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*Tikkun ha-Olam: The Metamorphosis of a Concept**

Gilbert S. Rosenthal / National Council of Synagogues

I

The notion of *tikkun ha-olam*—healing, mending, repairing the world, improving society—has become a popular concept these days. Everyone seems to be invoking the term or the concept: it is a shibboleth in both Jewish and non-Jewish circles; it has captivated the imagination of scholars and theologians, of statespersons and politicians. Former President Bill Clinton and Senator Hillary Clinton have invoked it; former New York Governor Mario Cuomo discussed it on a national television program; Catholic and Protestant theological statements cite it; there is even a left-wing magazine based in California that is named *Tikkun*. The term has become synonymous with social activism. In a word, *tikkun ha-olam* has arrived. But what does it really mean? What is its origin? How did it evolve and develop? What is its significance for Jews and non-Jews in today's world? In this study, I propose to trace its origin and analyze how it developed from a limited rabbinic legal norm into a complex and multifaceted concept that has intrigued so many in varied circles and milieus.¹

* I wish to acknowledge the wonderful assistance of the staff of the Library of the Hebrew College in Newton, MA, in preparing this essay.

¹ To the best of my knowledge, there is no proper survey of the concept of *tikkun ha-olam*. There are several short references in Menahem Elon, *Ha-Mishpat Ha-Ivri*, 3rd ed., 3 vols., (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988), 1:486–87, 494ff. Gerald Blitstein's essay, "Tikkun Olam" in *Tradition* 29, no. 2 (Winter 1995): 5–43, misunderstands the meaning of the concept and ignores its metamorphosis through the ages. The author relates it to the "mission of Israel" theory propagated by the early Reform movement. However, this is incorrect, as the Reform movement derived its theory of mission from the notion of the chosen people that they found odious and archaic and for which they substituted the idea of mission. Even the phrase is generally misquoted. The phrase appears thirteen times in the Mishnah, seventeen times in the Babylonian Talmud, eight times in the Talmud of the Land of Israel, and a handful of times in the Midrash and Tosefta. The correct term is *tikkun ha-olam* with the definite article before *olam* and so it appears everywhere in rabbinic literature of the Talmud and Midrash (although occasionally in the Midrash the term used is *tikkuno shel olam*). See my essay, "The

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Of course, the Jewish notion of social activism springs from the lives and teachings of the prophets of Israel. They were the zealous defenders of the weaklings and underclass of society: the foreigner, the widow, the orphan, the poor, the oppressed, and the downtrodden. Amos and Hosea, Isaiah and Jeremiah, Micah and Malachi put their lives on the line on more than one occasion as they faced down the kings and nobles, the land owners and aristocrats in demanding freedom and justice, righteousness and compassion, equity and kindness. But they did not fashion a fully developed concept of social justice. The sages were the ones who created crystallized norms and abstract concepts that could be applied to specific situations. *Tikkun ha-olam* may be implicit in biblical legislation and tales; it assumes potentially far-reaching dimensions in the rabbinic world.²

The verb *t-k-n* appears only three times in the Bible, and only in the late book Kohelet (Ecclesiastes). There it means “to straighten, to repair, to fashion.”³ In rabbinic Hebrew, as well as in the Aramaic of the *Targum* and Talmud, the verb assumes many meanings and, in fact, becomes one of the most flexible verbs in the language. It means to fix or repair objects such as shoes, a road, a vessel, or a staff or to beautify a person with cosmetics or clothing.⁴ It connotes preparing or readying

Teleological Approach to Halakhah,” in *Yakar Le'Mordecai: Jubilee Volume in Honor of Rabbi Mordecai Waxman*, ed. Zvia Ginor (Great Neck, NY: Temple Israel and Ktav Publishing House, 1998), 65–84. In popular parlance, *tikkun olam* has become the normal phrase so that the correct classical term has been effectively replaced.

² For some sources on justice in the Bible, see: Gen. 18:19, 25; Exod. 22:21–22; Lev. 19:15; Deut. 16:18–20, 17:8ff., 24:10ff.; 1 Kings 3:1–15; Amos 2:6–7, 5:7, 12–15, 24, 8:4–7; Hosea 2: 21, 4:2, 10:4, 12, 12:7–8; Mic. 2:1, 2, 3:1–3, 6:8; Isa. 1:17, 23, 27, 10:1ff., 58:1ff.; Jer. 5:28, 21: 12ff., 22:3, 15–17, 34:8ff.; Ezek. 16:49, 18:5–9, 22:7, 29; Mal. 3:5–6; Zech. 7:9–10, 8:16–17; Prov. 16:11–12, 18:5; Pss. 10:18, 15:1ff., 24:3ff., 72:1–3, 99:4, 146:7–10; Job 29:12ff., 31:5ff.

³ The verb appears in Kohelet 1:15, 7:13, and 12:9. Robert Gordis translates it, “straighten the crooked, fashion many proverbs.” See his *Koheleth—the Man and His World* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1951), 190, 201. Choon Leeong Seow translates it as “correcting, righting, editing many proverbs.” Compare Ecclesiastes, *Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 147, 385. See Eliezer Ben Yehudah, *Thesaurus of the Hebrew Language* (New York and Jerusalem: Thomas Yoseloff, 1959), 16:7878–85, 7754. Compare Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgarten, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 4:1784–85, who derive *t-k-n* from Aramaic and ultimately from Akkadian. There may be a connection with the Ugaritic god of order, *il-taqnu*. In Akkadian, *taqa-nu(m)* means “to be well, secure, ordered.” In Arabic, *tqn* means “to perfect.” See, too, Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Period* and his *Dictionary of Palestinian Aramaic* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2002), 1228–29 and 589–90, respectively. In the Aramaic of the *Targum*, the word assumes various connotations. For example, in Exod. 33:4 the verb means “adorn,” while in Exod. 33:21 it means “prepare.” In Rabbinic literature, the verb appears either in the *piel* or *hiphil*. I have not detected any difference in nuance or application.

⁴ Sifre Deut. (ed. Louis Finkelstein), 292, par. 271, and 348, par. 308; Mekhilta (ed. Jacob Lauterbach), *Bahodesh* 2:194; Avot de Rabbi Nathan (ARN; ed. Solomon Schechter), version A, chap. 1, 2a; Mishnah Sotah 7:4; M. Shabbat 19:6; M. Shekalim 2:1; M. Sukkah 5:2; Betza

oneself for a significant event or the study of Torah.⁵ It means to legislate or pass ordinances, to enact laws in order to remedy legal inequities or unjust situations. A *takkanah* (ordinance, legislation) is the repair of a legal inequity or societal flaw in marital laws, divorce matters, economic affairs, market protocols, and the redress of an inequity. It is the legal step taken to improve society.⁶

In purely ritual or cultic practices, *t-k-n* is the verb of choice to justify instituting new procedures in religious life—often in the wake of calamities such as the destruction of the Second Temple. The verb is applied to the composition or formulation of new prayers and liturgical procedures, the emendation of biblical texts, the fixing of the calendar and festival dates, and the cultic or ritual preparation of foods such as grain that were required to be tithed.⁷

Occasionally, the Midrash speaks of the role of human beings in completing or putting the finishing touches on God's work of creation, and the verb selected is *t-k-n*.⁸ Only rarely does the Talmud utilize the verb to describe the need of humans to "mend their souls" or "repair spiritual damage" or "rectify sin."⁹ This latter meaning that is found only

34a and 36b; Sotah 44a; Shabbat 33b; Avodah Zarah 2b; Eruvin 22b; Sukkah 51a–b; Nazir 59a; Gen. Rabbah (ed. Julius Theodor and Hanokh Albeck), chap. 22, sec. 7, 212 and chap. 84, sec. 7, 1008. Maimonides employs the verb in two contexts: to beautify one's self physically or to prepare esthetically for prayer. See his *Mishneh Torah*, *Melakim* 2:5 and *Tefillah* 5:1.

⁵ M. Avot 2:11, 3:16, 4:16; M. Demai 3:1; M. Maaser Sheni 5:8; M. Sanhedrin 6:5; Eruvin 32a; Betza 34b. Also cf. Mekhilta, *Shabbata* 3:204; Kohelet Rabbah 13:6; M. Ketubot 4:9. In the passive voice, the connotation is "proper, ready, ritually prepared, qualified, esthetically or morally fit." See Sanhedrin 39b and Yoma 86a, where the meaning is clearly "morally beautiful."

⁶ Ezra's ten ordinances on religious issues are dubbed *takkanot*. See Ketubot 3a, Baba Kama 82a, Berakhot 22b. Likewise, the series of *takkanot* passed at Usha had far-reaching consequences. See Ketubot 8b, 10a, 12a, 49b–52b, 82b, 88b–90a; Yer. Ketubot 8:11, 32a. Also see Baba Batra 21a; Rosh Hashanah 31b; Yer. Rosh Hashanah 4:3, 59a–b; Shabbat 14b, 30a, 41a; Sukkah 41a; Betza 5a–b; Sotah 40a. For purely secular *takkanot*, see Baba Kama 115a; Shabbat 33b; Baba Metzia 3a, 27b, 28b, 47b; Shabbat 33b; Yer. Gittin 5:3, 46d. For *tikkun* as a legal remedy, see Ketubot 2a, 85a, 111b; M. Gittin 4:5; and Gemara 41a.

