

# Tikkun Olam: Be Careful What You Ask For

Mannie Gross (June, 2019)

## Background

Some 15 years ago I began to hear the term tikkun olam used in Progressive Jewish statements. I was puzzled because I had no idea where this term originated, why was it considered “Jewish” or why especially Progressive Jews seemed to have adopted it. Worse for me was that it seemed to be used as a catch-all justification for anything Progressive Jews wanted to support. Why do you want to support protecting some endangered species? Ans – tikkun olam. Why do you oppose coal mining or wish to ban plastic straws or support so called illegal immigrants? Ans - tikkun olam. There was absolutely no fashionable cause that could not be justified by just saying “tikkun olam”. How convenient. But what do we recite every morning service?

These are the obligations without measure,  
Which enhance our world ...  
honouring one’s father and mother,  
engaging in deeds of compassion,  
arriving early for study, morning and evening,  
dealing graciously with guests,  
visiting the sick,  
providing for the wedding couple,  
accompanying the dead for burial,  
being devoted in prayer,  
making peace among people -  
and the study of Torah encompasses them all.

Well it seems we need none of that anymore because tikkun olam supersedes the Torah. After all, if I can justify any action or cause by invoking tikkun olam, what need do I have for the Torah or for that matter all the rest of rabbinic law?

It seems to me that the history of Jewish religious law, which has always changed to adapt to changing circumstances, describes a continuous struggle to derive those changed laws from the Torah. I am convinced that the myth of the equal status given to the invented so-called Oral Torah or Law was necessary in order to justify changes to religious practice that could not be derived from the Written Torah.<sup>1</sup> Why did the rabbis do this? Because if they didn’t, Judaism wouldn’t have survived & as the core of their belief was the divine origin of the Torah, all practice needed to be derived from it.

So why shouldn’t we steal or murder? Ultimately because the Torah, & therefore God, said so. And you can’t argue with that! But what if I answer because of tikkun olam? Well that makes life easy. I don’t have to derive my laws from a specific injunction in the Torah. If everything is justified by tikkun olam, it would seem there is no need for Torah any more.

Problem: On most Progressive Jewish websites you will find a statement that tikkun olam is a core value of Judaism but on none is the term defined in terms of anything uniquely or even remotely Jewish. Further, the term does not appear in the Torah. So how can it be a core value of Judaism?

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<sup>1</sup> See my talk, *How Did Halacha Originate or Did the Rabbis Tell a “Porky”?* presented at LBC, June 2018 (<http://lbc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/How-Did-Halacha-Originate.pdf>)

This talk will investigate the origins of the term & its different meanings through history & try to determine if tikkun olam is really a core Jewish value.

At the UPJ's web site, under Progressive Judaism Q&A<sup>2</sup>, it notes:

Judaism is built on the history and laws set out in the Torah (Five Books of Moses). It emphasises ethical behaviour and prescribes a way of life, telling us how to behave, work, rest, eat, celebrate and much more.

Progressive Judaism embraces all these traditions and works to make them meaningful parts of contemporary life.

We put particular emphasis on *Tikkun Olam* (rebuilding the world), the belief that through social or environmental action we are partners with God in creating the world as it should be.<sup>3</sup>

Here Tikkun Olam is equated to "rebuilding the world" which is further equated with "social or environmental action". There also seems to be an attempt at misdirection in these statements in that it skips over the fact that Tikkun Olam is not part of the Torah which it claims Progressive Judaism is built on.

In an article entitled "Judaism Beyond Slogans" appearing in Commentary magazine, dated Jan 17, 2018, Jeffrey Salkin<sup>4</sup> wrote:

In 2016, in my capacity as a Rabbi, I chaperoned a Jewish youth-leadership event on social-justice issues. During the program, a teenage boy approached me with a memorable observation. "I might not know that much Torah," he said, "but I certainly can't believe that every issue in the world comes under the general heading of 'Justice, justice, shall you pursue.'"

He had picked up on a disturbing truth: For years now, liberal Jews have been teaching a Judaism of slogans. And these slogans are all of a particular political bent.

Liberal Jewish groups have long taken standard progressive positions on various social issues, such as civil rights, immigrant rights, LGBT inclusion, gun control, and environmentalism. The Reform movement's involvement in civil rights is, in fact, more than a century old. Its rabbis, such as the late Arthur Lelyveld, shed blood in its cause.

The problem with this has less to do with what liberal Jews say about these matters than with how such Jews justify their positions. They tend to attach Jewish texts to the issues at hand, and to do so sloppily. Talmudic Judaism calls this practice the *asmachta*: the use of a biblical text in support of a particular practice when, in fact, there is no proof that the practice is actually derived from that particular text. In citing Jewish texts to bolster political stances, liberal Jews too rarely unpack what

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.upj.org.au/index.php/learning/progressivejudaismqnada>

<sup>3</sup> Tikkun Olam means repairing/mending the world. Is "rebuilding" a step too far? Whatever word is used, who decides what requires repairing/mending/rebuilding? What criteria should be used for deciding? If it is the Torah (written or oral), as it is subject to constant reinterpretation, the criteria for deciding is subject to constant change. What is the basis in Torah or Jewish tradition that tikkun olam requires social action or environmental action?

