

Tikkun Olam: Repairing the Text and the Self.....Jan 2009

Few noticed that key portion of President's second inaugural address (2005) borrowed from Jewish liturgy, philosophy:

President George W. Bush's second Inaugural Address was certainly ecumenical. As he honored Christianity, Judaism and Islam, he recalled the "truths of Sinai, the Sermon on the Mount, the words of the Koran, and the varied faiths of our people." But the 43rd President went far beyond that.

The speech used the language of the traditional Jewish liturgy to outline a breathtaking vision for the future of the world. The President and his speech writer, Michael Gerson, appear to have infused the text and tone of the speech with language from the High Holiday liturgy, and the message of the *Aleinu* — the concluding daily prayer of traditional Jewish worship that is also given a central role during the High Holiday service. How do I know that? Because, as a product of a Jewish Day School, the Yeshivah of Flatbush, who is still observant, I have been saying almost-identical words all my life.

□ In his speech, Bush contended that the "great objective of ending tyranny is the concentrated work of generations." In the High Holiday prayers, the congregation explicitly and literally prays for the vanquishing of evil and the "passing of the rule of tyranny", which is then immediately followed by praying for the exclusive rule of G-d over all of His creation from Mount Zion.

□ And so when Bush declared that America's policies were aimed at the "ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world", I kept thinking about how that would sound in Hebrew — I could hear my ears ring with the text of the High Holiday liturgy — "*ta'avir memsheles zadon min ha'aretz*". This same religious ideal also finds voice in the second stanza of the *Aleinu* prayer, which begins "*Al ken nekaveh*" (literally, "therefore we put our hope in You"). At the core of the *Al ken nekaveh* is *tikkun olam*, the "perfection of the world through the Almighty's sovereignty." In other words, *tikkun olam* is not about "Kumbayah," holding hands, taking a village, or even leaving no child behind.

□ Rather, liturgically and traditionally *tikkun olam* is about all of humanity calling G-d's name, and literally and metaphorically eradicating idolatry and G-d's willing "every knee to bend" before Him and "every tongue swearing" allegiance to Him.

□ Thus, without ever using the actual words "*tikkun olam*", George W. Bush, the Methodist scion of Greenwich and Midland, demonstrated a better grasp of the original intent and meaning of *tikkun olam* than either Michael Lerner or Bill Clinton. And that is what made the Bush Second Inaugural memorable, and worthy of both attention and pause. Namely, *tikkun olam* is about making G-d's dominion felt in both its majesty and force in the here and now on Earth.

What Bush understands □ about '*tikkun olam*'

Lloyd M. Green [Jewish World Review](#) Jan. 31, 2005

The work of healthcare givers in repairing and healing the world is reminiscent of the function of man in the world...TIKKUN OLAM. This term has been appropriated from these kabbalistic sources by various modern religious groups from orthodox to reform and the Jewish renewal movement, even intimated by a president! Literally it means repairing the world, fixing or restoring what had been broken.

For Arnold Wolf (who sadly died recently) the usage of this term was changed by the holy Ari, Rabbi Izaak Luria.

"One hardly knows what to say about the ineffable hutzpah of the circle around the Ari, Isaac Luria, who presumed to plumb the very essence of the divine. They accepted a mythology of the creation of the world by God's tsimtsum, self-contraction, followed by the breaking of vessels and the repair of the world by human theurgic practice. How all of this rank superstition could be accepted with profound loyalty is a mystery to us of the mitnagid persuasion; we agree with Emmanuel Levinas, the great twentieth century Jewish philosopher who considered it also dangerous nonsense. But even more incredible is the manipulation of the esoteric doctrine to support political views of the soft left in our own time."