⁷ M. Rosh Hashanah 1:4; Gemara 29b; Mekhilta, *Vayisa* 2:90; Yer. Rosh Hashanah 4:3, 59a; Baba Batra 160b; Taanit 27a; Megillah 2a, 4a, 17b; Moed Katan 27a–b; Yevamot 112b; Berakhot 4b, 26b, 28b, 48b, 54a; Yer. Berakhot 3:2, 6b; Yer. Megillah 3:7, 27a; Sotah 32b; Gittin 61b–62a; Nidah 13b, 53b; Num. Rabbah 18:17. Emendation of the biblical texts by the sages is dubbed *tikkun soferim*. See Sifra Shemini (ed. Meir Ish Shalom), 4–5, 48b, and Raavad ad loc.; ARN, version A, chap. 34, 100–101; Gen. Rabbah 18:22, 505. In modern usage, a *tikkun* is the book used by a Torah reader to prepare the reading.

⁸ Gen. Rabbah 11:7, 95, 13:13, 122–123; Deut. Rabbah 6:5; Yer. Berakhot 9:3, 14a; Yer. Taanit 1:3, 64b; Seder Eliyahu Zuta (ed. Ish Shalom), 6, 43 and nn. ad loc. These are the only examples as far as I know where the phrase is *tikkuno shel olam*. Here the connotation is propagating the species and saving God's creations.

⁹ Arakhin 15b (slander); Hagigah 9a–b and Yevamot 22b (sexual misconduct); Baba Kama 109a and Gittin 55a (theft); Berakhot 26a (neglect of prayer); Kohelet Rabbah 1:15 and Num. Rabbah 9:6 (scholars who neglect the Torah). See, too, Gen. Rabbah 14:6, 130; Exod. Rabbah 23:3; Nidah 53b; Tamid 27b; Ketubot 111b.

a few times in rabbinic literature attained popularity in moralistic writings of later centuries and came to full and fateful expression in arcane writings of the Kabbalah, as we shall see shortly.

The noun form *tikkun ha-olam*, which I prefer to translate as “the improvement of society,” is found some thirty times in the Mishnah and Gemara of the Babylonian Talmud, eight times in the Talmud of the Land of Israel, and a mere handful of times in the Midrash and *Tosefta*. Remarkably, almost all the references are to be found in the fourth and fifth chapters of Tractate Gittin, which deals primarily with divorce laws. This leads me to conclude that the principle was originally devised to protect the rights of women in divorce cases and to shield them from unscrupulous, recalcitrant, and extortionist husbands.¹⁰

For example, the Mishnah records the following *takkanot* to protect women: “Originally, the *beit din* [religious court] would hear a divorce case in another community and annul it. Rabban Gamaliel the elder ordained that courts should no longer follow this pattern in order to improve society [*mipnei tikkun ha-olam*]. Originally, they used to write only the husband’s and the wife’s name and the name of his town and her town. Rabban Gamaliel the elder ordained that they must write his name and all names by which he was known, the wife’s name and all names by which she was known in order to improve society [*mipnei tikkun ha-olam*].”¹¹ The rationale behind these *takkanot* was the fear that the husband might impugn the *get* in another community or might claim that the name indicated in the *get* is not his, thereby nullifying the document. The results of such actions could be bastard children if the woman remarries or a chained woman (*agunah*) who may not remarry for a lack of a *get*. All of these considerations fall under the category of *tikkun ha-olam*.

Yet another *takkanah* required that witnesses sign a *get* to prevent impugning of the *get* in another town where the witnesses are unknown to the locals or else are not available to guarantee the *get*.¹² If a man took an oath to fast if he failed to divorce his wife and then had a change of heart, the rabbis nullified his vow and allowed him to take back his wife lest she be ruined economically and driven into an immoral life.¹³ Finally, the sages ruled by *takkanah* that we do not pay the

¹⁰ In the Babylonian Talmud: Gittin 3b, 32a–b, 33a, 34a–b, 36a–b, 37b, 40b, 41a, 45a–b, 46a–b, 47b, 48b, 49b, 50a, 51a, 53a, 65a, 75b; Baba Metzia 14b; Ketubot 52b, 56b; Pesahim 88b; Hagigah 2b; Arakhim 2b; Makkot 3b. In the Jerusalem Talmud: Gittin 4:2, 45c, 4:7, 46b, 5:3, 46d; Baba Batra 10:4, 17c and 10:16, 17d; Ketubot 12:2, 34d; Pesahim 2:2, 29a; Demai 5:9, 24d.

¹¹ Gittin 4:2, 33a and 36a.

¹² Ibid. 4:3 and 36a.

¹³ Ibid. 4:7 and 46a–b.

ketubah settlement to a divorced wife from movable properties but only from land properties because the value of movables fluctuates greatly, and, lacking a set value, the woman would be adversely affected by such alimony settlement.¹⁴ All of these examples from divorce law come under the rubric of *tikkun ha-olam*; their teleology is the improvement of society.

The principle of *tikkun ha-olam* was expanded into the economic and commercial realm as well. Perhaps the most famous case deals with the sabbatical year when all debts were cancelled (Deut. 15: 1–3). But this meant that poor people who needed to borrow cash would be turned down by creditors as the sabbatical year approached for they realized that any debts owed them would be wiped out in accord with biblical law. Consequently, the creditors refused loans, in violation of another biblical rule that we must not close our hands and harden our hearts to the requests for loans from the poor (Deut. 15:9–10). As a result, Hillel adopted by *takkanah* the *prozbol*, a document that circumvented the sabbatical cancellation of debts by empowering the *beit din* to collect the money rather than the creditor, *mipnei tikkun ha-olam*. In short, Hillel nullified a biblical law, citing another one instead, and invoked the legislative power of the court for the sake of improving society.¹⁵

Tikkun ha-olam was applied in several other areas as well. Creditors were not allowed to seize property sold by debtors to a third party as long as the debtor had chattel assets; otherwise, no one would purchase property for fear that creditors will seize the purchased land.¹⁶ Additionally, we do not pay support for a wife and daughters from land property for the same reason that purchasers will balk at buying such properties for fear that they are designated for wife and child support.¹⁷ All of these economic legislations fall within the category of *tikkun ha-olam*.

In criminal law, the sages ordained that a tortfeasor must pay the victim from his choicest property.¹⁸ We do not hold a physician liable for malpractice if his mistakes were made innocently and without mal-

¹⁴ Tosefta Ketubot (ed. Saul Lieberman), 12:2, 95. Compare Ketubot 56b and Gittin 51a.

¹⁵ M. Gittin 4:3; M. Sheviit 10:2–3 (where the principle of *tikkun ha-olam* is not cited) and Albeck's notes on 382–383; Sifre Deut. 173ff., par. 113; Tosefta Sheviit 8:5, 72; Gittin 33b–34b, 36a–b, 37b, and parallels; Yer. Sheviit 10:2 and 3, 39c. See Rambam, *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot* (ed. Rambam La-Am), "Positive Commandments," 124 n. 141, and "Negative Commandments," 277 n. 231; Rambam on Deut. 15:1; Tosafot Gittin 36a, s.v. *mi ika*; and Tosafot Kiddushin 8b, s.v. *mashkon*.

¹⁶ M. Gittin 5:3 and 49b–50a.

¹⁷ Ibid. 5:2–3 and 48b–49b; Yer. Gittin 12:2, 34b. Sources on wife and child support are Exod. 21:10; Ket. 47b, 58b–59a; Yer. Ket. 11:2, 34b; Num. 27:8; M. Ket. 4:11–12, 13:3 and 52b–53b; M. B.B. 9:1, 13:2. See Rambam, *Mishnah Torah, Ishut* 19:17.

¹⁸ M. Gittin 5:1 and 48b–49b.

ice, lest physicians refuse to ply their profession.¹⁹ The sages allowed the owner of a field to fence in his property in the sabbatical year out of concern that the poor gleaners might riot in an effort to gain entrance and thereby injure one another.²⁰ They also ruled that we must not redeem captives or sacred books and scrolls for exorbitant amounts lest we encourage kidnapping, extortion, and blackmail.²¹ The underlying motive in all of these rulings was *tikkun ha-olam*.

A variety of religious and humanitarian *takkanot* were legislated by the sages with the same goal in mind. A person who was half slave and half free because he had been owned by two owners, one of whom emancipated him, was set fully free by *takkanah* so that he might fulfill the commandment of procreation in marriage.²² The sages ordained that we not administer an oath to the finder of a lost object indicating that he returned everything lest we dissuade people from returning lost property.²³ If a Jew sells land in Eretz Yisrael to a pagan who then resells it to another Jew, the purchaser must bring an offering of first fruits, ruled the sages. Their reason was to discourage people from selling property in the Holy Land to pagans.²⁴ If someone intentionally renders another's grain or wine or oil ritually impure, he is liable, because we must discourage people from polluting the food or drink of enemies.²⁵ A priest who delays offering a sacrifice for three days, thereby rendering it unfit for the altar, must pay for a replacement in order to prevent priests from delaying sacrifices of people whom they hold in contempt or with whom they have a quarrel.²⁶

In all of these varied cases the rationale of the sages of the Talmud is the improvement of society, *tikkun ha-olam*. This legal principle, applied earlier primarily to divorce law, was now expanded into a variety

¹⁹ Tosefta Gittin (ed. Moses Zuckerman), chap. 4, 328, pars. 6–7; *Tashbetz* 3:82; Elon, *Ha-Mishpat Ha-Ivri*, 1:496.

²⁰ Mekhilta, *Mishpatim* 3:175.

²¹ M. Gittin 4:6 and 45a–b; Tosafot, s.v. *de-lo ligrevu*; Ketubot 52b; Yer. Gittin 4:6, 46a.

²² M. Gittin 4:5 and 41a–42a; M. Eduyot 1:13; Yer. Pesahim 2:2, 29a; Yer. Gittin 4:5, 46a; Berakhot 47b.

