

**Tikkun Olam - A Religious Imperative**  
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Our tradition teaches us that before the creation of our world, the Divine Presence filled all of the universe and all that ever was. But in order for God to create the world, the Holy One had to perform *tzimtzum*. *Tzimtzum* is in a sense an act of humility, it is a drawing inward of oneself in order to make space for other things to exist.

So The Holy One created 7 *clei'lim* - 7 vessels to contain the Divine Presence. But the vessels were not strong enough, and as they contained God's holiness, these *clei'lim*, these vessels, shook, and shook, and shook, and then finally with a BANG! I might say, a really "big bang" the world began the process of being created.

As the vessels shattered, the resultant messy mass became what the Torah describes as "*tohu v'va'hu*" a collection of matter that was "unformed and void." And slowly, over a period of time, God began to shape the matter, adding to it, changing it, helping it to evolve into something that we could now recognize.

And as God created the world, God would pause and look at what had been created and say "ah, this is good."

But after God had been creating for some time, the Holy One realized that there was still so much to be done, in fact this creation business, God thought, should never be completely finished. Each day, said God, should be a new day, with new opportunities for creation to happen, again and again.

And God realized that a partner in this work was needed. The angels, thought God, just won't do. They're not exactly self starters, they were always asking God what needed to be done, and if God asked them their opinion on anything they would say "well what would you do?" And besides, they seemed to be singing Halleluyah - all day long.

What God wanted was someone who would have their own ideas, think up new things to do and to create, and build on what had already been done. God also needed someone who could be put in charge to watch over all of the animals, all of the magnificent forests and oceans and deserts. Someone who would guard and protect all of creation. Someone, well, someone, like God.

So God came up with what God thought was the best idea yet - the Holy One would create an "*Adam*" - a person, and this person would be created in God's image, with the ability to think and to reason, to create and to protect.

And this *adam*, this person could be God's partner not only in creation, but in cleaning up this world as well. Because God noticed, it had already become a bit messy. There were all those

broken shards around left over from creation itself, and God wanted someone who could help *l'taken et ha'olam* - to fix the earth, or what we more commonly refer to as *tikkun olam* - repair the world.

Each Rosh Hashanah we gather together to celebrate the creation of the world, but that is only part of the task that is set before us. We are also called upon to ponder what does it mean to us to be partners with God in both the act of creation and in repairing the world?

The world is in a constant state of creation and recreation - and so are we.

The Universe is still expanding - still reacting to the Big Bang - and so are we. We are still reacting - still responding to the creation not only of the THE world, but to our world, to the constant change, the constant creation of our own lives.

Rosh Hashanah provides us with an opportunity to look at where we stand, in our world, in our country, with our people and with our families, and in relation to our own hopes and dreams.

Every day provides us with an opportunity for *teshuva*, of returning to a place of beginning again, and repairing the world within us and around us.

The story of creation is so important in the Jewish tradition that we are commanded to remember it each Shabbat. The Friday night kiddish reminds us not only of the day of rest, but also of all the work that preceded it.

And if Shabbat is not enough of a reminder for us to appreciate the many gifts our earth gives us, each Rosh Hashanah we are commanded to stop and to celebrate the constant renewal of our world and all that lives on it.

We are taught to take the time to bless each different type of food we eat for the first time that year and say a *she'he'chianu*, a prayer of thanksgiving for each type of fruit, each variety of vegetable, anything we've eaten for the first time that year.

The very act of saying a blessing, of expressing gratitude, whether with a *she'he'ch'ianu*, or a specific blessing before we eat, or even a prayer when we wake up in the morning, or go to sleep at night, should remind us not to take anything for granted.

Built into the foundation of Judaism is an understanding that even as we have been put in charge of watching over the earth, we are also dependent on it. Shabbat and the harvest festivals remind us that our fate is intertwined with that of the land.

If the rain does not fall in the right season, if we destroy our fruit trees, if we fill our rivers and oceans with garbage, we threaten to destroy not only what God has created, but destroy ourselves as well.

