

# The Assimilation of Tikkun Olam

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# The Assimilation of Tikkun Olam

Levi Cooper<sup>1</sup>

“Tikkun olam” is most commonly heard as a slogan for activism, political involvement, and social justice. The term has had numerous lives, such that its endurance and malleability over time are truly impressive. It has been used as a pliable legislative justification for changing specific laws and as an eschatological ideal that may describe a human process or the divine end. It has had practical implications for some, and mystical connotations for others. In the twentieth century the term tikkun olam has been used in reference to Jewish political involvement, or to argue for abstinence from any political participation whatsoever. More recently it has become a banner, bandied around for almost any value, including energy conservation, recycling, government health care packages, the fight against terrorism, better nutrition, looking after stray animals, and the list goes on.

This paper will touch on the main waystations of the term, starting with a brief look at the term’s etymology, and journeying from rabbinic literature to modern times. This whistle stop tour will provide an overview of the vicissitudes of the term tikkun olam, and will demonstrate how it has come to connote a disparate array of values. Thus the term tikkun olam has been assimilated into modern, liberal, democratic discourse; it has come to serve as watchword for any value, even if a particular value – laudable as it may be – is not rooted in Jewish tradition. This trend raises a question that should be considered: What is the opportunity cost of the cultural assimilation of the term tikkun olam?

## 1. An elusive term

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 *t-k-n* appears in Ecclesiastes where it is used in the sense of straightening, repairing, or fashioning.<sup>2</sup> Many of its later uses, however, depart from those original connotations.<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew noun *’olam* also carries more than a single implication: world, society, community, universe, spiritual sphere, forever, and eternity.

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<sup>1</sup> Because of the prevalence of the term in English literature (as will become apparent), I have retained the common spelling “tikkun olam” and not italicized the term (that is, unless I cite from a source that has the term italicized, or when transliterating Hebrew phrases).

<sup>2</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:15 (in the *kal* verbal stem), 7:13, 12:9 (in the *pi’el* verbal stem).

<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I will not deal with uses of the verb *t-k-n* that appear without *’olam* or with other words, for it appears to me to unnecessarily expand the parameters of the discussion without advancing our understanding of the idiom tikkun olam.

In rabbinic literature the term appears as *tikkun ha-'olam* (with the definite article), and occasionally as *tikkuno shel 'olam* (with a preposition), and it 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.<sup>4</sup>

Given the range of meanings, the contemporary Hebrew term *tikkun 'olam* – which is how it usually appears in modern parlance – is not easy to translate faithfully. Different suggestions have been offered in a variety of contexts: preparing<sup>5</sup> or correcting<sup>6</sup> the world; ordering the world or society correctly;<sup>7</sup> improving society;<sup>8</sup> preserving the system as a whole;<sup>9</sup> maintaining proper order in the Jewish community<sup>10</sup> or the public interest;<sup>11</sup> making the physical world inhabitable;<sup>12</sup> healing, repairing, and transforming the world;<sup>13</sup> and others.<sup>14</sup> Given this flexibility, we can expect that in different ages, under different circumstances, and in different contexts, *tikkun olam* will have different meanings.

## 2. Liturgy

Perhaps the best known reference to *tikkun olam* – and possibly the earliest reference too – appears in the *'aleinu* prayer. *'Aleinu* is a special prayer: it is an ancient passage that dates back to the Second Temple Period<sup>15</sup> and its recitation is laden with mystical

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<sup>4</sup> Gilbert S. Rosenthal, “*Tikkun ha-Olam*: The Metamorphosis of a Concept,” *The Journal of Religion* 85, no. 2 (April 2005): 215-16.

<sup>5</sup> *The Code of Maimonides: Book Fourteen – The Book of Judges*, trans. Abraham M. Hershman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949), 240.

<sup>6</sup> Arnold Jacob Wolf, “Repairing Tikkun Olam,” *Judaism* 50, no. 4 (Fall 2001): 479.

<sup>7</sup> Gerald J. Blidstein, “The Import of Early Rabbinic Writings for an Understanding of Judaism in the Hellenistic-Roman Period,” in *Jewish Civilization in the Hellenistic-Roman Period*, ed. Shemaryahu Talmon (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 64 n. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Rosenthal, “*Tikkun ha-Olam*,” 217.

<sup>9</sup> Jill Jacobs, “A History of ‘Tikkun Olam’,” *Zeek*, June 2007, [www.zeek.net/706tohu](http://www.zeek.net/706tohu).

<sup>10</sup> Eugene J. Lipman, “*Mipnei Tikkun Ha'Olam* in the Talmud: A Preliminary Exploration,” in *The Life of Covenant: The Challenge of Contemporary Judaism – Essays in Honor of Herman E. Schaalman*, ed. Joseph A. Edelheit (Chicago: Spertus College of Judaica Press, 1986), 108. Lipman also noted that “[i]t is a long way from that definition to ‘build a better world’.”

<sup>11</sup> Hillel Halkin, “How Not to Repair the World,” *Commentary* 126, no. 1 (July-August 2008): 22-23.

<sup>12</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, trans. H. Freedman (London and Bournemouth: Soncino Press, 1951), 31, section 4:6; 108, section 13:13. In both places the phrase is *le-tikkun ha-'olam u-le-yishuvo* (and to settle it).

<sup>13</sup> This is the sub-heading of the *Tikkun* magazine, the English language quarterly published by Michael Lerner since 1986 (see [www.tikkun.org](http://www.tikkun.org)). In 1996, Lerner founded *Beyt Tikkun*, a Jewish Renewal Synagogue in the San Francisco Bay Area, whose goal is “spirituality and social transformation” (see [www.beyttikkun.org](http://www.beyttikkun.org)). In 2005, Lerner founded *The Network of Spiritual Progressives* as an interfaith advocacy arm of *Tikkun* (see <http://spiritualprogressives.org>).

<sup>14</sup> See Jacob J. Schacter, “*Tikkun Olam*: Defining the Jewish Obligation,” in *Rav Chesed: Essay in Honor of Rabbi Dr. Haskel Lookstein*, ed. Rafael Medoff (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 2009), 2:182-83.

<sup>15</sup> Regarding the provenance and adventures of *'aleinu*, see *Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1901-1906), 1:336-38, entry *'Aleinu*, [www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/1112-aleinu](http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/1112-aleinu); Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History*, trans. Raymond P. Scheindlin (Philadelphia: JPS, 1993), 71-72, 405 n. 25; Joseph Heinemann, *Ha-tefilla bi-tekuvat ha-tana'im ve-ha-'amora'im* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1966), 173-75 n. 43; Meir Bar-Ilan, “*Mekorab shel tefillat 'Aleinu lesabei'ah*,” *Da'at* 43 (1999): 5-24; Mitchell First, “Aleinu: Obligation to Fix the World or the Text?” *Hakira* 11 (Spring 2011): 187-97; Ruth Langer, “The Censorship of Aleinu in Ashkenaz and its Aftermath,” in *The Experience of Jewish Liturgy*, ed. Debra Reed Bank (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2011), 147-66; Mitchell First, “*Le-Taven Olam* (לתכן עולם): Establishing

import.<sup>16</sup> On one hand, *'aleinu* occupies a place of pride in the liturgy of the Days of Awe, while on the other hand it is recited thrice daily at the end of each service.<sup>17</sup>

In *'aleinu*, however, the phrase is somewhat ambiguous: assuming that the sense is to transform the world, who is supposed to do this? From the opening line of the second paragraph – “and therefore [looking] to You, we hope...” – it would appear that tikkun olam is God’s domain. The supplicant turns to God, perhaps with a sense of frustration in the face of human ineptitude that precludes repairing all that is broken, and voices the hope that God will fix society.<sup>18</sup> This understanding is buttressed by the context of the *'aleinu* prayer when it is recited on the High Holy Days as part of the recognition of divine sovereignty.<sup>19</sup> If this is the correct reading of *'aleinu*, then modern tikkun olam has morphed from an aspiration for the divine to a human endeavor.

A few scholars have suggested that the correct text of *'aleinu* is not לתקן as is assumed by most, but rather לתכן (to establish).<sup>20</sup> If we accept the emendation, *'aleinu* has nothing to do with tikkun olam.

Nonetheless, if the *'aleinu* reference is the inspiration for those who invoke the contemporary notion of tikkun olam, then a caveat should be considered. The full phrase in *'aleinu* is “*le-takken 'olam be-malkhut shaddai*” – to repair the world in the kingdom of God.<sup>21</sup> In context, this specifically includes the abolition of idolatry and universal recognition of the Almighty. Many times when tikkun olam is cited today, divine sovereignty is not mentioned and probably not intended. The *'aleinu* notion of the kingdom of God involves uncompromising rejection of any religion that does not acknowledge the one deity. Such intolerance is likely to be anathema to many who invoke tikkun olam.<sup>22</sup>

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the Correct Text in *Aleinu*,” *the Seforim blog*, September 3, 2013, <http://seforim.blogspot.co.il/2013/09/le-tacem-olam-establishing-correct-text.html>.

<sup>16</sup> See the collection of Hebrew sources gathered in *Rahamei ha-'av* (Elad: Y.H. Ketina, 2008), 1-10.

<sup>17</sup> This duality is part of a famous joke, see: Mordecai Weissmann-Chajes, *Osem bosem* (Vienna: n.p., 1913), 43, section 54; Alter Drujanow, *Sefer ha-bediha ve-ha-hidud* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1963), 1:143-44.

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Sacks, “Tikkun Olam: Orthodoxy’s Responsibility to Perfect G-d’s World,” delivered at the Orthodox Union West Coast Convention, December 1997, <http://advocacy.ou.org/1997/tikkun-olam-orthodoxys-responsibility-to-perfect-g-ds-world>.

<sup>19</sup> According to Elbogen, *'aleinu* was originally part of the New Year service, and it was taken from there to the daily service: “It was of high religious significance that the lofty ideal of the future union of all mankind in the world to come in the service of the one God became part of the daily service” (Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, 71).

<sup>20</sup> Bar-Ilan posited this correction and First dedicated a study to the topic (Bar-Ilan, “*Mekorab*,” 20 n. 72; First, “*Aleinu*”; First, “*Le-Tacem Olam*”). In his conclusion, First noted that “[t]here is no question that social justice is an important value in Judaism,” but “it is almost certainly a mistake to read such a concept into the *Aleinu* prayer” (“*Aleinu*,” 197).

<sup>21</sup> Maimonides refers to *tikkun olam* in the sense that a putative Messiah will recalibrate the entire world to serve God together (*Laws Concerning Kings and Wars*, 11:4).

<sup>22</sup> Jill Jacobs accurately noted that “[t]o our contemporary pluralist ears, the rejection of other religions appears intolerant and proselytizing. Most contemporary Jews who extol the value of *tikkun olam* certainly do not understand this term as a mandate to impose worship of the Jewish God on all other peoples.” While Jacobs offered some solace in explaining the historical context of *'aleinu*, she acknowledged that “[s]uch apologetics ... go only so far” (“A History of ‘Tikkun Olam.’”).