²³ M. Gittin 5:3 and 51a–b. Likewise, if a man designated his slave as a guarantee for a loan (*apoteke*) and subsequently freed him, according to the strict letter of the law (*meshurat ha-din*), the slave had to make good on the debt to the creditor. But for the sake of *tikkun ha-olam*, lest the creditor point out the slave and declare, “You are my slave,” thereby impugning the legitimacy of the slave's children, we force his ex-master to write a note of indebtedness for his value. See M. 4:4 and Albeck's notes on 399–400; Gemara 40b; Tosefta Terumah (ed. Lieberman), 2:1, 113–14; Tosefta Kifeshuta, 307–8. Clearly, *tikkun ha-olam* overrides *meshurat ha-din* in this clash of halakhic norms.

²⁴ M. Gittin 4:9 and 47b; Yer. Demai 5:9, 24d; Yer. Gittin 4:9, 46b.

²⁵ Tosefta Gittin, chap. 4, 327–28, par. 5. In M. Gittin 5:4, the rule is laid down minus the words *mipnei tikkun ha-olam*, which appear in the Tosefta; cf. Gemara 53a. The underlying principle is “a person is forever forewarned” (M. Baba Kama 2:6).

²⁶ Gittin 53a.

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of other areas. Its initial application was limited; its potential, however, was limitless.

II

Then something strange happened: the concept seems to disappear; the term slips out of sight. We search through the liturgy and find no reference anywhere to *tikkun ha-olam*. Indeed, the verb *tikkun* or its variants is found only a handful of times in all the prayers and liturgy.²⁷ But in the third century CE it does reappear in the well-known *Aleinu* prayer attributed to Rav, one of the architects of the Babylonian Talmud, or to his school of liturgists. We read there:

We therefore hope in You, O Lord our God that we may speedily see Your glorious power, when all the abominations will be removed from the earth and all the idols will be abolished; when the world will be mended and improved under the kingship of the Almighty, and all creatures will call upon Your name and the wicked will turn to You.²⁸

The syntax is difficult but the meaning seems clear: We pray that God will establish his kingship so that the world might be mended and healed and idolatry might disappear (*le-taken olam be-malkhut Shaddai*). This popular prayer that ends each of the three daily services ever since the fourteenth century is well known by most Jews and is sung lustily to a familiar tune. But it introduced an eschatological theme to the service and invested the notion of *tikkun ha-olam* with a totally new

²⁷ The verb is found in *Hashkiveinu*, the second paragraph after the evening *Shema* ("and correct us through Your good counsel"); the first paragraph, *Emet Ve-Yatziv*, after the morning *Shema* ("True and certain . . . beautiful and acceptable"); *El Adon*, from the Sabbath morning service ("He completed the sphere of the Moon"); the Festival *Musaf* ("and gladden us in the restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem"); and *Akdmut*, an eleventh-century *piyyut* for Shavuot ("He will prepare a meal for the righteous"). It also appears in the fourth of the Seven Wedding Blessings: "and He constructed [*ve-hitkin*] for him from himself a perpetual structure" (alluding to the construction of Eve from Adam's rib in Gen. 2:21–23; see Ketubot 8a). It is also found in the second paragraph of the Sephardic version of *Birkat Ha-Mazon* (grace after meals).

²⁸ *Aleinu* is of uncertain origin. There are two distinct parts to the prayer. Gershom Scholem has published texts indicating that *Aleinu* was authored by the early mystics of the Merkabah School in the third century. See his *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1960), 27ff., 105–6. Sometime around 1300 it was incorporated into the daily service and was sung by martyrs in Blois and elsewhere as they faced death. See Stefan Reif, *Judaism and Hebrew Prayer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 208–9 and 383 nn. 4–5. The translation of "*le-taken olam be-malkhut Shaddai*" is difficult. Most modern prayer books translate it: "To perfect the world under the kingdom of the Almighty." But the verb *t-k-n* means, as we have seen, "to fix, mend, improve."

connotation: God, rather than humans, will repair the world. The Talmudic sense of the word was *this-worldly*; the liturgical is *other-worldly*.²⁹

Both applications of the concept are found in rabbinic writings of the early middle ages, although the full phrase is rarely detected. Moralists such as Solomon ibn Gabirol wrote of “the improvement of human virtues.”³⁰ Yehudah Halevi described the process of how God “fashioned the human souls with the primordial light.”³¹ Maimonides wondered, “What is the remedy for the person who is morally ill?” (*takkanat holi ha-nefesh*). His prescription is such a person must consult scholars who are doctors of the soul that they might heal his moral illness by teaching him so that they might lead him back to the good path.³²

At the same time, jurists in the middle ages applied the verb *t-k-n* to legislation. The legislative process and the authority of sages to pass *takkanot* derived from the notion that the welfare of the community or the common good mandates such action. Maimonides based the authority of the sages to legislate on the Deuteronomy verse “You shall act in accordance with the instructions given you and the ruling handed down to you.”³³ “This refers to the *takkanot* and *gezeirot* and customs that the sages teach the masses in order to strengthen the religion and improve society” (*le-takken ha-olam*).³⁴ The mass of medieval ordinances and legislation derives from this principle. Curiously, the term *tikkun ha-olam* is not used; rather, the principles cited to justify

²⁹ See Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, trans. R. Scheindlin (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1993), 71ff., 119–120, 220. Joseph Heinemann argued convincingly that *Aleinu* is very ancient and was placed in the *Malkhuyot* section of the *Musaf* service on Rosh Hashanah in Temple days. He also suggested that *Aleinu* was one of those beloved prayers that were inserted in various places in the liturgy out of popular demand. See his *Ha-Tefillah be-Tekufat Ha-Tanaim ve-Ha-Amoraim* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1964), 173ff., and *Iyunei Tefillah* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1981), 51. Ezra Fleisher has found complete texts of *Aleinu* for Rosh Hashanah in the *Genizah* mss. See his *Tefillah u-Minhagei Tefillah Eretz Yisraelim be-Tekufat ha-Genizah* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988), 127, 129, and 239.

³⁰ Solomon ibn Gabirol, *Sefer Tikkun Midot Ha-Nefesh*, ed. and trans. Yaakov Blobstein, Noah Baron, and Avraham Zifroni (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, n.d.), 7 and 30.

³¹ Quoted by Nahmanides in his *Responsa*, in *Kol Kitvei Ramban*, ed. Charles Chavel (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1963), 1:385, and also in his Torah Commentary on Deut. 11:22. The source seems to be a *piyyut* by Halevi, *borchi nafshi*, recited before the *Neilah* service on Yom Kippur.

³² Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Deot* 2:1–2.

³³ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Mamrim* 2:1–2 (based on Deut. 17:11 and Rosh Hashanah 25a–b), and *Introduction to the Mishneh Commentary*, trans. Yosef Kafah (Jerusalem: Rambam La-Am, 5723), 12. See *Sefer Ha-Hinukh*, attributed to Aaron of Barcelona, ed. Charles Chavel (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 5712), 607 n. 492.

³⁴ For Nahmanides’s use of the term, see his commentary on Isaiah 52–53 in *Kol Kitvei Ramban*, 1:325.

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legislative action are *takkanat ha-kahal*, *takkanat ha-yishuv*, *takkanat maa-seh ha-medinah*, or *takkanat ha-rabim*—the public good or the well-being of the community.³⁵ In fact, the term is used sparingly in the vast Responsa literature, as I have determined from a study of several hundred *teshuvot*. Invariably, when the respondents cite the principle, they do so in connection with the Talmudic discussion about the need for witnesses to sign a *get*. They quote the Talmudic discussion where the principle is invoked; they almost never utilize it to decide a contemporary issue.

Occasionally, some decisors cited the principle in addressing a contemporary need. Rabbi Solomon ibn Adret (Rashba, Spain, 1235–1310) utilized the principle in ruling that local custom, not Torah law, determines the method of tax collection so that people are required to pay their assessment even before a legal ruling on the matter has been handed down, “for the betterment of the community.”³⁶ Rabbi Yom Tov Asbili (Ritva, Spain, c. 1250–1330) cited Nahmanides, who allowed the testimony of witnesses who were related to the litigants and who normally are invalid rather than import witnesses from afar, “in order to improve society.”³⁷ Rabbi Jacob Weil (Germany, fifteenth century) invoked the principle of *tikkun ha-olam* in ruling that a person who insults another must apologize publicly “for the sake of the public good and in order to stem controversies.”³⁸ Rabbi Benjamin Ze’ev (Turkey and Venice, sixteenth century) decided that it is permissible to liquidate a *moser* (traitor) because of the principle of *takkanat yishuv ha-olam*.³⁹ But these are remarkably few exceptions to the phenomenon that a potentially broadly applicable principle of law was essentially ignored for centuries by jurists and codifiers.

If the legal application of *tikkun ha-olam* was all but ignored, the spiritual-eschatological interpretation was equally shunned and was only occasionally cited. In *Sefer Hasidim*, for example, we read that “a person who commits adultery and seeks to repent so that he might repair the moral damage [*le-taken me-uvat*], must immerse himself up to his nose in an icy river in the winter or in an ant hill in the summer; if in the fall or spring, he must fast and eat only bread and water in the evening.”⁴⁰

³⁵ See Elon, *Ha-Mishpat Ha-Ivri*, 1:367ff.; Louis Finkelstein, *Jewish Self-Government in the Middle Ages* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1964), 125, 138, 282.

³⁶ Rashba, *Responsa*, 2:277 and 3:398.

³⁷ Ritva, *Responsa*, 131.

