

**What Is Tikkun Olam? - What does Tikkun Olam mean, who came up with it, and how do I do it?**

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**This article is part of our comprehensive [Tikkun Olam Section](#).**

**Tikkun Olam:** In Jewish teachings, any activity that [improves the world](#), bringing it closer to the harmonious state for which it was created.

Tikkun olam implies that while the world is innately good, its Creator purposely left room for us to improve upon His work.

All human activities are opportunities to fulfill this mission, and [every human being can be involved in tikkun olam](#)—child or adult, student or entrepreneur, industrialist or artist, caregiver or salesperson, political activist or environmentalist, or just another one of us struggling to keep afloat.

## **What Do the Words *Tikkun Olam* Mean?**

*Tikkun* is often translated as *repair*. But in the Hebrew Bible and in the early code of Jewish law called the Mishnah, it has a range of meanings: improve, fix, prepare, set up, or just “do something with...”<sup>1</sup> *Tikkun* could be used to describe straightening a crooked rod, maintaining a roadway, cutting fingernails, setting a table, or devising a parable to explain a difficult idea.<sup>2</sup>

*Olam* in Biblical Hebrew connotes *all of time*. In later Hebrew, it came to mean *the world*.

So *tikkun olam* *Tikkun olam* means to do something with the world that will not only fix any damage, but also improve upon it. literally means to do something with the world that will not only fix any damage, but also improve upon it, preparing it to enter the ultimate state for which it was created.

What improvement does our world need?

For one thing, all great art is an expression of its creator. But unlike a Rembrandt or a Chagall, our world lacks its artist’s signature. It appears to be a place that “just is” — without an author, without a story, without meaning.

Each act of *tikkun olam* is a fine-tuning of our world’s voices. With each *tikkun*, we are creating meaning out of confusion, harmony from noise, revealing the unique part each creation plays in [a universal symphony that sings of its Creator](#).

This is a deeper meaning of the term *tikkun olam*: The word *olam* also means *hidden*. We need to repair the world so that its Creator is no longer hidden within, but shines through each thing in magnificent, harmonious beauty.

[Learn more: Tikkun Olam: A Brief History](#)

## Who Came Up With Tikkun Olam?

*Tikkun olam* is a signature theme of Jewish tradition.

Most ancient creation stories, *Tikkun olam* is a signature theme of Jewish tradition. and modern philosophies as well, grant little if any inherent value to the material world in which we live. In stark contrast, the creation account of Genesis repeats seven times that the Creator beheld His creation as “good,” and even “very good.”<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, the conclusion of the creation narrative is that all of this was created “to do” — meaning, for those inhabiting it to improve upon it.

G-d completed on the seventh day all that He had done...And G-d blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, for on it He ceased from all the work that G-d created *to do*.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, the narrative describing the creation of the original human beings tells us that we were placed in the Garden of Eden “to work it and to protect it.”<sup>5</sup>

That the Creator values our world and our work to improve it is a motif that resounds

throughout the prophets and rabbinical writings.

“Not for desolation did He create it,” says the prophet Isaiah, “He formed it to be settled.”<sup>6</sup>

Living in an age when war and conquest was glorified, Isaiah describes an era of the future when all nations that “beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”<sup>7</sup>

An ancient Midrash teaches “All that G-d created, He made to be improved.”<sup>8</sup>

And so the rabbis of the Talmud encouraged all the people, no matter how spiritually or intellectually inclined, to contribute to the common good. That meant building homes and families, and creating a civil society filled with deeds of caring and compassion, sustained by justice, integrity and peace.<sup>9</sup> The term “tikkun olam” is used in the Mishnah as the motive behind social legislation meant to improve upon such a society.<sup>10</sup>

The “Aleinu” prayer, said at the conclusion of all three daily prayers, speaks of our hope for a better future soon-to-come. So, too, does the kaddish, a responsive prayer repeated many times throughout every public prayer service. Both describe not an apocalyptic future, but one in which the world will experience its final tikkun and ultimate glory.

