

“Teach Torah and Fight for Justice” | Shalom Carmy

Authors

In Jewish law, *tikkun olam* means improving the world. It refers to several rabbinic enactments of the first and second centuries of the Common Era intended to improve the functioning of certain social institutions. The ancient *Aleinu* prayer, originating in the Rosh Hashanah liturgy, expresses our hope to witness God’s sovereignty in full, through *tikkun olam* in the kingdom of God “when all flesh shall call upon Your Name.” *Aleinu* subsequently migrated to the daily prayer book. In early modern Jewish mysticism, the idea of *tikkun olam* designated esoteric theurgic practices performed by elite mystics and designed to bring about eschatological consummation.

A Hebrew phrase, especially when borrowed from the mystical realm by people who are not seriously committed to being mystics, has a warm fuzziness that dissociates it from the regimen of full-time orthodox practice and belief. Among contemporary “progressive” Jews, *tikkun olam* is a synonym for adherence to left-wing projects of “social justice.” It is the rallying cry of an ideology that identifies the supposed essence of Judaism with the favored style of social activism. Predictably this outrages traditional Jews and Jews whose politics are not “progressive.” For them, the high-handed annexation of a term with a specific set of theological meanings for self-righteous political agitation is intellectual dishonesty and the hijacking of religious identity.

Most traditional Jews are accustomed to liberal misstatements of Jewish teaching. For example, we are often told authoritatively that “Judaism” endorses no limits on abortion, homosexual marriage, and so forth. This creates a counter-reaction. Because the liberal megaphones dominate public discussion, it is not surprising that some upholders of Jewish tradition, and the conservatives who find themselves in alliance with them, now stridently deny any connection between Judaism and the liberal slogan of *tikkun olam*.

This raises a question in my mind: What does it mean to deny that Judaism teaches *tikkun olam*? Leaving aside its tendency toward karaoke mysticism, the liberal position asserts two things. First, maximizing the satisfaction of human desires in an equitable manner redeems the world in the service of God. Second, the pursuit of this *summum bonum* must be universal rather than particularistic, and so Jews committed to this idea need to rise above a purportedly narrow concern for their own tribe.

There is something both right and wrong about this liberal view. Does Judaism care about mundane human welfare? Yes, much of life revolves around meeting human needs and desires. Should distribution of goods be equitable? Well, fairness is a fundamental ethical principle. Judaism is surely not committed to strict egalitarianism, but a society governed by halakhic principles would be much more egalitarian than our own.

Rabbi Hayyim Soloveichik is an iconic figure of non-mystical, intellectually aristocratic Jewish devoutness, one of the most influential of the last two centuries. He was once asked to define the role of the rabbi. Not to adjudicate difficult halakhic cases, he replied, but to teach Torah and to fight for justice. His grandson, my mentor Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, wrote a manifesto called [Halakhic Man](#), a phenomenology of the study-centered religious existence exemplified, in part, by his family. He devoted an entire chapter to this saying and its ramifications. To be sure, R. Hayyim’s justice was about concrete individuals and communities. It was simple justice. He and his ilk had reason to fear the radical movements that needed to qualify justice with the adjective “social.” They saw the righteous gleam in the eyes of budding commissars. But their dread of what was to come was not due to excessive solicitude for laissez faire capitalism or approval of its ethical values. Our due censure of political messianism does not entail complacent acquiescence to the status quo.

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We recite the *Aleinu* three times each day. It expresses a hope for divine kingship that is addressed to all mankind. This universal hope needs to be properly understood, however. The everyday dreams and responsibilities of everyday practicing Jews are centered on this world permeated with everyday duties and needs, rather than diffused on the large abstraction of humanity-in-general. At the same time, the universal element in biblical religion is indelible. The larger horizon of our responsibility is all the more acute as citizens of democratic countries in which we are called to help shape a common life we share with other communities. The one-sidedness of *tikkun olam* ideology is no excuse to deny outright the social and universal elements to which it calls attention.

Yet that one-sidedness is misleading and sad. It is false for reasons already stated: A world consecrated to the service of God is not the same as a world whose meaning is gained by satisfying the desires of man, no matter how fastidiously egalitarian and even civilized the process of distribution. It is false because God made his covenant with a particular people and that covenant inaugurates a personal relationship with that people, a bond of obedience and destiny that is distorted and diminished when it is reduced to the manufacture of universal values, even if those values are decent and worthwhile on their own.

Because the center of my existence is a personal and particularistic covenant with God, I am inclined to respect the integrity of the particular loyalties that bind others together on different terms. The discrete and circumscribed secular social and political communities that populate the world are natural, and I am suspicious of attempts to deplore those who adhere to them simply because of their particularity. The twentieth century taught us that when any human value is made into an absolute, it becomes the object of idolatry. Confusing the “progressive” *tikkun olam* agenda with the worship of God runs that risk. It assigns to a particular set of political judgments a spiritual weight it cannot bear. When people strive to derive ultimate meaning from worldly goals, however well-intentioned, the inevitable result is overreaching, bad faith, disappointment, and worse.

It can be hard to believe that the many attempts to reduce Judaism to *tikkun olam* are sincere. To the critical eye, their signature interpretations of Jewish tradition are partial, even arbitrary. Yet often the proponents of *tikkun olam* are convinced that by extracting their predetermined social-political lessons from the sources, they have tapped into the ultimate meaning of religious existence. From their perspective, the story of Exodus can omit the movement from enslavement to Pharaoh to subjection under God. In their telling, it becomes the emancipatory message of liberation from social marginalization or unfair work practices. The Sabbath, likewise, can be interpreted as the celebration of social progress to a shorter, more humane work week rather than as the day consecrated to the worship of the Creator. Torah study loses its character as the passionate rendezvous with the word of God and is instead deployed as a source for social-political rhetoric. Even human intimacy becomes less important than public attitudes. What fails to suit the social justice agenda is pretty much left out.

What makes these one-sided efforts sincere is not their naiveté or colossal ignorance. Their propagators can sometimes be persuaded that the service of God is indeed more multifarious than their narrow social-political agenda. But such recognition is fleeting, and soon the monochromatic message of social justice in its politically correct form takes over and fills the horizon. What’s lacking is not intellectual awareness. Instead, there’s an impoverished religious imagination that cannot envision a three-dimensional God-centered life. This is what saddens me about the *tikkun olam* movement. Yes, it involves a misrepresentation of the Jewish tradition, but much worse is its spiritual poverty, which is masked by the use of a religious gesture. And I am sad because I, and others in my position, have failed to overcome that narrowness.

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