

Tikkun Olam: Defining the Jewish Obligation

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The issue is clear and straightforward: What is *tikkun olam* and are Jews obligated to engage in it?

This phrase is variously translated as repairing, fixing, mending, or improving the world. Insofar as it relates to the theme of this article, it connotes four basic assertions:

- The world as it is known to be is not what the world is ultimately meant to be; there is a fundamental disconnect between the real and the ideal.
- Human beings are empowered with the capacity to transform the real into the ideal. Not only is this within the purview of God, but human beings are granted by God the capacity to do something about it. Human beings can make a difference.
- Not only do human beings have the capacity to make a difference, but it is part of the religious obligation of Jews to make a difference. Jewish religious tradition expects and requires Jews to be engaged in the effort to bring about this transformation.
- This obligation includes bettering the welfare of all peoples who populate the earth, not only Jews. Of course, the primary responsibility of all Jews is for one another (*hayekha*

kodmim; see *Bava Mezi'a* 62a and Rama, *Yoreh De'ah* 251:3), for family members and then for other Jews, both in terms of the time as well as the money spent. But these universalistic obligations make demands upon Jews as well. Jews also bear a fundamental religious responsibility not only to ensure Jewish moral, spiritual, and material welfare but, albeit secondarily, also to ensure the moral, spiritual, and material welfare of the world as a whole. And this comes with the awareness that every minute or every dollar spent on those activities is a minute or dollar taken away from Jewish causes and Jewish needs.¹

The fact is that such an obligation is absent from the vast majority of Jewish primary sources from the post-biblical to the pre-modern period. The authoritative texts of the Jewish tradition – the Talmud and its commentators, responsa literature and codes – are almost silent on the obligation, and even the desirability of Jewish involvement in what is known as social justice, activity aimed at universal social or communal betterment.

Furthermore, even when such statements do appear, one gets the impression that the sentiment they reflect is very far from the notion of *tikkun olam* just described. Very often the justification is primarily, if not exclusively, a pragmatic or self-serving one, for the sake of advancing parochial Jewish interests. For example, note the injunction of Jeremiah (29:7), “Seek (*ve-dirshu*) the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray (*ve-hitpalelu*) to the Lord on its behalf, for in its peacefulness you will enjoy peace.” Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch notes the significance of both verbs in this verse, suggesting that while *hitpalelu* clearly refers to prayer, *dirshu* obligates the Jew “to do everything to promote the welfare of the countries in which we live.”² But the end of the verse is most significant. The rationale offered is not that such behavior is intrinsically worthwhile but that it will bring benefit to the Jew, “for in its peacefulness you will enjoy peace.”

The text of the Mishna in *Avot* (3:2), which serves as the locus for this comment of Rabbi Hirsch, is another case in point.

Rabbi Hanina is quoted there as having made a wonderful universalistic statement: “Pray for the welfare of the government.” But the reason that immediately follows negates its relevance for us. “Because if people did not fear it, a person would swallow his fellow alive” is about as self-serving an explanation as one can find. One gets the impression that the Mishna is really stating, “Pray for the welfare of the government, because if people did not fear it, Gentiles would swallow Jews alive.” Jewish self-interest, then, is what animates the desire expressed here for Jewish engagement in ensuring a just and moral society.

This point becomes even more clear in the parallel text in *Avoda Zara* (4a): “As it is with the fish of the sea, the one that is bigger swallows the other up, so it is with man. Were it not for fear of the government, everyone who is greater than his fellow would swallow him up. As it is taught, Rabbi Hanina the Deputy Priest said....” There is no doubt as to who was considered “bigger” or “greater” in this Talmudic perception of the world.³

Another possible example. A well-known passage in the Talmud (*Gittin* 61a) states that a Jew supports the Gentile poor, visits the Gentile sick, and buries the Gentile dead “*mipnei darkei shalom*,” because it will lead to peace and harmony between us and them. Once again, the ruling appears to be self-serving. Support them, visit their sick, and bury their dead, not because such behavior is necessarily intrinsically worthwhile and laudatory but because of the Jew’s desire to foster “ways of peace” [read, perhaps: Jews do not want Gentiles to beat them up].

Furthermore, there are those who suggest that the Jewish people best fulfills whatever responsibility it may have for the welfare of mankind not by busying itself directly in the moral, spiritual, and material welfare of the world but by acting appropriately before God as pious and observant Jews. In other words, to the extent to which the impact of the Jew on the world at large is considered something of value, it is an indirect impact. For example, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch wrote that “Abraham’s descendants should follow with love and justice in the ways of

God and by this silent example become a blessed monument to God and humanity among the peoples of the earth.”⁴ Note also the following quote from Theodor Herzl: “The world will be liberated by our freedom, enriched by our wealth, magnified by our greatness. And whatever we attempt there [in the Jewish state] for our own benefit will redound mightily and beneficially to the good of all mankind.”⁵ Jews are to affect the world by serving as an example; their actions within the confines of their homeland will bring benefit to the world as a whole.