The tikkun olam as defined here is mostly an invention of the second half of the 20th Century. It bears little resemblance to the Tikkun Ha-olam referred to in Talmudic literature.

"... we are partners with God in creating the world as it should be." Didn't the Torah explain in Genesis that God created the world in six days then rested on the seventh day, after which creation stopped? When did God start creating again? Why would God require help from humans in creating the world as it should be? & who determines how the world "should be"?

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Salkin is a Reform rabbi and the spiritual leader of Temple Solel in Hollywood, Florida.

these texts meant in their original context. More rarely still do they admit to stretching their original meanings.

The need for a more truthful and coherent approach becomes clear when considering the findings of a 2017 study by Yale University. It showed direct correlation between the observance level of a denomination and social and political liberalism. It found that 80 percent of Reform rabbis and approximately 70 percent of Conservative rabbis identified as Democrats<sup>5</sup>. Among Orthodox rabbis, Democratic affiliation dropped to 40 percent. If Jewish texts point in an inexorably [politically] liberal direction, then we would expect that those Jews who, presumably, are the most adept with Jewish texts—the Orthodox—would be the most [socially & politically] liberal. Yet it seems the opposite is true.

How, then, have many liberal Jews managed to make biblical texts support the political policies of their choice? The answer is that key parts of these texts have been shrunk down to a set of memorable slogans and repurposed as [politically] progressive maxims. The four most common examples are: “Justice, justice, shall you pursue,” “Made in God’s image,” “Love the stranger,” and “Repair the world.”

At least the first three slogans can be found in the Torah. As I have already noted, “Repair the world” cannot.

When discussing the slogan *Tikkun Olam*, Salkin notes:

*Tikkun olam*, or “Repairing the world,” is one of the most popular Hebrew phrases in America. Its use is so common that one joke imagines a visitor to Israel asking: “How do you say *tikkun olam* in Hebrew?”

There is much to respect and admire in Jewish groups that are engaged in *tikkun olam*. That has become the preferred term for social-action and social-justice committees. But, somewhere along the line, the meaning of *tikkun olam* was transformed. It now seems to mean just about anything—which is to say, it means almost nothing.

...

“If Judaism supports all the policies you believe anyway,” writes David Wolpe<sup>6</sup>, “can’t you be at least a little suspicious that your politics are guiding your Torah, and not your Torah leading to your politics?” As one can see from the above examples, that suspicion has been slow in coming. But as that skeptical teenager shows, it exists.

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<sup>5</sup> In the US, the Democrats are more socially & politically liberal (i.e. left wing).

<sup>6</sup> David J. Wolpe (born 1958) is the Max Webb Senior Rabbi of Sinai Temple. Named the most influential rabbi in America by *Newsweek Magazine* and one of the 50 most influential Jews in the world by the *Jerusalem Post*, David Wolpe is the [Conservative] rabbi of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles, California. He previously taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York, the American Jewish University in Los Angeles, Hunter College, and UCLA. Wolpe’s work has been profiled in the *New York Times*, and he is a columnist for *Time.com*, he regularly writes for many publications, including *The LA Times*, the *Washington Post’s On Faith website*, *The Huffington Post*, and the *New York Jewish Week*. He has been on television numerous times, including the *Today Show*, *Face the Nation*, *ABC this Morning*, and *CBS This Morning*. In addition, Wolpe has been featured in series on PBS, A&E, the History channel, and the Discovery channel. Wolpe is the author of eight books, including the national bestseller *Making Loss Matter: Creating Meaning in Difficult Times*. Wolpe’s new book is titled *David: The Divided Heart*. It was a finalist for the National Jewish Book Award (2014), and has been optioned for a movie by Warner Bros. Wolpe became the focus of international controversy when he gave a Passover sermon that questioned the historicity of the Exodus from Egypt. Ordained by the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York in 1987, Wolpe is a leader in Conservative Judaism. (See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David\\_Wolpe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Wolpe))

In 1966, Commentary published a symposium on “The Condition of Jewish Belief.” In it, Jacob Neusner<sup>7</sup> captured the nature of the challenge we still face:

Judaism may provide political insight. It is to be discovered through a search for the political implications of its theology, surely not through a hunt for texts proving whatever we have already decided we want to do. We have not been sufficiently serious about either a study of Jewish tradition, or reflection upon Jewish realities today, to say just what political insight Judaism has now to offer.

I am, by nature and disposition, a political centrist. That is to say, I lean mostly liberal on American domestic issues and am slightly more conservative on foreign-policy and security issues. Like Wolpe and Neusner, I wish that Jews on or near the political left would be more intellectually honest. As that Commentary symposium was published a half-century ago, it’s past time for us to admit that too often our political and social stances come first and are then followed by interpretations of Jewish texts that serve as post facto justification.

So, the criticism of Progressive & Conservative Jews’ use of Tikkun Olam is twofold:

1. Tikkun Olam has become an empty, next to meaningless slogan.
2. Progressive & Conservative Jews in America dishonestly cherry pick from & misinterpret the Torah to justify already held mostly left-wing political views.