Notwithstanding the accuracy of the text, its contextual meaning, and the use of the idiom as a “truncated quote”<sup>23</sup> – the *tikkun olam* of *‘aleinu* as an eschatological hope and expectation of an improved society and a repaired world, reverberates in contemporary collective memory.

### 3. Legislation

The term *tikkun ha-‘olam* appears in the talmudic literature in a normative context, but its exact legislative function is not stated.<sup>24</sup> Various suggestions have been offered.

Rabbi Gilbert S. Rosenthal, executive director of the National Council of Synagogues, advanced the following theory: “[A]lmost all the references are to be found in the fourth and fifth chapters of Tractate Gittin, which deals primarily with divorce laws. This leads me to conclude that the principle was originally devised to protect the rights of women in divorce cases and to shield them from unscrupulous, recalcitrant, and extortionist husbands.”<sup>25</sup> More generally, Rosenthal suggested that the divorce law cases are similar in that “their teleology is the improvement of society.”<sup>26</sup> According to Rosenthal, the legal principle was expanded from divorce law into a variety of other areas.

Indeed, most of the cases deal with divorce law, but it is questionable whether this necessarily indicates the source of the legal mechanism.<sup>27</sup> More importantly, there are a sufficient number of cases that have nothing to do with women’s rights. These cases come from different areas of law, including economic legislation, criminal law, and matters of personal status.

Rabbi Jill Jacobs, executive director of T’ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, suggested that in rabbinic literature the term “is invoked in response to situations in which a particular legal detail threatens to overturn an entire system. . . . By invoking the concept of *tikkun ha-‘olam*, the rabbis fix the flaw that endangers the stability of the system as a whole.”<sup>28</sup> Rabbi David S. Widzer, spiritual leader of Temple Beth El of Northern

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<sup>23</sup> By the term “truncated quote” I mean a partial citation of a source that excises salient parts of the original and thus alters the meaning. Two further examples of the phenomenon of modern truncated quotes that expunge God: (1) The late nineteenth century *Bilu* movement whose goal was the agricultural settlement of the Land of Israel, took its name from the verse: *beit Ya‘akov lekhu ve-neilkha* (House of Jacob: Go! And we will go), without the end of the verse that adds “by the light of God” (Isaiah 2:5).

(2) “*Shalah et ‘ami?*” or in English “Let My people go” became a slogan demanding freedom for oppressed people, such as African Americans and Soviet Jewry, though in its biblical context the phrase appears with a goal that the free should celebrate for God or serve God (Exodus 5:1; 7:16, 26).

<sup>24</sup> Sagit Mor’s doctoral work is the most comprehensive treatment of *tikkun olam* in rabbinic literature. See Sagit Mor, “*Tikkun ha-‘olam be-mahashevet hazal*,” (PhD diss., Hebrew University, 2003); see also Sagit Mor, “*Tikkun ‘olam: le-mashma‘uto ha-keduma shel ha-munah ve-bashlahkhatu ‘al dinei ha-geirusin bi-tekuvat ha-mishna*,” *Mo‘ed* 15 (205): 24-51. The scope of this paper does not allow me to present her detailed analysis that differentiates between stages of development in rabbinic literature. For shorter analyses in English, see Lipman, “*Mipnei Tikkun Ha‘Olam*”; Rosenthal, “*Tikkun ha-Olam*,” 214-20; David S. Widzer, “The Use of *Mipnei Tikkun Ha‘Olam* in the Babylonian Talmud,” *CCAR Journal* (Spring 2008): 34-45.

<sup>25</sup> Rosenthal, “*Tikkun ha-Olam*,” 217.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>27</sup> Mor understood that Hillel’s *proshul* legislation was the earliest use of *tikkun olam* and pointed out how the various *tikkun olam* laws come from different periods.

<sup>28</sup> Jacobs, “A History of ‘Tikkun Olam’.”

Valley, New Jersey, also offered stirring words when he suggested that the legal justification “is used for more than just tinkering with the law. It is an overarching goal of rabbinic society to live with God in mind, making society the best it could be, not just for reasons of justice and fairness, but because those ideals were what God wanted.”<sup>29</sup>

These scholars may have overstated the case: It is not clear why these cases loom as threats to the entire legal system more than other instances of rabbinic legislation (as Jacobs suggested); nor is it apparent that there is an “overarching goal” particular to these cases (as Widzer suggested). Calling the rabbinic legal *tikkun olam* a “principle” (as per Rosenthal) or a “concept” (as per Jacobs) may also be hyperbolizing the term. Since *tikkun olam* appears as a justification for legislation in relatively few cases, it is difficult to see it as a guiding notion of the Jewish legal system.

It would appear that a more modest reading of the legislative context is appropriate. It can be said that when jurists perceived a need for legislation to solve a problem – big or small – *tikkun olam* served as a justification for such legislation. Thus *tikkun olam* was used in a diverse array of cases that are not easily grouped together. The laws include matters of personal status and ransoming captives; they are aimed at encouraging or discouraging certain behavior, or circumventing problematic norms.<sup>30</sup> Regarding the scope of the *tikkun olam* legal justification, Rosenthal’s analysis appears to be spot on: the principle’s “initial application was limited; its potential, however, was limitless.”<sup>31</sup>

The *tikkun olam* legal justification reflects a serious turn from its liturgical counterpart. First, the universalist theme of *‘aleinu* has its eyes set on repairing society in general, both Jewish and non-Jewish.<sup>32</sup> The legal justification, however, was offered for the inner workings of the Jewish community; legislation regarding Gentiles is justified by a different term: *mipnei darkhei shalom* (in the interests of peace) – a justification that sounds more pragmatic than idealistic.<sup>33</sup>

Second, *tikkun olam* in *‘aleinu* talks about God repairing the world, not humans; whereas the legal justification is clearly the province of humanity. Professor Gerald J. Blidstein of the Department of Jewish Thought in Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, suggested that “[t]his may be symptomatic of the way the rabbis were appropriating terminology –

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<sup>29</sup> Widzer, “*Mipnei Tikkun Ha'Olam*,” 42.

<sup>30</sup> Lipman wrote: “It is impossible to designate the legal status of *tikkun olam* in the Talmud as it is to define the phrase in a way which will cover all its uses in talmudic literature” (“*Mipnei Tikkun Ha'Olam*,” 107). The way the Talmud deals with the *tikkun ha-‘olam* justifications that appear in the Mishnah may be indicative. In a number of cases the Talmud discusses laws enacted with this justification without explaining why they fall under the rubric of *tikkun ha-‘olam*. The Talmud’s silence may be because the reason is self-evident (as per Widzer, “*Mipnei Tikkun Ha'Olam*,” 37, 38). Alternatively, the Talmud may not have been concerned with delineating the *tikkun ha-‘olam* justification because it did not conform to prescribed parameters.

<sup>31</sup> Rosenthal, “*Tikkun ha-Olam*,” 220. Widzer grouped the appearances of *tikkun ha-‘olam* in the Babylonian Talmud into four categories: (1) Addressing issues of social status; (2) Preventing harm to society; (3) Maintaining communal wellbeing, and; (4) Best orienting society in service of to God (“*Mipnei Tikkun Ha'Olam*,” 35-42). It is not clear how Widzer’s categories further the discussion, given how broad and general they are. Was Widzer trying to limit the scope of the legal justification by delineating these categories?

<sup>32</sup> The universalist meaning can also be found in *Midrash ha-gadol*, ed. Mordecai Margulies (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook Publishing, 1956), 452, Exodus 21:1.

<sup>33</sup> See also Schacter, “*Tikkun Olam*,” 184-85, 192-97; Halkin, “How Not to Repair the World,” 23.

in a very subtle and minor, but nonetheless significant, way. *Malkhut shaddai* is, perhaps, God's task; but the human task or the task of the sages is to correct any small injustice within society, so as ultimately to achieve that kingdom of heaven."<sup>34</sup>

Despite the potency of *tikkun olam* and its potential for justifying legal solutions to a slew of social problems, the term subsequently dropped off the legislative radar screen. To be sure, the term was not stricken from the record; it continues to be cited when the relevant talmudic discussions are invoked. However, *tikkun olam* is rarely used as a justification for solving new legal issues.<sup>35</sup> The potential of the legal *tikkun olam* has not been realized.

#### 4. Mysticism

While it may be unclear in *'aleinu* who is charged with repairing the world, the legislative *tikkun olam* was clearly the purview of humans. The kabbalistic tradition also understood the injunction to be referring to human activity; even minor, seemingly insignificant acts. To be more precise: kabbalistic *tikkun* (pl. *tikkunim*) describes a person's theurgic potential to repair the fragmented world with the goal of restoring it to its original, divine design. This usage focuses on the word *tikkun*, rather than *tikkun olam*.

*Tikkun* is a central doctrine in Lurianic kabbalah, and writers have discussed *tikkun olam* from this mystical vantage.<sup>36</sup> We might wonder, however, whether kabbalistic *tikkun* is truly an offshoot of the liturgical expression or the legal justification? In Lurianic writings the term *tikkun* is common, but it seldom appears as *tikkun olam* and in those cases it appears as *tikkun olam x*, where *x* refers to one of the four "worlds" (*'asiyah, beri'ah, yetzirah, atzilut*). Thus the phrase *tikkun olam x* describes the mystical repair of a particular sphere. Lurianic writings also refer to *'olam ha-tikkun* (the world of *tikkun*) – a world beyond our current existence, where all matter returns to its original spiritual condition. *Tikkun olam* also appears in the kabbalistic sense to describe an everlasting repair.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Blidstein, "Import of Early Rabbinic Writings," 65. Rosenthal noted this turn and added that *'aleinu* is an "other-worldly" pursuit as opposed to the "this-worldly" focus of the legal mechanism in the Talmud ("Tikkun ha-Olam," 220-21). I am not convinced that *'aleinu* should be described as an "other-worldly" pursuit.

<sup>35</sup> Rosenthal succinctly highlighted four such rare cases and concluded: "But these are remarkably few exceptions to the phenomenon that a potentially broadly applicable principle of law was essentially ignored for centuries by jurists and codifiers" ("Tikkun ha-Olam," 222).

<sup>36</sup> See, *inter alia*, Wolf, "Repairing Tikkun Olam," 479; Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 72, 75-78; Jacobs, "A History of 'Tikkun Olam'" (Jacobs went so far as to call this "the most well-known use of the term"); Halkin, "How Not to Repair the World," 23; Sarah Breger, "How Tikkun Olam Got Its Groove," *Moment*, May/June 2010, <http://ftp.momentmag.com/Exclusive/2010/06/Jewish%20Word.html>. This would appear to be the subtext of *Tikkun* magazine. Fine noted, however, that "Michael Lerner's original editorial statement in *TIKKUN* makes absolutely no mention of and betrays no interest in the kabbalistic tradition which is the source of his journal's name" (Michael Lerner, "Tikkun: To Mend, Repair, and Transform the World," *Tikkun* 1, no. 1 (1986): 3-11; Lawrence Fine, "Tikkun: A Lurianic Motif in Contemporary Jewish Thought," in *From Ancient Israel To Modern Judaism: Essays in Honor of Marvin Fox*, ed. Jacob Neusner, et al (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 4:51).

