

## Tzedek: Creating the World Anew

By Rabbi Ruth A. Zlotnick



“In Your goodness, you renew, continuously, the work of Creation / *U’vtuvo m’chadeish b’chol yom tamid ma’asei v’reisheet*” (*Yotzer Or*). From this beautiful verse in our morning prayers, we derive inspiration for our annual learning theme, Acts of Creation / *Ma’asei V’reisheet*. This verse asserts that every aspect of our lives has within it the resources to be renewed. This is true for the world, for each of us, and for our congregation.

From the beginning, Temple Beth Am’s founders intended for every member to feel personally empowered to renew Judaism and our world, and, therefore, our congregation has always been committed to social justice (seeking righteousness) and social action (doing righteous acts). We may think that this means we’ve always done things in the same way; however, social justice and social action change with the times. From fighting for civil rights and against the Vietnam War in the 1960s, to the sanctuary movement of the 1980s, to our work towards creating marriage equality legislation earlier in this century – our congregation has always been at the forefront of renewing the world through social justice and social action.

Most recently, we understand these efforts as acts of *tikkun olam*, healing or repairing the world. By emphasizing *tikkun olam*, our congregation has been a leader in steeping our social justice and direct service efforts in Jewish values. “*Tikkun olam*” has become part of the everyday parlance of Temple Beth Am, and, indeed, the larger progressive Jewish world, so much so that it would be understandable to think that the term “*tikkun olam*” has always been a synonym for social action and social justice.

In truth, *tikkun olam* is a concept that has shifted over time – originally it was intended to speak of protecting us from disorder by repairing those areas where the social fabric may have frayed (such as in the realms of divorce, debt release, and Shabbat observance). In 16<sup>th</sup> century Jewish mysticism, the concept of *tikkun olam* transformed into the obligation to gather (through righteous acts) the sparks that escaped during Creation; in this way, we make the Divine manifest and repair the cosmos. And, as we know, in the past generation, *tikkun olam* was used as a general term to describe making the world a more just place.

Today, there is a widespread reconsideration of the term. Jonathan Krasner writes: “[In the 20<sup>th</sup> century], most Jews had a vague sense of correlation between their Judaism and their liberalism. *Tikkun olam* legitimized it and gave it a name. However, *tikkun olam* promises much and demands comparatively little in the way of sacrifice. This is its greatest strength and, perhaps, its major weakness” (<http://jcpa.org/article/place-tikkun-olam-american-jewish-life1>). In other words, the concept of *tikkun olam* was helpful when it was introduced because it encompassed so much, but today, given the specific needs of our time, the term’s broadness may not be enough to compel us toward action.

In this year when we lift up *Ma’asei V’reisheet* / Acts of Creation, we seek to renew our engagement in social justice and social action in a way that makes sense for the unique challenges of this era. The term “*tzedek*,” justice or righteousness, can help us re-orient our focus. *Tzedek*, unlike *tikkun Olam*, has its origins in Torah. Underlying this term is the notion that life is a gift from God, the earth is lent to us by

God, and, therefore, we must help return to the natural order where all humanity is valued equally and equitably.

In Deuteronomy we read "*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof, Justice, justice, you shall pursue.*" Torah is clear: pursuing justice, seeking equity, dignity, and compassion is a *mitzvah*, a sacred obligation. This helps us understand, for example, the difference between "*tzedakah*," from the word "*tzedek*," and charity. Charity is a voluntary act of donating money beyond what is expected; it is giving "above and beyond the call of duty." "*Tzedakah*," because its root is "*tzedek*," is about rebalancing resources in the world, so that no one is left in dire need. *Tzedakah* is not giving above and beyond the call of duty; it *is* our duty.

*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof, Justice, justice, you shall pursue.* How do we continually renew the work of Creation? Through the pursuit of *tzedek*, bringing the world back to its natural state – being a place where justice, righteousness, and peace prevail.