[Learn more: Who Came Up With Tikkun Olam?](#)

## How Is Tikkun Olam Described in Kabbalah?

The Kabbalah is the traditional theology of Judaism. It illuminates all the practical applications of Judaism prescribed by the [Torah](#) with their inner meaning and purpose.

The Kabbalists taught that the Torah was given so that we could improve not only our own selves, but the entire cosmic order. In the writings of the great Kabbalist, Rabbi Isaac Luria, known as “the Ari,” this is called both *tikkun* and *birur*. “Birur” is the act of selecting good from the bad.<sup>11</sup>

[The Ari described](#) how everything that exists and every activity you might do contains a spark of the divine. Our job, he taught, is to find those divine sparks, select them, and reconnect them to their original, higher purpose. Our job, he taught, is to find those divine sparks, select them, and reconnect them to their original, higher purpose, using the Torah as our guide.

How do we find those sparks? Simply by doing those same activities, but in a way that reveals a higher, divine meaning.

The Ari provided the example of eating. You might eat just to fill an empty stomach. But you could also eat in order to derive energy from the nutrients of your food, and then channel that energy into fulfilling your divine mission in life.

You are now doing *birur* and *tikkun*—separating good from bad and reconnecting the good to its true place.

Similarly, you might do business just to accumulate wealth. But you could do the same business using a percentage of your profits for charitable purposes. [The business itself could be a vehicle for good](#), by creating cooperation between otherwise hostile parties, demonstrating the virtues of honesty and integrity, and providing many people with a dignified source of income.

This is also a birur and tikkun. You are revealing the true meaning and higher purpose of your business and everything connected to it.

[Learn more: Rabbi Isaac Luria and Tikkun Olam](#)

## How Did Tikkun Olam Affect the Modern World?

The Ari's explanation of tikkun had a powerful impact on the Jewish world—and beyond. Some scholars have suggested that the modern idea of social progress that arose in Europe in the 17th century emerged out of the idea of tikkun, as kabbalistic texts were popularized among the intelligentsia.<sup>12</sup>

It wasn't long until Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov and his students applied the teachings of the Ari to every Jew. He taught that this was not the domain of kabbalists alone—every Jew, with every [mitzvah](#), wherever the divine force may take him or her, is repairing, improving and purifying the world.

In our times, the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, of righteous memory, [described tikkun olam as the mission of every human being](#). He spoke with a voice of urgency, with the conviction that in our times, one small deed could bring the world to the resolution for which it has yearned since its creation.

## What Are Examples of Tikkun Olam?

Tikkun olam is often used exclusively to describe acts of social justice and environmental awareness. These are certainly important, as we are all responsible to right injustice. "Silence," goes the Talmudic edict, "is consent."<sup>13</sup>

And it is certainly vital that we [ensure the sustainability of life upon this magnificent stage](#) of creation.

But it is crucial to note that Tikkun olam is not for political activists and environmentalists alone. Tikkun olam is [not for political activists and environmentalists alone](#). There are really innumerable ways for us to do tikkun olam in our daily lives.

The Mishnah teaches that each person is an entire world.<sup>14</sup> Any tikkun made in that world [reverberates through all the rest of the world](#). Each tikkun has the potential to change everything.

In prayer, we discover the divine sparks both in the magnificent world about us, as well as [within our own selves](#).

In study of Torah, as we [apply divine wisdom to our everyday lives](#), we reveal the divine sparks hidden there.

One of the most meaningful forms of tikkun olam today is to sit with your family on a Friday night and celebrate the creation of this magnificent world, with a kiddush in the glowing light of the [Shabbat candles](#).

[Every mitzvah](#) prescribed by the Torah is a crucial element in tikkun olam.

But it doesn't stop there. Every aspect of a person's life, even the most seemingly mundane, has purpose and provides an opportunity for tikkun olam.

[In our workplace](#), [we create value](#) by building connections, gluing the world together in a peaceful, harmonious way.

The way you eat and what you eat, the way you treat others, the commitments you make to family and friends—all these are means of tikkun olam, bringing the world yet closer to its ultimate state for which it was created.