I am only going to deal with the first point here but I note in passing that I have definitely observed the second apply amongst members of the UPJ’s religious & lay leadership.

#### Origins: Talmudic Literature

Before we study examples of tikkun olam in the historically earliest use of the term, let’s first look at its meaning. In a study entitled “The Assimilation of Tikkun Olam”<sup>8</sup>, Levi Cooper<sup>9</sup> notes the following:

Tikkun olam is now a familiar term, but it carries a variety of meanings and associations which makes its translation an exercise in interpretation. The Hebrew root תקן (*t-k-n*) appears in Ecclesiastes where it is used in the sense of straightening, repairing or fashioning. Many of its later uses, however, depart from those original connotations. Thus, in rabbinic literature the root has a range of meanings such as fixing a variety of items, preparing for a significant event, legislating, composing liturgy, emending biblical texts, determining calendric calculations, propagating the species, and pursuing spiritual objectives. The Hebrew noun *‘olam* also carries more than a single implication: world, society, community, universe, spiritual sphere, forever, and eternity.

In rabbinic literature the words appear together in the form of *tikkun ha<sup>10</sup>-‘olam* (with the definite article), and occasionally as *tikkuno shel<sup>11</sup> ‘olam* (with a preposition).

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<sup>7</sup> Jacob Neusner (July 28, 1932 – October 8, 2016) was an American academic scholar of Judaism. He was named as one of the most published authors in history, having written or edited more than 900 books. (See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacob\\_Neusner](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacob_Neusner))

<sup>8</sup> The Jerusalem Center, November 1, 2014

<sup>9</sup> Levi Cooper teaches at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies and is a rabbi in Tzur Hadassah. He is currently a post-doctoral fellow in Bar-Ilan University’s Faculty of Law. Rabbi Dr. Cooper is a contributing editor to Jewish Educational Leadership. (At the time of writing (Winter, 2013))

<sup>10</sup> “*Ha*” meaning “the”.

<sup>11</sup> “*Shel*” meaning “of” or “belonging to”.

A comprehensive discussion of the term & how it was used comes from *Tikkun ha-Olam: The Metamorphosis of a Concept* by Gilbert S. Rosenthal<sup>12</sup> (National Council of Synagogues):

The noun form *tikkun ha-olam*, which I prefer to translate as “the improvement of society,” is found some thirty times in the Mishnah and Gemara of the Babylonian Talmud, eight times in the Talmud of the Land of Israel, and a mere handful of times in the Midrash and *Tosefta*. Remarkably, almost all the references are to be found in the fourth and fifth chapters of Tractate Gittin, which deals primarily with divorce laws. ...

For example, the Mishnah records the following *takkanot*<sup>13</sup> to protect women: “Originally, the *beit din* [religious court] would hear a divorce case in another community and annul it. Rabban Gamaliel the elder ordained that courts should no longer follow this pattern in order to improve society [*mipnei tikkun ha-olam*]. Originally, they used to write only the husband’s and the wife’s name and the name of his town and her town. Rabban Gamaliel the elder ordained that they must write his name and all names by which he was known, the wife’s name and all names by which she was known in order to improve society [*mipnei tikkun ha-olam*].”<sup>14</sup> The rationale behind these *takkanot* was the fear that the husband might impugn the *get* in another community or might claim that the name indicated in the *get* is not his, thereby nullifying the document. The results of such actions could be bastard children if the woman remarries or a chained woman (*agunah*) who may not remarry for a lack of a *get*. All of these considerations fall under the category of *tikkun ha-olam*.

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The principle of *tikkun ha-olam* was expanded into the economic and commercial realm as well. Perhaps the most famous case deals with the sabbatical year when all debts were cancelled (Deut. 15: 1–3). But this meant that poor people who needed to borrow cash would be turned down by creditors as the sabbatical year approached for they realized that any debts owed them would be wiped out in accord with biblical law. Consequently, the creditors refused loans, in violation of another biblical rule that we must not close our hands and harden our hearts to the requests for loans from the poor (Deut. 15:9–10). As a result, Hillel adopted by *takkanah* the *prozbol*, a document that circumvented the sabbatical cancellation of debts by empowering the *beit din* [court] to collect the money rather than the creditor, *mipnei tikkun ha-olam*. In short, Hillel nullified a biblical law, citing another one instead, and invoked the legislative power of the court for the sake of improving society.<sup>15</sup>

Rosenthal goes on to describe other cases covering commercial law, property law, criminal law, and redemption of captives and holy books. He continues:

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<sup>12</sup> Rabbi Gilbert S. Rosenthal is executive director of the National Council of Synagogues. He served as a pulpit rabbi for thirty-three years and as executive vice president of The New York Board of Rabbis for ten years. He is the author and editor of eleven books including *Contemporary Judaism* and *The Many Faces of Judaism*. (<https://www.amazon.com/What-Can-Modern-Jew-Believe-English-ebook/dp/B01M25ZEIV>)

The National Council of Synagogues is a partnership of the Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist movements in Judaism dealing with interreligious affairs on a national level. We believe that religious bodies need to talk to one another, dialogue with each other, and share ideas, insights and values if religions are to play a role in building a better society. (<https://nationalcouncilofsynagogues.org/>)

<sup>13</sup> *Takkanot* = fixes, repairs, corrections.

