started entering the mainstream in the 1970s and 1980s, the phrase *tikkun olam* began to gain more traction. The phrase has since been adopted by a variety of Jewish organizations, to mean anything from direct service to general philanthropy.^[2] It was presented to a wide international audience—itsself an indication of how widely *tikkun olam* had now permeated American Jewish life—when Mordecai Waxman used the phrase in a speech during Pope John Paul II's visit to the United States in September 1987.^[23]

For some Jews, the phrase *tikkun olam* means that Jews are not only responsible for creating a model society among themselves but also are responsible for the welfare of the society at large.^[24] This responsibility may be understood in religious, social or political terms and there are many different opinions about how religion, society and politics interact.

Michael Spiro, a Reconstructionist Jew, argues for the validity of a conservative politics of *tikkun olam*. He contends that the perception that *tikkun olam* requires leftist politics is based on two myths: (a) conservatives uniformly value self-interest over society and (b) conservatives uniformly are against the rights of women and homosexuals. In response to the myth of self-interest he observes that Adam Smith and the conservatives after him emphasized free markets precisely because they believed that *was* the path to the greatest public good. In addition, conservatives have always emphasized the importance of *private* efforts of *gemilut chasadim* (benevolence) and *tzedakah* (charity or philanthropy). The conservative position is that individuals and communities should not use government efforts as a substitute for the individual and collective responsibility for these *mitzvot*. In response to the second myth, he argues that the right's position on family values is fundamentally a question of process, not content: changes in the right to abortion and gay marriage should be pursued using *legislative* rather than *judicial* means. Spiro views the concern for process as fundamentally Jewish.^[25]

Tikkun olam is used to refer to Jewish obligations to engage in social action in the Reform^[26] and Conservative^{[27][28]} movements as well. For example, in USY, the Conservative youth movement, the position in charge of social action on chapter and regional boards is called the SA/TO (social action/tikkun olam) officer.^[29] Furthermore, USY has the Abraham Joshua Heschel Honor Society.^[30] A

requirement of acceptance to the honor society is to perform one act of community service a month. In NFTY, the Reform youth movement, the position in charge of social action on chapter and regional boards is called the social action vice president (SAVP).^[31]

In addition, other youth organizations have also grown to include *tikkun olam* as part of its foundation. BBYO has community service/social action commitments in both of its divisions AZA and BBG. BBG includes two different programming areas specific to *tikkun olam*—one for community service, and another for social action.^[32] AZA includes a combined community service/social action programming area.^[32] In addition, both divisions include "pledge principles," principles by which to guide them. For BBG girls the "menorah pledge principles" include citizenship, philanthropy, and community service.^[33] For AZA members, the "7 cardinal principles" include charity

Jewish fundamentalism

Elon University professor Geoffrey Claussen has asserted that concepts of *tikkun olam* have helped to inspire Jewish fundamentalists such as Meir Kahane and Yitzchak Ginsburgh. According to Claussen, "while visions of *tikkun olam* may reflect humility, thoughtfulness, and justice, they are often marked by arrogance, overzealousness, and injustice."^[34]

See also

- Eschatology

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