

Alyth



Alyth Chavruta Project

Tikkun Olam

Week 4



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'Iron sharpens iron, so a person sharpens the wit of their friend.'

Proverbs 27:17



Introduction

Welcome to the final text pack of this series of the Alyth Chavruta Project focused on the concept of *tikkun olam* ('repairing the world'). In this final week we look at sources about *tikkun olam* from the last few decades and consider how they relate to ideas about the concept from the last two millennia, as well as the way in which the concept has penetrated into the politics of the non-Jewish world.

The text itself can be found here in both Hebrew only and Hebrew with translation. For those with some knowledge of Hebrew, we encourage you to attempt your own translation, but there is absolutely no expectation that you engage with the Hebrew. As usual, there is also no requirement to get to the end of the pack – we have provided more than you can get through in an hour of study. It is up to you whether you want to focus exclusively on the text itself, or explore the commentaries and supplementary materials provided.

Further resources and advice on how to get the most out of chavruta can be found in our [revised FAQs](#). We look forward to seeing you on Thursday to share our learning with each other.

Blessing for Study

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוֵּנוּ לְעֲסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה.

Blessed are You, our Living God, Sovereign of the universe, whose commandments make us holy, and who commands us to devote ourselves to the study of Torah.

Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheynu Melech ha-olam, asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav, v'tzivanu la-asok b'divrey Torah.

From THE PITTSBURGH PLATFORM, 1999¹

We bring Torah into the world when we strive to fulfill the highest ethical mandates in our relationships with others and with all of God's creation. Partners with God in *tikkun olam*, repairing the world, we are called to help bring nearer the messianic age. We seek dialogue and joint action with people of other faiths in the hope that together we can bring peace, freedom and justice to our world. We are obligated to pursue *tzedek*, justice and righteousness, and to narrow the gap between the affluent and the poor, to act against discrimination and oppression, to pursue peace, to welcome the stranger, to protect the earth's biodiversity and natural resources, and to redeem those in physical, economic and spiritual bondage. In so doing, we reaffirm social action and social justice as a central prophetic focus of traditional Reform Jewish belief and practice. We affirm the *mitzvah* of *tzedakah*, setting aside portions of our earnings and our time to provide for those in need. These acts bring us closer to fulfilling the prophetic call to translate the words of Torah into the works of our hands.

In all these ways and more, Torah gives meaning and purpose to our lives.

Questions

1. How is *tikkun olam* defined by the twentieth-century American Reform Movement?
2. What does *tikkun olam* have to do with the 'prophetic focus of traditional Reform Judaism'?

¹ You can read the full text of the 1999 Pittsburgh Platform [here](#).



BARACK OBAMA, 2008²

As any Israeli will tell you, Israel is not a perfect place, but like the United States it sets an example for all when it seeks a more perfect future. These same qualities can be found among American Jews. It is why so many Jewish Americans have stood by Israel, while advancing the American story. Because there is a commitment embedded in the Jewish faith and tradition: to freedom and fairness; to social justice and equal opportunity. To *tikkun olam* — the obligation to repair this world.

I will never forget that I would not be standing here today if it weren't for that commitment. In the great social movements in our country's history, Jewish and African Americans have stood shoulder to shoulder. They took buses down south together. They marched together. They bled together. And Jewish Americans like Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner were willing to die alongside a black man — James Chaney — on behalf of freedom and equality.

Their legacy is our inheritance. We must not allow the relationship between Jews and African Americans to suffer. This is a bond that must be strengthened. Together, we can rededicate ourselves to end prejudice and combat hatred in all of its forms. Together, we can renew our commitment to justice. Together, we can join our voices together, and in doing so make even the mightiest of walls fall down.

Questions

How does Obama use the term *tikkun olam* in this speech?

² This speech was given on 4 June 2008 during the Presidential Election campaign. You can read the full transcript [here](#).

In its current incarnation, the term *tikkun olam* can refer to anything from a direct service project such as working in a soup kitchen or shelter, to political action, to philanthropy. While used widely by organisations on the left, the term also appears regularly in the rhetoric of more mainstream groups such as synagogues, camps, schools and federations. In these contexts, *tikkun olam* more often refers to direct service projects, and less often to political initiatives, as synagogues and schools generally feel more comfortable dealing with immediate needs, for reasons of both politics and capacity.

