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Tikkun Olam: Repairing the World

היום הרת עולם

Ha-yom harat 'olam – this is the birthday of the world. On this day, according to the ancient rabbis, the world was created. God spoke, and the world became. The Holy One of Blessing became the Creator of all. But what kind of world did God create? In the beginning, as we read in Torah, the things that God creates are a series of balances. The heavens are balanced by the earth. Light is balanced by darkness. The waters in the seas below are balanced by the waters in the clouds above. Even the three elements of water, air, and earth are balanced by each being filled with creatures made to survive on or in them – fish in the sea, birds in the air, and animals on the earth. All is in balance, all is clear, all is right. And then, God says, "Let us make humanity."[1] In the Midrash, one of the ancient rabbinic stories about this moment, the angels immediately start to push back.[2] "Humans?!" they ask, incredulously. "But everything was going so well! Take it from us, God: those humans are going to be nothing but trouble. They'll knock everything out of balance. It'll be a mess! Why not leave the world as it is? It's perfect, just like this." Unfortunately for the angels, but fortunately for us, it turns out that God is not asking for their permission, or even for their advice. God is simply telling them the plan. So God creates humanity. And the angels cover their eyes with their wings so that they don't have to see what happens next.

And we know what happens next: the entire balance of the world goes out the window. God gives the first two humans one rule, just one: don't eat the fruit of that tree.[3] And what do they do? Of course, they do exactly what God tells them <u>not</u> to do.[4] Then they have children, the first siblings, brothers, and what do <u>they</u> do? One kills the other.[5] Then, after ten generations of humans come and go without anything getting a lot better, God decides to destroy the world and start over with Noah, the one half-way

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[1] Genesis 1:26.
[2] Midrash Rabbah Bereshit 8:5, as creatively retold by me. In the Midrash, some of the angels do, in fact, argue <u>for</u> the creation of humanity. But what do they know? By the way, the ancient rabbinic schools of Hillel and Shammai also have an argument about whether humanity should have been created (since they also didn't get to have a say at the beginning). In the end, surprisingly, Shammai wins (and Shammai almost never wins) – they agree that humanity should <u>not</u> have been created. But since we already have been created, we should each examine our deeds. That's in the Babylonian Talmud Eruvin 13b.
[3] Genesis 2:15-17.
[4] Genesis 3:6-7
[5] Genesis 4:1-8.

decent person on earth.[6] So after the flood, Noah and his family come out of the ark onto the fresh, clean earth and what do they do? Noah gets drunk and one of his sons makes fun of him.[7] You can just hear God sighing. "Oy!" God even makes a note to self: "Remember not to doom the earth because of humanity, since the devisings of the human mind are evil from its youth."[8] And this is how it goes for the rest of the book of Genesis, for the rest of the Torah, for the rest of the Bible. We could call the whole thing, "Humans Behaving Badly."

So let's think about this for a minute. God creates the earth, everything in its place, everything perfectly in balance. Then God creates humanity, which throws everything into chaos. And then, after many generations of this mess, God begins to give the people rules to follow that will keep the chaos a little bit in check. God speaks to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah and Rachel, and eventually Moses and Miriam and Aaron. More laws, more rules, more guidelines, more instructions. The people, mostly, break the laws, violate the rules, ignore the guidelines, and question the instructions. Occasionally, they follow them. And the world lurches around on its axis for a good long while.

For those of you interested in theology, I can hear you saying, "Rabbi, we have a problem. A major problem. Isn't God supposed to be all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good? Isn't God supposed to be perfect? So how could a perfect God create such a mess of a world? Why would God do such a thing?! Why???" And of course, people have been asking these questions for a long, long time. Since our world is manifestly imperfect – even our origin stories are full of huge flaws and misdeeds – how could it be the creation of a perfect, loving God? Wouldn't such a God create a better product? Doesn't God have quality-control angels up there? What is going on?! Now, I don't think that God created an imperfect world by accident. After all, according to the ancient rabbis, God had a detailed plan for the world all worked out.[9] Instead, I'm here to tell you that God intentionally created an imperfect world, a world in need of repair. A perfect God created an imperfect world. Why would God do such a thing?

