

Healing the World

Rabbi Sarah Mack

Rosh Hashanah is the world's birthday. Our liturgy proclaims, Hayom harat olam, a day literally pregnant with possibilities. The poet Marge Piercy writes, "On the birthday of the world/we begin to contemplate what we have done and left undone."¹ Birthdays are indeed perfect moments to reflect upon the past and to gaze into the future. And birthdays are also an excellent opportunity to tell a good birth story.

So I share this one with you.

It is an old story. Dating to the 14th century when our ancestors had very little power over their world, their political situation or even their lives. It goes like this. . . .

In the beginning, there was only darkness. The holy darkness, the Ein Sof, the source of life. Then, this world emerged from the heart of the holy darkness as a great ray of light. And then there was an accident. The vessels containing the light of the world broke. And the light was scattered into a thousand fragments. These fragments, these broken pieces fell

¹ (Marge Piercy, Birthday of the World)

everywhere. . . , into people, into events, into the world. These fragments of light remain where they fell, deeply hidden until this very day.

At the doorway to this new year, what do we learn from this birth story?

According to the Kabbalah, our mystical tradition, all of humanity is a response to this very accident. We are here because we are born with the capacity to find the hidden light in all events and all people. It once was whole, but now fragmented, it lies all around us waiting for discovery. We have the capacity to lift it up and make it visible once more and, thereby, to restore the wholeness of the world.

In this way, we are each tasked with healing the world one light, one heart at a time. This charge has a familiar name: “tikkun olam”.²

“Tikkun olam” has become such a commonly used term in progressive Jewish circles that it is the basis for a joke. An American Jew visiting Israel asks her guide, “How do you say tikkun olam in Hebrew?”

Familiar as it is, Tikkun Olam is both a nuanced and an ancient concept.

Dr. Rachel Naomi [Remen](#) has spent her career teaching physicians that sometimes compassion and listening are a cure in themselves. What, she suggests, if we translate Tikkun Olam not as Fixing or Repairing or even

² Inspired by On Being with Krista Tippett, “The Difference between Fixing and Healing”

Restoring--but instead as HEALING. For healing is a gift from one person to another. We need not be perfect to affect it. In fact, our vulnerabilities, our brokenness are part of our power to heal. Carl Jung taught that wounded people are healed by other wounded people. Our loneliness enables us to see the loneliness in another. Our suffering informs our ability to walk with another in their pain.

Healing the world is not reserved for only the holiest among us. We are all healers of the world. The story about seeking and finding the hidden light of the world resonates so deeply because it opens up a sense of possibility. It inspires faith in the potential of even the smallest act. It's message is that we can each heal the piece of the world that touches us personally. That is within our reach.

If we think we do not have enough wealth or power to make a difference. If we decide that we lack the wisdom or experience. That is a decision to surrender to apathy. We are reminded that we must not concede before beginning the work. The Kabbalists pronounced the remarkable reality that we are each exactly what the world needs right now. And so, on this

birthday of the world, at the gateway to 5780, we ask the question: HOW?

How can I heal the world?

It is an empowering idea at a moment when it is easy to feel disempowered. After all, each day we wake up to news beyond our control. What can we possibly do about natural disasters? Politics? Or foreign policy? The Mishnah teaches “we are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are we free to desist from it (2:21).” We need not repair the whole, but we must start. One tiny spark of light at a time. We learn that we actually do have great power-- the power to heal the world, ourselves and each other.

In the Talmud, Tikkun olam refers to healing a such a broken system. In these passages “mipnei Tikkun Olam” reflects a social policy of balance. It is used to restore dignity in the case of divorce rulings or freeing of slaves. Rabbi Jane Kanarek teaches “Tikkun Ha'olam” may be translated and understood as a recalibration, a recognition that the world is out of balance and that legal remedies are needed in order to readjust the world to a better balance.”³ Not perfect balance... but better balance.

³ *Righteous Indignation: A Jewish Call for Justice*, Rabbi Jane Kanarek

Rabbi Hillel employs the phrase “tikkun olam” in a landmark ruling to prevent predatory lending with direct intent of keeping the rich from taking advantage of the poor. In this way, we could translate Tikkun Olam as “the betterment of society” or for the “benefit of the world.” We learn from our ancient rabbis that we can harness our own unique power to heal the world by raising our voices for those who cannot raise theirs.