<sup>14</sup> Gittin 4:2, 33a and 36a.

<sup>15</sup> M. Gittin 4:3; M. Sheviit 10:2–3 (where the principle of *tikkun ha-olam* is not cited) and Albeck’s notes on 382–383; Sifre Deut. 173ff., par. 113; *Tosefta* Sheviit 8:5, 72; Gittin 33b–34b, 36a–b, 37b, and parallels; Yer. Sheviit 10:2 and 3, 39c. See Rambam, *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot* (ed. Rambam La-Am), “Positive Commandments,” 124 n. 141, and “Negative Commandments,” 277 n. 231; Ramban on Deut. 15:1; Tosafot Gittin 36a, s.v. *mi ika*; and Tosafot Kiddushin 8b, s.v. *mashkon*.

In all of these varied cases the rationale of the sages of the Talmud is the improvement of society, *tikkun ha-olam*. This legal principle, applied earlier primarily to divorce law, was now expanded into a variety of other areas. Its initial application was limited; **its potential, however, was limitless.**<sup>16</sup>

Rabbi Jill Jacobs<sup>17</sup> in her article *The History of "Tikkun Olam*, writes:

In all of these *mishnaic* cases, we might translate "*mipnei tikkun ha'olam*" as "for the sake of the preservation of the system as a whole."

As far as I am aware all scholars who have looked at the rabbinic literature on tikkun olam agree that the term relates to Jewish society & its halacha. It is not universalistic in outlook.<sup>18</sup> Today, of course, tikkun olam is completely universalistic in its meaning & scope. This has been specifically discussed in *Tikkun Olam: Particular or Universal?* by Vernon H. Kurtz.

To summarize, in the talmudic literature tikkun ha-olam appears about forty times and in every case is used as a justification to change the halacha (the system of Jewish law). In extreme cases the change is a complete abrogation of a written law. Its application is claimed to be limited to Jewish law & Rosenthal indicates that its potential was limitless. I believe what he was implying was that the rabbis could have used tikkun ha-olam to change any aspect of halacha they desired. Why? Because the term is not derived from Torah. It appears to be plucked from out of the aether and used to override anything where there is a perceived problem.

In all the articles I have referred to so far, no one provided an explanation of how this principle, mipnei tikkun ha-olam, came into existence. It would appear that the rabbis had invented something from outside the Torah that according to Rosenthal allowed them to change anything they liked.

Recently I came across another article entitled *Law And Exception: "Uprooting" Torah Law* by Shraga Bar-On.<sup>19</sup> In it he identifies the only midrash that helps explain the derivation of tikkun ha-olam from the Written Law.

... There is one mishna where the term tikkun olam is revealed, that is the fifth mishna. This mishna is unique from several perspectives – it is older than the others, we know that because its heroes are Beit-Hillel and Beit-Shamay who disputed during the second temple period; and it has an identical-parallel in tractate Edoth, which is considered to be oldest tractate of the mishna. All over the chapter the term tikkun olam is frozen, but only in this mishna it appears in a vital and lovely dispute. But the most illuminating feature of this mishna is that the term appears as part of a midrash. So, here we have the origin of this unique (and overused) term. Let's have a closer look at that Mishna:

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<sup>16</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>17</sup> Jill Jacobs (born 1975) is the Executive Director of T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, formerly Rabbis for Human Rights-North America. She is a Conservative rabbi and the author of *Where Justice Dwells: A Hands-On Guide to Doing Social Justice in Your Jewish Community* and *There Shall be No Needy: Pursuing Social Justice through Jewish Law and Tradition*. This book includes chapters on tzedakah, poverty, health care, housing, labor, criminal justice, and environmental justice in America, seen through a Jewish viewpoint. She has served as the Rabbi in Residence of Jewish Funds for Justice and as the Director of Outreach and Education for Jewish Council on Urban Affairs.

Jacobs is also the author of a teshuvah (legal position), passed by the Rabbinical Assembly's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards that says that Jews should pay their workers a living wage, create dignified workplaces, and hire union workers when possible. She was named to *Newsweek's* list of the fifty most influential rabbis in 2009 and 2010; to *The Forward* newspaper's list of fifty influential American Jews in 2006, 2008, and 2011; and to *The Jewish Week's* list of "thirty-six under thirty-six" in 2008. She was also named to *Newsweek's* list of the 50 Most Influential Rabbis in America in 2009, 2010, 2011, and 2012.

<sup>18</sup> From what I have read there appears to be a philosophical divide between Liberal/Reform/Progressive & Orthodox Judaism, where the former stresses the universalistic nature of Judaism & the latter emphasizes the particularistic/covenantal (i.e. chosen people) nature of Judaism.

<sup>19</sup> Rabbi Shraga Bar-On, Ph.D. is the director of the David Hartman Center for Intellectual Excellence, at the Shalom Hartman Institute and a faculty member at Shalem College in Jerusalem, Israel.