The world before humanity is a balanced world, but it is a static world. Everything acts according to its nature, and there are no surprises. There is no striving and no development. Even in the Garden of Eden before they eat from the tree, Adam and Eve are barely recognizable as human. Before flaws and imperfections enter the world, God's acts of creation have had very little impact on the cosmos. Things are very similar to the way the rabbis imagined they were before the moment of creation, when

[6] Genesis 6:5-8.
[7] Genesis 9:20-23.
[8] Genesis 8:21.
[9] "God looked in the Torah and created the world." Midrash Rabbah Bereshit 1:1.

God and the angels were just basking in supernal splendor. There was no time because nothing differentiated one moment from the last or the next. There was no history because no change was taking place. When God began creating, God created time and change by creating an imperfect world filled with imperfect humans who would need to work to advance, to learn, to perfect themselves, and to perfect the world. Creation is not the replication of perfection. Instead, it is the introduction of imperfection so that humanity can strive to repair the world. Without the world's imperfections, there is no life, no humanity, no meaning, and no purpose to our existence. The recognition of the world's flaws, the impulse to strive to repair them, the desire to reach toward what we don't yet have, the realization that the world we have is not the world we need – all of these are key parts of the story of creation that shape our understanding of what it means to be human. They are the mission of human life.

The ancient rabbis embrace this human mission of repairing the world, and they coin a term for it – *tikkun ha-'olam.* They even create a prayer, the Aleinu, that states the mission of humanity in no uncertain terms: *l'takein 'olam b'malchut Shadai* – "to repair the world under the sovereignty of God."[10] But the context in which the rabbis first use the term *tikkun ha-'olam* couldn't be more different than the context of the Biblical stories, which are all about trying to overcome the flaws built into humanity by the Creator. Instead, the rabbis use the term *tikkun ha-'olam* to point to the need to try to counter the confusion that human beings themselves are constantly bringing into the world. In fact, you might say that this is a large part of the rabbinic project: trying to resolve the many confusions that human life creates so as to repair the rips that humans make in the social fabric of the world. Perhaps, then, it's not so surprising that the term first appears in a legal context, in Mishnah Gittin, the rabbinic collection of procedures for divorce. In the Torah, divorce seems simple: the husband writes a document, the *get*, stating that he hereby divorces his wife and hands it to her; divorce done.[11] But in practice, many confusions creep into the process. What if the husband sends a *get* to his wife by messenger, then thinks better of it and tries to take it back? Is the couple married or divorced? What if the writer of the *get* uses the wrong names? Or the wrong city? Or uses a nickname instead of a proper name? Are they married or divorced? And so on. So the rabbis create procedures to correct human mistakes, and in justifying each of these, they say that the reason they are being instituted is: *mipnei tikkun ha-'olam* – "for the sake of the repair of the world."[12]

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[10] The *Aleinu* prayer is certainly of ancient origin; some attribute it to the 3rd century sage Rav, who includes it in his High Holiday liturgy, but it may have been written centuries earlier. It entered the weekday and Shabbat liturgy in the middle ages, and it now ends every prayer service.

[11] See Deuteronomy 24:1.

[12] See Mishnah Gittin Chapter 4.

Why are the ancient rabbis so concerned about clarifying the status of marriage and the countless other details that fill the pages of the Mishnah and Talmud? Since they are so familiar with the Torah, they draw the same conclusions from it that I sketched out above: humanity is flawed, and without guidance, we will inevitably make a mess of things on earth; as we've learned in the last hundred years, we even have the ability to destroy the earth itself in more than one way. The rabbis believe that the laws of the Torah, and the subsequent guidelines that they deduce from its words, provide humanity with just the guidance we need to move the world in a positive direction, to repair its flaws and lift up its goodness. So they urge us not to go it alone, not to rely only on our own individual sense of what's right or wrong to do in any particular moment. Instead, they encourage us to draw on the wisdom of the generations that preceded us, to build on all that they have learned from Torah and from each other, so that our striving toward perfection will join with and work with the striving of countless others to truly make progress on earth.

