

Tikun Olam

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The sociologist [Percy Cohen](#), in his book, [Jewish Radicals and Radical Jews](#), argues that as Jews abandon Jewish religious life there is a tendency to shift towards radical social attitudes to compensate.

One sees this throughout the Jewish world. But there is a new variant. [Tikun Olam](#), to change the world (for better), has become the new cliché for large numbers of Jews, in particular for those seeking a Judaism confined to idealism and largely bereft of traditional practice. All of Judaism is fundamentally concerned with improving human life and the general state of the universe we have been made custodians of. The question is really one of emphasis and priority.

The expression “Mipnei Tikun HaOlam”, to set the world straight, occurs some twelve times in the Mishna. There it means that one needs sometimes to act so that the world, that is human society, can function fairly. Hillel found a way round the law forbidding loans to extend over the seventh year release, by creating an innovative transaction called Prosbul, to ensure that commerce and lending for charitable purposes ran smoothly. Finding ways of ensuring a couple can get married where status is a problem, safeguards to encourage people to return lost property, not redeeming captives for extortionate prices so that society can run fairly without fear of a plague of abductions and ransoms—these are all examples given of “Tikun Olam”.

Nowhere in traditional sources will you find the sort of usage now common, that refers to a specific obligation to “correct the world” and put it right. Only in the Aleynu Prayer, where the full verse goes “leTaken Olam BeMalchut Shaddai” (“To rectify the world through the authority of God”), do we ask God to bring about a time when He will put the world right by getting everyone to accept Him.

Kabbalah uses the word “Tikun” a lot. But it usually refers to special ways of trying to connect with God or, alternatively, raising one’s own spiritual level. In this way, one may then rebuild a perfect world; but to try to rebuild the world before we have rebuilt ourselves does not make sense.

There is indeed the universal obligation of justice and charity which goes beyond one’s home, town, country, and people—the overriding principle of Tzedek, an amalgam of “just law” and “kindness”. That is the fundamental principle of Judaism, caring for others and trying to improve life and the world on every level, social, political, and ecological. Gemilut Chesed, kindness to others, together with charity, involves working or giving to improve human conditions, including such more modern ideas as micro loans, combating hunger, providing drinkable water, curing diseases, and changing corrupt regimes.

There have always been attempts to redefine Judaism, to adopt the

theoretical, some call it the prophetic, agenda of social justice, without the pesky and inconvenient obligations of Torah. To be able to claim involvement in Jewish affairs and Jewish peoplehood without actually having to live a Jewish life.

Recent manifestations have been the idea that Zionism could replace religion. Support for Israel, if only through the checkbook, was good enough to preserve one's Jewish identity. Then came the preoccupation with the Holocaust to the point of obsession, and the myth that memorials to it would help defend against anti-Semitism or indeed genocide. The fashion for secular Yiddish and klezmer. All ways of proudly asserting one's Jewish identity, association, and commitment, without actually having to live it. This way many thought they could have the best of both worlds. In practice, it led to the loss of at least one—usually the Jewish one—because the next generation either did not share these passions or saw its parents' involvement as merely social, so they decided to join a bigger and better social club.

Sadly, we suffer from such overwhelming insecurity, with some justification after all, that we have made our survival the be-all and end-all of Judaism. This cannot be right if it excludes wider issues. If what survives is a travesty of traditional Jewish values, then it is a mutation. Torah stands for making life easier, more livable, more workable for others, Jews and non-Jews.

The work that Rabbi Lerner does through his [Tikkun](#) magazine, and more significantly through his Network of Spiritual Progressives, is important precisely because he emphasizes the whole range of Jewish values and responsibilities within the context of mitzvot and living a Jewish life, not as a substitute. In this he does Judaism a great service, offering a home and inspiration to those otherwise turned off by Jewish insularity (regardless of how controversial his ideas might seem to some).

Of course we must try to make the world a better place. "Tikun Olam" is just a new slogan for a hallowed ancient obligation. The priority is to start living Torah at home as a basis for going off preaching to others. Changing the big world starts when you change the little you.