We are taught that after God created *Adam*, God took the person around the Garden of Eden and said: "Behold My works, how beautiful, how splendid they are. All that I have created; I have

created for your sake. Take care that you do not become corrupt, and thus destroy My world. For once you become corrupt; there is no one after you to repair it.”<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps when God chose to put humanity in charge, God was using the psychology that is sometimes used with unruly children. Oftentimes when a teacher needs to leave a room, they put the biggest trouble maker in charge of the class, hoping that by giving him, or her, a sense of responsibility it will co-opt them into upholding the system, rather than destroying it.

But as I look around at our world, I wonder, has it worked?

So why would God, as our rabbis have taught us, leave the world unfinished? And why entrust such a sacred and important task to us?

On this holy day, we are reminded that we have been given a gift - to be partners with God, to be able to engage in acts of holiness each and every day.

And on *this* day, we are reminded that the world we have is the world that *we* create.

So let's ask ourselves, do we act in a way that reflects that we are partners with God? Do we live our lives in a way that shows that we are stewards of the earth? When we stand before God on *this* day, can we do so with a clean conscience that we have been holding up our end of deal?

The concept (and obligation) of *tikkun olam* has evolved over the millennia. As used in the Mishna, the phrase is legalistic and referred to a practice that while not biblically mandated, was decreed by the rabbis as being necessary to make the world a better place.

It refers not only to our responsibilities for the earth, but also towards each other. Judaism teaches us that we are to be concerned not only with our own particular well being, but also the well being of the community we live in, and the larger world. Because all of our fates are intertwined. And particularly now as technology brings us closer together, we know that *everything* is local.

Some have wondered why our temple is engaged in Gay Rights, or Sustainable Living, why we do interfaith work in the larger community.

We do these things because it is all part of Tikkun Olam - these are all ways in which we engage in repairing our world.

Last February a certain commentator on Fox News accused Reform Judaism of being more interested in politics than religion. According to him, Reform Judaism “is more concerned about 'politics' - changing what is outside of oneself - rather than about 'religion' - changing what is inside of oneself.”

You can imagine my reaction to watching him say these things. Clearly, he doesn't understand the purpose of religion, and by that, I mean not just Reform Judaism - but religion in general.

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<sup>1</sup> Eccles. Rabbah 7:13, Big Book of Legends, pp. 14-15:58

Because the whole point of changing ourselves is that we should then engage with the world differently. Every major religion is concerned not only with change occurring *within* the individual - but also how that change then effects society.

Two of the greatest social movements in American history came out of American houses of worship - the Abolitionist Movement and the Civil Rights Movement. Both are examples of tikkun olam in action - faith motivating us to repair what is broken in our world.

And we should not forget that the Jewish people were also part of those religious movements. In fact, this year the Reform Movement is celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the RAC, the Religious Action Center, the Reform Movement's lobby in DC. The RAC was born out of the Civil Rights Movement and our understanding that it was our *religious* imperative not only to be engaged in that important social and ethical movement, but to be engaged in repair on an ongoing basis.

There is a story from that time period that always brings tears to my eyes, a story that for me gives expression to what it means to be engaged in sacred work.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the great lights of his generation, was one of the first rabbis to go south to lend his support to the Civil Rights movement. There are many pictures of him, looking like a biblical prophet with his flowing white beard, marching, arm in arm, with Rev. King.

Rabbi Heschel participated in the march in Selma, Alabama, in 1965. During the march someone asked him why such a prominent scholar would come to Selma. He replied by saying: "When I march in Selma, my feet are praying."<sup>2</sup>

Prayer should not be done only with our mouths, but also with our feet, and with our hands, and with all that we have.

Prayer is a vehicle where we can enact personal change and healing - but that tikkun - that repair should not stop with ourselves. Prayer should give us strength, it should ground us, it should draw us closer to God, but it should also draw us closer to one another. And most importantly, prayer should remind us of our obligations to others and to the world we live in.

The purpose of prayer, the purpose of the mitzvot, the purpose of Judaism is not to earn us a place in the world to come, it is to make the world we live in a better place, not only for ourselves, but also for the generations that will come after us.

Our tradition teaches us that a synagogue is supposed to have windows in it, so even as we are engaged in prayer, we don't forget the outside world.