(Judaism Fall 2001)

Wolf agrees with the change in the use of the term from rabbinic usage as "not much more than fine tuning their construction of the mitzva system so that it might be made feasible for obedience." To the radical notion of a

"Lurianic doctrine of the restoration of the flawed universe to its original design, or specific act which helps to effect this process. Renewed divine

emanations and human religious and contemplative efforts are to eventually end the cosmic exile of the Shekhinah and the historic exile of the Jewish people.”¹

Wolf is more concerned about the abuse of the term as used by such spokesmen as Dennis Prager and the liberal left for their political aims believing there has been a distortion of the term's use. However he has conflated the historical use of this term as “talmudic-zoharic” notion of tikkun olam.

I would prefer to review the complexity of this term, refusing to conflate its usage into a theological uniform category, rather review the history of this intellectual idea that becomes transformed over time within the matrix of Jewish spiritual history. The change from the talmudic notion to that used in mystical literature culminating in that of the writings of the Ari, reflects a dramatic and theological transformation beyond the literal myths Wolf describes. Let us unpack this.

David Weiss Halivni suggests that the talmudic usage of tikkun olam is a technical term with specific references in context. (See his recent work “Breaking the Tablets: Jewish Theology After the Shoah” Rowman and Littlefield, 2007)

For instance he makes a claim that the word *Letaken* means to make straight as in Ecclesiastes 7:13 “to make straight that which he has made crooked”. The Hebrew root in the Bible *TKN* means to enhance, to prepare or to repair something broken. In the midrash Sifra to Shemini 4:5 the meaning of the expression remains ambiguous. “They said to Rabbi Akiva “one does not tell a person to pervert his ways in order that he may correct them (*yitaken*) them”. This quote from Tosefta Hallah 1:9 implies the word means “correcting that which was broken”. Weiss Halivni goes on to make use of the term *tikkun* in its Kabbalistic sense as conveyed in the Lurianic notion of *olam hatikkun* meaning “mending the world”. According to the Ari the world has been broken through a process of “breaking of the vessels” and it now needs to be mended. Weiss Halivni makes use of this meaning to apply to the fixing of the text itself or *tikkun hamikra*. Quoting the Raavad he supports the notion of the reader enhancing the text. His theory is based upon the notion that there appears to be a defective text which requires correction. He admittedly uses the term in a non-traditional way combining the words tikkun and mikra without regard to the way that they have previously been used historically.

More importantly for me the use of the term in the Mishna especially in Gittin 4:3 (“Hillel instituted the *prosbul* because of tikkun ha-olam”) betrays just how far the term has been moved from its original *sitz im leben*. A similar expression tikkun hamizbeach the preservation of the sanctity and proper ordering of the altar is used as follows: “so that the altar will not be desolate and the priest melancholic which would prevent them from doing the sacrificial service” (Gittin 55A). This use of this term implies an adjusting of certain legal situations that could intentionally or unintentionally be injurious to society.

¹ A. A. Cohen and P. Mendes-Flohr, eds., Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought: Original Essays on Critical Concepts, Movements, and Beliefs (New York: Scribner, 1987), p. 1095

Tikkun ha-olam in its classical sense means **doing what is necessary for the proper running of society as a whole**. It is a far cry from mending a broken world suggesting that there is a flaw in creation. Weiss Halivni's use of the expression *tikkun hamikra* then borrows from the Lurianic rather than classical notion of repairing what was broken in the beginning. In his reading scripture needs restoration because its texts have suffered "maculation" since its inception. And from there he moves onto his ingenious theory of repairing forced interpretations.

What inspired me to think further on tikkun ha-olam is precisely what Weiss Halivni tried to conflate whereas (as is customary for my reading of texts of a different era) I wish to maintain the tension thereof; that is, acknowledge the radical new usage of the term tikkun ha-olam in the course of historical development.

This notion of tikkun did not begin with the Ari in the 16th century but is already hinted at in the Zohar. Isaiah Tishby in his anthology on the Zohar² notes (volume 3 page 956)

"the first tikkun is the restoration of oneself i.e. self perfection, the second tikkun is the restoration of this world and the third tikkun is the restoration of the world above throughout the hosts of heaven, the fourth tikkun is the restoration of the holy name through the mystery of the holy chariots and the mystery of all the worlds above and below with the proper kind of restoration".