<sup>37</sup> As in the 1933 sermon of Hayim Elazar Shapira cited in Anonymous, *Kuntras divrei torah ... shenat [5]694* [Mukačevo: Grafia, 1933/4?], 7: "And behold Adam was created to repair an everlasting repair (*tikkun olam*)."

According to Lawrence Fine, professor of Jewish studies at Mount Holyoke College, the identification of tikkun olam with the kabbalistic *tikkun* can be dated to the late 1970s. He rightly called this “an amazing journey of ideas,” but noted that “[t]he highly charged mystical symbolism of Lurianic literature, with its endless anthropomorphic description of God’s inner life, its multiple levels of reality, its impressive convictions about the power of the contemplative imagination, has given way to the bare bones of ‘rupture’ and ‘mending.’” This was not necessarily a critique, for Fine concluded: “A contemporary idea is thus legitimated and rendered all the more significant by clothing it in the garb of tradition, a process as old as ‘tradition’ itself.”<sup>38</sup>

Be that as it may, tikkun olam is often used today with varying hues of mysticism. This can be clearly heard amongst those interested in modern, in-vogue Kabbalah study. Thus in a 2008 *New York Times* article, writer and literary critic Daphne Merkin explained the history of Kabbalah, noting that the “fragmented and disordered state of affairs ... can only be made whole through selfless devotion to *tikkun olam*.” Moreover, Madonna was credited with bringing “the Kabbalah Center’s message of egoless dedication of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) home to her fans both in her music and in personal appearances.”<sup>39</sup> This incarnation of tikkun olam is also indicative of the inroads that the term has made in American public discourse, as we will see below.<sup>40</sup>

## 5. Political involvement, social justice, activism

Tikkun olam as a modern turn of phrase generally refers to political involvement, striving for social justice, and grassroots activism. The origins of this popular usage, however, are hazy.

In 1918, the Committee on Synagogue and Industrial Relations of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) adopted the Reform movement’s first resolution on social justice:

The next few decades will have as their chief concern the rectification of social and economic evils. The world will busy itself not only with the establishment of

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I find it indicative that in his definition of tikkun olam, Arthur Green – no stranger to Jewish mystical tradition – did not invoke the Lurianic concept of *tikkun*. Moreover, Green included the definition in the section headed “Community, Life with Others,” not in the sections headed “God and Worlds Above” or “Spiritual Life”; see Arthur Green, *These Are the Words: A Vocabulary of Jewish Spiritual Life* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Pub., 1999), vi-vii, 175-76. Compare the critique of Wolf, who charged Green (and others) with “the manipulation of the esoteric doctrine to support political views of the soft left in our own time” (“Repairing Tikkun Olam,” 479). Green’s definition of tikkun olam appears not to be drawing on the esoteric doctrine, but on liturgical and legal usages of the term.

<sup>38</sup> Fine, “Tikkun: A Lurianic Motif,” 4:51-53.

<sup>39</sup> Daphne Merkin, “In Search of the Skeptical, Hopeful, Mystical Jew That Could Be Me,” *The New York Times*, April 13, 2008, magazine, 52. See also Boaz Huss, “All You Need is LAV: Madonna and Postmodern Kabbalah,” *JQR* 95 (2005): 611-24.

<sup>40</sup> Below, section 7.

political, but also with the achievement of industrial democracy through social justice. The ideal of social justice has always been an integral part of Judaism.<sup>41</sup>

The resolution continued with the committee submitting a “declaration of principles as a program for the attainment of which the followers of our faith should strive.” The principles focused on minimum wage, eight-hour work day, compulsory day of rest, safety and sanitary conditions in the work place, abolition of child labor, accident compensation, health insurance, assistance to the unemployed in finding a job, right to unionize, and more.<sup>42</sup> Social justice became the central theme of the Reform movement, but the resolution made no mention of the term *tikkun olam*. Other early platforms and resolutions also did not employ the expression *tikkun olam*.<sup>43</sup> The term would later become synonymous with a variety of types of activism: social, political, environmental, and others. But when these values were first championed by the Reform movement, they were not labeled as *tikkun olam*.

Surprisingly, the earliest use of the term *tikkun olam* as suggesting political involvement comes from across the ocean in inter-war Europe. In Warsaw 1932, Alter Hayim Levinson published a work entitled *Tikkun ‘olam* that was aimed at encouraging Jews to join the Agudas Yisroel political party (founded 1912). The party was to be an organization that would unite observant Jews under the one banner.

In 1936 another volume with the same title was published in Mukačevo, Czechoslovakia. This Mukačevo *Tikkun ‘olam* was a collection of letters and documents against the Jewish political organizations of the day, including the various secular and religious Zionist parties, and Agudas Yisroel. The work was produced by Moshe Goldstein, at the behest of his teacher Hayim Elazar Shapira (1871-1937) – rabbi of Mukačevo, leader of the Minkatch Hasidim, and the outspoken opponent of Jewish political organization.

To complete the bibliographic picture – Levinson’s *Tikkun ‘olam* and the Minkatch *Tikkun ‘olam* were predated by other works that carried the same title:

- (1) A commentary on Isaiah by Shelomo Mamrini of Padua, printed in Verona 1652. The proof reader wrote a poem that begins with the line from *‘aleinu*.

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<sup>41</sup> Leonard J. Mervis, “The Social Justice Movement and the American Reform Rabbi,” *American Jewish Archives* 7, no. 2 (June 1955): 178; Albert Vorspan & Eugene J. Lipman, *Justice and Judaism: The Work of Social Action*<sup>4</sup> (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1961), 253.

<sup>42</sup> On the contemporary influences that precipitated the resolution, see Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 286-89. See also Vorspan & Lipman, *Justice and Judaism*; Abraham J. Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1966), ch. 7; Jeffrey S. Gurock and Jacob J. Schacter, *A Modern Heretic and a Traditional Community: Mordecai M. Kaplan, Orthodoxy, and American Judaism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 102-3; Eilon Schwartz, “Social Responsibility and Educational Audacity: Heschel’s Challenge to 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Jewish Education,” *Kol Hamercaz* 10 (April 2008): 1; Schacter, “*Tikkun Olam*,” 189-91.

<sup>43</sup> Namely: 1885 Pittsburgh Platform, 1918 resolution cited herein, 1928 report of the Commission on Social Justice, 1946 Columbus Platform, and 1976 resolution adopted in San Francisco. See *Declaration of Principles*, adopted in Pittsburgh, 1885; Vorspan & Lipman, *Justice and Judaism*, 255-60; *The Guiding Principles of Reform Judaism*, adopted in Columbus, 1937; *Reform Judaism: A Centenary Perspective*, adopted in San Francisco, 1976 (platforms and resolutions can be found at the CCAR website <http://ccarnet.org>). For social justice in the Reform movement, see Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, according to the index.

- (2) A work dealing with bills of divorce, by Rabbi Shelomo Kluger (1785-1869). The work was printed Żólkiew 1854, at the back of Kluger's *Shi'urei tabara*.
- (3) A short work in Hebrew and in Yiddish, dealing with the correct place on the head for laying *tefillin*. The work was printed in Vilna as an appendix to an 1879 prayer book, and subsequently reprinted in other prayer books.<sup>44</sup>
- (4) A small collection of rabbinic legislation in Poland from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, published in Kołomyja 1901 by Moshe Yaakov Szwederszarf (1857-1922).<sup>45</sup>
- (5) A compilation of a few short works that deal with eclectic topics published in Piotrków 1904 and written by Rabbi Moshe Klig of Hrubieszów.

To be sure, contemporary liberal tikkun olam activism, pro-Agudas Yisroel *Tikkun 'olam*, Minkatch *Tikkun 'olam*, and the eponymous volumes dating back to the seventeenth century – each advocated different political, religious, or social agendas. Significantly, contemporary tikkun olam is universalist in essence, while the universalism of the earlier versions of political tikkun olam was to be achieved via a decidedly particularistic focus. I suspect that many contemporary political tikkun olam activists would be surprised to learn of the idiom's erstwhile use.

## 6. Banner for liberal American Jewry

While tikkun olam as political activism may have been a European innovation, it would be on the shores of progressive America that the catchcry would blossom.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, for many American Jews, tikkun olam as social justice became no less than a pillar of Judaism. As the president of the Union of Reform Judaism (URJ), Rabbi Rick Jacobs, recently wrote: “Tikkun olam is the gateway for most young Jews to live a life of Jewish commitment.”<sup>47</sup> Or as the URJ's website declares: “To be a Reform Jew is to hear the voice of the prophets in our head; to be engaged in the ongoing work of *tikkun olam*; to strive to improve the world in which we live.”<sup>48</sup>

Fine suggested that the first use of the expression tikkun olam in America was in the 1950s by Shlomo Bardin (1898-1976), the founder of the Brandeis Camp Institute in

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<sup>44</sup> The work was written by the unknown Eliezer Lippman and reprinted numerous times, including the following prayer books: *Tefillot yisra'el* (Vilna: Yehuda Leib, 1879), vii-xiv; *Shir u-shevaba* (Vilna: Yehuda Leib, 1898); *Kol benei yebuda* (Vilna: Frodel, 1912), 3-4; *Kol benei yebuda* (Riga: Star, ca. 1925), xi-xii; *Kol benei yebuda* (Vilna: Rom, 1927), [5-7]; *Or le-yisra'el be-hadash* (Warsaw: I.M. Alter, 1928), 4-12; *Kol benei yebuda* (Warsaw: G. Piment, ca. 1928), 3-4; *Kol benei yebuda be-hadash* (Warsaw: Pospiech, ca. 1930). The *Kol benei yebuda* editions reproduced the Yiddish and the drawings, without the Hebrew.

<sup>45</sup> One piece of legislation was reprinted in Hayim Elazar Shapira, *She'elot u-teshuvot minbat el'azar*, vol. 1 (Munkács: Kahn & Fried, 1902), 10a-11b, though the booklet was mistakenly referred to as “*Hukat 'olam*.” See also I. Halperin, *Pinkas va'ad arba artsot* (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1945), 62-65.

<sup>46</sup> I have found no evidence to suggest that the political activist connotation of the term “migrated” from Europe to America.

<sup>47</sup> Rick Jacobs, “Don't give up on Jews who care about being Jewish,” *Haaretz*, October 10, 2013, [www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-1.551719#](http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-1.551719#).