A famous Talmudic passage at the end of *Yoma* (86a) comes to mind in this context:

“You shall love the Lord your God” (Deut. 6:5), [meaning] that the name of Heaven should become beloved through you. One should read [Scripture], learn [Mishna] and serve Torah scholars, and his dealings with people should be conducted in a pleasant manner. What do people (*beriyot*) say about him? “Fortunate is his father who taught him Torah. Fortunate is his teacher who taught him Torah. Woe unto people who do not learn Torah. This person who studied Torah, see how pleasant are his ways, how refined are his deeds.” Regarding him Scripture states, “He [God] said to me, ‘You are my servant Israel through whom I am glorified’” (Isa. 49:3).⁶

The Jew should behave as a Jew should, and the rest of the world (*beriyot*) will become inspired and ennobled; the world will become more just and more peaceful when the non-Jew will watch and emulate the moral, ethical, and spiritual behavior of the Jew. This is also how some explain the biblical verses, “And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you (*ve-nivrikhu vekha kol mishpilot ha-adamah*)” (Gen. 12:3) or “And all the nations of the earth will be blessed through him (*ve-nivrikhu vo kol goyei ha-arez*)” (Gen. 18:18). “All the families of the earth” and “all the nations of the earth” will be blessed by observing the behavior of

the Jew and by being inspired to emulate it.⁷ In fact, it is in this sense, perhaps, that the well-known biblical mandate for Jews to be *le-or goyim* (Isa. 42:6) is to be understood.⁸

Indeed, to put it mildly, the classical authoritative texts of our tradition do not abound with statements requiring Jewish involvement in activity designed solely for the purpose of advancing the general good.⁹ What does one make of this apparently striking lacuna? Does it reflect a reasoned ideological position that, in fact, such activity was deemed unimportant in principle, or is it a reflection perhaps of something else? In other words, is this position prescriptive, the way it should be, *lekhathila*, or is it descriptive, reflecting a specific set of historical realities, *bi-dieved*?

It seems clear that this silence in the Talmud and subsequent rabbinic literature does not reflect any principled objection to the values here being discussed but is rather the product of historically grounded mitigating circumstances. To extrapolate a negative Jewish attitude toward this kind of universalism from the absence of a significant universalistic emphasis in post-biblical pre-modern classical Jewish texts is to misunderstand a fundamental value of Judaism.

First of all, one may wonder to what extent the notion of a moral imperative for the universal good which transcends religious boundaries is present at all in any religious tradition prior to the eighteenth century. Perhaps this value is also not articulated outside the Jewish community in pre-modern times, in which case the significance of its absence in Jewish sources is significantly minimized. Nevertheless, there are special considerations that are relevant specifically to Jews. The fact is that the big world out there has not been good to the Jews. Throughout the ages, from ancient through modern times, the Jewish people was repeatedly forced to confront demographic dispersion, political disintegration, economic dislocation, social alienation, psychological oppression, subtle as well as crude discrimination, and, at worst, of course, brute physical annihilation.¹⁰ Can there be any wonder,

then, that a genuine sense of obligation to the welfare of society at large was not high on the list of the national, communal, or personal priorities of previous Jewish generations?

In a collection of poems published just five years after the end of the Holocaust, the Israeli poet Uri Zvi Greenberg voiced the deep disillusionment widely shared by many members of his shattered generation:

בינינו לבין אמות העולם מנחים טבוחי משפחתנו
 “Between us and the nations of the world lie the slaughtered
 of our family...”¹¹

Under such circumstances, can one blame Jews for not feeling a burning responsibility for the welfare of mankind, for not placing this responsibility high on their scheme of obligations? As a vulnerable and beleaguered community shouldering the difficult burden of a long and arduous exile, other internal priorities were much more pressing. Jews needed to expend whatever precious little resources they had on keeping their own house in order, on caring for their own, on simply ensuring their own survival. Simply put, they had enough trouble just taking care of themselves. The struggle for survival in the dispersion of the Diaspora sapped all their strength. Nothing was more important than self-preservation.

True, in the nineteenth century the situation somewhat changed. Emancipation and Enlightenment joined to create a much more favorable external situation for Jews. But even then one does not find forthcoming any real support for the kind of obligation being described here. In analyzing the thinking of some of the major Jewish thinkers of the nineteenth century on this subject – Solomon Maimon, Saul Ascher, Samuel Kirsch, Nachman Krochmal, Samson Raphael Hirsch, Zechariah Frankel, Heinrich Graetz, and Solomon Ludwig Steinheim – Eliezer Schweid came to the striking but not unexpected conclusion that not a single one of these thinkers, writers, or communal leaders promoted political

Jewish engagement with society at large. With all the improvements modernity had brought to the Jews, and there were many, those living even at the end of the nineteenth century could not even imagine being in a position of having significant political influence in the countries in which they lived.¹²

A major shift occurred in America shortly after the turn of the twentieth century. In 1919 Mordecai M. Kaplan was using his pulpit at the Jewish Center on the Upper West Side of Manhattan to “fulminate” in favor of unions, workers’ rights, a five-day work week – positions that evoked significant opposition among his wealthy congregants.¹³ And the value of social justice became very important in the Reform movement. At its annual meeting in 1918 the Committee on Synagogue and Industrial Relations of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) adopted the first social justice resolution of Reform Judaism: “[In] the next few decades...the world will busy itself not only with the establishment of 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.” The CCAR submitted a “declaration of principles” calling for a more equitable distribution of profits, a minimum wage, a compulsory day of rest for workers, a safe and sanitary working environment, the abolition of child labor, universal workmen’s health insurance, and more.¹⁴ Michael Meyer ascribed this emphasis to two influences, both of which came from outside Judaism: the American Progressive movement and the Christian Social Gospel movement. Nevertheless, as Meyer points out, and as was made clear in the platform cited above, the Reform rabbis adopting it did not consider themselves as importing from Christianity but as drawing from the heritage of prophetic Judaism common to both Jewish and Christian religious traditions.¹⁵

However, this emphasis and interest were not widely shared across the American Jewish denominational spectrum. In the larger American Jewish community, social justice was simply not a priority. On one end, Jews were still not interested in becoming

involved in the broader society and, at the other end, no one was interested in asking them to do so.

