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Blog Post: The Americanization of Tikkun Olam

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February 23, 2015

When President Barack Obama declared at the first White House reception for Jewish American Heritage Month, in 2010, that America must "uphold the principle of *tikkun olam*—ourobligation to repair the world," he became the latest in a parade of prominent American politicians, celebrities and opinion-makers, including Bill Clinton, Cornell West and Madonna, to invoke the term. The Americanization of *tikkun olam* reflects its ubiquity in American Jewish life, where many religious and communal leaders identify it as a core Jewish value.

This is remarkable when one considers that prior to the 1980s most American Jews had never heard the term. Social justice, of course, was a longstanding Jewish concern, as reflected in the disproportionate Jewish involvement in social reform and civil rights movements. But the association of *tikkun olam* with social justice is new. While the term *tikkun olam* can be traced as far back as the second century, its meaning has changed over time. In the Talmud, where it appears 38 times, it is a principle of jurisprudence designed to close legal loopholes. In the *Aleinu* prayer, which was composed in the second century but only became part of the standard daily liturgy during medieval times, it refers to the eradication of paganism. For the kabbalist Rabbi Isaac Luria, *tikkun olam* involved the reunification of the Godhead and the undoing of creation – an end to the sinful, material world.

To some extent the contemporary popularity of *tikkun olam* can be attributed to the growing propensity of American Jews to pepper their language with Hebrew buzzwords. Basic Hebrew words, like *mitzvah* and *tzedakah*, are used far more frequently in everyday conversation about Jewish commitments today than they were a couple of generations ago. But in the case of *tikkun olam*, this linguistic trend is only part of the story. Ask anyone who came of age before the early 1970s if they remember hearing and using the term *tikkun olam* in Jewish school, camp or youth group: the answer is likely to be no. In North America it appears that the circle of rabbis and educators around Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan first employed it. In Kaplan's 1937 book, The *Meaning of God*, the founder of Reconstructionism interpreted the passage in the *Aleinu* prayer, "*l'taken olam b'malkhut shadday*," ("to restore/fix/establish the world under the kingdom of God") as a mandate for social activism: "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,'" he wrote. Kaplan's disciples began using *tikkun olam* in their sermons and articles at around this time.

The association of *tikkun olam* with human agency, a human-centered utopian quest to realize God's Kingdom on Earth, most likely originated a few decades earlier, among the *halutzim* of the Second and Third Aliyah, whose embrace of modern nationalism and the colonization of Ottoman and British Mandatory Palestine defied conventional Jewish teaching that only God could initiate the ingathering of the Exiles and the messianic era. But it took on new meaning as American Jewry struggled to come to terms with the implications of the Holocaust and the mission of American Jewry in a post-Holocaust world.

As I argue in my article, "The Place of *Tikkun Olam* in American Jewish Life," there were three discrete but at times overlapping groups of people who were instrumental in popularizing *tikkun olam* in cold war America: Theologians, troubled by the implications of the Holocaust, found in *tikkun olam* a useful concept for reimagining the covenantal relationship between humans and God; Educators in the 1960s, who when confronted by a countercultural youth culture gravitated to *tikkun olam*, with its idealistic connotations, as part of a larger effort to align the teaching of Jewish values with contemporary concerns; and finally, social activists and *havurah* members concerned about the conservative and inward-oriented drift of the American Jewish community. By the end of the twentieth century, *tikkun olam* was widely acknowledged as a central Jewish tenet and even as a rationale for Jewish survival.

The "*tikkun olam*-ization" of American Judaism has not been without its critics. Some on the right have argued that the champions of *tikkun olam* have tried to make Judaism synonymous with American liberalism, which they view as a gross distortion. At its core, Judaism is about submitting oneself to a system of sacred law, sections of which are decidedly politically incorrect and ethnocentric.

Even voices on the left have complained that the definition of *tikkun olam* has become overly squishy and insufficiently challenging. Reform Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf argued in 2001 that, "the notion of *tikkun* only seems to require that which seems very good to us. … Our good faith is suspect when we demand so little of ourselves."

While these critiques have some merit, I agree with Rabbi Eugene Lipman that the conflict about *tikkun olam* is merely the latest iteration of a longstanding contest over the essence of Jewish values between Jewish universalists and survivalists. This struggle dates back at least as far as the Jewish encounter with modernity. In appropriating the language of *tikkun olam*, progressives were trying to ground social justice within the tradition. But as Lipman reminds us, attacks on the authenticity of contemporary understandings of *tikkun olam* are reductionist and ahistorical. Since the definition of *tikkun olam* has varied over historical time and within different communities, the tradition itself is contested.

One can applaud the modern-day interpreters for trying to save Jews for Judaism by crafting an inspirational message that made the tradition relevant to their concerns. This was certainly the motivation of Shlomo Bardin, who inspired young people at Brandeis Camp Institute in late 1950s and early 60s with a call to service (*tikkun olam*) that was consonant with the exhortations of President John F. Kennedy. It also drove Hillel rabbis like Gerry Serota to fashion a progressive Jewish politics under the banner of *tikkun olam* that would appeal to disaffected Jewish youth on university campuses in the late-1970s and 80s. Likewise, it is

providing a rationale for the humanitarian work of thousands of young people over the past decade, who are engaging with their Judaism through service learning programs and humanitarian organizations like AVODAH, the Global Jewish Service Corps and the American Jewish World Service.

Leonard Fein was fond of saying that "in order to survive, a people needs more than a strategy; it needs a reason." For some that reason will be *tikkun olam*; for others it may be peoplehood and identification with the state of Israel; and for still others it boils down to belief in an obligation to perform the Torah's commandments. Multiple rationales for Jewish survival provide multiple gateways to Jewish engagement. The propagators of *tikkun olam* Judaism would do well to raise the bar and sharpen their definition so that it becomes more than Jewish window dressing for liberal values and progressive social causes. In the final analysis, however, *tikkun olam* is indubitably good for the Jews.