

Tikkun olam - Wikipedia

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This article is about the concept in Judaism. For the blog, see [Tikun Olam \(blog\)](#). For the medical marijuana firm, see [Tikun Olam \(cannabis\)](#).

Tikkun olam ([Hebrew](#): תיקון עולם, [lit.](#) 'repair of the world') is a concept in [Judaism](#), interpreted in [Orthodox Judaism](#) as the prospect of overcoming all forms of [idolatry](#),^[1] and by other Jewish denominations as an aspiration to behave and act constructively and beneficially.^[2]

Documented use of the term dates back to the [Mishnaic period](#). Since medieval times, [kabbalistic](#) literature has broadened use of the term. In the modern era, among the post-[Haskalah Ashkenazi](#) movements, *tikkun olam* is the idea that Jews bear responsibility not only for their own moral, spiritual, and material welfare, but also for the welfare of society at large.^[3] For many contemporary pluralistic Rabbis, the term refers to "Jewish social justice"^[4] or "the establishment of Godly qualities throughout the world".^[2]

History

The earliest use of the term *tikkun olam* comes in the phrase *mip'nei tikkun ha-olam*, "for the sake of repairing the world", which appears in the Mishnah with the meaning of amending the law in order to keep society well-functioning. More generally, tikkun can mean improvement, establishment, repair, prepare, and more. In the Mishnaic context it refers to practical legal measures taken in the present to ameliorate social conditions.

A conception of *tikkun olam* is also found in the [Aleinu](#), a concluding part of most Jewish congregational [prayer](#), which in contrast to the Mishnah's usage, focuses on the end of time. The *Aleinu* [beseeches](#) God:

Hebrew: "לראות מהרה בתפארת עוזך, להעביר גלולים מן הארץ והאלילים כרות יכרתוון" "לתקן עולם במלכות ש-די"

Translation: "to speedily see Your mighty splendor, to cause detestable (idolatry) to be removed from the land, and the (false) gods will be utterly 'cut off', to *takein olam* - fix/repair/establish a world - under the Almighty's kingdom"

In other words, when all the people of the world abandon false gods and recognize God, the world will have been perfected.

A common but more modern understanding of this phrase is that we share a partnership with God, and are instructed to take the steps towards improving the state of the world and helping others, which simultaneously brings more honor to God's sovereignty.[\[citation needed\]](#)

Some scholars have argued that the *Aleinu* prayer is actually not a valid source for the concept of *tikkun olam*, claiming that the original prayer used a homonym "l'takhen" (spelled differently, לתכן) meaning "to establish" rather than "to fix" or "to repair"[\[5\]](#). However, the standard and almost universally accepted spelling of לתקן can also mean establish, and the reading of l'taken לתקן became altogether normative by the time of the [Rishonim](#) and influenced all further evolution of the concept of *tikkun olam* since the beginning of the previous millenium if not earlier. Therefore, the question of which version of *Aleinu* is original only affects whether we date *Aleinu*'s influence on *tikkun olam* to the 3rd century or the 11th century, but not whether it was a determinative influence *tikkun olam*'s evolution.

Over the course of Jewish intellectual history, *tikkun olam* has at times referred to eschatological concerns, as in *Aleinu*, and at times to practical concerns, as in the Mishnah, but in either context, it refers to some kind of social change or process that is for the betterment of society or humanity or the world. Whether that happens primarily within Jewish society or primarily in relation to the nations of the world, whether that happens primarily through acts of justice and kindness, or equally through ritual observance, whether primarily through internal work or through external deeds, is something that changes from one source to the next.[\[6\]](#) For example, Maimonides saw *tikkun olam* as fully inclusive of all these dimensions when he wrote "Through wisdom, which is [represented by] Torah, and the elevation of character, which is [represented by] acts of kindness, and observing the Torah's commandments, which are [represented by] the sacrifices, one continuously brings *tikkun olam* improvement of the world, and the ordering of reality."[\[7\]](#) Yet he also saw justice as a fundamental component, as for example when he wrote, "Every judge who judges truth unto its [deepest] truth, even for one hour, it's as if he fixed the whole world entirely / *tikein et kol ha'olam kulo* and caused the Shekhinah to rest upon Israel."[\[8\]](#)

Furthermore, the original context of the *Aleinu* prayer, in the Rosh Hashanah liturgy, is accompanied by the hope that "all [the people/creatures] will form a single union to do Your will with a whole heart". In many contexts this is interpreted to be a call to universalism and justice for all mankind - sentiments which are common throughout Jewish liturgy. For example, in the American Conservative movement's prayer book, [Siddur Sim Shalom](#), published by the Rabbinical Assembly and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, "A Prayer for Our Country" elaborates on this passage: "May citizens of all races and creeds forge a common bond in true harmony to banish all hatred and bigotry" and "uniting all people in peace and freedom and helping them to fulfill the vision of your prophet: 'Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they experience war anymore.'" Both lines express wholeheartedly the idea of universal equality, freedom, and peace for all.