But in the second half of the century the situation changed, and in both directions. Jews became significantly more involved in *tikkun olam*, and the “world out there” welcomed and became much more supportive of that involvement. In midcentury, Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote: “Religion becomes a mockery if we remain callous to the irony of sending satellites to the sky and failing to find employment for our fellow citizens, of a highly publicized World’s Fair and insufficient funds for the extermination of vermin in the slums. Is religion to be a mockery?”¹⁶ More recently Ruth Wisse wrote about how in the Montreal Jewish school she attended in her youth, “Jewish values were transmitted as a passion for justice.”¹⁷ In the 1960s, Jews played a prominent role in the civil rights movement disproportionate to their numbers.¹⁸ In his 1986 acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize for Peace, Elie Wiesel said:

Of course, since I am a Jew profoundly rooted in my people’s memory and tradition, my first response is to Jewish fears, Jewish needs, Jewish crises. For I belong to a traumatized generation, one that experienced the abandonment and solitude of our people. It would be unnatural for me not to make Jewish priorities my own: Israel, Soviet Jewry, Jews in Arab lands.... But others are important to me. Apartheid is, in my view, as abhorrent as antisemitism. To me, Andrei Sakharov’s isolation is as much a disgrace as Joseph Begun’s imprisonment and Ida Nudel’s exile.¹⁹

A series of national polls of American Jews conducted in the last twenty years shows that “commitment to social equality” tops “religious observance” or “support for Israel” as the most important factor in American Jewish identity by a factor of more than two to one.²⁰ In reflecting upon his campaign for the vice-presidency in 2000, Joseph Lieberman wrote: “Today, Jewish Americans are

broadly represented in all aspects of American civic life.... We all have a stake in the health of this unique, free, pluralistic country. And America needs the commitment to justice, spirituality, and the communitarian ethic of Jewish tradition.”²¹ In December 2007 the Melton Centre for Jewish Education of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem sponsored a conference on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Heschel which focused specifically on linking Jewish religious thought to the value of social justice that was so central to his life. The conference theme was described in the Centre’s newsletter as follows: “Heschel’s uniqueness as an educator was in his understanding that being Jewish was not simply about a set of particularistic practices, but also about giving voice to God’s vision of social justice, often in opposition to the status quo.”²² Also a special supplement to New York’s *Jewish Week* in June 2008 was devoted to highlighting the many efforts being made in this area across the American Jewish communal and religious spectrum.²³

In fact, *tikkun olam* has become a widely bandied about code word within the Jewish community as well as in American culture at large. *The New Republic* reported on a speech former New York governor Mario Cuomo delivered in 2000 to a group of lawyers. In response to a question about what his advice would be to law students, he said: “*Tikkun olam*. That’s Hebrew for ‘repair the world.’ Complete the task of creation.”²⁴ In 2001 *The New Yorker* published a story about African American Studies professor Cornel West which included the following: “He fingered his cufflinks, which were gold and molded in the shape of the Lion of Judah. (*Tikkun olam* all the way,’ he said. ‘Hebrew scripture, uh-huh.’)”²⁵ An April 2008 article in the *New York Times Magazine* about the Kabbalah Center in Los Angeles noted how “Madonna brings the Kabbalah center’s message of egoless dedication to *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) home to her fans both in her music and in personal appearances.”²⁶ In a speech delivered before an audience at the AIPAC National Policy Conference in Washington, D.C. on June 4, 2008, then-Senator Barack Obama said:

As any Israeli will tell you, Israel is not a perfect place but like the United States it sets an example for all when it seeks a more perfect future. These same qualities can be found among American Jews. It is why so many Jewish Americans have stood by Israel while advancing the American story, because there is a commitment embedded in the Jewish faith and tradition to freedom and fairness, to social justice and equal opportunity – *Tikkun Olam* – the obligation to repair this world.²⁷

And, finally, the first major exhibition at San Francisco’s new Contemporary Jewish Museum, entitled “In the Beginning: Artists Respond to Genesis” and on display from June 2008 to January 2009, included an installation by Mierle Laderman Ukeles named, “*Tsimtsum/Shevirat Ha-Kelim: Contraction/The Shattering of the Perfect Vessels: Birthing Tikkun Olam.*”²⁸

What then are sources from Jewish tradition that we can draw upon to serve as the foundation for a commitment to *tikkun olam* or social justice as we now understand it? What follows is surely not an exhaustive presentation but merely some sources that should be considered as particularly relevant.

First, the Bible, of course. The Bible is replete with references to the broader social responsibility of the Jew, both via explicit verses as well as implicit lessons to be drawn from various biblical narratives. Abraham’s interest in caring for his noontime visitors, whom he took to be traveling nomads, as well as his efforts on behalf of the sinners of Sodom are instructive, as are Rivka’s concern for Eliezer and his flock (Gen. 24:46) and Moshe’s assertive defense of seven Midianite daughters (Ex. 2:17). And there are many other examples as well. Various prophecies in Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zekhariah, and other biblical books also underscore this value.

The second source brings us back to the Talmudic passage (*Gittin* 61a) cited earlier regarding the Jewish responsibility to

support Gentile poor, visit their sick, and bury their dead. Some would question its relevance to the topic being considered here, for a number of reasons, even without taking into consideration the possible self-serving nature of its attendant rationale of *mipnei darkei shalom* as suggested above. There are those who point to the fact that in each case the Talmud couples helping Gentiles with simultaneously helping Jews: “One provides support to the Gentile poor *along with the Jewish poor* (*im aniyei Yisrael*). One visits the Gentile sick *along with the Jewish sick* (*im holei Yisrael*). One buries the Gentile dead *along with the Jewish dead* (*im me-tei Yisrael*).” This juxtaposition leads them to limit the obligation to help Gentiles only to circumstances where Jews are also being helped as well,²⁹ a position that would clearly minimize the usefulness of this text as a broad expression of *tikkun olam*. Furthermore, some do not read the phrase “one provides support to the Gentile poor” as constituting an obligation to do so, as in “one is obligated to provide support to the Gentile poor” but rather understand it as optional, as in “it is permitted (*mutar*) to provide support to the Gentile poor.”³⁰ Clearly these scholars assume that some would consider such behavior as actually being prohibited and therefore feel the need for Jewish law to allow it as optional. Once again, the relevance of this text to the more overarching principle of *tikkun olam* is clearly minimized.