The medieval rabbis, especially those of the Jewish mystical tradition of Kabbalah, build on the work of the ancients, but they take it to a different level. For them, the idea of *tikkun 'olam* is primarily about repairing not this lower world in which we dwell, but the upper world in which God and the angels make their home. To understand why, we have to go back to the story of creation, told from a somewhat different perspective by the great 16th century Kabbalist Rabbi Isaac Luria. Before anything was created, God filled every part of an undifferentiated cosmos; everything was God. In order to create something separate from God's self, God had to withdraw from a small part of the cosmos, opening up a space for something that was <u>not</u> God to exist. As we've seen, in so doing, God created an imperfect lower world that humans would have to strive constantly to repair. But because the lower world reflects something of God's essence, God's creation had another effect: it created a division within God's self, a rent in the upper world, that also was in need of repair. Luria teaches that this upper world and our lower world are intimately connected, tied together by the reflection of one in the other. So the medieval mystics understand our mission as humans on earth a little differently than the ancient rabbis. For them, the world that is in such dire need of repair is the upper world, the divine world above. Amazingly, the acts of human beings on earth have the power to repair the fabric of that upper world, to reconcile the different parts of God's self that have been exiled from each other. And they refer to those acts as *tikkun 'olam* – repairing the upper, divine world.

For the mystics, then, each act that we undertake, guided by the teachings of Torah, to bring the world to more wholeness has a double impact. Yes, our acts can reduce confusion, pain, and injustice in our human world below. But they also have cosmic significance. Our attempts to bring justice, clarity, and light into the world matter in a way that reaches far beyond the particular situation or the people directly

involved. Every act we take, even an act that only involve ourselves, has the potential to move the divine world toward wholeness, to fulfill the mission of humanity on a cosmic scale. The ancient rabbis teach that we should view each of our choices, each of our acts, as having immense significance even when we can't see its results in front of our eyes and may never know what it accomplished. The medieval mystics expand that view to encompass the divine realm, teaching that the consequences of our actions reverberate in places we can't even imagine and have an impact on the very nature of God's self. Nothing could be more important.

So where does this leave us today, we who are the heirs to the teachings of the Torah, the writings of the ancient rabbis, and the far-flung thoughts of the medieval mystics? What do we learn from them about our mission, the meaning of our lives? First, we learn that both the world's brokenness and the human aspiration for wholeness are not new. They go all the way back to the beginning of the world and are intentionally built into the fabric of creation by God. The world's flaws impel human beings to take action, to strive to mold the world into a more perfect shape, giving human life a consciousness of time, an appreciation of history, and a sense of meaning. Second, we learn that just as human action can complicate lives and bring pain and confusion, so too can human action unravel complexities and bring comfort, clarity, and light into our mundane world. We need not rely only on our individual sense of right and wrong; we are the inheritors of a vast wealth of thought on complicated questions of morality and ethics stretching back thousands of years that can help us turn in the right direction. Third, we learn that our actions, and the choices we make, have ultimate, cosmic significance. Although their impact and consequences may be hidden from us by distance or time, that does not take away from their power. The coherence and cohesion not only of our everyday world below but also of the divine world beyond our imagining depend on what we do, up to and including God's very self. We are more powerful, and far more consequential, than we know.

So I want to apply these insights to just two of the many contemporary social problems we face today. How is each of these a "Jewish" problem? How do the insights of the Bible, the ancients, and the medievals deepen our understanding of them and sharpen our actions? And why should we be involved in them specifically as a Jewish community?

First up: Poverty. We live in one of the richest and most economically unequal societies in the world. The U.S. is consistently rated in the top five nations in terms of income inequality. It was good news when we heard recently that the poverty rate declined slightly last year, but we are still living in a nation in which over one eighth of the population lives in poverty, while the ranks of the super-rich continue to grow. And the overall poverty rate masks the fact that in some places, things are much worse. Philadelphia is the nation's poorest big city, where more than one in four people live in

poverty, including more than one in three children, and in neighborhoods like North Philadelphia, the poverty rate for children is over 60%. These are real people struggling every day to find and keep jobs, feed their families, find adequate housing, and get education for themselves and their children to improve their futures.