In the liberal movements of Judaism, most especially in the United States, this sentiment is especially embedded in the idea of acting compassionately for all people, as for example in the 1975 New Union, American Reform movement's prayer book, [Gates of Prayer](#), which

includes the text "You [Lord] have taught us to uphold the falling, to heal the sick, to free the captive, to comfort all who suffer pain". ^[9] These aspects of Judaism already have a traditional name however, *gemilut chasadim*, and some have criticized the tendency to emphasize social action as kind of disregard for other aspects of Judaism traditionally connected to *tikkun olam*, like learning, prayer, repentance, and ritual commandments.

Lurianic Kabbalah

[Lurianic Kabbalah](#) dwells on the role of prayer and ritual in *tikkun* of the upper worlds. According to this vision of the world, God contracted part of God's self into vessels of light—partly limiting himself—to create the world. These vessels shattered and their shards became sparks of light trapped within the material of creation. Prayer, especially contemplation of various aspects of the divinity (*sephirot*), releases these sparks of God's self and allows them to reunite with God's essence. According to [Moshe Chaim Luzzatto](#), in his book *Derech Hashem*, the physical world is connected to spiritual realms above that influence the physical world, and furthermore, Jews have the ability, through physical deeds and free will, to direct and control these spiritual forces. God's desire in creation was that God's creations ultimately will recognize God's unity and overcome evil; this will constitute the perfection (*tikkun*) of creation. While the Jews have the Torah now and are aware of God's unity, some believe that when all of humanity recognizes this fact, the rectification will be complete.^[10] In recent years Jewish thinkers and activists have used Lurianic Kabbalah to elevate the full range of ethical and ritual *mitzvot* into acts of *tikkun olam*. The belief that not only does prayer lift up divine sparks, but so do all of the *mitzvot*, including those traditionally understood as ethical, was already a part of Kabbalah, but the contemporary emphasis serves the purpose of a finding mystical depth and spiritual energy in ethical *mitzvot*. The application of the Lurianic vision to improving the world can be seen in Jewish blogs,^[11] High Holiday sermons^{[12][13]} and on-line Jewish learning resource centers.^[14][\[better source needed\]](#)

The association between the Lurianic conception of *tikkun* and ethical action assigns an ultimate significance to even small acts of kindness and small improvements of social policy. However, this association can be a double-edged sword and has begun to trigger critique even within the social justice community.[\[citation needed\]](#) On one hand, seeing each action as raising a divine spark can motivate people to action by giving them hope that their actions will have long-term value. On the other hand, if this is done in a manner that separates the concept of *tikkun olam* from its other meanings as found in rabbinic literature and the *Aleinu* prayer, the risk of privileging actions that have no real significance and represent personal agendas is introduced.^[2]

The application of Lurianic Kabbalah to ethical *mitzvot* and social action is particularly striking because Lurianic Kabbalah saw itself as repairing dimensions within God, the mystical worlds and [world to come](#), rather than this world and its social relations. Author Lawrence Fine points to two features of Lurianic Kabbalah that have made it adaptable to ethical *mitzvot* and social action. First, he points out that a generation recovering from the tragedy of the [Holocaust](#) resonates with the imagery of shattered vessels. Second, both Lurianic Kabbalah and ethical understandings of *tikkun olam* emphasize the role of human responsibility and

action.^{[15][16]}

Performance of *mitzvot*[]]

Jews believe that performing of ritual *mitzvot* (good deeds, commandments, connections, or religious obligations) is a means of *tikkun olam*, helping to perfect the world, and that the performance of more *mitzvot* will hasten the coming of the [Messiah](#) and the [Messianic Age](#). This belief dates back at least to the early Talmudic period. According to Rabbi Yochanan, quoting Rabbi [Shim'on bar Yochai](#), the Jewish people will be redeemed when every Jew observes Shabbat (the Sabbath) twice in all its details. This suggests that *tikkun olam* will prove successful with the coming of the Messiah and the Messianic Age.^[17]

Observing Shabbat[]]