However, with regard to the suggestion that Jews must also benefit when Gentiles are being helped, the majority of commentators and decisors disagree with this limiting reading and, on the basis of the formulations in the *Yerushalmi* and *Tosefta*, do understand this Talmudic passage as requiring assistance to Gentiles independent of any concurrent help for Jews.³¹ With regard to the question of whether this passage is to be understood as merely providing permission to assist Gentiles or requiring it as an obligation, most instructive – and most relevant – is a Maimonidean formulation codifying this Talmudic passage. In some places in his *Mishneh Torah* (*Hil. Avoda Zara* 10:5; *Hil. Matnot Aniyim* 7:7; *Hil. Avel* 14:12) Maimonides simply cites the Talmudic ruling that

one supports the Gentile poor “*mipnei darkei shalom*” without any further comment or elaboration. Elsewhere, however, his language is more expansive and significant. In *Hil. Melakhim u-Milhamot* (10:12) he writes:

Even with respect to Gentiles (*ha-Goyim*), *our Sages admonish us (zivu Hakhamim)* to visit their sick, bury their dead along with the dead of Israel, and maintain their poor as well as the Jewish poor in the interests of peace (*mipnei darkei shalom*). Behold it is written, “The Lord is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works” (Ps. 145:9). It is also written, “Its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace (*ve-khol netivoteha shalom*)” (Prov. 3:17).³²

Unlike the other places in his *Mishneh Torah* where Maimonides cites this ruling, here he introduces it with the important phrase *zivu Hakhamim*. For him, supporting Gentile poor is clearly not simply optional; it is required. Second, and even more significant, Maimonides concludes his ruling by adducing two different verses to support it. Two points are relevant here. First, by citing the second verse, “Its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace,” Maimonides is drawing the reader’s attention to a Talmudic passage (*Gittin* 59b) that associates that verse with the totality of Jewish law. “The entire Torah is also for the sake of [fostering] the interests of peace (*mipnei darkei shalom*), as it is written, ‘Its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace (*ve-khol netivoteha shalom*).’” And note Maimonides’ concluding statement of *Sefer Zemanim*, the third of his fourteen books of the *Mishneh Torah*: “Peace is great, for the entire Torah was given to make peace in the world as it is written, ‘Its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace’” (*Hil. Hanuka* 4:14). “In the interests of peace (*mipnei darkei shalom*)” must be seen within the broader overarching context of “and all its paths are peace (*ve-khol netivoteha shalom*).” And this latter phrase is a blanket statement about the ethical sensitivity of Torah in general,

clearly with no reference to anything that might be construed as reflecting any level of personal or communal self-interest. Hence *mipnei darkei shalom* in this Maimonidean passage must be understood as a rationale for supporting Gentiles, which is not to be circumscribed by any ulterior or self-serving motives. One must act this way because it is the right thing to do; such behavior is in keeping with the overall goal or purpose of “the entire Torah.”

In addition, Maimonides went out of his way to cite another verse first, one that is unrelated to the value of peace but that stresses God’s indiscriminate and universal goodness, a trait that is incumbent upon His people to follow. Clearly, for Maimonides there is another factor central to this ruling: the religious obligation to imitate the ethical behavior of God. Indeed this same verse is cited by Maimonides in a similar context elsewhere in his *Mishneh Torah* (*Hil. Avadim* 9:8):

Cruelty and effrontery are not frequent except with heathen who worship idols. The children of our father Abraham, however, i.e., the Israelites, upon whom the Holy One, blessed be He, bestowed the favor of the Law and laid upon them statutes and judgments, are merciful people who have mercy upon all. Thus also it is declared by the attributes of the Holy One, blessed be He, which we are enjoined to imitate: “And His mercies are over all His works.” (Ps. 145:9).

Once again, emulating God’s attributes is in itself an independent religious obligation, absent any considerations of self-interest or ulterior motive.³³

That this is Maimonides’ understanding of the phrase *mipnei darkei shalom* can also be inferred from one of his responsa dealing with the religious status of the Karaites, an issue to which he, as well as many others, devoted significant attention.³⁴ He ruled that as long as the Karaites act respectfully to “us,” they should be treated in a similar fashion. In support of his position, he cited the Talmudic passage in *Gittin* that one is obligated to inquire as

to the welfare of Gentiles *mipnei darkei shalom*. And, he continues, “If this is the case for idol worshippers, then certainly (*kal va-homer*)” it should apply to Karaites.³⁵ If acting favorably to Gentiles *mipnei darkei shalom* was only permitted (*mutar*) and not required, or if it was only self-serving, it would be irrelevant here. Applying this ruling to the Karaites via a *kal va-homer* makes sense only if it is understood as an independent, objectively morally appropriate act.

