Tikkun Olam -- Repairing the World

Introduction

“Tikkun ‘olam -- the repair of the world” -- making the world a better place.
  - Very popular concept since 1980s in non-traditional Jewish circles, in the sense of social action, espousing progressive causes, encouraging political correctness, etc.
  - Is it the mission of Judaism, though?

What does it really mean?

Five meanings have surfaced in the evolution of Judaism:

1-Going beyond the law to prevent undesirable consequences

Origin of term is in Mishnah. Rabbis would render rulings “Mip’nei tikkun ha-’olam -- for the sake of the repair of the world”. Rulings are not commanded by Torah, go beyond strict commandments, but are deemed necessary to keep order in the world. [Gittin 32a ff; Bava Metzia 83a, 14b; Chagigah 2b; Ketubot 52a-b, 56b]

Example 1: The half-slave
A man dies and leaves a slave to his two sons. One sets him free, the other does not.
  - Bet Hillel rules that the slave must work for his master half the time, and is free the other half.
  - Bet Shammai disagrees, because then the slave then cannot marry and procreate (can’t marry a free woman and can’t marry a slave woman):
    [Bet Shammai said: And if you say] he should be idle [and not marry], isn’t it [true that] the world was created only for procreation, as it says [in Isaiah]:

[God] did not create [the world] to be a waste. He formed it to be inhabited. [Isaiah 45:18]?
Rather, for the betterment of the world [Mip'nei tikkun ha-'olam], we force his master to free him, and [the slave] writes a bill [to his master pledging to pay] half his value [to him]. And Bet Hillel [ultimately] retracted their opinion, to rule in accordance with the statement of Bet Shammai [that a half-slave must be set free]. [Chagigah 2b]

Rare example where Bet Shammai prevails. Bet Hillel was not willing to go beyond Torah.

**Example 2: Redeeming the captive**
The captives are not redeemed for more than their actual monetary value, for the betterment of the world. [Mishna, Gittin 45a]
- Meaning: Even a rich relative is not allowed to pay more.
Allowing relatives to pay more encourages more kidnapping and games of chicken.

**Example 3: Prozbul**
Hillel instituted a document (prozbul) preventing cancellation of a debt on the Sabbatical year, for the betterment of the world. [Gittin 34b]
Debts to individuals must be canceled on 7th year. By considering them (in the loan contract) to become debts to the court in the 7th year (and therefore not cancelable), prozbul encouraged the rich to continue to lend to the poor.

### 2- Abolition of idolatry in the world

In the second half of the ‘Alenu (which some congregations omit), we hope for the day when we will be able to perfect the world under God's kingship.

לתקן עולם במלכות שד'ai

*I’takken ‘olam b’malkhut Shaddai*

Note context: Tikkun Olam clearly associated with the abolition of idolatry and the universal recognition of God:
Therefore we put our hope in You, Lord our God, that we may soon see Your mighty splendor, removing detestable idolatry from the earth, when false gods will be utterly cut off. We hope for the day when the world will be perfected under the kingship of the Almighty. Then all humanity will call upon Your Name… all the world's inhabitants will recognize and know that to You every knee must bend and every tongue swear loyalty… As it is written [in the Tanach]:

The Lord shall be king over all the earth. On that day The Lord shall be One and His name One. [Zech. 14:9]
3-Gathering of the divine sparks spread in the world

In 16th century, concept expanded in Isaac Luria’s mysticism: At Creation, God created ten vessels holding divine “sparks of holiness”. Sin caused them to burst, and spread the sparks throughout the world. Jews were then made to wander far and wide just so they could gather these “sparks of holiness” and make them available to all. That is the needed “repair”.

And when enough holy sparks have been gathered, the broken vessels will be restored, and Tikkun Olam, the repair of the world, awaited for so long, will finally be complete. Therefore it should be the aim of everyone to raise these sparks from wherever they are imprisoned and to elevate them to holiness by the power of their soul. [Isaac Luria (the Arizal), quoted in Petech Anayim by Chida, Yoma 38]

The main lesson here is that individual actions can affect the fate of the entire world.

