

Tikkun Olam: Repairing the World

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Imagine, if you will, that this is the mid-16th century and we are Jews living in a shtetl (or village) in eastern Europe. It is Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year and the beginning of the Days of Awe, otherwise known as the Days of Repentance. We are sitting in a synagogue much like this meetinghouse (minus a Tiffany Angel window, of course).

We are farmers and merchants, teachers and financial leaders, healers and caregivers, young families and older couples, widows and widowers, the disabled and the robust, the learned and students of the Book of Life, rich and poor. Minus facial hair on all the men and head scarves on the women, we could easily be them.

Why the 16th century, you might ask? The 16th century was a time of unprecedented change in the course of human history, the very beginning of the modern era of science with *the likes of Copernicus and Galileo* changing the way we looked at the Universe and our place in it. Imagine a time without all of our 21st century technology when people would actually sit beneath the heavens and contemplate our relationship with the cosmos and the meaning of our lives in the larger scheme of things. It was also a century of great exploration, religious and political turmoil, and extraordinary literature by none other than Shakespeare and Cervantes.

There were also famines, floods, disease, and war that indiscriminately brought families to their knees. All the *isms* that instilled fear and marginalization were prevalent, and persecution was commonplace against those who did not fit the idealized norm of the culture. The expansion of thought and discovery offered new ways of looking at the world and their lives, but the process and progression of living always remained the same. *For Jews, it was the wisdom of the sages and their inherited faith that sustained them for the journey through this hard and miraculous life.*

It is in this context of the 16th century that we sit here in our village synagogue this morning and listen to a story told by the visiting Rabbi named Isaac Luria, who is of the mystical Kabbalah tradition. (If you ask me, if Jews didn't invent storytelling, they certainly perfected it.) So Rabbi Luria tells us this tale of Creation that you will not find in the Torah. Neither is it in the book of Genesis, because it came from his imagination! He says,

*At the beginning of time, God's presence filled the universe. When God decided to bring the world into being, to make room for creation, He contracted Himself by drawing in His breath and forming a dark mass. Then God said, **Let there be light** (Gen. 1:3) and ten holy vessels came forth, each filled with primordial light.*

God sent forth the ten vessels like a fleet of ships, each carrying its cargo of light. But the vessels—too fragile to contain such powerful Divine light—broke open, scattering the holy sparks everywhere.

Had these vessels arrived intact, the world would have been perfect. Instead, God created people to seek out and gather the hidden sparks, wherever we can find them. Once this task is completed, the broken vessels will be restored and the world will be repaired.

Rabbi Luria uses this metaphor to challenge us to see that our mission in life is to gather the holy sparks of light that are within our domain and to use them to repair this broken and hurting world that desperately needs love and healing. The Hebrew term for this is *tikkun olam*: repairing the world.

The phrase *tikkun olam* was first used in the 2nd century and meant “guarding the established order.” Then it became more widely used in the 13th century by Maimonides in the context of God strengthening the world. It was Rabbi Luria in the 16th century who was the first to propose that the Jewish people are God’s partners in repairing the world, and he did so by constructing this cosmic myth around the term, *tikkun olam*, beginning with the creation of the world and ending with the Messianic Era.

(Back in the synagogue) Now that we have heard his teaching and admonition, what better time for us to hear this than at the beginning of the ten days of reflection that will culminate on the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur. That is when we will bring our own brokenness before the Source of **our** creation and seek to be forgiven for our iniquities and then go forth to bring our better selves and the light of loving kindness back into this world that trembles in pain.

What kinds of questions do you think we should ask ourselves in preparing for this day that calls us to profoundly consider how we walk in this world? Life in the 16th century, after all, is very hard. The world is a big place and its brokenness is vast. How could our seemingly insignificant thoughts, words, and deeds possibly matter...how could they possibly make a difference?

Perhaps the first question should be: **Where do I even begin?** The answer to that question is to realize that our world does not begin out beyond the horizon of our vision, but rather within the parameters of our families, friends, neighbors, and community. Then we must recognize that we are all wounded healers, and if we are going to bring healing into the world, we must first begin by healing ourselves and our relationships. *We must first begin by owning the power within us to bring about positive change.*

We know that harsh and demeaning words never lift someone-up, and we also know that loving and compassionate words offer comfort and healing. We must, therefore, learn to choose words that *encourage understanding and empowerment.*

We know that greed and selfishness never lifts someone-up, and we also know that our abundance comes from our willingness to share what we have with others. We must, therefore, learn to choose *generosity and gratitude.*

We know that injustice and persecution never lifts someone-up, and we also know that standing-up for justice and offering a helping hand to those in need gives them dignity and hope. We must, therefore, learn to choose *justice and acts of kindness*.

We know that physical and mental abuse never lifts someone-up, and we also know that a gentle touch and a caring heart offers respect and hope to others. We must, therefore, learn to choose *tenderness and thoughtfulness*.

In order to bring healing into our own lives, we need to gather into ourselves the spark of light and love and compassion that is our birthright, that we might forgive ourselves for those times when we inadvertently contributed to the brokenness around us. Only then will the light of love that heals all wounds grow stronger, and only then can we shine it into those places that need its healing power the most. Yom Kippur is that holy day which inspires us to make those internal changes that will allow us to begin again in love. To truly repair the world, we must notice the sparks of light that are waiting to be kindled within us all, then the world will finally be lit by the transformative power of love.

I cannot say for certain that Rabbi Luria's sermon that day used quite the same words as I have just spoken, but I suspect the sentiment was in a similar vein. I would now like to call you back to the 21st century, to this meetinghouse, to this sanctuary of loving hearts, bringing with you strands of connection from that synagogue of so long ago.

We are still farmers and merchants, teachers and financial leaders, healers and caregivers, young families and older couples, widows and widowers, the disabled and the robust, the learned and students of the Book of Life, rich and poor. We, too, live in a time of unprecedented change in the course of human history, in the modern era of science, a time of great exploration, religious and political turmoil, and extraordinary literature.

We know so much more about the Universe and our place in it than our forebears. In this sanctuary we are not only Jews, but we are also Christians and Buddhists, Pagans and Mystics, Atheists and Theists and everything in-between, and we share responsibility for one another and the world we live in. The process and the progression of living remains the same for us all.

While we still struggle with the *isms* that have tried to separate us from our full humanity, we continue to work at breaking down those barriers and are trying to teach each new generation to do the same. We even have a woman in the pulpit! Yet, there is still so much that needs to be done to *put all of Gods vessels back together so the world can be restored to its intended balance and perfection*.

There are still famines, floods, disease, and wars that indiscriminately bring us to our knees. So much has changed, so much has been revealed, yet in so many ways we are the same people struggling to find wholeness in the broken places of our lives. This journey through the Days of Awe has taught us that from generation to generation the story must still be told, that self-reflection and repentance for our shortcomings is what empowers us to make positive changes in our lives. It is in that place of humility that we find our strength, that our light gets

brighter, that we bring acts of loving kindness back into the world, and that we draw others out of the shadows of their own brokenness into the healing light of their own becoming.

Tikkun Olam is the essence of Yom Kippur: repairing the world one person at a time. May the wisdom of the sages and our inherited faith sustain us for the journey through this hard and miraculous life.

Amen and Blessed Be