Later rabbinic authorities also seemed to follow this approach. It would appear that Rabbi Jacob Emden, writing in the eighteenth century, applied the obligation to bury Gentile dead, comfort their mourners, and support their poor *mipnei darkei shalom* even during a time and in a place when and where Jews had authority over them and did not need to fear retaliation from them.³⁶ One century later Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch referred to Maimonides’ *Hil. Melakhim* 10:12, among other sources, while waxing eloquently about how positively Jews must treat a *ger toshav*, a Gentile who accepts the Seven Noahide Laws as a part of divine revelation, thereby considering them to be binding.³⁷ In the twentieth century Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler understood that these obligations of Jews toward Gentiles, predicated upon this rationale of *mipnei darkei shalom*, represented a fundamental general requirement for Jews to treat all human beings with *derekh eretz*, no strings attached. He made the point that Abraham’s greatest test was having to negotiate with the Bnei Het for a burial place for his wife while her dead body still lay before him and while his grief over her passing was still fresh and intense. Yet, despite his deep distress, he made sure to treat them properly and respectfully in keeping with “a fundamental principle with regard to *derekh eretz*. The other need not suffer because I am in pain.” In this context he quoted the rabbinic and Maimonidean ruling that one must seek the welfare of Gentiles *mipnei darkei shalom*. For Rabbi Dessler, a human being is deserving of respectful behavior simply and only by virtue of their being human (*Avot* [3:14]: “Beloved is the human being [read: including

a non-Jew] who was created in the image [of God]”). There are no alternative considerations, no ulterior motives.³⁸ And in 1966, addressing the scandal that erupted regarding the alleged refusal of some to desecrate the Shabbat in order to save the life of a non-Jew, Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Isser Yehudah Unterman, wrote that the concept of *darkei shalom* “does not have the status of a *middat hasidut* and is not a means to defend ourselves, but it emerges out of the core ethical values of the Torah.”³⁹

A third source. In commenting on the last verse in the book of Jonah, R. Menahem Azaryah of Fano (d. 1620) noted that God has greater compassion for a large group of Gentiles in danger than for a smaller one. The verse (Jonah 4:11) highlights that “more than a hundred and twenty thousand people” could have been destroyed because numbers matter. The potential danger to such a large number of Gentiles aroused a special, greater, degree of mercy from the Almighty.⁴⁰

A fourth source remains an important one even though it has often been cited in this context. Toward the end of his well-known essay outlining his position on interfaith dialogue, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik characterized the nature of the obligation of the Jew to the world at large. “We are human beings, committed to the general welfare and progress of mankind...interested in combating disease, in alleviating human suffering, in protecting man’s rights, in helping the needy, *et cetera*.” A few pages later he formulated the Jew’s relationship to the world by reference to the apparently mutually exclusive categories of stranger (*ger*) and sojourner (*toshav*):

Our approach to and relationship with the outside world has always been of an ambivalent character, intrinsically anti-thetic, bordering at times on the paradoxical. We relate ourselves to and at the same time withdraw ourselves from, we come close to and simultaneously retreat from the world of Esau.... Yes, we are determined to participate in every civic, scientific, and political enterprise. We feel obligated to enrich

society with our creative talents and to be constructive and useful citizens.⁴¹

On another occasion Rabbi Soloveitchik addressed the question of why the book of Jonah, surely the biblical book most reflective of Judaism's universalistic concerns, is read on the afternoon of Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year. After all, are there not other biblical passages that one may have considered more appropriate on that most solemn and awe-filled occasion?

Said Rabbi Soloveitchik:

During the Yom Kippur services, our prayerful concerns are almost exclusively with our own people.... We are often accused of being parochially clannish. This may be true, for otherwise we would have succumbed long ago, considering our historical vulnerability. But this self-involvement is not hermetically exclusionary. The universal emphasis is prominent in all our prayers, in Scripture, the Talmud and the Midrash; and when opportunities were benign and conditions propitious, we have contributed far more than our proportionate share to the welfare of humanity....

It is, therefore, characteristic of the universal embrace of our faith that as the shadows of dusk descend on Yom Kippur day, after almost twenty-four hours of prayer for Israel, the Jew is alerted through the book of Jonah, prior to the closing of "the heavenly gates" (*Ne'ilah*) that all humanity is God's children. We need to restate the universal dimension of our faith.⁴²

As the holiest day of the Jewish calendar begins to come to an end, the focus of the Jew turns outward to a sense of responsibility for the larger world in which he or she lives.

The fifth source is a strong letter of endorsement written by Rabbi Aaron Soloveichik in the late 1980s or early 1990s on behalf of the Jewish Fund for Justice, an organization committed to

social and economic justice in America, particularly for non-Jews. The undated letter included the following:

It is obvious that, from the Judaic perspective, righteousness is to be practiced equally towards Jews and non-Jews. Rabeinu Bahya ben Asher in his comment on the verse in Deuteronomy chapter 16 v. 20: “Righteousness righteousness thou shalt pursue” says that the reason as to why the Torah reiterates the term righteousness twice is to impress upon us the notion that righteousness is to be practiced equally to Jews and non-Jews alike. Rabeinu Menachem Hameiri – one of the outstanding Torah giants in the thirteenth century – writes that decent Christians and decent Moslems are to be treated like proselytes of the gate (*ger toshav*). And in respect to a *ger toshav* (a Gentile who observes the fundamental obligations of humanity as represented by the seven Noachide Laws) Maimonides in the *Yad Hachazaka Hilchot Melochim* chapter 10 writes: “It is my view that we are obligated in our relationship with a *ger toshav* to deport ourselves with the same degree of consideration and generosity as we display towards our Jewish brethren. Even in respect to pagans our Sages commanded us to support their poor, to visit their sick, to comfort their mourners in the same way as we do it towards our Jewish brethren. For it is written: ‘G-d is kind to all and His compassion extends to all His creatures.’ And it is written: ‘Its ways are pleasant and all its paths are conducive to peace.’”⁴³