Consider this story from the Talmud: there was once a rabbi in whose household there worked an impoverished maid. The rabbi’s wife caught the young woman taking some food from the pantry. In outrage, she grabbed a hold of the maid and pulled her out of the house to drag her to court. As the two of them were on their way, the rabbi started after them. The rabbi’s wife said, “Listen, you can stay here, I don’t need you to plead my case.” To which the rabbi responded, “I am not going to help you. I am going to plead her case.”⁴

⁴ *The Right Not to Remain Silent*, Rabbi Jack Stern, pg 241

Tikkun Olam is about lifting those who need us most. It is about our sacred duty to ever be working for the benefit of a greater good. Melinda Gates writes about this phenomenon in detailing her philanthropic work around the world.

"Love is what lifts us up. When we come together, we rise. And in the world we're building together, everyone rises.We can love without limits. We see ourselves in others.That is the moment of lift. "⁵ Just as the Kabbalist speaks of lifting each spark, each fragment of light up, so can we lift up another.

That moment of lift was present a few weeks ago at the US Open. Naomi Osaka, ranked first, triumphed over the much younger Coco Gauff in a masterful match. [Perhaps some of you watched with bated breath as we did in our house.] The tears started streaming down 15 year old Gauff's face. She had lost in the third round at the US Open and her disappointment was painfully clear.

Then, without a moment of hesitation, [Naomi Osaka](#), the very woman who had handed her the loss, came over to console her and tell her it was all right. Osaka, who had just won the match in convincing fashion, then

⁵ *The Moment of Lift*, Melinda Gates

insisted Gauff be a part of her post match on-court interview, typically reserved for only the winning player. There were few dry eyes in the stadium at that moment--there certainly weren't any in my living room. Many will remember the same scene one year earlier, when Osaka was the controversial victor and she herself was consoled by Serena Williams. Williams, while distraught at her own loss, modeled compassion and grace to the world. While it went unsaid, it was clear that Osaka was inspired by this gesture as she stepped forward in her own moment of victory to meet Gauff with grace and compassion. Naomi Osaka in her moment of triumph demonstrated that truly winning means holding up another. She showed us how to both be the victor and the healer. How to lift up a vulnerable colleague. That is Tikkun Olam at its most powerful.

Just after 9/11, Fred Rogers -- well loved founder of Mr. Roger's Neighborhood and himself a Presbyterian minister -- came out of retirement to shepherd young people through the traumatic events. He calmly taught, "No matter what our particular job, especially in our world today, we all are called to be 'tikkun olam,' We all are called to be repairers of creation.

Thank you for whatever you do, wherever you are to bring joy and light and hope and faith and pardon and love to your neighbor and yourself."

Think of all the ways we can bring that hope and light to those around us:

[A phone call to a friend. An unexpected thank you. A kind word.]

Secular culture teaches us to care for ourselves in the dark moments, when we feel paralyzed, anxious or depressed. Judaism in many ways offers the additional advice. Lifting up another person is a way to heal the world and also has the wonderful side effect of healing our own pain (or at least distracting us from it). When we feed the hungry we nourish our own souls. When we visit the sick, we assuage our own loneliness. When we support a young person who needs a mentor or tutor, we receive the gift of gazing into a hopeful future. Through boosting others, we lift up ourselves. We may not be able to fix the world entirely. There isn't enough duct tape to do that today. But we can heal it. One person, one deed, one act of tikkun at a time.

Sometimes we don't recognize that healing until years after the fact. Rabbi Gerald Wolpe lost his father suddenly when he was only 11 years old. He walked to the synagogue daily to say kaddish for his father. The ritual director of the shul, Mr. Einstein, was walking by the Wolpe home one morning and said to the young boy, "You know, this is on my way and I thought, why not pick you up and we'll walk together... that way I won't

have to walk alone each morning.” The two of them walked together, through the seasons.

Years later Rabbi Wolpe returned home for a visit and called Mr. Einstein. Mr. Einstein invited him to come to his home.

Rabbi Wolpe later wrote, “The journey between my childhood home and Mr. Einstein’s was long and complicated. His home by car was a full 20 minutes away. I drove in tears as I realized what he had done. He had walked for more than an hour to my home so I would not have to be alone each morning. By the simplest of gestures, the act of caring, he took a frightened child and led him with confidence and faith.”⁶

We can each heal the world.

One person, one tikkun, one deed at a time.

Let us walk with confidence and faith into 5780, knowing the power to heal resides in each of us. And let us open our hearts to the gifts of healing from others. We won’t fully repair the broken vessel, but neither will we let doubt and fear stop us from trying.

⁶ A story shared with me by the other Rabbi Gutterman (Rabbi Rebecca Gutterman of Edison, NJ)