At this point in Jewish history, the phrase *tikkun olam* is so often used by both Jews and non-Jews that it threatened to become nearly meaningless. Though once identified with the political left, *tikkun olam* has begun to appear frequently enough in mainstream and right-wing publications to blur its identification with any specific vision of what the world might be. In its popular usage, the origin of the term has become sufficiently confused that it is possible to find references to ‘the prophetic value of *tikkun olam*’ and ‘the commandment of *tikkun olam*’. As a post-biblical term, *tikkun olam* does not appear in any of the prophetic books, nor is it counted as a commandment.

As the meaning of *tikkun olam* has expanded to apply to virtually any action or belief that the speaker thinks is beneficial to the world, many Jewish social justice activists and thinkers have moved away from using the term at all. Complaining about the equation of Judaism with liberal politics, Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf comments, ‘All this begins, I believe, with distorting *tikkun olam*. A teaching about compromise, sharpening, trimming and humanising rabbinic law, a mystical doctrine about putting God’s world back together again, this strange and half-understood notion becomes a huge umbrella under which our petty moral concerns and political panaceas can come in out of the rain.’



Rather than reject this term altogether, I suggest a reimagining of *tikkun olam* that combines the four understandings of the term we have seen in traditional text: 1) the *Aleinu's* concept of *tikkun* as the destruction of any impurities that impede the full manifestation of the divine presence; 2) the literalist midrashic understanding of *tikkun olam* as the establishment of a sustainable social order; 3) the rabbinic willingness to invoke *tikkun ha'olam* as a justification for changing laws likely to create chaos; and 4) the Lurianic belief that individual actions can affect the face of the world as a whole.

...

Each of these four strands taken alone has the potential to lead us into dangerous pitfalls when we try to apply it to contemporary thought. The *Aleinu* prayer risks directing Jews toward blaming the problems of the world on people outside the Jewish community, or toward waiting passively for God to bring the messianic era. Likewise, the Lurianic emphasis on the restoration of divine wholeness easily leads to an otherworldly focus and a minimalization of our sense of obligation toward the here and now. The fact that the concept of *tikkun olam* is often cited as a product of mystical thought, combined with the current popularity of kabbalah as a means of spiritual seeking, increases the chance that the Lurianic definition of *tikkun olam* will lead to a focus on the relationship between the self and God, rather than on relationships between people in the world.

In contrast, the midrashic focus on the physical maintenance of the world might lead to an emphasis only on issue that affect the physical world – such as global warming, deforestation, or the extinction of animal species – and a concurrent disregard for human problems, such as poverty and health concerns. The rabbinic attention to fixing loopholes that disrupt the legal and social system may limit the definition of *tikkun olam* only to issues that are understood to interfere with the large-scale functioning of society.

For the purpose of crafting an approach to Jewish action in the public sphere, I lean toward resurrecting the rabbinic definition but modifying this

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approach by means of comparison with the other three strands. Ultimately, only the rabbinic definition permits – and even mandates – changing law in order to create a more functional and even equitable society. By itself, the rabbinic approach to *tikkun olam* risks reducing the word *tikkun* to seeking small changes in specific laws. The more global approaches of the midrashic, Lurianic and *Aleinu* models challenge us to see our obligation of *tikkun olam* as in the larger context of moving toward a more sustainable and divine world.

Questions

1. What are the drawbacks Jacobs identifies with the historical definitions of *tikkun olam*?
2. What is Jacobs's own definition of *tikkun olam*?



A GUIDE TO THE SOURCES

The Pittsburgh Platform was a document originally authored in 1885 which sought to define the theological positions of the American Reform Movement. The Platform was revisited and rewritten in 1999.

Barack Obama was Senator of the State of Illinois 2004-2008, and then President of the United States 2008-2016. The speech included in this pack was given while Obama was running against Senator John McCain in the Presidential Election in 2008.

Rabbi Jill Jacobs is an American conservative rabbi who serves as the CEO of Tr'ual: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights (formerly known as Rabbis for Human Rights North America). The passage in this book is taken from her book, *There Shall be No Needy: Pursuing Social Justice Through Jewish Law and Tradition* (2009).

HAPPY STUDYING!

If you have any further questions, please be in
touch with Rabbi Elliott

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