<sup>48</sup> Marla Feldman, “Why Advocacy is Central to Reform Judaism,” <http://urj.org/socialaction/judaism/advocacy>.

California.<sup>49</sup> During the 1970s, the term was used in the Conservative movement.<sup>50</sup> Professor Yehudah Mirsky of Brandeis University suggested a later date for its propagation: “The term [*tikkun olam*] entered contemporary usage as the rubric for spiritually charged social justice efforts in recent decades, most notably via the journal *Tikkun*, founded in 1986.”<sup>51</sup>

In the Reform movement’s 1999 Pittsburgh Platform, the term was used: “Partners with God in תְּקוּן עוֹלָם (*tikkun olam*), repairing the world, we are called to help bring nearer the messianic age.”<sup>52</sup> The approach of Reform towards *tikkun olam* drew on the universalism of ‘*aleinu*. I discussed the ‘*aleinu tikkun olam* above; here allow me to add that ‘*aleinu* is comprised of two significantly different paragraphs.<sup>53</sup> The first paragraph emphasizes chosenness and particularism, while the second paragraph underscores universalism. Liberal liturgists did not always identify with the first ‘*aleinu* paragraph; but the universalism of the second paragraph has become a banner proudly waved.<sup>54</sup>

The emphasis on *tikkun olam* in progressive circles was not shared across the denominational spectrum. This was partly due to a dearth of primary sources advocating *tikkun olam* in its social activist incarnation.<sup>55</sup> In general, the traditionalist camp exhibited a relative disinterest in universalist activities. In fact, the elevation of *tikkun olam* as a prime value by liberal Jews had a negative impact on Orthodox circles. As Rabbi J. David

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<sup>49</sup> Fine, “Tikkun: A Lurianic Motif,” 4:51.

<sup>50</sup> Rosenthal, “*Tikkun ha-Olam*,” 238-39.

<sup>51</sup> Yehudah Mirsky, “*Tikkun Olam*: Basic Questions and Policy Directions,” *Facing Tomorrow*, Jewish People Policy Planning Institute (JPPPI), 2008: 214, [www.bjpa.org/Publications/details.cfm?PublicationID=5245](http://www.bjpa.org/Publications/details.cfm?PublicationID=5245). Regarding the journal *Tikkun*, see above note 13.

<sup>52</sup> The 1999 Pittsburgh Platform was officially titled *A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism*; Hebrew words appear in the original. In the *Commentary on the Principles for Reform Judaism* that also appears on the CCAR website, *tikkun olam* is contextualized by reference to ‘*aleinu* and to the “kabbalistic overtones” of the phrase, and then the Reform use is explained: “In the latter part of the 20th Century, the Reform Movement appropriated this phrase to refer to acts of social justice which could help repair our broken world.” Two years before that, the 1997 Miami Platform also used the term (below, note 91).

<sup>53</sup> First, however, proposed that the paragraphs are complementary and “our presumption should be one of unitary authorship” (“*Aleinu*,” 195 n. 28; “*Le-Tacen Olam*,” n. 30).

<sup>54</sup> Jakob J. Petuchowski, *Prayerbook Reform in Europe: The Liturgy of European Liberal and Reform Judaism* (New York: World Union of Progressive Judaism, 1968), 298-306. Petuchowski quotes Abraham Geiger who in 1869 wrote: “The separation between Israel and the other people, which existed at one time, has no right to be expressed in prayer. Rather ought there to be an expression of the joy that such barriers are increasingly falling” (*ibid.*, 299). For two specific episodes, see Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, 56, 158. Regarding the second paragraph of ‘*aleinu*, Bleich observed: “Indeed, at times, the relative length of this Hebrew passage is striking, appearing as it does in some Reform rites in its pristine form as one of the lengthier Hebrew selections to be found in the prayerbook” (“*Tikkun Olam*: Jewish Obligations to a Non-Jewish Society,” in *Tikkun Olam: Social Responsibility in Jewish Thought and Law*, ed. David Shatz, Chaim I. Waxman and Nathan J. Diament (Northvale, NJ: J. Aronson, 1998), 99).

Compare the more recent Reform approach as exemplified by the 1975 *Gates of Prayer* prayerbook (Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, 374-75), and the approaches of liberal Jewish communities as described by Jacobs, “A History of ‘Tikkun Olam’.”

<sup>55</sup> Schacter, “*Tikkun Olam*,” 189-90. Regarding Elliot N. Dorff, *The Way Into Tikkun Olam (Repairing the World)* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Pub., 2005), Schacter wrote: “Despite its title, this book deals virtually exclusively with Jewish obligations and responsibilities to other Jews, not Gentiles. One searches the entire volume almost in vain for any sources that specifically address the Jewish obligation towards non-Jews, which is how the phrase *tikkun olam* is generally understood” (“*Tikkun Olam*,” 202 n. 9). Cf. Elliot N. Dorff, *For the Love of God and People: A Philosophy of Jewish Law* (Philadelphia: JPS, 2007), 108-10, 166; *idem*, *The Jewish Approach to Repairing the World (Tikkun Olam): A Brief Introduction for Christians*, with Rev. Cory Willson (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Pub., 2008).

Bleich of Yeshiva University commented: “[S]ocial action became a dominant concern of the Reform movement with the result that such activity quite incorrectly became suspect within the traditionalist sectors of our community.”<sup>56</sup> In 1997, then-chief rabbi Jonathan Sacks put it in harsher terms:

[E]very phrase associated with the idea of Tikkun Olam, phrases like – “light unto the nation,” or “the Jewish mission,” or “ethical universalism,” all those things became code words for assimilation, reform, and the whole concept of Tikkun Olam became suspect. What a tragedy that is today.<sup>57</sup>

It was some time before Orthodox communities took up tikkun olam as a cause, and even then it was not with the same gusto. In 1994, the Sixth Orthodox Forum convened by then-Yeshiva University President Norman Lamm, discussed tikkun olam in the context of Jewish responsibility for society in general and a conference volume was subsequently published.<sup>58</sup> At this conference, Blidstein demonstrated “an authentic call for broad Jewish involvement with the welfare of society as a whole,” but he also noted that the nature of the sources meant that they did not “decide either concrete questions of prudence and priority; nor ... provide any guidance to religionists who do not wish simply to be swept along by the faddish social current of the day.”<sup>59</sup> Thus Blidstein suggested that tikkun olam is best fulfilled indirectly rather than by actively pursuing the goal. Blidstein called this a “paradoxical possibility that Israel best fulfills whatever responsibility it has for the welfare of mankind by acting in devotion and probity before the Lord, rather than by busying itself in attempting to directly affect the spiritual or material state of the world.”<sup>60</sup> Blidstein’s conclusion went further:

I think we can safely say that “responsibility for the welfare of general society” is not the highest priority in our scheme of things, at least on the day-to-day level. The people Israel seems called upon primarily to keep its house in order and to care for its own, to serve God and to witness to Him. At the same time this exemplary life ought to have an overall incremental impact on mankind as a whole.<sup>61</sup>

At the same conference, Bleich discussed tikkun olam from the perspective of the Jewish obligation to determine, disseminate, promote, and enforce the Seven Noahide Laws among Gentiles. Bleich also reflected on sources that consider the eventuality of Gentile fidelity to standards that are normative for Jews. While Bleich advocated voicing Jewish

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<sup>56</sup> Bleich, “*Tikkun Olam*,” 98.

<sup>57</sup> Sacks, “Tikkun Olam.” For Sacks’ fuller treatment of the subject, see Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World*. See also Jonathan Sacks, *Tradition in an Untraditional Age* (London: Valentine Mitchell, 1990), 132, and the critique of Rosenthal, “*Tikkun ha-Olam*,” 237 n. 101.

<sup>58</sup> David Shatz, Chaim I. Waxman and Nathan J. Diament, ed., *Tikkun Olam: Social Responsibility in Jewish Thought and Law* (Northvale, NJ: Aronson, 1998). Isadore Twersky’s 1963 essay, entitled “Some Aspects of the Jewish Attitude Toward the Welfare State” is an early Orthodox exploration of social responsibility and would undoubtedly fit into the contemporary category of tikkun olam. Indicatively, Twersky did not use the term tikkun olam (“Some Aspects of the Jewish Attitude Toward the Welfare State,” *Tradition* 5, no. 2 (Summer 1963): 137-58; Schacter, “*Tikkun Olam*,” 201 n. 1).

<sup>59</sup> Gerald J. Blidstein, “Tikkun Olam,” *Tradition* 29, no. 2 (1995): 14 (Blidstein’s article appeared before the conference volume). For a critique of Blidstein, see Rosenthal, “*Tikkun ha-Olam*,” 214 n. 1.

<sup>60</sup> Blidstein, “Tikkun Olam,” 11.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

approaches to contemporary issues in light of the Noahide laws, like Blidstein, he did not give this expression of tikkun olam primacy.<sup>62</sup> Three years later when Sacks spoke about tikkun olam, he opened his analysis with similar sentiments.<sup>63</sup> It would appear that the contemporary Orthodox notion of tikkun olam is best realized by focusing on Jewish values that are not aimed at realizing tikkun olam. Like an autostereogram, the coveted ideal only appears when it is not in focus.

In his comments on tikkun olam, Sacks embarked upon a journey that he called “an exercise in historical imagination.” He explained that the first divine promise focused on the Land of Israel, while the second divine promise spoke about the Children of Israel. Both promises have been realized in the present era, leaving the third promise as the next challenge: to perfect the world under the sovereignty of God. Sacks acknowledged the enormity of the challenge: “It is the last task of Jewish history, and it is the hardest task.”

Given the centrality of this task, why is it apparently absent from traditional sources? Sacks explained that this was by dint of the historical reality of Jewish existence in a hostile Gentile world: “It would have been absurd to raise our sights any higher ... because who were we to change the world?”

The paucity of primary sources has also been observed by other scholars. Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter of Yeshiva University noted that there was scant discussion of tikkun olam as an ideal, and placed this literary phenomenon in its historical context. Schacter then offered traditional sources in an attempt to ground the contemporary understanding of tikkun olam as social justice.<sup>64</sup> More recently, Mirsky commented that “the historical moment in which we find ourselves is without precedent in human history” and therefore “in many respects the corpus of Jewish tradition is of limited usefulness in addressing many contemporary questions of social justice – and certainly on a global scale.”<sup>65</sup>

Despite continuing efforts by the Modern Orthodox community,<sup>66</sup> it would appear that tikkun olam as a call for social and political activism is still most closely associated with liberal strands of Judaism.

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<sup>62</sup> Bleich, “*Tikkun Olam*,” 61-102.

<sup>63</sup> Sacks, “Tikkun Olam.” In his later work, Sacks commented: “Of all the ideas in Judaism’s ethics of responsibility [– tikkun olam] is the least halakhic, the least rooted in law”; “[Tikkun olam] is not a concept given to precise definition, still less is it spelled out in the crisp imperatives of Jewish law” (*To Heal a Fractured World*, 72, 82).