³⁸ Jacob Weil, *Responsa*, 145 and 152.

³⁹ Benjamin Ze’ev, *Responsa*, 286.

⁴⁰ Reuven Margoliot, ed., *Sefer Hasidim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 5717), 171ff., par. 167.

In messianic discussions, as we might expect, the eschatological nuance was stressed. Maimonides discussed the meaning of the messianic era in his *Code*, where he wrote: “All the achievements and events in the lives of Jesus and Muhammad who came after him were designed to smooth the way for the king messiah and to prepare the entire world [*le-takken et ha-olam*] to worship the Lord.”⁴¹ At the same time, Nahmanides (Spain, 1194–1270) rarely used the verb or the term and when he did, it means either the calculation of the coming of the messiah or the role of the suffering messiah in repairing the damage caused by sinful humanity.⁴² In short, the eschatological meaning of the phrase *tikkun ha-olam* is scarcely seen in the early medieval writings of legalists and moralists.

III

All of this changed, however, with the advent of the Zohar and the new system of Kabbalah that appeared in the thirteenth century in Spain as a consequence of the writings and impact of Rabbi Moses de Leon (d. 1305). The Zohar frequently uses the term *tikkun*, in a variety of contexts, to mean “repair,” “restoration,” or “amendment.” In the words of Isaiah Tishby, “it becomes a central concept in the history of Kabbalah.”⁴³ More significantly, the Zohar views every human act as of cosmic importance so that when humans perform *mitzvot*, engage in prayer and Torah study, and observe the festivals of the calendar year, they help unite the *sefirot*, the ten emanations of the Divine, and restore the world to its pristine state, ending all divisions so that all existence is united with God. Human actions in bringing about the *tikkun* in the supernal world cause the Divine effulgence to flow down to earth in what Scholem described as “draw-down theology.”⁴⁴ The act of *tikkun* opens the supernal source of influence, causing it to flow down from one level to the next, thereby radiating bliss throughout the sefirotic system. The *Shekhinah* enables it to reach all areas of existence down to the lowest creatures.⁴⁵

For example, by performing *mitzvot*, Israel accomplishes the *tikkun* that unites the *sefirot* of *Tiferet* (God) and *Malkhut* (*Shekhinah*), which then radiate blessings to all.⁴⁶ In prayer, the worshiper “restores himself

⁴¹ *Mishneh Torah* (uncensored version), *Melakhim* 11:4.

⁴² Nahmanides, *Kol Kitvei Ramban, Sefer Geulah*, 1:291; *Torat Ha-Shem Temimah*, 1:144.

⁴³ Isaiah Tishby, *Mishnat Ha-Zohar*, 3 vols., (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1961), 2:261, 3:955ff.

⁴⁴ Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), 176ff.

⁴⁵ Zohar 1:207b–208a, 243b–244a.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 2:201b, 215b, 3:113b.

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[*tikkun*], restores this world, restores the world above through the heavenly hosts, and restores the holy name through the mystery of the holy chariot and the mystery of all the worlds above and below with the proper kind of restoration.”⁴⁷ The recitation of significant prayers such as the *Shema*, *Amidah*, and *Hallel* and of particular psalms helps restore the sefirotic system to balance. Public prayer in the synagogue is particularly effective in the process of *tikkun*; consequently, the synagogue should be a “replica of the supernal Temple in all of its beauty and esthetics so that the house of prayer might achieve true *tikkunim* [and unite the *Shekhinah* with its husband, *Tiferet*].”⁴⁸

Interestingly, the Zohar considered incense used in the Temple of Jerusalem as even more effective in the *tikkun* process than prayer because it “restored and recreated bonds and caused a supernal light to illuminate more effectively, removing the pollution of sin and purifying the sanctuary so that all is illuminated, restored [*nitkan*], and bound together.”⁴⁹ Similarly, the sacrifices brought in the Temple achieved *tikkun* in the world and brought joy to heavenly and earthly creatures alike.⁵⁰

Sin causes the Divine letters of the Tetragrammaton to separate. “What helps unite them? The study of Torah because the very word Torah contains the four letters of the sacred Name.”⁵¹ In like fashion, the act of *teshuvah*, repentance, remakes a human being by removing his or her flaws caused by sin, “repairs the flaw in the supernal world and achieves *tikkun* for all: on high, down below, for the individual who repents, and the entire world.”⁵²

The function of the Sabbath and festivals in affecting *tikkun* is also stressed in the Zohar as this passage clearly indicates: “All week long you work, but now, on these holy days, I invite an exalted and honored guest and I do not want you to work or labor or engage in commerce. Rather, ready yourselves just as My sacred days prepare themselves [to unite *Tiferet* with *Malkhut*] and prepare yourselves [*hatkinu*] to receive the guest with a cheery countenance, with joy and praise, and prepare special meals for him.”⁵³

The Zohar bestows special importance on the festival of Shavuot, because, on that occasion, God gave the Torah to Israel. Consequently, the scholars are to stay awake all night and engage in Torah study so

⁴⁷ Ibid. 2:138b, 215b, 3:126a.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 2:59b–60a (*Raya Mehemna*), 213b, 259b, 3:263a (*Raya Mehemna*).

⁴⁹ Ibid. 2:218b–219b.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 1:243b–244a.

⁵¹ Ibid. 3:110a (*Raya Mehemna*).

⁵² Ibid. 3:122a–b.

⁵³ Ibid. 3:94a–b.

that the *Shekhinah* may unite with her husband, *Tiferet*, thereby uniting the written and oral Torah into one entity. “Let the scholars spend all night with the bride and help make her happy and adorn her with her appropriate adornments [*tikkuneha*],” because all of the “new interpretations of Torah by the scholars adorn her as she prepares to enter the marital canopy with all her attending maidens so that she is beautified thereby and rejoices in them all that night.”⁵⁴

In summation, the Zohar introduced a startlingly new meaning to the concept of *tikkun*: the actions of humans repair the flaws in the universe, reunite the various *sefirot*, and help restore the cosmic balance.⁵⁵ *Tikkun ha-olam*, repair of this world by rabbinic sages and judges has been displaced or superseded by mystical *tikkun olamot*, other-worldly repair of worlds.

IV

Rabbi Moses Cordovero of Safed (1522–70) developed these kabbalistic theories in his various writings. For example, in his *The Palm Tree of Deborah*, he demonstrated how each of the *sefirot* might be perfected, restored, rectified (*tikkun*) by human deeds and thoughts in the light of the qualities each *sefirah* reveals. The actions we humans perform in the lower world affect and perfect the upper worlds in the same pattern.⁵⁶ But Rabbi Isaac Luria, the reclusive and saintly mystic of Safed, took this theory to new heights.

Isaac Luria (1534–72) knew and read the works of Cordovero, whom he met personally in Safed.⁵⁷ Since he wrote down virtually nothing of his teachings and preaching, we must depend primarily on his faithful disciple, Rabbi Haim Vital (1543–1620) for a report of his message. Luria taught that when God created the universe he contracted his glory cracking the vessels and displacing the *sefirot*. Additionally, holy sparks were left embedded in the *kelipah* (shell) of sin. It is the human task and mission to redeem those holy sparks and lift them on high to restore them to their source. This is achieved through observance of *mitzvot* and righteous actions so that the ultimate redemption depends on human performance. Rabbi Vital records that Luria taught

⁵⁴ Ibid. 1:8a.

⁵⁵ See Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 3rd ed. (New York: Schocken, 1954), 273ff., and *Sabbatai Sevi*, 2 vols. (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1957), 1:223ff., 2:732ff.

⁵⁶ Moses Cordovero, *The Palm Tree of Deborah*, ed. and trans. Louis Jacobs (New York: Hermon Press, 1974), 91ff.

⁵⁷ See Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), for a splendid summary of Luria's life and teachings. David Arnow called this book to my attention.

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that “Israel has been dispersed in the Diaspora to gather the holy sparks and return them to heaven via Torah and righteous deeds. Since humanity created the problem of sin through Adam’s sin, it is up to humanity to repair that sin via deeds.” In fact, the largest part of Lurianic Kabbalah is devoted to this process of *tikkun*.⁵⁸

Shortly after the *sefirot* were displaced by the act of creation, *Adam Kadmon*, the supernal anthropos or primordial man, the source of all souls, committed the original sin, causing the souls of the exalted to mingle with those of the lowly leaving the residue of *kelipah* in all souls. Consequently, all human souls struggle through the process of *gilgulim*, transmigration or metempsychosis, to return to their original pristine state in the soul of *Adam Kadmon*. Israel is scattered in the *galut* (Diaspora) to gather the holy sparks and souls of the exalted ones and purify them so that “when all are repaired [*nigmeru kulan te-tikkun*] good is separated from evil and the messiah will arrive.”⁵⁹ Luria believed that it is possible to evaluate a person’s soul, determine what level of *gilgul* has been achieved and how to repair the soul through prayers and oaths and thereby end the *gilgulim*. In a word, the process of *tikkun* in the lower world achieves two goals: the repair of the cosmos and community and the repair of the individual soul.⁶⁰ “The Gnostic character of Lurianic cosmogony,” notes Scholem, is “one of the greatest paradoxes in the entire history of Judaism.”⁶¹ Be that as it may, the great novelty of the Lurianic approach to *tikkun* is that it elevates the role of human beings far beyond that envisioned by the Talmudic sages who devised the concept. It is now within the hands of every man and woman to lift the sparks and redeem the supernal and lower worlds by our own actions. The Lurianic notion of *tikkun*, writes Joseph Dan, is “the most powerful idea ever presented in Jewish thought,” expressing, as it does, an intense messianic endeavor of cosmic dimensions, covering all aspects of individual and ethical life.⁶²

Lurianic Kabbalah swiftly captured the minds and hearts of theolo-

⁵⁸ See Haim Vital, *Sefer Ha-Gilgulim* (ed. Frankfurt), introduction, chap. 2, 3, and chap. 11, 21a. The bulk of his enormous *Etz Hayim* deals with *tikkun* while his *Peri Etz Hayim* applies his theories to the prayer and festival rituals. See *Peri Etz Hayim*, “*Shaar Ha-Tefillah*,” (Koretz, 1836), chap. 1, 1a ff., and *Shaar Ha-Gilgulim*, chap. 15, 16b. See Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 140–44, and *Sabbatai Sevi*, 1:37–66; Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 57.