So as we look *beyond* this sacred space, we must ask ourselves, what can we do to repair the world we live in? What can we do in our lives, in our families, in our town, in our state, in our world, to bring healing?

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<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Andrew Sacks, "Praying With Our Feet"

Our congregation has long been engaged in tikkun olam. When Sacramento was ravaged by floods and fires, our members were there to help and to heal. For decades, we have provided food for the Downtown Food Closet, given help to Wellspring, volunteered at Loaves and Fishes, championed equal rights for women and the LGBT community. We have volunteered at local schools, and engaged in Interfaith Dialogue in the larger Sacramento community. These are just a few of the things that B'nai Israel has been involved in.

Five years ago we held a Social Action Shabbaton where over 100 members came together for an entire day to set a social action agenda for our congregation to follow. At that time, with the Board's approval, we chose to focus on Sustainable Living, Gay Rights, and providing support for the Jed Smith elementary school. This was in addition to the work we already do on a regular basis, such as cleaning up the American River Parkway, our annual Blood drive and Mitzvah Day. And in the last year, we have joined a coalition of churches and synagogues known as Family Promise where we help homeless families get back on their feet.

And while all of these things are important, it is not enough. There is more tikkun - more repairing of our world - that is needed.

In Pirke Avot we are told that Rabbi Tarfon would teach: *Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor, v'lo ata ben chorin lehibatel mimena* - It is not your responsibility to finish the work [of perfecting the world], but you are not free to desist from it either (Pirke Avot:2:21)."

The world we live in is in great disrepair. And it can be overwhelming to look at all of the areas that need to be fixed. And while it is not realistic for us to think that we can finish the work, as Rabbi Tarfon taught, it is not acceptable for us not to try at all.

For the last several months members of our congregation have been involved in what is called a "listening campaign." Congregants have been hosting small house gatherings where we are listening to you about how you would like to see B'nai Israel further engaged in Tikkun Olam.

The plan is not to change or abandon the activities that our congregation is already involved in, but to expand into new areas. Our city is in crises, homelessness is rising, our schools are woefully underfunded, healthcare costs continue to rise, and working people are struggling to keep it together from month to month.

We want to hear from as many people as possible, but we also want to be able to begin to move forward. So we will be holding a few more listening gatherings, one on next Sunday morning, October 2nd, behind the bimah, and the other will be on Thursday night, October 13th in our temple's sukkah.

I hope that those of you who have not yet participated will be able to come. Mandy Greene will be sending out another email to the congregation about the details of when these meetings will take place.

Our hope is that by Thanksgiving B'nai Israel will begin moving forward in whatever activities we decide upon as a community, whether it is becoming more actively engaged in helping the homeless, supporting our local public schools, helping foster children transition into society, whatever it is that we do, we need to be responsible for repairing our corner of the world.

So let's use these High Holidays to begin the work of *tikkun* by first getting our own lives in order, but let's not stop there. Let's make a renewed commitment as a *k'hillat kodesh* - as a sacred community to be engaged in sacred work - being partners with God in *tikkun olam*.

Today is not only the birthday of the world, it is also my birthday. When my son Ezra turned 3, he wanted to celebrate his birthday by giving presents to his classmates. The thing that he wanted to give them was something that he loved, something that made his world better, band-aids.

I was moved by the wisdom of my child, this idea that the best way for him to celebrate his life was by sharing his blessings with his community, and with ice cream cake.

So while there won't be any ice cream cake at the Sisterhood oneg following this service, I do want to give each of you a present. Tucked into your prayer books should be a card small enough to fit into your wallets or purses. On it are blessings for different occasions. Blessings are a way that we can show our appreciation, our gratitude, for things, for people, for life. I consider it a blessing in my life to be a part of this community, and in particular this congregation.

Rabbi David Wolpe teaches us that all *tikkun*, all repair, both personal and global, first begins with appreciation. We first need to appreciate something in order to understand its value, so that we can then understand *why* it is important to engage in *tikkun*.<sup>3</sup>

May this year be filled with many opportunities for you to acknowledge the blessings in your life, and bring healing to our world - *shana tova*.

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<sup>3</sup> Rabbi David Wolpe, "Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur 5772," American Jewish World Service