Finally, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein also affirmed the importance of demonstrating concern for and acting to ensure the welfare of non-Jews. He wrote:

There is no gainsaying the fact...that Judaism has espoused a double ethic. The *Halakha* indeed has championed a double standard grounded in recognition of *kedushat* Israel and the

perception...that intensive ethnocentric *hesed* is preferred to bland universalism. Yet the tendency, prevalent in much of the contemporary Torah world in Israel as well as in the Diaspora, of almost total obliviousness to non-Jewish suffering is shamefully deplorable. Surely Avraham Avinu and Moshe Rabbenu felt and acted otherwise, and intervening *mattan* Torah has not changed our obligation in this respect. Priorities certainly need to be maintained, as regards both practical and emotional engagement; but between that and complacent apathy there lies an enormous moral gap... but the notion that only Jewish affliction is worthy of Jewish response needs to be excoriated and eradicated. In this respect, the Hafez Hayyim's remark – that if the Gentiles knew how much we pray for them on Rosh Hashana, they would publish *Mahzorim* – serves as an instructive guide.⁴⁴

It is thus clear that there is a Jewish obligation to engage in *tikkun olam* as it has been defined here. It should also be noted that this entire enterprise of seeking *halakhic* sources for the obligation to engage in *tikkun olam* raises the larger question of whether Jewish tradition recognizes the legitimacy and binding nature of ethical imperatives outside the structure and parameters of *halakha*. If, in fact, it does, would it not be possible to argue that the search for specific source texts supportive of engagement in *tikkun olam* might be unnecessary? But this discussion raises large and complicated questions that are beyond the scope of this paper.

In any case, rabbinic authorities have ruled that supporting Gentile poor is required, and is the case even when doing so will inevitably result in the diminution of money available to support the Jewish indigent.⁴⁵ A place has been set at the table of Jewish obligation for needy non-Jews as well. But, as Rabbi Lichtenstein noted, the matter of priorities is important, and it needs further attention.⁴⁶ What about percentages? *Halakha* has determined that one should donate one tenth (*ma'aser*) of one's income to charity with a maximum of 20 percent.⁴⁷ *Halakha* has also determined

that certain categories of needy individuals have priority in laying claim to one's charity dollar: for example, one's relatives, righteous Jews and Torah scholars, the poor of one's own city and the land of Israel, those in greatest need, and a poor bride.⁴⁸ In addition, certain causes also have priority, such as ransoming captives, facilitating Torah study, and supporting a synagogue.⁴⁹ Clearly not all these causes can be supported in full; giving more to one will inevitably result in less to another. If *tikkun olam* then, as defined in this essay, is a religious obligation and therefore also has a claim to the Jewish charity dollar, how much of a priority should it have? How much of one's *ma'aser* money should go to help victims of the hunger crisis in Darfur (since 2003), the tsunami in the Indian Ocean (2004), Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans (2005), the Sichuan earthquake in China (2008), and Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar (2008)?⁵⁰ While this is an issue that still requires further clarification, the question is an important one and needs to be asked. For, indeed, "all humanity is God's children."

✂ NOTES

In honor of Rabbi Haskel Lookstein, who has spent a lifetime teaching an expanded vision of the parameters of Jewish obligation.

My thanks to Rabbi Dr. Gil Perl and Rabbi Kenneth Hain for their thoughtful suggestions.

1. For some of my thoughts on this subject, I am indebted to David Shatz, Chaim I. Waxman, and Nathan J. Diament, eds., *Tikkun Olam: Social Responsibility in Jewish Law and Thought* (Northvale, N.J. and London, 1997). For a more recent treatment of the full range of meanings of this term, see Gilbert S. Rosenthal, "Tikkun ha-Olam: The Metamorphosis of a Concept," *The Journal of Religion* 85:2 (April 2005):214–240. See also "Israel Among the Nations: A Symposium," *Jewish Action* 50:4 (Fall 1990); Jonathan Sacks, "Tikkun Olam: Orthodoxy's Responsibility to Perfect G-d's World," at www.ou.org/public/Publib/tikkun.htm; Jill Jacobs, "The History of 'Tikkun Olam,'" at www.zeek.net/print/706tohu; idem, "From Pumbedita to Washington: Rabbinic Text, Urban Policy and Social Reality," *Shofar* 26:3 (2008):105–126; Or N. Rose, Jo Ellen Green Kaiser, and Margie Klein, eds., *Righteous Indignation: A Jewish Call for Justice* (Woodstock, N.Y., 2008) and the critical review of this book by Hillel Halkin, "How Not to Repair the World," *Commentary* 126:1 (July–August, 2008): 21–27.

In one of his earliest articles, my late teacher Dr. Isadore Twersky addressed the *halakhic* nature of the responsibility of Jews for others and asked three questions, the third being: "Is charity a particularistic performance of the Jew – like Sabbath observance – or is it a universal expression of the basic dignity of man and the concomitant sense of reciprocal helpfulness? On the practical level, this question revolves around the historic position of Judaism vis-à-vis non-Jewish philanthropic enterprises." It is regretful that, because of "limitations of time and endurance" Dr. Twersky decided to "eliminate the third question for the time being," and I am not aware of his coming back to it again. See Isadore Twersky, "Some Aspects of the Jewish Attitude Toward the Welfare State," *Tradition* 5:2 (Summer 1963):138–139.