Some^[who?] explain the power of Shabbat by its effect on the other six days of the week and their role in moving society towards the Messianic Age. Shabbat helps bring about the Messianic Age because Shabbat rest energizes Jews to work harder to bring the Messianic Age nearer during the six working days of the week. Because the experience of Shabbat gives one a foretaste of the Messianic Age,^[citation needed] observance of Shabbat also helps Jews renew their commitment to bring about a world where love and mercy will reign.^[clarification needed] This relates to the section on the role of *mitzvot* (above) that suggests that *tikkun olam* will prove successful with the coming of the Messiah and the Messianic Age.^[18]

Ethical behavior[]]

In Jewish thought, ethical *mitzvot* as well as ritual *mitzvot* are important to the process of *tikkun olam*. [Maimonides](#) writes that *tikkun olam* requires efforts in all three of the great "pillars" of Judaism: Torah study, acts of kindness, and the ritual commandments.^[19] Some Jews believe that performing *mitzvot* will create a model society among the Jewish people, which will in turn influence the rest of the world. By perfecting themselves, their local Jewish community or the state of Israel, the Jews set an example for the rest of the world. The theme is frequently repeated in sermons and writings across the Jewish spectrum: Reconstructionist, Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox.^[citation needed]

Also, the *mitzvot* often have practical worldly/social effects (in contrast to mystical effects as held by Lurianic Kabbalah).

Tzedakah[]]

[Tzedakah](#) is a central theme in Judaism and serves as one of the 613 commandments.^[20] Tzedakah is used in common parlance as charitable giving. *Tzedek*, the root of *tzedakah*, means justice or righteousness.^[20] Acts of *tzedakah* are used to generate a more just world.

Therefore, *tzedakah* is a means through which to perform *tikkun olam*.

[Philanthropy](#) is an effective tool in performing *tikkun olam* as it supports organizations that perform direct service. There are many different philanthropic organizations devoted to repairing the world. The [United Jewish Federations of North America](#), one of the top ten charities in the world, counts *tikkun olam* as one of the three main principles under which it operates. Similarly, the [American Jewish World Service](#) supports grassroots organizations creating change in Africa, Asia, and the Americas.

The intersection between *tzedakah*, philanthropy, and *tikkun olam* is captured by Yehudah Mirsky in his article "Tikkun Olam: Basic Questions and Policy Directions". Mirsky writes:

The rich tradition of *tzedakah* is a model of communal social responsibility in the absence of a strong welfare state; it also connects to the burgeoning area of Micro Philanthropy, which pools large numbers of small donations resulting in more direct interaction between donors and recipients, or "givers" and "doers," higher resolution in the focus of giving and the creation of new networks of cooperation. ^[21]

Building a model society[]

By performing the *mitzvot*, it is believed that the Jewish people will become a model society. This idea sometimes is attributed to Biblical verses that describe the Jews as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" ([Exodus 19:5–6](#)) and "a light of the nations" or "a light to the nations" ([Isaiah 42:6](#) and [Isaiah 49:6](#)). The philosophies of Rabbi [Samson Raphael Hirsch](#)^[22]^[23]^[24], Rabbi [Abraham Isaac Kook](#), and Rabbi [Yehuda Ashlag](#) are prominent in this field, the former rationally and in terms of a *kehilla* (community) of Jews in *galut* (the [diaspora](#)) influencing their non-Jewish neighbors, and the latter [mystically](#) and in [Zionist](#) terms of a [Jewish state](#) influencing the other nations of the world. Some other [Orthodox](#) rabbis, many but not all of them [Modern Orthodox](#), follow a philosophy similar to Hirsch's, including [Joseph H. Hertz](#),^[25] [Isidore Epstein](#),^[26] and [Eliezer Berkovits](#).^[27] The philosophy of [Religious Zionism](#) follows Kook in his philosophy.

In Modern Orthodox philosophy (which often is intertwined with Religious Zionism, especially in America), it is commonly believed that *mitzvot* have practical this-worldly sociological and educational effects on those who perform them, and in this manner, the *mitzvot* will perfect the Jews and the world.

According to the rationalist philosophy of Hirsch and others, the social and ethical *mitzvot* have nearly self-explanatory purposes, while ritual *mitzvot* may serve functions such as educating people or developing relationships between people and God. As examples, [prayer](#) either inculcates a relationship between people and God or strengthens beliefs and faith of the one who prays, and keeping [kosher](#) or wearing [tzitzit](#) serve as educational symbols of moral and religious values. Thus, the ultimate goal of *mitzvot* is for moral and religious values and deeds to permeate the Jewish people and ultimately the entire world, but the ritual *mitzvot* nevertheless play a vital role in this model of *tikkun olam*, strengthening what is

accomplished by the ethical.