⁵⁹ Haim Vital, *Sefer Ha-Gilgulim*, chap. 11, 20b–21a; *Peri Etz Hayim*, “*Shaar Ha-Tefillah*” chap. 6, 3b ff. Luria actually viewed 1575 as the messianic year, and his disciples considered him to be Messiah son of Joseph, a role Vital assumed after his master’s death in 1572.

⁶⁰ See Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, 150–86, for the various techniques Luria utilized.

⁶¹ See Scholem, *Major Trends*, 244–86.

⁶² Joseph Dan, *Jewish Mysticism and Jewish Ethics* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1986), 98.

gians and rabbis; it became, in the words of Dan, “the national theology for Judaism for several generations.”⁶³ New *mitzvot* and festival practices were introduced as well as *tikkunim* in the hope that they might quicken the worshiper’s soul along its *gilgulim* and also hasten the redemption through the messiah.⁶⁴ Even Rabbi Joseph Karo (1488–1575) was swept up in the tide. In his introduction to his commentary on Maimonides’s *Mishneh Torah*, he wrote that study of the *Mishneh Torah* would be a *tikkun le-khol ha-olam* (a restoration for all the world), as well as for the student who peruses the work (*ve-gam lo hu tikkun*).⁶⁵ Karo, who was a passionate mystic, believed the spirit of the Mishnah, the so-called *Maggid Mishnah*, spoke to him at night, instructing him in the means of *tikkun* for his soul as well as that of others.⁶⁶ Various mystics, including Solomon Alkabetz (c. 1505–84) and Moses Alshekh (died after 1593), expounded on the value of *tikkunim* in shortening the painful process of *gilgulim* that must precede the coming of the messiah. The sixteenth century was permeated with a sense of sin in the wake of the Iberian tragedy; hence, there arose the keen need to atone for the primordial sin via *tikkun*.⁶⁷

Two great theologians built on the foundation laid by Luria and his circle. The first, Rabbi Judah ben Bezalel Loew of Prague, better known as the Maharal (c. 1525–1609), discusses the two Torahs that Israel has received. The first is the written Torah that God gave through the agency of Moses. The second is the Torah of the sages that is actually a Torah in itself. This latter Torah consists of *takkanot*

⁶³ Ibid., 103.

⁶⁴ Fine argues that too much attention is paid to Luria’s cosmogony and not enough to his ritual innovations that were designed to achieve *tikkun* of the soul and shorten the *gilgul* process. See Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, 150–258. Luria developed his own liturgical pattern (*Nusah Ari*), introduced the *Kabbalat Shabbat* service, wrote various *tikkunim* prayers and fashioned a ritual for midnight prayers and study called, *tikkun hatzot*. Vital devotes an entire chapter of his *Peri Etz Hayim* to midnight rituals (“*Shaar Tikkun Hatzot*,” 72b ff.). See Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken, 1965), 118–57, and *Sabbatai Sevi*, 1:37–66. Compare Moshe Idel, *Messianic Mystics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 308–20, who denies that the midnight rituals began with Luria but claims rather that they existed long before and challenges the view of Scholem that these new rituals were connected with the acute messianic yearnings.

⁶⁵ See Joseph Karo, *Kesef Mishneh*, on Maimonides’s introduction to his *Mishneh Torah*.

⁶⁶ See Karo, *Magid Mishnah*, 14b.2, cited by R. J. Z. Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo, Lawyer and Mystic* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1977), 112, 240ff. Karo viewed *gilgul* as spiritual growth and *tikkun* as the process of “repairing omissions or flaws [*tikkun ha-pegam*].”

⁶⁷ See Alshekh, *Torat Moshe* on Gen. 3:19, where he writes, “to purge the filth injected in humanity by the serpent, humans must repair themselves.” Likewise, Eleazar Azikri (c. 1533–1600), in his *Sefer Haredim* (Lemberg, 1862; esp. the end of chap. 4), prescribes a variety of *tikkunim* to purge that primordial filth and repair the damage to the soul, such as care not to waste semen, spreading peace throughout the community, reciting prayers and blessings daily, battling sexual licentiousness, remaining humble, increasing righteousness, and defending Israel.

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(ordinances) and *gezeirot* (prohibitions) legislated by the sages. The prohibitive ordinances are designed “to keep this people, Israel, separate from the impurity of other nations especially by perfecting the food it consumes because food is essential for the perfection [*tikkun*] of humans.”⁶⁸ Maharal notes that the power of the sages to legislate flows from the verse in Deuteronomy 17:11 empowering them to use their discretion, and he cites the Talmudic statement of Ulla that “before King Solomon arrived on the scene, the Torah was like a basket lacking handles. Solomon passed legislation that placed handles on the basket.”⁶⁹ Moreover, legislation of the sages adds stability to the law thereby improving society. In a word, legislation “improves [*tikkun*] the society by fashioning laws regulating relations between a human and his fellow creatures, by improving the words of the written Torah and by affecting patterns of behavior.”⁷⁰

Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz, more popularly known as Shelah (c. 1560–1630), viewed the goal of all the *mitzvot* and subsequent legislation of the sages as “the repair of the world and the assurance of its continuation [*tikkun kiyyum ha-olam*].” *Tikkun* is directed toward three goals: the repair of the flaws in the world from creation, the perfection of humans, and the repair of the primordial sin of Adam and purging of the pollution injected by the serpent into Eve in Eden.⁷¹

v

In its next permutation, the idea of *tikkun* took an ominous and even lethal turn in the phenomenon of the messianic movement that swirled around Shabbatai Zevi. The prophet of the Shabbatai movement, Nathan of Gaza, expounded on the Lurianic ideas of the power of *tikkun*. But whereas Luria placed the challenge before all Israel, Nathan of Gaza taught that only the messiah could assume that task and extract holy sparks from the deepest recesses of the *kelipah*. The messiah will achieve *devekut* (intense cleaving to the divine) so that he will raise the outer side of the world, an accomplishment beyond ordinary mortals. Nathan borrowed the teaching of Vital, the “holy fraud,” which meant that if the soul is exceedingly holy, it is impossible to save it from the *kelipah* except by cunning and ruse, a notion that played such an im-

⁶⁸ *Derekh Hayim* on Avot 1:2; *Kitvei Maharal*, ed. Abraham Kariv, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 5744), 2:14ff.

⁶⁹ Eruvin 21b and Yevamot 21a.

⁷⁰ *Hiddushei Aggadot* on Yevamot 21b; *Perush Maharal Le-Aggadot Ha-Shas*, ed. H. Honig, 4 vols. (London: Honig & Sons, 1960), 1:129ff.

⁷¹ *Shnei Lufot Ha-Berit* (Jerusalem, 5753), 5:21–23.

portant role in the conversion of Shabbatai to Islam. Shabbatai himself evidently believed that *tikkun* meant the uniting of individuals formerly separated from God due to sins for which excision is the prescribed punishment, so that symbolically the law returns to its essences of pure spirituality leading to subsequent abolition of all prohibitions. This was the mystical rationale for his eating prohibited fat and committing other sins. In short, the messiah replaces Israel as the vehicle for redemption. Whereas Luria's system of *tikkun* meant that the devoted efforts of Israel to mend the world would bring the messiah, the Shabbatean heresy insisted that only the messiah could bring about the complete *tikkun*, the redemption of the last holy sparks from the recesses of the *kelipah*.⁷²

The Shabbatean heresy bequeathed a legacy of bitter controversy and sharp recriminations. Not a few of the sages and rabbis, mystics and kabbalists in Europe and the Middle East were accused of Shabbatean sympathies. This led to witch hunts and excommunications. One of those who suffered deeply because of this backlash was the great Hebrew poet, philosopher, moralist, and kabbalist Rabbi Moses Hayyim Luzzatto of Padua (1707–47). Luzzatto, whom many consider one of the fathers of the modern Hebrew renaissance, was accused of being a follower of Shabbatai Zevi and even fancying himself as the messiah. Consequently, many of his writings were either destroyed or lost, and Luzzatto and his family were driven into exile in Acre where they all perished in the plague of 1747. But enough of his writings survive to offer us an ample picture of his understanding of *tikkun*.

Luzzatto deals with *tikkun* on two levels: the ethical-moral and the theosophic. On the moral level, Luzzatto writes of the traits of our character that need improvement and training, wondering “who will improve and cultivate them for us, if we ourselves pay no attention to them nor scrutinize them carefully?” To walk in God's ways, suggests the author, includes everything that makes for uprightness and for the improvement (*tikkunim*) of character. “It is that course which leads to the achievement of the true good, namely, zeal for the Torah and the improvement of social relations.”⁷³

His theosophic understanding of what he describes as *tikkuno shel olam* derives from the teachings of Luria and his school. Evil came to this world in the wake of Adam's sin; the struggle to subdue sin and exalt good is ongoing. “The summary of all is that there is destruction and repair [*tikkun*] and from the destruction comes the ‘other side’

⁷² Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, 1:30ff., 223, 235–40; Idel, *Kabbalah*, 57 and 300.

