

# *Tikkun Olam:* A Public Policy Focus

BY STEVE GUTOW

**W**e live in an age where poverty, persecution, hunger, the lack of health care and basic educational opportunities affect considerable proportions of the earth's population. The Torah, the prophets, and the other ethical texts of Judaism mandate that the attention and the action of Jews be devoted to such concerns. Most of these problems will not be solved under the rubric of private philanthropy or a "thousand points of light." They require strong political responses. The imperative of *tikkun olam* (repair of the world) requires that Jews do what they can to alleviate this kind of suffering. Action that can make a difference in the lives of a great number of people is most effectively pursued in the political sphere. Jewish leadership must be willing to communicate this message if Judaism is to be an effective engine for social change.

## Changing Basic Structures

Repairing the world must be about changing economic and social struc-

tures so that those in need can achieve the means to effect changes in their own lives. If poor people have their own resources and means of supporting themselves and their families, they do not need to look longingly, respectfully or bitterly at the charity of the rich. If lesbians and gay men do not have to fight for the right to live lives unimpeded by discrimination and bigotry, they do not have to spend so much time beseeching legislators and administrators for fair and equitable treatment in housing and jobs. The fight to promote more democratization and the further shifting of power relationships so that women, African-Americans, Latinos, the poor and other persecuted people become more powerful is a political fight; and it is a fight that needs to occupy more of the Jewish agenda.

Whereas today many individual Jews involve themselves in political affairs and seem to take the repair of the world seriously, Jewish tradition often does not appear to be their primary motivation. In the past Judaism has been a powerful motivating

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Steve Gutow is a student at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. He previously worked as an attorney in Texas, where he was active in Jewish community relations work.

factor for *tikkun olam*. Since the *Haskala* (the emancipation of European Jews in the nineteenth century) Jews have made great efforts to further social justice. There have been a large number of Jews in the leadership of social justice movements, some who lived religiously Jewish lives, some who only had a limited connection to their Judaism, and some who lived purely secular lives. There is good reason to examine those concepts which have inspired Jews to move the world into being a fairer and more equitable place.

### Prominent Jewish Presences

In the twentieth century in the United States one can see how Jews have played a significant role in America's pursuit of a more just society. Labor and grassroots organizers such as Emma Goldman, David Dubinsky, Sidney Hillman, Saul Alinsky, and Samuel Gompers certainly deserve mention in any roster of those who made a difference in the lives of American workers in the twentieth century. Iconoclasts like Allen Ginsberg and Ben Hecht wrote poetry, plays and newspaper articles that promoted left-wing and liberal causes. The fight for the rights of women in this country has names in its forefront such as Bella Abzug and Betty Friedan.

Progressive legal figures such as Louis Brandeis, Abe Fortas, Arthur Goldberg, Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Alan Dershowitz have led the way towards liberal jurisprudential change

in this nation. William Kunstler, Hyman Bookbinder, Abraham Joshua Heschel and a host of other Jewish attorneys, teachers and volunteers helped immeasurably in the battles of the 1960s for the civil rights of African Americans.

These people occupy different places on the continuum of Jewish identity and Jewish practice, but all of them come from Jewish homes and Jewish upbringings. Some, like Emma Goldman, felt the pain of persecution when she and her family were forced to leave Tsarist Russia. Betty Friedan, in recent years, has begun an in-depth course of personal study of Torah to understand more about her Jewish roots. Allen Ginsberg, while accepting the Buddhist faith, never denied the impact of his Jewish origins, and Benjamin Hecht returned to reflecting upon his Jewish identity only after establishing himself as an author of note. Samuel Gompers never appeared to want to discuss his Jewish ethnicity. Yet no matter how much or how little these leaders identified with Judaism or understood the Jewish sources of their commitment to social justice, they all grew up in a Jewish environment.