So this sounds horrible, but why is it a Jewish issue? Well, the Torah certainly has a lot to say on the subject of poverty, which was a well-known phenomenon of human societies even thousands of years ago. We are urged to care for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger, each of whom may not have other resources and can easily fall into poverty.[13] We are taught to leave the corners of our fields and the gleanings of our orchards and vineyards for the poor, so that they will at least have something to eat when their resources are exhausted.[14] And we are admonished to give directly to those who are in need:

> If there is a needy person among you…, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy brother or sister. Rather, you must open your hand… Give to them readily and have no regrets when you do so, for in return the Lord your God will bless you in all your efforts and in all your undertakings. For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy in your land.[15]

Here, poverty is seen by the Torah as an inevitable feature of human society, so humans are urged to combat it, to fix society's built-in flaws by finding ways to transfer resources from those who have to those who lack. The ancient rabbis expand on the Torah's laws regarding the poor by finding specific ways – from encouraging anonymous giving to extending interest-free loans to dismantling business practices that take advantage of the poor – that human agency can counteract the human creation of poverty. And from the standpoint of the medieval mystics, combatting poverty is much more than attacking a human scourge. The sufferings of the poor reflect rents in the fabric of the divine world, taking seriously the Biblical teaching that humans are created in the reflection of the divine, as well as the teachings safeguarding the dignity and worth of those at the economic bottom of society. By tolerating poverty and the real pain it causes, humans open up gaps in God's very being. By taking action to help the poor and to correct the inequalities that create and perpetuate poverty, the divine world can be restored to wholeness.

Scandalously, the fact of poverty in this country and its horrifying extent is nearly invisible in our civic and political discourse. You won't hear much about it from

[13] See for example Exodus 22:22-23.
[14] Leviticus 19:9-10.
[15] Deuteronomy 15:7-11

candidates for office or see much action to combat it from elected representatives in our state legislature or in Congress. They must figure that poor people don't vote; the poor certainly don't have millions to give to political campaigns. Instead, from both candidates and office-holders, we are more likely to see attacks on the poor and on their character than we are to see recognition of their needs and plans to address them. On the level of budget and policy, we have seen in recent years enormous cuts to some of the biggest federal and state programs that help address the effects of poverty, including bipartisan agreements to cut millions of dollars from the SNAP program that provides food stamps to help feed tens of millions of hungry Americans.

Jewish voices across thousands of years are calling on us to do better. And we, in the Jewish community at this moment, are better positioned to change this situation than we have ever been. Many of us are well-educated, financially secure, and politically savvy; we have the skills and the knowledge to help. We need to educate ourselves about the causes of poverty and publicize its effects. We need to act to share our own resources with those in need in our local communities. And we need to advocate to both candidates and elected representatives to support the systemic changes and large-scale programs that are necessary to address the immense and complex problems of poverty. From the Mitzvah of the Month to the Women's Clothing Exchange to the Kol Nidrei Food drive to the Economic Justice team within POWER, the multi-faith advocacy organization of which GJC is a part, some among us have been working for years to do just these things. They need our help. Only then can we be said to be doing *tikkun 'olam* – truly striving to repair the brokenness of the world.

Next: Racism and racial injustice. In a country with a shameful history of slavery that was followed by an equally shameful period of rampant racial discrimination and oppression, the problem of racism and racial injustice hardly needs an introduction. We all long to put this problem behind us, but it persistently, stubbornly remains. Those most affected by racism can never forget that it exists, but it sometimes seems that the rest of America only wakes up about once every 20 years and notices that it is still a problem, and we are clearly in one of those periods now.

I talk about racism and racial injustice separately because the problem we have to deal with has two parts. People often see racism as an individual behavior – a particular person pre-judging another on the basis of the color of their skin. This kind of prejudice is certainly a scourge on our society and requires recognition, education, and a concerted effort to combat it. But when people of color are far more likely to live in poverty and to attend poor schools, when a black man who does not complete high school has a 70% chance of being sent to prison, when black boys growing up in North Philadelphia are more likely to go to prison than to go to college, this is not just about individual behavior. When we see young black men being killed by police in the streets, not just once, not just twice, but over and over and over again, every week bringing

more and more deaths, this is not just about individual behavior. And when we see people all around our country feeling impelled to assert time and time again, in the face of yet another terrible event, that Black Lives Matter, a truism that should be self-evident to all, this is not just about individual behavior. This is about a system of racial injustice that consistently and repeatedly relegates the lives and the rights and the opportunities of people of color to second-class status.