Hirsch's *Horeb* is an especially important source, as his exposition of his philosophy of the *mitzvot*. He classifies the *mitzvot* into six categories:

- (1) *toroth* (philosophical doctrines);
- The ethical *mitzvot* fall under (2) *mishpatim* and (3) *chukim* (commandments of justice towards (living) people and the natural world (including the human body itself) respectively) and (4) *mitzvot* (commandments of love);
- The ritual *mitzvot* under (5) *edoth* (educational symbolic commandments) and (6) *avodah* (commandments of direct service to God).

Aside from the fact that by perfecting themselves, the Jews set an example for the rest of the world, there is thus the additional distinction that *mitzvot* have practical, worldly effects—for example, charity benefits the poor materially, constituting *tikkun olam* by its improvement of the world physically or socially, in contrast to the mystical effects of *mitzvot* as held by Lurianic Kabbalah.

Improving the world□

According to Jewish scholar [Lawrence Fine](#), the first use of the phrase *tikkun olam* in modern Jewish history in the United States was by [Brandeis-Bardin Camp Institute](#) founder [Shlomo Bardin](#) in the 1950s.^[15] Bardin interpreted the *Aleinu* prayer, specifically the expression *le-taken olam be-malchut shaddai* (typically translated as *when the world shall be perfected under the reign of the almighty*), as a responsibility for Jewish people to work towards a better world.^[15] However, while Bardin was a significant popularizer of the term, one also finds it being used in similar manner in the late 1930's and early 1940's by [Alexander Dushkin](#)^[28] and [Mordecai Kaplan](#).^[29] As left-leaning progressive Jewish organizations started entering the mainstream in the 1970s and 1980s, the phrase *tikkun olam* began to gain more traction. The phrase has since been adopted by a variety of Jewish organizations, to mean anything from direct service to general philanthropy.^[2] It was presented to a wide international audience—itsself an indication of how widely *tikkun olam* had now permeated American Jewish life—when [Mordecai Waxman](#) used the phrase in a speech during [Pope John Paul II](#)'s visit to the United States in September 1987.^[28]

For some Jews, the phrase *tikkun olam* means that Jews are not only responsible for creating a model society among themselves but also are responsible for the welfare of the society at large.^[30] This responsibility may be understood in religious, social or political terms and there are many different opinions about how religion, society, and politics interact.

[Jane Kanarek](#), a Conservative rabbi, argues that discussions of *tikkun olam* in the Mishnah and Talmud point to the importance of creating systemic change through law. She concludes that contemporary *tikkun olam* should also focus on systemic and structural changes to society.^[4]

While many non-Orthodox Jews have argued that *tikkun olam* requires socially liberal politics, some have argued for the validity of a conservative political approach to *tikkun olam*. Michael Spiro, a [Reconstructionist](#) Jew, draws on a conservative tradition that emphasizes [free markets](#) precisely because they believed that was the path to the greatest public good. In addition, conservatives have always emphasized the importance of *private* efforts of *gemilut chasadim* (benevolence) and [tzedakah](#) (charity or philanthropy), and Spiro argues that *tikkun olam* should be carried out through such private efforts rather than through government.^[31]

Jewish Youth Organizations[]

Tikkun olam is used to refer to Jewish obligations to engage in social action in the Reform^[32] and Conservative^{[33][34]} movements as well. For example, in [USY](#), the Conservative youth movement, the position in charge of social action on chapter and regional boards is called the SA/TO (social action/*tikkun olam*) officer.^[35] Furthermore, USY has the [Abraham Joshua Heschel](#) Honor Society.^[36] A requirement of acceptance to the honor society is to perform one act of community service a month. In [NFTY](#), the Reform youth movement, the position in charge of social action on chapter and regional boards is called the social action vice president (SAVP).^[37]

In addition, other youth organizations have also grown to include *tikkun olam* as part of its foundation. [BBYO](#) has community service/social action commitments in both of its divisions, [AZA](#) and [BBG](#). BBG includes two different programming areas specific to *tikkun olam*—one for community service, and another for social action.^[38] AZA includes a combined community service/social action programming area.^[38] In addition, both divisions include "pledge principles," principles by which to guide them. For BBG girls the "menorah pledge principles" include citizenship, philanthropy, and community service.^[39] For AZA members, the "7 cardinal principles" include charity.

Jewish fundamentalism[]

[Elon University](#) professor [Geoffrey Claussen](#) has asserted that concepts of *tikkun olam* have inspired [Jewish fundamentalists](#) such as [Meir Kahane](#) and [Yitzchak Ginsburgh](#). According to Claussen, "while visions of *tikkun olam* may reflect humility, thoughtfulness, and justice, they are often marked by arrogance, overzealousness, and injustice."^[40]

See also[]

- [Eschatology](#)

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17. [^] [Shabbat](#), 118b.
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Further reading

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