Another striking piece of evidence of Jewish support for social justice is the Jewish voting pattern in the United States. Most Jews vote against what might reasonably be seen as their economic interests and support the Democratic Party, a political party predominantly supported by the poor and lower middle class. In each of the last two elections over

eighty percent of Jewish voters voted for Bill Clinton. It has often been observed that Jews in America “earn like Episcopalians and vote like Puerto Ricans.”

### **Jewish Roots of *Tikkun Olam***

What is it within the fabric of Judaism that calls Jews to stand up for the rights of the oppressed and persecuted? What are the factors which, when synthesized, have led to such an outpouring of Jewish leadership and participation in the cause of repairing the world? The consistent support of Jews both in action and attitude for social justice causes comes from somewhere. There is a combination of sources within Jewish tradition that causes Jews to take a leadership role in the struggle for *tikkun olam*, and, for those who wish to see our tradition remain in the forefront of this struggle, an examination of these sources is in order.

There are four major Jewish concepts, that, when synthesized, have been the foundation of the Jewish commitment to *tikkun olam*. If we are willing to study these concepts and promote them now and in the future, they can form, for many of us, the basis of a renewed Jewish commitment to *tikkun olam*. These are: (1) the nature of the revelation at Sinai; a call to action; (2) Judaism’s ethical teachings; (3) the persecution of Jews throughout history; and (4) an underlying belief that a person should not surrender in the face of difficult challenges. By understanding these

concepts we can begin to comprehend why there is such an urge within Judaism to create a better world.

### **To Act In This World**

The revelation at Sinai is the experiencing of a voice demanding that Jews live a commanded life and consistently act out those commandments. Many progressive Jews do not follow or even recognize the majority of these commandments, but they often affirm Judaism’s call for action. The legacy of Sinai is a belief by Jews that they need to do righteous deeds in this world. Whether or not there are 613 commandments or just a few ethical mandates, the central concept that Judaism teaches is that we have a duty to act. The Jewish religion is about what can be done in the here and now. In the face of a problem or an injustice, Jewish teaching demands action. Following a commanded life may have different meanings to different groups within Judaism, but the duty to act in this world is of paramount importance.

The second concept in this synthesis is Jewish ethics, which are replete with calls to fight injustice. Hillel said, “If I am not for myself who will be for me? And, if I am for myself only, what am I? And if not now, when?” (*Pirke Avot* 1:14) Chapter 58 of the Book of Isaiah is read every Yom Kippur, stating that the reason for the fast is to “clothe the naked and feed the hungry.”

When Deuteronomy discusses the forgiveness of all debt in the *Shmitta*

year or return of land to its original owners in the Jubilee year, the Torah is advocating ideas that are more progressive than anything Karl Marx or the nineteenth century land reformer, Henry George, ever proposed. When Jews grow up hearing “Justice, justice, you will pursue” (Dt. 16:20) or the enigmatic and haunting words of the Haggadah, “We were slaves in Egypt!” an indelible ethical imprint is made on those who are listening.

In our own time, Jews encounter equally powerful voices on behalf of justice. When Mordecai Kaplan states in *Judaism as a Civilization* that “The future of Judaism, even more than that of the other historical civilizations, depends upon its having the courage to commit itself to the cause of social idealism,”<sup>1</sup> Jews are reminded of duties and obligations that can be traced back to rabbinic and biblical imperatives.

## History As Teacher

Yet the demand for action and ethics only form the framework of the call. A tragic history teaches by example what happens when people do not look out for others. Jewish history is as effective a teacher as a history can be. Torquemada and the Inquisition, the Crusades, false accusations of blood libel, the Czars and their penchant for murderous pogroms, and the Ku Klux Klan — as well as the horrific mark left on history by the Holocaust — have all left their imprint on the Jewish people. If others had risen in support of the

Jewish victims of these tragic persecutions, Jewish lives would have been saved. History has taught us that there is a need to stand up against injustice even when non-Jews are being victimized.

Jews profoundly understand the words attributed to German Protestant theologian Martin Niemoeller after the debacle of World War II:

In Germany they came first for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time no one was left to speak up.<sup>2</sup>

Jews are taught that they must act; Jews understand the demands of Jewish ethics; and Jews know what occurs when people do not act to stop injustice no matter who the victim is.