2. See *Chapters of the Fathers: Translation and Commentary by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch* (Jerusalem and New York, 1967), p. 40.
3. On the implication of these statements, see Martin Sicker, "A Political Metaphor in Biblical and Rabbinic Literature," *Judaism* 40:2 (Spring 1991):208–214. Parenthetically note also that even the first part of Rabbi Hanina's statement mandates only prayer; the text does not read, "Act for the welfare of the government..."
4. R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Horeb* 2 (London, 1962), p. 465, #613. For this theme in the writings of Rabbi Hirsch and other nineteenth-century figures like his teacher, Rabbi Yaakov Ettlinger, and Rabbi Naphtali Zevi Yehudah Berlin, see J. David Bleich, "Tikkun Olam: Jewish Obligations to Non-Jewish Society," in David Shatz, Chaim I. Waxman, and Nathan J. Diament, eds., *Tikkun Olam: Social Responsibility in Jewish Law and Thought*, pp. 87–96.
5. Theodor Herzl, *The Jewish State: An Attempt at a Modern Solution of the Jewish Question* (London, 1872), p. 79.
6. See too Rambam's formulation of this concept in his *Sefer ha-Mizvot, Mizvat Aseh* #3.
7. For the uniqueness of this interpretation of these verses, see Gerald J. Blidstein, "Tikkun Olam," in David Shatz, Chaim I. Waxman, and Nathan J. Diament, eds., *Tikkun Olam: Social Responsibility in Jewish Law and Thought*, p. 54. This article first appeared in *Tradition* 29:2 (1995): pp. 5–43.
8. For a very different perspective on the meaning of this very important phrase, see Harry M. Orlinsky, "A Light of the Nations: A Problem in Biblical Theology," in Abraham A. Neuman and Solomon Zeitlin, eds., *The Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Volume of the Jewish Quarterly Review* (Philadelphia, 1967), pp. 409–428.
9. This point is sharpened by reading Elliot N. Dorff, *The Way Into Tikkun Olam (Repairing the World)* (Woodstock, N.Y., 2005, 2007). 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 toward non-Jews, which is how the phrase *tikkun olam* is generally understood.
10. This felicitous formulation comes from Isadore Twersky, "Survival, Normalcy, Modernity," in Moshe Davis, ed., *Zionism in Transition* (New York, 1980), p. 349.
11. Uri Zvi Greenberg, *Rehovot ha-Nahar* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, 1950), p. 172, cited in J. David Bleich, "Tikkun Olam: Jewish Obligations to Non-Jewish Society," p. 98.
12. Eliezer Schweid, "The Attitude Toward the State in Modern Jewish Thought Before Zionism," in Daniel J. Elazar, ed., *Kinship and Consent: The Jewish Political Tradition and Its Contemporary Uses* (Ramat Gan and Philadelphia, 1981), pp. 127–147.
13. Jeffrey S. Gurock and Jacob J. Schacter, *A Modern Heretic and a Traditional Community: Mordecai M. Kaplan, Orthodoxy, and American Judaism* (New York, 1997), pp. 102–103.
14. Leonard J. Mervis, "The Social Justice Movement and the American Reform Rabbi," *American Jewish Archives* 7:2 (June 1955):178–179.
15. Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York and Oxford, 1988), pp. 286–289. See too Albert Vorspan and Eugene J. Lipman, *Justice and Judaism: The Work of Social Action* (New York, 1956), highlighting the centrality of social justice in the Reform Jewish community over a half-century ago.
16. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom* (Philadelphia, 1966), p. 111.
17. Ruth R. Wisse, *Jews and Power* (New York, 2007), pp. x–xi.
18. See, for example, Sidney Schwarz, *Judaism and Justice: The Jewish Passion to Repair the World* (Woodstock, N.Y., 2006), pp. 108–112.
19. www.eliewieselfoundation.org/nobelprizespeech.aspx, cited in Sidney Schwarz, *Judaism and Justice*, p. 134.
20. Elliot N. Dorff, *The Way Into Tikkun Olam (Repairing the World)*, p. 1; Sidney Schwarz, *Judaism and Justice*, p. xxi.
21. Joseph I. Lieberman, "Introduction" to L. Sandy Maisel and Ira N. Forman, eds., *Jews in American Politics* (Lanham and Boulder, Col., 2001), p. xxii.