So why is this a Jewish issue? The Torah recognizes early on the danger that despite their common origin, different groups of people will try to place themselves above others. As I have taught many times, the lesson of stories like the Tower of Babel, in which God creates difference as an antidote to human arrogance, is that difference is good![16] God could easily have created a world in which every person was the same and everyone spoke the same language and had the same color skin. But God did not do that, and that decision also was intentional. We are intended to struggle against our urge to care only for people who look and sound and act like us. We are intended to strive to respect all people and to learn from the differences that God build into the structure of the world. For this reason, the Torah repeatedly urges us to apply the law equally to everyone, not distinguishing between those who are like us and those who are not.[17]

The ancient rabbis elaborate on this greatly, creating a whole system of justice intended to root out bias and require the firm evidence of multiple, independent witnesses in order to convict anyone of a crime. They emphasize the interdependence and common origin of the human family, and while they are concerned with how the Jewish people can maintain a distinct existence as a minority in a non-Jewish world, they take pains to detail the ways that even Jews and idol-worshippers can productively interact.[18] Again, for the medieval mystics, the emphasis is on taking a God's-eye view of humanity. One of the focuses of mystical writings is the importance of raising up the sparks of the divine that are hidden inside every part of creation. While they believe that divine sparks dwell even in rocks and wood, the sparks that dwell in human beings are the most consequential. As it says in the Book of Proverbs, "The human soul is the light of God."[19] So honoring each soul as a consequential part of God's light is a key part of bringing all sparks back together to heal God's very being and repair the divine world.

Again, unfortunately, the words and actions of our politicians and leaders have often created more heat than light in talking about the issue of racism and racial justice. There's been a lot of denying, blaming, and shaming, but little talk about constructive

[16] See Genesis 11:1-9.
[17] See for example Leviticus 24:22.
[18] See for example Mishnah Avodah Zarah Chapter 1.
[19] Proverbs 20:27.

steps that could be taken by judges, the police, legislators, and the public. The Jewish community, historically a place of great support for racial justice, has not done a great job responding to the current situation. Especially after the release of a platform from leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement that was harshly critical of Israel, many leaders of Jewish institutions distanced themselves both from the movement and from the cause of racial justice. This cannot be our response. In all of our struggles for justice, we find ourselves making alliances with those whose views in other areas we disagree with or even find offensive. Just because we partner with the Catholic Church, for example, on finding ways to combat poverty or anti-Semitism does not mean that we agree with the Church's views on, for example, the treatment of LGBTQ people in religious life. We have to be willing to be in uncomfortable situations and to make conditional alliances if we are to have any hope of addressing the gigantic problem of racism and racial injustice that is so entrenched in this country.

I firmly believe that what we are seeing right now are the side effects of a massive change in American society that is happening before our eyes and under our feet. We are transitioning from a country dominated by a white, Christian majority to a new vision of a multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-religious society in which no one group holds power over all others, a country in which justice, equality, and economic opportunity are shared among all segments of the population. That diverse, tolerant new vision is overwhelmingly supported by the young people who are our future. And we all have the obligation to try to make it a reality, dealing with the very difficult issues and blockages lying in its way, and acknowledging the extremely hard transitions that lie ahead. Jewish communities have a key stake in this struggle, and our Germantown Jewish Centre community has been working for years to move it forward, from efforts like the Racism Book Group, to reaching out to African American communities within our neighborhood, to connecting, through POWER, with the struggles of people of color throughout our city and region. Now, more than ever, we need to redouble our efforts to move forward. Only then can we be said to be doing *tikkun 'olam* – truly striving to repair the brokenness of the world.

This year, as you've probably heard, the GJC group formerly known as the Social Action Committee changed its name to Tikkun Olam @ GJC. I was very proud of the hard work that so many GJC members put into thinking about and organizing this transition, and I think it says something very important about the kind of work we are committing to as members of this community. Social action can be good, but as we've seen, the idea of *tikkun 'olam* encompasses far more than our specific actions on certain issues. It means acknowledging that the brokenness and flaws that God built into the world are meant to spur human beings to strive for a vision beyond what our eyes can see. It means enriching ourselves with thousands of years of Jewish wisdom about how we can use specific strategies to make real progress in repairing the damage humans often inflict on the world. And it means seeing the significance of our actions stretching

far beyond this world to influence the fabric of the divine presence, bringing infinite worth to our attempts to bring change. May we all embrace this human mission of repairing the world in all that we do in this brand new year. And may the worlds above and below sing a new song because of our efforts.

L'shanah tovah.