One who is partly a slave and partly free, shall work one day for his master and another day for himself. Such is the dictum of Beth Hillel; Beth Shammai said to them, “Your institution is good for the master but not for the slave; because, being partly free he cannot marry a bondwoman, nor [can he marry] a free woman on account of his being partly a slave;

he may not remain unmarried,	therefore, for <i>tiquun ha'olam</i> ,
since the world was created that man should thereon be fruitful and multiply, as it is said (Isaiah xlv. 19), 'He created it not in vain, He formed it to be inhabited'	the master is to be compelled to manumit such a slave, completely, and the latter shall sign a bond for half of his value.”

Beth Hillel retracted and adopted the opinion of Beth Shammai.

The slave is in a liminal condition: partly free and partly slave. The house of Hillel suggests a solution which is compatible with the tradition that protect the master's property-rights, and according to a (later) Halachic tradition prohibit releasing gentile slaves (and considers it a Torah law). But, here comes the house of Shamai and protests against this solution. They combined two claims:

- 1) This is a good solution for the master but doesn't solve the personal status problem of the slave. This is a moral/sociological claim. Does it count for the legal system? Maybe yes and maybe not.
- 2) But here comes the next claim which has a legalistic form. The house of Shamai starts to litigate in favor of the slave, and brings up the principle that the term *Tiqqun Olam* embodies. They claim that the world was created just for procreation, and this is an elementary right of the slave.

Please look carefully at the way the argument is formed. The negative side of the coin is "הלא לא נברא" <sup>20</sup>; the positive side of the coin is: "מפני תיקון העולם כופין את רבו...".<sup>21</sup> In this way we can realize clearly what the meaning of the term is and what is its role. The house of Shamay is saying there are certain purposes for the creation of the world. Those purposes have precedence over the written law or the halachic tradition. In my view this is one of the lonely cases were the sages represent a kind of natural-law argument.

This is of course a religious version of natural-law, we can call it "a creational law." The values, principles and norms which are rooted in the act of creation have a historical and logical precedence over Halachic laws. They have historic precedence because they came first into being and were given long before the Torah appeared; and they have a logical precedent because they are the primary reasons for the existing of this world, where the Torah is practiced.

It is interesting that the justification in the written Torah for the term “*mipnei tikkun ha-olam*”, in the purpose of God’s creation, has historical & logical precedence over Halacha. And not only that, but the principle is clearly universalistic in nature. It applies to all humanity equally & because of its universalistic nature & its logical & historical precedence over halacha, where it can be applied it is a knockout argument.

So, contra Rosenthal & perhaps all the other writers on *tikkun olam*, Rabbi Shraga Bar-On has identified the hook in the Torah upon which to hang the concept of *tikkun ha-olam*. It would be an interesting exercise to go back to all the Talmudic examples of the use of *tikkun ha-olam* to see if its use can be linked to “values, principles and norms which are rooted in the act of creation.” I would imagine it would not be difficult to find that link in the cases related to divorce. It might be a lot harder when considering the case of ransoming holy

<sup>20</sup> Suggested translation: Surely He did not create the world but to place fruit & multitudes.

<sup>21</sup> Suggested translation: Due to *tikkun ha-olam*, compel the master.

books. But the important point here is that the use of *tikkun ha-olam* to change the halacha is limited by the requirement to link it to the command to all humanity to be fruitful & multiply.

### Origins: Aleinu Prayer

Rosenthal & others indicate that the next oldest historical link of *tikkun olam* is to the second paragraph of the *Aleinu* prayer. There it states:

יְתִקְּנוּ עוֹלָם בְּמַלְכוּת שְׁדֵי (to perfect the world in the kingdom of God).

Rosenthal writes:

The syntax is difficult but the meaning seems clear: We pray that God will establish his kingship so that the world might be mended and healed and idolatry might disappear (*le-taken olam be-malkhut Shaddai*). This popular prayer that ends each of the three daily services ever since the fourteenth century is well known by most Jews and is sung lustily to a familiar tune. But it introduced an eschatological theme to the service and invested the notion of *tikkun ha-olam* with a totally new connotation: God, rather than humans, will repair the world. The Talmudic sense of the word was *this-worldly*; the liturgical is *other-worldly*.

I believe we can ignore this instance of *tikkun olam* because almost certainly the line in the prayer originally was:

יְתִקְּנוּ עוֹלָם בְּמַלְכוּת שְׁדֵי (to establish the world in the kingdom of God or to establish forever the kingdom of God). In this case there is no connection to *tikkun olam*.<sup>22</sup>

### Origins: Kabbalah

Quoting from *The History of "Tikkun Olam"* by Jill Jacobs<sup>23</sup>:

The most well-known use of the term *tikkun olam* comes from Lurianic Kabbalah, a sixteenth-century mystical school that revolved around Rabbi Isaac Luria. Luria described creation as a process by which God contracted the divine self in order to make room for the world. In the Lurianic creation story, God then emanated Godself into the world through ten *sefirot* – aspects of the divine presence. God contained these *sefirot* within vessels, but some of the vessels proved too weak to hold the more powerful of the *sefirot*. The vessels shattered, resulting in the mixture of divine light with the *kelipot*, or shells of the vessels themselves. This process resulted in the introduction of evil into the world.