## Against Impossible Odds

One more concept needs to be discussed. Judaism has as one of its underlying affirmations a notion that people can rise to any challenge. One of the earliest stories Jewish young people learn is the story about King David as a young boy. He comes to

bring supplies to his brothers and learns that the Israelites are giving up in the face of an evil giant named Goliath. David, with little more than a slingshot, does the impossible and fells this great evil.

Also from childhood, Jews learn the story of the Exodus. What crazy group of people could have ever imagined that they could rise up from slavery under the leadership of a Moses and achieve freedom? Moreover, when another Biblical story recounts how against great odds Esther saved her people, Jews understand that no matter what the cost may be, it is nonetheless important to resist evil in the world.

In more recent times, when impoverished Jews left the shtetls of Russia for Palestine with little more than Herzl's dreams and Bialik's poetry, they too were living out the Jewish faith in overcoming impossible odds.

If David, Moses, Esther and the beginnings of modern Israel are examples of fighting injustice in the world, it is not surprising that Jewish young people could see themselves following the footsteps of these heroic examples when they decide to tackle the problems of injustice and repair the world. Rabbinic tradition attributes to Rabbi Tarfon the teaching "You are not required to complete the work, but neither are you exempt from the effort" (*Pirke Avot* 2:16).

These fundamental sources for the Jewish mandate to repair the world may be synthesized differently by different Jews in different Jewish cultures, but they provide a wellspring

of motivation and justification for those who believe that *tikkun olam* is essential if Judaism is to be an engine for social change in this world.

## The Call to Action

With all this said, Jews today are not as fully engaged in the repair of the world as they might be. Two factors impede the kind of involvement that many advocates of *tikkun olam* believe to be necessary. Both a movement towards particularism and a hesitancy to enter the arena of political action stand in the way of a more solid Jewish participation in effective social justice action.

Today Jewish leadership puts great emphasis on the internal growth of Jewish life. This emphasis shows itself in the concerns of the great institutions that dominate the Jewish organizational landscape. In both public relations and in allocation of resources, organized Jewish life appears to have embraced particularism.

I do not suggest that there is nothing good in particularism. Jews are writing large checks to Jewish charities, building impressive synagogues and spending a lot of money in rejuvenating Jewish education. But when this focus on Jews alone becomes unbalanced and singular, this particularism becomes something that needs to be ameliorated.

## Abandoning the Larger Society?

Clearly, this is the case at the pres-

ent moment. The emphasis on particularism needs to be curbed. Not only does this particularism support an unbalanced expenditure of resources solely for Jewish causes, but this type of self-concern also brings with it a far more dangerous result: Jews begin to separate themselves from the world at large. If Jews see the improvement of only themselves and their institutions as the single appropriate channel for Jewish energy and Jewish actions, they may become isolated from the non-Jewish universe, and live without regard to the problems faced by those in need who are not Jewish.

This is precisely what is occurring. Jews are found among the many Americans who appear to be embracing an elitist lifestyle. Many live in sheltered neighborhoods and rarely venture forth into places in which they may encounter people different from themselves. Social interaction with African-Americans, Latinos or anyone of a lower socioeconomic status is all too rare. In the last decades a significant number of Jews in America have recreated of their own volition the ghettos of their past.

The danger in following this movement towards particularism is that by continuing in this direction Judaism will lose an important part of something intrinsic to Judaism. In the new Reconstructionist *Mahzor*, Richard Hirsh wrote:

On the eve of the destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C.E., the prophet Jeremiah

called on his people to “pray for the peace of the land to which I am exiling you.” We Jews have recognized the importance of just government in the lands where we have lived because we have fared better in societies guided by principles of justice, equality and law. Today, in North America, where we strive to fulfill the opportunities inherent in living in two civilizations, our motivation must go beyond what is good for us to what is right for all.<sup>3</sup>

## Challenging Particularism

Is the challenge to this particularism all that it can be? Are those who believe that Judaism has a wider mandate speaking forcefully about their beliefs? Jews are retreating from their universalistic moorings. Isaiah and Jeremiah appear to be losing ground. The idea of being “a light among nations” does not receive a great deal of resonance in many synagogues. There is a fear among liberals of sounding too prideful, too knowledgeable and too demanding. After a talk I recently gave, a listener approached me and said quizzically, “You seemed to be saying that we must involve ourselves in social action. People don’t usually speak to us that way.”