⁷³ Moses Hayyim Luzzatto, *Yalkut Yediat Ha-Emet*, 2:311, and *Mesilat Yesharim*, ed. M. M. Kaplan (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1948), 5, 7–8.

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[i.e., sin] which by *tikkun* can be subdued and completely destroyed.” If the *tikkun* is complete, he writes, then there will be no future “other side.” But the world’s *tikkun* depends on human actions: if human actions are effective, the *tikkun* is complete and the flaws in creation are corrected. *Tikkun* is achieved through deed and thought and the sacred books of the Jews, especially the Zohar, are the means to *tikkun* for eternity.⁷⁴

Luzzatto assigns a very significant role to Israel, which he describes as “God’s partners in affecting the repair needed to bring completion to creation” and restoring it to pristine harmony. When Israel accepts God’s kingship, it adds *tikkun* upon *tikkun*, defeating the forces of evil, assisting the transmigration of all souls, and “leading to the ultimate completion and perfection.”⁷⁵ The *tzaddik* (saintly leader) fulfills a special mission in accomplishing the *tikkun ha-shalem* (complete restoration) by “repairing the creation and removing all separation between God and humans.” This doctrine was to form a crucial component of Hasidic belief not long after Luzzatto’s death.⁷⁶ Finally, Israel can hasten the coming of the messiah by expressing their love for him and lifting the world to greater heights. The messiah will bring the great *tikkun* of body and soul that is essential for the repair of the world corrupted by Adam’s sin, end the painful transmigration of souls, and restore the world and the *sefirot* to their primordial state of perfection.⁷⁷

VI

The Hasidic movement borrowed elements of the teachings of the Lurianic circle, concepts preached by Nathan of Gaza, earlier kabbalistic ideas, as well as the insights of Moses Hayyim Luzzatto. Scholem has advanced the view that early Hasidism “neutralized” the messianic concept in reaction to the Shabbatai Zevi fiasco, and replaced the idea of *tikkun* with *devekut* (cleaving to God, communion with the Deity) at the

⁷⁴ Moses Hayyim Luzzatto, *Yalkut Yediat Ha-Emet*, 2:332; *Daat Tevunot*, ed. C. Friedlander, trans. S. Silverstein (New York: Feldheim, 1982), 208ff.; *Adir Ba-Marom* (Warsaw, 1859), 21ff.

⁷⁵ Moses Hayyim Luzzatto, *Derekh Ha-Shem* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1960), 81, 157ff.; *Daat Tevunot*, 16, 130–132, 212, 278ff.; *Yalkut Yediat Ha-Emet*, 2:332; *Adir Ba-Marom*, 6–7.

⁷⁶ Moses Hayyim Luzzatto, *Adir Ba-Marom*, 14, 21, 26; *Daat Tevunot*, 284ff.

⁷⁷ Moses Hayyim Luzzatto, *Adir Ba-Marom*, 17–18, 21ff. Luzzatto, like Luria and Karo before him, also heard a *maggid* who revealed secrets to him and evidently encouraged his messianic fancies. See M. Benayahu, ed., *Kitvei Ha-Kabbalah shel Ramhal* (Jerusalem: Menahem Press, 1979), 211ff.

center of its theology.⁷⁸ The term *tikkun ha-olam* almost never appears in Hasidic writings and certainly not in its legal sense. Instead, the Hasidic writers and preachers are fond of using the term *tikkun* or its plural, *tikkunim*, by which they usually mean the healing or improvement of one's soul, repairing the supernal world, and elevating the souls of our departed. Hasidism removed *tikkun* from the Lurianic myth so that humans must no longer be concerned with the breaking and repair of the broken divine vessels but rather with the correction of the human being within his or her own soul. *Tikkun* and *shevirah* are now interpreted in psychological terms; they are viewed as psychological phenomena.⁷⁹

Rabbi Hayim Haykl of Amdur (d. 1787), for example, wrote that humans may arrive at the *tikkun* and higher spiritual attainment if they do not surrender to the lawlessness of the world of psychological "breaking" but are able to lift themselves up by the light that is in their soul. He adds that the breaking in the world was necessary so that there might be a *tikkun* for humans.⁸⁰ Similarly, Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezhirech (d. 1772) declared that "the act of breaking was needed in the world, for if each thing and attribute were attached to its source and were as nothing in its eyes, then all the world could not exist." Consequently, humans elevate the sparks of the World of Action.⁸¹

Hasidism fashioned its notion of *tikkun* and assigned singular prominence to the *tzaddik* in that process. Whereas Lurianic Kabbalah taught that we are to avoid evil, Hasidism insisted that we must confront it head-on so as to lift and purify it and return it to its divine origin. The *tzaddik* is essential to this process; his *devekut*, his prayers,

⁷⁸ See Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1971), 178–202; Martin Buber, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 107–16. Idel dissents vigorously from their views. See his "Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem on Hasidism: A Critical Appraisal," in *Hasidism Reappraised*, ed. Ada Rappaport-Albert (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1996), 389–403, and also *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 16–17 and 45ff.

⁷⁹ See Yoram Jacobson, *Hasidic Thought* (Tel Aviv: MOD Books, 1998), 55ff.; Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1993), 120ff. Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezhirech, in his *Maggid Devarav le-Yaakov*, ed. R. Schatz-Uffenheimer (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1976), 126–27, sec. 73, and in *Or Ha-Emet* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 5720), 36a, reworked Lurianic theories of *shevirah* and *tikkun* as psychological phenomena, as Schatz-Uffenheimer indicates. See, too, Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, *Kedushat Levi* (ed. Jerusalem, 5718), *Toledot*, 43b.

⁸⁰ *Hayim va-Hesed* on Daniel, chap. 12, 122, cited by Schatz-Uffenheimer, 210. See, too, Joseph Weiss, *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1985), 142–54. The early Hasidic masters were fond of speaking of *tikkun ha-beriah* (repairing the creation) and *tikkun ha-nefashot* (repairing the souls). See Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 334 n. 71.

⁸¹ Dov Baer, *Or Ha-Emet*, 36a, cited in Schatz-Uffenheimer, 121.

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his daily *tikkunim*, his spiritual exercises, his *kavvanot* (intentions, meditations), his good deeds, his intercessions for the people with God—all of these activities benefit Jews throughout the world and could usher in the coming of the messiah. In every generation, a cadre of *tzaddikim* performs the necessary spiritual exercises and serves as intermediaries between humans and God.⁸² Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezhirech, in describing the role of the various *tzaddikim*, stated that “when the *tzaddik* performs *mitzvot* and good deeds thereby elevating the sparks in mineral, vegetable, animal and human realms, God has great love for these deeds. But the complete *tikkun* will take place at the time of the coming of the messiah, as it is written in Isaiah (11:9), ‘For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the Lord.’”⁸³

Sadly, the notion of the *tzaddik* could be misinterpreted and misapplied, and more than one *tzaddik* was viewed as at least a potential messiah. There are those among the Lubavitcher Hasidim today who view the late Rabbi Schneerson as the messiah even though he has been dead since 1994.⁸⁴

Special spiritual exercises were developed by the Hasidim to aid in the *tikkun* process. Prayers and *kavvanot* were inserted and Luria’s *nusah* (liturgical pattern) was adopted; midnight prayer sessions, already employed by Luria’s circle, became popular; the recitation of specific psalms for special occasions or to eradicate specific sins and the study of particular books or texts were prescribed for the Hasidim.⁸⁵ Rabbi

⁸² Dov Baer writes of a “magical unity with God that is able to alter His will.” See *Or Ha-Emet*, 12a, and Weiss, *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism*, 183–93. On Nahman of Bratslav’s conception of the function of a *tzaddik*, see his *Shivhei Maharanim* (Frampol, 1913), secs. 17–18, 10ff., where he speaks of himself as “the true leader and *tzaddik* of the generation, unique in the world, without any leader like me”; Arthur Green, *Tormented Master: A Life of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav* (New York: Schocken, 1981), 116–23, 218–20; Rappaport-Albert, *Hasidism Reappraised*, 113 nn. 125 and 135.

⁸³ Dov Baer, *Maggid Devarav Le-Yaakov*, sec. 68, 114–15. See Norman Lamm, *The Religious Thought of Hasidism* (Hoboken, NJ: Yeshiva University Press; distributed by Ktav, 1999), 559–60. Hayim of Amdur wrote: “The *tzaddik* raises the 22 letters of creation and joins them to the Holy One giving God pleasure so that He then pours His presence on the world.” See his *Hayim va-Hesed* (Warsaw, 1929), 120. See, too, Green, *Tormented Master*, 118ff.; Joseph Dan, *Jewish Mysticism*, 4 vols., (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aaronson, 1999), 4:111–30, who cites sources indicating that the *tzaddik* is both a channel between God and humanity and an intermediary confessor for sins, and *The Teachings of the Hasidim* (Springfield, NJ: Behrman House, 1983), 80ff.

⁸⁴ On the current messianic cult centered about the late Rabbi Schneerson, see David Berger, *The Rebbe, the Messiah and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2001).