Lurianic Kabbalah imagines that Adam, the first human being, could have redeemed the world and restored the divine light to its proper place. Through his sin, however, Adam lost the chance to achieve this repair, and the responsibility for restoring divine perfection fell to later generations. The attempt to free the divine emanation from the *kelipot* is known as *tikkun* (repair) and is achieved primarily through the performance of *mitzvot* (religious commandments), as well as through contemplation and study. Before performing *mitzvot*, the 16th century kabbalists often recited *kavvanot* (intentions) in which they stated their intention that this *mitzvah* would help to reunify parts of the divine being. The kabbalists also instituted certain new rituals, including the practice of praying or studying at midnight, and a *seder* for the holiday of Tu B'shevat, all intended to advance the process of *tikkun*.

The mystical notion of *tikkun* introduces into Jewish thought the idea that human actions can have an effect on the cosmos. Earlier biblical and rabbinic writings suggest that God demands certain behaviors, that human beings are rewarded or punished according to their behaviors, and even that God celebrates or mourns the appropriate or inappropriate actions of human beings. The innovation of *kabbalah* was the idea that God is not static, but changes in response to human behavior. In deciding

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<sup>22</sup> Aleinu: Obligation to Fix the World or the Text? by Mitchell First in *Hakirah*. 11: 187–197

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.zeeq.net/706tohu/index.php?page=2>

whether or not to perform a *mitzvah*, Jews thus must consider not only the potential consequences for themselves and their communities, but also the effect that a given action may have on the cosmos.

I don't want to say much more about the kabbalistic conception of *tikkun olam*. To find out more you can read *How the Ari Created a Myth and Transformed Judaism* by Howard Schwartz<sup>24</sup> and in *Tikkun ha-Olam: The Metamorphosis of a Concept* by Gilbert S. Rosenthal. Rosenthal notes:

In summation, the Zohar introduced a startlingly new meaning to the concept of *tikkun*: the actions of humans repair the flaws in the universe, reunite the various *sefirot*, and help restore the cosmic balance. *Tikkun ha-olam*, repair of this world by rabbinic sages and judges has been displaced or superseded by mystical *tikkun olamot*, otherworldly repair of worlds.

Two further transformations of the Kabbalistic interpretation of *tikkun ha-olam* occurred in the Shabbetai Zevi (1626–1676) messianic movement, where complete repair of the world could not occur without the intervention of the messiah. This was in contradistinction to the Lurianic kabbalistic belief that repair of world required all of Israel. Then there was the Hasidic reinterpretation, which was a reaction to the failed Shabbatean movement. As Rosenthal puts it:

The Hasidic movement borrowed elements of the teachings of the Lurianic circle, concepts preached by Nathan of Gaza, earlier kabbalistic ideas, as well as the insights of Moses Hayyim Luzzatto. ... early Hasidism “neutralized” the messianic concept in reaction to the Shabbetai Zevi fiasco, and replaced the idea of *tikkun* with *devekut* (cleaving to God, communion with the Deity) at the center of its theology. The term *tikkun ha-olam* almost never appears in Hasidic writings and certainly not in its legal sense. Instead, the Hasidic writers and preachers are fond of using the term *tikkun* or its plural, *tikkunim*, by which they usually mean the healing or improvement of one's soul, repairing the supernal world, and elevating the souls of our departed. Hasidism removed *tikkun* from the Lurianic myth so that humans must no longer be concerned with the breaking and repair of the broken divine vessels but rather with the correction of the human being within his or her own soul...

Although still being written about by kabbalists & Hasids, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the term seems to have disappeared completely & only begins to come to prominence in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century.

#### Origins: Modern Meanings – North America

According to Rosenthal, the writings of Martin Buber & Abraham Joshua Heschel allude to the concept of *tikkun ha-olam*, without actually mentioning the term.

To summarize the modern concept's development in America, I quote below from a summary of the Jonathan Krasner's large (forty page) article *The Place of Tikkun Olam in American Jewish Life* by Curt Biren<sup>25</sup> entitled *The Real Meaning of Tikkun Olam*:

The current connotation [of *tikkun olam*] can be traced back to the beginning of the post-War [WW II] period. Brandeis University professor Jonathan Krasner, in his 2014 article “The Place of Tikkun Olam in American Jewish Life,” identifies three distinct groups that transformed *tikkun olam* over the past 75 years. The first were theologians who, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, looked for ways to re-imagine the covenantal relationship between humans and God. They included Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Palestine, and various Reform and Conservative rabbis, including Rabbi Leo Baeck and Rabbi Harold Schulweis. Under *tikkun olam*, as used by these Jewish

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.tikkun.org/how-the-ari-created-a-myth-and-transformed-judaism>

<sup>25</sup> <https://jewishjournal.com/culture/religion/189136/>

leaders, “the Jews were not merely partners with God but ‘senior partners in action,’ entirely responsible for the execution of the covenant.”<sup>26</sup>

The second group were educators — including Shlomo Bardin, founder of the Brandeis Camp, and Rabbi Raphael Artz, director of Camp Ramah in New England — many of whom sought to reinvigorate Jewish education, including social action and *tzedakah*, under the rubric of *tikkun olam*. For example, as Krasner notes, in speaking to a group of campers in 1960, “Bardin insisted that it was their ‘task’ as Jews to ‘fix the world.’” Similarly, Rabbi Artz, in a 1967 address to Jewish educators, proclaimed, “The ultimate goal of man’s partnership with God is Tikkun olam.”