<sup>64</sup> Schacter, “*Tikkun Olam*,” 184-88, 192-200.

<sup>65</sup> Mirsky, “*Tikkun Olam*,” 215.

<sup>66</sup> See, for instance, a recent publication on social justice by Orthodox rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz, *Jewish Ethics & Social Justice: A Guide for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (n.p.: Derusha Publishing, 2012). See also the favorable review by Margie Klein where she notes that Yanklowitz is effectively rebuking his Orthodox peers “to think beyond the bounds of their community to engage with the more universal aspects of the Jewish tradition” (“Why Liberal Jews Should Read an Orthodox Social Justice Book,” *Zeek*, March 22, 2012, <http://zeek.forward.com/articles/117526>). Previously in 2007, Yanklowitz founded the Orthodox social justice organization *Uri L'Tzedek* ([www.utzedek.org](http://www.utzedek.org)).

## 7. American value

The tikkun olam ideal has become so pervasive in America that the Hebrew term is often used in English without the need to translate it.<sup>67</sup> Schacter provided an eclectic, and at times entertaining, survey of modern expressions of tikkun olam as the Jewish ideal of social justice. Schacter's survey included quotes from former New York governor Mario Cuomo, African American Studies professor Cornel West, Madonna and then-Senator Barack Obama.<sup>68</sup>

A well-publicized example of the Americanization of tikkun olam was President Barack Obama's speech at the Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) in March 2012, when he referred to "the concept of tikkun olam that has enriched and guided my life."<sup>69</sup> This was not the first time President Obama invoked the notion of tikkun olam: In 2010, at a gathering marking Jewish American Heritage Month, Obama spoke about the contributions and values of Jewish Americans and summarized: "So what we are called upon to do now is to continue to live up to those values as a nation — to continue to uphold the principle of 'tikkun olam' — our obligation to repair the world."<sup>70</sup> The presidential proclamation marking the event also mentioned tikkun olam: "Today, Jewish Americans carry on their culture's tradition of 'tikkun olam' — or 'to repair the world' — through good deeds and service."<sup>71</sup> In 2011, at the White House Hanukkah celebration, Obama asserted: "Let's extend a hand to those who are in need, and allow the value of tikkun olam to guide our work this holiday season."<sup>72</sup> In fact, it would appear that tikkun olam is one of Obama's talking points — or to use George Orwell's term, "ready-made phrases"<sup>73</sup> — at least for Jewish audiences.<sup>74</sup> In recent years, Obama's staff and official appointees have also regularly invoked tikkun olam in Jewish contexts.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> For an exception to this rule, see the organization mentioned below, note 105.

<sup>68</sup> Schacter, "Tikkun Olam," 190-92. See also Breger, "How Tikkun Olam Got Its Groove." For another survey that focuses on social concern (not just use of the term *tikkun olam*), see Matthew Baigell, "Social Concern and *Tikkun Olam* in Jewish American Art," *Ary Judaica* 8 (2012): 55-58.

<sup>69</sup> [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/03/04/remarks-president-aipac-policy-conference](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/03/04/remarks-president-aipac-policy-conference); Robert Skar, "Can Obama Really Stand with Israel as Iran Raises Stakes?" *Detroit Jewish News*, March 8, 2010, [www.thejewishnews.com/can-obama-really-stand-with-israel-as-iran-raises-stakes](http://www.thejewishnews.com/can-obama-really-stand-with-israel-as-iran-raises-stakes).

<sup>70</sup> [www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/marking-jewish-american-heritage-month?page=18](http://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/marking-jewish-american-heritage-month?page=18).

<sup>71</sup> [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/presidential-proclamation-jewish-american-heritage-month](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/presidential-proclamation-jewish-american-heritage-month). Two years later, the presidential proclamation marking the same event similarly mentioned tikkun olam ([www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/05/01/presidential-proclamation-jewish-american-heritage-month-2012](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/05/01/presidential-proclamation-jewish-american-heritage-month-2012)).

<sup>72</sup> [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/12/08/remarks-president-hanukkah-reception](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/12/08/remarks-president-hanukkah-reception); Matt Compton, "A White House Hanukkah Celebration," *The White House Blog*, December 9, 2011, [www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2011/12/09/white-house-hanukkah-celebration](http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2011/12/09/white-house-hanukkah-celebration). The event was held twelve days before Hanukkah.

<sup>73</sup> George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," *Horizon* (London) 76 (April 1946): 259.

<sup>74</sup> Obama also used the term in his 2008 address to AIPAC; in his 2011 address to the Union for Reform Judaism (below, note 78); in his 2012 remarks upon the presentation of the Medal of Freedom to the President of Israel, Shimon Peres (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/06/13/remarks-president-obama-and-president-peres-israel-presentation-medal-fr>), and; in his 2013 address at the Jerusalem International Convention Center (below, note 80).

<sup>75</sup> To cite a few examples: The post from November 14, 2011, by Jarrod Bernstein, Associate Director in the Office of Public Engagement, regarding the work of the Jewish Federations of North America: "I was struck by the overwhelming sense of commitment to *tikkun* [sic.] *olam*. Repairing the world, a central Jewish value dating to biblical times, has inspired innovation to help solve modern day problems" ([www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2011/11/14/exciting-week-american-jewish-life](http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2011/11/14/exciting-week-american-jewish-life)). The remarks by Susan Rice,

An interesting exchange occurred in the lead-up to the 2012 U.S. presidential election. In December 2011, *The Jerusalem Post* ran an article by Steven M. Bob whose headline heralded Obama as “The ‘tikkun olam’ President.”<sup>76</sup> Bob serves as senior rabbi of *Congregation Etz Chaim* in Lombard, Illinois and was a co-founder of *Rabbis for Obama*.<sup>77</sup> The context of the article was Obama’s tikkun olam references at the biennial convention of the Union for Reform Judaism.<sup>78</sup> Listing President Obama’s achievements, Bob grouped them under the heading of tikkun olam. In some of the cases, classifying the achievements as tikkun olam employed an extremely broad definition of the term (“General Motors is alive and Osama bin Laden isn’t”). Bob concluded his praises by declaring: “That’s tikkun olam in deeds, not just in words.”

Then in August 2012, *Forward* ran an article by Noam Neusner entitled “Mitt Romney Is Real Tikkun Olam Candidate.”<sup>79</sup> Neusner served as a speechwriter for President George W. Bush, and as the White House Jewish liaison, and his article addressed “tikkun olam minded voters.” Neusner specifically turned to *Rabbis for Obama*, snickering at their notion of tikkun olam: “At some point, all that tikkun olam,” – wrote Neusner in reference to Obama policies such as the health care package – “is going to wreck the country, and that, if I’m not mistaken, is pretty much the opposite of the goal of tikkun olam.” Neusner concluded his article by declaring: “Vote Mitt Romney. He’s the real tikkun olam candidate.” Thus in the lead up to the 2012 American presidential election, policy questions were refracted through the tikkun olam lens, and this watchword became a suggested standard by which to judge the candidates.

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US Ambassador to the UN, at the AIPAC Synagogue Initiative Lunch on March 5, 2012: “This extraordinary gathering is a testament to the strength and dedication of the pro-Israel community and the American Jewish community – a community devoted to the unshakeable U.S.-Israel bond, to human rights for all, and to the wider principle of *tikkun olam*” ([www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2012/03/08/ambassador-susan-rices-remarks-aipac-synagogue-initiative-lunch](http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2012/03/08/ambassador-susan-rices-remarks-aipac-synagogue-initiative-lunch)). The address by Valerie Jarrett, Senior Advisor to the President, at the J Street Conference on March 26, 2012: “Guided by faith, by history, and by a belief in Tikkun Olam, your community has always helped make our union more perfect” ([www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2012/03/26/unbreakable-bond-state-israel](http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2012/03/26/unbreakable-bond-state-israel)). The remarks by Janet Napolitano, Secretary of Homeland Security, to the Anti-Defamation League on April 29, 2012: “In the spirit of ‘tikkun olam,’ you stand for civil rights and civil liberties for all” ([www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2012/05/01/remarks-secretary-janet-napolitano-anti-defamation-league](http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2012/05/01/remarks-secretary-janet-napolitano-anti-defamation-league)).

<sup>76</sup> Steven M. Bob, “The ‘tikkun olam’ president,” *The Jerusalem Post*, December 31, 2011, [www.jpost.com/Opinion/Op-Ed-Contributors/The-tikkun-olam-president](http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Op-Ed-Contributors/The-tikkun-olam-president).

<sup>77</sup> On *Rabbis for Obama*, see “600 Join Rabbis for Obama,” *Forward*, August 21, 2012, <http://forward.com/articles/161460/-join-rabbis-for-obama>; Max Slutsky, “Obama for America Launches Rabbis for Obama,” *Organizing for Action*, August 21, 2012, [www.barackobama.com/news/entry/obama-for-america-launches-rabbis-for-obama](http://www.barackobama.com/news/entry/obama-for-america-launches-rabbis-for-obama).

Just before the 2008 US presidential election, *Haaretz* rated Bob as one of the thirty six Jews who shaped the election (Bradley Burston and J.J. Goldberg, “36 Jews who have shaped the 2008 U.S. election,” *Haaretz*, October 16, 2008, [www.haaretz.com/36-jews-who-have-shaped-the-2008-u-s-election-1.255502](http://www.haaretz.com/36-jews-who-have-shaped-the-2008-u-s-election-1.255502)).

<sup>78</sup> “[American Jews] pursued tikkun olam, the hard work of repairing the world”; “We stand with Israel as a Jewish democratic state because we know that Israel is born of firmly held values that we, as Americans, share: a culture committed to justice, a land that welcomes the weary, a people devoted to tikkun olam” ([www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/2011/12/16/president-obama-speaks-71st-general-assembly-union-reform-judaism](http://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/2011/12/16/president-obama-speaks-71st-general-assembly-union-reform-judaism)).

<sup>79</sup> Noam Neusner, “Mitt Romney Is Real Tikkun Olam Candidate,” *Forward*, August 31, 2012, <http://forward.com/articles/161869/mitt-romney-is-real-tikkun-olam-candidate/?p=all>.

With Obama's reelection, the term has not fallen into disuse: in March 2013, when the newly elected president visited Israel, he addressed the people of Israel and referred to tikkun olam as "that timeless calling within the Jewish experience."<sup>80</sup>

To be sure, Obama's tikkun olam has been directed at Jewish audiences. Similarly, *Tikkun Olam Ted* – an English language Jewish children's book – tells of Ted whose "family calls him 'Tikkun Olam Ted' because he wants to help fix the world and make it a kinder, better place." Ted spends his week recycling, cleaning up fallen leaves, walking dogs from an animal shelter, watering the plants, and feeding the birds. *Tikkun Olam Ted* never actually defines the term; it is assumed that the reader will understand the idiom.<sup>81</sup> Literary critic Hillel Halkin noted that "Repairing the world' is now as much of a Jewish contribution to the American language as are chutzpah, schmooze, and schmaltz."<sup>82</sup> Perhaps Halkin should have used the Hebrew, rather than the translation.