⁸⁵ *Tikkun Hatzot*, midnight prayers, developed by Luria, became popular with the Baal Shem Tov, Shneur Zalman of Liady, Aaron of Karlin and others, and Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav selected special psalms and prayers for the occasion, “to repair sin and to repair the flaw in the covenant.” See Green, *Tormented Master*, 183ff. Elliot Horowitz detects a connection be-

Nahman of Bratslav (d. 1814) recommended the study of the *Shulhan Arukh* because “it provides a great *tikkun*, purifying all the impairments one has caused by his sins . . . and it enables us to distinguish between good and evil, which is the essence of all *tikkunim*.”⁸⁶ Humility and stoic acceptance of suffering are traits that help achieve *tikkun* of the soul. Even the mundane acts of eating, drinking, and walking can achieve spiritual goals. The Baal Shem Tov (d. 1760) is reported to have taught: “When you make use of a utensil or eat a particular food, even for the sake of your body, you repair [*tikkun*] its sparks. They are repaired when you use the strength derived from the food, clothing or other things to serve God. . . . When people eat, drink and utilize things, their main goal should be to absorb the sparks that exist in each thing.”⁸⁷

To be sure, Hasidism did not totally abandon some of the main premises of Lurianic Kabbalah. The idea that Israel’s mission is to repair the world is found in at least some of the Hasidic writings. The Gerer Rebbe (d. 1866) wrote that, “in truth, the children of Israel after the exodus from Egypt were created to repair the entire world and after they passed through the depths of the Sea of Reeds it was the Divine intention for them to serve as an iron wall to annul the bitterness of the wicked.”⁸⁸ Nor is the old rabbinic concept of *tikkun ha-olam* in the sense of social justice legislation totally absent. The Gerer Rebbe offered this notable comment in a Hanukkah sermon: “The words of the sages are like nails’ [Kohelet 12:11]. That is because the ordinances [*takkanot*] and commandments ordained by the Men of the Great Assembly are *tikkunim* for the soul of humanity and also *tikkunim* for the supernal world. They are nails below and embedded in the supernal root.”⁸⁹

The modern Musar movement created by Rabbi Israel Salanter (1810–83) was designed to revitalize Jewish ethical behavior that, in the eyes of Salanter and his followers, had been neglected by East Eu-

tween the midnight prayers and the newly developed coffeehouses in Western Europe. See his “Coffeehouses and the Nocturnal Ritual of Early Modern Jewry,” *Association of Jewish Studies Review* 14, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 17–46. The Baal Shem Tov urged *devekut* to God to expel extraneous thoughts during prayer as a means to *tikkun* of the Holy Spark in humans. See his *Keter Shem Tov* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1972), 15b n. 112. For Hasidic views on prayer, see Louis Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1993), esp. 126–39; Weiss, *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism*, 95–125.

⁸⁶ *Likkutei Eitzot* (Lemberg, 1867), “*Tabnud Torah*,” 85b–86a nn. 62–63; Green, *Tormented Master*, 183ff.

⁸⁷ Baal Shem Tov, *Tzavaat Ha-Besht* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1975), 19b. Nahman of Bratslav extolled the virtue of dancing as part of rituals. See *Shivhei Maharanim*, sec. 22, 8–11. See, too, Elliot R. Wolfson, “Walking as a Sacred Duty,” in Rappaport-Albert, *Hasidism Reappraised*, 180–207.

⁸⁸ *Sefat Emet*, Sukkot, n. 646.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, Hanukkah, n. 660.

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ropean Jews of the time, even in the yeshivah world.⁹⁰ Salanter, who held a pessimistic view of human nature, was not so much interested in repairing the world or improving society or rectifying the original flaws in the universe caused by creation. He was more concerned with correcting the flaws of the individual Jew, improving and refining his or her character, and creating better people. Rather than seeking *tikkun ha-olam*, a phrase he does not use, Salanter sought *tikkun ha-yetzer* (improving instincts) and *tikkun ha-midot* (improving moral traits), in the spirit of the medieval pietistic and ethical writers. “A human was not created to completely repair [*le-takken*] his inner forces,” he wrote, “but rather he must make a start by repairing his external forces as perfectly as possible until he has a powerful effect on his inner forces and then the Holy One will aid him in conquering once and for all his evil urge if he fails to do so on his own.”⁹¹

Similarly, Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, Salanter’s great-grandson (1892–1953), urged that we must serve God with great devotion and repent our sins out of love to achieve “the ultimate *tikkun* whereby evil is converted to good.” Dessler shared his illustrious ancestor’s low opinion of humanity, and he wrote that “the central axle of humanity is the repair of the original sin of Adam,” adding that “it is Israel’s role to return us to primordial Adam in the Garden of Eden so as to bring all of creation to perfection.” The repair of Adam’s sin (*tikkun het Adam ha-rishon*) implies “that humans must strive to rise above their arrogance in believing that they may rule totally over nature.”⁹²

VII

And then, the doctrine disappeared almost entirely, except in esoteric kabbalistic circles. Few wrote about *tikkun ha-olam* in the classic rabbinic sense outside of the walls of the various yeshivot. Then, quite suddenly, the concept reappears in the middle of the twentieth century. Martin Buber began to allude to the doctrine, without actually using the appropriate terminology. He wrote that the purpose of Israel and humanity is “the building of peace” and “the people of Israel was charged to lead the way to righteousness and justice.”⁹³ Elsewhere, he mused that inertia “is the root of all evil” and this implies that man is

⁹⁰ See Dov Katz, *Tenuat Ha-Musar*, 5 vols., (Tel Aviv: Avraham Zioni, 1967), esp. 1:245–310, for an overview of Salanter’s teachings.

⁹¹ See Mordecai Pechter, ed., *Kitvei Rabbi Yisrael Salanter* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1972), 127ff., 156, 171–73.

⁹² Eliyahu Dessler, *Mikhtav Me-Eliyahu* (Jerusalem: Society of Students of Rabbi Dessler, 1983), 3:151ff., 211ff.

⁹³ Martin Buber, *Israel and the World* (New York: Schocken, 1948), 185–87.

not allowed to be carried along “on the undirected swirl of passion” but for the direction of God. Evil is the shell or wrapping, the crust of the good, a shell that requires piercing. Man has been appointed to be a real partner in the dialogue with God in this process of piercing. In discussing messianism, Buber insisted, “so long . . . as the kingdom of God has not come, Judaism will not recognize any man as the true Messiah”; yet, it will never cease to expect redemption to come from man, “for it is man’s task on earth to establish God’s power on earth.”⁹⁴

Similarly, Abraham Joshua Heschel did not actually employ Lurianic terms even though they are implicit in much of his thinking and writing. He wrote that the Jewish messianic belief indicates that man’s power alone cannot achieve redemption and that “even the supreme human efforts must fail in redeeming the world.” Noting that Judaism teaches that man is a partner rather than a master in this world, Heschel suggested that, “man’s task is to make the world worthy of redemption. His faith and his works are preparation for ultimate redemption.”⁹⁵

The late Emil Fackenheim, Reform rabbi and philosopher, whose philosophical system is predicated on the view that the Holocaust is the defining moment in modern Jewish history, devoted much of his work to introducing the concept of *tikkun ha-olam* into Jewish philosophy. Indeed, one of his important books is titled *To Mend the World*. In it, Fackenheim wrote of the “rupture” created by the Holocaust and the need for *tikkun*. The rupture has affected the world at large as well as Christian-Jewish relations. For Jews to affect *tikkun*, they must recover Jewish tradition, that is, the word of God for religious Jews and the world of man for secular Jews. They must also strengthen and cherish the State of Israel, for that is part of the *tikkun* process. Second, recovery is analogous to recuperation from an illness: it takes time. Third, there is a fragmentariness that attaches to these recoveries making them forever incomplete. Fackenheim was very emphatic: “If un-mended, the rupture would haunt Jewish-gentile relations forever, even if learned professors could give absolute proof to the effect that a repetition is impossible.” Consequently, Jews must rebuild even if *tikkun* is fragmentary, precarious and incomplete for “*tikkun olam* depends on Jewish collective, particular response to history.”⁹⁶

Another Reform rabbi and theologian who has had a significant impact on Jewish thought in the twentieth century is Eugene Borowitz.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 18ff. See, too, his *On Judaism*, ed. Nahum Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1972), 110–11.

⁹⁵ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1955), 379–80.

⁹⁶ Emil Fackenheim, *To Mend The World* (New York: Schocken, 1982), 250–313.

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In his more recent writings, he, too, invokes the notion of *tikkun*. He notes that since the Holocaust the almost universal Jewish response has been “to act to frustrate its goals and prevent its repetition.” Negatively, that means opposing evil wherever one sees it; positively, it means fostering goodness. He adds that, “this form of *tikkun* has been the most important Jewish response to the Holocaust.”⁹⁷ Elsewhere he correctly analyzes the contemporary meaning of the concept, noting that “today’s *tikun olam* has little to or nothing to do with halakhic adjustments or mystical intentions. Rather, it summons us to Jewish ethical duty, most often of a universal cast—but in keeping with our intensified postmodern particularity, it legitimates this remnant of modernity by cloaking it in a classic Jewish term.”⁹⁸

Arthur Green, one of the leading contemporary experts on mysticism and Hasidism, notes that “in contemporary usage it [*tikkun ha-olam*] refers to the betterment of the world, including the relief of human suffering, the achievement of peace and mutual respect among peoples, and the protection of the planet from destruction.” He suggests that, for Jews to spread their most basic moral message, we must be “concerned with the welfare including the feeding, housing, and health of all” and that we pursue justice, close gaps in learning and opportunity, and protect resources and natural order. In short, this implies a program of “activism for political and social change.”⁹⁹

Among the modern Orthodox thinkers, Rabbi Irving Greenberg has espoused the notion of *tikkun ha-olam* most fervently and eloquently. He defines the state of *tikkun ha-olam* as “the arrival of the messianic kingdom—when the actual legal, political, social institutions in the world will be structured so that each human being will be sustained and treated as if he or she is an image of God.” But Greenberg argues that *tikkun ha-adam*, the improvement of humanity, is essential to this process; perfecting the human being must precede the making of the world whole. Jews have a special role to play in this process: “The whole system of *mitzvot* is dedicated to *tikkun ha-adam*. The halakhah is designed to bring out the fullness of life and to bring out the best in humans.” We Jews must be a “goading minority” and society’s conscience in attaining this goal.¹⁰⁰

Great Britain’s Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has taken up the theme

⁹⁷ Eugene Borowitz, *Studies in The Meaning of Judaism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002), 331.