The third group was political. Beginning in the 1970’s, a number of progressive rabbis and community leaders began appropriating *tikkun olam* for their publications and programs. As Krasner notes, at the New Jewish Agenda’s founding conference in 1982, “The platform asserted that ‘many of us base our convictions on the Jewish religious concept of *tikkun olam* (the just ordering of human society and the world) and the prophetic traditions of social justice.’” In the early ’90’s, says Krasner, “others took up the effort to shape a progressive Jewish politics around *tikkun olam*.” Among these was Michael Lerner, who founded *Tikkun*, a left-wing alternative to *Commentary* magazine. “Lerner hoped to energize alienated Jews with a model of Judaism that rejected the crass materialism and hypocrisy of middle class suburban Jewish life in favor of a Jewishly grounded ethic of social justice.”

Among the educators noted by Krasner was Alexander Dushkin, who at one point was the executive director of the Jewish Education Committee of New York. He invoked *tikkun olam* during World War II as a means of “Identifying Judaism and Jewish values with the war against fascism”. In 1940 Krasner quotes Dushkin as defining *tikkun olam*, “the continuous task of reconstructing the world.” There is a significant difference between defining *tikkun olam* as fixing/repairing/mending the world & reconstructing the world because in the former you require an understanding of what is broken in order to fix/repair/mend it but in the latter you require a vision of how you wish the future world to be in order to reconstruct it.

Krasner notes:

As a student of Mordecai Kaplan and a member of the circle of rabbis, educators and communal workers which actively worked to spread Reconstructionism during the interwar years, Dushkin was familiar with Kaplan’s interpretation of the passage in *Aleinu* as a mandate for social activism. In *The Meaning of God* (1937), Kaplan asserted: “We cannot consider ourselves servants of the Divine King unless we take upon ourselves the task ‘to perfect the World under the Kingdom of the Almighty.’” It is clear that Kaplan did not regard the task to be exclusively or even mainly contemplative. He wrote about striving to “reconstruct the social order” and specifically focused on economic inequality, political corruption, a failing education system and the persistence of war. “We should not give up hope of achieving an adequately representative government integrally related to a righteous economic order and to an internationalism without which there can never be universal peace.”

Rosenthal notes:

Ironically, the Reconstructionist movement also names its social actions program Tikkun Olam. The founder of the movement, Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan, was bitterly opposed to Kabbalah and any

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<sup>26</sup> All the above theologians appear to have based their Twentieth Century re-interpretation of *tikkun olam* on the corrupted version of the *aleinu* prayer.

manifestation of mysticism in Jewish thought or practice, dubbing it, “theurgy<sup>27</sup>.” For his movement to adopt a kabbalistic concept is both bizarre and amusing.

Besides the apparent inconsistency, there is a clear expansion of the concept from the religious to the political sphere, indeed socialistic sphere, in Kaplan’s vision of tikkun olam. Over time, the main streams of Judaism – Progressive/Liberal/Reform, Conservative/Masorti & Modern Orthodox - have adopted the term tikkun olam in its more modern definition where people are active partners with God in fixing the world. Interestingly from Krasner’s work it seems that the Conservative movement was a decade ahead of the Progressive movement in North America in adopting the term.

### Origins: Modern Meanings – Israel

Quoting from Krasner:

Interestingly, tikkun olam gained currency in Palestine in the early twentieth century. It was adopted by Jews of various political stripes in order to describe the most utopian manifestations of the Zionist project. To be a *metaken olam*, a perfecter of the world, was to embrace radical change. For example, during the Second Aliyah (1904-1914), tikkun ha-olam was used to articulate the motivations of the members of the earliest cooperative settlements.

Again, there is a clear political component to the vision of tikkun olam. Krasner continues:

Later, it became an important component of the teleology<sup>28</sup> of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Palestine. ...

Kook ... regarded penitence a means to tikkun, and a reunification with God. While penitence begins with the quest for self-perfection, it ultimately “overflows into the endeavor to perfect society and the world.”

Even more controversially, from the perspective of many Orthodox leaders of his day, teachings about tikkun and his perception of holiness of all of humanity became a springboard for a redemptive religious Zionism. He embraced the secular Zionists’ rebuilding of Eretz Israel as a holy project and regarded them as (unwitting) agents of messianic redemption and tikkun. ... Rav Kook’s understanding of tikkun, however, derived more from his reading of kabbalistic and Hasidic sources than from its usage in secular Zionist circles.<sup>24</sup>

Ironically both Kaplan & Kook seem to at least partially base their concepts of tikkun olam upon a corrupted version of the *Aleinu* prayer.