It appears, however, that tikkun olam is no longer confined to Jewish discourse. Matthew Baigell, professor emeritus at Rutgers University, pointed out the term "has become a catch-all term used by Jews and non-Jews in America" to the extent that "[i]n the course of a single day, it has now become almost impossible to avoid hearing or reading references or inferences to *tikkun olam*."<sup>83</sup> As Bob succinctly noted: "Tikkun Olam is simply a commitment Americans share."<sup>84</sup>

Tikkun olam has even been assimilated into popular American culture. This is evident from the 2008 romantic comedy-drama, *Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist*, which included the following conversation:

*Norah:* It reminds me of this part of Judaism that I really like. It's called Tikkun olam. It says that the world's been broken into pieces and it's everybody's job to find them and put them back together again.

*Nick:* Well maybe we're the pieces. Maybe we are not supposed to find the pieces. Maybe we are the pieces.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> [www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/2013/03/21/president-obama-speaks-people-israel](http://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/2013/03/21/president-obama-speaks-people-israel).

<sup>81</sup> Vivian Newman, *Tikkun Olam Ted*, illustrated by Steve Mack (Minneapolis: Kar-Ben Publishing, 2012). The book also emphasizes rest on the seventh day ("On Shabbat, Ted rests and dreams of Tikkun Olam"), even though many forms of tikkun olam are appropriate for Saturday. For a critique of *Tikkun Olam Ted*, see Melissa Langsam Braunstein, "Friday Night: Repairing the World Means Helping People," *Kveller*, June 21, 2013, [www.kveller.com/blog/parenting/friday-night-repairing-the-world-means-helping-people](http://www.kveller.com/blog/parenting/friday-night-repairing-the-world-means-helping-people). The critique focused on the narrow scope of Ted's tikkun olam, opining that tikkun olam is broader than the children's book suggests. See also Ellen G. Cole, "Tikkun Olam Ted," *Jewish Book Council*, [www.jewishbookcouncil.org/book/tikkun-olam-ted](http://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/book/tikkun-olam-ted).

<sup>82</sup> Halkin, "How Not to Repair the World," 23. Halkin's list does not claim to be exhaustive; other words could easily be added, in particular the Yiddish word for *matza* balls, which was the winning word in the 2013 Scripps National Spelling Bee. Subsequently, *The New York Times* reported a dispute amongst Yiddish speakers over whether the winning spelling was indeed the correct spelling. In 1983, the winning word was Purim. See [www.spellingbee.com/champions-and-their-winning-words](http://www.spellingbee.com/champions-and-their-winning-words); [www.scripps.com/press/pdf/1305](http://www.scripps.com/press/pdf/1305); [www.nytimes.com/2013/06/01/nyregion/some-say-spelling-of-a-winning-word-wasnt-kosher.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/01/nyregion/some-say-spelling-of-a-winning-word-wasnt-kosher.html?_r=0).

<sup>83</sup> Baigell, "Jewish American Art," 55.

<sup>84</sup> Bob, "The 'tikkun olam' president."

<sup>85</sup> The movie is based on the eponymous novel, where tikkun olam is discussed there at greater length: Rachel Cohn and David Levithan, *Nick & Norah's Infinite Playlist* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 145.

The character of Norah Silverberg is Jewish, but the film is not about a Jewish girl; it is about an American girl (who is Jewish) and her budding romance with Nick (who is not Jewish).<sup>86</sup> Employing the term *tikkun olam* in this movie reflects Jewish social integration in American society. As such, this use is distinct from the political and ideological usages that I have highlighted. It would seem that *tikkun olam* has been assimilated into American culture on many levels.

## 8. Imported ideal

With *tikkun olam* so firmly ensconced in the Jewish American agenda, we may wonder: What is the place of *tikkun olam* in Israel?<sup>87</sup>

In the years 1939 to 1941, a short-lived journal entitled *Chevrah Chadasha – Hashalom* (New Society – The Peace), was published in Tel Aviv. The journal printed the transactions of the eponymous society, as well as other short articles. The fifth (and last) issue of the journal carried an additional title: *Le-takken 'olam be-malkhut shaddai*.<sup>88</sup> Seven of the nine short pieces were penned by Akiva Aryeh Weiss (1868-1947), founder of the first Hebrew city in the Land of Israel, *Ahuzat bayit* (renamed *Tel Aviv* in 1910).<sup>89</sup> Then, in 1955, the IDF's education department printed a small work entitled *Tikkun ha-'olam*. In this simple nineteen page booklet, the author, Avraham N. Pollak (1910-1970), compared the optimistic Jewish notion of *tikkun olam* to the pessimism and fatalism of Greek, Christian, and Islamic thought.<sup>90</sup> Neither of these publications offered serious analysis or discussion of the notion of *tikkun olam*, nor were they representative of Israeli discourse. It must be said that *tikkun olam* has not truly been on the Israeli agenda.

In the 1997 Miami Platform, the American Reform movement voiced its potential contribution to the State of Israel. *Tikkun olam* was one of the select values that was touted as a Reform export:

Confident that Reform Judaism's synthesis of tradition and modernity and its historic commitment to *tikkun olam* (repairing the world), can make a unique and positive contribution to the Jewish state, we resolve to intensify our efforts to inform and educate Israelis about the values of Reform Judaism. We call upon

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<sup>86</sup> On the positive portrayal of Norah, the Jewish heroine of the film, see Marista Lane, "Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist' And Its Young Jewish Heroine," *InTheMoment*, March 2, 2009, <http://momentmagazine.wordpress.com/2009/03/02/nick-and-norahs-infinite-playlist-and-its-young-jewish-heroine>.

For another silver screen *tikkun olam* foray, see Uri Fintzy, "Filmmaker marries Hollywood to *tikkun olam*," *JTA*, November 19, 2010, [www.jta.org/2010/11/19/arts-entertainment/filmmaker-marries-hollywood-to-tikkun-olam](http://www.jta.org/2010/11/19/arts-entertainment/filmmaker-marries-hollywood-to-tikkun-olam).

<sup>87</sup> In this paper I have not dealt with *tikkun olam* outside the two largest Jewish concentrations. For an example of *tikkun olam* in Australia, see the website of Kehilat Nitzan, a congregation in Melbourne associated with Masorti Australasia and affiliated with Masorti Olami, the World Council of Conservative Congregations: [www.kehilatnitzan.org.au/tikkun.html](http://www.kehilatnitzan.org.au/tikkun.html).

<sup>88</sup> *Hevrah hadasha – ha-shalom* 5 (1941); see, in particular, pp. 7-12.

<sup>89</sup> Weiss also published a volume under the same title, that outlined an ideal society: *Hevrah hadasha – ha-shalom* (Tel Aviv: Herzliya, 1938). The material included in the fifth issue of the journal was taken from a planned further volume.

<sup>90</sup> Avraham N. Pollak, *Tikkun ha-'olam: be-mahasbevet yisra'el ve-ha-'amim* (Tel Aviv: Matkal, 1955).

Reform Jews everywhere to dedicate their energies and resources to the strengthening of an indigenous Progressive Judaism in Medinat Yisrael.<sup>91</sup>

In a 2010 episode of *Shalom Sesame* – a co-production of *Sesame Street* and the Israeli version *Rechov Sumsum* – the characters talk about fixing the world, and note “in Hebrew that’s tikkun olam.”<sup>92</sup> They then sing a song with the refrain: “We help the world when we help someone / Do what you can to make things right / tikkun olam.” Despite the Israeli input, *Shalom Sesame* was not written for Israeli audiences, but sought to bring Israeli life and Jewish culture to American audiences.<sup>93</sup>

Writing on the gulf between the American Jewish community and the Israeli Jewish community, Israeli journalist Yair Ettinger recently noted that “the concept of ‘Tikun Olam’ ... appeals to so many young Jewish Americans,” implying that tikkun olam was not what animates their Israeli counterparts. The specific context of Ettinger’s observation was a news item in the summer of 2013 that “for the first time, Jewish organizations from the United States will offer humanitarian assistance to refugees from Syria.”<sup>94</sup>

Avraham Infeld, a recognized authority in the field of informal Jewish education, suggested that tikkun olam could be a possible vehicle for strengthening the bonds between Israel and the Diaspora:

Imagine now the powerful potential comprised in the power of a state and the spirit, know-how, and resources of a globally dispersed people, together mobilized in pursuit of a common vision of making a significant, and distinctly Jewish and Israeli, contribution to solving humanity’s most pressing problems.<sup>95</sup>

Tikkun olam, argued Infeld, was the appropriate rubric for such a vision. Thus he suggested that “[a] joint *tikkun olam* mission can be a way to strengthen the common bonds of the Jewish people in a time of growing gaps between Israel and world Jewry communities.”

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<sup>91</sup> 1997 Miami Platform was officially titled *Reform Judaism & Zionism: A Centenary Platform*.

<sup>92</sup> *Shalom Sesame*, season three, episode five; the clip is available at [www.shalomsesame.org/parents-and-educators/jewish-values/making-a-difference](http://www.shalomsesame.org/parents-and-educators/jewish-values/making-a-difference). Like Tikkun Olam Ted who “helps walk the dogs at the animal shelter” (above, note 81), the particular episode of *Shalom Sesame* involved returning a stray cat to its owner.

<sup>93</sup> “Shalom Sesame’s Educational Value for Children and Families,” Research Memo, January 2012, [www.shalomsesame.org/documents/shalom/Sesame%20Printables/ShalomResearchMemoFINAL/ShalomResearchMemoFINAL.pdf/Original/ShalomResearchMemoFINAL.pdf](http://www.shalomsesame.org/documents/shalom/Sesame%20Printables/ShalomResearchMemoFINAL/ShalomResearchMemoFINAL.pdf/Original/ShalomResearchMemoFINAL.pdf). The memo is based on the unpublished research of Dr Shalom Fisch of MediaKidz Research & Consulting.

<sup>94</sup> Yair Ettinger, “Our Uncle From America: A Family Divided,” *Jewish Philanthropy*, August 8, 2013, <http://ejewishphilanthropy.com/our-uncle-from-america-a-family-divided/#sthash.jtYTBz6t.dpuf>; also available at [www.prozion.org.uk/our\\_uncle\\_from\\_america\\_a\\_family\\_divided.htm](http://www.prozion.org.uk/our_uncle_from_america_a_family_divided.htm). For relevant items, before and after Ettinger’s piece, see: Anshel Pfeffer, “Jewish groups launch program to aid Syrian refugees living in Jordan,” *Haaretz*, July 24, 2013, [www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/.premium-1.537759](http://www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/.premium-1.537759); Uriel Heilman, “Jewish groups aiding Syrian refugees – sort of,” *JTA*, September 11, 2013, [www.jta.org/2013/09/11/news-opinion/united-states/jewish-groups-sending-aid-to-syrian-refugees-sort-of](http://www.jta.org/2013/09/11/news-opinion/united-states/jewish-groups-sending-aid-to-syrian-refugees-sort-of).