⁹⁸ Eugene Borowitz, *Renewing the Covenant* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 50–51.

⁹⁹ Arthur Green, *These Are the Words* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1999), 175–76.

¹⁰⁰ Irving Greenberg, *Living in the Image of God* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aaronson, 1998), 69–78.

of *tikkun* in his most recent writings and statements. He writes that “there is no way of specifying in advance the way a life can be a model of *kiddush ha-Shem* or *tikkun olam*, of sanctifying God’s name or perfecting society. There are as many ways as there are human lives.”¹⁰¹

In a recent speech to an Orthodox Jewish body, he refined his premise, declaring that what stands before us is “the great challenge of *tikkun* that we, in a secular age, should become role models for spirituality” and that “we, in a relativistic age, should be able to teach people once again to hear the objective ‘Thou shalt’ and ‘Thou shalt not.’”¹⁰²

It is noteworthy that the contemporary religious movements in Judaism have taken up this theme and incorporated it into their pronouncements on social action. Indeed, for the Reform and Conservative groups, *tikkun olam* (as they phrase it) has become virtually synonymous with their social action agendas. This phenomenon did not become immediately apparent and the use of the classical term is a rather recent development. For example, the Reform movement did not utilize the phrase in its platforms of religious principles in 1885, 1937, and 1976.¹⁰³ However, the most recent reformulation of the “Ten Principles of Reform Judaism,” issued in 1999, revives the term unequivocally. There we read: “We bring Torah into the world when we strive to fulfill the highest ethical mandates in our relationships with others and with all of God’s creatures. Partners with God in *tikkun ‘olam*, repairing the world, we are called to help bring nearer the messianic age. . . . In doing so, we reaffirm social action and social justice as a central prophetic focus of traditional Reform belief and practices.”¹⁰⁴

The Reform movement has been in the forefront of liberal causes, including marches for racial justice and against racism, support of civil rights and the rights of labor, promoting nuclear disarmament, preserving the right of choice for a woman in abortion matters, opposing ecological degradation, and striving to repeal the death penalty. Many synagogues call their social actions committees “*tikkun olam* committees,” and the Reform movement’s North American Federation of Temple Youth supports a charitable drive called Tikkun Olam.

¹⁰¹ Jonathan Sacks, *Tradition in an Untraditional Age* (London: Valentine, Mitchell, 1990), 132. Sacks confuses the concept of *tikkun ha-olam* with *kiddush ha-Shem*.

¹⁰² Jonathan Sacks, speech to the West Coast Convention of the Union of Orthodox Congregations, December 1997.

¹⁰³ The texts are conveniently printed in Michael Meyers, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 387ff. Compare Dana Kaplan, *American Reform Judaism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 105ff., for a critique of the recent “decline of social justice imperative” as Reform has laid greater stress on tradition and ritual.

¹⁰⁴ *CCAR Journal* 47, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 4–5.

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Only slightly less committed to the centrality of social justice and activism, the Conservative movement began to cite increasingly the doctrine of *tikkun olam* in its pronouncements of the last decades of the twentieth century. *Emet Ve-Emunah: The Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism*, issued in 1988, utilizes the term in several contexts. In the paragraph, "Social Justice: Building a Better World," the document states: "Involvement in this world as expressed in the prayer *Aleinu* reflects our concern for all people and our impulse to mend and improve the world under God's Kingship." In a later section, the *Statement* reads: "There is an unfinished agenda before us: *le-takken olam be-malkhut Shaddai*, to mend and improve the world under God's Kingship" so that we must "take action to fulfill the call of our tradition to advance the cause of justice, freedom, and peace."¹⁰⁵ The Conservative movement's youth movement, United Synagogue Youth, has established a charity campaign similar to that of the Reform and also called Tikkun Olam. Additionally, many of the social action groups and committees in Conservative congregations use the descriptive term *tikkun olam* in outlining their goals.

Ironically, the Reconstructionist movement also names its social actions program Tikkun Olam. The founder of the movement, Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan, was bitterly opposed to Kabbalah and any manifestation of mysticism in Jewish thought or practice, dubbing it, "theurgy." For his movement to adopt a kabbalistic concept is both bizarre and amusing.¹⁰⁶

Clearly, at least these contemporary movements in Jewish life have utilized the phrase and concept of *tikkun ha-olam* in delineating their social justice and social actions programs as they have moved into the twenty-first century.

Not all observers are convinced that the new metamorphosis of *tikkun ha-olam* is valid or even beneficial. Reform theologian, Rabbi Arnold J. Wolf, criticizes the liberal political circles for "their capture of the Talmudic-Zoharic notion of *Tikkun Olam*" which once was an esoteric notion of "rank superstition" requiring theurgic practices to restore the universe to its primordial design and end the exile of the *shekhinah* and Israel. He derides his own movement for incorporating sundry issues such as gay rights under this rubric and insisting on re-

¹⁰⁵ Robert Gordis, ed., *Emet Ve-Emunah: Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1990), 44–46.

¹⁰⁶ See Jacob Staub and Rebecca Alpert, *Exploring Judaism: A Reconstructionist Approach* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1985), 43ff., on the social actions commitment of the movement but without use of the term. Compare M. M. Kaplan, *The Greater Judaism in the Making* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1960), 126–28. See *The Reconstructionist* 68, no. 1 (Fall 2003); the entire issue is devoted to "Tikkun Olam: Theory and Practice."

pairing the world “only when it doesn’t cost too much.” Wolf suggests that the Reform program resembles the American Civil Liberties Union or Democratic Party, that “this strange notion has become a huge umbrella under which our petty moral concerns and political panaceas can come in out of the rain.”¹⁰⁷

Lawrence Troster, a Conservative rabbi and ecologist, is concerned that the exaltation of human freedom in the concept of *tikkun olam* and partnership with God may lead to bestowing religious sanction for human arrogance in our relations with the natural world and to a glorification of human power. He warns that it “can also create too much optimism about the role of technology in solving human problems,” particularly in engendering possible dangers in genetic engineering.¹⁰⁸

VIII

Remarkably then, *tikkun ha-olam* has taken on a new life with many new nuances and applications. The Internet is replete with references to the subject in its various permutations. It is the theme of a plethora of organizations. It is employed by an array of politicians—Jewish and otherwise. Writers and journalists allude to it in secular journals and newspapers. Catholic and Protestant theologians and scholars cite it in their theological pronouncements.¹⁰⁹ A new mitzvah has been added to the complex of Jewish commandments in several Jewish movements. It has become the synonym for social action, and social justice groups everywhere consider their program as within the purview of *tikkun ha-olam*. It is virtually the equivalent of the struggle for justice and peace, brotherhood and racial equality, and economic opportunity and ecological responsibility.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Arnold J. Wolf, “Repairing *Tikkun Olam*,” *Judaism* 50, no. 4 (Fall 2001): 479–82.

¹⁰⁸ Lawrence Troster, “Cross Generational Retribution and Genetic Engineering,” *Conservative Judaism* 54, no. 3 (Spring 2002): 33–41, esp. 38.

¹⁰⁹ Of the several relevant Christian documents, I single out these most recent ones: “Talking Points” of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (2002); “Reflections on Covenant and Mission” (August 2002), a joint statement of the Bishops Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the National Council of Synagogues; “A Sacred Obligation” (September 2002), issued by the Christian Scholars Group. All three allude to the Jewish principle of *tikkun ha-olam* in formulating a Jewish-Christian agenda for social action.

¹¹⁰ A new study (2003) conducted by the Hartford Institute for Religious Research of the Hartford Seminary, “Meet Your Neighbors: Interfaith Facts,” disclosed that 40 percent of Reform and Conservative synagogues in America conduct social justice programs, a percentage exceeded only by African American Churches and Muslim mosques, and over 40 percent are engaged in interfaith programs, the second highest percentage. On social justice programs in the various contemporary Jewish religious movements, see my *Contemporary Judaism* (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1986), 77–81, 140–44, 206–8, 251–53, 337–39, 356–58, 369–71.

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Thus, the concept of *tikkun ha-olam* has come full circle. First, it was a limited rabbinic norm or legal principle with great potential, all but forgotten in the Middle Ages. Then we encounter a brief and ambiguous reference in a single prayer with eschatological overtones ascribing to God the power to bring mending to the world. Afterward, the Zohar reinterprets the idea so that it implies *tikkun olamot*—the repair of the supernal and lower worlds and restoration of the balance of the *sefirot*. In its next metamorphosis, the Lurianic School stresses the role of humans, and especially of Israel, in mending the flaws in creation, healing the cracks, and redeeming the sparks of divinity scattered throughout the world. Afterward comes the Hasidic emphasis on improving human souls so as to ease their transmigration and hasten the coming of the messiah. Finally in our odyssey, we arrive at the current phase: the modern borrowing and reversion back to the Talmudic notion of *tikkun ha-olam*—of improving and bettering society through legislation, social action, and activism and highlighting the human component required to achieve these goals, with a dash of eschatology thrown in.

Undoubtedly, Rabbi Isaac Luria would be amazed and astonished.