4-Simply performing all the commandments in the Torah

Traditional Judaism: The way to tikkun olam is to perform commandments, both ritual and ethical. The more performance, the more the world will move towards perfection in the Messianic age. Main example: Observance of Shabbat:

Talmud Bavli:
Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Shim’on bar Yohai: If all Jews kept two Shabbatot according to all the laws [of Shabbat], the redemption will come immediately. [Shabbat 118b]

Talmud Yerushalmi:
The son of David (Mashiach) will come if [Jews] keep just one Shabbat, because Shabbat is equivalent to all the the mitzvot. [Ta’anit Y 1:10]

Midrash:
Rabbi Levi said: If Israel kept Shabbat properly even for one day, the son of David would come… [Ex. R. 25:12]

Hassidic Rabbi Yitzhak Aharon Korff, Chaplain of the City of Boston, writes:
Mitzvot include not simply socially or politically correct precepts such as giving charity and engaging in political action, but also observance of Shabbat, dietary restrictions, daily prayer, and other commandments... [Some] substitute the false panacea of... Tikkun Olam for the authenticity of true Judaism... to avoid their actual responsibilities as Jews to observe the Torah and the commandments ... The only honest and authentic Jewish way to [engage in Tikkun Olam] is to encourage observance of the Torah across the entire spectrum of the Jewish Community. ["The fallacy, delusion and myth of Tikkun Olam," Jewish Advocate of Boston, 2013]
5- Performing good deeds and acts of kindness for the world

As mentioned, non-traditional Jews have enthusiastically put tikkun olam at the center of their philosophy, giving it the meaning of emphasizing justice, philanthropy and social action. In practice, this is done in a secular manner, excluding all religious underpinnings. They quote Isaiah:

Learn to do good, seek justice, relieve the oppressed, bring justice for the orphan, seek defense for the widow. [Isaiah 1:17]


“Judaism is more than ‘Tikkun Olam’

...Jews increasingly try to find their Judaic meaning in social/political causes (immigration reform, Supreme Court appointments, environmentalism, women’s rights, etc.). Putting aside the merit of the positions taken, let’s be honest: These “tikkun olam” pursuits might feel good and even do some good, but they do little to build Jewish communities.

...If Jews continue to prioritize these social/political efforts over proven religious practices, we must have the courage to acknowledge that we have substituted all these secular causes for Judaism… We might insist that tikkun olam and social justice are central to our Jewish way of life, but they are increasingly taking the place of serious Jewish education and Jewish practice.

...The Modern Orthodox largely swim in the same secular waters as other Jews: They own televisions, use the Internet, attend secular universities, and work and vacation in the secular world. But they also hold to a religious discipline that they believe is life-improving. They observe Shabbat and the Jewish holidays, and they study Jewish texts in far greater numbers than non-Orthodox Jews. They are more likely to have children, and their children are far more likely to marry Jews and make Jewish homes.

...It is the discipline of leading a traditional Jewish life that also reminds us how best to engage in repairing the world…Ironically, by overemphasizing tikkun ‘olam we could ultimately, through lack of Jewish knowledge and experience, lose the very impetus that put us in the tikkun olam business in the first place. [Emphasis mine] …We’ll be severely weakened if we don’t acknowledge that we must repair ourselves far more urgently than we must repair the world.”

Conclusion

Torah has two sets of commandments: Ritual and ethical.

- Ritual commandments preserve Judaism.
- Ethical commandments make Judaism worth preserving.
“Ethical only” (Tikkun Olam) does nothing to preserve Judaism. It kills the goose with the golden eggs.

-Ahad Ha’Am: More than Israel has kept Shabbat has Shabbat kept Israel.

Need a balance. Maimonides:
Tikkun olam requires hard work in all three pillars of Judaism: Torah study, acts of kindness, and the ritual commandments [Commentary on the Mishna, Avot 1:2]

-A lot of work? Mishna gives answer:

-Lo ‘alecha hamlacha ligmor, v’lo atta ven chorrin lehabitel mimmena
-You don’t have to complete the task, but you may not desist from it entirely either. [Pirkei Avot 2:21]