<sup>95</sup> Avraham Infeld, “Obama’s ‘tikkun olam’: Lost in Translation,” *The Times of Israel*, March 10, 2012, <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/obamas-tikkun-olam-lost-in-translation>.

It is easy to envisage how Infeld's vision would speak to the hearts of American Jewry; it is more difficult to imagine Israelis embracing the suggestion. Not that Israelis are not interested in addressing "humanity's most pressing problems," it is just that tikkun olam is not necessarily the banner under which those issues are tackled. Moreover, local pressing problems are at the foreground of Israeli consciousness. Some might argue that Israelis do not have the luxury to tackle world problems, as long as they still need to grapple with local challenges.

Israeli expressions of tikkun olam are often new immigrants, imported products, or marketed for tourists. This is the case, for example, with MASA's "Tikkun Olam in Tel Aviv-Jaffa" program.<sup>96</sup> The program, established in 2006, involves study and volunteering in lower socioeconomic areas. It caters to participants aged 18-35, most of who have already been on a Birthright trip to Israel, and who come to Israel to volunteer or intern for five to ten months. Undoubtedly, the name of the program has a strong marketing impact on potential participants. While the venture – valuable as it is – brings together Diaspora Jewry together with Israelis, it is hardly a realization of Infeld's vision of a joint mission. First, it focuses on challenges in Israel, rather than humanity at large. Second, even this apparent Israeli expression of tikkun olam is primarily catering to an American public. Having said that, since 2011 the program has integrated Israelis – according to MASA, 20-25% of Tikkun Olam participants are Israeli. Still, the program, its components, and its partners are geared to the population that is most attracted by the tikkun olam motto: liberal American Jewry.

This is not to say that the liberal incarnation of tikkun olam is entirely absent from Hebrew discourse in Israel. The Religious Kibbutz Movement issues a weekly Torah sheet for youth entitled "*Tikkun 'Olam*."<sup>97</sup> But apart from the title, the sheet has no apparent link to contemporary notions of tikkun olam. In 2013, in the lead up to Rosh Hashanah, *Ne'emanai torah va-'avoda* posted a letter under the *'aleinu* words: "*le-takken 'olam be-malkhut shaddai*."<sup>98</sup> *Ne'emanai torah va-'avoda* is a religious Zionist movement founded in 1978 that advocates "strengthening tolerance and openness in Orthodoxy."<sup>99</sup> The letter in Hebrew was an expression of thanks, in appreciation for support in the battle to prevent the segregation between boys and girls in an existing religious primary school in Gedera. The letter itself did not use the term tikkun olam; *Ne'emanai torah va-'avoda* felt that maintaining the mixed school was an act of tikkun olam.

It must be said that these in-roads are exceptions, and are limited to particular sectors of Israeli society. The tikkun olam banner is still primarily an American phenomenon. True, the term tikkun olam can be found in Israel; yet in the land where Hebrew is the native tongue, this Hebrew idiom seems to be a foreign import. The truth continues to ring in

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<sup>96</sup> For MASA, see [www.masaisrael.org](http://www.masaisrael.org). For the program, see [www.masaisrael.org/programs/tikkun-olam-tel-aviv-jaffa](http://www.masaisrael.org/programs/tikkun-olam-tel-aviv-jaffa); Rivkah Ginat, "The real hands-on experience," *The Jerusalem Post*, August 9, 2013, magazine, 6-9.

<sup>97</sup> Back issues from June 2012 can be accessed at [www.kdati.org.il/scandir/scandir79.htm](http://www.kdati.org.il/scandir/scandir79.htm).

<sup>98</sup> [www.toravoda.org.il/node/8145](http://www.toravoda.org.il/node/8145).

<sup>99</sup> <http://toravoda.org.il/en>; other, similar slogans also appear on their English website: "Fostering an open and engaged Modern Orthodoxy"; "Its orientation aims to promote the values of tolerance, equality, and justice in religious society."

Infeld's wry comment that the term tikkun olam "is probably better known to American non-Jews than it is to Jewish Israelis."<sup>100</sup>

## 9. Expanding the umbrella

It would appear that the term continues to evolve, and not just in the political arena; let me recount a few examples. In the context of the Americanization of tikkun olam, I mentioned Steven M. Bob, rabbi in Illinois and co-founder of *Rabbis for Obama*. Bob is also the founder of the *Fourth Day Initiative*, an interfaith solar energy project. In his 2009 Rosh Hashana sermon, when he launched the program, Bob explained the environmental initiative in terms of tikkun olam. In 2011, Bob's synagogue had a "Solar celebration" ceremony on the occasion of the instalment of 136 solar panels on the roof of the synagogue.<sup>101</sup> I also mentioned Rick Jacobs, URJ president and formerly rabbi of *Westchester Reform Temple* in Scarsdale, New York. A long-time advocate of tikkun olam, Jacobs oversaw the eco-friendly renovation and expansion of the synagogue that was dedicated in 2009. The new sanctuary was constructed from sustainable materials and carpeted with rugs made from recycled fibers, while the eternal flame is powered by solar energy. The synagogue's website hails this project as "a physical example of one of our congregation's five pillars: *Tikkun Olam - Repairing the World*."<sup>102</sup> Tikkun olam has thus become synonymous with environmental issues and concerns for ecology.<sup>103</sup>

Tikkun olam is not reserved for the rhetoric of social action; the ideal has also been given artistic expression. In a fascinating article by art historian Matthew Baigell, the author discussed how social concern was reflected in Jewish American art from the late nineteenth century, and how in recent times this trend has turned to tikkun olam as the subject of art. Baigell explained this development by pointing out that "in today's market-driven, profit-making artistic climate, the creation of works with tikkun olam in mind provides the artists with moral and socially-minded reasons to create and to give purpose to their art."<sup>104</sup> Baigell further noted that there was a gender difference, in that women

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<sup>100</sup> Infeld, "Obama's 'tikkun olam'." For a curious example from Israel, see the colorful vignette in Shlomo Riskin, *Listening to God: Inspirational Stories for My Grandchildren* (New Milford, CT: Maggid Books, 2010), 405-7.

<sup>101</sup> Bob's sermon was recorded in *Congregation Etz Chaim of DuPage County e-bulletin*, October 7, 2009, 8, [www.congetzchaim.com/pdf/EBulletin/2009/October/Oct7-09.pdf](http://www.congetzchaim.com/pdf/EBulletin/2009/October/Oct7-09.pdf). This was followed up with a message from the congregation's president once again connecting the initiative to tikkun olam (*Congregation Etz Chaim of DuPage County e-bulletin*, November 4, 2009, 2-3, [www.congetzchaim.com/pdf/EBulletin/2009/November/Nov4-09.pdf](http://www.congetzchaim.com/pdf/EBulletin/2009/November/Nov4-09.pdf)). See also Marcia Kaplan, "Synagogue Celebrates Pioneering Solar Roof," *TribLocal*, September 14, 2011, [www.triblocal.com/forest-park/community/stories/2011/09/synagogue-celebrates-pioneering-solar-roof](http://www.triblocal.com/forest-park/community/stories/2011/09/synagogue-celebrates-pioneering-solar-roof).

<sup>102</sup> [www.wrtemple.org/page/wrt\\_is\\_green](http://www.wrtemple.org/page/wrt_is_green); Amy Spiro, "The Scarsdale Dynamo," *The Jewish Week*, March 29, 2011, [www.thejewishweek.com/news/new\\_york/scarsdale\\_dynamo](http://www.thejewishweek.com/news/new_york/scarsdale_dynamo). Westchester Reform Temple is involved in many programs that it classifies as tikkun olam, including: feeding the hungry, collecting for others, welcoming particular groups ("Thanksgiving Dinner for the Visually Impaired"; "Chanukah Party for Developmentally Disabled Adults"; "Passover Luncheon for Elderly Jewish Poor," etc), helping others outside the synagogue walls ("Breast Cancer Walk"; "Holiday Party for Homeless Children and their Families"; "Men's Club Blood Drive," etc). For the impressive list, see [www.wrtemple.org/page/social\\_action](http://www.wrtemple.org/page/social_action).

<sup>103</sup> For another example, see Adam Shery, "What Can We Do?" *Koach*, January 8, 2008, [www.uscj.org/koach/koc\\_5768\\_shevat\\_ashery.htm](http://www.uscj.org/koach/koc_5768_shevat_ashery.htm).

<sup>104</sup> Baigell, "Jewish American Art," 80 (see also pp. 78-79).

“are in the forefront of contemporary Jewish American artists who explore aspects of *tikkun olam* ... For them, feminism, Judaism, and an art of social concern go hand in hand.” In line with Baigell’s observations, October 2013 was declared “Arts and Culture Month” by the American organization *Repair the World*.<sup>105</sup>

In addition to ecology and art, *tikkun olam* has also expanded to include nutrition. In the February 2012 issue of *Nashim* – a Hebrew magazine published by the *Makor Risbon* newspaper and aligned with Orthodox Religious Zionism – there was an article about healthy eating and the front cover of the magazine ran the headline “Education Towards Correct Nutrition is Tikkun Olam.”<sup>106</sup> In the article the interviewee was quoted as saying: “In a better world, if we are talking about *tikkun olam*, we must encourage correct eating, such that fewer children will be overweight and we will raise here a stronger and healthier nation.”<sup>107</sup> At first blush this version of *tikkun olam* appears to be an Israeli expression – it appeared in a Hebrew publication that was catering to a sector of Israeli society. The article, however, was a feature interview with Phyllis Glazer – chef, accomplished cookbook author, and ... expatriate American.

*Tikkun olam* can also be found as a rallying cry in new media. Thus, a number of blogs and websites carry the term *Tikkun* (or *Tikun*) *olam* as their title. These sites champion an array of causes: “Promoting Israeli democracy, exposing secrets of the national security state”<sup>108</sup>; “[M]y view of the purpose and essence of life as a Jew, the importance of the Land of Israel, how to differentiate good from evil, and perhaps even what to do about it”<sup>109</sup>; “Live and volunteer for 5 or 10 months with Israelis in Israel’s most exciting city.”<sup>110</sup> Needless to say, one blogger’s *tikkun olam*, is another blogger’s incubus.