22. Eilon Schwartz, "Social Responsibility and Educational Audacity: Heschel's Challenge to 21st-Century Jewish Education," *Kol Hamercav* 10 (Nisan 5768/April 2008):1.
23. "The New Activism: Repairing the World – With a Vengeance," *The Jewish Week* (June 20, 2008):25–39.
24. See Dahlia Lithwick, "Devil's Advocate," *The New Republic* (July 31, 2000):20.
25. Eric Konigsberg, "Cornel West Busts a Rhyme," *The New Yorker* (August 20 and 27, 2001):56.
26. Daphne Merkin, "In Search of the Skeptical, Hopeful, Mystical Jew That Could Be Me," *The New York Times Magazine* (April 13, 2008):52.
27. www.aipac.org/Publications/SpeechesByPolicymakers/PC_08_Obama.pdf, p. 9.
28. www.thecjm.org.
29. Mordekhai, *Gittin* #464.
30. See, for example, *Sefer ha-Hinukh* #426; *Tur*, *Yoreh De'ah* 151, end; *Shulhan Arukh*, *Yoreh De'ah* 151:12. See *Taz*, *Yoreh De'ah* 151:9, who strongly argues that supporting Jewish poor is a *mizvah* while supporting Gentile poor is not.
31. *Ran*, *Gittin* (*dapei ha-Rif* 28a), s.v. *kovrin*; *Hiddushei ha-Rashba*, s.v. *ha de-tanya* and *Hiddushei ha-Ritva*, s.v. *ve-ha de-amrinan*, *Gittin*, ad. loc. In addition, see, for example, *Bah*, *Tur Yoreh De'ah* 151, s.v. *asur*; *Shakh*, *Yoreh De'ah* 151:19, 251:2, 335:8; *Taz*, *Yoreh De'ah* 151:9; *Perishah*, *Yoreh De'ah* 151:21, 335:16; *Bi'ur ha-Gra*, *Yoreh De'ah* 151:20, 251:2, 335:12; 367:1; *Be'er Hetev*, *Yoreh De'ah* 251:1. See *Enzyklopediah Talmudit* 7 (Jerusalem, 1993), p. 723.
32. I translate from the Shabsai Frankel edition of the *Mishneh Torah* (Jerusalem and Bnei Berak, 1999), vol. 12, p. 288.
33. For this point, see Walter S. Wurzburger, "Darkei Shalom," *Gesher* 6 (1977–1978):84; idem, *Ethics of Responsibility: Pluralistic Approaches to Covenantal Ethics* (Philadelphia, 1994), pp. 50–51.
34. Maimonides' attitude to the Karaites has also been the subject of much scholarly interest. See, for example, Isadore Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides (Mishneh Torah)* (New Haven and London, 1980), pp. 84–86.
35. Joshua Blau, ed., *Teshuvot ha-Rambam* 2 (Jerusalem, 1986), pp. 729–730, #449.
36. R. Jacob Emden, *Sheilat Yaavev* 1 (Lemberg, 1884), #41, s.v. *u-lefima*'sh, p. 36b.
37. R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Horeb* 2 (London, 1962), pp. 379–380, #503.
38. R. Elyahu Eliezer Dessler, *Mikhtav me-Eliyahu* 4 (Jerusalem, 1983), pp. 245–246. See also the editor's note on p. 246.
39. For a discussion of this position as well as a bibliography of sources where this statement by Rabbi Unterman appeared, see Binyamin Lau, "Bivoah shel Emet: Rabbanut ve-Akademiah be-Kitvei ha-Rosh Rosenthal al Hazalat Goy be-Shabbat," *Akdamos* 13 (April 2003):11–12. Some considered this position to be "apologetics." See Yosef Salmon, "Nozrim ve-Nazrut be-Sifrut ha-Pesikah mi-Shilhei ha-Me'ah ha-Shemonah Esreh ve-ad ha-Mahzit ha-Sheniyah shel ha-Me'ah ha-Tesha Esreh," in Uri Erlich, Hayyim Kreisel, and Daniel Y. Lasker, eds., *Al Pi ha-Be'er: Mehkarim be-Hagut Yehudit u-be-Mahshavat ha-Halakhah Mugashim le-Yaakov Blidstein* (Beer Sheva, 2008), p. 645, n. 56.
40. R. Menahem Azaryah of Fano, *Sefer Asarah Ma'amarot* (Jerusalem, 2005), p. 110. My thanks to Rabbi Yehuda Kelemer for this reference. Rabbi Kelemer also informed me that when asked if someone could donate part of his *ma'aser* money to the American Cancer Society, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach responded in the affirmative and explained that his reason was not that Jews would also benefit from a cure for cancer but that there is an obligation to help rid the world at large from this terrible disease.
41. R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Confrontation," *Tradition* 6:2 (1964):20–21, 26–28. See also p. 17.
For a sense of how central this text is for this discussion, note that it is cited and discussed no less than nine times in David Shatz, Chaim I. Waxman, and Nathan J. Diament, eds., *Tikkun Olam: Social Responsibility in Jewish Law and Thought*. See pp. 4, 6, 9 n. 23, 10, 19–20, 145–146, 161–162, 179, and 220.
42. Abraham R. Besdin, *Man of Faith in the Modern World: Reflections of the Rav* 2 (Hoboken, N.J., 1989), pp. 142–143.

43. My thanks to Rabbi Kenneth Brander for bringing this letter to my attention. Dr. David Luchins, who solicited the letter from Rabbi Soloveichik on behalf of the Jewish Fund for Justice, told me that parts of it had already been publicized by that organization and had appeared in print in the Jewish press, and he encouraged me to publish this excerpt here.
See also Rabbi Soloveichik's comments on this subject in his "Civil Rights and the Dignity of Man" and "Jew and Jew, Jew and Non-Jew," *Logic of the Heart, Logic of the Mind* (Jerusalem, 1991), pp. 61–91.
44. Aharon Lichtenstein, "The Duties of the Heart and Response to Suffering," in Shalom Carmy, ed., *Jewish Perspectives on the Experience of Suffering* (Northvale, N.J., 1999), p. 59.
45. See the passages in Maimonides cited earlier; *Perishah* on *Tur*, *Hoshen Mishpat* 249:2, "Even if there are Jewish poor, a person should not say, 'If I support Gentile poor I will have less for the Jewish poor.'" Cf. *Taz*, *Yoreh De'ah* 251:9.
46. Rabbi Lichtenstein revisited this issue in his paper "Jewish Philanthropy – Whither," prepared for the Twentieth Orthodox Forum Conference held in New York City in March 2008. There he also offers further rationales for the obligation of Jews to be engaged in "outward looking" philanthropy, among them an *a fortiori* argument from the *mizvah* of *za'ar ba'alei hayyim* and an explanation of the implication of the requirement for Jews to be engaged in *yishuvo shel olam*.
47. See *Ketubot* 50a; Rambam, *Hil. Matnot Aniyim* 7:5; *Hil. Eirikhen ve-Haramin* 8:13; *Shulhan Arukh*, *Yoreh De'ah* 249:1. See also Cyril Domb, *Ma'aser Kesafim* (New York, 1980).
48. Rambam, *Hil. Matnot Aniyim*, Chapter 8; *Shulhan Arukh*, *Yoreh De'ah* 251.
49. *Shulhan Arukh*, *Yoreh De'ah* 252.
50. See n. 40 above.

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