Perhaps, in some synagogues, there is a more selfish reason. Preaching against “big money” and “corporate insensitivity” may upset some wealthy donors and certain corporate

executives. Whatever the reason, the present acceptance of particularistic self-interest should be challenged. Jewish leadership speaks very strongly if the speech is about contributing to the synagogue's building fund. Surely, those who believe in *tikkun olam* can speak just as loudly.

Much is done in synagogues to promote *Mitzvah* days and contributions to the poor and the needy in this world. These are good and important acts. However, most significant change requires involvement in social policy and in advocacy regarding legislation. If there are to be large-scale changes in the lives of the poor and the persecuted, political action is required. Education and health care for the needy in this country will not be fundamentally improved by private donations of time and money.

This is not to suggest that there should be a lessening of *Mitzvah* day activities and the like. They certainly help individual people and contribute to the notion amongst Jews that they should be involved in the pursuit of social justice. These efforts alone, however, are not enough.

*Mitzvah* days, for example, will have no impact on foreign policy. This arena cannot be entered unless Jews are willing to engage in debates in the "public square." Only by joining political movements that support intervention or withdrawal from specific international involvements can foreign policy decisions be influenced. Participation in rallies, letter-writing campaigns and visits to public officials are often the only roads

open to citizens who want to have a voice in the politics of foreign affairs. After witnessing the horrors of Bosnia and Rwanda, the Jewish community can hardly afford to close its eyes to the world in which it lives or only focus its foreign policy involvement on concerns involving the state of Israel. If the problems of social injustice require political action, as many do, very little is being promoted by the community.

### **Affirming the Mandate to Act**

Many Jews believe that Jews should not toot their own horns and make too much of themselves. There is nothing inherently chauvinistic about pointing out to believers of a religious tradition what it is about their tradition that should impel them to take action. When the action is *tikkun olam* and Jews seem to be retreating from following its path, the obligation to expound on what is mandated and why it is mandated becomes pronounced.

When Christians or Moslems or Buddhists extol their own religious tradition and exhort their followers to make this world a more livable place, many Jews enthusiastically support their efforts and their words. Why not seek out and support the same exhortations in trying to help Jews find their way back to their own special path of repairing the world.

Those who believe that there is a special call within Jewish tradition to rise up and fight persecution and unfairness in the world have great

resources from which to draw. The synthesis of the four sources: the call to action, ethical mandates, a history which reinforces our understanding of inaction, and a spiritual mandate to battle against impossible odds, is fertile ground from which to explain the message.

If those who believe in *tikkun olam* as a fundamental principle of Judaism are to be effective, they must speak early and often. They must not be afraid of suggesting that repairing the world through political action is every bit as important, if not more so, than building synagogues, supporting Jewish education or not angering rich contributors. They must be willing to delineate the differences between *Mitzvah* days and supporting legislation.

If the prophets are going to con-

tinue to live today, if “Goliaths” and “Pharaohs” are to be defeated, and if Jewish social activists are going to do what it takes to repair the very broken parts of the world in which they live, they must find the courage and the words to insist and demand that the Jewish people live up to the obligations and mandates of its rich tradition. They must find their “still small voice,” teach it, train it, speak it and live it.

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1. Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1957), 471.

2. Martin Niemoeller, in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* (Boston/Toronto: Little, Brown And Company, 1980), 824.

3. *Kol Haneshamah: Mahzor Leyamim Nora'im*, David A. Teutsch, editor (Elkins Park, Pennsylvania: The Reconstructionist Press, 1999), 579.