The elasticity of the term is truly remarkable, as *tikkun olam* constantly appears to be encompassing an even broader spectrum of values. The aforementioned Jill Jacobs, a Conservative rabbi and social justice activist, aptly described the term’s pliability, when she commented that “the meaning of the term *tikkun olam* has expanded to apply to virtually any action or belief that the user thinks is beneficial to the world.”<sup>111</sup>

## 10. Critique of the catch-all

That *tikkun olam* has evolved into a catch-all that is bandied around for such a variety of causes, has not necessarily been seen as a positive development. Arnold Jacob Wolf (1924-2008), a well-known Reform rabbi and advocate of progressive politics, wrote that

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<sup>105</sup> <http://weprepair.org/blog/arts-and-culture-month-at-repair-the-world/20125>. *Repair the World* is headquartered in New York City, and according to their website – “Repair the World works to inspire American Jews and their communities to give their time and effort to serve those in need. We aim to make service a defining part of American Jewish life.”

<sup>106</sup> *Nashim*, February 24, 2012, front cover.

<sup>107</sup> Tammy Polak, “*Lo ‘al ha-kino’ab levada*,” *Nashim*, February 24, 2012, 47.

<sup>108</sup> [www.richardsilverstein.com](http://www.richardsilverstein.com). This blog published the Shama Leibowitz leak and the Anat Kamm – Uri Blau affair.

<sup>109</sup> <http://lady-light.blogspot.co.il>.

<sup>110</sup> <http://tikkunolamisrael.blogspot.co.il>, [www.tikkunolamisrael.org](http://www.tikkunolamisrael.org).

<sup>111</sup> Jacobs, “A History of ‘Tikkun Olam’.” Baigell wrote that *tikkun olam* and social concern are “concepts which today are basically interchangeable” (“Jewish American Art,” 58).

“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.” This is not to say that Wolf advocated aborting tikkun olam; on the contrary he openly declared that “[o]ur world does need repair. So do we.” For Wolf this meant asking ourselves hard questions: “Is our ethical system finally theocentric or pragmatic? Do we want what *we* want or what God wants?”<sup>112</sup>

Mirsky described a different challenge facing those who wave the broad tikkun olam banner by asking “How Jewish is Tikkun Olam?” Mirsky asked questions like whether there was “a distinctively Jewish way of doing humanitarian work in developing countries?” Exemplifying the irony of the situation, Mirsky offered a Jewish perspective on tikkun olam, trying valiantly to redeem the term from its use “as a substitute for universalist moral concern” by “articulating a distinctively Judaic moral vision.”<sup>113</sup>

Jill Jacobs also bemoaned that “the term has become so overused and so little understood as to be meaningless.” She pointed out that “[s]ome have suggested imposing a ban or hiatus on the term *tikkun olam*, given the general confusion about the meaning of this phrase.”<sup>114</sup> In response to this situation, Jacobs proposed “weaving together the four primary definitions of *tikkun olam* present in Jewish history: the anticipation of the divine kingdom in the *‘aleinu* prayer; the *midrashic* call to preserve the physical world;<sup>115</sup> the rabbinic desire to sustain the social order; and the Lurianic belief in our power to restore divine perfection.” Jacobs deftly outlined the tikkun olam objectives, beginning with traditional understandings and recasting the original meanings in light of contemporary sensitivities. Jacobs summarized her proposal in the following points:

- 1) the *Aleynu’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 world; 3) the rabbinic willingness to invoke *tikkun ha’olam* as a justification for changing

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<sup>112</sup> Wolf, “Repairing Tikkun Olam,” 482. Wolf had a long history of social activism: he marched in Selma for civil rights, travelled to Washington D.C. to protest the Vietnam War, and in the 1970s campaigned for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. See also Halkin, “How Not to Repair the World.” Halkin’s article is a review of a collection of essays that cover a range of social justice causes, grouping many of them under the rubric of tikkun olam: Or N. Rose, Jo Ellen Green Kaiser and Margie Klein, ed., *Righteous Indignation: A Jewish Call for Justice* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Pub., 2008). In his brusque review, Halkin critiqued the trend of using tikkun olam as a buzzword for every cause. In a recent response to Halkin’s reissuing of his 1977 *Letters to an American Jewish Friend*, Ruth Wisse wrote: “We both know that merely being born Jewish, whether in Israel or America, is a qualitatively different thing from living as a Jew. And of course by ‘Jewish way of life,’ I don’t mean tikkun olam – the perversions of which you exposed in one of my favorite essays by you” (“By Our Efforts Combined,” *Mosaic*, November 2013, <http://mosaicmagazine.com/supplemental/2013/11/by-our-efforts-combined>).

<sup>113</sup> Mirsky, “*Tikkun Olam*,” 216-20, 224-29. Mirsky also addressed other issues in his paper, namely: how to ensure that tikkun olam work is not merely aimed as assuaging the conscience of those involved; whether tikkun olam can ground Jewish identity, and; the relationship between tikkun olam and political advocacy. As Mirsky pointed out, the first question has been discussed in non-Jewish forums. On this point see Jo Ann Van Engen, “The Cost of Short Term Missions,” *The Other Side*, January and February 2000, 20-23 (the author is a board member of *Association for a More Just Society*, [www.ajs-us.org](http://www.ajs-us.org)); Mark Hill, “5 Popular Forms of Charity (That Aren’t Helping),” *Cracked*, July 1, 2012, [www.cracked.com/article\\_19899\\_5-popular-forms-charity-that-arent-helping.html](http://www.cracked.com/article_19899_5-popular-forms-charity-that-arent-helping.html).

<sup>114</sup> I am yet to identify these people.

<sup>115</sup> Above, note 12.

untenable laws; and 4) the Lurianic belief that individual actions can affect the fate of the world as a whole.<sup>116</sup>

Despite Jacobs' proposal, we might wonder: Must the term be defined in an encyclopedic fashion?

## 11. How to repair the world

Tikkun olam has become a catchcry with an array of connotations. As a flag, tikkun olam helps people rally around an ideal. The Hebrew idiom lends a tenor of Jewish tradition to contemporary values: those who champion modern tikkun olam believe they are drawing from hallowed traditional Jewish sources, while at the same time advocating liberal values. The marketing utility is clear, the end is laudable; alas, the authenticity is dubious.

So what is the course for an individual seeking to contribute to repairing our fragmented world? This is certainly a tall order, and I doubt it can be met with an adequate recipe, nor would a pat answer satisfy. Surely any attempt to make the world a better place should be celebrated, even if we decide that the tikkun olam banner is historically inappropriate or that the idiom has become trite. The 2013 Pew survey reminded us that for Jews in America, a large part of being Jewish is living an ethical life, and working for justice and equality.<sup>117</sup> Or as the rabbi of *Temple Adas Israel* in Sag Harbor, Leon A. Morris, described Jewish culture without Jewish religion in America: “[T]elling funny jokes and some abstract commitment to repair the world.”<sup>118</sup> It is of greater value to discuss what steps are beneficial, rather than focusing on whether a particular endeavor can faithfully be classified as tikkun olam.

Alas, we would be remiss to ignore the cost of dissolving tikkun olam into the melting pot of liberal democratic values. In order to guarantee the diverse tapestry of a multicultural society, minority cultures must avoid erosion. To be sure, multiculturalism is not an absolute value; any discussion of a multicultural mosaic needs to balance other values, such as national unity and universal liberal values. Americanizing tikkun olam might seem harmless or even desirable – tikkun olam seems to promote national unity

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<sup>116</sup> Jacobs, “A History of ‘Tikkun Olam.’” Jacobs serves as executive director of *Rabbis for Human Rights – North America*, is the author of *There Shall be No Needy: Pursuing Social Justice through Jewish Law and Tradition* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Pub., 2009), and wrote a responsum dealing with minimum wages, dignified workplaces, and related issues; the [responsum](#) was approved by the Rabbinical Assembly’s Committee on Jewish Law and Standards in 2008 and is available at [www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/20052010/jacobs-living-wage.pdf?phpMyAdmin=G0Is7ZE%252CH7O%252Ct%252CZ1sDHpI8UAVD6](http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/20052010/jacobs-living-wage.pdf?phpMyAdmin=G0Is7ZE%252CH7O%252Ct%252CZ1sDHpI8UAVD6). For Jacobs’ suggestions for effective programming, see Jill Jacobs, “Next Time, Let’s Teach Social Justice in an Effective Way,” *Forward*, January 29, 2010, <http://forward.com/articles/123856/next-time-let-s-teach-social-justice-in-an-effec/#ixzz2gf9s6XLp>.

<sup>117</sup> “A Portrait of Jewish Americans: Findings from a Pew Research Center Survey of U.S. Jews,” October 1, 2013, [www.pewforum.org/files/2013/10/jewish-american-survey-full-report.pdf](http://www.pewforum.org/files/2013/10/jewish-american-survey-full-report.pdf). Responding to the question “What does being Jewish mean in America today,” 73% said remembering the Holocaust, 69% leading an ethical life, 56% working for justice and equality, 49% being intellectually curious, 43% caring about Israel, 42% having a good sense of humor, 28% being part of a Jewish community, 19% observing Jewish law, 14% eating traditional Jewish foods (see pp. 14, 54-57).

<sup>118</sup> Leon A. Morris, “Religion matters: Beware the American ‘cultural Jew,’” *Haaretz*, October 9, 2013, [www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-1.551291](http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-1.551291).

and universal liberal values. Yet the assimilation of tikkun olam is indicative of a turn towards monoculturalism. If we can no longer distinguish tikkun olam from the gamut of American or liberal democratic values, then we may have lost tikkun olam as a feature of Jewish culture. This would be a blow to Jewish tradition, but perhaps even a greater loss for any multiculturalist dream.

Besides the dubious authenticity and the risk of monoculturalism, blurring the definition of tikkun olam may entail a further cost. Using tikkun olam as a watchword for any action that purports to improve society may lend a fictitious stamp of Jewish approval to policies and projects that run counter to values that are deeply rooted in Jewish sources. Just because an objective jibes with a liberal democratic worldview does not mean that it is necessarily a *Jewish* value. Instead of labeling a particular undertaking as tikkun olam, a sincere effort should be made to clarify how that enterprise is perceived in Jewish law and tradition, and what is its relative weight.

Political involvement, grassroots activism, social justice, energy conservation, healthy eating – they are all laudable values that we do well to earnestly promote and actively engage. They just need not be subsumed under an encyclopedic rubric of tikkun olam. As we have seen, historically tikkun olam has always been a grand ideal, yet it is to be achieved through modest, often very specific and narrow means. Returning to the words of the former British chief rabbi: “Jewish history is a journey through three destinations: the destination of Jewish land, the destination of Jewish children, and the destination of changing the world. The question is how do we do it?” Sacks’ answer is simple yet profound, such that “anyone who has tried to teach will know the answer,” that is “to be a particular, specific living example of how to live.”<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Sacks, “Tikkun Olam.” In starker words, Halkin wrote: “Classical rabbinic thought represents a turning-away not only from utopian thinking about humanity but from the notion that it is the Jews’ task to help save humanity – except, that is, insofar as it is their task to build a society that the rest of humanity might some day wish to emulate” (“How Not to Repair the World,” 25-26).