This quote from the Zohar (volume II: 215B and 201) implies that the worshiper, the physical world, the world of angles and the sefirotic system represented by the name of God can all be restored by human prayer. The tikkun of the worshiper is accomplished by purifying himself of earthly desires, by fulfilling the religious precepts and through the sanctification of prayer and intentionality. It is accomplished by the recital of Psalms and other rituals. The restoration or tikkun of the lower and upper world is realized when the prayer that is directed towards them reaches its goal. All these assents and tikkunim are no more than preparations for the most sublime tikkun of all; the tikkun of the godhead in the mystery of unification. It was this that was picked up by the Ari in his notion that tikkun ha-olam must be the adept's restoration of the world of shattered vessels and its restoration through his self sacrifice in his ritual behavior.

The term has therefore traversed a whole world of meaning from the original expression in the Mishna of Hillel's use as the adjustment of legal arrangements so that the proper functioning of society may by continue, to this cosmological-cosmogonic meaning of the word tikkun in which the divine is actually affected by the affairs down below.

Elliot Dorff suggests another usage of the term by the Maharal³ meaning the removal of evil in this world through the Torah and Mitzvot. In Beer Hagolah (II 30-32) he adds

² Tishby I. The Wisdom of the Zohar : An Anthology of texts: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization and Oxford Univ. Press 1991.

³ Dorff, Elliot N., The Way into Tikkun Olam: Repairing the World (Paperback) Jewish Lights, 2005

another dimension, where there is a conflict between social mores and manners and Torah values the latter takes precedent because it is always moral and value laden.

I would like to maintain the tension between its various meanings by suggesting that the paradox inherent in its development between the rigid legal technical terms of the Mishna in upholding the values of the society and even the Maharal's interpretation of upholding the individual's moral value system and those meanings discovered by the mystics are real and are to be internalized. By that I mean I need to internalize both meanings despite their inherent contradiction.

May I be permitted to add another meaning of the term Tikkun Olam beyond the modern notions, since I consider myself "post-modern and post-Hassidic"?

I would like to suggest the term mean recovery. The world is in need of recovery. We human beings are in need of recovery. Having inherited the greed of the twentieth century and its horrors we enter now the first decade of what seems to be more of the same. Nothing has changed. Human beings kill one another and violence in the name of the law and religion as before. Man's inhumanity to man continues as ferociously as ever. We need recovery the way an addict needs recovery to help him overcome his addiction to drugs alcohol sex work and gambling. We as a society and as individuals need recovery from the greed of our economic system our consumerism, our infatuation with media and alternative realities of the movies, our habits of the heart and our callousness to the environment and world. All this needs recovery. Not fixing. We are beyond fixing. An alcoholic remains one forever: it is enzymatic therefore genetic. All he can hope is for recovery. We too need recovery from our insistence on the power of the mind and its ability to overcome all problems even within. After all the analysis and talking we still behave the same way. The human heart needs more than talk. The demonic within laughs at all the learned sermons. For this we need tikkun=recovery.

I am arguing for tikkun within me as BOTH the need to maintain order within, the hierarchical structure of my soul that needs the law to sometimes bend so that order can continue to be maintained. Rigidity according to Hillel might have broken the system itself so he invents the legal loophole called prosbul. At the same time I need the tikkun of the mystics, that need to become consumed by my archetype, by participating in the divine around and within me, by restoration rituals that make me part of the whole universe of the divine. And lastly I need recovery. From the habits that allowed me to survive the traumas of childhood and abuse, the loneliness of surviving a competitive world where success was measured by all the wrong things etc. My internal soul architecture need tikkun to be able to correct and recover from the trauma of the past and the need to stay away from behaviors that might harm. This too is tikkun.

I have no need to choose or force a developmental historical approach to the term. It remains valid at all its levels of meaning despite their conflicting meanings. In post holocaust world meaning must be grabbed wherever it makes sense and historical differences are insufficient to prevent me holding paradox and disparity if it can be used in the service of my own spiritual survival.