### Summary

We have tikkun olam meaning different things at different times in Jewish history. Its earliest use was in the Mishnah (completed about 200-220 CE) where it meant fixing or repairing the halachic system the rabbis had devised to manage all aspects of Jewish life. It’s only justification in Torah appears to be a universal law that takes historic & logical precedence over the covenant between God & the Jewish people at Mt Sinai. We then have a transformation to an otherworldly, messianic, end of days type of tikkun olam developed by Jewish mystics that itself goes through a number of transformations via the kabbalists, Shabbateans & Hasids. The mystical concept of tikkun olam is more otherworldly concerned than the practical, this-worldly halachic concerns of the Talmudic rabbis.

In our time, especially in North America, tikkun olam has come to mean fixing/repairing/mending/remodeling the world in whatever left-wing or progressive or social democratic utopia a particular Jewish group

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<sup>27</sup> Definition of theurgy: the art or technique of compelling or persuading a god or beneficent or supernatural power to do or refrain from doing something.

<sup>28</sup> The explanation of phenomena by the purpose they serve rather than by postulated causes.

envisages. The term is often equated with social justice<sup>29</sup>. This has its own problems as social justice, originally a Catholic concept, is never defined. (Although this is a topic for another occasion, the philosopher & Nobel laureate Friedrich Hayek, concluded that social justice is a term bereft of any meaning. To the extent any meaning can be determined for this term, I have concluded it means socialism by those too dishonest or afraid to say what they really mean.)

### Conclusion

In LBC's old mission statement, adopted by the Board on February 2004<sup>30</sup> we read:

We ... encourage *Tikkun Olam* (Healing the World).

So, let's now add "healing" to the list of current day translations of tikkun. But I think most would agree that there is a subtle difference between healing something that is sick & fixing something that is broken in that usually the former alludes to something alive & the latter to an inanimate object. (Is this introducing Gaia worship into the Progressive Judaism?)

Getting back to our original question, is tikkun olam a core Jewish value? To help answer this question let's compare it to the indisputably core Jewish value of justice. There can be no doubt that justice is a core Jewish value as the Torah makes it so in many places. It even has Abraham arguing with God over justice for the people of Sodom & Gomorrah. But as no form of the term tikkun olam appears in the Torah, we would appear to have to look elsewhere to justify calling tikkun olam a core Jewish value.

As tikkun olam has had different meanings at different times we need to consider each period where it had these different meanings separately. For the Talmudic meaning of repairing the halachic system of Jewish life, I think a case can be made that, for the rabbis, it was a core Jewish value that could be derived from humanity's purpose, as described in the Torah, to be fruitful & multiply. This universalist reason took historical & logical precedence over the covenant at Sinai. One could even claim that for the Talmudic rabbis it was a core human value.

With regard to the mystical meaning, I think today's Kabbalists & other believers in this mumbo jumbo would consider tikkun olam, as they understand it, to be a core value. Whether it is a core Jewish value, depends perhaps on whether you consider Kabbalists to be Jewish.

When we come to the present day, tikkun olam does not appear to have any relation to the Torah, or the Talmudic rabbis' use of the term or to the various mystical meanings we have looked at earlier. It is therefore harder to justify calling it a core Jewish value. There are two problems equating tikkun olam with social justice:

1. "Social justice" is not a term found in the Torah. (Justice is a core Jewish value.)
2. Social justice needs to be clearly defined in order to understand what is meant by tikkun olam.

There appears to be nothing Jewish in the term tikkun olam as it is used today. Of course, if one wishes to declare tikkun olam a core Jewish value, there is nothing stopping you from doing so. As I noted at the start, Judaism has evolved continuously & tikkun olam can be made part of that continuous evolution. Only make sure you define clearly what it means. Does it mean to "re-imagine the covenantal relationship between humans and God" or "to reinvigorate Jewish education, including social action and *tzedakah*" or to "shape a progressive [left wing] Jewish politics"? Or does it mean a combination of all three or something else

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<sup>29</sup> Social justice is a political philosophy that advocates the redistribution of income—and sometimes even wealth and other property—in order to achieve economic egalitarianism. It's often used synonymously with the terms "economic justice" or "distributive justice." (Neumann, Jonathan. *To Heal the World?* (pp. x-xi). St. Martin's Press. Kindle Edition.)

<sup>30</sup> In 2019 the Leo Baeck Centre adopted a new mission statement that does not contain the term tikkun olam.

altogether? For until tikkun olam is defined very clearly it will remain an empty slogan. And don't try to hide the fact that the term does not appear in the Torah.

Of course, just declaring tikkun olam a core Jewish value is no validation of the claim. A more satisfying, honest approach, that would justify its claim to be Jewish, would be to take a leaf out of the Talmudic rabbi's book & identify universal ethical or legal principles from the Torah that can be used to derive the use of tikkun olam, however you define it, in particular circumstances.

Finally, I would like to leave you with some questions with regard to the term tikkun olam as it is understood today:

1. Who decides what is broken in the world?
2. How do you know it is really broken?
3. Who decides how to fix what is broken in the world?
4. Who decides that the benefits of the "fix" outweigh the disbenefits?
5. If everyone concentrated on fixing what is broken in themselves, would the world be a better place?

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